

The Globalization of Chinese Religions and Traditions

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Chinese religions are now practiced throughout the world. Carried by Chinese migrants, they have for centuries served to establish the ethnic identity of communities throughout the Chinese diaspora. In more recent years, however, Chinese religions have been disseminated through modern media far beyond the boundaries of Chinese ethnic communities. Thus, *fengshui*, *yin* and *yang*, and Tao (*dao*) have become common terms in lexicons around the world. In their global travels, Chinese religions enter into many different social contexts and are practiced and understood in many different ways. As global migration patterns shift and as new media speed up the global confluence of cultures, these different ways of practicing Chinese religions undergo constant change.¹

Chinese Religions and Ethnicity

A memorable feature of Chinatowns around the world is the smell of burning incense. The incense comes from little shrines tucked away in the back of shops and restaurants, from ancestral altars located in community association buildings and from temples to such deities as Lord Guan and Mazu. These religious artifacts serve to mark boundaries between insiders and outsiders—and to link the insiders into chains of relationships extending all the way back to ancestral homes in China. They are a distinctive feature of old Chinese communities from Manila to San Francisco to Vancouver to Amsterdam—communities that originally were established in the face of discrimination and exclusion. For example, Chinese workers who were brought to the United States in the late nineteenth century to help build the transcontinental railroad became the object of widespread racial prejudice and, starting in 1882, were subjected to the Chinese Exclusion Act, which restricted further immigration and denied those already in the United States the right to become naturalized citizens. The Exclusion Act was repealed only in 1943.

Under these circumstances, Chinese communities in places such as San Francisco had to take care of themselves. They developed institutions to govern themselves and buffer themselves from the outside world. The most important of these were clan (extended family) associations, tying together people who shared the same surname and, supposedly, the same common ancestor. There were also regional associations, representing those who came from a certain district (in San Francisco, they were mostly from Guangdong) and from the same linguistic-ethnic groups, like the Hakka. Finally, there were secret brotherhoods, whose membership to some extent transcended these divisions. These associations owned much of the community property found in Chinatowns. They provided jobs and social services to their members and regulated the activities of the community, for example, by mediating disputes. Among their leaders, the associations would have people who spoke English and could act as go-betweens with the outside community.²

Religion was an important resource for constituting such groups. The clan association hall contained a shrine to the clan's ancestors. Regional associations built temples to patron deities of that region, like Tianhou (Mazu) or Tan Gong (a patron of seafaring Hakka people). Secret societies like the Hongmen association (sometimes called "Chinese Freemasons" in the late nineteenth century) had their own patron deities, like Lord Guan.³ These various patron deities divided as well as united the Chinese community. Different gods symbolized different loyalties. Thus, clan associations bound their members to common loyalty in opposition to other clan associations. But the overall system of associations dedicated to different protector deities marked off the Chinatown community from the world of the dominant American culture organized according to Protestant denominations or Catholic parishes. Religiously infused festivals, like the Chinese New Year, also brought forth public celebrations that bolstered the solidarity of the community and marked its distinctiveness from outsiders. An important form of public activity was the funeral, which, if the deceased was wealthy and influential, could involve a large procession and much communal feasting. Interment would be in a Chinese cemetery, built with money raised from the clan associations. Eventually, the bones of the deceased would be dug up, according to south Chinese religious custom, and sent back to the ancestral home in China.⁴

BOX 13.1 Transnational Burials

In nineteenth-century America, the Chinese practice of exhuming bodies and shipping the bones to join their ancestors back in China was seen by many Anglo-Americans as a menace to public health. But these prejudices were gradually overcome. Now, the remains of deceased Chinese are likely to go in the other direction. Having become settled in the United States, many Chinese Americans are bringing the ashes of their parents to be interred in their new home in America.

