



Background Information on Daoism

Directions: The following information will help your group create a character collage on Daoism. Each group member reads a section of the handout and leads a discussion of the questions following that section.

Daoism (pronounced *DOW-ism*) is a belief system based largely on the *Daodejing*, or “The Way and Its Power,” a sacred text that many believe was written by Laozi (pronounced *LAU-zzz*), a legendary sage (wise person). Laozi, whose Chinese name translates to “wise, old master,” is believed to have lived from 606 to 530 B.C. and to have been the first Daoist philosopher. Laozi lived during troubled times in China. The Zhou empire was weakening and could not assure security for the Chinese people. Laozi concluded that people should be able to find happiness and peace within themselves, rather than depending on success and wealth. He wrote the *Daodejing* to guide people on how to live and find happiness.

Laozi thought the goal of life was to achieve oneness with the Dao (the Way), a universal force connected to nature that cannot be defined, only experienced and felt. Daoism teaches that humans should see themselves as part of nature. The only true rules and laws, according to Laozi, are the rules and laws of nature, or Dao. To discover how to behave, Daoists believe people should observe nature and try to live in harmony with it. To discover how nature acts, taught Laozi, sit by a river, feel a breeze, and observe a drifting cloud. In doing so, one notices that nothing in nature strives for fame, power, or knowledge. The river, the breeze, and the stream move without effort because they follow the Dao, the way of nature that guides all things. Similarly, a simple creature like a squirrel is naturally wise because it does not argue or strive for personal glory. The squirrel simply follows the Dao of its nature.

Likewise, Laozi felt that the small agricultural villages in which most Chinese lived were ideal communities. These villages had little government or formal education systems, and villagers lived in harmony with the agricultural cycles on which their lives depended. He believed that these communities would remain happy and prosperous if left to themselves, rather than controlled by intellectuals and government officials.



- How did Laozi believe that people should find happiness?
- What is the Dao?
- According to Daoists, how should people discover how to behave?
- Why did Laozi feel small agricultural villages were ideal communities?

According to Laozi, to achieve oneness with the Dao, individuals should contemplate (think about) nature and lead a balanced life in tune with nature. Daoism teaches that harmony comes from balancing the opposite forces of nature, called *yin* and *yang*. A classic Daoist metaphor is a simple bowl: the yang is the clay that makes up the bowl, but the bowl’s true usefulness lies in the yin, the empty space, the nothing at its center. Laozi taught that it is impossible to have good without bad, beauty without ugliness, or pleasure without pain.

Because Daoists see good and bad as connected they try to accept both, neither bragging about good fortune nor complaining about bad fortune. All things that occur are accepted as part of the balance of yin and yang.



- What are yin and yang?
- Why do Daoists accept all things that occur?

Laozi was opposed to organized government, but he knew that lords and emperors would not disappear and leave people to govern themselves. Rather, he believed that the Dao contained rules by which rulers should govern. The most important principle of Daoism for the ruler to follow was what Laozi called *wuwei* (pronounced *woo-way*), which translates as “action through non-action.” Rather than attempting to take control and guide the people, a ruler should take very little action and only support the people in achieving what they naturally desire. Just as a farmer cannot force a plant to grow, Laozi thought that a ruler cannot force the people to prosper. A plant grows best on its own, and excessive prodding from the farmer only hurts it. Likewise, people already know how to live, and a ruler who makes too many laws will only interfere and cause problems. Daoists believe the principle of *wuwei* can be applied to all areas of life.

Since Laozi’s time, Daoist philosophy has been an important influence on Chinese culture, and it continues to be. Chinese people have survived difficult periods in recent Chinese history by practicing *wuwei*, not trying to take control of the situation, but rather waiting for the situation to pass. One can also see Daoist influence in how nature is portrayed in Chinese landscape paintings, which show serene mountains (yin) contrasted with violent storms (yang). The paintings often include humans, but always as small beings living in harmony with a natural world, which is depicted as larger and more powerful.



- How did Laozi believe a ruler should rule?
- What is *wuwei*? How does it relate to Daoism?
- How does Daoism influence Chinese society today?

Quotes from the Teachings of Laozi

Quote 1: *“Highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefiting the myriad creatures without contending with them and settles where none would like to be, it comes close to the Way.”*

Quote 2: *“The more laws and edicts are imposed, the more thieves and bandits there will be.”*

Quote 3: *“Of the best rulers the people only know that they exist; the next best they love and praise; the next they fear; and the next they revile. When the best rulers have done their task, the people all remark, ‘We have done it ourselves!’”*