

Of Alchemy and Authenticity: Teaching About Daoism Today

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Abstract. *The authors discuss the complexities and responsibilities of teaching about Daoism in contemporary North American colleges and universities. Expanding and revising the findings of Kirkland (1998), they argue that enough has changed in educational and cultural contexts to warrant new strategies for teaching about Daoism. Textbooks are now available that offer more accurate and responsible presentations of Daoist history, and this enables a richer appreciation of Daoist culture and religion, and its significance within broader areas of Chinese culture such as art, politics, and science. On the other hand, students have a far greater possibility of interacting outside the classroom with North Americans of Chinese and European background who claim affiliation to the Daoist tradition especially through techniques of moving meditation such as Qigong and internal alchemy. This situation poses challenges in the classroom concerning claims of authenticity, tradition, and representation. Rather than shying away from these contemporary North American cultural forms, the authors argue that the skilled teacher can use these interactions to facilitate a deeper inquiry into questions of authenticity and tradition. Moreover, the authors discuss the use of an interactive website designed specifically to assist in reflecting on these issues in the classroom.*

In the nine years since Russell Kirkland's article "Teaching Taoism in the 1990s" appeared in the second issue of the inaugural volume of this journal (Kirkland 1998), it has become a pedagogical classic and required reading for anyone teaching Daoism, whether as a component in a world or Asian religions course, or as whole course. The present authors have read it many times, and one has taught it as a primary source in a graduate seminar on current debates in Daoist Studies.

Kirkland's essay offers such practical advice as: use up-to-date scholarship, cover all historical periods of Daoism, and use reliable texts and translations. In particular he draws attention to the fact that very few scholars of Chinese history and religion have had a nuanced and appreciative view of Daoist religion, the majority of such work being conducted through Confucian or Orientalist lenses (111–112). The task for the responsible teacher, Kirkland argued, was to "teach real Taoism," by which he meant introducing students to the full range of Daoist history and traditions, not merely those elements popularized by the perennially popular *The Tao of Pooh* (Hoff 1982) or selected for inclusion in world religions textbooks. The hermeneutical issues involved in constructing a representation of the entirety of the tradition are discussed more fully in Kirkland (2004). However, in the eight years since Kirkland published his guide, much has changed in the field of Daoist Studies. Perhaps the most significant impact on the field is that scholars of Daoism are now graduating from Ph.D. programs in religious studies rather than Asian studies and are bringing to the foreground theoretical, comparative, and interpretive questions about the tradition that derive more from the field of religious studies than sinology. An updated and refocused article about teaching Daoism is now possible and perhaps desirable.

To understand Kirkland's article it helps to understand the less-than-ideal resources available to those who wanted to teach about Daoism in 1998. First and foremost was inadequate and inaccurate coverage of Daoism in world religion textbooks. This point was thoroughly demonstrated by Jeffrey Dippmann (2001) who surveyed a range of popular world religions textbooks for their coverage of Daoism. The thirteen textbooks that Dippmann examined spent on average slightly more than half their space allotted to Daoism

discussing two early philosophers Laozi and Zhuangzi. Only four of the thirteen texts mention Quanzhen (Complete Perfection) Daoism, the major monastic tradition that exists to the present day; and only two of those take note of the Zhengyi (Orthodox Unity) tradition, the major priestly tradition that has existed in one form or another from the second century through to the present. (To use an only slightly exaggerated analogy, imagine a survey of the treatment of Christianity in thirteen currently used world religion textbooks. What if the surveyor found the books spent an average of 50 percent of their time on something called “philosophical Christianity?” What if only four of the thirteen treated Protestantism and only two mentioned the Roman Catholic Church?) Dippmann also found that the textbooks used outdated sources and translations, from the 1930s, and even the nineteenth-century translations of James Legge, the pioneering missionary and sinologist (see Girardot 2002).

Also a factor at the time of Kirkland’s article was the lack of introductory textbooks on Daoism. Kirkland mentions using *The Shambhala Guide to Taoism* by Eva Wong (1996), despite its idiosyncratic and non-scholarly presentation – but at the time that was the best there was.

