

Oneness with Heaven and Earth: Mystical Attainment in the Chinese Tradition

Livia Kohn, *Boston University*

Chinese mysticism has a long and varied history: from the early thinkers of the Axial Age through various permutations in the middle ages to modern versions of both theory and practice. It spread throughout the different aspects of the Chinese tradition and was present as much in the dominant school of Confucianism and the foreign religion of Buddhism as in Daoism, the indigenous higher religion of China. How, then, is the Chinese mystical tradition different from comparable Western and Indian systems? What are some of its fundamental characteristics? Can we pinpoint commonalities and differences among its main indigenous forms, Confucianism and Daoism? What are these traditions? And what is their take on wisdom, the self, mystical training, the ideal human, and the way they envision mystical union? Let us begin with general characteristics.

Main Features

The first fact one notices when looking at Chinese religion in general and the mystical tradition in particular is that the Chinese tradition does not have a single creator deity or focus on a monotheistic god. There is no entity completely beyond the world, no transcendent other, no “thou” to a this-worldly “us,” no power that will never cease and never change. Rather, the Chinese tradition sees its ultimate in the Dao, a divine force so immanent that it is even in the soil and tiles; so much a part of the world that it cannot be separated from it.¹ Oneness or union with Dao is the birthright of every

1. In fact, the entire early philosophy of China focuses on the Dao and how best to live in and with it. Thus, A. C. Graham named his discussion of early Chinese thought *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1989).

being, not a rare instance of divine grace. It is natural to begin with and becomes only more natural as it is realized through practice.²

The Chinese experience of oneness with Dao, as a consequence, is astounding only in the beginning. It represents a way of being in the world different from ordinary perception, which is determined by the senses and the intellect, but not essentially alien or completely other. The longer the mystic lives with the experience, the more he integrates it into his or her life and being and the less extraordinary it becomes. Being at one with the Dao, joining Heaven and Earth, is the natural and original state of humanity, which is recovered through mystical practice.³ Thus, neither is the experience itself the central feature of the tradition, nor is there a pronounced “dark night of the soul,” a desperate search for a glimpse of the transcendent divine. The Dao is here and now, residing right within oneself. The main difficulty Chinese mystics face in realizing Dao is the scatterbrained and pleasure-seeking nature of their ego-centered self. This, in turn, is amply discussed in the texts, together with varied techniques to overcome it.⁴

Still, even there the Chinese go their own way. They do not envision the ego-centered self in a dualism of body versus divine soul or rational mind. Rather the human being—body, mind, and spirit, plus everything else that exists in the universe—consists of *qi*, vital cosmic energy, the concrete, material aspect of Dao.⁵ There is only one *qi*, just as there is only

2. Mystical practice can thus be seen as the intensification and perfection of ordinary life. See Livia Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism: Philosophy and Soteriology in the Taoist Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 11.

3. Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism*, 23.

4. Some of these techniques involve the conscious reorganization of thinking and perception in a meditation practice known as “observation.” Adapted from Buddhist insight meditation, it forms an important part of a seven-step program to Daoist realization. For studies, see Livia Kohn, “Taoist Insight Meditation: The Tang Practice of *Neiguan*,” in *Taoist Meditation and Longevity Techniques*, edited by Livia Kohn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies Publications, 1989), 191–222; and Livia Kohn, *Seven Steps to the Tao: Sima Chengzhen's Zuowanglun* (St. Augustin/Nettetal: Monumenta Serica Monograph XX, 1987).

5. Livia Kohn, *Health and Long Life: The Chinese Way* (Cambridge, Mass.: Three Pines Press, 2005), 11. Further discussions of *qi* are found in Stephen Chang, *The Complete Book of Acupuncture* (Berkeley: Celestial Arts, 1976); Ted Kaptchuk, *The Web that Has No Weaver: Understanding Chinese Medicine* (New York: Congdon & Weed, 1983); and Donald E. Kendall, *Dao of Chinese Medicine: Understanding an Ancient Healing Art*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

one Dao. Already the ancient thinker Zhuangzi emphasizes that human life is the accumulation of *qi* while death is its dispersal. After receiving a core potential of primordial *qi* at birth, people throughout life need to sustain it. They do so by drawing postnatal *qi* into the body from air and food, as well as from other people through sexual, emotional, and social interaction. But they also lose *qi* through breathing bad air, overburdening their bodies with food and drink, and getting involved in negative emotions and excessive sexual or social interactions. Body, mind, and soul are part of one and the same continuum of *qi*.⁶

Rather than by overcoming a body that is a prison or hindrance to the soul, the Chinese accordingly find mystical attainment through creating an utmost harmony of *qi*-flow, a perfect balance of patterns and forces, a subtlety and refinement of vital energy. Once they have reached such a balance, they continue their practice and gradually transform their *qi*, which is both personal and universal at the same time, into a finer cosmic energy known as spirit (*shen*).⁷ A subtle dimension of *qi*, this serves as the guiding vitality behind all its other forms; it is the active, organizing force and transformative influence in the individual that connects him or her to Heaven and the underlying oneness with Dao. Within the person it is individual awareness and mental direction; it resides in the heart and is related to the mind and the emotions.⁸

As mystics attain their realization of personal *qi*-subtlety, they not only gain physical health, mental well-being, and a sense of oneness with Dao. They also contribute to harmony and health in the larger universe: in nature, where *qi*-balance appears as regular weather patterns and the absence of disasters; in society, where it is found in the peaceful coexistence among

6. Kohn, *Health and Long Life*, 12.

7. A powerful discussion of *shen* in Chinese medicine is found in Manfred Porkert, *The Theoretical Foundations of Chinese Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974). An examination of the notion in ancient Chinese and Daoist thought appears in Harold D. Roth, "The Early Taoist Concept of *Shen*: A Ghost in the Machinery?", in *Sagehood and Systematizing Thought in the Late Warring States and Early Han*, edited by Kidder Smith (Brunswick, Maine: Bowdoin College, 1990), 11–32.

