

Article

Daoist Cosmogony in the *Kojiki* 古事記 Preface

Jeffrey L. Richey

Asian Studies Department, Berea College, Berea, KY 40404, USA; richeyj@berea.edu

Abstract: A close reading of the cosmogony found in the preface to Ō no Yasumaro 太安萬侶's *Kojiki* 古事記 (*Record of Ancient Matters*, 712 CE) reveals the ways in which Japan's early Nara period elites appropriated aspects of China's Daoist traditions for their own literary, mythological, and political purposes. This debt to Daoism on the part of the oldest Shintō 神道 scripture, in turn, reveals the extent to which Daoist traditions were eclectically mined for content that early Japanese elites found useful, rather than transmitted as intact lineages. This also raises questions about whether and how "Daoism" has functioned as a systematic body of doctrines and practices, whether in China or overseas. The essay argues that Ō no Yasumaro's appropriation of the Daoist cosmogonic repertoire is consistent with Daoist traditions as they developed during China's Six Dynasties and Tang periods—that is, with Daoism as it existed contemporaneously with the early Nara period, when the *Kojiki* was compiled.

Keywords: China; cosmogony; Daoism; Japan; *Kojiki*; Shintō

1. Introduction

The influence of Chinese traditions on Japan's cultural development is well-known, but the questions of whether and how the specific Chinese tradition of Daoism influenced Japanese culture remain murky. It has been said that there are only four major aspects of Chinese culture that Japan did not adopt: foot-binding of women and girls, the tradition of eunuchs, the Confucian ideal of the "Mandate of Heaven" (the idea that regimes govern by virtue of their personal moral merit, which if lost mandates their replacement), and Daoism (Taoism).¹ While it may be true that the first two items in this list did not become integral to Japanese culture, it certainly is not true that Daoism—or at least its influence, including the emulation and appropriation of Daoist ideas, images, institutions, and practices—is absent from the Japanese religious landscape. However, such influence is well-hidden in Japan, and if one does not know where to look, it is easy enough to miss it altogether. After all, when the Japanese Buddhist monk and visitor to China, Ennin (794–864 CE), was asked by Chinese officials whether Daoist practitioners existed in Japan, he replied that they did not. Even if Daoist traditions were more overtly apparent in Japan at an earlier date, by Ennin's time they had completely vanished from the view of Chinese-educated Japanese.²

The invisibility of Daoism in Japan, both to Ennin and to us, is partly because Daoist influences are concealed in what might seem to be the unlikeliest of places—the foundational texts of Shintō 神道, among other locations. Before one can find Daoism in Japan, however, one must know not only where to look, but also precisely what it is that one seeks.

The quest to find Daoism, or Daoist influence, in Japanese religious history is made even more difficult by the lack of clear definitions of Daoism in China, much less Daoism elsewhere. As Michel Strickmann memorably put it, "Few subjects in China's long history have been the source of greater confusion than 'Taoism'." (Strickmann 1980, p. 201). In recent decades, scholars have tended toward one of two views when attempting to define Daoism. At the risk of imparting a sense of prejudice that is not intended, these views might be neutrally described as "broad" and "narrow". Those who take the "broad" view "defin[e] what fits inside the border by actors' criteria" (Sivin 2010, p. 45) and accept the loosely defined, heterogeneous nature of Daoist traditions as they present



Citation: Richey, Jeffrey L. 2021.

Daoist Cosmogony in the *Kojiki* 古事記 Preface. *Religions* 12: 761. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090761>

Academic Editor: Mark Berkson

Received: 9 August 2021

Accepted: 6 September 2021

Published: 13 September 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

themselves in history, liturgy, and texts and then develop criteria to justify this heterogeneity. Those who take the “narrow” view object to this messiness and attempt to tidy it up by limiting authentic Daoist traditions to those that possess a known historical foundation in a verifiable social movement, usually no earlier than the second century CE. Advocates of the “broad” view often embrace the perspective of cultural “insiders” with regard to Daoist traditions, either as sympathetic ethnographers or as active practitioners, while advocates of the “narrow” view tend to privilege “outsider” perspectives on Chinese culture and remain personally apart from the practice of Daoism. An example of the “broad” view may be found in the work of Gil Raz, who argues that

Daoism was never . . . a unitary phenomenon. Rather, we should think of it as a number of intersecting textual and ritual lineages which, with a set of shared core beliefs or attitudes, formed a commonality, as opposed to other traditions—particularly the practices of local popular cults and those of Buddhism. We must also remember that the Daoists constructed their new ritual systems while relying on diverse older and contemporary practices. If we bear these caveats in mind, we may better understand why early Daoist rituals and practices are found in multiple versions and seem to have multiple meanings (Raz 2005, p. 28). See also (Raz 2012). However, earlier scholars such as Anna Seidel pointed out that

[w]hat many authors . . . call [D]aoist practices . . . divination, five-element sciences, time-keeping, calendar-making, astrology, prognostication, omen-lore, etc.—were Chinese traditions cultivated at every Chinese court . . . These traditions exerted a great influence on [D]aoism; but they are a pan-Chinese branch of learning with its own chain of transmission distinct from [D]aoism (Seidel 1989, p. 301).

This point has particular bearing on any attempt to identify “Daoism” in Japan, since much of what has been called “Daoist” in the archipelago is connected with calendrical and divination lore. As James Miller and Daniel M. Murray have noted, when “[t]aken out of Chinese cultural context, Daoism is often associated with physical cultivation practices . . . rather than the traditional lineages of . . . a hierarchically organized religion” (Miller and Murray 2015, p. 315). Going even beyond Raz’s argument, Louis Komjathy has suggested that such “pan-Chinese” traditions properly belong in any definition of Daoism, which ought to accept and advocate a more encompassing view of the Daoist tradition as originating in the Warring States period (480–222 B.C.E.) and becoming an organized religion in the Later Han (25–221 C.E.) . . . Certain traditions and texts . . . are not “Daoist” in origin, yet they must be studied for a fuller understanding of historical precedents and influences. For example, earlier daoyin 導引, yangsheng 養生, and Chinese medical texts provided important foundations for later Daoist worldviews, practices, goals, and ideals (Komjathy n.d., p. 15).

Finally, another “broad” way of viewing Daoist traditions is to see them “as a succession of revelations, each of which includes but remains superior to the earlier ones” (Teiser n.d.). his view may be said to possess the virtue of mirroring the perspective of most Daoist practitioners from the second century CE onwards, but it also may be accused of exhibiting the vice of ignoring the many doctrinal disagreements and historical discontinuities to be found across that “succession of revelations”.

Such broad disagreements and discontinuities are, in part, what has occasioned the development of more “narrow” perspectives advanced by other scholars, including Strickmann, who remarked upon “the hospitable, uncritical comprehensiveness of Taoist textual collections and the exuberant cumulation of lineages and practices of Taoist priests” (Strickmann 1980, pp. 235–36) Strickmann sought to tidy up the inherently complex category of “Daoism” by limiting it to the sectarian movements that first arose in the mid-100s CE and their later legacies, and this view has begun to prevail in recent decades, especially among the many Western scholars trained by Strickmann.³ Strickmann’s argument rests upon the lack of “social being”—a discernible community of historical human beings, as

opposed to a mere text or set of practices, which may be socially disembodied, as is the case with what is perhaps the most famous “Daoist” text of all, the *Laozi* 老子 or *Daodejing* 道德經—on the part of texts and traditions labeled as “Daoist” that predate the earliest sectarian Daoist movements.

Whatever its ideological prehistory, this religion [of Daoism] came into social being with the Way of the Celestial Master (*T'ien-shih tao* 天師道) in the second half of the second century AD, and continues under the aegis of its successors and derivatives to the present day (Strickmann, *ibid.*)

Thus, anyone who wishes to know what “Daoism” is typically is asked to choose between these “broad” and “narrow” views, each of which has important implications for resolving the questions of whether and how the specific Chinese tradition of Daoism influenced Japanese culture. If one adopts the “broad” view, then one must explain why Daoism—rather than Chinese culture as a whole—should be singled out for attention when looking at Japanese cultural development. But if one takes the “narrow” view, then one must explain why artifacts found in Daoist liturgical and textual lineages suddenly lose their “Daoist-ness” when detached from those lineages in the diaspora, as seems to have become the case in Japan.