Even as immigrant Chinese communities used their religious rituals and icons to regulate their internal solidarity in opposition to a hostile host society, the host societies sometimes undertook efforts to convert the Chinese to the dominant faiths. In North America, for example, both Protestants and Catholics established missions in their Chinatowns. Such churches often attracted Chinese immigrants through English language lessons and other social services. In some denominations, such outreach efforts were inhibited by resistance from nativist members who believed that Chinese were unfit to become Christians. Within the Chinese community, conversion was inhibited by fear of the consequences of alienation from the clan and community associations that were so important for survival in a hostile environment. In an extreme case, in Victoria, British Columbia, in 1898, a Hongmen member was marked for death because he had compromised the society's secrets by converting to Christianity.⁵

In Chinese communities around the world, one can still find the religious legacies of historical exclusion and discrimination. Shrines and temples with their assorted patron deities and associated rituals still serve to mark families and regional associations off from one another and to mark the community as a whole off from its social environment. This is especially the case when the community is being replenished by illegal immigrants, whose fate is completely in the hands of clan and regional associations and secret societies. The Fujianese section of New York's Chinatown is a good example of this.⁶

But especially since the 1960s, in response to professional and commercial opportunities, new kinds of immigration flows brought well-educated and affluent Chinese to cities around the world. In North America, such immigrants usually settled in suburbs rather than the old Chinatowns, and the old clan and regional associations were much less important to them than to earlier generations. Religion was nonetheless important, not least because it provided places and occasions for Chinese immigrants to gather together as a community.⁷

Such immigrants, though, practice religion in different ways than earlier generations. They typically interpret their traditions in ways that foster their integration with their host country even as they affirm distinctive aspects of their cultural heritage. A good example is the religious activities of Taiwanese immigrants to Los Angeles, as described by Carolyn Chen in her book *Getting Saved in America*. The immigrants depicted here seem to feel a need to conform to the religious structure of the United States, in which most citizens (about 60%) have a formal affiliation with some organized religious community. About a third of recent Taiwanese immigrants (mostly middle-class professionals and entrepreneurs) become Christian. The favored form of Christianity seems to be the non-denominational evangelical Christian congregation, composed almost exclusively of Taiwanese.

In this new situation, conversion to Christianity does not alienate Taiwanese from their ethnic community but provides a distinctively Taiwanese way (emphasizing strong "family values" in worship services carried out in the Taiwanese

language) of belonging to the American Christian mainstream. Another third of recent Taiwanese immigrants in Los Angeles, however, formally join a humanistic Taiwanese Buddhist organization, like the Hsi Lai temple, affiliated with Buddha's Light Mountain, or the Tzu Chi (*Ciji*) Buddhist Compassion Relief Association.

Although many of the latter might have gone to Buddhist temples on special occasions in Taiwan, they would not necessarily have practiced Buddhism in a way that that most religiously inclined Americans would think religion should be practiced—that is, to make a formal declaration of faith in a particular religious organization and to commit oneself (and one's family) to regularly attending worship services and to carrying out good works through the organization. This is also a distinctive way of affirming one's Chinese heritage while integrating oneself with American culture. In Chen's account, the Taiwanese humanistic Buddhist associations are actually more ecumenical, more concerned about reaching out through charitable works to non-Chinese Americans, and more concerned with fostering interreligious dialogue than the Taiwanese evangelical Christian organizations.⁸

In many parts of Southeast Asia, such as Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, however, even professionally educated overseas Chinese face more restrictions on becoming integrated with the dominant culture. Although their social life thus continues to be confined to ethnic enclaves, the Chinese middle classes in these situations still look to humanist Buddhist associations to be vehicles for creating good relationships with the wider community. Buddhist lay associations like Tzu Chi and the Buddha's Light International Association, for example, contributed large amounts of time, money, and expertise to relieve the suffering of victims of the 2005 tsunami in Southeast Asia. Unlike many traditional Chinese religion-based philanthropic bodies, these organizations distribute aid not only to members of their own extended kinship and regional groups, but also to people of all ethnicities and creeds who need help.⁹

BOX 13.2 Chinese New Year Parades

As the old forms of discrimination die out in the United States, Chinatown community celebrations become less a marker of separation from the wider community and more an invitation to the wider community to enjoy the richness of the Chinese contribution to the American cultural mosaic. Thus, Anglo, Latino, and African Americans join the annual San Francisco Chinese New Year Parade. Nonetheless, such community celebrations cannot completely transcend divisions. For example, there are often conflicts between immigrants from the People's Republic of China and immigrants from Taiwan (especially those advocating Taiwanese independence) over rights to march in the parade.

