

**THE TAOISM OF THE WESTERN IMAGINATION  
AND THE TAOISM OF CHINA:  
DE-COLONIALIZING THE EXOTIC TEACHINGS OF THE EAST**

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Scholars of Chinese religion — East and West — have spilled a great deal of ink over the issue of what "Taoism" is. To most, the term "Taoism" is simply a convenient rubric for discussing common concepts in such ancient Chinese texts as the *Lao-tzu* and the *Chuang-tzu*. The modern Chinese term for that set of concepts is "Lao-Chuang," and the contents of that set are generally what Westerners have learned to think of as "Taoism." But in the 1970s, some Western scholars began struggling with that pat definition. Their struggle began because it had gradually become apparent to them that what is actually found in the history and writings of traditional China makes it very difficult to understand "Taoism" in such terms. And even today, most people in the West — even scholars who write and teach about Asian religions — have found it hard to accept the reality of what the people of China traditionally regarded as "Taoism," and impossible to accept the reality of what the Taoists of China traditionally thought of their own tradition.

For instance, the late H. G. Creel imagined "true Taoism" to have consisted only of what he considered the "pure" elements of supposed speculative philosophy found in the *Chuang-tzu*.<sup>i</sup> As Western interpreters, especially philosophers, have become more familiar with, and more admiring of, the thoughts found in the *Chuang-tzu*, some have virtually reversed the traditional Chinese concept to create a new beast that seems to need the name "Chuang-Lao thought."<sup>ii</sup> Such a view is ironic, since the Taoist tradition in China actually gives the *Chuang-tzu* rather little importance.<sup>iii</sup>

But there is an additional set of problems regarding what the term "Taoism" means in the minds of most Americans, Americans who have learned about Taoism from textbooks on world

religions and from the works of translators, and pseudo-translators, who have often been wholly oblivious to the true realities of Taoism. To many, for instance, "Taoism" has come to be imagined — and I emphasize the word "imagined" — as a living spiritual ideal into which anyone today — particularly the individual American — can easily step. Such ideas have been, for decades, created and propagated by Americans who could care less about the realities of Chinese culture. These Americans can be identified primarily by one common characteristic — they publish books with American trade publishers, that is, books designed and marketed to sell in large volume. Until recently, the most notorious example was the fatuous fluff published by Benjamin Huff under the title, *The Tao of Pooh*. Perhaps a more typical example is the narcissistic new pseudo-translation of *Lao-tzu* published by the accomplished science-fiction writer Ursula K. LeGuin.<sup>iv</sup> Such books can readily be distinguished from books on Taoism published by knowledgeable authorities, which are generally published by university presses, and are seldom found on the shelves at Waldenbooks. This fact — a fact of the social, intellectual, and economic life of late 20th-century America — is what I wish to address here tonight. For what passes for "Taoism" in the books in B. Dalton has nothing to do with **real Taoism**, if we define "real Taoism" as the traditions that have been practiced in China for over twenty centuries. This problem is a complex one, and it is a problem that makes some Americans uncomfortable, for the truth about this situation is that thousands of Westerners have been literally deluded about Taoism, and some stubbornly refuse to accept the facts even when they are presented to them clearly by a trustworthy authority.

Tonight I wish to examine some of the cultural assumptions that underlie the insistence of many modern minds upon maintaining the false categorical distinction between "philosophical Taoism" and "religious Taoism." In doing so, I shall draw attention to certain unexamined cultural and intellectual values that prevail among modern intellectuals. Our ability to understand other cultures — or even our own culture — is tied to our ability to recognize such prejudices. That is, our ability to understand ourselves and others alike is conditioned our own patterns of making sense of things and determining their value. We make such decisions, generally subconsciously, on the basis of unexamined assumptions about what is true, what is valid, and even what is worthy of our attention. I propose that such values need to be examined in light of the specific historical realities of its ambient culture. I do not contend that such "biases" are inherently in conflict with reality, but rather that we need to be fully aware of them,

and alert to the possibility that the intellectual and religious values at work within our own culture sometimes distort our efforts to make sense of a foreign tradition like Taoism.

For instance, most Westerners have been conditioned to believe the falsehood that there were two "Taoisms" in traditional China — an ancient philosophical school represented by *Lao-tzu* and *Chuang-tzu*, and a later religious tradition which supposedly had little in common with it. Virtually every student of Chinese thought or religion has been indoctrinated with the 20th-century notion that that distinction is one that "the Chinese make themselves." The late Fung Yu-lan, for instance, argued falsely that "there is a distinction between Taoism as a philosophy... and the Taoist religion....Their teachings are not only different; they are even contradictory."<sup>v</sup> Such ideas, like those of H. G. Creel, have been echoed widely in modern scholarship, regardless of their invalidity. In premodern China, for instance, no one made any such distinction, as Nathan Sivin pointed out nearly 20 years ago.<sup>vi</sup> I shall merely note here that, in terms of our present knowledge of Taoism, neither Fung nor Creel have any credibility in this connection, since neither had any significant familiarity with post-classical Taoism.<sup>vii</sup>