The question of whether and how “Daoism” has been present in Japanese culture has received significant, if sporadic, attention over the years. Taking the “broad” view, one may assert that nearly any idea, image, institution, or practice found in both Daoist traditions (however those are defined) and Japanese culture is evidence of Daoism in Japan. Examples of such a “broad” view of Daoism in Japan include the work of several Japanese scholars⁴, such as Fukunaga Mitsuji 福永光司 (Fukunaga 1982), Nakamura Shōhachi 中村璋八 (Nakamura 1983), and Masuo Shin'ichirō 増尾伸一郎 (Masuo 2013), but also may be found among Western scholars, such as Felicia G. Bock (1985) and Livia Kohn (2001).⁵ If, however, one takes the “narrow” view, then one is hard-pressed to find anything at all in Japan that meets such criteria for being labeled “Daoist”. From this perspective, since Daoist clerical, liturgical, and textual lineages did not replicate themselves in Japan as their Buddhist counterparts did, and as Shintō traditions later emulated, one should not regard elements of Japanese religious culture that appear to be “Daoist” as Daoist per se, but instead see them as—at the very most—“a ‘Daoist residue’ present throughout the cultural history of Japan”, as Richard Bowring puts it (Review of Bowring 2016). It is Daoism’s lack of “social being” (to use Strickmann’s phrase) in Japan that is the obstacle to seeing Daoism there, just as it is an obstacle to seeing Daoism in China prior to the second century CE for scholars of Strickmann’s school. This polarization of views cries out for some kind of compromise, and it is exactly this sort of middle path between the two that this essay intends to pursue. While it may not be possible to identify any aspect of Japanese religious culture as Daoist beyond a shadow of a doubt, it is possible to see in Japan aspects of religion that are neither Confucian nor Buddhist nor Shintō, which upon closer examination seem likely to have been derived from Daoist traditions. Even when such aspects of Japanese religion are no longer directly connected to a Chinese clerical, liturgical, or textual lineage (as is the case with the topic of this essay), one still may discern what might be called Daoist tendencies, or what Herman Ooms has called the *Daoisant* in Japanese religious culture. By this French neologism, Ooms intends something along the lines of the French term *Marxisant*, meaning “somewhat Marxist” or “tending toward Marxism”, and he uses it to describe what he calls any aspect of Japanese religion that “certainly [is] not Confucian, and . . . [is also] pre-Buddhist” (Ooms 2009, p. 72). An aspect of Japanese religious culture may not be Daoist in the narrow sense, but it may nonetheless be *Daoisant*, much as aspects of Judaism and Christianity have found their way into Japanese *anime* アニメ and *manga* 漫画 without remaining Jewish or Christian See (Reed 2015), or elements of Christianity have metamorphosed into U.S. attitudes toward economic and social policy without necessarily connoting Christian faith See (Friedman 2021).

2. Looking for “Daoism” in the China–Japan Contact Corridor

Just as Daoism in China is not always well-defined, with few of the neat distinctions (especially between Buddhism, popular religion, and Daoism) that some might wish to see, Daoism in Japan also defies quick categorization and clear boundary-drawing. This is as true of Daoism’s intertwined relations with Shintō as it is of Daoist cross-fertilizations with Japanese Buddhism, especially esoteric or tantric Buddhism (*mikkyō* 密教).⁶ “The worlds of proto-Shintō and Daoism,” the Japanese scholar Ueda Masaaki 上田正昭 has written, “overlap” (Ueda 1978, p. 137)—or, in Ooms’ words, “Daoism as such did not exist in the archipelago and neither did Shintō when the two met there in the seventh and eighth centuries” (Ooms 2009, p. 135). After all, “All of this continental learning was brought to Japan piecemeal, and, in the end, comprised a highly unsystematic body of knowledge” (Drott 2015, p. 279). The shared heterogeneity of both Daoism and early Japanese religious culture also may be the result of their shared historical context—the second through the eighth centuries CE, during which Daoist traditions suddenly and multiply proliferated in China and early Japanese state-building and myth-making processes and actors absorbed a great deal of Chinese influence, including Daoism. In other words, the arrival of Daoist influences in the Japanese archipelago coincides with a period of rapid and explosive change in Chinese religious culture, of which Daoism’s development is arguably the most prominent element. Moreover, the “contact corridor” through which much Chinese influence was transmitted to Japan during this time was essentially a highway paved by China’s Tang dynasty, which arguably did more to promote Daoism than any other polity in history (Kohn 2001, pp. 101, 108–112).

To understand the forms in which Daoist influence reached early Japanese culture, one must understand the highly plastic and varied forms that Daoism assumed during this crucial period of East Asian history, as well as the paramount importance of religion to rulers. Stephen R. Bokenkamp has argued that

[a]mong the many social, political, and ideological changes that took place [in China] during the period . . . none matches in impact or endurance those brought about in the realm of religion . . . To name but one indicator of this, in the second century CE, religious organizations were local and community-based. By the beginning of the seventh century, kingdom-wide networks of temples, both Buddhist and Daoist, dotted the landscape and emperors found it necessary both to control the influence of religion through regulation and to seek support from these organizations for legitimation (Bokenkamp 2020, p. 553).

However, rather like late Roman rulers around the same time, who confronted a bewildering and ever-changing farrago of “Christian” beliefs, practices, and scriptures (See Brown 2013, pp. xxxii–xxxiii), Chinese and other East Asian regimes did not experience “Daoism” as a neat and well-organized system. On the contrary, those who identified as Daoists

would adhere to a variety of practices including, sometimes, those emanating from what we today might see as incompatible scriptural traditions, including even Buddhism. Recent work on religious groups that erected steles as acts of merits for their ancestors indicates that lived religious practice, sometimes including elements of both Buddhism and Daoism, was very different from the doctrinal orthodoxies we find prescribed in scriptural evidence (Bokenkamp 2020, p. 569; see also Mollier 2008).⁷

One might even say that Daoism itself was, on occasion, more *Daoisant* than Daoist in middle-period China. To a certain extent, such a blurring of boundaries between the Daoist and the non-Daoist in early medieval China—boundaries that may not even have existed for many practitioners of that time and place, however important they may seem to some today—anticipated the process by which Daoist artifacts later found their way into Japanese esoteric Buddhism and Shintō:

In the same way that the Chinese had not realized that many “Buddhist” cults and deities (Indra, Brahma, Yama) were in fact Indian, the Japanese accepted as Buddhist many Chinese cults and deities that were in fact products of Chinese religious culture adopted by Buddhism. The same kind of fruitful misunderstanding happened again later when, in Japan, the whole cultural finery associated with the tea ceremony and Chinese gardens became associated with Zen, because these products of Chinese Sung dynasty culture were brought back to Japan in the same period and by the same travellers who brought Ch’an Buddhism (Seidel 1989, p. 302).

By the time of the earliest known contacts between China and Japan—attested by chroniclers’ mentions of at least five “tributary” delegations from the archipelago to Chinese courts between the mid-first and mid-third centuries CE⁸—what Staffan Rosén calls “the North Asian–Peninsular cultural flow during the [first] millennium . . . the northeastern cultural-religious complex” (Rosén 2009, pp. 5–6) already was connecting Chinese regimes and their religious apparatus with nascent centralizing powers in both the Japanese islands and the Korean peninsula. Elite Japanese tombs from the Middle Yayoi 弥生 period (c. 100 BCE–100 CE) through the Kofun 古墳 period (c. 300–538 CE) contain a great many artifacts of both Chinese and Korean origin, such as ritual swords and mirrors associated with Daoist traditions, which eventually became symbols of the unifying Yamato 大和 polity that emerged in what now is Nara 奈良 prefecture in central Honshū 本州 around the end of the Kofun period.⁹

By the third century CE, the Chinese had already been curious about the Japanese archipelago for some time. In 219 BCE, the imperial unifier Qin Shihuang 秦始皇 is said to have sent the *fangshi* 方士 (occult specialist) Xu Fu 徐福 in search of *shenyao* 神藥 (“divine medicine”)¹⁰, in pursuit of which he is thought to have explored the fabled eastern islands inhabited by Daoist immortals, identified with Japan in the Chinese imaginary See (Wang 2005, pp. 7–9). There is no evidence that either of Xu Fu’s two recorded voyages resulted in contact with Japan, much less discovery of immortality elixirs (Kidder 1993, p. 82). However, there is evidence which suggests that at least some aspects of Daoist traditions—deity cults, apotropaic practices, even liturgical and scriptural texts—arrived in Japan as what Michael Como has called “stowaways” (that is, as haphazardly, episodically transmitted items of cultural exchange) closer to the time of Himiko 卑彌呼 (sometimes rendered as Pimiko), the first Japanese ruler mentioned in Chinese records, who may have lived between 170 and 248 CE. See (Como 2015, pp. 26–27). (Such “stowaways” prefigure similar exchanges during Japan’s Heian period (794–1185 CE), when “[m]any specifically Taoist beliefs and cults were carried back to Japan in the baggage of the Japanese students and pilgrim monks who brought Tantric Buddhism”. *ibid.*) Moreover, it was precisely at this time that Daoism enjoyed great appeal as a source of techniques for coping with illness, especially the epidemic diseases that tend to accompany cross-cultural exchanges.¹¹

If one wishes to discover the “social being” of Daoism—or at least the *Daoisant*—in early Japan, one must wait for the emergence of a full-blown imperial polity—the sort of concerted social enterprise with the power to bring the abstract into concrete existence through law, custom, and narrative. In China, that occurred under the reign of the Tang emperor Xuanzong 玄宗 (r. 713–56 CE), often seen as the most “Daoist” of Tang rulers, who along with his dynastic founders promoted Daoism above all other traditions See (Bokenkamp 1994, pp. 59–88). In Japan, that moment arrived during the sixth century and reached fruition during the eighth century—the Nara period (710–84 CE), when much of the archipelago was unified by a Chinese-style court based in the brand-new, purpose-built capital city of Nara. The *Kojiki* 古事記 (*Record of Ancient Matters*) is the story told by that court about itself and its dominions. Compiled by imperial command in 712 CE, it is a heterogeneous work that draws from many types of pre-existent texts, but it begins with a rather *Daoisant* bang: the creation of the universe, which auspiciously presages the creation of Japan’s imperial order out of social chaos. The remainder of the text simply retells this story in increasingly earthly terms, as the narrative gradually shifts from highly

anthropomorphic gods and goddesses to emperors and empresses who somehow are not only human, but also divine.