8. Kaptchuk, *The Web That Has No Weaver*, 58.

families, clans, villages, and states; and in the greater world in the state of Great Peace, the great cosmic harmony of all.⁹

This outflowing dimension of mystical attainment, then, means that in the Chinese tradition the mystic is not one to leave society behind and stay away from all involvement. On the contrary, the accomplished mystic is always a social being who would spread and radiate his qualities throughout the world. Placed at the pinnacle of society, the mystic is the sage and also the ideal ruler, a continuation of the ancient Chinese ideal of the shaman-king as the chief intermediary between humanity and the cosmos.¹⁰ Mysticism in China thus was never isolated from society but always had a strong political dimension.¹¹ The tradition as a whole is much more immanent, body-focused, and socially responsible than what one might expect from comparative Western and Indian models.

Confucianism and Daoism

The two main indigenous traditions of China that have both brought forth active mystical traditions are Confucianism and Daoism. Both arose around 500 B.C.E. with dominant thinkers that form part of the Axial Age, had their founders divinized under the Han dynasty around the beginning of the Common Era, underwent serious transformations under Buddhist influence in the middle ages, and have survived actively in modern forms to the present day.

9. For a discussion of the idea state of Great Peace or Taiping in traditional Daoism, see Chit-tim Lai, "The Daoist Concept of Central Harmony in the *Scripture of Great Peace: Human Responsibility for the Maladies of Nature*," in *Daoism and Ecology: Ways Within a Cosmic Landscape*, edited by Norman Girardot, James Miller, and Liu Xiaogan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Center for the Study of World Religions, 2001), 95–112; and Max Kaltenmark, "The Ideology of the *T'ai-p'ing-ching*," in *Facets of Taoism*, edited by Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979), 19–52.

10. This notion is already a central feature of the thought of the ancient *Daode jing*. See Benjamin Schwartz, "The Worldview of the *Tao-te-ching*," in *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, edited by Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 189–210. On the spiritual dimensions of rulership in ancient China in general, see Roger T. Ames, *The Art of Rulership: A Study in Ancient Chinese Political Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1983).

11. Kohn, *Early Chinese Mysticism*, 172.

Confucianism

Confucianism goes back to the thinker Confucius, Kongfuzi or “Master Kong” (551–479 B.C.E.), the illegitimate son of the ruler of Lu, a small state in eastern China (modern Shandong). Trained in elementary feudal arts as well as to read and write, he became a minor functionary in the state’s administration, then developed certain ideas of his own as to the causes of his country’s problems and their remedy.¹² In an effort to see his ideas put into practice, he left his employment and traveled through China, presenting himself as a potential prime minister to many local rulers. However, no ruler employed Confucius, and so he returned home and began to teach interested disciples in private, soon establishing a name for himself and his ideas.¹³ The disciples later collected his sayings into a volume known as the *Lunyu* (Analects).¹⁴

The main concept of early Confucianism is the idea of ritual formality or etiquette (*li*) in alignment with the overarching universal power of Heaven.¹⁵ The character represents the image of a ritual vessel and indicates the proper behavior in all social and religious situations: in society, government, and ritual. Socially, *li* means proper behavior among people of different rank and status, defined through hierarchical relationships that always include a senior and a junior person, and each has obligations toward the other, expressed in the so-called Confucian virtues which foster the positive, heavenly nature in people: benevolence, righteousness, filial piety, and loyalty. According to Confucius and his followers, if everyone knew his or her personal and social position at any given moment and acted fully in accordance with it, society would be fully harmonious.¹⁶

12. For the role of Confucius and his thought, see Herbert Fingarette, *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

13. Biographical studies of Confucius include Raymond Dawson, *Confucius* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982); Betty Kelen, *Confucius in Life and Legend* (New York: T. Nelson, 1971); and Wu-chi Liu, *Confucius, His Life and Time* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1955).

14. For translations of the *Analects*, see Arthur Waley, *The Analects of Confucius* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989 [1938]); D. C. Lau, *The Analects* (New York: Penguin, 1979); and Roger T. Ames, *The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballentine, 1998).

15. See Robert Eno, *The Confucian Creation of Heaven: Philosophy and the Defense of Ritual Mastery* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

16. On Confucian thought and social relevance, see David Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 1987).

The same idea also applies to government organizations, which should act in proper accordance with their specific duties and not infringe upon or compete with each other; and also to religious rituals, where it is important to honor the ancestors and the local and cosmic deities with proper formalities, offering sacrifices of food and drink. Everybody under Heaven should participate in this ideal Confucian world of *li* to their best ability, and while some may have a stronger natural inclination toward it than others, everyone can learn. In fact, learning in ancient Confucianism and for the Chinese throughout history has been the key method of attaining the proper feeling for *li* in all given situations, and good behavior that creates social harmony is at first a learned response, which becomes natural after many years of training.¹⁷ Social harmony, moreover, as formulated most expressively in the *Daxue* (Great Learning) chapter of the *Liji* (Book of Rites), begins with the individual and radiates outward, to create an overarching sense of oneness and balance throughout the world.¹⁸

In the Song dynasty (960–1260), Confucianism underwent a revival and transformed to include various Buddhist elements. Its thinkers began to encourage a more internal realization of “bright virtue,” the inherent power of the individual that could make the self one with Heaven and Earth and bring Great Peace to the world. They supported meditation methods such as “quiet sitting” and lauded a spontaneous connection to Heaven known as “innate knowledge,” thus giving rise to a mystical tradition in their own right.¹⁹

17. For the development and role of Confucianism in Chinese society over the millennia, see John H. Berthrong, *Transformations of the Confucian Way* (Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1998); Jennifer Oldstone-Moore, *Confucianism: Origins, Beliefs, Practices, Holy Texts, Sacred Places* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

18. A translation of this chapter, together with other important Confucian documents, is found in Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963). For a complete rendition of the *Liji*, see James Legge, *The Li Ki—Book of Rites* (Delhi: Motilal Barnasidass, 1968 [1885]). A discussion of the role of ritual in ancient China is found in Joseph P. McDermott, *State and Court Ritual in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

19. On the development of Confucianism in its modern form since the Song dynasty, see William Theodore DeBary, *The Unfolding of Neo-Confucianism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975); and *Neo-Confucian Orthodoxy and the Learning of the Mind-and-Heart* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). For its modern vision and relevance, see

Daoism

Unlike the Confucian preoccupation with society, the proponents of the cosmic “Way” (Dao) proposed a return to naturalness, spontaneity, and organic so-being. Their ideas were first represented in the *Daode jing* associated with the thinker Laozi, the Old Master, a largely legendary figure who allegedly served as an official at the royal Zhou court and instructed Confucius about the rites.²⁰

The text consists of about five thousand characters and is commonly divided into eighty-one chapters and two parts, one on Dao (1–37), and one on De (38–81).²¹ It is written in verse—not a rhyming, steady rhythmic kind of verse, but a stylized prose that has strong parallels and regular patterns—and contains sections of description contrasted with tight punchlines.²²

The *Daode jing* has been transmitted in several different editions, three of which are most important today. The first is the so-called standard edition, also known as the transmitted edition. Handed down by Chinese copyists over the ages, it is at the root of almost all translations of the text. It goes back to the third century C.E., to the erudite Wang Bi (226–249) who edited the text and wrote a commentary on it that Chinese since then have

Wei-ming Tu, *Humanity and Self-Cultivation: Essays in Confucian Thought* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1979).