For the first and second immigrant generations at least, religious practice provides a way of remaining engaged with one's country of origin. This is done in different ways, according to whether the religious practice is more socially embedded in family and local community or more transcendent. Thus, for devotees of Tianhou in American Chinatowns, the connection with the ancestral homeland is personal. Devotees of Tianhou periodically bring the statue of the goddess back to its place of origin in China to recharge it with sacred power. But for middle-class, suburban practitioners of humanistic Buddhism, the connection may more often be virtual. The diasporic temples of humanistic Buddhist associations are usually branches of a primary temple in Taiwan or China. Followers of humanistic Buddhist associations regularly study books and videos from their masters in China or Taiwan. However, many of them also make pilgrimages back to those home temples, and they send their children to summer camps sponsored by the home temples.

The passage of generations in a foreign land, however, tends to weaken understanding of the religious practices of the homeland. As young people leave home and find themselves caught up in the study and work needed to succeed in the new society, they often do not have the time (even if they have the interest) to carry out the regular intellectual and moral cultivation needed to appreciate the deeper meaning of the rituals practiced at family gatherings or community festivals. The Chinese religion then becomes for them a hodgepodge of disconnected customs. Asian American students at American universities often take courses on Chinese religion precisely to gain an understanding of the reasons behind their family customs.

Between Transnational Institutions and the State

As Chinese spread around the globe, they have to reconcile their allegiances to different political authorities. The resulting tensions shape their religious practices and sometimes their religious practices contribute to the tensions. As it did during the imperial era, the contemporary Chinese government claims to be the arbiter of religious orthodoxy and heterodoxy. (The democratic government on Taiwan is based on a liberal model that guarantees religious freedom from most government interference.) In China itself, this leads to conflicts with transnational religious communities like the Catholic Church, which claim allegiance to an outside authority. Such conflicts become exacerbated when Chinese travel into the diaspora.¹⁰

For example, Chinese Catholics living in North America and Europe (especially of the first and sometimes second generations) often remained keenly interested in the fate of the church in China. Thus, illegal Fujianese immigrants employed in New York sweatshops sent some of their hard-earned money to build churches in their home communities. Many of these immigrants belonged to the "underground" segment of the church in China, and the money they sent was for building unregistered (officially unapproved) churches in their home communities. In the recent past the

Chinese government has systematically torn down such churches. Even if such acts were aimed at intimidating underground Catholics in China, the destruction of churches only strengthens the resolve of outraged compatriots living in New York. This in turn deepened conflict between Chinese underground Catholics living in New York and other Chinese American Catholics who more willingly accommodated the officially registered church in China.¹¹ Sometimes, the underground Catholics and the officially oriented Catholics in New York will not attend Mass together. Other times they clash over who gets to represent the Chinese Catholic Church to the general American population. There is currently a controversy over the picture of Mary, Our Lady of China that hangs in the National Cathedral in Washington DC. The Catholics oriented to the official church like the picture that has the approval of the American Bishops to hang in the National Cathedral. The picture is of Mary dressed in flowing blue robes, very similar to the depictions of Guanyin. The underground Chinese American Catholics, on the other hand, want this image replaced with one painted by missionaries to China in the early twentieth century, of Mary dressed in the robes of a Western-style queen and sitting on a throne with her son on her lap. For them, for Mary to be authentic means she should not look like a Chinese bodhisattva, but like a powerful foreign queen ready to call a corrupt Chinese government to task.¹²

Analogous conflicts between state authority and transnational religious authority still occur with the Dalai Lama. Exiled from Tibet to India, this Nobel Prize-winning religious leader has gained great moral stature around the world. He has become an authoritative teacher not only for Tibetan Buddhists seeking autonomy, but for all kinds of Buddhists, and indeed for a great variety of spiritual seekers. He has been warmly welcomed in Taiwan, but the People's Republic of China bitterly denounces him as a "splittist." When he dies, there will inevitably be a great struggle between the Chinese government and the Tibetan exile community on how to identify his reincarnation.

