

# THE PHENOMENON OF DAOISM IN CHINESE CIVILIZATION

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In this article Daoism is analyzed in the context of Chinese culture. It is demonstrated how the ideas of Daoism were shaped and matured in the Chinese civilization and how they reflect the peculiarities of the civilization of Eastern Asia and China. The author revives the genealogy and authorship of the main works of the Daoists (*Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*) and analyzes their influence on the development of Daoism tradition during later periods. It is argued that Daoism was formed as the reaction towards the crisis of old Zhou culture and feeding degradation of Confucian rituals followed by the ruling circles. Different correlations are emphasized between the development of Chinese civilization and the maturation and transformation of Daoists' ideas. It is demonstrated that Daoism is a natural product of its epoch and society; thus, it could not be dissociated from common Chinese cultural, religious and philosophical context, but rather analyzed together with it. Finally, the discussion is held on the anti-rationality, sceptical view towards mind and logical argumentation.

Keywords: Antirationalism, Chinese culture, *Daodejing*, Daoism, transformations, *Zhuangzi*.

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## Introduction

What conditions determined that Daoism has formed and prospered in Chinese civilization? How was the formation of Daoism ideas influenced by the peculiarity of Eastern Asia and Chinese civilization? How the prevailing incredulous attitude towards rationality and tendency towards intuitivism that dominates in East Asia is reflected in Daoism? In searching the answers to these and similar questions, we will look at the period when Daoists' ideas began shaping and main Daoists' treatises were born. While discussing the basic Daoists' treatises – *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi* – the problems of their genealogy and authorship will be analyzed and some basic guidelines will be emphasized.

How various metamorphoses of Daoists' ideas work during the development of Chinese culture and civilization? How Chinese culture influenced development of Daoism? And *vice versa* – how the main ideas of Daoism influenced Chinese culture? We will look for the answers in the second part of the text. The assumption is made that despite the fact that Daoism was constantly fluctuating during the centuries, it

has not lost its integrity; thus, it is not aimed to differentiate or oppose Daoism and Neodaoism, also so-called philosophical and religious Daoism.

Finally, we will briefly review the antirationalist relationship with the mind and we will demonstrate why the Daoists refuse to give priority to rational mind and tend to give more attention to intuition, and how such attitude was influenced by the peculiarities of Chinese civilization.

### The main treatises of early Daoism: *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi*

The attention of Western researchers is often traditionally given to main Daoists' texts – *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. Precisely, the analysis of these works gets most interpretations. Being of small extent, *Daodejing* (道德經) is the most noted text of Daoists which had a great influence on the Chinese culture and has a lot of interpretations and translations into Western languages. Two oldest and most significant *Daodejing* comments belong to Hoshang Gong (~ 2<sup>nd</sup> c.) and Wang Bi (226–249). The former analyzed cosmological, political and religious aspects of Dao, discussed the relation of a Daoist with the community and the living world (Erkes 1950). The second went deeper into philosophical and cosmological nuances of *Daodejing* treatise and grounds the concepts of emptiness, Nonbeing and spontaneity (Wang Bi 1999). Precisely in Wang Bi's treatise, as Hans Georg Moeller noticed, “the way is paved for the later “metaphysical” Dao interpretation and philosophical nature of this work is highlighted” (Moeller 2004: 15).

For the purpose to understand why *Daodejing* treatise has made such a big influence on Chinese culture and received such a great much researchers' attention, let us try to look deeper into the problem of authorship of this mysterious work. Traditionally, *Daodejing* is attributed to a legendary originator of Daoism, the name of which literally means “Old Master”. Chinese historian Sima Qian (145–90 BC) in the piece of work named *Shiji* (The Records of the Grand Historian of China) maintains that Laozi lived in the 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> c. BC in Chu kingdom, but seeing the downturn of the state he quit his service and went to the West, and being asked by the principal of borderline cordon he wrote the treatise *Daodejing* (Sima Qian 1993). In time, the personality of Laozi was mythologized and his biography was surrounded by legends. According to some legends, Laozi was conceived when his mother gazed upon a falling star, stayed in the womb for sixty-two years, and was born when his mother leaned against a plum tree. He emerged a grown man with a full grey beard and long earlobes, which in Chinese culture are a symbol of wisdom and long life. However, modern sinologists doubt the historicity of the personality of Laozi and cannot unambiguously answer if he was a real historic character, when exactly he lived and what was his relation to the text of *Daodejing*. Speaking about the genealogy of Laozi myth, Wing-tsit Chan's work *The Way of Lao Tzu* (Wing-tsit Chan 1963) is worth mentioning. It analyzes the differences and correlations between Laozi as a human and the work of Laozi, and Angus Charles Graham's text *The Origin of the Legend of Lao Tan*, which considers how the legend of Laozi originated and matured (Graham 1998). Thus, there is no

