

Daoist Alchemy in the West: The Esoteric Paradigms

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Daoism, as the primary indigenous religion of China, is a highly esoteric tradition. Constructed of many different strands, over several thousand years, Daoism has a complex history of integrating various techniques of meditation, spirit communication, consciousness projection, bodily movements, medicine, and “internal alchemy” with a profound transpersonal philosophy of nature and a metaphysics of human relationships based on an ideal of spiritual transformation leading to immortality. The mythically structured world of Daoism is rooted in the tripartite division of Heaven, Humanity, and Earth which interact through a rich web of symbolic correlations and correspondences centered on the Daoist sage as a master of a parallel integration of spirit, mind, and body. Thus while Daoism emphasizes bodily disciplines like T’ai Chi and Chi Gong, a healthy diet, and a natural life in harmony with nature and natural processes, it also emphasizes a paradigm of embodied spirituality that seeks to actualized various inner potentials that can lead to the radical transformation of the natural. Rather than seeking to attain transcendence “beyond nature,” Daoism emphasizes the value of nature as the ground of all transpersonal development.i[1] Such a paradigm is highly congruent with certain streams of practice and thought in Western esotericism as well as with current, emergent models of participatory spirituality influenced by Daoism.ii[2]

Over the last fifty years, Daoism has become increasingly accessible to the west, primarily through the translations of esoteric texts and through the increasing propagation of multiple Daoist traditions by both Chinese and Western teachers. Daoism is by no mean a single hegemonic tradition, but a mosaic of textual, ritual, and interpretive practices and schools that eludes any simple quantification. Much like Western esotericism, Daoism is a complex reflection of movements and dialogical interactions, often based on the writings or oral traditions of individual masters whose teachings were at times subversive or highly controversial within the Chinese context.iii[3] This dialogical interaction was unmediated by any single institutional hierarchy until very late in Chinese history and even in that late context, individual Doaists continued to develop esoteric practices through personal interpretations of the immense collection of Daoist esoteric texts, as epitomized in the *Daozang* or collected sacred texts of Daoism, canonized in 1444 and still largely untranslated into English.iv[4] The thousands of texts in this collection are highly esoteric and yet, there is no specific doctrinal framework for the collection which leads, in turn, to many sectarian differences in both interpretation and application of those texts.

Simultaneously, specific schools have also institutionalized their ritual enactments and training processes resulting in highly diverse sects, each with its own ethics, techniques, and relationship to the local community. The cosmological and philosophical reflections (dao^{jia}) of the sages and the religious activities (dao^{jiao}) of the institutional priests combine in a dynamic syncretism that is unique for each school or, possibly, for each Daoist. Only a loosely confederated series of specific texts, practices, and concepts,

such as yin-yang, wuxing five-element cosmology, reiterative correspondence, basic moving and sitting meditations, a shared pantheon of deities, and a search for immortality link the various schools.v[5] By the Tang dynasty, the mythical founder of Daoism, Laozi [Lao Tsu], was worshipped by many Daoists as both a divine ancestor and as the personification of the great Dao, incarnating as or appearing to different Daoist masters.vi[6] Daoism, like Western esotericism, is a plurality of traditions, not a unilateral institution, a rich synthesis of diverse texts and practices, not a dogmatized creed. Further, Daoism is also influenced by shamanic practices, Chinese folk religions, Confucianism, Buddhism, and various missionary influences from Islam and Christianity (beginning with the 17th century Jesuits). Daoists have reacted diversely to these additional influences and have debated, sometimes fiercely, with each other over the appropriation of non-Daoist ideas or practices.

Daoism in the West

Early European writings on Daoism such as Athanasius Kircher's *China Illustrata* (1667), characterized it as "full of abominable falsehoods" and as originating in a form of idolatry transferred from ancient Egypt. Jesuit missionaries further muddied the waters by describing Daoists (as opposed to Confucianists whom they supported) as "magicians and enchanters" whose alchemical search for immortality was "ridiculous".vii [7] The German philosopher Leibniz (c. 1690s) was among the first of the European intelligensia to see in the Chinese classics, and in the synthesis of Neo-Confucian and Daoist thought, a true religious expression of *philosophia perennis*, the ancient and perennial, unitary truth underlying all great religions, a concept resonant with much of Western esoteric thought.viii [8] The Leibnitz theory of the monadology, of living beings mirroring and interacting through harmonious relations, of the uninterrupted flow of continuous unfolding, has strong resonance with Daoist ideas.ix [9] More serious study of Daoism developed in the 19th century after the appointment of Abel Rémusat to the first European chair of Chinese language and literature at the Collège de France. In 1823, Rémusat published *Mémoire sur la vie et les opinions de Lao-Tseu*, one of the earliest European works on Lao-tzu and classical Chinese Daoism.x [10] It was during this same period that Jacques Marter published his book *Gnosticism* (1828) in France which first used the term "esotericism" as a construct linked to perennial philosophy and secret knowledge.xi [11] Stanislas Julien published a French translation of the *Daodejing* (the most popular classic text of Daoism) in 1841; in 1915 the French Jesuit Père Léon Wieger published his etymological *Dictionary of Chinese Characters* plus a large volume of translated Chinese texts (some from the *Daozang*); and by 1921, J. J. M. DeGroot had published his detailed six volume study of the religious systems (primarily Daoist) of China, a work largely ignored by the European intelligensia.xii [12]

By the 1840s, European scholars had constructed a form of Chinese religious philosophy that they named "Daoism"--a term not used before this time. As a philosophical tradition, Daoism became associated with a very limited selection of classic texts (*Yijing*, *Daodejing*, and *Zhaungzi*) as epitomized in the early 1848 English translation of the "old philosopher Lau-Tzse" by John Chalmers who presented the text as a serious work of metaphysics.xiii [13] By the late 19th century, "classical Daoism"

was constructed in an orientalist paradigm as a text based philosophy, a perennial wisdom tradition that “reflected a timeless spiritual quality” while “later” or “religious” Daoism was seen as a decline from its original essential purity.xiv [14] This dual attitude toward Daoism as a transcendental philosophy unencumbered by religious practice as juxtaposed to a marginalized and degraded magical religion was largely a French Catholic construct that was popularized well into the 20th century in both Europe and America. In 1876, the Scottish Congregationalist minister, James Legge, was granted the first British Chair in Chinese studies at Oxford University. His construction of “Daoism” through reputable classic text translations engendered an attitude and vocabulary around western Daoism that virtually ignored the history and complexity of Daoist esotericism.xv [15] Legge dismissed “popular” religious Daoism (Taojiao) as ‘superstitious’, ‘unreasonable’ and ‘fantastic’ much in the same way that other Protestant scholars dismissed Western esoteric traditions of magic and the occult. Subsequently, the emergent orientalist paradigm of Daoism was an imaginative projection by western scholars and esotericists based in a reification of a narrow text corpus reminiscent of the Christian New testament as “foundational” and essential to western constructions of religion.xvi [16]

In America, scholarly and popular interest in “oriental religions” resulted in a Daoist representative attending the World’s Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893. American interpreters also carried forth the theme of the universalist aspect of Daoism as illustrated in Samuel Johnson’s 1878 work on “oriental religions” in which a limited philosophical Daoism is shown to be a manifestation of a transcendental “universal religion” independent of any creed or dogma or rituals and united with the celebration of nature as found in the New England Transcendentalists.xvii [17] By way of contrast, as early as 1853 the first Chinese temple was built in San Francisco and by 1900 there were over 400 such temples stretched along the American west coast, mixing popular Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism. This living presence of Daoism was largely ignored by American scholars and mostly engaged by Chinese immigrants.xviii [18] In 1912, C. H. Bjerregaard gave a series of lectures on *The Inner Life and the Tao-Teh-King*, discussing the mystical aspects of philosophical Daoism, at the American Theosophical Society; the lectures were then published by the Theosophical Society. Bjerregaard was a newly initiated member of Hazrat Inayat Khan’s Sufi Order (Khan was a *murshid* of the Indian Chishti Order); this tentative relationship between Daoism and Islamic esotericism would be later developed in Europe and America (see below). This publication also marks the beginning of American interests in esoteric Daoism.xix [19]

In general, the American Theosophical Society supported an ecumenical idea of the *philosophia perennis*, an underlying primordial wisdom teaching, as inherent to all world religions, an interpretation that was reinforced throughout much of the 20th century.xx [20] Another supporter of the “universalism” inherent to Daoism was Paul Carus, a German emigrant to America who published (1906) with Teitaro Suzuki the first English translation of a Daoist text on the afterlife and karmic retribution, following his 1898 translation of the *Daodejing* in support of his beliefs in a universal brotherhood inherent to many eastern traditions.xxi [21] A similar approach to the text was made by Dwight Goddard’s (1919) translation of the *Daodejing*, entitled *Laotzu’s Tao and Wu*

Wei, later (1939) retranslated and edited with an article on Daoist philosophy. In 1928, Obed Johnson published *A Study of Chinese Alchemy*, one of the earliest western accounts of Daoist alchemical theory in English.xxii [22]



