

UNIT 3 TOPIC 2 LAO ZI AND DAOISM

Pre-knowledge

Before class, students should read Unit 3 Topic 2 and watch some videos or read up some information on Lao Zi to find out who he is and have a basic understanding of his philosophy.

Aim and Objectives

Topic 2 aims to provide students with some knowledge of Lao Zi's life and the core concepts of his philosophy. It will also equip them with some knowledge of the development of Daoism and its influence and impact on the daily lives of the Chinese, Chinese culture and Chinese art. They will also learn about other famous Daoists.

Teaching and Learning Activities

Created by Lao Zi and developed by his followers, Daoism played an important part in the development of the Chinese society. Considered as both a philosophy and a religion, Daoism has had a great influence on Chinese culture and the daily lives of the Chinese.

Activity 1

Have your students prepare a PowerPoint presentation on what they know about Lao Zi and his life. Each presentation should last about five minutes.

Activity 2

Have your students learn about the *Dao De Jing* from <http://zhongwen.com/dao.htm> and then have a class discussion on what the book is about and its significance in Chinese history.

Activity 3

Ask your students to each write down five sentences from the *Dao De Jing* and explain their meanings. They have to also analyse the core concepts of Daoism that are underlined by the quotes.

Activity 4

Divide your students into groups of three or four and have a group discussion on the importance of Daoism in China and the role of Daoism in the world. Each group will then prepare a summary of their discussion and present it to the class.

Activity 5

Ask your students to research various resources to find out how Daoism became a religion and the similarities and differences between Daoism as a philosophy and Daoism as a religion. They then have to present a summary of their findings to the class.

Activity 6

Pair your students up and have each pair interview 10 Chinese and 10 non-Chinese in their communities to find out how much they know about Lao Zi and Daoism. Each pair will then report their findings to the class.

Activity 7

Divide your class into two groups to research various resources to prepare for a class debate on this topic: Does Daoism still have any value in the modern society? Encourage them to look at the arguments both for and against.

Activity 8

Building on Activity 7, each student is required to write a 600-word newspaper article on his/her reflection on Daoism.

Activity 9

Have your students do Exercise 2 of the Workbook according to your teaching needs and progress.

Resources/Materials

Apart from those listed in the activities, you may also consult these resources/materials:

1. Adler, J. A. (2002), *Chinese Religions*. London: Routledge.
2. Ames, R. & Hall, D. (2003), *Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*. Ballantine Books.
3. Csikszentmihalyi, M. & Ivanhoe, P. J. (eds.) (1999), *Religious and Philosophical Aspects of the Laozi*. SUNY Press.
4. Little, S. & Eichman, S. (2000), *Taoism and the Arts of China*. University of California Press.
5. Lagerwey, J. (1987), *Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History*. Macmillan Publishing Company.
6. Wang, Jianyu & Stringer, L. A. (2000), "The Impact of Taoism on Chinese Leisure". *World Leisure Journal*. 42(3), 11 March, 2011. pp. 33-41.
7. Wu, Kuang-Ming (1982), *Chuang Tzu: World Philosopher at Play*. Crossroads Publishing & Scholars Press.

Assessment

1. Collect the notes taken by your students during all group and class discussions.
2. Prepare some questions and assess your students when they answer them verbally.
3. Students are required to prepare a PowerPoint presentation to show their understanding of the core concepts of Daoism.
4. Students are asked to hand in the findings of their interviews when they have done Activity 6.
5. Students are required to write a newspaper article on their reflection on Daoism.

Workbook Answer Key

1. Internet Search
What do you know about Lao Zi's life? Find out some interesting facts about him and share them with your classmates.

Suggested video: *EASTERN PHILOSOPHY – Lao Tzu*

Published by The School of Life on November 21, 2014
Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFb7Hxva5rg>

According to *Shi Ji* (史记), Lao Zi was born in the State of Chu (楚国), the present Henan and Hubei Provinces. His family name was Li while Dan (聃) was his designation.

Legend has it that he was born after spending 81 years in his mother's womb, for which he was called Lao Zi, literally 'old child'.

When he realised the Zhou Dynasty was on the verge of collapse, Lao Zi embarked on a journey to the west, travelling to the Hangu Pass (函谷关) to enter the State of Qin, where he met Yin Xi (尹喜), guardian of the pass, who insisted that he write a book on his philosophy before he would let him through.

