Taoism (dou'iz-uhm), a traditional component of Chinese culture embracing a broad array of moral, social, philosophical, and religious values and activities. The overall concern of Taoism is to liberate people from heedless immersion in mundane activities and reorient them toward the deeper, abiding realities of life. Over the long history of Taoism, people of diverse inclinations understood the fundamental issues differently and developed highly distinct teachings and practices. Nonetheless, from the "Taoist classics" of the *Lao-tzu* (*Tao-te ching*) and the *Chuang-tzu* down through the Taoist religion of modern times, Taoism has been united in an overriding concern with undoing the problems that beset people's individual and social lives. Contrary to certain modern misconceptions, Taoists traditionally concerned themselves not only with individual spiritual transformation but also with society and the world as a whole.

In fact, Taoists traditionally believed themselves—and were often believed by others—to play a unique role as upholders of the moral and spiritual principles that undergird a healthy, well-ordered society. Taoism can properly be styled a holistic value system that emphasizes individual, social, and political reintegration with the beneficent forces inherent in the cosmos, forces generally subsumed under the traditional rubric of "the Tao."

The Debate over "Taoism": To some scholars, "Taoism" is simply a convenient rubric for discussing common concepts in the *Lao-tzu* and the *Chuang-tzu*. Others have argued that Chinese history demonstrates that "Taoism" is a coherent religious tradition that (unlike "folk religion") can be defined in clear social and historical terms. Some scholars maintain that we must differentiate between "Taoism" as an ancient philosophical school and "Taoism" as a later religious tradition, which, they contend, has little or nothing in common with the former. However, most specialists today tend to agree that Taoism actually constituted a single cultural system. This position is especially held by scholars who have done the most intensive study of Taoist history and literature, particularly the diverse array of materials preserved in the Chinese Taoist canon, the *Tao-tsang*, a vast collection of materials pertaining to Taoist history, ritual and meditative communion with the Tao and its hypostases, and the full range of classical Taoist philosophical works and pertinent commentaries. Some scholars insist that we should define the Taoist tradition in terms of the texts preserved in the *Tao-tsang* and those individuals and groups who composed, preserved, and used them. Such a definition results in a fairly amorphous subject for study.

"Mystical" Taoism and "Liturgical" Taoism: From research into the *Tao-tsang* over the last generation, it is clear that the central concern with individual self-perfection first seen in the *Lao-tzu* and the *Chuang-tzu* generally remains a key element of the thought and practice of the later Taoist religion. What is truly distinctive about the later religious tradition is that the "mystical" elements familiar from the philosophical classics are often interwoven with other human concerns. For instance, in the "mystical Taoism" of the *Chuang-tzu* and some meditative traditions within religious Taoism, the individual seems to be conceived as a generalized existential monad—a cog, perhaps, in the cosmos, but not in the community; that is, one's true identity is not seen there as being in any real way tied to one's actual historical context, to one's community, or to one's social roles. In the liturgical traditions that developed within the Taoist religion, the opposite is true: the individual is generally understood as a member of the actual human community, of a specific place and time, and involved in a real-life web of interrelationships.

This apparent tension is by no means a polar opposition but rather a broad continuum. Along the "mystical" end of the spectrum, the soteriological models are generally transformative or developmental models of self-cultivation that involve a process of re-perspectivization—a transformative process of self-rediscovery that involves a new mode of perceiving reality. Along the "liturgical" end of the spectrum, the same is sometimes true, but the soteriological media there are primarily moral and ritual. In any event, both "mystical" and "liturgical" Taoism work to focus the individual toward the deeper elements of reality underlying the domain of everyday life and to rectify life through a realignment with those deeper realities. What the liturgical tradition offers is a much more active and interactive mode of effecting that realignment: rather than simply perceiving an underlying harmony with the cosmos (as in the *Chuang-tzu* and Ch'an Buddhism), liturgical Taoism begins with one's localized, contextualized existence. It then carries one to and through a transcendent realm of the sacred and eventually returns to one's everyday life. In this way, the space and time of one's life are newly sacralized (or, at least, their inherent sacrality is newly disclosed). At the same time, the individual is morally and spiritually renewed and, when all goes well, one is newly enabled to undergo a spiritual transformation.

History of the Taoist Religion: The liturgical tradition of religious Taoism is often characterized as representing "popular Taoism" and has long been disparaged by Confucians and modern Westerners as a religion of the superstitious masses. This attitude seems to diminish as one becomes more aware of the complex development of Taoism within Chinese history and culture.

