

THE EVOLUTION OF TAOIST DOCTRINES.¹

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THE early fathers of Taoism, Lao-tze, Lieh-tzè, and Chwang-tze, who lived from the fifth to the fourth century B. C., were philosophers and controversialists. Without denying the existence of a Lord on High as ancient as China,² without opposing the paltry notions of the "Grand Plan",³ they looked farther and higher for the origin of all things. Their researches tend practically toward a naturalistic pantheism obviously inspired by contemporary Indian systems.⁴

A unique First Principle, at first concentrated and inactive, begins to emanate, to produce. In its passive aspect, it is called *Tao*; in its active aspect, *Teh*.⁵ By its emanation the Principle created heaven, the earth and the air between them, a trinity from which all beings are brought forth; or rather a duality, heaven and earth acting and reacting as a pair, the air between serving as mate-

¹ [Translated from the preface of the first volume (*Le Canon taoïste*) of the author's work, *Taoïsme* (1911) by Lydia G. Robinson. For a review of this work see p. 767.]

² The ancient Chinese books say that he governs the world but they do not say that he created it. Hence the question of origin remained open.

³ A document of 1122 B. C. See my *Textes philosophiques*, p. 25. [Cf. Carus, *Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 21-24.]

⁴ Such as the Upanishads. See my *Bouddhisme Chinois*, Vol. I, Introduction, pp. 40-58. Complete identity with India and an evident innovation in China. Modern Chinese critics are unanimous in stating that Taoism did not originate in ancient Chinese philosophy but was elaborated by the chroniclers who were the custodians of national and foreign documents. The assertion is dated far back. It is written in all characters in the bibliographical Index of the first Han dynasty. This text dates from the first century before the Christian era.

⁵ I have often been asked if the two Chinese terms *Tao* and *Teh*, whose meaning in the Taoist sense is not natural but acquired, might not have been originally the transliteration of the Sanskrit words *Tat* and *Tyad*, primary being and secondary beings, being and what remains. I would see in Lao-tze more than a Sanskritism.

rial.⁶ The Principle dwells and operates in all. It does not think but is thought. It does not ordain but it is law. From it emanates with its being the destiny of every being. In nature which has originated from the Principle, there are certain special features like the poles of its power of emanation. From heaven emanates the fecundating (male) quality, from earth the productive (female) quality. Special effluvia proceed from the stars, the celestial anodes, and from the mountains, the terrestrial cathodes. These forces are beneficent when they are normal, that is, when they are developed in the direction impressed on the cosmos by the Principle. They are harmful when they are abnormal, misdirected, deflected.⁷

In every being, whether mineral, vegetable, animal or man, there is a soul which partakes of the universal Principle as the principle of its particular nature and special properties. As it grows older each soul rises higher, its virtue increases to a higher degree. The soul of an old object acquires a certain reason; the soul of an old tree acts in a certain direction; the soul of an old animal thinks almost like a man; the soul of an old man fathoms space and time. These steps of progress are accomplished by acquired experience, by stored-up knowledge. Souls that have learned nothing return at death into the great unknowing All; those that have learned something transmigrate in accordance with their acquired knowledge. Human souls that have attained great wisdom can exist for a time in a garment of ethereal substance before their reincarnation. Those that have learned the great secret that all is one, *tat-tvam*, are spared metempsychosis and return into the-conscious Principle.

Since everything is one there is no specific distinction between good and evil. This identity of contraries is taught by the Taoist fathers with an insistence bordering on fanaticism. Hence they do not teach to do good and to avoid evil, for they recognize neither good nor evil. In their eyes man has but one great duty, and that is to unite himself to the primordial Principle of which he is a temporary end, to desire what the Principle desires and to do what the Principle does.

⁶ I regret to say that certain extremists see a revelation of the trinity in the text of Lao-tze, "one begets two, two begets three, three begets all things," the meaning of which is that the Principle, at first motionless (one), next by alternations of movement and rest (two), produced heaven and earth, and air-substance (three), from which all beings have been derived.

⁷ Electricity, currents, waves, vibrations, ions, radio-activity; mesmerism, hypnotism, effects at a distance, telepathy, almost all the lucubrations of occultists and spiritists—all these things appear perfectly natural to the Taoists; to them the world is full of emanating virtues.

From this doctrine follow three practical consequences:

1. Since the Principle made him a thinking creature, man ought to think as much as possible—to meditate, to investigate; not in order to acquire manifold and varied knowledge but in order to appropriate in the most intense degree the unique cosmic knowledge that he is one with the Principle, that he is the Principle, that everything is the Principle, that it is therefore sufficient to concentrate his attention upon this center, ignoring points in the periphery—individuals and details.

