



University of Tennessee, Knoxville

## TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange

---

Masters Theses

Graduate School

---

8-2008

# American Daoism: A New Religious Movement in Global Contexts

Steven San-Hu Chan  
*University of Tennessee - Knoxville*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_gradthes](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes)



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Chan, Steven San-Hu, "American Daoism: A New Religious Movement in Global Contexts. " Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2008.  
[https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_gradthes/3652](https://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/3652)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of TRACE: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [trace@utk.edu](mailto:trace@utk.edu).

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Steven San-Hu Chan entitled "American Daoism: A New Religious Movement in Global Contexts." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Philosophy.

Dr. Miriam Levering, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Dr. Mark Hulsether, Dr. Rachelle Scott

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting a thesis written by Steven San-Hu Chan entitled “American Daoism: A New Religious Movement in Global Contexts.” I have examined the final copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in Philosophy.

Dr. Miriam Levering, Major Professor

We have read this thesis  
and recommend its acceptance:

Dr. Mark Hulsether

Dr. Rachelle Scott

Accepted for the Council:

Dr. Carolyn R. Hodges,  
Vice Provost and  
Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

American Daoism: A New Religious Movement in Global Contexts

A Thesis  
Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Steven San-Hu Chan  
August 2008

## Abstract

This thesis explores the phenomenon of American Daoism. It assumes that American Daoism is a New Religious Movement, and argues that it has roots in counter-hegemonic religious movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I will explore these roots and describe how they are counter-hegemonic. Furthermore, I will build upon Elijah Siegler's doctoral dissertation, "The Dao of America: The History and Practice of American Daoism," by using post-modern theories of identity to discuss how American Daoist identity is formed. This thesis argues that American Daoist identity is a combination of Chinese and American cultural objects that form a hybrid religious identity.

American Daoism has largely been influenced by globalization and consumer culture. I will argue that there is some degree of commodification in American Daoism. The process of commodification is not negative, rather it facilitates American Daoism's spread into new markets. I also discuss the negative aspects of commodification in relation to Daoism, and the problems encountered when differentiating between the two.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: American Daoism: Representation and Identity.....	5
Chapter Two: Historical and Cultural Background of American Daoism.....	25
Chapter Three: Global Cultural Flows and Their Affects on Daoism.....	54
Conclusion .....	77
Works Cited .....	79
Vita.....	86

## Introduction: The Daoism of America

Daoism has been a subject of study in academia for over a century. Unfortunately, many scholars who studied Daoism in the first half of the Twentieth Century did not study Daoism for the sake of studying Daoism, but rather compared it to Christianity. Through this comparison, Daoism was deemed superstitious and fanciful because of its close interaction to the folk religions of China. Only within the last thirty years have scholars begun to break down some of the stereotypes that previous scholars and Sinologists have amassed to present an objective picture of Daoist practices and doctrines.

This thesis attempts to deal with the issue of Daoist Identity. The study of identity raises many questions: How closely is identity linked with culture? What are the effects of globalization on identity? What are the differences in cultural identity in relationship to religious identity? How do race and class affect it? All these issues must be kept in mind when discussing identity even though it can be difficult to attribute which factors are responsible for certain actions.

The first chapter addresses American Daoist identity, and to begin this discussion I will dissect the term “American Daoism.” Firstly, some scholars may call into question why I use the qualifier “American?” The phenomenon of Daoism is not limited to the United States, there are practitioners of this form of Daoism that believe the same basic philosophy as American Daoists in Europe, Canada and South America as well. The difficulties that arise are identifying who is a practitioner and then having adequate studies detailing their practices and beliefs. In this thesis, I heavily use Elijah Siegler’s doctoral dissertation that studies the practice of Daoism in the United States, and he is the person that coined the term American Daoism. Therefore for the purposes of this thesis I

will continue to use this term, although Daoism of the United States or Western Daoism could be more accurate and all encompassing.

Secondly, this term is used for the purpose of differentiation, because there are two forms of Daoism that are formally recognized by modern scholars of religion in the West today and they have different characteristics and divergent histories. In the past, Daoism has been divided into religious and philosophical categories. Religious Daoism represents the beliefs and practices of the native Chinese, while, philosophical Daoism represents the universal ideas that have been extracted from religious Daoism. American and European scholars and thinkers were the main proponents of this bifurcated model of Daoism. They proclaimed that philosophical Daoism was superior to religious Daoism. American Daoism rose out the philosophical model of Daoism and is connected to the Orientalist/ Sinologist views of Daoism. This connection will be discussed throughout the thesis, and will illustrate the divergent nature of American and Chinese Daoism.

The second chapter of this thesis will explore the history of American religious freedom and the usage of religion as a counter hegemonic tool: against traditional religions such as Christianity and against rampant consumerism and secularism (although later on I will address the cyclical nature of consumerism, religion and globalization). American Daoism can be classified into the New Age and eclectic religions, and are a significant representation of amount of religious freedom and agency that Americans have. American Daoism allows practitioners an alternative to established religions like Christianity, while maintaining their social and racial status within the US.

The second chapter will also discuss some of the movements within the history of US that have been at the forefront of New Religious Movement developments, and that



have paved the road for Asian religions to enter into the mosaic of religious practices in the US. Most of the alternative religions that will be discussed deal with the issues of health and healing, a topic that American Daoists are extremely interested in. These movements are linked together by threads of consciousness that extend across time. One of these threads is the preoccupation with bodily health and the condition of oneself in the mortal realm. Another of these threads is the idea that there is something else out there besides the religious experiences that one grows up with. An individual undergoes transformation through seeking out religions to find fulfillment in one's own spiritual experiences.

The religious practices that I will discuss (Quakerism, Mesmerism, Spiritualism, American Buddhism, etc.) have commonalities in purpose with American Daoism. First, to some degree, these religions represent counter hegemonic movements that went against the established religions, and claimed a better, more efficient way of attaining spiritual achievements. Second, these religions have been commodified, as all religions need to be in order to survive. These religions were marketed to individuals and were part of the exchange between individuals and groups. Lastly, these religions represent the history of Wade Clark Roof's spiritual seekers present in the early United States and their ability to exercise their rights of religious freedom. These religions would not have survived in the US had religious freedom been outlawed, and would have been stamped out by most established Christian groups.

Finally, the third chapter will explore some of the theoretical frameworks in which American Daoism can be placed. Since, American Daoism is a product of globalization and industrialization. I will explore the aspects of globalization and how it

affects culture. Through globalization cultures evolve, change and mix together to form new cultural forms. These hybrids contain elements from the previous cultural forms, but often new cultural practices can form as well as new ideologies. American Daoism is a product of such a merging between American capitalism, Orientalism and Chinese religious philosophy.

This thesis intends to build upon Siegler's work and his discussion of American Daoist identity. Through my discussion of globalization and hybrid cultural forms I want to recognize the fluid nature of cultures and the impacts of other cultures on native cultures, in this case American spirituality meets Daoism. Theorists such as Arjun Appadurai and Pierre Bordieu have much to offer to identity theory and the recombination of religions in the study of New Religious Movements.

## Chapter One: American Daoism: Representation and Identity

### I. A Debate on Identity

American Daoist identity has been called into question by some scholars, who deny that American Daoism is Daoism at all. Russell Kirkland argues that American Daoism is based on a “false categorical distinction between “philosophical Taoism” and “religious Taoism”.”<sup>1</sup> Kirkland argues that, “what passes for “Taoism” in the books at B. Dalton has nothing to do with real Taoism, if we define ‘real Taoism’ as the traditions that have been practiced in China for over twenty centuries.”<sup>2</sup> The bifurcation of philosophical Daoism and religious Daoism created the possibility for American Daoism to arise. Based on philosophical Daoism, American Daoism seeks to return to the root of Daoist practice at the time of Laozi, often translated as “Old child”, around the first century BCE. Kirkland takes issue with American Daoists because they have very little to do with the Daoism that is alive and well in China and Taiwan today. Kirkland would reject American Daoist claims to Daoist identity and write them off as faddists infatuated with “Asian” culture.

The argument in opposition to Kirkland assumes that American Daoist identity is as valid as Chinese Daoist identity and that religious identity is fundamentally decided by the practitioner. This argument is taken up by Elijah Siegler in his dissertation, “The Dao of America: The History and Practice of American Daoism”. Siegler’s study of Daoism in United States assumes that practitioners who self-identify as Daoists were indeed Daoists. The practitioners Siegler studied are the very same American Daoists with

---

<sup>1</sup> Russell Kirkland, “The Taoism of the Western Imagination and the Taoism of China: De-colonializing the Exotic Teachings of the East.” Unpublished Paper accessed on <http://www.uga.edu/religion/rk/basehtml/pubs/pres/TENN97.html>, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Kirkland, “The Taoism of the Western Imagination,” 2.

whom scholars like Russell Kirkland take issue.

For the purposes of this paper I will use Elijah Siegler's methodology: a Daoist is someone who identifies himself or herself as a Daoist; whether or not they adhere to a sense of history that scholars believe they should fall into. According to this approach, a person's religious identity can only be identified by themselves -- although Siegler does recognize that Daoism practiced in America is dissimilar to Daoism practiced in China.<sup>3</sup> By following Siegler's approach, we can simplify the thorny problem of who we should consider to be Daoists. People in the United States who claim to be practicing Daoism are American Daoists, however different they may be from most Chinese Daoists. American Daoists can be recognized by their distinctive history, practice and doctrine.

## II. What is American Daoism?

American Daoism, as coined by Siegler, is a new religious movement that has some connection to the Daoist tradition in China, but is disconnected to Chinese Daoism historically and in practice.<sup>4</sup> Siegler argues that this new religious movement has roots that begin in the nineteenth century when Daoism was first mentioned in publications until the 1970's when the "scholarly perception" of Daoism changed.<sup>5</sup> American Daoism's progress has not ended. American Daoism is alive and well today, but it is not without opposition. Some scholars and Daoist practitioners continue to believe that American Daoism is not truly Daoism. American Daoism is a distinctive tradition with a unique history shaped by its development in the United States.

American Daoists have a romanticized view of Daoism that, Siegler argues, is

---

<sup>3</sup> Elijah Siegler, "The Dao of America: The History and Practice of American Daoism" (Santa Barbara: University of California Press, 2003): 10.

<sup>4</sup> Siegler, 2003, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Siegler, 2003, 10.

more New Age/metaphysical than Chinese Daoism.<sup>6</sup> Siegler defines American Daoism with eight general characteristics. (1) it is nonexclusive: American Daoists can also be Christians, and nondogmatic; (2) it recognizes Laozi as its founder and the *Daodejing* as its scripture; (3) it is not geographically specific and does not have devotional sites nor does American Daoism have specific training or worship sites; (4) it is not historically reflective and does not recognize the history of Chinese Daoism; (5) it uses few texts other than the *Daodejing* and in some cases the *Yi Jing*; (6) it is apolitical but some American Daoists do participate in environmental groups; (7) it is not concerned with social ethics or religious ritual; (8) it is nonsectarian and nondenominational (meaning that it accepts all people to practice even from different religions).<sup>7</sup>

Siegler describes the history of American Daoism, he tells the story of how American Daoist organizations were formed and the process through which Daoism became popularized in America. The first accounts of Daoism in America and Europe came from priests and ministers who traveled to China in order to convert Chinese citizens to Christianity. These ministers were the sources of descriptive accounts that were colored with commentary from Confucian literati, who were, in totality, the keepers of Chinese history. The Confucians did not have a positive opinion on the state of Daoism in China, and condemned it as a superstitious practice.<sup>8</sup> The missionaries observed Daoist practices and then they would ask the Confucian literati about the practices, and without actually consulting Daoists the missionaries would obtain misinformation and transmit it back to Europe. Thus the accounts of missionaries were

---

<sup>6</sup> Siegler, 2003, 15.

<sup>7</sup> Siegler, 2003, 17.

<sup>8</sup> J.J. Clarke, *The Dao of the West* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2000): 37.

skewed; they reflected the ideas of the Confucian literati who believed that Daoism as it existed in China was superstitious and paganistic.<sup>9</sup> These accounts are the basis for early scholarship in Europe and America; subsequently they trickled down into today's popular literature.

The influences of Confucianist commentary regarding Daoism led to the scholar's bifurcation of Daoist thought into philosophical and religious Daoism. Scholars hailed philosophical Daoism as the original religion of China, a primordial religion that was based on universal rules that could be applied and adapted by anyone. Philosophical Daoism was the precursor to religious Daoism and was considered the untainted origin of Chinese popular religion. Religious Daoism grew out of philosophical Daoism; it was considered a mutation of the original philosophical Daoist beliefs. Religious Daoism supposedly became suffused with magic, rituals, dogmas, lineages and the quest for the ultimate goal, immortality. This is the system that American Daoists rejected: they did not recognize Chinese religious Daoism or the systems of belief that are in place for Chinese Daoists.

### III. American Daoism vs. Chinese Daoism

The following section begins with a very brief introduction to Chinese Daoist history. This will help to clarify the differences between American and Chinese Daoists. After I have outlined Chinese Daoist history, I will use Siegler's eight characteristics of American Daoists to explore and differentiate between the Daoism of America and China.

The history of Chinese Daoism is divided into different periods: Proto-Daoism, Classical Daoism, and Modern Daoism. During the Proto Daoist (pre first century CE)

---

<sup>9</sup> Clarke, 2000, 37-39.

period the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi* and the *Nei Ye*, a book that details Daoist breathing practices, were written.<sup>10</sup> It is difficult to find texts that were written during this period that would detail and explain the practices of the early Daoists. The lack of texts from this period is due to the use of oral transmission of texts, and the texts that were found did not contain information that would have been transmitted orally. Daoists, in ancient times, would not have needed explanations to the oral material within the written texts, because they would already understand the ideologies that were commonly orally transmitted. There would be a level of understanding that the texts would presuppose.

The period of Classical Daoism began in 142 CE and lasted until the end of the Tang Dynasty (8<sup>th</sup> Century CE) with the creation of the Celestial Masters. Zhangdao Ling was their founder.<sup>11</sup> This was the first known Daoist organization that had some of the rituals and practices that are extant today in China. The Celestial Masters performed public rituals and had services that could wash away sin.<sup>12</sup> They also divinized Laozi as Laojun, or Lord Lao, one of the Sanqing, translated as Three Purities (the major deities of Chinese Daoism).<sup>13</sup> Also during the period of Classical Daoism, the Shang Qing and Ling bao schools were founded. The Shang Qing School had an intricate system of internal meditation that involved the imagination of a cosmos inside the body, and through the navigation of this cosmos practitioners were able to obtain celestial immortality.<sup>14</sup> The Ling Bao School was adept at writing talismans and performing shamanic rituals.<sup>15</sup> The Celestial Masters, Shang Qing and the Ling Bao School did not have completely separate practices.

