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## The Taoist Priest (*Daoshi*) in Comparative Historical Perspective: A Critical Analysis<sup>1</sup>

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WESTERN SCHOLARS HAVE, for the most part, not yet begun to analyze such simple conceptual issues as that of the distinction between a “priest” or “priestess”—that is, a person authorized to perform certain religious roles within a given social setting—and a “monk” or “nun”—that is, a person who carries out certain spiritual practices, within or without a cloistered setting, with or without having undergone actual ordination. Modern scholarship has yet to produce a complete or balanced picture of the roles and functions of *daoshi* throughout Chinese history. The *Daoism Handbook*, edited by Livia Kohn, can be considered, in many regards, the state of the art in Taoist studies today.<sup>2</sup> But though it contains chapters on Taoist ordination, ritual, etc., it does not specifically address monasticism or priesthood, whether as institutions or as conceptual abstractions. Examination of most other twenty-first-century works on Taoism leaves us unclear not only about what the characteristics of “a Taoist” are, but also about the ideals to which such a person is devoted, and the relationship between the two.

Religions, and their ambient cultures, commonly employ a particular term for a person who is regarded as embodying fully the religion’s ideals—for example, a “saint.” The term “saint,” however, is generally not reserved for a holder of any specific religious office, and to qualify as a “saint” a person does not even have to be currently alive. In fact, most persons regarded as “saints” are no-longer-living persons who, during life, held no formal ecclesiastic office.<sup>3</sup> Such terms are thus quite distinguishable from terms that designate individuals who play specific roles within the religion and/or within its ambient culture and society.

Such terms are also clearly distinguishable from terms employed to designate an order of beings who are, by their nature, trans-human, indeed unembodied. For instance, the Christian tradition has its

“angels,” and it is generally assumed that a person’s entry into the religious life in a social or institutional sense does not, in any meaningful sense, lead such a person to eventual attainment of the status of “an angel.”

The indigenous Chinese terminology pertaining to the corresponding concepts associated with Taoism are, it appears, roughly equivalent. The category of “angel” is approximated by the Chinese term *xian* (*hsien*), which was traditionally mistranslated as “immortal,” as though the primary characteristic of such beings is that they do not undergo death.<sup>4</sup> Since Christians do not use the term “immortal” for those transcendent beings whose normal state is beyond the empirical world of form, one might wonder why we should not simply render the term *xian* as “angel”—at least a rough equivalent. But the objection might be that while Christians who pursue the religious life most diligently are seldom if ever imagined to be engaged in practices that might allow them to “become an angel,” there have been numerous Chinese minds (including, or even perhaps even predominantly, non-Taoist Chinese minds) that have imagined that Chinese culture (and, to a certain extent, the Taoist tradition more particularly) offers a range of practices that indeed offer a diligent person a theoretical, and perhaps even a practical, possibility of attaining the status of a *xian*. For that reason, some scholars of the last generation began rendering the Chinese term *xian* as “transcendent”—a term that allows us to apply it either to a disembodied being who has never been human, or to a human whose religious practice has been so exceptionally fruitful as to transform him or her into such a being—who, being not subject to any of the conditions of the mortal state, may be called “immortal.” Also, the *xian* is clearly distinguishable from “a saint,” for the latter is a status that cannot, during life, be effectively earned or attained: it is an honorary status, conferred *post mortem* by leaders of a religious organization who have decided to offer a particular person the cultural status of “saint” in order that his or her life and deeds might become considered exemplary, for present and future living persons to emulate in their effort to fulfill the tradition’s ideals most fully.

What follows here is part of a larger project, an exploration of Taoist terms and titles more generally. In addition to having terms that correspond roughly to such English terms as “priest,” “monk,” and “saint,” Taoism, like other religions, has a variety of ranks and titles, which are of distinguishable types. Some are titles that are given to a living

person, by living contemporaries within a specific institution, to signify that he or she is authorized to perform a specific role within their religious community (for example, as an abbot or a rector). Others are master-titles that signify that a given person has authority over other duly recognized religious figures (for example, a bishop, a monsignor, a cardinal, or a pope). Then again, there are honorific titles, which suggest great respect and deference, but actually specify no particular duties or privileges and correspond to no particular rank within the religious community, either in social terms or in historical terms. In Tang times, Taoists used the term *lianshi* (煉師, “refined master/mistress”) and even the term *tianshi* (天師, “heavenly master”) as such loose and general honorifics.<sup>5</sup> Another term, used by Tang Taoists in just such a sense, is the term *xiansheng*, which once connoted a master of religious matters, but passed down into modern Chinese culture as the everyday term for a male adult person—equivalent to the terms “mister,” “sir,” or *monsieur*. Within the Taoist tradition, however, all such titles, formal or informal, have been used to certify that the person to whom they are applied is someone whose life has a substantial religious significance. In Tang times, the terms *tianshi* and *lianshi* seem to have been considered available for assignment by any given literatus to any given illustrious personage of past or present; whereas the term *xiansheng* seems to have been regarded as a title of honor that was most typically bestowed upon a distinguished religious figure—during life or posthumously—by the imperial court.

Such facts, however, do not appear in the general literature concerning Chinese culture or society. Whereas Westerners’ use of terms like “angel,” “saint,” “priest,” or “pope” generally reveal, and cause, little social or historical confusion, these issues of terminology are in fact of the most vital significance for the study of Taoists, for as we enter the second decade of the third millennium (as dates are now calculated not only by Christians, but by most Asians—regardless of religious identity), these matters remain fundamental for any serious discussion of “Taoist practice” or “Taoist belief.”<sup>6</sup>

While the terminology employed by Taoists over the centuries has not yet been fully explored, the representation of such terminology in the writings of some Western scholars has actually obfuscated such matters, rather than clarify them. Those scholars include such erudite twentieth-century luminaries as Henri Maspero, Isabelle Robinet, and Kristopher Schipper. It is true that those scholars did much—and in Schipper’s case,

is still doing much—to add to our historical and conceptual knowledge of Taoism. And it is certainly true that each of them endeavored diligently to make sense of the data of Taoism that was known to most scholars of their day. But significant interpretive problems are posed by any effort to integrate data that originated in different periods, in different social and cultural contexts. And some of the pertinent writings of Maspero, Robinet, and even Schipper seem, upon careful inspection, to use data from one historical setting as though it were continuous with—and therefore useful for explaining—data from a quite disparate social or historical setting. By conflating modern phenomena—for example, data from the Zhengyi tradition that endures in Taiwan today—with data from ancient or medieval texts, such scholars have inadvertently perpetuated anachronistic conceptual amalgams that are, in the final analysis, deeply misleading. In addition, some writers have often confused *literary images* concerning “Taoists” with actual historical data. Even the compilers of China’s “standard histories” typically conflated known Taoist leaders with members of a category like “hermits”—most of whom never even met an actual Taoist, much less represented any Taoist community. Furthermore, some such presentations have confused even the scholars of the present generation—much less today’s students, who will be tomorrow’s scholars—by thoughtlessly using certain terms and titles as though they were simply interchangeable with other terms and titles.

For instance, at the close of the last the millennium, the only reliable historical overview of Taoism was Isabelle Robinet’s *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*.<sup>7</sup> Robinet begins her book with a chapter entitled “Definitions and Controlling Concepts.” But in that chapter, she uses the term “Taoist” *both* as an utterly ahistorical abstraction *and* as a synonym for the term “Taoist priest.” For example, in one section, she writes as follows: “Because they are cyclical, the Taoist time and the Taoist world permit a new beginning, a rebirth. . . . In this dynamic world, which he himself has built, the Taoist sits at the center, as a kind of demiurge, a creating spirit: by locating, connecting, identifying, and naming, he gives meaning to the cosmos. . . .”<sup>8</sup> In reality, I doubt that anyone can name a single specific Taoist practitioner, at any moment in Chinese history, who actually fits such a “definition.” The writings of all Taoists that are known to me would not even seem to have been produced by people who would even have understood themselves, or any of their living associates, in any such terms. But we can certainly

allow for a certain degree of imprecision when a scholar is attempting to generalize about an entire tradition, especially when writing for the general educated public, as Robinet was doing.

On the other hand, elsewhere in the same chapter, Robinet—like many Western scholars of the twentieth century—uses the term “Taoist” as a synonym for “Taoist priest.” For instance, she writes: “A creative power in his chamber, a prince in his body, the Taoist officiating at a ritual also plays a role like that of a sovereign and his representatives in the empire. . . . The Taoist, as we shall see, does the same thing in his liturgy. The Taoist’s exorcistic function originally belonged to the government. . . .”<sup>9</sup> So is every “Taoist,” one wonders, a person who is entitled to—much less expected to—*perform a liturgy*? So any reader of that passage would logically conclude. However, in another place, Robinet writes: “The Taoist world is above all the world of nature rather than that of society. Taoists are renowned for this. Often hermits in distant mountains, they are the ones who taught the Chinese to appreciate landscapes with the feelings that we recognize as Chinese.”<sup>10</sup> So if these passages all “define” for us how we are to think of the persons designated as “the Taoist,” we can apparently conclude that the hermits who live in distant mountains must also somehow play “exorcistic functions.” Or is it, rather, that the Taoist performs his exorcistic functions and then goes into the mountains to appreciate the landscape there? Are we to conclude that a person who does not appreciate natural landscapes will somehow have trouble performing a liturgy? Or does one perform a liturgy most properly while in the mountains, dwelling as a hermit?

The fundamental issue is whether we are all talking about the same thing when we seek to communicate with each other about “what Taoists believe” or “what Taoists do.” For example, one need not be Roman Catholic to understand that the ranks of ecclesiastic functionaries—up to the Pope himself—are specifically defined ranks that pertain to specific roles that particular men, and occasionally women, have been authorized to play on behalf of the Catholic Church. The specificity of such roles, and of the corresponding terminology, is fully distinguishable from the less clearly specified roles that the Catholic faithful understands to be the activities of the men and women of past ages who are recognized as “saints.” The Church seems to have always taken implicit pride in the fact that the category of “saint” has never been directly tied to the categories of the Catholic clergy. History abounds

with “saints” who exemplified the highest ideals of and for human life, yet who held no ecclesiastical office at all. Were it not for that long-standing distinction, the Church would have had little opportunity to hold up any women as religious exemplars. Indeed, the highest female luminary in the Catholic tradition—St. Mary, the mother of Jesus—is a perfect example: neither she nor any other member of Jesus’ family was ever portrayed as having undergone ordination as a “priest”: that most elementary ecclesiastical rank—like the more exalted ranks of “bishop,” “archbishop,” “cardinal,” and “pope”—have in fact always remained unyieldingly closed to even the most illustrious woman, no matter how “saintly” she may have been recognized as being. Hence today, Benedict XVI is laboring assiduously to elevate his predecessor, John Paul II, to the rank of a “saint”—a rank that can never formally be attained by any Christian during his or her lifetime.

By comparison, there has been historically plenty of discomfort among faithful Christians when discussing the words or deeds of an individual who embraces beliefs and values at variance with those of the majority of Christians, past and present. Indeed, some men and women who regarded themselves, and were sometimes regarded by many others, as “good Christians,” were tied to a post and set afire to die a horrible flaming death by persons who held pointedly different beliefs about the criteria by which we ought to define who, exactly, is “a good Christian” and who is not. Fortunately, no examples come to mind of Taoist “heretics” being flambéed for their deviant ideals or practices—a fact that, I shall argue, is neither a historical accident nor proof that Taoists are “more spiritual” than Christians, but merely a happy consequence of different cultural traditions regarding the way “religious identity” is construed.

