

Towards Western Daoism

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Daoism (Taoism) is an indigenous Chinese religion deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, including aesthetics, art, language, literature, and ritual. At the same time, Daoism has now become a global religion characterized by multiculturalism, multiethnicity, multilingualism, and multinationalism. As such, it is the object of various Western fabrications, fictions, and fantasies rooted in colonialist, missionary and Orientalist legacies.

For connoisseurs, popularizers, and spiritualists, “Western Daoism” refers to their own appropriative agendas, intellectual constructs, and/or commercial ventures, often with accompanying hybrid spirituality and spiritual colonialism. This even includes individuals with mistaken views and/or no formal standing in the tradition, not to mention insight and practice-realization, composing quasi-manifestos on topics like “being Daoist.” Such individuals usually are living through and perpetuating the Three Poisons (*sāndú* 三毒) of power, sex, and money, and injuring other individuals in the process, sometimes with devastating and traumatic consequences. In the language of Chinese Daoism, such individuals are “eating Daoism” (*chī dàojiào* 吃道教). For Americanists (scholars of American religion), “Western Daoism” (i.e., “white Daoism”) most often designates Western adaptations of Chinese Daoism, especially transformations based on American values (secularized Protestant Christianity). The latter include anti-clericalism, anti-institutionalism, anti-ritualism, egalitarianism, individualism, self-power, transcendentalism, and the like. In both of these cases (popularizers and Americanists), “Westernization” (cf. Orientalism) is shorthand for crazy things that white people do to other people’s cultures and religions, “Asian” and Daoist ones in the present case. For conventional Sinologists, “Western Daoism” usually refers to Popular Western Taoism (PWT), a new religious movement (NRM) with little to no connection to Daoism as such. One in turns encounters academics attempting to function as authoritarian interpreters and surrogates of tradition, frequently with equally problematic views about the tradition and careerist motivations. Such individuals most often lack deep understanding of the contours of Daoist history, the diverse expressions of the tradition, and the “messy” reality of religion, especially as applied and lived on the ground.

Beyond all of this, something else is possible. The present brief reflection is a gesture towards that alternative. Here I assume basic religious literacy about the *religious tradition which is Daoism*, specifically as articulated in my books *The Daoist Tradition* (2013) and *Daoism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (2014), among others. While I am sympathetic to the need to investigate the entire spectrum of this phenomenon (traditionalism/innovation/fabrication) in scholarly or documentary projects, and in the process to utilize the principle of “self-identification” as an *initial* methodology, for present purposes I am taking a more aspirational, committed, prescriptive, and even normative perspective. This is *not* about “orthodoxy,” “purity,” or even “traditionalism” per se; it is about the *promise* of Daoism as a lived and living tradition, one that may survive and perhaps flourish amidst the perils of modernity.

One major issue involves the massive disruptions that have occurred in modern world, especially the Chinese Communist revolution (1949), so-called Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and now increasing cyborgization and digitalization (2010s-), as well as systemic misunderstanding of Daoism

outside the Chinese cultural sphere, even to the point of “invincible ignorance.” In terms of conservation biology and the associated conservation status, Daoism may be considered “endangered,” and perhaps critically so. This is even more the case if we imagine Daoism as a wild animal in its own natural habitat and intact ecosystem. One of reasons for this is that Daoism places greater emphasis on embodiment, organicism, and place-specific community, including the importance of wildness. The fact is that few people have met actual, living Daoists rooted in the tradition. This is not to mention a lack of experience with place-specific Daoist communities rooted in traditional Daoist aesthetics, values, and lifeways. Along these lines, we should be careful to avoid the pitfalls of faux “traditionalism” and “restorationism,” including “traditionalization.” The latter involves individuals presenting innovation as tradition, including furtive or unrecognized reconstructions (e.g., so-called “Daoist medicine”).

