

## **Sinic & Semitic Esoterica: Exploring the Bridge between Daoism and Kabbalah**

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Though certain affinities and similarities between both the cultures of the Chinese and Jewish peoples have been documented, only recently have there been serious studies conducted that compare their religious and philosophical traditions. One such area that contains unexplored parallels between the spiritual traditions of Judaism and those of China are the forms of mysticism each produced. This article takes a critical look at the similarities as well as differences between Jewish and Chinese mysticism as embodied in the two traditions of Kabbalah and Daoism.

Jewish mysticism is most prominently represented by Kabbalah, a title that literally means 'that which is received' referring to the belief that it consists of an esoteric doctrine received during the revelation at Sinai as depicted in the Hebrew Bible. Though there have been numerous strains of Jewish mysticism throughout time, Kabbalah, since it gained popularity in the middle ages, has remained the dominant school. Kabbalah became the dominant form of Jewish mysticism after the propagation of the *Sefer haZohar*, literally 'The Book of Radiance', most often referred to simply as 'The Zohar'.

China has produced its own varying forms of mysticism, from ancient shamanic practices to certain schools of esoteric Buddhism. The particular form of Chinese mysticism that this study compares is that of Daoism, arguably the most popular and dominant form of Chinese mysticism as well as the only indigenous form of organized mysticism in China. The belief in a supreme, eternal, ineffable and incomprehensible force which is the source of all existence referred to as the Dao is where Daoism gets its name.

Before proceeding, a disclaimer of sorts is in order. Daoism as a religion is extremely diverse, has never been monolithic and has never had a central authority which laid claim to what Daoism truly *is*. The *Daozang*, Daoist canon, is composed of over 1400 volumes, many with entirely different teachings, methods of personal cultivation and religious motifs. Kabbalah is quite similar in this regard. Ever since Kabbalah became a literary genre, (i.e. it began to be written down rather than simply passed along orally), it has been extremely multivocal. In order to both respect and embrace the shared diversity of these traditions, this article focuses on the most common and widely accepted themes within each.

Another point concerning this study must be stated. The goal of this article is not to uncover some universal truth that both the Kabbalists and the Daoists deciphered through intellectual or intuitive investigation. Nor do I

propose that there was some form of communication or influence between the adherents of these traditions. Rather, the purpose of this study is to explore the many striking similarities between each of these traditions as they exist in their own context. This is done in the hope of stimulating further investigation into the mystical traditions of the Jewish and Chinese peoples in order to find firmer common ground and understanding between two separate, yet connected cultures and traditions.

## **Part 1: The Divine**

It should not be surprising that Kabbalah, being a tradition within the monotheistic religion of Judaism, views the God of the Hebrew Bible as the source of all life and truly the entire universe. What was revolutionary about Kabbalah when it was first promulgated during the Middle Ages was how definitively it portrayed the God of the Hebrew Bible. The transcendent God which was believed to be above all description and portrayal is analyzed, categorized and even 'graphed out' in Kabbalah. This graph is structured according to what is often referred to as the Tree of Life. The Tree of Life is most usually composed of ten *sefirot*, 'spheres' or more correctly 'levels' or 'aspects'. These *sefirot* were originally portrayed in the Zohar as being the ten dimensions of God's inner essence. Thus, Kabbalah became very close to employing a definitive, divine pantheon in order to explain the very nature of divinity.

Overtime, however, a debate among Kabbalists arose over whether the ten *sefirot* were 'pieces' of God himself, or merely vessels that held his divine essence. Due to the theological problems the former idea presented the monotheistic religion of Judaism, the consensus of the tradition for the past few hundred years has been the latter.

Daoism viewed the source of life as the Dao, which originally translates as 'path' or 'way'. The Dao, much like the God of the Hebrew Bible, is believed to be above all description or conception; absolutely eternal and ineffable. The most foundational Daoist scripture, the Daodejing, (Tao Te Ching) opens with the line, "The Dao that can be spoken of is not the true Dao. The name that can be named is not the true name."

Unlike the God of the Hebrew Bible, however, the Dao itself is never personified, it never gets angry, jealous, sad, or happy nor does it issue commandments or dish out punishment. But like Kabbalah, later Daoists incorporated an extremely extensive pantheon in order to explain how the Dao is made manifest in phenomenal reality. Nevertheless, it would be just as much of a misnomer to categorize Daoism as polytheistic as it would to say the same about Kabbalah; the latter which was the subject of such accusations in its earliest heyday by a number of rabbinic figures. Such accusations were one of the root causes of what led Kabbalah to eventually curb its doctrine of the

*sefirot* as mentioned above. Rather than believing that these various gods are actual divine beings in their own right, they are viewed as being manifestations of the Dao just as every aspect of the universe is.