Such atrocities of bygone days as burning heretics at the stake (now repudiated by virtually all Christians of all denominations) have, both in generations past and even in our own day, been exploited by “leading intellectuals” who hate Christianity and indeed hate “religion”: those modernist elitists point to such atrocities as incontrovertible evidence that “religion” per se is not merely foolish, but dangerous to human civilization. In reality, of course, such “intellectuals” are woefully under-educated about the actual facts of life regarding the world’s religions: even a first-year undergraduate at nearly any Western college can take a course in which he or she learns that in most Asian lands—among Buddhists, Hindus, Confucians, and Taoists,

for instance—no one has ever been burned at the stake for “heresy.” Nor are “Crusades” or “wars of jihad” common elements of the religious history of the lands where those traditions hold sway.

But the more fundamental issue for students of such religious traditions is whether, on even a theoretical level, there *could be* such a thing as a Buddhist or Taoist “heresy.” The fundamental issue is this: Are there “doctrines” that are so characteristic of “Taoism” that a person who does not see fit to adhere to them somehow fails to qualify as a representative of “the Taoist faith”? For if so, we could use such facts to forge clear definitional distinctions between “Taoist ideas” and the ideas of others who cannot seriously be held to represent “Taoism” per se. For example, in the mid-twentieth century the leading Western expositors of “Taoism” were writers like H.G. Creel and Holmes Welch, who taught generations a highly warped concept of Taoism grounded entirely in the biases and cultural conflicts inherent to Western intellectuals’ disdain for *all* “religion”; without bothering to analyze the social or historical data, Creel maintained (1) that “true Taoism” consisted originally of certain abstract naturalistic notions produced from the heads of long-dead “philosophers” who had written such classical texts as *Lao-tzu* (Laozi) or the *Tao te ching* (*Daode jing*); and (2) that—just as Protestants and modern secularists maintained that Jesus was a wise and good man whose noble teachings were not truly represented by the centuries of “degenerate” Roman Catholic practitioners of Christianity—the “true successors” of the sagely authors of the *Daode jing* were most certainly not the centuries of Chinese practitioners of *Daojiao* (the term for Taoism used in China by Taoists and non-Taoists alike). Rather, the Confucianized translators of “Chinese Thought” for the twentieth-century English-speaking world (e.g., Fung Yu-lan, Wing-tsit Chan, Theodore deBary, and H. G. Creel) dismissed all the practicing Taoists of imperial and post-imperial China as “superstitious” and “degenerate.” This anti-religious mania that was embedded in Western Sinology as a methodological axiom taught generations of Western minds that the “true successors” of the supposed “philosophical Taoists” of antiquity were elite, educated men who were “above” such vile “superstition”—poets, “Zen masters,” landscape painters, and men who wrote texts about metaphysical concepts like “Non-Being.” Notably, according to this anti-Taoist re-definition of Taoism, there were no women at all among the “true successors” of Laozi.

From the perspective of the Confucian/academic doyens of modern Sinology, the men and women who actually founded modern China's leading Taoist organization—such as Wang Zhe, the putative founder of the Quanzhen (Ch'üan-chen) monastic order—were ignored as unworthy of consideration at all. Wang was a highly educated member of twelfth-century China's landed gentry, but twentieth-century Sinology ignominiously dismissed eight centuries of very spiritual (and often highly educated and politically well-connected) Taoist men and women. Ironically, while such men and women in 1950s China were struggling to preserve their traditions, and their own lives, from the secularistic radicals then laboring to exterminate all forms of religious practice, the Westerners who were teaching other "free" Westerners about "Chinese religion" not only denied the significance of those Taoists' struggle, but also denied the respectability of the ideals and practices that those Taoists were struggling to preserve.

During the last quarter-century of the twentieth century, Western Sinologists did begin teaching the public that Taoism was not just an ancient "school of philosophy," but also an enduring religious tradition. But during that period, few Westerners could gain admittance to the mainland to observe and learn from the living Taoists there: Westerners could gain access only to the Taoists practicing in Taiwan, where a very sacerdotal, liturgical organization called Tianshi, "the Heavenly Masters," predominated. Only within the past decade have any Western scholars begun publishing expositions of the state of "Taoism" during the Qing (Ch'ing) dynasty (1644–1911).<sup>11</sup> At the end of the twentieth century, hardly anyone in the West had even heard of Quanzhen Taoism—a monastic order in which men and women live as monks and nuns in a setting comparable to (and in part inspired by) the monastic sangha of Buddhists. And though the Tianshi priests represented "living Taoism" only on the island outpost where Western scholars—denied access to the "living Taoists" of the entire mainland—could "do fieldwork," the Quanzhen monastic order managed to survive just beyond the political fringes of Mao's China, in Beijing as well as at the traditional mountain centers of premodern Taoist religious practice. Hence, the traditions and practices of the men and women who actually practiced Taoism, considered themselves "Taoists," and were considered to be "Taoists" by non-Taoist members of Chinese society—those traditions and practices are only now, in the past ten years or so, beginning to be explained to Westerners in terms that

suggest that Westerners, and Asians alike, ought to attempt to learn about them.

The study of Buddhism in the West has a very different history, of course. And Westerners were also given a very misleading understanding of the contents of “Buddhist tradition.” One such misunderstanding concerned the role and status of the men and women whom Buddhists recognized as authentic representatives of their tradition as it was, and should be, practiced within any given community. For instance, as a college student, I learned that the Buddha had established a monastic community called the sangha, and had established a set of highly specific regulations (*vinaya*) to govern the lives of the men and women whom the monastic community formally admitted to their ranks—the men ordained as “monks” (Skt. *bhikṣus*) and the women ordained as “nuns” (Skt. *bhikṣuṇīs*). But I also saw that in most Western writings, even by leading authorities on Asian cultures, the persons mentioned as representatives of Buddhism within, say, Chinese or Japanese society were generally called Buddhist “priests.” No college professor, and no textbook, ever explained why the term “priest” was, or should be, used for East Asian Buddhists (e.g., Ch. *zeng*; Jpn. *so*), when our understanding of South Asian Buddhism was always that the Buddha had established a *monastic* order.

Anyone raised in any Christian land knows that a “monk” or “nun” is a person whose training, standing, and social roles are quite different indeed from those of a “priest.” And the significance of that difference is particularly apparent to any woman, for the terms “monk” and “nun” suggested at least some nominal possibility of equality for women to participate in the religion, despite the fact that no woman was ever allowed to become a “priest.”

It also went without saying that anyone familiar with Christianity would understand that a person did not necessarily have to become a “priest”—or even a “monk” or a “nun”—to be accepted, by everyone, as “a Christian.” Indeed, throughout history, the overwhelming majority of Christians were men or women who had never even imagined the possibility of attempting to earn the status of a Christian “monk” or “nun,” and certainly very few ever earned the rank of “priest.” Indeed, from the very establishment of “the Christian religion,” there was a clear understanding that certain individuals would be authorized to speak to others so as to correct misunderstanding and misbehavior in regard to the practice of their faith. And historically, it was precisely

because of the presence of rigorous, highly specialized ecclesiastical structure among the community of those who considered themselves as, and were considered, “Christians” that the Roman emperor Constantine realized that he could essentially marry his imperial government to the Christian church and thereby gain effective control over the lives of the Christian multitudes who lived in his hitherto mixed-pagan realm. Few of the “pagan” religious communities that flourished within the Roman world (e.g., that of the Mithraists or of the devotees of Isis or other popular goddesses) provided any such rigorous social structure. So as Rome declined in “the West,” Constantine extended its putative political sovereignty for many centuries by effectively outlawing all other religious organizations, as well as the element of Christian thought that had been most successful *outside* of that ecclesiastic structure—the Gnostic understanding of Christ as the revealer of wisdom that is open for any person to achieve by attaining full understanding of the spiritual nature of all reality and indeed of one’s own personal identity. Regrettably, the political success of Constantine’s program to make himself the sovereign over all his subjects’ religious life led to the death (at times, a flaming death) for those who considered themselves Christian following a template that was quite comparable to that which has always informed nearly all of Buddhism. For centuries, Gnostic Christians aspired to attain a Christ-like spiritual identity by acquiring the same wisdom that their many Gnostic gospels taught them that Christ had revealed. But no worldly potentate could effectively appropriate or exploit religious institutions to control the life of a person whose religious identity was understood as an effort to “become a Christ.” Only at the fringes of today’s academic world are there scholars who teach their audience the fact that Buddhist ideas were known and respected in those ancient communities where Greco-Roman society overlapped with the Buddhist world. The fact that there were Buddhists in Alexandria interacting with the Christian “father” named Clement, or that texts like the *Milinda-pañhā* were being composed to explain Buddhist beliefs to Hellenistic minds, are nearly unknown to modern minds.

However, nearly all Westerners who have taken a course on Buddhism do learn a few very important facts that serve as touchstones for comparing Christian belief and practice with that of most Buddhists. One such fact is the idea of “the bodhisattva path.” Another is the East Asian belief—prevalent especially in Japan—that a diligent practitioner

can “become a buddha in this very lifetime,” *sokushin jōbutsu*. Such notions—elements along a broad spectrum of widespread and long-lasting models for Buddhist practice—have one fundamental element in common: like the ancient teachings of Gnostic Christian texts, these Buddhist teachings assume that the tradition’s founder was important not primarily because of any element of his historic life or death, but rather because that founder opened a door that anyone can himself, or herself, step through, by developing a higher and fuller understanding of reality and attaining the same wisdom that the founder had himself attained. Once that belief was in place, the only question was that of determining the precise practice one must engage in in order to facilitate one’s ascent to the beatific state that had been achieved by the great exemplar who founded our great religious tradition.

Again, one might ask here, once again, what such facts could have to do with the issue of what, exactly, “a Taoist” is. The fundamental problem that requires clarification is as follows. In the modern world—in Asia and the West alike—the word “Taoist” has been used so indiscriminately that meaningful discussion of, say, the extent to which twenty-first-century Taoists are doing what Taoists of any given century in the past did, cannot take place until we can all dispel a range of misleading—and at times quite silly—representations of “what Taoists believe.” If the monastic life of eight centuries of Taoist men and women remains buried under the carpet while interpreters try to explain “Taoism” only in terms of “ancient philosophers” selling “non-action,” or hereditary male priests performing Tianshi liturgies while *hoi polloi* watch passively (and put a few drachmas into a collection plate, as it were, to feed the priests who do all our religious activity for us), then what is being written or taught about “Taoism” will be quite worthless.

I am writing here not to disparage the mistaken notions of dilettantes. We may all take for granted that the notions cherished or expounded by dilettantes are nearly always mistaken, in regard to any topic, in any field of endeavor. Rather, what I do intend to do here is to address notions of “what Taoists do” that have been written and published not by dilettantes, but by leading scholars in the field of “the study of Taoism” at the turn of the millennium.

Let us begin with a set of very simple questions on the basis of the wide-ranging exposition just concluded: Is there, in a strict sense, such a thing as “a Taoist priest”? If so, to what extent, and in what ways, is

such a person to be differentiated from “a Taoist monk” or “a Taoist nun”? To what extent, in what ways, and for what reasons, have the roles of “a Taoist priest,” “a Taoist monk,” or “a Taoist nun” changed over time? Yet more importantly, to what extent are such figures historically differentiated from any particular type of *layperson*? One can certainly be “a Christian” or “a Buddhist” without undergoing ordination as a priest. But as the twenty-first century opened, one can read the writings of some leading specialists without coming away with any coherent answer to the question, “Can one be ‘a Taoist’ without undergoing ordination as ‘a priest’?” Who, in fact, decides whether any given person is, in fact, someone whom we ought to call “a Taoist priest”?<sup>12</sup> What are the personal qualities, or social roles, that we ought to expect of a person who holds the title of “priest”—and what are the personal qualities, and social roles, that we ought to expect of a person who holds the title of a “monk” or “nun”? Are there specific activities, or religious practices, that we ought to expect to see being performed by one but not by the other? And even more importantly, are there specific activities, or religious practices, that we ought to expect to see being performed by a Taoist “priest,” “monk,” or “nun” that we ought never expect to see being performed by a Taoist layperson?

