

DAOISM *An Introduction*

BY RONNIE L. LITTLEJOHN

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Reviewed by Hal W. French

The author succinctly defines his approach by initially stating, “Daoism is no single thing. It is the living tangled vines of teacher-practitioner lineages”(3). He traces these vines in more intricate detail than we might have expected from a book entitled *An Introduction*. This is a sophisticated work, and while it might challenge a beginning student of Chinese thought, it will reward the particularly interested student or teacher with its comprehensive treatment of the subject.

It is often difficult to separate one tradition from other cultural elements, and Littlejohn recognizes this. “Daoism is wound around and over, and integrated with the Chinese calendar, traditional medicine, national artifacts and treasures, and even its holidays and festivities”(5). He might have added, and even discusses in a number of passages, its interweaving with Buddhism. This interweaving is characterized at times by rivalries and at other times by borrowing back and forth, even blending, and at still others, by ascendancies and declines caused by the vagaries of imperial favor. During the Yuan period, for instance, Littlejohn records how a Buddhist monk complained to the Mongol court that Complete Perfection Masters had seized Buddhist temples and were distributing a fraudulent document that taught that Laozi had converted the Buddha.

In response to these complaints, the emperor (Kublai Khan) ordered a series of debates to be held, with the result that the emperor as arbiter not only sided with the Buddhists, but ordered that all Daoist books except the *Daodejing* be burned! Despite this disaster, Daoism’s resilience was evidenced in the presence of certain Celestial Masters—leaders who made themselves favored in the Mongol Court, even as the Complete Perfection influence was in disarray and somewhat blending with Buddhist centers, perhaps for protective coloration (156, 157). In fact, the Complete Perfection branch did have much in common with Buddhist monasteries in practicing celibacy and vegetarianism in their communities (155). In still other texts, as in one by Taishang entitled *Tract of the Most Exalted on Action and Response*, there is a blending of the three teachings of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism in a way that might resemble the institutionalized Cao Dai religion in Việt Nam (149).

If the Complete Perfection vine seemed stringent in its moral dictates, the moral element was certainly not absent in earlier schools. Ge Hong, for instance, from the fourth century CE, believed that anyone could obtain immortality. “Wealth and position, and even education, were not relevant. One’s moral life was, however, quite important” (118).

The pervasive quest for immortality, then, was not simply to be pursued magically through external means such as rituals employing cinnabar and certain medicinal herbs, but through internal alchemy, in which meditation practices refine one’s true nature. In addition to the quest for immortality, the goalless goal of merely living simply, following the dictates of *wu-wei* (action without action), is extolled.

Most casual students and scholars of Chinese philosophy will know two names—Laozi and Zhuangzi—and the two texts associated with them, the *Daodejing* and the work simply titled by the author’s name, the *Zuangzi*. The former, Littlejohn states, is “not arranged to develop any systematic argument. In this sense, the *Daodejing* is more like an anthology than a book with an overarching theme” (11). Thus, we may assume, this “trunk of Daoism” naturally spreads divergent

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branches, as they develop beyond its “Composite Trunk” (the *Zhuangzi* and other early texts in Littlejohn’s terminology). There is no doctrinal core that would lead to a natural self-pruning of different schools and practices. They spread out, in the author’s analogy, like the entwining branches of a kudzu plant.¹

While it is beyond the province of this review to discuss the treatment of all of the schools listed here, the influence of Daoism might also be seen in directions, which the author does not explore. These might include Chinese martial arts, especially Tai Chi Chuan, or the poetry of Han Shan, whose hermetic life style might be as reflective of Daoist models as those of Buddhism.

But an introduction has understandable limitations, and this work transcends any legitimate expectations in so many ways. The author is very conversant with other works, and he establishes his own niche with a book that is highly satisfying to a student of The Way. ■

NOTE

1. I am not sure that the analogy is altogether felicitous. While the kudzu plant does branch out voraciously, in the American South it is viewed as biologically malevolent in its invasive and pervasive nature!

