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## Dao Gives Birth to Lots of Killing: Violence in the Daoist Tradition

-Micah Dunwoody

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to examine the purpose of violence in Daoism. The earliest texts, including *Daodejing*, argue for defensive war that must be conducted appropriately by rulers. Myths and rituals that developed later in the tradition portray gods and spirits subduing demons. The latter are either killed, or enlisted into the armies of the gods. Rituals include the role of humans, particularly Daoist priests/ritual specialists who call upon the gods to fight demons who inflict maladies upon people. This paper also examines the role of martial arts and physical violence. Martial arts are often imbued with religious hues in Daoism, as is seen with Taijiquan, Xingyiquan, and Baguazhang. The styles carry combat effectiveness with different methods such as wrestling, striking, grappling, and the use of weapons. Physical violence in Daoism took the form of overturning dynastic regimes, namely the Han, Yuan, and Qing dynasties. There are possibilities that Daoist monks fought in 20<sup>th</sup> century China. There is too little to confirm this currently. The paper ends with an analysis of the book trilogy, *Chronicles of Tao*. It portrays the actions of Huashan monk Guan Shihung who acted violently. The book is examined for what it can tell us about the Daoist view of killing.

## Introduction

Daoism: just like all religions of the world, it is full of violence. This statement may seem strange to most people, only because it has not been seriously considered at great length. This paper examines how violence is central to Daoism, whether it be justified or glorified. First, it provides a brief summary of the current state of research relating to Daoist violence. It mentions how violence is often ignored by modern scholars. After this, the paper examines Daoist scriptures, rituals, myths, martial arts, and practitioners to demonstrate that in some cases, Daoism does allow and even encourages the use of physical violence. Here, the word ‘scriptures’ means texts that are part of the Daoist canon. The scriptures studied are those from the Zhou and Han dynasties. These scriptures justify war, but only for dire circumstances. Rituals and myths arguably encourage violence among practitioners by confronting them with narratives of gods and immortals who use violence for good purposes, especially the safety of humans. This subsection will be followed by examples of instances when Daoist practitioners did act violently. It focuses on rebellious movements that included Daoist beliefs in their ideologies and practice, and some notes on how Daoist monks might have committed violence in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, it presents the late-20th-century trilogy *Chronicles of Tao* as an extended case study of how Daoist monk Guan Shihung acted violently.

## Scholarship on Violence in Daoism

When modern Western scholars discuss anything related to violence in Daoism, they may not focus on physical violence. They have addressed violence in Daoist scriptures as well as ritual violence. In their discussions of scriptures, scholars compare these with the Confucian views of virtue. For ritual violence, we have the research of Barend J. ter Haar, Avron Boretz, and Mark R.E. Meulenbeld. In ter Haar’s and Boretz’s works, they discuss the presence of Daoist ritual and

gods in the lives of non-Daoist Chinese people. While the presence of Daoist ritual and the violence portrayed are pervasive, the works focus on the broader forms of Chinese religiosity, not Daoism alone. The question of how Daoists acted violently is better answered by Mark R.E. Meulenbeld's research. In his work, he primarily discusses rituals, but explains that Daoist rituals did motivate military decisions that led to the rise of the Ming dynasty in 1368. The victories earned by the Ming's founder, Zhu Yuanzhang, were attributed to the worship of a military god who is said to have brought rains against Zhu's enemies. Furthermore, Boretz mentions how Daoism is inextricably linked with the Chinese "popular religion", as is seen in Boretz's work where violent Daoist rituals are the mainframe of his field studies.

Gongfu (Kung Fu/功夫) generally translates as 'mastery' or 'skill', and today, it refers to fighting styles that are either open-handed or use weapons. Gongfu has gained some popularity in the scholarly field, but has not been extensively studied for its presence of Daoism. Gongfu is recognized as a type of Daoist practice, especially by Douglas Wile. He has studied the role of Taijiquan (太极拳) in Daoism, but has not seriously considered how the practice has violent potential. Shaha is the only one who has written on relationship that Gongfu had with violence and Chinese religion. His work focuses on Buddhism, but his work has been a great contribution to understanding of the relationship between religion and martial arts, as is obvious from it being cited in various works on martial arts. Meanwhile, the Wudang monastery is renowned for its practice of Gongfu, but is not part of the scholarship on martial arts. The role of martial arts practice has been considered, but has not been elaborated on how it developed into Wudang's practice and teachings. There are studies of its history in earlier Chinese dynasties. These studies show that Wudang was favored amongst government officials and had received gifts from rulers (Lizhi, Stoll,

Mei, pp. 2-4; de Bruyn, pp. 556-568), but there are no works on what happened to it in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nor whether monks from Wudang ever fought in battle.