More importantly, the common distinction of "philosophical Taoism" and "religious Taoism" ultimately reflects specific cultural prejudices, cultural prejudices that were current among intellectuals in late imperial China as well as in the modern West. There are quite clear cultural explanations for the profound state of denial from which Creel and Fung launched their hostile diatribes against Taoism. The fears of modern Chinese intellectuals like Fung reflect the historical fears of their Confucian predecessors in late imperial China, as well a fear of being dismissed by secularized Western intellectuals as the representatives of a "superstitious" culture. Those Chinese intellectuals catered to the biases of their Western interpreters. Until the late 1970s, what passed for academic depictions of Taoism — in China and the West alike — was almost universally a perpetuation of the distortions created by Victorian scholars like James Legge and their Confucian informants. The sinologists of the nineteenth-century were always guided by Confucian informants, who were hostile to Taoism for reasons too complex to address here.<sup>viii</sup> As a result, Westerners came to see Taoism through the eyes of late-imperial Confucians, who saw no value in the living Taoist religion of that time. The perspective of those Confucian informers toward Taoism was quite comparable to that of most nineteenth-century European intellectuals toward Catholicism: i.e., that the religion in question is a ritualistic religion led by priests who simply cater to the fears and superstitions of an ignorant and

backward populace, and offers nothing to the "enlightened" intellectual in search of "Truth." So just as modern Confucians dismissed Taoism as the antithesis of their supposedly enlightened tradition, so modern Westerners came to dismiss it as antithetical to their Enlightenment mentality. This intellectual purge — the product of the collaboration of fear-ridden Confucians and Victorian Orientalists — exempted only two ancient texts — the *Tao te ching* and the *Chuang-tzu* — and persuaded the modern audience that no other element of Taoism deserved serious attention. As a result, the rest of Taoism — i.e., two thousand years of complex and diverse religious phenomena, many of them the product of thoughtful, highly educated men and women — has either been ignored, or it has presented in the same ghastly caricature that prevailed among the ill-informed sinologists of the Victorian era. In essence, Taoism has been caricatured the way that Catholicism was long caricatured by Protestants in their polemical attacks: to wit, lots of dangerous nonsense has corrupted the original, pure truth, and should be rejected in favor of a return to that original truth, as embodied in ancient texts that can be read, context-free, by the individual seeker of "Truth."

This bizarre picture of Taoism — a twisted product of Confucian/Protestant collaboration in a secularizing setting — has particularly come to obsess alienated young Westerners who seek a spiritual alternative — though seldom a religious alternative — to their own culture's traditions. Many authors and publishers remain perfectly happy churning out books, including some truly horrendous textbooks, that cater to that immense audience, books that generally provide their readers an understanding of Taoism that is on the order of what pornographic publications provide their readers as an understanding of women.

Beginning in the 1970s, a few scholars in Asia and the West began giving serious attention to the historical, social, and intellectual realities of Taoism, i.e., to the actual facts of the Taoist tradition as it evolved in China. Those scholars' research is still just beginning to find its way into the hands of non-specialists, even into the hands of scholars with training in Asian religions. Through the 1980s, for instance, it remained very difficult to find a textbook that gave the reader a correct and well-informed picture of Taoism.<sup>ix</sup> Very slowly, publications of the 1990s are beginning to bring a correct picture to the attention of educators and their students.<sup>x</sup> In another generation or two, Taoism may even begin to be taught on the same order as other traditions, like Buddhism — i.e., as a rich and fascinating tradition worthy of respect and appreciation on its own terms. But at the moment, most educators — not to mention the

educated public — remain acutely ill-informed about basic Taoist values and practices, about the realities of Taoist history, and about the lives and thought of the leaders who shaped the unfolding of Taoism in Chinese history. Some of today's educators and students may now be able to see past the grotesque Victorian distortions about Taoism. But even so, nearly all remain almost totally in the dark about the great names in Taoist history, the great texts that were produced and treasured by Taoists through the ages, the authentic practices of conscientious men and women of many centuries, and even the fundamental goals and values of the tradition. Until courses on Asian religion accurately explain the importance of pivotal Taoist figures like Lu Hsiu-ching or Wang Ch'ung-yang as commonly as they explain pivotal Confucians like Chu Hsi, Buddhists like N\_g\_rjuna, or Hindus like \_ankara, such courses will perpetuate a false and condescending caricature of what Taoism really is.

