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## “LITERATI TAOISM”

### RE-THINKING THE SOCIAL AND INTELLECTUAL MATRICES OF PREMODERN TAOISM

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Since the 1970s, specialists in Taoist studies have made many breakthroughs in understanding elements of Taoism. But for the most part, they have avoided the task of integrating the implications of their new findings to expand our interpretive framework for understanding the overall contours of Taoism as it evolved through the long course of Chinese history. Scholars who study the Taoism of one period or social movement have often ignored the Taoism of other periods or movements. In particular, many seem to resist exploring the continuities between (1) the meditative practices of classical or medieval Taoists and (2) those of today's practitioners of so-called “Northern Taoism,” particularly the Quanzhen tradition. At a recent conference in the U.S., a group of some twenty American and Japanese scholars listened with not only disinterest, but actually with apparent disdain, as a young Chinese observer pleaded with them to give some consideration to the Quanzhen traditions that are embraced by large numbers of Taoists in today's China.

Such facts result from the historical circumstances of the modern study of Taoism, a matter that I have addressed in several publications.<sup>1</sup> Because of Confucian condemnation over the last thousand years, both Chinese and foreigners—even leading scholars—are often reluctant to acknowledge that Taoism ever constituted anything other than a religion of “the masses” of China, rather than a highly developed religion that was cherished and practiced by centuries of educated, thoughtful, respectable men and women. Here, I will examine elements of premodern Taoism that were clearly **not** produced by, or for, “the masses.” These include (1) the classical self-cultivation practices exemplified in such texts as the *Neiye*; (2) the Taoism of Tang times, which flourished among “the elite”; (3) the new traditions of personal cultivation that arose in the early second millennium; and (4) the modern forms of Taoism that flourish in China today.<sup>2</sup> These elements of Taoism I shall term elements of “**literati Taoism**.”

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance my articles: "Person and Culture in the Taoist Tradition." *Journal of Chinese Religions* 20 (1992): 77-90; "The Historical Contours of Taoism in China: Thoughts on Issues of Classification and Terminology," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 25 (1997): 57-82; and "Teaching Taoism in the 1990s," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 1.2 (1998): 121-29.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of the *Neiye*, a text of the 4<sup>th</sup>-century BCE, see my article, "Varieties of 'Taoism' in Ancient China: A Preliminary Comparison of Themes in the *Nei yeh* and Other 'Taoist Classics'," *Taoist*

Here, I shall focus upon pertinent elements of Taoism during the Tang dynasty, when Taoism occupied an honored place at the center of Chinese culture. Some have argued that the Tang was the most significant period in Taoist history, for it was in that era that Taoism showed that it could satisfy the spiritual, cultural, and political needs of the entire society.

A crucial fact about our current knowledge of Tang Taoism is that virtually all that we know involves the activities of members of the cultural and political elite. It is well known that several Tang emperors showed intense interest in Taoism, primarily for its legitimacy value. For instance, in 741 the emperor Xuanzong (reigned 713-756) established "Colleges of Taoist Studies" (*chongxuan xue*) in each prefecture, and established a new system of government examinations, the *daoju*, to promote scholars who were proficient in Taoist texts. Through such political acts, Tang emperors broke down any barriers that may have otherwise existed between the leaders of the Taoist tradition and the scholar-official class. Meanwhile, Taoist intellectuals, like Sima Chengzhen and Wu Yün, acted to intensify literati involvement in Taoism by writing a variety of verse and prose works that made Taoist beliefs and practices comprehensible and attractive to other literati. Studies of Tang government and literature have demonstrated conclusively that such efforts succeeded in spreading Taoist ideas, and at least certain Taoist practices, among a great many Tang scholars, poets, and officials, both in the capital and in the provinces beyond.<sup>3</sup> But the effects of such facts on the Taoism of later ages has not yet received sufficient scholarly attention.

The authors of Tang Taoist texts assumed their readers to be extremely well-read, and to be comfortable both with the heritage of Taoism itself and with secular traditions, such as those of traditional historiography and the state cult. In that sense, both the writers of such texts and their intended readers were all "literati," in the strictest sense. Since Tang officials, like He Zhizhang, entered the priestly ranks, and Taoist priests entered government office, the texts of Tang Taoism were often directed at scholar-officials. They assume only a sincere interest in Taoism on the part of readers, not any ritual initiation. Moreover, these texts were generally not kept cloistered in monastic libraries, but were reportedly "current in the world," and copies were collected for the imperial library.

