

The Dao of the West: The Orientalist Critique and Western Interpretations of Daoism¹

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JIM SANFORD: TEACHING WITHOUT TEACHING

I TOOK MY FIRST GRADUATE course in religious studies with Jim Sanford before I had even enrolled in the graduate program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. That first course was on mysticism, memorable because I found myself performing alchemical fugues by Michael Maier² with another student and studying the symbolism on the U.S. dollar bill. At the time I was trying to figure out what hippies did once they were over thirty, and I had found myself working part-time in the department as an administrative assistant. Jim's office was across the hall from mine. It didn't take long to become intrigued by his office door, his books, and him. My background in "Eastern religions" then consisted of four years of daily Zen meditation under a student of Eido Roshi of the Zen Studies Center and one *sesshin* at Dai Bosatsu Zendo, as well as several years of *taiji quan* practice with a local Chinese teacher. The latter had introduced me to the *Daode jing* (John C. H. Wu translation)³ and told me that the principles in that book were incorporated into *taiji*. None of these teachers were in the habit of talking much, being oriented more towards learning by doing than books and lectures, and that suited me. I fancied myself something of a mystic. I was probably quite mockable, from an academic's perspective, but the only time I can remember Jim ever laughing at me was when I naively declared that I did not need to learn any more foreign languages (I knew French) because anything I wanted to read was available in English translation.

Jim agreed to do a reading course with me in the second year of my master's program, and we read widely: from Jung to William James, Hesse to Kerouac, Waley to Strickmann, and much more. He steered me towards books that helped me deconstruct my New Age mysticism without taking the joy out of it, and guided me towards a more sophisticated discourse on subjects that interested me. Out of that reading course

evolved my master's thesis, which was an analysis and critique of the counterculture's inner spiritual journeys.⁴

I began a PhD program at neighboring Duke University, and by then I had realized that I really did need to learn some Chinese to study Chinese religion, so I started with beginning Chinese. The following year, while continuing with intermediate Chinese, I took my second formal class with Jim: his two-semester Chinese Religious and Philosophical Texts in classical Chinese. In that class I discovered the complexity of reading these texts in the original language and the new levels of understanding such a process can bring. Jim also served as an outside reader on my Duke dissertation committee, and parsed the document with care. As the MA thesis had been, the dissertation was an analysis and critique of New Age interpretations of Eastern religions, but this time the thesis, "Archaic Utopias in the Modern Imagination," focused specifically on Western interpretations of Daoism.⁵

It was while I was writing the dissertation that I really began to learn—not in a classroom but through conversations, book recommendations, conferences, and, most especially, weekly gatherings at a local bar with Jim, translator and scholar J. P. (Sandy) Seaton, and an ever-changing group of others from a variety of disciplines with a common interest in Asia. I did not appreciate how much I had learned in this way until my first teaching job, immediately following the dissertation defense, when I proposed a course on religion in Chinese poetry. Once the syllabus was completed, I realized that the reading list and approach I had chosen had evolved almost entirely from these largely informal but genuinely educational experiences. In the many years since then I have continued to learn in this way, and as a teacher I have especially encouraged students who are inquisitive, imaginative and gritty—so I dedicate this essay to Jim Sanford, who encouraged me.

IS THERE A DAO OF THE WEST?

During the discussion following a 2001 AAR panel on J. J. Clarke's prize-winning book, *The Tao of the West: Western Transformations of Taoist Thought*,⁶ a Sinologist in the audience suggested, somewhat in jest, that the term *Daoism* be reserved for "real" Chinese Daoism, while the Western version be spelled and mispronounced with an initial "T" sound as it sometimes is in the West. The same individual, along with others, protested Clarke's linking of *qigong* and *taiji* specifically to Daoism. These

critics echo the views of other Sinologists who are unhappy that Daoism is misunderstood by so many Westerners. Daoism has become a catchall term for Chinese practices that have found their way to the West, such as *fengshui*, *taiji*, and *qigong*. Concepts such as *yin* and *yang*, *qi*, and *dao* are also frequently taken to be specifically Daoist terms when they are actually part of a vocabulary common to Chinese thought in general.⁷

Some Sinologists, however, have described aspects of Chinese culture—*qigong*, for example—as remnants of Daoist religious practice now secularized. In 1982 Kristofer Schipper, one of the first Westerners to be initiated as a Daoist priest, wrote:

On the surface, there appears to be little left of Taoism. . . . Taoism never did have any strong organization. However, it is present in today's China in manifold and sometimes quite unexpected ways. One of the major forms of its revival is to be found in the present widespread enthusiasm for the health and longevity practices that go under the name of *ch'i-kung* (spelled *qigong* in modern Chinese transcription), exercises of the vital breath of energy. The *ch'i-kung* masters may well officially minimize any relation between their art and Taoism; however, the numerous publications—books as well as periodicals—published on the subject of *ch'i-kung* in China devote a great amount of space to Taoism, its history, and its sacred books. The same holds true for the practice of Chinese medicine and for Chinese arts and sciences in general: one only has to scratch the surface in order to find living Taoism. Thus, Taoism remains present, today as in former times, in the daily life of the people. . . .⁸