2. Since the Principle has invested him with a corporeal matrix and has determined a fixed number of years for his life, man ought so to act that his body will live to the end of this number of years, that death will not come before its time because of premature waste of the body. Otherwise his abortive soul will descend in the ladder, will become a monster or will even return into the unthinking All. Hence arises the Taoists' hygienic cult, their practical interest in questions relating to habits and diet, their interest in medicine and pharmacy. Hence also arises the Taoist ethics which is the hygiene of the soul: the suppression of the passions because they consume; continence and abstinence because luxury and gormandizing are destructive;⁸ especially prohibition of ambition and of attempts at success because nothing is more corrosive. With this understanding, in the faith of his identity with the Principle, with the consciousness that he has neither wearied his soul nor worn out his body and that therefore he has nothing with which to reproach himself, the Taoist awaits the end of his years and dies in an unprecedented peace without changing expression, as the texts say. For him there is no fear of death nor any terror in the hereafter. To die is to change his worn-out garment for a new one which will be better.

3. Since the Principle determines the course of all beings it is man's duty not to interfere with anything; not to put his finger into the machinery, into the gearing; to attend to his own business and not to require anything of any one; to let the universe go its way, this fly-wheel which the Principle keeps in motion.⁹ The Taoist

⁸ A circumstance which at first sight seems most singular is that many celebrated Taoists though very moderate eaters were heavy drinkers. This is because in their opinion alcohol stimulates the vital energy, and drunkenness is no disadvantage. Therefore to drink conforms to their theory, and they put it in practice whenever they can.

⁹ The formula for this non-interference with the decrees of the Principle is *wu-wei* which is badly translated by "not-doing." The meaning is to do nothing contrary to what is foreordained. Many Taoist terms ought to be translated in the Taoist sense to avoid misinterpretation; thus *wu* is not the denial of being, but the denial of (bodily) form, the absence of definite (concrete) form, etc.

looks upon its rotation with impassive eye. For him nothing can happen wrong. The point of the rim which now is at the bottom will soon be on top. Necessary alternations, controlled by the Principle and governed by the *yin yang* numbers and phases, must succeed each other. They must be given free course since this instability is according to law. So much the worse for inventors of systems, moralists, politicians, idealists and Utopists of every kind. Country, government, progress, ideals, plans, projects, formulas,—the Taoist smiles at all these things. Let matters go then as they can. It is the number, it is the period, it is the Principle which makes them go on in this way. Mad indeed would be the man who would struggle to make them go in the opposite direction. His failure is foreordained. The worst interference with the normal march of the universe is war, for it puts an end to lives before the appointed time and against the will of the Principle.

The Taoist fathers were never aggressive, because impassioned controversy would have used up their soul and body. For their ordinary contemporaries they had a compassionate disdain which is often amusing. Confucius however was singled out to be treated by them with irony and scorn because they saw in him a man of artificial ritual and conventional virtue, the destroyer of what is natural and an opponent of the Principle. Lao-tze refuted the teachings of the Master, without calling him by name. Lieh-tze undertook to do so more fundamentally, but Chwang-tze made the poor sage, who had then been dead for about one hundred and fifty years, his favorite target. The pages in which he turns him round and round, rolls him over, converts him, makes him abjure his past errors and teach Taoism, count among the most spirited which Chinese literature has produced.¹⁰ What is more, they are very important because they show what were the positions of the school of Confucius and the opposing schools a century after his death, the strength and weakness of both sides.

These philosophers had successors, pantheists like themselves, and a few followers; but not many, for only intellectual minds arrive at the heights of such abstruse theories. Then Taoism commenced to develop in a more practical sense from the time of the fathers themselves to the fourth century A. D. This evolution was rapid during the third century. About the second century before the Christian era it resulted in a sort of theism,¹¹ the principal features

¹⁰ See *Taoisme*, Vol. II, "Les Pères du système taoïste."

¹¹ Since Lao-tze, Lieh-tze and Chwang-tze never denied the existence of the Lord on High, were they not also theists? I do not think so. They pre-

of which are as follows: The emanations (*shan*) of nature were personified and heaven and earth became peopled with non-human transcendent beings varying in degrees of intelligence and power.¹²



THE GENIUS OF THE YELLOW RIVER.