### Violence in the Daoist Framework

#### **War in Daoist Scriptures**

*Daodejing*, the most influential text in Daoism, does not reject war altogether, but proposes strict circumstances for when war should be conducted. It is generally dated to the Warring States period and to the legendary Laozi (老子). It was certainly viewed favorably by officials of the Han dynasty who studied and chanted it. Some scholars take the view that *Daodejing* is only a political treatise. Others say that it discusses different topics including politics. Arguably, the *Daodejing* teaches espouses more than a political view. In general, the work emphasizes acting in accord with the Dao. Although, the political philosophy is certainly present. The uniqueness of *Daodejing* lies in how it intricately connects war and peace, at least according to Zhang. A ruler should always watch for, and quell, potential causes of war. War is framed as discordant with Dao because it creates boundless suffering. Suffering in turn drives people away from Dao because their lack of inner peace drives them into grief, despair, rebelliousness, etc. If war has reached one's kingdom, then the *Daodejing* proposes that it should protect itself. To not respond would be unnatural, likely because rulers are politically obligated to protect their people. If a ruler conducts war properly, then he is advised by *Daodejing* to have compassion and humility, to not boast of their power. They should also avoid excessive violence. By this standard, even secret and sneak attacks are permissible because they are not manners of boasting power. They also became favored in Daoist military strategies such as those in *Art of War*. On the whole, *Daodejing* is distinct in how it criticizes violence in general as well as mortality. Morality is viewed as unnatural, and its

ideological nature inspires violent action against those who do not conform to it (Zhang, p. 496). As chapter 32 states: “So you have the beginning of division into names. Since there are already plenty of names, you should know where to stop. Knowing where to stop, you can avoid danger.” These words certainly bear truth to them, as political and ideological biases between self and other caused conflicts between different Chinese ethnicities, and other countries such as the Mongols.

The same attitude towards violence and morality is carried in *Zhuangzi*, the second most popular Daoist scripture after *Daodejing*. It does not give statements on warfare, but treats violence as a deviation from the Dao which may bring tremendous pain and suffering to those who engage in it. In one of the later chapters translated as “discoursing on swords”, King Wen of the Chao kingdom is portrayed as a king who is fond of swords. His court is filled with swordsmen with whom he does combat. Since he never leaves his quarters, Zhuang Zhou is hired to give the king a lesson on the ineffectiveness of combat. Zhuang teaches the king about the swords of Heaven (天), the feudal lord, and of the commoner. The swords of the first two are the kind that meet no opposition. The feudal lord is even able to bring the country to great peace. By describing him as such, Zhuang Zhou imagines the ideal ruler in the same way the *Daodejing* does – one who does not seek his own benefit, but acts for the people. The sword of the commoner, in contrast, is one who is in great danger in constantly fighting and killing others. Such words sway the king to stop engaging in sword combat. The swordsmen end up killing themselves months later – likely because they are unfulfilled with lack of combat and because they were misaligned with Dao. Suicide is mentioned in other passages where people commit when they have failed in their pursuits that are misaligned with Dao. Furthermore, Zhuang Zhou’s teachings on the sword of the commoner resonates with other teachings from *Daodejing* on not getting oneself in danger by excessive action (Watson, Barry, pp. 339-343).

At around the same time as the composition of the oldest chapters of *Zhuangzi*, another Daoist text known as *Wenzi* (文子) was beginning to take form. Its final version may have been achieved by the first century C.E. *Wenzi* takes a slightly more permissive stance on war than *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*: it states that it can be morally appropriate to respond to a war that is already occurring, or to engage in war out of righteousness. The book also presumes a more optimistic view of war than the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, although this attitude is simultaneously naïve. In its view, defenders in war are not only assumed to be morally superior, but they are predicted to be constantly successful. This claim is not borne out by events, however; Feich demonstrates that some Northern kingdoms in the second century had defended their homeland and failed (Feich, pp, 2-5).

Later texts also adopt more optimistic views of war because they were written in different circumstances than *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*. The last two were written when war was constantly occurring, perhaps leading them to take a dim view of war because of the violence their writers had witnessed. By the Han dynasty, other texts that carried Daoist ideas and beliefs interpreted violence as a mere annoyance which can easily be avoided. *Huainanzi* (淮南子) is accounted as a Daoist text here since it draws more heavily on *Zhuangzi* and *Daodejing* than any work from other schools of philosophy<sup>1</sup>. It imagines the ruler as being a sage who unifies with Dao, his people, and the military. By doing so, he will be impervious to his enemies who act for themselves. Barbarians who may attack are also claimed to bow to the sage ruler (Puett et al., pp. 586-588, 601). Although, the work is critical of war, particularly of annexations, and this might be the reason that the chapter

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<sup>1</sup> There are other reasons for assuming that *Huainanzi* is a Daoist text. 1) Its reliance on the *Daodejing* occurred at a time in Han politics when consulting that book might have been considered treasonous. To cite it shows that the writer/s upheld the text to the point that they might have been willing to risk their lives for it. 2) Huanglao Daoism was popular amongst elites at that time, so there was some affinity for Daoist teachings (Puett, et al., pp. 12, 22).

on military warfare is placed towards the end of the book. It suggests that righteous war might only be a defensive war; however, it and the *Huangdi Sijing* (黄帝四经) criticize 'righteous warfare' as an excuse to begin war and violence. The latter assumes war should only be enacted under strict circumstances, such as being ordained by Heaven, Earth, and the people (Fech, pp. 6-12).