3. The Compilation of the *Kojiki* in Context

As a state-building, myth-making project that drew heavily on Daoist traditions, the *Kojiki* was not without precedent in Japan or China. The early emperor Kōtoku 孝德 (r. 645–54 CE), having been propelled onto the throne by a coup, imposed the adoption of Chinese culture, including Daoist learning and lore, as part of a “Great Transformation” (*Taika* 大化) of Japan from a fractious set of provincial tribal polities into a unified empire modeled after China’s Sui 隋 and Tang 唐 dynasties as well as the Korean kingdoms of Silla 新羅 and Paekche 百濟—a “Great Transformation” accomplished, in part, by adherence to “an ideology of Japanese sovereignty that made a ruler the high priest of kami worship and also the chief patron of Buddhism . . . reinforced with Confucian principles” (Brown 1993, pp. 31–32). Kōtoku was one of many early Japanese rulers who used foreign culture, especially imported religious traditions, to cement his hold on power and legitimize his newly established regime See (Lowe 2014, pp. 225–29; Wong 2018, pp. 139–42 and Mitsutada and Brown 1993, pp. 163–220). While Buddhism was the most prominent foreign tradition deployed for such purposes by Asuka 飛鳥 (538–710 CE) and Nara period emperors (very few of whom ruled without being threatened by assassinations, coups, or rebellions¹²), Daoist traditions also were utilized on occasion, especially by Kōtoku’s nephew, Tenmu 天武 (r. 673–86 CE). As emperor, Tenmu established a “*Yinyang* Bureau” (Onmyōryō 陰陽寮), staffed by Silla and Paekche refugees, introduced new hereditary court ranks based on Daoist terminology such as 真人 (Chinese *zhenren*, Japanese *mahito*—“perfected person,” a step above immortals in Daoist theology) and 道師 (C. *daoshi*, J. *dōshi*—“*Dao* master”), and posthumously imitated his contemporary, the Tang emperor Gaozong (r. 649–83), by adopting Gaozong’s title of 天皇 (C. *Tianhuang*, J. *Tennō*—the Daoist deity of the Pole Star, whose title also was bestowed by the Tang regime on their mythological founder, the Daoist sage Laozi) with lasting consequences for Japanese emperors to this day (Ooms, 75, 154–156, 182–183).

All of this imperial dabbling in Daoism helped to set the stage not only for the new Nara-centered state that emerged in the early eighth century, but also for the compilation of the *Kojiki*, Japan’s first official chronicle, which was intended to document the regime’s links to divine power from the dawn of time up to about 628 CE, when the xenophilic, reform-minded Empress Suiko 推古’s reign ended. It may have been based on written documents, no longer extant, that dated back to the 500s and early 600s, prior to the coup in 645 that enabled Kōtoku to assume power (Philippi 1968, pp. 4–5). According to the text itself, the *Kojiki* owes its inception to Tenmu’s command in 681 that now-lost court documents (*Teiki* 帝紀, “Imperial Chronicles,” and *Honji* 本辭, “Original Ballads”) be composed by the 28-year-old royal attendant Hieda no Are 稗田阿礼, who may or may not have been a woman, a court dancer and singer, and/or a bard, in order to “correct” the “many falsehoods” found in “the royal annals and the words of former ages possessed by the noble houses” (Heldt 2014, pp. xviii–xix, 3):

‘If these faults are not corrected now, the original import will be lost before many years have passed. This is no less than the fabric of the realm and the foundation of royal influence. Therefore, it is our wish that the royal annals be edited and recorded and the ancient words of former ages be sought out and examined, so that we may erase falsehoods and establish truth, passing this down to later generations . . . ’ Straightaway His Majesty [Tenmu] commanded [Hieda no Are] . . . to learn the recitation of the sovereigns’ sun line of succession and the ancient words of former ages. But time passed, and the reign changed before this undertaking was completed . . . Now ruing errors in the ancient words, and wishing to correct the royal records, Your Majesty [Tenmu’s niece and daughter-in-law, Empress Genmei 元明, r. 707–15 CE] issued a command to your minister [Ō no Yasumaro 太安萬侶, d. 723 CE] . . . proclaiming, ‘Write down a selection of

the ancient words recited at royal command by [Hieda no Are] . . . and present them to us . . . In humble obedience to this royal command, I compiled a detailed account . . . The content of this account starts with the beginning of heaven and earth and ends with the sovereign who reigned at [Oharida 小墾田, site of Empress Suiko's palace in what now is Nara prefecture's Takaichi 高市 district] (Heldt 2014, pp. 3–5).

One of the most *Daoisant* qualities of the *Kojiki* is its occasional lack of clarity. To some extent, that is a result of its reliance upon Chinese characters to transcribe both the sounds and the meanings of Japanese language See (Philippi 1968, pp. 26–30), a problem that leads to a multitude of other problems:

The dissonances that resulted from the harnessing together of two forces as powerfully antagonistic to each other as we shall see Japanese matter and Chinese script to be created a primitive and almost geological strain that permanently fractured the surface of the entire semiotic field of culture. This important semi-otic fracture continued thereafter to spread itself over a thousand years and more of Japanese cultural history . . . Japan and China are not merely two different countries and cultures. Their languages belong to two groups that are not only entirely unrelated but appear almost exactly antithetical in their phonological, morphological, and syntactic systems, which is to say in their deepest linguistic structures. In terms of their contrast only . . . Chinese and Japanese can be, and often have been, characterized as, respectively, monosyllabic as opposed to polysyllabic, isolating as opposed to agglutinating, and uninflected as opposed to highly inflected (Pollack 1986, pp. 15, 19).

This observation should not be misconstrued as criticism, for in fact, “the Japanese were . . . making extremely sophisticated use of the Chinese writing system to record their own language,” although the “complexity of this adaptation merely reflects that of the underlying problems” (Pollack 1986, p. 36). The *Kojiki*'s compiler, Ō no Yasumaro, is quite candid about the challenges of relying on Chinese orthography in the text's preface See (Heldt 2014, pp. 4–5 and Philippi 1968, pp. 43–44).

The text is not only heterogeneous in terms of its form, but also in terms of its content, which is a grab-bag of narratives, etymologies, poems, and genealogies. Genealogies are especially important within the text, given that it was compiled at “a time when noble families based their claims for distinction on ancestry . . . [and] falsification of family records . . . [had] reached alarming proportions” (Philippi 1968, p. 6). Paramount among Japan's noble families of the era, of course, was the imperial lineage, which the *Kojiki* links to the solar deity Amaterasu 天照, whom the text depicts as paramount among the gods from prehistoric times, although modern scholarship has reconstructed this deity's origins as a hybrid of various other deities connected with both the sacred mountain Miwa 三輪 (called Mimoro 三諸 in the *Kojiki*) in Nara prefecture and the seaside shrine of Ise 伊勢 in Mie 三重 prefecture, where the first shrine to Amaterasu as official imperial ancestor was established by Tenmu about thirty or so years prior to the compilation of the *Kojiki* as a gesture of thanksgiving for his victory in the civil war that brought him to the throne in 672 CE. See (Akima 1993, pp. 141–98; Mori 2003, pp. 34–35).

The *Kojiki* appears to have been supplanted by the slightly later Nara period chronicle, the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 (“Chronicles of Japan,” c. 720 CE), and then largely neglected for centuries thereafter, but by the Edo 江戸 period (1603–1868 CE) it had been reclaimed by advocates of nationalistic scholarship (*kokugaku* 国学) as a scriptural text of the Shintō tradition, then on the cusp of being separated from its millennium-long symbiosis with Buddhism, in part because “it all but ignores the Buddhist religion that had been an integral element of Japanese culture from the sixth century onward” (Heldt 2014, p. xxii). For the purposes of this essay, however, it is the very first passage (lines 2–3) in the text's preface (序) that is most important.

