

T A O I S I N I

TAOISM

The Quest For Immortality

JOHN BLOFELD



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'From the Tao all the myriad objects derive their being, their illusory separateness being wrought by the interplay of yin and yang.'

Taoism, born amidst the shining mists that shroud civilization's earliest beginnings, is a living manifestation of a way of life that has almost vanished from the world. It combines folklore, occult sciences, cosmology, yoga, meditation, poetry, quietist philosophy and exalted mysticism, and teaches how human beings can ascend from mortal to immortal state.

Lao-tzù said that the Tao (Way) was best described as the Nameless, since nothing can be said of it that does not detract from its fullness. Yet in this book John Blofeld provides a comprehensive introduction to 'that which cannot be named' – the Way that is a shining fulfilment of man's spiritual destiny.

*To Huang Chung-liang (Al Huang)
of the Living Tao Foundation
and to my daughter Hsüeh-Ch'an (Susan),
also called Snow Beauty*

John Blofeld devoted a lifetime to the study of Eastern traditions, was fluent in Chinese and wrote several books. He is well known for his translations from Chinese, including his popular *I Ching: The Chinese Book of Change*. He died in Thailand in 1987.

Foreword

Taoism – ancient, mysterious, charmingly poetic – born amidst the shining mists that shroud civilisation’s earliest beginnings, is a living manifestation of an antique way of life almost vanished from the world. Now that the red tide has engulfed its homeland, who knows its further destiny or whether even tiny remnants of it will survive? For people who recognise the holiness of nature and desire that spirit should triumph over the black onrush of materialism, it is a treasure-house wherein, amidst curiously wrought jewels of but slight intrinsic value, are strewn precious pearls and rare, translucent jades. Folklore, occult sciences, cosmology, yoga, meditation, poetry, quietist philosophy, exalted mysticism – it has them all. These are the gifts accumulated by the children of the Yellow Emperor during no less than five millenia. The least of them are rainbow-hued and the very stuff of myth and poetry; the most precious is a shining fulfilment of man’s spiritual destiny, a teaching whereby humans can ascend from mortal to immortal state and dwell *beyond* the gods!

How strange that, with the single exception of the philosophy of those delightful sages, Lao and Chuang, so little of this has hitherto been touched upon in Western languages! Of Lao-tzû’s *Tao Tê Ching* there are over fifty(!) translations and Chuang-tzû’s work has begun to receive a modicum of the attention it deserves, but what of all the rest of Taoism? It seems that, by an ironic twist of fate, Taoists are still paying for their temerity in laughing at the humourless rectitude of the Confucian establishment that was itself swept away at the beginning of this century. Smiling individualists who, like the young people of the world today, mocked rigidity and pomposity in all its forms, they were smeared by the ruling hierarchy as people lost in superstition fit only for illiterate peasants; and the fiction that Taoism has no more to offer than picturesque but worthless superstitions has somehow stuck until today – just as, until very recently, Tibetan Buddhism was held to be Buddhism in its most degraded form! Ha ha ha ha ha! Curiously, though both Chinese and Western scholars have scornfully echoed the Confucian strictures on Taoism as a system utterly debased, I have rarely met anyone who, prior to the coming of the red flood, actually visited Taoist hermit-

ages for more than a day or so to discover for themselves what went on there. As for me, I did quite often visit those remote and delightfully situated places and I arrived at the conclusion that, though the obloquy hurled at Taoism is occasionally justified, it is flagrantly false in most cases.

My first surprise was to discover that, despite a widespread supposition, Lao and Chuang were not the actual founders of Taoism, but notable blossoms on a tree hoary with age even in their day – around two and a half millenia ago! Indeed, Chuang-tzû himself makes frequent, if ironic, mention of its traditional founder, Huang Ti, the Yellow Emperor. Whether or not that excellent monarch ever existed as a *person* is beside the point. The dates of his reign (2697–2597 BC) place him in an epoch so remote and allow him to have reigned so long that it seems fair enough to regard him as a largely if not wholly mythical figure. But then? Supposing there never was such a person, the poetic legends surrounding him have endowed him with reality, and why should he not be accepted as an apt symbolic representative of the shadowy founders of Taoism long lost to sight in the darkness of prehistory? His followers speak of him poetically as a person. Would it hurt us to go along with them as we have gone along with the Romans in according a place in our history books to Romulus and Remus? The Taoists themselves like to refer to their system of belief as ‘Huang Lao’, thus honouring both Huang Ti (the Yellow Emperor) *and* Lao-tsû as their founders. This makes a lot more sense than saying that Taoism has degenerated from what it never was in the first place.