In Germany, Daoist alchemy was first introduced through the publication of Richard Wilhelm’s *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (1920’s in German, 1931 in English), a small esoteric Daoist text selected from the *Daozang* canon, with a commentary by C. G. Jung. Wilhelm also published early German translations of the *Yijing* (with Daoist influenced commentary) and the *Daodejing* (1924). Wilhelm’s translation of the *Yijing* was extremely popular in its English translation (1950) in both Britain and America.xxiii [23] In 1910, Martin Buber published a German translation, with commentary, on the *Zhuangzi* (the other classic work of Daoist philosophy). Buber drew parallels between Daoism and Hasidic Kabbalah as shown in a common use of tales and parables of spiritual masters, religion as social protest, an ethic of unconventionality, common meditation-visualization techniques with a goal of mystical union.xxiv [24] From the 1920s to the 1970s, Martin Heidegger drew on German translations of the *Zhuangzi* and the *Daodejing* (as well as Zen Buddhist texts) as primary sources for his philosophical reflections after writing *Being and Time*. In fact, Heidegger made his own translation of the *Daodejing*. Concepts such as being-in-the-world, releasement, letting-be, his affirmation of worldliness and “openness to Being” all seem resonant with primary Daoist teachings.xxv [25]

C. G. Jung, a proponent of modern alchemical and gnostic psychology, used the Wilhelm translation of the *Yijing* as a therapeutic aid in “exploring the unconscious” of his patients in analysis. Further, his popular idea of “synchronicity” was deeply influenced by his Daoist readings as an alternative holistic idea in the face of the more mechanistic theories of contemporary science. Jung also borrowed from the Daoist theory of visualization processes and from Yin-Yang to develop his theory of the polarity of the archetype and the general polarity of the psyche in search of wholistic integration.xxvi [26] Other psychological theorists, like Erikson and Maslow, also contain ideas resonant with Daoist thought, while a few limited studies in Daoist alchemy were also being

published.xxvii [27] By the 1950s, a limited textual Daoism was being propagated in academic institutions and a rudimentary beginning was made in the study of the religious, social, and historical aspects of Daoism through the work of Maspero, Needham, Creel, Girardot, Wing-tsit Chan, and others.

Thus the primary influence of Daoism in the west was through texts and translations, not through the study of religious rituals or alchemical practices which remained largely obscure and unknown. Further, these texts were composites based on generations of redaction and application to religious life and not simply the unedited philosophical texts of individual masters. This literary bias, based on a western orientalist textual paradigm, has obscured much that is esoteric and magical within living Daoism, both in the past and in the present. The 5,000 texts of the *Daozang* are filled with esotericism of the most diverse and complex kind, written in special languages, with hundreds of symbolic, alchemical drawings, mandalas, maps, diagrams, and instructions for internal alchemical transformations. The Chinese terminology for the various esoteric traditions has a highly complex etymological and semantic history (the 1915 Chinese-German dictionary gives 46 different meanings for the term Dao). While the *Daodejing* has over 200 translations in 17 languages, the inner teachings of Daoist esotericism still remains obscure in the popular context.xxviii [28] Nevertheless, Daoist thought has impacted both European intellectual traditions and American transcendental thought and popular culture in significant and enduring ways.

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Early Western Esoteric Interests

In Germany, the first German translation of the *Daodejing* (1870) was introduced as a theosophical work of “ancient esoteric wisdom” (*~prisca theologia*).xxx [30] The theme of “ancient wisdom” (coupled with a developing interest in the “exotic east”) attracted some western esotericists to explore Chinese Daoist texts as resources for the development of their own systems. The range of intersection between the two is a fascinating melange of cross-cultural comparison, systemic parallelism, and synthetic integration. Daoist Five Element (*wuxing*) cosmology is based in a theory of correspondences very similar to theories developed in the Greco-Roman world and subsequently passed onto Medieval Europe. The many diagrams of the various Daoist correlative systems, distinctive within the various Daoist schools, resemble in many ways the correlative symbolism of European Renaissance esotericism in synthesizing the elements (in Daoism five: in the four directions, water (N), wood (E), fire (S), metal (W), and earth in the center), with seasonal, astrological, herbal, mineral, animal as well as with colors, human organs, and spirit correlations. Equilibrium is found by balancing the Five Agents through meditative (*neiguan*), symbolic processes of internal alchemy (*neidan*), based in what Isabelle Robinet calls a “double syntax” of balanced polarity and creative ambiguity.xxxi [31]

The Five Agents are a product of the deeper Yin-Yang dynamics which originated as a relationship between *Yang* (light, breath, movement, male heaven) and *Yin* (darkness, bodily stillness, female earth) in the midst of which emerged the Human (*jen*) realm of mediation and synthesis. This tripart division of Heaven, Humanity, and Earth

each have their correspondent rulers, spirits, and powers. The interactive dynamics of Yin-Yang integration emerges from the Primordial Breath (*yuanqi* or *taiji*), the creative energy of Being, which is itself is born of *wuqi* (Highest Non-Energy). These correlations, which are many and highly diverse within various Daoist systems, were further correlated with the eight trigrams and the sixty four hexagrams of the *Yijing*, accompanied by multiple Daoist commentaries, associated with many diverse deities, and strong emphasis on astral influences of the Big Dipper constellation (Thunder Magic). All of these associations were tied to ritual and magical practices carried out by trained Daoist masters who were experts in the esoteric lore and visualization techniques of Daoist alchemy and ceremonial invocation.xxxii [32] This correlative approach is highly congruent with the western Hermetic tradition rooted in a similar correlative cosmology based in early Greco-Roman alchemy, based on five elements (earth, water, air, fire and aether) transmitted through Islamic alchemical traditions in the form of alchemical and Hermetic cosmological texts which were translated into European languages during the Italian Renaissance. The Hermetic texts were primary sources for western esoteric theories of the *prisca theologia* and the *philosophia perennis* and were clearly an early, comparative resource for the esoteric reading of translated Daoist texts.xxxiii [33]

Renaissance correlative cosmology was highly visual (graphic arts) and imagistic in mapping the body, for example Robert Fludd's microcosmic "atmospheric" depiction of the body or various Kabbalistic theories of the body, in ways more detailed and elaborate but similar to Daoist theories of the "landscape of the body" which contains a multitude of sacred beings, astrological energies, and a tripart division of upper, middle and lower chambers, each with its ruling spirits and cosmological correlations.xxxiv [34] Renaissance esotericists also used number schemas to elaborate their cosmological symbolism encoded in archetypal patterns of three, seven, nine and twelve, as do many of the Daoist masters, particularly using schemas of three, five, nine, and twelve. Western esotericism has many hierarchical systems in organizing its cosmology as do the many Daoist schools where various planes correspond to specific orders or powers or deities, linked through correlative relationships forming a "chain of being" between the different orders, as illustrated in ~Cornelius Agrippa's *De Occulta Philosophia* (1533) and similar to many Yuan dynasty Daoist texts.xxxv [35] However, Daoists have tended toward a less rigidly structured hierarchy and have been tolerant of diversity among the various Daoist esoteric schools.xxxvi [36]

Many texts on Daoist alchemy share resonances with Western esoteric, hermetic practices including the refinement of material substances through various stages of transformation, a search for an immortal elixir or "cinnabar pill", use of an hermetic vessel or cauldron, occult animal and talismanic (*fu*) symbolism including special magical scripts, the use of mineral, vegetable and pharmacological substances, secret or orally transmitted instructions (later written down), the use of esoteric visualization (*tsun*), breath and movement techniques, reclusive withdrawal from the world, fasting and asceticism, the significance of dreams and a general visionary epistemology, as well as the elusive search for varying degrees of immortality, a particular goal of Daoist practice. Magical practices, with invocations, sacred circles, geomantic inscriptions, carried out with magical implements like the staff or sword, with incense, bells, and chanting are also common aspects of both Daoist and Western esoteric techniques.xxxvii [37] It was the religious and magical techniques of Daoism that strongly attracted the

interests of certain western esotericists, much more than the strictly philosophical texts of early classical Daoism. Mythical stories and imagery, dragon bones and water fairies, the golden peaches of immortality from the gardens of Hsi Wang Mu (Queen of Heaven), as well as the reputed occult powers and abilities of the Daoist masters or “immortals” (xien), both embodied and disembodied, resonate well with the imaginative worlds of western esoteric, magical thought. The Daoist emphasis on “internal” (*neidan*) alchemy or the distillation of the “Golden Elixir” (*jindan*) based on ritual, meditation and breath techniques for personal spiritual transformation, as compared to the more “external” (*waidan*) laboratory practices, also resonated well with late 19th century magical society practices that emphasized personal transformation while the mingling of both alchemical aspects was common in western esoteric traditions.xxxviii [38]

