Chapter One

MYSTICAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE TAOIST TRADITION

The Taoist tradition has historically been divided into a philosophical and a religious branch. The former is represented primarily by the philosophies of Laozi and Zhuangzi, documented in the texts ascribed to them as well as in later materials, such as the *Huainanzi* and the *Liezi*. Religious Taoism, on the other hand, began with the Celestial Masters' movement in the second century C.E. and continued, supported by ever new revelations of the Tao, into the present age. It is textually represented by the works of the Taoist Canon of 1445 and its successors.

The interrelation between the two strands of the Taoist tradition has given rise to much perplexity. Where, in the elaborate rituals and fantastic visions of countless gods and heavenly palaces of the Taoist religion, did the sophisticated philosophy of the same name have any place? Indeed, did it play any role at all? The tendency generally is to keep the different strands of the Taoist tradition apart, to treat them as separate entities—the philosophy to the philosophers, the religion to the students of religion.

There are, however, materials in the Taoist Canon that suggest other possibilities. Not only does the Canon abound in extensive religiously-based commentaries to the ancient philosophers. It also contains scriptures and discourses that, though fundamentally religious in outlook, depend heavily on philosophical Taoism. Highly ideosyncratic and very different from the ancient works, these documents represent a continuation of ancient Taoist thought within the framework of religious Taoism. They are a bridge between the strands, they hold together what fashion tended to divide.

Who were the thinkers of the Taoist religion? What did they believe in? Where did they come from? How did they understand their
world? What did the philosophers mean to them? How did they develop the ancient concepts and ideas? And under what influences?

For the whole of Taoist history, these questions must remain unanswered. Still, in a limited way, some inroads into the problem can be made.

The text studied in the following pages offers some insight into the workings of Taoist thought in a religious environment. Called Xisheng jing or “Scripture of Western Ascension,” it goes back to about the fifth century. Neither dated nor ascribed to any known author, the text claims to document the exact words Laozi spoke in explanation when he transmitted the Daode jing to the Guardian of the Pass.

The Xisheng jing is a classical example of a philosophical text written from a religious background and advocating ways to salvation. It is unique in that it arises at a time when religious Taoism reaches its first full development as one of the leading religions of China. It differs from earlier materials in that it is primarily a religious text which yet integrates the ancient philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi into its fundamental belief in immortality and ascension into heaven. More than that, it shows a pervading Buddhist influence, a dominant feature of religious Taoism in later times. Its numerous commentaries help delineate the development of its outlook over several centuries. In addition, the lives of the two commentators about whom some historical data are available show the kind of people religious Taoist thinkers were and the environment in which they thought.

Mystical Philosophy

What kind of worldview system did religious Taoists subscribe to? What were the major terms and concepts of their philosophy? How did they interpret the ideas of the ancients and of their contemporaries? How did they relate to the other traditions of medieval China, to Confucianism and Buddhism? What, moreover, were their aims and how did they go about attaining them?

In the most general manner, the aim of Taoist religious thinkers is to show people a way to the Tao. They wish to make people overcome the narrow confines of ordinary life, to attain longevity and immortality.

Taoist thought as it grows from the religious tradition is highly dualistic and distinguishes the purity of the underlying Tao from the distorted and estranged lives of ordinary people. The Tao is beyond yet
always present, it is subtle and fine, impossible to grasp with common human means, the senses and the intellect. Yet there is a path to oneness with the Tao. To approach the Tao, human beings have to completely reorganize their personalities and perception of the world. The mind has to become subtler; the gross apparatus first of the senses, then of the intellect has to be refined and cleansed. The more the senses and the intellect are refined to higher degrees of subtlety, the less impact any acquired conscious and emotional personality has on the true self of the Tao within. Becoming outwardly selfless, decreasing in egoistic pursuits, the Tao within begins to shine forth. An inner awareness of the underlying potency of the Tao that pervades everything buds and flourishes.

Taoist religious thought can therefore be classified as mystical philosophy. It is a system of thought that claims to relate directly to the personal experience of oneness with the Tao. For the Taoist mystic, a life in the Tao is the only true way of being in the world. The Tao is everything, all beings live only with the Tao. Taoist mystical philosophy neither justifies nor explains the religious truth of the Taoist believer. Rather, it proceeds to outline the consequences of this religious truth for the understanding of reality, religious practice, and life in society. Taoist mystical philosophy describes the path, in theory and practice, that leads to salvation, liberation, immortality.