---

<sup>10</sup> James Miller, *Daoism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: One World Publications: 2003): 6.

<sup>11</sup> Miller, 2003, 8.

<sup>12</sup> Miller, 2003, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Siegler, 2003, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Miller, 2003, 9.

<sup>15</sup> Livia Kohn, *Daoism and Chinese Culture* (Cambridge: Three Pines Press, 2001): 92.

The Modern Daoist Period began during the Song Dynasty. During this time a new sect, the Complete Perfection School was founded by Wang Zhe, later named Wang Chong Yang. This school had distinctive practices: it was monastic based, involved a strong sense of virtue and morals, performed public services and helped the needy. Along with their humanitarian good works the Complete Perfection School was practiced in internal meditations that were meant to help them achieve immortality.<sup>16</sup> This school survives today in the Southern Provinces of China and Hong Kong.

Just through this short introduction to the different schools and periods of Chinese Daoism we can see a strong sense of history and continuity. Several of Siegler's characteristics of American Daoists can be placed in direct opposition to Chinese Daoism. Siegler argues that American Daoists are nondenominational and nonexclusive. For instance, in an American Daoist organization you may join the group and perform the practices, but you may also be a church going Christian. Being a Daoist in the US does not exclude you from other religions because Daoism is not seen as a religion but a philosophy. In Chinese Daoism, at least in Proto and Classical Daoism, there is a clear demarcation between being a Daoist and being a Confucian or a Buddhist.<sup>17</sup>

American Daoists only have one text, the *Daodejing*, whereas Chinese Daoists have texts that are compiled into the Daoist Canon, which is composed of many, many volumes. Each school of Chinese Daoism had its own texts and read them in a ritualistic fashion. Chinese Daoists have added their own commentaries on certain texts in the Daoist Canon. Granted, not every Daoist school in China had access to all the texts within the canon, but each school would read and used the texts that suited their

---

<sup>16</sup>Miller, 2003, 11-12.

<sup>17</sup>Clarke, 2001, 39-40.



particular school for ritual purposes. American Daoists are also historically unreflective; they do not hold to lineages. Conversely, Chinese Daoists take their lineages very seriously, because it is through a certain lineage that Chinese Daoists obtain their authentication. Although American Daoists do not claim the Chinese Daoist lineages of the Celestial Masters or the Great Perfection School, they do lay claim to their own lineages through “secret” teachings that their distinctly Chinese teachers brought with them overseas. American Daoists do not recognize Chinese Daoist history, but they do create a history and lineage of their own.

Siegler also argues that American Daoists are not geographically specific. They can and do practice anywhere: often they do not have a place where they can go and congregate. American Daoist practitioners consider their spirituality to be a philosophy of life that it can be practiced anywhere. American Daoists do not recognize the majority of holy sites and mountains of Chinese Daoists, but Chinese Daoists place a great deal of emphasis on holy pilgrimage sites. Chinese Daoists have many holy sites and pilgrimage sites based on sacred mountains. The mountains are not the only sacred spaces that Chinese Daoists have; there are also famous temples and monasteries that have historic and mythic significance.

Most American Daoists do not recognize nor practice rituals of Chinese Daoism; their practice is essentially devoid of religious ritual that Chinese Daoists would consider central, such as pilgrimage to holy sites, daily prayer, and giving offerings to the pantheon of Daoist gods. Many American Daoist practices are related to the topics of health and nature. Health is an important aspect of American Daoism and many American Daoists link health to the natural balance of the body, Yin Yang Theory in

Chinese Medicine. American Daoists will often practice some form of exercise such as Tai Chi or Chi Gung and will also participate in acupuncture or acupressure sessions.<sup>18</sup> Chinese Daoists, however, go to temples to burn incense, pay Daoist priests to perform funerals and exorcisms, and worship the Daoist cosmological gods in the proscribed way. Ritual and the community of priests that serve them bind their religious lives. American Daoists are not bound by ritual and do not seek that sort of constraint; conversely, Chinese Daoism is a structured religious tradition prescribing to rules set forth by tradition and sanctioned by the hierarchy of Daoist priests.

The discussions of these characteristics show that American Daoists and Chinese Daoists are vastly different and practice profoundly different religions. American Daoism and Chinese Daoism do share the same figure of Laozi and the book that is often attributed to him, the *Daodejing*, but the similarities are less striking than the differences. American Daoism claims that they pick up where Laozi left off, and that they are continuing the legacy of his universal religion. While Chinese Daoists have a continued history of practice dating back to Laozi, American Daoists believe that Chinese Daoism had become superstitious and infected with popular religion and had moved away from the purity that Laozi had once envisioned, and that they are now returning Daoism to its rightful place. By viewing these two religions side by side is one able to find the discontinuities of the two religions and explore where the religions diverged.

Modern scholars have determined that the distinction between philosophical and religious Daoism to be an arbitrary bifurcation which has been associated to aggressive imperialist motives of Western Europeans and the colonization of the Asian countries.

---

<sup>18</sup> Siegler, 2003, 31.

Colonization births an ideological concept that is rooted in Enlightenment thought and Orientalism. To move the discussion forward, I will discuss Orientalist thought and how it spawned American Daoism.

#### IV. The Orientals and the Orientalists

Now, I will set the phenomenon of American Daoism within the theoretical discussion of Orientalism and globalization. It is important to include these theories because they help to explain how Daoism came to America, what images and ideas the West has commonly associated with East Asian religions and why some Americans decided to devote themselves to Daoist practices.

Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, is an important theory used when studying early scholarly representations of Asian culture and religion. Said views Orientalism as a phenomenon that is composed of three interrelated parts: the academic study of the Orient as a region, the mindset based on the dichotomy of Oriental (East) and Occidental (West) and the institution of the West's control and domination of the East.<sup>19</sup> Orientalism emerged from centuries of European colonialism. The imagined superiority of European countries and the misrepresentations of Asian and African countries laid the foundation for Oriental scholarship. Said critiques the Orientalists' creation of the dichotomy of East and West. The colonizers imagined and represented the colonized as an "other" that became the polar opposites of the West. The West is superior and the East is inferior; the West is rational and the East is irrational. These sentiments were written in scholarly works and popular literature of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

---

<sup>19</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, Vintage Press: 1978): 2-3.

In *Orientalism*, Said discusses the importance of texts and the power that is associated with the written word. The academy of Orientalists had tremendous influence over anyone who had not experienced the “East” directly; in most cases the Orientalists’ words were taken as truth because they had “expertise” within the field. The texts that were written about China, India, and Islamic Countries were influential with fellow scholars and the stereotypes that were written were continually perpetuated and re-circulated. These texts were often the only sources of knowledge dealing in a particular area of the “Orient” that people would read. Through the “power” of these texts the Europeans controlled the images of the “Orient” and often the “others” were portrayed in poor light.

The “power” of the texts resided both in the texts themselves and the authors of these texts. Orientalists were able to control the image of the “Orient” by constructing them as the “other.” Furthermore, Orientalists decided what the “other” would be to the Occidental West, and this was where the Orientalists’ power resided. The Orientalists created a dichotomous relationship between East and West based on their own observations. Some Orientalists did not see civilized societies in the East, but, rather they saw idolaters who needed the word of Christ. Other Orientalists found Asian religions such as Buddhism and Daoism intriguing and different, but did not accept the cultural trappings of these religions. The latter group of Orientalists combined Asian religions with Enlightenment science and believed that these religions were universal in nature and could be successfully adapted to Western practice.

The strict dichotomy of West and East was clearly shown through the literary texts that Said reviewed. The “Orient” was at best the cradle of civilization, an area that

had not changed since the beginning of humankind. At worst, the “Orient” was an area where backward people dwelt and superstitious animism ruled. The Christian West’s need to civilize the “Orient” and bring them into the modern age was strong and the West considered themselves far more advanced than the East. Said sums up his discussion well by saying, “to speak of someone as an Oriental, as Orientalists did, was not just to designate that person as someone whose language, geography and history were the stuff of learned treatises: it also was often meant as a derogatory expression signifying a lesser breed of human being.”<sup>20</sup>

Critics of Said’s work claim that he over-generalizes and that he is anti-western. They also argue that Said glosses over the Orientalist works that are not derogatory to indigenous peoples that are being studied. Said’s position in *Orientalism* was not anti-western, but it emphasized the changes that Colonialism and Imperialism forced upon the people of the Orient and their culture. Said’s work was anti-essentialistic and anti-reductionistic. Orientalists sought to encompass all of the “Orient” into one group and essentialize their culture into its simplest form and generally reduce their cultures to a few characteristics. Said recognized that the different cultures and subjects of Orientalist study were not able to be reduced to a single group and called for them to be studied in their own historical and cultural contexts.

By flagging the term “Orientalist,” Said brought attention to the inequalities of representation of many people in Asia and Africa. Although he was not the first person to focus on these inequalities, his book was widely read and received a landslide of criticism from the Orientalists as well as some of the “Orientals” that Said was trying to help.

---

<sup>20</sup> Said, 1978: 340.

From Said's scholarship there emerged many scholars who wanted to discuss the people of the "Orient" with their own terms and not compare them to the West.

Building upon the anti-Orientalist work of Said, Richard King wrote *Orientalism and Religion*. King agrees with Said and discusses Orientalism by looking at the mutual effect of culture/religion and power. He says,

"Power is not mere material conditions without cultural trace since there is no Power in the abstract – power, indeed, is constituted in particular cultural forms. Equally, cultural forms are embedded in a field of power relations. It is important to intersect with Globalization theory."<sup>21</sup>

King argues that power and religion have a strong connection to each other, but are often discussed separately as if they are separate entities that have nothing to do with each other. In reality cultural and religious forms contain an element of power, and are used to wield power. Power is not separate from culture and religion because "power is constituted in particular cultural forms."<sup>22</sup>

In addition to an emphasis on power and hegemony, King seeks to recast the Orientalist dichotomy because he considers Said's strict dichotomy too close-minded. He criticizes Said for only representing Western Orientalist thought as the powerful, but not including the "natives" of the Orient within the "field of power." King argues that "native" peoples have the ability to push back against the hegemonic forces of Western Orientalism through the system that the Western powers have set up within the colonized countries. King further argues for an emphasis on the heterogeneity of culture.<sup>23</sup> The heterogeneity of culture assumes that the indigenous people of the colonized country have agency. King and other anthropologists have labeled these indigenous people as the

---

<sup>21</sup> Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 1999): 1.

<sup>22</sup> King, 1999:1.

<sup>23</sup> King, 1999: 203-210.

subaltern. Accompanying the emergence of subaltern studies there is a broadening of categories, because subaltern scholars find it insufficient to discuss the complex relationships and power plays of Colonialism in dichotomous polarized entities.<sup>24</sup>

The ‘autonomous domain’ of the subaltern is a powerful factor when countering the hegemony of Western Orientalism because often the power of Western imperialism is over estimated.<sup>25</sup> According to Homi Bhabha, contact with the subaltern has had a distinct effect on the imperialists, abroad and at “home.” Bhabha argues that the hybridization of culture is the result of contact. The cultures of the colonized and the colonizer do not exist in vacuums, but are subject to change, especially when they are forced together through an act of violence, such as colonization.<sup>26</sup> The effect of this collision of culture is the hybridization of culture, where the hegemonic culture takes on some aspects of the subaltern and the subaltern are also altered by the hegemonic culture. For culture to be this adaptable it is necessary for Bhabha to reject the Enlightenment trends that considered culture to be a monolithic, static aspect of life, and to define culture as a dynamic and highly malleable form. Culture is considered to be malleable because there is little or no evidence that a people’s culture remains the same over time without change. When people make contact through an exchange of ideas, services and/or goods is where cultural change or hybridity occurs.

Accompanying the concept of hybridization, a question of representation arises. Who represents the norm of Indian or Daoist culture? Is there a representative for the subaltern? Does the subaltern have a voice? Representation is created by the hegemonic

---

<sup>24</sup> King, 1999: 204.

<sup>25</sup> King, 1999: 204.

<sup>26</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994): 52-55.

power, and often if the subaltern groups want to have their voices heard they must find a means through the system the hegemonic powers have created. Homi Bhabha explored this issue and argued that the representatives of Indian culture were the social elites who had adopted British culture and thought into their own culture. The Indian elite's acceptance and practice of British culture allowed them to gain a foothold in the political system that was put in place by the British.

In the case of India, Britishness seeped into the education of the social elite, and as the future leaders of India, they were taught British customs and given a formal Western education. These elites were also raised as Hindus and were expected to perform their duties to their caste and family. They had to discover methods of blending two cultures, and reconcile the differences between the contrasting cultural ideologies. These elite Indians were able to obtain and maintain the hegemonic position that the British occupied, after becoming British, in a sense. They were able to subvert the British hegemonic regime with their own leadership consequently building upon the groundwork of the former regime.<sup>27</sup>

Through the educational system and the civilizing of the Indian elites the British were able to create a group of people that were more to their liking. These elites became the representatives of the Hindu religion and Indian culture to the British and the rest of the world. Utilizing Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridization and its effect on the subaltern we can explain the emergence of the "Westernized" indigenous elite. This "Westernized" elite is steeped in Enlightenment thought and holds the same ideologies that the British have. They come to see India in the light that the British do and seek to

---

<sup>27</sup> King, 1999: 116.



change their environment through to keep up with the Western world, as the colonizers had tried to do.

Postmodern theories of identity build upon the Said's work. Rather than dividing the world into a single "us/them" dichotomy, we should recognize that there are many kinds of "us" and "thems." The strict dichotomy of West and East is not valid anymore, but it has had a large impact on the way the West views the East. The Orientalist's theories have proliferated for so long that the concepts have become embedded in Western thinking; they have created many hybridized cultural practices and new religious movements. American Daoism rose from the ideologies of Orientalism and Colonialism, and has flourished. Although American Daoism has a particular meaning to its practitioners it is difficult to nail down who is practicing what and why? The difficulty lies within identifying Daoists and differentiating them from other Daoists because their practices are so eclectic and diverse. Many people just want to increase their levels of health; whereas others have meaningful, life altering, spiritual experiences.

This brief discussion of anti-Orientalist thought and postmodern theories of identity are the basis of my discussion for American Daoist identity. Orientalism and Colonialism, in a large part, formed some of the basic assumptions of American Daoism, but we will not assume that American Daoism is not a valid practice simply because of its early philosophical influences. Instead, we will look at American Daoism as a viable New Religious Movement that has garnered a following in the US. American Daoism, irregardless of its origins, is a hybridized religion; as we will see, it combines aspects of Daoism with the culture of the United States.