common opinion about Laozi – historians variously contend that Laozi is a synthesis of multiple historical figures, that he is a mythical figure, or that he actually lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> c. BC, concurrent with the Hundred Schools of Thought and Warring State Period.

Regarding the dating of *Daodejing*, the researchers have not got a common opinion as well. Traditionally, *Daodejing* treatise was dated 570 BC, but recently it is thought that this work was written at least several centuries later. Herbert A. Giles in his essay *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching* already in 1914 grounded the thesis that this treatise was written later than 5<sup>th</sup>–6<sup>th</sup> c. BC, as it is not mentioned by early historians and philosophers, and even in *Zhuangzi* and *Hanfeizi* texts there are only few references to it (Giles 1914). Henri Maspero dates *Daodejing* treatise approximately 4<sup>th</sup> c. BC (Maspero 1971); Feng Youlan thinks that this work was written no later than 284–259 BC (Feng Youlan 2001: 107–108); Arthur Waley dates it about 240 BC (Waley 1934: 86); Michael LaFargue argues that *Daodejing* is the product of a collective activity of 500–200 BC, and its authors, Laoists, were united by close spiritual practices and the main insights stated in this text were born in the experiences of meditational and mystic practice (LaFargue 1992). Noteworthy is the argumentation of William H. Baxter: in the essay *Situating the Language of the Lao-tzu: The Probable Date of the Tao-te-ching* he analyzes *Daodejing* rhetorical structure, phonetic features, compares them with other texts of the contemporaries and in this way he comes to a conclusion that the text was created in the first part of the IV c. BC (Baxter 1998). Recently, sinologists tend to accept this dating of *Daodejing*.

Another most important text – mysterious *Zhuangzi* treatise – formed several centuries later than *Daodejing*. As one of the two most popular Daoist texts in the Chinese tradition, the *Zhuangzi* has been the subject of more than sixty major East Asian commentaries since the third century CE, some of which contain philosophically significant interpretations of the text. Full *Zhuangzi* text contains thirty-three chapters and is not the original recension of the text. In early times there were different versions of this text. Main changes were done by Guo Xiang – he revised a fifty-two chapter original recension first listed in Imperial bibliographies circa 110 CE by removing material he found not enough philosophical. Thus, he appended some philosophical commentary to the text that soon became famous and within four centuries his shorter version became the only one known. This recension is traditionally divided into three sections: ‘Inner Chapters’ (1–7), ‘Outer Chapters’ (8–22), and ‘Miscellaneous Chapters’ (23–33). The whole of this text is traditionally announced in the name of *Zhuangzi*, but its authorship and dating still stay the object of various debates. Talking of the authorship of *Zhuangzi*, noteworthy are the essays of Harold D. Roth *Who Compiled Chuang Tzu?* (Roth 1991) and the essay of Graham *How Much of Chuang Tzu did Chuang Tzu Write?* (Graham 1990: 283–321). In his essay Graham did an analysis of idioms, linguistic peculiarities, philosophical terms, references to characters and place-names; the comparison is made on the texts that are known to *Zhuangzi* himself and other authors, and the idea is grounded that the inner chapters were probably written by *Zhuangzi* himself. According to modern understandings

