

## INTRODUCTION

The heterogeneous nature of Taoism is well known. The existing Taoist canon or *Tao-tsang*, which was first issued in 1442, contains more than a thousand works. It simultaneously gathers together works by philosophers like Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu; pharmacopoeial treatises; the oldest Chinese medical treatise; hagiographies; immense ritual texts laced with magic; imaginary geographies; dietetic and hygienic recipes; anthologies and hymns; speculations on the diagrams of the *I ching*; meditation techniques; alchemical texts; and moral tracts. One finds both the best and the worst within the canon. But it is exactly this state of affairs that constitutes its richness.

Imagine if one gathered together a Christian Summa that included not only St. Thomas Aquinas alongside Gilson, but also the hagiographies of St. Theresa of Lisieux. The poems of St. John of the Cross would be next to the medieval Mysteries and parochial hymn books. And the Gospels would be placed together with the Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola and the Imitation of Christ. Moreover, the Holy Grail legend and the Latin works of Meister Eckart and Basil of Valentine would be arranged not only alongside the sermons of Bossuet and the Hesichast writings, but also next to descriptions of local cults and rural superstitions. Concerning this total assemblage, one would then say, "This is Christianity."

It is in this manner that the *Tao-tsang* is given to us in its raw state: a massive accumulation of documents lacking any detailed inventory. Certain texts appear several times with different titles; other texts carry the same title but have different contents. There are, finally, other documents that contain parts of each other. Moreover, most of these texts are neither signed nor dated. A number of the texts are "apocryphal," but one wonders whether such an attribution has any meaning in a tradition where the idea of orthodoxy, if it exists at all,

is defined by each school. For all of these reasons, the jumbled nature of the *Tao-tsang* is even more confused than that of the aforementioned Christian Summa.

In a certain sense, it is the very vocation of Taoism to be marginal. One can say that whatever did not fall within the categories of official learning or did not fit into the framework of some particular technical knowledge—all that was “other” without being Buddhist—was classified as Taoist. This is so much the case that the only common point concerning certain texts designated as Taoist is that they appear in the *Tao-tsang*. This commonality may also, though not always, involve the search for a certain kind of immortality—or a quest for the “other-worldly,” which is often identified with what is simply “different.”

One should not, however, infer that these treatises are resolutely dishevelled. On the contrary, it appears that certain works manifest a coherence among themselves that is strong enough to constitute a system. In this way, one can locate several small islands of meaning.

Wishing to avoid the kind of confused and erroneous generalities found in most works on Taoism, and also to avoid leading the reader into a contradictory and incoherent labyrinth, I have chosen to introduce texts that belong to a specific school with a vocabulary, avowed goals, and a pantheon coherent enough to form a well-constituted whole. On the other hand, the texts that I will rely upon here are rich and varied enough to allow for a broad and complex portrait of a movement that for several centuries played an important role in Taoist history.

I will focus only on themes illustrated by these texts. By way of explanation or to show their relation to the origins of Taoism, I will, whenever possible, connect these themes with other more ancient themes. In this initial work, however, I want to avoid making comparisons between the methods and principles of meditation found within these texts and the meditation techniques stressed within other schools. It is not my purpose here to formulate a general theory or history of Taoism. I want simply to present one aspect of Taoist history and theory. Granting these limitations, I hope nevertheless to explicate an aspect of Taoism that includes works of major significance due both to their quality and to their place within the whole *Tao-tsang*. Moreover, it seems to me that much that has been asserted about these works is fallacious.

The texts in question are those of the school of the *Shang-ch'ing ching* or *Book of Great Purity*, also known as the Mao-shan school which refers to the name of its mountain center located to the south of Nanking. The texts of this school have the advantage of having been verified and enumerated several times. Although scattered and sometimes appearing with titles associated with other traditions, they can be located within the *Tao-tsang*.