Many twentieth-century scholars (and some today) have written as though there has never been any such thing in China as a specific religious identity for any group or individual: we are often told that “religion” in China, as in Japan, is “diffused”—not “institutional,” as in Christianity or Islam; hence, we are often told, individuals in those Asian lands may engage in various ceremonies, or think various thoughts, that *might* have historically derived from some specific religious tradition, without such facts demonstrating that that person wishes to be, or ought to be, identified with any such specific tradition. For instance, over the course of Chinese history, it became fairly common (at least as compared to the premodern or modern West) for individuals (including some Quanzhen Taoists) to believe that all persons undergo rebirth—a belief that derives quite specifically from Buddhist beliefs, rather than from Confucian or Taoist beliefs. Yet, we have always been told that when we hear a Chinese person speaking of rebirth, we are certainly not to conclude that that person holds a Buddhist religious identity, rather than a Confucian or Taoist identity. And it is certainly true that over the past thousand years, there were frequent efforts among political and cultural leaders to convince the

Chinese public that “the Three Religions are one,” i.e., that the ideal of “becoming a Sage (*shengren*)” is somehow analogous with, if not identical to, the ideal of “becoming a Buddha” or “becoming a Transcendent (*xian*).” And there are certainly prominent examples of works of “Taoist literature,” indeed Taoist scripture, in which such equivalences are expressed as ideals to be accepted by “Taoist” readers.

However, it is also quite true that over the course of the same centuries, within the same societies, there were assiduous efforts by men and women in China to articulate and fulfill the ideals for a follower of “the Taoist tradition” as distinguished from (if seldom opposed, in any hostile sense, to) “the Buddhist tradition” or “the Confucian tradition.” That is to say, there were, century after century, men and women in China who desired to do what was most likely to lead a person to attain the ultimate ideal for a human being, in the sense of becoming a Transcendent, or a Realized Person (*zhenren*)—not in the sense of becoming a Buddha or a Confucian “Sage.”

And more importantly for a sound comparative understanding, for none of those men or women was “becoming a Transcendent” or “Realized Person” (*zhenren*) a *theoretically impossible goal*—the way that it would be for a person who claims Christian religious identity to say that “I wish to do what is necessary for me to develop myself so that I may someday, perhaps, become ‘a Christ.’” For no Christian—at least since the extirpation of the Gnostic “heresy”—has it ever been a thinkable goal that one should seek to practice the religious life to the point that one might “become a Christ.” But for followers of Taoism, as for Buddhists, it was not only thinkable, but actually quite important, that one should seek to put into practice a model of religious practice that was appropriate for attaining the ultimate spiritual goal: becoming a Transcendent or a Realized Person.

And moreover, the determination of the characteristics of such an ideal person, and of the precise religious practices most conducive to the eventual attainment of such an ideal, was the subject of periodic discussion among Taoists—not all of whom were ever ordained into any specific ecclesiastic religious organization. Nor did any Taoists, to my knowledge, ever insist that “unless you leave home and follow me”—i.e., abandoning one’s family and wholly renouncing one’s natural social/political community, the way that the Mohists of pre-Han China were expected to do—one would have no hope of attaining the ultimate spiritual goal. Western Sinologists of the twentieth century

taught us that when Buddhism arrived in China, there was heated debate (represented by the late-Tang Confucian Han Yu) about the fact that “becoming Buddhist” would seem to demand that one deny one’s family (and by extension, one’s ruler—a peculiarly Chinese extension of social values), thereby becoming “no longer really Chinese.” Yet, the Sinologists who taught such things kept mum about whether Chinese men (or women—never really present in the minds of twentieth-century Western Sinology at all) felt that by becoming a Taoist monk one might also, somehow, be violating one’s cultural heritage. That is, of course, because those Sinologists had been taught to think that the term “Taoist” referred properly only to the ideas of certain classical “philosophers,” not to any actual men or women practicing religion in imperial China.

In addition, we may now consider the fact that China’s Taoists never underwent the sustained argument about the viability of “the bodhisattva path,” for monastics and/or for laypeople, that the Buddhists of India underwent. Our historical Indian sources for the study of the first few centuries of Buddhist institutions are scant. Our picture of what happened in those centuries is informed mostly by speculation upon the implications of words found in texts of indeterminate date—in comparison, perhaps, with the implications of certain artifacts, of uncertain date, that may have come down to us from such early communities. What we generally hear, and what our students are generally taught, is that the Buddha insisted upon a very strict monastic code—more strict than that which the Chinese found utterly unpalatable when the Mohists insisted that one could not “be a Mohist” while continuing to live among one’s natural family and paying allegiance to one’s natural ruler. It is a commonplace concerning the introduction of Buddhism into China that “Chinese society” itself was repulsed by the idea of “renunciation” implicit in the Indian model of “the Buddhist monastic community.” There may have been certain comparable elements among the earliest “Celestial Master” (*Tianshi*) movement in late-Han China. But our historical sources for that community are just as scarce, and just as difficult to date, as our historical sources for India’s early Buddhist community. And the discontinuities between that movement and the later traditions of China’s *Daojiao* are quite shocking indeed—and were to the Taoists (like the fifth-century aristocrat Lu Xiuqing) who first attempted to codify the sacred literature of their tradition. In the first version of Taoism’s so-called “canon”

(the “Three Caverns,” “Sandong”), the writings of the Celestial Master movement were conspicuously excluded, thereby demonstrating that any argument that that movement was “central” to Taoism (an argument made by several leading late-twentieth-century Western specialists) is quite opposite to the definitional thrust of the men and women who developed China’s indigenous religious traditions into a society-wide religion that won respect and participation by centuries of rulers and literati, rather than the exclusionary cult of the Tianshi, which offered no explanations of life to interest intellectuals, and no model of religious practice for personal spiritual self-development (*xiulian*) other than cultic liturgical activities at the behest of an all-male hereditary leadership.

So among the Taoists of medieval China, as among the Buddhists of ancient India—and indeed as among the early Christian community—only speculation and generalization from materials of dubious pertinence allow us to say what the people within that community actually argued about when it came to *the formulation of their specific spiritual ideals* and their ideas of *how specific practices might theoretically conduce to the attainment of those ideals*.

But one thing is almost universally believed about the early evolution of “Buddhism.” That is that “at the beginning,” the only acceptable model for how one practiced the Buddha’s teachings was a *monastic* model, which required each practitioner to renounce one’s home and family—not in old age, after having had children and having raised them to adulthood and children of their own, as in standard Hinduism *per se*, but rather at the moment that one *heard* the teaching and decided to heed it by renouncing one’s ordinary social roles in favor of total immersion in a new and wholly artificial set of social roles. Indeed, the generic term for anyone who showed interest in that first Buddhist community was a *śrāvaka*, a “hearer” of the dharma. That term—a vague one suggesting acceptance of the dharma’s validity, but no actual commitment to any given lifestyle, monastic setting, or modes of religious practice—was clearly distinguishable from the term for “monk” or “nun”—*bhikṣu/bhikṣuṇī*. And it certainly suggests no “priestly” role. Yet, it was also not a term for a lay Buddhist *per se*, for *bhikṣus* and *bhikṣuṇīs* were also certainly *śrāvakas*: taking monastic order did not involve renouncing some putative *śrāvaka* status.

In later Buddhist literature, these terms come into clearer focus. For example, a Mahāyāna scripture from South Asia that had a tremendous

impact in China and Japan was the *Lotus Sutra* (*Saddharma-puṇḍarīka-sūtra*). In the *Lotus Sutra*, the *śrāvaka* was sharply distinguished from the (presumably rival) models of (1) the *pratyeka-buddha* (a person who lives by all the Buddha's teachings in pursuit of the same ideals—but without practicing within the monastic community, and thus worthy of denigration for presumptive “selfishness”), and (2) the *bodhisattva* (a person who lives by all the Buddha's teachings, either within or outside of any specific monastic community, but who pursues the universalistic “salvation” of all sentient beings, and hence is regarded (in this and related texts) as higher than either the allegedly more selfish *śrāvaka* or *pratyeka-buddha*).

Such materials make it clear that there were sharp disagreements, among numerous parties, as to whether the monastic life was truly essential for living the Buddhist life in expectation of achieving the highest goal, as well as in regard to the nature of that goal itself. Some thoughtful Buddhists apparently held that one could attain the theoretical goal only by adopting a very strict monastic lifestyle, which had been mandated by the founder himself, as all parties clearly seem to have agreed. But others—just as influential—took just the opposite view. One such example was the composer of the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa-sūtra*, whose eponymous protagonist demonstrated that a layperson (*upāsaka*) who fulfilled the tradition's spiritual values—in this case, most notably, “compassion” (*karuṇā*)—was said to rank *higher* among the “pantheon” of notable Buddhist figures than even the “cosmic bodhisattvas” (*mahāsattvas*) whose karmic achievements have freed them from the necessity of birth as an embodied being. These ideas bring us to the verge of the teachings of the Pure Land tradition, which are all based on the story of how a bodhisattva of a bygone era, Dharmākara by name, was to transform the lives of millions of sentient beings for eons to come by devoting himself to the ideals of “the bodhisattva path.” He did so with such special salvific efficacy that his eventual attainment of Buddhism's ultimate theoretical goal, “complete perfect awakening” (*samyak-saṃbodhi*), also resulted in the creation not only of a “Pure World,” *Sukhāvātī*, where any sentient being has a chance someday to be reborn, but also of a salvific mechanism designed carefully and effectively enough so as to make it possible for any sentient being with “a sincere mind/heart” to gain “rebirth” there instantaneously, while yet still alive in one's present body. Shinran refined (and in his view, corrected) such basic beliefs, by turning back

to Amitābha's "original vow" (*hongan*), rather than to the idea that one can attain "rebirth" (*ōjō*) by sincere performance of the "single-practice *nenbutsu*" (*senjaku nenbutsu*), as his teacher Hōnen had maintained.

At this point, we have a wide-ranging comparative perspective from which to think productively about the terminology that Taoists over the century devised to designate the various spiritual ranks conceivable for Taoist practitioners of various descriptions, as well as the terminology that Taoists adopted as formal ecclesiastic ranks and offices. It was Taoists of the early medieval period—most specifically, well-educated male aristocrats such as Lu Xiuqing—who first began to try to get the Teachings of Tao (Daojiao) "organized" so as to prove more impressive and resilient as a body of teachings and practices—especially as compared to the body of teachings and practices then known as the Teachings of (the) Buddha(s), Fojiao. By the fifth century, when Lu in the South and others in the North (most famously Kou Qianzhi) began such efforts to "organize" their religious traditions, the cultural complex that we call Buddhism had won respect and acceptance at all levels of the then-divided Chinese society, both North and South—most importantly among the rulers and aristocrats of both regions.