As a final piece of the background, Kirkland’s classroom experiences led him to be wary of students misinformed about Daoism: “Every course will contain students who have read popular fluff” Kirkland writes (1998, 113). Thus, learning about Daoism, for Kirkland, first meant unlearning misconceptions, gleaned from unreliable, “mystical” translations of the *Daode jing* (Mitchell 1989, 2000 being the most pernicious in this sense) and *The Tao of Pooh* (Hoff 1982). Such popular works have tended to construct a view of Daoist tradition based on only one or two Daoist texts, and have interpreted those texts through the lens of contemporary North American spirituality rather than through the lens of Chinese history and culture.

Kirkland’s frustration with the prevalence of commercially successful but culturally decontextualized readings of Daoism is by no means unique. Norman Girardot, for example, condemns “the endless ethereal adumbrations of the *Lao Tzu*” (1994, xvii) and writes that Benjamin Hoff’s *The Tao of Pooh* “will not really help us understand the actual religious genius of Taoism” (1993, xix). Students armed with only non-scholarly renditions of the *Daode jing* and *The Tao of Pooh* not only had the basic facts about Daoism wrong, but worse, internalized the erroneous idea that Daoism was a philosophy that opposed book-learning and scholarly inquiry. Thus “Pooh-brained” students came to class already hostile to an academic authority figure. Any attempt to view Daoism through the lens of Chinese history or culture, is inherently “Un-Daoist” – the professor is probably a pedantic Confucian.

The Good News

In the last eight years, the situation outlined above has greatly improved. World religion textbooks now include more accurate information and sourcebooks contain excerpts of Daoist texts from all periods of history. The sourcebook *Ways of Being Religious* by Gary Kessler (2004), recommended by Kirkland himself (2005), is exemplary in containing primary texts from all periods of Daoist history, as does Livia Kohn’s *The Taoist Experience* (1993).

There are now several excellent introductory books on Daoism, suitable for classroom use. These include Livia Kohn’s *Daoism and Chinese Culture* (2001), James Miller’s *Daoism: A Short Introduction* (2003; reviewed in this journal by Thompson [2005]), and *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition* by Kirkland (2004), although his volume is perhaps too concerned with historiographical issues to be appropriate as an introductory textbook.

Finally, in the past eight years, according to our anecdotal experiences, students no longer have preconceived notions of Daoism as an anti-intellectual philosophy of spontaneity taken from popular volumes – we have found they have absolutely no notions of Daoism at all. One of us conducted a survey of our students in a Chinese Religions course and found a few students thought of Daoism as “nature worship” and one learned about it via Chinese landscape paintings in an Art History class, but most had never heard of Daoism prior to the class. In this case at least, then, ignorance is bliss. There is, however, one important avenue through which people in North America are gaining access to cultural and religious traditions related to Daoism, and that is through increased immigration from, and travel to, China. In particular, we are now more clearly aware of the role played by religion in Chinese immigrant communities (See Yang 2002; Lee 2006), of the revival of religion in the People’s Republic of China (Overmyer 2003) and of the traditions of meditation practice that have been retrieved from China through increased cultural contact between North America and China (Komjathy 2004, 2006; Siegler 2006). In particular, where it was impossible to imagine ten years ago that there might be many self-identified Euro-American Daoist practitioners in North America, now the authors increasingly come into contact with Westerners who have received instruction and even ordination at the hands of Daoist masters in China.

This emerging cultural interchange raises a new set of problems for teaching about Daoism in contemporary North American colleges and universities. Now it is theoretically possible, though perhaps unlikely, that students will have come into contact with an ordained Daoist priest who is not of Chinese ancestry. Secondly,

even if students are not aware of Daoism in any philosophical or religious sense, most are aware of practices such as *Taiji quan* (*T'ai Chi*) or *Qigong* (*Ch'i-Kung*), *Fengshui*, or the *Yijing* (*I Ching*) popularized across the Internet and in local bookstores, though they may have no notion of how, if at all, those practices are connected to a religious tradition across the Pacific. As a result of this religious traffic, it is no longer possible to suggest that there is somehow a *real* Daoism that exists in some authentic, pristine condition accessible only to erudite scholars skilled enough to read literary Chinese texts. Rather, through immigration and cultural exchange, Daoism has become a living, global religious tradition, one that bears a complex set of relationships to Chinese culture and that raises important questions for the scholar of religion about issues of tradition, authenticity, and representation.