20. As A. C. Graham has shown, the early legend of Laozi arose as part of the Confucian effort to show the humility and continuous learning of their master. He was associated with a growing “Daoist” community in the fourth century B.C.E. and credited with longevity and even immortality under the Qin. See “The Origins of the Legend of Lao Tan,” in *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature*, edited by A. C. Graham (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 111–24.

21. The *Daode jing* is among the most frequently translated books on the planet. For a discussion of the intricacies of its translation and a guide to the most commonly used ones, see Michael LaFargue and Julian Pas, “On Translating the *Tao-te-ching*,” in *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, edited by Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 277–302.

22. The particular style of *Daode jing* poetry is closely related to that of the *Shijing* (Book of Songs), a collection of ancient local songs and poems that date back to around 500 B.C.E. For a discussion, see William H. Baxter, “Situating the Language of the *Lao-tzu*: The Probable Date of the *Tao-te-ching*,” in *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, edited by Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 231–54.

considered inspired. It has shaped the reception of the text's worldview until today.²³

The second edition is called the Mawangdui edition, named after a place in south China (Hunan) where a tomb was excavated in 1973 that dated from 168 B.C.E. It contained an undisturbed coffin surrounded by numerous artifacts and several manuscripts written on silk, mostly dealing with cosmology and medicine.²⁴ Among them were two copies of the *Daode jing*. The Mawangdui version differs little from the transmitted edition: there are some character variants which have helped clarify some interpretive points, and the two parts are in reversed order, i.e.; the text begins with the section on De, then adds the section on Dao.²⁵ The manuscripts are important because they show that the *Daode jing* existed in its complete form in the early Han dynasty, and that it was considered essential enough to be placed in someone's grave.

The third edition was discovered in 1993 in a place called Guodian (Hubei). Written on bamboo slips and dated to about 300 B.C.E., the find presents a collection of various philosophical works of the time, including fragments of Confucian and other texts. Among them are thirty-three passages that can be matched with thirty-one chapters of the *Daode jing*, but with lines in different places, and considerable variation in characters. Generally, they are concerned with self-cultivation and its application to questions of rulership and the pacification of the state. Polemical attacks against Confucian virtues, such as those describing them as useless or even harmful, are not found; instead negative attitudes and emotions are

23. On the creation of the standard edition and the commentary by Wang Bi, see Alan Chan, *Two Visions of the Way: A Study of the Wang Pi and the Ho-shang-kung Commentaries on the Laozi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991). A translation of the commentary appears in Paul J. Lin, *A Translation of Lao-tzu's Tao-te-ching and Wang Pi's Commentary* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies Publications, 1977); Ariane Rump and Wing-tsit Chan, *Commentary on the Lao-tzu by Wang Pi* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1979).

24. A detailed study of the Mawangdui finds and a complete translation of the medical works is found in Donald Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Manuscripts: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts* (London: Wellcome Asian Medical Monographs, 1998).

25. For a translation of this version of the text, see Robert Henricks *Lao-Tzu: Te-Tao ching* (New York: Ballantine, 1989).

criticized.²⁶ This Guodian find of this so-called “Bamboo Laozi” tells us that in the late fourth century B.C.E. the text existed in rudimentary form, and consisted of a collection of sayings not yet edited into a coherent presentation. Another text found at Guodian, the *Taiyi sheng shui* (Great Unity Creates Water), gives further insights into the growing and possibly even “Daoist” cosmology of the time, as does a contemporaneous work on self-cultivation, the “Inward Training” (*Neiye*) chapter of the *Guanzi*.²⁷ It appears that, gradually, a set of ideas and practices was growing that would eventually develop into something specifically and more religiously Daoist.

Dao and Non-action

The *Daode jing* has often been hailed as representing the core of the Daoist worldview and the root of Daoist mysticism. But it is in fact a multifaceted work that can be, and has been, interpreted in many different ways, not least as a manual of strategy, a political treatise on the recovery of the golden age, a guide to underlying principles, and a metalinguistic inquiry into forms of prescriptive discourse. It can be read in two fundamentally different ways: as a document of early Chinese culture or as a scripture of universal significance.

It outlines the ultimate power and reality of Dao, the underlying source and power of the universe, the way the world functions, a mystical power of universal oneness. Benjamin Schwartz describes it as “organic order”—“organic” in the sense that it is part of the world and not a transcendent other as in Western religion, “order” because it can be felt in the rhythms of the world, in the manifestation of organized patterns.²⁸ Dao is at the root of creation—tight, concentrated, intense, and ultimately unknowable, ineffable,

26. A translation of the various manuscripts unearthed at Guodian appears in Robert Henricks, *Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching: A Translation of the Startling New Documents Found at Guodian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). A collection of essays on the texts is found in Sarah Allen and Crispin Williams, eds., *The Guodian Laozi* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2000).