Illustration on the cover of Dr. Wieger's *Taoisme*, Vol. I.

tended so strongly to have nothing to do with him, to pass him by in silence, that I strongly suspect their faith in his existence. It is true they never denied him, but they never invoked anything but the Principle. Practically they were pantheists.

¹² A text of the year 211 B. C. relates that a slight emanation *shan* of a

The *chan*, men who rose into the air in full daylight before the eyes of large numbers of spectators with their bodies entirely etherealized in life, moved at will in space and inhabited the heavenly bodies, especially those forming the square of the Great Bear and the constellations around the poles. Here they formed the court of the Lord on High who since the year 113 was called the Supreme One. The Taoist books do not contain biographies of these beings. Mention is made of their apotheosis as if it were not to be contradicted. Their life would last, like that of the Indian *deva*, for a long time, for a cosmic period and even more, but not for always. Only the Supreme One survives every cataclysm and exists always unchanged.¹³

The sages (*shang*) form a small special group among the *chan*. They were scholars when on earth and are now the chiefs of the polar Elysium. The many Taoist ascetics retired into the fine locations of the mountains to live there in peace; they were exalted men (*hsien*), or men of the mountain, the equivalent of the Indian forest-dwellers¹⁴ who did not carry asceticism to the extreme of complete etherealization but developed in themselves the supernatural child, the new man. These saints depart this life by the division of the body; that is to say, one day the child escapes leaving an empty skin like the shell of cicada or the cocoon of a chrysalis. Then it strolls on the high mountains or dwells in happy isles—delivered from the grosser needs of nature, yet eating, drinking and even becoming intoxicated on occasion, continuing to exist during long centuries, but not forever, and less long a time than the *chan*.¹⁵

mountain or river has knowledge only to the end of the year, but more important emanations are conscious for a longer time, each according to its degree.

¹³ According to the Taoist definition the Supreme One is the *shan* of heaven, emanated from the *ch'i* of heaven in its totality. Fundamentally therefore it is of the same nature as the other *shan*, and I am told that I should call Taoism a polytheism and not a theism. I answer that whatever is the substance which constitutes his being, the Taoists ascribe to the Supreme One attributes which belong only to him and distinguish him from all the other *shan* sufficiently to make him the supreme God of a theism. He alone lives eternally while others perish in the destruction of the cosmos. He alone is ruler of the universe and of men. Theoretically he is beneath the Tao, the universal predetermination and cosmic fate; but practically this subordination is ignored, in fact does not exist; and the Supreme One in the opinion of believers is the chief of the universe, omnipotent and omniscient.

¹⁴ See my *Bouddhisme chinois*, Vol. I, p. 53.

¹⁵ *Shan, chan, hsien*: since no western term can render exactly the nature of these exclusively Taoist beings, I am obliged to my great regret to retain the Chinese terms. The word "spirit" does not primarily fit any of these categories. Their most ethereal members still bear some sheath of rarified matter. Neither primitive Taoism, nor Buddhism, nor Confucianism had any notion of spiritual substance, of pure spirit apart from matter.

An army of *Lei-Kung*, genii of thunder, returning to the class of the *shan*, is accused of concealing incorrigibly wicked men in the name of the Supreme One. Comparison of the texts leaves no doubt of the Indian origin of these avengers, modeled after the Maruts, the sons of Rudra. This is the first form of penal sanction. There is not yet any trace of a hell or of punishment after death. It is not until later from contact with Yogism and Buddhism, that the "long night" appears, the "infernal city" with its tribunals,¹⁶ etc.

To reach the two degrees of transcendental existence accessible to man, those of *chan* and *hsien*—the complete etherealization or the endogenesis of the child which is to survive—it is necessary to practise the Taoist moral and physical dietetics. The effects of this diet are strengthened by the absorption of the essence of *yin* and *yang*: From these ideas first arise very complicated systems of nourishment, theories of cold and heat, theories and systems whose popularization has made the Chinese, even those who are not Taoists, a nation of hypochondriacs. From the same ideas originate the practices of kinesitherapy, mechanotherapy and massage, intended to make the vital spirit circulate in the body, to loosen its knots (sic!) to free from obstructions and to expel injurious fluids from the organism. From the desire to assimilate the cosmic essence arises the cure by means of light, phototherapy, the exposure of the nude body to the solar light, the quintessence of the *yang*, and to the lunar light, the quintessence of the *yin*.

