Chuang Tzu tells about a conversation among four Taoists:

Who can think of nothingness as his head, of life as his spine, of death as his buttocks? Who knows that life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness are all one body? He shall be my friend! The four looked at each other and laughed. They felt no opposition in their hearts and thus they became friends.¹

A little further on, the same book tells us about three other friends who talk among themselves:

Who can join with others without “joining with others?”² Who can do something with others without “doing something with others?” Who can go up to heaven [make himself one with nature], wander in the mists [of mystery], dance in the Infinite, become oblivious of life, forever, without end? The three looked at each other and laughed. They felt no opposition in their hearts and thus they became friends.³

These texts come from the oldest part of the book of the philosopher Chuang Tzu (the Chuang-tzu), itself one of the most ancient Taoist texts which has come down to us. They tell us about a certain relationship between the physical body, the cosmic body, and the social body, that of the “friends in the Tao.” Even today, Taoist masters call each other “friends” when they address one another. Never very numerous, these priests of the true religious and philosophical traditions of China are nowadays few indeed. As to their traditions, they are comparable, to a certain degree, to the ancient mystery religions of Greece and the
Hellenistic world, which vanished at the end of the age of Antiquity. Today, Taoism is threatened with a similar fate and its disappearance, which may be near at hand, will leave our knowledge of the religion of ancient China quite incomplete.

Not that great efforts have been made to understand China's religion up to now! In the course of its history, China has known and assimilated all the major creeds of the world: Buddhism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and even Hinduism, which was introduced through the intermediary of Tantric Buddhism. All these religions have had their moment of glory, have been in fashion for longer or shorter periods, before being slowly absorbed into the Middle Kingdom, which integrated them into its own culture, though not without first introducing profound modifications. In scholarly works these religions of foreign origin occupy a prominent position. There are, for instance, countless studies on the history of Buddhism or the history of the Jesuits in China. In contrast, very little is made of the religion that preceded them and that has survived them all: Taoism, the religion of the Chinese themselves. And yet, to understand the history and the fate of the other beliefs, one must always refer to Taoism, for it was mainly under its influence, direct or indirect, that the foreign creeds were transformed. To cite but one famous example, Indian Buddhism was changed into that radically different form of Chinese Buddhism called Ch' an (better known under its Japanese name of Zen).

The Notion of Religion

The widespread ignorance concerning Taoism can by no means be imputed to the nature of Chinese religion as such: until the persecutions that descended on it a century ago and which still go on, it was alive, visible, and accessible in daily life. Taoism moreover, which can be seen as the most elevated expression of Chinese popular religion, possesses a rich and vast literature comprising more than a thousand works, covering all aspects of its traditions. Rather, this loss of interest on the part of Western scholars is due, I think, to the difficulty in understanding Chinese religion. The very notion of religion as we define it in the West is an obstacle, and a great number of observers have fallen into the trap of failing to see that in a society so dissimilar from ours the religious system must also be very different.
In everyday life, religious activity had no particular name or status, since—as the French sinologist Marcel Granet was fond of pointing out—in China, religion was formerly not distinguished from social activity in general. Even its most distinguished representatives, the Taoist masters, were generally integrated in lay society and enjoyed no special status. In modern times and in imitation of Western culture and its concept of religion as something setting humanity apart from nature, the authorities have applied themselves to the task of classifying and dividing the people, trying in vain to convince the ordinary peasant that he was either a Confucian, a Buddhist, a Taoist, or, more recently still—in keeping with the party line—simply “superstitious.” In fact, none of this really applies and certainly no ordinary person would call himself a Taoist, since this designation always implies an initiation into the Mysteries, and consequently is even now reserved for the masters, the local sages.

Traditionally, no special term existed to express religious activity. In order to translate our word religion, modern Chinese usage has coined the term tsung-chiao, literally “sectarian doctrine.” This may be correct for Islam or Catholicism, but when this term is used for the Chinese popular religion and its highest expression, Taoism—that is to say, a religion which considers itself to be the true bond among all beings without any doctrinal creed, profession of faith, or dogmatism—it can only create misunderstandings.

The Tao

One may say that it is the absence of definition that constitutes the fundamental characteristic of Chinese religion. Whether other cultures have conceived a notion analogous to the Tao, I do not know, but in China, from the times of antiquity on, this notion has always been fundamental. By definition, the Tao is indefinable and can be apprehended only in its infinitely multiple aspects. A principle at once transcendent and immanent, the Tao is unnameable, ineffable, yet present in all things. It is far more than a mere “principle.” The first meaning of the character tao is “way”: something underlying the change and transformation of all beings, the spontaneous process regulating the natural cycle of the universe. It is in this process, along this way, that
the world as we see it, the creation of which we are an integral part, finds its unity.