27. A detailed discussion and translation of this early Daoist mystical text, which represents a practical supplement to the *Daode jing*, is found in Harold D. Roth, *Original Tao: Inward Training and the Foundations of Taoist Mysticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

28. Schwartz, “The Worldview of the *Tao-te-ching*”, 192.

and beyond conscious or sensory human attainment—and also present in the world, in the patterned cycles of life and visible nature. The way to be with Dao is through non-action (*wuwei*) and naturalness (*ziran*), which means letting go of egotistic concerns and passions and desires, finding a sense of where life, nature, and the world are headed on the social level, and abstaining from forceful and interfering measures in the political realm. The person who has realized Dao to the utmost is the sage, in the *Daode jing* ideally the ruler, to whom the treatise was originally addressed.²⁹

In the course of history, Laozi was divinized as a personification of Dao and began to appear in ecstatic visions to selected seekers.³⁰ These seekers founded various organized schools that proposed specific celestial realms to attain, moral rules to follow, rituals to observe, and a plethora of mystical practices to master, from basic physical refinements of *qi* through diets, exercises, breathing, and sexual control to advanced meditations of all different kinds: quietistic concentration, Buddhist-inspired insight meditation, intricate visualizations of the gods, and the still-active practice of internal alchemy.³¹

We will not be able to go into all these details, but will have to limit ourselves to pointing out the main common points and unique features of the two main mystical traditions of China.

Common Points

A first common point among Confucianism and Daoism is the belief in what perennialists call the “Ground,” an underlying power or force that

29. The original setting and structure of the *Daode jing* are particularly explored in Michael LaFargue, *The Tao of the Tao-te-ching* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

30. On the growth of Laozi into a god and one of the key deities of the Daoist religion, see Anna Seidel, *La divinisation de Lao-tseu dans le taoïsme des Han* (Paris: Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1969); Livia Kohn, *God of the Dao: Lord Lao in History and Myth* (University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies, 1998).

31. On the various practices involved in Daoist cultivation, see Livia Kohn, ed., *Taoist Meditation and Longevity Techniques* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Center for Chinese Studies, 1998); *Daoist Body Cultivation: Traditional Models and Contemporary Practices* (Magdalena, NM: Three Pines Press, 2006).

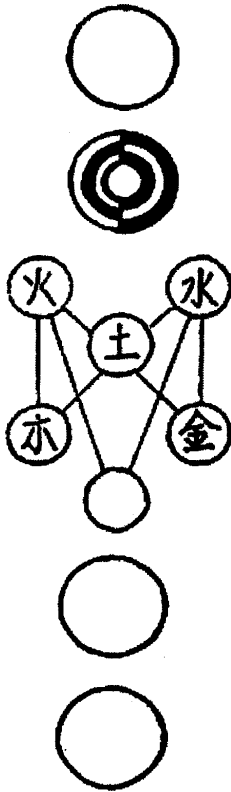


Fig 1:
The Great Ultimate

creates and supports the universe.³² Described as the Dao or “Way” in both, it is known more specifically as the Non-ultimate among the Confucians. This is depicted as an empty circle, from which the Great Ultimate arises, depicted as the classic diagram of yin and yang. The Great Ultimate, in turn, is the core of the existing universe, and as such gives rise to the three forces (Heaven, Earth, Humanity) and the five evolutive phases (wood, fire, earth, metal, water), which in different combinations appear in everything that exists (see Fig. 1: The Diagram of the Great Ultimate. Source: *Taiji tu*.)³³

In Daoism, at least in its classical form, the Dao similarly is said to give rise to the One, the core of creation and existence that is part of chaos yet also contains the universe in seminal form. This unfolds in a dividing movement to produce the two—the two forces yin and yang—which in their turn unite to form the three, described as yin and yang plus “yin and yang in harmony.” These three, then, characterize everything created in the world, and are accordingly said to “produce the myriad beings.”³⁴

32. The notion of the Ground appears in discussions of the perennial philosophy, a term coined by the German philosopher Leibniz and more extensively formulated by Aldous Huxley in *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946). Among mysticism studies, it is most clearly present in F. C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1970).

33. While this cosmology is already part of the ancient *Yijing* and appears in Han-dynasty commentaries to the text, it is most explicitly formulated in early Neo-Confucian documents, notably the works of Zhou Dunyi (1017–1073). A translation of the full document is found in Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 463–64.

34. *Daode jing*, ch. 42.

Within this overall cosmogonic framework and common reliance on the universal Ground, both Confucian and Daoist mysticism further rely heavily on traditional Chinese cosmology of yin-yang and the five phases and their complex correspondences. All beings actively participate in the cosmic cycles. They have the power to either go along with them smoothly or distort them at their will. The ordinary consciousness of people, typically governed by passions and desires, and their actions in society are then understood as forms of distortion, which cause self and world to be out of balance. The mystical endeavor in both traditions as a result aims not only at the restoration of cosmic harmony but at its conscious and active realization within the individual who is then able to live as long as Heaven and Earth.

From this arises a third common point: the understanding that every part of the world is closely interrelated with every other part and that the macrocosm and microcosm mirror each other to perfection. The world here is seen as a series of concentric circles, which are isomorphic structurally and in their energy makeup. They begin with the body on the microcosmic level, then proceed through the family, the community or society, and the natural world to the cosmos as visible in the movements of the stars and planets. Each level is the exact replica of the next, and impulses in one have inevitable responses in all others. Mystical realization, as a result, means the perfection of the whole, beginning with the smallest entity and extending toward the larger universe. The mystic in China, whether Confucian or Daoist, is therefore never socially separate and his realization has highest relevance for the perfection of human life as a whole.

These points appear in the "Great Learning" chapter of the *Liji* and are formulated strongly in the philosophy of resonance or "impulse and response" (*ganying*) in the Han dynasty,³⁵ and later taken up vibrantly in Ming dynasty Neo-Confucianism, notably in the thought of Wang Yangming.³⁶ In Daoism, they form part of the vision of Great Peace but are also pervasively

35. For a discussion of the concept of resonance, see Charles Le Blanc, "Resonance: Une interprétation chinoise de la réalité," in *Mythe et philosophie à l'aube de la Chine impériale: Etudes sur le Huainan zi*, edited by Charles Le Blanc and Remi Mathieu (Montreal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montreal, 1992), 91–111.

36. On the thought of Wang Yangming, see Julia Ching *To Accumulate Wisdom: The Way of Wang Yang-ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976).

present in the understanding of the body and the role of humanity in the greater universe.³⁷

Another aspect both traditions share is their indebtedness to Buddhism, Daoism since the Six Dynasties period (ab. 406–489 C.E.) and Confucianism since the Song dynasty.³⁸ In Daoism, Buddhism contributed the monastic setting of its practice, the doctrine of karma and retribution (including punishments in the hells), the belief in popular savior figures and techniques of insight meditation.³⁹ Neo-Confucianism owes to the religion especially its understanding of the difference between principle and affairs, the underlying essence of the world and its manifestation in reality, as well as its meditation of quiet-sitting, which goes back to the practice of *zazen*.⁴⁰ Buddhism, a highly sophisticated system of doctrines, meditations, and monastic organization, thus contributed significantly to the shaping of the Chinese mystical tradition, even in its indigenous forms.