Israel Regardie tells the story of how, in the late 1920’s, he watched Aleister Crowley of Golden Dawn fame “operate the sticks” for the oracular use of the *Yijing* in Crowley’s apartment in Paris in order to “obtain some augury for the ensuing period.”xxxix [39] Crowley at that time had “written a poetic interpretation” of the 64 *Yijing* hexagrams which Israel Regardie observed him using in oracular fashion. After Crowley obtained his Hermetic revelation from Aiwaz, the messenger of Horus in Egypt in 1904, he then traveled to China (1905) and in 1907 established his own magical order, Argenteum Astrum (AA/Silver Star) in which he integrated rewritten Golden Dawn rituals with “yogic and oriental materials of his own.” By 1925, Crowley, a high standing member of the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) German magical order, became the international leader of the OTO.xl [40] It was in this magical ritual context that Israel Regardie, later a prominent member of the Stella Matutina (a late division of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn), went to Paris in 1928 where he was introduced to the transliterated “Daoist” texts of Crowley as his secretary. Crowley, like Jung, took a serious interest in the *Yijing* and published in the 1930s, *Shih Yi; A Critical and Mnemonic Paraphrase of the Yi King* and *Khing Kang King, The Classic of Purity* (a paraphrase of the *Daodejing*).xli [41] At the very least, Crowley seems to have learned something of the Daoist oracular use of the *Yijing* and of the importance of the classic Laozi text as fundamental to Daoist occultist practices. Crowley mixed a magical brew of east-west esoteric symbolism, oracular divination and spirit invocation, reminiscent of Daoist religious techniques, without any exposure to genuine Daoist religion.xlii [42] In 1932, Regardie also referenced yin-yang and Daoist theory in his classic work on Stella Matutina magical Kabbalah.xliii [43]

Another follower of Crowley, Louis Culling, who in the early 1930s joined the magical gnostic order of the GBG founded in America by C. F. Russel (a disciple of Crowley) and who became head of the southern California section of the GBG Order, studied the *Yijing* for many years as intrinsic to the GBG gnostic magical path. Culling became the expert on magical interpretation of the “pristine” *Yijing* which he believed was hidden beneath the “barnacles” of historical text transmission. He eventually published (1966) a written version of the text, *The Pristine Yi King*, as used in the GBG starting in the late 1930s. The casting of the divination sticks (or wands or coins) fell according to a “Supraconscious Intelligence” working through the operator of the sticks.

The 64 hexagrams were memorized as a Magic Square by members of the GBG and drawn on a white cloth for the oracular casting. In developing his magical use of the *Yijing*, Culling demonstrates familiarity with Daoist terminology and the symbolism of the *bagua* prognostic chart of the eight primary trigrams. He rejected the *Yijing* translations of Wilhelm and Legge and claims to have “recovered” the original text based on the eight *bagua* (trigrams) of Fushi, the original (mythic) author of the *Yijing*. Culling created a table of correlations for each of the eight *bagua* consisting of a trigram, a symbol, a specific meaning, a quality, and “sigil” or geomantic graphic image of an element—for example, “Khien” (three solid *yang* lines), symbol of heaven or sky, the meaning is projecting strength or power, the quality is will or creation, the sigil is a large T symbolizing the *lingam* (Sanskrit), the male sexual organ.xliv [44] This is all a strange mix of Daoist and east-west magical symbolism. From this table of correspondences, Culling then develops a system of interpretations of the position of each of the *bagua* in 64 combinations and gives the magical application of the hexagrams as related to a magical circle very similar to actual Daoist ritual practices related to the hour, day, season and so on. He then gives only a single line “translation” for each hexagram, coupled with his own original commentary based on his primary table of correspondences. Subsequently, this oracular technique was taught by Culling to the GBG members.

While the writings of C. G. Jung and Mircea Eliade on western alchemy set the stage for even greater interest in possible parallels with Daoist alchemy, perennialists such as René Guénon, Titus Burckhardt, and Julius Evola were also strongly attracted to Daoism as an esoteric expressions of *philosophia perennis*.xlv [45] Whereas earlier writers, as noted above, drew parallels between Daoism and Kabbalah, these neo-traditionalists drew parallels between Daoism and Islamic Sufism. By "perennialists" I mean a coterie of European intellectuals committed to *sophia perennis*, or a “perennial wisdom” that they claimed as the authentic, inherent core of all “true” religious traditions, epitomized by Frithjof Schuon as a “transcendental unity” inherent to all religions, a claim still made under the term “primordial tradition” in America by such scholars as Huston Smith and Seyyed Hossein Nasr.xlvi [46] The link with Daoism was made through the circuitous route of identifying an inner core of teachings reflecting a universal and transcendent, esoteric spirituality supposedly free of all cultural and hermeneutic influences. Daoism was eventually assimilated into this esoteric ideology through comparisons drawn between various mystical texts and initiatic traditions, which came to include the “pristine” teachings of the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*.

John-Gustaf (Ivan) Agueli, a Swedish painter and Swedenborgian living in Paris in 1905, was a member of the Paris Theosophical Society. In 1907, while on a second visit to Egypt, Agueli was initiated by a Sufi sheikh strongly interested Islamic “universalism” (*philosophia perennis*), 'Abd al-Rahman 'Illyash al-Kabir, head of one branch of the Shadhili Sufi Order. Abd al-Rahman initiated Agueli and conferred upon him the title of *moqaddem*, one who has the authority to initiate others into the order. Agueli was possibly the first European traditionalist sanctioned to give esoteric Sufi initiations. In the same year, 1907, Agueli also wrote an article for the journal *La Gnose* on the universal and esoteric similarities between Daoism and Islam. Agueli’s

understanding of Daoism came from Albert Puyon, Comte de Pouvourville, “who had been initiated into a Chinese Daoist secret society” (c.1907) where he took the name Matgoi.xlvii [47] In 1907, René Guénon had started publishing *La Gnose*, as an esoteric journal, which he continued for about five years. As an esotericist, Guénon helped to organize the Spiritualist and Masonic Congress of 1908 where he met Fabre des Essarts, ‘the Gnostic patriarch’ (or ‘Synesius’) who initiated him as a “bishop” into the Masonic brotherhood founded by Encasse (Papus) where he assumed the name ‘Palingenius’. During this same period he was also initiated into the Primitive and Original Swedenborgian Rite, and given the title (or name) Chevalier Kadosch, and, supposedly, in 1912, Agueli initiated Guénon into the Shadhili Sufi order. The Daoist Puyon, the Sufi Agueli and the Traditionalist Guénon were friends and collaborators on *La Gnose*, thus creating a context for an orientalist reconstruction of “Daoism” along the lines of a traditionalist ideology.xlviii [48] Guénon also references another French esoteric source, a small work entitled “Les Enseignements Secrets de la Gnose,” which discusses the various esoteric aspects of the gnostic revival, such as in Kabbalah and Freemasonry, and the gnostic connection with Daoism.xlix [49]

From this initial introduction, Guénon went on to develop an enduring interest in Daoism as a manifestation of *sophia perennis*, even though he eventually migrated to Egypt where he was fully initiated into Sufism. Significantly, Guénon’s first book, published in 1924 was entitled *Orient et Occident* (East and West) and touches on Daoist ideas as part of his development of an esoteric, traditionalist paradigm. In his *Symbolisme de la Croix* (1931), which was composed in part for *La Gnose*, he writes extensively on the concept of *jingyong* (unchanging middle) and on the *yin-yang* symbol and its universal significance for all religious and esoteric traditions, specifically quoting many times *La Voie Métaphysique* written by the Daoist “initiate” Puyon (Matgoi) who cites the *Yijing*. Guénon also compares the Sufi “primordial man” with the kabbalist Adam Cadmon and the Daoist “wang” (Emperor) quoting the *Daodejing*.l [50] In later works such as *La Métaphysique Orientale* (1939) and particularly in *La Grande Triade* (1946/1994), Guénon focuses on the Daoist ternary-- Heaven, Man, Earth -- while referencing other traditions, as an “inescapable feature of all spirituality,” a triad whose symbolic structure, according to Guénon, offered guidance for inner development and spiritual transformation. Guénon continued this comparative and analogical analysis of Daoism in relationship to Sufism and other traditions until the end of his life, particularly as epitomized in his work, *Insights into Islamic Esoterism & Taoism (Aperçus sur l’Esotérisme Islamique et le Taoïsme*, 1973).li [51]

The Italian hermetic and magical baron, Giulio (Julius) Evola, was a keen follower of Guénon and wrote a book on his life among his many other esoteric works. While Evola, as a “philosopher-visionary”, sage, esotericist, painter and mountaineer applied the traditionalist and perennialist ideology to political matters, he also had a strong interest in Daoism. Evola borrowed from Daoist, Buddhist and Tantric texts to formulate his magical theories of correspondence. Recently, Evola’s thoughts on Daoism have been published in *Taoism: The Magic, the Mysticism* (1995).lii [52] Evola, whose interests centered on an “aristocracy of the spirit” epitomized by heroic, kingly figures and ascetic, mystical “men of knowledge,” understood Taoism as a paradigm of the “primordial Eastern tradition.” Lao-tzu, whose teachings are described as “mysterious, elusive, and bewildering,” became a “super-temporal being” after his death (a reference

to the divinization of Lao-tzu in the later Han period), and was an initiator of “real men” though his visionary appearances to various Chinese masters. This initiatic element reflects a universal esoteric current “strictly associated with the royal function” meant to guide elect human beings to higher knowledge. Evola regarded the *Tao Te Ching* as an esoteric text of the great “primordial tradition” centered on the Dao, or Way, manifest in two aspects: the great principle of primordial unity (transcendence) and the active principle (immanence) of spiritual virtue or law (*de*).