Thus today we are perhaps in less of a position than we were in 1998 to “teach real Chinese Taoism” since this phrase begs a whole set of interpretive questions. The contention of the authors, however, is that this complication in fact presents a pedagogical challenge that should be seized while the opportunity presents itself in order not simply to teach students about Daoist traditions in China and, now, across the world, but also to ask students to reflect on the terms of the debate of what makes Daoism *real* or not. In other words, while Kirkland warns teachers to avoid teaching popular or fluffy Daoism in favor of authentic Daoism, we invite teachers to use Daoism as a tool to teach about the construction of religious authenticity.

How We Teach Daoism in the Twenty-First Century

Following Kirkland's six suggestions, we offer our own sextet that reflects our own classroom experiences and the emerging cultural situation in North America. Our priorities are perhaps also slightly different from Kirkland's in that his emphasis is clearly on Daoism as a unique tradition that can stand on its own as one of the major world religions. Our emphasis leans slightly more towards viewing Daoism more broadly as a living component of Chinese culture, and one that has from its outset interacted with other religions and cultures. Our experiences are also colored by discussions with students about what they learned in our classes. These discussions took place in the form of a focus group conducted by one author the semester after the course, to see what students had retained from their learning experience. They are also based on our joint experience of using in two separate classes the *American Daoist Cultivation* website (Miller 2005), designed by one of the authors to facilitate discussion about the representation of Daoism in contemporary North America.

1. Emphasize that Daoism is Part of Chinese Culture, with Permeable Borders

We teach Daoism as having been influenced by, and influencing, Chinese politics, art, and popular religious culture, a view based in the claim that to distinguish religion from culture or politics is to take a modern Western theoretical perspective that is not always helpful in dealing with Chinese religious life. The origins of the first Daoist religious movements, for instance, can be traced back to the turbulent times at the end of the Han dynasty (second century C.E.) and involved rebellion and warfare against the central government. Moreover, until Daoism became firmly established at the imperial court in the Tang dynasty (618–907 C.E.), Daoists were occasionally embroiled in sectarian strife fuelled by millenarian and messianic prophecies (see Kohn 1998). In this light, Daoism fits into a pattern of Chinese religion articulated most forcefully in Ching (1997) that sees Chinese religious life imbued from start to finish with metaphors of kingship and royal authority.

The impact of Daoist philosophy and religion on China's artistic life can hardly be overestimated. Particularly poorly understood is the importance of music for Daoist ritual, and the fact that many Daoist monks are accomplished musicians in their own right. Better understood is Daoist visual art, thanks to a magisterial exhibition curated by Stephen Little at the Art Institute of Chicago, which resulted in a beautiful and lavishly illustrated volume, *Taoism and the Arts of China* (Little 2000). The images, together with their accompanying articles, provide a visual introduction to the connection between Daoism and Chinese artistic culture and remind students that religion is not just about philosophy or doctrines but ritual and performance.

A third way to engage Daoism from its borders with Chinese culture is to examine the lives of women in Daoist religion and the way in which Daoists construct views of the female body and roles of women in Chinese society. According to Despeux and Kohn (2003, 6), five major roles and visions of women can be distinguished in Daoist cultural life. These are the view of the female as divine mother, or life-giving and nurturing power of the universe; women as representatives of the cosmic force of yin; women as revealers of Daoist texts and teachers of immortality practices; women as healers, priests, and mediators of the Dao; and the female body as a repository of the ingredients for engaging in spiritual alchemy. Approaching the study of Daoism from the perspective of women immediately engages students in debates about the patriarchal and virilocal practices of Chinese family life and, more broadly, the impact of religion on the lives of women, and its role in shaping the cultural contexts in which people have to live their daily lives.