The first Western Sinologist to advocate limiting the use of the term *Daoism* to historical Chinese religious institutions such as *Shangqing*, *Quanzhen*, or *Lingbao* was Michel Strickmann, who said, nearly thirty years ago, “I should like to restrict the term [Daoist] to the Way of the Celestial Masters and the organizations that grew out of it.”⁹ The view that the “philosophical Daoism” of twentieth-century scholars such as Needham, Granet, Creel, and Welch¹⁰ is largely a Western construct is now accepted by most Sinologists.¹¹ Russell Kirkland, who has strongly condemned popularized Western understandings of Daoism, states, “No aspect of the fantasy Taoism created by immature, self-centered Western minds has any basis in the facts of Taoism in China.”¹² “Generations of Westerners” have “found the opening they needed to indulge their own egos and to make money in the commercial book market, making money by draping their own thoughts around the corpse of a text that

they cannot read.”¹³ *The Tao of Pooh* is “fatuous fluff”; Ursula Le Guin’s translation of the *Daodejing* is “narcissistic.”¹⁴

While I agree that some Western interpretations of Daoism are poor representations of Chinese thought, I part ways with Kirkland and others in that I think very little of what some call “Pooh Bear” Daoism (after the very popular *The Tao of Pooh*¹⁵) is imperialistic, market-driven, or Orientalist claptrap. It is not damaging to China, nor is it part of a conspiracy to dominate China politically or economically. “Pooh Bear” Daoism is based on the work of scholars like Needham and his contemporaries who used their understanding of what Daoism is to create a utopian vision that countered colonialist aggression and the attitudes that fueled it, and on the ideas of centuries of predecessors who were inspired by Chinese models to effect changes in Western thought.¹⁶ Like Clarke, I believe that “Daoism has played a facilitative role in prompting a rethinking of Western assumptions and a critical analysis of the formation and value of Western thought,”¹⁷ and that it can continue to do so in the future.

DAOISM AS ANTIDOTE TO “THE WEST”

Rather than to claim Western interpreters are colonizing Chinese thought via their appropriations of Daoism, it could be argued that it is Chinese thought that is colonizing the West. Following World War II, some who opposed the triumphalist claims of Western superiority reached out to Daoism as an alternative. While Clarke presents in some detail the ways in which these Western interpretations were shaped by Western cultural needs and motivations, his vision of Daoism is also clearly shaped by those same needs and motivations. He makes no secret of this, saying, “I have long been attracted by its attitude of oneness between the human and natural worlds, and its affirmation of life, good health and vitality, and have been drawn to its sense of stillness and silence, its sense of spontaneous simplicity and its gentle anarchism.”¹⁸ Statements like this leave him vulnerable to accusations of Orientalism, but Clarke counters that the critique

does not do justice to the role that orientalism has sometimes played, and plays with increasing effectiveness, as an agent of subversion and transformation within the West itself, as a method used by Western thinkers to reconstruct their own world rather than to buttress the West’s essential supremacy. Nor does it take adequate account of the

way in which in a post-colonial epoch, the balance of power and cultural influence between East and West has shifted significantly.¹⁹

As I have argued elsewhere, scholarly criticism of the inaccuracies of Western interpretations of Daoism has overshadowed the fact that they served “to undermine the notion of Western superiority by undermining the structures of thought and systems of values which have supported it, to offer in its stead respect and appreciation for the non-West, and to challenge the West to reform itself on the basis of non-Western models.”²⁰ It is “the West” with a capital W that these interpretations of Daoism opposed. Daoism was regarded by many as a “therapeutic alternative to Western thought,” a “Chinese antidote to Western problems.”²¹

Not only Western scholars but also Chinese scholars writing in English participated in the development of these interpretations of Daoism in the West. In *The Tao of the West* Clarke speaks positively of an earlier generation of Chinese scholars: men like Fung Yu-lan, Chan Wing-tsit, and Lin Yu-tang, whose interpretations of Chinese religion have been regarded by some Sinologists as so corrupted by Western influence as to be without merit. Lin was one of the first to suggest an Oriental antidote for Western problems. In 1942, he wrote:

If I were asked what antidote could be found in Oriental literature and philosophy to cure this contentious modern world of its inveterate belief in force and struggle for power, I would name this book. . . . [Laozi] has the knack of making Hitler and the other dreamers of world mastery appear foolish and ridiculous. . . . And furthermore, if there is one book advising against the multifarious activities and futile busy-ness of the modern man, I would again say it is Laotse's Book of Tao.²²

Lin was a resident of the United States for thirty years, though he spent the last decade of his life in Hong Kong. A romantic, he expressed deep admiration for Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau. He blamed scientific materialism and the absence of a “philosophy of the rhythm of life”²³ for the problems of modernity, and he recommended the *Daode jing* as a source for an alternative philosophy.

Lin, Fung, Chan, and others have helped to shape Western ideas about Daoism. It is common for today's Sinologists to dismiss them as “popularizers,” but these were bi-cultural scholars. Chan (1901–1994) earned a PhD from Harvard and taught philosophy at Dartmouth and Columbia; Fung (1895–1990) returned to China after receiving his

doctorate in philosophy from Columbia University; and Lin (1895–1976) also studied at Harvard and taught at the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Hawaii. The value of their contributions has been diminished by the Orientalist critique; without exempting them from criticism, it is my opinion that their role in shaping twentieth-century philosophy has been too long belittled or ignored.

