

RUSSEL KIRKLAND. *Taoism: The Enduring Tradition*, New York and London: Routledge, 2005 (reprint; first ed. 2004), pp. xxii+282. ISBN 0-415-26321 (pbk), £16.99

This book is an intriguing and challenging new type of introduction into Taoism or, as Norman J. Girardot writes in the foreword, “it is also a revelatory evocation of the spirit of the tradition.” What differentiates this work from other introductions to and histories of Taoism is the author’s ambition to ground his research on as much available pertinent data on Taoism as possible, instead of limiting himself to a few representatives, Taoist schools or several certain historical periods. Kirkland claims that one of the main reasons for established false attitudes and stereotypes towards Taoism lies in the ignoring of many authentic Taoist sources and the clinging to prejudices by researchers, philosophers and many others who write about Taoism. Even more, he says that much of what we “know” about Taoism is false simply because it is based on lies. Kirkland thinks that realistic, reasonable research of Taoism based on facts has only recently started. Without doubt, much of those revealed prejudices are known to competent scholars, but even they, as Kirkland successfully shows, are not liberated from opinions and attitudes that no longer withstand the reality which we know due to the newest researches and achievements in the field. Kirkland admits that his aim is not to change the opinions of those specialists, but rather to shed light on these questions to a larger circle of people who have no access to newly discovered facts and who still are under the influence of numerous clichés about Taoism that were formed during the twentieth century and in earlier times.

Kirkland often emphasizes that one of the main errors made by those who do research on Taoism is that they ignore or do not sufficiently value the fact that what “Taoists” tell us and what they left in their written scriptures springs from their ability to “peer into unseen realities.” The whole fundament of Taoism is based on the awareness of that reality. Taoists of all stripes used to strive for integration of their lives with reality and through self-cultivation gradually to eliminate in themselves all obstacles that hold us from reaching that integration. As a result, they would qualitatively enrich and perfect their own lives as well as those of others. When talking about spiritual practices, Kirkland, relying on a wide range of recent scholarship,

concludes that, in opposition to what is conventionally believed, Taoists were never selfish and reclusive hermits without interest in social and political life, but always actively and altruistically engaged in helping others and thus participated in social life. Among them there were representatives from all strata of society, with no restrictions to gender or education.

Kirkland contends that Taoism evolved not as an opposition to Confucian teachings; quite the contrary, he holds that Taoists and Confucianists essentially agreed on the main questions of life and agreed in their belief that man's primary aim in life is to become a better and more perfect being by going the path of spiritual perfection. It is true that these two traditions have their differences, but those differences are subtly nuanced and never were of such antagonistic character as many tried to depict. The recent archeological research of Guo Dian shows that in earlier versions of Laozi the ideas of Confucian followers also are not derided.

Kirkland convinces the reader that many Taoists took Laozi's *Dao De Jing* as the guide for their lives and ideals and even respected it as a sacred scripture. In some Taoist traditions Laozi was raised even to the level of divinity, even though, on a wide scale, Laozi was never the founder of Taoism as mistaken so commonly. The ideas that later were integrated into Taoism had existed in spiritual practices of Chinese culture long before the famous *Dao De Jing* was put to paper. For instance, in order to gain a better understanding of the roots of Daoism and its ancient practices, Kirkland recommends to pay particular attention to a much earlier scripture than the *Dao De Jing*—the “Nei Ye” (one of *Guan Zi* chapters). Interestingly, he points out that ideas from “Nei Ye” can be easily found not only in *Dao De Jing* and *Zhuang Zi*, but also in the works of Han Fei Zi and Mencius who are usually seen as followers of the traditions that ordinarily had little in common with Taoist spiritual practices. In order to have a better understanding of Laozi, instead of reading *Zhuangzi* which as a commentary doesn't do much, Kirkland instructs us to read “Nei Ye” in which the ideas about *qi*, *Tao* and self-cultivation are explained in a more open and clear form.

Kirkland also tries to show that popular promoters and researchers of Taoism often overestimate the role of such concepts as *wu wei* (non-action) or *zi ran* (natural, spontaneous), especially in its Western interpretation. Research shows that Taoists have never been inactive passive guys who needed just to kill time; instead, they were proactive participants in different activities of life, their participation being guided by subtle principles rooted in a perfected awareness of the unseen reality. Keeping in mind the Taoist objective of creating a peaceful country and seemingly contrary recommendations to a war strategist, Kirkland notices that by “doing nothing” it would hardly be possible to “spontaneously” elaborate complicated battle plans, or what is even more unlikely, to establish and maintain a peaceful country. Similarly, Taoists would never tolerate the “spontaneous” “being yourself” attitude as it might be

understood in Western culture, which is often nothing but indulgence in selfish desires and passions. Being oneself or living according to Tao is not the same as gratifying the senses of one's lower "self"; instead, living according to Tao means becoming aware of the unseen reality and acting in accordance with this awareness.