Historical Unfolding

These four points common to both Confucianism and Daoism—the belief in the Ground, the application of five-phases cosmology, the correspondence of macro- and microcosm, and the adaptation of Buddhist concepts—have their root in the historical development of the traditions, which is highly parallel and reflects the overall unfolding of Chinese religion. Typically, this development is divided into three periods: a classical that reaches from the ancient philosophers to the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.); a medieval that lasts from the Three Kingdoms (221–265) to the Tang (618–907); and a modern that begins with the Song dynasty in 960 and goes all the

37. For more on the Daoist vision of Great Peace, see note 9 above.

38. On the transmission and adaptation of Buddhism in China, see Kenneth Ch'en, *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Erik Zürcher, *The Buddhist Conquest of China: The Spread and Adaptation of Buddhism in Early Medieval China* (Leiden: E. Brill, 1959); Zenryu Tsukamoto and Leon Hurvitz, *A History of Early Chinese Buddhism* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1985).

39. See Erik Zürcher, "Buddhist Influence on Early Taoism," *T'oung Pao* 66 (1980), 84–147.

40. For Buddhist influence on Neo-Confucianism, see Carsun Chang, *The Development of Neo-Confucian Thought* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1962); Rodney Taylor, *The Cultivation of Selfhood as a Religious Goal in Neo-Confucianism* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978).

way through late imperial China (Ming and Qing dynasties, 1368–1644, 1644–1911) to the present.⁴¹

Each of these periods has its specific tendencies and overall marks. The classical is characterized by a high emphasis on philosophical speculation and the emergence of a systematic cosmological base; the medieval evolves under the strong influence of Buddhism and sees the emergence of sophisticated concepts of body and mind as well as complex methods of meditation and mystical attainment; the modern recovers the classical models and integrates them in a new and farther-reaching synthesis that allows a broad vision of practice and realization.

More specifically, in the classical period we have the key thinkers of the two traditions, Confucius and Mencius in Confucianism, Laozi and Zhuangzi in Daoism. While none of them wrote anything himself, their words were considered important enough to be transmitted through generations of disciples and committed to bamboo and silk around the third century B.C.E. Even the vagaries of changing dynasties and the notorious book-burning of 214 B.C.E. did not lessen either their intactness or importance for Chinese culture.⁴² Classics in the true sense of the word, they were used for governmental as much as personal guidance, cited frequently and interpreted ever anew, and in both their overall outlook and particular phrasing gave the two traditions their unique foundations. In addition, the classical period saw the emergence of the five-phases cosmology with its complex correspondence system and its vision of the universe as concentric circles of parallel layers and its postulation of an intimate interrelation between all levels of life.

The medieval period of about seven hundred years is commonly divided into an early and a high phase, the boundary being set in the sixth century when the country was reunified after a long stretch of division. The early medieval period is characterized by an unprecedented dynamic, especially in Daoism, which saw the emergence of its major schools (Celestial Masters,

41. For a discussion of periodization issues in Chinese religion and Daoism, see Russell Kirkland, "The Historical Contours of Taoism in China: Thoughts on Issues of Classification and Terminology," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 25 (1997), 5782.

42. On the burning of the books and other radical measures under the first Chinese imperial dynasty, see Derk Bodde, *China's First Unifier: A Study of the Ch'in Dynasty as Seen in the Life of Li Ssu, 280?–208 B.C.* (Leiden: E. Brill, 1938).

Highest Clarity, Numinous Treasure) under the heavy influence of Buddhism, which was sponsored particularly by the Central Asians in north China. The period saw the divinization of the philosopher Laozi, who was venerated as a personification of the Dao and became increasingly like the Buddha in character. It also saw the formulation of Daoist mystical attainment through ecstatic journeys to the stars and the realization of mental detachment.⁴³

Confucianism, the more dominant creed of the south, was less affected, but still had to engage in debates with a growing number of Buddhists and gradually began to incorporate Buddhist ways of thinking into its worldview. The high medieval phase, next, saw a consolidation of the new forms of thinking, actively integrating Buddhist visions into indigenous Chinese systems and creating the sophisticated mystical systems of the mid-Tang. These systems were carried largely by Daoists, Confucianism being relegated to state-supporting doctrine at the time.

This changed in the Song dynasty when an overall recovery of Chinese roots and the ancient classics took place. This recovery followed upon two hundred years of confusion and civil war, beginning in 755 with the rebellion of An Lushan, a general of Central Asian descent, and ending only with the founding of the Song in 960. With much of high culture and social infrastructure in ruins, the new dynasty engaged both in the eager collection of lost materials (turning the Song into the great age of Chinese encyclopedias) and in the return to ancient models that were more Chinese and less Central Asian or Indian. As a result, Confucianism was greatly revived and turned, in its Neo-Confucian form as formulated especially by the great Zhu Xi (1130–1200), into a form of mystical self-cultivation, giving rise to a rich and varied tradition that had its own form of meditation (quiet sitting), its own centers of learning (academies), and its own specific vision of the world (as issuing from the Great Ultimate and relying on universal principle).⁴⁴

Daoism, at this time much less important than Confucianism, reformulated its doctrines in the integrated system of inner alchemy, which applies alchemical metaphors and the symbols of the *Yijing* (Book of

43. For an overview of Daoist history, see Livia Kohn, *Daoism and Chinese Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Three Pines Press, 2001).

44. On Zhu Xi, see Wing-tsit Chan, *Chu Hsi: New Studies* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989).

Changes) to express a vision of immortality highly patterned on the Buddhist attainment of nirvana. In addition, its new leading school of Complete Perfection imitated the Chan (Zen) tradition in many ways, organizationally, doctrinally, and in methods of transmission and asceticism. Both traditions have continued to the present day along the patterns established in the Song dynasty, evolving new forms of interpretation and new modes of practice but leaving the overall framework of worldview and mystical vision unchanged. While both suffered under Communist rule in China and are today recovering, Confucianism in addition was also heartily adopted in Korea and Japan and has a rich extended environment for its modern unfolding.

