

Title: Conversations

Subtitle: Taoism

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Author: wizanda

Date: 1089465805

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Quote:

Numbers: Because Chinese religious beliefs and practices overlap, the exact number of Taoists is difficult to estimate. However, about 225 million people adhere to Chinese traditional religions, of which Taoists is probably the chief one.

Founder: Lao Zi, (or Lao-tzu, according to the older Wade-Giles system of romanizing Chinese characters), supposedly an elder contemporary of Confucius (c. 551-470 B.C.E.), has traditionally been credited with founding Taoism, but few scholars now believe that any such person as Lao Zi ever lived. Unlike Confucius, who sought harmony in the ordering of social life, Lao Zi located life's ultimate principle in nature.

Main tenets: Taoism takes its name from the word "Tao" ("the Way"), the ancient Chinese name for the ordering principle that makes cosmic harmony possible. Not a transcendent ultimate, the Tao is found in the world (especially in nature), and can be encountered directly through mystical experience. It is the ultimate reality as well as the proper natural way of life humans must follow. Taoism prizes naturalness, non-action, and inwardness.

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of Taoism,: philosophical and religious. Philosophical Taoism is rational, contemplative, and nonsectarian, and it accepts death as a natural returning to the Tao. Religious Taoism is magical, cultic, esoteric, and sectarian, and it emphasizes health and healing as ways to gain long life or even immortality. T'ai chi and the medical practice of Quigong are modern manifestations of Taoism.

Main sacred text: It is still convenient to speak of Lao Zi as the author of the Tao Te Ching (or Dao De Jing, "Book of the Way and Its Power"), the most important scripture of popular Taoist sects. Dating from the early third century B.C.E., this text combines religion, philosophy, poetry, and mysticism. The Tao Te Ching later became part of a larger Taoist canon (Tao Zang) which includes revelations, meditative and ritual texts, moral codes, registers of names and functions of spirits, and texts on alchemy, exorcism, astrology, and philosophy. Although Kublai Khan ordered the Tao Zang burned in 1281, it survived, and in its last main printing in 1926, it included 1,120 volumes. Other texts held as important in Taoism include the philosophical writings of Zhuang Zi (369-286 B.C.E.).

Principal center: In China, Taoism came into conflict with Confucianism and later, Communism. Today it survives in most of China only in folk beliefs and small monastic communities. Taoism does survive in other forms wherever traditional Chinese culture survives, especially in Hong Kong, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand, Hawaii, and, most recently, in continental North America and Europe.