All of these texts date from approximately the same period and the majority of them were reputedly revealed to a single person at the beginning of the fourth century C.E. They have, however, suffered various modifications and have been mixed up with forgeries. But since these altered texts were made by persons of the Mao-shan tradition who were familiar with the school's language and doctrines, even specialists of the period could hardly discriminate between "authentically" revealed texts and copied imitations.

We have therefore texts, appearing between the fourth and fifth centuries, which provide us with some basic knowledge of the beliefs and mystical practices of a school that developed in a rather precise, though extensive, geographical area in south China. This was a school that mostly recruited its members from the well-defined social and cultural circle of the Southern literati. Although relatively restricted, this circle was strongly influential at the time. Several of its most eminent members were summoned to the imperial court during the Six Dynasties and T'ang periods (from the fourth down to about the eighth century); and one of this group was the illustrious poet, Li Po.

These texts are, moreover, of particular interest because they contain the first precisely detailed descriptions of the Taoist practices of interior meditation.

Let me point out that, because these texts are so numerous and varied, it will not be possible to examine all of them in detail. I will focus on the majority of texts that are concerned with meditation. But even in this case, I will not attempt to deal with them exhaustively.

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Between 367 and 370, a certain Yang Hsi was visited in the middle of the night by a group of immortals, among whom was Lady Wei Hua-ts'un who had died about thirty years previously. She was the one who revealed most of the texts of Great Purity to Yang Hsi. Lady Wei herself was said to have received these texts during a revelation involving the apparition of her master, Wang Po. According to the great Taoist theorist T'ao Hung-ching (456-536), the appearance of the Mao-shan texts dates to this period.

The tradition itself, however, claims that its origins go back to the Mao brothers who, in the first century B.C.E, retreated to the mountain that subsequently was named after them. Both the Great Purity texts and T'ao Hung-ching readily maintain that the recommended methods were already known and practiced during Han times. It may be that such practices were orally transmitted for centuries before they were written down during the fourth century; but it could also be the case that the prestige of Han Taoism caused it to be claimed by its successor. Given our present state of knowledge, there is no way to resolve this issue.

While very little is known about Yang Hsi, we know that one member of the Hsü family, Hsü Mi (303–373), inherited Yang Hsi's revelations and that Hsü's son, Hsü Hui (341–370), was among the first to retire to Mao-shan. The aristocratic Hsü family, which claimed an ancestry of high Han officials, had emigrated to south China in 185 C.E. during the disturbances at the end of the Han dynasty.

South China had been the cradle of sorcerer-exorcists known as the *wu* and had maintained its own religious tradition of mediumship. In 317, when Loyang of the Western Chin dynasty fell, the great families of the north, together with the imperial court, took refuge in the south and brought with them the Han religious doctrine of the Heavenly Masters (*t'ien-shih*). In this period, these developments set the stage for an underhanded struggle between, on the one hand, the government party aligned with the northern aristocracy and, on the other, the southern natives. Religiously, this conflict was reflected by a rivalry between the messianic Taoism of the Heavenly Masters and the traditional mediumistic beliefs of the south.

Ko Hung, whose family was allied with the Hsü's, had already completed his famous *Pao-p'u-tzu* before 317. It is a work, therefore, that was finished before the exodus of northern families to the south and before the revelation of the Great Purity texts. In this sense, the *Pao-p'u-tzu* seems to be a rather eclectic compendium of southern esoteric beliefs made up of a mixture of alchemy, magic, and meditation. Neither the Heavenly Masters nor, obviously, the Great Purity texts are mentioned. The *Pao-p'u-tzu* does, however, refer to a number of practices that are very similar to those of the later Mao-shan tradition; and it is this fact that suggests that Mao-shan inherited part of the southern Taoist tradition.

One knows, on the other hand, that certain members of the Mao-shan tradition had links with the Heavenly Masters school. Thus, Lady Wei Hua-ts'un was said to have been a "libationer," which was a hierarchical title used by the Heavenly Masters. Hsü Mi's uncle had converted to Northern Taoism and was said to have received instructions both from a "libationer" and from Ko Hung's father-in-law. Moreover, Buddhist influences can be found in the Great Purity texts.