As I have said, by no means all Huang Lao beliefs and practices are of great worth. Some are too bizarre to call for more than a smile, which is scarcely surprising when one considers their enormous antiquity; yet, embedded in much charming moonshine is a precious core of wisdom and exalted spiritual aspiration so striking as to make me almost ready to believe that an ‘Ancient Wisdom’ was once dispersed throughout the world of which scattered fragments still remain. Huang Lao Taoism may be thought of as a kingdom wherein peasant-like naivety prevails throughout the far-flung provinces; in the central area lies a smiling parkland embellished with hills and streams where poets and lovers of nature’s mysteries roam; and, in the midst of this, stands a citadel of wisdom so sublime as to lead beyond the world of mortals to the secret heart of Being. Strangers

entering that kingdom without credentials are not likely to penetrate to the citadel without some effort (and courtesy!) on their part.

Even those Huang Lao beliefs that strike us as pure moonshine are touched with the magic of poetry and have long been a rich source of inspiration to painters, calligraphers and carvers of ivory and jade. They are rarely without charm and almost never ugly.

My earlier book of Taoism, *The Secret and Sublime*, was in most respects very different from this one; for when I wrote it I had little more to draw upon than recollections of my visits to hermitages tucked deep among the mountains and imperfectly remembered conversations with the lovable recluses dwelling there. I could speak only in very general terms about Taoist yoga and other matters pertaining to the spiritual path known as cultivation of the Way, for my primary interest in Buddhism had led me to neglect some unique opportunities of studying living Taoism thoroughly. This defect has since been repaired thanks to an invaluable gift sent to me by one of my former Chinese students – a book published by the Chung Hwa Book Company, Taipei, Taiwan, Republic of China, entitled *Tao-Chia Yü Shên-Hsien (Taoist Philosophers and Immortals)* by Chou Shao-hsien. The *Tao Tsang* or Taoist Canon, consisting of 5,485 volumes, is so vast that an Englishman with an imperfect knowledge of Chinese like myself could be excused for not even dreaming of plumbing its mysteries. Mr Chou Shao-hsien, however, has obviously spent many decades on that task, for his book contains the quintessence of what is to be found there. For various reasons it is not suitable for translation, unless for a very select English-reading public with a thorough knowledge of Chinese history and much else besides, but as source material it is invaluable, the more so as it contains carefully documented quotations from all the great Taoist masters through the ages. With that and some other works to fall back on and my own memories to lend colour to the scene, I have been able to write much more authentically of Taoism than before. To the best of my knowledge, the present work is the first attempt ever made to give a comprehensive sketch in English of Huang Lao Taoism as a whole.

The cream of my researches, of which the principal source is Mr Chou's work, will be found in the eighth and ninth chapters. The precious eight-stage Yoga of Immortality detailed in Chapter 8 can be practised to perfection only with the guidance of a gifted teacher; certain omissions have been inevitable, for the yoga is a secret one

and some of its essentials can never have been committed to writing. Alas, Taoist teachers these days are almost as rare as horns on a rabbit or dugs on a serpent; even so, the written instructions are far from useless; even though they do not reveal all secrets, they can lead to a state of spiritual exaltation, whether the yoga is practised on its own as originally intended or as a support to some other meditative or yogic practice (Taoist, Buddhist or otherwise) of the yogin's own choosing. It is not impossible that this yoga, if carried out with unwavering determination by one who has truly mastered the art of stillness, will lead to the glorious spiritual apotheosis set forth in Chapter 9, that of expanding the yogin's being to include the entire universe – the most dazzling prospect ever held up to man!