To those rulers—the men who, to some degree, controlled Chinese society through their political and economic power—it was clear that Buddhism was an old, rich, varied, but highly organized tradition, which could be used by rulers to achieve a variety of political and economic goals. One Southern ruler, for instance, the Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty, reportedly "gave himself as a slave" to a nearby Buddhist temple, thus forcing his ministers to empty the imperial treasury to "buy him back." Meanwhile, other rulers periodically turned to the vast "monastic estates" (an ironic designation to be sure) as potential sources of revenue: then, as in many modern societies, both religious institutions and the men who ran them were exempt from general taxation on property. So while no Chinese ruler ever managed to achieve what Constantine achieved—i.e., take total control of a vast religious community as a means of taking total control of his far-flung realm—those rulers certainly made repeated efforts in that direction. At least one self-appointed Taoist "leader," Kou Qianzhi, labored to persuade one ruling house (that of the Wei dynasty established by the non-Chinese Toba people) to institute Taoism as a kind of state religion.<sup>13</sup>

By Tang times, the risks—and opportunities—for exploiting rulers' political ambition in efforts to bolster the standing of one religious group over another religious group led to a series of imperially staged "debates," and a genre of polemical literature in which Buddhists launched diatribes at Taoists and vice versa.<sup>14</sup> Of course, the very idea of a Taoist deriding anyone for "wrong thinking," much less for "improper religious practice," is somewhat ironic: other than the Tianshi denunciations of other forms of Taoism as unworthy (both during early medieval times and in twentieth-century Taiwan), Taoists have been no more inclined to polemics than Buddhists have been. But during the early Tang, a Taoist master who professed to know and love Buddhist teachings just as well as his own had no choice but to obey an imperial order that he stand on a stage and denounce Buddhists to their faces, just as Buddhists were ordered to do against Taoists.

And the consequences of such debates were, at times, the imperial proscription of the entire religious organization of the men whom the emperor decreed to be the "loser" of the debate, as happened when the Mongol emperor Qubilai Khan ordered the entire existing Taoist "canon"—the massive 7000-plus-volume Quanzhen compilation—to be burned, a desecration that permanently destroyed much of the literary heritage of Quanzhen Taoism. Fortunately, the rulers of earlier Tang times—even the redoubtable Empress Wu Zetian, who formally abolished the Tang dynasty and replaced it with the short-lived house of Zhou—never took such extreme measures against any religion. And even a formal imperial "proscription" of a given religious organization never really led to its demise—only to a need for it to reformulate itself on terms more acceptable to the existing government. Moreover, when Empress Wu passed, and the Tang house was restored, the fortunes of organized Taoism were restored: though Tang rulers—like nearly all Chinese rulers, from the first imperial dynasty to the present day—endeavored to maintain authority over all religious organizations, the Tang emperors claimed lineal descent from the legendary "Laozi," and were always happy to provide patronage to any Taoist—or even semi-Taoist—who could be presented to the public as a supporter of their dynasty.<sup>15</sup>

Still, both the evidence of history and the evidence of the Taoists' voluminous collection of sacred literature (the *Daozang*) demonstrate that efforts to organize "Taoism"—whether on the part of emperors like those of the High Tang era or on the part of Taoist "leaders" themselves

(even Kou Qianzhi or Lu Xiujing)—were never even remotely successful: unlike the Christian Church, which became effectively unified in doctrine, practice, and social organization by the fourth century, there was never any single “Taoist church,” and no doctrine or practice was ever considered “heretical” by any (save perhaps some political figure trying to create a false impression that he and his coterie represented “all Taoists”).

Yet, the *Daozang* does contain a number of texts that reveal the minds of certain individuals or groups who liked to *think about* their tradition in a unified, organized manner. Though the texts that they produced never became a socially or politically effective “charter document,” it is instructive to examine how they present the categories of Taoist functionaries—the men and women who represented Taoist tradition and ideals within the Taoist community itself—as well as how they present the highest imaginable exemplars of Taoist ideals—the “saints” or *mahāsattvas* of the Taoist religious imagination.

It is intriguing that the Taoists who decided to write about such matters often seem to have been people who made no real distinctions between “those living men or women who act as leaders within our religious community” and “those beings—embodied or disembodied—who represent the highest imaginable personification of our ideals.” For example, an undated text from the late fifth or the sixth century—the *Lingbao chujia yinyuan jing* 靈寶出家因緣經 (HY 339<sup>16</sup>)—lists seven ranks of Taoist notables:

1. the libationer (祭酒, *jijiu*)
2. the home-dweller (在家, *zaijia*)
3. the home-leaver (出家, *chujia*)
4. the mountain-dweller (山居, *shanju*)
5. the recluse (幽逸, *youyi*)
6. the spiritual transcendent (神仙, *shenxian*; sometimes called “immortals”)
7. the heavenly perfected one (天真, *tianzhen*).<sup>17</sup>

To all appearances, the first five figures indicate ordinary living persons, distinguished not by their personal qualities (spiritual or otherwise) but simply by what we might call lifestyle choices. The last two, however, are terms that are generally understood as references for non-mortal beings, who may at times appear in our world but are certainly not trapped in bodies, so to speak. From the perspective of Western religions, such as Christianity, it is difficult to understand

how such beings could be linked together meaningfully on the same list. As noted above, for instance, Christians only recognize someone as “a saint” retrospectively—though part of the requirement for such recognition is that such a person must have demonstrated “miraculous powers,” e.g., of healings that cannot be performed by the most skilled medical specialists. Both the Taoist “spiritual transcendent” (*shenxian*) and the “heavenly perfected one” (*tianzhen*) would seem to correspond more closely to the Western concept of “the angel.” Indeed, in Han-dynasty texts (i.e., before “Taoism proper” began to develop) Chinese writers and artists seem to have imagined *shenxian* as winged beings, who can move back and forth between our own realm of existence and a more sublime realm, sometimes imagined as off in the distance horizontally (e.g., on Mt. Kunlun in the far west, or on the legendary isle of Penglai off in the east). However, the term “heavenly perfected one” seems, by its nature, to denote a being whose “proper home” is, in some sense, vertically above ours.

Most Christians give scant thought to the practical implications of “where angels come from,” except perhaps when telling children that a loved one who just died has “gone to heaven to be with the angels.” But perhaps for that very reason, it is almost unthinkable for a Christian to sit down and try to think seriously about the question of whether “I, too, could become an angel, and if so, how?” In the Christian worldview, “becoming an angel” seems always to be assumed to require death—and no one really wants to die. At any rate, “the Christian message,” for adults at least, has almost never been “Let us tell you how you, too, can become an angel.”

For Buddhists, however—as for Taoists—such issues are not only thinkable, but indeed quite central. In an Indian Buddhist context, anyone can “become a *śrāvaka*,” in a sense apparently comparable to how Westerners think anyone can “become a Christian”: such a person is a living person, whose fundamental lifestyle and social standing are not necessarily altered at all, but whose spiritual orientation, and dedication to the tradition’s beliefs and values, has become meaningfully changed. The Mahāyāna concept of “becoming a bodhisattva” is merely a few steps beyond: someone who has heard the dharma takes a vow to live selflessly, with compassion for all sentient beings, developing him- or herself, life after life, until he or she finally attains full buddhahood.

So not all religions share the common Western assumption of an ontological gulf between the state of an embodied mortal and the state of more sublime beings: for some, attaining some kind of transcendent state is assumed to be quite possible for any living person at any moment. However, what remains is not only the question of “how,” but the issue of what social role, if any, such a person may justly be expected to play, if he or she begins working toward, and achieving, such a transcendent state.

And when we add to the general Mahāyāna worldview the “radical” new implications that Shinran added, the issue becomes more complex, but more fruitful for comparative contemplation. Before Shinran, it was generally assumed (a) that anyone who intended to devote himself fully to the Buddhist life must take ordination, and (b) that a Buddhist priest must remain celibate. But Shinran saw the most vital elements of Buddhism to lie in what the individual allows to happen within himself, through the movement of *shinjin*, “the sincere mind,” that has been endowed upon all sentient beings by the Buddha Amida. For Shinran, then, living the Buddhist life most fully and meaningfully had nothing to do with celibacy. Reportedly declaring himself “neither monk nor layman,” Shinran married, and the fact that he and his wife Eschin-ni had children was quite significant for the historical evolution of Jōdo Shinshū (since their daughter Kakushin-ni was instrumental in helping to establish the Hongwanji in Kyoto). Shinran thus added to the diversity of acceptable “lifestyle arrangements” for Buddhists, within a historical and scriptural context that had long included laymen and women as exemplars of and for the Buddhist faithful.

Similarly, the range of Taoist functionaries and exemplars listed in the *Lingbao chujia yinyuan jing* includes “the home-dweller” (*zaijia*) as well as “the home-leaver” (*chujia*), demonstrating that for Taoists of that period there was no *unacceptable* lifestyle for persons committed to Taoist ideals and values. Specialists in Taoist studies might wonder about other issues. For one thing, that list appears in what is denominated a *Lingbao* 靈寶 text, though it employs terms like *jijiu* (“libationer”), long associated with the archaic Tianshi 天師 organization. Moreover, the *Lingbao chujia yinyuan jing* nowhere includes terms for religious functionaries that often appear in late-imperial Taoism, such as *fashi* 法師 (“ritual master”). Hence, one quickly sees that the text’s list bears no relation to the ranks and offices of Taoist functionaries familiar to scholars who study later periods.

Most particularly, this list nowhere mentions the category of religious functionary known, through most of Taoist history, as the *daoshi* 道士. Since the list appears intended to include all imaginable categories of “the faithful”—lay as well as clerical, mortal as well as transcendent—what do such texts tell us about how Taoists understood the nature of the roles that “a Taoist” can, should, or must play in the course of his or her efforts to live “the Taoist life” most fully?

By the early Tang period, we begin to find texts that seek to explain the Taoist community’s expectations for its primary religious functionary, the *daoshi*. This issue warrants careful attention because of the rampant confusion that has plagued modern Western scholarship regarding the precise meaning of the term *daoshi* within the Taoist tradition per se and within Chinese society more broadly.

Broadly speaking, what Taoist specialists have said to date about the supposed referent of the term *daoshi* usually mirrors their general conceptions of the nature and contours of Taoism itself. And those conceptions have usually been expressed in terms of what those scholars have thought that their audience needs to hear about Taoism in order to understand it properly.

For instance, in his now-dated book, *The Taoist Body*, the most highly regarded European scholar of Taoism, Kristofer Schipper—himself an ordained Zhengyi 正一 Taoist priest—declares: “[The] *tao-shih* . . . has no community, or rather, is not the spiritual leader of a congregation. His position is in no way comparable to that of our Catholic or Protestant clergy.”<sup>18</sup> Certainly, there is a kernel of truth in that statement, for a Taoist priest—of any period or sub-tradition—is certainly not *identical*, in roles or functions, to a Catholic priest of any period. As we have seen, at an early date the Catholic Church was compelled by secular authority (the Roman emperor Constantine) to adopt a highly formalized set of explanations of and for every aspect of Christian life and practice. And the creed associated with the Nicene Council at which Constantine forced unambiguous, unexceptioned unity upon *The* “Christian church” was only one of an ongoing series of creeds by which Christians, to modern times, have presented “settled answers to all possible questions” regarding how people can, should, or must practice Christianity. At no time in Chinese history have Taoists ever even made an attempt to hold “councils”—as even the earliest Buddhist communities of India did—at which competing points of view would be verbally contested until unanimity was, at least nominally, agreed—or until, lacking such,

one religious sub-community formally divorced itself from others who held different views. So while there were points in history at which Christians, and even Buddhists, felt it necessary to convene to cavil until the social body either resolved its disputes or re-configured itself on the basis of unresolved-and-unresolvable disputes, nothing of any such kind ever happened among the Taoists of China.

And yet, it seems quite reasonable and appropriate to use the term “priest” for comparable functionaries of such different traditions, so long as no one imagines that all religious communities have an identical history or structure. After all, Westerners commonly write, without much anguish or trepidation, of “Shintō priests,” though the officiants at Shintō liturgies could hardly be confused with the officiants at Anglican rites in America or Catholic rites in Spain. And though Shintō today has certain elements of “unity,” those are merely the remnants of a state-imposed unification during the Meiji Reform of the nineteenth century (when Japanese leaders realized that unification would be necessary if their land was not to fall victim to the colonization that Westerners had brought to other Asian lands, including China—whose loss in the Opium Wars led to a victimization from which the nation is even today seeking finally to put behind them).