Given these factors, the Mao-shan movement would appear to be a new synthesis of both northern and southern tendencies. It is a synthesis which presents itself as a new and superior truth since it reveals texts that gave access to the heaven of Great Purity (*Shang-ch'ing*), a realm said to be superior to the heaven of Grand Purity (*T'ai-ch'ing*) mentioned in the *Pao-p'u-tzu*. It established the reign of the "Three Heavens" and put an end to the dispensation of the "six heavens" which only ruled over the hells.

The practices of the Mao-shan tradition are, furthermore, characterized by a distinct "interiorization." As we shall see, the sexual practices of the

Heavenly Masters school, so greatly defamed by the Buddhists, were replaced either by a spiritual union with a female deity or by a totally interior fusion of the masculine and feminine principles. Magical techniques were equally sublimated so that, for example, the supernatural powers of the saint, as described in the *Pao-p'u-tzu*, took on a totally spiritual dimension. In this way, religious terminology was invested with a new significance. Ritual, which was so important in the Heavenly Masters school, became secondary to the benefits of solitary meditation practiced either in a specially consecrated room or on a mountain.

In the fifth century, this new school was propagated within the ranks of the high officials. At this time, Hsü Huang-min (361–429), Hsü Mi's grandson, emigrated to Chekiang where he circulated the sacred texts. At his death in 429, he bequeathed part of the texts to the Ma family and part to the Tu family, both of whom were priestly families of the Heavenly Masters school. In this way, the new doctrine spread geographically but, for the first time, its textual corpus was divided.

It is also with Hsü Huang-min that forgeries started to appear. At first, certain persons fraudulently acquired copied texts which, according to the school's teaching, were irregularly transmitted and of doubtful efficacy. Then a certain Wang Ling-ch'i, who obstinately succeeded in getting the texts from Hsü Huang-min, set about to propagate the scriptures widely. To accomplish this end, Wang reworked the texts to make them more accessible. Being quite gifted in the literary arts, he also imaginatively fabricated new texts. In fact, he succeeded so well that later T'ao Hung-ching, wanting to distinguish between the authentic and spurious texts, was only able to judge the merits of a text by seeing the manuscript version and checking its calligraphy. Wang, moreover, enhanced the verisimilitude of his apocryphal works by giving them titles of Great Purity texts that had been announced in revelation but had "not yet descended to earth." The confusion of the situation was total.

The apocryphal works were enormously successful and disciples flourished. Even Hsü Huang-min, who had only inherited some of the original texts, was convinced that these new texts were authentic and had copies made for himself. Wang Ling-ch'i took this opportunity to increase the amount of silk and gold contributions traditionally demanded by a master at the time of a text's transmission. These developments had the result of elevating the social level to which the new doctrine was addressing itself.<sup>1</sup>

From this period on, the Great Purity texts were widely prevalent within the cultivated centers of south China. Famous Taoists became interested in these new texts so that, for example, Lu Hsiu-ching (406–477) started to search for manuscripts and had the Mao-shan scriptures transmitted to him. He combined these texts both with the scriptures of the Ling-pao movement and with the *San-huang ching* texts connected with Ko Hung's lineage. He then

classified these three streams into the three *tung*, or "Mysteries," which established the three basic divisions of the *Tao-tsang*. The first and major division of the canon included the Great Purity texts which placed these writings in the highest rank of the Taoist sacred scriptures. Following these developments, Ku Huan, the renowned author of the *I-hsia lun* and of a commentary on the *Tao-te ching*, embarked upon a critical study of the authenticity of the Great Purity texts.<sup>2</sup> This was published in a lost work entitled *Chen chi* or *Traces of the True Men*.