CONCERNING ACCUSATIONS OF ORIENTALISM

Arguing that popularized Western interpretations of Daoism are mere inventions, created in service of Western needs and bearing no resemblance to “real” Daoism, Kirkland has said:

Taoism is a religion of China, and it is studied by learning classical Chinese, by reading the great works of Taoism (which remain unknown to all but a handful of scholarly specialists), and by learning how to practice Taoism from *real Taoists*—from the living men and women of China who have maintained the ideas of Taoist tradition, and might be persuaded to teach a sincere Westerner what it truly means to live a Taoist life.²⁴

He argues that “we do terrible violence [to Daoism] if we impose upon it the intellectual and spiritual needs of Americans today.”²⁵ This, he says, is a perversion of Daoist teachings, and helps to perpetuate mistaken notions of what Daoism is and is not: “The purpose of studying other cultures is *not* to use them to solve our own problems.”²⁶ To do so is “intellectual colonialism” or “spiritual colonialism”; it “ignores the true realities of the culture being explained, and imposes an interpretive framework that suits the sensibilities of the conquering interpreter.”²⁷

This harsh tone is probably a reaction to earlier negative comparisons of Daoist “religion” to Daoist “philosophy.” One could fill a library with centuries of books containing derisive and belittling statements about Chinese religions, particularly “religious Daoism” or “popular religions,” contrasted unfavorably with the more “rational” teachings of Confucianism or with “philosophical Daoism.” For example, in the late nineteenth century James Legge wrote, “The school of Lao-tzu . . . has made no advance but rather retrograded, and is represented by the still more degenerate Taoism of the present day.”²⁸ In the early twentieth century, Herbert Giles stated that “Taoism, once a pure philosophy, is now a corrupt religion.”²⁹ There is still a lot of misinformation about

Daoism in circulation, and the scholarship on so-called “religious Daoism” does not receive the attention it deserves. First-rate books on Chinese Daoist religion are being published by Sinologists every year; it is a field that has been expanding for many years, but is only now beginning to receive recognition.³⁰ There must be some frustration that a book like Clarke’s *The Tao of the West*, yet another popularization of Daoism by a nonspecialist, received special attention and praise from the academy of scholars of religion, and this may explain some of the reactions at the AAR panel that I mentioned earlier.

Clarke is not unaware of the Orientalist critique. There is a long passage in his book *Oriental Enlightenment* in which he takes note of the “somewhat naive and over-inflated . . . conviction that Eastern traditions could provide a ready-made solution to Western ills.”³¹ This awareness does not lead him, however, to relinquish any attempt to interpret Daoism for the Western reader. To the argument that Westerners are exploiting or distorting Daoism, he responds:

Daoism has no single, unitary essence but enjoys a polychromatic richness that has been subject to constant renewal, reinterpretation and proliferation throughout its long history in China. . . . Traditions are not monolithic and timeless phenomena, closed off and lacking in the capacity for critical reflection, but systems in interactive play, multiple and competing narratives that transform and reinvent themselves through dialogue or struggle with rival traditions as well as through their own inner dynamics and tensions.³²

As he points out, the anti-Orientalists can be as patronizing as the Orientalists:

Might it not be patronizing to look upon Daoism as a fragile object to be handled gingerly like a Ming vase, and to defend it against rough-handling by Westerners? The orientalist critique initiated by Edward Said has certainly succeeded in uncovering the hidden agendas of Western scholarly and intellectual appropriations of Asian cultural traditions, but it has been rightly criticized for tending to represent these traditions as purely passive and inert victims of Western aggression.³³

The Orientalist critique that shapes Kirkland’s arguments about the misinterpretation of Chinese Daoism was first articulated by Said in his book, *Orientalism*.³⁴ Simply put, he argued that Western scholars incor-

rectly regarded modern Oriental cultures as debased and inferior versions of ancient, pure, classic forms. This premise was used to justify colonialist expansion: contemporary non-Western cultures needed the help of the West to regain their lost purity through archaeology, linguistics, and other scholarly pursuits. Orientalist rhetoric was often used to justify the political and economic exploitation of some regions, particularly the Middle East. Said's analysis has been an invaluable contribution to modern scholarship, but it has been, on occasion, misapplied.

In *The Tao of the West*, Clarke continues and expands upon some of the arguments against Said that he began in *Oriental Enlightenment*. "I find myself parting company with the more reductive versions of Said's orientalist critique," he states; "the relationship between Daoism and Western thought is too complex to be shoehorned into a simple model of Western power imposed on a passive East, or into the old binarism which constructs the East as wholly alien and other."³⁵ Said himself has rejected reductive interpretations of his theory: "The one aspect of *Orientalism's* reception that I most regret and find myself trying hardest now to overcome is the book's alleged anti-Westernism, as it has been misleadingly and rather too sonorously called by commentators both hostile and sympathetic." What *Orientalism* is, Said reaffirmed in a 1995 *Times Literary Supplement* essay excerpted from an introduction to a re-edition of the book, is a critique of the way in which powerful political entities have used knowledge as a means of subjugating and exploiting others. It is particularly applicable to the Middle East, where the Western powers' desire for oil has motivated more than a century of domination and exploitation, but *Orientalism* is not, Said emphasizes, about how "the predatory West and Orientalism have violated Islam and the Arabs." Extremists who seek to trade one form of world domination for another, who claim the West is entirely evil and Islam entirely good, are, he states, as guilty of reductionism and essentialism as Western colonizers have been.³⁶