The struggles over the religious authority of the global Catholic Church and transnational Tibetan Buddhism on the one hand and the Chinese government on the other are the most dramatic struggles afflicting the Chinese religious world, but they are by no means the only struggles. From bases abroad, Chinese evangelical Christians launch missionary projects in China. Unlike nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century missionaries, who were mostly white Europeans, most contemporary missionaries to China are actually overseas Chinese. Often they travel to China in the guise of English teachers or business investors but carry out surreptitious proselytization in defiance of Chinese laws. They claim to be accountable to God rather than to any earthly government. In their countries abroad, such Christians often organize lobbying groups to urge their governments to pressure China to grant the human right of religious freedom.

Finally, leaders of Falun Gong and other movements dubbed "evil cults" by the Chinese government have escaped into exile abroad and have become the inspirational center for transnational religious movements. Some of them—Falun

Gong especially—have developed extremely sophisticated global multimedia enterprises. Examples include Falun Gong's websites (<http://www.minghui.org>; <http://clearwisdom.net>), newspaper (*Epoch Times*), and TV stations (*New Tang Dynasty*). Members of such organizations carry out demonstrations in public places around the world and have even interfered in major political events, as when a Falun Gong practitioner disrupted a public appearance of the American president George W. Bush and the Chinese president Hu Jintao at a White House meeting.

Some Taiwan religious leaders have also achieved global stature. Sheng Yen, the Master of Dharma Drum Mountain, divides his time between his monasteries in Taipei and New York. He has been a spokesperson at international Buddhist congresses and has taken part in interreligious dialogues organized by the United Nations. Hsing Yun, the founder of Buddha's Light Mountain, also travels constantly and has met with world political and religious leaders, including the Roman Catholic Pope. Citing frail health, Cheng Yen, the founder of Tzu Chi, does not leave Taiwan, but she, too, is recognized and admired around the world. Even though their origins were in Taiwan, the Buddhist movements started by these masters transcend the boundaries of any nation-state, have received global recognition, and are a source of nationalistic pride. (And it is a matter of national shame to be dependent on out-

BOX 13.3 Buddhist Karaoke

Francesca Tarocco

In China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, the karaoke boom of the 1990s gave birth to a deceptively incongruous by-product, namely, Buddhist-inspired karaoke recordings. In recent years, the availability of audiovisual recordings of both traditional Buddhist chants and newly composed songs of Buddhist inspiration and content has significantly increased. These recordings vary greatly in both content and appearance. Some appear to be directed at an audience of Buddhist practitioners, while others target a more generic and composite audience in search of spiritual solace or a connection with traditional values.

The video *Buddhist Liturgical Singing, Karaoke Singing Instructions* is just one of many possible examples of Chinese Buddhist karaoke videos for educational and proselytizing purposes. The visual element of the karaoke video consists mainly of images of lotus flowers, statues of the bodhisattva Guanyin, and incense holders of various shapes and forms. The objects appear to float in space and are not shown in any particular ritual context, while standard special effects including fades, split screens, and page-turners are deployed throughout the duration of the video. The recording is produced and distributed in China by the Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA), a society bringing together monastic and lay devotee members of the Taiwanese Buddhist association Foguangshan. The association's logo is repeatedly displayed throughout the duration of the video. The charismatic Buddhist monk Hsing Yun, founder and patriarch of Foguangshan, a Chinese Buddhist denomination with a vast international network, created BLIA in

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BOX 13.3 (continued)