Moving towards the aspirational and visionary, “Western Daoism” refers to Daoism as adhered to and practiced in Western societies, especially Western Europe and North America. Given the diversity and complexity of the associated cultural contexts, it is probably more appropriate to refer to “American Daoism,” “British Daoism,” “French Daoism,” and the like. In addition, given the problematic characterization of “Western,” it is probably better to frame our inquiry and project as “global,” “international” and/or “trans-national Daoism,” with accompanying recognition of Daoist presence in the Global South (so-called “Third World”) (e.g., Brazil, Mexico). However, there are some fundamental issues and unique challenges occurring in the adaptation and transmission of Daoism to/in Western Europe and the United States.

To begin, I want to advocate for using “Western Daoism” to designate *tradition-based* Daoism in so-called Western societies, and “Western Daoists” as Daoist adherents and affiliates living in those societies, regardless of ethno-cultural identities. Of course, there are matters of particular concern for “convert adherents” (usually of Western European backgrounds), compared to “birthright adherents” (usually of Han Chinese backgrounds). Here to invoke Daoism *assumes recognition of Chinese Daoism as source-tradition*. This is Daoism as the Tradition of the Dao (*dàotǒng* 道統), with the Dao 道 (Tao/Way) being a Daoist name (Chinese character) for that which Daoists consider sacred and ultimately real. For individuals seeking some universal designation, “Mystery,” “One,” or “Silence” might be a better (less colonialist) choice. Similarly, any self-identified Daoist who denies this baseline has, *ipso facto*, negated their own claim to affiliation. This is not to mention questions of religious literacy, actual training, and formal standing, let alone the Three Expressions (*sānxiàn* 三見) of cultivation (*xiū* 修), embodiment (*tǐ* 體), and transmission (*chuán* 傳).

In terms of religious literacy, Daoism is a diverse and inclusive tradition, actually a series of traditions (“Daoisms”). Unity in diversity, and diversity in unity. It includes alchemists, ascetics, hermits, householders, liturgists, monastics, priests, scholastics, teachers, and so forth. While “Daoist” technically refers to any religious adherent or affiliate, there are various, associated indigenous Chinese Daoist designations. For present purposes, it is important to recognize that, as an organized and mature tradition, Daoism makes a distinction between “Daoist adherents” and “Daoist affiliates,” to which we might add “Daoist sympathizers.” The former basically corresponds to *dàorén* 道人 (lit., “person of the Dao”). Daoist adherents are individuals who identify with and potentially are associated with the tradition. This is a generic designation for “Daoist.” *Dàoshi* 道士 (lit., “adept of the Dao”) are ordained Daoist priests and monastics who have formal standing in the tradition, often through specific lineages (*pài* 派). From a traditional Daoist perspective, it is the latter form of Daoist identity, adherence and affiliation that is privileged in terms of authority, representation, and

responsibility. These are individuals who, at least ideally speaking, have dedicated their lives to the tradition, understand and accept the associated commitments and obligations, and embrace their role in assisting others and the larger Daoist community. One issue here is the contemporary use of Daoist ordination as “credentialing” and “licensing,” especially as a form of identity construction and cultural capital. Unfortunately, many (most?) ordained Daoist priests in the West, assuming they are actually ordained, have purchased ordination certificates, received very little training, and more often than not are engaging in theatre performances. This is “being Daoist” without “Daoist being,” frequently for the purposes of (faux) authority and commercial advantage and profit. That being said, such corruption and degeneration should not be taken as justification for “anything goes,” as evidenced by the appearance of various spiritual charlatans (*jiǎrén* 假人; *piànzi* 騙子) masquerading as Daoists and/or using the contemporary situation as an opportunity to advance their own distorted/distorting projects. Daoists sometimes refer to such people as “thieves of/in the Way” (*dàozéi* 道賊), “sly foxes” (*húli* 狐狸), and even “scoundrels” or “traitors” (*jiǎnrén* 姦人; *pàntú* 叛徒). In addition, one must recognize that Daoism is not a “membership religion.” Unlike other traditions, such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism, one does not need to be born into a specific ancestral line, go through a formal ritualistic process, proclaim faith in some established credo, take required vows, have one’s name in a religious registry, and/or participate in institutional structures to be a Daoist in the broad sense. Things are obviously more complex for Daoist priests, monastics, and lineage-affiliates.

