

THE ROOTS OF ALTRUISM IN THE TAOIST TRADITION

RUSSELL KIRKLAND

Taoism may be defined as the Chinese philosophico-religious tradition dedicated to achieving harmony with the salutary forces inherent in the cosmos. The Taoist tradition has several components, which, while interrelated, can meaningfully be distinguished. By far the most widely known component is the philosophy represented by such classic works as *Lao-Tzu* (or the *Tao te ching*) and *Chuang-tzu*. But Taoism is also comprised of several other elements, which are often subsumed under the rubric of "religious Taoism."

The Taoist religion remains poorly understood for a variety of reasons. Perhaps the most important is the persisting reputation of Taoism as a hodgepodge of meaningless superstitions. To many, nothing outside of *Lao-Tzu* and *Chuang-tzu* qualifies as "true" or "pure" Taoism. Such condescending attitudes among both Chinese and Western interpreters has slowed research into Taoism and hindered attempts at an accurate appreciation of it. Only in the last twenty years has Taoism begun to be recognized as a coherent religious tradition with a valuable perspective on the human condition and a reputable program of individual and collective spiritual development. Even today, vast reaches of the history and literature of Taoism remain wholly unexplored.¹

¹ Scriptures as central to the tradition as the Fourth Gospel or the Lotus Sutra remain virtually untouched. None of the principal Taoist scriptures has yet been translated into a Western language: the *T'ai-p'ing ching*, *Huang-t'ing ching*, and the primary Ling-pao and Shang-ch'ing scriptures remain inaccessible to any but the most advanced of specialists. Meanwhile, historical figures as consequential as St. Jerome or St. Augustine remain little more than names. The life and career of, e.g., Lu Hsiu-ching (406-477), the codifier of the Ling-pao sect and compiler of the first Taoist canon, remains entirely neglected. That is the situation which exists in regard to the best-studied period of Taoist history, the formative centuries (1st-6th centuries CE). Our knowledge of Taoism in its later stages is even more exiguous.

The attainment of a proper understanding of Taoism requires not only additional historical and textual research, but also a sensitivity to inherited misconceptions concerning the nature of the tradition itself. A prime example is the long-standing supposition that the values of Taoism were intrinsically egocentric and that Taoists were typically egoists in a classic sense. In both Asia and the West, Taoist thinkers like *Lao-Tzu* and *Chuang-tzu* have sometimes been reproached as proponents of "mystical escapism" who ignored the realities of human existence. Similarly, the practitioners of religious Taoism have been criticized for an alleged preoccupation with the pursuit of personal immortality: they are claimed to have sought only the prolongation of their own individual existence, ignoring all the wholesome values which benefit the entire human community. Both philosophic and religious Taoism have thus been censured for fostering a selfish disregard of the legitimate needs and concerns of human society.

One grants that every variety of Taoism prescribed spiritual self-perfection. But the Taoist tradition was hardly the epitome of egocentrism that it is widely believed to have been. To the contrary, religious Taoism grew directly out of a conviction that a world in disorder is a world requiring remedial spiritual activity. Throughout history, Taoists frequently believed themselves—and were believed by others—to possess a special role as upholders of the moral and spiritual principles which conduce to a healthy, well ordered world.

That concept of the mission of the Taoist religion induced many Taoist leaders to offer guidance and support to temporal authorities, and to devote their wisdom and skills to relieving personal distress throughout Chinese society. Such ideals of social service were, at least during certain periods, considered central to the Taoist religion, not only by its practitioners, but also by those outside the tradition. That hitherto unrecognized Taoist ideal of service to others should be of considerable interest not only to historians of religion, but also to theologians and specialists in religious ethics.

This paper is an attempt to document the altruistic elements in the medieval Taoist religion and to trace their roots in earlier phases of the Taoist tradition.

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF TAOISM

A brief outline of the historical evolution of Taoism would be useful at this point. The earliest roots of Taoism are generally assumed to have rested in the naturalistic philosophy contained in such ancient writings as *Lao-Tzu* and *Chuang-tzu*. While *Lao-Tzu* and, to a much lesser extent, *Chuang-tzu* indeed served as inspirational forces at various points in the history of Taoism, their direct contribution to the development of the Taoist religion was actually quite limited.

The ground out of which religious Taoism actually grew was the sociopolitical ideal of "Grand Tranquillity" (*t'ai-p'ing*). *T'ai-p'ing* was a utopian concept of a world in perfect harmony. Many of the ancient Chinese schools of thought (including Lao-Chuang Taoism) had expressed such utopian ideals, and the term *t'ai-p'ing* did appear in late classical times (3rd century BCE) (Eichhorn: 113-14; Pokora). But in Han times (206 BCE - 220 CE) the cosmological theorizations of thinkers such as Tung Chung-shu (2nd century BCE) stimulated new socio-political ideologies which called for the harmonization of the earthly order with the sublime directive forces which reside in heavenly spheres.