This view of the sage-ruler takes a different form in a commentary of *Daodejing* written by Tang dynasty commander Wang Chen (王陈) who instead focuses on the virtue of a ruler. The man wrote the work in response to all the violence and war which had ensued all of China over the past thousand years. The work assumes a cosmological degradation of society has been occurring. Society was utopic, and even remained so during the rule of the mighty Five Emperors and three Sage Rulers. Thousands of years after they had died, society plummeted into chaos and war (Sawyer, p. 14). Thus, society has come to a state of chaos where militaries are employed. Wang's views can be summarized in his commentaries of the first ten chapters. The deployment of the military will always harm society. Asides from the one mention of any ruler who is also a sage, Wang assumed sages to be more like wise men, but that rulers can embody the Dao to achieve a harmonious society. They model the Dao of Heaven by disciplining, emptying, and not overextending themselves. They are not motivated by greed, so they do not possess rare objects that would lead to people stealing from each other. Modelling themselves after Heaven, Dao, Earth, and nature allows them to be a model for people who will then return to simplicity (Sawyer, pp. 70-98).

The discussion of war in these scriptures is relevant to the discussion of violence, but it is not tradition's only concern. The Zhou and Han Daoist scriptures examined above only address violence in war, not personal violence or violence understood more broadly; however, Daoism



engages morally with the idea of violence beyond the context of war. To understand how Daoist thinkers and communities have approached the permissibility of violence, it is most helpful to consider how Daoist myth and ritual portray or engage with the idea of violence.

### **Cosmological Violence in Myth and Ritual**

This analysis begins with examining the role of mythology with attention to J.R.R. Tolkien's views. His idea constitutes that stories and myths abide by laws which govern that world, so all beings and events submit to those laws. The audience of these stories, observers in our case, are persuaded of the pervasiveness of those laws (Tolkien, p. 60). In Daoism, even violence is formally necessitated. Daoism imagines that the world transforms through four cosmic periods. The first period was when humans harmonized with nature and Dao. This society may have been imagined by *Daodejing's* author(s) (Zhang, p. 495). The cosmos devolved to the Shanghuang period in which we are now living. This period of time is marked by excessive violence and war (Kohn, p. 208). This includes battles against evil spirits that are often thwarted by gods, spirit soldiers, and ritual specialists.

History itself may even be a law, as events are bound to repeat themselves while also explaining the special role of humans in the cosmos. Myths are glimpses of the power of the gods that they used in the past. Furthermore, we are convinced of their reality through the use of symbols and motifs. Those symbols carry emotional intensity with them, which causes us to react (with ritual violence against demons), and represents our role (as demon quellers). Myths reveal the past, present, and future to us (Kohn, pp. 175-176). Thus, the past victories of gods hold relevance to practitioners today. Battles are still fought through rituals today, and will continue to be fought throughout the future until the end of the universe.

Tolkien also mentions how myths glimpse at the Divine (or the Dao, in this case), but that we are able to make sense of them. Thus, causal explanations pertaining to our world may hearken back to the myths and cosmologies of Daoism for people to make sense of their world. The Chinese religious view seems to contain such causality where the misdeeds of demons and evil spirits (gui/鬼) have physical ramifications. All misfortunes upon humans such as insanity, natural disasters, sickness, and economic impoverishment are all attributed to the workings of evil spirits who died violent, premature deaths and have returned to haunt the living to gain a place at ancestral altars (Meulenbeld, p. 22).