But we should be careful not to extend this notion of unity to the Tao itself. The Tao may make whole, but is not itself the Whole. It gives birth to the One, it can be the One, and then it can again split this unity into fragments, divide it. "The Tao gave birth to the One, the One to the Two; the Two produced the Three and the Three the Ten Thousand Beings," says the Tao-te ching. This generative action of the Tao is called its "power," te, a word which is also often translated as "virtue." But virtue comes from the Latin virtus and the root vir, meaning "male," whereas the Tao's action, its creative power, is on the contrary feminine.

The Tao is flux, transformation, process ("way") of alternation, and principle of cyclical time: "Nameless, it is the origin of Heaven and Earth; named, it is the Mother of the Ten Thousand Beings" (Tao-te ching, chap. 1).

The absence of any definition is not only characteristic of Taoist philosophy, but also of the practice of Taoism, and of its very existence in the world. For almost two thousand years now, the people have lived in communities organized around the local temples, observing festivals and holding ceremonies that correspond to the liturgical structures of Taoism, and calling on its masters without, however, professing the "Taoist religion" in a conscious way. As a religious and liturgical institution, Taoism, the social body of the local communities, has never had any true governing authority, nor canonical doctrines, nor dogma involving a confessional choice.

Nor in the course of its long history has Taoism ever known any internecine strife or any serious rivalry among its several branches, for nothing is further from the spirit of the Tao than cabals and factions. On the contrary, Taoism tends to absorb and harmonize all its currents in order to overcome its contradictions and outlast the vicissitudes of the world. It succeeds in this not by adhering to any formula or doctrine, but by modeling itself on the Tao and its effect in the reality closest to us, in our own physical bodies. "The tao is not far off; it is here in my body," say the sages.

The priority given to the human body over social and cultural systems may be seen in the predominance of the internal world over the external world and in the refusal to seek the absolute in our mind. Taoism is always rooted in the concrete, indeed the physical, and is at the same time universal and commonplace. These are the main reasons Taoism
resists the Western mind. For still other reasons, of a more circumstan-
tial nature, it remains difficult to access.

The History of Taoism

It is hard to say what the origin of Taoism is. In the vast
number of Taoist texts, historical data are lacking. The Tao-te ching, the
fundamental book which dominates the entire tradition of the Myster-
ies, contains no dates and mentions no proper names, nothing that
would tie it to history.

As for the supposed author, Lao Tzu, the "Old Master" (or the "Old
Child"), he belongs primarily to legend and secondarily to theology;
historiography has never managed to confer on him a more ordinary
reality. In any case, one should distinguish the Old Master, who is said
to have lived in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C., from the book that
bears his name, the Lao-tzu (better known as the Tao-te ching [The
Book of the Way and its Virtue]), as this book supposedly did not ob-
tain its present form until the third century B.C.

The ahistorical nature of the Tao-te ching is shared by almost all the
texts that make up the Taoist Canon. The latter, which comprises some
fifteen hundred works and is representative of Taoist literature throughout
the centuries, abounds in works that carry no signature, no date, nor
any proper name. It is as if, to their authors, linear history made no
sense at all and as if individual authorship was considered contrary to
the nature of things. Furthermore, Chinese official historiography, though
exact and abundant, is virtually silent on the subject of Taoism, which
stands apart from, or even in opposition to, the cult of the state and its
ideology. Indeed, the annalists prefer to ignore Taoism as much as pos-
sible. Therefore, the dynastic annals do not reflect its importance in the
life of the nation.

Nevertheless, one would like to know more about the history of
Taoism. However, no serious study yet exists on the history of Taoism
through the ages. My purpose will therefore be to consider only the
problem of its historical dimension in light of its destruction in recent
times, and not to write a chronicle which would necessarily be incom-
plete.

Taoism originated in ancient China at the times of the first emer-
gence of philosophical thinking and of the general inquiry into the na-
ture of humanity and the meaning of life. The first great thinkers, Confucius (born in 551 B.C.) and Mo Ti (fifth century B.C.), were concerned with moral philosophy, but not with individual freedom and destiny. The aristocratic religion, that of the feudal class, considered the human being only in terms of his social role, codified in rituals which themselves expressed the entire feudal order. This order seems to have envisioned an afterlife only for the nobles, the great ancestors. As a Confucian work has it: the "rites do not extend to the common people," and, thus, ordinary people went anonymously to the Yellow Springs in the underworld.