Although Said's focus was Middle Eastern studies, his work can be and has been applied to Chinese studies as well. There is no doubt, for instance, that generations of Western scholars were preoccupied with classical Chinese thought, and judged later developments (such as "religious Daoism") pejoratively as evidence of civilizational decline. It is also true that attempts were made by Western powers to colonize China, with limited success, and that some Western scholars played a role in this process. China today, however, is autonomous, politically stable, and

economically viable. Former Western colonies Hong Kong and Macao have been returned to Chinese control. Taiwan has found that no Western power will risk challenging the PRC to straightforwardly advocate for its right to political independence from the mainland. In recent decades there has been far more conversation about the PRC's own colonizing efforts—in Tibet, for example, now assimilated by China—than about the impact of Western colonialism on China.

I am not arguing that the West has no impact on China today. I am saying that China is not vulnerable to the West in the way that the Middle East has been. If anything, one could argue that America in the twenty-first century is potentially vulnerable to China—politically and economically. I do not think that Hoff and Le Guin can be properly characterized as “conquering” China by virtue of their misinterpretations. There is no political force to subdue China accompanying their work, no condescending attitude about a “corrupt” contemporary form that must be replaced by classic forms. If anything, it seems to me that scholars like Kirkland who demean others—both Western and Chinese—for their misinterpretations of Chinese thought are actually practicing a kind of Orientalism and imperialism of their own by virtue of their claim as non-Chinese to represent “true” Chinese religion and their appeal to its “classic” forms.

DIFFERENCE AND DIALOGUE: ZHANG LONGXI

Bi-cultural literary scholar and philosopher Zhang Longxi has made a similar argument regarding his own field of study: that some scholars, in their effort to preserve and protect a true understanding of Chinese forms, have isolated themselves from the larger community and unintentionally revived a form of Orientalism. As Clarke notes, Zhang “points to the dangers of extreme cultural relativism which not only puts into question the very possibility of cross-cultural understanding, but also tends to resurrect the colonialist attitudes that it sought to transcend.”

Zhang, with an MA from Beijing University and a PhD from Harvard, is a compelling theorist of the East–West encounter. His criticisms of literary scholars Stephen Owen and Pauline Yu in the book, *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China*, mirror mine of Sinologists—Kirkland and others. In each case a preoccupation

with “classic” forms serves to isolate Chinese studies and to shut down dialogue with those outside of this “cultural ghetto”:

In drawing a rigid line between China and the West . . . they may have closed the portals and pushed [the study of Chinese literature] further into the cultural ghetto. . . . The irony is that they have apparently done this out of their genuine love of Chinese literature, their real interest in literary theory, and their hope to find and grasp the distinctly Chinese nature of classical Chinese poetry.³⁸

“Purist” scholars of Chinese Daoism can be compared to Zhang’s literary scholars who “wish to achieve some kind of purity, in thinking as well as in style, that would guarantee the authenticity or originality of something uniquely or distinctly Chinese.” This wish “can only be a romantic and utopian desire that arises from the very condition of its own impossibility.”³⁹

I grant that the use of Daoism as an antidote to Western problems tends to place it in the category of theories to which Zhang objects: theories that “reduce China to a fantastic mirror image of Western desires, fantasies, and stereotypical notions.”⁴⁰ Zhang also notes, however, that Orientalist criticism has not escaped this “emphasis on East-West difference.”⁴¹ He argues that postmodern, postcolonial criticism has placed too great an emphasis on difference: “It is precisely the notion of a common ground, the idea of a shared frame of reference, which is seriously contested in much of contemporary critical theory.”⁴² Zhang is concerned about the fact that “theories of orientalism and postcolonialism . . . can be easily misappropriated to serve the purposes of cultural conservatism, nationalism, and sinocentrism.”⁴³ The images of China to which he most strenuously objects in *Mighty Opposites* are not the utopias of the “Pooh Bear” Daoists, but the utopian fantasies of those who persist in treating China as a twentieth-century Marxist paradise, even after the events of June, 1989:

It is morally dubious, I believe, for some self-appointed leftist intellectuals in the United States to blame the Chinese for their aspirations for a democratic society simply because these intellectuals would like to hold China in their imagination as the sanctuary of revolutionary and utopian dreams, the idealized Third World country that is everything opposite to the decadent capitalist West.⁴⁴

He likewise has harsh words for Chinese students who use Said and other postmodern theorists to support Chinese nationalism and anti-Americanism, and thus “rise on the tideway of a xenophobic nationalism in covering up every internal problem with a bogus enemy in the West.”⁴⁵

Zhang warns that the Orientalist critique can have the unintended effect of creating “cultural ghettos” within academic studies of China, and of fostering “xenophobic nationalism” among those for whom cultural criticism is far more than an intellectual exercise. To seek common ground instead would better promote communication: “Linguistic purists, like cultural purists, always emphasize the uniqueness of a language and its untranslatability into any other, but communication is and has always been made possible by negotiating a common ground between the foreign and the familiar, a ground on which we find not the identical, but the equivalent, which nevertheless makes the expansion of our knowledge and vision possible.”⁴⁶