Despite its overall transcendent orientation, the texts of Taoist mystical philosophy are written in human language and apply such human ideas and systems as are valid at the time of their writing. They appear in rather systematized literary forms. They present speculative systems describing the structure and purpose of the universe and give theoretical interpretations of human life. Often they are discourses that encourage people to embark on the route to the Tao and contain detailed practical instructions on how to go about attaining the cosmic state. In all cases, the texts of Taoist mystical philosophy can be studied as literary documents that show a specific Taoist way of making sense of the world. Generally speaking, they share the influence of various textual traditions and agree on certain basic assumptions and concepts.

Taoist Mystical Philosophy

Taoist mystical philosophy as a form of discourse distinct from the ancient philosophers, revealed scriptures, and practical manuals, develops in the fifth century with the full-fledged establishment of religious
Taoism. At that time, Taoism first built its own monastic institutions and compiled its first organized canon. The *Xisheng jing* is the earliest mystical scripture of Taoism as a pan-Chinese organized religion. It reflects the same textual traditions as religious Taoism in general. These are three:

1. The philosophical texts going back to Laozi and Zhuangzi, together with their later commentaries. The commentaries integrate the ancient philosophers with Han-dynasty correlative thinking and the worldview of Chinese medicine as well as with certain basic doctrines of Confucianism.

2. The ecstatic experiences described by Han dynasty and later poets and religious seekers. These find their religious continuation in the scriptures of the Shangqing (Highest Clarity) school, revealed in the fourth century. Texts of this type represent both personal experiences and more general instructions and principles of salvation.

3. The steadily inflowing translations of Buddhist sutras, beginning in the first century. The organization of Taoism as a valid higher religion of all China owes much to the Buddhist impact (see Ofuchi 1979). Similarly its textual and conceptual development cannot be understood without taking into account the sweeping influence of Buddhist worldview and religious practice.

As I have described in much detail elsewhere, these three kinds of sources correspond to the three main lineages of early Chinese mysticism in theory and practice.¹

1. The quietistic, naturalistic tradition that developed in the wake of the philosophers Laozi and Zhuangzi;

2. the ecstatic, shamanistic visions of southern China that were most clearly expressed in poetic songs, from the *Chuci* (Songs of the South) to Han-dynasty and later rhapsodies, and formed the backbone of Shangqing ecstatic meditations;

3. the analytical and insight-oriented systems of Buddhism with their emphasis on truly understanding the workings of one's own body and mind.

The former two, Lao-Zhuang and shamanism, were merged comparatively early. Even in the early Han, the *Chuci* show how closely the ecstatic tradition relied on expressions and metaphors of the philosophers. Similarly, Buddhism was first introduced to the Chinese elite through the medium of Lao-Zhuang philosophy, borrowing expressions
and concepts according to the practice of "matching the meanings," particularly popular in the fourth century. However, the full impact of Buddhist ideas and practices on Taoist mystical philosophy and practice was not felt until the late Six Dynasties and Tang. The fruitful merging of all three traditions is first evident in the *Xisengjing*.

Taoist mystical philosophy is centered around its understanding of the Tao. The Tao stands for an organic order, a whole including and embracing everything, yet at the same time pervading all. The Tao is the one power underlying the universe; it makes things be what they are; it causes the world to come into being and to decay again. It is the foundation of all, the source of life and being, from which we all come and to which we all return.

The Tao is organic in that it is not willful, it is not a conscious active creator; and it is not personal. The Tao is nature, yet it is more than mere nature, it is the essence of nature, the inner quality that makes things what they are. The Tao is governed by the laws of nature, yet it is also these very laws itself. Inherently the Tao is order; like nature it is rhythmic in its changes and predictable in its developments. It can be analyzed and described in its ordered patterns—but these patterns are only its periphery, its outside, not its central essence.