Speaking as a Daoist scholar-practitioner and an ordained Daoist priest, specifically as a 26th-generation (萬) member of the Huàshān 華山 lineage of Quánzhēn 全真 (Complete Perfection) Daoism, who has dedicated his life to the Daoist tradition, and envisioning the possibility of a revitalization of “authentic Daoism,” I want to say a few more things about both Daoist clerical identity and Daoist being as such. With respect to the former, I understand ordination and being a Daoist priest as a specific religious path, requiring dedication and responsibility. Recalling the external Three Treasures (*sānbǎo* 三寶) of the Dao, the scriptures, and the teachers (in that order), Daoist priests should aspire to be embodiments of the Dao in the world, informed by Daoist scripture study and application. The latter helps to establish, develop, and clarify Daoist views, not to mention to provide actual guidance on Daoist practice-realization. Being a member of the Daoist clergy, and a representative of the Daoist tradition by extension, is a vocation, a sacred calling. It also involves communal responsibilities, most importantly to help others realize their original and inherent connection to the Dao. It involves maintaining “holy vision” of others, regardless of their degree of connection/disconnection and orientation/disorientation. That is, one key clerical responsibility, especially in the modern world, involves spiritual direction (*zhǐshén* 指神). For this, we need authentic affinity and true aspiration. We also need deeper training, including through formal teacher-training attentive to other-care. One issue here is the egoic and narcissist tendencies among many self-proclaimed “Daoist masters” (now even “grandmasters”), in which ordinary self has replaced both the Dao and the Daoist community. Speaking more specifically, to be an ordained Quánzhēn Daoist involves three core commitments, known as the Three Vows (*sānshì* 三誓; *sānméng* 三盟). These are celibacy (no sex), sobriety (no intoxicants), and vegetarianism (no meat), with celibacy understood as sexual propriety for “non-monastics” and vegetarianism often being closer to veganism (no animal products). In a modern context and considered more broadly, sexuality is complex and a personal matter. However, we might understand the first vow as non-reproduction of the dominant social order and status quo, including in the form of ordinary biological reproduction. While Quánzhēn is often discussed in terms of *chūjiā* 出家 (lit., “leave the family”), it is perhaps better understood as *chúsú*

除俗 (lit., “abandon the mundane”). This is a “renunciant orientation,” including rejection of and purification of the previously mentioned Three Poisons (power, sex, and money), which are the fall of many, if not most. On a lineage level, there are other commitments and requirements as well. For example, the charisma of the Lóngmén 龍門 (Dragon Gate) lineage centers on ethics (and temple administration), specifically precept study and application as documented in associated precept texts and monastic manuals. And it is no coincidence that almost no self-identified Lóngmén Daoist in the West maintains or teaches even basic Daoist ethics. Here references to things like “American Dragon Gate” and “Orthodox Daoism in America” are instructive, that is, the qualification “American” signifies the opposite of what is traditionally the case. These are *simulacra*, or copies without an original. Along these lines, one might compare the “Zen” of Alan Watts (1915-1973) with the Mountains and Rivers Order, for example. Regardless of lineage-location, the tradition clearly needs more Daoist priests who are actually Daoist priests. For this, virtue (*déxíng* 德行), as shorthand for character and integrity, is a non-negotiable baseline and declination.

