

Daoism without Dao in ancient Japan

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Abstract

The current trend of the study of Daoism in ancient Japan can be divided into two aspects. One is to continue to indicate what elements of Daoism have been absorbed by ancient Japan. Researchers have consciously tried to provide more arguments on how these elements have entered and affected Japan, rather than related studies of last period. The other is to explain why Japanese envoys to Tang turned down the offer to send Daoist priests to Japan made by Emperor Xuanzong of Tang in 753. These two aspects seem self-contradictory as they show that Daoism was rejected by Japan officially but meanwhile, many elements of Daoism existed in ancient Japan. Shimode Sekiyo once figured out the kind of Daoism practiced in ancient Japan is Folk Daoism (Shimode, 1974:226). But in fact, his research could not interpret the elements of Daoism that could be found at the official level in ancient Japan. In this paper, I want to make the overall picture of Daoism in ancient Japan more clear. I focus on the understanding of Daoism by the Japanese *Ritsuryō* state 律令国家 and the founder of the Shingon Esoteric Buddhism 真言密教, Kūkai 空海(774-835), as the two subjects both have shown their understandings of Daoism as a religion. Japanese *Ritsuryō* state regarded Daoism as the religion representing Tang Dynasty and thought the content of Daoism was the methods of the Daoist master 道士法. Kūkai considered Daoism as a technique toward immortality in his essay *Sangō shiiki* 三教指歸 and chose Buddhism as his belief in the end. The common point of the two understandings of Daoism is there isn't a core divinity concept of Dao but only the techniques of Daoism. Based on this, Daoism without Dao never really existed in Japan as its own separate, organized religion although it had an unmistakable influence on Japanese religion culture via its methods of various techniques.

Introduction

The current trend of the study of Daoism in ancient Japan can be divided into two aspects. One is to continue to indicate what elements of Daoism have been absorbed by ancient Japan. Researchers have consciously tried to provide more arguments on how these elements have entered and affected Japan, rather than related studies of last period (Sakade Yoshinobu, 2009, 2010; Masuo Shin'ichirō, 2008, 2010; Matsuda Chihiro, 2010). The other is to explain why Japanese envoys to Tang turned down the offer to send Daoist priests to Japan made by Emperor Xuanzong of Tang in 753 (Shinkawa Tokio 1994, 1999; Obata Michiru 2004, 2007). These two aspects seem self-contradictory as they show that Daoism was rejected by Japan officially but meanwhile, many elements of Daoism existed in ancient Japan. Shimode Sekiyo once figured out the kind of Daoism practiced in ancient Japan is Folk Daoism (Shimode, 1974:226). But in fact, his research could not interpret the elements of Daoism that could be founded at the official level in ancient Japan. As Livia Kohn concludes in the paper *Taoism in Japan: Positions and Evaluations*, the overall picture of Taoism in Japan is still largely unexplored (Kohn, 1995:407). In order to make the overall picture of Daoism in ancient Japan more clear, I will focus on the understanding of Daoism by Japanese *Ritsuryō* state 律令国家 and the founder of the Shingon Esoteric Buddhism 真言密教, Kūkai 空海 (774-835), as the two subjects both have shown their understandings of Daoism as a religion.

Japanese Embassies to the Tang refused Daoist masters

Japanese Embassies to the Tang 遣唐使 (Kentōshi), once turned down the request, from Emperor Xuanzong of Tang, in 753, of sending Daoist masters to Japan, with the excuse that “the King of Japan has never favored the methods of the Daoist master 日本君主先不崇道士法”, but nevertheless has allowed Chun Taoyuan 春桃原 and four others to stay [in China] and study the methods of the Daoist master.¹ Based on this, it is said that the ancient Japanese government officially rejected the introduction of Daoism to Japan. Fukui Fumimasa (1995:8) describes it as a kind of common knowledge in Japanese history.