Thus, both Kabbalah and Daoism are founded on the view that the divine, either God or the Dao, is absolutely eternal, inexplicable and incomprehensible. Perhaps due to the fact that such divinity is quite difficult to relate to, both traditions produced more comprehensible forms to depict the divine in a way that would make it possible for religionists to interact with.

## **Part 2: The Universe**

The cosmological paradigms, ('maps' of the universe) as well as the metaphysics by which the universe is believed to be governed are very similar in these two traditions. The cosmologies of Kabbalah and Daoism are both built upon an almost identical foundational cornerstone; a dualistic view of the universe based on the binary gender paradigm. In simple terms, all aspects of existence were believed to be of a either female or male nature, negative or positive, dark or light, etc. The 'stuff' which the universe is made of was believed to have either one of these two qualities or more commonly, a mixture of them. Because of this, both traditions perceive everything that exists as an extension of their respective cosmological structures and to be connected through an invisible web of sorts, giving everything a sympathetic relationship to everything

else. This is one aspect of these two traditions that has been somewhat embellished, though understandably so, by modern, eclectic religious movements and pop-culture spirituality.

The dualistic, gender enriched symbology of Chinese cosmology is often referred to as the Yin Yang theory. In a nutshell, it is the belief that all that exists in the perceivable universe is both created by and is composed of an amalgamation of the forces of yin and yang. Yin represents the female aspects of reality and is associated with earth and darkness. Yang represents the male aspects and is associated with heaven and light. The belief that the world was created by an interaction between the female force of Yin and the male force of Yang is rooted in ancient Chinese mythology which attributed the creation of the world to a divine coupling between a supreme father and mother goddess. The terms Yin and Yang respectively originally referred to the shady and sunny sides of a hill. This is at the heart of the well known circular symbol of the *taiji*, usually simply referred to as a “Yin Yang”, which has one black and one white half. The martial art of *Taiji Chuan*, (Tai Chi Chuan), was given its name because its circular foot and hand movements resemble this symbol. The roots of this cosmological structure are most dramatically embodied in the book of the *Yijing* (I-Ching) the ancient Chinese divinatory system and philosophical text. The title, *Yijing* translates as ‘The Scripture of Change’ and is evocative of the book’s divinatory qualities; for one who is able to discern and interpret the signs of the

*Yijing* correctly is believed to be able to predict the changes in the timeline and thus predict the future. Though the contents of the *Yijing* serve as a source of inspiration for much of Daoism, it is not actually a Daoist work as it predates any organized religious or philosophical tradition in China.

Kabbalah, much like Chinese cosmology, is entirely dualistic. It views all of reality including all levels of God's own being, the Tree of Life and all ten *sefirot* except for the highest, as being an extension of either male or female. As already stated, the Tree of Life, the cosmological structure which all Kabbalah is based upon was originally believed to be God; they were the ten aspects of God's very own being as well as his anthropomorphic body. Since the entire world is both a representation and extension of God, Kabbalah looks to the structure of the Tree of Life to discern the inherent, hidden nature of existence. Much like Yin and Yang, the Tree of Life is divided into male and female aspects. This is the foundation of the Kabbalistic version of creation, which is believed to be an ongoing process which occurred by the coupling of God's male and female aspects. Thus, both Kabbalah and Daoism see creation and existence as the ongoing process of the divine having sexual intercourse with itself.

What exactly the universe is made of, the building blocks of creation, the primordial substance even more foundational than atoms or their subatomic components are explained in both Kabbalah and Daoism. Kabbalah referred

to this substance as *shēfā* meaning 'outpouring' and usually translated as emanation. This *shēfā* is the productive substance which is subsequent to the divine coupling between God's male and female aspects and is the source of all creation.

In Daoism, the world is believed to be composed of *qi* (Chi), usually translated as 'energy' but also means 'breath' and 'steam'. *Qi* is believed to be the substance which emanates from the root of all life and the universe, the Dao.

Both Chinese and Kabbalistic cosmology thus view the universe as being both the product and continuation of a form of supernatural, sexual intercourse. Though such a similarity between two entirely independent and separate cosmologies is so striking, their differences are equally interesting.

In the Yin Yang theory, both the female and male aspects are considered equal; separate and different, yet equal. They are not viewed as contradictory forces which need to be appeased through compromise but harmonized through balance. Though Yang is considered to be dominant and Yin to be submissive, this view is not one of value but one of function, much like the positive and negative poles of a battery.