The solution to the complexity of cross-cultural understanding and interpretation is not a return to some mythical, pure, and original form, Zhang counters, but dialogue: “the genuine desire to listen to the voice of the other person or text, and the effort to reach beyond oneself to communicate with that person or text.”⁴⁷ Making frequent reference to Gadamer, Zhang argues in *The Tao and the Logos* that the hermeneutic process leads to the possibility of multiple correct interpretations: “With the realization that understanding is an infinite process of inquiry—a dialogue between the author, the text, and the reader in the constant exchange of questions and answers—the interpreter no longer needs to attempt to close the text with a definite answer but can keep the critical dialogue open.”⁴⁸ Clarke also employs Gadamer’s notion of dialogue in support of the interpretive process:

All human understanding has to be construed, not as an impersonal interaction of disembodied ideas or passive recording of information, but as a kind of *dialogue*, an ongoing encounter in which a text or tradition is addressed and which answers questions, or itself questions the interpreter. . . . [Dialogue is] a continuing exchange in which the sense of a text is sought by reiterative interplay or conversation between interpreter and interpreted, and in which meaning is a function of the interaction between the two, not a mystery that lies hidden beneath the text. . . . [W]e must avoid any supposition that by some kind of

thought transfer we can enter into and fully recover the meanings and mentalities of past ages and their symbolic products.⁴⁹

Sinologist Lisa Raphals also criticizes purist analyses of Daoist texts: “Daoists are not texts, and texts do not act (or not act) with purpose. . . . Texts are not persons; we cannot predict the behavior of Daoist humans from Daoist texts.”⁵⁰

As Clarke notes, “All knowing is historically grounded, which means that, though I may become critically aware of this fact, I can never escape the historical conditions in which I think and write. . . . Far from seeing this as a block to communication, Gadamer regards it as a necessary condition thereof.”⁵¹ Western interpretations of Daoism are grounded in their “historical conditions,” but so are the criticisms against them. In my opinion, an unintended effect of the harsh postcolonial critiques of Western interpretations of Daoism has been to “ghettoize” serious Sinological studies, isolating this scholarly community and discouraging interest in and understanding of their work on the part of the larger community of scholars and the lay public.

DAOISM AND ECOLOGY: THE BABY IN THE RIVER

A recent publication that explores the potential of Western interpretations of Daoism, without ignoring the fact that interpretation of Daoism in support of environmental issues has been roundly objected to by many Sinologists, is *Daoism and Ecology: Ways Within a Cosmic Landscape*. As the editors observe in the introduction, “If Daoism somehow has a special ecological wisdom going back to the foundations of the tradition, why has there been such a woeful record of environmental concern throughout Chinese history?”⁵² *Daoism and Ecology* is the result of a 1998 conference at Harvard University that was a model effort to facilitate dialogue between specialists and nonspecialists, and the book continues that conversation by presenting a variety of different views as to the applicability of Daoist thought to environmental problems.

In his essay in this volume, “‘Responsible Non-Action’ in a Natural World: Perspectives from the *Neiye*, *Zhuangzi*, and *Daode jing*,” Kirkland continues his argument against Western appropriations of Daoism. His approach is to try to demonstrate that the Chinese texts do not say what some Westerners wish them to say, but his eagerness to prove the appropriations wrong directs him towards an interpretation that is, in my

opinion, equally inaccurate. He begins with a proposition borrowed from a colleague: "An infant [is] floating on the river, apparently on its way to its death from drowning"; what should a Daoist do?⁵³ Kirkland compares the motivation to save the baby with the human desire to protect an endangered species such as the whooping crane, and suggests that in both cases, a Daoist should avoid heroic intervention. This unfortunate analogy diminishes the credibility of his argument. I agree that "from the classical Daoist perspective, it is clearly morally suspect for humans to presume that they are justified in judging what might constitute 'impending ecological danger,' or to presume that interventional action is necessary to rectify the situation."⁵⁴ I disagree strongly, however, that "from the classical Daoist perspective" every human event that occurs is a natural act that should be allowed to take its course. It is true that the *Zhuangzi* advocates acceptance of the natural order, even in the face of tragedy, as in the examples he cites: Zhuangzi accepts the death of his wife without grieving, and Yuzi does not complain of the deformity that disease is inflicting upon him.⁵⁵ The *Zhuangzi* teaches acceptance of natural events such as disease and death, but it does not advocate passive acceptance in the case of individuals who have been endangered by accident or by human intentionality, such as this example of a baby on the verge of drowning.

Kirkland's rationale for inaction does not suffice: "What if . . . the baby in the water had been the ancient Chinese equivalent of Adolf Hitler, and the saving of him . . . led to the systematic extermination of millions of innocent men, women, and children?"⁵⁶ To follow this logic to its conclusion, must one also refrain from acting to save Hitler's victims? Perhaps Kirkland would say yes. I agree with him that the texts indicate that the Daoist should not "play God."⁵⁷ I agree also that the *Zhuangzi* does not support social or environmental activism based on the notion that humans are in some way responsible for nature or that nature cannot find its own way; the earth does not need to be "saved" by humanity.⁵⁸ I disagree, however, that Daoism advocates passive acceptance of any and all human events. This interpretation leads inevitably to the "doing not-doing means doing nothing" interpretation that is so common among "Pooh Bear" Daoists and so often criticized by scholars. The *Zhuangzi* does not advocate fatalistic non-intervention, but, rather, an acceptance of the natural cycles of human life, and of the cycles of the life of the planet as they affect human life. Kirkland's analogy, by putting the focus on a human act of intentionality as a starting point,

fails to support his valid point about the misinterpretation of Daoism to support Western ecological movements.