Lao Zi then began writing the book that would eventually become the *Dao De Jing*, a philosophical account of his take on *Dao* (道, Way) and *De* (德, Virtue). Upon completing the book, the wise old man was then granted access through the pass. Nobody knew his whereabouts thereafter.

2. What is the relationship between Lao Zi and Daoism?

Daoism is one of the main religions in China. Established in late Han Dynasty, Daoism has three key aspects, namely philosophy, meditative practice and folk religion. Daoism as a philosophy is best known in the West through the book *Dao De Jing*, which is attributed to Lao Zi. In Lao Zi's philosophy, one had to live in harmony with the natural world – there is a virtuous way people should follow. He was more concerned with self-contemplation than with relationships, as compared to practitioners of Confucianism. Politics and purely logical thought were rejected as pointless, because they were thought not to lead to harmony and peace.

Roughly meaning the "Way", the term *Dao* reflects the chief Daoist principle of "finding the correct path through life". However, it is more dynamic than just a fixed path – it adapts and changes constantly in order to achieve an equitable balance. As Daoism incorporates the contemplative study of nature, it is from the Daoist strand of Chinese philosophy that scientific inquiry developed. Many Daoist scientists made important discoveries, some as alchemists seeking out the elixir of immortal life but incidentally contributing to the work of chemistry and physics.

3. Pair Work

What are the core concepts of Lao Zi's philosophy? Can you think of ways they can be applied to one's life in today's context?

The core concepts are: Do-nothingness (无为之道), the balance of Yin and Yang (阴阳调和), Being (有) and Non-being (无).

The state of Do-nothingness is effortless, but arriving at this state usually requires effort. To understand it, we can think of the state of Do-nothingness as our breathing and the beating of our heart. These are actions that take place naturally without intervention, although they are physiological phenomena we have little control over.

When applying the concept of Do-nothingness, it is important to note that it is not about doing nothing at all. Rather, it is about non-striving. One does things so spontaneously and appropriately that things happen looking as though no effort has been put in.

If the universe is an ocean of energy, then it is made up of two fundamental forces, namely *Yin* and *Yang*. *Yin* is the energy that is passive and negative, and *Yang* the active and positive. They are in every existence of the universe, found everywhere and in everything. For example, it can help us manage our personal strengths. Taking the *Yin-Yang* perspective, our weakness can also be our strength. Likewise, no matter how powerful one is, one is bound to have his weaknesses and he must know what they are. Every weakness has the potential of being transformed into a strength.

This is a useful analogy in understanding the concept of being and non-being: A teapot is useful not for what we can see. It is useful for what we cannot see, its emptiness. What we can see in a teapot is the being, but it is the non-being, the emptiness that we cannot see, that makes a teapot useful. By extension, a person is useful not for his looks but his ambition and creativity; he is useful not for his skills but the mind that directs the use of these skills.

4. Explain, in a diagram, the relationship between the unnameable and non-being and the nameable and being. Write down a short description of this relationship.

Refer to page 132 of the Textbook.

5. What is Daoism? Name a famous Daoist besides Lao Zi. Explain briefly his beliefs.

For Daoism, refer to the suggested answer for Question 2.

Other Daoists:

1. Zhuang Zi (庄子, 369-286 BC)

A native of the State of Song (宋国), on the border between present-day Shandong and Henan Provinces, Zhuang Zi was said to have lived as a hermit. The collection of essays attributed to him, the *Chuang-tzu*, is distinguished by its brilliant and original style, with abundant use of satire, paradoxes and seemingly nonsensical stories.

Zhuang Zi emphasised the relativity of all ideas and conventions that were the basis of judgements and distinctions. He proposed identifying with the universal *Dao*, or the principle of nature, as the solution to all of the problems of the human race. However, he was less political in his orientation than Lao Zi.

2. Zhang Daoling (张道陵, 34-156)

Zhang Daoling was the founder and first patriarch of organised religious Daoism. He composed a Daoist work that attracted many followers among the Chinese and indigenous groups in Sichuan Province. Like contemporary Daoists, he promised longevity and physical immortality. However, he emphasised the importance of religious organisation and founded the Five Pecks of Rice Movement (五斗米道). Using the *Dao De Jing* as a basic text, Zhang Daoling wrote commentaries on it, interpreting it to suit his organisation's needs. This collection of commentaries came to be known as *Xiang Er* (老子想尔注).