1991. The main focus of the association is to give lay Buddhist devotees a formal means of playing a leadership role in promoting Buddhism. Foguangshan's sources claim that Master Hsing Yun has been consistently deploying audiovisual materials for educational and proselytizing purposes since the late 1950s and that he cut the first ever ten-inch Buddhist record in 1957. Hsing Yun is also quoted saying that "Buddhism must be directed to the masses, it must be popularized and made artistic." Both Foguangshan and BLIA have a very positive view of entertainment, and especially of music and singing, regarding them as a possible means to attract converts as well as creating a collective identity. For them, modern communications technologies, including karaoke machines, are perfectly legitimate means to actualize and popularize the Buddhist message. Today, Foguangshan, besides publishing books and magazines, produces vast numbers of cassettes, videos, and karaoke recordings in multiple media formats. It also owns satellite television channels and radio stations. Although neither Foguangshan nor BLIA are officially present in China, their audiovisual materials are available there as well as through the Internet. They can be found both in commercial retail outlets and in shops near or within monastic premises. It is now fairly common for karaoke-inspired videos of Buddhist chanting, such as the one described earlier, to be played within monastic premises and appear on screens in China's major monasteries and pilgrimage places.

The phenomenon of Buddhist karaoke is not confined to traditional chanting. In fact, there are countless examples of newly composed Buddhist music, often rather startling mixtures of traditional and electronic instruments and of different vocal styles. There also exist several websites that promote the work of performers and composers of new Buddhist music. The Singaporean composer Daniel Yeo's BuddhaNet Audio offers downloadable MP3 format files of "Buddhist songs," several of which have a karaoke version (http://www.buddhanet.net/audio-songs_chinese.htm). The songs bear titles like "Journey of Realization," "Mundane Attachment," and "Bond Free," and a 2003 collection of songs borrows its title from the Buddhist recommendation to "Come Forth."

siders for everything that is considered valuable in one's religion, art, and culture.) These transnational Buddhist movements help to bolster a sense of Taiwan's nationalism, even as they transcend the boundaries of the nation state.

For the sake of its own national pride, China, also would like to be a source of cultural ideas and moral-religious movements that are considered valuable transnationally. The dilemma is that the Chinese government cannot tolerate any movements (like Falun Gong) that are beyond its control. The government is cautious about producing religious leaders who may receive world acclaim and have the leverage to function independently of the government in global circles. Some Chinese academics and officials have responded to this dilemma by calling for a reinstitutionalized Confucian State that then can propagate Chinese moral-religious

values around the world. Planning meetings have taken place and scholarly papers have been written in China about how to carry this out. It is still too early to tell how far this will go.

In an effort to extend its “soft power,” the Chinese government also has tried to insert Confucian values into international agreements. At international meetings like the UN World Conference on Human Rights in Bangkok in 1993, the government of China was influential in drafting a Declaration on Human Rights with significant Confucian echoes. Although the Bangkok Declaration affirms the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it stressed that human rights “must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm-setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural, and religious backgrounds.” The document gave more emphasis to economic and social rights than most Western documents—a notion that resonates with Confucian-inspired traditions of government paternalism. The Chinese government’s effort to promote this version of paternalistic and authoritarian “Asian values,” supposedly based on Confucianism, has much in common with that of the Singapore government.¹³

An identity based on “Confucianism” is indeed seen by other governments in Asia as the best way of categorizing and co-opting their Chinese populations. The Malaysian government, for example, has developed a Confucian curriculum for religious instruction of Chinese citizens, to go along with Muslim and Christian curricula for the other parts of its population. The Indonesian government has recently added Confucianism to its list of officially sponsored religions, in an attempt to placate and protect an often-persecuted ethnic minority. The kind of Confucianism favored by most Asian governments tends to be conservative, emphasizing duties to obey authority.