4. The *Kojiki* Preface: Daoist Cosmogony in a Shintō Scripture

Following Ō no Yasumaro’s rhetorical introduction (臣安萬侶言, “I, Yasumaro, say . . . ”), the next few lines of the preface are as follows (the English translation given here, in which key Chinese terms are rendered as they would be pronounced in modern Mandarin in order to highlight their presence in the text, is based on the work of both Heldt and Philippi):

Line	Text
2	夫混元既凝 When the primordial chaos [<i>hunyuán</i> 混元] had begun to condense 氣象未效 and vital energy [<i>qì</i> 氣] and physical forms had not yet appeared, 無名無爲 namelessly and effortlessly [<i>wuwei</i> 無爲], 誰知其形 who can know how it was formed?
3	然乾坤初分 Thus the heavenly [<i>qian</i> 乾] and the earthly [<i>kun</i> 坤] first divided, and 參神作造化之首 the three deities [<i>canshen</i> 參神] were the first to be created. 陰陽斯開 The receptive [<i>yin</i> 陰] and the active [<i>yang</i> 陽] thus began, and 二靈爲群品之祖 these two spiritual powers [<i>erling</i> 二靈] became ancestors to all things.

As Philippi remarks, “The whole paragraph is thoroughly Chinese in its conception” (Philippi 1968, p. 37, n. 3). That the passage relies heavily on Chinese terminology is clear, but to what extent can this terminology be described as Daoist? Or is it merely *Daoisant*? A line-by-line explication of this passage may allow these questions to be answered.

Line 2: 夫混元既凝。氣象未效。無名無爲。誰知其形。

The passage begins prior to the introduction of order to the cosmos. For a text that is preoccupied with anthropomorphic deities who meet, mate, fight, and rule much like their human counterparts in the Japanese imperial lineage, it is striking to see both how agnostic this cosmogony is about the precise author(s) of the cosmic order (“who can know how it was formed?”), as well as how insignificant such deities are at the beginning of the universe, when they do not yet even exist. Here we do not find a creator god, but rather a self-creating cosmos. The story told here strongly resembles the cosmogonies found in Daoist texts, especially the so-called “Proto-Daoist”¹³ writings collected under the titles *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (c. 300s BCE—see Roth 1993), *Laozi* (c. 300s BCE at earliest, but in its present form probably several centuries later—see Boltz 1993), and *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (c. 100s BCE—see Le Blanc 1993), but which also connect to cosmological themes and terminology found in later sectarian Daoist traditions that are contemporary with the *Kojiki*, such as the “Twofold Mystery” (*chongxuan* 重玄) tradition that thrived in Tang China¹⁴.

The first key term in line 2 is *hunyuán* 混元 (“primordial chaos,” or more literally, “the chaos of origin”). The character *hun* 混 (“confused, dirty, mixed-up”) forms part of several compounds in classical Chinese that are used in Daoist texts to describe the formless, disorganized condition of the universe prior to its bifurcation into *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽. These include *hundun* 混沌/渾沌, *hunlun* 混淪, and *hundong* 混洞 (Robinet 2013, p. 524). This shapeless, egg- or womb-like mass of undifferentiated cosmic stuff is said to have preceded all form as we know it, which leads to the association of this primordial cosmic fecundity with both caverns (*dong* 洞) and gourds (*hu* 壺) in Daoist art, ritual, and texts¹⁵. In recent centuries, *hunyuán* has lent its name to become the label for all kinds of Daoist paraphernalia and practices, including a form of “thunder magic” (*leifa* 雷法, exorcistic ritual) practiced by rural Daoist clergy (Xu 2017, pp. 141–59). See also (Reiter 2007), the headdress worn by practitioners of Quanzhen 全真 (Complete Perfection) Daoism (known

as the *hunyuan jin* 混元巾, “primordial chaos turban”) (Fung 2009), a style of *gongfu* 功夫 (martial arts—*Hunyuan Pai* 混元派), and a modern system of *taiji* 太極 exercise developed by Feng Zhiqiang 馮志強 (1928–2012) See (Institute for Classical Asian Medicine 2021). References to *hun*, *hundun*, and so forth in Daoist texts are too many to enumerate, but a few examples stand out. The twelfth, “Heaven and Earth” (*Tiandi* 天地) chapter of the *Zhuangzi* states that “all things return to their proper nature—this is called ‘chaotic [*hun*] obscurity’ (萬物復情 此之謂混冥),” thus linking both the origin and fulfillment of all things to *hun*. Chapter two of the *Huainanzi*, entitled *Chuzhen* 俶真 (“The Beginning of Reality”), quotes a bewildering cosmogonic passage from the second, “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” (*Chiwulun* 齊物論) chapter of the *Zhuangzi* and then offers its commentary:

有始也者

There was a beginning.

有未始有始也者

There was a not-yet-beginning to have something beginning.

有未始有夫未始有始也者

There was not yet beginning to have a not-yet-beginning to have something beginning.

有有也者 有無也者

There was something, and there was nothing.

有未始有夫未始有無也者

There was a not-yet-beginning to have something and nothing.

有未始有有始者 天氣始下地氣始上

‘There was not yet beginning to have something beginning’ refers to when the *qi* [vital energy] of Heaven began to descend and the *qi* of Earth began to ascend.

陰陽錯合 相與優遊競暢於宇宙之間

The *yin* and *yang* mixed and merged, wrangling and expanding in the space of the cosmos.

被含和 續紛龍從 欲與物接而未成兆朕

Covering power [*de* 德] and containing harmony, confused and chaotic, they desired to connect with things¹⁶.

And chapter 14 of the *Laozi* describes a *hun* entity or a phenomenon (presumably *Dao* 道, the self-directing, self-transforming flow of the universe) that one may “look at, but not see . . . listen to, but not hear . . . [and] grasp, but not obtain” (視之不見..... 聽之不聞..... 搏之不得), which then is provisionally labeled “balanced” (夷), “rare” (希), and “subtle” (微):

此三者不可致詰，故混而為一。

These three cannot be understood, therefore they are mixed [*hun*] to become one.

This association between undifferentiated unity and cosmic fertility is mirrored in other *Laozi* passages, such as chapter 25: 有物混成，先天地生 (There was something undifferentiated [*hun*] and complete—before Heaven and Earth, it was born).

Because of the Tang royal family’s genealogical and propaganda interests in *Laozi*, the mythical author of the text that bears his name, as their primeval ancestor, in the seventh century CE Daoism became “implicated . . . in that most serious of traditional Chinese intellectual projects—the establishment of an ideal imperial order” (Bokenkamp 2020, p. 60). The *Laozi* consequently became extremely popular in Tang court circles and was available in multiple commentarial editions (including one written by the Tang emperor Xuanzong in 735 CE) as well as many colossal stone inscriptions located in prominent locations throughout the Tang capital, where they might easily have been seen by members of the eight Japanese delegations to Tang China (*kentōshi* 遣唐使) sent by the Asuka court between 630 and 704 (see Boltz 1993, pp. 277–80; Wong 2018, pp. 98–99 and Von Verschuer 2006,

pp. 1–22). The appetite of the late Asuka and early Nara Japanese courts for Tang fashions included a general taste for what T. H. Barrett has called the “state Taoism” of the Tang emperors (see Barrett 2000, pp. 15, 16, 18). Certainly, later Japanese visitors such as Fujiwara no Kiyokawa 藤原 清河 (d. 778 CE) were given special access to Daoist worship sites that ordinarily were reserved exclusively for members of the Tang royal family as a diplomatic courtesy (Wang 2005, p. 185). It also was the case that, like their predecessors under the Sui dynasty, Daoist institutions in the Tang capital (which enjoyed lavish government support) worked hard to distribute copies of key Daoist texts to communities as far away as Dunhuang 敦煌 in modern China’s Gansu 甘肅 province, which is more than 1700 km from the present-day city of Xi’an 西安, site of the Tang regime (Barrett 1996, pp. 23, 26). If hand-copied manuscripts of the *Laozi* could reach Dunhuang, might they not also have reached Nara?

