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Taoist Temple Compounds

It is difficult to say what was the first Taoist structure in China or where or when it was built. It seems certain that large monasteries were not erected during the age of the philosophers Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu in the Warring States period (403–221 BCE) nor, it appears, under the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), by which time small temples were built to popular gods. By the period of Chinese history known as the Six Dynasties (220–589), however, Taoism had evolved from a philosophical system with a focus on individuality or the attainment of immortality into an organized religion; with this new religion came a clergy, an increasing number of deities, and buildings to house and serve them. The change in the Taoist religion is due largely to the intensified fervor of worshipers from the competing foreign faith of Buddhism beginning in the fourth century. Indeed, the forms and functions of Taoist architecture in China from this time onward directly reflect the styles and purposes of Chinese Buddhist buildings to the extent that Taoist images stand on altars in the center of worship halls, Taoist male and female clergy are trained and reside in monastic settings, and certain temple compounds include halls for both Buddhist and Taoist worship.

Taoist temple compounds are made up of halls dedicated to a variety of purposes. The majority are built for Taoist deities and usually house their images; some of these deities are purely legendary; others are believed to have had terrestrial existences prior to their elevation to the Taoist pantheon or are actual people of the past such as Lao-tzu; still others are popular or household gods worshiped in China in the pre-Buddhist centuries before the Six Dynasties period. Taoist architecture also includes buildings located at potent sites, notably the five sacred peaks or other natural phenomena, which are themselves objects of worship. Frequent recipients of Taoist halls are the Three Pure Ones (San Ch'ing), the eight Immortals, the god of war (Kuan-ti), city gods, mountains, and streams.

In Chinese terminology for Taoist buildings and building groups, the words kung, kuan, and miao occur most often, and an, tz'u, and ko less frequently. The first two, kung (monastery or palace) and kuan (abbey), are restricted to Taoist architecture. Each is basically equivalent to the Buddhist ssu (monastery or temple compound), consisting, in general, of a large group of buildings facing courtyards and enclosed by walls and covered arcades, with the main architectural structures arranged along a north-south axis and other less important buildings located along less dominant north-south or east-west lines. An (nunnery) is the same term used for Buddhist architecture, and miao (temple), tz'u (shrine), and ko (pavilion) are similarly not restricted to Taoist architecture. Miao and tz'u generally refer to a single hall or one hall with only a small number of associated buildings that may be part of a more extensive Taoist, Buddhist, or imperial building complex. Ko refers to a multi-story hall usually dedicated to one deity. Kung, kuan, and an function as living, training, and learning centers for Taoist monks and nuns, who may be attached to more than one monastery in their lifetimes.

Standard histories of Chinese architecture mention only a few Taoist temple compounds, none of which includes buildings earlier than the Sung dynasty (960–1279). Like all Chinese timber structures, those dedicated to the Taoist faith fell subject to natural disaster, and many a Taoist monastery suffered destruction from an anti-Taoist imperial or Buddhist faction. However, literary records relate that almost every important Taoist building site has a history much older that its earliest surviving structure, in most cases going back as far as the T'ang dynasty (618–906) and often earlier.

Of the forty or so sites in China where Taoist temple compounds survive today, three are most noteworthy.
First is T'ai Shan, the Eastern Peak, most popular of the five sacred peaks of Taoism. Located in Shantung province, it is considered the abode of life-giving forces as well as the site to which dead souls return. At times the gods of T'ai Shan have been revered as royalty, and, according to Édouard Chavannes, the powers of T'ai Shan and the emperor have been more or less equal, both being appointed by the heavens to ensure human happiness. When Chavannes studied T'ai Shan at the beginning of the twentieth century, more than 250 Taoist temple halls or shrines were located there. One of the most important is the T'ai Shan Miao (see figure 1). Inside the main shrine, the god of T'ai Shan is enthroned in the yellow robes of a Chinese emperor, and the emperor’s journey from his capital to T’ai Shan is painted on the interior walls. Directly behind this main hall is the bedchamber of the wife of T’ai Shan, situated according to prescribed imperial palace layout.

The two other great repositories of Taoist temple architecture are located northeast of T’ai Shan, in Shansi province. More than thirty halls stand at the Chin shrines, just outside the provincial capital T’ai-yuan. The site is dedicated to Prince T’ang Shu-yin, son of the founder of the Chou dynasty (1122–255 BCE), but the focus of worship is the eleventh-century Holy Mother Hall, built to Prince T’ang’s mother, who in the Sung dynasty was believed capable of giving rain and foretelling the future (see figure 2).

At the southern tip of Shansi is the Yung-le Kung (Monastery of Eternal Joy), where three halls and a gate from the thirteenth-century temple compound still stand. Its worship halls are dedicated to the Three Pure Ones, Lü Tung-pin, and Wang Che, the latter two being the patron saint and legendary founder of the popular northern Chinese syncretic Taoist sect known as Ch’üan-ch’en (see figure 3).

Taoist temple compounds are very much alive today, especially in Taiwan. Now as in the past, the principles of Chinese imperial and Buddhist construction are apparent in the temple halls, and the focus of worship still includes local and national heroes, legendary beings, renowned sages, historical figures, and natural phenomena.

[See also Iconography, article on Taoist Iconography.]

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**Confucian Temple Compounds**

The architecture of Confucianism in China is built in honor of men. It is dedicated to Confucius (551–479 BCE), sage and secretary of justice of the ancient state of Lu, or his disciples and their teachings. Confucian monuments are distinct from other Chinese religious structures in their avoidance of images—it is the teachings that are venerated at ceremonies or by visitation to a temple; man is not worshiped as a deity. The Confucian building is also a center of homage to the Chinese civil (in contrast to the military) official.

The temple or temple compound is the predominant form of Confucian architecture. The 3,500-year-old town of Ch’ü-fu, in Shantung province, birthplace of Confucius, has been the site of the most important Confucian

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*Figure 2. Holy Mother Hall. Front elevation; Chin Shrines, Shansi; eleventh century.*

*Figure 3. Hall of Three Pure Ones. Front elevation; Yung-le Kung, Shansi; thirteenth century.*