## V. American Daoist Identity

American Daoist identity is a slippery topic to pin down. American Daoists are a diverse group, with subdivisions that perform different practices. Some subgroups do not recognize other subgroups as Daoist and most American Daoist groups do not recognize the “superstitious” Chinese Daoist as Daoists. American Daoist identity, as described by Siegler, is an interesting a mix of beliefs and practices. I hope to advance the discussion of identity by using post-structural and post-modern theories of identity to help define Daoist identity. By discussing theories of hybridization and globalization we can begin to see how American Daoists formed their own identities.

First, we should look at how this form of Daoism came to exist. Homi Bhabha’s useful theory of hybridization and his study of Indian elites are relevant to our discussion because American Daoism can be viewed as a hybrid culture. It is an amalgamation of Western rational thought and Chinese Daoist philosophy, or at least an Orientalist approach to Daoist philosophy. Chinese religions experienced the same forms of Westernization within China through colonization and domination by colonial forces. The “Westernized,” Orientalist conceptions of Chinese culture were exported from China, and were the dominant representations of Chinese religions in Europe and America.

The previous discussion of the bifurcation of Chinese Daoism into philosophical and religious Daoism is an example of the Orientalist categories that were created. The Orientalists presented a romanticized version of Daoism in an effort to cast aside the Daoist practices that they were observing in China. *Religion of China* was Max Weber’s compendium of Chinese religions that followed his famous book *Religion of India*. In *Religion of China*, Weber contrasted Confucianism and Daoism as orthodox and

heterodox, respectively. He found the Confucian emphasis on loyalty to the emperor to be appealing and he applauded their respect for the government. Conversely, he depicted Daoists as superstitious, mystical and often at odds with Confucianism.<sup>28</sup> Weber's description of Daoism suggests his knowledge of the split within Daoism. He writes,

having repeatedly spoken of “successors” and “disciples” of Lao-tzu we should realize that this designation does not quite agree with the facts. Lao-tzu, whatever his personal teaching may actually have been, has hardly left a “school.” However, there were philosophers quite some time before Ssu-ma Ch’ien who referred to Lao-tzu as an authority. In far later historical times in China, mysticism found some eminent representatives who at least partially considered themselves as “disciples” of Lao-tzu. This development is only of limited interest here.<sup>29</sup>

This paragraph indicates many things: 1) the division of philosophical and religious Daoism was known to Weber; 2) Weber considered “mysticism” or religious Daoism to be of “limited interest” in the scope of Chinese religions; 3) the school of Laozi was recognized as the “true” school of Daoism; and 4) Weber's information pertaining to Daoism came from two main sources: the Daodejing and the works of Confucian literati. From *Religions in China* it is clear that the Orientalist ideas had taken root in European and American academic works by the mid-twentieth century, and the this Orientalist version of Daoism was the common method of discussing Daoism. The Orientalist vision of Daoism became the representation of Daoism in the West, and was the authorized version of Daoism by the academics and sinologists.

American Daoism is one modern incarnation of philosophical Daoism with some similar philosophical approaches; in addition, it also incorporates practices of health and well being. It has been deemed by modern Daoist scholars as a misinterpretation of Daoism. As we have seen, scholars such as Kirkland go as far to say that American

---

<sup>28</sup> Max Weber, *Religions of China* (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1951): 181-190.

<sup>29</sup> Weber, 1951: 189.

Daoism is not Daoism at all, and that it is a collection of practices that have historically been Daoist, but the real essence of Daoism has been left out. Previously, I have described American Daoist identity as self-identification as a Daoist. This definition of identity seems fine as a preliminary definition of American Daoists, but we can deepen the approach theoretically by grounding it in post-structuralist identity models. For example, using Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridization, we can clearly see that American Daoism is a hybrid of Western thought and indigenous Chinese cultural objects. As I will show in further chapters, these objects -- *taiji*, Chinese Medicine and the *Daodejing* -- have been adapted to life in the contemporary United States. When American Daoists adopt these practices they seem to meld the practices into their lives and they genuinely believe in the philosophy behind their practices, but they still remain fundamentally American.

It is also useful to discuss American Daoist identity in terms of global flows of culture, and how these flows help to develop personal and social identity. Arjun Appadurai problematizes modern conceptions of culture and calls for a new theory of culture that allows variant forms of culture to be included into rubric of culture. In his book, *Modernity at Large*, Appadurai uses culture as a heuristic device to discuss difference.<sup>30</sup> Culture describes situated difference, in relation to something local, embodied and significant.<sup>31</sup> He defines culture as "a pervasive dimension of human discourse that exploits difference to generate diverse conceptions of group identity."<sup>32</sup> Appadurai argues for overlapping cultural zones that form group identity because it is

---

<sup>30</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1996): 12.

<sup>31</sup> Appadurai, 1996: 13.

<sup>32</sup> Appadurai, 1996: 13.

difficult to tell where one culture ends and another culture begins.

Culture, due to the quick pace of globalization, must be altered to keep up. Culture is no longer isolated, and it may never have been isolated. With the invention of the internet, cultural forms are available at the touch of a button. We are constantly being exposed to other forms of culture and to continue using a rigid categorization of culture is unreasonable. Appadurai argues that people interact and their cultures influence each other, and this interaction creates cultural spheres. With the quickening pace of Globalization, cultural spheres can span the globe. Chinese immigrants in America can remain in touch with their Chinese culture and maintain their identity. Culture and identity is becoming less restricted by geography and place, but is entering into the realm of imagined space.<sup>33</sup>

The impact of Appadurai's theory of culture is very large indeed. Culture is no longer bound by geography and cultural forms are malleable and adaptable. Appadurai's theory dovetails well with Bhabha's theory of hybridization and builds usefully on the rigid approaches of Orientalism set forth by Said. To describe American Daoism as a hybrid cultural form that is not bound by geography would be fitting. American Daoism is not grounded by place, but is based on practice. The forms of practice that American Daoists perform bind them to their group, and award them their group identity.

American Daoists are able to link with other Daoists across the United States, Canada and Europe through the internet, telephones and more efficient travel from place to place. There are many websites where Daoists, or just about anyone interested, can learn about Daoism. The phenomenon of American Daoism is not isolated; it is

---

<sup>33</sup> Appadurai, 1996: 30.

happening in other parts of the Western world, but Siegler does not discuss this because he is focusing on Daoism in America. I believe the important issue here is that American Daoists use these global connections to help them pursue their spirituality in a group when possible, but mostly individually.

Furthermore, based on these theories, American and Chinese Daoism have equal validity because each religion was formed in their own cultural contexts that allowed their followers a means to cope with their immediate surroundings. Like the Dao, Daoism evolved and continued to change. American Daoism may be considered an Orientalist creation by some scholars, but it has special meaning to its adherents.

## VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, American Daoism is a valid cultural category and there are people that choose it as their identity. When Daoist identity is defined through post-colonial theory and anti-Orientalist thought, the argument for American Daoism is much stronger. American Daoism differs clearly from Chinese Daoism, but it is distinctive in its own rights. American Daoism cannot be tossed aside as a remnant of Orientalism, but must be given due credit because it is an example of the diversification of cultural forms in America, it has a history, and not to mention the practitioners who are American Daoists that have real experiences. There have been historical and cultural underpinnings in America that have allowed Americans to take up the mantle of Daoism, and these ideas will be explored further in the next section.

## Chapter 2: Historical and Cultural Underpinnings of American Daoism

### I. Introduction

To understand American Daoism, it is important to find some of the underlying factors and events that propelled Americans to seek out a new religion. At first glance, American Daoism seems very dissimilar to the historically and socially hegemonic religion of America, Protestant Christianity. Many Protestants consider Christianity to be the first civilized religion in the United States. In this chapter I will argue that American Daoism is a contemporary religious movement that has risen from a long history of religious freedom in the United States. Religious freedom in the US has allowed many groups to break away from orthodox Christian practice and begin new churches, denominations and religions.

The presence of Christianity, dissenters of Christianity and the influx of immigrants from various countries contribute to the formation of new religions. New ideas, new cultures and people were introduced to America through immigration, colonialization and imperialism. These global cultural flows have allowed the US to become simultaneously religiously diverse, yet culturally segregated. Due to various cultural influences in the US, we have seen hybridization occurring in many areas where cultural contact occurs, creating layers to the social, political and economic hierarchy of this country.

This chapter seeks to find the intersections between Christianity and American Daoism. In the previous chapter, I discuss some of the characteristics of American Daoism and how we can talk about Daoist identity. One characteristic is non-exclusive practice, meaning that there are American Daoists who claim both Christian and Daoist

identity. Then there are others that claim Daoist identity with other eclectic Asian practices and have rejected orthodox Christianity. Even though American Daoism has Chinese origins, it has been linked to Western rational thought by Orientalist scholars. This combination of philosophical ideas has created a religion that can be accepted by rational Westerners.

First, I will explore some of the roots of Daoism in America through the history of Chinese immigration. I will look into some of the religious and cultural practices Chinese immigrants brought. The history of Chinese immigration is important to this discussion because their religious practices were some of the practices that helped to form American Daoism. Most Chinese immigrants practiced some form of Daoist ritual – praying to Daoist gods, funerary rites or shrine worship – which was considered religious Daoism. These immigrant practices are examples of what American Daoists do not believe, and it is important to contrast the two types of Daoism that exist side by side in the contemporary United States.

Next, I will discuss some of the controversies that surround American Daoist masters, their practices and how they fit into the theoretical model that I am using. The subject of this paper is not to judge the validity of these American Daoist masters' teachings nor to judge the truthfulness of their life stories. The aim is to ground American Daoist history within a framework of theories that help us to categorize and discuss American Daoist identity.

Then, I will survey the history of counter hegemonic spiritualities in the United States and their associations with health-oriented practices. These health based spiritualities are not directly linked to American Daoism, but they have similar goals.



These health-oriented spiritualities represent a desire for religions that address the issues of the body. The discussion will progress from the nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century – when Asian spirituality was particularly in vogue and a small percentage of Americans rejected the foundational principles of Christianity and actively sought out different religions – to the contemporary religious context.

The spiritual and health based religions have a long history in the United States as a counter hegemonic tool to combat the oppressive orthodoxy of Catholic and later Protestant Christianity. I will illustrate this point by giving many examples of religious movements that have acted in this capacity. The formation and the practice of these counter hegemonic movements helped to lay the foundation for the New Age religions of the 1960's and 1970's to continue the fight against hegemony. American Daoism falls into this category of religious practice. In this chapter we will find that many people who practice American Daoism are disenchanted with Christianity and actively seek new religions.

## II. A Short History of Chinese Migration

To begin, I want to explore the introduction of Chinese immigrants to the United States and treatment of Chinese immigrants after relocating to America. Chinese and other Asian migration to the United States has been poorly represented in American historical writing, especially before the past couple of decades. Asian immigrants who moved, willingly and forcibly, to America have been given little recognition in textbooks and public education. This lack of discussion on this topic is similar to the lack of discussion of Native American expulsion from ancestral lands and the steady push to move them onto reservations. The neglect of these topics signals a certain amount of

embarrassment at the treatment of these people and an effort to forget about them. This topic is relevant to the study because Chinese immigration to the US and the treatment of immigrants is indicative of how white Americans saw and interpreted Chinese culture.

Ronald Takaki, in *Strangers from a Different Shore*, expressed a need to reintroduce the neglected Asian American pioneers and settlers that helped to build the Transcontinental Railroad into American history. Takaki writes, “We need to “re-vision” US history to include Asians in a broad and comparative way.”<sup>34</sup> *Strangers from a Different Shore* discusses some of the issues Asian immigrants had to face and the prejudices of white Americans and European immigrants. This is an important story for historical purposes and as well as for the purposes of this chapter, because it shows some of the images that Americans had of Chinese immigrants, and it raises a fascinating question: how can white Americans adopt a religion from a people of which they disliked so intensely?

Chinese immigration increased due to a need for laborers increased during the Gold Rush of 1849 and the erection of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1863. Many Chinese men were taken from China and moved to the United States, Cuba, Brazil, and Hawaii.<sup>35</sup> During the initial period of Chinese immigration, before Chinese migrants were considered an economic threat to lower class white migrants, the Chinese migrants were admired for their strong work ethic and their industriousness.<sup>36</sup> White Americans had difficulty placing the Chinese within a racial class. Their skin was definitely colored, but their attitudes toward work and abilities to endure long hours of work were

---

<sup>34</sup> Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1989): 7.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Kwong and Dusanka Miscevic, *Chinese America* (New York: The New Press, 2005): 4-13.

<sup>36</sup> Kwong and Miscevic, 2005: 41-43.

considered unparalleled by the White Americans.<sup>37</sup>

From the 1850's, companies were having difficulty obtaining cheap reliable labor for work on the frontier. At first, companies were reluctant to retain Chinese laborers, but they found that Chinese immigrants could be obtained at cheap prices and the companies were able to keep them under contracts. Under the coolie system, which allowed buyers to contract Asian immigrants as indentured workers for eight or more years, Chinese immigrants and other Asian immigrants were charged vast amounts of money for passage across the Pacific Ocean in return for indentured servitude.<sup>38</sup> Kwong and Takaki agree that there were Chinese coolies that were taken to Cuba and Peru, but Takaki argues that coolies were not brought to the Americas. He argues that immigration to America was "by and large, free and voluntary."<sup>39</sup> It may be as Takaki argues, but the coolie system was in place and Europeans as well as Americans coerced Chinese men to sign coolie contracts in exchange for the promised opportunities of riches.

California was named Gold Mountain by the coolie traders and the Chinese men who wished to come to America to try their fortunes. According to Takaki, the majority of Chinese immigrants to make it to America had paid their debts in China or borrowed money to pay off their debts, allowing them to arrive in America to do what they needed to do. Chinese immigrants wanted to mine for gold, but often they were run off of the land that gold had been found on. Since many Chinese were not able to work the mines for their livings, they turned to entrepreneurial activities: opening shops, laundry services,

---

<sup>37</sup> Kwong and Miscevic, 2005: 27-29.

<sup>38</sup> Kwong and Miscevic, 2005:

<sup>39</sup> Takaki, 1989: 36.

restaurants and hotels.<sup>40</sup> By the 1860's, more laborers were needed as the Transcontinental Railroad was to be built. Train companies hired thousands of Chinese workers to lay railings; this increased number of Chinese immigrants that were brought in each year.

After immigrating to America, the Chinese needed to build an infrastructure to support their communities. Kwong and Miscivenic discuss the emergence of *tongs* and *huiguans* as the institutional structures that they put into place.. The *huiguans* were recognized by the Chinese government and the local government of California while the *tongs* were not. These associations' "claimed purpose of existence was to provide services and protection to members, and they did hire lawyers to challenge discriminatory US laws that affected the entire Chinese American community."<sup>41</sup> These associations soon became money lenders and credit holding groups for their more affluent members and acted as the go-between for immigrants and white Americans.