3. Zhang Sanfeng (张三丰)

Zhang Sanfeng was a semi-mythical Daoist priest who is believed by some to have achieved immortality. There are many versions of when he lived – during late Song Dynasty and during the Yuan Dynasty or Ming Dynasty. As a legendary cultural hero, Zhang Sanfeng, whose original name before he became a Daoist is thought to be Zhang Junbao (张君宝), is credited by modern practitioners with having created the concepts of Nei Jia (内家, Nèi Jiā), a type of martial arts. In particular, Taiji Quan (太极拳) is associated with his mastery of Daoist Tao Yin (内功) principles. As a legend, he is also associated with the Daoist monasteries at Wudang Mountains (武当山) in Hubei Province.

6. Internet Search + Pair Work

With a partner, find out more about the influence of Daoism on Chinese culture and the everyday life of the Chinese. Write down some key points and support them with examples.

The influence of Daoism on the lives of the Chinese is evident. This folk religion is more common in the rural regions among peasants and includes ancestor worship, palm reading and Feng Shui. In modern times, many Chinese practise Taiji or Qigong. These two types of exercises, which have their roots in Daoism, are especially popular among older women, who can be seen practising in groups after sunrise in public places all over China.

Some Daoists believe in prolonging life or achieving immortality through internal and external techniques. Some worship gods and idols who represent historical or immortal figures and folk gods. This deistic type of Daoism is more common among Chinese in places like Hong Kong and Taiwan, which are outside the officially atheistic and materialistic Mainland China. Some temples in Hong Kong and Taiwan are popular, big and well organised.

7. Group/Pair Work

What is *Dao De Jing*? What is the main content of the book? Write down some key points of what you discussed.

The *Dao De Jing* is a book of verses covering several central aspects of Daoism, such as action, the duality of nature, knowledge and virtue.

The essence of *Dao De Jing* and Daoism lies in *Dao*, an abstract concept most commonly translated as the “Way”. *Dao* refers, in rough terms, to the natural order and progression of the universe. *Dao* is unified, eternal and indescribable. Daoism describes nature as the interaction of two opposite but complementary forces. In the practice of Daoism, the goal is to harmonise oneself with *Dao* and consequently with nature and the universe.

8. Why is Daoism also considered a religion? What does it entail as a religion?

Daoism is often taught in the West as an atheist or agnostic philosophy. However, in mainland China and Taiwan, in particular, Daoism continues to function like any other conventional religion and not as an abstract philosophy of life.

There are a host of gods and goddesses believers worship and many Daoist temples and monasteries they do so at. There are also many priests who would conduct Daoist rituals and ceremonies. These are as vital to the survival of Daoism as individual understanding and practice.

Religious Daoism follows two main traditions, each with a clear hierarchical and well-organised structure with its own set of rules, guidelines, ordination rites and registration procedures:

- The Celestial Masters (天师), which is centred in Taiwan;
- The Complete Perfection School (全真派), which has its headquarters in Beijing; this school ordains people and provides monastic communities as a focus for Daoist practice and rituals.

Daoist priests undergo long and intense training to acquire the necessary skills. They must study music, liturgy and ritual, as well as meditation and other physical practices. They must also learn Daoist theology and the spiritual hierarchy of the Daoist deities. While undergoing training, they have to live highly disciplined lives.

The Daoist traveller makes such journeys through ritual, meditation and visualisation, which separate them from this world and harmonise them with the energy flows of the universe. These journeys gradually move them closer and closer to the *Dao* itself.

9. What is the connection between Daoism and the surname 李?

Lao Zi had another name, Li Er (李耳), which carried the surname 李.

10. Prepare a PowerPoint presentation on a comparison of Daoism and Confucianism.

Confucianism and Taoism are both ancient Chinese ways of life. Confucianism emphasises the relationship between man and society while Daoism focuses on that between man and nature.

Confucianism is mainly concerned with social virtues and ethics and their impact on the relationship between a man and his society. In Daoism, the individual's relationship with *Dao*, or the way of nature, takes precedence.

Note: All URLs listed herein were ascertained to be accessible on 9 September, 2020.