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Taoism: The Enduring Tradition (review)

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BOOK REVIEWS

Taoism: The Enduring Tradition. By Russell Kirkland. New York and London: Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group. Pp. xvii + 282. Hardcover \$105.00. Paper \$18.45.

Reviewed by **Ronnie Littlejohn** Belmont University

Those of us who have been waiting for a thoroughly undated introduction to Daoism need wait no longer. Russell Kirkland, among America's best known scholars of Daoism, has offered us one in *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition*. To be sure, this work will stand in sharp contrast to virtually all of the introductions to Daoism produced by Western scholars in the twentieth century. And the reason for this is simple. Kirkland has made a conscientious effort to use his knowledge of not only the most recent work on Daoism but also the Daoist canon itself to provide correctives and dispel misunderstandings that have enjoyed, in some cases, as much as a hundred years' currency. The result is a narrative that will appear to be iconoclastic because it tells the story of Daoism as we are presently able to reconstruct it, and this story differs dramatically from that set forward by the previous two generations of scholars and continues to be taught in most venues to the present day. Undertaking such a project is a difficult task. This work is one of the very few (perhaps including James Miller's recent work) to plow through dozens of well-trodden and almost axiomatic assumptions about Daoism that are now known to be mistaken. Perhaps this is one reason why even Norman Girardot, who wrote the foreword to this book, calls attention to Kirkland's "acerbic" style (p. ix). A careful reader will notice many places in which matters could be put in a kinder and gentler manner—and perhaps even more accurately (e.g., see Kirkland's characterization of the exchange between H. G. Creel and Henri Maspero in the previous generation, on pp. 182–183). Daoist scholars will also perk up over some overstatements and sweeping generalizations that typically seem to me to be designed to highlight a point of correction but sometimes go too far. But these matters should not distract us from the work's major accomplishments, which are considerable.

The first place where a reader will notice substantial correctives of the received scholarship on Daoism is in Kirkland's treatment of the definition of Daoism itself. At the beginning he puts aside the "simplistic dichotomy" between *dao* (philosophical Daoism) and *dao* (religious Daoism), reminding us that any view that religious Daoism was the province of the illiterate masses and philosophical Daoism that of the educated elite can be set aside simply by directing attention to the hundreds of Daoist texts in the *Daozang* (Daoist canon), many of which are explicitly "religious." If we are to study Daoism, Kirkland says, then we cannot privilege ancient Daoism over medieval or modern; nor should we focus only on male Daoists and not female ones; and we cannot reify any particular form of Daoism and regard it as the essence of Daoism or as Daoism's normative expression. He wants us to

take as “Daoists” anyone who self-identifies as a Daoist. Historically, the writings and practices of these persons are expressed in the *Daozang*. To study the data of Daoism one must “study all that is revealed intentionally and unintentionally, by the centuries of material preserved in the *Tao-tsang* and related collections” (p. 13). When I first read this construction of Kirkland’s project, I had several reservations. The principal one is that he appears to assume that the compilers of the *Daozang* had no agenda of their own beyond that of collecting “everything Daoist.” This seemed and still seems unlikely to me. I am also concerned that some voices and traditions in Daoism, especially the Zhengyi stream of ritual practitioners, may be underrepresented in the canon. But Kirkland does readily admit that some texts and practices might not have survived in the canon and yet still be quite relevant to an understanding of Daoism.

One way of getting to the impact of Kirkland’s work is to pay attention to his chapter on “The Classical Legacy.” To do so is a somewhat dangerous undertaking, because Kirkland is rightly very interested in dismantling the view that Daoism is equivalent to the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuangzi* and that these texts say essentially the same thing. Still, perhaps readers of this review will be most familiar with this period of Daoist formation, so I will mention some of Kirkland’s main points in this chapter. He argues not only that there was no such social entity or school of thought as “Daoism” or “Classical Daoism” in pre-Qin China and that this taxonomy was the creation of Han dynasty (206 B.C.E.–C.E. 221) thinkers, but also that there was no set of coherent ideas or values that was “daoist” (p. 21). He thinks that what later Daoists inherited from “classical” times was an assortment of behaviors and practices and a richly varied “matrix of interpretive frameworks.” We may wonder, however, whether this is not one of the overstatements that I mentioned earlier. While I am not aware of any Daoist scholar now working who believes that there was a Daoist school in the “classical” period, I also think that many agree that the lineages that transmitted practices and frameworks communicated ideas and values that overlapped with each other and spread, creating a web of interlocking coherence over time. So, even if Kirkland is right in saying that the first sociocultural group whose participants consciously identified themselves as “Daoists” and began conceiving a comprehensive collection of texts flourished during the fifth century C.E., we must be cautious about saying that there was no set of coherent ideas or values being transmitted in the “classical” period.

Kirkland’s discussion of the *Zhuangzi* is an important example of the way he works in this text. As he says, there are no primary historical data for Zhuang Zhou outside the *Zhuangzi* itself and a vague passage in the *Shiji*. And he is right that Guo Xiang created the present text of the *Zhuangzi* in the third century C.E. But the key word here is “created,” and this must not be confused with “authored.” When I first read Kirkland’s book, I thought that he might not be making this distinction sufficiently clear, but it is there in his book, and he certainly is aware of the literary criticism on the *Zhuangzi* (p. 35), indicating that he knows that some strands with which Guo Xiang worked clearly predated Guo Xiang, even if we do not know their origin and date. It is distracting, though, when Kirkland says, “the contents of the

Chuang-tzu are in certain key ways *utterly* at odds with the contents of both the *Nei-yeh* and the *Tao te ching*" (p. 36). Again, he overstates the case. And sometimes more than mere overstatement occurs, as in the statement "the *Chuang-tzu* does not teach that the reader should 'not do and nothing will be undone'—a theme oft repeated in the *Tao te ching*" (p. 36). The *Zhuangzi* does teach such practice. From the Laozi logia in the *Zhuangzi* alone, Kirkland's claim is easily shown to be false (e.g., see the Laozi passages in chapters 3, 7, 12, and 14).

