Daoism

THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF WORLD RELIGIONS: DAOISM

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This anthology of Taoism (the alternative spelling "Daoism" is used throughout the volume) is the broadest in scope ever published to this day, for both its thematic openness and for covering over two and a half millennia of history. The book's cover art is attractive. Inner page layout is dense but clearly organized, with tables, black and white illustrations and photographs, eight color plates, and footnotes usually arranged in two columns. A glossary, a selected bibliography, and a very selective index close the volume. Two groups of written material may be distinguished. First, the introductory essays to the volume and to each core section, and the presentation of each anthologized text within sections; in this group, redundancy is inevitable. The anthologized texts themselves form a second group. Following the general editor's policy to target "the college undergraduate and the willing general reader" (Jack Miles, "General Introduction: How the West Learned to Compare Religions," 39), the volume works well as a popular sourcebook allowing readers enticing glimpses into some past and present religious phenomena of East Asia. There are errors, omissions, and oversimplifications, however, and historicity is often disregarded. The whole volume therefore ought to be handled with caution, especially by academics from non-Sinological fields looking for a handy introduction to Taoism and its textual sources.

To his credit, most of the book's space being taken up by texts, the editor, James Robson, did a respectable job of collapsing a fair amount of data into his various essays. His "Introduction: Daoism Lost and Found" (45–67) is an unequal attempt at combining historiography, linear history, and a quotation from former U.S. President Ronald Reagan (1911–2004) into a teleological narrative aimed at convincing North American readers that the nebulous thing called "Taoism" is finally worth our interest, thanks to Western efforts. Beginning with the religion's "history in the West," it culminates with its "recovery" and "rehabilitation" by a "growing group" of—mostly Western—"specialists" after World War II, and its accession to the Western-sanctioned status of "world religion" (also the closing words of the last essay, 649). In this story, the figures most devotionally quoted are Anna Seidel (1938–1991) and John Lagerwey, Kristofer Schipper being glorified as the "first Westerner ordained as a Daoist priest" (in 1968). The latter may thereby be credited with launching one of the latest waves of Western appropriation of Chinese culture, and adding to the cortege of methodological and deontological issues of field research.

About halfway the narrative branches off into a "Brief History of Daoism" (54–64) whose chronological framework also serves to organize the core sections of the anthology. The basic notions of *dao* (the "Tao"), *qi*, Yin/Yang, and the Five Agents ("phases" in Robson's wording is too restrictive to render the versatility of the Chinese notion), none of which was ever the preserve of any thinker or group in China, are introduced as "Earliest Elements of the Daoist Synthesis" (55–56). Robson rightly stresses that *qi* (variously rendered in English by Sinologists as "breath, vapor, pneuma, or energy") does not "[support] a dualism between spirit and matter." Robson then surveys the most salient figures, texts, and traditions of Taoism. A present-tense digression on the vestment and headdress of Taoist monks and priests (60–61) seems out of place. Closing the introduction, "Daoism in Today's China and Beyond" (64–67) is commendable for its caution toward some Western use of "Taoism" as an exotic label for popularized forms "only loosely related to traditional Daoist practices." Nor does it endorse the state-controlled revival of Taoism in today's China, business-oriented (tourism) and, as in the better-known case of Confucianism, obeying propaganda purposes.

Those prolegomena are concluded by a "Note on Transliteration" (67–68) supposed to help readers vocalize terms spelled out in *pinyin*, the PRC's official romanization system for transcribing the pronunciation of Modern Standard Chinese (more accurately than "Mandarin Chinese," 67). This "note" deserves some attention. Earlier, we had read that "Taoism," an English word coined in the eighteenth century and whose usage has been consecrated by all dictionaries, is "mispronounced" with a "strong" (45; or "aspirated," 649) *t*, a far-off echo of a paper published twenty-five years ago (Carr 1990).[1] Now if, as the "Note" states, "the correspondence between English letters [used