Daoist myths are testimonies to the dangers of the cosmos, and the power of those who protect the living such as gods (shen/神) including Guan Yu (关羽), Zhenwu (真武), and Laojun (老君). Violence committed by gods in service of protecting humans is viewed in Daoist mythology as righteous and morally good. It also justifies rituals and military violence which places both humans and gods as allies against demonic forces and the unrighteous barbarians. For example, Guan Yu was a military general who was killed in Han Dynasty by the Yellow Turban rebels. He became one of the protagonists of *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* novel which depicts Guan Yu and his allies fighting the Yellow Turbans. At one point in the novel, he fought sorcerers and demons. His method of vanquishing demons was to spill pig blood all over them (Palmer & Zhao, pp. 129-131). Zhenwu is not known for specific martial feats, but he is one of the Four Saints who protects the universe (Kohn, p. 18). Yun Xiang Tseng from the Wudang monastery (wudangsi/武当寺) his name as “Authentic martial arts”, which aligns with the monastery’s practice of martial arts (Lizhi, Stoil, and Mei, p. 1). He is often listed on protective talismans, much like Laojun (老君), the deified version of Laozi, who once instructed one of his disciples to decapitate his family’s heads

which then turn into pig's heads. This was a common test for Daoist immortals when they had to prove their devotion in pursuit of the Dao (Kohn, pp. 260, 272).

The stories of some Daoist immortals portray violence as a righteous act when it is committed by those who are aligned with the Dao. Immortals are almost like saints in Daoism. They are individuals who have achieved longevity through the practice of alchemy – proper practice and regulation of diet, exercise, and sometimes sex. The lifespans of these beings can range from over 118-1,000 years. They differ from gods in their practice of alchemy. While some like Tiekuaoli and Cheng Yu Li are said to withstand physical beatings out of love for others, some immortals were known for their willingness to kill people and engage in warfare, even if it meant breaking their precepts (Eskildsen, p. 34). Lü Dongbin is a famous example because of his bad temper. On one occasion, he nearly drowned a whole village of people over losing a chess game. His plans were foiled when one of the village people alerted everyone, leaving Lü Dongbin to be punished by Heaven (Palmer, Zhao, pp. 113-116). Another story says that he was draining the life force (qi/氣) of a beautiful woman who seeks the help of a Chan master. When the woman follows the advice, Lü Dongbin attempts to kill the woman, but goes after the Chan monk instead. Some have argued that the story is fake because the virtue of immortals is such that they would never kill humans. On the other hand, a considerable amount of people did believe that Lü Dongbin did kill people. This conviction may have come out of a fear from the Tang dynasty that alchemists would gain powers like sorcery and skill in weapons that they could then use to kill people (Eskildsen, p. 34).

Daoist rituals place practitioners and audiences in a dangerous universe, thereby necessitating violence. They seem to give testimony to the pervasiveness of how violence is necessitated by cosmic law in Daoism. They are effective at doing this because they bring to life the fury of the

deities and demons. They are not just retold on paper and pen, but descend on to the human plane to lash out in the physical bodies of the mediums who use various tactics to scare the demons: fire, water, incantations, piercing, etc. As listed by Livia Kohn, Daoist cosmology is populated by “ghosts, demons, specters, sprites, hobgoblins, poltergeists, revenants, spooks, bogies, and contagions” (Kohn, p. 36). These threats are responsible for all sorts of misfortunes such as natural disasters and sicknesses (Boretz, p. 26; Ching, pp. 35, 206). To address these, the gods are assigned with killing these demons. At that, even some demons and evil spirits including the Eight Retainers and Divine Generals are enlisted into the Daoist pantheon for the same task (Kennedy & Guo, pp. 9-10; ter Haar, p. 72, 246). These figures possess a love for mischief and thirst for blood respectively, making them the best defense against the faith’s enemies. Much like in Buddhism, demons would be the best defense against their own kind because they know the tactics of their enemies (Shahar, p. 40).

Oftentimes, ritual and theatre combine in Daoist religious practice to bring to life the fury of the gods and their magical abilities. Gods are known to possess mediums who are then able to perform dangerous tasks. They are able to conduct, and withstand, piercings all over the body such the ears, nose, lips, shoulders, chest, and back. The lighting of a tall tower while still on it. Facing firecrackers being thrown while they sit on a throne carried through town. These are just a few examples. Very often, theatre ritual actors will paint their faces to imitate demon soldiers. They then behave in a way that expresses the rage of these beings in the Daoist pantheon. The reenactment of gods and demons is similar to what was stated above about symbols convincing their audiences of some divine reality. This idea may come under criticism here on the premise that there is no barrier between the gods and demons and their witnesses. The gods are believed to be present. The makeup, the movements, the success in dangerous tasks, the jolting of the mediums,

are signs that the demons and gods are actually present amongst the people. Even the ritual dances and performances such as the Lion Dance and Song Jiang Battalion require the knowledge and practice of martial arts styles, showcasing the danger that the performers pose if they wanted to exact violence against others. Historically, the performers were members of local militias who practiced martial arts for defense of their communities, but could also apply them to rituals (Boretz, pp. 55-56; Meulenbeld, p. 11). In these practices, violence is arguably encouraged in connection with narratives around the violent power of the gods, immortals, and performances that demonstrate this power.