I am immensely grateful to that devoted scholar, Chou Shao-hsien, whose book may do much to assist Taoism to survive these days of peril. To him I owe not only most of the yogic knowledge just mentioned, but also many of the quotations from the Taoist Canon scattered throughout this book, some of the details embodied in my text (such as the description of the Shantung coast opposite the Isles of the Immortals), and all the poems in my chapter on the Poetry of Stillness. I also offer my warmest thanks to Burton Watson from whose translation of Chuang-tzû I have, as on a previous occasion, borrowed extensively. Both these men richly deserve the honorary title of Immortal and who knows but that they will attain true immortality by virtue of their learning and wisdom? I greatly appreciate the kindness of the Chung Hwa Book Company and the Columbia University Press in permitting me to make use of Mr Chou's and Dr Watson's works respectively.

Among English works I have consulted, the following may be of interest to readers who would like to know more of various aspects of Taoism:

Yoga

Taoist Yoga by Lu K'uan-yu (Allen & Unwin); *Sexual Life in Ancient China* by Robert Van Gulik (Brill, Leyden).

Philosophy

Truth and Nature, a particularly enlightening translation of the *Tao Tê Ching* by Chêng Lin (Wan Kuo Shu Tien, Hong Kong); *Lao Tzû: Tao Te Ching* by D. C. Lau (Penguin); *Chuang-Tzû* by Burton Watson (Columbia).

Folklore

The Eight Immortals by T. C. Lai (Swindon, Hong Kong).

Magic

Tao Magic by Lazzlo Legezzo (Panther) – a most excellent book!

Art

Creativity and Taoism by Chang Chung-yuan (Harper Row).

General

Taoism by Holmes Welch (Beacon Press); *The Secret and Sublime* by John Blofeld (Allen & Unwin and also Dutton).

The list is short, but could not be greatly lengthened, except under the heading 'Philosophy', for that is the only aspect of Taoism on which many works are available in English and even these are largely confined to just one subject, the *Tao Tê Ching*. Much remains to be written on the subjects of Taoist yoga and mysticism especially. Taoist magic and Taoist art are other fruitful fields. If some Taoist beliefs strike us as naive, that naivety is more than redeemed by poetic charm. Going further, one may taste the cool tranquility of philosophers and poets enraptured by nature's mysteries, glean yogic knowledge of true worth and, in the end, learn how to mount upon a dragon, soar above the clouds to the palaces of immortals and, having supped with them on wind and dew or powdered moonbeams, penetrate to the very source of Being – the immaculate, undifferentiated Tao! *This can be done!*

JOHN BLOFELD, who once received a cherished title he would wish to revive – the 'Ox-Head Recluse'

The Garden of Immortals
Mid-Autumn Festival
4673rd Year since the
Accession of the Yellow
Emperor (1976)

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Tables Pertaining to the Wu Hsing Five Activities (Science)

A brief account of the science of *wu hsing* will be found in Chapter 1. The following tables are provided mainly for the convenience of users of the *I Ching* (*Book of Change*). With the help of Table 1, trigrams forming the lower and upper sections of a hexagram can be related to the appropriate *hsing* and these *hsing* will provide additional data on the hexagram's significance, which may be incorporated in the final reading or be taken into consideration during the process of interpreting the hexagram.

The science of *wu hsing* is often practised independently of the *I Ching*, but involves matters unfamiliar to most Westerners and not easy to deal with in a few pages. For what it is worth, therefore, I pass on the suggestion of a Vietnamese friend which, he claims, will obviate the need for special knowledge:

The *wu hsing* science enables mortals to understand, foresee and to some extent manipulate the unfolding of events. Normally, a professor of this science is called upon to identify the various *hsing* involved in a sequence of events, their relative strengths, mutual relationships and so on. In the absence of an expert, one may use coins or yarrow stalks to obtain *I Ching* trigrams, one for each component of the situation to be studied. These trigrams will indicate which *hsing* are involved. By studying the relationships among these *hsing* [from the tables] and giving more or less weight to each in accordance with the corresponding components of the situation, it is possible to discover how things are likely to turn out and what steps must be taken in order to alter the result in the manner desired. Thus, whereas the expert determines the *hsing* involved and their relative weight *vis à vis* one another

by a hundred different means for which specialised wisdom and knowledge are required, the amateur can obtain the same results much more simply.

