



OVERVIEW

Taoism, also known as Daoism, is an indigenous Chinese religion often associated with the *Daode jing* (Tao Te Ching), a philosophical and political text purportedly written by Laozi (Lao Tzu) sometime in the 3rd or 4th centuries B.C.E. The *Daode jing* focuses on dao as a "way" or "path" — that is, the appropriate way to behave and to lead others — but the *Daode jing* also refers to Tao as something that existed "before Heaven and Earth," a primal and chaotic matrix from which all forms emerged. Taoism did not exist as an organized religion until the Way of the Celestial Masters sect was founded in 142 C.E. by Zhang Daoling, who based the sect on spiritual communications from the deified Laozi. The Way of the Celestial Masters and other later sects of Taoism engaged in complex ritual practices, including devotion to a wide range of celestial divinities and immortals, and thousands of Taoist religious texts were produced over the centuries. Taoists also engaged with Chinese politics in a variety of ways throughout Chinese history. At one time, scholars in both China and the West distinguished philosophical from religious Taoism, but more recently a continuity of belief and practice between these has been recognized. In both, a harmonious relationship between nature, humanity and the divine is emphasized, and both are concerned with





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Daode jing, but in both the West and in the East, there is considerable interest in practices which, while not "Taoist" *per se*, are often associated with Taoism, to acupuncture and herbal medicine.

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Quick Fact Details:

- *Formed:* As with many ancient religious traditions, an exact date is impossible to determine. Taoist ideas and early writings long precede any organizational structure. The date given here (c. 550 B.C.E.) is generally the time period when a variety of spiritual thinkers were putting their ideas into writing. These writings were not collected as a composite teaching of the "Tao" until the 4th or 3rd century B.C.E.
- *Deity:* While Taoists recognize a vast pantheon of gods and goddesses, they do not acknowledge any that are omnipotent or eternal. All the gods, including Laozi, are divine emanations of celestial energy.
- *Headquarters:* Taoism has no centralized authority and different sects have different headquarters. However, the White Cloud Temple in Beijing is a key center for training for priests and for administration.

Quick Fact Sources include www.adherents.com

(<http://www.adherents.com/>), www.bbc.co.uk/religion

(<http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion>), *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*

(2006), *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (2005), the [Religious Movements Page at](#) 



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