¹ refer to Marcus Bingenheimer: A Translation of the Tōdaiwajō tōseiden 唐大和上東征傳.” (Part 2) *The Indian International Journal of Buddhist Studies* No.5 (2004), 19. The original text was written by Ōmi no Mabito Mifune 淡海真人三船 (722-785), which can be found as no. 2089 (7) in volume 51 of the Taishō 大正藏.

Compared with that Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism all flourished in the High Tang, Japan in Nara period adopted Confucianism and Buddhism a lot while Daoism was not included (Wangyong 1994:53-54). The reasons have been discussed as follows. (1) The Japanese imperial court recognized Daoism in Tang as the ancestor veneration of the Tang imperial court which might threaten the Japanese imperial court's own ancestor veneration (Tōno Haruyuki 1992:218-221; Yaegashi Naohiko 2003:40-41; Shinkawa Tokio 1994:82-83). Shinkawa(1994,74) also notes the fact that the Daoist is a member of the Tang imperial court, especially during the period under Emperor Xuanzong of Tang(713-756). (2) The Japanese imperial court had come to be cautious about Daoism since "Prince Nagaya's rebellion (Nagaya-ō no hen 長屋王の変)" occurred, which is that Nagaya-ō 長屋王 was betrayed of practicing "black magic" personally to overturn the country 私学左道欲傾国家 in 729(*Shoku Nihongi*:115). Shinkawa considers the "black magic" 左道 as the behaviors related to Daoism(1994, 79-80). (3) The states around Tang adopting symbols of Daoism such as *Lao Zi* 老子 or the Tianzun Statue 天尊像, to some extent, means they are making tributes to Tang. It is because Daoism itself is regarded as the symbol of the Tang imperial court in the Tang period. Japanese government denied Daoism and Daoist for its equal diplomacy policy towards China (Obata Michiru 2007).

I agree, for the most part, with the discussion above, however, I disagree the opinion on the relation between "black magic" 左道 and Daoism by Shinkawa. I draw attention to the sentence "the King of Japan has never favored the methods of the Daoist master 日本君主先不崇道士法", which doesn't mean Japanese society didn't adopt the methods of the Daoist master. Furthermore, Japanese Embassies to the Tang tried to keep Daoist masters from Japan but didn't condemn the methods of the Daoist master itself. In fact, we can see some books of Daoism listed in *Nihon-Koku Kenzaisho Mokuroku* 日本国見在書目録, which is the oldest catalogue of imported Chinese books in Japan called "Catalogue of Writings Present in Contemporary Japan", enumerated by Fujiwara-no Sukeyo 藤原佐世 in the late 9th century(Yajima Kurosuke 1984). Most of them should be taken back by Japanese Embassies to the Tang to Japan. The point is what the methods of Daoist master 道士法 means to Japanese government in the first half of 8th century.

“Dōjutsufukin 道術符禁” in *Sōni-ryō* 僧尼令

The term "the methods of the Daoist master 道士法" could be found in the Article

“do fortune-telling 卜相吉凶” of the “Regulations Concerning Monks and Nuns (*Sōni-ryō*, 僧尼令)” in *Koki* 古記(738-740), which is a commentary on the *Taihō Code* (*Taihō-ritsuryō*, 大宝律令, 701-702). The content is “ the art of the Dao, charm and incantation is called the methods of Daoists, which is being practiced by 辛国連, 道術符禁, 謂之道士法, 今之辛国連行是也”(Ryō-no-syuge:215). Here we shall see what “Dōjutsufukin 道術符禁” exactly means from two approaches. One is where Dōjutsufukin appeared in *Sōni-ryō* and what it means. The other is what kind of arts was Karakunimuraji 辛国連 practicing during 738-740, the time *Koki* was being composed.