The reason that such courses have generally continued to neglect the realities of Taoism is that all the participants in such courses — teachers and students, Asian and Western — are products of the modern age, conditioned to interpret everything in terms of specific modern values and categories. Those values and categories comprise a mindset that is quite comparable to the mindset of a follower of a religious cult: our beliefs are axiomatically true, so any facts that do not jibe with our beliefs may legitimately be dismissed, anyone who follows other beliefs is not worthy of our respect, and anyone who challenges our beliefs is a dangerous fool who must be attacked and discredited. Modern intellectuals are, for the most part, members of a particularly pernicious cult, for they suffer from the delusion that they are not actually part of any cult, that they do not have any socially constructed beliefs that may sometimes need to be re-examined and possibly repudiated. With the smug assurance that the modern mindset is an infallible guide to what is true — regardless of what reason or the facts may demonstrate — modern intellectuals have often comforted the general public that we are entitled casually to exploit other cultures for the fulfillment of our own individual and social needs, specifically our need to believe that we may repudiate the Judaeo-Christian tradition and yet be honorable adherents of a culture-free "Truth."

As the contemporary Chinese interpreter Tu Wei-ming has frequently noted, both Western intellectuals and modern Chinese intellectuals are heirs to the sensibility of the European Enlightenment of the 18th century. That sensibility was rooted, in turn, in the Protestant Reformation, and was shaped by the secularism of intellectuals who were moved by

reflections upon Newton. Later, the Enlightenment sensibility was refocused by the ideals of the 19th-century Romantics, so that Westerners — for nearly two centuries now — have assumed that *the locus of all legitimate values can and must be sought only within the individual*. For instance, most Americans today will generally tell you that "religion" is essentially a "personal" matter, that it is the prerogative of the individual to "decide for her/ himself" what to believe. (The implication, of course, is that there is no higher truth than the autonomous individual subjectivity, that there is really nothing true or real or valid or good except "me.") The fact that such modern concepts of "the individual" are essentially a cultural construct, which are the product of our social and intellectual history, is a fact that few have ever pondered. Few are aware that such assumptions can easily be explained by the fact that Americans today are the living heirs of the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Romantic era of glorified individualism. And certainly, few Americans who have learned about "Taoism" would imagine that what they have learned is largely the result of that same cultural history, a cultural history that has conditioned Americans to see "Taoism" as something that is beautiful to us, and exists only for us to decide whether and how to appropriate it. Rather than learning to understand Taoism as it was actually taught and practiced by Taoists in traditional and modern China, Americans have been conditioned to understand "Taoism" in terms of an appealing vision of personal simplicity and a so-called "harmony with nature," both delightfully free of any unpleasant cultural baggage. Who amongst us, for instance, would fall in love with a Taoism that involved actual moral principles to which one must subjugate one's free will, or a real higher power that has priority over our own desire for individual autonomy? In the Western imagination, the Taoism of China has been ignored in favor of a Taoism of our own devising, just as an immature, self-centered man might avoid getting "bogged down" in the realities of an actual living woman, preferring a fantasy woman who never argues, never says no to his wishes, and never thinks or acts for herself. The "Taoism" of such writers as Huff and Le Guin constitutes precisely such a fantasy. And not only does such a fantasy have nothing to do with the actual facts of Taoism, but it would never have existed had it not been for the Protestant revolt against church authority in matters of truth, the teachings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau about returning to a simpler life, and the 20th-century reaction against the dehumanizing effects of the Industrial Revolution. No aspect of the fantasy Taoism created by immature, self-centered Western minds has any basis in the facts of Taoism in China.

Some of these points were made a few years ago in an article by Steve Bradbury entitled "The American Conquest of Philosophical Taoism."<sup>xi</sup> Bradbury notes, for instance:

Because the vast majority of its translators, Western and Chinese, were attracted to [the *Tao te ching*] in the first place because of their humanist faith in Taoism as a 'common heritage of mankind,' and of the *Tao te ching* as proto-humanist doctrine compatible with liberal Protestantism, they have usually produced...readings of the work that not only tend to reduce it to a Western epistemology but also endorse a Western agenda.<sup>xii</sup>

Bradbury cites, in particular, the great influence of the 1944 pseudo-translation by the poet Witter Bynner. He says, "Like many Americans attracted to Taoism, Bynner is an advocate of an enlightenment narrative of religion," and Bynner reads so much "Emersonian individualism" into the *Tao te ching* "that Bynner's Taoism is nothing other than a patchwork of Yankee transcendentalism." What is most significant, Bradbury says, about the license taken by men like Bynner and, more recently, the inane pseudo-translation of Stephen Mitchell, is that they are merely egregious examples of an American literary tradition of cultural theft. Inspired in part by Ezra Pound, "imperially confident American poets" have annexed "exotic literary territories":

