

Exploring the reasons for the rise and fall of Taoism from the perspective of historical development: taking several key periods as examples

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Abstract: The paper delves into the historical development of Taoism, analyzing its rise and fall across various Chinese dynasties. It begins with the Eastern Han dynasty, emphasizing Zhang Ling's role in establishing Taoism as a significant religious force. The paper highlights the strategic expansion of Taoist influence under Zhang Lu in Sichuan. During the South North Dynasty, the focus shifts to Tao Hongjing's efforts in integrating Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian ideas, thereby creating a comprehensive deity system. The contributions of Ge Hong, especially in alchemy and the concept of 'inner alchemy', are noted in the context of the Danding School. The peak of ancient Taoism is traced back to the Song and Yuan dynasties, underscoring the pivotal support of emperors and the roles of figures like Zhang Zhengsui and Zhang Jixian in promoting Taoism. However, the Ming and Qing dynasties saw Taoism's decline due to the suppression of religious practices and its reduction to a mere cultural aspect for the royal family and aristocracy. The paper concludes by proposing a future path for Taoism, emphasizing the need for adaptation to modern society. It suggests that Taoism should lower barriers to entry and increase its relevance to contemporary life, learning from other religions like Christianity, to sustain its growth and significance in the modern era.

1. Introduction

1.1. East Han: Origin of Taoism

Taoism is an early folk religion native to China. Originating from Taoist thought during the Spring and Fall, and Warring States periods, the overall teachings and concepts revolve around the Huang Lao doctrine, the religion is based on Lao Tzu's Five Thousand Texts of Lao Tzu. The birth of Taoism as a religion was in the Eastern Han Dynasty, with the earliest Taiping Dao and Wudou Mi Dao as the mainstream. After the failure of the Yellow Turban Uprising, Taiping Dao immediately dispersed, giving the dominance of Taoism to Wudou Midao.

The founder of Wudou Midao, Zhang Ling, his appearance determined the rise of Taoism in the Eastern Han Dynasty, and Zhang Ling, who originally lived in Beizhu Mountain, moved to Yunjin Mountain in Jiangxi Province to escape the imperial court's edict, and later changed the mountain's name to Longhu Mountain. At that time, in order to refine the elixir of immortality, Zhang Ling's funds soon bottomed out. In search of an income source, he traveled to modern-day Sichuan because he heard that the people in the Bashu area were "simple and pure, easy to educate". Zhang Ling wanted to both accumulate wealth and educate the local residents at the same time. Zhang Ling, invented Fushui to earn money

Fushui is a magical method used to cure diseases, he earned a sum of money through this method. Zhang Ling himself did not ask for a fee, but the local residents insisted on giving something, so Zhang Ling had to compromise and let the village give rice, thus having the saying of Wudou Mi Dao (five stones of rice).

"Teacher Zhang Ling righteously refused money and only collected five bags of rice, which made the villagers admire him. It is only like this he is worthy of being a high-ranking person". [5]

In the first year of Emperor Heng's life in the Eastern Han Dynasty (155), Zhang Ling was named "Zhengyi Shi" (Heavenly Master) on that day, and his name was changed to Zhang Daoling. Zhang Daoling confirmed the religious position of Taoism before his ascension to the heavens, and Taoism has been Taoism since then. As a religious leader, Zhang Daoling determined several religious characteristics of Taoism, the ultimate concern for life, what to do after death, the guidance of religious classics, and the practice methods and rituals.

The Heavenly Master after Zhang Daoling is his son Zhang Heng, Zhang Heng as a cultivator can be ranked as supreme, but as of performing Heavenly Master duties, Zhang Heng is far less capable than his father or even his own son, Zhang Lu, in terms of leading the Zhengyi forces. At that time, Sichuan was divided into two regimes, one in Xichuan, led by Liu Zhang, who was then the pastor of Yizhou. The other is in Dongchuan, which is led by Zhang Lu, the leading Hanning Taishou. Zhang Lu