For the religion of the common people, from antiquity up until the present, I often make use of the term shamanism. To some specialists, this term may seem inadequate, and even inappropriate, to describe a sociocultural phenomenon of such great scope, so rich, so sophisticated and poetic, as Chinese popular religion. Indeed, if we had to limit ourselves to the information furnished by classical literature, we would be ignorant of practically everything concerning the religion of the people. But Chinese shamanism has survived until today, admittedly as a poor relation of the higher religion of Taoism, but with sufficient vitality to be reckoned with. It should be seen, I think, as being the *substratum* of Taoism; it is at certain times its rival and, in modern China, its inseparable complement. In every period Taoism has been defined in relation to shamanism. And so we too must take this Chinese shamanism as our point of departure.9

But let us first return to Taoism itself. In tombs of the third century B.C., we find the first examples of a beautiful object made of bronze, sometimes inlaid with gold, and whose relationship to Taoism seems undeniable: an incense burner in the shape of a miniature mountain (*po-shan lu*). On the mountain, we see a decoration representing trees, wild animals, and curious figures with elongated heads: the Taoist Immortals. The mountain, wide at the top, narrows toward the bottom to form a round basin representing a sea. In fact, it is a kind of upside-down mountain in the shape of a mushroom rising from the waters. It represents the land of immortality, either Mount K'un-lun, dwelling place of the Queen Mother of the West—the great goddess of the setting sun and of death, who offers initiates invited to her banquets peaches that confer Long Life—or else the island of the rising sun, in the sea of the East, home of the Immortals.

The first chapter of the book of Chuang tzu tells us of these lands:
On the distant mountain of Ku-yeh\textsuperscript{10} live divine beings. Their skin is cool like frosted snow and they are delicate and shy like virgins. They eat no cereals, only breathe wind and drink dew. They mount clouds of dhā and ride winged dragons to wander beyond the Four Seas [the limits of the world]. By concentrating their minds, they can protect all beings from the plague and ripen the crops. . . . These men! What power [te]! They embrace the Ten Thousand Beings, making them into a single one. The men of this world may beg them to bring order but why would they tire themselves with the concerns of this world? These men! Nothing can hurt them: were the waters to flood even to the sky, they would not perish; were it to become so hot as to melt stone and burn the land and mountains, they would not even feel warm.\textsuperscript{11}

The po-shan lu incense burner may well have been used as an aid to ecstatic meditation.\textsuperscript{12} Sitting in front of it and looking at the coils of smoke coming out of the holes (the grottoes) in the mountain-shaped cover, one could mentally reach those wondrous lands and become like the Immortals mentioned above: light, shy, doing good without acting or interfering, so absorbed in the universe that they gather all of creation into themselves. The great deluge and the great heat wave are apocalyptic themes; only the real Being, the True, the Pure will survive. We also find here a mention of the abstinence from grains, which is a characteristic aspect of Taoist dietetics. The simple mention suffices to call up the vast range of practices for “tending life” in the search for immortality.

The Taoist diet does not conform to what people generally eat. This—as well as the practice of meditation and physical exercises—allows one to recognize, even today, initiates within society. They are often spoken of as hermits; indeed, withdrawal “to the mountains and the valleys” is an image and a frequent theme in Taoist literature. However, this does not necessarily correspond to an observed rule, for as we shall see further on, initiation into the “mountain” can include many other realities. One need not leave the world of men nor attempt to set oneself apart from others. One follows others, for that is the price of freedom.

The initiates of ancient Taoism, as presented by Chuang Tzu, are—in addition to the “Old Master”—interesting characters, such as “Gourd,” “Toothless,” and “Inspired Madman.” Confucius too is described as an initiate, but as one who still has much to learn. The Awakening of the Yellow Emperor, the great ancestor of Chinese civilization, to the Tao constitutes a major maieutic theme.

What came to be called Taoism—the term did not yet exist in the Chuang Tzu’s times—must have constituted a higher, initiatory dimen-
sion of the religion of the people. As is still the case today, traditions existed, whereas Taoists knew (that they did not know).

In Taoism, the rites and myths of popular shamanism become Mystery cults and give rise to liturgy and theology. Chuang Tzu uses the ancient myths only to reach beyond them. He shows that no mythological hero, no legendary animal knows the freedom of those who "mount on the regulating Principle of the universe, ride the transformations of the Six [cosmic] Energies to go off and wander in the Un-ending."\(^{13}\)

Towards the beginning of the first empire (221 B.C.), these cosmological visions of the Tao were associated with the "Way of the Yellow Emperor and the Old Master" (Huang-lao chih Tao).\(^{14}\) This school appears then to have been a Mystery religion with a wide following that has inspired many thinkers.

During the following Han dynasty (206 B.C. to A.D. 221) the tombs contained objects related to the quest for immortality; shrouds were decorated with images representing the flight of the body towards the lands of bliss. Contracts inscribed on funerary vases guaranteed a home in the next world. The texts of such contracts carried with them a symbol, that is, an inscription made up of sibylline signs. This corresponded to a "password," which identified the initiate at the gates of paradise. Such symbols were called *fu*, a word whose etymological meaning is similar to the Greek word *tessera*.