Our experience of approaching religion through its interface with broader cultural concerns is not only driven from theoretical arguments about the nature of religion and culture, but is also based in positive pedagogical experiences. Happily (and surprisingly), some students cited this approach as what they remembered most about one of our classes on Chinese religion. Speaking to students several months after the class in question, one author heard a student say he came away with the new knowledge that “culture and religion are never divided.” One student didn’t realize how much Daoism was “tied to Chinese culture, and to political institutions.” One student, echoing current debate in Daoist studies, found it “particularly difficult to distinguish between folk religion and Daoism, or general cultural practices of China versus Daoism. But Daoism changes so much and is so broad. . . .” Another student applied this learning about the inseparability of religion and culture in China to his own life, remarking that he no longer felt “like a hypocrite going to church with my mom.”

2. Introduce the Language of Alchemy and Self-Cultivation as an Important Expression of Daoism

Central to the practice of Daoism is its long tradition of body cultivation that developed in close relation to traditional Chinese understandings of medicine and the body. Daoist practitioners, however, developed these traditions into a remarkable system of internal energy practices that can be grouped together under the broad term of inner alchemy (*neidan*). These practices form a key element of the monastic Way of Complete Perfection, or Quanzhen Daoism. Using vocabulary inherited from the earlier traditions of external or laboratory alchemy (*waidan*), Daoist practitioners speak of the subtle energies of lead and mercury in the body, and of refining those energies in the body’s inner cauldron into a divine elixir that is capable of transforming the practitioner into a refined and ethereal “perfected person” (*zhenren*) or transcendent figure.

Teaching Daoism in the classroom, the non-specialist may be tempted to elide inner alchemy: it is tricky to explain. As one student said it is “confusing and difficult to grasp.” Part of the problem is the language: “I know internal alchemy to be a whole lot of metaphors but I am not sure what they are metaphors for,” said one student. Students in our classes have wondered what is the object of immortality and, when immortality was achieved, what in the body allowed that to happen. Of course, these questions have also been the object of Daoist speculation and practice throughout the centuries. Although outsiders may not have the easy answers to religious mysteries such as this, it is certainly possible to teach about the cultural aspect of immortality practice.

In keeping with our view about engaging religion through culture, therefore, we approach the teaching of immortality practices first of all through the vast quantity of hagiographic literature generated by Daoists through the centuries. A large amount of this material has been the object of recent critical analysis (see Campany 2002) and much of it contains ample material on the lives of women Daoists (see Bumbacher 2000 and especially Cahill 2006). In terms of engagement with popular culture, however, it was not until the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 C.E.) that popular novels depicting Daoist religious life began to flourish. Perhaps the most famous of all such literature is *Seven Taoist Masters* (Wong 1990), a folk novel from that period, (which Kirkland 1998 also lauds as a useful teaching tool) about the forming of Complete Perfection (Quanzhen) Daoism by Wang Chongyang (1113–1170 C.E.) and his seven disciples. The novel emphasizes the practice of internal alchemy, along with austerities derived from Buddhism, and Confucian virtues, as a means of attaining perfection. (Indeed, a literal translation of the title would be closer to “Seven Perfected Ones.”) The novel, written in a fast-paced adventure style that may be described as “Harry Potter meets the Dao” had the students in its grip. Students reported reading even the unassigned chapters and recommending it to friends and family, attesting once again to the power of stories to activate learning and memory. Students found the strict life of self-cultivation depicted therein, so foreign to their own, nonetheless attractive. One mentioned that he was raised in a church, where you learn “you’re not perfect.” But in *Seven Taoist Masters*, “you can be.” Another student said: “After reading it I wanted to become a Daoist.”

However some discursive information about internal alchemy and Chinese theories of the body that provides its background, is still necessary. Sources of this information for the non-specialist can be found in the chapters on “Body” and “Alchemy” in Miller (2003) but can also be related, more broadly, to the views of the body developed in Chinese medicine. Studies such as Kaptchuk (2000), though more technical, are useful in explaining the general principles of Chinese medicine and their view of the circulation of *Qi* energy through the vital organs. This general view was the foundation upon which Daoist views of inner alchemy and body cultivation developed.