As for the former one, the original text of *Taihō Code* has been lost. What we can read today is the *Yōrō Code* (*Yōrō-ritsuryō*, 養老律令, compiled in 718, promulgated in 757) which is the revised version of *Taihō Code*. Unfortunately, there isn't any discussion of “Dōjutsufukin” in the article, “do fortune-telling 卜相吉凶” of *Sōni-ryō* in *Yōrō Code*: “ All the Monks and Nuns doing fortune-telling or curing illnesses with minor arts and sorcery should resume secular life. But curing diseases holding mantras in accordance with Buddhist doctrines won't be prohibited. 凡僧尼卜相吉凶, 及小道、巫術療病者, 皆還俗。其依佛法, 持咒救疾, 不在禁限。” So where should “Dōjutsufukin 道術符禁” be in the text of *Taihō Code*? Was it prohibited as a form of minor arts or sorcery?

The commentary of “Dōjutsufukin” in *Koki* is for the latter part 其依佛法, 持咒救疾, 不在禁限, following the commentary of “using mantras 持咒” and followed by the commentary of “decoction 湯藥” which can't be seen in the *Yōrō Code* version either. It is more possible that “Dōjutsufukin” appeared in the latter permitted part than in the former prohibited part (Miura Hiroyuki 1924:1118-1119; Shinkawa Tokio 1979:119). We could find the term in another commentary, *Kekki* 穴記(782-806), on *Yōrō Code* explaining the same article, “do fortune-telling” of *Sōni-ryō*. It is mentioned in the commentary of the word “sorcery 巫術”: “問, 依醫方治者何。答, 古令, 依道術符禁湯藥救療者。今除湯藥字, 明不還俗。但爲非持咒故, 合有異科”(Ryō-no-syuge:215). It is written in dialogue style to explain the law that one asked what about in the case of the Monks and Nuns curing illnesses with medical skill. The answer was as bellow, “Curing illnesses through Dōjutsufukin and decoction were both considered medical skills under the older Code. But decoction has been removed from the present Code. [The monks curing illnesses through Dōjutsufukin] doesn't need to resume secular life. However, they should be punished by the other law since [Dōjutsufukin] aren't skills of using mantras”.

These commentaries show that “Dōjutsufukin” is a sort of medical skill permitted by the Japanese government; but neither minor arts and sorcery, nor holding mantras is in

compliance with Buddhist doctrines. As for Monks and Nuns, curing illnesses through “Dōjutsufukin” was tolerated under the *Taihō* Code, Whereas less permitted under the *Yōrō* Code. The next to be taken note of is the relation between “Dōjutsufukin” as a recommended medical skill and the art practiced by Karakunimuraji 辛国連.

“Jugon 呪禁” in Tenyaku-ryō 典藥寮

Karakunimuraji 辛国連, also written as 韓国連, is an honorary surname bestowed by the Japanese emperor to the ancestor of the family who has been sent to San-kan 三韓, located in the Korean peninsula (*Shoku Nihongi*:549). We can see the name, Karakunimuraji-hiroinari 韓国連広足, in the biography of the Fujiwara family (Kaden 家伝:886) which records Karakunimuraji-hiroinari as a specialist of incantation (Jugon 呪禁) in 728. Moreover, Karakunimuraji-hiroinari should be well-known as he became the Chief of Tenyaku-ryō (Bureau of Medicine, 典藥寮) established by the Japanese Ritsuryō state, called Tenyaku-no-kami 典藥頭 in October 732(*Shoku Nihongi*:130). The art practiced by Karakunimuraji mentioned in the *Koki* as a representative example describing “Dōjutsufukin” should be the “Jugon” practiced by Karakunimuraji-hiroinari in the Tenyaku-ryō.

Thus, we can learn that the “Jugon” practiced in the Tenyaku-ryō is exactly the same content what Japanese Ritsuryō state thinks of Daoism. It also proves that the methods of Daoism actually have been used in an official institution of Japanese Ritsuryō state. Daoism in ancient Japan cannot be summarized as the above-mentioned Folk Daoism by Shimode. What is more important is that the Japanese Ritsuryō state does not treat the “Dōjutsufukin”, “Jugon” as the same skills as minor arts or sorcery. Rather, “Jugon” was recommended and implemented in a proactive way at the governmental level.