...Kenneth Rexroth, Thomas Merton,...Robert Lowell, Robert Bly,... Stephen Mitchell: these are but a handful of the poets who have followed Pound's example, not just in the translation of Chinese lyric poetry, of course, but other genres from other cultures; everything from Zen koans to Sanskrit love poems, from Noh plays to Amerindian prayers. And, like the modus operandi of American imperialism, their conquests have not been through direct seizure so much as [through] a mixture of aggressive market capitalism and humanitarian idealism....Electing themselves the mediators and interpreters of exotic literary traditions, they have taken possession of antiquity, not on the basis of a substantive knowledge of the language or culture, but...through a desire to translate antiquity into the American present. And they have done this, of course, not with any sense of theft, but with the very best conscience of the *imperium Americanum*. ...Nowhere has the appetite of Americans to make for themselves what is old and to find themselves in it been more apparent than in the translation of philosophical Taoism....The legacy of American translations of philosophical

Taoism is, at best, a tribute to an essentialistic faith in the autonomous American self's capacity to transcend cultural, linguistic and temporal boundaries.<sup>xiii</sup>

The "Taoism" of the Western imagination is thus not a product of China at all, but rather a product of the specific cultural history that Americans inherited from post-Reformation Europe, and extended with their own capitalistic individualism.

Ten years ago, a respected scholar named Rodney Taylor published a book entitled *The Way of Heaven: An Introduction to the Confucian Religious Life*, in a series entitled *The Iconography of Religions*.<sup>xiv</sup> Taylor's introduction claims that Confucianism should be considered a "religion" on the grounds that its ultimate goal is the attainment of "sagehood." I shall not pass judgment here upon such a claim, though it is extremely debatable. Rather, I will just note that the photographs that Taylor uses to illustrate the Confucian life have little to do with any individual search for "sagehood": rather, they are almost exclusively devoted to Confucian rituals being performed by Confucian priests in Confucian temples. That contrast strikes home for a student of Taoism, for Westerners are often intrigued by the prospect of becoming a "sage," but have no intention of ever performing, or even observing, any rituals. Though the fact makes Confucian intellectuals highly uncomfortable, Chinese tradition has often represented Confucius as a divinity, just as "Lao-tzu" came to be understood by centuries of Chinese as a divinity.<sup>xv</sup> Westerners have usually been uncomfortable with that fact, for they have preferred — for reasons involving their own cultural conditioning — to envision "Lao-tzu" as a saintly individualist of antiquity who taught values that we find attractive, specifically, an individualistic pursuit of some abstract self-perfection, with no priests, rituals, or temples — and with nothing identifiably Chinese at all.

Elsewhere, I have drawn a heuristic distinction between what has sometimes been called "liturgical Taoism" and what I have chosen to call "mystical Taoism."<sup>xvi</sup> The distinction that I thereby imposed upon the tradition involves the degree to which it conceives a person as attaining the Taoist goal as someone identified in a specific social, familial and cultural context. "Liturgical Taoism," I argued, takes such matters seriously, while "mystical Taoism" conceives of the individual as more generalized existential monad — a cog, perhaps, in the cosmos, but not in the community. Just as modern Confucians spurn the liturgical elements of their own tradition, Westerners spurn the liturgical elements of Taoism. As heirs of the Enlightenment,



and of 19th-century Romanticism, moderners' heads are often full of a simplistic assumption that there is some basic conflict between society — assumed to be nasty and oppressive — and the individual — assumed to be the heroic champion of Freedom and Truth. In this adolescent mindset, the isolated individual is pure and noble, while "society" — meaning tradition, family, community, and "religion" — is not merely worthless, but oppressive. For people with such a mindset, it is virtually inevitable that the liturgical dimensions of Taoism, like the liturgical dimensions of Confucianism, will always be explained away or studiously ignored. For such people, what I heuristically termed "mystical Taoism" is supremely attractive, for, like Zens, it can much more easily be interpreted as providing an exotic but noble justification of the adolescent pursuit of the "freedom" of the individual. Such traditions, at least as they have been packaged and marketed in the West, present a vague soteriology that is generalized, cosmicized, internalized, and devoid of "cultural baggage."

Beginning about a century ago, Westerners who learned of the *Tao te ching* from the translations of sinologists like Legge started assiduously assaulting the text to re-make it into a manifesto of their own cherished ideals. Why did they colonize the *Tao te ching*, instead of, say, the *Chuang-tzu*? Part of the answer lies in the fact that the final redactor of the *Tao te ching* apparently worked to make it possible. How could that be, when that redactor lived sometime around 300 B.C.E., and had no opportunity to make money in the American book trade? The answer is that he lived in a cosmopolitan city in north China, during a period in which there was in fact no "China." Instead, there were a variety of separate states — Lu, Ch'i, Ch'in, Ch'u, etc. — each with its own quite distinct cultural traditions. But in his day, intellectuals from all of those cultures gathered at the courts of rulers of the various states, attempting to get those rulers to buy a certain package of ideas. Mencius and his colleagues dutifully packaged Confucian ideas for that market, as did thinkers of other persuasions. The man who designed and packaged the ideas found in the *Tao te ching* was a very clever marketer. Apparently inspired by the form of an anonymous 4th-century text called the *Nei-yeh*, which also featured a great reality called "Tao," the redactor of the *Tao te ching* carefully sanitized the traditions that he had brought from his southern homeland of Ch'u, and removed any and all names of real people, real places, real events, or anything else that might remind a 3rd-century Chinese intellectual from one state of the traditions of another state. In other words, the redactor expanded the market for his product by ridding it of "cultural baggage," so that intellectuals or rulers of Lu or Sung or Han or Wei