of Chinese tradition, the text known as the *Zhuangzi* was the production of a Daoist thinker of ancient China named Chuang Chou, but in reality, it was nothing of the sort. According to Russel Kirkland, *Zhuangzi* text “known to us today was the production of a thinker of the third century CE named Guoxiang. Though Guo was long called merely a “commentator”, he was in reality much more: he was the actual creator of the 33-chapter text of *Zhuangzi*. Regarding the identity of the original person named Zhuang, there is no reliable historical data at all” (Kirkland 2004: 33–34). Also, there is no information about where exactly could *Zhuangzi* live. According to Sima Qian, *Zhuangzi* was born in a village called Meng, in the state of Song; according to Tang dynasty scholar Lu Deming, *Zhuangzi* lived in state of Chen which probably had become a territory of Chu Kingdom because there he locates Pu River (*Zhuangzi* was said to have fished in that river) of Chen. Nevertheless, most researchers agree that *Zhuangzi* was a real historic character and at least a part of *Zhuangzi* text belongs to him. *Zhuangzi* is known as one of the greatest literary and philosophical authors that China has produced. His style is complex – mythical, poetic, narrative, indirect, polysemic and humorous. *Zhuangzi* text is distinguished for a sceptical, relativistic view towards the world, but in this multiple text even relativism itself is relative. One of the main topics of this text is individual liberation of every person. *Zhuangzi* uses such perspectives “as a therapy to free us from the confines of our cramped and narrow perspective and give us a greater and more accurate appreciation of our true place in the world” (Ivanhoe 1996: 210).

Thus, worth mentioning is an eclectic treatise *Liezi* which is attributed to the school of Daoism, but his authorship is unknown (Ле-Цзы 1995). The dating of this work is also controversial: researchers disagree whether *Liezi* was created at the same time as *Zhuangzi* or several centuries later in our era when Buddhism started spreading in China. Anyhow, it is somewhat later than *Zhuangzi*, because some *Liezi* extracts are word-by-word tapped from *Zhuangzi*. Wishing to solve the emerging disagreements, Graham grounds the idea that *Liezi* text was lost and soon changed with a somewhat later fake, which could include some authentic extracts of the text (Graham 1961; Graham 1990: 216–282). Sinologist Herlee G. Creel thinks that *Liezi* was probably written at least in the first century *Anno Domini* (Creel 1956). Some parts of *Liezi* text repeat the same stories that are told in *Zhuangzi*’s text. In principle, both texts are quite close in their content and style of idea enunciation.

Much attention in early Daoist discourse is given to cosmogony, various reflections on the origin of the universe are offered. The cosmogonies of those texts are characterized by continual exploration of the formation of time and space in relation to the earlier existence of the primordial Dao. Special attention to the cosmogonic topic is a characteristic attribute of early philosophical Daoism. It comes from the peculiarity of Chinese culture and mythological visions of the very origins of the things. “The early Chinese, before the appearance of early Daoist discourse, richly employ the images and motifs from their own myths in depicting the beginnings of things” (Thomas 2005: 7).

The three works discussed above – *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi* – establish theoretical foundations of Daoism which reflected the polysemy, metaphorical language, attention to emptiness and non-action, spontaneity and critical attitude towards the absoluteness of rational mind specific to Chinese culture.

### Formation and development of Daoism in the context of Chinese civilization

The rise and development of Daoism is closely related to social, political and cultural processes that take place in China. The beginning of Daoism probably lies in old Chinese religious practices (shamanism, magic) and mythology, but as philosophical *Weltanschauung* Daoism formed only in the Warring States period, about IV-III c. BC. Deepening crisis of ancient Zhou culture and developing degeneration of Confucian rituals which were performed by the ruling circles at that time helped to form the ideas of Daoism. During that time, the ostensibly ruling house of Zhou had lost its authority, and there was increasing violence between states contending for imperial power. Then, because of the strengthening decadence, formalized and lifeless manifestations of Confucianism settled and the main ideals of Confucius (humanity, justice) became the objects of manipulation. Numerous “followers” of Confucius started indulging in the outer blaze although they often did not know anything about the teaching itself. Zhuangzi tells how the ruler of Lu Kingdom threatened to punish anyone who, having no knowledge about the ideas of Confucianism, would dare to prink with Confucian robes and primp with their attributes; a few days later it became clear that there is only one person in the whole country who was able to prove his own knowledge of teaching (Watson 1968: 227–228). Zhuangzi strictly criticizes the decline of Confucianism, but he thinks positively of the originator of this teaching, and in authentic, inner, chapters of *Zhuangzi* there is no direct critic of Confucius (Shuen-fu Lin 1988).