At the same time, other intellectuals and activists within Asia, including Taiwan, are arguing for more liberal interpretations of Confucian traditions. Central to the Confucian tradition, for example, are the Five Relationships described by Mencius: father-son, husband-wife, older-younger sibling; ruler-subject, friend-friend. Proponents of a Confucian-justified authoritarian government (such as found in Singapore) emphasize the hierarchical nature of these relationships. But in Asian societies, such as Taiwan and South Korea, that have undergone democratization, there is more emphasis on the mutual responsibilities inherent in these relationships. There are also feminist interpretations rejecting the patriarchy that seems to be present in a literal reading of the Five Relationships. Such interpretations emphasize that anyone, male or female, could become a Confucian sage through proper self-cultivation. Finally, Yu Dan, a female scholar and media personality from Beijing, has written a book (based on television lectures) on Confucianism as a vehicle for harmonious personal growth. Her writings have now become immensely popular throughout Asia, although some established Confucian scholars complain that they are not faithful to the socially oriented intent of the original works. In the long run, therefore, it is unclear what degree of success the Chinese government,

and other authoritarian Asian governments, will have in promoting conservative, authority-focused versions of Confucianism as a global ethic.

Chinese Religions and Personal Spirituality

The global popularity of Yu Dan's writings points to a quest—especially prevalent among modern, educated, mobile middle classes around the world—to adopt parts of Chinese religions into repertoires of personal “spirituality.” Among such social strata there are often searches for personal wholeness—a reconciliation between warring impulses and a harmony between body and mind and reason and emotions—but a wariness of religiously based demands for sacrifice of the self to social needs or the subordination of the self to external authorities. Parts of Chinese religious traditions—especially when lifted out of their original contexts—seem to promise this. There is also a desire on the part of many non-Chinese in Europe and North America for alternatives to what some would see as the dogmatic, moralistic, guilt-provoking demands of the monotheistic, Abrahamic faiths. For some, Chinese religions may seem like such an alternative.

Thus, for the past 200 years, movements within the West have learned from and appropriated aspects of Chinese religions. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these movements were especially common among intellectuals and artists. To cite a few examples, Emerson and the other nineteenth-century American transcendentalists were influenced by translations of the Confucian classics. The avant-garde Dada artists of the early twentieth century were fond of Laozi and Zhuangzi because their Daoist works seemed to defy the categories of Western logic. The Beat writers and poets of the 1950s called themselves “dharma bums.” But especially since the countercultural movements of the 1960s, a fascination with “Oriental religions” migrated from intellectual elites to the middle-class mainstreams of the West. An important carrier of these trends is popular media. The ideas of Chinese Daoism of course permeate martial arts movies such as Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. But they also appear in transfigured ways in American classics such as *Star Wars*—“May the Force [Dao] be with you.” Video games are also full of these ideas.

Some of this fascination with Asian religious themes leads to a blend of motifs from Chinese religion with the routines of ordinary life. Home decorators consult books on fengshui to achieve a proper balance of energies in the layout of their living rooms. Cooks consider how to balance *yin* and *yang* nutritional elements. Athletes practice the Daoist-influenced exercises of Chinese martial arts.

Other Westerners, however, take up a more serious study of Chinese religions, but usually in ways that are deeply shaped by their own cultural expectations. Surrounded by the smell of incense, refreshed by herbal teas, and soothed by the

soft melodies of Chinese lutes, they regulate their breath and center their bodies to achieve psychic tranquility, physical health, and more pleasurable sex.

The Westernization of Chinese Religions

Through these processes, some parts of Chinese religions have become assimilated into Western cultures. Daoism—to be more specific, Daoism as the perennial mystical philosophy of Laozi, with perhaps some longevity practices appended—has undergone the most complete indigenization. The first American edition of the *Daodejing* appeared in 1898, translated by Paul Carus and D. T. Suzuki, who would go on to become popularizers of Buddhism. But this version would not be the last: by 1950, there were ten translations in print, and in the last thirty years new English translations have appeared in bookstores with great regularity. The values the *Daodejing* seem to advocate include many that coincide with Western 1960s counterculture: spontaneity, naturalness, quietude, and concern for the environment.