would be equally happy to find themselves in it. It is because of that marketing ploy of the text's final redactor that the *Tao te ching* has maintained its appeal to readers of many cultures. Its abiding appeal — particularly in overseas markets like our own — has always been in its seeming timelessness, its lack of discernible "cultural baggage," particularly in a translation that has already by re-sanitized to enhance its marketability in the target audience. If such translations, or pseudo-translations are accepted as authoritative, as they generally have been, then modern readers easily jump to the conclusion that it is as easy for them to be a "Taoist" as it was for a person of antiquity, and as easy for an American or a Bosnian as for a Chinese. A marketing ploy designed to work in ancient China succeeded so well that it continues to work in America today, especially among people who have never bothered to learn Chinese or to make any serious study of Taoism. Since the form of the text itself seems to suggest the irrelevance of cultural baggage, generations of Westerners have found the opening they needed to read their own ideals into an ancient and honored text from another culture. And generations of them have also 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, and defrauding the reader into believing that he or she is learning thoughts that actually came from ancient China. Numerous pseudo-translations of the *Tao te ching* — including, of course, those of Bynner, Mitchell, and Le Guin — even go so far as to doctor the text itself, surreptitiously chopping out passages that the pseudo-translator does not happen to care for, and re-arranging the rest to say what the pseudo-translator wants it to say. As Bradbury notes most astutely, the irresponsible arrogance of early pseudo-translators opened the floodgates for decades of Westerners to read themselves — and their book-buying audience — into an obscure text from another age and another culture. And in doing so, they are demonstrating their most cherished belief, to wit, that I, because I am me, am fully justified in doing whatever I please, unconstrained by what others think or say, unfettered by the actual realities of the world outside of myself, and irresponsible to any higher authority. By producing a pseudo-translation of the *Tao te ching* — or any other text of any other culture — the pseudo-translator is surreptitiously shouting the unexamined assumptions of her or his secular Enlightenment faith:

- (1) there is no God: only an impersonal reality called "Tao," and it doesn't have a will that I have to respect above my own personal desires;

(2) there is no true moral authority outside of myself: anyone who says otherwise is trying to oppress me;

(3) "Truth" is whatever I say it is.

In this misreading, of course, the Tao is everything that the Enlightenment mind accepts about God, devoid of everything that the Enlightenment mind rejects about God: it is a wonderfully impersonal spiritual reality — quite the antithesis of the personal God of Western religion, who inconveniently commands and judges, thereby infringing upon my individual freedom to define and live my own Truth. Modern humanists have taken Protestantism to a logical conclusion, declaring their absolute "freedom" by locating the only true reality inside themselves, and denying the existence of any authority outside of themselves. The Tao te ching, when properly misunderstood, gives the reader justification for her or his secular humanistic individualism, while ennobling it with references to an undemanding, non-judgmental higher reality, and suffusing it with the fragrant perfume of the exotic East.<sup>xvii</sup>

As can be seen in the prantings of H. G. Creel, and of most Western scholars up to the 1970s, Westerners — whose Romanticized Enlightenment mindset seemed to them to justify a colonialist orientalism — have generally assumed that the traditions of post-classical Taoism could hold no interest. The Enlightenment mind abhors the realities of "religion," for religion involves actual teachings that are handed down through the generations, actual practices that a person must practice in order to re-embody those teachings, and no individualistic freedom to define Truth according to one's own tastes. Religions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Taoism — the real Taoism of the land of China — involve precisely such shared teachings and practices, and are therefore unworthy of respect. But since they exist, it has always been necessary for post-Enlightenment intellectuals — from Marx to Freud to Fung and Creel — to provide justification for dismissing them. And this they did, by caricaturing Taoism, and by ridiculing it as a childish indulgence fit only for foolish, superstitious peasants. Of course, such propaganda required denying the reality of many facts. For instance, most post-classical forms of Taoism were by no means created by any superstitious peasants. The primary Taoist tradition — called *Tao-chiao* by the Taoists — was formulated by scholars of the 5th and 6th centuries who were high-ranking members of the social and political elite. The traditions of the subsequent centuries retained that elite cast. Hence, the institutions of Taoism in its heyday were

anything but "popular": they were actually highly elitist, prompting recent scholars like Anna Seidel to style Taoism the "unofficial High Religion of China."<sup>xviii</sup>