The Taoist mystic aspires to both: to order and to organic living, both harmonious and joined into one. Depending on the background, he will emphasize different aspects of the order of the Tao: the seasons, the interchange of yin and yang, the harmony of society, the movement of the stars and planets, or just the personal needs for food and sleep. But the aim is to reach through order to the inner organism of the world, to its hub, its empty and vague center, which is the Tao in its essence.

The Tao is thus described in a pattern of outer and inner, yin and yang, dark and light. Opposed to it is the reality of everyday life as interpreted by the human mind. The Tao is the most within and at the same time the most without. Human beings are within the Tao because the Tao is the enveloping order of the whole universe. But the Tao is also within every human being inasmuch as he or she needs it to be alive, to be himself or herself. Since, however, the Tao is not just one possible mode of consciousness but ultimately encompasses all ways of thinking, the mystical evaluation of the human mind reflects a complex structure of more and less accordance with the Tao.

Human discriminating consciousness is the factor that keeps people from realizing their oneness with the Tao. Yet this is also part of the Tao because it comes with the basic human endowment in this life. At the same time, consciousness stands outside of the Tao because it
opposes it, is separated from it and does not share the Tao as fully as it could and should. In the center of the human mind resides spirit or virtue that represents the spark of pure Tao. On the periphery of the mind is the active, scheming consciousness with its various functions, all basically enemies of the Tao.

Especially the intention and the will arise only because of classifications and value judgments relative to outer reality. Entirely artificial and humanly constructed, these judgments cause people to develop a sense of identity, a so-called personal body or self, which then gives rise to worries and fears, hopes and delights. The will and the intention are the conscious expression of these emotions, all equally separated from the Tao.

To attain oneness with the Tao, one has to abandon all ego personality, blot out the intention and silence the will, go back to the center of the mind, isolate the spirit and make it stable and suffused with Tao. Once this has been achieved, the inward and darkening movement is reversed, and the Tao is allowed to radiate its brilliance to the outside. Then intention and will become the servants of a higher function. Unity in thinking and feeling is attained, the inner spark of the mind joins with the pure cosmic energy of the Tao. Human beings not only intuit the divine reality within and without, but join it with all their being.

Unlike in most other mystical traditions, in China the physical body, as opposed to the "personal body" or self, the individual's sense of ego-identity, is not the part that has to be suppressed and overcome. Rather, one's physical so-being is a positive basis for mystical attainments. It is fundamentally part of the Tao, not only because it is the most natural aspect of human existence but also because it is a replica of the cosmos. In all it does, the body follows the cosmic rhythm spontaneously. It does so the more, the less it is interfered with by culture and consciousness. The physical body is therefore where mystical practice starts. If there is no physical being, no vessel of the spirit, then there can be no foundation of the Tao to work with. To attain perfect oneness, one must first reach perfect health. Only by fulfilling one's life-span and living to an eminent old age can one properly prepare for the higher stages.

Taoist mystical practice begins therefore by becoming physically healthy. For this one resorts to the help of various medical and physiological techniques: gymnastics, breathing techniques, dietetics, drugs, and many more. Only when the physical body is ready should one proceed to practice more specifically meditational techniques. However, as the healthy body becomes the foundation of the spirit-
pervaded mind, mystical practices often bridge the physical and the psychological. Nourishing the body on the pure energy of the five directions, for example, and meditating on them by means of visualization is one and the same process. The result of the practice affects both the body and the mind. The body will not feel hungry any more and the mind will perceive the Tao throughout the world.

Within the realm of the more specifically meditational techniques, then, practices are manifold and go back to all three major traditions. Quietistic, concentrative exercises in the Lao-Zhuang tradition are seamlessly joined with Shangqing ecstatic excursions to the higher and lower heavens, trips already made by the shamans of old. Both are then combined with Buddhist insight meditation, analyses of the structure of one’s self, leading to the reinterpretation of oneself as a cosmic being.

The fully realized sage, the unified cosmic being in Taoist mystical philosophy, is the great man. He can be understood as a combination of the ancient figures of ruler, shaman, and sage. His appearance in the world has an immediate impact on the harmony of the universe at large and of the country in particular. Since the Tao is universal order, the person who realizes it not only embodies order but brings it to those around him, to the family, the village, the state, and the empire. The idea of the great man goes back far in history. Even in ancient Shang times the king was at the hub of the universe, the main communicant between the heavens above and the earth below, the head priest of the state cult and the leading shaman of the country. It was the domain of the priest-king to ensure that the will of the ancestors was duly known and respected, to see to the proper information and placation of the powers-that-be.