Kabbalistic dualism, on the other hand, always depicts the female as an afterthought or accident. Much like the version of the second creation story in



Genesis in which Adam, the male, is first created alone and then Eve, the feminine, is created as an afterthought as well as an offshoot of the masculine.

### **Part3: Humanity**

Another striking similarity between Daoism and Kabbalah is how each tradition views the composition of humanity.

In Kabbalah, the human soul is most often divided into three parts, *nefesh*, *ruah* and *neshamah*. The *nefesh* is considered to be the lowliest of souls, one which animates the body and gives it life. Animals are also believed to have a *nefesh*. The *ruah* a word which translates as 'wind' or 'spirit' is considered the root of the intellect. The *neshamah* is portrayed as being akin to a piece of God's own divine being. Thus, the Kabbalists imagine a human as existing primarily of three levels of existence, physical, mental and spiritual.

In much of Daoist literature, there is a similar soulful trinity, the *po*, *hun* and *shen*. The *po* is much like the *nefesh* which gives life to the body. The *hun* is quite similar to the *ruah* as it is considered the root of all mental activity, though this similarity is not entirely parallel or universal within Daoism. Echoing ancient Chinese beliefs that gave rise to the practices associated with ancestor veneration, the *po* is believed to reside in the underworld after an individual's death. The *hun*, if the individual is worthy, is believed to ascend to a heavenly realm. Many rituals associated with ancestor veneration and even practices

that are included in the Chinese art of *Feng Shui*, literally 'Wind and Water', are intended to appease the restless spirits of departed family members.

The *shen* is much like the *neshamah* in the sense that it was considered to be eternal and the part of the individual which gets admitted to an afterlife paradise. In certain forms of Daoist internal alchemical practices, the aims of which are explained later in this article, the *shen* is portrayed as the most purified form of *qi* that an individual harnesses to construct a spiritual body of sorts to house his or her *hun* in the afterlife.

Though these categorical designations are not universal, as both Kabbalah and Daoism are quite diverse and break up the constitution of humanity differently, these are their most common and better known views of humanity's composition.

The core similarity between the goals of Daoist cultivation and Kabbalistic practice are rooted in the belief in the macrocosmic/microcosmic respective relationship between the universe and humanity. In simple terms both God and the Dao which, though quite different, are considered to be the source of the universe as well as its totality and are seen as the macrocosm, human beings, on the other hand, are viewed as the microcosm, meaning that a human being is believed to be much like a smaller, distilled version of the *entire* universe; much

like a small reproduction, photocopy or print of a larger, original piece of artwork.

In Kabbalah, the passage from Genesis which states that “God created man in his own image” is taken quite literally. The human body itself is seen as a representation of God as it is depicted as being constructed according to the structure of the ten *sefirot*. So in essence, the universe is constructed according to the ten *sefirot* as is humanity.

In Daoism we find another striking parallel. The human body is shown to be inhabited by and a manifestation of the primary gods of the universe. Each of the five organs of classical Chinese physiology is believed to be inhabited by one of these five gods. These ‘bodily gods’ play a large role in Daoist internal alchemical practices.

Thus, in both Daoism and Kabbalah, not only are the various aspects of human soul believed to contain a piece of the divine, but even the human body is depicted as being a representation and embodiment of the whole of the divine as well as the entire universe.

#### **Part 4: Goal**

Because of this relationship between each human individual and the entire cosmos, both Daoism and Kabbalah place most of their emphasis upon

the personal, inner spiritual life of the individual rather than stressing external works. This is not to say that neither Daoism nor Kabbalah are very much concerned with the fate and well being of the world and all of its inhabitants, quite the contrary. Rather, since each human being is believed to have a direct relationship with every aspect of the created universe, if an individual focuses on elevating his or her spiritual state, they inevitably bring redemption to the entire universe. For the Kabbalist, this process is referred to as *tikkun*, meaning 'fixing' or 'repairing'. As the world is believed to be in a fallen state caused by Adam and Eve's eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, the entire universe is constantly in need of spiritual repair; an idea similar, but not identical to, the Christian notion of "Original Sin". Though usually the *tikkun* that the Kabbalist is intent on enacting is a personal *tikkun*, it has cosmic ramifications due to the relationship between the micro and macro.