Another element of the confusion in these matters is that scholarly understanding of the Taoist priesthood has been heretofore hampered by the marginalization of Taoist priests in late-imperial and modern China. After all, scholars studying the Buddhist or Christian priesthood—from virtually any social setting—have always been able to observe, and interact with, many living persons who are themselves such priests—from the ordinary cleric who fulfills only standard roles to the outstanding exemplars of the tradition’s highest ideals. But until the closing years of the twentieth century, students of Taoism seldom had such opportunities, for historical, social, political, and cultural reasons. The paucity of such contact has impoverished, and sometimes skewed, scholarly depictions of the *daoshi*.

Moreover, most modern Chinese—especially the educated elite (once forced to adhere to “Confucian” identity—then forced to adhere to Marxist, or at least secular, non-religious identity) have looked upon all practitioners of living Taoist traditions with disdain. In the West, Protestants and non-Christian alike have most usually held Catholic nuns in high regard, and priests as well. But in modern China, there has been no general social agreement that those who wear Taoist formal

vestments, of whatever kind, are worthy of respect by *all* members of society—Taoist or not. Today, the social standing of Taoist clerics may be characterized more as ambivalent than as disdainful. But the youth of China today see for themselves a range of social roles and opportunities to earn self-respect as well as the respect of the rest of their society, and indeed of the rest of the world—but that range of social roles and opportunities seems not to include “Taoist monk or nun” as a particularly high goal for growing boys or girls to aspire toward.

Because of that social ambivalence within modern Chinese society (i.e., since the Opium Wars), virtually all Westerners came to see “Taoist priests” as characters fit only for disdain. In fact, as soon as Westerners completed the “breaking and entering” begun in the Opium Wars, they began depicting Taoist leaders as “popes,” and thus as worthy of all the same contempt and disdain that both Protestants and secularists so vehemently dumped onto all representatives of “popery.”

The effects of that gross misrepresentation have not yet been purged from Taoist studies in the West. It has sometimes resulted in depictions of the Taoist priesthood that are focused solely upon data from past eras, or upon sociological data or anthropological fieldwork (with scholars thus equating the Chinese community of any given locale with the small-scale pre-industrial non-literate societies of Pacific Islands or the Amazon). One rarely finds depictions of the ordained representatives of organized Taoist traditions that demonstrate how those representatives, past and present, can be understood as fulfilling the deepest spiritual ideals of the Taoist heritage.

In addition, most Western presentations of the Taoist priesthood continue to privilege the institutions of the Tianshi and Zhengyi traditions. Zhengyi priests today, like the Lingbao liturgists of the Six Dynasties, still conduct liturgies, like the *jiao* 醮 and *zhai* 齋, which are intended to protect, order, and sanctify the local community. But the Zhengyi tradition actually represents only one important variation among Taoist religious institutions.<sup>19</sup> Overemphasis on its institutions—imagined to represent a Church that has maintained itself from antiquity to today, just like the Catholic Church—became endemic to the Western field of Taoist studies primarily because mainland China was virtually inaccessible to Western scholars throughout the twentieth century, making fieldwork difficult except in regions like Taiwan, where Zhengyi traditions heavily predominated.

The privileged importance bestowed upon Zhengyi traditions in modern scholarship has obscured several fundamental facts about the Taoist priesthood more broadly. For instance, during the Tang dynasty, women were duly ordained as *daoshi*, and women clerics continue to participate in modern Quanzhen 全真 liturgy, on a basis comparable to that of men.<sup>20</sup> Only in the twenty-first century have scholars begun to illuminate the lives of Taoist “nuns” in the modern world and throughout Chinese history.<sup>21</sup> The very fact that there have ever been women officiants in Taoist liturgy was obfuscated in twentieth century Western scholarship by the attention given to the fact that in modern Zhengyi traditions, “hereditary *tao-shih* are always men,” as Schipper says.<sup>22</sup>

In addition, the socio-political marginalization of Taoism in late imperial times seems to have led to a decline in the number of *daoshi* who participated openly in the cultural and intellectual activities of the educated elite. During the Taoist heyday, in Tang times, many *daoshi* were highly educated, composed a wide range of scholarly and literary secular and religious works, and were often honored by rulers and *ru* scholar/officials alike.<sup>23</sup> The founders of the Quanzhen, or “Complete Perfection” tradition—which has been the dominant form of Taoism in China for centuries—were educated members of the “gentry” class. And there remained “literati Taoists” in later ages, though the facts of their lives, thought, and writings have heretofore been all but ignored among most Western scholars—particularly in the Francophone and Anglophone communities.<sup>24</sup>

In modern times, the ideal of *daoshi* as members of the socio-cultural elite endures in most of Chinese society. As Schipper says, “The *tao-shih* belong to the lettered class; they are minor notables.”<sup>25</sup> But in fact, throughout the late-imperial period, “literati” *daoshi* seldom achieved celebrity, among the Chinese intelligentsia or among early Western visitors.<sup>26</sup> That is because the antagonism toward Taoism of late-imperial regimes, and of Cheng/Zhu “Neo-Confucians,” drove centuries of intellectuals away from the Taoist priesthood, and suppressed public awareness of the work of those Taoists who did take part in “elite” activities.<sup>27</sup> The Taoist traditions of late-imperial times remain woefully understudied and underappreciated.<sup>28</sup> Only in 2007 did there appear a good study of Taoism in late-Qing times, a detailed analysis by Vincent Goossaert.<sup>29</sup> A companion-piece by Xun Liu on Taoists in late-Qing and early Republican Shanghai just appeared in

2009.<sup>30</sup> Further study of “literati Taoism” in imperial China—particularly in the later periods—will enhance our awareness of the full range of political, intellectual, and cultural activities in which *daoshi* engaged over the centuries.<sup>31</sup>

But to what extent, and in what ways, are the values and ideals of “literati Taoists,” in premodern and modern times, specifically tied to participation in the Taoist priesthood? Such questions did not seem to occur to Isabelle Robinet, whose explanations of what “the Taoist” is led us either to a cleric who performs liturgical ceremonies or to a mountain-dwelling lover of “Nature,” but never to an educated member of the Chinese gentry or aristocracy who lived among, and was held in high regard by, non-Taoists of the same social class.

However, such questions did occur to John Lagerwey, one of today’s leading European scholars of Chinese religion. In his 1987 book, *Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History*, he wrote: “[T]his book will ask, at the end as at the beginning, what is Taoism? But it will respond to this very general question from the very specific standpoint of the liturgical specialist, no, even more explicitly, from the stance of the married Taoist priest (*huo-chü tao-shih* [火居道士], ‘hearth-dwelling Taoist’), whose position is normally hereditary. This is the Taoism of China’s plains and people. There is another Taoism, that of (often) mountain-dwelling mystics, of wanderers and visionaries, of alchemists, poets, and philosophers.”<sup>32</sup> So if that passage is accurate, there are two kinds of “Taoism,” but apparently only one kind of *daoshi*: a male, married liturgist, whose position is hereditary, and who is not to be understood as someone whose life or activity overlaps, in any truly meaningful sense, with that of “mystics, . . . alchemists, poets, and philosophers.” Though figures of the latter kind were, Lagerwey concedes, “Taoist,” they were certainly not “Taoists,” at least not in the strict social sense that he privileges.

But what if history should show us a *daoshi* who was also demonstrably a poet? There were indeed such individuals, like the Tang poet Wu Yün, who was ignored by most twentieth-century Sinologists, but is now the subject of a detailed monograph by Jan de Meyer.<sup>33</sup> There were, in fact, even illustrious Taoist women poets, such as Cao Wenyi (fl. 1119–1125), whose life and works remain almost wholly unexamined.<sup>34</sup>

Or what if history perhaps shows us a *daoshi* who was also an “alchemist”? Indeed, the Shangqing 上清 luminary Tao Hongjing 陶弘景 fits just such a description.<sup>35</sup> Of course, one could quibble over

the definition of “philosopher,” and one *must* demand such definitional specificity if one is going to use such an egregiously vague term as “mystic.”

But apparently Lagerwey’s 1987 formulation solved the confusion in Robinet’s ambiguous usage of the term “Taoist” by postulating a dichotomization—though one that the Taoists of China do not themselves ever seem to have recognized, at least not on any consistent or enduring basis. That is to say, the actual Taoists of China cannot be demonstrated to have ever found a reason to say, “I am a liturgist, not a poet,” or “I am a ritualist, not a philosopher.” To argue that “a Taoist” is, and can be, understood *only* as a liturgical official is contrary to the abundant facts of Chinese history and society—past and present—and of the texts that Taoists themselves composed and collected in the course of their activities as Taoists.

I furthermore question whether every Taoist is, as Robinet and Lagerwey seem to wish to have us believe, necessarily *male*. Our evidence seems quite clearly to prove otherwise, for women have not only been participants in Taoism from at least the Han period onward, but they have actually played specific acknowledged roles—even as laity—and were, in many forms of Taoism, actually ordained as *priests*—*daoshi*—on virtually the same terms as men were.<sup>36</sup> Robinet’s depiction of “the Taoist” certainly leads us to imagine otherwise, and Lagerwey’s definitional premises are utterly at odds with such data.

Just as Robinet’s presentation muddles our understanding of the social, historical, and institutional realities involved, it also muddles our minds by using the term “Taoist master” as an apparent synonym for what she otherwise terms “the Taoist.” Her book’s index, revealingly, has a cross-reference: “Priest, see Master.” When one looks up the listing for “Master,” one finds that it reads “Master (*tao-shih*),” and refers us to the pages in which the above passages were found.

To be fair, in perpetuating such terminological confusion Robinet was simply continuing a scholarly tradition that includes even the first great pioneer in the Western study of Taoism, the estimable Henri Maspero. Maspero wrote, for instance, as follows:

The Taoist life, crammed with meticulously detailed practises, was incompatible with worldly life. Still, Taoism quickly became a universal religion leading to the salvation of all the faithful alike, rich or poor, religious or men of the world, so that there were two degrees in the religious life. Some were content to take part in collective ceremonies through which one’s sins were washed away and a happy

destiny was prepared in the other world. These were the Taoist People, *daomin* 道民. To these participatory observances, the second group added scrupulous observances of personal religion combined with physiological techniques, seeking after an exalted rank within the hierarchy of the immortals: these were the Taoist Adepts, *tao-shih*.<sup>37</sup>

Passing over some of the questionable assertions—not to mention the apparent anachronisms—within this passage, I shall simply note the oddity of the term “Taoist Adepts,” and its usage here as a *translation* for the term *daoshi*. It is quite instructive that neither Maspero nor Robinet are altogether happy presenting the term *daoshi* to their readers in its *primary historical sense*—that is, as a term that simply translates as “Taoist priest or priestess.” In one passage, Maspero says: “in Tang times the communities of married *tao-shih* had disappeared, and all the Taoist *guan* [abbeys] were filled with celibate monks or nuns.”<sup>38</sup> In another passage, however, he writes: “The Taoist clergy is composed not only of monks, *tao-shih*, or even nuns, *daogu* 道姑, but also of lay masters, *shigong* 師公.”<sup>39</sup> So a *daoshi*, if one trusts Maspero here, is to be understood to be an “adept” who is married rather than celibate while also being celibate rather than married, and so both is, and is not, properly termed a “monk,” but is apparently not to be termed a “priest,” and *certainly* not a “priestess.”