Unique Characteristics

Having seen the overall commonality and historical parallels of the two traditions, we shall now turn to their distinct and unique characteristics, understanding how they differ in many respects of mystical worldview, location, and practice.

Creation

To begin, in their vision of the ultimate Confucians posit a relationship between humanity and the cosmos that is direct and immediate, with harmony and virtuous order being the key factors in the attainment of oneness and mystical vision. The same holds true for classical Daoism, the teachings of the ancient thinkers Laozi and Zhuangzi, but is vastly different in the religion, where the Dao gives rise to the One, which unfolds into three *qi* or cosmic energies, called the mysterious, beginning, and primordial. These, in turn, coagulate to bring forth the first god, the deity Laozi, personification of the Dao.

Coagulating further, the same energies also produce a series of nine heavens, a number of other deities (as, for example, the Queen Mother of the West as representative of pure yin), and a canon of sacred scriptures which contain, in essential and celestial form, the teachings the world will need to be created. Before, therefore, the world ever comes into existence, there is a level of manifest divinity, found in the heavens, the gods, and the scriptures, which are neither beyond sensory experience and verbal expression as the Dao itself nor yet manifest in the world. Mediating chaos and creation, they

represent a pure level of Dao-existence, from which human life springs and to which it will return. The Dao, as apparent on this mythical level, is a willful agent that is no longer a spontaneous “flow of life” but gives a soteriological dimension to the creation. The mystical quest accordingly goes beyond the attainment of harmony with the cosmos, however encompassing, to the transcendence of the world in a state of immortality in the celestial realm.⁴⁵

Wisdom

Wisdom in the classical texts and later interpretation of the two traditions appears similarly different. Confucians emphasize the acquisition of wisdom through learning and its practical realization in benevolence and social harmony, striving for the perfect equilibrium of forces and energies.⁴⁶ They begin with inherent intelligence, whose training leads to sincerity. Sincerity in turn brings forth an equilibrium, which results in an overarching harmony that radiates brilliantly from the person to the community and into the world, bringing “happy order” to Heaven and Earth. Daoists, on the contrary, find Heaven and Earth in their own body and see the five phases of the larger universe as spirits in the five *qi*-storing organs (liver, heart, spleen, lungs, kidneys). Practicing controlled breathing, they balance the different powers on a microcosmic level and find the One in themselves to then reach out to the celestial spheres.⁴⁷

As wisdom and a sense of harmony in Confucianism are acquired through learning, an intellectual effort that is based on the classics, the goals and means of the practice are always described in words. The tradition acknowledges that some words are better than others but never reaches the point of denying their potential or use. Not so the Daoists. They, in both the classical and religious traditions, place a high emphasis on the ineffability of Dao. Zhuangzi in his famous chapter on “Making All Things Equal” even denies any applicability of words whatsoever.⁴⁸ Words to Daoists are just sounds, made meaningful only by convention. Dependent on opposites, they

45. Livia Kohn, *Daoism and Chinese Culture*, 89–90.

46. Julia Ching, *To Accumulate Wisdom*, 15.

47. For the complexities of the inner landscape and gods in the Daoist body, see Livia Kohn, “Taoist Visions of the Body,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 18 (1991), 227–52.

48. See Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang-tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), 41.

are eternally relative and therefore nowhere near the truth. Valuing silence highest, Daoists describe their creed as the “teaching without words,” and follow the statement of the *Daode jing*: “Who speaks does not know, and who knows does not speak.”⁴⁹ As a result, the state of oneness with Dao is explained in paradoxes and by redefining words in spiraling circles, taking the adept’s consciousness to ever more formless and ineffable levels, until it dissolves in utter serenity.⁵⁰

The Self

The self in mystical experience is similarly verbalized and conscious in the Confucian tradition and ineffable and formless in Daoism, where mythological figures are called upon to replace words in giving expression to its transformation.⁵¹ An individualized aspect of the Great Ultimate, the self in Neo-Confucianism is linked to the origins in its inherent “mind of Heaven,” which has to be freed from attachments to externals and focused back on stillness and sincerity. As Confucian auto-biographies document, this process is a conscious search that takes place as part of a government career which leaves room for serious practice after hours and between official posting and never necessitates the complete withdrawal from society. Inspired by readings and verbal teachings, the conscious mind is led to give certain interpretations to the world, as for example, “in reality there is not a single thing,” and accordingly finds harmony in its social environment.⁵²

The Daoist self, on the other hand, is transformed into celestial dimensions after it is first seen as consisting of several contradictory

49. *Daode jing*, ch. 81.

50. A good example of the mystical use of language in Daoism is found in the medieval *Xisheng jing* (*Scripture of Western Ascension*), which purports to contain Laozi’s oral instructions at the time of *Daode jing* transmission. For a translation and study, see Livia Kohn, *Daoist Mystical Philosophy: The Scripture of Western Ascension* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

51. A study of the different aspects of the self is found in Livia Kohn, “Selfhood and Spontaneity in Ancient Chinese Thought,” In *Selves, People, and Persons*, edited by Leroy Rouner (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, Boston University Series in Philosophy and Religion, vol. 13, 1992), 123–38.

52. See Rodney Taylor, “The Centered Self: Religious Autobiography in the Neo-Confucian Tradition,” *History of Religions* 17 (1978), 255–283; *The Religious Dimensions of Confucianism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

forces—seven material or yin souls matching three spiritual or yang souls, plus various celestial deities of the pure Dao and demonic parasites known as the three worms—which pull it in opposite directions: yin toward instinct, satisfaction, sensuality, and darkness; yang toward intellectual endeavors, spirituality, and light.⁵³ Through control of the yin impulses and the destruction of inner demons, the adept's inner nature is changed into pure yang. Then the celestials, notably the Three Ones, can come to occupy all thinking and feeling by being constantly visualized in the energy centers or elixir fields of head, chest, and abdomen.⁵⁴ The body, a microcosm of the created world, is transformed into a replica of the heavens, the gods, and the scriptures that reside before the creation of the material universe. Adept in the process become denizens of the empyrean, leaving behind the perfection of naturalness in the attainment of celestial purity.