Around the turn of the first millennium, there appeared several texts which (1) articulated visions of a new world order and (2) revealed that heavenly powers desired human assistance in effecting it. In the earliest of those texts, the Lord of Heaven (*t'ien-ti*) is said to have dispatched a divine emissary to renew the heavenly mandate of the Han dynasty (Seidel, 1969:217; Kandel: 21). But as the Han dynasty weakened, hopes for a great cosmic renewal became increasingly

detached from the Chinese imperial house and associated more directly with the Chinese populace as a whole.

The first known text identifiable as a Taoist scripture was a work entitled the *T'ai-p'ing ching*. That text was a compendium of religious ideas of diverse origin, apparently compiled among the lower classes of Chinese society during the second or third century CE. While the *T'ai-p'ing ching* is not the product of a single thinker and reflects the ideas of several earlier schools of thought, its concept of the world is fairly clear and has much in common with classical Taoism.

According to the *T'ai-p'ing ching*, the original condition of the world had been that of Grand Tranquillity (Kaltenmark, 1979: 22-29). *In illo tempore*, lofty sages engendered peace and harmony through the contemplation of natural signs which reveal the processes that lead to success and failure. In that "Ambiance of Grand Tranquillity" (*t'ai-p'ing chih ch'i*) all creatures found their proper place in the world, and none suffered injury. The unnamed "Rulers of Grand Tranquillity" practiced Non-action (*wu-wei*), merely ensuring that all people obtained life's basic necessities—food, clothing, and sexual union. In later generations, however, rulers increasingly meddled in the workings of the world, and Grand Tranquillity was eventually lost.

The scripture then states that a divine being referred to as the Celestial Master (*t'ien-shih*) was sent by Heaven to save humanity from the accumulated evils of the ages. That salvation was to be accomplished through the revelation of celestial writs, particularly the *T'ai-p'ing ching* itself. It was said that Heaven had charged the Celestial Master with conveying this revelation to a worthy ruler, in order that proper government could be restored and the "Ambiance of Grand Tranquillity" re-created. It was further indicated that compliance with the scripture's teachings would not only ensure those results but would also eliminate illness and allow prodigious longevity. Towards those ends, the reader was enjoined to behave morally, to meditate, and to sublimate his/her diet and respiration.

During the second century CE, there appeared two popular movements that sought to actualize elements of the *T'ai-p'ing* ideal. One, known as "the Yellow Turbans," launched a massive revolt in hopes of displacing the Han government, and did in fact succeed in crippling it. The other was known as the "Five Pecks of Rice" community. That sect's founder, Chang Tao-ling, claimed to have received a revelation from the deified Lao-Tzu in 142 CE. The deity was said to have conferred upon Chang a covenant which authorized a new social and religious order. Chang claimed the title of Celestial Master, and his followers created a religious organization which endured for several centuries.

In the early third century, Chang's grandson and successor, Chang Lu, allied himself with a generalissimo who aspired to the authority of the recently deposed Han emperors. As a result of that alliance, the Celestial Masters began to enjoy the status of spiritual intercessors for the Chinese emperors, confirming them in the legitimate possession of Heaven's mandate to govern the earth. The intimacy of the bond between Taoists and the throne is apparent from the fact that through the centuries that followed, the Chinese emperors were frequently enthroned in ceremonies which were cognate with the Taoist rites of ordination (Seidel, 1983:348-71).

In the early fourth century, northern China was conquered by a non-Chinese people from the northern steppes, and the Celestial Masters accompanied their imperial patrons in a flight to the south. But the elite of south China already possessed religious traditions of their own. Those traditions stressed the attainment of health, longevity, and spiritual immortality through the sublimation of material processes—chiefly dietary, respiratory, and pharmacological in nature.

The southern religious tradition (epitomized in the *Pao-p'u-tzu* of Ko Hung) sometimes made reference to classical Taoism. But its primary assumption seems to have been one of an essential unity between matter and spirit. Unlike the Celestial Masters, who sought to actualize

cosmic unity in the social and political arena, the southern tradition focused almost exclusively upon the individual. Its goal was personal spiritual perfection, not the spiritualization of the socio-political order. While such an emphasis has long been considered characteristic of Taoism, it in fact represented only one facet of Taoism, which actually evolved independently from either Lao-Chuang philosophy or the religious ideals of the Celestial Masters.

