

BLUE PAPERS

Kūndào 坤道

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Kūndào 坤道 (lit., “Way of Kun-Earth”) refers to female Daoist practice in general and Daoist nuns in particular.

The Chinese character *kūn* 坤, which consists of *tǔ* 土 (“earth”) and *shēn* 申 (“extend”), first and foremost refers to the Kūn-Earth ☷ trigram and the Kūn-Receptive ☷ hexagram (2) of the ancient *Yijing* 易經 (Classic of Change). These consist of three and six “broken” or yin-lines, respectively, and thus represent pure yin. As a technical designation for Daoist practice, Kūn-Earth is associated with women, so Kūndào may be understood as “**Women’s Way**.”

Daoism is one of the more inclusive and empowering religions with respect to **female participation**. In fact, women have occupied key positions in the Daoist religious tradition from the very beginning (ca. 300 BCE), although many of their names have been lost to the annals of history. While Daoism is not a matriarchal or matrilineal tradition, there is a strong emphasis on qualities and values traditionally identified as “feminine.” One might thus think of Daoism as the “feminine” (yin) counterpart to other Chinese “masculine” (yang) traditions, including Legalism, Militarism, and Ruism (“Confucianism”). Here it is important to note that “**female/femininity**” relates, first and foremost, to **yīn** 陰, rather than women per se. Defining characteristics include cold, dark, quiet, receptive, and the like. So, when the anonymous fourth-second century BCE *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power) speaks of “**guarding the feminine**” (*shǒuci* 守雌), it is referring to maintaining a state of open receptivity. In fact, *cí* 雌,

which contains the *zhuī* 隹 (“sparrow”) radical, refers to a female bird, not a human being. The phrase thus directs *all Daoists*, regardless of gender, to cultivate **yin qualities** and to become more yin: Flexible, inward, present, receptive, quiet.

Women have played **major roles** in the development of the Daoist tradition, including as alchemists, ascetics, deities, mothers, ritualists, teachers, wives, and so forth. The earliest known female Daoist teacher is Nǚyǔ 女媧 (Woman Yu), whose name has also been translated as “feminine self-reliance” and “Woman Crookback.” She appears in chapter 6 of the anonymous fourth-second century BCE *Zhuāngzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuāng), wherein she teaches meditation to a male disciple and describes various meditative and mystical states. Some other **important female Daoist figures** include the goddess Xīwángmǔ 西王母 (Queen Mother of the West); early Tiānshī (Celestial Masters) libationer and then Shàngqīng 上清 (Highest Clarity) Perfected Wèi Huácún 魏華存 (252-334); and Sūn Búèr 孫不二 (Qīngjìng 清靜 [Clear Stillness]; 1119-1182), one of the members of the so-called Seven Perfected (*qīzhēn* 七真) of early Quánzhēn 全真 (Complete Perfection) Daoism and eventual honorary founder of the Qīngjìng 清靜 (Clarity-and-Stillness) lineage.

Generally speaking, Daoist practice is gender-neutral, or at least gender-inclusive. Female Daoists have tended to engage in the same practices as their male counterparts. However, during the Qīng dynasty (1644-1911) and first appearing around the eighteenth century, a new form of practice intended specifically for women became systemized. This was **female alchemy** (*nǚdān* 女丹). This approach places greater emphasis on the embodied experience of women, with specific attention to the blood, breasts, heart, and uterus. It includes deeper understanding of the lived reality of female embodiment engaged in Daoist cultivation. In the process, we discover and participate in Kūndào as the **Way of Women** within the Daoist tradition.