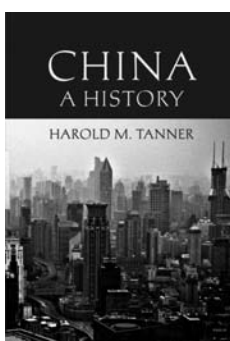
HAL W. FRENCH is retired and teaches part time in the University of South Carolina’s Department of Religious Studies, where he has been since 1972. He has received a number of teaching and service awards, and he has been active in study-abroad courses and service projects. His most recent book, *Zen and the Art of Anything*, has just been published in a third edition.

CHINA *A History*

BY HAROLD M. TANNER

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610 PAGES ISBN 978-0872209152, PAPERBACK

Reviewed by David Kenley



Since the conclusion of the Beijing Olympics, China has been in the international spotlight, and many students across the US now seem to be clamoring for access to Chinese language and history courses. Seeking to capitalize on this excitement, Harold M. Tanner has published a new, cogently written textbook entitled quite simply, *China: A History*.

Encompassing the full breadth of China’s history, from its mythical origins to the 2008 Beijing Olympics, both teachers and students will welcome this ambitious text. It will join the thin ranks of texts that attempt to cover 5,000 years of Chinese history (including Fairbank and Goldman, *China: A New History*; Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilization*; Ebrey, *Cambridge Illustrated History of China*; and another similarly-titled, recent

entry, Keay, *China: A History*). Instructors who are looking for a single text for both pre-modern and modern China will find this to be an appealing option. Though printed entirely in black and white, it contains numerous attractive and easy-to-read charts, graphs, and illustrations. It is also modestly priced relative to its competitors.

The text opens with a recounting of the Beijing Olympics. “For Chinese audiences,” Tanner writes, “the opening ceremony and the games themselves symbolized a recovery of lost glory.” On the other hand, Tanner points out, “most American spectators approached the Beijing Olympics with a very different idea of China’s history. The American media portrayed the games as China’s ‘coming out party.’” Tanner rejects both of these meta-narratives.

The story of China,” he claims, “goes beyond the simple but misleading narratives of glory to downfall to redemption or of isolation to opening . . . (and includes) heroes and villains . . . women and men, tragedy and comedy, high culture and coarse humor, exquisite art and terrible suffering, feast and famine, extremes of wealth and poverty, philosophies of peace and practices of war . . .

In short, this is an extremely ambitious 600-page text.

Tanner admirably retells many familiar aspects of “the story of China,” while incorporating recent scholarship. His sources are varied and impressive. For instance, his use of recent environmental histories sheds interesting light on the fall of the Eastern Han, making connections and conclusions unavailable in earlier Chinese history textbooks. Not only does Tanner use very current publications, but he also relies on conference presentations and online sources. Furthermore, Tanner should be commended for his balanced chronological coverage. Too frequently, texts of this type focus primarily on the modern period, while skimming over earlier eras. By contrast, Tanner’s date of demarcation is 1366 (the founding of the Ming Dynasty), with half of the text covering the preceding years and the other half covering subsequent years. The work is arranged chronologically, based on China’s political dynastic divisions.

The text consists of an introduction and four main sections, each characterized by a selected hexagram from the *Book of Changes*. These include the hexagrams symbolizing, “biting through,” “possession in great measure,” “abundance,” and “change.” Because of the book’s scope, Tanner must make choices regarding content coverage. Throughout all four sections, his analysis of political and military history is excellent. He helps clarify those politically confusing eras, such as the Warring States, the Eastern Han, and the Six Dynasties periods. His definition of China is broad, allowing him to provide considerable coverage to non-Chinese borderlands including Manchuria, Mongolia, and Xinjiang. This allows Tanner to highlight the cross-cultural interactions that have been so pervasive (and so overlooked) in Chinese history. Visual art, literature, and other aspects of cultural history also receive attention. For example, Tanner’s discussions of the famous calligraphers “Crazy Zhang” and “Drunken Monk” are both entertaining and enlightening. Because of his emphases, other topics receive less attention than perhaps they should. Tanner’s analysis of women in history focuses primarily on powerful women (Empress Wu, Cixi, and Madame Chiang Kai-shek, for instance), while his coverage of typical women is far more scant. He also tends to gloss over those topics that are especially interesting to Western audiences, such as the examination system, foot binding, and the Rape of Nanjing. Perhaps Tanner does not want to emphasize the exotic, thereby