The final section of his essay is entitled “The Transformative Power of the Perfected Person” and explains the rationale for self-cultivation expounded in the Daoist text, the *Neiye*: “When one transforms one’s being into a state in harmony with life’s true realities (that is, Dao), that state has a beneficent effect upon the world around one and facilitates the reversion of all things to a naturally healthy and harmonious condition.”⁵⁹ Kirkland has written about the *Neiye* elsewhere as well, stating that it commends techniques of “biospiritual cultivation” by which one can align one’s “biospiritual nexus” with the unseen forces of the world in order to attract “spirit” and receive it into one’s quietened “heart/mind.”⁶⁰ These are concepts that have the potential to be appreciated, and perhaps understood and practiced in the West, but unfortunately, as in his *Daoism and Ecology* essay, Kirkland devotes more space to discussing what the *Neiye* is not, in comparison to the popular “philosophical Daoist” texts, than to what it is. Detailed descriptions of biospiritual practices, and of the ritual and communal activities that Kirkland emphasizes are so important to Daoist religion, could serve as valuable resources for Westerners seeking to understand “real” Daoism, but only if they are made accessible to them. To direct scholarly condescension towards popular interpretations—however far they may be from “real” Daoism—inhibits dialogue and hampers communication between scholars and an interested and intelligent lay public.

INVENTING TRADITION

Another contributor to the *Daoism and Ecology* volume, Sinologist and scholar of Chinese religion Jeffrey F. Meyer, reports that the interpretive process was “variously described by participants in the conference on Daoism and ecology” as “‘the hermeneutics of retrieval,’ ‘confrontational hermeneutics,’ or, more mischievously, as ‘creative misinterpretation.’”⁶¹ Meyer defends the reinterpretation of Daoism and other religions in a search for solutions to environmental problems. Citing Eric Hobsbawm’s notion of “inventing tradition,”⁶² he advocates for this kind of “creative misinterpretation,” stating, “By a process of selective remembering and forgetting, all these resources [of the world’s major religions] may be reclaimed and used to reshape the environmental ethic.”⁶³

Meyer provides examples of “inventing tradition” that argue persuasively for the viability of this technique. The phrase “all men are created equal,” for instance, had one meaning when written by Thomas Jefferson, an owner of slaves who assumed that restricting the right to vote to white male property owners was reasonable and fair. When Lincoln used this phrase to justify the abolition of slavery, he extended the meaning of the phrase beyond its original author’s intention; and when Martin Luther King Jr. used the phrase in his “I have a dream” speech, he reinterpreted it yet again. In the same manner, people at one particular time and place may choose to emphasize one aspect of scripture, and at another time and place, another. Meyer indicates, for example, that the biblical admonition of Genesis 1:28 from God to humankind to “Increase, multiply, fill the earth and bring it into subjection” is no longer appropriate for today’s environmental consciousness, but one “may instead choose to emphasize the command to care for the garden, given in Genesis 2:15.”⁶⁴ In his essay, which is entitled “Salvation in the Garden,” Meyer then proceeds to “invent” a profound way in which Chinese religiosity involving gardens and mountains can be utilized to inspire “an appropriate model for future environmentalism.”⁶⁵

Others who wrote for *Daoism and Ecology* are “inventing” tradition as well, as is Clarke in *The Tao of the West*. According to Clarke, the “symbiosis” between West and East could foster “the concern not just for a personal way of salvation but for the future of the planet, a counter to excessive consumption, materialism, environmental degradation, and, in a word, a new way of thinking about our relationship with the natural world. This implies a non-exploitative relationship with the earth and with non-human creatures, and the development of technologies which go with rather than against nature.”⁶⁶ To those who would question the legitimacy of this process, I would say that Daoism, like the whooping crane, does not need to be “saved.” Reinterpretation and reinvention are not unique to Daoism. Religions that cross national, linguistic, or cultural boundaries are inevitably changed, and those who change them are changed by them as well.

Long ago when Buddhism was being assimilated in China, concerted efforts were made to correct some of the ways in which it had been misinterpreted in popular culture; the fact remains that Chinese Buddhism is very different from Indian Buddhism, and Japanese Buddhism is different from both. The process of criticism and correction is a necessary and vital part of the process of transmitting traditions from one culture

to another, but it will not prevent change altogether. As Clarke puts it in the concluding pages of *The Tao of the West*,

We need to accept that Daoism has gained a new, and inevitably different, life of its own in the modern world. It is a life in which Daoism will no doubt interact creatively with non-Chinese traditions of thought in ways similar to those which have characterised its earlier productive relationships with the other ancient traditions of China, India, and Japan, and which will progressively involve scholars, writers and practitioners of all kinds from both Asia and the West.⁶⁷