Once the Celestial Masters had entered the south of China, there occurred a religious reaction among the southern elite. During the fourth century, a new revelation occurred to a medium in the service of a court official. Over several years, he repeatedly received new scriptures and supplementary materials from celestial Perfected Ones (*chen-jen*), divine beings who reportedly dwelt in a heaven more sublime than that envisaged in the old southern traditions. These, the scriptures of the "Superior Heavens" (*Shang-ch'ing*), prescribed meditation and—for the truly advanced adept—alchemy, as means of attaining Perfection and ascending to the Shang-ch'ing heavens (Strickmann, 1978, 1979, 1981; Robinet).

There was also a messianic and millenarian component to the Shang-ch'ing revelation. It was asserted that the disordered contemporary world was in the process of being purged by demonic forces. People who heeded the Shang-ch'ing revelation were exhorted to perfect themselves in anticipation of the descent of a savior, known as "the Sage Who is to Come" (*hou-sheng*). It was promised that the savior would establish a new world order for the Chosen People (*chung-min*). The Shang-ch'ing linkage of the millenarian utopia with a requirement of personal self-perfection reveals a synthesis in which the northern emphasis upon rectification of the socio-political order had been combined with the southern emphasis upon individual spiritual perfection.

When the expected savior failed to appear at the date predicted (392 CE), another soteriological revelation occurred. This is known as the Ling-pao (or "Numinous Talisman") revelation (Bokenkamp). The Ling-pao scriptures, heavily influenced by Mahayana Buddhism,

tell of a supreme deity who came into being spontaneously at the time of the cosmos' first appearance. The deity is said to have effected universal salvation by reciting a pre-existent scripture which embodied the salvific efficacy of divine reality. He then charged a divine emissary with revealing the divine scripture within the world of humanity. Consequently, the Ling-pao Taoist adept was trained in the scriptural material, in order that he/she might participate in its salvific potency through a liturgical recitation.

The Ling-pao system seems to have been designed to duplicate the appeal that Mahayana Buddhism had achieved in Chinese society. The Celestial Master tradition had appealed to the masses but had lacked a sophisticated doctrine to rival that of the Buddhists. Conversely, the Shang-ch'ing system offered a fairly advanced theology but remained quite elitist: only the elect could expect to attain the highest heavens, and only then through long years of intensive training and practice. The Ling-pao system, however, bridged all three traditions, translating Buddhist concepts and values into Taoist forms in such a manner that intellectuals, mystics, and pious peasants could all participate in a single comprehensive religious system.

The roots of the Ling-pao tradition had lain in the Han dynasty "apocrypha" and associated talismanic ritual (Kaltenmark, 1960). While the influence of Buddhist sutras and Shang-ch'ing scriptures had provided a new cosmogonic and soteriological framework, the emphasis in the Ling-pao tradition always remained upon ritual. Indeed, the new liturgical rituals that developed within Ling-pao Taoism soon supplanted the rites practiced in the Celestial Master tradition, and have been maintained even up to the present day.

The Taoist rituals initiated within the Ling-pao tradition fell into two categories. The first was the *chiao*, an elaborate ritual performed over several days, which renewed the local community by renewing its correlation with the heavenly order (Saso). The second category of ritual was the *chai*, a series of specialized rites conducted to achieve particular aims. In T'ang times (618-906 CE), there were seven forms of *chai*. One was a penitential rite intended to ward

off illness through confession of sins. (Similar rituals had been practiced in the early days of the Celestial Master movement.) Another *chai* sought to extend salvation to deceased ancestors.² Perhaps the most important was the *chin-lu chai* ("Fast of the Golden Register"). That rite was performed to harmonize the cosmos and human society through (1) balancing *yin* and *yang* (thereby averting natural disasters), (2) prolonging the life of the emperor, and (3) generally producing stability and prosperity in the empire.

The *chin-lu chui*, like the *chiao*, reflected a Taoist ideal of a society which was stabilized and sanctified through the diligence of the benevolent Taoist clergy (*tao-shih*). Such ideals demonstrate that the adherents of the Taoist religion were far from preoccupied with a pursuit of personal immortality. To the contrary, organized Taoism continually stressed the necessity of working to promote the authority of the imperial government and to contribute to socio-political stability by ministering to the welfare of all classes of society. That commitment to service to state and society is most readily apparent in the lives of prominent Taoists of the T'ang period.

TAOISM UNDER THE T'ANG

The T'ang dynasty is often hailed as a Golden Age in Chinese history. Indeed the first half of the T'ang period (618-ca. 756) is celebrated as one of the most glorious eras in all of East Asian history: imperial rule was stable, imperial leadership was vigorous and conscientious, the international standing of China was at its very zenith, and civilization flourished in virtually every respect—literature, music, religion, and the arts.

