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# Reconstructing Taoism's Transformation in China

Sinosphere

By IAN JOHNSON    AUG. 8, 2016

Terry F. Kleeman is a leading scholar of the early texts and history of China's only indigenous religion, Taoism. A professor of religious studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder, he is the author of the recently published "Celestial Masters: History and Ritual in Early Daoist Communities." This is the first work in any Western language on the founding of Taoism as a formal religious movement, rooted in earlier philosophical teachings like the Tao Te Ching, also known as the Daodejing and sometimes translated as "The Way and Its Power."

In an interview, Professor Kleeman discussed how Taoism provided an alternative political model to the Confucian-based imperial order, how Taoist texts can help deepen our understanding of early Chinese history and why today's Communist government seeks to control Taoist practices.

## What is Taoism?

The word Taoism is horribly vexed because it has to translate two Chinese terms: "dao(jiao)" and "dao(jia)." "Dao(jiao)" is the religion Taoism, while "dao(jia)" refers to philosophical works associated with Laozi and Zhuangzi, such as the Daodejing.

The two are not really that closely related. Taoist priests don't carry around copies of the Daodejing, and that work has little to do with what they teach. They teach a set of rules and morality, but you'll find little morality in the Daodejing.

**Many people, especially in the West, think of Taoism as going with the flow, getting back to nature and so on.**

Taoism, the religion, really has the same value structure as any other Chinese religion. It is full of very detailed codes of conduct that everyone has to observe. I think of Taoists as Confucians of the other world. Confucians deal with this world. They send petitions and documents to the emperor. Taoists do the same thing, but to the other world. But the structures and bureaucracy are very similar.

**How many people believe in Taoism today?**

This is a very difficult question, because for centuries Taoism did not have lay members. This is true for Buddhism as well. The only "Buddhists" were Buddhist monks and the only "Taoists" were Taoist priests. Temples were run by committees, and they used monks and priests as needed for certain ceremonies.

**Today this is a bit different. There are ordinary people who join temples and call themselves lay Buddhists or Taoists.**

This is a modern invention. They are trying to remake these religions in Christianity's image, with membership in a churchlike structure. This is not traditionally how it was organized.

**What does the early history of the religious form of Taoism tell us? Its founding is usually dated to the year 142, in western China.**

The early history sheds light on China as a whole. China had never had an alternative political model other than the emperor. That was the model for over 2,000 years.

But the early history of Taoism is different. It's a theocracy based around "tianshi" [celestial masters]. The celestial master was supposed to establish a new

political structure, the “Great Peace,” in which every individual would be treated justly. This provided an important alternative to the norm of Confucianism.

### **But they didn't set up a rival dynasty?**

No, the founder, Zhang Daoling, never took the title of emperor. In the area around Hanzhong [in modern-day Shaanxi Province], they called themselves “yiguo,” or the “country of righteousness.”

**The political order lasted only a short time, but your book makes the point that many things that we can see then are present today. What are some examples?**

Well, first, it's not exactly true that the political structure didn't last. It didn't last in China as a whole, but we can see examples among the Yao tribes of Yunnan, for example. In almost all Yao villages, men and women have a Taoist name and title. The social structure of the community is based upon this ritual, with social status determined by your rank in the Taoist religion.

### **How did it end up all the way down in Yunnan?**

We don't know this, but there were non-Chinese members of the religion from the beginning and Taoism is an important religion among ethnic minorities in China, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.

**Something like how the Hakka carried traditions with them when they were expelled from central China to the coasts and the south?**

In fact, Hakka may have remnants of this, too. If you look at the family lineage charts of Hakka, 200 or 300 years ago, many had a Taoist name too. This still has to be studied.

**Are there any physical traces of the founding period of religious Taoism?**

Nothing. There was a stele from the second century, but it was lost in the Song. The physical remains that we have now are from the fifth century. This is probably

because they did not use physical objects for worship. It was aniconic. They used visualizations in their minds.

**What about the “Taoist popes” of today? There are people claiming to be the 65th generation descendant of Zhang Daoling, the founder and first celestial master of the Taoist religion.**

We don't see this lineage until the Song. After that, the lineage of the celestial masters is clear. But before that it's not clear. We have the first three generations of celestial masters from the second century and then a mention in the sixth century, but nothing lasting until the Song.

**Then does it make sense to speak of mainstream Taoism today as having descended from this second-century religious movement?**

Absolutely, yes. So much of modern ritual stems from them. Taoist priests still use many of the same terms and practices.

The ideas now are exactly the same: The world of the dead is like the world of the living. Taoist priests are like cosmic lawyers. They can go up to heaven and extricate the dead from difficulties. Taoism gives you a way of controlling your fate in another world. This is the same now as then.

**How did you piece together this history without physical objects?**

Primarily by using texts, but in a different way than before. Most Chinese historians have used official dynastic histories. They comb through it for mention of who is a Taoist and then write this up as a history, but they ignore the religious texts.

**Why is that?**

The religious texts are found in a huge collection called the Taoist canon. Until fairly recently, people said it was a mess — you can't date anything and so it's not worth considering if you are writing a history of China. But this has changed. We now have for example the work of Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen that gives a date for every document.

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**So the Taoist canon can be used as an alternative history, expanding on the official histories.**

It shows another aspect of Chinese society that you can't get from the "zhengshi," or "official histories." This has been my inspiration my whole career — to find this alternative thread through Chinese society — the part that didn't get recorded in the emperor's official history.

**This strikes me as similar to the history of early Christianity. There, too, is a very limited amount of physical material.**

I'm fascinated with the parallels. We have the same limited amount of textual material. We need to squeeze it, just like they did with the Gospels. That's been one of my goals with the book, to get all of that early authentic material, and write a history of the movement.

**Have Chinese historians worked this material?**

There is little philological tradition like this in China. The main philological work in Chinese Buddhism, for example, was done by Japanese and Western scholars. They dated the material and produced catalogs.

There's been very little work in Taoism or Chinese religion comparable to the work done on Christianity. For example, you can internally date texts and say this part is earlier than that part. This is common in the Bible, but very uncommon in Chinese texts.

**Why hasn't this been popular among Chinese scholars?**

I think it reflected the prejudice by the educated elite against religion — that it wasn't worthy of study. Most Chinese scholars have thought of Taoism as a degenerate philosophy — something that once had to do with Laozi but ended up with a bunch of charlatan tricks.

**Today it seems different. Taoism is embraced as part of the traditional Chinese culture that the government is promoting.**

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Only certain aspects of the religion. The Chinese constitution guarantees freedom of religious belief but not religious practice. Much of what a traditional Taoist priest did is now illegal. They are allowed to do rituals but cannot claim to have actually accomplished anything with the ritual, or else it is called superstition. If you claim your ritual will actually heal someone or save their relatives, you can be thrown in jail for fraud.

It leaves Taoism in a very different position in society, a representative of the culture without any rights to control their own public image, which is controlled by the government.

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