It was set up as two Jugonshi (masters of incantation 呪禁師) managing Jugon affairs: a Jugonhakase (doctor of incantation 呪禁博士) to teach Jugonsei (students of incantation 呪禁生) and six Jugonsei in the Tenyaku-ryō based on *Shikiin-ryō* (the law of officials 職員令) (*Ryō-no-syuge*:127-129). The details of Jugon can be seen in the Medical Law (*Ishitu-ryō* 医疾令), written as the methods of what students of Jugon should learn, “呪禁生, 学呪禁、解忤、持禁之法。持禁者, 持杖刀誦咒文, 作法禁氣, 為猛獸虎狼毒虫精魅賊盜五兵不被侵害。又以呪禁固身体, 不傷湯火刀刃, 故曰持禁也。解忤者, 以呪禁法解衆邪驚〔忤〕, 故曰解忤也”(*Ryō-no-gige*:283). “Jikin 持禁”, one of the methods, is explained as two ways. One way is to practice arts and use Qi 氣 in order not to be attacked by beasts, tigers, wolves, poisonous insects, evil

spirits, thieves, five weapons, along with reading an incantation and holding a sword. The other is to stiffen the body to defend it from boiled water, fire, and blade through incantation. Another method named “解忤”, uses incantation methods to liberate people from being frightened by negative vibes. As was already pointed out (Shimode 1974:264-265), these methods of incantation originate from Bao-pu-zi 抱朴子² by Ge Hong 葛洪 and also can be seen in 隋書·經籍志³. Furthermore, the establishment of Jugonhase was probably influenced by Tang dynasty that also established Jugonhase in the official medical institution. But there are some differences between them. “Zhoujin 呪禁” in Taiyishu (Imperial Medical Academy 太醫署) of the Tang is explained as bellow, “there are Daojin 道禁 from magicians staying in the mountain and Jinzhou 禁咒 from Buddhists. Their power shall be exploited with five methods: meditation; Yu-step, the art with one eye opened and the other closed; palm mnemonic; and handprint. All must abstain from meat, wine and blood in advance and accept the incantation in the mandala. 有道禁出於山居方術之士，有禁咒出於釋氏。以五法神之一曰存思、二曰禹步、三曰營目、四曰掌訣、五曰手印。皆先禁食羶血齋戒，於壇場受焉”(Tanqliudian:150). Here we can see that, the first difference is Japanese “Jugon” doesn’t contain incantations from Buddhism but only from Daoism. The second is there aren’t any Daoist rituals like the five methods and religion precepts required when practicing Japanese “Jugon”. The “Jugon”, which was regarded as the main content of Daoism by Japanese Ritsuryō government, might be only used as an official medical technique.

It is said that the Jugonshi named 末使主望足 who was rewarded by the emperor in 767 is the last Jugonshi in Japan(*Shoku Nihongi*:346). The active period for Jugonshi is merely during the 7th-8th century (Shimode 1974:272-273). The methods of Jugon itself were mainly adopted by Shugendō 修驗道 and Onmyōdō 陰陽道, that the former comes from folk society while the latter has been developed from Onmyōryō 陰陽寮 (Bureau of Divination) also established by the Ritsuryō state (Shimode 1974:279-281). And as we have discussed above, the real Daoist master was refused by Japanese Embassies to the Tang. Jugonshi, as the official doctor practicing Jugon 呪禁 as a

² “或有邪魅山精，侵犯人家，以瓦石擲人，以火燒人屋捨。或形見往來，或但聞其聲音言語，而善禁者以氣禁之，皆即絕，此是氣可以禁鬼神也。入山林多溪毒蝮蛇之地，凡人暫經過，無不中傷，而善禁者以氣禁之，能關方數十裡上，伴侶皆使無為害者。又能禁虎豹及蛇蜂，皆悉令伏不能起。以氣禁金瘡，血即登上，又能續骨連筋。以氣禁白刃，則可蹈之不傷，刺之不入。若人為蛇虺所中，以氣禁之則立愈。”See *Bao-pu-zi Neipian 抱朴子內篇*, Vol.5 *Zhili*, P114.