There is another question that must be answered here: if Daoist rituals are typically practiced for non-Daoists, why are they essential for understanding Daoist violence? This consideration comes from how Chinese religious thought and practice combines aspects from various traditions, not Daoism exclusively (Ching, pp. 205-206, 215-217). Be that as it may, Daoism is at the core of Chinese religious behavior, especially amongst lay people who would not be required to meet certain requirements like those found in orthodox Buddhism and Confucianism. Daoist priests who perform rituals can claim to be from prestigious lineages like Celestial Masters or Qingwei. The latter is a branch that argued for the inextricable link between Daoism and local traditions. According to it, Daoist rituals, including martial rituals, belong to the Dao (Meulenbeld, pp. 154-155). The next section will take a broader look at martial arts beyond their ritual use. Then, a summary is provided of the violent actions which sometimes involved the use of Daoist rituals.

## Physical Violence in Daoism

### **Martial Arts**

Despite the importance of studying rituals and myths, physical violence is obviously different from violence in rituals and scriptures. Violence between humans has various motives and causes behind it which would differ from unseen ritual violence. So, there are advantages and limits to studying scriptures and myths as they pertain to violence. They do not provide the full picture, but they give insight into the dimensions of the tradition itself, and the legitimation and importance of actual violence. The gods are responsible for killing demons, so humans must also kill demons and other humans. Such humans may even be portrayed as demons themselves. Qing dynasty syndicates who practiced Daoist rituals believed the ruling Manchus were demonic barbarians that had to be overthrown (ter Haar, p. 280). Various means can be employed to defeat these demons, including with the use of martial arts.

Here, it is not assumed that martial arts represent an unbroken or causal link between violence and Daoist philosophy. They do, however, make it easier for Daoists to engage in violence, whether that be through self-defense or assault. Martial arts, however, happen to embody Daoist philosophy as shown by Allen (2014). Firstly, the practice of martial arts regulates energies through the bodies for health and longevity and teaches people how to fight. The fulfillment of two goals at the same time is “doing more by doing less.” If wuwei (無为) can be interpreted as doing as little as possible to produce the most advantageous consequences, then it certainly applies here. Second, some martial arts styles are governed by basic concepts in how they are executed in combat. Styles like Taijiquan and Southern Praying Mantis are focused on ‘going with the flow’. The fighters of this style do not ‘force’ their strength upon their opponents. They use the

momentum of their opponents' movements against them to achieve victory. Southern Praying Mantis focuses on trapping your opponents into close proximity and an enclosed space. It requires that the skin on the forearms is sensitive enough to sense your opponent's movements to strike them. Other styles embody the military strategies of Daoist thinkers and Sunzi of striking opponents where they are weakest. Eagle Claw Kung Fu is known for gripping at the tendons of your opponents (Russo, p. 44). Some Qing dynasty manuals at Shaolin (少林) taught the reader styles that aimed for the acupuncture points. Such methods were described to make their opponents laugh or cry themselves to death, or at least paralyze them (Shahar, p. 118).

While stereotyped as “disciplines of the mind”, martial arts carry great potential to injure and kill (Boretz, pp. 55, 163-164; Shahar, pp. 71-80; Russo, pp. 22-24). The place of martial arts in Daoism has to do with their integration into alchemy, as they are believed to regulate the energies within the body (Cleary, p. 23-25). When Yun Xiang Tseng was sent on a journey by his master to learn about life, he was instructed that all he could use to defend himself was his “internal arts.” Internal arts is a term for fighting styles which are believed to regulate qi throughout the body (Shahar, p. 149). They are also distinct in their focus on structure and framework before strengthening the body. These include Xingyiquan (形意拳), Baguazhang (八卦掌), and Taijiquan. Taijiquan is more often associated with Daoism because of the translation of Grand Ultimate Fist and its attribution to the Daoist immortal Zhang Sanfeng. Its name could also derive from its efficacy in open-handed combat (Nyenhuis, 2023). It carries aspects of wrestling and open-hand combat like fists and kicks to defeat opponents. In terms of weapons, Taijiquan specializes in the straight and broadswords. Two other styles that are associated with Daoism are Xingyiquan and Baguazhang. Xingyiquan is akin to long-distance striking styles. It aims to push your opponent away so you can stab them with a spear (Shahar, pp. 134-135; Nyenhuis, 2023). The synthesis of