in *pinyin*] and Chinese sounds does not always follow phonetic English," is it of paramount importance to replace with a *d* the initial *t* in "Taoism"? Anyone taking at face value the subsequent list of "English-language sounds for *pinyin* spelling" will assume that *pinyin* uses two different spellings for the same sound: "q" and "ch" for [tʃ], "x" and "sh" for [ʃ]. Puzzlement is complete when the list states that "ang" should be pronounced "as in the 'ong' sound in 'song'," which every beginner knows to be false after a first Chinese lesson. In effect, this "note" constitutes an umpteenth but not systematized transliteration mode, and the "pronouncing glossaries" supplied in the core sections often read as recondite incantations ("Laozi xiang'er zhu: *lao-tzu shee-ang-erh chu*," 194; "Guifeng Zongmi: *gwei-fuhng twsong-mee*," 415, etc.). Some of these "glossaries" even include Sanskrit ("nirvana: *near-vah-nah*," 431), Japanese ("Nihongi: *knee-hown-gee*," 441), or Korean words ("Samguk yusa: *sawm-gook yu-saw*," 552). All this does little justice to the general editor's early promise that "transliterations have been simplified to serve pedagogical utility rather than philological perfection" (Preface, xxix), but serves to remind us that transliteration systems are by nature arbitrary and imperfect, and that any new one only adds to the general confusion: academics from other fields sometimes ask me ingenuously whether "Taoism" and "Daoism" refer to two different things, showing how the spread of the latter coinage has blurred even more the Western general perception of that tradition.

The anthology distributes textual materials among six consecutive sections whose chronological order does not exactly mirror Robson's introductory outline:

INTRODUCTION:	CORE SECTIONS:
Warring States to Han	Zhou to Qin
Late Han through Six Dynasties	Han to Six Dynasties
Tang, Song, and Yuan	Sui through Tang
Ming	Song and Yuan
Qing	Ming through Qing
Twentieth century	Republican era to present

Each section opens with an essay that develops the more or less corresponding paragraph in the introduction, before unfolding texts preceded each by a summary of date-, authorship-, and content-related information. The first section ("The Dawn of Daoism," 77–156) roughly parallels Karl Jaspers's "Axial Age" (800–200 BC) as being the "time" of Confucius, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Mozi. The two uncredited quotations (78, 82) are from Isabelle Robinet (1997, 1) and T. H. Barrett (in Kohn 2000, xix-xx), respectively. The second section ("Classical Daoism Takes Shape," 159–356), twice as long as the average section, deals with the era (second century BC to sixth century AD) that is the most problematic for any attempted history of Taoism (see Barrett 2010;[2] Raz 2012). The third section ("The Consolidation and Expansion of Daoism," 359–452) covers the unstable collaboration—official support in exchange for superhuman sanction and ritual responsibilities—between Taoists and emperors, especially during the Tang dynasty (618–907), and the introduction of some Taoist elements to Korea, Japan, Tibet, and India. The fourth section ("The Resurgence and Diversification of Daoism," 455–555) sketches the "religious renaissance" of Taoism as "Neo-Confucianism" appeared under the Song dynasty (960–1279)—when, "for a span of roughly three centuries, China was the most advanced (and populous) society in the world" (456)—and the rise of new religious movements, including a Taoist monastic order and various exorcistic traditions, under the Yuan dynasty (1260–1368). The penultimate and shortest section ("The New Standardization and Unification of Daoism," 557–634) covers the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties, an era notable for "the absence of any prominent new developments or innovations" in Taoism and the arrival of Europeans on the Chinese scene. The last section ("Modern Chinese History and the Remaking of Daoism," 637–754) recounts the transformations of Chinese religions—including two main Taoist traditions—through a century marked by the impact on traditional Chinese society of European ideologies, Japanese imperialism, and domestic totalitarian policies.

According to the publisher, the core sections of the anthology comprise "over 150 primary texts." Actually, the volume collects 123 items sometimes containing more than one "text"; 104 of these items (85%) are English translations—or, more often, translation excerpts—from Chinese sources; the remaining 19 items comprise original English compositions (6) and translations from Japanese (4), German (4, including a translation from Chinese by Richard Wilhelm, 1873–1930), Korean (3), French (a translation from Chinese by Henri Maspero, 1882–1945), and Latin (from a work by the Italian Jesuit Matteo Ricci, 1552–1610). Manuscript and epigraphic sources are underrepresented, with 6 items (less than 5%) and 5 items (about 4%), respectively. The source corpus is highly heterogeneous. The genres represented include, but are not limited to, nonreligious texts and their commentaries; hagiography; revealed scriptures; community and monastic rules; liturgical compendia; treatises on "external" (or operative) and internalized alchemy; self-cultivation manuals; temple and stele inscriptions; government edicts; memorials; literary works (poetry, theater, and fiction); morality books; Taoist anti-Buddhist polemic texts; Buddhist anti-Taoist lampoons; Buddhist sutras; and Japanese and Korean chronicles. The editor's all-embracive policy, coupled with the absence of a definition of Taoism (see below), allows the inclusion of many sources "not strictly Daoist" (403, 442) or, at best, "Daoism-inspired" (437). For instance, the volume's first anthologized text is an