Beyond and ideally within Daoist clerical identity is “Daoist being.” Rather than focusing on egoic identity or social status, this concept (approach/path) draws attention to the way in which the Dao and Daoism manifest as embodied being-in-the-world, specifically through Daoist commitments, principles, qualities, values, and so forth. It is about practice-realization (*xiūzhèng* 修證). It is about the above-mentioned Three Expressions (cultivation/embodiment/transmission). Here we should note that everyone is cultivating, embodying, and transmitting something; it is just that most people are unaware of what that is. From my perspective, each and every committed Daoist engages in “cultivating the Dao” and ideally “embodying the Dao.” In the language of the Chinese tradition, there is a shared commitment to “cultivation and refinement” (*xiūliàn* 修煉), which may be understood as shorthand for *xiūdào* 修道 (“cultivating the Dao”) and *liàndān* 煉丹 (“refining the elixir”). This specifically centers on formal, tradition-based training. This is Daoism as a system of spiritual transformation, which is fundamentally contemplative, mystical, and transpersonal. As such, it involves specific views, shared values, and an associated soteriology (ultimate purpose) and theology (sacred). For those of us committed to the path of inner cultivation, the most important of these is the belief (experience) that innate nature (*xìng* 性) is the Dao, and that all beings have this original and inherent sacred presence and connection, albeit in varying degrees of manifestation and actualization. This is the Dao as numinous thread and intersecting network, and it connects with Daoist energetic approaches to being and experiencing. The third of the Three Expressions, “transmitting the Dao” (*chuándào* 傳道), is the specific responsibility of Daoist elders and teachers, although the entire community ideally participates and contributes. Such transmission requires a more complete expression of cultivation and embodiment, specifically one that aligns and resonates with others, that exerts a beneficial and transformative influence in the world. The latter includes awakening others to their own possibility and actuality of sacred connection. At the same time, such Daoists take a stronger role in assisting others on their own spiritual path, with attentiveness to themselves/ourselves as a vessel for such assistance.

For those who understand the Chinese Daoist source-tradition, who have engaged in the requisite inquiry, but who are not “birthright (Chinese) Daoists,” at least in the conventional sense, various issues emerge. Some of these are common among “converts” in general, while others are specific to Daoist adherence and participation. With respect to the former, for many people who leave their birth-tradition (or who never had one) and enter a different, often unfamiliar one, it is common to have anxiety, discomfort, doubts, and so forth. It is common to wonder if one “really belongs.” Depending

on the tradition, this may be exacerbated by affiliated members themselves. If one is not part of the dominant or traditional ethno-cultural in-group, one may feel or be made to feel like an outsider or interloper. In the case of Daoism, one of the most common issues for “non-Chinese” Daoists involves “the question of Chineseness,” including the relative importance or requirement of Sinification/Sinicization (“becoming Chinese”). This is extremely complex because it involves some understanding of conventional Sinocentrism (Han Chinese ethnocentrism), including among many Chinese Daoists, of historical patterns, and of larger Daoist views. Again, interested individuals may consult my introductory books. Different tradition-based Daoists have different perspectives on this matter, and I often advise individuals to explore it as a “contemplative inquiry.” For my part, I see this as one place where received and conventional Chinese Daoist views prove unhelpful, and need to be largely rejected. Simply stated, many Han Chinese Daoists assume ethno-cultural and religious superiority *by birth*. This is evidenced in the conflation of “being Daoist” with “being Chinese,” and the treatment of “non-Chinese” Daoists as inferior or subordinate. That is, from such a Sinocentric perspective, only Chinese Daoists are “real Daoists,” a view also found among many conventional (and mistaken) Western Sinologists. One issue here is the degree to which “Chinese” designates cultural, ethnic and/or national identity. Such chauvinism and discrimination are not the case for *all* Chinese Daoists, but it is the dominant tendency, often disguised or hidden depending on context. Regardless, as a Daoist elder (*dào zhǎng* 道長), I reject ethnocentrism and discrimination in *any* form. Moreover, one’s degree of *practice-realization* determines (or should determine) authority. We are cultivators, not politicians and bureaucrats.