open-handed and spear fighting derives in part from Shaolinquan, as well as the ideas of its creator, Ji Jike. He was of the opinion that barehanded combat was more suitable for peaceful times. The five strikes of Xingyiquan are affiliated with five element theory that relates to human activity. Baguazhang is affiliated with the eight trigrams of the *Yijing* (Classic of Changes) (Shahar, pp. 153-154). The style focuses on encircling your opponent and bodylocking them from different angles. In this aspect, it bears resemblance to Brazilian Jiujitsu and Silat. Although these styles have religious hues, they were initially intended for combat. Their affiliation with Daoist healing arts came in the Qing dynasty when writers were blending them with religious and medical terminology, when Buddhist monks gained interest in cultivating the spiritual, physical, and martial dimensions of their lives (Shahar, p. 153). Even though Allen states that martial arts were added to Daoist practice by the Qing dynasty (Allen, pp. 262-264), Eskildsen hints that Daoist internal alchemy in the Tang dynasty which provided potential to kill. This suggests that some martial aspect of alchemy had existed long before the time Allen suggests. It may not have been similar to modern styles like Taijiquan, but may have been some early form of Daoist martial arts. Immortals were advised to carry swords with them so they could defend others (Eskildsen, p. 25).

### **Physical Violence**

We are still left with the question, however, of whether Daoists have committed violence and whether they have understood that violence to be encouraged by their Daoist principles? Based on current sources and research available, yes, but there is too little research on this topic to make a strong pronouncement about the exact relationship between Daoist doctrine and practitioners' use of physical violence. The scholarship on this is scant compared to what we know about violence in other traditions (including Buddhism, where the scholarship on that is thriving). What is notable about 'Daoist' violence is that it was sometimes committed against dynastic powers by members



of millenarian movements. These movements either practiced Daoist rituals that authenticated their political goals, or they were Daoist at their core. The earliest example we know of is the Yellow Turban rebellion that came out of the Way of Great Peace. This was a Daoist branch that derived its teachings from *Taipingjing*, the Scripture of Great Peace. This work boasted of the end of times that would come about from the actions of mankind that failed to be in accord with the Dao. The followers would be blessed with a leader who would teach them to be in accord with Heaven and Earth to avoid further calamity. Their belief system focused on aligning their actions with Heaven and Earth. The violent rebellion that they launched could have been deemed as such since the Han dynasty was failing. This was interpreted as a sign that they were no longer fit to rule and had to be overthrown. The Yellow Turban movements were thwarted early on with the deaths of their leaders, yet the Yellow Turbans were ultimately successful in their goal since the Han dynasty ended in 20 to 30 years. The downfall of the Hans is also due to outbursts and activities of other Daoist rebel movements (Michaud, 1958; Hendrichke, pp. 135-138).

The role of Daoism in rebellious movements did not stop at the end of the Han dynasty. There was another movement at the end of the Yuan dynasty labelled as the Red Turbans, and it is here that Daoist rituals begin to take role in physical violence. One of the leaders of this movement, Zhu Yuanzhang, used Daoist rituals to secure his victories. In battles in the 1350s, he would have a Daoist master perform the Thunder Rituals to summon spirit soldiers. Yuanzhang believed that these beings helped him win. When he overthrew the Yuan dynasty in 1368 and founded the Ming, he ordered temples to be built in honor of some of these gods (Meulenbeld, pp. 132-135). Centuries later, Daoists participated in rebellious groups which sought to overrule their Qing rulers. These groups, collectively known as Tiandihui (天地會) had aspects of their practice which came from Daoism such as the use of swords to kill demons. They also framed the overthrowing of the Qing

dynasty in a worldview that borrowed heavily from Daoist apocryphal scriptures that focused on the end of the world at the hands of demons who would overrun it. Some Daoist priests involved themselves in some of these groups, including the faction led by Ma Chaozhu (ter Haar, pp. 225, 237-248, 319).

Current research largely has not addressed the use of violence by Daoist practitioners in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Some evidence suggests Daoist monks did engage in violence in twentieth century China. Rumors hint at two Daoist monks who fought to reclaim the Wudang monastery after the Cultural Revolution of 1966-67 (Schnell, 2023) Decades before that, monks and priests were possibly involved in the Sino-Japanese war of 1937 to 1945. In his book on Buddhist participation in the war, Yu mentions Daoist priests on Nanyue mountain were also persuaded to engage in the war efforts. He does not investigate whether they actually fought in the war or made different contributions like medical services (Yu, pp. 143-145). To better understand how violence has been portrayed in popular Daoist imagination in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can consider an extended case study: Ming-Dao Deng's book trilogy, *Chronicles of Tao*<sup>2</sup>.