As the Chinese communities grew in size and wealth, other immigrant communities came to resent them. Other European immigrants such as the Irish were quick to violence against African-American and Asian-American communities. The Irish were considered, by many Protestant legislators, to be on a similar level as Chinese immigrants and African-Americans, and partly due to such classification, the three groups were often in direct competition. The Irish forcibly removed colored immigrants from their own lands and businesses so that the Irish could take over.<sup>42</sup> There was a tremendous amount of tension between immigrants from different Asian (mainly between

---

<sup>40</sup> Kwong and Miscevic, 2005: 77-83.

<sup>41</sup> Kwong and Miscevic, 2005: 84.

<sup>42</sup> Kwong and Miscevic, 2005: 71.

the Chinese and Japanese) and European countries as well as some tension with the African-Americans, although there were not many African-Americans in the western US at this time. The economic competition turned into an issue of race, with the help of anti-Chinese and anti-black legislation, the European immigrants gained the upper hand.

The period around the Civil War was difficult for African-American and Asian immigrants. There were many restrictions on people of color due to the issues of race and racial superiority. Takaki argues that Chinese immigrant labor programs were designed to bring Chinese into the country to work for a period of time, then to send the laborers back to China and bring in a new batch of laborers. The Chinese were never meant to settle and become citizens, because many legislators and common people believed that America was racially homogenous.<sup>43</sup> “Historically, whites generally perceived America as racially homogenous and Americans as white.”<sup>44</sup> Thus the entry of Chinese laborers into America was perceived as a threat to racial and national identity.

The colored threat to white racial superiority was a strong motivation to enact all sorts of anti-Asian and anti-Black laws that restricted the access of colored people to the basic rights of US citizens. For instance, in 1880 California lawmakers passed a law that prohibited a white person from marrying a Chinese, Black or ‘mulatto.’<sup>45</sup> Chinese women were targeted as prostitutes and spreaders of disease. Chinese laborers were charged extra fees and fines for being Chinese.

Anti-Chinese legislation culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was meant to stop Chinese immigrants from coming to the United States and settling. This bill

---

<sup>43</sup> Takaki, 1989: 100.

<sup>44</sup> Takaki, 1989: 100.

<sup>45</sup> Takaki, 1989: 102.

was passed by Congress in 1882; it not only suspended entry of Chinese laborers, but also prohibited state and federal courts from naturalizing Chinese immigrants.<sup>46</sup> This act would effectively stop Chinese immigration to the United States for the next six decades, until 1943.

Kwong and Miscevic argue that after WW II America entered the global scene as an industrialized nation, it no longer had a high need for unskilled laborers. Instead, it needed skilled laborers, educated through the higher education system, who could quickly adapt to the ever changing industrialized environment.<sup>47</sup> Congress lifted the Chinese Exclusion Act because it desired skilled workers and professionals. After the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed, Chinese immigrants began to pour into the US again. Chinese professionals and intellectuals fleeing a China caught up in civil war came to the United States to start a new life and avoid the turmoil of the Communist takeover.

After gaining a foothold in the United States, the Asian immigrants begin to view each other as brethren with a common cause. Chinese-American and Japanese-American status in the US was always tenuous. Although they had been granted citizenship the issues of racism still remained. In the late 1960's the Asian American movement gains momentum, as a struggle for human rights wages in the US. During this period Asian Americans protested for their rights and Asian American writers wrote about what it meant to be Asian in the US.

Two of the most famous writers during this time period were Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan. They viewed themselves as a hybrid of Chinese and American culture. This hybrid was created over hundreds of years "separated by geography, culture, and

---

<sup>46</sup> Kwong and Miscevic, 2005: 101.

<sup>47</sup> Kwong and Miscevic, 2005: 235-236.

history from China and Japan.”<sup>48</sup> Asian Americans were not distinctly white Chinese, rather they were a unique amalgamation of the two.<sup>49</sup> Although Chin saw this hybridity, he also recognized that for an Asian American it was essential not to neglect or be ashamed of his/her Asian history or background. Chin did not consider assimilation into white society as a “model minority” -- a tractable minority that toes the line of general white conformity -- a positive thing. Chin fought racial stereotypes through his writing and urged others to do the same. The Asian American movement shows us the creation of two different Chinese American profile types: the “Americanized” Chinese American and the radical unassimilated Chinese American. These two types of immigrants would move to different locations within the American social and economic scheme.

For some Chinese immigrants it was difficult to assimilate into everyday American life, and they sought out places that seemed familiar and offered a refuge for them. After the 1965 Immigration Act was passed, the numbers of Chinese immigrants grew exponentially, and many immigrants sought out the remnants of the Chinatowns in urban centers such as New York and San Francisco. As these communities grew, the limited economic and geographical resources restricted further growth of these communities. The Chinatowns were small in comparison to the whole of the city; immigrants would cram themselves into the limited space to find jobs. The land and buildings were bought up by migrants who came earlier. The Chinatowns were so jam-packed with people that they reached a saturation point and some of the immigrants had to search for other places to settle.

---

<sup>48</sup> Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong. *Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1983), vii-viii.

<sup>49</sup> Kwong and Miscevic, 277.

As some of the early immigrants achieved economic success, they began to invest in real estate. They would buy, renovate and then sell.<sup>50</sup> This opened up more areas for Chinese Americans to move into. In addition to the economically challenged immigrants, professionals, scholars and scientists also immigrated to this country. These populations moved into the suburbs, the areas surrounding urban centers. As these professionals found jobs they were able to assimilate into American life. For instance, during the 1980's when the computer industry was booming many of the engineers and scientists that worked in Silicon Valley were Chinese Americans. As the Chinese population grew and a generation of American-born Chinese entered the work force a section of the community was steadily being integrated into the US mainstream.

This all-too-brief discussion of Chinese immigration illuminates how Chinese people were viewed and the circumstances they endured. The immigrants were viewed as less than human, inferior to white Americans and unsuited to life in the US for a majority of their tenure. Chinese religion was viewed in a similar vein. These issues lead me to question how Americans would choose to adopt a religion such as Daoism and how Daoism could be considered a viable American religion today.

In the next section I will discuss the way Chinese religions were viewed in America and the difficulties Americans had with accepting Chinese religions. There are definitely elements that Americans found attractive in Chinese religions and Daoism. These religious practices have been appropriated by viewing Chinese religions through a Western lens and modifying them so that they are acceptable to an American audience.

---

<sup>50</sup> Kwong and Miscevic, 324.



### III. American Views of Chinese Religion

Daoism in America has not been thoroughly researched. Only in recent years have scholars begun to study it, while Buddhism in America has been studied extensively. Buddhism has penetrated further into American society because it has networks of institutionalized Buddhist organizations, but Daoism did not have the benefit of such organizations. The few Daoist temples that have been established in America have remained within Chinatowns, in large urban areas, where many Chinese people have settled. Daoism has been confined to Chinatowns and Chinese communities and has not been introduced to the larger US society. The Daoism that is confined to Chinese communities is largely a representation of religious Daoism. It is a Daoism that has been rejected, persecuted and demonized for its differences from Christianity and its “otherness.”

In “Engaged Habits and Besotted Idolatry,” Laurie Maffly-Kipp describes the environment that surrounded Chinese religion during the early periods of Chinese immigration. Maffly-Kipp argues that there are two views of Chinese religion present in the early 1860’s: 1) is the “tactile, material and disquieting nature of immigrant religious rituals” and 2) the Confucian and Chinese Classics were portrayed as “intellectual, philosophical and distinctly – almost willfully – divorced from bodily practice.”<sup>51</sup> These two views are evidence of the interactions of European and Chinese culture, and these explanations are a way for Europeans to explain Chinese religions through Christian norms.

This method of viewing other cultures and religions is not too different from

---

<sup>51</sup> Laurie Maffly-Kipp, “Engaged Habits and Besotted Idolatry” in *Race, Religion and Region* eds. Fay Bothem and Sarah M. Patterson, (2006): 61.

Said's Orientalism. The European outsiders sought to control the image of the Chinese religions and define what constituted real religion and what was backward and pagan. The difference of the religions that the Western frontiersmen were viewing was overwhelming, because they had not viewed anything like that before. Maffly-Kipp describes the religious rituals as bodily, ritualistic and evoking the senses. The frontiersmen, on the other hand, were used to religion that was confined to a study and with as "little bodily activity as possible."<sup>52</sup>

The frontiersmen and the writers who recorded these events sought to convey the images and sounds they experienced in written form. They tried to control the representations of Chinese religion through their writings; they desacralized Chinese ritual practice and sacralized what they considered the "real" Chinese religion. The religious philosophy of Confucius and Laozi became the American representations of Chinese religions, because the ritualistic Chinese religion was too superstitious and not based on rationality.<sup>53</sup>

Positive representations of Chinese religion were available through Orientalist writings about an imagined China they sought in antiquity. James Legge, a Scottish sinologist in the mid nineteenth century, is a representative of this group. Legge fits into Maffly-Kipp's model as a scholar that romanticized China. He describes the Chinese Classics as intellectual and philosophical. He has translated many classical Chinese texts, such as the *Daodejing* and the *Confucian Anlects*, but has represented them separately from their cultural bases.<sup>54</sup> Legge argues that these religions are in essence philosophies

---

<sup>52</sup> Maffly-Kipp, 2006: 66.

<sup>53</sup> Maffly-Kipp, 2006: 68-69.

<sup>54</sup> Maffly-Kipp, 2006: 65.

and do not need cultural context, rather, they can be applied to other cultures because of their universality. This type of scholar is sympathetic to Chinese religions, but seeks to discuss them in terms of Christianity and seeks to find the parallels between them. This method ultimately cannot be successful because the act of separating a religion from its cultural context changes that religion, and often creates something different from the original. The product of cultural interactions is a valid cultural form, but we must differentiate between the new and the old.

In the same vein as James Legge's discussions on Asian religions, one of the most famous beat poets of the 60's, Jack Kerouac, wrote,

(about Japhy Ryder) "He knew all the details of Tibetan, Chinese, Mahayana, hinayana, Japanese and even Burmese Buddhism but I warned him at once I didn't give a goddamn about the mythology and all the names and national flavors of Buddhism, but was just interested in the first of Sakyamuni's four noble truths, *All life is suffering*. And to an extent interested in the third, *The suppression of suffering is achieved*."<sup>55</sup>

This statement reveals what Kerouac deems important in Buddhism. He believes that life is essentially suffering and he wants to end that suffering. Later in his writing he remarks that the Lankavatara Sutra would show him how to suppress suffering through the use of the mind's powers.<sup>56</sup> Kerouac's approach is similar to Legge's in that they both do not care about the cultural trappings (the myths or language) of Buddhism, but they want the religious ideology that was born in those particular cultures. This is an example of the Orientalist view of Buddhism, and this method has also been applied to American Daoism.

Another representation of Asian religions is the image of the Oriental monk. Jane

---

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Tweed and Stephen Prothero. *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): 198.

<sup>56</sup> Tweed and Prothero, 1999: 198.

Iwamura's essay "The Oriental Monk in American Popular Culture" introduces the image of the Oriental monk. He is encapsulated in his "spiritual commitment, his calm demeanor, his Asian face, and oftentimes his manner of dress."<sup>57</sup> The Oriental monk is the epitome of the "good Asian," and is culturally good for the US and the West. Iwamura's Oriental monk draws from the stereotypes of Orientalist theory and is a representation that is born from it.

Iwamura describes the Orient as a source of modern spirituality that will save the West from self-destruction. This view is a common theme found in the image of the Oriental monk. Iwamura describes the West's disillusionment with Christianity, imperialism and materialism. This disillusionment leads individuals to seek out images and ideologies that "represent (the) future salvation of the dominant culture – they embody a new hope of saving the West from capitalist greed, brute force, totalitarian rule, and spiritless technology."<sup>58</sup> The Oriental monk is a stereotype that many Americans have access to and have seen on television or in the movies. For example, David Carradine in the hit television show, *Kung fu*, or Pat Morita as Mr. Miyagi in *The Karate Kid*. These characters represent the image of the oriental monk, with their calm countenances, their abilities avoid confrontation -- not to mention their skills at face rearranging. The oriental monk archetype is one that has been portrayed in television and cinema for the past forty years. They present themselves as humble, wise men with an uncanny ability to get themselves in the middle of trouble and they always find a resolution.

---

<sup>57</sup> Jane Iwamura "The Oriental Monk in Popular American Culture" in *Religion and Popular Culture in America* eds. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, (Berkley: University of California Press, 2005): 27.

<sup>58</sup> Iwamura, 2005: 32.

Iwamura argues that the Oriental monk first made its appearance in 1919 in a movie called *Broken Blossom*, and the image has persisted throughout the twentieth century into the twenty first century. The Oriental monk is one of the figures that American Daoists have attached themselves to. The Daoist masters they seek out and train under are charismatic individuals with a nicely wrapped Daoist philosophy ready for transmission. They embody the image of the Oriental monk and so they are able to garner support from students.

In Siegler's dissertation he discusses the image of American Daoist masters and their "strong attachment to -- and nostalgic vision of -- the China of their memories manifests itself in the utopian and restorationist character of American Daoism."<sup>59</sup> Some of the earlier American Daoist masters (such as Chao Li Chi, who Siegler claims is the first American Daoist and Ai Chung Liang Huang, a popular master and writer of Daoist philosophy and taiga) migrated at a young age. These two masters, Chi and Huang, both emigrated to the US during WWII during the Japanese invasion of China. They both came from well to do families that had literati status in China, and their religious educations consisted of Taoist and Buddhist rituals as well as Confucian moral and ritual behavior. Siegler argues that when these masters left China they brought with them an image of China that was forever destroyed by the war.<sup>60</sup>

These masters grew up and were able to attend American universities, and upon graduation they found that Christianity and other American religions were lacking. They grew up with the influence of Daoism in their lives and in their later years returned to their Daoist roots through their contact with individuals that they had met in the US. They

---

<sup>59</sup> Siegler, 2003: 112.

<sup>60</sup> Siegler, 2003: 127.

developed their own philosophies based on the contact of Daoist philosophy and western philosophy, best illustrated by Alan Watts' view that "Oriental culture represents an unstructured paradoxical antinomianism."<sup>61</sup>

Furthermore, Siegler describes "two aspects of the creation of the Daoist teacher in America: that he is formed through cultural contact between Chinese and non-Chinese and that he is performing a role."<sup>62</sup> The first generation Daoist masters' spirituality, Chi and Huang, taught their students the hybrid religious practices that involved taiji, chigung, and Daodejing study. Their brand of practice was different from their childhood reminiscences, but they believed that their new practices were ultimately better and more authentic.