At the same time, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition* does a fine job of showing the significance of the *Neiye* for the classical legacy of Daoism and in doing so reveals that the formative period of Daoism consisted of much more than a Lao-Zhuang gestation. Scholars may quibble over the particulars of Kirkland's interpretations of *Neiye* passages and his remarks about its relationship to the *Dao De Jing*, but not over its significance to the story of Daoism's evolution in this period. When speaking of the *Dao De Jing*, Kirkland's claim that Huan Yuan, who was associated with the Qixia academy, may have been the *Dao De Jing*'s final redactor is intriguing and deserves more study. Summing up his view of the classical legacy, Kirkland concludes that Daoists of later periods modeled their lives on the teachings of the *Zhuangzi* and *Dao De Jing* "to about the same extent that Christians from the time of the crucifixion to the present day have modeled their lives on the teachings contained in Jesus' parables" (p. 69).

After the chapter on "The Classical Legacy," the book offers an overarching historical summary of forty-one pages on the development of Daoism from the Han period (roughly the period of Liu An and the *Huainanzi*) to the present day. Kirkland utilizes the metaphor of Daoism as a river, with currents, eddies, and branches. This is a fine and readable summary that shows his command of the distinctions between Daoist traditions and also the so-called Northern and Southern currents of Daoism. In my view, his account of Daoism in the Tang is especially helpful. Here I should pause to mention that some readers will be impatient with Kirkland's decision not to use the pinyin romanization system, as this seems most confusing when dealing with historical personages. But this will be a minor distraction. Kirkland keeps in view his overall premise to identify Daoism through its canon, and he offers comments on several important canonical works and their influence. Kirkland's knowledge of current Daoist scholarship is right on target when he reminds us that there are fruitful areas of study as yet unexplored throughout this period. For example, he mentions specifically the fact that no one has yet examined the overlap of concepts between the *Neiye*, *Huainanzi*, and *Xiang'er*.

In "The Socio-Political Matrix of Daoism" Kirkland reminds us that there were Daoist literati in various periods of Chinese history and that not all Daoists were recluses living in mountain sanctuaries. Each dynastic period is surveyed, with comments on the role of Daoism during that time. Some Daoists were poets, historians, scholars, and even well-connected members of the political elite who held government offices or served as advisors to high officials. Kirkland shows that these literati Daoists practiced inner alchemy, and he comments directly on the fact that they practiced other Daoist arts and rituals as well and indeed often performed them for

and on behalf of ministers and emperors. Kirkland is right in saying that this means also that it is not possible to say that all Daoists were drawn from one social class. They came from diverse social backgrounds.

In discussing the social and political intricacies of Daoism, Kirkland makes a very important contribution to Daoist studies. He offers a well-informed overview of women in Daoist history and practice. In my view, the role of female Daoists is one of the most neglected areas in Daoist studies. One could read pages 126–144 of this text and be confident in having gained an accurate view of the substantive issues on this crucial subject. For example, Kirkland considers such key questions as: What did the classical texts tell us about women practitioners? Were Daoists texts and practices intended exclusively for men? When were women significant in Daoist history, and who were the women who played important roles?

In “The Cultivated Life,” Kirkland devotes a chapter to what might be regarded as the central issue of Daoist studies. What was the ultimate goal of Daoist teaching and practice? Was it to obtain physical immortality? He places Ge Hong and the *Liezi* in their contexts and shows the importance of the Shangqing and Lingbao revelations to any understanding of this subject. He demonstrates that there were many views about death in Daoism, and that not all Daoists pursued physical immortality. He sets aside the idea that the reclusive mountain dweller using a burner to cook the elixir of immortality is the one irreducible ideal in the practice of Daoism. And yet he reminds us that a recurring goal was to attain an exalted state of transformed existence through diligent cultivation of the world’s deeper realities. Once reaching this state, one will not be extinguished, even when the physical body ceases to be one’s form. Kirkland often refers to this transformation in the book as biospiritual cultivation.

All in all, this work is a genuinely new introduction to Daoism that helps clear away much of the dense underbrush of Daoist history and textual relations, and also utilizes the most recent findings and conclusions of scholars of Daoism to set the reader on a more solid path to understanding China’s most misunderstood and underappreciated transformational tradition.

Going Forth: Visions of the Buddhist Vinaya. Edited by William M. Bodiford. Kuroda Institute Studies in East Asian Buddhism 18. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005. Pp. x + 317. Hardcover \$48.00.

Reviewed by **Mario Poceski** University of Florida

Monasticism has been a central feature of Buddhism from its earliest inception in ancient India. Monastic ideals, practices, and institutions shaped virtually all aspects of the religion in India and elsewhere, and in many places they still retain their traditional prominence. The Vinaya (monastic code of discipline) was accorded a place of honor as one of the three main divisions of the Buddhist canon(s). As such, it exerted a strong influence on basic Buddhist mores and institutions, not only codifying issues of personal morality but also serving as an organizational charter or