

## Fields of Inquiry

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I work in an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and even transdisciplinary manner. Academically speaking, I was trained in Daoist Studies and Religious Studies. In fact, I am one of the few scholar-educators of Daoism (Taoism) trained in Religious Studies and explicitly utilizing a comparative Religious Studies approach, that is, an approach informed by and applicable to the comparative and cross-cultural study of religion. This includes wide-ranging interpretive, theoretical and methodological issues. More recently, and having left my formal academic appointment and institutional affiliation in 2019, I am increasingly moving beyond a narrow specialist approach. Thus, my larger engagement with fields like Animal Studies, Contemplative Studies, and Religious Studies. One key contribution involves my application and development of a “scholar-practitioner approach” (SPA) and “critical adherent discourse” (CAD). These are rooted in actual practice and experience, perhaps even “practice-realization,” in a life committed to something beyond ordinary academic concerns and “values” like domination, hierarchy, materialism, position, reputation, and so forth. Here my work seeks to engage and invoke areas of inquiry like consciousness studies, mysticism, somatics, theology, and the like. Perhaps it will even result in new, unimagined, and currently taboo fields like Immortality Studies and X Studies.

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### ***Animal Studies***

Animal Studies is an emerging interdisciplinary field dedicated to research and education on “animals.” This may include actual biological animals and living animal communities, symbolic animals, and “the animal” as the dominant other-construct in human socio-political history. The latter is frequently referred to as the “human-animal binary,” although this framework presupposes a distinction between “humans” and “animals.” Alternatively, one may consider the human-as-animal or simply the “human-animal.” The field may, in turn, engage and/or utilize biology, ecology, literature, philosophy, psychology, Religious Studies, zoology, and so forth. I am specifically interested in contemplative insights derived from animal observation and companionship, including the possibility of animals-as-teachers.

Key Publication(s): *Taming the Wild Horse: An Annotated Translation and Study of the Daoist Horse Taming Pictures* (Columbia University Press, 2017)

Additional Materials: Daoist Horse Taming Pictures

### ***Contemplative Studies***

Contemplative Studies (CS; COST) is an emerging interdisciplinary field dedicated to research and education on contemplative practice and contemplative experience, including the possible relevance and application to a wide variety of undertakings. It is closely associated with other fields of inquiry such as consciousness studies, mysticism studies, psychology, neuroscience, Religious Studies, and so forth. *The field of Contemplative Studies is in its formative phase, and its parameters are still being established.* One approach emphasizes the development of awareness in each and every area of inquiry, including teaching and learning (“contemplative pedagogy”). From this perspective, contemplative practice might encompass art, dance, movement awareness,

music, photography, theatre, and so forth. A more narrowly focused and Religious Studies approach seeks to map the entire breadth and depth of contemplative practice and contemplative experience as documented within and transmitted by religious adherents and communities. In any case, Contemplative Studies recognizes the importance of third-person, second-person, and critical first-person approaches; it makes space for direct personal experience with specific forms of practice. In this way it challenges the denial of embodied experience and subjectivity within much of academic discourse and brings the issue of adherence in Religious Studies and the academy into high relief. Developing the three primary characteristics of the field, namely, practice commitment, critical subjectivity, and character development, I am specifically interested in the potential contributions of “scholar-practice approaches” (SPA), “critical adherent discourse” (CAD), and “inter-contemplative dialogue” (ICD). These relate to my broader interest in “theorizing praxis,” including what might be referred to as “theorizing from the inside out” and “techniques of transformation.” The latter brings attention to the actualization of psychosomatic potentials and distinct ways of embodied being-in-the-world.

Further Reading(s): “Contemplative Studies: Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)” and “Contemplative Studies: A New Vision”

Key Publication(s): *Introducing Contemplative Studies* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2018) and *Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer* (State University of New York Press, 2015)

Additional Materials: *Contemplative Studies as Interdisciplinary Field & Praxis*