Along with Confucians, Zhuangzi and his contemporaries criticized Mohists as well; they at that time made a well-organized philosophic school that took dominant positions in the state’s political and social life. Mohists were not interested in culture, refused to worship religious rituals and even fought against them, but highly appreciated duty and military rituals, and grounded teaching with rational statements. Thus, although Mohists and Confucians often pamphleteered together and the founder of the first ones, Mozi, was the most important competitor of Confucius, they seemed to Daoists quite close – Daoists considered both schools deviated from the real Path and encouraging living an apocryphal and spiritually empty life.

Perhaps the decadence and the decline of civilization which was obvious during the period of Daoism formation helped to form an offhand Daoist’s relation with the society. Daoist tends to withdraw from political life and prefers the shortage or even poverty to the bonds of social dependence. Daoist does not fight with the imperfections of society, but living in society, they try to stay independent in their hearts as if walking and not touching the ground. This attitude is perfectly well illustrated by the story of Zhuangzi about a turtle which he told to noblemen who came to invite him to most

honourable posts of the state: “I have heard that there is a sacred tortoise in Chu that has been dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxes, and stores it in the ancestral temple. Now would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind and honoured? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail in the mud” (Watson 1968: 188). Zhuangzi invites to take off the mask that was put by the society and which imposes preconceived presuppositions and apocryphal, outer objectives.

Perceiving the risk of technocracy, Daoists offhandedly looks at the achievements of the civilization, but, nevertheless, they do not force to implicitly run away from the civilization. For example, Zhuangzi tells about a gardener who has patiently been bringing water in a simple pot for land watering and refused the offer to install a more effective water wheel, as by this way he would become a slave of technology, with a machine heart in ones breast, failed what was pure and simple. It could seem that this gardener represents Daoists’ position, but Zhuangzi resumes that he understands the essence of Dao equally poorly as the one who is not able to manage without mechanical equipment (Watson 1968: 134–135). Thus, Daoists do not deny that civilization and technology can successfully serve a person, and sometimes it is worth using it; but, on the other hand, they stress that one cannot get used to it as the kingdom of technocracy withdraws from a person the ability to view the world as a whole, and civilization brings constraint on inherent human nature.

However, although Daoists tend to critically estimate human relations with society, they do not force including *outer* connections, but rather emphasize the value of *inner dissociation*. Zhuangzi believes that even living among people and engaging in public activity one could be a real Daoist and follow the path of Dao. Such attitude reflects his story about cook Ding which acted following *wuwei* principles, thought he lived in society and was socially engaged (Watson 1968: 50). Approaching to the Dao helped him to become even more attentive to his experience and the very moment of the present, and to perform every movement consciously and easily. This character symbolizes practical knowledge which is based not on theoretical information but rather on skills (Eno 1996: 127). When a person pulls away from the public bonds, his look becomes considerate towards the world; thus, he can view the Dao more easily, he acts freely and spontaneously and his life becomes more harmonious and effortless.

During the time, Daoism had many transformations, assimilated new ideas and tendencies, connected various, usually different doctrines. Adepts of various philosophical and religious Daoism schools interpreted differently the same ideas and were fond of intercommunion discussion, but adepts of both – philosophical and religious Daoism – agreed on some main topics. In the way of spiritual perfection all of them accepted rather personal experience than the words of authorities. Adepts of various schools of Daoism searched Dao (wisdom, clear mind, nirvana), and *ad hoc* sometimes even used relative techniques of psycho-training. Thus, it is useless to contrast “theoretical” (*Dàojiā* 道家) and “practical” (*Dàojiào* 道教) Daoism. We should rather agree with the thesis of such researchers like Isabelle Robinet (Robinet 1997: 25) and Max Kaltenmark (Kaltenmark 1969: 107) that religious Daoism as if a practical extension of philosophical Daoism.