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differs from his predecessors in that he has extraordinary political talent. Zhang Lu immediately attacked Liu Zhang after Liu Zhang killed his mother and brother. After fighting several battles, Zhang Lu's forces gradually grew stronger, but he was unwilling to be bound by the title of Hanning and wanted to claim the title of king himself, and after the failed political coup, since then fell into the bottom of his life.[3]

Zhang Lu is actually quite unique in political management. His administrative jurisdiction was all under the control of the Tianshidao's "Jijiu" and "Dajijiu". Individual areas were all made religious by Tianshi Dao, and Zhang Lu perfected the original organization on the basis of the original religion and added his own innovations. Zhang Lu was eventually captured by Cao Cao, and the Tianshi Dao slowly declined from its peak at that time with Zhang Lu's decline. Although Zhang Lu did not amount to great success at the end of his life, he created the only theocratic regime in Chinese history, and he was the only one.[7]

During the Eastern Han Dynasty, the initial development of Tianshi Dao was sluggish, but in Zhang Lu's hands, because of his political talent, he was able to expand the influence of Tianshi Dao in Sichuan. At the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty, the imperial family's attitude towards Taoism changed from indifference to disgust. Mainly after starting from Emperor Xian of Han, due to the revolt of the Yellow Turban Army, the emperor had to make a move, which lead to great chaos in the world and created a lot of problems for the rise of Taoism. Considering the ruler's attitudes of different rulers, Cao Cao was superior to the Han emperor. Cao Cao used the Mandate of Heaven to get the princes to control Zhang Lu in his own hands. The Heavenly Master is in his hands, and the Heavenly Master Dao has to listen to him. Even though this meant the end for Zhang Lu, still, Cao Cao's operation also preserved the bloodline of Wudou Mi Dao and continued it.

2. South North Dynasty: The reformation of Taoism

During the South North Dynasty, it was a time of chaos and instability. After the development of the four dynasties of "Song, Qi, Liang, and Chen", Taoist talents are also emerging in this era, "If Zhang Daoling started Taoism, then the work of perfection was finally completed by Ge Hong, Tao Hongjing, Lu Xiuqing and other later magi during the two Jin and Northern Dynasties." [5] At the same time, Buddhism from the West also planted roots in Chinese soil.

In the Wei and Jin dynasties, this was an extremely turbulent era. Since the decline of the Heavenly Master Dao led by Zhang Lu, various sects have also competed within Taoism. The talents of the Shangqing faction were born one after another. Among them, Tao Hongjing of the Shangqing Dynasty was a prodigy of centuries. With Buddhism from the west and stepping into the Central Plains, Tao Hongjing realized what Taoism lacks [2]. Taoism has not had a complete system of deities since Zhang Daoling founded Taoism. As a religion, Buddhism,

with its regular deity system, is easier to spread among the populace, and at the same time, the ultimate concern for life, was something Taoism has not yet discovered. Taking Buddhism as an example, after death, people will fall into the six reincarnations, and the goodness in this life will be used as a blessing in the next life. This ultimate understanding and interpretation of life is the root of religious attraction, but Taoism at this time is like a pile of sand. Starting from the immortal system, Tao Hongjing spent 40 years compiling the "True Spirit Position Karma Map", a masterpiece that integrates all the deities of Taoism. From the moment this book was published, it received support from the government, basically, everyone in the country had a copy of the "True Spirit Position Karma Map", although Taoism had its own immortal system, but it was still more or worse than Buddhism at that time. However, Tao Hongjing's contribution to the cause of Taoism goes far beyond this "True Spirit Karma Map". He also brought reforms to the new Taoist theory, and the originally unrelated Confucianism, Buddhist thoughts and Taoism were synthesized into the new Taoist theory under Tao Hongjing. He pioneered "dual practice of Buddhism and Taoism" and "integration of three teachings". These actions made the already famous Shangqing faction leap to become the same rank as the Taoist leading faction as Tianshi Dao. These theories also contributed to the pluralism of Taoism. However, there is not only Tao Hongjing who has powerful Taoist priests in the Southern and Northern Dynasties, and there is a rising sect in the Jiangnan region, the Danding School. And there is also a powerful faction in the Danding faction, that is, the grandson of the founder Ge Xuan, "Bao Puzi" Ge Hong.

