



Daoism

By Eman M. Elshaikh

The Dao, meaning “the way,” is an ancient Chinese belief system which emphasizes harmony with the natural, balanced order of the universe.

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The Daoist way

Belief systems usually have rules and practices. These include rituals, rules about food, and laws. Daoism is a Chinese belief system that is a little different. It is sometimes called Taoism. Daoists try to avoid strict rules and laws. They practice inaction, which is pronounced *wu wei* in Chinese. That might sound like Daoists believe in doing nothing, but that's not quite right. Instead, it means that a person should do nothing that conflicts with the Dao. So what is the Dao?

The Dao means "the way." It is the natural order of the universe. Daoists try to be in harmony with this natural order. Instead of following rules, Daoists try to create a sense of naturalness called *ziran*. Daoists believe that by being in tune with nature, they can avoid violence and suffering.

The *Dao De Jing* is a Daoist text from around the year 500 CE. The text describes the ideas of Daoism. Daoists believe in obeying the natural order of things. Daoist belief also states that it is important to balance opposites, like difficulty and ease.

Most people say the legendary Chinese thinker Laozi is the author of The Dao De Jing. However, historians are unsure if Laozi even existed at all. Some think he may have lived at the same time as Confucius. Confucius is another Chinese thinker. Confucius' ideas make up another belief system called Confucianism.

Daoism and Confucianism have important similarities. In fact, Confucianists also use the term "dao." However, Daoists and Confucianists disagree about what dao means. For Confucianists, dao means living in a fair and ethical way. However, Confucianists are different than Daoists because Confucianists focus on making strict rules.



[A part of a Taoist manuscript](#), ink on silk, 2nd century BCE, Han Dynasty. Public domain.



[A painting depicting Laozi meeting Confucius from the Yuan dynasty \(1271–1368 CE\)](#). By Shih K'ang, public domain.

Daoists believe that nature, not people, controls how things change. As a result, they think human rules are less important. Confucianists also focus on culture and society. However, Daoists see culture as unnatural and unnecessary. One powerful Daoist symbol is uncarved wood. Uncarved wood shows how simple nature is when humans do not try to change it.

Daoism and society

Daoism is not focused on action or rituals. However, Daoists do have a number of traditions. Some of these practices impact the ways both communities and individuals act. These include meditation and certain forms of martial arts.

In general, Daoists have stayed out of government. They prefer to live naturally and simply. Wealth and fame were all big no-nos for Daoists. They preferred having small, self-sufficient communities living in harmony with nature. This meant that Daoists stayed away from many aspects of Chinese culture and society, like language and education.

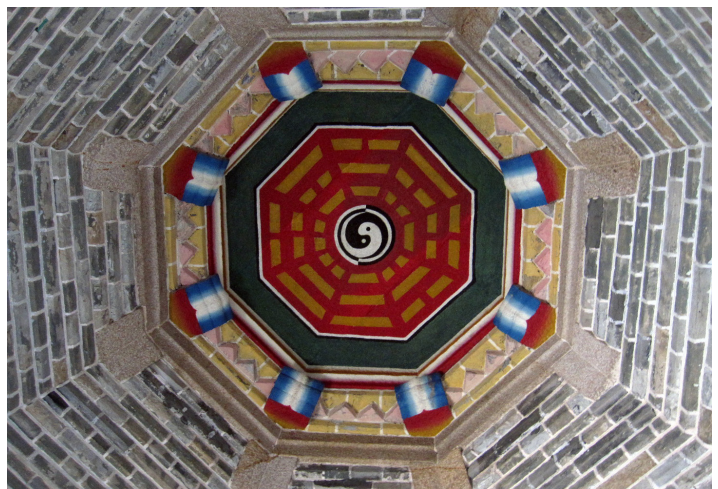
Daoists believe in living simply. This meant using simple clothes, food, houses, and forms of entertainment. This belief had many effects on society. Both Confucianists and Daoists believed that the family unit was incredibly important. However, Confucianists created a clear divide between men and women. Daoists on the other hand did not create such a sharp divide between genders. Daoist women could be religious figures and teachers. In fact, the *Dao De Jing* speaks highly of qualities associated with women. Women are often connected to things like fertility, softness, and submission. Still, some of these associations are not necessarily correct.

The ancient idea of *yin and yang* is another part of Daoism. The idea is that society is made up of opposites that exist harmoniously together. In Daoism, *yin and yang* also symbolize the masculine and the feminine. The *yin* is considered feminine. It is seen as a necessary and natural part of the universe.

Confucianism and Daoism have big differences. However, they have both influenced Chinese society in significant ways. In fact, some people saw the two systems as a *yin and yang* that balanced each other out. Confucianism guided public life. Meanwhile, Daoism influenced private life. Different belief systems like Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism have influenced Chinese cultures for hundreds of years. They continue to play a role in Chinese communities today.



[*A Western Han \(202 BCE–9 CE\) fresco depicting Confucius and Laozi, from a tomb of Dongping County, Shandong province, China. By Xinhua News, public domain.*](#)



[*A decorative ceiling depicting Daoist symbols, including yin and yang. By Kunwi, CC BY-SA 3.0.*](#)

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