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He rejects, as did other traditionalists, the religious (*dao-jiao*) aspects of Daoism, focusing on the “impersonal” philosophical teaching (*dao-jia*) of the text as “characteristic of the Far Eastern *Weltanschauung*, its superhuman purity...and what may be called its ‘immanent transcendentalism’.” For Evola, Daoism reflected a perfect integration of both immanence and transcendence, actualized through the virtue of emptiness (*wu*), in order for these two aspects of the Dao to initiate the “eternal development of the world.” However, somewhat at odds with his rejection of religious Daoism, he theorized that virtue (*de*) is a magical power whose efficacy was not based on a “moralizing theology” (Christian) but was an expression of a “superior influence uncaring about individual human existence.” This virtue was a magical power of presence that “real men” manifested through their spiritual perfection, a presence that did not require them to act, but only to be “real” in order for that magical efficacy to impact others and the world at large. The “men of Dao” undergo a profound transformation “beyond form” that results in their being true men of spirit (*shenren*), “illuminated by a great light” and beyond all rudimentary forms of change or horizontal existence. The term “real men” for Evola reflects an ontological state of spiritual perfection that he borrowed from Guénon as a “purified and subtle doctrine of the ‘superman’.” Such “real men” are rare, aristocrats of the spirit concerned with “transcendental inner life and not external social conduct.”liiii [53]

The Daoist concept of spontaneity (*po*) is interpreted by Evola as not “animal-like innocence” but a state hinted at in the myth of the Golden Age as the “naturalness of the supernatural” in certain individuals. The perfected “real man” of Dao does not act but bends, withdraws, gives in, in order that the principles of *yin-yang* may manifest the will of the Dao in harmony with him who is truly in accord with the Dao. Such an individual is an “impenetrable type of initiate” whose similar type can be found, according to Evola, in western Hermeticism and in Rosicrucianism, as well as in Sufism, as an antinomian “real man” who dismisses current values and norms as insufficient for true spiritual life. Such an individual has the magical traits of invulnerability, spiritual charisma, and a transcendent detachment that reflects his royal ontological status (as *wang* or king). He is a true “sovereign” and mediator between heaven and Earth, a custodian of doctrine, a natural leader and “royal man” who is not passive but active through his magical presence. Evola sees an “Olympian” quality in Daoist political teachings: the initiate leader who acts with supreme detachment and whose subtle, invisible, and immaterial influence, based on his attunement with Dao and De, is superior to any type of force or coercion. Detached from every human feeling with “impersonal impassibility,” utterly neutral before good or evil, he fosters “primordial simplicity” in the common folk, in

order for the Dao to act with perfect freedom and efficacy. For Evola, this uptoian, kingly ideal was realized in the “ancien regime” in Europe (King Arthur, the Grail, and so on).liv [54]

The decline of Daoism from its utopian ideals is evident, according to Evola, in the rise of popular, folk religious Daoism (*daojiao*), “surviving only as a cult practiced by monks and wizards.” However, operative Daoism survived in the form of an esoteric alchemy whose adherents sought immortality (*xien*) through the formation of secret initiatic schools. Daoist immortals, in Evola’s view, attain immortality through the transformation of the physical body using techniques of “fixing the breath” and practicing the “coagulation of subtle ethereal substances” in order to avoid the loss of connection with the One/Dao (and the fall into rebirth and loss of all spiritual knowledge). Immortality consists, then, in sustaining consciousness while undergoing the crisis of radical changes of state (at death) through training in esoteric techniques similar to initiatic traditions of the west. The formation of the “immortal embryo” is the esoteric alchemical technique by which one forms an enduring identity, one consonant with a “real man” (immortal) of the Dao. Consciousness then is transferred to an embryo or immortal body, or into a “pure form” analogous to the Forms of Platonic scholasticism, a teaching that Evola regards as beyond the understanding of the ordinary non-initiate. Further, these immortal forms reflect an esoteric hierarchy of higher and lower types manifesting the degree and intelligence of the individuals thus transformed. Finally, Evola references Matigoi (Puyon) as a European who had direct training in esoteric Daoism and who was clearly a source of information for Evola’s interpretation.lv [55]

Another less dogmatic traditionalist and esoteric writer, Titus Burckhardt, was also influenced by Daoism, particularly by Daoist aesthetic theories as seen in Chinese painting. Burckhardt, a close intellectual compatriot and friend of Frithjof Schuon, espoused a universalist Sufi wisdom (*sophia perennis*) and wrote on alchemy and gnosis. He also wrote at length on the Daoist idea of “creative spirit” in painting, which he identified in Daoism with “the rhythm of cosmic life.” The flow of brush and ink, like the appearing and dissolving of a snowflake, reflected the dynamic reality of the Dao underlying static, perishable physical phenomena. Burckhardt saw in the Daoist perspective, a less individual or “homocentric” emphasis, which expressed an inner calm of contemplation that revealed a hidden, timeless harmony normally veiled by “the subjective continuity of the mind.” He accurately grounds this deeper harmony in the Daoist concept of *wuqi* (non-being or void) as a primordial, transcendental truth. He also references the importance of Daoist concepts of “wind and water” (*fengshi*), sacred geography (mountain and water), simplicity, naturalness, and spontaneity, all basic to classical Daoism.lvi [56] In a similar spirit, Toshihiko Izutsu, a scholar at McGill University, published his perennialist work, *Sufism and Taoism* (1967) comparing the mystical writing of Ibn ‘Arabi (*Fusus al-Hikam*) with the *Zhuanzi* and *Daodejing*, which became highly popular among traditionalists and esotericists supporting *philosophia perennis*.



Chinese Daoist Teachers and Western Esotericism

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, Daoism in the west had entered a new phase. Scholarship was producing new translated texts for study, historical interpretations were moving beyond the old paradigms, and Daoist studies were moving increasingly away from a simplistic interpretation of a few classic texts.^{lvii} [57] Increasingly, Daoism was differentiated from western models of mysticism and spirituality in an attempt to elucidate its unique cultural and historical aspects. The “immanent” aspects of Daoist spirituality were emphasized in contrast to Christian “transcendence” and the religious and magical aspects of Daoism were increasingly regarded as normative features of the religious traditions--there was no true split between “philosophical and religious” Daoism. Instead there was only an increasing complexity and interweaving of diverse sources, as more ethnography was published and more texts from the *Daozang* have become accessible.^{lviii} [58] Starting in the 1970s, American-Chinese authors also began to publish translations on Daoism, beyond the normative texts, such as Lu K‘uan Yü’s (Charles Luk) *The Secrets of Chinese Meditation* (1964) and his more influential *Taoist Yoga: Alchemy and Immortality* (1970) which gives a translation of the *Xin Ming Fa Jue Ming Zhi* (“The Secrets of Cultivating Essential Nature and Eternal Life”) written by an late 19th century Daoist master of internal alchemy, Zhao Bi Chen. This work and its useful Chinese-English alchemical glossary has become highly referenced by contemporary esotericists and by many Chinese Daoists in America.

In the 1970s, authors like J. C. Cooper (1972), began to write popular but short overviews of Daoism, published (like Charles Luk) by Western esoteric presses, which covered the subject in a way that demonstrated familiarity with more diverse aspects of the esoteric tradition.^{lix} [59] Fritjof Capra also published his very popular work, *The Tao of Physics* (1975), which explored parallels between modern physics and “eastern mysticism” and has a chapter on Daoism. Capra draws heavily on the *Zhuangzi* and on the *Daodejing* and *Yijing* but applies the ideas to the physics relativity paradigm, to holistic transformation, and to *wu-wei*, or non-action, as intellectual ideas precursory to quantum physics and a “dynamic transformative view” of the universe, with an emphasis on flow, change, and the integrated polarity of the Dao. Such a work helped to give

credibility to Daoism by aligning it with science (following Joseph Needham's earlier work) and with a detheologized metaphysics.lx [60] Even more popular were two outstanding authors who were very influential in making Daoism accessible to westerners, John Blofeld and Alan Watts. Both Watts and Blofeld have associations with western esotericism simply because they helped to popularize Daoism at a time when "eastern religions" were part of an emergent "new age" paradigm that was impacting many currents within American and European esotericism.lxi [61] While both authors had strong interests in Buddhism, Blofeld's work was largely based on his actual meeting with Daoist masters and practitioners during his 17 years in China.