In an important article, Nelly Naumann argues for the influence of Han dynasty Chinese thought, particularly the cult of the Pole Star (worshiped as *Taiyi* 太一), on the intellectual and religious imaginary of the emperor Tenmu, and subsequently upon the construction of the cosmogony found in Kojiki’s preface (Naumann 1995, pp. 3–5). While it seems certain that Tenmu’s court was responsible for setting the *Kojiki* project in motion, it seems far from certain that early eighth-century Chinese-educated elites would restrict themselves to Han era sources for inspiration, especially when one considers the enormous influence of the contemporary Tang dynasty on the Nara court that ultimately executed Tenmu’s apparent wishes. Thus, it makes sense to look for more immediate models in works that are closer to the Nara court in time and temperament—the Daoist texts then current in Tang China. As for the phrase *hunyuán*, it appears in the title of almost a dozen sectarian Daoist texts and figures prominently in the content of many others, such as the *Taishang laojun kaitian jing* 太上老君開天經 (*Scripture on the Opening of Heaven by the Most High Lord Lao*) (Verellen 2004, pp. 108–9). This Six Dynasties (220–589 CE) text describes Laozi as *Taishang laojun* 太上老君 (“the Supreme Venerable Sovereign” or “the Most High Lord Lao”), who also is known by the names *Daode tianzun* 道德天尊 (“the Heavenly Worthy of the Way and its Power”) and *Hunyuán laojun* 混元老君 (“Lord Lao of Primeval Chaos”). This deified Laozi is said to have inhabited the “primordial chaos” (*hunyuán*) described by the *Laozi* and other Daoist texts as antecedent to the emergence of cosmic order, which includes his creation of the Earth and the sky, after which he manifested himself in human form to impart scriptural truths to wise rulers and their righteous subjects. However, his “unfathomable true form” (*zhenxing buce* 真形不測) is said to be without name or shape, and another text, the *Hunyuán huangdi shengji* 混元皇帝聖紀 (*Sage Record of the Emperor of Primeval Chaos*), “compares the marvelous Lord Lao to the true Dao, both formless and invisible to ordinary eyes” (Huang 2012, p. 135). Yet another text, the *Taishang hunyuán zhenlu* 太上混元真錄 (*The True Record of the Most High Primordial Chaos*), encourages practitioners to visualize the Dao within their own bodies as a means of gestating a kind of fetal Laozi through the blending and balancing of one’s own vital energy (*qi* 氣) in its *yin* 陰 and *yang* 陽 aspects without conscious effort (*wuwei* 無爲), an “inner alchemy” (*neidan* 內丹) practice that was very much *au courant* in the late seventh and early eighth centuries (Eskildsen 2015, pp. 75–142). The seventh-century “Twofold Mystery” thinker Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 also writes about the role played by *qi* in the cosmogonic process that is the Dao, which then may be seen as a macrocosm for which the body of the practitioner becomes the microcosm (Assandri 2009, pp. 105–8). Contemplative focus on the deified Laozi, the personification of *hunyuán*, as the avatar of the Dao’s serenity and pluripotentiality thus becomes a way to cultivate those powers and attributes within oneself.

In line 2, the story of creation begins with primordial chaos (*hunyuán*)—personified by Laozi as *Taishang laojun* in Daoist cosmology—as “that which is beginning” (有始也者), but which has not yet manifested as vital energy (*qi*) or physical form, remaining nameless (無名) and acting effortlessly (無爲), remaining beyond the ability of anyone to “know its form” (知其形)¹⁷. This cosmic fetus, which somehow contains the entirety of the universe-to-be,

is reminiscent of images found in the *Kojiki*'s rival text, the *Nihon shoki*, which also begins (1:1) with a cosmogony rooted in undifferentiated unity and primordial chaos:

古天地未剖

In ancient times, Heaven and Earth were not yet separated.

陰陽不分

Yin and *yang* were not yet divided.

渾沌如鷄子

They formed a primordial unity [*hundun*]*—*something like a bird's egg.

Compare this, as well as the *Kojiki* preface's cosmogony, with this passage from the twelfth chapter of the *Zhuangzi*:

泰初有無 無有無名

In the great beginning, there was nothing—nothing that could be named . . .

有一而未形

It was one, but it was without form.

未形者有分

That which was without form was divided . . .

Clearly, the grip of such cosmogonic imagery on the early Nara court imaginary was very strong. But the rhetorical anonymity of the creative power behind the cosmos reveals as well as conceals. Paradoxically, the *Kojiki*'s insistence that this primordial source of cosmic order cannot be named or known is the clearest giveaway of its true identity—the Dao (perhaps in its guise as the deified Laozi), which sectarian Daoist texts identify as the entity who “is nameless, and namelessly acts effortlessly (無名 無名故無為)” (*Zhuangzi* ch. 25, “*Zeyang* 則陽”) and “namelessly existed before Heaven and Earth (無名天地之始)” (*Laozi* 1)—the “Nameless Man” (*wuming ren* 無名人) who also is the “Creator” (*zaowu zhe* 造物者) in the seventh, “Response to High Kings” (*Ying diwang* 應帝王) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. The cosmogonic drama—and the appropriation of more Daoist rhetoric—continues in line 3.

Line 3: 然乾坤初分。參神作造化之首。陰陽斯開。二靈爲群品之祖。

The preoccupation with dyads and triads is a universal one across cultures, but the Daoist interest in twos and threes probably originates from a combination of influences from “Proto-Daoist” texts, the early Confucian divination manual known as the *Yijing* (*易經* (*Book of Changes*)), and Buddhist traditions. In addition to the usual *yin-yang* dyad, there are many groups of three in Daoist thought. This preoccupation may have begun with the cosmogony narrated in chapter 42 of the *Laozi*:

道生一

The Dao gave birth to one,

一生二

One gave birth to two,

二生三

Two gave birth to three, and

三生萬物

Three give birth to everything.

The *Taishang laojun kaitian jing* mentions the “three powers” (*sancai* 三才) of Heaven, Earth, and humankind, a cosmological concept derived from the *Yijing*. Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 (406–47 CE), an advocate for the Lingbao 靈寶 (Numinous Treasure) sect of Daoism that preceded the synthesis of Daoist sects under the Tang regime, seems to have borrowed his threefold classification for Daoist texts from the Buddhist *tripiṭaka* (“three baskets” of Buddhist scripture) and *triyāna* (“three vehicles” for attaining Buddhist salvation) in order

to develop his *sandong* 三洞 (“three caverns”) typology of scriptures, sects, and patron deities (Kohn 2001, pp. 119–21). By the early 500s, Daoist monument inscriptions included references to “three purities” (*sanqing* 三清), a divine trinity of space, power, and devotional focus that mirrors the older triad of Heaven, Earth, and humankind, and by the early Tang era, Daoist encyclopedias listed the members of this trinity as follows:

1. *Yuanshi tianzun* 元始天尊 (“Heavenly Worthy of Primordial Beginnings”—the phrase *yuanshi* 元始 is taken from the *Huainanzi*, while *tianzun* 天尊 is a Daoist adaptation of the Buddhist epithet *lokanatha/shizun* 世尊, “world-honored one”), a being of pure, undifferentiated *qi* who resides in the heaven of *Yuqing* 玉清 (“Jade Purity”) and is responsible for the creation of Heaven and Earth, with which he himself then forms a kind of trinity;
2. *Taishang dadao jun* 太上大道君 (“Most High Lord of the Great Way”), also known as *Lingbao tianzun* 靈寶天尊 (“Heavenly Worthy of Numinous Treasure”), who resides in the heaven of *Shangqing* 上清 (“Upper Clarity”) and is responsible for revealing scriptural texts to human beings for their salvation, rather like a Buddhist *bodhisattva*; and
3. the aforementioned *Taishang laojun* (“Most High Lord Lao”), also known as *Daode tianzun* (“Heavenly Worthy of the Way and Power”) or *Hunyuan laojun* (“Lord Lao of Primeval Chaos”), the deified Laozi, who resides in the heaven of *Taiqing* 太清 (“Great Purity”) and is specifically responsible for the text of the *Laozi* as well as other interventions in history on behalf of humanity¹⁸.

Given this Daoist fascination with twos and threes, which not only order texts and sects but also gods and heavens, it is difficult to imagine any Chinese-educated reader of the *Kojiki* preface could avoid reflecting on Daoist themes when reading in line 3 about how the “two spiritual powers” (*erling* 二靈) of Heaven and Earth (corresponding to the *qian* 乾 and *kun* 坤 diagrams found in the *Yijing*, which in turn signify *yang* and *yin*, respectively) generated a triad of deities (*canshen* 參神), through whom all other things were brought forth.

Read from this perspective, it seems more likely that line 2’s “primordial chaos” (*hunyuan*), devoid of name and form, that effortlessly (*wuwei*) brings forth *yin* and *yang* would be interpreted by an audience familiar with Tang Daoism as *Yuanshi tianzun* rather than *Taishang laojun*, as previously suggested. Yet the plasticity and heterogeneity inherent to Daoist traditions makes it possible for both interpretations to coexist. In actual practice, Daoists frequently interchanged members of the “three purities,” which were understood as both three and one, equally but differently revelatory of the Dao, and these two members of the trinity, in particular, sometimes were regarded as representations of one another (Kohn 2013, p. 843). While *Yuanshi tianzun* was unambiguously understood to be a creator deity, he also was identified with the Buddha, who in turn frequently was presented as having depended upon Laozi (*Taishang laojun*) for inspiration and guidance (Kohn 2001, pp. 89, 95).