Though not present in the Zohar, the doctrine of *Shevirat hakelim* "The Shattering of the Vessels" taught by the Sixteenth-Century Kabbalist Isaac Luria, further developed the Kabbalistic notion of *tikkun*. As Lurianic Kabbalah represents a later phase in the development of Kabbalah, it did not view the *sefirot* as God Himself but as vessels that contain His divine essence. When God created the universe, he utilized the *sefirot* and the channels which connect them as a 'pipeline' of sorts to direct *shefa* down from His undifferentiated divine being into phenomenal reality in order to plant the seeds of creation. As lofty

and magnificent as the *sefirot* were, they were not able to adequately contain the flow of *shefa* and “shattered”; dispersing “sparks” of divinity throughout the entire universe. The goal of *tikkun* in the eyes of Luria was to repair the *sefirot* by uplifting these sparks through *mizvot*.

Daoism, on the other hand, does not see the world as fallen. Things simply are as they are. The different levels of existence, whether positive or negative, are based on how pure and unadulterated they are; i.e. how close to communion with the ineffable Dao. In Daoism, there is a sense of reward and punishment, though these are sometimes depicted as being divvied out by various deities, are in essence viewed as more the inevitable consequences of either adherence to or transgression of universal principles and laws. Rather than seeing the opposite poles of existence as being in opposition, they are viewed as complimentary. Unlike Kabbalah, where there is a definite aim of subjugating the negative to the positive, Daoism sees no struggle to be won, rather a balance to be stricken.

## **Part 5: Life and Death**

The very definition of what ‘goodness’ truly entails at its root is the same in both Daoism and Kabbalah: life. At face value, this fact may appear deceptively simple, for of course life is good. This fact is true for most philosophies and religions save for forms of nihilism as well as certain strains of

Buddhism and Christianity. But it is not merely that life is good, but goodness *is defined* by life.

This fact plays out in Kabbalah most poignantly in its cosmology and metaphysics. Being that Kabbalah is wholly dualistic, it should be of no surprise that mirroring the Tree of Life is the Tree of Death, or more correctly, the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil”; another motif inspired by the Book of Genesis. Building upon the creation story and the exile of humanity from the Garden of Eden, mirroring the lofty realm of God’s ten *sefirot* is the realm of the demonic and the ten *sefirot* of evil. What truly defines each of these realms or trees are their relationships to *life*. The Tree of Life is productive, constantly emanating *shefa* and the all life giving force. The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil on the other hand, is shown to be entirely sterile and actually parasitic in nature. All perceived struggles between good and evil such as an individual’s personal battle with sinful temptations as well as violence between one person and another are believed to be manifestations of the continuous cosmic struggle between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Death. Related to the Kabbalistic view of the feminine, the Tree of Life is always portrayed as masculine and the Tree of Death as feminine.

Just as all existent phenomena in the universe are perceived as either belonging to the male or female aspects of the divine realm, they are also

viewed as manifestations of either the Tree of Life or the Tree of Death. These two opposing poles are referred to by many names. The side belonging to the Tree of Life is often referred to as 'the right side', 'south', 'silver', 'the side of holiness' and of course the masculine. The side belonging to the Tree of Death goes by such terms as 'the left side', 'north', 'gold', 'the other side', 'the side of impurity' and of course the feminine.

Daoism for the most parts lacks the belief in such a cosmic struggle but its very definition of 'goodness' is equally related to *life*. Being that the Dao is viewed as the inexhaustible source of all life, it is logical that life and the forces of life are believed to be positive while the forces that cause death are believed to be negative. This, one may assume, lies at the heart of the Daoist quest for transcendence, often referred to as the quest for immortality. In the west, this quest is often portrayed as one of the defining facets of the religion of Daoism, though modern scholars of Daoism have pointed out that such an emphasis is a mistake. Though there are a number of strands within the diverse religion of Daoism that sought some sort of form of immortality, for the most part, this is not necessarily the most important goal. Rather, communion with the ineffable Dao and is the goal. Most Daoist traditions which place a great emphasis on the immortality of the individual, still believe that physical death of the current body is inevitable. Many texts speak of a celestial body, the *shen* mentioned earlier, that the *hun* enters after it is 'liberated from the corpse'.

Whether a Daoist seeks a form of physical immortality or spiritual transcendence, such cultivation is based on the belief that life is inherently positive and superior to death.