Mystical Training

Mystical training differs accordingly. Centered on the five virtues (honesty, propriety, wisdom, benevolence, and righteousness) and their proper feelings, Confucians are guided to see the inherent principle of universal oneness in their body and mind, and from there expand it into the family, community, and wider world.⁵⁵ As the virtues, among which humanity or benevolence is first, are realized, all selfish impulses are overcome and the mind becomes identical with the impartiality of Heaven. A harmonious life in the world is possible, and the world itself finds perfect balance.⁵⁶

Daoists, in their turn, undertake mystical training not within family and society but in a monastic setting that separates them from the concerns of everyday life. They live in establishments tucked far away in remote

53. A discussion of the various souls and their impact on the body-mind in Daoism appears in Livia Kohn, "Yin and Yang: The Natural Dimension of Evil," in *Philosophies of Nature: The Human Dimension*, edited by Robert S. Cohen and Alfred I. Tauber (New York: Kluwer Academic Publishers, Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, 1997), 89–104.

54. The specific method of visualizing the Three Ones, with a detailed description of their looks and garb and the incantations necessary for their activation is translated in Poul Andersen, *The Method of Holding the Three Ones* (London: Curzon Press, 1980).

55. A detailed discussion of the virtues and their role in Confucian self-cultivation is found in Wing-tsit Chan, *Neo Confucian Terms Explained* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 177–79.

56. See Philip J. Ivanhoe, *Confucian Moral Self-Cultivation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

mountain areas and set up to replicate the wondrous world of the immortals, wear formalized ritual garments, adapt a simple vegetarian diet combined with regular periods of fasting, and follow a strict ritual schedule that denies normal patterns of waking and sleeping.⁵⁷ They vow to obey sets of precepts that also include Confucian values, but rather than cultivating specific virtues, they strive for an overall harmony with the natural forces. In their practice, moreover, they think less of the social impact—although that will eventually follow—but focus on their physical bodies, which they see as the primary residence of the gods, nurturing them with herbal remedies instead of the rich foods of the world. In place of man-made structures, they engage actively with physical nature, close to mountains and streams, boulders and grottoes, while yet maintaining a strong cosmic awareness and visualizing celestial palaces both in the body and in the stars.

Ethics and Community

Directly related to this aspect of mystical training is the nature of community and ethics, being highly hierarchical and family-centered in Confucianism, and more egalitarian and universal in Daoism. Confucian specialist communities, preparatory to life in society, are academies where the classics are read and thoughts are developed in active contemplation. Their rules include proper reverence for elders, awareness of hierarchies, and abstention from harmful social actions. As the Neo-Confucian thinker Dai Zhen (1723–1777) says: “When a person is neither selfish nor beclouded, his mind is pure and clear; this is a state of supreme illumination. When a mind is still and does not move, it is pure and attains the perfection of heavenly virtue.”⁵⁸

Daoist communities, in comparison, are religious organizations, dedicated under Mahayana influence to the universal salvation of all beings. Thus community rules here imitate the Buddhist precepts, emphasizing the restraint of baser appetites, and often focus on the purity of the body

57. See Livia Kohn, *Monastic Life in Medieval Daoism: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003).

58. Chung-ying Cheng, *Tai Chen's Inquiry into Goodness* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1971), 106. For more details on Confucian rules for mystical training, see the Korean interpretation of Zhu Xi's guidelines translated in Michael Kalton, *To Become a Sage: The Ten Diagrams on Sage Learning by Yi T'oege* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

attained through the retention of the gods within. In addition, they guide adepts to give proper veneration to sacred locations and objects and threaten punishments in mythological form as tortures in the various hells.

As regards the practice that goes on in these centers, Confucians, aside from reading the classics and pondering the oneness of the universe, engage in a meditation called “quiet-sitting,” which is a form of contemplation that aims at stilling the mind and making it into a mirror that reflects but does not act on its own.⁵⁹ Without cutting off social relationships and responsibilities, practitioners develop a pure and reflecting mind and thereby lose all selfish impulses in favor of a calm and impartial response to the world. Anger and happiness in this context are accepted as part of the natural response and encouraged to occur at right times.

Daoists, again more Heaven-oriented, have a much larger variety of practices. They begin with a change in diet and daily habits, then perform various physical and breathing exercises to open up the *qi*-channels in the body and activate the energy centers in the five organs. These practices tend to combine slow body movements with deep breathing, and a keen mental awareness. They go back far in Chinese are nowadays known under the name of Qigong.⁶⁰

Beyond that, Daoists engage in more comically centered meditations, visualizing the five cosmic energies as they appear in their characteristic colors in the five organs and thus relating the body actively to the heavenly spheres. They also imagine deities in the body such as the Three Ones who, often in the form of infants and clad in luscious brocades, reside in the inner palaces and bestow health, harmony, and celestial empowerment on the practitioner. Externalizing these gods, Daoists further visualize them

59. For an outline of traditional Confucian practice, see Chan, *Neo Confucian Terms Explained*. For contemporary forms of Confucian meditation, see Rodney Taylor, *The Confucian Way of Contemplation: Okada Takehiko and the Tradition of Quiet-Sitting* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988).

60. A good overview of Qigong as practiced today is found in Kenneth S. Cohen, *The Way of Qigong: The Art and Science of Chinese Energy Healing* (New York: Ballantine, 1997). Traditionally it goes back to a practice called *daoyin* (lit. “guiding the *qi* and stretching the body”), discussed in depth in Livia Kohn, *Chinese Healing Exercises: The Tradition of Daoyin* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008). The martial art of Taiji quan is often also practiced in a similar healing and self-awareness manner and has been adopted in many Daoist establishments today. For a discussion, see Kohn, *Health and Long Life*, 191–202.

as outside entities, from whom they can acquire valuable knowledge or celestial energies. In yet another form of Daoist practice, adepts refine their bodies to heavenly purity in a quasi-alchemical process, seeing the yin and yang energies of the body as the lead and mercury of the crucible and concocting a cinnabar elixir, the pearl of immortality, within. This pearl eventually grows into an immortal embryo, the spirit *alter ego* of the practitioner, allowing him or her to leave the body behind and traverse the heavens in utter freedom. As the body falls away in death, this spirit entity survives and the practitioner becomes a celestial being, living forever and attaining a celestial form of oneness with Dao.