The next generation of American Daoist teachers came in the 1960's when there were large numbers of Chinese immigrants coming to the US in 1965. These contemporary teachers were different from the past generation of teachers previously discussed -- who had been educated in the US and prescribed to Western thought. The American Daoist teachers of the 60's were charismatic and claimed to have teachings from China that gave their religious teachings authenticity. Siegler writes, "personal charm and fanciful exploits that surround (these) American Daoist masters ... recall Chinese masters."<sup>63</sup> This means that the second generation of Daoist teachers had some striking similarities to the Chinese Daoist masters. For instance, Chinese Daoism is full of stories about "mysterious hermits, wandering monks and gnostic teachers who perform amazing physical and psychic feats."<sup>64</sup> The new generation of American Daoist teachers also claimed powers, including increased longevity, amazing healing abilities

---

<sup>61</sup> Siegler, 2003: 141.

<sup>62</sup> Siegler, 2003: 122.

<sup>63</sup> Siegler, 2003: 161.

<sup>64</sup> Siegler, 2003: 162.

through chi control and spiritual achievements that only they could teach. These new teachers came to the US with their identities fully formed and took on Jane Iwamura's proposed role of the Oriental monk.

Siegler describes the biographical information that is available on three American Daoist masters from the 1960's: Hua-ching Ni, Mantak Chia and Moy Lin Shin. These contemporary Daoist teachers have built successful businesses around their specific teachings and have gained large numbers of students. Siegler discusses some interesting similarities between Ni, Chia and Shin that fit the role of Oriental monks. The first similarity was one based on appearance. From Mark Johnson's, one of Hua-Ching Ni's first disciple, personal photographs Siegler writes compares two photographs and he writes,

“One was taken at Ni's home in Taiwan by Mark Johnson I early 1976. Hua-Ching was clean-shaven and wearing a white button down shirt and slacks. Johnson took another photograph of Ni soon after he arrived in the United States; here he boasted a long thin chin beard and moustache, and he wore a Chinese-style embroidered jacket. Subsequent photos that adorn covers of Ni's books all show him dressed in similar fashion.”<sup>65</sup>

This striking change of clothing choice from Western style to a distinctly Chinese style is observed in the case of Mantak Chia as well. This is a tactic that the masters used to authenticate their teaching status. They used clothing that people in the United States associated with China and chose to wear them over Western clothing because there is psychological power in the image of a person. This clothing style also conforms to Iwamura's category of the Oriental monk because the Daoist masters represent the Asian spirituality in the US.

Siegler discusses the charisma of the American Daoist masters; this is important

---

<sup>65</sup> Siegler, 2003: 177.

because they are able to draw people to them, get people to believe them and enter into their confidence. Iwamura also discusses the relationships between the master, Oriental monk, and the primary student which she calls a “bridge figure”<sup>66</sup> The bridge figure is the means which the Oriental monk teaches their knowledge to the West. The American Daoist masters were able to attract these “bridge figures” with their demonstration of Daoist practices and Daoist insights and through their charisma they were able to get their disciples to help them come to the United States.

These charismatic leaders had enormous control over their students. Most of their students had previously studied the other Asian religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism, with strong emphases on the relationship between student and master. The previous training of these students led them to have expectations of their new masters, and the Daoist masters fell into the roles of spiritual master well. In the three cases of American Daoist masters, they were able to draw many students to them and build large organizations that were quite profitable by selling their teachings and services. Hua-Ching Ni created one of the first accredited acupuncture institutes in the United States, and has written many books. Mantak Chia gathered a following of students that wanted to learn qi techniques from him and when he returned to his native country of Thailand he built a spiritual center with an all-inclusive spa and timeshare condominiums. Moy Lin Shin founded the Taoist Tai Chi Society, a national society for the practice of taiji that has branches all over the US and Canada.

Another similarity between the Daoist masters is the mystery that surrounds the origins of their spiritual teachings. This a vague point for both Ni and Chia that they have

---

<sup>66</sup> Iwamura, 2005: 32.



not intended to illuminate upon. Siegler discusses the difficulty that he faced when he tried to trace the lineages of Ni and Chia whom both claimed special Daoist knowledge. In Ni's case, he claims that his tradition extends back to the third century CE and dates back to the "famous alchemist Ge Hong."<sup>67</sup> Another mystery is the age of the masters, especially Hua-Ching Ni. The Daoist master claims to practice longevity techniques and keeps an aura of mystery around himself, particularly his life in China. Ni wrote, "For many years now, I have been requested to write my autobiography, but I prefer to talk about my cultivation, so everything I have written is an elucidation of Lao Tzu, the Yellow Emperor and Fu Shi. The ways to save the world are in these books."<sup>68</sup> This statement clouds Ni's past, but it hints at Ni's beliefs about his teachings. The phrase, "The ways to save the world," point to the fact that Ni believes the world needs saving and that the world is on a course for destruction, and through his Daoist teachings the world will be able to recover from its destructive course. These teachings and this frame of mind is inevitably passed onto his students, who believe similar things.

These similarities that Siegler discusses are part of the role as the Oriental monk, who is a figure that is exoticized and romanticized by Western audiences. The Oriental monk is able to captivate his students through displays of their powers and exhibiting their superior spirituality. Iwamura suggests that the Oriental monk possesses something - knowledge, practices or abilities - that is not found or taught in the West. Through the aforementioned "bridge figure" the Oriental monks are able to preserve the teachings that they have. Iwamura's "bridge figure" is a parallel to Said's preserver – the white European that is able to take Asian spirituality and save it from bastardization by Asians.

---

<sup>67</sup> Siegler, 2003: 180.

<sup>68</sup> Hua-Ching Ni, "Passing the Torch, a Statement of Transition," *Integral Voyager* 7 no. 4 (2002): 3.

It is clear that the American Daoist masters fit into Iwamura's model of the Oriental monk. This model has useful linkages with Said's work that address the question, "why do American Daoists practice Daoism?" They practice Daoism because they have found a genuine experience with masters that they believe are the real deal. To explain this phenomenon of the religious seeker we turn to Wade Clark Roof. American Daoists were part of the Baby Boomer generation, and Clark classifies some of these Boomers as spiritual seekers. In the next section I will introduce this theoretical model of the spiritual seeker and apply it to the argument at hand.

#### IV. Spiritual Seekers

In Roof's book, *A Generation of Seekers*, he argues that religion is increasingly individualized and people seek out what they want to believe. He describes the religious environment of the 1960's to the 1980's is set up through survey information and interviews. He is looking to identify the religious tendencies of the Boomer Generation (individuals born between 1946 and 1964).<sup>69</sup> Roof finds through his interviews that within the Boomer Generation there emerged a gulf of religiosity. On one end you have evangelical Christians and on the other end you have the New Age Religions. Through statistical data Roof found that about nine percent of the population consisted of highly active spiritual seekers.<sup>70</sup> Seekers, as Roof defines them, are "autonomous, highly independent" people "seeking to become fully actualized" they seek for religious meaning within themselves.<sup>71</sup>

These religious seekers are often unhappy with the choice of religion that they

---

<sup>69</sup> Wade Roof Clark, *A Generation of Seekers* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993): 1.

<sup>70</sup> Clark, 1993: 81.

<sup>71</sup> Clark, 1993: 119-120.

were given as a child and grow up to seek new forms of religiosity. They try many different practices and groups, feeling each one out to see if it fits their sense of self. Roof's book has a chapter entitled "A Time When Mountains Are Moving," which he describes the changing conditions that the Boomers lived through. The fight for civil rights, gender equality, and wars all signal the changing situation within the United States. Roof uses these events to push forth his idea of increased spirituality and an urge to seek out religious meaning in one's life. I would like to take Roof's category and apply it to other generations. I do not think that there has been only one generation of seekers throughout history. If political and social change are catalysts for increased religiosity then there are many periods where there would have been individuals seeking out a different way of worship or a different method of practice.

In the following sections, I will discuss some spiritual groups that applied their religious freedom to seek out spirituality that suited them. These groups should be considered seekers as well because they fit into Roof's model of spiritual discontent with orthodox religion. American Daoist practices are linked to the groups that preceded them in a few ways. 1) They all used their religious freedom to seek out new religions. 2) They were not happy with the religious choices that they had, and in some cases they created their own religions. 3) Many groups fought the hegemony of orthodox Christianity to practice their new found spirituality.

#### V. Alternative Religions and Spiritualities

There has been a long history of alternatives to orthodox religion throughout the history of the United States. These alternative religions were formed because a group was unsatisfied with the way things were done in the orthodox religions. For instance, today

we take for granted denominational divisions within Christianity. When these groups split there were protests and conflicts that created difficulties that could not be resolved. Often the dissenters would be forced to move away and settle in a new place.

Catherine Albanese postulates the formation of three categories of religion in the US mainstream: denominational Christianity, evangelical Christians and metaphysical religions.<sup>72</sup> In this thesis I will concentrate on the metaphysical religions which encompass the New Age traditions and the Eastern traditions as well as others that were formed here in the US. Many of these metaphysical religions center around alternative healing methods and an alternative spiritualities. Their practitioners consisted of a cross section of white Americans: there were educated individuals as well as laborers and they all experienced some of the same phenomena. This argument relates to our study because many of these beliefs and practices are of the same types that fascinate American Daoists, and these previous metaphysical religions contributed to the long history of spiritual seekers and their quests for identity as well as meaningful religious experiences.

Some of the earliest dissenters against orthodox Christianity were the Quakers. In the seventeenth century the Quakers were persecuted for their belief and adherence to the Inner Light.<sup>73</sup> The Inner Light was the spirit of Christ within the body that allowed one to be pure. They also wore modest clothing and shunned violence.<sup>74</sup> The Quakers were all but forced from Europe and came to the US to settle and practice their religion freely.

R. Lawrence Moore, in his book, *In Search of White Crows*, discusses the practice of Spiritualism in the United States as an alternative to Christian worship. Spiritualism

---

<sup>72</sup> Catherine Albanese. *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007): 4-6.

<sup>73</sup> Stephen J. Stein. *Alternative American Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 42.

<sup>74</sup> Stein, 2000: 42-43.

came into vogue in the 1840's; it was a sensational public display of mediumistic powers. Spirit mediums would be able to channel the ancestor spirits of some one in the crowd, not dissimilar to what John Edwards of the show *Crossing Over* (1999-2004) did for audience members. The medium is a channel for the spirits to cross over from the realm of the dead to the physical world and to communicate with people here on earth.<sup>75</sup>

Spirit mediums came in a number of types ranging from those that would go into full trances and become completely absorbed into the spirit realm to more moderate mediums that would converse and remain in reality while receiving messages from the spirits.<sup>76</sup> These mediums were considered to be fraudulent tricksters by the Protestant Christian community; they were rejected as superstitious and their practices had no place in religion. The same can be said for Daoism in the 1800's, because good Christians denied that Daoism was a religion. The Daoism of the Chinese immigrants had an aspect of spiritualism to it. Daoist priests are considered the medium between the earth and the celestial beings of Heaven. They entered into trances, danced, and spoke to gods and ancestors. If this Daoism was so similar to the practices of spiritualism why was this form of Daoism not recognized as a religion?

The issue here continues to be about the hegemony of race and culture. Chinese immigrants were distinctly "other" and their religious practices could not be as sophisticated or scientific as the American practices. Even if the two practices performed the same function, the color of the practitioner's skin seemed to matter greatly. Spiritualism might not have lead directly to the practice of American Daoism, but it still occupied a space where people could turn to in times of trouble when the dominant

---

<sup>75</sup> R. Lawrence Moore, *In Search of White Crows* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977): 1-5.

<sup>76</sup> Moore, 1977: 22-23.

religions are not doing what they are supposed to do.

There are other nineteenth century practices that added to the mix from which American Daoist practices emerged. Mesmerism was another practice that captivated some white Protestants in the nineteenth century. Mesmerism was the ‘miraculous power of one human being over the will and passions of another.’<sup>77</sup> This power was one of clairvoyance and it was considered a miracle because the practitioner used it to heal people of illnesses and afflictions.<sup>78</sup> Mesmerism represented the powers that man could attain through spirituality, and Moore argues that its practitioners believed that the practice put them on more equal footing with God.<sup>79</sup>

It is easy to imagine how Mesmerism gained popularity, because it was a practice that left the spiritual development to oneself. It was an empowering practice that allowed both men and women to feel that they had control over their spiritual destinies. The United States entered into a period of instability and some people turned to Mesmerism as a relief for the problems the country was facing. Around the 1850’s, the debate over slavery has come to a head and the Civil War is brewing. There is uncertainty and instability and people are trying to find some form of practice that makes more sense to them or gives them more power in a powerless situation. Mesmerism and other forms of alternative religious practices are there for them to try.

This trend of instability and searching seems to run throughout religious history. People seem more inclined to search out religion in times of turmoil and uncertainty. They latch onto a religion that makes sense and is significantly different than what they

---

<sup>77</sup> R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994): 122.

<sup>78</sup> Moore, 1994: 123.

<sup>79</sup> Moore, 1994: 124.

grew up knowing. These seekers are not necessarily the majority of the population: thus many white Protestants remained faithful to Christianity and found comfort and solace within their faith. The people that do search for other truths can be considered spiritual seekers in any generation; I do not think that seeker status is monopolized by the Boomer Generation.

The case of Mesmerism fits with American Daoism and Roof's theory of the spiritual seeker. In both Mesmerism and American Daoism there is a similar strand of individuality and empowering the individual. The tradition of individualism is not always best expressed through group oriented religions such as Christianity. Some people seek to find their religion elsewhere and need to believe in themselves more than in an entity outside the body. The tradition of individualism is not a phenomenon that pops up only in the twentieth century; it was present in United States throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Therefore, seeking religious practices that would accentuate and complement individuality is not something new to the twentieth century.

Some interesting spiritual healing practices that emerged in the nineteenth century because of the unreliability of Western medicine were hydropathy and homeopathy. These become a spiritualized means of healing the body in the 1840's. Hydropathy involved the use of water to heal the body, while homeopathy involved the use of substances that would, in an otherwise healthy person, produce the same symptoms of the sick person. These substances were paired with a diluent (usually water) and the substances were to draw the sickness out of the body, in essence purifying it. These health practices are not too far in general principle from some practices in Chinese medicine.

All of the previously mentioned spiritual practices help us to understand the long history in the US where individuals are not satisfied with the established answers that orthodox religions give for the problems that are faced. These individuals then seek out other spiritual experiences that better suit them. American Buddhism is perhaps linked closest to American Daoism because they both share a common thread in Orientalist imaginings and have been sought after by many lost souls.

