

The “Taoist Master”*

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The “Taoist Master” (TM) is a Daoist (perhaps T’aoist) version of the Oriental Monk (OM). According to Jane Iwamura (University of the West), the Oriental Monk represents an Orientalist construct, a stereotype, and a trope rooted in colonialist legacies and appropriative agendas. The standard narrative and framework involve the Oriental Monk as a “storehouse of Asian wisdom” and salvific figure appearing to rescue “non-Asians” from the supposed corruption, degeneration, vacuousness, and imagined impending collapse of “Western culture.” The second, complementary part of the equation is the chosen “non-Asian” successor who becomes a surrogate for the original Oriental Monk and his (yes, his) representative and/or spiritual heir (i.e., “dharma-successor”). Some prominent Oriental Monks include Kwai Chang Caine, Deepak Chopra, Dalai Lama, Mahatma Gandhi, Bruce Lee, Mr. Miyagi, Pai Mei, Rajneesh (Osho), Chogyam Trungpa, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Yoda, and Paramahansa Yogananda. Note the intersection of, and possibly irrelevant distinction between, “historical figures” and “fictional characters.” Now in a trans-Asian guise (e.g., Morpheus, Obi-Wan Kenobi). There often also is an accompanying spiritual capitalism and “rhetoric of tradition.”

While early Oriental Monks were primarily associated with Buddhism and Hinduism or supposed (imagined) “trans-Asian spirituality,” there is now the sub-category of the “Taoist Master.” The Taoist Master, often actually a representative of Popular Western Taoism (PWT), *is an Oriental Monk*. Some early, prominent examples include Mantak Chia, Ni-hua Ching (OmNi), Chungliang “Al” Huang, Kwan Sai Hung, and various other unnamed/unknown “Chinese Taoist masters.” (Get your checkbooks and bank account information ready, preferably electronic transfers.) The Taoist Master phenomenon also includes some ethnic Chinese teachers, especially more recent immigrants without any formal connection with Daoism, knowingly “playing the Oriental Monk/Taoist Master.” That is, there is “reverse Orientalism,” or at least consumerist evangelism involved. These are theatre performances, complete with costumes and scripts. There is an accompanying rhetoric of “authentic teachings,” “secret wisdom,” and “special transmissions,” often with degree programs, tiered training, and certificates. Such Taoist Masters now also include Euro-American (Western/white) convert-teachers as supposed “transmission vessels.”

Key markers of the Taoist Master usually include long hair and beards, especially of the Santa Claus and Fu Manchu variety (see Beard Styles Guide), and possible topknots and robes. Also may play the Qin-zither, have long finger-nails, and practice martial arts. Sometimes also hippie-esque and Gypsy-like appearance and tendencies, at least if profit-motive is central. Some even combine each style simultaneously (e.g., “Zen Hippie Tao-ists”). Depends on intended audience and associated market forces.

* My reflections on the so-called “Taoist Master” have benefited from collaboration and discussions with Dr. Elijah Siegler (College of Charleston).