Ge Hong, as a person who can be ranked high in history, he is naturally extraordinary. He inadvertently invented gunpowder while refining alchemical ingredients, but it wasn't his greatest achievement. His contribution to alchemy was unprecedented. Before Ge Hong, all the alchemy techniques were all "outer dan", and many Taoist priests were obsessed with practicing "outer dan" to dissolve and ascend to the heavens, but later many Taoist priests learned to practice "outer dan" and caused countless deaths. Ge Hong used the technique of refining "Outer Dan" to develop a method of refining "Inner dan", which retained as Taoism's status as a formal religion, and "Inner dan" cultivation has since become the foundation of life cultivation, and since then all sects have used "Inner dan" as the cornerstone. In addition to the "Inner dan" cultivation, Ge Hong also has a book "Bao Puzi". In this book, Ge Hong put forward a supreme idea that made Taoism famous.[9]

In the book, Ge Hong loudly shouts out the most forceful sentence in Taoism: ---- 'My life is in my hands, not the gods, and I will become god and last for billions of years! [5]

This sentence solemnly expounds Taoism's claim on the ultimate care of life. The main factor in the existence of a religion is what people can get from that religion. Christianity is going to heaven, Buddhism is becoming a Buddha, or escaping into the six reincarnations. The "benefits" of these religions to people are virtually

unverifiable, and they all exist in the afterlife. However, this is the charm of Taoism, as long as you can strictly follow the Taoist cultivation method, you do not worry about what happens after death, because you will not die at all.

In addition to the above magi who have made unrivaled contributions to the basic development of Taoism, there are also legendary figures who have made the Tianshi Dao reach the peak again, that is, the Heavenly Master who is not surnamed Zhang, Kou Qianzhi. Kou Qianzhi was born into a famous nobleman. When he was young, he met a man, Cheng Gongxing, who took Kou Qianzhi into the being a Taoist, and because of a mistake, Kou Qianzhi missed the opportunity to become immortal. After Kou Qian descended the mountain, he began to build his own Northern Tianshi Dao. Kou Qianzhi was aware of the status of Taoism in the Northern Wei Dynasty at that time, so he brought himself closer to the emperor through Cui Hao, a dignitary, thus achieving his goal of being the "master of the emperor". Through the battles of Emperor Taiwu of Wei sending troops to attack Daxia, directly bringing the Tianshi Dao to its peak, Emperor Taiwu of Wei also made Taoism the state religion.

In year 440, officially change the name of the Dynasty to Taiping Zhengjun, officially announced Taoism as the national religion ” [1]

Kou Qianzhi even promoted the world-shaking Buddha extermination event at that time, and under the influence of Cui Hao and Kou Qianzhi, Emperor Taiwu of Wei decided to launch a Buddhist extermination. But Buddhism itself has a unshirkable responsibility for this incident. Because the Buddhists built temples on a large scale and spent too much money, the emperors at that time were thrown into poor status due to this excessive use of wealth. The problem of having a high degree of merit led to the eradication of Buddhism.

3. Song, Yuan Dynasties: The peak of ancient Taoism

After the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the Taoist system and religious components have been perfected, like most things in the world, once stable, it is the beginning of prosperity. The status of Taoism during the Song Dynasty began with Song Zhenzong in the Northern Song Dynasty, and its status became higher and higher, and the peak of Taoism was under the rule of the Yuan Dynasty.

Since Chen's reign, the status of Taoism in the Song Dynasty has become even higher. The emperor at that time, Song Zhenzong, had the advantage in the struggle against the Liao state, but he himself was too cowardly. So, a peace treaty was signed with the Liao State. After the "Alliance of the Yuan", Song Zhenzong used religion to justify himself, the most convenient being Taoism. He made a big speech, which was concise and clear, that is, the heavenly immortals sent the heavenly book to Song Zhenzong, saying that the current suffering is temporary, and if you continue to make efforts, the bright future can be expected. Song Zhenzong used this set of rhetoric to improve his people's morale, but when it came to the