Transformations of Daoism could be seen not only by comparing different schools that existed at the same time, but also by looking at different Daoists' text that were written in different historic periods. Neodaoism emphasized new features, differently interpreted traditional concepts. Neodaoism settled as a reaction to the chaos and corruption of the late Han dynasty and the repeated wars, droughts and floods of the time. These adverse circumstances lead a number of thinkers and philosophers to withdraw both from the corruption and their rejection of the social and philosophical dogmas developed in different directions. Thus, the influence of Buddhism and Confucianism helped forming the ideas of new trends of Neodaoism; for example, it was popular to combine Confucian moral perfection and clear mind with common in Daoism naturalness, spontaneity, mysteriousness and celebration of free creative spirit. China did not have one prevailing philosophical or religious trend which would represent the truth and would unite all cultural and religious life of the state. Thus, Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and its branch Chan Buddhism, despite some disagreements and conflicts, harmoniously coexisted and supplemented each other in various aspects. Geoffrey Parrinder says that various religious and philosophical schools had a similar aim which could be defined as an objective to search and to spread idea of Great Dao (Parrinder 1976: 87). In Zhou epoch and during later dynasties Chinese civilization survived different periods of rise and fall which influenced the development of Daoism and transformations (Hall, Ames 1998; Hansen 2000). Thus, with the purpose to understand Daoism, it is necessary to consider it as not dissociate from the whole cultural context. One could not say that Daoism emerged and developed disembodied from common Chinese cultural, religious and philosophical context, it is rather organic product of its epoch and society. Adepts of ancient Daoism confronted the ideas of *The Canon of Changes* and Confucians, and followers of later school of Daoism confronted with the texts of Buddhists and chan. Adepts of Daoism from other Chinese philosophical and religious schools borrowed various ideas and *vice versa* – they did noticeable influence on whole Chinese culture.

### Antirationalism in Chinese civilization and Daoists' texts

Daoists' texts are full of multi-meaningfulness, absurd expressions, antirational worldview. According to the researcher of Chinese culture, Graham, antirational approach is typical of a sceptical but quite rational approach towards mind and sceptic outlook towards emotions as well (Graham 1985; Graham 1992). However, after looking deeper into the spread of antirational ideas in Chinese and Western cultures, it becomes obvious that the relation of antirationalist with emotions can be very multiple – in some cases Daoist can admire emotions, and in other situations he can keep a distance from them (Carr, Ivanhoe 2000: 31–57; Juzefovič 2006).

We could say that Daoist is antirationalist, but it does not mean that he is antirealist – he does not contradict to scientific theories or reality of the world: suspension of the decisions about the reality of the world does not mean that the world becomes irrational or less real but rather *vice versa* – then reality can unfold in an authentic shape.

Such approach highlights some essential parallels with Western philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (Evans 1999). This attitude towards reality helps to refuse the dichotomy of subject-object and to penetrate into the primary uncertainty; Daoists do not try just to deny the mind and they do not state that it is necessary to ignore it. Simply, with the help of antirationalist approach, it is attempted to reject uncritical confidence in mind as the prevention of a relation with reality.

The antirationality of Daoists texts was determined by dominant in Chinese culture and whole East Asian sceptical view towards rational mind and especially towards predisposition to overestimate it. Rationalism was criticized for its fragmentariness, tendency to divide everything into components and disability to see the whole. An exaggerated rationality was also criticized for the tendency to determine various preconceived attitudes and stereotypes that indicate how to act and encouraging to seek apocryphal aims that were enforced by the others. Daoists reject such approach and reduce rationalistic position, suspend natural attitude and they perceive surrounding things as “the things themselves” which are not simple things: The Great Man “is a thing, and yet he is not a mere thing, he cannot be regarded as a thing himself” (Watson 1968: 124).

Zhuangzi represents an approach related to phenomenological – in both cases the necessity to suspend natural attitude and search an object as the thing itself is argued. The thing itself, according to Edmund Husserl, contains both geometrical and sensuous qualities (Husserl 2002: 81). Between ordinary thing and thing-itself there is essential difference: “The thing itself is idealized as something existing through its properties <...>, as a thing with its not merely actual but also ideally possible experience” (Husserl 1970: 346).