### *Chronicles of Tao*

*Chronicles of Tao* follows the escapades of Guan Shihung, a former Daoist monk of Huashan and a teacher of Ming-Dao Deng, the author. Guan Shihung came from a family of martial artists who were also government officials of the Qing dynasty and practitioners of Daoism. In the first book of the trilogy, *The Wandering Taoist*, two monks from Huashan came to their complex in approximately 1920 to adopt Shihung as one of his students. His training consists of meditation, qigong, and martial arts styles from Huashan and other Daoist monasteries, including Wudang. He

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<sup>2</sup> The author uses the Wade-Giles romanization of Dao.

engages in the Sino-Japanese War for a couple of months before returning to Huashan to resume his training. In this book, Deng, a Daoist practitioner and teacher with influence in some American Daoist circles, takes a positive view of Guan's use of violence to defend himself, his homeland, and his family. Current research has not yet delved fully into the possible participation of Daoist practitioners in the Sino-Japanese War. Under the circumstances, it is likely that some Daoists did participate. In any case, Guan is portrayed here in a positive light, as a morally good figure who fought in a war to defend his home country. Based on the first book alone, there is no reason to assume the writer is interpreting the story of Shihung. There is some historical basis in what he writes. There is no reason to disbelieve that Daoist monks practiced martial arts during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Most importantly, the Sino-Japanese war is presented accurately even with what little details are mentioned. The possibility of Daoists presented by Yu's work only gives more reason to believe that Shihung fought in the war.

In the second book, *Seven Bamboo Tablets of the Cloudy Satchel* (hereafter called *SBTCS*), Shihung continues his training in martial arts and Daoist philosophy. One of the lessons from his master is that Daoism should never be used for killing. One of his closest friends is a man named Tiger who we later learn is a gangster who has been abusing his skills that he learned from the monks at Huashan. The grandmaster sends him and two other monks to pursue and return Tiger to Huashan to face punishment. They have to travel through the criminal underworld and fight brigands along the way, but they eventually find him and bring him to Huashan. There, they take him to the Grandmaster. He kills Tiger. His death shocks the younger monks. Shihung kneels and cries asking, "why did you do it?!" The Grandmaster remains placid. The event confuses and grieves Saihung to the point that he must leave the monastery for a while to contemplate life.

The third book, *Gateway to a Vast World*, occurs amidst the Communist takeover of China that began in 1949. Huashan ends up destroyed. Shihung travels to the United States where he ends up working at restaurants. The radical change in lifestyle allows him to contemplate the value of life even amidst having everything taken from him.

While martial arts are given religious significance in modern Daoist practice, they were also of significance to Shihung because of his upbringing. He was raised by his grandparents for most of his childhood, and these were people who were accustomed to violence. On one of his grandfather's birthdays, a group of men came disguised as Daoist priests in an effort to kill him. The grandfather released them out of generosity, since it was his birthday. Shihung's grandmother did not. She killed the men right in front of Shihung's eyes. The upbringing as a warrior greatly influenced Shihung.

*The Wandering Taoist* engages in ethical reflection on the Sino-Japanese War, condemning the war in general terms but showing approbation for Shihung and other Daoists who may have participated in it. Although the book is not intended to be a historical source, it is accurate when it mentions the war. Chapter 24 opens with the Japanese takeover of the Marco Polo Bridge in 1937 (Van de Ven, pp. 65-68). There is a mention of the conflicts that were occurring between the Chinese Communists and Nationalists that had been vying for power for decades. When Shihung returns to his childhood home, he witnesses the dead bodies of women and girls who had been raped by the Japanese. The significance of this moment lies not only in its historicity, but also in the way that Shihung reflects on it. Even though he had been raised as a warrior, he grieves for his people who have died from the "savage" Japanese. At this point, the book seems to take on a similar view to *Daodejing's* about war. War creates nothing but suffering, and those who are

responsible for it are evil and must be killed, even if Shihung accrues bad karma on himself (Deng, pp. 186-194; Zhang, p. 479).

When Shihung engages in gang violence in *SBTCS*, glimpsing tenets of the martial underworld including loyalty, honor, and fighting to the death. In combat, fighters entered agreements to kill or be killed. Indeed, some people die when Shihung and some of the other monks fight gangsters (Deng, pp. 131-132). For monks to engage in such deals shows adaptability when monks responded to various situations, even if they had to kill people (Deng, pp. 152-153). Furthermore, the violence that occurred between gangs in China seemed more orderly by Shihung's standards. In the third book, *Gateway to a Vast World*, Shihung immigrates to America, and fights three Americans who threaten one of his Chinese friends. When coming close to killing one of the men, he decides not to do so. The author writes a reflection explaining why:

He had fought since his youth, even though he knew killing brought retribution against one's soul. For the sake of women, children, and his homeland, he had gladly volunteered for war, willing to accept that consequence. As for martial duels, he and his opponents accepted death as part of the integral arrangement. There was a certain nobility and honor to his fighting. But here, there were only racist bigots, idiots. He disdained them. There was no glory in killing them. (Deng, p. 55)