The emperors of the T'ang, perhaps more than those of any other native dynasty, considered themselves universal rulers and sanctioned all schools of religious belief, both

² A later rite with a similar focus is analyzed in Boltz.

domestic and imported. Foreign traders introduced Manichacism, Zoroastrianism, Nestorian Christianity, Islam, and even Judaism to the cosmopolitan capital of Ch'ang-an. And Mahayama Buddhism—a fixture in China since at least the third century—flourished at every level of T'ang society.

But while the T'ang emperors condoned virtually every form of organized religion, the tradition with which they formed the most intimate relationship was that of Taoism. Almost every Chinese dynasty was in a position to avail itself of several legitimacy forces, including a formal state cult and the Confucian value-system. But the T'ang emperors were also in a position to employ a robust and amenable Taoist organization as a potent adjunct to the other existing legitimacy systems. The T'ang was a period of harmony within the Taoist tradition, with no perceptible sectarian discord. In addition, through much of the T'ang period there was no conspicuous conflict— ideological, social or political—between Taoists and the representatives of China's other major value systems, Confucianism and Buddhism.

Research into the nature of T'ang Taoism and its place in Chinese society is still in its early stages. We are not yet in a position to evaluate the place of Taoism among the masses in medieval China. We have little documentation of the everyday activities of ordinary Taoist clerics, and cannot yet discern how they were perceived by the peasants, laborers, merchants and artisans who may have approached them for healing, blessing, counseling, religious instruction, or ritual ministrations. The most accessible source materials were compiled by members of the social elite, Confucian scholars and *littérateurs*. Even the works compiled by Taoist clerics outside the circles of the government tend to accentuate the imperial recognition and patronage granted to Taoist personages and institutions. Perhaps because of the aristocratic nature of T'ang society, the available sources tell us much more about the activities of eminent individual Taoists than about those of the Taoist clergy in general. In fact, the closer a Taoist's contacts with the T'ang government, the more attention his or her life tended to receive. In any event, materials

pertaining to the lives of prominent Taoists provide a natural starting point from which to explore the nature of Taoist values in medieval China.

ALTRUISM IN MEDIEVAL TAOISM

An excellent presentation of the altruistic ideals of medieval Taoism appears in a thirteenth-century biographical text preserved in the massive Taoist canon, the *Tao-tsang*. The work is entitled the *T'ang Yeh chen-jen chuan* [An Account of Yeh the Perfected One of the T'ang Dynasty].³ The subject, Yeh Fa-shan (631-720), was a wonder-worker who had been highly honored by several T'ang dynasts.

The primary thesis of the biography is that Yeh Fa-shan had been no ordinary mortal, but rather an immortal dignitary who had been banished from heaven for negligence in his official duties. (As is fairly well known, Chinese conceptions of heaven frequently assumed a celestial officialdom analogous to that of the imperial administration in the subcelestial realm.) Yeh Fa-shan, we are told, had been exiled into the world of humanity to prove his moral worth through selfless exertion on behalf of others. Yeh himself only learned of those facts during the course of two revelations, in which several divinities charged him with earning his way back to his former celestial office.

Of particular interest in the first revelation is the fact that the deities enjoined altruistic activity upon Yeh as the proper method of accumulating merit and regaining his blessed station. One divinity advised him as follows:

³ A thematic analysis and translation of the entire biography may be found in Kirkland: 135-39, 417-30.

At present, you practice the formulae of the Triadic-Pentadic Orthodox Unity with the Authority of the Covenant [i.e. the way of the Celestial Masters]. You exterminate goblins and sprites, and rescue all manner of creatures. You extend favor to the needy and destitute, and carry out principles on behalf of Heaven. If you but take "hidden virtue" as your priority, it will not be necessary to offer you further advice.

It is a frequently recurring theme in the accounts of Taoist worthies that they were believed to exert an unseen influence, which benefited sovereign and society in a subtle and mysterious manner. The term "hidden virtue *or* merit" was often applied to such an influence. In some cases, it was apparently considered a matter related to arcane skills. In other cases, it seems to have been conceived as a distinct and unique power with almost magical overtones. It should be noted that such concepts did not originate within the Taoist religion; since the time of Lao-Tzu and Confucius, it had been widely believed that a sage who embodied sufficient moral power could exert an unseen, beneficent influence throughout society.