In addition, the tombs contained objects related to alchemical research, also known to us through texts. By transforming cinnabar (tan) into mercury, Chinese alchemy sought to reproduce the cyclical alternation of *yin* and *yang* and to integrate the adept into this cosmological model. The fortunes of alchemy varied over the course of Taoism's history, but the theory of transmuting cinnabar became a fundamental part of Taoist discourse.

The same situation prevailed in medical science. Not all the doctors were Taoists, but the quest for immortality certainly influenced medical research, and contributed especially to its theoretical systematization as found in the classic *Simple Questions of the Yellow Emperor*, the oldest manual to have come down to us.\(^{15}\)

Under the first rulers of the Han dynasty, the Way of the Yellow Emperor and Lao Tzu were introduced to the court. But this situation was profoundly changed under Emperor Wu (140–86 B.C.), when Confucianism was established as the state ideology, excluding all other systems. A strange fate for this ancient philosophy, mainstay of the
feudal order, to become the doctrine of imperial absolutism, the moral philosophy of the central administration! With this, a deep gulf opened which, despite noticeable variations, was to remain constant throughout Chinese history. On the one hand, there was the state and its administration, the official country, claiming the “Confucian” tradition for its own; on the other was the real country, the local structures being expressed in regional and unofficial forms of religion. It was then that Taoism consciously assumed its own identity and received its present name.¹⁶

Relegated to the opposition, Taoism remained out of official favor—even though it was to enjoy imperial patronage from time to time—and became the basis for the liturgical organization of the “country.” Local leaders, the elders who headed the villages, and sometimes even the chiefs of non-Chinese minorities, found in Taoist initiation and worship the consecration that legitimized their power, outside the imperial administration and sometimes in opposition to it.

Such a situation carried within it the ferment of revolt, and as early as the first century B.C., Taoist-inspired messianic and millenarian movements appeared in the hope of establishing the reign of Great Peace (T'ai-p'ing). The Great Peace was believed to have existed before civilization and to be destined to reappear one day on earth. The state fought these movements, while certain politicians tried to exploit the messianic expectations of the masses.¹⁷ The great millenarian revolt of the Yellow Turbans, in A.D. 182, was so widespread that the Han dynasty was left drained and exhausted by its efforts to repress it. The fall of the Han empire, comparable to that of the Roman empire, allowed the local Taoist organizations, which had been obscured by the official mantle, to surface: certain regions possessed true autonomous theocratic structures; the communes were administered by ordained masters, guarantors of freedom within the area and equal partners with the heads of neighboring communities. It was a democracy in some way comparable to that of ancient Greece.

Part of what was then China—the richest and most developed western provinces—was organized into local units, all claiming allegiance to the same movement, that of the “Heavenly Masters.” The movement originated in the revelation which Lao Tzu (who had “come again” in A.D. 142) made to the Taoist, Chang (Tao-) Ling, the first “Heavenly Master.” This revelation marked the beginning of a new era, fortunate for the elect, disastrous for those who would continue to follow the old customs and practices in spite of the new covenant. Chang Ling became
the prophet of this revelation as heir to the new heavenly mandate, and thus "Heavenly Master." Historians tend to identify the birth of organized Taoism with this movement of the Heavenly Masters, but in fact the situation is more complicated. Although primary sources are scarce, there is enough evidence to show that before Chang Ling there were many earlier organized religious groups that were seen as Taoist, both by the groups themselves and by others. The prophecy of a new era was not unknown in these earlier movements. The fact that Lao Tzu is presented as "come again" (hsin-ch'u) shows the idea of a continuity with the religion of the Old Master of earlier times. It is true, however, that the appearance of the popular organization of the Heavenly Masters does mark a turning point in the social history of China. Their tradition has lasted to this day, and with it the Taoist liturgy of local communities. Despite important changes, this tradition remained through the centuries the superstructure of local cults, the written and initiatory expression of a shamanistic, popular religion, of which it is both the antagonist and the supporter; even when Taoism opposes itself to shamanism, it always strives to complement it.

We find the Heavenly Masters and the "dignitaries of the Tao" in today's liturgy. Let me simply point out here the remarkable continuity of these structures which were able to survive while our ancient religions disappeared with the emergence of the great universal religions of salvation.

China came to know these proselytizing foreign religions, as well. The decline of the imperial order and, more important, the conquest of Northern China by non-Chinese tribes from Central Asia, introduced into China a guest who had waited at its gates for a long time: Buddhism. At first, it was considered a junior relative of Taoism and even presented itself as such. The first Buddhist books translated in China responded to Taoist preoccupations, for they concern breathing techniques and medicine. But the movement soon broadened and in so doing established its autonomy with respect to the indigenous religion.

