Chinese Philosophy I
Elements of Early Chinese Thought

Early Chinese religion shares much in common with the other early tribal religions of the world. There was a belief in spirits and in reverencing their ancestors. There was the universal belief in “animism,” which is the belief that everything is alive.

**animism**
Belief that nature has soul:
The belief that things in nature, e.g. plants, mountains, animals and the sky, have souls or consciousness.
What is Folk Religion?

Consists of beliefs, superstitions and rituals transmitted from generation to generation in a specific culture.

It often uses divination to foresee the future.

No formal theology or religious organizations.

Participants believe that personal spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs.

During times of disease, death, and drought, folks must use divination to discover what beings and forces are affecting them in order to ward them off or use their power.
Rituals and practices may include:

- Ancestor worship
- Amulets (objects such as necklaces, wrist bands, etc.)
- Animism (saints, demons, angels)
- Belief in traditional systems of magic
- Blessings
- Superstitions to ward off the Evil eye, curses, demons and witchcraft.

What is Folk Religion?
Shang Dynasty

During the Shang dynasty (1500? - 1100 B.C.E.) the omnipotent power that was believed to rule the world was called Shang Di and was thought of as a personal god, capable of being contacted by diviners.
Zhou Dynasty

During the Zhou dynasty (1100-256 B.C.E.) the conception of an impersonal power called Tian (usually translated as “Heaven”) came into common parlance. Tian was seen as an impersonal divine force that controls events on earth and as a cosmic moral principle that determines right and wrong.

52 天 [tiān] heaven; day; (天空 tiānkōng) sky; 天气 tiānqì weather

Picture of a person with a big head. An anthropomorphic symbol for the power of Heaven, that is, the sky. The head is now drawn as a horizontal line at the top.

▶ stroke 天 (4 strokes)
▶ list characters containing 天 as a component
Patterns in Nature

To survive, the Chinese people had to learn that while they could not often control nature they could learn to work with it when they understood its underlying patterns. Taoism may be traced back to this concern for finding-and working with-natural patterns.
Yin and Yang

After about 1000 B.C.E. the Chinese commonly thought that the universe expressed itself in opposite but complementary principles: light and dark, day and night, hot and cold, sky and earth, summer and winter. The names for the two complimentary principles are yang and yin.
Yin and Yang

The yin and yang principles are not the same as good and evil. Yang is not expected to win over the force of yin, or vice versa; rather the ideal is a dynamic balance between the forces.
Yin and Yang

Inside each division is a small dot of the contrasting color that represents the seed of the opposite. The dot suggests that everything contains its opposite and will eventually become its opposite.
Ancestor Reverence

Chinese believe that the people we love who die can influence our lives for the better or worse from the afterlife.

It is important to respect them and complete rituals.
Rituals of ancestor worship most commonly consist of offerings to the deceased to provide for their welfare in the afterlife, which is envisioned as being similar to the earthly life.

Ancestor worship begins at the deceased kin's funeral, at which necessities like a toothbrush, comb, towel, shoes, water, or even a computer are placed in the coffin or burned as a sacrifice.
• After the funeral, offerings are made to ensure the family member gets a good start in the afterlife.

• Necessities and luxuries, like the deceased's favorite foods, wine, and "spirit money," are placed on the altar in bowls or burned in front of the altar.

• Fruits and vegetables are the preferred foods for offerings; meats are avoided because of their association with killing.

• Statues representing servants or other necessities for the afterlife are also placed on or near the altar.
Altars may be taken down after 49 days, the period during which the deceased is believed to be undergoing judgment.

Some families may keep the altar to continue to show reverence for the deceased along with other ancestors of the family.
Unity

One basic principle that has run through Chinese thought from the beginning is that the universe is a unity in which all things fit together. If humanity aligns itself with it, all will be in harmony.
The Tao

“The unity in which all things fit together harmoniously is called the Tao.”
Tao (Dao)

The mysterious origin of the universe, which is present and visible in everything. This is the name for whatever mysterious reality makes nature to be what it is and to act the way it does.
Laozi (Lao Tzu)

The legendary founder of Taoism. His name means “old master” or “old child.”
Who was Laozi?
Version I

Laozi (551-479 B.C.) a contemporary of Confucius

There were supposedly two interactions between them.