Later the roles were separated: the ruler remained at the hub of a strongly ritualized universe that was patterned after the natural cosmic order as much as one was able to understand and arrange it; shamans became self-employed, freelance communicators with various gods and spirits, servants to the populace often without a specifically defined standing in any community or religious organization; a sage, finally, was what one became through cultivation, be it cultivation of learning as the Confucian tradition has it or be it cultivation of oneself in purity and simplicity as the Daode jing suggests. All three figures—ruler, shaman, and sage—had in common that they represented the apex of human life. They all had free access to the otherworld and served as communicants of a higher level of order and knowledge to the realm of humanity.

In the mystical tradition, the three roles are again joined into one. The accomplished mystic is ruler, shaman, and sage. He is a true
human being, a perfected or realized one, who is whole within himself, easily communicates with the world above, and has an enormous impact on the political and social order of his time.

Major Traditions

These general characteristics of Taoist mysticism do not form a static and unyielding structure of belief and practice. Rather, they continue to develop in manifold variation on the basis of the three major textual and conceptual traditions. From century to century there is enormous change in worldviews and activities. Depending on the fashions of the time, one tradition predominates over the other. Depending on the personal background and experiences of the individual mystic, new visions of the cosmos emerge. To understand the complexity of the mystical philosophy of the Xisheng jing and its major commentators, a clear picture of its most important concepts and textual forerunners is needed.

The Daode jing

The first document of Taoist mystical philosophy, to which most texts return again and again, is the Daode jing. Ascribed to the philosopher Laozi, the later god of religious Taoism, then known as Taishang Laojun, it was edited on the basis of aphorisms or the philosopher's remembered sayings in the third century B.C.E. Its earliest extant edition was unearthed in 1973 from a tomb in Mawangdui, Hunan, and is dated to before 168 B.C.E. The version transmitted through the centuries was put together and commented on by Wang Bi (226–249) and is surprisingly similar to the excavated copy. This overall integrity of the tradition has to do with the fact that the Daode jing was recited as a holy text even in the former Han dynasty and became one of the central scriptures of the Celestial Masters (Tianshi) school of Taoism. It thus remained in the memory of people rather than being merely transmitted on bamboo, silk, or paper.

In terms of contents, the Daode jing expresses most of the fundamental concepts of the mystical tradition, especially regarding cosmology and the political role of the accomplished sage. It conspicuously lacks any concrete descriptions of mystical methods, physical or otherwise, nor does it emphasize the mind and development of the individual. In other words, the Daode jing as it stands can in itself hardly be taken for a mystical manual; much more likely it should be considered
a work on ideal government written on the background of a magico-religious conception of the ordering of society and the world, where the ruler is the apex of humanity and the hub of the universe (see Schwartz 1985: 192). It is, however, quite definitely a mystical text as far as the tradition of Taoism is concerned. Moreover, there is certainly no lack of attempts by later commentators and interpreters to fill in the gaps of the text by evaluating terms and passages allegorically and symbolically.

The most important and maybe the most radical of these later commentaries is the one ascribed to Heshang gong (Master on the River). According to legend, he lived during the time of Emperor Wen of the Han dynasty (179–156 B.C.E.), but in fact he only appears in sources since the third century C.E. (Robinet 1977: 25). Although traditionally assumed to go back to the Han dynasty, recent scholarship suggests that this commentary, at least as we have it today in the Taoist Canon (DZ 682, fasc. 363), was only put together in the fifth century (Kusuyama 1979).5

Unlike earlier commentaries, especially by Wang Bi and Yan Zun, which continue the more strictly philosophical lineage of the text, Heshang gong contributes to the mystical tradition in two major ways. He draws a connection between cultivating oneself and governing the country. He also establishes a link between the philosophy of the Daode jing and the worldview and practices of Chinese traditional medicine as well as those of the ancient magico-technicians (fangshi). These early forerunners of Taoist practitioners attain first prominence at the court of the Han and play an important role in the development of Taoism as a religion (see Seidel 1983; Yamada 1989).