Some of this terminological confusion is sorted out by Kristofer Schipper in his book, *The Taoist Body*.<sup>40</sup> But Schipper’s presentation of what the term *daoshi* really does mean is often hard to understand in terms of anything that either Maspero or Robinet told their readers. For instance, Schipper tries to distinguish the *daoshi* from another kind of figure, the *fashi*, whom he variously describes as a “magician,” a “shaman,” or a “barefoot master,” drawing upon twentieth-century data from Fukien and Taiwan.<sup>41</sup> He distinguishes explicitly between the *fashi* and “those who are called *tao-shih*, and who are, properly speaking, the true Taoist masters.” He translates the term *daoshi* as “Dignitaries of the Dao,” and adds, with a candor unseen in the statements of Maspero or Robinet, the following quite sensible disclaimer: “another element obscures the situation for us: if the designation *tao-shih* is widespread, it is not always very easy to understand to what it corresponds.”<sup>42</sup>

Such would, it seems, appear to be quite true, *if* one is seeking to define such terms solely on the basis of twentieth-century social

realities in Taiwan and nearby coastal regions, as Schipper was trying to do. Unlike Maspero or Robinet, Schipper is trying to distinguish *daoshi* from non-*daoshi* by looking around in Fukien and Taiwan to see what distinctions, if any, the people living there in the twentieth century tended to make. It is therefore quite difficult to recognize in Schipper's *daoshi* anything that corresponds to Robinet's statement that Taoists were often "hermits in distant mountains . . . who taught the Chinese to appreciate landscapes."

Unlike Robinet, but like Maspero, Schipper works to explain the data that he found in southeastern China in the late twentieth century in relation to the historical data of the early "Heavenly Master" organization in late Han times. For instance, Schipper says: "From the early times of the independent local communities of the Heavenly Masters' movement, the *tao-shih*, men and women, were married people. Traditionally, and even today, marriage is one condition for becoming a Great Master. Taoist monks are the rare exception. Rather than his way of life, then, it is his liturgical function, his role as a ritual specialist, that defines the position of the *tao-shih*. To be a Dignitary of the Dao is first of all to fulfill an office."<sup>43</sup> But here, Schipper is doing something that neither Maspero nor Robinet attempted to do: he is attempting to explain the term *daoshi* in terms of actual social realities, in terms of something that living people, in communities that recognize certain individuals as *daoshi*, actually say and do.

Yet, while Schipper attempts to derive his explanations of the nature and functions of the *daoshi* from empirical data derived from ethnological observation, he simultaneously attempts to pin those explanations to the historical data of the early Tianshi tradition. Such an effort is understandable, given that he is working from the (now clearly outdated) premise that the Zhengyi priests of southeast China and Taiwan today are a direct continuation of the institutions purportedly established by Zhang Daoling in the year 142.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, Schipper's attempts to explain what a *daoshi* is corresponds to what I would be doing if I took the data of what a Catholic priest does today in Boston or Barcelona, along with the data of what a priest did in texts dating back to the early centuries of the Christian church, and used the overlapping elements as constitutive of my definition of the Christian "priest"—without giving due weight to the vital distinctions among all those social and historical settings, or giving any weight to the data found in other social and historical settings.

Schipper's method leaves us with several problems, particularly leading to such confusions as in the following passage:

Today hereditary *tao-shih* are always men, whereas many who become masters by vocation are women. But this situation does not derive from Taoist principle. The liturgical tradition of the Heavenly Masters grants women a status identical in every respect to that of men, and a mastership [n.b.: not "a priesthood"] is accessible to both. . . . Even today the hereditary transmission legitimizing the officiants may be passed on through the maternal as well as the paternal line. The disappearance of female secular *tao-shih* is simply the result of a modern society that requires a masculine presence in transactions with lay organizations such as guilds.<sup>45</sup>

Schipper introduces here a wholly new term, "secular *tao-shih*." That neologism seems quite odd to those of us for whom the term "secular" is generally understood to denote "non-religious." Schipper, however, seems to be using the term "secular" to mean a person who has some religious identity, but who lives "out in 'secular society'"—i.e., within the general community—rather than within a monastery. But his statement here that "female secular *daoshi*" have disappeared seems hard to square with his statement that "hereditary *daoshi* are always men, whereas many who become masters by vocation are women." Here, I am unclear whether the word "masters" in the last clause is meant to refer to non-*daoshi*—that is, perhaps to the *fashi* whom Schipper characterizes as a "magician," a "shaman," or a "barefoot master"—or whether the word "masters" here is meant to suggest *daoshi* who become *daoshi* by vocation, rather than by birth. In order to maintain his equation between twentieth-century social data from southeastern China and the historical data of the early-medieval "Heavenly Masters," Schipper has to make some such distinctions, which do not seem to hold up very well as historical generalizations.

One must grant that much additional research has been done since Schipper's book was first published in 1981. So we should allow for the fact that the Schipper of today is much more informed about some of the historical data of Taoism than the Schipper of a generation ago.<sup>46</sup> Though the data of Taoism during Tang times, for instance, remains incompletely digested, even by today's specialists, the research conducted in recent years certainly does allow us to make some well-substantiated statements about what the term *daoshi* meant in the Six Dynasties and Tang periods, not only within texts composed and preserved among Taoists themselves, but also in non-Taoist texts of those

periods. And such material is replete with data that demands to be considered in this discussion.

For instance, the notable *daoshi* of Tang times—from Wang Yuanzhi 王遠知 to Du Guangting 杜光庭—were, in no significant regard, “hereditary *daoshi*”: all of them, male and female alike, were literally what Schipper chooses to identify as “*daoshi* by vocation,” though a few may have had other such “*daoshi* by vocation” among their ancestors.<sup>47</sup> The only “lineage” that was important to Taoists of that era was a Chan-like “spiritual lineage,” by which leaders like Sima Chengzhen 司馬承禎 could be presented as an “heir” to the *dao* of Tao Hongjing—certainly not to his genes. And actually, such “Taoist lineages” were mostly fabrications of late Song times and later ages, including the Longmen 龍門 “lineage” of Qing times, by which the literati Taoists of that period sought prestige by claiming a historical “descent” from the Quanzhen founders of the twelfth century. Further, in those days there was no commonly employed distinction—either among Taoists or among non-Taoists who wrote about them—between a “secular *daoshi*” and a “religious *daoshi*.”

Nor do the historical facts show that “the *tao-shih*, men and women, were married people” in those days. In Tang times, marriage was certainly not required, or even expected, of *daoshi*. Nor did the great *daoshi* who wrote tomes on Taoist practice in those days—such as Sima Chengzhen—even mention such issues as whether “a Taoist” should or should not be married. To judge by their writings, and by the known biographical data of such people’s lives—including that of the female *daoshi* Huang Lingwei 黃靈微—such *daoshi* could, and did, live in whatever domicile they wished, and marriage was not necessarily a part of their lives at all. Yet, such people were demonstrably called *daoshi*—in Taoist and non-Taoist texts alike. And many of them were demonstrably authorized to conduct such liturgies as *jiao* and *zhai*.

A prime example was the wonder-worker Ye Fashan (葉法善, 631–720), an extremely famous figure of the High Tang period. The pertinent data, which is abundant and now well-studied, indicates that Ye Fashan was hardly a *daoshi* in any “typical” social or institutional sense. Yet, he was indeed identified as having a *daoshi*, even within a memorial edict issued in the name of the Tang emperor Xuanzong 玄宗.<sup>48</sup>

So on the basis of such facts, it is quite difficult to perceive any attempt by Tang Taoists to articulate, much less to enforce, any specific

distinctions regarding who is, or is not, a *daoshi*—at least not along the lines that Schipper proposed to find running through the history of Taoism.

It is only in the last few years that we have begun to be able to discuss, with any real precision, what the Taoists of the Six Dynasties or Tang period may have regarded as “the normally accepted sense” of a term like *daoshi*. One focus of such discussion is a text generally called the *Fengdao kejie* 奉道科誡, sometimes dated to the sixth century, but now thought to date to the seventh. That text was explicated, rather imperfectly, by the German scholar Florian Reiter, in his 1998 book, *The Aspirations and Standards of Taoist Priests in the Early Tang Period*.<sup>49</sup> A better translation is a 2004 book by Livia Kohn, *The Taoist Monastic Manual*.<sup>50</sup> By examining such texts, and comparing and contrasting them with data from other sources and other periods, we can reach a somewhat better idea of what Taoists of different periods *actually* meant by the term *daoshi*, and a better idea of what they regarded as the characteristics of a priest or priestess within their tradition.

Earlier, I mentioned idealized rankings of religious categories that appear in late Six-Dynasties texts, like the *Lingbao chujia yinyuan jing*. The fact that those rankings were often highly *idealized*—rather than a description of actual responsibilities or activities of actual men and women—is revealed from the fact that *no* such categories seem to *persist* throughout the ages. Tang texts like the *Fengdao kejie*, and Zhang Wanfu 張萬福’s *Chuanshou sandong jingjie falu lueshuo* 傳授三洞經戒法籙略說 of the year 711, distinguish the *daoshi* per se from lower functionaries, such as various classes of *fashi* 法師 (“ritual masters”) and *dizi* 弟子 (“disciples”).<sup>51</sup> But the specifications for each such “class” varied from text to text. And since some “classes” extended even to transcendent beings—beings who do not exist within physical bodies on earth—it remains unclear how much such formulations ever really reflected, or even affected, actual practices, or even standard expectations, for living Taoist practitioners. In other words, those texts reveal that Taoist writers in different historical settings wrote about such things *not* in order to specify how some monolithic “Taoist community” defined and enforced clerical institutions, but rather how one particular community, or perhaps even more likely, *one particular writer*, in one particular generation and one particular locale, thought that it makes sense to *think about* such things.

The fact that such texts are more an idealization—perhaps in the mind of a single individual—than a reflection of any social or historical realities should hardly be surprising. After all, the term *daoshi* is first attested in Han-dynasty texts. In some, like the *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 (attributed to the Confucian thinker Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, second century BCE), the term *daoshi* appears as a vague appellation for idealized persons of ancient times—that is, as a literary figure, vaguely comparable to the *Zhuangzi*'s idealized “Perfect Person” or “Complete Person.” Other Han texts, however, like the *Hanshu*'s 漢書 biography of Wang Mang 王莽, seem to use the term *daoshi* for living people with uncommon abilities—i.e., as a synonym for the term *fangshi* 方士.<sup>52</sup> The Han usage of the term *fangshi* seems to suggest that it denoted specialists in knowledge and activities that lay beyond the pale of ordinary civilian or technical officials.<sup>53</sup>

The imprecise use of the term *fangshi* exceeds even the ambiguities of the term *daoshi*. For instance, in his discourse on the imperial *feng* 封 and *chan* 禪 rites, the Han historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 mentions five individuals who “practiced the Way of Expansive Transcendence (*fangxian* 方僊). They shed their mortal forms and melted away, relying upon matters involving spiritual beings (*quishen* 鬼神).”<sup>54</sup> We have no way of knowing precisely what activities such men may have engaged in, knowing whether Sima Qian really had an accurate understanding of any such activities, or knowing whether his phraseology here is really intended to be descriptive (that is, theoretically providing a means to deduce the men's activities) or merely evocative. He is clear that they “shed their forms” in some sort of transformation that took them out of mortal embodiment—a concept that makes sense in terms of the later concept of *shijie* 屍解 (“mortuary liberation”).<sup>55</sup> But it is unclear what he means by the nebulous statement that these men “relied upon matters involving spiritual beings.” And it is even more unclear what he meant by the statement that the men practiced the “Way of Expansive Transcendence.” The passage seems to suggest that the men in question practiced some sort of *fangshi* techniques that involved *xian* 僊, but exactly what that term means remains open to all manner of speculation. Were they, perhaps, men who practiced techniques that would allow mortals to *turn into xian* 僊 [仙]? The last line might be read as supporting such an idea. Or were they, rather, men who engaged in practices that allowed them to communicate or connect with *xian*, possibly in pursuit of some different goal (for example,

healing, auspication, or knowledge of deeper dimensions of reality)? Moreover, would the Han-Court Astronomer/Historian Sima Qian have truly understood, or even cared about, such hypothetical distinctions? The safest course of interpretation is to read the lines as a general evocation of ideas that Sima understood imperfectly, or as a conflation of unrelated ideas from diverse provenances that sounded interesting, if unintelligible.