origin of this immortal, it was related to the Heavenly Master Dao, which also had to do with Zhang Zhengsui, the current Heavenly Master, who revitalized the Tianshi Dao in the Song Dynasty. It is said that this immortal was originally the ancestor of the Zhao family, named Zhao Xuanlang, but he was also one of the sons that was shot down by Houyi, and then he followed Zhang Daoling and became a Dan furnace. As soon as this news appeared, Zhang Zhengsui was distressed for a long time, and then he eventually went down the mountain to resolve this issue. Zhang Zhengsui also cleverly used the story of Song Zhenzong to hold conferences around the country, so that everyone had admiration for Taoism. At that time, the admiration for Taoism had a heavy atmosphere, allowing Tianshi Dao to directly ascend to the top. After the death of Emperor Zhenzong of Song, the status of Tianshi Dao in the Song Dynasty still maintained its peak, and several generations of Heavenly Masters were given the honorific title of "Sir" by the emperor. Especially Song Huizong, the emperor had a unique love for Taoism. At that time, the Heavenly Master, Zhang Jixian Master, could be said to be the Heavenly Master who was summoned by the emperor the most times in history. Because of Song Huizong's love, Zhang Jixian also continued the good tradition of being named "Sir" and was named "Mr. Void Jing". However, it was also because of this love that when the Jin soldiers invaded, the Northern Song Dynasty was caught off guard, and Song Huizong also handed over military power to an unknown Taoist priest. Later, the Song army suffered heavy casualties, and Song Huizong was also captured.[10]

The status of Taoism in the Northern Song Dynasty remained on the rise until the Northern Song Dynasty was expelled to the south by the Jin State.[6] During the Southern Song Dynasty, Taoism was actually in a lukewarm state, but there were also active Taoist advocates. At that time, the Heavenly Master was already the 35th generation Zhang Ke Great Heavenly Master, and although his position in history was not very important, he promoted the development of Northern Taoism. The Mongols realized the power of religion during their own conquests to the West. Having seen the religious attitude of Westerners, the Mongols also wanted to master this power. So Kublai Khan sent a Wang Yiqing Taoist to the south to communicate with Zhang Tianshi. Finally, when the Yuan army finally defeated the Song Dynasty, the true spring of Tianshi Dao came.

The original Fuqi school had three major sects, the Tianshi Dao of Longhu Mountain, the Shangqing Sect of Maoshan, and the Lingbao Sect of Gezaio Mountain. Originally, the other two mountains pressed the Tianshi Dao so much it could not develop, but since the Song Dynasty, the Tianshi Dao has slowly developed its advantages, and by the Yuan Dynasty, the Tianshi Dao directly dominated the three sects. In the middle of the Yuan Dynasty, the Fuqi faction slowly merged into one to form a huge faction, "Zhengyi". At the same time, in the far north, the Quanzhen sect founded by Wang Chongyang gradually gained fame.[8]

Wang Chongyang originally lived in the tomb of the living dead at the foot of the Junan Mountain, and in 1163, Wang Chongyang left the place for the Shandong