Daoists encourage suspending all decisions about the reality of the world and do not state that the things exist, but regard them as *possible* to exist. According to Daoism, uncritical trust in mind prevents from overpassing ordinary attitude and viewing the world as a possibility, penetrating the things themselves and understanding the reality in itself. This is exactly what Daoists seek – to understand the world in itself, the world as a possibility.

Daoists do not refer to logical arguments and do not participate in discussions that grounded by them. Thus, Daoists do not begin discussing with the sophists who liked grounding various logical paradoxes, they just laugh at them. Exactly this was the reaction of Zhuangzi when he hears the argument of the leader of the “name school” (*mingjia*), sophist Gongsung Longo, as if “a white horse is not a horse” as the concepts of “whiteness” and “horse” are different. “Whatever contradicted other men’s view he declared to be the truth, hoping to win a reputation for outwitting others. This was why he never got along with ordinary people (Watson 1968: 377). Zhuangzi criticizes philosophical schools which were popular at that time – Confucianism, Moism and Sophism because their adepts are imposed simplex confidence in mind, uncritical rationalism, dependence upon social and political realities, inflexibility. He invites free away from rituals and social rules and regard the Way intuitively, rather with the heart than with the mind. So, Daoists sceptically assess the discussions that are grounded only with logical arguments.

## Conclusions

There are different opinions about when exactly the three basic Daoists' texts were written – *Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi* and *Liezi* – and whether the authors, to whom the texts are subsumed, were real historical characters. However, there are no doubts that these texts, especially the treatise *Daodejing*, formed a theoretical basis for Daoism and made a huge influence on the development of Daoism. Polysemy, figurativeness and attention to emptiness, non-action, spontaneity and critical attitude towards the rational mind which was characteristic to Chinese culture traditions reverberated in the aforementioned texts.

Daoism is an organic product of its culture and it reflects various nuances that are characteristic to Chinese culture and Eastern Asia in general, that are quite strange to the Western culture. Daoism has not been fossilized and has constantly been changing, and absorbed the moods and ideas of the society of that time. In the course of time and during various cultural and civilization changes, Daoism changed too, it transformed and absorbed new ideas and tendencies, connected various, often different doctrines.

Antirationalist world-view is characteristic to Daoism – the mind is assessed sceptically but quite rationally, the aim is to reject the dichotomy of subject-object and to penetrate into the primary uncertainty; nevertheless, the aim is not just to deny the mind or to ignore it.

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## DAOIZMO FENOMENAS KINŲ CIVILIZACIJOJE

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## Santrauka

Daoizmo fenomenas straipsnyje nagrinėjamas platesniame kinų kultūros kontekste. Parodoma, kaip kinų civilizacijoje susiformavo ir subrendo daoizmo idėjos ir kaip jos atspindi kinų kultūros ir viso Rytų Azijos regiono savitumus. Apžvelgiama pagrindinių daoistų veikalų (*Daodejing*, *Zhuangzi*) genealogija ir autorystė, išryškinama šių traktatų įtaka tolesnei daoizmo raidai. Argumentuojama, kad daoizmas susiformavo kaip reakcija į senosios Zhou kultūros krizę ir stiprėjantį valdančiųjų sluoksnių išpažįtamų konfucianistinių ritualų išsigimimą. Išryškinamos įvairios sąsajos tarp kinų civilizacijos raidos ir daoistinių idėjų brendimo bei transformacijos, grindžiama mintis, kad daoizmas yra organiškas savo epochos ir visuomenės produktas, tad netikslinga būtų jį tyrinėti atsietai nuo kinų kultūrinio, religinio ir filosofinio konteksto. Parodoma, kaip daoizmas absorbavo idėjas, būdingas kitoms kinų mąstymo tradicijoms, ir kaip kinų kultūroje susiformavo skirtingos daoizmo mokyklos. Galiausiai aptariamas antiracionalumas, skeptiškas požiūris į protą bei loginį argumentavimą, parodoma, kaip daoistai siekia iversti subjekto ir objekto dichotomiją, kaip skverbiasi į pirminį neapibrėžtumą.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: antiracionalumas, kinų kultūra, *Daodejing*, daoizmas, transformacijos, *Zhuangzi*.

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