According to Heshang gong, the creation of political order is structurally isomorphic with the cultivation of personal longevity and mystical union. Politics and philosophy as well as magic and morality are thus interconnected in his thought, realms which are clearly distinguished in our terms (Robinet 1977: 30). In a way that strongly reminds the reader of the “Great Learning” chapter of the Liji (Book of Rites), the cultivation of oneself, of one’s shén, one’s body, but also one’s identity and proper way of being in the world, leads to the correct order of one’s household, one’s community, the country, and eventually the world.

In the old days, those who were skillful practitioners of the Tao would cultivate themselves and then extend this cultivation to the government of the country. They would never use the Tao to teach the people to be bright and full of wisdom, cunning and full of hypocrisy.
Rather, they used the Tao and the Virtue to teach the people to be simple and plain and without hypocrisy and falsehood. (chap. 65)

According to Heshang gong, both the world and the body participate in the same universal structure of qi, the cosmic energy which can be described as the material aspect of the Tao. World and body are parallel and through cultivation and realization of one the other is automatically attained too. Cultivation here means not only the reduction of passions and attachments to the world but also the awareness of the power underlying all. This power is more narrowly defined in terms of the five agents of the five directions. These, as shown in the table below, are in turn linked with colors, seasons, inner organs, emotions, senses, and spiritual forces.

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<th>agent</th>
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<td>wood</td>
<td>east</td>
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<td>fire</td>
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<td>water</td>
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<td>earth</td>
<td>center</td>
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As a consequence, all mystical practice is cosmologically oriented. At the right time, facing the right direction, and visualizing the right color, a particular energy can be accumulated from its source and absorbed into the corresponding section of the practitioner's body. Visualized first as a ball of colored light, it is felt to enter the body and take up residence in the respective inner organs or orbs. The result of the practice, which remains basic in the Taoist tradition for many centuries, is first of all a stronger body that will grow increasingly independent of ordinary nourishment in the form of food or breath.

At the same time, the integration of the five agents into the realm of mystical practice also influences the psychological disposition of the adepts. Not only physically stronger, their spiritual constitution will also become closer to the Tao in nature. They attain perfect health, longevity, and a sense of cosmic oneness with the transformations of the Tao.

Whoever is able to nourish the spirits within will not die. By spirits I refer to the spirits of the five orbs: the spirit soul in the liver, the material soul in the lungs, the spirit in the heart, the conscious intention in the spleen, and the essence together with the will in the kidneys. When these five orbs are exhausted and harmed, the five spirits will flec. (chap. 6)
The commentary of Heshang gong, therefore, links the ancient *Daode jing* with a more technical understanding of the body and its parallel structure, the state. It also integrates it with notions and practices of long life as first practiced by the *fangshi* and with the cosmological system of the five agents, part and parcel of all Chinese thought after the Han. Oneness with the Tao becomes tangible and practicable, the vagueness of the description of the Tao is replaced with a cosmological system, and instead of indistinct indications of quietistic withdrawal and "preservation of the material soul" (*Daode jing 10*) one finds a clear idea of what and how to practice.

**Zhuangzi and Guo Xiang**

For Heshang gong and the mystical tradition in the wake of the *Daode jing*, the essential point is a return to the one underlying ground of the Tao by means of tranquility and the nourishing of cosmic energy. The *Zhuangzi* as well as Guo Xiang, who wrote the earliest extant and most important commentary to the text and edited it in its present-day form, on the other hand, express their mystical ideal in terms of ecstatic freedom. They seek a floating through the world, a going-along with the flux and transformations of the Tao.⁶

Zhuangzi and Guo Xiang understand the Tao to mean the flow of existence as such. Its major characteristic is change and transformation. Human beings have lost touch with this ongoing process of natural life because they have developed consciousness. In order to recover a state of oneness, of floating along with the Tao in "free and easy wandering," one must come to "make all things equal." This means one should fully realize that whatever happens is part of the Tao and therefore good and cannot be changed. All value judgments and emotional reactions to things are erroneous and ultimately meaningless. There is no need to feel separate from life and the Tao or to evaluate it in any way, because one is always part of it. The Tao is the *now* that is right here to be participated in absolutely.