These fifth century events ushered in a new age in the Great Purity movement. Up until this time, individuals possessing transmitted texts were unknown within official history. But from this period on, great Taoist figures took an interest in the Great Purity teaching, emperors ordered copies of the writings for themselves, and monasteries were built for the movement's adepts. The spiritual influence of the movement was pervasive and extended into the realms of government.

T'ao Hung-ching, who was a friend of the Buddhist emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty and held high court positions, was a great figure equally accomplished in classical literature, calligraphy, and pharmacology. Favored with imperial patronage, T'ao was influential enough to have his monastery on Mao-shan protected during the proscription against Taoism in 504. He not only took up Ku Huan's work concerned with the collection and arrangement of the Great Purity texts, but also, following the lead of Lu Hsiu-ching, sought to construct a synthetic classification of the various Taoist movements of his generation. And he placed the Mao-shan movement in the highest rank of traditions.

T'ao was succeeded by other great figures among the faithful or patriarchs of the movement. One of these was Wang Yüan-chih (528-635), who was greatly honored by emperors and transmitted the Taoist tradition to the crown prince of the T'ang, the son of Kao-tsu. He ended his life by refusing any kind of official position so that he could devote himself to the teachings of his adepts on Mao-shan. A later figure was Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen (647-736), who was a descendant of the imperial family of Chin. He was periodically summoned to court by T'ang emperors who sought his instruction and who had monasteries constructed for him. He also taught many high officials and eminent literati the practices of his school and had Emperor Hsüan-tsung build shrines dedicated to the saints of Great Purity. One of the greatest Chinese poets, Li Po, was both a friend and his disciple.

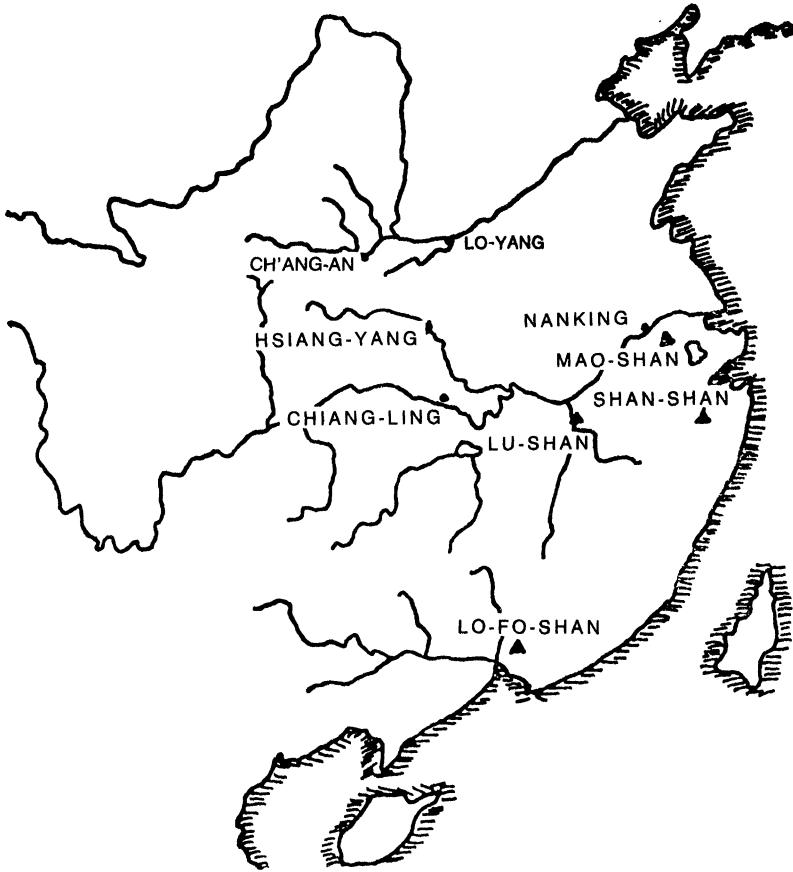
Ssu-ma was succeeded by Li T'an-kuang (639-769), who turned once again to the search for the original Mao-shan texts so that the alterations and gaps that had entered into the writings could be corrected. Under imperial orders, he compiled and recopied the scriptures, assisted in this task (as it is said) by spirits that filled his study. The prestige of these texts was so great that anthologies of the period refer almost exclusively to them.