anti-Confucian passage from the *Mozi* (Master Mo), although Robson convincingly defends this choice in the item's presentation.

Most of the texts in the first five sections are translations from Chinese (92 items, 91%), mainly coming from religious sources and being of direct relevance to the topic. Since the whole volume contains not a single Chinese character, however, readers are prevented from comparing the original texts; in some cases, identifying the source material or tracking it proves difficult. The last section constitutes a special case. For the first time in the volume, internal sources are outnumbered by external ones—original English writings by the Victorian poet Alfred Tennyson (1809–1892), the Irish writer Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), the American science fiction writer Ursula Le Guin, the American physicist Fritjof Capra, the Beatles guitarist and songwriter George Harrison (1943–2001), and the American hip-hop group leader RZA (Robert F. Diggs), as well as translations from German texts by Carl G. Jung (1875–1961), the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965), and Paul S. Y. Hsiao, from a Japanese article by the Buddhist scholar Y. Yoshioka (1916–1981), and from a 1950s Chinese radio broadcast of antireligious propaganda.

Remarkably in view of its contents, the volume never discusses the conditions of translation from the various forms of Sinitic into modern or contemporary European languages. Robson does not differentiate translators able to read Chinese and interact orally with Chinese speakers from those having some knowledge of the written language and those, not proficient at all, who rely on native "assistants" whose help they sometimes acknowledge in print. He mentions in passing that English "versions" of the *Laozi* (Old Master) and *Zhuangzi* (Master Zhuang) derived from previous translations (86, 98, 638) raise "intriguing questions"—never elaborated upon—"about rendering Chinese texts without knowing Chinese" (667). The topic could have deserved some attention, considering that most of the Westerners mentioned above did (or do) not master Chinese. But knowing foreign languages never implies gaining unmediated access to foreign cultures. That "discrepancies in translation" mar publications in the field of Chinese studies is one of the many critiques recently voiced by Nathan Sivin (2010, 43–44). The magnitude of the problem becomes considerable in a florilegium of translations performed over the course of the past eighty years (1930s–2010s). Keeping to a single example, a *Zhuangzi* passage from Burton Watson's 1964 translation includes a very suspect occurrence of "God" (103).

Robson rightly criticizes the centrality of texts in "how the West carried on its conversation with Daoism up through the mid-twentieth century" (50), but if "pressed to identify one watershed moment that helped unlock the secrets of Daoism," he highlights the reprinting of the "Daoist canon" (*Daozang*, literally Repository of the Way) in 1926, cinematically trumpeted as "The Return of the Daoist Canon" (52). This act "[inaugurated] a new generation of scholarship" and eventually led Taoism to be regarded as "a complex, hybrid religious tradition with diverse (and continually evolving) doctrines and institutional forms" that "appealed"—a surprising past tense, inasmuch as one of the aims of the volume is to convince us that Taoism is alive today—"to a broad spectrum of people, from urban elite to rural villagers, whom it knits together through its communal rituals and practices" (54). But this caption is so conventional that it could be affixed to a number of religions. What is specifically "Taoist" then? The average publication on Taoism still neglects to define the word (Kirkland 2004, 1–19, and Raz 2012, 14–18, offer noteworthy exceptions). Michel Strickmann's (1942–1994) proposal to restrict its use to the Heavenly Master tradition and its branching-offs enjoys virtually no following, while, at the other end of the spectrum, "Taoism," "Chinese religion," and "Chineseness" seem to function as exchangeable signifiers in the discourse of scholars apparently unaware of essentialism. In lieu of a definition, Robson informs us that the anthology is intended to provide a "map" of the "terrain" of Taoism (45). But for his claim to be persuasive that a few European and North-American scholars, among whom himself, "brought into clearer view" a "different Daoism" toward the turn of the century (65), the so-called "terrain" would require at least some distinctive features. There are none.