Blofeld, an English gentleman, was a world traveler, an outstanding raconteur, and a gifted writer who got along well with practitioners of many diverse esoteric schools, particularly among Daoist hermits. Following the publication of his own translation of the *Yijing* (1966), he published a work on Daoist "mysteries and magic" (1973) based on the Daoist classics (using reputable English translations), Charles Luk's previously mentioned works, and a reconstruction of his "wanderings" in the mountains and hermitages of China (1930s) where he met and conversed with as "many different kinds of Daoists as possible."lxii [62] Blofeld clearly states that there is little or no distinction among practicing Daoists between philosophical and religious Daoism. He draws parallels between Daoism and Sufism, western mystics and esoteric writers, and tells many a remarkable and entertaining tale embedding Daoism in its proper Chinese cultural milieu.lxiii [63] This is not scholarly or textual Daoism, but a living representation of the foibles, ritual practices, magical techniques, and remarkable accomplishments of real Daoists. Following Luk, Blofeld also discusses Daoist yoga or meditation and Daoist sexual techniques, a theme which has attracted some contemporary esotericists. In Blofeld's other major Daoist work (1978), he draws extensively on the *Dao Jia Yu Shen Xian* (Daoist Philosophy and Immortality) of Zhou Shau Xian based on selections from the *Daozang* canon. Blofeld describes this expanded overview as "a first comprehensive sketch of Huang-Lau Daoism" and discusses popular Daoist religion as well as three chapters on Daoist alchemy, with an appendix tabulating a variety of wuxing correspondences. This work is one of the first, very readable, overviews of Daoist religion.lxiv [64]

Alan Watts, an English emigrant to America, had an early interest in Buddhism and its Zen variations, and toward the end of his controversial and somewhat eccentric life, wrote a book exclusively on Daoism. Being a great popularizer of "Eastern religions" through public lectures, Watts (author of 25 popular books melding Eastern and Western thought) was a member of the English Theosophical Society and was friends with D. T. Suzuki and Krishnamurti (the promised "Avatar" of the Theosophical Society). Interested in Zen "enlightenment" and Daoist *yin-yang* principles of spiritual transformation, Watts eventually migrated to America in the mid-1940s and embraced the *perennialist* view (influenced by Aldous Huxley) of the universality hidden in all spiritual traditions.lxv [65] After leaving the Episcopal ministry and rejecting institutional religion, Watts "embraced insecurity" based on his "Daoist" interpretations of individual freedom, the immediacy of experience, and the abandonment of all creeds and

dogmas.lxvi [66] By the late 1950s, Watts was on the lecture circuit to about 100 American cities, had a radio program, and his own televised education special (“Eastern Wisdom and Modern Life” a 24-part series on NET). Watts, more than any other individual, popularized “eastern religions” to the American public and rode a wave of enthusiasm for his books throughout the 1960s and 70s. His book on “nature, man, and woman” (1958) had very strong Daoist influences and from this point onward, his interest in Daoism deepened. A friend of Timothy Leary and Richard Alpert (Ram Das), Watts became a charismatic “guru” to many younger people, influencing them to practice meditation and take an interest in eastern teachings. By the late 1960s, he became increasingly identified as “the American Daoist” through the publication of *Cloud-Hidden, Whereabouts Unknown* (1968) and his last book, *Tao: The Watercourse Way* (1975), published two years after his death.lxvii [67]

Watts was also involved in the human-potential movement, centered in the California Esalen Institute where he met and gave seminars with Al Huang, a popular Chinese Tai Ji teacher, calligrapher, dancer, and organizer of his own Daoist institute, the Living Tao Foundation. Al Huang, a close friend of Watts, helped complete his final Daoist book after Watts’ death and illustrated it with his own gracious and flowing calligraphy. Watts also read and supported Huang in the writing of his popular Tai Ji book, *Embrace Tiger, Return to Mountain* (1973). Huang teaches “Watercourse Way Tai Ji” (not Tai Ji Quan), a popular improvisational form of Tai Ji and dance movements, and seeks to “represent Dao without the ism” through improvisational classes designed specifically for Westerners. Using Daoist concepts such as *yin-yang*, *wuxing*, and *Yijing bagua* symbolism, his work represents a mediating East-West cultural synthesis that bridges the normative gap between academic scholars and popular writers and Chinese Daoist teachers.lxviii [68]

During the 1970s, in China, a popular wave of interest in Tai Ji reanimated cultural inquiry into Daoism and Chinese Daoist teachers began to immigrate to America (and Europe). Eva Wong, PhD, came to America in the 1960s as a member of the Daoist Fung Loy Kok temple and eventually became director of studies at Fung Loy Kok Taoist Temple in Denver CO. which offers various Daoist activities, including scripture study, meditation, classes in *qi-gong*, retreats, chanting, and training in traditional Lion Dance. Dr. Wong, who grew up as a Daoist in China, has translated many Daoist texts and contributed to a growing interest in Daoist religious practices.lxix [69] In the 1970s, Lily Siou, who began her studies in Daoism at the Dai Xuan monastery in China on the “dragon and tiger mountain” of Long Hu Shan and was eventually initiated and confirmed as the 64th generation Master of the Zheng Yi (Lingbao) Daoist school, opened her own school in Hawaii (Tai Hsuan Foundation College) where she teaches Daoist theory, magic, and Tai Ji to many American students.lxx [70] In 1974, Jwing-Ming Yang, PhD, came to American as a Qi Gong, Wushu, and Tai Ji teacher and eventually formed the Oriental Arts Association (Boston) where his students have won outstanding international awards for excellence in Tai Ji. Dr. Yang mixes science, martial arts, and Daoist internal alchemy with vocabulary drawn from English esotericism and European alchemical thought. His eclecticism typifies a willingness to synthesize and accommodate his American students common to many Chinese Daoist teachers.lxxi [71]

In 1978, Michael Saso, a Western scholar fluent in Pinyin and classical Chinese as well as in Japanese, published his excellent *Taoist Master Chuang* about the life and esoteric practices of a Zheng-Yi Daoist master then living in Taiwan. Saso lived with Master Chuang in Taiwan and studied with him over a period of years. He writes, “Daoism is an esoteric religion” and he observes that Daoist masters draw a clear distinction between “common doctrines” and the “secret teachings of the highly trained specialist” which he then describes in a detailed, though introductory fashion.lxxii [72] From the mid-1970s on, “esoteric Daoism” based in *wuxing* (correlative cosmology) and *neidan* (internal alchemy) became increasingly accessible through texts and ethnographic descriptions. While these resources have proliferated, it has been the Western students of Chinese teachers that have introduced Western esoteric ideas into a Daoist context. These ideas in turn have initiated dialogues that have resulted in publications by Chinese teachers (and by their students) that meld Western esotericism and Chinese esotericism into a variety of systemic comparisons and a rich vocabulary of teachings and practices. The mediating language of this comparison, in America, Canada, Britain, and Australia, has been English in translations, ethnography and in Daoist writings. Subsequently, it is the English vocabulary of esotericism that is most commonly used and assumed by these writers. Thus there is a certain amount of “matching terminology” (*ge-yi*) between systems of Chinese and English esotericism, simply assumed as normative by both Chinese teachers and their American students.

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The most prolific of all the Chinese teachers in America is Hua Jing Ni. He is a 74th generation Daoist master who dates his school back to the Han Dynasty. He was educated in the Daoist spiritual traditions by his family and was then chosen to study with Daoist masters “in the high mountains of mainland China.” After more than 30 years of training, he was acknowledged and empowered as a master of traditional Daoism. Master Ni arrived in America from Taiwan in 1976 and has since written many books (over 30) related to the practice of traditional Chinese medicine and Daoist esotericism. He is also the founder of Yo San University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, the College of Tao and the Integral Way, and the Universal Society of the Integral Way.lxxiii [73] Master Ni’s earliest English works are translations of classic Daoist texts, while many later works are on esoteric Daoism and the creative interactions “of East and West, ancient and modern” as seen from a Daoist master’s perspective.lxxiv [74]

Master Ni’s writings are eclectic and diverse, borrowing many Western esoteric, psychological, and scientific ideas in a non-systemic fashion, in order to explain Daoist esoteric thought and practice. He writes, “to attach an ‘ism’ to Dao is to attach a limit or title which is really not appropriate.” Terms like astral realm or worlds, astral beings or entities, ghosts, demons, subtle beings, multiple subtle bodies or souls, nine astral lights of different colors, astral rays, elixir, alchemical furnace, magic, elementals, mountain and lake spirits, human aura, reincarnation, invisible masters, channeling, energy centers in the body, microcosm and macrocosm, dream states, higher mind, universal energy, psychic powers, and so on, abound in his writings demonstrating his correlations of Chinese Daoist esotericism with English language esoteric vocabulary.lxxv [75] His son Maoshing Ni is also trained in Daoist esotericism and Chinese medicine and is a teacher

and Vice President of Yo San University (established in 1989) which he describes by saying, “The heart and soul of the university is the Daoist approach, which includes a strong Qi program and offers over 15 different courses in Qi development.” The Yo San program covers five branches of Traditional Chinese Medicine: acupuncture, herbology, massage, nutrition and Qi Gong. Much of the vocabulary of the school reflects the above esoteric terminology.lxxvi [76]

Perhaps the most prominent influence of the contemporary fusion of Daoism and Western esoteric thinking has been through the teaching of Mantak Chia. Chia was born in Bangkok, Thailand and, after studying Tai Ji Quan, Aikido, and Kundalini Yoga, he met and followed the Daoist Master Yi Eng, known as the White Cloud Hermit. Originally from Central China, but living in the mountains not far from Hong Kong after WW II, Yi Eng taught Chia “Daoist Esoteric Yoga” during a five year training period, with the “formulas and methods of internal alchemy, culminating in the Reunion of Heaven and Man.” His teachings also combine various healing techniques, including the Buddhist Palm, a martial arts system uniting Thai Boxing and kung fu, a Shao-lin technique for collecting internal energy and the Iron Shirt and Steel Body techniques for strengthening muscles and tendons. In 1977, Master Chia moved to New York city and began teaching Daoist Yoga and his “universal Dao system” in a contemporary, modern form. Author of ten books, he is particularly well known for his techniques of self-healing, male and female sexual yoga practices, and for founding the Taoist Esoteric Yoga Center and Foundation in New York City in 1981. He presently has 32 Universal Dao Centers worldwide and in an international Daoist teacher with his home center (after 1994) in the Tao Garden Healing Arts Resort just outside of Chiang Mai, Thailand.lxxvii [77]

During his years in New York City, he attracted many students and several of them had a background in Western esotericism, particularly Eric Yudelove in Kabbalah and Dennis Lewis, who was a student of the Gurdjieff breathing techniques. Yudelove’s work is by far the most integrative work on Daoism and Kabbalah (*The Tao & the Tree of Life: Alchemical & Sexual Mysteries of the East and West*). Yudelove references John Blofeld (1973) as highly influential on his thinking and talks of his interests in Kabbalah, the *Yijing*, and Western alchemy during his earlier years. The study of Western alchemy led to interests in Chinese alchemy, Wilhelm’s publications, Aleister Crowley, Charles Luk, and subsequently to Daoist martial arts where he met Mantak Chia in 1981 in New York City, a rather archetypal journey. Yudelove notes that he “taught Master Chia about shamanism and the Western study of the elements called Hermetics.”lxxviii [78] Yudelove picks up on an old theme of the connection between Daoism and Kabbalah, as first compared by Martin Buber, then in the masonic text “Les Enseignements Secrets de la Gnose,” and later by members of the Golden Dawn like Israel Regardie, and more recently by René Guénon. Yudelove’s book is a remarkable dialectic exploration of Kabbalah and esoteric Daoism.