After having dominated the religious scene during the T'ang, the Great Purity movement continued into the Sung period. At that time, the movement's major text, the *Ta-tung chen-ching*, had acquired such a high reputation that each of the other major Taoist schools had its own version. Wei Ch'i, one of the commentators on this text, wrote in 1310 that each of the "three mountains," or Taoist centers, possessed a copy.<sup>3</sup> Signs of the movement's decline were, however, already apparent. Thus it was gradually absorbed into the Ling-pao movement and completely disappeared as a distinct school during the Yüan (1277–1367).

Despite these developments, the great liturgy of the Ling-pao school, the *Tu-jen ching ta-fa*, betrays much borrowing from the Mao-shan texts—so that invocations, charms, and sometimes even complete sections on meditation techniques were incorporated.<sup>4</sup> Numerous descriptions of paradise and of certain important deities found in later texts also seem to have originated, or at least find their oldest recorded source, in the Mao-shan writings.<sup>5</sup> The journey to, or march on, the stars of the Big Dipper, which would be richly developed in later tradition, also finds its first detailed expression in these texts. Finally, let us note that an important ritual still practiced today in Taiwan perpetuates the principal themes of the Great Purity texts.<sup>6</sup>

In this way the Mao-shan school, which perhaps only transcribed and developed beliefs and techniques dating from the Han period, may be considered the link that connects the Taoism of the first centuries with the Taoism of the present day.

BUDDHIST AND TAOIST CENTERS OF MAJOR IMPORTANCE  
DURING THE FIFTH CENTURY





**CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE**  
**From the Fourth Century B.C.E. to**  
**the Death of T'ao Hung-ching**

*Chinese Dynasties**Taoism*

B.C.E.

## WARRING STATES

(403–222)

4th c.

*Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu*, School of Five Agents (Tsou Yen). Expeditions to the isles of the Immortals.

3rd c.

*Lieh-tzu. Ch'u-tz'u* (Taoist and shamanistic tendencies).

*CH'IN* (221–210)

Ch'in Shih-huang-ti,  
1st emperor of China

Techniques of immortality mentioned in historical sources: magicians of the North, "deliverance from the corpse."

*HAN**Former Han*

(206 B.C.E.-8 C.E.)

In the Han dynasty, a flourishing of the divinatory arts (sciences of omens, prophetic writings). Taoism, magic arts, and medicine are mixed up.

2nd c.

c. 130. Li Shao-chün, one of the first alchemists, at the imperial court. Chao Weng, necromancer, at the court. Luan Ta: magician enfeoffed as a marquis. *Huai-nan-tzu*.

1st c.

The *fang-shih*, specialists in esoteric sciences, in the imperial workshops. Liu Hsiang (77–6): failed alchemical experience.

Official mention of a first *T'ai-p'ing ching*.

C.E.

9–24. Wang Mang's  
usurpation.

Disapproved by the literati and heavily mixed up with magic, Taoism spreads among the people and in the emperor's household. Spread of Lao-tzu's teaching (reinterpreted) by the lower officials and the village notables.

*Later Han* (25–220)

100

A well-developed Taoist mythology already exists (arts, hagiographies).

c. 142. Possible date of the *Ts'an-t'ung-ch'i*, the oldest surviving treatise on alchemy.

*Buddhism*

*Mao Shan School*

B.C.E.

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145-70. Dates given by legend for the Taoist saint, Mao Ying, who gave his name to Mao-shan and to the school.

C.E.

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25. First mention of a Buddhist community (northern Kiangsu).