3. Explain How Daoism Helped Pave the Way of Martial Arts and Secularized Body Practices

Taiji quan (*T’ai-chi*), a slow moving exercise routine, is taught in enough health clubs and community centers in North America that most students in our classes are familiar with it. Thus it provides an accessible way to introduce Daoist practice. How much *Taiji quan* owes

to Daoism is currently a topic for debate. Certainly it seems clear that *Taiji* developed in the nineteenth century in a completely secular context. However, as is common with many cultural practices, *Taiji* practitioners created a mythological account of the origins of *Taiji* going back to a legendary Daoist immortal known as Zhang Sanfeng who is supposed to have lived on Mt. Wudang in the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries, the key Daoist centre for martial arts (for a modern historical study see Wile 1995).

Rather than dismissing the connection between *Taiji* and Daoism as fictitious, we feel that this mythological connection can be used to explain how traditions are formed and how religious authorities function so as to legitimate cultural practices. The widespread accessibility of *Taiji* is also useful because it can be used in the classroom or outside to teach about basic principles of body cultivation that are foundational to more advanced Daoist practices such as inner alchemy. *Taiji* can be used to teach about the importance of the body, about the relationship between yin and yang, and the concept of soft overcoming hard.

More instructive (although less familiar to most students) is the case of *Qigong* (*ch'i-kung*), a body cultivation practice that originated in the early twentieth century and has become popular all over the world. David Palmer describes *Qigong* as the “most widespread form of popular religiosity in post-Mao urban China between 1979 and 1999” (2006, 147). Although *Qigong* is rooted in a long tradition of mainly Daoist body cultivation practices in China, it came to the fore in its present form only in the twentieth century as a thoroughly modernized and secularized form of practice free from the control of any religious institutions. Indeed at its height in late-twentieth-century China, it was adopted enthusiastically by members of the Chinese Communist Party and studied by China’s most renowned scientists. In North America, however, *qigong* is frequently a way in to discovering Daoism. As Roger Jahnke, a prominent Euro-American *qigong* practitioner states on the *American Daoist Cultivation* website, *qigong* can be understood at a basic level as restoring health and harmony to the body. It can also lead to a kind of “radiance” or “transcendence” that is expressed in the terms of traditional Daoist religion. Like *taiji*, there is clearly an affinity with Daoism in general and inner alchemy in particular, and, like many religious claims, this affinity is constructed around traditional concepts, lineage claims, and authority figures. Our view is that although it would be a mistake to teach about *qigong* in order to teach about Daoism, it is useful to teach about *qigong* in order to raise the more theoretical and perennial religious questions about legitimacy of tradition and claims to authenticity.

One question that must be broached, however, is whether to teach *qigong* or *taiji* practices in class. Does

this help “embody” teaching or does it cross the line into advocacy? When both authors asked their students about this, almost all replied it would help them learn. Most would have loved to learn a *qigong* technique in class, especially if optional. (A couple of students mentioned it would feel silly or funny to stand up, eyes closed, and wave your arms around in class.) One author has offered an extra credit assignment of visiting a *taiji* studio and writing a report reflecting on the student’s experience in the light of what had been studied in the class. Almost all the students, when properly prepared for this assignment, have found it worthwhile.

4. Don't be Afraid to Teach about Popular Western Daoism

In the last few years, the study of Daoism in the West has grown (see Clarke 2000, Siegler 2006). While by temporal standards, the development of what might be termed Western Daoism is no more than a footnote to the more than 2,000 year history of Daoism, we believe teaching about Western Daoism will introduce students to some key concepts in religious studies including a cultural critique of the development of religious studies itself.

As Siegler (2006) has demonstrated, the core values and motifs of Western Daoism are in part derived from the late-nineteenth-century field of religious studies (as well as sinology), which lionized the classical traditions of China, found in ancient texts, while despising its modern manifestations. Subsequent studies constructed views of Daoism along Orientalist lines, creating romantic pictures of Daoism that might cure the illnesses of the modern West. Popular writers took this idea further, seeing Daoism as a degenerated perennial philosophy that could be conserved in the West and restored to its original purity.