American Buddhism falls into Albanese's category of metaphysical religions. Buddhism's entrance into America's diverse religious tapestry first occurred through Chinese and Japanese immigrants that brought their practices to the US to have a sense of home in a foreign land. The second introduction the US received was at the Parliament of World Religions in 1893 where Soyen Shaku, a student of Daisetz Suzuki, spoke on behalf of Buddhism. Since the exposure of Buddhism in 1893 Buddhism's popularity has grown steadily, but during the 1960's Buddhism grew exponentially.

Buddhism in America is often seen as a religion that promotes mental health. The practice of zazen, sitting meditation, is an extremely popular practice, and one of the methods that help people to achieve a healthier, calmer state of mind. While practicing zazen one can develop concentration and mindfulness to help one cope with the daily difficulties that one faces. In *Modern Psychology and Ancient Wisdom*, Sharon G. Mijares, a therapist that employs meditation and mindfulness techniques in her practice, writes,

"I often see increases in unconditional confidence. That is, people develop confidence that is not based on their roles or specialized skills, which are impermanent, but rather that is derived from their recognition that they can fully experience all the moments of their lives, pleasant and unpleasant. This comes naturally from that repeated application of mindfulness. Mindfulness shows us



that it is possible to experience it all...As Buddhism teaches, it is not the presence of pain that is the biggest problem: It is our struggle against it that causes suffering.”<sup>80</sup>

Using Buddhist meditation techniques have been helpful for Mijares’ patients even though they are not adherents to the religion. Buddhism in America is similar to Daoism in that they have both been hailed as universal religions that agree with science and are therefore able to be practiced by anyone without the cultural accoutrements of their originating countries.

The practitioners of alternative religions in the mid nineteenth centuries were seekers of a sort. They sought out different religions, healing methods and how to contact their ancestors, they sought out alternatives to Christianity and found self fulfillment. The New Age has roots in the nineteenth century alternative religions that connected people to genuine experiences that they found lacking in their, for lack of a better word, “cradle” (religion they were born with)<sup>81</sup> religion of Christianity. By seeking out other religious experiences they formed hybrid religions that were syncretic mixes of Christianity and natural religions. When the Buddhism, Hinduism and Daoism emerged in Western society they became strong focuses of alternative religious seekers and they sought to use these religions as a means to find fulfillment.

### Conclusion

In this last chapter I have explored Daoism’s entrance into American society and how Daoism was not accepted as a proper religion by the majority of Americans. At first, Chinese Daoism was viewed with contempt as little more than a superstition that was

---

<sup>80</sup> Sharon G. Mijares. *Modern Psychology and Ancient Wisdom* (Binghamton: Haworth Integrative Healing Press, 2003): 39.

<sup>81</sup> Thomas Tweed. “Who is a Buddhist” in *Westward Dharma*, Charles Prebish and Martin Baumann eds. (Los Angeles: University of Berkley Press, 2002): 20.

only suitable for the uncultured Chinese to practice. Despite its odious reputation, Daoism becomes a religion that a sub-group of a majority class of Americans practice. This development is supported by two large contributing factors. The first I show through multiple examples that religious freedom in the United States allows people to seek out whatever religion they wish. The second is the appropriation of Daoism through Orientalist thought and the emergence of Daoist masters that represent the authentic teachings of Daoism.

Daoism was not accepted wholesale, by any means. Many changes were made to Daoism as it became a hybrid religion and was acculturated into America's melting pot of religion. As acculturation occurred Daoism was stripped of many of its original cultural objects and meanings, in essence, removing it from the Chinese framework and placing it into the American religious experience. American Daoism became a collection of practices, which will be discussed in the next chapter, two of which (taiji and traditional Chinese Medicine) deal exclusively with bodily as well as mental health.

At the same time as the Chinese-American community evolved and struggled with misrepresentations by the dominant culture many alternative religions arose in the dominant culture as precursors to the contemporary practice of American Daoism. Many of these alternative religions deal with bodily health in conjunction with spiritual attainment. The long history of alternative practices has helped people explore American Daoism in the hopes of answering some of the same questions that were asked hundreds of years ago. Many practitioners of American Daoism are interested in, mainly, bodily health, mental health and the connection between health and spiritual experience. American Daoism follows a long tradition of American alternative religions that attempt

to heal the body, thus allowing humans to live happier and longer lives, which in turn allows them to become closer to the spiritual world. American Daoist practitioners have been quite successful in promoting Daoist exercises, such as Tai chi and Chi gung, and Chinese medicine, acupuncture – these topics will be discussed in depth throughout the next chapter. As these practices become more popularized we can begin to picture the forces of globalization and cultural change emerging from the points of contact.

## Chapter 3: Global Cultural Flows and Their Affects on Daoism

### I. Introduction

American Daoism's acceptance into the United States is a prime example of the dynamic nature of culture and religion. As discussed previously, American Daoism has roots in Orientalist thought and became a new religious movement that is significantly different from forms of Daoism found in China. In chapter 2, I discussed some of the practices that became popularized in America that have helped ease American Daoism's entrance into American society. This chapter explores the phenomenon of globalization and patterns of cross-cultural exchange that occur through instances such as the acceptance of American Daoism.

Furthermore, this chapter examines the primary practices of American Daoism (reading the Daodejing, practicing taiji, and receiving TCM therapy) and the influence of American culture upon these practices. These practices are part of the identities of American Daoists, but draw Daoists and non-Daoists alike to practice them. The wonderful aspect of some of these practices is that they can be removed completely from a religious context and a person can become proficient at taiji or read the Daodejing without being a Daoist. When individuals privatize these practices and purchase the books and DVDs these practices then become commodified.

Many religions, to a certain extent, have commodified aspects to them, for instance, the abuse and sale of Catholic indulgences or the sale of Daoist talismans to ward off evil spirits or bad events. Commodification occurs when an object is given an arbitrary monetary value and then is able to be bought and sold. The process of commodification will be discussed later in this chapter, but first it is important for me to

explain that I do not view the commodification of religion as a negative occurrence. I think there are differing degrees of commodification and it is not the all or nothing process which was put forth by Marx when he was describing commodity fetishism. Commodification is a byproduct of the global capitalist economy, and when people are freely putting ideas out into the public sphere these ideas can be picked up and utilized by enterprising individuals. Commodification is a value process where objects are given value, but when the objects that are commodified become nothing more than their speculated value with no inherent social value then they enter into a dangerous realm of commodity fetishism.

In the following sections I will discuss how American Daoism has become a commodity and can be abused. While I understand fully that not all practitioners of American Daoism are guilty of this infraction, there are many that see Daoist practices as a New Age fad that will recede as fads often tend to do. Then there are many people who have genuine experiences while practicing Daoism and take their practice seriously; these people are the American Daoists. I do not mean to take away from their experiences with some of the following points that may be made. American Daoism is different from the faddism of the American consumer culture even though they may be comprised of some of the same practices.

In this chapter, I differentiate between genuine American Daoists and faddists that consume Asian culture because it is exotic. I think this differentiation is important to the discussion of American Daoist identity because they are two different practices. American Daoists consume goods from the cultural supermarket, but do not consume them rampantly.

## II. Daoism in a global world

First, I will briefly discuss the major debates within globalization theory to lay the foundation for further analysis. Globalization has been described as a force that is politically, economically and culturally significant. According to Benjamin Barber, a professor of Political Science at Rutgers University, globalization has two primary effects. The first product of globalization is a homogenizing effect upon cultures and creates sameness within the cultures it affects.<sup>82</sup> This theory was initially based on the observation of American and Western European culture transmitted to undeveloped countries and effecting their way of life in adverse ways. One common example is the rapid spread of fast food culture in the form of chains, such as McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken, to other countries thereby displacing local cuisine with fast food often at cheaper prices than local cuisine. The spread of fast food chains represents the homogenizing beam that Barber discusses in his article, "Jihad vs McWorld." Barber writes,

"McWorld is a product of popular culture driven by expansionist commerce. Its template is American, its form style. Its goods are as much images as matériel, an aesthetic as well as a product line. It is about culture as commodity apparel as ideology."<sup>83</sup>

Barber describes the fundamental construction of the "McWorld" worldview, and discusses its expansion through commodity exposure to other markets. As other markets become saturated with the images and materials that comes along with the "McWorld" the culture of commerce expands and envelopes existing cultures. The invasion of "McWorld" produces a secondary reaction and can create diversification of culture as well.

---

<sup>82</sup> Benjamin Barber. "Jihad vs McWorld" in *The Globalization Reader*, Frank J. Lechner and John Boli eds. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000): 21.

<sup>83</sup> Barber, "Jihad vs McWorld," 2000: 25

Barber recognizes another effect of globalization which he terms “Jihad,” preferring the fundamentalist definition of the forceful destruction of the “other.”<sup>84</sup> Indigenous inhabitants of countries that are being culturally invaded fear the loss of their culture to the overwhelming influence of American and Western consumer culture. This fear created a backlash of attempts by indigenous people to deter American culture from entering their social culture. As the global market opens up and more people are exposed to the products that “McWorld” is selling, individuals and groups that want to protect their way of life seek ways to differentiate themselves from the global culture. Barber writes about nationalism as a standard for people to rally behind. He describes the nation-state as a “cultural integrator and has adapted well to pluralist ideals: civic ideologies and constitutional faiths around which their many clans and tribes can rally.”<sup>85</sup>

Some scholars consider the “McWorld” model of globalization to be “cultural imperialism.” Immanuel Wallerstein’s “capitalist world system” best represents the cultural imperialist takeover of the “McWorld.” Wallerstein’s discussion of the transmission of culture from the core - the imperialist agent - to the periphery - the imperialized - is unidirectional. Cultural imperialism is an invasion of cultural forms such as: media, language, cuisine and customs. In addition to military strength, the US is also economically and culturally powerful. They used their economic might to access markets overseas to spread their products. Scholars that study the homogenization of global culture will use examples as simple as the television show *Dallas* being broadcast and watched in foreign countries as evidence of cultural homogeneity, but if they looked

---

<sup>84</sup> Barber, “Jihad vs McWorld,” 2000: 24.

<sup>85</sup> Barber, “Jihad vs McWorld,” 2000: 24.

deeper they would find something altogether different.<sup>86</sup>

The example of *Dallas* is a pertinent example because when scholars investigated deeper into the show's foreign audience scholars found some interesting results. John Tomlinson cites a study from Katz and Liebes who interviewed fifty focus groups in Israel that were asked to watch an episode of *Dallas*, and then they were asked what they felt about the show.<sup>87</sup> Some of the interviewees expressed disgust for the behavior of the characters citing greed and sexual debauchery as an undesirable trait. Most of the interviewees found the show entertaining, but did not connect to the show on a cultural level.<sup>88</sup> Deeper analysis into the imperialist media "text" of *Dallas* shows that the culture of the US is not as pervasive as Wallerstein and other cultural homogeneity scholars thought, and lends evidence to the continued differentiation of people through global capitalism.

In countries where indigenous inhabitants were able to counter the dominating force of Western culture there was a push back against oppression and efforts to adapt and renew indigenous practices. These points of contact created areas of hybridization as Arjuni Appadurai describes in his book, *Modernity at Large*.<sup>89</sup> Appadurai emphasizes media as the means by which information is moved from one place to another. Media movement is increased as modes of transfer are discovered and enhanced by the migration of people, creating diasporic communities. New technologies allow these communities to maintain ties with their homeland and secure their identity within their new homes.

---

<sup>86</sup> John Tomlinson. "Cultural Imperialism" in *The Globalization Reader*, Frank J. Lechner and John Boli eds. (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000): 308.

<sup>87</sup> Tomlinson, "Cultural Imperialism," 2000: 309.

<sup>88</sup> Tomlinson, "Cultural Imperialism," 2000: 309.

<sup>89</sup> *Modernity at Large*, 1996: 4.



Appadurai rejects the argument for “Americanization” - the totality of Western culture - as it encounters indigenous cultures. Acceptance of such an argument would discount the strength of the indigenous people and their ability to adapt to cultural change. Appadurai argues that indigenous people can maintain their culture, their differentness, in the face of invading cultural influences. He states that “culture is a pervasive dimension of human discourse to generate diverse conceptions of group identity.”<sup>90</sup> Through discursive interaction groups can change their identities and their culture if they find something that is worth integrating into their conceptions of culture. Appadurai is also trying to define culture as a boundary that marks difference.<sup>91</sup>

Although a boundary exists it is not clear. It is not black and white. There is a significant amount of overlap. This overlap is created by the interactions of cultures through the five dimensions of global cultural flows: ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financerscaples and ideoscaples.<sup>92</sup> The use of the suffix, –scape, in these terms is to emphasize the fluidity of the terms and also to note their constructed natures. Of the five dimensions of global cultural flows ethnoscaples and ideoscaples will play an important role in this discussion of American Daoist religion, but the five dimensions are inextricably tied together because they influence and affect each other.

Ethnoscaples consist of the people that inhabit the world. People are constantly moving and their minds and ideas shift. The shifting locales and migrating groups have an effect on economics and politics. Mediascaples facilitate the dissemination of information in the private and public spheres of life. Mediascaples help maintain the

---

<sup>90</sup> *Modernity at Large*, 1996: 13.

<sup>91</sup> *Modernity at Large*, 1996: 15.

<sup>92</sup> *Modernity at Large*, 1996: 33-34.

connections between ethnoscapas as technology is constantly growing and changing. Technoscapas consist of the mechanical and informational technologies that are constantly progressing and becoming more sophisticated. Advancement within the dimension of technoscapas allows more people easier access to the mediascapas, and connecting more people. Financescapas reflect the dispositions of global capital and are required for access to mediascapas and technoscapas. Access to capital is an important dimension and is tied into all the dimensions. Financescapas dictate what groups are more influential than another. Ideoscapas consist of the ideas and concepts that groups of people accept, reject and exchange. Ideoscapas fuel the other dimensions because all dimensions can be broken down into ideas and concepts. Mediascapas and technoscapas assist ideoscapas to get from one ethnoscape to another.

These dimensions of global movement are the basis of Appadurai's theory of globalization. They illustrate the dynamic nature of culture, and the reciprocal relationship between foreign and indigenous populations. Appadurai found other theories of globalization insufficient to explain the effect of indigenous culture on the invading foreign culture. The examples described in *Modernity at Large* focus mainly on the hegemony of foreign elites applied to the detriment of the indigenous population. Then Appadurai discusses how the indigenous people can use foreign culture as a counter hegemonic tool to combat hegemony. In the case of American Daoism, we have an example that is contrary to the majority of examples studied by anthropologists, because American Daoists are comprised of a group of privileged people in an affluent country adopting a religion from a country that was once considered less civilized.