The Ideal Human

Anyone having attained the goal of the tradition becomes a master, an ideal human being in the Confucian tradition and a celestial sage or heavenly perfected in the Daoist vision. The Confucian gentleman (*junzi*) is characterized as highly virtuous and eminently learned, a paragon of benevolence and filial piety, who knows all about ceremonies and music and can explain the truth of cosmic harmony with ease and simplicity. As described in a Neo-Confucian document, "he is as pure as pure gold, and as mild and lovable as excellent jade. Liberal but not irregular, he maintains harmony with others but does not drift with them. His conscientiousness and sincerity penetrate metal and stone, and his filial piety and brotherly respect influence all beings."⁶¹

The Daoist sage (*shengren*) or perfected (*zhenren*) has similarly characteristics but more dominantly is a heavenly being with no explicit teachings who acts in complete non-action among people. Moving along with the currents of the world, he or she neither supports nor hinders but gives free rein to the currents of life and lets things take their natural course. Never claiming to know or be able to do anything, the accomplished Daoist simply floats through in the world as a ray of pure heavenly light, shining widely and transforming all without active intention.⁶² As the *Daode jing* says: "The Sage does not act and so does not ruin; he does not grasp and

61. Wing-tsit Chan, *Reflections on Things at Hand: The Neo-Confucian Anthology Compiled by Chu Hsi and Lü Tsu-ch'ien* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 299.

62. See Livia Kohn, "The Sage in the World, the Perfected Without Feelings: Mysticism and Moral Responsibility in Chinese Religion," in *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status*

so does not lose;”⁶³ and: “He always helps people and rejects none; always helps all beings and rejects none.”⁶⁴ This is called practicing brightness.

Despite these differences, both traditions emphasize the importance of microcosmic perfection in macrocosmic reality and claim the transformative powers of the accomplished mystic in society at large. The goal, however much the Daoists may emphasize Heaven, is ultimately the transformation of earth, seen here as the establishment of a celestial kingdom on earth, a state that both contains and transcends the happy order of Confucianism.

Mystical Union

Mystical union, finally, as celebrated in the traditions, reflects once more their fundamental difference as inherent versus transcendent. Confucians hope to “regard Heaven, Earth, and the myriad things as one body, the world as one family and the country as one person.” They come to “form one body with Heaven, Earth, and the myriad beings,” seeing “all people as their brothers and sisters, and all things as their companions.”⁶⁵ The underlying oneness of the cosmos is fully realized in the mystics’ minds as they become impartial and pure in their relationship to all. Joining all creatures in celestial oneness, they have empathy for all and give selflessly everywhere. Their own person one with the family, the community, the world, and the cosmos, they naturally radiate bright virtue, spreading benevolence and goodness wherever they go.

Daoist mystics, on the contrary, after living out an extended lifespan as sages or perfected on earth, find complete realization in a triumphant ascent to the heavens. Having realized the cosmos within, they ride into the empyrean on cloudy chariots drawn by a quadriga of dragons, encountering pure divinities of Dao and joining splendid banquets in the celestial palaces.⁶⁶ As the Tang poet Wu Yun (d. 778) has it:

of *Mysticism*, edited by G. William Barnard and Jeffrey J. Kripal (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2002), 288–306.

63. *Daode jing*, ch. 64.

64. *Daode jing*, ch. 27.

65. Wing-tsit Chan, *Instructions for Practical Living and Other Neo-Confucian Writings by Wang Yang-ming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 272–74.

66. Poetic descriptions of the ecstatic flight of the Daoist mystic are first found in ancient shamanic songs, then in medieval poetry. See David Hawkes, *Ch'u Tz'u: The Songs of the South*

The emperor of the Great One settles in my heart;
 As streaming light pours from my Cinnabar Field.
 The gods, like Nonradiance and the Lord Peach,
 Chant brightly from the chapters of long life.
 My six viscera glow with luminous morning light;
 My hundred joints are like a net of purple mist.
 My whirlwind carriage traverses endless space:
 Slow and steady, I rise on light itself.⁶⁷

Watching phoenixes and unicorns dance to spheric music, they enjoy the eternal freedom of the pure spirit; at one with the Dao in its first creative stage and partaking of its powers, they can live forever, appear and disappear at will, be in numerous places at once, and reverse the course of nature.⁶⁸ Still dedicated to universal salvation, they then use their new power and position to administer celestial justice and, almost in bodhisattva fashion, aid humanity in its plight. Having become gods, Daoist mystics are beyond the world and yet for it, personifications of the purity of Heaven and the creative powers of Dao.

Conclusion

Chinese mysticism in its various forms always focuses on the attainment of oneness with Heaven and Earth, is centered on the body-mind of the living individual, has a strong social and political dimension, and relates to an underlying force of multiple divinities rather than a single creator god. In its indigenous mode, it comes in two major traditions: Confucian and Daoist, which have undergone parallel phases of historical development,

(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959); Donald Holzman, *Poetry and Politics: The Life and Works of Juan Chi (210–263)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

67. Wu Yun, *Buxu ci (Songs on Pacing the Void)*, translated by the author, based on Edward H. Schafer, "Wu Yün's 'Cantos on Pacing the Void,'" *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41 (1981), 377–415.

68. Detailed descriptions of ideal Daoists, their activities and powers are found in a collection of immortals' biographies from the fourth century. See Robert F. Campany, *To Live As Long As Heaven and Earth: A Translation and Study of Ge Hong's Traditions of Divine Transcendents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

are deeply indebted to Buddhism, and served Chinese society widely with their vision.

Classified traditionally in the complementary system of yin and yang, Confucian self-realization is the more outward-going, society-oriented, politically active form, achieved through conscious learning and the steadfast practice of essentially communal virtues. Daoist perfection, on the other hand, is more transcendent and deeply steeped in myth. It, too, begins with the individual and encourages ethical conduct and social responsibility, but in its higher stages focuses on venerating revealed scriptures, connecting to divine entities, ecstatically traveling to other-worldly realms, and ultimately going completely beyond the limitations of human life and world. Both traditions are eager to contribute to a greater sense of wholeness of the person, to peace and harmony in the world, and to a sense of cosmic integration and oneness. They start from a positive, life-affirming outlook and encourage being in the world, making a contribution to society, and finding happiness in this life. Yet they also retain a sense of a greater reality beyond, of a connection to higher cosmic realities, and express the strong urge to reach for the ultimate, for a life in oneness with Heaven and Earth.