The *Daodejing*'s fascination for Westerners, as well as its status as the second most translated text in the world (after the Bible), can be attributed to its brevity, its lack of proper names, and especially its multiplicity of possible meanings. These traits continue to make the *Daodejing* central to the globalization of Chinese religion. In fact, many Westerners who identify themselves as following a path based in Chinese spirituality first embarked on this path when they read the *Daodejing* in a college or high school class or were lent it by a friend or family member.

Also entering into global circulation are popularized renditions of Chinese meditation, visualization, and movement exercises designed to promote health, longevity, and transcendence. Whether called *qigong*, inner alchemy, or a more proprietary term, these techniques have appealed to the West's growing interest in body-centered spirituality. Thus, the language of transformation and cultivation has found its way into the popular discourse about Chinese religions.

By the early 1960s this discourse had found a home in the "human potential movement," a generic name for a gamut of therapeutic techniques based on self-transformation, and indeed the growing popularity of the *Daodejing*, the *Yijing*, and the practice of *taiji* can be historically and conceptually linked to the famed California retreat center Esalen, often seen as the birthplace of the human potential movement, where Gia-fu Feng (1919–1985) and Ai Chungliang Huang resided.

These self-styled Chinese "masters" were part of the wave of Chinese migrants who entered the United States after passage of the liberal immigration reform act of 1965. They were experienced in various Chinese religio-physical techniques and eager to teach these skills to willing Westerners. Their arrival coincided with young Westerners' search for spirituality outside traditional institutions (a phenomenon sometimes called "the new religious consciousness") that led them to embrace teachers and practices from Asia.

The 1970s saw the birth and growth of popular Western religious organizations inspired by Chinese religions, often with the word “Dao” or “Daoist” in their name. These organizations are mostly made up of non-Chinese but are usually led by Chinese immigrants.

The first such organization officially recognized as a tax-exempt religious institution in the United States was the Taoist (Daoist) Sanctuary, founded in North Hollywood, California, in 1970. The founder of the Sanctuary was not Chinese—though he often played one on TV (most famously as the Red Chinese agent Wo Fat on *Hawaii 5–0*). Khigh Dhiegh (1910–1991) was of Anglo-Egyptian descent and was born Kenneth Dickerson in New Jersey. Nonetheless, his Sanctuary was the first comprehensive popular Chinese religious organization in North America, teaching *taiji*, martial arts, the *Daodejing*, and the *Yijing*, and conducting seasonal Daoist rituals (albeit invented by Dhiegh himself). Dhiegh brought to the Sanctuary teachers from China, including one who had been trained at a Daoist mountaintop monastery in Guangdong.

In 1976, three students of the Taoist Sanctuary who were studying Chinese medicine in Taiwan met a Chinese doctor whom they invited to the United States. Hua-Ching Ni settled in Malibu, California, opened a shrine called the Eternal Breath of Tao, and began teaching classes privately in a venue he named the College of Tao. Over the years, Ni-sponsored organizations have multiplied—including a private acupuncture clinic known as the Union of Tao and Man—and an accredited degree-granting college, the Yo San University of Traditional Chinese Medicine.

A Thai-born Chinese named Mantak Chia (1944–) moved to New York City in 1979 and opened the Taoist Esoteric Yoga Center, later renamed the Healing Tao Center. Today, Chia attracts an international clientele to his Tao Garden in Thailand, while the Healing Tao USA is headed by Chia’s former student, Michael Winn (1951–), and based in Asheville, North Carolina. Chia’s classes and books teach a popularized, streamlined system of Chinese internal alchemy, though his popularity first spread through books revealing “secret” Chinese sexual techniques.

