Daoism
Daoism: Historical Notes

- Tradition arose during Period of Warring States & most likely during time of Confucius
- Foundational Text, the Daodejing, may have been written by Laozi / Lao Tzu, a legendary sage, but may also have been written by a number of Daoist philosophers and published as a collection of their writings.
- Fullest articulation of theory offered by Zhuangzi/ Chuang Tzu (4th C BCE)
Laozi

- Chinese philosopher, reputedly the founder of Taoism. It is uncertain that Lao Tzu [Ch.,=old person or old philosopher] is historical. His biography in Ssu-ma Ch’ien’s Records of the Historian (1st cent. B.C.) says he was a contemporary of Confucius and served as curator of the dynastic archives until retiring to the mythical K’un-lun mountains. He allegedly transmitted his teachings to a border guard who subsequently compiled the Lao Tzu, also titled the Tao-te ching [Classic of the Way and Virtue]. Scholars date the work in the 4th–2d cent. B.C., with some strata perhaps as old as the 6th cent. B.C.

Zhuangzi

- In spite of his importance, details of Zhuangzi's life (born c. 369, Meng [now Shangqiu, Henan province], China—died 286 BCE), apart from the many anecdotes about him in the Zhuangzi itself, are unknown. The "Grand Historian" of the Han dynasty, Sima Qian (died c. 87 BCE), incorporated in his biographical sketch of Zhuangzi only the most meagre information. It indicates that Zhuangzi was a native of the state of Meng, that his personal name was Zhou, and that he was a minor official at Qiyuan in his home state. He lived during the reign of Prince Wei of Chu (died 327 BCE) and was therefore a contemporary of Mencius, an eminent Confucian scholar known as China's "Second Sage." According to Sima Qian, Zhuangzi's teachings were drawn primarily from the sayings of Laozi, but his perspective was much broader. He used his literary and philosophical skills to refute the Confucians and Mohists (followers of Mozi, who advocated "concern for everyone").

- Zhuangzi is best known through the book that bears his name, the Zhuangzi, also known as Nanhua zhenjing ("The Pure Classic of Nanhua"). At about the turn of the 4th century CE, Guo Xiang, the first and perhaps the best commentator on the Zhuangzi, established the work as a primary source for Daoist thought. It is composed of 33 chapters, and evidence suggests that there may have been as many as 53 chapters in copies of the book circulated in the 4th century. It is generally agreed that the first seven chapters, the "inner books," are for the most part from the hand of Zhuangzi himself, whereas the "outer books" (chapters 8–22) and the miscellany (chapters 23–33) are largely the product of his later followers.
Daoism: Overview

- The response to political chaos and corruption is to simplify one’s life, reduce one’s desires and live as close to the natural order of things as possible – to achieve a kind of “spontaneous ease.” (p.217)

“Man models himself on earth,
Earth on heaven,
Heaven on the way,
And the way on that which is naturally so.”
(Daodejing XXV)
The Dao: The Way

Three Manifestations:

- The Way of Heaven
  - The way of ultimate reality – essentially unknowable. “The way can be spoken of but it will not be the constant way.”

- The Way of Nature
  - The observable Dao, the integrating principle of the whole - driving power behind nature and the ordering principle behind all life - establishes cycle of life. “…The named is the mother of all things…”

- The Way of Human
  - Sometimes referred to as “the do-able Dao” & includes the guidelines for man’s ability to go through life. “Only where all is clean will it reveal itself.” One must put aside all emotions and desires in order to perceive the true way.
Daoist Critique of Confucianism:

- The most basic drive for humans is to satisfy their desires
- If all humans strive to satisfy their desires then there will not be enough goods to satisfy everyone
- The inevitable result of shortage of goods is competition and strife
- Attempting to regulate competition and strife through moral rules fails to address the root of the problem
The Vinegar Tasters

- http://www.taoism.net/sanctuary/books/vintaste.htm
The Daoist Solution:

- The Daoists called for an “abandonment” of morality which could only be achieved when the root of the problem causing such chaos is addressed.
- Since the Dao is without desires, if humans model themselves after the Dao, order will naturally flow and strict rules will become unnecessary.
Wuwei: Nonaction

- Often translated as active not-doing or creative quietude.