But around the time that north China came under the control of the Khitan, Jurchen and Mongols in the 10th to 13th centuries, a major shift occurred in the socio-cultural status of Taoism. As I have outlined elsewhere, Taoism during that period was forced to change in order to survive.<sup>xix</sup> The broad-based, politically prominent tradition called *Tao-chiao* — led by intellectuals who were members of the social and cultural elite — was soon supplanted by new Taoist movements. Some of those movements rejected the social focus of some of the earlier traditions in favor of a newly defined ideal of individual purification, often conceived as something that could best be pursued in a monastic setting. Others involved priests who performed services for their community, services that struck early Western observers as worthy of ridicule: to Christian missionaries, the Taoist priests were charlatans who worshipped false gods, and to secular scholars, they were perpetuating the same oppressive, un-Enlightened "religion" that the Catholics of the West obdurately maintained.

In the minds of those Westerners, and of their descendants in the twentieth century, the elements of Chinese culture that were fit to study and write about were those elements that fit in neatly with the Westerners' own ideals. Those ideals, conceived in Greek rationalism, had, during the Reformation and Enlightenment, supposedly been purified of the so-called superstitious dross of Catholic religiosity that had allegedly mired civilization during the so-called Dark Ages. As modern Chinese and Western intellectuals worked to write the history of Chinese culture and to catalog its contributions to civilization, their picture of Taoism emerged along predictable lines. The living practitioners of Taoism were decried not only as obdurately perpetuating ignoble superstitions, like those horrible Catholics back home, but as having audaciously committed a despicable theft and fraud: these ritualistic priests with all their silly mumbo-jumbo had audaciously stolen the name of "Taoism" from the ancient saints Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu. Echoes of timeworn Protestant charges against Catholicism are of course unmistakable here. But scholars like H. G. Creel, following Confucians like Fung Yu-lan, labored successfully to convince Westerners that there was an original purity to the Taoist tradition, if one only agrees to repudiate and ignore two thousand years of conscientious Taoists, just as Protestants have long repudiated ignored two thousand years of conscientious Catholics. If only we can sanitize the tradition, to purge it of all the nastiness involved in actually sharing

traditional beliefs and practices — that is, to purge it of "religion" so that we can enjoy its "spirituality" — then the tradition can be made acceptable to modern tastes, secular humanist tastes that refuse to compromise the supposed freedom of the individual to find Truth wherever he/she wants to find it, and to deny that it exists anywhere else. With these facts in mind, it is little wonder that such sanitized — indeed, fictionalized — visions of "Taoism" — like similarly sanitized, secularized visions of Zen — have proven irresistible to modern Westerners. This is the vision of "Taoism" that has made a very lucrative industry out of publishing pseudo-translations of the *Tao te ching*. And this is the vision of "Taoism" that has convinced more than a few young Westerners that they have finally found the real truth of life — sanitized even of the dross of their own Western heritage.

The inconvenient fact that such a vision of Taoism does not actually coincide with the realities of the tradition's history, teachings, and practices has seldom been considered relevant. Why not? Because those facts threaten to dispel that vision, and the vision is too beautiful to surrender. Rather than have to sacrifice their illusions on the altar of factuality, intellectuals like Fung and Creel — and the producers and consumers of the pseudo-Taoist tripe that sells extremely well indeed in our bookstores — happily perpetuate those misinterpretations of Chinese cultural history that preserve their illusions.

If, however, we choose today to face and accept the authentic cultural realities of China, we must do so at the cost of surrendering that alluring but illusory vision of Taoism, as well, of course, as the monetary profits that it makes possible for irresponsible authors and publishers. As an element of Chinese civilization, Taoism is indeed a rich and fascinating reality, a tradition, for instance, that virtually always found a place for women as leaders. But we do terrible violence to that reality if we impose upon it the intellectual and spiritual needs of Americans today — a need, for instance, for humanistic individualists to imagine themselves as "free" to reject "society" and "religion" in favor of a "pure spirituality," something interpreted and practiced by the solitary individual without the so-called interference of "tradition" or "organized religion." Just as modern Confucians, and their Western interpreters, prefer to define "Confucianism" as the vague pursuit of some individual sagehood, rather than as a cultus with temples, priests, and hymns to Confucius, the "Taoism" of the Western imagination does the same. Some of my students in colleges around the country have sometimes had the *chutzpah* to

claim that the Taoists of China are "not true Taoists," because the value of illusions like "the Tao of Pooh" is more important to those students than any historical facts.