Taught the Tao, humility and modesty

Not much more is known about him.
Who is Laozi?  
Version II  

He may be a myth.

Even if he did live, he probably did not actually write the *Tao Te Ching*.

“Laozi” also conjures up the idea of respect, and this title was given to works like this because they purported the wisdom of old age.
• The classic scripture of Taoism.

• An anthology of sayings.

• Individual chapters made up usually of shorter passages that do not necessarily follow each other well.

• Does not represent a coherently related system and must be taken one line at a time rather than as chapters and books.
Often translated as “The Way.”

Descriptions from the text:

“The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way.” and

“The way is forever nameless.”

“There is no other name because language is incapable of defining it.”
Tao -- The One

Existed before the universe.

Responsible for creating and supporting the universe.
The myriad creatures in the world are born from Something, and Something from Nothing.”

The Tao is more like nothing because if it were something, the Tao would be definable and the Tao is undefined.

The Tao often is defined by opposites, “strong” and “weak” for example, because if it is responsible for one, it is also responsible for the other.

Negative terms are often used to define the Tao because they are less limiting than positive terms.
The “Uncarved Block”

The “uncarved block” is one of the most famous Taoist metaphors.

Symbol for original state of man before desire is produced in him = freedom from desire
How the Tao Works

It is often unclear whether the Tao is an entity or a principle to be followed.

Humans should model themselves on the “tao.”

Weak, submissive and passive are considered good qualities.

Turning back is how the way moves; Weakness is the means the way employs.

Concept of change is at the heart of Taoism.
The Wu Wei Approach

No action, no strain; doing only what comes spontaneously and naturally; the ideal of effortlessness. It is the way of nature.
Wu Wei

A man does what he can learn from the Tao:

non-action/inaction
not to contend,
stand behind,
dwelling low,
Be supple, soft, pliant
Be humble, yielding (bending), compliant, modest
Be passive
Be content
Be simple
Be wordless (use few words)
Be natural, spontaneous
What is Qi?  (pronounced "chee").

Qi is energy in the very broadest sense possible.

Qi is universal.

Qi embraces all manifestations of energy, from the most material aspects of energy (such as the earth beneath your feet, your computer, and flesh and blood) to the most immaterial aspects (light, movement, heat, nerve impulses, thought, and emotion).

Life, it is said in the Chinese medical classics, is a gathering of Qi.

A healthy (and happy) human being is a dynamic but harmonious mixture of all the aspects of Qi that make up who we are.
Philosophical Taoism

Taoism today contains elements of both philosophical and religious Taoism. But for our purposes we will be focusing on the philosophy of Taoism.

Early Taoism, while possibly influenced by shamanism, created literature that was philosophically oriented. Later, an organized religion emerged.
Images of the Tao: Water

Water is gentle, ordinary, and lowly, but strong and necessary. It flows around every obstacle. “The highest good is like water.” It assists all things “and does not compete with them.”
Images of the Tao: Woman

• “The female is sensitive, receptive, yet effective and powerful.”
Images of the Tao: Child

• “The child is full of energy, wonder, and naturalness.”
Images of the Tao: Darkness

• “Darkness can be safe, full of silence and possibility.”
Images of the Tao: Gentleness

• “Because Taoists pursue the gentle way, they hate weapons and war. The wise person loves peace and restraint and avoids all unnecessary violence.”
Taoist Practice

• “The two primary guidelines in Taoist meditation are jing (quiet, stillness, calm) and ding (concentration, focus). The purpose of stillness, both mental and physical, is to turn attention inwards and cut off external sensory input...”
TAOIST PROBLEMS:

• Often the Taoism practiced by the unlettered peasants was simply a retreat into superstition and magic, rather than a march forward into greater spiritual consciousness and compassion.

• Ancient Chinese Taoists were enthusiastic alchemists, who attempted to produce immortality pills by smelting minerals such as aluminum and mercury. The experiments in alchemy, though irrational from a modern viewpoint, greatly promoted advances in science and technology in ancient China, including the production of gunpowder and ancient chemistry.