Of course, a more straightforward reading of the *Kojiki* implies line 3’s “three deities [*canshen* 參神] [who] were the first to be created” are the creator deity Ame-no-mi-naka-nushi 天之御中主神 (“Divine Lord Defender of the Center of Heaven,” or as Heldt translates it, “Master Mighty Center of Heaven”) and his pair of companion deities, the male Takami-musu-hi 高御産巢日神 (“Tall Defender of the Childbearer of the Sun’s Nest,” or, in Heldt’s translation, “Lofty Growth”) and his apparent consort, the female Kami-musu-hi 神産巢日 (“Sacred Childbearer of the Sun’s Nest,” or, as Heldt puts it, “Sacred Growth”), who are listed as they are created by primordial chaos in precisely this sequence in *Kojiki* 1:1 (Heldt 2014, p. 7 and Philippi 1968, p. 47). But it is striking that the Daoist cosmogonic motifs seen in the *Kojiki*’s preface repeat themselves here, beginning with the emergence of a heavenly ruler-figure from Heaven and Earth¹⁹, with whom he forms a kind of trinity, followed by the appearance of binary complementarity in the form of the *yin*-identified Kami-musu-hi and the *yang*-identified Takami-musu-hi. Heldt (2014, p. 228) notes that Ame-no-mi-naka-nushi’s “name could evoke the Six Dynasties Daoist belief in a heavenly sovereign ruling over the world at its beginning”—in other words, *Yuanshi tianzun*. Nor do

any of these deities seem as earthy, immanent, and rooted in Japanese soil as those who follow in *Kojiki* 2:2 onward. *Kojiki* 1:1 concludes with the statement that “their forms were not visible” (隱身也—literally, “*yin* were their bodies”). They are ethereal, transcendent “heavenly deities” (天神), as described in *Kojiki* 1:3. As Philippi (1968, p. 397) notes, “[i]t is clear that th[ese] . . . accounts . . . had little basis in popular tradition and . . . were the intellectual products of the literati familiar with Chinese culture who were charged with editing a national mythology” (Philippi 1968, p. 397). These deities seem far closer to the abstracted and remote figures of the Daoist *sanqing* than to the trickster storm god Susanoo スサノオ or his sister Amaterasu—beings who defecate, deceive, and otherwise behave much more like human beings than the distant lords of celestial realms.

5. Conclusions

This essay began with several questions—whether and how the Chinese tradition of Daoism influenced Japanese culture, whether the “*Daoisant*” (tending toward Daoism) emulation and appropriation of Daoist ideas, images, institutions, and practices amounted to “influence” by Daoism, and with what criteria one might identify aspects of culture as “*Daoist*,” whether in China or Japan. The clear modeling of the cosmogonic passage found in the *Kojiki* preface on multiple elements of Daoist traditions should put to rest the first question of whether and how the Chinese tradition of Daoism influenced Japanese culture. It also is clear that the text’s oblique invocation of Daoist cosmogonic tropes—including the narrative of a self-creating universe born of primordial chaos (*hun* and its related compounds) that develops in a sequence from unitary to binary to trinary, the themes of nameless (*wuming*), formless, effortless efficacy (*wuwei*), and references to the “Heaven” (*qian*) and “Earth” (*kun*) trigrams and hexagrams of the *Yijing*, not to mention *yin* and *yang*—is not deployed by the text’s compilers in order to perform any vital work for Daoist traditions, per se. The point of the *Kojiki*, after all, is to advance the political fortunes and enhance the cultural capital of the Japanese royal family based in early eighth-century Nara by providing it with an impeccably divine genealogy. But the notion of grounding a Chinese-style court’s authority in a set of highly abstract fables about the creation of the universe is extremely *Daoisant*—that is, it mirrors the nearly identical strategy of the early Tang court, which endorsed Daoism as a means of shoring up its somewhat fragile political legitimacy and strengthening its questionable cultural credentials. The Tang royal house, of course, did not invent such a move, for which there was abundant precedent in the Northern Wei 魏 (386–534 CE) and Northern Zhou 周 (557–81 CE) regimes that preceded theirs (Barrett 2000, p. 15). But one might say that the Tang perfected it, and that the Nara court then emulated and appropriated it—the very definition of the *Daoisant*. But does that make the *Kojiki* preface “*Daoist*”?

Debates about what is and is not “*Daoist*” resemble the endless and enervating debates about what is and is not “*religious*” that have mired the academic disciplines devoted to understanding religious phenomena in culture, history, and thought. Fortunately, there is a way out of such debates, and it is a way out of this one, too. That way lies in the direction of the “*cultural repertoire*” concept of religion, as theorized by Robert F. Campany:

[C]ultural repertoires . . . are not accessible to everyone in the same degree . . . [P]eople use culture more in situations of flux or novelty, when their lives are uncertain . . . A repertoire may contain different and indeed contradictory models of certain areas or aspects of life because these models answer different sets of questions; people resort to these models in their discourse about meanings and values even when they reject certain implications of each model as implausible, in part because each model describes something about the real constraints of life and institutions . . . If we imagine religions and cultures as repertoires, then everyone—not merely those who study religions but also those who participate in them—is potentially in the position of bricoleur, syncretist, and comparativist (Campany 2003, pp. 318–19).

Company's shift away from seeing religions as "really existent things in the world; as organisms; as hard-sided, clearly demarcated containers of people and things; and as agents" (Company 2003, p. 319) is a movement toward talking about "'religion' in a non-theological way . . . fundamentally talking about culture in the sense of institutions imbued with symbolic meaning through collective recognition" (Fitzgerald 2003, p. 17). Thinking of both "Daoism" and the "*Daoisant*" as cultural repertoires rather than as "religions"—abstract entities that are not people, but which scholars and laypersons alike often speak about as if they were people (performing actions, feeling in certain ways, etc.)—enables one to sidestep the interminable arguments that have sidelined scholarship for decades:

Religions do not exist, at least not in the same way that people and their textual and visual artifacts and performances do. And when religions are metaphorically imagined as doing things, it becomes harder to see the agents who really and nonmetaphorically do things: people (Company 2003, p. 319).

After all, it was not "Daoism" or even the "*Daoisant*" that prevailed in a seventh-century coup to seize power in the Japanese archipelago, looked to the Tang and other Chinese regimes for tactics and resources for remaining in power, and ordered the invention of a grand Chinese-style mythological narrative to be tacked onto pre-existing native tales of gods and ancestors. It was people who did these things—seventh- and eighth-century Chinese-educated people who lived in Japan's Nara prefecture at the beginning of a new social era for the archipelago. Daoism and the *Daoisant* can influence nothing, because by themselves, they cannot do anything and do not actually exist. Human agents can and do influence texts such as the *Kojiki* preface, but when they do so, they must choose from cultural repertoires—the collection of ideas, images, institutions, and practices available to them through their cultural contacts and social relationships, and through which the drama of social identity is both scripted and performed by very real human actors.

[S]uch alleged things as "Daoism" . . . are helpfully seen as "imagined communities" . . . [W]e [sh]ould search our texts for indications of the imagined communities to which they refer . . . We should think of the coherence of such imagined communities as something repeatedly claimed, constructed, portrayed, or posited in texts, rituals, and other artifacts and activities, rather than as simply given. Much of this claiming concerns the past: the importance of retrospective selection, organization, and classification by latecomers as they tell the stories of communities they are in the process of imagining, highlighting certain aspects of the past and creatively forgetting others, cannot be overstated. Processes of the (again often retrospective) construction of lineages and the selection and arranging of scriptural canons are places where the process of community-imagining can be observed especially clearly. As we observe such processes at work, we will notice common touchstones, things referred to again and again—certain words, figures, stories, or texts—but how these are portrayed, used, and interpreted may vary so dramatically that the mere notation of references to them gains us very little (Company 2003, pp. 316–17).

Searching the earliest scripture of the Shintō tradition—for that is what the *Kojiki* eventually became—for the "imagined community" of Daoism reveals that "Daoism," at least in this text, is a cultural repertoire from which the text's compilers eclectically chose those elements that seemed most suitable to the task with which they were charged. To be "Daoist" is to be "*Daoisant*"—tending toward Daoism, or more accurately, tending to select items from the cultural repertoire called "Daoism" when the situation requires "community-imagining". These "common touchstones, things referred to again and again—certain words, figures, stories, or texts . . . are portrayed, used, and interpreted [in ways that] . . . may vary so dramatically," to be sure, but insofar as they form part of the cultural repertoire of Daoism and help to sustain the "imagined community" of Daoism, they are Daoist, and so are those who appropriate and emulate them. If that is not "social being," then one has to ask, what is? From this perspective, the compilers of the *Kojiki* and their

royal patrons in early eighth-century Nara were no less, and no more, Daoist than those who infused the Tang court with ideas, images, institutions, and practices drawn from the sectarian Daoist imaginary.

Of both the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon shoki*, Philippi says, “in neither case can we be justified in looking to the Japanese official mythology—compiled for political purposes—for a satisfactory and lucid cosmogony” (397). Nor need one do so. A “satisfactory and lucid cosmogony” already is available, and it is the Daoist cosmogonic repertoire to which the *Kojiki*’s preface has left numerous clues, like so many breadcrumbs, for the Chinese-educated reader (and there was no other kind of reader in early Japan) to follow back to its primordial source. As lines 6 and 7 of the preface say:

故太素杳冥

Thus, though the primeval stuff of the cosmos [*taisu* 太素] was dark and dim,

因本教而識孕土嶋之時

ancient teachings tell of the time when the Earth came to be and islands were born.

元始綿邈

And though the primeval beginning was far away and remote,

賴先聖而察生神立人之世

long-ago sages help us see when gods were born and people were established.