In the last decade scholars of Daoism have initiated several efforts to facilitate dialogue within and outside of the field of Sinology. The website <http://www.daoiststudies.org>, begun in 2000, provides an organizational framework and gives easy access to a variety of information: names of scholars and researchers, notices of events and publications, reviews of scholarly books, and “an ongoing collaborative web project containing an index of the *Ming Zhengtong daoze* [an extensive collection of Chinese Daoist texts available in only a few university libraries] with access to PDF facsimiles of the text and annotations made by members of the Daoist Studies community.”⁶⁸ There have been three international conferences on Daoism in the Contemporary World: the first in Boston in 2003; the next in Chengdu, PRC, in 2004; and the last in 2006 in Germany, all of which have included Daoist practitioners as participants. A fourth international conference in Hong Kong in November, 2007, will include a Daoist *jiao* ceremony. The Daoist Studies Consultation of the American Academy of Religion, begun in 2005, is making scholarship on Daoism more accessible to scholars of other religions and facilitating its incorporation into the discourse of the discipline of religious studies.

Interpretations of Daoism in the West in the twenty-first century are more informed; interpreters are more aware of the issues raised by the Orientalist critique and of the realities of Daoism in China. While acknowledging the potential for confusion and misinterpretation in cross-cultural communication, Zhang endorses the effort “to explore the possibilities of understanding cultures other than one’s own, of reaching the reality of other cultures through the necessary mediation of one’s own language and one’s own moment in time.”⁶⁹ He argues that translation is a form of dialogue. The results may be inadequate, interpretations may be incorrect, but translation is an opening to communication: “What we get in translation is not the original, certainly not the myth of a pure

linguistic essence; likewise in cross-cultural translation of ideas and values, what we get is not the myth of an unadulterated essence. What translation allows us to gain, however, is invaluable linguistically and culturally, that is, understanding, knowledge, and communication, for which every effort of ours is worthwhile and richly rewarding.”⁷⁰ A book like Clarke’s *The Tao of the West*, written by a nonspecialist and aimed at the boundary between scholarship and popular interpretation, is a vital part of the translation process.

Contrary to what some “Pooh Bear” Daoists might think, Daoism will never solve all of the world’s problems, and I am not suggesting that it can. It has not prevented the ecological disasters of modern China, and there is a certain irony in appealing to it as an inspiration for Western environmentalist movements. The “philosophical Daoism” of twentieth-century Western interpreters was able to provide an alternative to the mentality of Western triumphalism, but it has not overcome the dominance of that attitude, and no interpretation has proved adequate to solve all the challenges of a post-9/11 world. In its original forms in China it was unable to overcome centuries of authoritarian government, though it did provide some political balance on the level of the community and it was able to nurture artistic and life-affirming philosophies and practices among some members of the ruling classes. Still, I think both China and the West can benefit from Daoism in new forms “invented” by new interpreters in a new century.

NOTES

1. Portions of this article are from Julia M. Hardy, *Daoism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming) and appear with the permission of the publisher.
2. Michael Maier, *Atalanta Fugiens* (Oppenheim: Johann Theodor de Bry, 1617).
3. John C. H. Wu, trans., *Tao Teh Ching* (New York: St. John's University Press, 1961).
4. Julia M. Hardy, "Inner Pilgrimage" (master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1983).
5. Julia M. Hardy, "Archaic Utopias in the Modern Imagination" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1990).
6. J. J. Clarke, *The Tao of the West: Western Transformations of Taoist Thought* (London: Routledge, 2000), 202–203. *The Tao of the West* was awarded the American Academy of Religion Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion in the category of Constructive-Reflective Studies and was honored with a special panel at the 2001 Annual Meeting. The panelists' papers and Clarke's response appear in *Religious Studies Review* 28, no. 4 (2002).
7. See Da Liu, *The Tao and Chinese Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), 4–8. See also Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, trans. Karen C. Duval (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993; originally published as *Le corps taoïste*, Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1982), chaps. 1 and 2.
8. Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 19. "Today's China" in the quoted text refers to, presumably, Taiwan, where Schipper studied and received his initiation in the 1960s. The situation is further complicated in the PRC, where religion was suppressed for much of the twentieth century. In the last few decades, studies of Chinese Daoism have taken place in both Taiwan and on the mainland, and Daoist religion has experienced a minor revival in the PRC.
9. Michel Strickmann, "On the Alchemy of T'ao Hung-ching," in *Facets of Taoism: Essays in Chinese Religion*, ed. Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 165.
10. Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilisation in China*, vol. 2, *History of Scientific Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956). Marcel Granet, *La pense chinoise* (Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1934). H. G. Creel, *What Is Taoism? and Other Studies in Chinese Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977). Holmes Welch, *The Parting of the Way: Lao Tzu and the Taoist Movement* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).
11. The comparative analysis of Chinese and Western philosophies, based at times on Daoist texts, continues within the discipline of philosophy. While not

unaware of it, philosophers are on the whole less burdened by this issue of Western invention than are scholars of religion.

12. Russell Kirkland, "The Taoism of the Western Imagination and the Taoism of China: De-colonializing the Exotic Teachings of the East" (lecture, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN, October 20, 1997), <http://kirkland.myweb.uga.edu/rk/pdf/pubs/pres/TENN97.pdf>, 6.

13. *Ibid.*, 10.

14. *Ibid.*, 2.