³ *Suishu·Jingjizhi 隋書·經籍志*, No.4 Daojin 道經:“又能登刀入火，而焚救之，使刃不能割，火不能熱。”

medical technique who were under the control of the imperial government by the Ritsuryō system, couldn't organize and develop Jugon 呪禁 into Daoism as a religion in China.

Understanding of *Lao-zi* 老子 in Japanese Ritsuryō state

It is said that Dao 道 is the basic doctrine in Daoism, as well as the ultimate goal for a Daoist (Kong Linghong 2006). As *The Seven Slips of a Cloudy Satchel* (*Yunji Qiqian* 雲笈七籤) states: “ Dao is true within emptiness. Technique is mysterious skill that can change. Dao that doesn't appear in shape, rescue people with techniques. People who have spirit, can attain Dao with training. People who can learn Dao are able to change naturally. The point of Dao is profound but easily learned. The mysteries of technique are merely Charm, Qi and medicine. 道者，虛無之至真也。術者，變化之玄伎也。道無形，因術以濟人。人有靈，因修而會道。人能學道，則變化自然。道之要者，深簡而易知也；術之秘者，唯符與氣、藥也”(Vol.45:261). As is well known this Dao 道 was addressed by Lao-zi 老子 in his book, *Dao-de-jing* 道德经 also called as *Lao-zi*.

Lao-zi was also read by the Japanese. The literati at the Japanese courts in the early 8th century showed their understandings of Lao-zi in the national exam for officer selection. The question asked them to tell the differences between the three teachings of Kong-zi, Buddha, and Lao-zi. It describes the teachings of Kong-zi as the rule to build a country, while teachings of Buddha and Lao-zi are arts to obtain a blessing and avert evil, “周孔名教，興邦化俗之規。稷老格言，致福消殃之術”(*Keikokusyū*:378). The answer of Fujiinomuraji-hironari 葛井連広成⁴ is a typical one as follows, “metaphysics(teaching of Lao-zi) is self-righteousness-oriented. The follower of it will abandon their father and betray their lord without love and respect. A Confucian is mutual-relief-oriented in a pecking order, devoting his body to complete his mission. 玄以独善作為宗，無愛敬之心，棄父背君。儒以兼濟為本，別尊卑之序，致身尽命(*Keikokusyū*:378). It is clear from the above that the literati at the Japanese courts considered Daoism as a self-righteousness-oriented teaching in a negative way. To choose mutual-relief-oriented Confucianism but not Daoism for the Ritsuryō government should be a common thought at that time (Takeuchi Yoshio 1938). In contrast to this, The government's thought of “by doing nothing”(Wu-wei 無為) which is the essential concept of the Dao has been adopted by many Chinese emperors,

⁴ appointed as an envoy to the Shiragi 新羅 in 719. See the article of 719 in *Shoku Nihongi*.

especially by emperors of Tang(LÜ Xichen 1991:176-219). However, as for Japanese Ritsuryō government, instead of doing nothing, it needs to establish a new Ritsuryō system to strengthen the management by country. The result is that, Japanese Ritsuryō government didn't add the book *Lao-zi* into the text book list for the students in Daigakuryō (Bureau of Education 大学寮) to learn as Tang dynasty did(*Ritsuryō*:263).

We can find another answer as well. The answerer says he tried to find the principle of Daoism, but in the end he found the principle to be covered up with the pursuit of longevity. He also searched for how Daoism converted people, but the only thing he found was the techniques to avert evil. “望凝玄之□。斯誠事隱探頤之際。理味鈎深之間。然詳搜化俗之源。曲尋消殃之術”(Keikokusyū:379). Daoism was recognized as a technique like averting evil in order to achieve longevity. We still aren't able to see any understanding of the Dao as a core concept and as the highest goal in Daoism.

The understanding of Daoism in *Sangō shiiki* 三教指歸

Doubtlessly, the Japanese Ritsuryō state's understanding and treatment of Daoism is based on its political needs and benefits. Here we will draw the attention to an independent thinker, also the founder of Shingon Esoteric Buddhism 真言密教, Kūkai 空海(774-835), and his understanding of Daoism.