In the preface to the *Kojiki*, one can see very far indeed—past the city of Nara where the text was compiled to the abbeys, palaces, and scholars’ retreats of Tang China and even further, in the land where the Daoist community first was imagined and from which its cultural repertoire would extend its reach to the “isles of the immortals” far to the east.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The variant spelling “Taoism,” which predominates in Western scholarship dating before the 1990s and in popular culture to this day, is the result of the Wade-Giles system of romanizing Chinese language, which slowly ceased to prevail in the decades after the adoption of the pinyin romanization system by the People’s Republic of China in 1962. Both “Taoism” and “Daoism” are derived from the same Chinese root word, dao 道, and are pronounced exactly the same. See (Carr 1990).
- ² See (Reischauer 1955). The passage is located in 卷 1 of the text: 「又問。有道士否。答云无道士。」 (CBETA 2021.Q3, B18, no. 95, p. 16a10)
- ³ (Strickmann 1977). See also (Kleeman 2016, pp. 1–3). For a discussion of Strickmann’s work on this vexed question in Chinese studies, see (Nickerson 1997).
- ⁴ Livia Kohn helpfully reviews much of the Japanese scholarship on Daoism and its influence upon Japanese religious culture in two related essays: (Kohn 1995, 1999).
- ⁵ “Other East Asian Countries,” in (Kohn 2001, pp. 207–10).
- ⁶ See (Teeuwen 2002). This phenomenon of “native” religions developing in dialogue with “foreign” religions also appears in Korean cultural history. See (Huntley 1984).
- ⁷ Bokenkamp (2020, p. 569). On the often-surprising interplay between Daoist and Buddhist traditions in middle period China, see (Mollier 2008).
- ⁸ See Zhenping Wang, “Appendix 1: A Chronology of China-Japan Relations from the First to the Ninth Centuries,” in (Wang 2005, pp. 229–32).
- ⁹ On continental East Asian items in Yayoi and Kofun period tombs, see (Mizoguchi 2017, p. 572), fig. 34.7. On the broader history and significance of the exchange of such items in early East Asia, see (Richey 2020).
- ¹⁰ See Shiji 史記, ch. 6 (Qinshihuang benji 秦始皇本紀), sec. 45. A similar episode in ch. 118 (Huainan Hengshan liezhuan 淮南衡山列傳), sec. 19, describes the object of Xu Fu’s quest as “divine alien things” (shenyiwu 神異物).

- 11 On Daoism, healing, and the epidemiological aspects of Sino-Japanese contacts, see Como, *ibid.*, and (Miura 2013, p. 459).
- 12 See Figure 1, “A Chronology of Japanese Military History, 500–1300,” in (Farris 2020, p. xxii).
- 13 “Proto-Daoist” has become a way to describe texts that predate the third century CE and whose “social being” remains unknown, but whose themes and motifs anticipate many aspects of the sectarian Daoist traditions that began to take concrete social form beginning in the second century CE, many of which then adopted such “Proto-Daoist” texts as part of their scriptural canon. See (Miller 2008, pp. 1–2). Seidel notes that “many beliefs and practices of the early Taoist church (e.g., the bureaucratized heavenly and netherworldly hierarchies) had been the religion of a literate class outside of officialdom—village elders, exorcists and specialists in funerary rites—since at least the first century CE” (Seidel 1989, p. 237).
- 14 Regarding the dating of these texts, see (Roth 1993, pp. 56–57; Boltz 1993, pp. 269–71; Le Blanc 1993, pp. 189–90). On the “Twofold Mystery” Daoism of the seventh and eighth centuries CE, see (Assandri 2009).
- 15 (Girardot 1983, pp. 21–29). Girardot notes, in passing, the Japanese use of gourds as apotropaic symbols.
- 16 (Puett 2000, p. 39). This passage from the Zhuangzi also attracted extensive commentarial attention from “Twofold Mystery” thinkers of the Tang era. See Assandri (2009, pp. 97, 100–5).
- 17 In rendering wuwei 無爲 as “acting effortlessly,” I am following the work of Edward Slingerland. See (Slingerland 2003).
- 18 (Little 2000, p. 231 and Kohn 2001, p. 89). Precisely which three deities constituted the “three purities” has tended to change over time, depending upon dynastic politics and sectarian rivalries; this list merely reflects one early Tang understanding. See (Kohn 2013, pp. 840–44).
- 19 Heldt notes that Ame-no-mi-naka-nushi’s “name could evoke the Six Dynasties Daoist belief in a heavenly sovereign ruling over the world at its beginning” (Heldt 2014, p. 228, sub “Master Mighty Center of Heaven”)—in other words, Yuanshi tianzun.

References

Primary Sources

- Ennin 圓仁. *Nittō guhō junreikōki* 入唐求法巡禮行記. Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association (CBETA), <http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/B18n0095> (accessed 20 August 2021).
- Huainanzi 淮南子. Chinese Text Project, Donald Sturgeon, <https://ctext.org/huainanzi> (accessed 20 August 2021).
- Huainanzi yizhu 淮南子注. Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian, 2014.
- Laozi 老子. Chinese Text Project, Donald Sturgeon, <https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing> (accessed 20 August 2021).
- Ma Xulun 马叙伦. Laozi jiaogu 老子校诂. Hong Kong: Taiping shuju, 1965.
- Ō no Yasumaro 太安萬侶. *Kojiki*. Japanese Historical Text Initiative, University of California at Berkeley, <https://jhiti.berkeley.edu/Kojiki.html> (accessed 20 August 2021).
- Teisei Kokun Kojiki 訂正古訓古事記. Kyōto: Kawanami Gihei et al., 1803.
- Sima Qian 司馬遷. *Shiji* 史記. Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1975.
- Zhuangzi 莊子. Chinese Text Project, Donald Sturgeon, <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi> (accessed 20 August 2021).
- Zhuangzi yin de 莊子引得. Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1986.

Secondary Sources

- Akima, Toshio. 1993. The Origins of the Grand Shrine of Ise and the Cult of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu Ōmikami. *Japan Review* 4: 141–98.
- Assandri, Friederike. 2009. *Beyond the Daode Jing: Twofold Mystery in Tang Daoism*. Magdalena: Three Pines Press.
- Barrett, Timothy H. 1996. *Taoism under the T'ang: Religion and Empire during the Golden Age of Chinese History*. London: Wellsweep Press.
- Barrett, Timothy H. Shinto. 2000. Taoism in Early Japan. In *Shinto in History: Ways of the Kami*. Edited by John Breen and Mark Teeuwen. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, pp. 13–31.
- Bock, Felicia G. 1985. *Classical Learning and Taoist Practices in Early Japan, with a Translation of Books XVI and XX of the Engi-shiki*. Tempe: Arizona State University.
- Bokenkamp, Stephen R. 2020. Daoism. In *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 2, The Six Dynasties, 220–589*. Edited by Albert E. Dien and Keith N. Knapp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 553–78.
- Bokenkamp, Stephen R. 1994. Time After Time: Taoist Apocalyptic History and the Founding of the T'ang Dynasty. *Asia Major (3rd Series)* 7: 59–88.
- Boltz, William G. 1993. *Lao tzu Tao te ching* 老子道德經. In *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*. Edited by Michael Loewe. Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, pp. 269–92.
- Bowring, Richard. 2016. Review of Jeffrey L. Richey, ed., *Daoism in Japan*. *Japonica Humboldtiana* 18: 203–7.
- Brown, Delmer M. 1993. Introduction. In *The Cambridge History of Japan, Vol. I: Ancient Japan*. Edited by John Whitney Hall, Marius B. Jansen, Madoka Kanai and Denis Twitchett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 1–47.
- Brown, Peter. 2013. *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000, Tenth Anniversary Revised Edition*. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.
- Company, Robert Ford. 2003. On the Very Idea of Religions (In the Modern West and in Early Medieval China). *History of Religions* 42: 287–319. [CrossRef]