Peninsula. In Shandong, Wang Chongyang made a name for Quanzhen, and there were seven more disciples under him, later known as the "Seven Sons of Quanzhen", and the most famous of them was Mr. Qiu Shuji. In 1219, Qiu Zhiji led 18 disciples to embark on a two-year long march of more than 20,000 kilometers at the invitation of Genghis Khan. The relationship between Qiu Zhiji and Genghis Khan became closer and closer, and even Qiu Zhiji's title changed directly from "Sir" to "Qiu Shenxian". Genghis Khan finally gave Quanzhen several benefits, was exempted from all taxes, and ordered Qiu Shuji to take charge of all the monks in the world. Returning to Quanzhen's Ancestor Wang Chongyang, Wang Chongyang realized that today's Taoist theory was deeply flawed, so he extracted many elements from Buddhism and Confucianism. Zhang Tianshi's family made great contributions to the Yuan Dynasty, but only the Heavenly Master was named a "Zhenren", and Wang Chongyang received much better treatment in comparison, each of the seven sons of Quanzhen was a Zhenren, and Wang Chongyang was named a "Zhenjun". The Yuan Dynasty began to make an effect on the status of Quanzhen, but after the debate between Buddhist and Dao, the Quanzhen Dao was short-lived. The Quanzhen Dao collapsed after that, but the Quanzhen Taoists did not stop there, and they seized more than 480 Buddhist temples. Kublai Khan could not let Quanzhen go unchecked like this, so the status of Taoism in the hearts of the Yuan royal family plummeted. However, the popularity of Tianshi Dao was not affected in the slightest, and under the 90-year rule of the Yuan Dynasty, after Zhang Lu, the dream of Tianshi Dao revitalizing was also achieved. Since the Yuan Dynasty, the title of Heavenly Master is not only a title, but for the first time in history, the Master's position has had substantial political significance. South of the Yangtze River, all disputes over Taoist affairs had to go through Zhang Tianshi first, and he was regarded as a first-class official. In the late Yuan Dynasty, the power of the Zhengyi faction reached its peak in history. The Zhengyi faction, which included many sects, also became a hegemon in the Jiangnan region. It basically perfectly reproduces the scene of Zhang Lu back then, Zhengyi sect is now as bright as the midday sun.[11]

4. Ming, Qing Dynasties: From peak to downfall

Taoism during the Ming Dynasty was not actually the prosperous era that Taoists expected. Under Zhu Yuanzhang's rule, having seen the power of religious terror, he decided to suppress all religions in his territory, especially Taoism. All Taoist priests, were forced to live in Taoist temples, a move that undoubtedly cut off the financial resources of most Zhengyi Taoists, and the government also controlled the number of Taoist priests, and people under a certain age were not allowed to become monks. On the surface, Zhu Yuanzhang instructed the Heavenly Master to take charge of all the Taoists in the world, but he himself set up a special judicial department, the Daolusi Division, which was the hand in

charge departments of the all Daoists in the world. Even the law is extremely harsh for the Taoists

But in the Ming Dynasty, Taoism still played a role in history, that is, the forty-third generation of Heavenly Master, Zhang Yuchu Heavenly Master. He compiled many famous Taoist classics, such as the Ten Rules of Daomen, and he also led the compilation of the famous Orthodox Daozang. This book contains many aspects of Taoism, from ideas and history to magic and alchemy. This book is no less important in the history of Taoism than Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching. And bad luck will not haunt the Heavenly Master all the time. During the Yongle period, after Zhu Di took the throne, Mr. Zhang Yuchu won the favor of this imperial master, but he also shouldered a heavy task, that is, to find Emperor Jianwen. At the same time, Zhu Di also asked Zhang Yuchu to find Zhang Sanfeng. Zhang Sanfeng made a name for himself in the Ming Dynasty with his own no-end style. Zhang Sanfeng's ability is world-famous in the country, and even the hot-tempered Zhu Di is very tolerant of him. At that time, Zhang Sanfeng made a prophecy that Wudang Mountain would one day prosper, and Zhu Di also fulfilled this prophecy and pulled hundreds of thousands of people to build the Wudang Taoist Temple. Zhang Yuchu and Zhang Sanfeng's temper, personality, and behavior are unrelated, but they have a perfect fit for each other. Zhang Yuchu is the face of Taoism, the image of facing everyone, and Zhang Sanfeng is the image of a hermit. This is why the two seem to be at odds, but they actually complement each other. It is a pity that Taoism has not had such a powerful talent since these two.[12]

In 1647, the Qing army had already conquered the Central Plains, and the last trace of the Ming Dynasty was extinguished with the Chongzhen Emperor. Also, a foreign invasion, the Manchus did not care about Taoism at all. The Yuan Dynasty was the peak of Taoism, when there were talents such as Wang Chongyang and Quanzhen Qizi, and after the Ming Dynasty, only Zhang Yuchu and Zhang Sanfeng took the shot, and in the Qing Dynasty, it was a state of rest. There is no breakthrough in doctrinal theory, only a slight modification, fried cold rice, but everything has a turnaround. When the foundation of the Great Qing was laid, the emperor found that Taoism was not as weak as he thought, and the foundation of the Great Qing was not as strong as he imagined, so he used the old routine and recruited the Heavenly Master to the dynasty. Giving the Heavenly Master official position, thinking about continuing to control them. The Qing dynasty's attitude towards Taoism has always been disrespectful. In the previous dynasties, the object of respect of various emperors in Taoism was even if they did not like it. In the Qing Dynasty, Jing slowly became "use", and finally reduced to "play". Although the Qianlong Emperor finally raised the position of Heavenly Master to the third grade, the glory of Taoism was gone.