On a deeper level, individuals often wonder if one has to “become Chinese” on some level in order to be a Daoist. Again, this is complex, but from my perspective the answer is “yes and no” or “it depends.” Traditionally speaking, Daoism is an indigenous Chinese religion deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture (largely absent in the modern world), including aesthetics, art, language, literature, and ritual. Specifically, Daoist scriptures (*dào jīng* 道經) are written in classical Chinese, the language of pre-modern Chinese educated and literary traditions, and Daoist ritual is conducted in Chinese. Thus, at the very least, some, but not all Western Daoists need to know Chinese. Modern Chinese, especially “Mandarin,” also remains the primary international language of modern Daoism, although this is changing somewhat. On an applied, lived and practical level, I have found knowing Chinese language deepens understanding and practice. This is especially the case with tradition-based technical terms. In addition, Daoist views are so intricately connected to traditional Chinese culture, especially traditional Chinese cosmology (yin-yang/qi/Five Phases), that “converts” often move through a long process of cultural and cognitive relocation, and perhaps belonging. At the same time, the traditional Daoist skepticism concerning language tempers any unqualified statements. As chapter 1 of the fourth-second century BCE *Zhuāngzi* 莊子 (Book of Master Zhuang) tells us, “Names are the guest of reality” (*míngzhě shí zhī bīn yě* 名者實之賓也). And according to the eighth-century CE *Qīngjìng jīng* 清靜經 (Scripture on Clarity and Stillness), expounding on chapter 25 of the fourth-second century BCE *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power), “Compelled to name it, we call it ‘Dao’” (*qiáng míng yuē dào* 強名曰道). The same is true of “Daoist” and “Daoism.” Fundamentally, Daoist being, like that which we refer to as “Dao,” is beyond naming and names, beyond language and ethno-cultural identity. This is theologically-infused religious (non)identity, characterized by transcultural and transtemporal sacred connection. As radically, Daoists often emphasize things like “immortal bones” (*xiāngǔ* 仙骨) and “predestined affinities” (*yuánfèn* 緣分). Given the assumed reincarnation (*lúnhuí* 輪迴) model adopted from Buddhism and based on karma (*yīnguǒ* 因果; *yīnyuán* 因緣), there are more radical possibilities as well. One of these involves earlier

Chinese Daoists being reborn as “non-Chinese” Daoists and/or mystical transmissions occurring beyond/outside the Chinese cultural sphere, whether corporeal or geographical. Under this scenario (actuality?), “conversion” is only apparently so. The point here is that tradition-based Daoist views challenge any claims of ethnocultural superiority, and in fact point towards the possibility of Daoist community that is not only multicultural and multiethnic, but also transcultural and transethnic. This is Daoists as members of a transtemporal community connected to each other as an historical and energetic continuum. Along these lines, we must recognize, and I would say encourage others to explore and recognize, person-specific affinities and aspirations. These become clarified through formal practice. For some, such training reveals a deeper connection with Daoism, while for others it leads to a different path. Both are fine. Daoists traditionally are not interested in “conversion,” especially on the part of others, let alone proselytization. We might, in turn, imagine (work to actualize) Daoism as a counterculture, an underground, and perhaps a “fourth world.” This centers on an alternate religious ideal and reality (Reality).

In order to realize the “great dream” (*dàmèng* 大夢), we (by which I mean the Western Daoist community) are in need of many things. In addition to a commitment to inner cultivation and practice-realization, we need formal training. This requires holistic and integrated training with other Daoists in Daoist communities. For this, we need both systematic training programs and infrastructure. In my vision, as an ongoing community-building project, I believe that Western Daoism needs stable and enduring tradition-based and place-specific retreat and residential centers. Ideally, we need mountain retreat centers and even temples with traditional Daoist altars (*dàotán* 道壇), which function as both Daoist sacred sites and sanctuaries (*dào-chǎng* 道場). For this, I imagine a place infused with Daoist culture (*dàojiào wénhuà* 道教文化), including Daoist aesthetics and ethos. At the same time, embracing and applying traditional Daoist values like “suchness” (*zìrán* 自然), we need to be attentive to our own bioregions, ecosystems, and watersheds, perhaps developing alternative architectural designs with local materials. In any case, at such Daoist centers individuals could receive deeper authentic training and spiritual direction, including ordination tracks and formal teacher training programs.

Finally, beyond such material concerns, we need those of us committed to Daoist inner cultivation and practice-realization to become embodiments of the Dao and the Daoist tradition in the world. This involves witnessing sacred presence and recalling Daoist values. An important foundation would be commitment to and embodiment of the following:

見素抱樸
少私寡欲

Appear plain and embrace simplicity
Lessen selfishness and decrease desires

And perhaps then or concurrently focusing on the Nine Practices (*jiǔxíng* 九行). Again, this involves a Daoist contemplative inquiry and approach. Most importantly, it involves re-memorizing the Dao as both within and beyond ourselves and all other beings. Such is the Daoist community as the Daoist body, and the Daoist body as the Daoist community. Such is the Tradition of the Dao.