147. Beginnings of Buddhism in China: translator An-shih-kao in the capital.

*Chinese Dynasties**Taoism*

- 147–166. Taoism is integrated into official cult (divinization of Lao-tzu).
- 150 155–220. At the end of his life, Ts'ao Ts'ao surrounds himself with “magicians”: Kan Shih, Feng Chün-ta, Tso Tz'u (abstention from cereals, embryonic respiration, sexual practices).
- 200 184–215. Taoist revolt which causes the fall of the dynasty. Yellow turbans in the East and the South (Chang Chüeh; rely on the *T'ai-p'ing ching*) and Five-Bushels-of-Rice in Szechuan (Chang Lu; rely on the *Tao-te ching*); (cures with charm water, confessions, recitation of texts). Constitution of a Taoist state in Szechuan. The Heavenly Master school issues from the Five-Pecks-of-Rice movement and takes root during the following century.
220. Fall of the Han.  
 THE THREE KINGDOMS:  
 Ts'ao Wei (220–265) in the North; capital in Lo-yang;  
 Wu (220–280) in South; capital Nanking;  
 Shu Han (221–263) in Szechuan; capital Ch'eng-tu.
- 250 From the beginning of the century: development of “Neo-Taoism,” or School of Mysteries, from an intellectual tendency in contrast with “religious” Taoism; commentaries on *Lao-Tzu*, *Chuang-tzu*, and the *I ching*; this school originates in the North, then spreads to the South, and reaches its culmination in second part of the century (Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove). Wang Pi (226–249).
- The same period: Ko Hsüan, disciple of great-uncle Tso Tz'u and master of Ko Hung's master.
255. At the latest: *Cheng-i fa-wen*, important text of the Heavenly Masters school.
- CHIN*
265. *Western Chin*:  
 China reunited; capital in Lo-yang.
311. Fall of Lo-yang under attacks of barbarians. Escape to the South.
317. *Eastern Chin*: Era of Six Dynasties (South) and Sixteen barbarian kingdoms (North).
- c. 292. Emergence of *San-huang wen*, fundamental text of one of the major divisions of the Canon, revealed to Pao Ching, Ko Hung's father-in-law.
317. *Pao-p'u-tzu*, work of Ko Hung (283–343/63), heir of Ko Hsüan; alchemy, respiratory and sexual practices, pharmacology; attacks against superstitions and magic. Mention of many works lost today.
- In the South: discussion about “Emptiness”
- c. 300. Controversy between Taoists  
 Taoist pamphlet which presents

*Buddhism*

*Mao Shan School*

220. Introduction of Mahayana texts to China: Che-ch'ien in Nanking, 220-225; texts interpreted with Taoist terminology.

252. Birth of Wei Hua-ts'un, founder of the school.

From 300. Establishment of Buddhism in China.

288. Revelations to Lady Wei.

266-308. Dharmaraksa in Ch'ang-an: greatest translator before Kumarajiva.

305. Birth of Hsü Mi, third patriarch of the school.

310. Fo-t'u-teng (c.349), Buddhist miracle-worker in Ch'ang-an.

330. Birth of Yang Hsi, second patriarch of the school.

334. Death of Lady Wei.

between Taoist and Buddhist intelligentsia.

and Buddhists: The *Hua-hu ching*.  
Buddha as the reappearance of Lao-tzu.

*Chinese Dynasties**Taoism*

420: *SUNG* (Southern or Liu Sung).

389–404. Emperor of Northern Wei encourages alchemical research.

c. 397/400. In the South; emergence of the *Ling-pao ching*, basic text of the Ling-pao school, forged by Ko Ch'ao-fu, grandnephew of Ko Hung.

In the North, Taoism becomes the state religion: Kou Ch'ien-chih, who received a revelation in 415, reforms the Heavenly Masters school and becomes an imperial counselor; dies in 448. Favor of Taoists decreases gradually.

c. 454. Li Hung's uprising of Taoist inspiration.