On its own, or under the barbarian sword, China discovered a new world, an intellectual tradition very different from and in some respects superior to its own. The impact was great and the prolific output of Buddhist literature (translations and Chinese apocrypha) over time gave rise to the flowering of a Taoist literature of revelation: hundreds of works dictated by the "Tao" rival texts spoken by the "Buddha." In the early days, however, the influence of Buddhism remained formal.

Taoism was able to assert its position as the national religion, espe-
cially in South China, which had remained Chinese since 317 when the North passed under foreign rule. The clash between the liturgical organization of the Heavenly Masters—brought from North China by the refugees—and the local traditions—which preserved the ancient Taoist mysteries of the Han of South China—was the source of a new current which perfectly embodied the spirit of the Middle Kingdom before its downfall. Known as the school of Mao shan, it originated in the divine revelations made to a family of Southern notables in the second half of the fourth century. They communicated through a medium (shamanism is never far away), and the visions and the sessions of inspired writings crystallized into pages and pages of the most beautiful ecstatic literature. True tokens of the gods, the medium’s manuscripts ensured the initiate salvation in the cataclysms to come. Mao shan literature would thus gradually develop into a real movement and a new orthodoxy.

The religious organization did not change: it remained that of the Heavenly Masters. The liturgical ritual, however, did change. New hymns and then elements of the Buddhist rite, namely circumambulation and, in particular, the psalmody of the holy books, were incorporated into the service. For the Taoists, this psalmody of the scriptures was considered most beneficial, inasmuch as it reproduced the original sounds of the spontaneous writing of the heavens, which itself was the origin of the *fu* symbols, those “passwords” in the form of talismans. The *fu* were originally tokens (tesserae) for messengers and envoys. These were also called “sacred jewels” (*ling-pao*). Thus, texts recited in the Buddhist manner retain this symbolic quality by appearing as Sacred Jewels, signs of initiation turned into words. They rarely contain any doctrinal discourse and are hardly ever used in preaching, which is virtually unknown in Taoism. The *Books of Sacred Jewels* multiplied just as fast as the ecstatic writings of Mao shan, and together, in the fifth century, they made up an impressive corpus. A dynasty adopted them, a Taoist patriarch collated them: the first *Taoist Canon* was born (the Chinese response to Buddhism), and canonical Taoism became for a brief period an official institution.

One can bring the Mysteries under state control, but one has then to reckon with the profound hopes for salvation that arise in counterpoint. Lao Tzu had appeared to Chang Ling, thus he would perhaps not be long in coming again. His coming would be preceded by deluge and conflagration. Non-initiates and “bad men” would all die. When he did return, Lao Tzu would establish the kingdom of Great Peace.
Certain popular texts of the fifth century describe the apocalypse in highly colorful images and prophesy the coming of the Messiah in the near future. He would come to reign over the Pure, the Very Pure, the elect of his Kingdom.

This ardent waiting is part of the Chinese soteriological tradition. It was to influence Buddhism profoundly and, inevitably, to have political repercussions as well. During this period of successive short-lived dynasties, from the Chin to the Sui, the emperors sought more than ever to cultivate the image of Redeemer of the People, sovereign savior of the Great Peace. Efforts were made to turn Taoism into a national religion and an ideology of reunification, to refine it and make it official. The founders of the T'ang dynasty (618–907) went so far as to take advantage of the messianic expectations of the masses and tried once again to take over Taoism to make it into a state cult.24

Despite these maneuvers, state control of Taoism remained incomplete and provisional. The ancient Mysteries would never become a religion of universal salvation.25 The basic organization remained firmly rooted in local structures, and the masters, whose duties had become hereditary, were not tied to any central administration. Attempts to reform Taoism into a church were not carried out. Taoism, united in its diversity (the Tao is not the One), firmly maintained its base in the countryside and preserved its exclusive and initiatory character. Thus, the great dynasty of the T'ang, though officially Taoist, stands out as the high point of Buddhism in China.

Buddhism is truly a universal and all-embracing faith. Removed from society, it generally remained close to the state. Able to attract the charity of its faithful, the gifts of the lay believers became the inalienable property of the Buddha. The church thus accumulated capital, invested it for profit, but never spent it except to build magnificent sanctuaries: pagodas several hundred feet high filled with statues of gold, silver, jade, and precious stones! The church weighed heavily on the economic and political life of the nation. Restrictive measures, indeed persecutions of the church, which must be viewed as measures of economic rehabilitation, became inevitable.26 They occurred regularly with a varying degree of severity, even as the emperors, their wives, and the entire ruling class themselves remained fervent Buddhists.

In the high level transactions that characterized relations between the state and Buddhism, Taoism had no great role to play: it was no match for these mighty institutions27 and confined itself to the country. From the eighth century on, the rituals of the Mysteries and the liturgy
of the Heavenly Masters were associated with local festivals. The gods of the people became Taoist saints and vice versa.