Subsequent to that revelation, Yeh Fa-shan is said to have "secretly practiced hidden virtue, rescuing the quick and the dead." Like countless wonder-workers throughout history (and such "divine men" as Jesus and Apollonius of Tyana), Yeh is reported to have cured dreadful maladies, exorcised demons, manipulated the weather, and even raised the dead.⁴ His labors on behalf of his sovereign and fellow subjects are said to have won the gratitude of every segment of Chinese society:

People pressed money upon him, so he entreated the poor and the afflicted [to come to him for assistance]...From the emperor and empress on down, all the princes and dukes and courtiers personally received the formulae of the Tao [i.e., underwent ceremonial induction into Taoism]. The various officials and their sons

⁴ On such phenomena in biographies of Mediterranean antiquity, see Cox: 43.

and brothers, and the *tao-shih* of the capital city and all the prefectures, who received the scriptures and formulae from the Perfected One [i.e., Yeh] were calculated at several thousand persons. The princes and dukes were liberal in their donations, and the Taoists from the frontiers filled the streets in pursuit of what alms they could procure. [Yeh] entered the monastic buildings, restored and ornamented the images of the Venerable Ones, and rescued those in distress. Each day more than ten piculs of grain were cooked in order to provide for the destitute and afflicted who came forward, without any discrimination.

In a later passage, Yeh is said to have initiated numerous local officials and commoners into Taoist orders, whereupon numerous persons dispensed alms throughout the vicinity. The recurrent motif of generous almsgiving in connection with Yeh's activities indicates that Yeh's selfless exertions stimulated altruistic sentiments among others wherever he went. The juxtaposition of that motif with the reports of multitudes undergoing initiation into the Taoist religion suggests that the Taoist priesthood itself was perceived as having involved an altruistic ideal. It can even be inferred that the ideal of a *tao-shih* was not merely to serve others, but also to inspire others to embrace and exemplify such altruistic attitudes.

Whether or not the reports of the events surrounding the deeds of Yeh Fa-shan represent actual historical facts is irrelevant to the present discussion. What is significant about the account of Yeh's life is the persistent implication that his activities were directed not merely toward the emperor or a few isolated individuals, but rather toward all of society. The innumerable anecdotes in which Yeh is said to have saved emperor, ministers, and commoners alike from preternatural disasters were not presented merely to amaze the reader. To the contrary, those anecdotes were interwoven into a comprehensive portrait of an extraordinary individual who fulfilled his own personal destiny through a lifetime of service to sovereign and society. Similarly, the patronage and honors which Yen Fa-shan received from the T'ang emperors indicate not merely that great Taoists were respected by political leaders. Rather,

those facts signify a public recognition of Yeh's magisterial fulfillment of his altruistic life-mission.

Moreover, the reported encounters between Yeh and heavenly beings indicate that Yeh's beneficence was to be interpreted not as the product of personal conviction, but rather as activity ordained by Heaven in accord with the natural order of things. Yeh's lifelong dedication to public service—whether as wonder-worker or as sagely counselor—demonstrates that in medieval China the Taoist ideal of self-perfection involved more than individual spiritual cultivation. It also involved a commitment to active involvement in society, to promoting the general welfare in individual and collective contexts alike. What is more, the fact that the account of Yeh's life is an exemplary biography demonstrates that the reader was expected to emulate Yeh and devote his/her own life to fulfilling the ideals which Yeh is said to have embodied.

In the case of Yeh the banished immortal, humanitarian service is presented as a method of atonement and redemption. The reader, however—presumably quite mortal—might or might not have committed serious transgressions of his/her own. Hence in medieval Taoism, altruistic activity might not always have been intended merely as penance or remedial spiritual development. It is quite possible that a mortal who aspired to celestial immortality (such as Yeh at last re-attained) might very well have construed altruistic service as a viable and effective path to personal perfection. In a sense, then, altruism could be construed as a path to personal salvation within the context of Taoist doctrine.

It might be questioned whether such far-reaching conclusions can validly be drawn from a single Taoist text. But in actuality, the *T'ang Yeh chen-jen chuan* is only one of several available proof texts in this connection.

An examination of T'ang dynasty memorial inscriptions and other biographical materials reveals that the ideal of social service was an inherent component of Taoism throughout the

medieval period. For instance, an epitaph of 739, issued in the name of the emperor Hsüan-tsung himself; recounts that the Taoist divinity Lord Mao had enjoined the adolescent Yeh Fa-shan "to take aiding others and assisting in edification as your ambition" (Kirkland: 404).