Appadurai's theory of globalization deals with the movement of information;

which is relevant to the American Daoism example. In the modern age, information is not made up of intangible thoughts that have no value. Rather, information has become a commodity and has economic value. Information can be bought, sold, and traded for other information. Information becomes a commodity and the consumption of any commodity requires the consumer to have agency. Agency is the power of choice and the agent's power stems from the number of choices they have.

The controller of information has influence over the dissemination of said information. This creates a power gradient that is in the favor of the informed. Michel Foucault, in *The Birth of the Prison*, uses the historical example of the prison system during the French Revolution to illustrate the importance of power. Foucault points to the large gaps between the bourgeoisie and the common people as a source of the commoner's difficulty in gaining justice. Furthermore, the bourgeoisie had the power to create and change laws; since this power resided in the hands of the bourgeoisie, they used their knowledge of the law to circumvent punishment when they did break the law. My discussion of American Daoists requires the discussion of power, particularly, power in a capitalist society and how it manifests through individuals and their cultural choices.

Eric Wolf sums up the concept of power well in *Pathways of Power* saying, "the exercise of power entails symbolic distinctions between tribute takers and tribute payers, as well as symbolic understandings of what binds the two together."<sup>93</sup> Wolf points to the relationship between the powerful and the weak to show that there is a system or ideology in place that bestows power to those in charge and removes power from the subjugated people. In a capitalist society, the system relies on each individual's free will

---

<sup>93</sup> Eric Wolf, *Pathways of Power: Building an Anthropology of the Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 317.

and willingness to enter into “contractual relationships” with other people. It is a common misconception that individuals enter into these relationships on an even playing field, and that a capitalist system allows for even competition between individuals. The free will that individuals have is agency.

The ideologies of capitalism and free will allowed imperialists to think that as long as they were able to engage the people with whom they traded with and to purchase or otherwise obtain materials from them, then those materials were rightfully theirs and no longer had any connection to the creators. Since the creators “willing” sold their products the imperialists had no qualms in using or changing their cultural products. These were the basis of the imperialist’s philosophical power. The imperialists and Orientalists took cultural ideas and objects then they stripped them from their cultural context; creating a hybrid of the originals.

The concept of agency is important in the context of the global world and it is pertinent to the discussion of American Daoism. Elijah Siegler emphasizes the importance of agency in the American Daoist’s spiritual journey. Siegler utilizes Wade Clark Roof’s studies, *Generation of Seekers* and *Spiritual Marketplace*, to identify the patterns behind American Daoist membership. Roof would categorize American Daoists as spiritual seekers: a subgroup of the population that is dissatisfied with the religious choices that they were born into, Roof terms this dissatisfaction “wholeness hunger.” This “hunger” leads them to seek out other religious experiences to fill a void within their own lives. Often these seekers are educated people that have been exposed to other cultures and have the means to pursue their new chosen religion. The seekers are eclectic and search for religious experiences that enhance their lives. They are not bound by

confining restrictions of tradition; they frequently take up a practice from one religion and mix it with other practice from another religion. When the spiritual seekers find what they have been looking for, something that fits in the void formerly occupied by mainstream religions, they practice their new-found religion piously.

Roof's category of spiritual seeker fits well into the example of American Daoism. The majority of American Daoists that Siegler interviewed actively searched for a religious experience that was different from their Christian upbringings. Through Siegler's interviews he is able to show that many of these American Daoists became interested in Daoism through exposure in a course about Asian religions and/or reading the Daodejing.

These experiences of American Daoists and spiritual seekers in general are influenced by the privatization of religion. As people become more individualized, their religion must also become privatized. Many of the spiritual seekers that Roof studied sought religions that were not restricted by dogma. They sought a religious experience that could feed their "wholeness hunger", and many adapted religions that have, historically, been strongly based in community practice into a private religion that could be practiced alone without input or guidance from a "church". For instance, many Asian Buddhist groups practice are involved in practices that firmly tie the sangha, the monks, to the lay people. Spiritual seekers seem to gravitate towards religions that give the individual a strong sense of self-accomplishment and independence.

In the same vein as Roof, an anthropologist from the University of Hong Kong writes about global culture and identity. Gordon Mathews in his book, *Global Culture, Individual Identity*, compares the vast array of cultures that exist in the world to a

supermarket, and argues that people are influenced as much by this “cultural supermarket” as they are by their national identities. Mathews emphasizes the agency that people apply when selecting their identities from this “global supermarket”. He argues that people consciously choose practices, ideologies and cultural goods to incorporate into their personal identities. He recognizes that people from poor circumstances have limited access to the “global supermarket”, while rich people have unlimited access to it.<sup>94</sup> Limited access to the “global supermarket” forces less fortunate people to consume commodities that the individuals in charge, whether politicians or corporations, deem appropriate. These commodities, often foreign, are created by large corporations such as Coca-cola and Disney; whom are peddling an idealized culture based on their own agendas. In most cases people suffering from oppression and hegemony have little agency in what they consume.

Mathews focuses on affluent individuals in Japan, America, and China that have the ability to choose their ideal forms of cultural participation. Mathews’ subjects are similar in social status as the American Daoists of this study. The American example is most pertinent to my discussion of American Daoism because Mathews interviews right wing Christians, liberal Christians and Buddhists about the degrees of religious pluralism within the United States. Religious pluralism opens up the choices that individuals have. The more religious experiences there are the better for these seekers to test them out. Mathews’ views of cultural identity are based on the choices that a person makes and

---

<sup>94</sup>Gordon Mathews, *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket* (London: Routledge Press, 2000): 20-22.

what he/she chooses to integrate into their overall identity.

Mathews' subjects are mostly affluent individuals and have the agency to choose their own cultural attachments. He fails to address the issue of poverty and the lack of agency for these people. As I have described earlier, the limited agency that poverty stricken individuals have is due partly to the power dynamics of economic flows. In the previous discussion I used Coca-cola which markets its soft drinks by exposing people to American cultural iconography. At Christmas time, Coca-cola uses images of a cherubic Santa happily smiling while drinking a Coca-cola from an old-time glass bottle. This image links Coke with happiness and the United States. The psychological effect of their marketing strategy has made Coca-cola one of the most popular soft drinks worldwide, despite the poor nutrition content and poor dental hygiene that is a byproduct of consuming this product.

This lengthy discussion of commodity image will set up the following discussion of a faddist construction of Asian spirituality and the people that consume these created products. This discussion is meant to help us differentiate between American Daoism and contemporary Asian spirituality fads because they often consume the same goods.

#### American Daoists as Individuals

Spiritual seekers actively try to find a religion that is in sync with their identities, because their current religions or lack of religion creates a conflict with their ideal selves. This conflict must be resolved through the exercise of agency and the “cultural supermarket.” The seekers can discover themselves through religious introspection, group worship or simply finding a religion that feels comfortable. I have linked American Daoism and the spiritual seekers with a strong sense individuality, but that does not

discount the spiritual seekers that wish to find a deeper sense of community. There is a community in American Daoism, but individual practice is by far the more important aspect of the religion.

Many American Daoists searched for a sense of grounding in their life, and a real connection to something meaningful through their religion. Daoism provided that grounding with its ancient philosophy and traditions. Although many American Daoists did not practice the form of Daoism that they admired, they nonetheless perceived a connection to the Ancient tradition through their modern day practices.

As I have mentioned previously, Mathews recognizes that “the currency of the cultural supermarket” is wealth and knowledge.<sup>95</sup> “Spiritual searching” as he terms it, is similar to Wade Clark Roof’s “spiritual seeker”, and is an action of agency. Mathews and Roof both discuss the importance of personal choice and deep acceptance of cultural products from the global world. Roof also recognizes the importance of class and availability of information in the seeker’s life. Without means and knowledge a person from less fortunate circumstances would be stranded with their hunger for something more than their given identity could satiate. Neither Roof nor Mathews discuss in detail the difficulties when a person does not have the power to help themselves to a portion of the global pie.

Many of Mathews’ interviewees related their selection of cultural tidbits from the “cultural supermarket” through American individualism. Wealth and knowledge allow an individual to remain an individual and some of the Buddhists that Mathews spoke to

---

<sup>95</sup> Mathews, 2000:100.



express their desire to be “individuals instead of belonging to an institution.”<sup>96</sup> These practitioners felt that the Buddhist religion had some things to offer them that Christianity did not: separation from a group and the ability to integrate their religion into their daily lives.

The individualism that Mathews identifies is equally important in American Daoism. Siegler’s American Daoists are disheartened by the religions that they were born into and had taken them for granted. They sought a religious experience that was “grounded, yet fluid.”<sup>97</sup> American Daoists feel that their religion is fluid and free flowing, yet they perceive a connection to the ancient philosophy and tradition of Daoism. Some of the practitioners that Siegler interviewed did not want to be classified or hemmed in by the term daoist. Those who did identify themselves as Daoist practiced Daoism exclusively. These Daoists’ spirituality stemmed from their practice. In the following section I will discuss Daoism as practice and I will present what American Daoists do. II.

### American Daoism as practice

American Daoist identity is steeped in philosophy and the practices that accompany it. For an American Daoist, practice is an essential form of worship. Siegler divides American Daoist practices into three categories: reading, movement and healing.<sup>98</sup> These practices arrived in the US first through the first hand knowledge, media of books and then later in the form of Daoist teachers.

Reading as practice involves the study of two main texts: the *Daodejing* and the *Yijing*. The *Daodejing* is a collection of works that was the combined effort of many

---

<sup>96</sup> Mathews, 2000: 101.

<sup>97</sup> Siegler, 2003: 233.

<sup>98</sup> Siegler, 2003: 310.

people over many years. This compilation of poetic prose discusses matters from the emergence of the universe to the rulership of a country. The Daodejing has been widely interpreted in both China and America due to the ambiguity of the passages. This lends the Daodejing to a wide range of interpretations. In American Daoism, the Daodejing is the text that links American practice to the philosophical Daoism of the past. It represents the original text of an untainted religion, and because of this importance it was one of the first Daoist scriptures to be translated into English by Orientalists. The Daodejing has been translated into English many times, often with different emphases and interpretations of the translators. American Daoists tend to believe that Daoism began and ended with Laozi, and by extension the Daodejing (which he is attributed to have written).

Siegler remarks that Daodejing study has entered the daily routines of many Daoists he interviewed. As the text has been translated many times over, some of its “translators” have not even known how to read Chinese. Therefore, the “translations” are based completely on the interpretation of earlier translations and new ideas have been interjected into the translations. The proliferation of translations allows the American Daoists to obtain multiple copies of the Daodejing and study them side by side. Siegler describes this dedication to studying the Daodejing as a form of meditation for the practitioners.<sup>99</sup> The American Daoists read several versions of the same passage side by side and contemplate the various meanings and interpretations that are present in the passages.

The other text that Siegler flags as important for practice is the *Yijing*. The ancient

---

<sup>99</sup> Siegler, 2003: 316.

text predates the *Daodejing* and is an ancient book used for divination purposes. The diviner asks a silent question and then uses yarrow stalks or two crescent shaped blocks to divine a symbol, one of the eight trigrams. The Yijing consists of passages that indicate a solution or choice to the diviner's query.

As with the *Daodejing*, people practice with the Yijing everyday. Dissimilar to *Daodejing* study, the Yijing practice does not rely on a proliferation of translations, but rather on accurate translations of the original text. Accurate translations yield better explanations for the diviner's questions. Yijing practice can also be a form of meditation. The questioner can sit or kneel and silently poses a question to the cosmos, then concentrates on shaking the cup that contains the yarrow sticks until one stick comes out and reveals an answer to be looked up. Not only can Yijing study become a meditational, religious experience, it can also serve a practical purpose. Often, Yijing practitioners will consult the Yijing before undertaking major tasks or making difficult decisions, and they will take the advice the Yijing yields.

Movement as practice is Siegler's next category. The two most visible practices are taiji and qigong (breath work). These practices focus on the strengthening the body from the inside out, beginning with internal energy. Strengthening internal energy leads to strengthening the entire body. Taiji and qigong is seen as an essential practice of American Daoists.

Taiji incorporates qigong. While qigong has a longer history than taiji, the two really compliment each other. Taiji consists of sets of movements that emphasize the natural motions of the body. The connection of taiji to Daoism comes from the myth of Chang San Feng, a famous Daoist who lived on Wudangsan (one of the five sacred

Daoist mountains). Chang San Feng was believed to have invented taiji chuan while meditating on the Wudang. This romanticized story of taiji's birth is an important connection for American Daoists to grasp onto.

Qigong involves breathing exercises that move the breath in the body. It is thought that moving the breath a person moves qi. Circulation of qi through qigong has health benefits that American Daoists find intriguing. Qi circulation builds a healthier body and mind. Qigong is related to Daoism through Traditional Chinese Medicine and

American Daoists have been written extensively about *taiji* and *qigong*. There are many books pertaining to both subjects and these books are available through mail order services. This allows the practitioner to practice at home without the need for supervision from a certified teacher. The growing number of *taiji* schools and qigong practices also built up a large circuit of weekend seminars and day camps.

Healing as practice is the last identifying practice that American Daoists perform. Healing is an important theme because most American Daoists emphasize bodily health and wellbeing. Some of the American Daoists were “converted” to Daoism because when they were sick they were healed by Traditional Chinese Medicine. This healing experience therefore became a spiritual experience, removing the sickness from the body. Many American Daoists believe that physical and mental health are related and change their diets to natural foods. They also supplement their food with Chinese herbs.

The body is equally important in Chinese Daoism. Many Daoist practices in China revolve around the quest for immortality. Healing practices, *taiji*, meditation and qigong are all combined and used in conjunction to perform the internal alchemy that will allow the practitioner to become an immortal, *hsien ren*. Immortals are the equivalents of

gods. They are able to travel the heavens and hells and they have other tremendous supernatural powers. Although immortality has been the goal for many Daoists, American Daoists do not subscribe to the immortality practices. Instead, they perform longevity practices through qigong exercises, TMC and healthy eating to lengthen the lifespan.

### III. Consumerism and American Daoism

These three practices illustrate the degree of commodification that American Daoism has experienced. This religion is caught up in consumerism because the individualistic nature of the religion promotes consumption of the goods that teachers are selling. The private practices of American Daoism result in many of the practitioners spending large sums of money on buying books, DVDs, attending seminars and classes. This aspect of American Daoism represents commodification in the normal sense: assigning an object or idea a monetary value. I will reiterate that to a certain degree all religions have some commodification. It is not an inherently derogatory term.

In *Selling Spirituality*, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King discuss the term spirituality in relation to the privatization of religion in the US.