When Kūkai was twenty-four in 797, he composed in the form of a dramatic novel, the essay, Indications of the Three Teachings (*Sangō shiiki* 三教指歸), comparing and critiquing Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism in order to explain to those who opposed his decision and his reasons for entering the Buddhist priesthood(Takagi Shingen 1997:29-30). In the essay, teachers from each school of thought attempted to educate a dissolute nephew, Tokaku. Kibō Sensei 龜毛先生 lectures on Confucianism. Kyobō Inshi 虛亡隱士 critiques Confucianism from a Daoist's position. Finally, Kamei Kotsuji 假名乞兒 critiques Taoism from a Buddhist's position. The conclusion is that Buddhism is the superior teaching.

We shall focus on how Kūkai explains Daoism. Kyobō Inshi said to the nephew and Kibō Sensei at the beginning, “Listen with sincerity. I shall bestow upon you the divine techniques for prolonging your life and attaining immortality. 汝等恭聽。今當授子以不死之神術，說汝以長生之奇密。”(Hakeda 1972:116). The keyword is still techniques for longevity and immortality. Then, Kyobō Inshi introduced many techniques in details, like “stand apart from what people are fond of”, “take medical herbs”, “practice charms and spells”, “regulate breathing”, “take divine pills and refined pills”, and so forth. If

one “realize the Way and master this art”, as Kyobō Inshi says, “you will live as long as the heaven and earth; enjoy life for an eternity together with the sun and moon” (Hakeda 1972:118-119). Kūkai pointed out a good point that immortality in Daoism doesn’t mean to prolong the human body but to “live as long as the heaven and earth”. However, he didn’t pay attention to why Daoism insists that people can attain immortality, which is exactly the concept of “Dao” again. Hence, the main view of Daoism in Kūkai’s mind, the description Kamei Kotsuji used to criticize Daoism, is as “the petty seeking for longevity 神仙之小術”(Hakeda 1972:138).

We can’t expect Kūkai who had decided to believe Buddhism before he wrote this essay, would compare the three teachings objectively. Nevertheless, Kūkai didn’t deny Daoism at all, but tried to integrate Daoism into his thought. As Yoshioka Yoshitoyo says, Kūkai has never cleared out Daoism from his thought system for life (1972). It has been pointed out that some elements of Daoism can be found in Esoteric Buddhism both in China and in Japan (Misaki Ryōsyū 1997).

Conclusion

As discussed above, we can summarize the understanding of Daoism and measures towards Daoism by the Japanese Ritsuryō state as follows. (1) Japanese Embassies to the Tang refused Daoist priests who were members of the Tang imperial court. (2) In order to control and adopt the techniques of Daoism, named Dōjutsufukin 道術符禁, which was considered as the main content of the methods of Daoist priests 道士法 by the country, the Japanese Ritsuryō government forbid Buddhist priests to use Dōjutsufukin to cure diseases and established the official position called Jugon-hakase 呪禁博士 to practice Jugon 呪禁 in the Bureau of Medicine. (3) Japanese court literati who aimed to be officers recognized Lao-zi’s teaching as a self-righteousness-oriented teaching filled with techniques to avert evil and attain longevity. The book *Lao-zi* wasn’t listed in the official textbooks because it was thought unhelpful for the Ritsuryō system establishment. All we can see is technique and not Dao. Daoism as a religion couldn’t get support from the Japanese Ritsuryō state. And as for Kūkai 空海, he considered Daoism as techniques toward immortality in *Sangō shiiki* 三教指帰 as well. He didn’t pay any attention to the core divinity concept of Dao and chose Buddhism as his belief. Based on this, Daoism without Dao never really existed in Japan as its own separate, organized religion although it had an unmistakable influence on Japanese religion culture like Shugendō, Onmyōdō and Esoteric Buddhism via its methods of various techniques.

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