Returning to *SBTCS*, Shihung and his monks capture Tiger and return him to Huashan. Readers of *SBTCS* might even recall earlier in the book when the Grandmaster teaches Shihung, "don't think you can use Daoism as an excuse for killing!" (Deng, 1987, pp. 10-16). Would his actions seem hypocritical then? To answer 'yes' would ignore some basic facts about the trilogy and the people it portrays, as these are monks who do engage in violence, and even the Grandmaster was said to have fought and killed people a couple times in the first book (Deng, 1983, 97-101; 1987,

pp. 6, 23-26). When considering the Grandmaster's act of killing Tiger, it might reveal something fundamental about Daoism – the wisdom that must be earned for killing people. Such an idea diverges from the Han Daoist idea of sage rulers, but probably not too far. The sages imagined by these writers, and even Wang Chen of the Tang dynasty, do not imagine them as pacifists. Their power is such that they do not engage in violence out of greed, but are able to execute it effectively when war comes. As chapter 31 of *Daodejing* states, “victory is never sweet. Those for whom victory is sweet are those who enjoy killing” (Muller, p. 63). The Grandmaster certainly did not seem to enjoy killing Tiger.

To understand the act of killing by sages, it also proves useful to consider the Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine of ‘skillful means’ (upāya). Skillful means permits teachings to be diverged from for the spiritual development of other people. Killing is no exception, and there were instances when skillful means was employed by Buddhists in China, including the Sino-Japanese War which was continuing in *SBTCS* (Jerryson, pp. 47-50; Yu, pp. 4, 47-51, 83). The idea could have arisen through the interactions between Buddhism and Daoism since the two traditions often influenced each other. From the Daoist standpoint, one who has been granted wisdom through earnest practice will earn the wisdom to perceive the mysteries of the universe and the Dao that most people are blind to. Along with this comes the knowledge of when killing is a necessary consequence for bad deeds. The necessity for sages to kill from time-to-time could also derive from the very first line of *Daodejing*: “The Dao that can be followed [or told] is not the eternal Dao”, or “a way can be followed, but not a fixed path” (Muller, p. 3; Cleary, p. 11). The line could be interpreted to refer to teachings on ethics, thus permitting violence for proper situations.

### Conclusion

This paper examined the various manifestations of violence in Daoism. It began with how the role of violence in Daoism has not been seriously considered by scholars because they focus on ritual violence. Ritual violence is one instant where violence is portrayed as a necessary function in Daoist cosmology. Myths perform this same function, and the earlier scriptures of Daoism prescribe certain occasions for war. Aside from these, there is potential for the scholarship of violence as it was performed by Daoists across all branches and historical periods. The role of martial arts would also provide understanding for how violence can be effective in killing people. We've seen here that Daoism has nuanced and complex perspectives on the permissibility and morality of violence. Most texts and thinkers in the tradition are skeptical at best of the use of violence, but there are many moments in texts, ritual, and practice within Daoism in which violence is permitted and even encouraged for reasons that are perceived to be morally good; however, we will not be able to make strong claims about the presence of violence in Daoist practice or thought without further study. In particular, it is advisable that scholars examine Daoist patronage of dynasties, military, and even millenarian movements. As was seen in the case of Zhu Yuanzhang, founder of the Ming dynasty, the worship of gods was essential in the founding of the dynasty. The role of gods and rituals was essential in military expeditions of his death. There were also some instances when gods were cast as patrons for certain dynasties. Considering that certain gods were primarily martial (e.g. Guan Yu), it would suffice to explore the role of these martial gods in dynasties and how reverence for them may have influenced military decisions.

Another potential area of scholarship is exploring the Daoist use of martial arts for violent acts. In the current state of scholarship, the relationship between the two has been considered, but not in its relevance to times of combat. Nothing in the current state of scholarship has definitively

said that Daoist martial artists or monks engaged in violence at certain points in history. This is strange given the fact that Buddhist monks who practiced martial arts had been engaging in military expeditions for centuries. Even though some scholars believe that martial arts were integrated into Daoist practice in the Qing dynasty, it is worth looking into whether martial arts were practiced by Daoist recluses before that. Just as stated earlier, if there were concerns about Daoist immortals using alchemy and weapons to kill people since the Tang dynasty, there must have been some martial art being practiced in Daoist circles. There is some historical investigation of how martial arts came to Daoism or Wudang, but it is mainly centered on the mythical role of the Daoist immortal Zhang Sanfeng. How did martial arts become a Daoist practice? Did Daoist practitioners learn from military soldiers or Shaolin monks? Did military soldiers become Daoist clerics and teach their fellow clergy members? The fact that Wudang has not been considered for its role in martial arts is strange considering the fame of the monastery amongst some martial artists. To learn how martial arts came to Wudang, it may serve to research its history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We know about the history of Shaolin and how they contributed to martial arts from Shahar's work. It is time to recreate what he did for Wudang, Daoism, and martial arts.



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