Equalization of all things is attained through a reorganization of consciousness. One first examines the structure of one's mind and finds the root of all problems in the development of an ego-identity, which must be abolished and eradicated completely. The process by which this is achieved is called "forgetting": first one forgets to make any distinctions between the various living beings without, then one forgets all the value judgments attached to mental classifications within. Increasingly one merges one's mind with the Tao, the underlying flow of existence as such. In the end there is no more knowing, no
more clinging, no more definite identity. When there are no more categories of perception, life and death subjectively cease to exist. Fully at one with the flow of existence, the mystic is then able to enjoy everything as it is, without ever wishing to change it, without the least desire or regret for anything.

Going beyond this basic system of the Zhuangzi, Guo Xiang defines the exact relationship that human beings have to the Tao in terms of “inner nature” (xing) and “fate” (ming). Inner nature is the share (fen) everyone has in the Tao. It determines the way people are naturally, their character and inborn qualities, their gene-structure, so to speak. Fate, on the other hand, is the structural aspect of the Tao in people, it is the principle (li) that rules every single life. Every individual’s situation of birth, life-span, opportunities and chances, all the outer circumstances of one’s life, are determined by it. Nature and nurture are both given by the Tao and form part of the predetermined position everyone has in the world.

Yet far from being a straight-jacket of existence, they are the key to full self-realization. One cannot possibly realize something that is not somehow oneself—not a self in the limited artificial sense of an acquired personality, but a cosmic self that is part of the Tao. Therefore Guo Xiang is concerned that both inner nature and fate should be fulfilled, not counteracted. The more one works along with one’s destiny, the better one will realize oneself in the Tao, and the more contentment and happiness one will experience—happiness in the sense of a floating-along with existence in free and easy wandering. The more one tries to avoid the preset course, the harsher the realities of life will appear.

As a result, the realized one or true person in Guo Xiang not only goes beyond all conscious knowledge and attains spontaneous oneness with life as it continually flows along. In his every action he experiences the full freedom and openness of the Tao. The mystical ideal here is an ecstatic flight in the midst of everyday reality, a completely unthinking acceptance of all situations. This in turn means a spontaneous inner awareness at all times of what is the right thing to do and the right place to be in every single one of life’s moments. As a counterbalance, fate will also assert itself in that such a true one will no longer be confronted by adversities—the roads will always be open, the rivers fordable, the food tasty.

The ecstatic freedom of the Zhuangzi and Guo Xiang’s more thoroughly theoretical system are among the mainstays of Taoist mystical philosophy. They are combined with the ideas of the Daode jing and the medical practices in an integrated model that teaches adepts to first
reduce their old ways of thinking and feeling by developing a state of tranquill and quiet concentration. Thus they seek to restore their qi and return to the source of the Tao within. Once the Tao is discovered, it can begin to pervade the practitioner's mind, body, and life. In due course it will lead to the ecstatic freedom of going along with all.

Immortality

Beginning with the Han dynasty, the aim of mystical and ecstatic practices was no longer limited to the experience of oneness with the underlying Tao or of freely floating along with the course of existence. Rather, people sought the attainment of an eternal and perfect life in the heavens and paradises of the otherworld. They wished to become immortal.

First apparent in sources of the late Zhou period, the belief in immortality can be traced back to two phenomena not only basically unrelated but even contradictory: a strong wish for long life and an ascetic pursuit of the otherworld and altered states of consciousness. The former has remained an important feature of Chinese culture through the ages; down to the present day, early death has been regarded as one of the greatest disasters possible. It was considered a sacred duty to one's parents to live out one's given life-span as unharmed as possible and to provide for a certain permanence by having male descendants who would to continue the ancestral sacrifices and thereby preserve the family's identity.