Moy Lin-Shin (1931–1998) founded the Taoist Tai Chi Society (TTCS) in 1970 in Toronto. This is perhaps the largest Daoist group in the Western Hemisphere. The Taoist Tai Chi Society teaches “Taoist Tai Chi,” a modified form of Yang-style *taijiquan*, and has taught thousands of classes in over 400 locations on four continents. It claims to have some 10,000 dues-paying members worldwide. The Taoist Tai Chi Society’s religious arm is Fung Loy Kok Temple (FLK), dedicated in 1981. The original temple was located upstairs from the *taiji* studio. Although most Taoist Tai Chi studios around the world dedicate at least a corner of their space to a small shrine, in 2007 the Society dedicated the Cultivation Centre, the largest Taoist edifice outside Asia, in the town of Orangeville, north of Toronto.

These groups represent the major institutional forms of popular Chinese spirituality in North America today. Although each group has a different emphasis, they all teach practices through a combination of weekly classes and yearly, or seasonal, retreats or seminars. What all these practices have in common is that they can be

performed individually, not collectively, as a modular part of a daily regimen. The practices have been separated from their Chinese traditional context and adapted to an urban lifestyle in which well-being and spirituality are consumable commodities. Daoist regimens of meditation and bodywork are treated as pathways of self-realization that fit well with the Western culture of individualism.

A Global Confluence of Cultures

Even as Chinese religions are imported to the West and transformed by individualistic Americans and Europeans to meet their own spiritual purposes, the transformed Chinese religions are often imported back into China and begin to reshape the ways that Chinese understand their religious lives. Thus, growing numbers of groups of Daoist practitioners from Western countries visit China on tours of Daoist monasteries and sacred mountains. Although they report powerful experiences of the spiritual energies of the mountains, their feelings about the monks living there are more ambiguous: they often feel that the monks have lost touch with the true Dao because of years of living under Communism. Many Chinese monks, on the other hand, are annoyed by Westerners who seek mystical experiences and body and sexual cultivation techniques but do not have a strong foundation in morality or the rigorous and lengthy process of monastic discipline within a recognized lineage of masters. But in the end, both the Chinese monks and the Western spiritual tourists are changed through their mutual encounters.¹⁴

Similarly, after being imported to China and transformed by Chinese culture, a Sinified form of Christianity may be exported back to the West. A prime example is the “Local Church,” a form of Christianity indigenized in the 1930s by the charismatic preacher Watchman Nee. The Communists suppressed the Local Church in the 1950s and Watchman Nee died in prison. But his disciple, Witness Lee, took this fluid, nonhierarchical form of Christianity back to southern California, from whence it spread throughout North America—where most of the members of its 200 branches are not Chinese—as well as through Taiwan and Southeast Asia. Meanwhile, remnants of the Local Church have reconstituted themselves in China and drawn spiritual and material support from coreligionists in North America.

The confluence of Asian and Western religious cultures thus swirls in dynamic feedback loops. Chinese religions are both contributors to and recipients of a global search for transcendence.

Notes

1. There are many books on Chinese immigrant communities. Notable examples for North America are Victor Nee and Brett de Bary Nee, *Longtime Californ': A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974); David Chuenyan Lai, *Chinatowns: Towns within Cities in Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia

Press, 1988); Peter Kwong, *The New Chinatown* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1987); and Gwen Kinkead, *Chinatown: A Portrait of a Closed Society* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992). A good book on forms of community developed by recent immigrants to the United States is Timothy P. Fong, *The First Suburban Chinatown: The Making of Monterey Park, California* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994). Most of such books on Asian immigration, however, give rather short shrift to religious affiliations. Notable exceptions include Carolyn Chen, *Getting Saved in America: Taiwanese Immigrants Converting to Evangelical Christianity and Buddhism* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), and Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park, Pa.: Penn State Press, 1999).

2. Nee and Nee, *Longtime Californ'.*

3. Lai, *Chinatowns.*

4. Nee and Nee, *Longtime Californ'.*; Lai, *Chinatowns.*; L. Eve Armentrout Ma, *Hometown Chinatown: The History of Oakland's Chinese Community* (New York: Garland, 2000).

5. Lai, *Chinatowns*, 205.

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