### ***Daoist Studies***

Daoist Studies (Taoist Studies) is an interdisciplinary field dedicated to research and education on Daoism (Taoism), with the latter being an indigenous Chinese religion deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Conventionally speaking, Daoist Studies has been understood as a sub-field of Sinology, or the academic study of China. Such an approach usually involves viewing Daoism as a historical artifact based on textual (re)constructions. In my vision, and as first explicitly articulated in my *Cultivating Perfection* (2007) and developed over the last decade, I imagine an overlap with Religious Studies and beyond. Specifically, I see “Chinese Daoism” as the source-tradition of “global Daoism,” with the latter being primary. This involves recognizing Daoism as a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic religious tradition with international dissemination and adherence. The latter includes “American Daoism.” My general interests in Daoism are fourfold: the history of pre-modern Chinese Daoism; the emergence of global Daoism in the context of modernity; the Western reception of Daoism, especially with respect to popular culture; and the history of Daoist Studies as an academic field. That is, my intellectual approach includes the investigation of cultural influences, interpretive legacies, and contexts of reception. Some of my specific interests and areas of expertise include Daoist meditation, Daoist body-maps, and Daoist commentary literature. I also have conducted extensive fieldwork on contemporary Chinese Daoist monasticism and American Daoism from a participant-observation perspective. I am increasingly interested in “Daoist being” as it relates to human potential and actualization, especially with respect to alternate and distinct ways of embodied being-in-the-world. This includes distinct forms of embodiment, psychosomatic experiencing, and energetic awareness and presence. Such considerations require one to recognize Daoism as a living and lived religion.

Further Reading(s): Any and all materials on “Taoïsme” page

Key Publication(s): *Cultivating Perfection: Mysticism and Self-transformation in Early Quanzhen Daoism* (Brill, 2007), *The Way of Complete Perfection: A Quanzhen Daoist*

*Anthology* (State University of New York Press, 2013), *The Daoist Tradition: An Introduction* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), and *Taming the Wild Horse: An Annotated Translation and Study of the Daoist Horse Taming Pictures* (Columbia University Press, 2017)

### ***Immortality Studies***

Immortality Studies (*xiānxué* 仙學) is, first and foremost, a currently non-existent or only vaguely imagined field. Depending on context, the Chinese character *xiān* 仙, which consists of *rén* 人 (“human”) and *shān* 山 (“mountain”), may be understood as hermit, ascendant, immortal, and/or transcendent. As a potential sub-field of Daoist Studies, Immortality Studies in turn involves the study of alchemy and immortality within the socio-historical and religio-cultural parameters of China. However, there is some overlap with specific forms of Tantra, Yoga, and related expressions of “modern spirituality.” I am particularly interested in the associated transformative techniques, psychosomatic alterations, and conceptions of “immortality.” This includes the activation or actualization of what may be understood as “Daoist subtle anatomy and physiology” and the “Daoist alchemical body,” especially as documented in “Daoist body-maps” (*shēntú* 身圖). Although immortality is frequently understood as personal post-mortem existence, I increasingly believe that it is about a transpersonal and even trans-temporal ontological condition, which in turn relates to numinous capacities and mystical being/experiencing. Such is one of the areas of my current research.

Key Publication(s): *Cultivating Perfection: Mysticism and Self-transformation in Early Quanzhen Daoism* (Brill, 2007), *The Way of Complete Perfection: A Quanzhen Daoist Anthology* (State University of New York Press, 2013), and *Taming the Wild Horse: An Annotated Translation and Study of the Daoist Horse Taming Pictures* (Columbia University Press, 2017)

### ***Religious Studies***

Religious Studies is an interdisciplinary field dedicated to research and education on “religion” and “religions.” Historically speaking, it is a secularized Protestant Christian undertaking that explicitly constructed itself as “not (Christian) Theology.” Under this conception, Theology is a form of adherent/insider discourse; it is of/from religion. In contrast, Religious Studies is a form of academic/outsider discourse; it is about religion. The dominant and currently in-vogue approaches emphasize (mandate?) secular materialism, social constructivism, and scientism. (Some other influential theorists in Religious Studies claim the opposite, namely, that it is quasi-Theology). I am especially interested in contemplative practice, embodiment, and mystical experience. This includes experiential and lived approaches, such as *practicing meditation* and *directly experiencing the sacred*. One might understand this as a “theologically-infused” Religious Studies, one in which adherence is no longer taboo. In terms of Contemplative Studies and Daoist Studies, I have, in turn, argued for the unique contributions of “scholar-practitioner approaches” (SPA) and “critical adherent discourse” (CDA).

Key Publication(s): *Cultivating Perfection: Mysticism and Self-transformation in Early Quanzhen Daoism* (Brill, 2007), *Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer* (State University of New York Press, 2015), *Taming the Wild Horse: An Annotated Translation and Study of the Daoist Horse Taming Pictures* (Columbia University Press, 2017), and *Introducing Contemplative Studies* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2018)

***X Studies***

Non-existent, imaginary field dedicated to the study and actualization of X-being, in the sense of anomalous, extra-ordinary, mysterious and unknown abilities and states (“X factors”). A.k.a. Mutant Studies or Fringe Studies, in the sense of margins and outside. Insights at the edge. From the edge. Beyond the edge. In terms of academic scholarship, some foundational work has been done by Jeffrey Kripal (Rice University), who has particular interests in the “paranormal.” Being/Becoming beyond consensus mind/reality.