With the emergence of the New Age spiritual quest, Western Daoism evolved in close connection with young North Americans’ search for spirituality outside traditional institutions, and flourished alongside the Human Potential movement in Esalen, California. Following the lifting of restrictions on Chinese immigration to the United States in 1965 came the birth of American Daoist organizations, led by Chinese masters, with non-Chinese members. The Chinese masters were keen to present Daoism in ways that were adapted to the new cultural situation in the United States, and the non-Chinese members were keen to synthesize traditional Chinese values with their own spiritual needs, while claiming to have inherited the mantle of *authentic* Daoism. Alongside these new lineages of American Daoism emerged new, thoroughly Westernized centers of *qigong*, *taiji* and traditional Chinese medicine connected in loose net-

works and affiliations, and often using a common terminology inspired by Daoist alchemy.

Russell Kirkland argued that introducing students to New Age Daoism would have been most dangerous: they would mistake the go-with-the-flow pop-mysticism for the *real* Daoism. Today, with accessible books and other teaching tools we feel we should not teach our students to “laugh at authors who exploit Asian religions to make a quick buck,” as Kirkland put it (1998, 13), but explain why these authors might be financially successful, and question on what basis one might make value judgments about the appropriation, transmission, and exploitation of religious traditions, whether one’s own or not.

5. Use the American Daoist Cultivation Website

The *American Daoist Cultivation* website (<http://cultivation.daoiststudies.org>), created with the support of the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion was first published on the World Wide Web in 2005. It comprises twelve video clips taken from interviews with five “New Age” Daoists – all middle-aged, white men, including some of the most prominent and successful propagators of Chinese cultivation practices in North America. The video clips are arranged into four sections, “Healing,” “The Body,” “Cultivation,” and “Transcendence.” Each clip is accompanied by a short written commentary, and each section ends with its own discussion forum. The discussion forum invites students to reflect on the video clips they have seen and to answer questions about the issues of authority, authenticity, and representation. The interviews were recorded in 2001 at a conference on Daoist cultivation held on Vashon Island, Washington at which both authors were present. In addition to the video clips and discussion boards, the website contains a general introduction, a teacher’s guide, a student’s guide, brief biographies of the participants, and a bibliography.

Both authors have tested this website in their classes at roughly the same time. Students from the two institutions were encouraged to interact with each other, to read each other’s postings and comment on them. In both cases, we asked students to visit the site on their own and make postings on the discussion board before class. The postings on the board were then used in class as the basis for discussion. In an electronic classroom the discussion boards could be projected on a screen, or the instructor could print out key posts before the class and make copies of them for everyone.

The first section of the website, on the body, details how experience with Chinese body cultivation practices had transformed the lives of the interviewees and led them into a study of Daoist philosophy and religion. Interviewees explain how *taiji* helped them with a variety of common body ailments, especially with the

back, and one explains the healing power of Daoist cultivation in more social and psychological terms. Students are invited to reflect on how these personal stories lend credibility and authority to the interviewees.

Next the website invites the viewer to consider the Chinese view of the body. One practitioner explains *qi* as a physical constituent of the body and attempts to explain it in modern scientific terms, and another contrasts the Daoist view of the body with those traditions that emphasize the spirituality of the mind. The questions ask the viewer to consider not only the theory behind the Daoist view of the body as explained by the practitioners, but also the language that the practitioners use to explain it.

The section on cultivation leads the viewer away from a fairly mundane view of these cultivation practices towards considering them in a religious light. One practitioner describes his own experience of *qi* cultivation as a deepening spiritual path and this is contrasted with Western views that emphasize the mind and the soul. This leads finally into the fourth section, “Transcendence” in which the interviewees discuss body cultivation practices in overtly spiritual language. Students are asked to consider how these goals of spiritual practice resonate with contemporary western culture, and how they fit into what they know of traditional Daoist religion.

Altogether, the website is designed to help students encounter contemporary American “Daoists,” to hear their personal stories, and to reflect on how they explain their Chinese-derived spiritual practices to contemporary American audiences.