The pursuit of the otherworld in ecstasy or by "ascending to heaven in broad daylight" was first seriously undertaken by the fangshi of the Han: they engaged in experiments with diets, drugs, alchemy, physical practices, and certainly also mental states (see Ngo 1976; De-Woskin 1983). As the fangshi were engaged to produce elixirs of immortality by various emperors, their aspirations to otherworldly states became known and popular among the well-educated throughout the country. Elixirs were supposed to provide instant transport to the land of the immortals, then believed to be located on the magic island of Penglai in the Eastern Sea or alternatively on Mount Kunlun in the Western Mountains (see Shiji 28; Watson 1968a: II/13–69). Usually described as mountains surrounded by water, these fantastic lands on the periphery of the known universe were pictured as covered with glittering palaces, with gardens of gold and jeweled bushes, brilliant halls and marvelous towers. Trees there supposedly grow fruits that ripen only once in three thousand mundane years; birds with golden feathers nest in them. They have lakes of sweet dew or wine, from which sparkling princesses and glittering courtiers nip to their pleasure.
The spirit-beings living there, the immortals, were thought to consist entirely of supramundane substances. They live forever and can appear at will anywhere and anytime. They can change their shape, fly in the air or dive into the water, pass through walls or become solid as rocks. Nothing connects them with the world of humanity, although they appear once in a while to give instruction or help to mundane creatures. They are not responsible in any way, cannot be made to do what they don’t wish themselves. Unlike the heavens of the ancestors and the realm of the nature gods and the stars, to which human society maintains ties of reciprocity and mutual correspondence, the immortals are really beyond. Freedom there is unlimited, the power and joy without bounds.  

In terms of the literary tradition that has provided metaphors and images to the language of mystical philosophy, excursions to the immortals are first described in the Chu Ci, especially in the Yuan You (Far-off Journey; Hawkes 1959: 87). Following the tradition of this text, various poets of the Han and later dynasties have written on the magical travels of the great man, the true sage of heaven and earth, at one with the Tao and freely controlling the spirits above and below. Their descriptions furnish a testimony to the way immortal life was imagined at their time and to the power the immortals were believed to hold over the natural world as well as over gods and spirits. Mystical attainment in due course was intimately linked with the concept of ascension, of leaving this world of grime, of whirling free from all reciprocity and obligation.  

Although the Jiangshi were firm members of the medical tradition and although the poets made frequent use of Lao-Zhuang expressions, the full integration of the immortality cult into the mystical tradition of Lao-Zhuang thought did not take place until the development of Shangqing Taoism in the fourth century.  

Also known as Maoshan Taoism, after the seat of the headquarters of the sect, Shangqing Taoism originated in 364 with a series of revelations granted to Yang Xi (330–?), a medium residing near Nanjing. The revelations were written down by two brothers who then spread the new teachings in the area (Robinet 1984: 1/108). They were welcomed heartily by the local aristocracy who found in the newly discovered heavens a rank and nobility they had lost on this earth (see Strickmann 1978a, 1981). They learned all about the organization of the thirty-six heavens above, about the rhythmical patterns of the Tao in alignment with the five agents and the four seasons, and practiced visualizations and ecstatic meditations to experience immortality in the starry realms above.
Truly mystical, the aim of Shangqing practices is the reorganization of the individual’s consciousness, which allows an ordinary person to develop into a cosmic being. No longer limited to the earthly environment, adepts increasingly make the heavens their true home, they wander freely throughout the far ends of the world and up into the sky. Their minds are at one with the rhythmic changes of creation, they go along with them and thereby continue to exist eternally. The process of transformation ultimately results in a new personality of cosmic dimensions, where the physical and the imaginary body, the individual and the cosmos, are intimately merged, where the ordinary human being has become a true Taoist saint, such as described by Zhuangzi. (Robinet 1989: 160)

The major contribution that the immortality belief and its application, especially in Shangqing theory and practice, made to Taoist mystical philosophy is the notion of ascension. This is a key idea of all mystical literature of later ages, beginning with the Xisbenjing. The ultimate aim of mystical practice then is the attainment of a position in the heavens or paradises of the immortals. This attainment is reached when the bounded physical body that the spirit inhabited on this earth is discarded, either naturally at the end of a fulfilled life-span or intentionally upon receiving a summons from above. Before that time, mystical perfection consists of the ecstatic freedom found in free and easy wandering, a spontaneous going-along with all there is, and of the more ecstatic recovery of the Tao in quietude and simplicity.