5. Conclusion: Use historical experiences to brace for future

Taoism has also experienced great ups and downs throughout history. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, Taoism

was just beginning to emerge, and it was all operated by Zhang Daoling and Zhang Lu, laying the foundation, and the Wudou Mi Dao has since made a name for itself in the Central Plains. During the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the improvement of Taoism and subsequent sects and reforms also appeared. Tao Hongjing and other Daoist priests of the Shangqing school have made great contributions, and the Taoist immortal system genealogy "True Spirit Position Karma Map" compiled by Tao Hongjing himself provides a standardized worship goal for the common people, and Buddhism from the west has also caused certain harm to the development of Taoism. With the passage of time, Taoism also ushered in its peak, and Taoism, which laid the foundation in the Song Dynasty, was released in the Yuan Dynasty. Zhang Zhengsui and Zhang Jixian and others contributed to the Heavenly Master Dao more than to have a good relationship with the royal family. Taoism has always been a religion that relied heavily on rulers, and it was these two heavenly masters that kept Taoism in a high position in the eyes of the rulers of the Song Dynasty. In the Yuan Dynasty, these Mongol invaders also realized the power of religion, so they also chose to promote Taoism to implement religious rule. This is also the first time that the name Zhengyi has appeared in history. Taoism in the late Yuan Dynasty reached its historical peak. In the Ming Dynasty, the importance of Taoism slowly declined, and after Zhang Yuchu and Zhang Sanfeng, there were no Taoist talents. During the Qing Dynasty, Taoism also became the plaything of the royal family and aristocracy, and since then Taoism has been in decline.

Throughout the history of Taoism for 2,000 years, there is a constant law, that is, the rise and fall of Taoism largely depends not on its own ability, but on the attitude of the ruler. From the favor of Emperor Taiwu of Wei to the snub of Yongzheng, the journey of Taoism has never been in his own hands, which is also a major weakness of Taoism. Because the teachings and concepts of Taoism have not changed drastically in 2,000 years, they have only been applied to a small number of people since ancient times, which is why it is difficult for Taoism to continue to flourish. If Taoism wants to flourish in the future, it must develop new religious methods, reduce the requirements for belief, and not demand too much feedback from believers. For example, in Buddhism, Buddhists only need to live a clean life to have a good fate in the next life, but Taoism has extremely high requirements for the ultimate care of life (ascending to immortals) and requires hard practice, and Taoism is much worse at this level. If the threshold for ascension can be lowered and feedback can be given more timely, perhaps the number of believers will also increase. In order to escape the fate of being controlled by the rulers, Taoism also needs to spread its popularity, learn Christianity, hold weekend classes or summer camps, winter camps, etc. Enhance the presence of Taoism among the general public, because the government of the current economy will no longer promote a religion for its own liking, like the previous rulers. But Taoism has more room to develop in the future than other existing religions.

Taoist culture is not about material or fame, it is about the true values in life, respect, and the great Dao is enough” [4]

From this point of view, the concept of Taoism will be more in line with the concept of contemporary people, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the development and future continuation of Taoism need to test their own ability. Second, in accordance with the Taoist culture's principle of "knowing the common and tolerant," they should be good at learning the strengths of other families, including learning from the successful experience of Western studies on Taoist culture, so as to constantly enrich themselves; at the same time, in order to meet the needs of modern social life, they should also interpret the main Taoist classics and catechism as much as possible in line with the spirit of modernization, so that Taoist culture can be understood and accepted by more people.

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