Table 1 *I Ching Trigram Correlations*

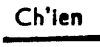
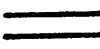


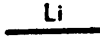
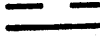


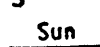

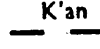
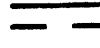

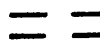

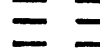
<i>Trigram</i>	<i>Hsing</i>	<i>Flourishes or dominates in</i>	<i>Declines or oppresses in</i>
1  Ch'ien  Heaven	} metal	autumn	summer
2  Tui  lake			
3  Li  fire	fire	summer	winter
4  Chên  thunder	} wood	spring	autumn
5  Sun  wind			
6  K'an  water	water	winter	turns of season
7  Kên  mountain	} earth	turns of season	spring
8  K'un  earth			

Table 2 *Wu Hsing Correspondences*

<i>Activity</i>	wood	fire	earth	metal	water
<i>Direction</i>	east	south	centre	west	north
<i>Colour</i>	blue/green	red	yellow	white	black
<i>Numbers</i>	8 and 3	2 and 7	10 and 5	4 and 9	6 and 1
<i>Climate</i>	windy	hot	wet	dry	cold
<i>Planet</i>	Jupiter	Mars	Saturn	Venus	Mercury
<i>Sound</i>	shouting	laughing	singing	weeping	groaning
<i>Virtue</i>	benevolence	propriety	faith	rectitude	wisdom
<i>Emotion</i>	anger	joy	sympathy	grief	fear
<i>Hour</i>	3-7 a.m.	9 a.m.- 1 p.m.	{ 1-3, 7-9 a.m. } { 1-3, 7-9 p.m. }	3-7 p.m.	9 p.m.- 1 a.m.
<i>Animal</i>	dragon	phoenix	ox	tiger	snake, tortoise
<i>Celestial</i>					
<i>Stem:</i>					
(yin)	<i>i</i>	<i>ting</i>	<i>chi</i>	<i>hsin</i>	<i>kuei</i>
(yang)	<i>chia</i>	<i>ping</i>	<i>wu</i>	<i>kêng</i>	<i>jên</i>
<i>Terrestrial</i>					
<i>Branches:</i>	<i>yin, mao</i>	<i>ssü, wu</i>	<i>ch'ou, wei,</i> <i>ch'ên, hsü</i>	<i>shên, yu</i>	<i>tzü, hai</i>
<i>Zodiac</i>	{ Gemini, Cancer	{ Virgo, Libra	{ Taurus, Leo, Scorpio, Aquarius	{ Sagittarius, Capricorn	{ Aries, Pisces

Table 3 *Normal Wu Hsing Interrelationships*

(< symbolises 'gives birth to', 'produces', 'assists'; > symbolises 'checks', 'opposes', 'harms', 'destroys'; † symbolises 'is subjugated by').

metal < water < wood < fire < earth < metal
 metal > wood > earth > water > fire > metal
 metal † fire † water † earth † wood † metal

Table 4 *Metrical Verse Showing Correspondences between the Hsing and the Seasons.*

In spring, the trees are clad in dazzling green; (wood)
 In summer, blazing sunshine lights the scene; (fire)
 While melancholy autumn's tints are gold, (metal)
 And streams are frozen hard by winter's cold. (water)
 Through all the seasons, earth remains serene. (earth)

Table 5 *Further Seasonal Correspondences*

In spring	wood	burgeons,	fire	aids,	water	rests,	metal's	stopped,	earth	'dies'.
In summer	fire		„	„	earth	„	„	wood	„	„
In autumn	metal		„	„	water	„	„	earth	„	„
In winter	water		„	„	wood	„	„	metal	„	„
			„	„	„	„	„	earth	„	„
			„	„	„	„	„	fire	„	„

Note. This table makes it obvious that *hsing* ought not to be rendered 'element'. Elements do not die, but activities can do so. The meaning is that, during each season, one activity is dominant, a second helpful to it, a third neutral, a fourth temporarily blocked, a fifth ceases to act.