The problem with such an attitude is that it remains deeply colonialistic. During the period of Colonialism, Westerners invaded the lands of other peoples, exploited and controlled them, and appropriated their resources. In so doing, they often decimated whole societies, extinguished indigenous cultural traditions, and justified their actions as those of a superior, enlightened culture. Such was the case in Africa, in the Americas, and in much of Asia. In every case, the conqueror also indulged in various forms of what we now call "intellectual colonialism." That is, the conqueror engaged in a one-sided intellectual activity, as he felt he was entitled to do because of his supposed cultural "superiority": he undertook to "explain" the cultures that he had conquered. And such explanations ignored the indigenous culture's explanations of their own traditions: just as the colonial authorities could ignore the wishes of the actual people under their rule, intellectual colonialism ignores the true realities of the culture being explained, and imposes an interpretive framework that suits the sensibilities of the conquering interpreter.

The ramifications of that process for our understanding of Asian religions are only now beginning to be noticed. They have been noticed much more clearly in the context of the culture of Native Americans. Such activities have rightly begun to be denounced as "cultural theft." But if such activities constitute what we might call "spiritual colonialism," what are we to make of "the Tao of Pooh," and the pleasant illusions profitably packaged and sold by Mitchell and Le Guin? Do the Taoists of traditional or modern China follow a truth that they would be willing to explain in terms of Western children's stories, or in terms of the various other elements of modern American life encountered in comparable books — books published not to present the beliefs of Chinese Taoists to modern readers, but rather to generate profit for the author and the publisher by selling a sanitized, imaginary "Tao" to the middle-class American consumer? Do we have here anything more than "spiritual colonialism for fun and profit"? Is it possible that as we move into the 21st-century, we might finally relinquish the incredible power to re-define others to suit our own purposes that we have inherited from the colonialistic mindset? Are we finally mature enough to respect other cultures' definitions of their own traditions?

Perhaps an American today can indeed become "a Taoist." But if so, how and where can that really happen? Not, certainly, in an American bookstore, library, or classroom. I would say

that if one travelled, for instance, to the Abbey of the White Clouds in Beijing, and underwent the spiritual training necessary to practice Taoism in the living tradition of "Complete Perfection," then a person of our society might be justified in claiming to "follow the Tao."

But what if one insists upon "the priesthood of the believer," and insists that all one has to do to "follow the Tao" is to read the *Tao te ching* (or *Tao of Poooh*) and meditate on it in solitude? I would ask modern Westerners to bear in mind that such a conception of the spiritual life does not actually reflect the ideals jofany form of "Taoism." Rather, it reflects the Protestant Christian ideals of Martin Luther, sanitized, of course, of all the hateful dross of Christianity. Americans may indeed be pleased, and even inspired, when they learn the true teachings of Taoism. But the texts that contain those teachings have only recently begun to be translated, and even well-educated Americans — even famous science-fiction writers — don't even know their titles, much less what's in them. If Taoism has something to offer the modern world, it is not to be found in the profitable inanities found on the shelves of American bookstores. 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 ideals of Taoist tradition, and might be persuaded to teach a sincere Westerner what it truly means to live a Taoist life.

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<sup>i</sup> See H. G. Creel, "What is Taoism?" *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 76 (1956), 139-152; reprinted in his *What is Taoism? and Other Studies in Chinese Cultural History* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 1-24.

<sup>ii</sup> We see such a view, for instance, in Chad Hansen's brilliant and stimulating book, *A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). In his chapter on the *Lao-tzu*, Hansen goes so far as to write: "Laozi's position... remains a way station in Daoist development...We still have no final answer to the question, 'What should we do?' Can we coherently see this book as giving the answer?...If there is some advice, some point, Laozi could not state it. And so neither can I. But Zhuangzi can! Daoism must still mature more" (202, 230). So "Daoism" must be defined in terms of *Chuang-tzu* for "Laozi" was too inarticulate to be able truly to express it! The Hegelian implication that "Taoism" inevitably marched upward to its shining peak in *Chuang-tzu* (and then, of course, "degenerated" into "superstition," only to be heroically rescued by an American philosopher) is egregious enough without banishing the *primary* text of Chinese Taoism to the back porch as "immature Taoism." I predict that future generations will decry such intellectual colonialism.

<sup>iii</sup> Though some Taoist intellectuals continued to draw upon the *Chuang-tzu* throughout the imperial period, the great majority of Taoists in China gave it little or no attention, and were seldom discernibly influenced by its perspective on the issues of life. The people who may have actually been most influenced by the *Chuang-tzu* were (1) the composers/transmitters of medieval and early modern tales of the fantastic (*chih-kuai* and *ch'uan-chi* tales,

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and later stories and novels that evolved from them. But such people were not adherents of the Taoist tradition, and did not purport to be, any more than did the early medieval Confucian intellectuals (such as Wang Pi) who are presented in obsolete Western textbooks as "the Neo-Taoists" (a term that actually more accurately fits the 12th-century Taoist leader Wang Che, otherwise known as Wang Ch'ung-yang). Hence, the idea that the *Chuang-tzu* was a Taoist text of comparable importance to the *Daode jing* is essentially a *non-Taoist idea*, and reflects more the tastes of secularized 20th-century Westerners than anything that is really found in China itself.

