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Book Review

James Miller, *China's Green Religion: Daoism and the Quest for a Sustainable Future* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2017), 224 pp., $60.00 (cloth), ISBN: 9780231175869.

James Miller's book, *China's Green Religion: Daoism and the Quest for a Sustainable Future*, fills a gap in the study of Religion and Nature: the absence of any monographs on the ecological implications and contributions of Daoism. Aside from edited volumes such as *Daoism and Ecology: Ways in a Cosmic Landscape* (co-edited by Miller), no scholar has yet addressed in depth how Daoism fits into conversations of the role of religions in addressing our current environmental crises. On this basis alone, Miller's work deserves notice. However, Miller goes further and claims to offer a 'decolonial reading of Daoism', 'an ecocritical analysis of the ideas and values found within Daoism' (p. xiv). Miller contrasts this approach with previous sociohistorical scholarship. The goal of Miller's ecocritical analysis and decolonial reading of Daoism seeks to subvert the common cultural frameworks used in thinking about the environment and humans' place in it. It also seeks to highlight the way Daoism, throughout history, has served to resist and challenge cultural norms.

Chapter 1 offers an overview of the modern predicament in dealing with the environment, namely the experience of an inner world, an external world (i.e., nature), and a transcendent realm of the gods (pp. 11-12). Miller argues that this inherited cultural understanding of three distinct realms prevents us from thinking about nature or religion in any kind of interconnected way. Miller's critique of modernity is fairly standard for many commentators on the positive ecological dimensions of religions, as is his following argument that Daoism's discourse on the human/nature/transcendent relationship offers an alternative worldview from which to frame environmental questions. The major difference with previous scholarship is that Miller argues Daoism's framing of the above-mentioned tripartite relationship not only transgresses the modern discourse on nature but the modern discourse on religion, as well.

Drawing on key terms from the *Daodejing*, in Chapter 2 Miller points out that in the Daoist tradition Nature has agency; it is a subjective entity that 'insists upon' human beings. This point sets up the reconfiguration of the human/nature/transcendent relationship that characterizes the following four chapters. Chapters 3-6 introduce and develop a concept that is central to Miller's reading of the tradition: 'liquid ecology'. Chapter 3 begins the discussion of this concept by arguing that *qi*, which Miller translates as 'the flow of liquid vitality' (p. 55), is the metaphysical basis for a liquid ecology. In this and the following chapters, Miller draws mostly on texts from the Shangqing school of Daoism and the inner-alchemical (*neidan*) practices from that school. In Chapter 4, Miller uses these practices of spiritual and bodily cultivation, in

which the Dao joins the human being to the universe, to illustrate the 'porosity of the body', a concept that transgresses the notion that the human is at some level closed off from the material or spiritual world.

Chapter 5 takes up the theme of the Daoist 'locative imagination'. The natural world, even the entire cosmos, does not exist in separation from a person's somatic experience. Rather, these levels of experience are part of a continuum, according to which places in the body have correspondences to places in the world and places in the cosmos. Moreover, there are some places that possess more *qi* than others. So, it is not just that the natural world is an important element in spiritual cultivation, but specific places throughout the natural world are more important. In Chapter 6 Miller expands on the implications of viewing the inner and outer worlds as mutually pervasive. Ecological or environmental problems are necessarily both bodily and cosmological problems. He draws on the role of ethical precepts in Daoism to illustrate how self-restraint is beneficial to self-cultivation and the health of the ecosystem. He also highlights that Daoism is not concomitant with China or Chinese culture by pointing out that contemporary Chinese policies towards the environment follow the same approach toward dichotomizing nature and human society instead of seeking to establish relationships of mutual flourishing (pp. 126-32).

Chapters 7 and 8 offer two conclusions to the book. Chapter 7 suggests how we might conceive of Daoism differently if we consider the mutual permeability of the body and world beyond the body. Miller argues that to read Daoism from the perspective of sustainability is to leave aside the distinctions between philosophy and religion, science and religion, tradition and modernity. Chapter 8 describes how an ecocritical reading of Daoism provides a way toward a philosophy and practice of sustainability that meets the demands such a philosophy would entail in the contemporary world.

Without a doubt, *China's Green Religion* is an overdue and valuable addition to the growing body of work on the role Asian religions can play in the field of Religion and Ecology. The book is written in a fluid and coherent style. Terms and concepts are explained well enough for students or non-specialists to understand. There are two areas, though, that would benefit from further explanation or clarification. The first concerns the degree to which Miller diverges from previous scholarship on Asian religions and the environment. Throughout the book, it seems that Miller's approach does not differ in kind to previous scholarship on Asian religious traditions as sources of rethinking the worldview that has led to the current global environmental crisis. There are readings of key concepts and parallels with modern Western philosophy. However, Miller states that his 'goal is to move beyond the relatively narrow goal of ecocritical analysis and to consider Daoist studies from the broader perspective of sustainability' (p. 6). The main difference with previous work is how his emphasis on 'values and motifs' will offer opportunities for 'interpreting and assessing' the ways in which modernity has constructed categories of Religion, Nature and the Environment (p. 6). To this end, Miller offers a theoretically novel analysis of Daoism through his articulation of liquid ecology, the porosity of the body, and locative imagination, which raises questions regarding the category of religion vis-à-vis our understanding of the environment.

The second area is perhaps of more concern to the specialist. Although Miller's book takes Daoism as its focus, it moves between levels of specificity—most specifically, it relies on the Shangqing tradition of Daoism as the basis for developing the

concepts that serve as alternatives to the Western, modern categories of thought. More generally, it draws on concepts found in both Confucianism and Daoism, or Chinese religion. Miller does point out areas where Daoism differs from Confucianism, particularly on the issue of transmission of power. But when discussing ethical precepts in Chapter 6, there is no distinction drawn between the two traditions. Furthermore, if we take a specific tradition within Confucianism (Neo-Confucianism), as Miller does with Daoism (Shangqing), then a similar understanding of porosity can be found. This is not to take away from Miller's arguments; rather, widening the historical scope of these concepts might prove to the reader that they are less esoteric than they otherwise might seem. In this respect, *China's Green Religion* sets a benchmark for intellectual creativity and rigor that should command attention for Religious Studies and Asian Studies scholars alike. This volume raises valuable questions that can initiate deep, challenging discussions in upper-level and graduate courses.

Seth Clippard
Hungkuang University
seth.clippard@sunrise.hk.edu.tw