

American Daoism in the 21st Century

Summary: Religious syncretism and variant, decentralized practices among immigrants and converts are a struggle facing 21st century Daoism practices in the United States. This diversity may result in the practices of "American Daoisms," rather than one monolithic American Daoist tradition.

In the early years of the religion's formation, Daoism quickly integrated several aspects of Chinese cosmology that were not obviously an initial part of the religion. The most prominent of these were the concepts of *yin* and *yang*. Daoism's ability to syncretize with its surrounding context continued throughout the tradition's history. When Buddhism entered China, Daoism absorbed many elements still seen today, elements such as the presence of altars to the *bodhisattva* Guanyin in many Daoist temples. Since Daoism did not travel in the same manner as, and lacked the popularity of, Buddhism, its numbers in America have grown relatively slowly. Today, it is estimated there are around 30,000 Daoist practitioners living in the United States. Now that American Daoists are becoming a larger part of the religious landscape, this openness to change is shaping the religion in distinct ways and presenting unique issues.

One issue facing Daoism is the culture of religious syncretism in the United States. Many Americans may take an aspect of Daoism and incorporate it into their own spiritual practice. Practitioners of Healing Tao may belong to or identify with a different religious tradition and often do not consider themselves religious Daoists, even as they seek to enjoy the benefits of *taiji* and *qigong*. This trend leaves many American Daoists grappling with the question: Should such a practitioner be considered a "Daoist"?

While Daoists may teach non-Daoist neighbors about their beliefs and practices, they often do not reach out to other Daoists. This could be due to several factors, including geographic distance and low numeric representation. Long-standing disagreements between groups in Asia may also ensure that Daoists interact less with each other than with people of other faiths.

Without large, visible Daoist communities, many Americans interact with Daoism solely through its scriptures. While the "founding" texts of Daoism, the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*, are de-emphasized in

China, they have become the center of focus for many individual practitioners and small groups across America for whom the texts are philosophical and spiritual guides. These practitioners often consider themselves Daoists, but do not belong to a temple, engage in rituals, or interact with monastics. Again, Daoists are dealing with the question of what it means to be a “Daoist” in the American context.

American Daoists are highly decentralized, a factor that contributes, at least in part, to their vastly divergent forms of practice. This decentralization can be traced back to China, where no official records track the number of Daoist lay practitioners, and where popular Daoist festivals and rituals are freely intermingled with Buddhist and Confucian practices without concern for sectarian differentiation or definition. There is also the sheer diversity of popular folk practice, with groups such as the Celestial Masters, the Complete Perfection sect, Red-head Daoists, and Black-head Daoists, to name just a few. This diversity is further compounded by regional differences—from the once-British colony of Hong Kong, to the mainland People’s Republic of China, to Taiwan—that make obvious the potential for Daoist decentralization. In short, Daoists brought a decentralized system to America, a land with its own rich history of decentralized individual engagements with religious practices.

As is often the case in America, the experiences of convert Daoists and immigrant Daoists are different. Often Daoist immigrants, in contrast to converts, do not concern themselves with scriptures or individual practices but instead are content to attend important annual rituals. Daoist immigrants tend to preserve their local traditions, and only slowly, and to a lesser extent, experience change. Converts to Daoism, however, often do not make attempts to preserve traditions they find unfamiliar. While there is naturally overlap between the two categories, generally speaking the ritual devotion to deities and the creation of talismans found in a Daoist temple in San Francisco’s Chinatown will be much different than the scriptural studies and *taiji* groups scattered across American suburbia.

Currently, American Daoism in the 21st century is undergoing a phase of self-definition as it grapples with issues of interfaith interaction, decentralization, and the contrasting practices of converts and immigrants. Some scholars have suggested that a specific form of “American Daoism” will not form; rather, the great diversity of practice within America will result in “American Daoisms.”