Terminological? The English word "Taoism," as we are told, derives from a Chinese word meaning "way" and "pathway"—then "the noun Way" and "the verb Say" elsewhere—while the terms *daojia* ("specialists of the Way") and *daojiao* ("teachings of the Way") have long misled scholars into distinguishing between a Taoist "philosophy" and a Taoist "religion" (45–47, 79–80). Geographical? Taoism originated in a totally reified "China." Sociological and chronological? "No one thing identifies someone as a Daoist across the past two millennia" (66), hence the reader's reluctance to accept the Chinese immortality seeker Ge Hong (283–343) and courtier Du Guangting (850–933), the Japanese Buddhist monk Kūkai (774–835), the Roman Catholic Ricci, Tennyson, Wilde, Buber, Le Guin, Harrison, and RZA as representing a shared Chinese religion, however called. Indeed, one often gets the feeling that the focus of the volume is less on the people who brought and bring Taoism to life—human agency being often dodged by resorting to the passive voice—than on a convenient personification ("Daoism meets Maoism," 62, among countless examples).

Robson's essays and the motley selection of documents supporting them weave an artificial discourse designed less to delineate Taoism than to match a definition of "world religion" that befits only, according to Miles, "the six most

important *major*, *living*, *international* religions" (Preface, xxvi-xxvii, his emphasis). Miles's justification for selecting Taoism, rather than "Chinese religion," alongside Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, further enlightens the subjectivity of the enterprise. And yet, members of the Chinese diaspora notwithstanding, the claimed "globalization" of Taoism seems to refer essentially to forms of Oriental "spirituality" or "mysticism" as exoticized by some Europeans and North Americans (647–49). Nothing proves that today's Taoists massively care for the status of "world religion" to be recognized for their creed, apart from officials sitting in state-controlled associations who champion the cause for anything but religious reasons, having embraced the Western ideological trends of the zeitgeist (as exemplified by the last anthologized text, Zhang Jiyu's 1995 "A Declaration of the Chinese Daoist Association on Global Ecology," 749–54). Furthermore, having made Beijing's non-negotiable ethnocentric stance his own (China under "non-Han rule," 61, 557, 562), Robson overlooks the strong nationalistic drive underlying the issue.

I now come to the array of problems evoked above, limiting myself to a few examples. Like most students of Taoism seemingly untrained to work as historians, Robson tends to indulge in simplistic and impressionistic storytelling instead. He caricatures a fragmentary yet important corpus, the Weft texts, anciently known in English as "Confucian Apocrypha," by Tao-centrically and retroactively calling them "quasi-Daoist addenda" to the Confucian Classics (161). Li Xian's (653–684) conjecture, isolated and unsubstantiated, that the rebel leader Zhang Jue, five centuries earlier, may have owned some writings of the Great Peace type, is empowered as fact (163). Nor do contemporaneous sources support the hypothesis that the Yellow Turbans referred to a deified Laozi as "Huang Laojun" (181): to my knowledge, they point solely to a cosmic deity correlated with the center (Espesset 2009, 1077–80).

The table supposedly schematizing the development of Taoist traditions ("The History of Daoism at a Glance," 57) is another textbook case of oversimplification. First, the relationship between Great Clarity (late designation of one of the traditions channeled by the Southern Ge clan), Upper Clarity, and Numinous Treasure, as represented by stick arrows, is misleading. Second, of the "new lineages and schools" of the Song and Yuan dynasties, an era of Taoist "fervent innovation" in Robson's own words, only Complete Perfection appears in the table. Robson often stresses the general antagonism between Taoists and Buddhists and their reciprocal borrowings from each other, aptly illustrated by excerpts from writings by both groups. But he ignores their attested sharing of epigraphic media and votive space (Abe 2002, 259–313; Wong 2004, 105–20), merely hinting at the development of Taoist iconography (168) and Taoism's "internecine struggles" (340), though the latter is one of the major inter-religious dynamics that allow better understanding of Taoism during the early medieval era (Raz 2012, 264–65). Nor does he acknowledge the existence of the Three Sovereigns corpus, fugitively appearing in a translation (225), which must have played some role until its seventh-century proscription (Steavu 2010, 1–127). "Chinese popular religion," "popular cults," and "local cults" surface now and again (59–60, 364, 457–59, 558, 565, 642), but what these phrases mean is nowhere elucidated. The fact that Taiwan's government still calls itself officially "Republic of China" is confined to a footnote (571); everywhere else in the volume, Taiwan as a polity is always identified with "the Nationalists" and, once, even named erroneously "Republic of Taiwan" (67).[3]