Table 6 *Further Interrelationships among the Hsing*

This will be found the most useful table of all, either for shedding additional light upon hexagrams received in answer to inquiries made during divination with the *I Ching*, always taking the lower trigram as representing the primary activity and the upper trigram, as subsidiary to it; or for divining the outcome of a situation in the light of the *hsing* alone. In the latter case, a trigram is obtained with yarrow stalks or coins to represent each person and each factor involved in the situation; the *hsing* should be weighed against one another in accordance with (a) their interrelationships and (b) the relative importance, sequence and relationships of the factors in the situation to which each pertains.

The data given in verse 1 reveals a favourable relationship between two *hsing* that may be seriously upset if the second of a pair is present in overwhelming strength. The data in verse 2 reveal the unfavourable consequences of activities good in themselves if they are carried to excess. Verse 3 reveals that there are circumstances in which the normal relationships between *hsing* may be reversed. Verse 4 indicates unfavourable circumstances for which there is no remedy. Verse 5 reveals that, where one *hsing* is present in very great strength, it is immune from the effects of one of the other four, except in the case of fire with earth.

1	a	Metal	relies	on	earth	for	birth;	but	where	earth's	aplenty	metal	'dies'.
	b	Earth	„	„	fire	„	„	„	„	fire	„	earth	is
													scorched.
	c	Fire	„	„	wood	„	„	„	„	wood	„	fire	blazes.
	d	Wood	„	„	water	„	„	„	„	water	„	wood	drifts.
	e	Water	„	„	metal	„	„	„	„	metal	„	water	boils.
2	a	Metal	doth	give	birth	to	water;	but	where	water's	aplenty	metal	sinks.
	b	Water	„	„	„	„	wood	„	„	wood	„	water	
													shrinks.
	c	Wood	„	„	„	„	fire	„	„	fire	„	wood	burns.
	d	Fire	„	„	„	„	earth	„	„	earth	„	fire	dies.
	e	Earth	„	„	„	„	metal	„	„	metal	„	earth	wanes.

- 3 a Metal overcometh wood; but where wood's plenty metal fails.
 b Wood " " earth " " earth " woods' destroyed.
 c Earth " " water " " water " earth floats away.
 d Water " " fire " " fire " water gleams.
 e Fire " " metal " " metal " fire's put out.
- 4 a Metal hath not the strength of fire and therefore melts.
 b Fire " " " " " water " " 'dies'.
 c Water " " " " " earth " " silts.
 d Earth " " " " " wood " " shifts.
 e Wood " " " " " metal " " falls.
- 5 a Metal, when powerful, if attacked by water can resist its fury.
 b Water, " " " " " wood dispels wood's power.
 c Wood, " " " " " fire weakens the flames' voracity.
 d Fire, " " " " " earth just moves its flames elsewhere.
 e Earth, " " " " " metal swallows the obstruction.

Example of Divination

As I am quite unskilled in this science, I shall not presume to offer examples based on my own experience; but I do recall an anecdote which indicates generally how to set about matters. In its original form, the story contained a lot more data on *hsing* than in the version that follows; the latter must be taken, therefore, only as a very general guide to the method.

Chin Hui, a district magistrate, once travelled all the way from Honan province to Mao Shan, a sacred mountain far to the south, to consult a certain Master of the Five Activities. 'My mother-in-law', he declared bluntly, 'is a tiresome hag forever interfering in my domestic affairs. My wife, though distressed on my behalf to the point of shedding tears, yields to the old harridan on every occasion, claiming that the laws of filial piety require her to put a good face on things and do what that wretch requires. As you may well imagine, my household is all at sixes and sevens. My own lictors laugh behind their sleeves whenever they hear our voices raised, which is often enough to affright the ghosts of the departed let alone all the living people within the vicinity of my *yamên* [official residence]. If things go on like this, the sacred authority vested in me by the Dragon Throne will be gone like a summer cloud or brought into contempt. Therefore have I come, and now beseech Your Immortality to pronounce a remedy.'