- Defines a quality of life in tune with the universe - involves a disassociation with the self and private ego - not self-assertive nor competitive - generates meekness and self-effacement - the person is “to blend with and to befriend nature.” (Huston Smith)

- The Dao moves nature through Wu Wei, establishing simplicity and happiness without formalism or ceremony - a guide to creativity stressing spontaneity and flow.

- It is important to note that wuwei is not complete passivity – it describes a way of getting things done with the absence of excessive force – not a way of life which gets nothing done!

**Four Principle Images:**

- Water
- The Valley
- The Uncarved Block
- The Female
Wuwei: Water

- One learns from water following the path of the stones yet powerful enough to carve great canyons - the Way is in fact the easiest way and the best way to follow.

- “The most submissive thing in the world can ride roughshod over the most unyielding in the world – that which is without substance entering that which has no gaps.” (Daodejing XLIII)
Wuwei: The Valley

- The valley symbolizes Tao's inclination toward the lowly, the underlying, rather than the prominent or impressive.

  “…Know the white
  But keep to the role of the sullied.
  And be a valley to the empire.
  If you are a valley to the empire,
  The constant virtue will be sufficient…”

  (Daodejing XXVIII)
Wuwei: Pu - The Uncarved Block

- The uncarved block is human nature before society limits it. To gain Wuwei, human nature must become like the uncarved block; it symbolizes the priority of natural simplicity over social adornment. A block of wood or jade, before it is carved, has infinite potential, but once we have made it into a table or a piece of jewelry, its use is fixed and limited.

“…When the constant virtue is sufficient, You will again return to being the uncarved block…."

(Daodejing XXVIII)
Wuwei: The Female

- The female is a lesson in the power of passivity, of yielding and adaptability. She influences not by assault but by indirection, by nuance and suggestion.

“The spirit of the valley never dies; This is called the dark female. The entry into the dark female Is called the root of heaven and earth. Tenuous, it seems as if it were there, Yet use will never exhaust it.”

(Daodejing VI)
Ziran: Self-so-ness

- The concept of acting just as one truly is – in the natural way.

“All things that are instituted have names. 
And the one that is instituted is a desire. 
Desires don’t have any names. 
Simplicity, which has no name, is free of desires. 
Being free of desires it is tranquil. 
And the world will be at peace of its own accord.”

Daodejing XXXVII
Yin/Yang: Relativity

- The basis of Chinese Yin/Yang involves the notion that all things are relative - identity of contraries and counterbalance as phases of a revolving wheel - at the center all distinction - even good and evil - are different ends of the same pole.

- It is not worthwhile to upset oneself at life's circumstances since all events can bring either/or good and bad. (See next slide - Huston Smith story of lost horse – “Who knows what is good or bad?”)

- It must be emphasized that neither yin nor yang is good or bad nor is either better than the other. They are both neutral like gravitation. To keep going the universe needs both.

- The author of Yin/Yang, Dong Zhongshu (c 179-104 BCE) divided the universe into two classifications: Yang things and forces, and Yin things and forces. Fundamental Yang is associated with the masculine and Yin with the feminine. But their respective meanings go much beyond gender.
Yin/Yang: Relativity

**Yang**
- male,
- day,
- sky,
- air,
- spring, all that is bright, clear, hard, assertive, growing, moving out.
- Its symbol is the dragon.

**Yin**
- female,
- night,
- earth,
- moisture,
- autumn and harvest, spirits of the dead, and all that is dark, underneath, recessive, pulling in, connected with the moon, mysterious.
- Its symbol is the tiger, which must be thought of as Blake's "Tyger, tyger burning bright/In the forests of the night"
One of my favorite stories from the Taoist tradition is told by Huston Smith, author of The World’s Religions, called “The Farmer Whose Horse Ran Away.”

On hearing of the misfortune, the farmer’s neighbor arrived to commiserate, but all he got from the farmer was, “Who knows what’s good or bad?” This proved to be true, for the next day the horse returned bringing with it a drove of wild horses in its train. This time the neighbor arrived with congratulations, only to receive the same response. This too was so, for the next day the farmer’s son tried to mount one of the wild horses and broke a leg. More commiserations from the neighbor, with the same response which was again validated, for soldiers soon came around commandeering for the army, and the son was spared because of his injury.
Yin Yang: The Symbol

- The outer circle represents unity
- The wavy inner line represents interdependence
- The two inner circles represent non-absoluteness
De: The Function of the Dao in Government