From the same desire also arises the Taoist aërotherapy,¹⁷ the theory of which is as follows: When the air, which is the substratum of every formation, is assimilated by the organism by being introduced under pressure and retained by force, it repairs the bodily waste, and its excess united with the sperm forms the child by condensation. From this theory arose daily exercises analogous to those of the June bug, which in preparing to take its flight stores up air in its trachea with a pumplike motion. The devotees continue these exercises for hours with conviction. They are very wearisome, especially the prolonged holding of the breath after the manner of ocean divers.

From the same desire arises what has been called Taoist alchemy, which consists in assimilating the quintessence of the *yin* and the *yang*. The light of the moon is one form of the quintessence of the *yin* and the dew is another. Not being acquainted with the laws which regulate evaporation and condensation, the ancient Chi-

¹⁶ See my *Bouddhisme chinois*, Vol. I, pp. 76, 84, 93.

¹⁷ See my *Bouddhisme chinois*, Vol. I, pp. 77 ff.

nese thought that dew is distilled by the moon. The Taoists gathered this excretion of the orb of night on a metal platter as an easy means of assimilating the quintessence of the *yin*. This harvest was a part of every Taoist ceremony. Other substances also are of the quintessence of the concrete *yin*, for instance, silver, jade, pearls, coral and yellow amber. The Taoists had a cult for these substances also, but as they were not within the range of all purses, they were never eaten in their pulverized form except by the privileged few.

The light of the sun is one form of the quintessence of the *yang*; the problem was to find an eatable form of this quintessence. Of the two common compounds sulphur and gold, the Chinese look upon sulphur as a violent poison,¹⁸ while gold in its metallic form can not be assimilated. Taoist alchemy grew from the desire to make sulphur and gold edible. Now cinnabar (sulphuret of mercury) is very abundant in China. When decomposed by heat it is seen to consist of sulphur and mercury. The mercury is *yin*, but the compound, as is testified by its red color, is *yang* and is not poisonous. In default of native sulphur therefore cinnabar was taken as an elixir of life. That cinnabar which had decomposed and recomposed many times was considered the most *yang* of all, the transcendent cinnabar, the virtue of fire having still further enhanced its properties. Hence arose the mystical series of the nine rotations, the nine times nine days of heating, etc.

When lead containing silver and arsenic produced orpiment upon manipulation, they thought they had found an edible form of gold. But when those who ate it died, few others were willing to risk this cure, whereas there were many who partook of cinnabar for many centuries. Taoist alchemy deliberately proceeded no farther than this. A few individuals were led by curiosity into chemical, mineral, vegetable and even animal researches, thus bringing upon themselves the reproaches of their colleagues and ill usage from government officials. There is no need to dwell upon other drugs dear to candidates for immortality: seeds from evergreen cypress, which lived an indefinite period; *pachyma cocos*, a giant fungus clinging to the roots of the cypress and regarded as extracting its quintessence; a branching parasitic mushroom, a cryptogamous plant of spontaneous growth (its spores were unknown

¹⁸ Little or no sulphur was to be found in ancient China, but a great deal of poisonous orpiment. The confusion of these two substances would have given rise to this mistaken belief.

to the Taoist sages) and consequently thought to be a cosmic compound.

Finally, since the Taoists thought that rotations of nature were the basis of all things, they appropriated and developed in a quasi-scientific fashion the ancient Chinese systems of divining these revolutions as means of foretelling the future. They monopolized everything—the figures of Huang-Ti and of Yü, the basis of numbers;¹⁰ the diagrams of Fuh Hi and the Book of Changes in which they were developed; the speculations of Tseu-yen on the rotation of the five elements. These proceedings could be carried on by the common people since no special skill was required of the operator.

Upon the superior man, the Taoist overman, his superiority conferred an extraordinary power of intellectual vision. Placed above the rest, he could see farther into the unknown, into space, into the future. Biographies of celebrated Taoists are full of predictions, historically gathered, often verified, and sometimes very interesting. This far-seeing vision requires a profound concentration, a sort of hypnosis or ecstasy, often described in Taoist books. The use of a mirror sometimes helped it. A very curious treatise explains how a mirror, gazed at fixedly for a long time with the intense will to see in it what one is looking for, will end by giving in its reflection the desired solution. The mirror serves also to disclose the emanations of places, things, and persons invisible to the naked eye. Other means of divination were used by the Taoists, such as the movements of the smoke rising from incense, the flight or song of birds, and the changing aspect of the clouds. All these were considered to be the manifestations of the cosmos, of the Principle, without any intervention of supernatural beings.

¹⁰ [See Carus, *Chinese Philosophy*, pp. 4-5.]