Kirkland, basing his judgements on recent scholarly research of available Taoist *data*, argues that Taoist tradition has hardly ever been a mere marginal reality of Chinese culture, and even after Zhuxi, who was rather intolerant to traditions other than the Confucian and after whom a certain type of Confucian orthodoxy was gradually established, Taoism continued to play an important role in the life of many Chinese people. Taoism endured not only until and through the Tang dynasty, but also played its role during the Ming dynasty, continued its existence through the Yuan dynasty under the rule of Mongols, and managed to survive even the turbulances of the Cultural Revolution. Besides, different personalities regarded as Confucians or Buddhists were often sincerely interested and involved in Taoist ideas and practices, as well as there were many historical cases when specific people were interested in and guided their lives by the ideas of all three schools (*san jiao*—Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist), and they did so not because of confusion among different ideas; quite on the contrary, they consciously chose to encompass the three schools in a creative synthesis. Even more, among them there were voices to claim that basically "all three teachings are one." This topic of the historical relations and development of the three teachings in China has in recent years attracted the attention of many scholars.

The reader will find many more stereotypes and cultural constructs about Taoist tradition revealed in Kirkland's work, as well as lots of new valuable insights and revealing points of view. In his earlier works Kirkland has already declared that his aim, however ambitious it might seem, is to reconstruct the Taoist tradition as it is and not as what we would like to see it. Kirkland's tremendous task is further complicated by the fact that there is no orthodoxy, but rather *omnidox*y in Taoism. He thinks that all manifestations of this Taoist *omnidox*y are equally important and nothing can be ignored or neglected.

Kirkland points out that often when we hear or use the terms "Taoism" or "taoist," we tend to assign a specific and definite meaning to them, while the scope of this spiritual tradition is so mind bogglingly immense that it embraces even most contrary concepts and phenomena, thus making it nearly impossible for any limited definition to contain all manifestations of the Taoist tradition. From this stems Kirkland's attitude of considering diverse Taoist traditions, works, schools and sects as equally important phenomena of Taoism and his contention that only through knowing and considering the entire range of these phenomena can we make more definite claims about Taoism. In spite of this variety, Kirkland thinks that there are principles common to virtually all Taoist phenomena, which mark the fundament of Taoism as a spiritual tradition. In

short, these principles are: keen attention to the awareness of unseen reality and subtle energies that underlie the universe and every human being, together with “bio-spiritual” self-cultivation in which the bodily health and awareness of inner energies is taken as the fundamental basis for perfection.

The book is of value first of all for its concise and thorough overview of a wide range of recent scholarly achievements in the field of Taoist researches, as well as for a reasonable analysis of qualified scholarly works and textual sources of the Taoist tradition. Kirkland not only reverberates what has been done in the field, but also critically reconsiders the established paradigms of orientalism, and sinology specifically, attempting to refute and correct the attitudes that cannot withstand the light of newest pertinent data and research. By critiquing obsolete ideas about Taoism, Kirkland also offers a set of new, in his opinion more reasonable and better grounded ways of interpreting Taoist traditions and phenomena.

On the other hand, it is important to note one established paradigm in Taoist researches which is not mentioned by Kirkland in his book and which underlies many of his reasonings. Kirkland, though many times mentioning that the teachings and ideas of the Taoist tradition are based on the direct knowledge of “unseen reality,” never mentions another assumption unconsciously shared by many researchers—the belief that any diligent researcher, merely with the help of analytical intellect and text analysis, is capable of appropriately comprehending and valuing the subtle manifestations of the Taoist tradition. Kirkland, as well as many other Taoist researchers, though accepting Taoist hints about unseen reality, its importance in all phenomena of life, still ignores or underestimates the logical conclusion that if Taoist insights are based on their ability to peer into the unseen, researchers of those insights should develop a similar ability unless they are afraid of being like those blind men who make false judgements about the elephant they touch. If Taoist claims about the importance of knowing our inner energies and refining our mind to an awareness of the unseen truth are true, then how can we understand or even go as far as to evaluate their teachings with the mere analysis of our unrefined intellect and mind? However, researchers continue to treat subtle realities of the Taoism tradition and life in general as if those realities could be successfully manipulated, analysed and appropriately understood by an analytical mind common to everybody. Isn't it one more unconscious assumption of researchers that is rarely considered? Perhaps due to this assumption even in Kirkland's book, who dared to touch upon the “unseen reality” so often neglected by scholars, this idea remains just an idea merely playing the vague role of yet another intellectual concept and providing little clue to the practical ways of peering into the unseen reality.

*The Enduring Tradition* could serve as a brilliant book for those who want to improve their knowledge of the scholarly achievements in the field, especially for those

readers who have at least little time to read additional works from the sources that Kirkland quotes and grounds his reasoning on. The book could also be useful for the specialists as a generator of new insights, as well as a reference book in researches on Taoism. I think that for readers who don't know anything or know very little about the Taoist tradition or at least know a few of its texts, as well as for those who are more interested in the practical aspects and applications of Taoism than in theoretical scholarly analysis, the book would be somewhat difficult to grasp. Kirkland discusses various historical events and phenomena of Taoism in an attitude that his reader is more or less familiar with various intricacies of the subject. Nevertheless, the book is interesting to read, and from its first pages on it kindles the hope that soon many of the hidden mysteries of Taoism, covered by complicated thoughts, stereotypes and not fully successful researches, will be revealed.

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