## **Part 6: Practice**

Kabbalah infuses all existing Jewish ritual and scripture with the belief in the Tree of Life. It views the aims of every Jewish *mitzvah*, commandment, as being a way to subvert the forces of evil to the forces of good while at the same time facilitating the divine intercourse between male and female aspects. Whether it be washing one's hands before breaking bread or reciting the daily liturgy; each act is believed to bring about the emanation of divine *shefa* if done correctly. The primary requisite for correct performance of *mitzvot* is to have the correct *kavanah*, 'intention'. In reality, these *kavanot*, 'intentions', are a form of meditation. This form of meditation entails having in mind the influence each particular act has on the Tree of Life. In order to make sure one has the correct intention before performing a commandment, certain incantations are recited, usually stating that one perform the ritual "for the sake of uniting the male and female aspects" of the divine. Thus, every human action, particularly religious acts, is believed to have a cosmic effect upon the entire universe.



Daoist cultivation, for the most part, contains two distinct yet related forms of meditation. One is aimed at achieving a form of union with the universal Dao; a unity that truly always existed, but because of our human limitations we have become unaware of throughout the course of our lives. This is achieved through various forms of meditation where the one who is meditating “sits and forgets” his or her corporeal limitations, banishing all forms of mental discrimination as well as physical and emotional appetites and cravings.

Though quite distinct from the Kabbalistic goal of uniting the different aspects of the divine, both have a similar aim: unity.

The other primary form of Daoist meditation is often referred to as ‘internal alchemy’, where one aims to purify and refine the energies of the body in order to enter a higher level of existence. This form of cultivation not only entails meditation, but also prescribed rituals, physical practices sometimes referred to in the west as “Daoist Yoga” and dietary restrictions. The root of these internal alchemical practices highlights a bold difference between Jewish and Daoist mysticism regarding the body. Though the Kabbalists views the human body as being a smaller version of God’s own ‘body’, they embrace a separation between the physical and spiritual aspects of human existence. Often times the body is portrayed as the jail cell in which the loftiest level of the soul, the *neshamah* is constantly trapped and tormented by its physical appetites.

Daoism views the human more holistically, with no true separation between the spirit and the flesh. In much of Daoism, such a separation is absolutely inconceivable as the body is perceived as the root of both physical and spiritual life. To explain this mindset and its subsequent internal alchemical practices, the noted Daoist scholar Russell Kirkland coined the term 'biospiritual'; a term eloquently expressing the Daoist belief that each cause that has an effect on the physical body of an individual has equal spiritual ramifications and vice versa.

Where Kabbalah is concerned with bringing about an outpouring of *shefa* from the divine, Daoist biospiritual practices are often concerned with purifying the practitioner's *qi* and rectifying its circulation through the body. Thus the meditative and ritual practices of both traditions are deeply rooted in how they understand the construction of the universe.

## **Conclusion**

The core commonalities between the mystical traditions of Daoism and Kabbalah are thus their metaphysics, cosmologies, views of humanity and emphases on achieving a form of cosmic unity. Their differences are primarily rooted in their perceptions of the divine and physical reality.

Both place a great emphasis on the personal, spiritual life of the individual for the individual is perceived to contain every aspect of the universe. This

emphasis on the individual was not rooted in any form of selfishness or self-centeredness, for the spiritual cultivation and purification of the individual is believed to have cosmic repercussions. Though I primarily discuss the personal practices of these two traditions, it would be imprudent to neglect the fact that both traditions place a great deal of emphasis on the communal religious experience. The most adept Kabbalist is still obligated to pray three times a day with a *minyan*, a gathering of at least ten individuals. Communal Daoist rituals aimed at creating sacred space, commemorating life cycle events as well as fluctuations and flow of the earth's *qi* as perceived in the changing of seasons have always been a core aspect of the religion.

Both traditions are also particularly concerned with their societies, countries and current state of the world. Daoism was often sanctioned as the state religion by many a Chinese emperor who were often coroneted via Daoist ritual performed by Daoist clergy. One key difference between the two traditions in this respect is definitely rooted in the fact that Daoism, until the foundation of the People's Republic of China, was always primarily based and practiced in the land and country in which it originated. Additional to the 'bodily gods' mentioned earlier, Daoism employs other pantheons that are depicted as the governing forces over time and nature. These external gods are commonly arranged according to a structure which mirrors the classical bureaucratic government. Thus, Daoists saw themselves inherently linked with

the bureaucracy and government structure; a structure that was usually the model which their pantheon was based upon. Being that Kabbalists produced their doctrines and ideas while living in Diaspora communities, many a times amidst religious intolerance and political oppression, they did not feel an affinity with the governing class.

Being that both traditions are so diverse, this study has hardly crossed the entire expanse of the bridge that lies between Kabbalah and Daoism. Hopefully, however, the issues raised and facts highlighted will help lay the ground for further inquiry into the shared beliefs between these two traditions as well as the spiritual life of the Chinese and Jewish peoples.

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