

Taoism generally enjoyed imperial respect, it never again existed as a state cult, but flourished as a religion of the masses, especially of the illiterate and superstitious.

As a religion of the masses, Taoism is distinguished by several prominent features. It has one of the most thickly populated pantheons in the world, with deities representing natural objects, historical persons, the several professions, ideas, and even the whole and parts of the human body. It has a host of immortals and spirits, and a rich reservoir of superstitions including an extensive system of divination, fortune-telling, astrology, etc. It developed an elaborate system of alchemy in its search for longevity which contributed much to material culture and scientific development in medieval China. It imitated Buddhism in a wholesale manner in such things as temples and images, a hierarchy of priests, monasticism, and heavens and hells. It has often been associated with eclectic sects and secret societies and so has been an important element in a number of popular uprisings. Today religious Taoism is rapidly declining, and, in the eyes of many, is virtually defunct. However, its concentration on a good life on earth, its respect for both bodily and spiritual health, its doctrine of harmony with nature, its emphasis on simplicity, naturalness, peace of mind, and freedom of the spirit have continued to inspire Chinese art and enlighten Chinese thought and conduct. Even if unable to maintain its existence as an organized cult, it has enriched Chinese festivals with the romantic, carefree, and gay carnival spirit of its cult of immortals, and through its art symbols, ceremonies, and folklore has given to Chinese folk life a special color and charm.

KO HUNG

The Belief in Immortals

[From *Pao-p'u Tzu*, 2:12-42; 122]

Someone asked: Is it really possible that spiritual beings and immortals (*hsien*) do not die?

Pao-p'u Tzu said: Even if we had the greatest power of vision, we could not see all the things that have corporeal form. Even if we were endowed with the sharpest sense of hearing, we could not hear all the sounds there are. Even if we had the feet of Ta-chang and Hsu-hai [expert

runners], what we had already trod upon would not be so much as what we have not. And even if we had the knowledge of [the sages] Yü, I, and Ch'i-hsieh, what we know would not be so much as what we do not know. The myriad things flourish. What is there that could not exist? Why not the immortals, whose accounts fill the historical records? Why should there not be a way to immortality?

Thereupon the questioner laughed heartily and said: Whatever has a beginning necessarily has an end, and whatever lives must eventually die. . . . I have only heard that some plants dry up and wither before frost, fade in color during the summer, bud but do not flower, or wither and are stripped of leaves before bearing fruit. But I have never heard of anyone who enjoys a life span of ten thousand years and an everlasting existence without end. Therefore people of antiquity did not aspire to be immortals in their pursuit of knowledge, and did not talk of strange things in their conversation. They cast aside perverse doctrines and adhered to what is natural. They set aside the tortoise and the crane [symbols of immortality] as creatures of a different species, and looked upon life and death as morning and evening. . . .

Pao-p'u Tzu answered: . . . Life and death, beginning and end, are indeed the great laws of the universe. Yet the similarities and differences of things are not uniform. Some are this way and some are that. Tens of thousands of varieties are in constant change and transformation, strange and without any definite pattern. Whether things are this way or that, and whether they are regular or irregular in their essential and subsidiary aspects, cannot be reduced to uniformity. There are many who say that whatever has a beginning must have an end. But it is not in accord with the principle [of existence] to muddle things together and try to make them all the same. People say that things are bound to grow in the summer, and yet the shepherd's-purse and the water chestnut wilt. People say that plants are bound to wither in the winter, and yet the bamboo and the cypress flourish. People say whatever has a beginning will have an end, and yet Heaven and earth are unending. People say whatever is horn will die, and yet the tortoise and the crane live forever. When the yang is at its height, it should be hot, and yet the summer is not without cool days. When the yin reaches its limit, it should be cold, and yet even a severe winter is not without brief warm periods. . . .