“the power of something to do what it does and to become what it can become…” (p.222)

“When the way prevails in the empire, fleet-footed horses are relegated to providing manure for the fields; when the way does not prevail in the empire, war horses breed on the border.” (Daodejing XLVI)

“Governing a large state is like boiling a small fish.” (Daodejing LX)
Five major differences between Laozi & Zhuangzi:

1) Zhuangzi rejected the idea that the past was finite and instead argued for an infinite concept of time without beginning or end.
2) Zhuangzi offered no advice for rulers since the whole idea of dividing the world between the ruler and the ruled is contrary to maximizing individual freedom and spontaneity.
3) Zhuangzi reduced the emphasis on the mysterious and placed more emphasis on the workings of the Dao here and now.
4) Rather than focus on preserving life, Zhuangzi argues that in order to be truly “free and easy wandering” one must conquer one’s fear of death and live life to the fullest in the present moment.
5) Zhuangzi argued that human creations – like art, music, architecture, etc., could be a reflection of the Dao and he emphasized the importance of such creative play.
Zhuangzi & The Authentic Life

- **Zhen-jun** – Authentic selfhood is achieved when one relinquishes one’s attachments to limited perspectives and conceptual, analytic knowledge claims.

- Happiness will follow and is only possible when one has realized their zhen-jun

- “...it is said that the Perfect Man has no self; the Spiritual Man has no achievement; the Sage has no name.” (Text, p.227 quoted from Fung Yu-Lan, History of Chinese Philosophy, Brodde.)
Zhuangzi & Knowledge

- Zhuangzi offered four arguments against ordinary, conceptual or analytic knowledge which is based on identifying, defining and categorizing selves and objects.

- He advocated for “conceptual freedom” whereby we “open our minds, freeing ourselves from the limitations of our own conditionings and circumstances… Through identifying with the Dao, following the rhythm of cosmic creativity, not by using our instrumental mentality and not by fulfilling social roles and functions.” (pp. 226-27)

- These arguments are:
  - Argument from relativity of distinctions
  - Argument from complementariness of opposites
  - Argument from perspectives
  - Argument from skepticism
Zhuangzi & Knowledge

Argument from relativity of distinctions

- This argument is very close to perspectives but in this case it is about the subjectivity of all judgments: One will always bring one’s own subjective background or frame of reference to every knowledge claim and it is impossible to be truly objective at any point for that would require a total absence of perspective.

- Objectivity has thus two problems:
  - It is impossible and,
  - even if it could be achieved, it would render any judgment totally meaningless.

- Most knowledge claims involve the claimant’s past “baggage” of their life, experience, previous judgments, etc. But the claim is more about the subject than it is about the object. A great example of the problems of subjectivity may be seen when a policeman tries to interview witnesses: each will often have an entirely different story to tell.
Zhuangzi & Knowledge

**Argument from complementariness of opposites**

- This argument claims that we cannot know anything unless we can know its compliment:
  - Heat cannot be known unless cold is also known.
  - Correspondingly we cannot know “Dog” unless we also know what a dog is not (“Not Dog”). Since not-dog includes everything else in the universe, it follows that knowledge of not-dog is impossible. From this it follows that knowledge of dog is impossible.

- Since everything has its compliment, we cannot know anything because we cannot know everything.
Zhuangzi & Knowledge

Argument from perspectives

- This is an argument based on context. Every judgment only has meaning within a particular context; if we change the context then the judgment takes on a different meaning.

- *This extends to every judgment one might make.*
We need a frame of reference to make any kind of judgment at all thus all judgments are relative to this frame.

- Example 1: in a base 10 system it is true that 7 plus 8 equals 15. In a base two system this is impossible.
- Example 2: Is hot tea wonderful? Well it depends on the relative temperature of the environment – the winter will drive a different answer than the summer.)
Zhuangzi & Knowledge

Argument from skepticism

- This argument is based on the fact that all knowledge is based on other knowledge which ultimately turns out to be based on some arbitrary assumptions.
- It is impossible to have knowledge which does not rest on some foundation or another – even if it is a grounding assumption – We always have to start somewhere.
- It follows from this that there is no absolute starting place – thus there is no absolute knowledge.
Zhuangzi & The authentic life for a Daoist Sage

Daoist Priest. Size: 10” x 14”. Painted in 2005. This is a copy-painting of a famous Chinese artist Mo Jing’s work.