

From Philosophy to Religion:

The Transformation of Taoism in the Early *Hans* Dynasty

(An abstract)

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There are two parts to what the term Taoism refers to: the Taoist School and the Taoist Religion. The Taoist School came from Lao Tzu (also called *Tao-te-ching*) and Chuang-tzu. Tao is here described as existing before the universe came to be, an unchanging first principle, the ancestor of all things, by which all things exist. This Taoist School is basically a school of philosophy. It is not a religion. However, some hundred years after it came into being, Taoism as a school evolved further into a religion. The key ideas here came from the book *Lao-Tzu-Xiang-er-Zhu*. This book suggested a way to religion by including ideas such as the transcendental God, religious practices, and life after death, etc. If we explore the meaning of the Taoist religion, we would see that its concerns are close to the needs of the people in the early part of the Han Dynasty. Taoists concerned themselves with the life hereafter but did not define eternal life in terms of spiritual immortality. The immortality of Taoists is a kind of body immortality through taking Alchemy or performing good deeds. Salvation in their theory is not difficult but easy to gain. Taoists were also concerned about daily living: food and drink, sexual life, political practices, and environmental protection. Taoism

tries to provide an ideal life style for people in the Chinese culture.

Taoists believe in the supernatural, not only as powers, but also as beings: a hierarchy of gods. In the hierarchy Tai-yi (Great One) comes first and Lao-tzu is the third. Taoism has also developed a complicated system of rituals and priesthood, which includes a quasi-sacramental ritual for initiation. There is also purification and renewal for men to take part in the continuation of the cosmic life and the well-being of human beings. All of these are important to the Taoist religion. So, although Taoists believe in gods, they are oblivious to them in the subjectivity of their religious pursuit. We can see their self-actualization in one of the founders Ge Hong (葛洪), who said: "I am the lord of my life but not the heaven, I can make myself Alchemy for my own immortality." This self-actualization became not only the way of Taoism, but may now be seen as a characteristic of Chinese religions in general.