Similar sentiments appear in early accounts of Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen (646-735), the greatest Taoist master of the high T'ang period. For example, one early memorial inscription admonished against withdrawing from society to pursue self-perfection in isolation:

Now if one withdraws, 'carving goblets' [i.e. refining one's excellences], his hidden traces do not respond to things. If one wanders, singing madly, his inner refinement does not edify people....Therefore the Venerable Master [i.e. Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen] attended to the vast Tao, and did not hinder its operation; he practiced 'excellence in saving [others],' and did not repose in his retreat.
(Kirkland: 266)

Similarly, an inscription text of 772 portrays Ssu-ma himself as conveying the same ideals to his foremost disciple, Li Han-kuang:

One who engages in meritorious activity while embracing Emptiness is inexhaustible in [terms of] the Tao. [But] one who obliterates his traces while trusting to secluded moors is indeed shallow in [terms of] Virtue (*te*). Though one may transmit [teachings] at a great distance, it is more fitting to save people.
(Kirkland: 309)

Taking these passages in conjunction with the message of the *T'ang Yeh chen-jen chuan*, one can see that the ideal of selfless social commitment was a pervasive feature of organized Taoism from at least the eighth century through the thirteenth.

It might be supposed that such an emphasis upon social service may have represented only a transitory anomaly in the history of Taoism. One does grant that altruistic activity may have been stressed somewhat more heavily in T'ang times than during other periods. Yet there is evidence that the basic principle had been present in the Taoist tradition since ancient times, and has endured as an aspect of Taoism even down to the present day.

ALTRUISM AS AN ELEMENT OF THE TAOIST TRADITION

A fact that has been generally overlooked is that altruistic ideals were an integral element of the teachings of Taoism from its earliest antecedents in the *Tao te ching*. Numerous passages of that classic work evince such ideals, as aspects of its most basic principles.

According to Lao-Tzu, selflessness is an essential quality of the Tao itself, the transcendental origin and guiding force of the universe: the Tao benefits all things with no expectation of praise or reward (chaps. 34, 51). Within the human sphere, Lao-Tzu's ideal was the Sage, an individual who successfully emulates the Tao. The Sage is described as one who (1) perfects himself and (2) benefits others in the silent and selfless manner of the Tao itself. He is said to be benevolent and faithful to all, regardless of others' behavior, and to accept the needs and interests of others as his own (chap. 49). In fact, he is said to cherish loving-kindness (*tz'u*) as his principal treasure in life (chap. 67).

So great in fact is the moral and spiritual wealth of one who has the Tao that he is said to be in a position to share such riches with all under heaven (chap. 77). Indeed, even at the installation of the divinely sanctioned monarch and his highest ministers, an offering of material tribute is accounted less appropriate than a gift of the Tao, the greatest of all possible treasures (chap. 62). In the work's final chapter, which summarizes its primary themes, the author's penultimate words of advice are unmistakably altruistic: "The sage does not hoard [his moral and

spiritual resources]: the more one does on behalf of others, the more one has for oneself; the more one gives to others, the more one is enriched" (chap. 81).

While many of those altruistic precepts are rather vague, lacking definite social focus, other passages of the *Tao te ching* clearly exhort the reader to activity which benefits society at every level:

Cultivate [the Tao] within oneself; and one's virtue will be perfected.

Cultivate it within the household, and one's virtue will be abundant.

Cultivate it within the neighborhood, and one's virtue will be enduring.

Cultivate it within the nation, and one's virtue will be overflowing.

Cultivate it within the entire world (*t'ien-hsia*), and one's virtue will be universal (chap. 54).

Most discussions of the Taoist classics give these sentiments little attention, for Taoism is generally regarded as an egocentric value system. But the altruistic principles articulated in the *Tao te ching* were not lost upon later generations of Taoists. For instance, in the *Lieh-tzu* (a classic of Taoist philosophy dating from perhaps the third century CE), one reads, "The highest sage shares his moral possessions with others. The next in wisdom shares his material possessions with them" (Graham: 126).

It is frequently asserted that religious Taoism lost sight of the lofty insights and ideals which Lao-Tzu and Chuang-tzu had attained. But in reality, organized Taoism preserved most if not all of the cardinal principles of the ancient philosophers. What it did with the ideals of classical Taoist thought was to integrate them into a comprehensive religious system. In the course of time, changing conditions stimulated many new developments, and the proliferation of scriptures, rites, and revelations in religious Taoism has served to distract attention from the underlying continuities within the common Taoist heritage. Diligent analysis of the full Taoist

tradition renders those continuities more fully intelligible, and allows a more accurate appraisal of the interrelated elements of that tradition.