Yudelove tracks the parallel developments of Daoism (from its shamanic roots) and Kabbalah, linking them through magical practices and specific theories of the body. Chia remarks in the preface that the Sephirot practice of the “flash of lightning” is a

“good way to move Qi energy quickly through the body.”lxxix [79] Yudelove describes Daoist Yoga as a “very advanced shamanic system” and sees a clear parallel between the upper, middle, and lower worlds of the shaman and the triadic Heaven, Man, Earth cosmology of Daoism as well as a parallel with the “upper and middle” worlds of Kabbalah. Both Kabbalah and Daoism are “magical traditions” and both have masters who are experts in ascending to the higher worlds.lxxx [80] In introducing Kabbalah, he distinguishes between Jewish Kabbalah and “Western Kabbalah” as found in post-Renaissance Christian Rosicrucianism, astrology, and magic (via Crowley and Regardie). He emphasizes that the comparisons with Daoism are found primarily in this “Western, esoteric” [non-Jewish] side of Kabbalah.lxxxii [81] He then compares terminology and worldviews, matching terms (*ge-yi*) such as Wu Qi (Energy of Emptiness) and Ein Soph (limitless) or comparing the highest three sephira (kether, hokmah, and binah) with the three great Daoist principles of Taiji, Yin-Yang, and the Three Pure Ones (divinities of Heaven, Humanity, and Earth). He uses a classic Kabbalah text, *The Sepher Yetzirah*, as a basis for many such comparisons, a text he describes as “a system most similar to Daoist yoga.”lxxxii [82]

Yudelove recreates a Daoist Tree of Wisdom by matching the Five Element (*wuxing*) correspondences with the 10 Sephera spheres: wu-qi/kether, yang/chokamah and yin/binah (upper triad); fire/geburah, wood/chesed and sun/tiphereth (second triad); and metal/hod, water/netzach, moon/yesod (third triad); with earth as malkuth, the lowest sphere.lxxxiii [83] He then goes into considerable detail on the Mantak Chia “universal dao system” (comparing Qi to aether and other Western esoteric ideas on subtle energy) and the circulation of Qi energy in the body, including an overview on Daoist sexual yoga and various energy exercises on “inner and outer fusion” (inner energy alchemy). He discusses *bagua* (eight trigrams) theory and the inner mandala, visualization processes of “higher fusion” and advanced circulation of the Qi, with a brief overview of Daoist Qi meridian systems. He then compares this with Kabbalah practices from Franz Bardon, the well-known Austrian occultist writer (d. 1958) who also explored the relationship between Kabbalah and eastern religions, while developing his extensive invocational magic system.lxxxiv [84] Yudelove regards the Chia “fusions” as a form of Hermetic practice and develops a correspondence theory between the Hebrew letters, number theory, and the organs of the body based on his reading of the *Yetsirah* and Bardon’s Kabbalah writings. These correspondences are then related to the “power of sound” (Hebrew invocations) and compared to the “six healing sounds” of Daoist esoteric healing chants. He also links the color system found in Bardon to a Daoist five-element color system, with their comparative vocables, sacred names, and internal visualizations.lxxxv [85]



Just as esoteric orders of the West have graded stages of mastery (Rosicrucian and Golden Dawn), so too, the Daoist training of adepts--both follow pathwork training and proceed in stages from higher to lower ranks using the various visualization and meditation techniques he outlines in comparative fashion. He compares various concepts of energy bodies and soul conceptualizations, as well as “sex magic” in both traditions, particularly drawing on Crowley for practices related to Kabbalah. He has written a much longer work on *Taoist Yoga and Sexual Energy* (2000) which explores the topic in great detail without the references to Kabbalah but published by a press specializing in Western esotericism.lxxxvi [86] He then goes on to discuss more advanced practices of Daoist internal alchemy, in relationship to astrology and Big Dipper (Thunder) magical techniques, astral visualizations in the body related to Kabbalah visualizations of Hebrew letters in the body, astral magic invocations, and the “return to heaven” or mystical realization in both traditions. The final sections of the book gives meditative exercises for both Daoism and Kabbalah. Overall, his book is an initial exploration of comparative esotericism, East-West synthesis, and a portent of such comparative systems yet to come.lxxxvii [87]

Another of Mantak Chia’s students, Dennis Lewis has also written a 1997 work on Daoist breathing techniques and practices which he compares to certain breathing techniques and ideas that he studied with John Pentland, the English teacher of the Russian Gurdjieff system. Gurdjieff had, at least in part, learned his breathing and dance exercises during his travels and studies among the Sufi dervishes of central Asia. Gurdjieff’s esoteric “law of three” (active, passive and neutral) corresponds well with the Daoist triad of Tai Qi mediating between *yin* and *yang*, as do the three chambers of Daoist alchemy (stomach, heart, and head) correspond well with Gurdjieff’s “three

bodies” of the carnal, emotional, and spiritual. Lewis attributes John Pentland (d. 1984) with teaching him “how to think from the perspective and sensation of wholeness” and thanks Jean Kline, an Advaita Vedanta master, for helping him to understand the “that love and consciousness are at the very heart of being.”lxxxviii [88] Lewis, blending Western esotericism with Vedanta, is particularly interested in Ji Nei Zang (Chi Nei Tsang) a Chia healing technique using an “internal organ Qi massage” with breathing techniques to clear tensions and illness from the body. He has been certified by Master Chia in Ji Nei Zang and combines his work with Gurdjieff breathing techniques to break down the “buffering mechanisms” (Gurdjieff) that inhibit connection with deeper self-awareness and good health.

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Following Gurdjieff’s maxim that “without mastering breath, nothing can be mastered”, Lewis gives a warning that correct breathing is an art and science that needs to be thoroughly studied to be correctly applied. Correct application leads to “deep inner relaxation and a freedom from willfulness,” whether one is a Daoist, a yogin, or a follower of Gurdjieff, that in turn allows for true, natural breathing and a “return to the expansive emptiness of *wu-ji*.”lxxxix [89] Citing Gurdjieff, Lewis writes that learning wholeness requires first seeing that one is not whole but often fragmented and imbalanced; the discovery of balance cannot be forced, it requires inner quiet, clarity, calm, and learning to “follow the breath without interfering,” listening to the body, and practicing the three breaths of balancing, cleansing, and energizing.xc [90] Lewis notes that, reflecting Gurdjieff’s ideas, both attachment to and identification with particular images, ideas, emotions, sensations, or actions can create severe limitation and disharmony, inducing poor breathing habits. These habits of identification and attachment, according to Gurdjieff, “reduce our impressions of what nature transmits to us as energy, the flow of life, slowing us down, creating poor health and leading to exhaustion.”xci [91] For Lewis, this “energy” is Qi, the fundamental life force according to Daoist teachings. Lewis goes on to discuss inner alchemy, the Daoist meridian system, whole body breathing, the expansive and smiling breath, and various systems for the circulation of ji-breath in the body.xcii [92]

Through the 1980s and 1990s, Daoism has become increasingly popular and accessible to the general public, primarily through the increasing presence of Chinese and American teachers in the area of Daoist martial arts. Micheal Winn, another of Mantak Chia’s students, and a 25 year practitioner of Daoist martial arts has his own teachings of internal alchemy, based on “the seven Tao alchemical formulas Chia transmitted from the wandering Daoist Yi Eng.” Winn has studied alchemy (East and West) and uses a vocabulary replete with East-West alchemical terms in teaching Daoist martial arts and internal practices.xciii [93] Deng Ming-Dao’s *Chronicles of Tao : The Secret Life of a Taoist Master* (1993), published in three volumes during the 1980s, tells the fascinating story of a Daoist martial artist’s training and then journey to America. Deng has also published an esoteric work on Daoist scholar-warrior’s training (1990) and several other popular works. Eo Omwake, who established the Mind, Body & Spirit Academy near Chadds Ford PA, is a member of the Gold Mountain Jin Dan Taoist Order, a “traditional Taoist order with roots going back many generations into old China.” Omwake, a highly

respected martial artist, writes on “Taoist Alchemy and Symbolic Language” (using Western terminology) to discuss the esoteric aspects of symbols and images as they apply to Daoist marital arts and personal psychological development.