“This is the point at which the first privatization (of religion) – involving the creation of individual, consumer oriented spiritualities – begins to overlap with an increasing emphasis on a second privatization of religion – that is, the tailoring of spiritual teachings to the demands of the economy and of individual self-expression to business success.”<sup>100</sup>

The privatization of religion has allowed the individual to bypass traditional means of religious experience (i.e. institutionalized religions, ordained members of a religious community, and community sanctioned reading material), and has allowed individuals to

---

<sup>100</sup> Jeremy Carrette and Richard King. *Selling Spirituality* (New York: Routledge Press, 2005): 44.

get information for him or herself through less traditional means (i.e. private companies publish books and make DVDs and personal gurus can give instruction via the internet). Religious information then becomes a commodity to be sold to whoever wants it. There is, in essence, free access to these religions provided that you have the necessary funds to access it.

The privatization of Daoism and other Asian religions involves the fragmentation of the original religious practices and ideals from which the new commodified religion claims authenticity. The term fragmentation assumes a breaking apart of something, in this instance Chinese Daoism. Chinese Daoism is complex to identify and explain, but for the purposes of Carrette and King's discussion of fragmentation we can assume that Chinese Daoism is a singular object made up of different components. The practices, beliefs and ideology that make up Chinese Daoism are what essentially identify the religion. Fragmentation assumes the separation of certain parts from the whole and then repackaging the selected parts, in the American Daoist case: health, *taiji* and TCM. Carrette and King write that "historically rich and complex traditions are exploited by a selective repackaging of the tradition, which is then sold as the 'real thing'."<sup>101</sup> The repackaged parts do not remain unchanged because hybridization occurs after fragmentation takes place. The dominant beliefs of those doing the fragmenting are inevitably inserted into the repackaged fragment. Now this hybrid religion is a new creature with dual identity and links to multiple traditions.

To some degree the process of fragmentation connotes a level of authenticity. For instance, American Daoists rejected Chinese Daoism as a whole because they saw too

---

<sup>101</sup> Carrette and King, 2005: 87.

much superstition in their practices. They sought out the practices that they deemed were the central themes of Daoism and took them. The practices and philosophies of American Daoism are authentic because they have roots in China and are, as Said postulates, being preserved in the Occidental West because the original caretakers of the knowledge were not suitable for the task anymore. This fragmentation allows companies and Daoist organizations to market their “product” to the right individuals.

Carrette and King also point to an important issue, “tailoring of spiritual teachings to the demands of the economy and of individual self expression to business success.”<sup>102</sup> This is a crucial point in this discussion of American Daoists. In the following pages I discuss the various founders of American Daoist groups and the ways in which they are able to market Daoism, through the lens of Orientalist thought, to Americans and Europeans. These Daoist founders “tailored” the religion to the demands of all the spiritual seekers that recognized them as gurus/ teachers. They created a religion that did not require the adherents to change their individuality and submit to a community; rather the teachers gave them a religion that they could practice in their own home without the constant need of a teacher. Through this ingenious construction of Daoist spirituality, the American Daoist founders were able to sell their repackaged religion as the genuine Daoism, which was formed in rejection of religious Daoism and instituted the resurrection of the philosophical Daoism.

As we can see, these figures are very important to the development of American Daoist organizations and the proliferation of American Daoist philosophy. To Carrette and King, the founders of American Daoist groups might be good examples of

---

<sup>102</sup> Carrette and King, 2005: 89.

“contemporary prosperity-oriented spiritualities in the west, comfortable to claim the authority of ancient Asian wisdom, while promoting a philosophy of individual self-expression and social conformism.”<sup>103</sup> Carrette and King discuss the types of books that claim Daoist authenticity and some of these books are geared towards using “Daoist” philosophy for monetary gains. Some of these books have names like: *The Tao of Sales*, *The Tao of Personal Leadership* and *The Tao of Management*. These books claim authentic Daoist philosophies that are applied to modern day methods of earning money. The writers of these books fall into the category of spirituality, but they are essentially writing self-help books with some quotes from the Daodejing thrown in.

Carrette and King use the phrase “social conformism” in the quote above. By the tone of their book and the examples they give, they are referring to participation in the consumption of the commodified spiritualities that they are describing. They see the United States as a consumer society and the greatest conformity is to consume the goods produced. Even the Daoist masters mentioned above are guilty of producing spiritual goods to sell in the marketplace and their students continue to purchase them.

Modern spirituality allows people to choose their religions based on what they feel, as described by both Wade Clark Roof and Gordon Mathews. A person’s feelings reign supreme as individuality creates private religions that can change continually based on an individual’s feelings and more importantly, their desires. There are instances where religious practices become a fad and spiritual seeking can become rampant consumerism.

There is a degree of commodification in most religions, and religions need this to be successful and to obtain followers. Carrette and King describe instances where

---

<sup>103</sup> Carrette and King, 2005: 89.



commodification gets out of hand and the line between religion and fad becomes muddled. Carrette and King compiled a list of books that are available for people to buy, these titles included: *The Tao of Motherhood*, *The Tao of Power*, and *The Tao of Bow Wow: Understanding and Training your Dog the Taoist Way*. These products have nothing to do with the philosophy of Daoism and are prime examples consumer driven products being created to satisfy an obsession with Asian spirituality.

These “Daoist” materials take the commodification of religion one step further extracting the religion out to sell a façade with “Daoist” stamped on the front. These materials supply the fad created by an exoticization of Daoism and an obsession with Asian cultural products. The consumption of these materials allows the consumer to have false sense of participation in something foreign and exotic. This is an abuse of American Daoist spirituality and makes it difficult to differentiate between who is a real Daoist and who is simply a consumer without spiritual guidance.

Anna Tsing explores the interactions of people on a global scale, and discovers that there are points of interaction that she calls friction. Although her book deals mainly with environmental friction, I think her term can be applied to friction between cultural groups. For when interactions happen between native Chinese Daoists and American Daoists there can arise conflict between the two concerning who is right and who is wrong. Friction can occur between genuine American Daoists and faddists that think they are Daoists by consuming “Daoist” goods.

One case that Siegler spends time on is an American Daoist retreat to which contractive and expansive Daoists as well as Daoist Scholars attended. There are debates among these groups as to which group was truly Daoist. Each group had a different

opinion and no one could settle on any answers. The most heated debates came from the contractive and expansive Daoists. The contractive believed that the expansive Daoists were too free in their religion and that they should uphold some of the Daoist traditions. While expansive Daoists believed the opposite and found the contractive Daoists too rigid and that they subscribed to too.

#### IV. Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have discussed how culture has affected the practice of Daoism in America and how American Daoism is a commodity. Religions need a degree of commodification if they want to survive and grow. Many American Daoists have chosen Daoism as their religion through the global cultural supermarket and have decided that their practice is significant and genuine.

Furthermore, I have also discussed the process through which Daoism was appropriated into American culture through capitalist acquisition and the personal choices of spiritual seekers to adopt their constructed Daoism as their religion. Through the processes of globalization Daoism has developed into a commodity that has been tailored for American and Western consumption. American Daoism is a religion of practice and these practices can be used by any individual.

## Conclusion

This thesis has described various aspects of American Daoism and builds upon Siegler's work. I have described how American Daoist identity is a hybrid of Chinese and American elements that manifest into a privatized religious practice. It has been shaped by Orientalist thought and by religions from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that applied their religious freedom to combat the hegemony of the established churches of their times. American Daoism is an interesting construction and has many characteristics of a New Religious Movement.

As a hybrid religion formed through global cultural flows, American Daoism is neither American nor Chinese; it is a unique formation that includes characteristics from both of its components. The practitioners who identify as American Daoists are spiritual seekers that have chosen this religion because it fills a void in their lives. Their practice and experience is genuine and should not be considered faddist.

American Daoism is a religion with an emphasis on practice: reading, movement and health. There is a fine line between genuine practice and consumer driven practice and I have tried to differentiate between the two. Genuine and consumer practitioners use similar available texts and sources, but each uses them for different purposes. The American Daoist practices the religion to gain spiritual insight into themselves and the universe. Whereas the consumer will consume the goods because they are in fashion and will quickly move onto the next fad created by the corporate marketers. American Daoist practices have longevity because the practitioners express their devotion to the religion and its philosophy. A fad is temporary quickly disappears.

American Daoist organizations have a strong following, but they have very little

in the form of structure within the religion. It is difficult to tell whether American Daoism will survive and be practiced by a future generation of American Daoists or if this form of spirituality will be a springboard for new types of Daoist movements in the United States. It will be interesting to see how well the successors of the contemporary American Daoist masters can continue this new religious tradition after the masters have retired or moved on.

There remains a significant amount of work that needs to be done involving the study of American Daoists. There can be more in depth discussion on identity theory and looking at what it means to be an American Daoist. Further study into globalization and how this phenomenon affects American Daoism is worthwhile. American Daoism as it stands is a religion that may be changed through further interaction with the global world.

Another front where work can be done is comparing American Daoism to Daoism in Europe. It would be interesting to see the similarities and find out if there are any large differences. Some of the cultural influences of European Daoism would be similar to those of American Daoism. It would be interesting to see which practices European Daoists have selected and whether they include more or less of Chinese culture into their practices. Overall, there is still much work that has to be done in the study of American Daoism.

## Works Cited

- Albanese, Catherine L. *America, Religions and Religion*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1981.
- Albanese, Catherine L. *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007.
- Appadurai, Arjun ed. *Globalization*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Appadurai, Arjun ed. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Bhabha, Homi. *The Location of Culture*. London; New York: Routledge Press, 1994.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993.
- Buff, Rachel. *Immigration and the Political Economy of Hope*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001.
- Cadge, Wendy. *Heartland: the First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America*. Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Camaroff, Jean and John Camaroff. *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 1: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- Camaroff, Jean and John Camaroff. *Of Revelation and Revolution, Volume 2: Christianity, Colonialism, and Consciousness in South Africa*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Carrette, Jeremy and Richard King. *Selling Spirituality*. New York and London, Routledge Press: 2005.

- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Davids, Roger. *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States Since 1850*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988.
- Deloria, Phillip J. *Playing Indian*. New Haven: York University Press, 1998.
- Dyer, Richard. *White*. London ; London; New York : Routledge Press, 1997.
- Eck, Diana. *New Religious America*. San Francisco: Harper Press, 2001.
- Eskildsen, Stephen. *The Teachings and Practices of the Early Quanzhen Taoist Masters*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.
- Faubion, James D. *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3*. New York: New York Press, 1994.
- Forbes, Bruce David and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds. *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2000.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. New York: Random House Publishing, 1979.
- Frankenburg, Ruth. *White Women, Race Matters: the Social Construction of Whiteness*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Franklin, Sarah, Celia Lury and Jackie Stacey, eds. *Global Nature, Global Culture*. London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000.
- Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.
- Heine, Steven and Charles S. Prebish. *Buddhism in the Modern World*. Oxford and New

- York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Hill, Jane “The Incorporative Power of Whiteness.” Paper in American Ethnological Society Conference. Santa Monica, CA, 1994.
- Inden, Ronald D. *Imagining India*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001.
- Jameson, Fredric and Miyoshi Masao eds. *The Cultures of Globalization (Post-Contemporary Interventions)*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Juergensmeyer, Mark, ed. *Global Religions: an Introduction*. New York: Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Kern, Robert. *Orientalism, Modernism, and the American Poet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion*. , London; New York: Routledge Press, 1999.
- Kohn, Livia and Harold D. Roth. *Daoist Identity: History, Lineage and Ritual*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002.
- Kohn, Livia. *Daoism and Chinese Culture*. Cambridge: Three Pines Press, 2001.
- Kwong, Peter and Dusanka Miscevic. *Chinese America*. New York and London: New York Press, 2005.
- Kyle, Richard. *Religious Fringe*. Downers Grove: Invarsity Press, 1993.
- Lawrence, Bruce. *New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian Immigrants in American Religious Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Lechner, Frank J. and John Boli, eds. *The Globalization Reader*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2000.
- Lee, Robert. *Orientalists: Asian Americans in Popular Culture*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999.



- Ma, Sheng Mei. *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and American Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.
- Maffly-Kipp, Laurie, "East-ward Ho!" in *American Religion from the Perspective of the Pacific Rim in Retelling U. S. Religious History*; Thomas Tweed ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Maffly-Kipp, Laurie, *Religion and Society in Frontier California*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.
- Masuzawa, Tomoko. *The Invention of World Religions*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005.
- Mathews, Gordon. *Global Culture/Individual Identity: Searching for Home in the Cultural Supermarket*. London; New York: Routledge Press, 2000.
- Mijares, Sharon G. *Modern Psychology and Ancient Wisdom: Psychological Healing Practices from the World's Religious Traditions*. New York, London: Haworth Press, 2003.
- Prebish, Charles and Kenneth Tanaka, eds. *The Faces of Buddhism in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Prebish, Charles and Martin Baumann. *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.
- Takaki, Ronald. *A Different Mirror: a History of Multicultural America*. Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1993.
- Takaki, Ronald. *Iron Cages: Race and Culture in Nineteenth Century America, 2nd ed.* New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.

- Seidel, Anna. "Chronicles of Taoist Studies in the West 1950-1990." *Cathiers d'Extreme-Asie* 5 (1990): 223-347.
- Siegler, Elijah. "The Dao of America: History and Practice of American Daoism." PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2003.
- Stein, Stephen J. *Alternative American Religions*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Takaki, Ronald, ed. *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. New York: Penguin Publications, 1990.
- Taylor, Charles. *Sources of Identity: Making of the Modern Self*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. *Friction*. Princeton and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Tweed, Thomas. *The American Encounter with Buddhism 1844-1912*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.
- Tweed, Thomas and Steve Prothero. *Asian Religions in America: A Documentary History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998
- Tweed, Thomas. *Crossing and Dwelling*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- Valussi, Elena. *Inner Alchemical Texts*. PhD diss., University of London, .
- Van de Veer, Peter. *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Van de Veer, Peter. *Conversion to Modernities (Zones of Religion)*. New York: Routledge Publishing. 1995.
- Weber, Max. *Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism, translated and edited by Hans H. Gerth*. Glencoe: The Free Press, 1951.

- Welch, Holmes. *Taoism the Parting of the Way*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.
- Welch, Holmes and Anna Seidel, eds. *Facets of Daoism: Essays in Chinese Religion*.  
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978.
- Weltner, Anne. *Community of Daoist Men and Women in the Ming Dynasty*.  
New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.
- Wolf, Eric R. *Pathways of Power: Building an Anthropology of the Modern World*.  
Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2001.
- Yang, Fenggang. *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999.
- Yu, Henry. *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact and Exoticism in Modern America*.  
New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

## Vita

Steven Chan graduated from the University of Tennessee with a bachelor's degree in psychology and religious studies. He is graduating with a master's degree in philosophy focusing on Asian religion from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. His interest in the subject of Daoism was born out of his Chinese heritage and a desire to understand what happens to religions when they travel across transnational contexts. He plans to take a year off and will pursue a doctoral degree starting in the fall of 2009.