The Taoism of Han times had a socio-political focus. The ideology of such works as the *T'ai-p'ing ching* blended the primitivistic utopian ideals of Lao-Tzu and Chuang-tzu with Han dynasty ideals of a spiritualized political microcosm. The cults of the Yellow Turbans and the "Five Pecks of Rice" also placed heavy emphasis upon the ethical and religious underpinnings of the well-ordered society. Then, in the third century, the Celestial Masters entered government circles, and social concerns received decreasing attention until the Ling-pao revelations occurred in south China. Shang-ch'ing salvation, for its part, was elitist, and its quasi-gnostic cosmology and eschatology could have engendered little enthusiasm for social commitment. But the Ling-pao tradition restored the ancient Taoist interest in altruistic activity as an inexpendable element of the individual and collective religious life.

The dominance attained by Ling-pao ritual in medieval Taoism may also have served to disseminate a set of characteristically Ling-pao values and attitudes. The doctrine of universal salvation that had inspired the Ling-pao liturgy did not achieve general acceptance within Taoism. Most likely, those individuals most amenable to such doctrines tended to gravitate instead toward Pure Land Buddhism, which was also developing during the same period. (Pure Land Buddhism taught salvation through faith, promising that a transcendental being—the *bodhisattva* Amitabha—would extend his saving grace to all who would accept it.) Yet other, more general Ling-pao values did receive frequent expression in later materials. Those values must be accounted essential characteristics of medieval Taoism.

Prominent among those fundamental ideals was an insistence upon service to others as a necessary element of the religious life. The lives of T'ang Taoists such as Yeh Fa-shan and Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen presented divinities and Taoist masters alike as pressing home one crucial principle: no matter how spiritually advanced an individual may be, he/she is morally and

spiritually deficient if he/she neglects the needs and concerns of others in a selfish pursuit of individual goals.

It may well be that that emphasis owed much to the *bodhisattva* ideal of Mahayana Buddhism (perhaps as filtered through Ling-pao doctrine). To what extent medieval Taoism may have been influenced by Buddhism, and through what mechanisms, are questions awaiting further research. But as witnessed in the *Tao te ching* and *Lieh-tzu*, altruism and social commitment had long been present as an undercurrent in the Taoist tradition itself.

Within the accounts of T'ang Taoists, one may discern the distinctly Taoist tenor of altruistic ideals in the continual commendation of "hidden virtue" and "unseen assistance." Lao-Tzu had accentuated non-action, and the beneficence which he had advocated had certainly been no program for social activism. It is true some T'ang Taoists did labor actively to benefit others—counseling the emperor, curing illness, dispelling evil spirits, etc. But in general, the Taoist ideal seems to have been to provide assistance to others through subtle and unseen means. The precise nature of such means is never precisely defined in the biographical sources. Yet, the subtler and more mystical such assistance was, the more it partook of classical Taoist ideals and the less it resembled common charity or the Buddhist *bodhisattva* ideal.

SOLICITUDE FOR NON-HUMAN LIFE IN MEDIEVAL TAOISM

The data examined above demonstrate a persistent Taoist commitment to nurturing the welfare of all of human society. The roots of that commitment lay in the altruistic sentiments expressed in the Taoist classics, and in the universalistic soteriology of the Ling-pao scriptures. But the accounts of the lives of T'ang Taoists provide evidence of an even more comprehensive dedication to the welfare of others, extending beyond the confines of human society to include all

living things, human and non-human alike. To the best of my knowledge, such an interest in the welfare of non-human life has never before been recognized as an element of Taoist piety.

The first indication that T'ang Taoism featured a concern for all living things appears in an imperial edict dated 711 CE. The edict was issued by the emperor Jui-tsung to provide formal sanction for the Taoist master Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen to take up residence upon a holy mountain. At the end of the edict, the emperor orders the creation of a sacred wildlife preserve around the master's place of residence:

[I] allocate forty *li* in a secluded area within Mt. T'ien-t'ai as a blessed spot for the prolongation of the life of flora and fauna and for the construction of a [Taoist] abbey (*knan*). (Kirkland: 243)

The term "blessed spot" (*fu-ti*) was a technical term for a Taoist holy place, usually associated with a sacred mountain. There is no indication that Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen had requested the establishment of a wildlife preserve at Mt. T'ien-t'ai. But one can hardly imagine that the emperor would have specified such an intention if it would not have been appreciated as an act which promoted the ideals of Taoism.