The Buddhist Impact

Buddhism was first officially introduced to China in the first century C.E. The earliest scriptures translated were then interpreted as presenting an alternative to the longevity and immortality beliefs common at the time. In the fourth century, the Chinese worldview thought to correspond closest to the Buddhist teaching was Lao-Zhuang philosophy. Many early Chinese Buddhists were still deeply involved with the ancient systems of Laozi and Zhuangzi and their Dark Learning interpretations. They contributed much to the acceptance of Buddhist thought by the Chinese elite and at the same time integrated the foreign worldview irrevocably into native Chinese mysticism and philosophy.

It was only with Kumārajīva and Huiyuan in the early fifth century that the intellectual and scriptural tradition of Chinese Buddhism began a serious life of its own. From that time onward one can speak of
an indigenous Chinese Buddhism, a tradition which in due course brought forth a mystical philosophy in its own right. Nevertheless, in the fifth century the Buddhist impact on the Taoist tradition was by no means over but had just begun to rise to large-scale borrowings and the taking over of entire scriptures with the compilation and spread of the Lingbao (Numinous Treasure) scriptures.\textsuperscript{10}

The main thinkers of early Chinese Buddhism, such as Zhi Dun, Daoan, and Sengzhao,\textsuperscript{11} influenced Taoist mystical philosophy and developed Lao-Zhuang thought on the three major levels of cosmology, psychology, and practice.

Cosmologically, they added the concept of the emptiness of all things as it is founded on the Buddhist law of dependent origination. Nothing ever happens without a cause, whether it be for the good or the bad; every cause in turn has its own cause, and so on \textit{ad infinitum}. Human life and the structure of the Tao, far from being merely determined in a general way by share and principle or inner nature and fate, can be studied and analyzed in far more depth with the help of cause and effect and the notion of unceasing and inescapable origination.

As a consequence of the closer definition of the workings of the world, human life and destiny were also understood differently. The law of \textit{karma}, including the belief in an accumulation of lives in the past and the possibility of further lives on this earth in the future, changed the analysis of the human mind, raising Taoist psychology and epistemology to a new level. It was possible to be born with some bad elements in one's inner constitution not merely because some particularly obnoxious and gross \textit{qi} had coagulated in one's mother's womb. Once settled with such a \textit{qi}, one's basic disposition and destiny could not be changed, only modified. If, on the other hand, the evil tendencies were due to one's own deeds and desires of the past, they could be fully remedied and transformed.

Recognizing the station of the individual in life as his or her own responsibility in turn led to the prescription of an active religious discipline with the aim of attaining more subtle states of mind and a higher purity of being. Where before mystical practice had consisted of "returning" to the Tao and "forgetting" one's acquired personality and discriminating consciousness, now it became an active pursuit. This included moral prescriptions in form of the five Buddhist precepts, special garb and appearance, and a refusal to procreate—unheard-of before. Life in the monastery as the best setting for the active realization of the teachings increasingly, though never entirely, replaced the mountain hermitages of the seekers of old.
Beyond that, countless more specific concepts of Buddhist worldview were integrated into Taoist mystical philosophy. The heavens were arranged to fit the scheme of the Three Worlds of Desire, Form, and Formlessness; the unknowing state of the accomplished mystic was identified with the wisdom of prajñā; non-action was raised to the elevated status of nirvāṇa; the attainment of a loss of personal ego-identity became a form of anātman; greed and desire were associated with rāga, the passion which forms one of the three roots of karma, and so on.

In the fifth century, when the Xisheng jing was written, the influence of Buddhism was still vague and on a rather low level, though clearly present in all the respects just mentioned. It came to the forefront clearly only in Taoist philosophy in the early Tang, in the fashion known as Chongxuan (Twofold Mystery). This tendency of thought is expressed in various commentaries to the Daode jing as well as in the philosophical encyclopedia Daojiao yishu (The Pivotal Meaning of the Taoist Teaching; DZ 1129, fasc. 762–63) of the seventh century. Li Rong’s commentary to the Xisheng jing grew out of this development. He and his successors, then, made more use of Mādhyamika concepts and Buddhist thought than the original Xisheng jing itself.

Taoist mystical philosophy as represented by the Xisheng jing reaches its fullest development at this period, in the early years of the Tang dynasty. It was continued with varying impact into the twelfth century, to be then replaced by new modes of Taoist thought, notably the Yijing (Book of Changes) inspired speculation of inner alchemy.