Far from the capitals, Taoism then found an ally: Confucianism, the doctrine of the literati. Ever since the fall of the Han, the rural clans had preserved its classical and scientific tradition. Not in opposition with this tradition, Taoism even assimilated it and became its guardian. At the end of the sixth century, the Taoist Canon adopted all the ancient philosophers, including those of Confucianism, in an effort to represent the national stand against Buddhism. The reunification under the T'ang signifies the end of Confucianism’s exile. But the two currents of thought continued to accommodate and influence each other. This had a profound effect on the evolution of Taoism whose traditional mythological cosmology was gradually replaced by the abstract one of the Book of Changes, the I-ching. At the same time, the literati became interested in the arts of longevity and took up alchemy. During the whole second half of the T'ang and up to the ninth century, Confucianism and Taoism coexisted and together prepared the great renaissance of the Sung (960–1279). They also took on Buddhism together. The great proscription of 842–845, whose true motivations were economic, took place at their instigation. This outright persecution of Buddhism was a real blow to the church, already weakened from within by corruption and decadence. The great period of Buddhism in China was coming to a close.28

But a reaction to the internal weaknesses had been brewing within Buddhism itself for a long time already. Opposed to luxury, ceremonies, and parasitism, a new current of thought was preaching the return to simplicity, intuition, and nature. This was Ch’ran (Zen), typically Chinese, practical, concrete, and above all Taoist. Ch’an thought, at odds with the scholasticism of the Buddhism of the Great Vehicle, borrowed from Taoist mysticism its shattering of concepts, its teaching without words, and its spontaneity. Its simplicity and its proximity to the masses would allow it to survive when the Buddhist high church itself collapsed. Alongside a rediscovered Confucianism and basic Taoism, Ch’an became the third component of this reawakening which marks the beginning of modern China.

If, thanks to the work of Paul Demiéville, we acknowledge Taoism’s important contribution to Ch’an, the same cannot be said for Confucianism, or “Neo-Confucianism,” which under the last dynasties became the official ideology of the Chinese state, the only system of thought to be accepted at the state examinations which provided access to public
service. But it must be stressed that the first philosophers of the Confucian renewal were either Taoist masters or had close ties to their circle. Even the great Chu Hsi (1130–1200), principal architect of the new orthodoxy, wrote commentaries on the sacred books of Taoism.

At the dawn of modern China, Taoism, which more than ever had become the religion of the people, presented itself as the root from which the new branches of Confucianism and Buddhism had developed; it was the oldest of the “Three Doctrines,” san-chiao, the common source. We are constantly reminded that, according to the legends, Confucius was the disciple and Buddha the reincarnation of Lao Tzu. The term _Three Doctrines_ (often translated as “Three Religions”) in fact corresponded to that form of Taoism which proposed itself as the representative of Chinese culture. For, clearly, the other two partners refused responsibility for this ecumenism and sought instead to set themselves apart. Indeed, considering how much the ideas of the three had become convergent, it is surprising that their institutional interpenetration remained so slight. It seems thus incorrect to view “the modern popular religion” as a syncretism of the three religions. In reality what we have here is Taoism asserting itself, as it had done in the past, as the national religion.

It had been granted this role more than once in the face of external aggression. The Sung governments sought in Taoism an ideological and nationalist support against the Tibetans and Mongols to whom they would eventually yield the whole empire, step by step. During these struggles, and especially under the Mongol occupation, Taoism served as a movement for cultural reawakening and passive resistance. It sought successfully to impose itself on the foreigners and to sinicize them. In 1222 the master Ch’iu Ch’ang-ch’un defended Taoism before Genghis Khan as the national religion and put himself forth as the representative of the Chinese people: “If the conqueror respects Taoism, the Chinese will submit.” Ch’iu won this daring bet and was installed by Genghis as head of the religious Chinese, including the Buddhists. This success, which conferred on Taoism a power unknown to it before, soon became detrimental.

The encroachment upon Buddhist and Confucian domains provoked their vengeance and resulted in the first serious proscription of Taoism. In 1282 Taoist books, except for the _Tao-te ching_, were burned. The loss was irremediable, and even Taoism’s spirit seemed broken. National resistance was led henceforward by the sects (the “Secret Societies”) which often shared the theology and practices of Taoism, but
which now became separate organizations. They worked hard for national restoration against the Mongols and eventually brought Chu Yüanchang, the founder of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), to power.

Henceforth, Taoism was comprised of two main schools which complemented each other without rivalry: that of the Heavenly Masters, passed on hereditarily since the Han,\textsuperscript{31} and that of Ch’iu Ch’ang-ch’un, Genghis Khan’s teacher. The latter school was called the school of Total Perfection (Ch’üan-chen). It was based on the Buddhist model, in monastic communities. As to the Heavenly Masters, they remained at the head of the liturgical organization. Installed on the Mountain of the Dragon and the Tiger (in the province of Kiangsi) since the T’ang period (eighth century), they became the “Taoist popes”—a derisive term bestowed on them by Western missionaries. This liturgical tradition of Taoism remained profoundly rooted in the communities of the people. The temples and their property belonged to them and never fell under the jurisdiction of the initiating Masters. More than ever Taoism was identified with popular religion; it represented the underlying tradition, the culture, and the institutions of the true country.