At this, the venerable immortal, who was having some difficulty in preserving his gravity, asked for the fullest possible details concerning His Honour's highly respected mother-in-law. It transpired that the old lady's maiden name was Li, a homonym of the *I Ching* trigram for fire, that the Celestial Stems and Terrestrial Branches indicated by her

hour and date of birth also pointed to a preponderance of fire, and that she had even managed to be born in a month of which part of the name was another homonym for fire. Naturally, varying proportions of the other *hsing* were woven into the whole, but it could not be disputed that the fire *hsing* was the main constituent of her personality and circumstances. Next to this, metal was present to a considerable extent and its proportion had been augmented somewhat by her marriage into the Chin family, since *chin* means gold, the metal of metals. As to Chin Hui's own affinities, earth predominated; metal came not far behind. The immortal, having given thought to the matter proclaimed that, since these two persons both had a secondary affinity with metal, this *hsing* could be discounted. The way to attack the problem was to concentrate upon the interrelationships between fire and earth, not altogether disregarding those between certain other *hsing* involved, but allocating to them a relatively minor importance.

'Your Honour,' he continued, 'the old saying "where fire's aplenty, earth is scorched" is a telling description of your grave predicament. Since "earth relies on fire for birth", there is nothing surprising in the old lady's running your life for you. Nevertheless, it is also written "where earth's aplenty, fire dies". There should be no difficulty in strengthening your complement of the earth *hsing*. You could, for example, wear undergarments of yellow and avoid arguments with your respected mother-in-law except during the ox, dragon, sheep and dog hours [namely from 1 to 3 and 7 to 9, both a.m. and p.m.] at which times earth predominates.' Adding various further instructions for supplementing his store of earth *hsing*, the immortal advised his distinguished client not to hesitate to shout the old lady down, provided the proper hours of the day were chosen for the purpose. 'The hour of the dog is especially propitious to such an undertaking. That is a time when it might be appropriate to pretend to lose your temper and threaten her furiously with a hundred strokes of the thick bamboo your lictors wield upon the more vicious types of criminal when so commanded by the court. Your troubles arise from your being too good-natured. From now on be careful to hide your kind heart behind the face of a scowling demon.'

Chin Hui carried out these instructions to the letter, but with an unlooked for result; for the old lady was cowed by this new treatment only for as long as it took her to realise that her son-in-law would never go so far as to use actual violence upon the body of the woman who had given birth and suck to the wife on whom he doted. Coming to this conclusion, she subjected him to even fiercer torrents of invective and more thoroughgoing interference in his domestic arrangements than before. Finally things reached such a pitch that Magistrate

Chin flew into a rage that led to his losing consciousness; and within three days he had yielded up his twin souls to the celestial and nether regions.

On hearing the distressing news of his client's demise, the Master of the Five Activities grew thoughtful. That evening, when treating his disciples to a learned discourse, he remarked: 'When the fire element rages in its fury and the earth element lacks sufficient cohesion, unless one is possessed of unusual wisdom, there is very little to be done. A sage would have succeeded where Chin failed, simply because it was in his nature to fail, just as it is in the nature of a sage to succeed in everything by going along with things instead of trying to overcome them. Nature, you will find, takes her course whether men say yea or nay.'

'Then what', inquired one of the disciples, is the purpose of our learning the science of *wu hsing*?'

'Ah well,' replied the Master, 'sometimes one can give nature a little push, if one knows the art of it; but it must be a push very nearly in the direction things were going any way. The late magistrate should have closed his ears and let the old lady talk herself to a standstill and then remarked quietly: "Do pray excuse my inattentiveness. Would you kindly go over all of that again." That is what is called "putting out the fire by exhausting the fuel".'