A similar passage appears in a slightly later text. In a memorial inscription dated 777, Jui-tsung's successor, Hsuan-tsung, is said to have honored Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen's successor Li Hanguang with splendid gifts, and with an extraordinary directive:

[The emperor] also prohibited hunting and fishing on the mountainside [at Li's residence, the holy massif known as Mao-shan], and those who consumed strong foods and meat could not obtain access [to the mountain]. [In addition, the emperor] conducted public and private prayers and supplications [on behalf of all living things], and totally abolished the [imperial] livestock pens. (Kirkland 312)

As in the edict concerning Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen, it is never asserted here that the Taoist master had solicited such measures from the throne. Yet the benevolent imperial actions—extending to wild and domestic creatures alike—are clearly presented as gestures of deference to Li. One can only surmise that the two T'ang emperors had reason to believe that measures protective of non-human life would have been judged apposite honors for the great Taoist masters.

Another text provides more direct evidence that T'ang Taoists sought to promote a concern for all life. In 744/745, the eminent government official Ho Chih-chang retired from his illustrious posts, begging imperial permission to undergo ordination as a *tao-shih*. According to the *New Dynastic History of the T'ang* (*Hsin T'ang shu*; completed in 1060), the emperor Hsüan-tsung approved Ho's request, whereupon Ho successfully petitioned "that a circular palace lake. . . be converted into a pond reserved for liberating living creatures" (Kirkland: 360).

Imperially sanctioned ponds for the liberation of living things were not unusual in the period in question (Kirkland: 115). The East Asian practice of "liberating living creatures" (*fang-sheng*) is generally regarded as a corollary of the Buddhist doctrine of *ahimsa*, the eschewal of the taking of life in any form. But a practice of the same name is also mentioned in native Chinese texts—including the *Lieh-tzu*—that were composed before the first East Asian attestation of the Buddhist custom (Bodde: 409-10). It is certainly likely that Buddhism helped popularize the practice of "liberating living things." Yet the fact that the medieval Chinese accepted it so readily may have resulted in part from its attestation in classical Taoist works (Kirkland: 123-24).

At any rate, it is clear from the biography of Ho Chih-chang that members of the Taoist clergy did on occasion openly urge the establishment of imperial wildlife preserves. At other times, they may have prompted such acts through less public advocacy. Those facts complete our understanding of the texts quoted above, in which the emperors displayed concern for non-human life and took protective measures as a method of honoring great Taoist masters.

One further biographical text dated to 803-810 demonstrates that the medieval Taoist solicitude for all things was considered a corollary of the virtue of "unseen assistance" or "hidden merit." The text, composed by a Confucian high official, details the spiritual lineage of Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen and proclaims that all the great masters involved "took the accomplishments of *yin* and the rescue of creatures as their priorities" (Kirkland: 104). From this and the passages cited above, it is apparent that T'ang Taoists were known for espousing subtle acts of all-embracing beneficence as preeminent ideals for the adherents of their tradition.

CONCLUSION

The fact that T'ang Taoists were concerned for the welfare of non-human life accords with the altruistic tendencies noted in other segments of the Taoist tradition. As a rule, Taoists assumed that it is impossible even to correct external affairs unless one has first corrected oneself. Faced with that imperative of self-perfection, some who aspired to Taoist ideals tended to become preoccupied with their own spiritual development, and lost sight of the ideal of devoting their moral and spiritual attainments to the service of others. Consequently, organized Taoism repeatedly reminded Taoist aspirants of the paramount virtue of dedicating oneself to the aid and advancement of all of society and, indeed, of all living things.

Lao-Tzu had taught that by means of the Tao, a ruler could ensure a peaceful and well-ordered society. But he had also stressed the ideal of placing the needs and interests of others before one's own. Lao-Tzu would have agreed with the medieval Taoists who warned that one who cultivates himself while neglecting others has lost sight of the true nature of the Sage. As the *Tao te ching* states clearly, "The sage is always adept at saving others, so that no one is rejected, and is always adept at saving things, so that nothing is abandoned" (chap. 27).

Hence the ideal of the Taoist—philosopher and priest alike—was to bear in mind the inherent value of all things, and to seek, like the Tao, to nurture all things in their natural course of development. Accordingly, rescuing a person in distress or protecting the habitat of wildlife was as natural an act for a Taoist as was counseling an emperor or instructing a student in ritual or scripture.

At one point, some Taoists had lived in hope of the arrival of a savior who would redress the evils of the world and establish a world of peace and happiness. But as the ages passed, those Taoists increasingly turned to a reliance upon their own efforts. As with many people in many ages and cultures, their motto would have been that if one waits for someone else to save the world, the task will never be accomplished. Hence, the Taoist religion enjoined its adherents "to take aiding others and assisting in edification" as their ambition. One who practiced "excellence in saving others" fulfilled the ideals of honoring the heavenly divinities and facilitating the operation of "the vast Tao." As Taoism declined, those principles may at certain times have become somewhat obscured. But over a large part of its history, Taoism espoused the soteriological value of altruism and social commitment.

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