There has been a remarkable continuity in the practice of the Tao, for despite the transformations of more than two thousand years of history, it remained the typical and coherent expression of the Chinese religion, of its she-bui (“the congregation of the Earth God”), that is, the society vis-à-vis the state. Its liturgy provided the context within which the politico-religious structures of non-official China were formed. Taoist thought perpetuated this notion of autonomy and liberty.

It is thus legitimate to consider Taoism as a whole and to link the classic works (the book of Chuang Tzu and the Tao-te ching), as do the Taoists themselves, to the search for immortality (“to nourish the vital principle”) and to liturgy (the social body).

The deep relation that exists between these three major components of the Taoist tradition obliges us to present them here in this book in an order contrary to that usually adopted, and to proceed counter to the chronology that the history of the texts would suggest. The works of the mystics are among the most ancient documents to have come down to us, but they also, in fact, represent the culmination of the Taoist system. They must be restored to this rightful position. Conversely, shamanism, which we know fully only thanks to the data of contemporary ethnography, actually corresponds to an archaic level which, from an objective point of view, is to be placed among the antecedents of Taoism.
The Destruction of Taoism

The destruction of Taoism coincides with the progressive decline of the Chinese culture over the last centuries. One of the main factors of this decline is Western influence.

When, in the sixteenth century, the Jesuit missionaries in China were faced with the historic choice to ally themselves either with religion against the state or with the state against religion, they chose the second alternative. Christianity entered the sphere of the imperial court and placed itself under the protection of the government. Back home, in Europe, the missionaries glorified the official imperial ideology and the image of Confucius as Sinarum Philosophus ("the only one"), while minimizing the religious role of the state cult. Thus China had no religion for the missionaries, and it was they who introduced into Chinese the term mi-sin, literally "deviant belief," to describe Taoism. Matteo Ricci, the most influential among the early missionaries, sought to confer on Confucianism the image of an agnostic doctrine or moral wisdom, a philosophy that had already recognized the existence of the Supreme Being and that lacked only the revelation of the Gospel.

This way of seeing things was very successful and, despite the quarrel over the rites and the campaign against deism inside the Roman Catholic church, these ideas gained ground and were accepted not only by the other missions, but also by European intellectuals and even, at a later stage, by the Chinese officials. In the long run, the result of all this has been that Republican China after 1912 has had two Christian presidents and that the introduction of Marxism was, without a doubt, much facilitated.

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, even the opponents of the church adopted the ideas of Ricci. For lack of other sources of information? Perhaps. But one must also recognize that the thinkers of the enlightenment discovered in China the country of their dreams: a nation without religion, led by sages, which put intelligence into power and placed culture at the service of the empire, all thanks to the institution of official examinations which provided access to public service. If, in the eighteenth century, China had not existed as a model for the West, it would have had to be invented.

This continuing love affair between the intellectuals in the West and a certain image of China is amazing; it is bound to become a source of astonishment for future historians. The uncritical approval of official
China—at the expense of its popular culture—by Western minds ready to acknowledge Christian or pseudo-Christian virtues in China continues to be expressed by a sinophilia whose excessive nature betrays the existence of deep misunderstandings: a people without religion. . . . This opinion held by the missionaries, revised and simplified by our intellectuals, and still current today, shows how poorly we know China. As I have indicated, it did not necessarily displease the Chinese officialdom, who found powerful allies in the missionaries to combat the local communal structures and their Taoist liturgy, which the officials held responsible for the ailments of the country.

With the end of the Ming dynasty, the split between the bureaucracy and religion (the real country) became greater than ever. The revolts of the sects—which like their close relative Taoism, had their base in the countryside—provoked the fall of the Ming (whom they had earlier carried to power) and brought on the foreign domination of the Manchus (the Ch'ing dynasty, 1644–1912). The Manchus oppressed the Chinese and sought to suppress their religion. The class of the literati and bureaucrats, while suffering discrimination like the rest during this period, blamed religion for the ruin of the national dynasty and sought to regain power by advocating a return to the Confucian orthodoxy of the Han. This was the beginning of Han-hsüeh, “national studies” (a term we in the West translate as Chinese Studies or Sinology!), which returned the Classics to favor and rejected Taoism entirely.

