

A Study of the Daoism's Concept of *Dao*

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Abstract: A key concept of Chinese traditional culture is *Dao*, which incorporates, in some form and to some degree, all Chinese philosophical Daoism, religious Daoism, philosophy of *the Book of Changes* and Neo-confucianist major ideas. One who wants to study Chinese traditional philosophy and religion deeply, he must first understand the concept of *Dao*. Therefore, this paper will take the study of the concept of *Dao* in classical philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism as its objects of research, and the study will be conducted from two aspects: 1) the philosophical Daoism and religious Daoist texts regarding the concept of *Dao*; 2) the meaning of *Dao*.

Introduction

In the history of Chinese civilization, Daoism is often referred to philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism. They have become an inseparable part of the indigenous of Culture of China. The foundation of both Philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism is the concept of *Dao*, which is often translated into English as “Way.” A number of Chinese classical texts address the theory of *Dao*. According to hermeneutical research methods, a comprehensive survey of the concept of *Dao* should begin with the philosophical and religious Daoist texts.

The Classical Texts Regarding the Concept of *Dao*

Philosophical Daoism is often referred to as the “Teachings of the Yellow Emperor and Laozi” (*huanglao xue*) or of “Laozi and Zhuangzi” (*laozhuang*). Descriptions of the Yellow Emperor in Si Maqian’s (145BCE-?) *Records of History* (*shiji*), *Zhuangzi*, *A Series of Sage Biographies* (*liexian zhuan*) and *The Mountain and Sea Classic* (*Shanhai jing*) show that the Yellow Emperor was a purely legendary figure. Laozi and Zhuangzi, on the other hand, seem to have been actual historical persons. According to the chapter “The Biographies of Laozi and Hanfei” (*Laozi Hanfei lie zhuan*) of *Records of History*, *The Daodejing*, a text of only slightly more than 5,000 Chinese characters, attributed to Laozi (sixth century BCE), the founder of Philosophical Daoism. According to *Records of History*, *A History of the Hua Dynasty* (*hanshu*) and the *Commentary on the Water Classic* (*shuijing zhu*), the second great figure of early Philosophical Daoism is the philosopher Zhuangzi, whose work is *Zhuangzi*.

The most basic philosophy of both Philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism is the concept of *Dao* (the Way). The following is a list of major philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism’s scholars before the Northern Song dynasty, with their work that relate to the concept of *Dao*.

Author/Date	Title	Subject Matter
King Wen (1152-1056BCE)	<i>The Book of Changes</i>	King Wen used <i>yin</i> and <i>yang</i> lines to interpret “the essence of nature,” which was understood by later scholars such as Zhu Xi as concept of <i>dao</i> (Way).
Confucius (551-479BCE)	<i>Xici (Great Commentary of The Book of Changes)</i>	In the <i>Xici</i> commentary on <i>The Book of Changes</i> , Confucius interpreted the <i>Dao</i> as the Supreme Ultimate and interpreted the <i>Dao</i> (Way) of change (<i>yi</i>) as the “alternation and exchange of <i>yin</i> and <i>yang</i> .”[1]
Laozi (600-470BCE)	<i>Daodejing (The Classic of Ethics)</i>	Laozi believed that “the Tao (Dao) [Way] that can be told of is not the eternal Tao (Dao); the name that can be named is not the eternal name. Nameless, it is the origin of Heaven and Earth; namable, it is the mother of all things.” [2] According to Laozi, the <i>Dao</i> is the whole of nature and the universe; it also envelops nature and produces nature.
Zhuangzi (369-286)	<i>Zhuangzi (The Classic of Zhuangzi)</i>	In Zhuangzi, the philosophy of <i>Dao</i> comes close to a philosophy of <i>qi</i> but not mind or the Supreme Ultimate, an important characteristic of Zhuangzi’s thought was not the interpretation of the <i>Dao</i> as being in the human mind, but as the way of change of <i>qi</i> (life-energy), or as <i>shen</i> (spirit-energy).
Author unknown, (25-220)	<i>The Classic of Great Peace (Taipingjing)</i>	Discusses the social political order of “great peace,” and the manifestation of all things in accordance with Laozi’s notion of “Dao gave birth to One; One gave birth to Two; Two gave birth to Three; Three gave birth to all the myriad things.” [3]
Wei Boyang (100-170)	<i>The Compatible Cultivation of the Book of Changes (Zhouyi cantongqi)</i>	Discusses tracing the vital force of sentient beings’ back to its origin; the primal <i>qi</i> (<i>yuanqi</i>) of the undifferentiated oneness; Inner and outer alchemy; uses of <i>The Book of Changes</i> in individual spiritual cultivation. [4]
Ge Hong (281-341)	<i>The Texts of Baopuzi (Baopuzi), Record of Immortal (Shenxian zhuan)</i>	Medicine; describes celestial beings
Baoling School (approx.300-400)	<i>Taishang dongxuan lingbao sanyuan pinjie gongde qingzhong jing</i>	Daoist precepts
Kou Qian (365-448)	<i>Texts of Daoist precepts (Laojun yinsong jiejing)</i>	Daoist precepts; monastic management.
Lu Xiuqing (406-477)	<i>The Guiding Principle of the Dao (Daomen kelue)</i>	monastic precepts and pure rules; edited Daoist scriptures.
Tao Hongjing (456-536)	<i>The Path of Attain Enlightenment (Dengzhen yinjue), Hedan yaozhufa</i>	Daoist precepts; medicine; health; inner and outer alchemy; individual spiritual. cultivation;[5] describes celestial being[6].
Sun Simiao (581-682)	<i>Qianjin Medicine Prescription (Qianjin yaofang), The Verse of Life-energy and</i>	Medicine; health; inner alchemy; meditation.