467. Ku Huan's pamphlet against the Buddhists.

471. Lu Hsiu-ching, by imperial order, establishes a first catalogue of Taoist works and attempts a first synthesis of the various currents (the three *tung*).

*Buddhism*

From 340 on. Expansion of Buddhism in the South and Central China, under patronage of the court and the aristocracy.

Active center in the Shan mountains; Fa-shen (286–374); Chih-tun (314–366), Chuang-tzu specialist.

c. 350. Buddhist center in the North.

From 365 on. Buddhist center in Hsiang-yang (Tao-an, 312–385), in Chiang-ling (Hui-yüan, 334–417) on Mt. Lo-fo.

After 380. Center on Mt. Lu with Hui-yüan (Amitabha cult).

402–413. Purely Buddhist reformulation of the texts.

402. Kumarajiva arrives in Ch'ang-an. The doctrine is clearly differentiated from Taoism on the philological and doctrine levels. Study of Mādhyamaka. Tao-sheng (c. 360–437), Seng-jui (352–436), Seng-chao (374–414).

This tendency spreads to the South (Hui-yüan, correspondence with Kumarajiva), where also the dhyana appears (Buddhabhadra on Lu-shan in 410).

Constitution of an organized Buddhist clergy (translation of the great treatises on monastic discipline).

*Mao Shan School*

341. Birth of Hsü Hui, son of Hsü Mi, and fourth patriarch of the school.

364–370. Revelation of sectarian texts to Yang Hsi by Lady Wei.

370. Death of Hsü Hui.

373/6. Death of Hsü Mi.

386. Death of Yang Hsi.

399. Copy of the biography of Tzu-yang chen-jen (dated manuscript which mentions sectarian texts and permits the dating of these texts).

From 400. The writings of the school are in demand (Yen Hsi-ho; afterwards governor K'ung Mo).

404. Hsü Huang-min, son of Hsü Hui, emigrates to the Shan mountains; propagation of the school to the East; textual manipulations and forgeries start (Wang Ling-ch'i).

429. Death of Hsü Huang-min: first dispersion of the texts; one part on Shan mountains with Ma family (Ma Lang, fifth patriarch, and Ma Han, sixth patriarch) another part in the capital with the Tu family (Tu Tao-chin).

435. Death of Hsü Jung-ti, son of Hsü Huang-min and author of textual manipulations.

450. Lu Hsiu-ching (406–477), seventh patriarch, summoned by the emperor and becomes his Taoist master.

465. In Shan mountains, a community under leadership of Ku Huan (c.420/8–483/91) studies the sectarian texts. Tu Ching-chang, son of Tu Tao-chü; Chou Seng-piao, friend of Tao Hung-ching and disciple of Ch'u Po-yu, famous hermit in these mountains.

*Chinese Dynasties**Taoism*

478–502. *CH'I* (South)

493. *THE NORTHERN WEI*  
(Topa), unification of North  
China.

503. *LIANG* (South)

502. Accession to the throne of the fervent Buddhist  
Liang Wu-ti, friend of T'ao Hung-ching.

504. Proscription of Taoism. Debates on the  
immortality of the soul.



*Buddhism*

From 470. Buddhism is almost state religion in the North.

*Mao Shan School*

467. Lu Hsiu-ching returns to court; construction of a monastery for him in Chekiang, where he keeps the manuscripts of the school.

477. Death of Lu Hsiu-ching, who transmits the texts to Hsü Shu-piao of Lu-shan.

481. Emperor sends an emissary to Lu-shan, who takes away part of the manuscripts.

484. Sun Yu-yo (398–488), eighth patriarch, disciple of Lu Hsiu-ching, teaches in a monastery in the capital; numerous disciples, among whom are great scholars (Shen Yo) and T'ao Hung-ching.

492. T'ao Hung-ching (452–536), ninth patriarch, retires to Mao-shan.

499. Probable date of *Chen-kao*.

518. *Hung-ming chi*, Buddhist anthology by Seng-yu

536. Death of T'ao Hung-ching.