Historical and philological studies, undertaken due to this national reawakening of the literati, almost completely ignored religious literature. When, during the eighteenth century, the great imperial library was constituted and the texti recepti of all the ancient writings were collated, Taoist books were virtually excluded. At the beginning of the present century, the Taoist Canon, long forgotten, survived only in one complete copy.32

An alliance was drawn up—a marriage of reason more than one of love—between the officials and Western Christianity. Together they fought the T'ai-p'ing rebellion (1851–1864), that pitiful religious war led by a novice who had become the Chinese Christ and who retained of the ancient ideal only the name, Great Peace. Indeed, the first great destruction of the Taoist sanctuaries was inflicted by the T'ai-p'ings in the name of Christian truth to combat “superstition.” Hundreds of magnificent architectural complexes—among them the Mountain of the Dragon and the Tiger, the thirteenth-century residence of the Heavenly Master—were entirely devastated. No one at that time, except some
among the working classes, considered restoring these prestigious monuments, which were as old as the gothic cathedrals of Europe—and this at a time when Viollet-le-Duc was undertaking the restoration of the Notre-Dame cathedral in Paris!

This destruction was followed by so many others that it would be tedious to enumerate them. Let me say simply that each time there was a turning point, each time China passed through a stage towards its modern destiny, the old religion was persecuted. The reformers of 1885 tried to confiscate all the surviving or reconstructed temples to turn them into public buildings, schools, and hospitals, often a function they already served on a voluntary and religious basis. The Republic of 1912 continued this program. A spontaneous upsurge for a national renaissance in 1917, officially termed the "Fourth May Movement," furnished the occasion for the confiscation by the state of all property of popular religious associations, thereby condemning most temples to ruin. A Christian warlord had all the sanctuaries in South China, however small, destroyed. In the 1920s, the "New Life" movement drafted students to go out on Sundays to destroy the statues and furnishings of the temples outside the capitals of Nanking and Peking. And so it went. By the time the Communists took power, only a few great Buddhist and Taoist monasteries remained. The monks and nuns were then expelled. A few of the most prestigious monasteries and temples were designated historical monuments; the rest were left to fall into neglect. During the land reform all sanctuaries that did not belong to other religions were placed under the authority of the newly founded official Taoist Association (Chung-kuo Tao-chiao hsieh-hui). But this body was unable to fulfill its task as keeper of holy places, for almost all remaining popular temples (about three hundred in Peking, where a century before there had been almost a thousand, and around fifty of the original two hundred in Shanghai) were requisitioned as army barracks or government offices, or else taken over by factories and workshops. Most festivals, all acts of worship, and even the burning of incense—which is one of the oldest forms of Taoist practice—were marked as "superstitious" and therefore forbidden.

The Cultural Revolution (1964–1974) completed the destruction. What for the Jesuits in the sixteenth century had been only a pious vow finally seemed realized: the ancient Chinese religion—like the ancient religions of Greece and Rome—had virtually ceased to exist, and the world was none the wiser. 33

And yet, as the following chapters will show, Taoism is not dead. It
survives, poor and maligned, but also astonishingly vivacious, in the peasant communities of Taiwan, in the fishing villages of Hong Kong, and on the Chinese mainland where it has increasingly surfaced during the last few years. In the coastal provinces of Canton and Fukien the newly acquired economic prosperity finds its expression in the restoration of the temples. In Fukien they are being rebuilt in granite "so that they will not burn again." The festivals and pilgrimages are also coming back. In the cities, wherever the local political structures so allow, branches of the Taoist Association are set up. Careful but stubborn attempts are being made by this Association to retrieve the holy places which, according to the 1952 cadastre, belong to Taoism. Often the places of worship have been hopelessly destroyed, but in these cases, there are certain possibilities for monetary compensation, which can be used for the training of the descendants of the traditional Taoist families. Everywhere in China the manuscripts which survived the Cultural Revolution are being collected and recopied. For the time being, however, the liturgical lay associations, as well as the celebration of the age-old rituals of the Heavenly Master, remain forbidden.

On the surface, there appears to be little left of Taoism. The Masters are much less openly active and vocal than the Buddhists or the Roman Catholics, let alone the Muslims. Taoism never did have any strong organization. However, it is present in today's China in manifold and sometimes quite unexpected ways. One of the major forms of its revival is to be found in the present widespread enthusiasm for the health and longevity practices that go under the name of \textit{ch'i-kung} (spelled \textit{qigong} in modern Chinese transcription), exercises of the vital breath or energy. The \textit{ch'i-kung} masters may well officially minimize any relation between their art and Taoism; however, the numerous publications—books as well as periodicals—published on the subject of \textit{ch'i-kung} in China devote a great amount of space to Taoism, its history, and its sacred books. The same holds true for the practice of Chinese medicine and for Chinese arts and sciences in general: one only has to scratch the surface in order to find living Taoism. Thus Taoism remains present, today as in former times, in the daily life of the people and maintains its highest goal: Long Life.