The ground out of which religious Taoism grew was the imperial court of the Han dynasty in the first centuries. Certain thinkers there treasured the sociopolitical ideal of "Grand Tranquillity" (*t'ai-p'ing*), a utopian concept of a world in perfect harmony, as idealized by most of the earlier schools of Chinese thought (including Confucianism). The first Taoist social movements emerged as efforts to actualize that idealized concept, particularly as it was expressed in the *T'ai-p'ing ching*, a text compiled

by court intellectuals, building upon many of the central concepts and values of the *Tao-te ching*. During the second century, a man named Chang Tao-ling claimed to have received a covenant from Lord Lao (Lao-chun, a deity identified with the "author" of the *Tao-te ching*) and claimed to be the "Celestial Master" promised in the *T'ai-p'ing ching*. The T'ien-shih (or "Celestial Master") tradition that arose stessed both sociopolitical renewal and individual purification. In the early third century, Chang's grandson allied himself with a northern ruler, forging a lasting tradition of political partnership. For hundreds of years thereafter, Chinese rulers often turned to Taoist leaders for spiritual legitimation of their regime.

In the early fourth century, foreign invasions drove the Celestial Masters into South China, where the indigenous religious traditions centered around efforts to attain health, longevity, and spiritual immortality through the sublimation of biological processes. Those traditions are exemplified in the *Pao-p'u-tzu* of Ko Hung, a maverick Confucian intent to demonstrate that the pursuit of immortality was reasonable and proper for gentlemen of refinement. The encounter between the old southern traditions and Celestial Master Taoism stimulated two new religious traditions. One, known as Shang-ch'ing Taoism, was inspired by revelations from angelic beings known as "Perfected Ones" (*chen-jen*). Guided by those revelations, Shang-ch'ing adherents worked to join the "Perfected Ones" through dedicating themselves to a disciplined process of self-perfection through visualizational meditation (or, for certain advanced adepts, through alchemy). The other new fourth-century tradition, Ling-pao Taoism, was rooted in old southern traditions of talismanic ritual but was reshaped by the stimuli of Mahayana Buddhism and the Shang-ch'ing revelations. The fifth-century Ling-pao master Lu Hsiu-ching developed a new soteriological process focused upon liturgies that soon supplanted the old Celestial Master rites and became the foundation for all later liturgical Taoism. It should be noted, however, that the founders of the Shang-ch'ing and Ling-pao traditions were all well-to-do members of the social and political elite of the day, and liturgical Taoism retained that elite cast for hundreds of years. Throughout T'ang times (i.e., down to the tenth century), great Taoist masters such as Ssu-ma Ch'eng-chen not only developed new meditational practices but also maintained imperial patronage of numerous Taoist abbeys (*kuan*), where male and female priests (*tao-shih*) performed rituals called *chiao* and *chai*, which were designed to integrate society and cosmos. This was Taoism's greatest period, and texts of the period reveal the continuing presence of "classical Taoist" language and values in every aspect of Taoist thought and practice.

The institutional prominence of Taoism was permanently undermined by events of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when China was conquered by foreign peoples like the Mongols. Both they and the subsequent rulers of the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties were deeply suspicious of independent religious organizations, and the Taoist liturgical tradition became increasingly marginalized. The early conquest period saw the emergence of several new movements, including some like Ch'uan-chen Taoism, which turned away from the social focus of the medieval liturgical tradition in favor of a more individualized pursuit of self-perfection seen in such meditative processes as "inner alchemy." These beliefs and practices (apparently influenced by Ch'an Buddhism) were swathed in the rhetoric of classical Taoism but actualized in terms of the individualized meditative practices of Shang-ch'ing Taoism and the more Buddhisticized practices of T'ang times.

Here we find a "parting of the way" within what has usually been called "religious Taoism." From the conquest period onward, the "mystical" tradition of Taoism began to grow apart from the liturgical tradition, which had for centuries been the spiritual bulwark of the Chinese empire. From the conquest period on, religiously inclined people began to fall increasingly into two camps: a cultural elite, who practiced a more "mystical," individualized pursuit of spiritual perfection (whether in Taoist or Confucian terms), and a nonelite component, who often cherished Taoist spiritual ideals but faced the practical necessity of making a living. The second group became the main participants in the modern liturgical tradition, particularly in the order known as Cheng-i Taoism. For this second group, the religious life became, by necessity, a profession, and their activities became a public service—a service performed, as always, for the benefit of all, but now underwritten by members of the local community. Under Communist rule, Taoism was outlawed in China, and its prospects for survival have at times seemed quite uncertain. In the Chinese diaspora today, both "liturgical" and "mystical" Taoism endure, though certainly not as in earlier centuries, when Chinese society and culture as a whole were colored and shaped by Taoist values and institutions.