- Carr, Michael. 1990. Whence the Pronunciation of Taoism? *Dictionaries: Journal of the Dictionary Society of North America* 12: 55–74. [CrossRef]
- Como, Michael. 2015. Daoist Deities in Ancient Japan: Household Deities, Jade Women and Popular Religious Practice. In *Daoism in Japan: Chinese Traditions and Their Influence on Japanese Religious Culture*. Edited by Jeffrey L. Richey. London and New York: Routledge, pp. 24–36.
- Drott, Edward R. 2015. 'To Tread on High Clouds': Dreams of Eternal Youth in Early Japan. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 42: 275–317. [CrossRef]
- Eskildsen, Stephen. 2015. *Daoism, Meditation, and the Wonders of Serenity: From the Latter Han Dynasty (25–220) to the Tang Dynasty (618–907)*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Farris, William Wayne. 2020. *Heavenly Warriors: The Evolution of Japan's Military, 500–1300*. Leiden: Brill.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy. 2003. *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Friedman, Benjamin M. 2021. The American Exception: How Faith Shapes Economic and Social Policy. *Harvard Magazine*. January–February. Available online: <https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2021/01/feature-american-exception> (accessed on 20 August 2021).
- Fukunaga, Mitsuji. 1982. *Dōkyō to Nihon bunka 道教と日本文化*. Kyoto: Jinbun Shoin.
- Fung, Ying Seen Koon. 2009. 蓬瀛仙館 (FYSK) Daoist Culture Centre. Daoist Headdresses and Dress. FYSK Daoist Culture Centre Database. November 8. Available online: https://en.daoinfo.org/index.php?title=Daoist_Headdresses_and_Dress (accessed on 20 August 2021).
- Girardot, Norman J. 1983. *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism: The Theme of Chaos (Hun-Tun)*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Heldt, Gustav. 2014. *The Kojiki: An Account of Ancient Matters*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Huang, Shih-shan Susan. 2012. *Picturing the True Form: Daoist Visual Culture in Traditional China*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Huntley, James Grayson. 1984. Religious Syncretism in the Shilla Period: The Relationship between Esoteric Buddhism and Korean Primeval Religion. *Asian Folklore Studies* 43: 185–98.
- Institute for Classical Asian Medicine. 2021. Hunyuan Taiji. Available online: <https://www.classicaltaiji.org/hunyuan> (accessed on 20 August 2021).
- Kidder, J. Edward, Jr. 1993. The Earliest Societies in Japan. In *The Cambridge History of Japan, Vol. 1: Ancient Japan*. Edited by John Whitney Hall, Marius B. Jansen, Madoka Kanai and Denis Twitchett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 48–107.
- Kleeman, Terry F. 2016. *Celestial Masters: History and Ritual in Early Daoist Communities*. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Kohn, Livia. 1995. Taoism in Japan: Positions and Evaluations. *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 8: 389–412. [CrossRef]
- Kohn, Livia. 1999. Daoism in Japan: A Comprehensive Collection. *Japanese Religions* 24: 197–208.
- Kohn, Livia. 2001. *Daoism and Chinese Culture*. St. Petersburg: Three Pines Press.
- Kohn, Livia. 2013. Sanqing. In *The Encyclopedia of Taoism, Vol. 2: M–Z*. Edited by Fabrizio Pregadio. London: Routledge, pp. 840–44.
- Komjathy, Louis. n.d. Daoist Texts in Translation. Onmark Productions. Available online: <https://www.onmarkproductions.com/taoist-texts-in-translation.pdf> (accessed on 20 August 2021).
- Le Blanc, Charles. 1993. Huai nan tzu 淮南子. In *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*. Edited by Michael Loewe. Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, pp. 189–95.
- Little, Stephen A. 2000. *Taoism and the Arts of China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lowe, Bryan D. 2014. Contingent and Contested: Preliminary Remarks on Buddhist Catalogs and Canons in Early Japan. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 41: 221–53. [CrossRef]
- Masuo, Shin'ichirō. 2013. Chinese Religion and the Formation of Onmyōdō. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 40: 19–43. [CrossRef]
- Miller, James. 2008. *Daoism: A Beginner's Guide*. Oxford: Oneworld.
- Miller, James, and Daniel M. Murray. 2015. A Sociedade Taoista do Brasil e a globalização do Daoismo da Ortodoxia Unitária. *Religare* 12: 315.
- Mitsutada, Inoue, and Delmer M. Brown. 1993. The Century of Reform. In *The Cambridge History of Japan, Vol. 1: Ancient Japan*. Edited by John Whitney Hall, Marius B. Jansen, Madoka Kanai and Denis Twitchett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 163–220.
- Miura, Kunio. 2013. Gui. In *The Encyclopedia of Taoism, Vol. 1: A–L*. Edited by Fabrizio Pregadio. London: Routledge, pp. 458–60.
- Mizoguchi, Koji. 2017. The Yayoi and Kofun Periods of Japan. In *Handbook of East and Southeast Asian Archaeology*. Edited by Junko Habu, Peter V. Lape and John W. Olsen. New York: Springer, pp. 561–601.
- Mollier, Christine. 2008. *Buddhism and Taoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual, and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Mori, Mizue. 2003. Ancient and Classical Japan: The Dawn of Shinto. Trans. Mark Teeuwen and John Breen. In *Shinto: A Short History*. Edited by Nobutaka Inoue, Mark Teeuwen and John Breen. London: RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 12–62.
- Nakamura, Shōhachi. 1983. Nihon no Dōkyō 日本の道教. In *Dōkyō 道教*. Edited by Fukui Kōjun. Tokyo: Hirakawa, vol. 3, pp. 3–47.
- Naumann, Nelly. 1995. Taoist Thought, Political Speculation, and the Three Creational Deities of the *Kojiki*. *Nachrichten der Gesellschaft für Natur- und Völkerkunde Ostasiens* 157: 1–10.
- Nickerson, Peter. 1997. Obituary: Michel Strickmann (1942–1994). *Early Medieval China* 1: 138–44.

- Ooms, Herman. 2009. *Imperial Politics and Symbolics in Ancient Japan: The Tenmu Dynasty, 650–800*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Philippi, Donald L. 1968. *Kojiki*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Pollack, David. 1986. *The Fracture of Meaning: Japan's Synthesis of China from the Eighth through the Eighteenth Centuries*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Puett, Michael. 2000. Violent Misreadings: The Hermeneutics of Cosmology in the *Huainanzi*. *Bulletin of the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities* 72: 29–47.
- Raz, Gil. 2005. Time Manipulation in Early Daoist Ritual: The East Well Chart and the Eight Archivists. *Asia Major* 18: 27–65.
- Raz, Gil. 2012. *The Emergence of Daoism: Creation of a Tradition*. New York: Routledge.
- Reed, Annette Yoshiko. 2015. The Afterlives of New Testament Apocrypha. *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134: 401–25.
- Reischauer, Edwin O. 1955. *Ennin's Diary: The Record of a Pilgrimage to China in Search of the Law*. New York: Ronald Press.
- Reiter, Florian C. 2007. *Basic Conditions of Taoist Thunder Magic*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag.
- Richey, Jeffrey L. 2020. The Comma at the End of the Silk Road: Tracing the Development of an Early Eastern Eurasian Ornamental Motif. *Sino-Platonic Papers* 299: 1–33.
- Robinet, Isabelle. 2013. Hundun. In *The Encyclopedia of Taoism, Vol. 1: A-L*. Edited by Fabrizio Pregadio. London: Routledge, pp. 523–25.
- Rosén, Staffan. 2009. Korea and the Silk Roads. *The Silk Road* 6: 3–14.
- Roth, Harold D. 1993. Chuang tzu 莊子. In *Early Chinese Texts: A Bibliographical Guide*. Edited by Michael Loewe. Berkeley: Society for the Study of Early China and the Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, pp. 56–66.
- Seidel, Anna. 1989. Chronicle of Taoist Studies in the West, 1950–90. *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 5: 223–347. [CrossRef]
- Sivin, Nathan. 2010. Old and New Daoisms. *Religious Studies Review* 36: 31–50. [CrossRef]
- Slingerland, Edward. 2003. *Effortless Action: Wu-wei as Conceptual Metaphor and. Spiritual Ideal in Early China*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Strickmann, Michel. 1977. The Mao Shan Revelations: Taoism and the Aristocracy. *T'oung Pao* 63: 1–64. [CrossRef]
- Strickmann, Michel. 1980. History, Anthropology, and Chinese Religion. *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 40: 201–48. [CrossRef]
- Teeuwen, Mark. 2002. From *Jindō* to Shinto: A Concept Takes Shape. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 29: 233–63. [CrossRef]
- Teiser, Stephen F. n.d. Defining 'Daoism': A Complex History. Asia for Educators, Columbia University. Available online: <http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/cosmos/ort/daoism.htm> (accessed on 20 August 2021).
- Ueda, Masaaki. 1978. Kodai shinkō to Dōkyō 古代信仰と道教. In *Dōkyō to Kodai no Tennōsei 道教と古代の天皇制*. Edited by Fukunaga Mitsuji. Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, pp. 51–95.
- Verellen, Franciscus. 2004. Taishang laojun kaitian jing 太上老君開天經. In *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang, Vol. 1—Antiquity through the Middle Ages*. Edited by Franciscus Verellen and Kristofer Schipper. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 108–9.
- Von Verschuer, Charlotte. 2006. *Across the Perilous Sea: Japanese Trade with China and Korea from the Seventh to the Sixteenth Centuries*. Translated by Kristen Lee Hunter. Ithaca: East Asia Program, Cornell University.
- Wang, Zhenping. 2005. *Ambassadors from the Island of Immortals: China-Japan Relations in the Han-Tang Period*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Wong, Dorothy C. 2018. *Buddhist Pilgrim-Monks as Agents of Cultural and Artistic Transmission: The International Buddhist Art Style in East Asia, ca. 645–770*. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press.
- Xu, Wei. 2017. Xintianjun fa yu hunyuan daofa de gouzao 辛天君法與混元道法的構造. *Daoism: Religion, History & Society* 9: 141–59.