At any rate, throughout Han times the term *daoshi* resonated very broadly with such ideas, thus constituting a very general designation for “someone who has special knowledge and abilities in regard to the spiritual realm.” Based on such usages, formulators of later Taoist institutions—in the fifth and sixth centuries CE—forged the term *daoshi* into something of a technical term, which thereafter served as their standard designation for any living person, male or female, who had been ordained into a specific, elevated rank of the clergy (that is, as distinguished from participants in less respectable “local cults”).

At the moment, the history of that coinage remains virtually unstudied. The institutions of the Taoist priesthood itself evolved slowly and fitfully. From the earliest days of the Tianshi organization, male and female participants alike had been ranked hierarchically, and certain terms, like the term “libationer” (*jjiu*) seem to have been reserved for leaders rather than for lay practitioners. By the fifth century, Taoist leaders like Kou Qianzhi 寇謙之 in the north and Lu Xiujing 陸修靜 in the south saw their tradition’s ranks as being muddled and disordered when compared to the ranks of Buddhist contemporaries.<sup>56</sup> They therefore began trying to standardize and elevate the clergy of the “Teachings of Dao” (*Daojiao* 道教).

The organizational efforts of such Taoist leaders during the late Six Dynasties are now beginning to be studied systematically. And it now seems that twentieth-century attempts to define “the *daoshi*” simply in opposition to “the celibate monk” have little basis in the Taoist institutions of medieval times. One important contribution to our efforts to understand this element of Taoism’s evolution is a recent study by Livia Kohn, *Monastic Life in Medieval Daoism*. In it, Kohn traces Taoist monastic institutions to the community established by Kou Qianzhi (365–448), which she compares and contrasts with the Taoist communities at Louguan 樓觀 in the north and Maoshan 茅山 in the south. She endorses Michel Strickmann’s finding that “it would . . . be ‘very wrong to think of [the Taoist community at] Mao Shan as a truly “monastic”

centre,' where celibate monks or nuns lived according to a strict rule in a tightly knit religious community." Regarding Louguan, she says, "How far they were a celibate community with a formal organization that could be truly called 'monastic' is not clear." But she argues that Kou Qianzhi's "theocracy" established a pattern that "remained valid [for the monastic organization] throughout medieval Daoism."<sup>57</sup> According to Kohn's thoughtful and well-informed analysis, "in medieval Daoism—as in medieval Chinese Buddhism and in Zen Buddhism even today—there was no radical distinction between priests and monastics. . . . Daoist monastics rose from the ranks of lay priests and had priestly status throughout, enhancing and modifying their ritual and meditation expertise to include more advanced spiritual practices and methods for personal attainment. . . . This shows that Daoist monasticism is not, as Kristofer Schipper has suggested, 'an aberration of true Taoism.'"<sup>58</sup>

Another detailed study of such medieval Taoist texts is Stephen Peter Bumbacher's 2000 book, *The Fragments of the Daoxue zhuan*.<sup>59</sup> After an exhaustive exploration of that late sixth-century collection of Taoist biographies, Bumbacher reports: "no single way of life is given priority over the others. Taoists can be happily married, regarding their wives as 'equal partners' and taking care for their children. . . . Or they may leave wife and children altogether. . . ."<sup>60</sup> Such findings correlate well with what we now know about Taoism in Tang times, when "there was no single religious model, and there was thus no single model for the role that a practitioner of Taoism should play in society."<sup>61</sup> Therefore, even in regard to men and women who were acknowledged as fulfilling certain technical specifications to qualify as a *daoshi*, "institutions and procedures may have varied by abbey, by region, and by period."<sup>62</sup>

Such being the case, if the roles and functions of the *daoshi* cannot be defined in the terms that were suggested by Western scholars of earlier generations, is it possible today to offer any sound generalizations regarding such roles and functions? I would say yes, in the following terms. During the late Six Dynasties period, Taoist "organizations" existed in the form of regional centers established under the vague umbrella of the ecumenical cultural construction denominated "the *Daojiao*," which to some as-yet-not-fully-studied sense corresponded to a cultural tradition that provided a sense of shared religious identity to individuals who did recognize distinctive *sub-traditions* tied to specific texts and rituals, such as Shangqing ("Highest Clarity"), but seldom

competing sects that denied the validity of each other's teachings or practices.

Since the Tang period, all Taoist organizations have commonly used the term *daoshi* to denote an ordained cleric of high standing. In relation to the broader "secular" community, such a person, in Reiter's words, "represented Taoist culture on a professional basis."<sup>63</sup> Within the Taoist community itself, the designation *daoshi* was generally reserved for a person

- (1) who has mastered
  - (a) specific efficacious knowledge identified and expressed as pertaining to "the *dao*," and
  - (b) the ritual skills whereby such knowledge can be put into effect in the world; and
- (2) who has therefore been authorized by some local organization to employ such knowledge and skills for the benefit of the community.

The precise nature of such "knowledge and skills" was determined by the traditions of the specific religious community that authorized and conducted the ordination.

It is also safe to say that, from the late Six Dynasties to the present, both the Taoists of China and the non-Taoists around them have used the term *daoshi* to designate religious specialists of Taoist organizations, as distinguished from any individuals whom they identified either (1) as specialists of other recognized traditions, such as Buddhism, or (2) as specialists of non-recognized traditions, such as local cults. Since the latter distinction seems to have been difficult for some non-Taoists to grasp, Taoists periodically took pains to distinguish themselves from the officiants of "cults," which they deemed less sophisticated or less admirable.<sup>64</sup>

In such connections, the term *daoshi* denoted a religious specialist who (1) was properly initiated and trained in the noble traditions of the *dao*; (2) was operating under the auspices of a reputable and duly instituted organization; and (3) was regarded as deserving the respect of *all* members of society—including scholars, officials, and the rulers themselves. A person who lacked the proper initiation or training, or was not operating under duly instituted authority, was identified by Taoists as someone alien to their tradition. That distinction endures within Chinese communities around the world to the present day. As a result, the social status of *daoshi* per se usually remained high, though

their other characteristics—including such factors as marital status—often varied and were regarded as not factors that warranted rigid regulation.

Further research, and careful thought, will be necessary to fill out this picture, to show how the varying concepts and roles of the *daoshi* evolved through Chinese history from antiquity into the present age.

#### NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Southeast Early China Roundtable, Charlotte, NC, 2001. Brief extracts appear in Russell Kirkland, s.v. “*daoshi*,” in *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, ed. Fabrizio Pregadio, 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 1:326–329.
2. Livia Kohn, ed., *The Daoism Handbook* (Leiden: Brill, 2000).
3. An excellent exploration of such matters in Katherine Young’s introduction to *Women Saints in World Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000). See my review in *Journal of Chinese Religions* 29 (2001): 349–352.
4. Regarding the figure of the *xian*, see, e.g., Russell Kirkland, “The Making of an Immortal: The Exaltation of Ho Chih-chang,” *Numen* 38 (1991–1992): 214–230; and the major new study by Robert Ford Campany, *Making Transcendents: Ascetics and Social Memory in Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2009).
5. Cf. Russell Kirkland, “Chang Kao: Noteworthy Tang Taoist?” *Tang Studies* 2 (1984): 31–36.
6. Even the orthographical issue of whether we should write in English and other alphabetic languages to refer to China’s main indigenous religious tradition as “Taoism” (as nearly everyone did until the “normalization” of international relations between “mainland China” and other nations began during the 1970s), or as “Daoism,” a nonsensical neologism that many Western non-Taoists now insist we are all required to employ, is an issue that is contingent upon the broader matter that I am addressing here, i.e., who qualifies to be regarded as “a Taoist,” either for purposes of a specific intellectual debate or as a sociological criterion. I retain the traditional English spelling for a number of reasons, the most telling of which is that “Taoist” is the spelling maintained by Taoists themselves today, even in mainland China: the Chinese Taoist (not “Daoist”) Association, which operates the Chinese Taoist (not “Daoist”) College, is an affiliate of the International Taoist (not “Daoist”) Association. If the Taoists of the People’s Republic of China officially call themselves “Taoists,” does it make any sense for anyone to write about them (much less Taoists outside of the PRC) as “Daoists”?

7. Isabelle Robinet, *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). Most notably, the book does not address developments in Taoism after the fourteenth century. In recent years, Livia Kohn published an overview that covers the entire sweep of Taoist history, as well as a variety of thematic matters: *Taoism and Chinese Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Three Pines Press, 2001; rev. ed. published in 2004 as *Daoism and Chinese Culture*). Other recent overviews of Taoism are James Miller, *Daoism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2003) (see my review at <http://www.daoiststudies.org/dao/content/daoism-short-introduction>, accessed 31 January 2011); and Russell Kirkland, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004). An extensive review by Nathan Sivin of these and other twenty-first-century works on Taoism is in press at *Religious Studies Review* 36, no. 1.
8. Robinet, *Taoism*, 15–16.
9. *Ibid.*, 22.
10. *Ibid.*, 20.
11. See Monica Esposito, “Daoism in the Qing (1644–1911),” in *Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 623–658; and Vincent Goossaert, *The Taoists of Peking, 1800–1949: A Social History of Urban Clerics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
12. “The field” was quite successfully purged of certain very silly arguments when the late Michel Strickman published his harsh, but quite well-founded and very helpful, critique of Michael Saso’s book, *The Teachings of Taoist Master Chuang* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), in which Saso endorsed, for scholarly and public use, the contemptuous calumnies preached by the “master” in question about Taoists of other orders than his own. See Strickman, “History, Anthropology and Chinese Religion,” *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* 40 (1980): 201–248.
13. In the West, this event is best-known from the influential article by Richard B. Mather, “K’ou Ch’ien-chih and the Taoist Theocracy at the Northern Wei Court, 425–451,” in *Facets of Taoism: Essays in Chinese Religion*, ed. Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 103–133. Cf. Livia Kohn, “The Northern Celestial Masters” in *Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden and New York: Brill Academic Publishers, 2000), 283–308.
14. See, e.g., Livia Kohn, *Laughing at the Tao: Debates among Buddhists and Taoists in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).
15. See, for instance, Russell Kirkland, *Taoists of the High T’ang* (PhD diss., Indiana University, 1986), and Russell Kirkland, “Dimensions of Tang Taoism: The State of the Field at the End of the Millennium,” *T’ang Studies* 15–16 (1997–1998): 79–123.

