

9-2011

## Review of "Daoist Modern: Innovation, Lay Practice, and the Community of Inner Alchemy in Republican Shanghai" by Xun Liu

Emily Wu

Center for the Pacific Rim, University of San Francisco, [emily.wu@dominican.edu](mailto:emily.wu@dominican.edu)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11462-011-0137-9>

**Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.**

---

### Recommended Citation

Wu, Emily, "Review of "Daoist Modern: Innovation, Lay Practice, and the Community of Inner Alchemy in Republican Shanghai" by Xun Liu" (2011). *Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship*. 268.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11462-011-0137-9>

### DOI

<http://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s11462-011-0137-9>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty and Staff Scholarship at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Collected Faculty and Staff Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact [michael.pujals@dominican.edu](mailto:michael.pujals@dominican.edu).

Daoist Modern: Innovation, Lay Practice, and the Community of Inner Alchemy in Republican Shanghai. By Xun Liu. Harvard University Asia Center, 2009. 396 pages. \$49.95.

Situated in the already metropolitan city of Shanghai during Republican era, *Daoist Modern* leads the readers through a Daoist inner alchemy revivalist (no pun intended) movement that actively participated in China's transformation from its imperial past onto the path of modernization. In this book, Liu Xun traces how Chen Yingning (1880-1969) and his followers infused the intellectual discourse and cultivation toward immortality with issues pertinent to their identity as Chinese urban elites of their time: Nationalism and the role of elite cultivators in a time of national and cultural crisis; gender equality and women's rights; and the changing mode of information dissemination. As these elites redefined the Daoist goals, reinterpreted Daoist methods, and redesigned Daoist cultivation regimen and programs, literati Daoism transformed and modernized along with the rest of the Chinese society. Furthermore, Liu points to a (albeit a thin one) lineage continuing the modern inner alchemy movement in Taiwan up to the late 1980s.

Through meticulous contextualization, Liu brings forth important facets of Chinese religiosity through the life narratives of Chen Yingning and his cohort. Here I will highlight three key facets in Liu's presentation. First is of course the stated objective of showing how elite Daoism responded to and interacted with modernity. As a group of elites and professionals variously trained in both classical Chinese and Western educational systems, Chen and his cohort were on a spiritual quest, as Liu puts it, "for spiritual autonomy and self-reliance"(p. 75). In Chen's comprehensive inner alchemy program, one is introduced to a lifestyle program that includes techniques and regimens from classical Daoist texts. A procedure is outlined, starting with seeking the source of oral secrets to explain textual knowledge, and a master to guide the adept through the program. This initiation step was important for the adept to identify a master who provided individually suitable instructions based on the temperament and conditions of the adept, and to form a strong and lasting master-disciple relationship. Furthermore, in an era when foreign invasions were viewed as severely threatening the integrity and even the survival of the Chinese civilization and culture, the ritually endorsed initiations ensured that important cultivation secrets were not casually transmitted and wrongly utilized especially by foreigners.

Once the adepts were properly initiated onto the path of inner alchemy, the program became a lifestyle revolution that took concurrent social conditions and needs into consideration. While the actual cultivation methods came out of classical texts, Chen and his cohort interpreted and innovated to make cultivation actually possible and sustainable while the adepts remained active and participating members of the society at large. Liu details how the cohort actively formed a fellowship to provide moral, ethical, and spiritual support for each other. They sought locations for cultivation according the traditional art of *fengshui*, but moved away from traditional model of financial sustenance through outside donors.

In terms of daily practice, the adepts again took on the classical program with a modern spin. Western scientific and biomedical categories were incorporated into their understanding of the diet and health regimen which were previously explained from the perspective of traditional

Chinese medical paradigm. However, the end goal of Chen's program—the attainment of perfection or immortality—was consistent with classical inner alchemy.

Besides the general confrontation with modernity, also a second key facet in Liu's presentation of Chen Yingning's movement is the understanding of women's body, role, and methods of cultivation toward immortality. Female cultivators, whether as the wives and partners of male cultivator, or as solo, independent cultivators, were recognized for their female physiology and different needs toward perfection. The educated women, such as Chen Yingning's students Chen Wuxuan and Miss Dong, were exposed to and insisted on gender equality among practitioners in the cohort.

Finally, Liu investigates the revival of inner alchemy in relation to the transformation of print media. Traditionally, knowledge on self-cultivation was either disseminated through morality books available in local temples, or due to the issue of secrecy, in print but in extremely limited distribution. Yihuatang, a publishing house in Shanghai, worked closely with Chen and his cohort in collecting and reprinting Daoist inner alchemy classics. Chen also hopped onto the bandwagon of the new genre of regularly published journals. This provided Chen for a national-scale platform for teaching, and also a space for discourse among practitioners previously disconnected by geographical separation. In turn, "the once largely private and individual practice of inner alchemy [was transformed] into an increasingly public experience of self-cultivation and spiritual pursuit" (p. 275).

Liu does not suggest this in his book, but perhaps we can call Chen's life work a new religious movement, where traditional practices were given new vernacular translations and packaged with popular new ideas of the time. The delicate balance between the old and the new brought success to the movement—the cultivation methods were traditional enough to be considered authentic, while the interpretations were trendy enough to be considered "modern." There is nothing new about this formula of keeping tradition up-to-date; in fact, traditions would not survive through time if there weren't constant updating. On the other hand, Liu shows us through Chen's narratives that the Daoist inner alchemy tradition, in its own diffusive way, continued and continuously interacted with the Chinese society in its transformations. Besides the direct attribution to Chen's teachings, we also still see remnants of that particular discourse in how Chinese today understand self-healing, self-cultivation methods, and traditional Chinese medicine.

Emily S. Wu  
University of San Francisco  
Email: [eswu@usfca.edu](mailto:eswu@usfca.edu)