	<i>Spirit-energy Training (Yangshen lianqi ming), Combination of Three Religions (Hesanjiao lun)</i>	
Cheng Xuanying (approx. 635)	<i>Commentary on Daodejing (Laozi Daodejingzhu)</i>	Commentaries on <i>Daodejing</i> , <i>Zhuangzi</i> and <i>Durenjing</i> .
Sima Chengzhen (655-735)	<i>Treatise on Sitting on No-thought (Zuowang lun), Self-cultivation and Life-energy Training (Xiushen yangqi jue)</i>	<i>Treatise on Sitting on No-thought (Zuowang lun)</i> and <i>Self-cultivation and Life-energy Training (Xiushen yangqi jue)</i> are the most important Daoist scriptures. <i>Treatise on Sitting on No-thought (Zuowang lun)</i> introduces Buddhist meditation such as “cessation” (<i>zhi</i>) and “contemplation (<i>guan</i>)” of the Tiantai School. Traces sentient beings’ vital force back to its origin; primal <i>qi (yuanqi)</i> of the undifferentiated oneness.[7]
Zhang Wanfu (approx.300-400)	<i>The Meaning and Pronunciation of Daoist Texts (Yiqie Daojing yinyi)</i>	Daoist precepts; pure rules; medicine.
Peng Xiao (?-955)	<i>Pure the Compatible Cultivation of the Book of Changes (Zhouyi Cantongqi fenzhang tongzhen yi)</i>	Inner alchemy.
Chen Tuan (?-989)	<i>(The Texts of Metaphysics) Zhixuanpian, The Book of Inner alchemy(Rushi huandan shi)</i>	Philosophy of <i>The Book of Changes</i> ; philosophy of <i>Laozi</i> and <i>Zhuangzi</i> ; Inner alchemy; the value of Chen Tuan’s thought is the interaction among Buddhism, Confucianism, <i>The Book of Changes</i> and Daoism.[8]
Zhang Boduan (987-1082)	<i>The Book of True Nature of Things (Wuzhenpian)</i>	Zhang Bozhuan indicated that the three religions - Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism - were the same religion; He introduces Buddhist concepts such as <i>prajñāpāramitā</i> and <i>sunyatā</i> into <i>Wuzhenpian</i> to develop Daoism.

Table 1 The Concept of *Dao* before the Northern Song Dynasty

In spite of the fact that a number of great philosophical Daoism and religious Daoist philosophers appeared, and their contribution to Daoism included political “great peace” (*taiping*), “inner alchemy” (*neidan*), “outer alchemy” (*waidan*), medicine, health, or introducing Buddhist concepts of *prajñāpāramitā* and *sunyatā* to develop Daoism etc., yet, the philosophical ontological developments did not take a step beyond *The Book of Changes*, *Yizhuan (Commentary on The Book of Changes)*, *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* in their philosophy of *Dao* as we have discussed above.

The Meaning of Dao

It will be helpful to summarize both the Philosophical Daoist and religious Daoist concepts of *Dao* as described by Chung-ying Cheng as follows:

Dao is the whole of nature and the universe.[9]

Dao is the origin and the source of the process of change and the creation of things; it gave birth to all things.[10]

The mysterious concept of *Dao* is the centerpiece of Daoist thought and living. *Dao* represents the ultimate first principle. It has a mysterious quality which cannot be known through any concept.[11]

All things returning to their root, *Dao*, “means tranquility, it is called returning to” their destiny. The “return to” their “destiny is called the eternal” *Dao*. [12]

This characterization suggests that “the *Dao* has both ontological and cosmological qualities, and that these qualities interpenetrate each other.” [13] Although Daoism indicates an ontocosmology of *Dao*, which is revealed most fully through tranquility and tranquility has an obvious relationship with meditation, the Way leads to meditation and is a return to the true nature of things. [14] However, in the philosophy of Daoism, the *Dao* was never defined as “mind,” that is, the universe in its entirety is not regarded by Daoists as consisting of a single absolute mind.

In addition, according to Chung-ying Cheng, before the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127), Daoism filled out a cosmic “black box” view of the interaction between mind and world harmony with the concept of *qi* as “life-energy.” *Qi* is a “blend of energy and matter rather than pure matter --translations such as ‘life force’ bring out an essential connection with vitality. This makes it appropriate in a cosmology that links the active mind with the changing world.” [15] Moreover, the application of *qi* theory has focused on “*shen*” (spirit-energy), or “*jing* (the essence of life-energy), *qi* (life-energy) and *shen* (spirit-energy).” [16] Yet, by doing so, it appears that Daoism had not viewed its consequences for mind as particularly iconoclastic. [17] It still lacked a notion of *jing*, *qi* and *shen* independent of mind.

Conclusion

Based on above discussion, the concept of *Dao* is the foundation of both Philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism. The *Dao* has both ontological and cosmological qualities, and has an obvious relationship with meditation, the Way leads to meditation is to return to the true nature of things. Hence, *Dao* is also considered as the whole of nature and the universe, it gave birth to all things.

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