<sup>iv</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, *Lao Tzu / Tao Te Ching: A Book about the Way and the Power of the Way* (Boston and London: Shambhala Publications, 1997). Careful readers of her book will find that Le Guin openly admits that her book is "a rendition, not a translation" (107); that she omitted lines that she believed to "weaken" the message that she wished the *Tao te ching* to express, and that such omissions were "strictly personal and aesthetic" (112); and that her explanations of individual passages "are idiosyncratic and unscholarly, and are to be ignored if not found helpful" (x). The last-mentioned sentiment seems tantamount to a parent spewing forth the contents of her/his psyche on an innocent and unsuspecting child, and then, in a near-secret footnote, asking the child not to be affected by anything the parent says that may turn out to have been irrational or counterproductive. Such rhetorical games seek to deflect all claims of responsibility, turning the book into nothing more than expressionism falsely labeled as a representation of an external reality. It is true that Le Guin is not the first, or the worst, example of narcissistic abuse of a text appropriated from an alien culture. But the commonness of a misdeed (and one might, for instance, consider domestic abuse) provides no justification for any individual to indulge in such shameful activity.

<sup>v</sup> Fung Yu-lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, edited by Derk Bodde (New York: The Free Press, 1948; rpt. 1966), p. 3.

<sup>vi</sup> See Nathan Sivin, "On the Word 'Taoist' as a Source of Perplexity," *History of Religions* 17 (1978), 303-331.

Sivin presents a highly informative analysis of the concept of "Taoism," vital for distinguishing real elements of the historical Taoist tradition from other phenomena that have been mistakenly associated with it in the popular mind, both in Asia and in the West.

<sup>vii</sup> See Kirkland, "Person and Culture in the Taoist Tradition," *Journal of Chinese Religions* 20 (1992), 77-90.

<sup>viii</sup> In "Person and Culture in the Taoist Tradition," I discuss the sweeping cultural changes set into motion by the conquest of North China, and eventually the entire country, by non-Chinese peoples like the Mongols, beginning in



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the 11th century. Because of those changes, Taoism — theretofore a respected part of the social and cultural mainstream — became marginalized, and Chinese social and intellectual leaders began to distance themselves from Taoism. As yet, no Western textbooks provide this perspective.

ix One good treatment appeared in Daniel Overmyer, *Religions of China* (Prentice-Hall, 1986).

x The most recent example is the material by Julia Ching in Willard Oxtoby, ed., *World Religions: Eastern Traditions* (Oxford, 1996). A better example is the material by Liu Xiaogan in Arvind Sharma, ed., *Our Religions* (HarperCollins, 1993), 229-289. Though certainly not a Taoist "insider" as the publisher would have us believe, Liu gives a surprisingly thorough overview of the entire tradition. His interpretations are sometimes debatable (e.g., his adherence to the outdated and deeply misleading notion that the *Pao-pu-tzu* of Ko Hung — actually a maverick Confucian — was "the basic theoretical work of early Taoist religion"), but the coverage is otherwise generally sound.

xi Steve Bradbury, "The American Conquest of Philosophical Taoism," in *Translation East and West: A Cross-Cultural Approach*, ed. by Cornelia N. Moore and Lucy Lower (Honolulu: University of Hawaii College of Languages, Linguistics and Literature and the East-West Center, 1992), 29-41. The complete social and intellectual history of the Western concept of "Taoism" has yet to be written.

xii Bradbury, p. 31.

xiii Bradbury, p. 30.

xiv Rodney L. Taylor, *The Way of Heaven: An Introduction to the Confucian Religious Life*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986.

xv The rich and changing conceptions of "Lord Lao" through Chinese history is the subject of a forthcoming book by Livia Kohn, *The Highest God of the Tao: Laozi in Taoist History*.

xvi Kirkland, "Person and Culture in the Taoist Tradition."

xvii The same might be said for Confucianism: its religious dimension, one could argue, has been Protestantized by interpreters like Taylor and Tu Wei-ming to the point that there seems to be little meaningful explanation for the traditional Confucian cultus. One need hardly mention that Tu's vision of Confucianism is even more thoroughly sanitized, purified of any lingering cultural baggage that might put off the modern individual — who would prefer to see the Confucian goal as a purely internal, abstract process of individual spiritual refinement, accessible to one and all. For example, Tu endeavors to purge Confucian ideals of the sexism that was implicit in the tradition before the twentieth century (or indeed, perhaps, the present generation). See, e.g., Tu Wei-ming, "Neo-Confucian Religiosity and Human-Relatedness," in his *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), pages 131-148, at page 145.

xviii See her posthumous article by the same name in *Taoist Resources* 7.2, in press.

xix See "Person and Culture in the Taoist Tradition."