More popularly, *Flying Without Wings: A Manual of Taoist Meditation and Subtle-Body Development* has recently been self-published by martial arts student Brian Orr, a fifth generation disciple of Gao Yen Tao, grandmaster of the Bu Di Zhen system, which contains the teachings of both Shaolin and Wudang traditions. The book also reflects strong interests in Western esotericism, “arua building” techniques, subtle body development, astral travel, a ninefold chakra-system, inner alchemy, and other aspects of an East-West synthesis.xciv [94] Articles in the popular American Daoist e-journal, *The Empty Vessel*, initiated by Solalal Towler in 1994, at Abode of the Eternal Tao in Eugene OR, has become a site for the mixing of Daoist and Western esoteric thought.xcv [95] Edwin Shendelman’s article in the journal, “The Vision of the Primary Body-Focus Zones in Qigong Practice,” compares the three body zones of Chinese esotericism (from the base of the torso up to the solar plexus, to the mid-brow region, to above the mid-brow) to the Christian Hermetic emblems of *Robert Fludd* where he equates 17th century terminology with Daoist cosmology. He writes, “the lower region is the sublunar elemental region, the sphere of the senses” while “the middle region represents the astral, ethereal region, the seat of the soul and vital spirit, the mediator between upper and lower, and the upper region refers to the unity of the light of human nature, the divine fire-heaven, the intellect, the subtle, spiritual fire.” He also makes a comparison drawn most likely from Yudelove’s work on the *Sefer Yetsirah*, noting how in Kabbalah, the three Hebrew mother letters are visualized “in the mid-brow, heart and navel areas respectively.”xcvi [96]

Conclusion: The Dao in Esotericism

Contemporary interest in Daoism abounds in popular culture, promoted primarily through martial arts centers and teachers, but also through the increasing abundance of newly published materials, increasing interest in Chinese medicine, and an ever-expanding scholarship in Daoism. Recently, *Orthodox Daoism in America* and the *British Taoist Association* have been formed to promote a better understanding of Daoism.xcvii [97] Another area of contemporary intersection with Daoism is in spiritual ecology as tied to Daoist philosophy of nature and to *feng-shui* (wind and water) geomantic arts. One scholar has noted that Daoism offers a foundation for a “genuinely ecological society” and the necessity of maintaining a healthy and positive relationship with the natural world. Daoism provides a genuine integrative perspective on relationships with the natural environment and on values of cooperation and balance rather than on issues of control and the exploitative use of resources. There is a convergence of themes in Daoism and in deep ecology that may well be assimilated into a more global esotericism that seeks to develop a cosmology of nature, drawing on Western esoteric resources, for example, such as German *Naturphilosophie* or New England transcendentalism. The ecological aspects of Daoism have been recently explored by a number of distinguished scholars, as an “older wisdom” able to enrich perspectives on contemporary attitudes toward nature.xcviii [98]

Increasingly, Daoism is resonant with various aspects of the deontologized views of physics, for example in “chaos theory,” which has also manifested intersections with various magical theories, such as “Enochian magic.” Daoism presents an interesting resource for cosmological speculations that are very current in terms of astrophysical theories concerning “self-organization,” an “open universe,” fractal transformation, and a general process view of change and development.xcix [99] Post-modern theorists have also reflected on Daoism, drawing certain aspects of Daoist language theory into post-modern discourse, claiming an affinity between the two. Deconstructive writers—who seek to undermine dualism and binary opposition—have seen in Daoism a theory of non-exclusive mutuality between pairs that undermines all oppositional metaphysics. Daoist theories of interdependence, harmony, and accommodation, its non-logocentric view of natural processes, and a pragmatic theory of immanence and transformation all contribute to a “post-philosophical” discourse that emphasizes the value of diversity, alternate perspectives, and multivocal language.c [100] Daoism continues to expand its influences in ways that will no doubt stimulate esoteric thought and practices in the years to come.

In summary, there are three notable stages of Daoist impact on Western esotericism. In the first and earliest stage, Daoism was seen as an exotic, strange, alien cultural alternative that was perceived only through a very limited textual horizon, primarily through questionable translations of the *Yijing*, *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, studied in a completely decontextualized atmosphere of Western speculation, theory building, and deculturalized appropriation. Opposed to a Confucian bias, reinforced by the early Jesuits preference for social order, and contrasted as a deviant, eccentric, and “degenerated” religious influence, Daoism was reduced to its classical texts as appropriated by intrigued European intellectuals, such as Leibnitz, Buber, Heidegger, Wilhelm, and Jung. In this stage, “Daoism” was constructed with little relation to its living religious practices, and was only minimally represented by the early formative roots of its most classic texts. The dominant paradigm of “philosophical Daoism” was built around the concept of *philosophia perennis*, as an enduring “truth” inherent to all religious traditions and as manifest in the comparative study of classic texts. Daoism was not seen as “esoteric” but as a vaguely understood mythic wisdom tradition whose enigmatic teachings perplexed and fascinated Western intellectuals who assimilated the classic texts into a metaphysical discourse built around themes of universalism, comparative mysticism, and archetypal theory.

In the second stage, some esotericists upheld a theory of Daoism as *~prisca theologia* (ancient wisdom) resonant with Renaissance astrological and correlative cosmology. These esotericists noted various structural similarities between Daoist and traditional pre-scientific, Western cosmology. Further similarity was noted between Chinese and Western practices or theories of alchemy, ritual magic, and divination techniques. Magical practitioners, like Crowley, Regardie and Louis Culling investigated the oracular use of the *Yijing* and the “pristine,” underlying *sophia perennis* of a few Daoist texts. Simultaneously, European traditionalists such as René Guénon, Titus Burckhardt, and Julius Evola drew parallels with Sufism and other forms of mystical and esoteric, perennial teachings. Daoism in this context referred to the textual classics and was interpreted ideologically in terms of a universalist approach to mysticism and a constructivist, orientalist paradigm. In this context, “esotericism” came to mean a

“traditional, initiatic school of masters and students” which passed on a universal teaching discoverable in the texts of all “authentic” religions. These traditions were hieratic and wisdom was based on authoritative teachings and masters that sought to elucidate each tradition in terms of an “inner core” of mystical, transcendent essence. Guénon in particular had specific ties with Western esoteric societies and initiatic lodges and epitomizes the intellectual appropriation, as does Schuon, of other religions into their unique brand of ideological universalism. However, some scholars, like Toshihiko Izutsu, were more carefully textual in their comparative analysis.

The third stage was initiated by an increasing dissemination of Daoist teachings through the popular writings of Westerners like Thomas Merton, John Blofeld, and Alan Watts as well as through emerging Chinese translations from writers like Charles Luk. These authors help to create a more receptive climate for Daoism in a popular context of interest in esotericism and “new age religions” and provided introductory works accessible to the general public. Watts specifically had ties to Western esotericism and more than others, promoted “eastern religions” as a source of wisdom without promoting any particular ideology regarding the relationship between traditions. Also in this same late 20th century period, Chinese Daoist teachers from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan began to immigrate into Western countries and began to attract Western students, particularly in relationship to Qigong, Taiji, and other martial arts related to “internal alchemy.” Chinese teachers began to publish materials on their own traditions at the same time that Western scholars began to publish on Daoist religion, its history, cultural context, and rich text traditions. Ethnographic descriptions of “Daoist esotericism” such as those by Michael Saso, were complimented by the writings of Chinese teachers, such as Deng Ming Dao, and many new translations of texts from the *Daozang*.

Chinese teachers, like Master Hua Jing Ni, have continued to write and publish prolifically and many have started Daoist organizations in the West in the form of training programs, schools, universities, and institutions for advanced training in Daoist medical and martial arts. In turn this is complimented by a growing American interests in martial arts, internal alchemy, and Daoist techniques of healing and self-development. Students of these Chinese teachers have written works that explicitly tie Daoism to Western esoteric traditions, in areas such as esoteric cosmology, Kabbalah, magic, occultism, and the teachings of specific Western masters, such as Gurdjieff. Increasingly, Daoist esotericism is resonant with Western esotericism in “matching terms” to form a basic vocabulary that is not strictly Eastern or Western, but a bit of both. At this stage, the comparative synthesis is far from fully developed but shows a deepening integration by those who are practitioners of both traditions. However, the emphasis for contemporary practitioners is far more on “embodied spirituality” than on any particular essentialist ideology; the goal of actualizing energies latent within the body seems to be the normative goal. The esoteric alchemical texts of physical transformation are far more influential in this period than the early classic philosophical texts because the latter texts are tied to spiritual practices inseparable from a concern with alternate perceptions at the somatic, sensate level. Daoism in the context of esotericism offers an entrance into energy practices, meditation, visualization, and martial arts that is far more grounded in

body work and self-development than earlier Western interests. The “internal alchemy” practices written about by Western students of Chinese teachers are particularly tied to visualization and magical techniques highly congruent with many of the practices in Western esoteric magical societies.

