

TAOISM AND CONFUCIANISM (through the Han Dynasty)

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The relationship of early Confucianism and Taoism was more complex than many modern minds imagine. Looking back through 2000 years, with lenses shaped by modern Confucian and Western biases, we have commonly assumed that Taoism arose mainly as a reaction against Confucianism. Indeed, many writers have simplistically presented Confucianism and Taoism in a dualistic caricature. A more realistic appraisal requires careful analysis of the social, cultural and political realities of early China.

Modern assumptions that Confucianism was founded by Confucius and Taoism by "Lao-tzu" are in error. Confucius, for his part, maintained that his ideals were not his own formulations, but only a restatement of the values bequeathed by the wise and virtuous men of earlier eras. There is some reason to believe that certain behavioral ideals, stressing honor and propriety, had in fact been cherished, and at least sometimes practiced, by members of the ruling clans of the various statelets of Confucius' day. But those ideals of *noblesse oblige* were transformed by Confucius from a social ideal, requiring aristocratic status, into a moral ideal that any conscientious man should develop and practice. Yet all Confucians considered social responsibility a primary concern. Even the more "cosmic" or "mystical" dimensions of classical Confucianism — e.g., in the *Zhongyong* — retain a social focus, insisting that the ultimate reason for a person to cultivate Confucian ideals is to lead a socio-political transformation. Despite the disparities between other proponents of classical Confucianism, such as Mencius (Mengzi) and Hsün-tzu (Xunzi), their core concerns were resolutely humanistic. Confucians always insisted that their ideals are to be attained in everyday life, through moral cultivation and the fulfillment of one's proper roles in society.

Contrary to modern misconceptions, early Taoists shared much with early Confucians. In fact, by the end of the classical period, a number of thinkers — artificially segregated by later writers into various "schools" — integrated Taoist ideals with Confucian ideals. In fact, both Mengzi and Xunzi did so. To understand such facts, one must understand that the thinkers of pre-Qin China *did not classify themselves* as "Confucian" or "Taoist," and certainly did not assume any contradiction between the two traditions. *All* such thinkers — even the compilers of the *Neiye* — insisted that it is possible and morally necessary for individuals to develop or transform themselves in ways that most people do not, thereby enhancing individual well-being *and* the well-being of others around us. *No* such thinkers gave priority to state concerns (as did the *fajia*), or to social activism devoid of self-cultivation (as did Mozi). None saw our lives as being beyond our ability to transform and perfect. They did all generally share a belief that our lives should somehow accord with *Tian* ("Heaven"), but none succumbed to the theistic moralism of Mozi: for the thinkers that we now call Confucian and Taoist, the individual is never to become a slavish follower of any external authority (whether political or supernatural), but rather a thoughtful practitioner of meaningful ideals that any serious mind can understand. Confucians seem to have assumed that such minds were found only in men; Taoists, though mostly male, seem not to have shared that assumption, and some (especially contributors to *Laozi*) commended seeking sensible lessons in women's life-experiences. Both Confucians and Taoists assumed that the world should have a human ruler, and that he should live by, and promote, the ideals propounded by the thinker in question. While Zhuang Zhou may have considered government irrelevant, he did not condemn its existence. So while Taoists may have been less interested in existing Chinese social and political institutions than Confucians, none denounced monarchy or aristocracy, none would have understood or condoned modern ideals of egalitarianism

or radical individualism. To all of them, no one is encouraged to discover or practice any "new" truth. Rather, one is to live the ideal life by finding and accepting one's real place within the existing world.

Where Confucians and Taoists parted ways is that the former viewed "the world" primarily in terms of inherited socio-political norms, while the latter focussed on humans' continuities with the invisible dimensions of reality that Confucians were often reluctant to discuss. Modern interpreters, including scholars, often mistakenly suggest that such differences resulted from a Taoist concern with a reality called "Tao" that did not concern Confucians. Others, more simplistically, maintain that Confucians advocated activism while Taoists commended *wuwei* (non-action). In reality, Confucius taught his followers to follow the correct and noble *dao*, and advocated *wuwei* by rulers, as did both the *Dao de jing* and such "Legalists" as Shen Buhai. Modern writers also generally ignore the fact that Mencius saw the cultivation of *qi* (see *Neijye*) as part of a gentleman's self-cultivation. Such matters deserve much more attention as we reappraise Chinese traditions.