15. Benjamin Hoff, *The Tao of Pooh* (New York: Penguin Books, 1982).

16. Hardy, "Archaic Utopias," and Julia M. Hardy, "Influential Western Interpretations of the *Tao-te-ching*," in *Lao-tzu and the Tao-te-ching*, ed. Livia Kohn and Michael LaFargue (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 165–188.

17. Clarke, *Tao of the West*, 8.

18. *Ibid.*, x.

19. *Ibid.*, 200.

20. Hardy, *Archaic Utopias*, 51.

21. See Hardy, "Influential Western Interpretations of the *Tao-te-ching*," 171–174 and 181–185.

22. Lin Yu-tang, *The Wisdom of China and India* (New York: Modern Library, 1942), 579.

23. *Ibid.*, 579.

24. Kirkland, "The Taoism of the Western Imagination and the Taoism of China," 15.

25. *Ibid.*, 13.

26. Russell Kirkland, "'Responsible Non-Action' in a Natural World," in *Daoism and Ecology: Ways Within a Cosmic Landscape*, ed. N. J. Girardot, James Miller, and Liu Xiaogan (Cambridge: Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School, 2001), 302.

27. Kirkland, "The Taoism of the Western Imagination and the Taoism of China," 14–15.

28. James Legge, *The Texts of Taoism (Part I): The Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu, The Writings of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Dover Publications, 1962; originally published in *The Sacred Books of the East*, Oxford University Press, 1891), 29–30.

29. Herbert A. Giles, *Religions of Ancient China* (London: Archibald Constable, 1905), 68.

30. Recent introductory texts include Livia Kohn, *Daoism and Chinese Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Three Pines Press, 2001), Livia Kohn and Harold D. Roth, eds., *Daoist Identity: History, Lineage, and Ritual* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002), James Miller, *Daoism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003), and Russell Kirkland, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2004). There are far too many scholars doing specialized studies of rituals, deities, art, and more to list here. Daoiststudies.org has a list of 475 scholars and teachers: <http://www.daoiststudies.org/scholars.php>. I must, however, mention the excellent work in Europe by Catherine Despeux, Fabrizio Pregadio (now at Stanford), and the late Isabelle Robinet, as well as the burgeoning field of Daoist studies in China.
31. J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 177–178.
32. Clarke, *The Tao of the West*, 202–203.
33. J. J. Clarke, “Having It Both Ways: A Reply to My Critics,” *Religious Studies Review* 28, no. 4 (2002): 338.
34. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
35. Clarke, *The Tao of the West*, 8.
36. Edward Said, “East Isn’t East: The Impending End of the Age of Orientalism,” in *The Times Literary Supplement*, February 3, 1995, 3–4.
37. Clarke, *The Tao of the West*, 11, referring to Zhang Longxi, *Mighty Opposites: From Dichotomies to Differences in the Comparative Study of China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), 8–9 and 14.
38. Zhang, *Mighty Opposites*, 136.
39. *Ibid.*, 145.
40. *Ibid.*, 14.
41. *Ibid.*, 9.
42. *Ibid.*, 8.
43. *Ibid.*, 195.
44. *Ibid.*, 16.
45. *Ibid.*, 17.
46. *Ibid.*, 116.
47. *Ibid.*, 5.
48. Zhang Longxi, *The Tao and the Logos: Literary Hermeneutics, East and West* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1992), 158.
49. Clarke, *The Tao of the West*, 10.

50. Lisa Raphals, "Metic Intelligence or Responsible Non-Action? Further Reflections on the *Zhuangzi*, *Daode jing*, and *Neiye*," in *Daoism and Ecology* (see note 26), 311.
51. Clarke, *The Tao of the West*, 10.
52. Girardot, Miller, and Liu, *Daoism and Ecology*, xlii.
53. Kirkland, "Responsible Non-Action," 287.
54. *Ibid.*, 289.
55. *Ibid.*, 290.
56. *Ibid.*, 291.
57. *Ibid.*, 285.
58. *Ibid.*, 288–289.
59. *Ibid.*, 299.
60. Russell Kirkland, "Varieties of Taoism in Ancient China: A Preliminary Comparison of Themes in the *Nei Yeh* and Other Taoist Classics," *Taoist Resources* 7, no. 2 (1997): 73–86, <http://kirkland.myweb.uga.edu/rk/pdf/pubs/VARIETIES.pdf>. Text quoted is from pp. 5 and 6 of the online version.
61. Jeffrey F. Meyer, "Salvation in the Garden: Daoism and Ecology," in *Daoism and Ecology* (see note 26), 220.
62. Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1–14.
63. Meyer, "Salvation in the Garden," 221.
64. *Ibid.*, 221.
65. *Ibid.*, 223.
66. Clarke, *The Tao of the West*, 210.
67. *Ibid.*, 203.
68. For more information on both the conferences and the consultation, see <http://www.daoiststudies.org>. Special mention should go to James Miller who runs the Web site, Louis Komjathy who organized the AAR consultation, and Livia Kohn who organized the first conference on Daoism and the Contemporary World. These three have made many other contributions and are among many others who have also contributed to these enterprises and to the field of Daoist studies in general, while also encouraging and supporting dialogue between scholars and the larger community. Kohn, who has authored dozens of scholarly works on Daoism, has now retired from teaching and has established a retreat center in Albuquerque.
69. Zhang, *Mighty Opposites*, 1.
70. *Ibid.*, 116.