6. Let Students Think for Themselves

Both authors recently tested the website in their courses on Daoism, inviting students to watch the clips and respond to the questions on the discussion board. One immediate impression was that we were shocked how clear and forceful our students’ writing could be when writing for their peers on a discussion board as opposed to writing papers and exams for their professors (this could be a lesson applied to many classrooms!). Below we report on several examples of our students’ postings.

One student, writing on the question of the relationship between autobiography and authority, managed to sum up eloquently many issues in the study of American Daoism:

Some of the testimony reminded me of a nighttime infomercial trying to sell videos on a new exercise/diet plan. It seemed somewhat commercialized and spiritually drained . . . because they seemed to see it more as a healing technique than a devotion to inner alchemy and a religious practice. . . . I feel like because the United States is a capitalist society the new cultivation of

Daoism continues in that direction and as our English is a separate English from that of Britain the New Daoism will be just that – a new branch of religion.

Another student comment insightfully linked the structure of the website with his understanding of Daoist cultivation:

The Daoists do believe in the Dual Cultivation of body and mind. I think it is important to note that a healthy body must come before the cultivation of the mind. The belief still remains that one cannot master the mind while suffering from sickness, hunger, or pain. I am happy to see that this website is set up to reflect the order. First healing is addressed, and then bringing harmony to the body, only then do they tackle the subjects of cultivation of *qi* and transcendence of the mind. This process of course ending in enlightenment or at least a better understanding of the reality in which we live.

On the representation of Chinese traditions in contemporary Western culture, one student wrote:

Jahnke's use of modern scientific language to represent Chinese concepts makes it easier for Westerners to understand Daoist views of the body. He uses these scientific terms to provide a sort of legitimacy or explanation to the Daoist idea of flow within the body.

The next student disagreed, writing:

I'm not sure that I agree with the view that Jahnke is "legitimizing" Chinese practices with modern terminology. To me, Jahnke is merely taking advantage of our advanced understanding of medicine and physiological processes in order to present Daoist concepts as they actually occur in the body.

In this case it was possible to engage in a broader discussion in the classroom on how religious adherents justify their beliefs in the modern world, especially with regard to the dominance of scientific discourse in the culture of modernity. In this case, at least, the website successfully presented primary source material from the interviewees, created a structure for reflection on that data, and enabled a discussion to take place in the classroom of a broader theme in the study of religion.

Conclusions

The familiarity of the discussion board led students to express themselves with an ease that proved valuable for starting discussions. Students also expressed personal opinions that were relevant to the material but might otherwise have remain unexpressed. One student found

Daoism personally appealing as a religion that emphasizes change instead of permanence, a view of the tradition that is echoed in many textbooks (see for instance Miller 2003, 1). Students found Daoism "more realistic," "more suited to our current circumstances," and "almost contemporary in its concerns."

At the same time as enabling students to feel some sort of connection to the tradition, they were not so naïve as to think that Daoism could be easily translated into contemporary Western culture. Indeed, one student identified a significant gap between the traditional Daoist religion that she had studied in the classroom and the visions of transformation that were presented on the website:

It is interesting to note that only one practitioner interviewed made reference to ascending to the heavens, or as he called it, "inner space." I have understood one of the fundamental goals of Daoist cultivation to be immortality and/or the ascension to another (higher) realm of existence. However, the western practitioners interviewed focus primarily on long life within THIS realm of existence. They value tangible, physical results such as health, long life, and an aura of radiance, in place of spiritual transcendence.

Overall, our approach teaches students to be aware of how religious traditions reconstruct authenticity, authority, and tradition as they transform throughout history. It also teaches them to look at traditions as continuous processes rather than as monolithic entities, a view that is, not surprisingly, consistent with Daoist metaphysical claims about the nature of reality. Teaching students to appreciate the fluidity of tradition rather than to grasp at timeless essentials is a familiar problem for those who teach the history of any religion. Sometimes, however, it is possible to be too successful in expanding the horizons of a student's thinking. We can illustrate this point with a final quote from a student looking back on the class: "I thought you presented Daoism in an easy to understand way. Emphasis on Daoism as part of Japanese culture was good."

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