Without doubt, the “dao in Western esotericism” will continue to develop as more texts, more enhanced practices, and more familiarity with Daoist esoteric magical rites become known. Overall, Daoism may prove to be far more amenable to synthesis with Western esotericism than other traditions like Buddhism and Hinduism due to its very strong connections with nature, magical techniques, martial arts, living a healthy long life, and a thoroughly magical and transcendent, detheologized cosmology. The implicit relationship with much of the history of interest in Daoism lies in its adaptability to a non-theological view of nature and human development. Western esotericism shares similar interests and both traditions favor a diffuse and decentralized institutional structure that allows for great variability without any controlling central authority, nor any strict monastic or ascetic traditions (though both exist in variant forms of Daoism). Popular Daoism has assimilated the classical tradition into its religious practices and subsequently developed a complex metaphysics that shows some compatibility with modern science and deconstructive theories of language (as in “the Dao that can be spoken of is not the true Dao”). Coupled with its highly developed esoteric practices, Daoism clearly offers a rich field of comparative study for the development of esoteric paradigms neither exclusively Western nor Eastern. In that context, Daoism will certainly provide a rich source of esotericism for those willing to make the necessary efforts to truly understand its inner teachings.

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^{i[1]} . J. J. Clarke 2000: 3. Since there is no strict convention for the conversion of Chinese characters into English, I have written this article using contemporary Pinyin transliterations. Thus, *Tao te Ching* (Wade-Giles, the older English system) is written as *Daodejing* (Pinyin). At present, there are four major transliterations used for converting Chinese to English, all of which ave various problems due to the subtlety of Chinese intonation and its distinctive lingual expressions.

ii[2] . Jorge Ferrer, 2002: 5-6.

iii[3] . J. J. Clarke 2000: 9.

iv[4] . Isabelle Robinet 1997: 196-97; Michael Saso 2000: 31-45.

v[5] . J. J. Clarke 2000:18-21.

vi[6] . Isabelle Robinet 1997: 50-52.

vii[7] . J. J. Clarke 2000: 39, as published in Charles le Gobien's *Histoire de l'édit de l'Empereur de la Chine*, 1698.

viii[8] . J. J. Clarke 2000: 40.

ix[9] . J. J. Clarke 2000:70.

x[10] . Lee Irwin 2001:18.

xi[11] . Antoine Faivre 1998: 118.

xii[12] . See Léon Wieger 1927a and 1927b, *passim*.

xiii[13] . See John Chalmers, 1848, *passim*, J. J.clarke 2000: 54.

xiv[14] . See Richard King, 1999, *passim*, for more on the “orientalist” paradigms constructed by Western scholars and esotericists.

xv[15] . See James Legge 1881, *passim*.

xvi[16] . J. J. Clarke 2000: 44-45.

xvii[17] . See Johnson 1878, *passim*; J. J. Clarke 2000: 45.

xviii[18] . Lee Irwin 2001:21.

xix[19] . C. H. Bjerregaard 1912, *passim*; Andrew Rawlinson, 1993: *passim*.

xx[20] . Antoine Faivre 1998:120.

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- xxi[21] . J. J. Clarke 2000:47; Paul Carus 1898 and 1906.
- xxii[22] . Obed Johnson 1928.
- xxiv[24] . J. R. Herman 1996: 15, 135, 163.
- xxv[25] . J. J. Clark 143-44, 172-175; Graham Parks 1987: 79-91.
- xxvi[26] . J. J. Clarke 2000: 73, 100, 121-22, 126.
- xxvii[27] . David Rosen and Ellen Crouse 2001: 120-129; Chung-yuan Chang, 1973; Tenny Davis, 1939.
- xxviii[28] . J. J. Clarke 48, 50-51.
- xxix[29] xxix[29]
- xxx[30] . J. J. Clarke 2000: 54.
- xxxi[31] . Isabelle Robinet 1997: 9, for an introductory overview of Daoist cosmology see 1997: 7-14; also John Blofeld 1985: 189-191.
- xxxii[32] . Michael Saso 2000: 208-218 gives a very condensed summary, also *passim*.
- xxxiii[33] . Antoine Faivre 1994:58-59.
- xxxiv[34] . Kristofer Schipper 1993: 103-112.
- xxxv[35] . Isabelle Robinet 1997: 252-256.
- xxxvi[36] . John Henderson 1984: 54-58.
- xxxvii[37] . Michael Strickmann 1979, *passim*, for a good introduction to Daoist alchemy; also Micheal Saso 2000, *passim*, for an excellent overview of Daoist magical practices; J. J. Clarke 2000:122-128.
- xxxviii[38] . N. J. Girardot 1983:292.
- xxxix[39] . Louis Culling 1989:ix.
- xl[40] . Neville Drury 2000: 92-93, 99, 108.
- xli[41] . For an interesting comparison of Crowley and Jung, see Lloyd Keane 1999.
- xlii[42] . Aleister Crowley 1971, 1973, *passim*.
- xliii[43] . Israel Regardie 1999: 42-44, 58, 60.
- xliv[44] . Louis Culling 1989: 25, Table One; GBG is a secret anagram, uninterpreted by Culling.
- xlv[45] . N. J. Girardot 1983: 294-98.

xlvi[47] . Robin Waterfield 1987:42.

xlviii[48] . Andrew Rawlinson 1993, *passim*; Robin Waterfield 1987: 35-42. Mark Sedgewick 1999: 3-24, *passim*.

xliv[49] . René Le Forestier 1990, contains the entire work.

l[50] . René Guénon 1958: 6, 95-98.

li[51] . René Guénon 1994: 171; 1973, *passim*; 2001.

lii[52] . Julius Evola, *Taoism: The Magic, The Mysticism* (Oriental classics, Holmes Publishing Group, 1995; original 1959). This short text was written as an introduction to an Italian translation of the *Tao Te Ching*.

liii[53] . Julius Evola, 1995: 8-14.

liv[54] . Julius Evola 1995: 18-21.

lv[55] . Julius Evola 1995: 21-26.

lvi[56] . Titus Burckhardt 1967: 134-142.

lvii[57] . Such authors as Angus Graham, Livia Kohn, Steven Bokenkamp, Roger Ames, David Hall, Chad Hansen, Thomas Cleary, Isabelle Robinet, Kristofer Schipper, Julia Ching, and Eva Wong have all contributed to the new paradigms.

lviii[58] . J. J. Clarke 2000: 146-47, 160-165; also Russell Kirkland 1997, *passim*.

lix[59] . J. C. Cooper 1972.

lx[60] . Fritjof Capra 1975: 106-118, 126ff; Clarke 2000:75-77.

lxi[61] . See Irwin 2001, *passim*.

lxii[62] . John Blofeld 1966, 1973: 15; Blofeld's title (*Taoist Mysteries and Magic*) is no doubt a paraphrase of Alexandria David-Neel's popular book on Tibetan esotericism; Blofeld's Daoist books are still in print.

lxiii[63] . Blofeld 1973: 30-31,

lxiv[64] . John Blofeld 1978, *passim*.

lxv[65] . Alan Watts 1950.

lxvi[66] . Alan Watts 1951.

lxviii[68] . Al Huang 1973; Solala Towler 1996: 111-130.

lxix[69] . Solalal Towler 95-109; beyond text translations, she has also written a good overview of Daoist religious history and practices, Eva Wong 1997.

lxx[70] . Solalla Towler, 1996: 49-57; see also
<<http://home1.gte.net/espcompu/97asbio.htm>>

lxxi[71] . Jwing-Ming Yang, see YMAA (Yang's Martial Arts Association Press), Yang says, "The best way to find a teacher is one who has published books"; Solalal Towler 1996: 15-29. I have studied Tai Ji with one of Yang's teacher-students for five years and attended his workshops; I have also studied Tai Ji with two other Chinese teachers (from mainland China) and all of them borrow esoteric constructs from Western alchemy and magical traditions.

lxxii[72] . Michael Saso, 1978/2000 (plus many other works), this is an excellent introduction to Daoist magical rites and practices.

lxxiii[73] . Hua Jing Ni, see <<http://www.sevenstarcom.com/7star/main/about.htm>>.

lxxiv[74] . See Hau Ching Ni, 1979, 1989, 1992, 1995.

lxxv[75] . Hau Ching Ni 1979/1996, passim; Solalal Towler 1996: 1313-149.

lxxvi[76] . Solala Towler, 1996: 30-48; Maoshan Ni, Yo San University at:
<<http://www.yosan.edu/>>

lxxvii[77] . J. J. Clark 2000: 133-134; Solalala Towler 1996: 58-73 and <[www.universal-
tao.com/index.html](http://www.universal-
tao.com/index.html)>; Tao Garden Healing Arts Center <[www.tao-
garden.com/about_us/index.html](http://www.tao-
garden.com/about_us/index.html)>.

lxxviii[78] . Eric Yudelove 1995: xviii-xxi.

lxxix[79] . Eric Yudelove 1995: xv.

lxxx[80] . Eric Yudelove 1995: 7-9.

lxxxii[81] . Eric Yudelove 1995: 16-18.

lxxxiii[82] . Eric Yudelove 1995: 25-27.

lxxxiiii[83] . Eric Yudelove 1995: 34-36.

lxxxv[84] . Franz Bardon, 1975 (original 1971).

lxxxvi[85] . Eric Yulelove 1995: 81-92.

lxxxvii[86] . Eric Yudelove 2000.

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