16. Dujian Weng, *Daozang zimu yinde* (Combined Indices to the Authors and Titles of Books in Two Collections of Taoist Literature), Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, no. 25 (Beiping [Beijing]: Yenching University Library, 1935).
17. See Charles D. Benn, *The Cavern-Mystery Transmission: A Taoist Ordination Rite of A.D. 711* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1991), 185–186n41.
18. Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, trans. Karen Duval (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 57. See my review, Russell Kirkland, “Cultivating Stillness: A Taoist Manual for Transforming Body and Mind,” in *Religious Studies Review* 21 (1995).
19. See Russell Kirkland, “Resources for Textual Research on Premodern Taoism: *The Taoist Canon* and the State of the Field in the Early 21st Century,” *China Review International* 14, no. 1 (2007): 33–60.
20. See Catherine Despeux, “L’Ordination des femmes Daoïstes sous les Tang,” *Études Chinoises* 5 (1986): 53–100; and Russell Kirkland, “Huang Ling-wei: A Taoist Priestess in Tang China,” *Journal of Chinese Religions* 19 (1991): 47–73.
21. See Russell Kirkland, “Women in Taoist History,” in *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition*, 135–44; Suzanne Cahill, *Divine Secrets of the Daoist Sisterhood: Du Guangting’s “Record of the Assembled Transcendents of the Fortified Walled City”* (Magdalena, NM: Three Pines Press, 2006); Shin-yi Chao, “Good Career Moves: Life Stories of Daoist Nuns of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Century,” *Nan Nü* 10 (2008): 121–151; and Wan-li Ho, “Daoist Nuns in Taiwan: A Case Study of the Gaoxiong Daede yuan,” *Journal of Daoist Studies* 2 (2009): 137–164.
22. Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 58.
23. See Kirkland, *Taoists of the High Tang*.
24. Among the few scholars who have focused on such matters is Judith Berling. See her “Paths of Convergence: Interactions of Inner Alchemy Taoism and Neo-Confucianism,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 6 (1979): 123–148; “Channels of Connection in Sung Religion: The Case of Pai Yü-chan,” in *Religion and Society in Tang and Sung China*, ed. Patricia Ebrey and Peter Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 307–333; and “Taoism in Ming Culture,” in *The Cambridge History of China, Vol. 8: The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644, Part 2*, ed. Denis Twitchett and Frederick Mote (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 953–986. See also the writings of Liu Ts’un-yan, such as “The Penetration of Taoism in the Ming Confucian Elite,” *T’oung-pao* 52 (1970): 31–103, and “Taoist Self-Cultivation in Ming Thought,” in *Self and Society in Ming Thought*, ed. Wm. T. DeBary (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 291–331.
25. Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 57.
26. An examination of “Literati Taoism” appears in Kirkland, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition*, 120–126.

27. See Russell Kirkland, review of *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, ed. Wm. deBary and Irene Bloom, 2 vols., rev. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), in *Education About Asia* 7, no. 1 (2002): 62–66. Further discussion of these issues appears in my paper, “Рассмотрение антидаосских предубеждений западной синологии Rassmotreniye antidaoisskikh predubetshdenii tsapadnoi sinologii [Probing the Anti-Taoist Biases of Western Sinology: Toward a Globalisation of Taoist Studies],” in *Religiotsno-filosofskoe nasledie Vostoka v germenevticheskoi perspektive* (Religious and Philosophical Legacy of the East: Hermeneutical Perspectives), ed. Evgeny Torchinov (Saint Petersburg, Russia: Peterburgskoe Filosofskoe Oschestvo, 2004), 69–81.
28. The first full overview of Ming Taoism did not appear until 1998: see Berling, “Taoism in Ming Culture”; a comparable contribution, by Pierre-Henry Debruyn, appeared in *Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 594–622. The first full overview of Qing Taoism did not appear until Monica Esposito’s entry “Taoism in the Qing,” in *Daoism Handbook*, ed. Livia Kohn (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 623–658.
29. Vincent Goossaert, *The Taoists of Peking, 1800–1949: A Social History of Urban Clerics* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2007).
30. Xun Liu, *Daoist Modern: Innovation, Lay Practice, and the Community of Inner Alchemy in Republican Shanghai* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009).
31. These matters are treated more fully in Russell Kirkland, “‘Literati Taoism’: Re-Imagining the Social and Intellectual Matrices of Premodern Taoism,” in *Daojia yu Daojiao: Dierjie guoji xueshu yanjiuhui lunwen ji* 道家與道教:第二屆國際學術研究會論文集 (The “Taoist School” and the Taoist Religion: Proceedings of the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Academic Conference) (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2001), 2:292–298.
32. John Lagerwey, *Taoist Ritual in Chinese Society and History* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), xiii. Cf. his entries on “Taoist Priesthood” and “The Taoist Religious Community” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 11:547–550 and 14:306–317.
33. On the life of Wu Yün (d. 778) see T. H. Barrett’s entry in *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, ed. Fabrizio Pregadio, 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 2:1048–1049; Kirkland, *Taoists of the High Tang*, 96–111 and 324–342; Jan De Meyer, *Wu Yün’s Way: Life and Works of an Eighth-Century Taoist Master* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006). Studies of Wu’s poetry also include Edward Schafer, “Wu Yün’s ‘Cantos on Pacing the Void,’” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 41 (1981): 377–415, and “Wu Yün’s Stanzas on ‘Saunters in Sylphdom,’” *Monumenta Serica* 35 (1981–1983): 1–37; and Paul Kroll, “Lexical Landscapes and Textual Mountains in the High Tang,” *T’oung Pao* 84 (1998): 62–101.
34. See Kirkland, *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition*, 143.

35. See Michel Strickmann, "On the Alchemy of T'ao Hung-ching," in *Facets of Taoism: Essays in Chinese Religions*, ed. Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel (New Haven: Yale, 1979), 123–192.
36. Daniel Overmyer has surveyed a variety of pertinent texts, including a fifth-century Tianshi text that lays out the specific expectations for women lay Taoists in five particular life situations. See Daniel Overmyer, "Women in Chinese Religion," in *From Benares to Beijing: Essays on Buddhism and Chinese*, ed. Koichi Shinohara and Gregory Schopen (Oakville, Ontario: Mosaic Press, 1991), 91–120.
37. Henri Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, trans. Frank A. Kierman, Jr. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 32; cf. the usage of such terms in pp. 266–268, etc. See more generally Russell Kirkland, review of *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, by Henri Maspero, trans. Frank A. Kierman, Jr., *Journal of Asian Studies* 42 (1982–1983): 395–397.
38. Maspero, *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, 50.
39. *Ibid.*, 81.
40. Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 63.
41. *Ibid.*, 48–49.
42. *Ibid.*, 56.
43. *Ibid.*, 56.
44. For an analysis of that premise, see Russell Kirkland, s.v. "tianshi," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), and Kirkland, "Dimensions of Tang Taoism," 96. The historical evidence demonstrates quite clearly that the modern Zhengyi Taoists' claims of continuity with the early Heavenly Master movement is no more than a pious fiction created in Song times to justify one local group's claims of importance. The fabrication of Chan lineages during the same era, as well as of a later Lung-men lineage continuous with that of early Quanzhen Taoism, demonstrate that from Tang times onward Chinese religious organizations often sought social and political legitimacy by means of such baseless claims. One can also see that such efforts often succeeded. A fuller examination of this issue, and its lingering effects in the twenty-first-century literature, is Kirkland, "Resources for Textual Research on Premodern Taoism."
45. Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, 58.
46. See, e.g., Kristofer Schipper's concise historical summary, "Taoism: The Story of the Way," in *Taoism and the Arts of China*, ed. Stephen Little (Chicago and Berkeley: Art Institute of Chicago and University of California Press, 2000), 33–55.
47. One might think of Zhang Gao 張高 as an exception here, but his actual

ancestry has not yet been critically studied, and in any case his historical significance was virtually nil.

48. See Russell Kirkland, s.v. “Ye,” in *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, ed. Fabrizio Pregadio, 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 2:1154–1155; Kirkland, “Tales of Thaumaturgy: Tang Accounts of the Wonder-Worker Yeh Fa-shan,” *Monumenta Serica* 40 (1992): 47–86; and “A World in Balance: Holistic Synthesis in the *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi*,” *Journal of Sung-Yuan Studies* 23 (1993): 43–70. Robinet (*Taoism*, 20 and 187) incorrectly gives Ye's name as “Ye Fashang.”

49. Florian Reiter, *The Aspirations and Standards of Taoist Priests in the Early Tang Period* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998). See Russell Kirkland, review of *The Aspirations and Standards of Taoist Priests in the Early Tang Period*, by Florian Reiter, *Journal of Chinese Religions* 28 (2000): 235–237.

50. Livia Kohn, *The Daoist Monastic Manual* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also Livia Kohn, “The Date and Compilation of the *Fengdao Kejie*, the First Handbook of Monastic Taoism,” *East Asian History* 13–14 (1997): 91–118; and T.H. Barrett, “The *Feng-tao k'o* and Printing on Paper in Seventh-Century China,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 60, no. 3 (1997): 538–540.

51. See Benn, *Cavern-Mystery Transmission*, 72–98. John Lagerwey (“The Taoist Religious Community,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade [New York: Macmillan, 1987], 14:313), cites “(a) text compiled at imperial behest around 712, the *Miao-men yu-ch'i* . . . [which] distinguishes between hermits and those who ‘leave the family’ on the one hand, and libationers and those who ‘live at home,’ on the other.” That text (HY 1115) was Shi Chongxuan 史崇玄's introduction to the *Yiqie Daojing yinyi* 一切道經音義. See Kirkland, “Dimensions of Tang Taoism,” 92.

52. Such, at least, would seem to be suggested by the pertinent entry in the *Zhongwen dacidian* 中文大辭典(9:14427), and the derivative entry in Li Shuhuan 李叔還's *Daojiao dacidian* 道教大辭典, 598: they both say that the term *daoshi* “broadly (*fan*, 泛) designates a gentleman (*shi*, 士) who possesses Dao.” For an exploration of the meaning of the term *dao*, and the sense in which a person can “possess” it, see my entry “Dao” in *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, 1:304–309.

53. See Kenneth J. DeWoskin, *Doctors, Diviners, and Magicians of Ancient China: Biographies of Fang-shih* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

54. *Shiji* 28.1368–1369. There is no easy explanation for the juxtaposition here of the term *fang*—connoting some knowledge/practice that extends beyond ordinary human activity—and the term *xian*—referring to beings who dwell beyond ordinary human space and can travel freely between that space and other realms.

55. See Russell Kirkland, "Shijie," in *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, ed. Fabrizio Pregadio, 2 vols. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 2:896–897.
56. A study pertinent to such matters is Stephen Bokenkamp, "Lu Xiujing, Buddhism, and the First Taoist Canon," in *Culture and Power in the Reconstitution of the Chinese Realm, 200–600*, ed. Scott Pearce, Audrey Spiro, and Patricia Ebrey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 181–199.
57. Michel Strickmann, "A Taoist Confirmation of Liang Wu-ti's Suppression of Taoism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 98 (1978): 471; quoted in Kohn, *Daoist Monastic Manual*, 11. The quotes regarding Louguan and Kou Qianzhi come from Livia Kohn, *Monastic Life in Medieval Daoism: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 41 and 40, respectively.
58. Kohn, *Monastic Life in Medieval Daoism*, 40 and 34. Kohn's presentation of such matters in regard to Kou's community is strikingly parallel to Berling's presentation of "The Ten Standards for Taoists" (*Daomen shigui*, 道門釋規) of the forty-third Heavenly Master, Zhang Yuchu 張宇初 (1316–1410); see Berling, "Taoism in Ming Culture," 955, 961.
59. Stephen Peter Bumbacher, *The Fragments of the Daoxue zhuan* (Frankfurt/Main: Peter Lang, 2000). Russell Kirkland, booknote in *Religious Studies Review* 27 (2001): 314.
60. Bumbacher, *Fragments of the Daoxue zhuan*, 525.
61. Kirkland, "Dimension of Tang Taoism," 90.
62. *Ibid.*, 91.
63. Reiter, *Aspirations and Standards of Taoist Priests in the Early Tang Period*, vii.
64. See R. A. Stein, "Religious Taoism and Popular Religion from the Second to the Seventh Centuries," in *Facets of Taoism: Essays in Chinese Religion*, ed. Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979); and Kristofer Schipper, "Vernacular and Classical Ritual in Taoism," *Journal of Asian Studies* 65 (1985): 21–51.