The Tang was also a period when a variety of writers composed works designed to "make sense" of Taoism. Some were histories, and other reference works, intended to give Taoists and non-Taoists alike a sense of the history and heritage of Taoism. But the efforts of Tang Taoists to "explain" their tradition to a wider audience was not limited to reference works. Writers like Sima Chengzhen produced manuals on spiritual practice, such as the now-lost *Xiuzhen mizhi* ["Esoteric Instructions for Cultivating Perfection"]. That text provided guidelines for practitioners who had knowledge of, if not initiation into, the traditionally esoteric Shangqing traditions. Despite its title, it was not really a "secret" work: one tenth-century historical text reports that it was "current in the world" even after the fall of the Tang.

Sima also edited, and may have authored, a brief work entitled the *Tianyinzi*. Its model of Taoist practice has clearly been sanitized of any terms that might be unfamiliar to a "general audience" of Chinese literati, and would have been easily comprehensible to cultured people of Sima's day. As a matter of fact, the *Tianyinzi* has remained widely read throughout imperial and

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Resources 7.2 (1997), 73-86.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, my article, "Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen and the Role of Taoism in the Medieval Chinese Polity," *Journal of Asian History* 31.2 (1997), 105-138.

modern times: it was preserved in such "standard" anthologies as the *Congshu jicheng* and *Baibu congshu*, and is still used by twentieth-century practitioners of *qigong*.

Another text from about the same period is the *Daomen jingfa*, a purported conversation between Sima's predecessor Pan Shizheng and the emperor Gaozong. It summarizes basic elements of Taoist belief and practice, and provides a glossary of Taoist terms. Such texts, like Wu Yun's *Xuangang lun*, demonstrate that the intense imperial interest in Taoism among Tang rulers stimulated Taoist leaders to formulate some of their teachings in ways that could hold the interest of such rulers, the rulers' families, and officials at all levels of the imperial government.

The failure of many scholars to give due attention to these facts seem to reflect ideological contentions within their own cultural traditions. A good step toward an integrated and properly nuanced understanding of Taoism would be the recognition of the diverse social backgrounds of the historical leaders and shapers of the Taoist tradition. Some subtraditions may have had origins among the peasantry, and struggled to gain the respect and recognition of members of the upper classes. Other subtraditions clearly had origins among members of the medieval aristocracy or the later "gentry." But the evidence suggests that Taoists of Tang times included men and women of different social levels, and that they strove in many ways to develop a "Taoism" that would attract and maintain the interest of people of all classes of society, including the "literati."

I also wish to argue that important elements of that Tang "literati Taoism" survived, and were reintegrated in new ways into the Taoism of modern times. Of course, "literati Taoism" did not survive intact, because the historical conditions that had produced it in Tang times were disrupted by a variety of military, political, economic and social changes, which shook the whole of China from the An Lushan rebellion into modern times. By the time of Wang Zhe, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, even men like Wang —whom the German scholar Florian Reiter has called "a representative of the literati class himself" —often felt little interest in trying to combine Taoist practice with the life of a public official. Yet, by maintaining and re-integrating various Tang teachings concerning self-cultivation practices, Wang's Quanzhen followers developed a new way of practicing Taoism: they developed a monastic tradition to rival that of the Buddhists. In their Quanzhen monasteries, individual pursuit of union with the Tao retained its age-old focus on self-cultivation, in terms that derived ultimately from such classical texts as the *Neiye*. That is, the cultivation of *qi*, *jing*, and *shen* can be traced back to that text.

However, the emperors of the Yuan, Ming and Qing periods had little interest in such forms of Taoism. They faced far different conditions than did the rulers of Tang times, and had little reason to turn to Taoist monastic traditions, like Quanzhen, in pursuit of imperial legitimation. In general, the emperors of late-imperial times felt safer surrounded by officials whom they could identify with Confucian ideals of public service. Though it has seldom been recognized in modern times, such ideals of government service had been shared by Taoists of earlier times, like Ge Hong. And those ideals had been officially institutionalized by the Tang emperors and their Taoist allies like Sima Chengzhen. Such ideals of Taoists who serve as government officials were apparently weakened by the invasions of the Jurchen, Mongols and Manchus. However, in some ways, Quanzhen Taoism endures as a living vestige of the more "ecumenical" Taoism of Tang times: it preserves elements of a model for practicing Taoism that had flourished among the literati of that era, and has thereby been able to fulfill a genuine religious need for men and women who wish to cultivate the Tao in accord with models of self-cultivation that date back to classical times.

#### **Further Readings:**

Russell Kirkland, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 116-126.