Many students of Taoism tend to overuse terms, common in religious studies (such as "scripture," "revelation," "transcendence," "millenarianism," and "soteriology") and social sciences (such as "lineage" and "community"), whose exact meaning in those fields they usually ignore. The net result of this abuse is not only that they produce widely distorted representations of their object of scrutiny, but also that their work invariably fails to be taken seriously by other disciplines and to have any significant influence on them. Thus, Robson calls "messianic" the Great Peace and early Heavenly Master movements (56), although no contemporaneous source mentions that either group prophesied the advent of a savior; and when messianism reappears, it includes the unrelated notion of "utopia" (163), although both words inadequately reflect what little is known of the revealed writings that a named Gan Zhongke submitted to the throne toward the turn of our era. Robson calls the *Daode jing* (Book of the Way and Virtue) in pre- and early imperial context a "scripture" (85–86), quite anachronistically considering what was the probable status of that book at the time (Kirkland 2004, 52–72).

Copyediting has missed a number of typographical errors, such as "dhamanistic-type practices" (58) and a plural ("sections," 169) in the presentation of a single section from the notoriously difficult *Taiping jing* (Great Peace Scripture). Footnote 3 to Heshang Gong's version of the *Laozi* betrays that the commentary to Chapter 6 was deleted from the anthology during the editing process (153).

In sum, the volume *Daoism* doubtlessly showcases an increased understanding of many ancient and modern documents of various origins and nature in Sinitic languages, of some rituals performed in sacred spaces, past or present, in China and elsewhere, and of some of the practices advocated by self-described Taoists around the world. But there is no reason to assume that, unlike past cultural and temporal inventions of Taoism or its state-controlled reinvention in contemporary China, Robson's

so-called "different Daoism" is authentic and definitive. On the contrary, what the volume sets forth is no less a product targeting a specific audience—the early twenty-first century North American nonspecialist—than the Taoism of the Scottish Protestant missionary James Legge (1815–1897) was "[an image invented] for the Victorian age" (648). Whether in the East or the West, the inventions and reinventions of Taoism are still going on.

NOTES

1. Carr offers an interesting overview of the various transliteration systems designed to accommodate Chinese sounds, but his display of complex phonetic data fails to conceal the value judgments and specious assumptions flawing his approach; for example, that one may rightfully judge loanwords pronounced "correctly" or "incorrectly" by comparing their pronunciations in the target and source languages (here, English and Chinese respectively), and that the spelling of loanwords thus found to be pronounced "incorrectly" should be "corrected." Carr disregards the fact that, unlike "kowtow," an actual loanword, "Taoism" and "Daoism" are not loanwords from Chinese but English words, a fallacy made obvious in the nonsensical sentence "Pinyin *Daoism* is replacing Wade-Giles *Taoism*" (1990, 68, his emphasis). Another proposition, that "in most cases," *pinyin* "more accurately represents Chinese pronunciation" than Wade-Giles (Carr 1990, 67–68), would need qualification. Carr's fervid assertion that "a thorough purging of Wade-Gilesian is overdue" (1990, 67) sheds light on his insistent use of depreciative vocabulary in conjunction with the Wade-Giles system ("mispronunciation," "misreading," "clumsy," "vagaries," and "misrepresents") and only confirms the paper's agenda, whatever the author's real motives were.
2. For some problems in Barrett's chapter inherent to the polemical approach of the editors of the parent volume, see Paul Goldin's critique in his review (2011, 320–21).
3. There did exist a "Republic of Taiwan," also known as Republic of Formosa, albeit for five months only in 1895. Hastily formed to counter Japanese imperialism after the Treaty of Shimonoseki that ended the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), that regime fell when Japanese military occupation effectively began.

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