Among creatures none surpasses man in intelligence. As creatures of

such superior nature, men should be equal and uniform. And yet they differ in being virtuous or stupid, in being perverse or upright, in being fair or ugly, tall or short, pure or impure, chaste or lewd, patient or impatient, slow or quick. What they pursue or avoid in their interests and what their eyes and ears desire are as different as Heaven and earth, and as incompatible as ice and coals. Why should you only wonder at the fact that immortals are different and do not die like ordinary people? . . . But people with superficial knowledge are bound by what is ordinary and adhere to what is common. They all say that immortals are not seen in the world, and therefore they say forthwith that there cannot be immortals. [2:1a-4a]

Among men some are wise and some are stupid, but they all know that in their bodies they have a heavenly component (*hun*) and an earthly component (*p'o*) of the soul. If these are partly gone, man becomes sick. If they are completely gone, man dies. If they are partially separated from the body, the occult expert has means to retain and restrict them. If they are entirely separated, there are principles in the established rites to recall them. These components of the soul as entities are extremely close to us. And yet although we are born with them and live with them throughout life, we never see or hear them. Should one say that they do not exist simply because we have not seen or heard them? [2:12a]

Alchemy

[From *Pao-p'u Tzu*, 2:3b-4a; 3:1a, 5a; 4:1a-3a; 6:4a]

The immortals nourish their bodies with drugs and prolong their lives with the application of occult science, so that internal illness shall not arise and external ailment shall not enter. Although they enjoy everlasting existence and do not die, their old bodies do not change. If one knows the way to immortality, it is not to be considered so difficult. [2:3b-4a]

Among the creatures of nature, man is the most intelligent. Therefore those who understand [creation] slightly can employ the myriad things, and those who get to its depth can enjoy [what is called in the *Lao Tzu*] "long life and everlasting existence" [Ch. 59]. As we know that the best medicine can prolong life, let us take it to obtain immortality; and as we know that the tortoise and the crane have longevity, let us imitate their activities to increase our span of life. . . . Those who have obtained Tao

are able to lift themselves into the clouds and the heavens above and to dive and swim in the rivers and seas below. [3:1a, 5a]

Pao-p'u Tzu said: I have investigated and read books on the nourishment of human nature and collected formulas for everlasting existence. Those I have perused number thousands of volumes. They all consider reconverted cinnabar [after it has been turned into mercury] and gold fluid to be the most important. Thus these two things represent the acme of the way to immortality. . . . The transformations of the two substances are the more wonderful the more they are heated. Yellow gold does not disintegrate even after having been smelted a hundred times in fire, and does not rot even if buried in the ground until the end of the world. If these two medicines are eaten, they will strengthen our bodies and therefore enable us not to grow old nor to die. This is of course seeking assistance from external substances to strengthen ourselves. It is like feeding fat to the lamp so it will not die out. If we smear copperas on our feet, they will not deteriorate even if they remain in water. This is to borrow the strength of the copper to protect our flesh. Gold fluid and reconverted cinnabar, however, upon entering our body, permeate our whole system of blood and energy and are not like copperas which helps only on the outside. [4:1a-3a]

It is hoped that those who nourish life will learn extensively and comprehend the essential, gather whatever there is to see and choose the best. It is not sufficient to depend on cultivating only one thing. It is also dangerous for people who love life to rely on their own specialty. Those who know the techniques of the *Classic of the Mysterious Lady* and the *Classic of the Plain Lady* [books on sexual regimen no longer extant] will say that only the "art of the chamber" will lead to salvation. Those who understand the method of breathing exercises will say that only the permeation of the vital power can prolong life. Those who know the method of stretching and bending will say that only physical exercise can prevent old age. And those who know the formulas of herbs will say that only medicine will make life unending. They fail in their pursuit of Tao because they are so onesided. People of superficial knowledge think they have enough when they happen to know of only one way and do not realize that the true seeker will search unceasingly even after he has acquired some good formulas. [6:4a]



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