

Not Doctrinal, Not Theological

An Empirical-Pragmatic Approach to the Concept of an Afterlife in Reference to China

Humberto Schubert Coelho

Associate Professor

Department of Philosophy

Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora

humbertoschubert@yahoo.com.br

Chiu Yi Chih

Lecturer of Daoist philosophy and literature

winnerchiu@gmail.com



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Abstract: Contrary to the philosophical purism of academic depictions of religious doctrines, syncretism is not a random event that might or might not happen to traditions but a consistent and nearly inevitable anthropological process whereby beliefs and doctrinal concepts are assimilated under the objective pressure of spiritual experience. As recent research presents indigenous traditions according to their original meaning, filtering colonial perspectives out of the analysis, anti-Western biases prove equally inadequate to revealing what these traditions actually mean. Scholarly understanding of afterlife conceptions in China suffered from the excessive emphasis on the tension between Westernized and anti-Western approaches, demanding not only a revaluation of original cultural meanings in the humanistic sense but also philosophical and scientific attempts to scrutinize objective experiential patterns. Through the exemplary Chinese case, this paper proposes that a more empirical and pragmatic approach to afterlife conceptions could be more fruitful for the philosophy of religion than more humanistic analyses based solely on cultural interpretation.

Keywords: Afterlife; China; Global Philosophy of Religion; Spiritual Experience

1. Introduction

While giving non-Western cultures their due in the academic debate has been universally accepted and praised for several decades, the reality is that academic research still reflects the dominance of the English language and Western patterns that more frequently than not distort indigenous concepts. The problem is particularly prominent in areas such as philosophy of religion, theology, and religious studies, where methods are deeply imbued with Greco-Christian concepts, values, and imagery.

At the same time, fundamental philosophy is a rational attempt to make sense of the whole of reality, and regional variations should not be used to erase universalities. In the common human effort to understand, a shared basis is essential to promote fruitful dialogue among different perspectives. As much as the acknowledgement of specificities is the call of our times, philosophy has to resist the anthropological temptation of losing connection with basic common truths, especially in matters of ultimate concern (McGrath, 2008: 26), which are not cultural but human.

From the tension between Westernized versions of Eastern philosophies and religions, on the one hand, and the attempt to confront them, on the other hand, simplistic caricatures based on anti-Western ideas arise. The Godless or even atheist versions of Eastern metaphysical conceptions do not do justice to their original understanding of reality and life (Coelho, 2015), proving themselves harmful, since antagonizing Christianity or Platonism could not possibly be the essential concern of fully independent traditions. In contrast, texts primarily committed to decolonialism and anti-Westernism may frequently fail to depict the essential features of indigenous concepts precisely by emphasizing what they do not mean.

If anti-Western narratives about non-Western philosophies and religions are well known and have enjoyed recent popularity, older authors also used romantic, i.e., explicitly anti-Christian, presentations of Eastern philosophies as tools in favour of their criticism of Western traditions. A. Schopenhauer, P. Deussen, F. Nietzsche, W. Durant, and H. Zimmer, to mention just a few, became famous for not only incorrect but also very naïve conceptions about Eastern philosophies and religions (Zimmer, 1951; Durant, 1952), contrasting with equally famous pro-Western and potentially prejudicial approaches, such as Hegel's (Hegel, 1970, XVI: 360-361).¹

Logically, the best way to avoid the dangers of biased perspectives is to give voice to each tradition in its own terms. As initiatives that take a global perspective on the philosophy of religion show, Western (or Westernized) philosophical papers frequently fail to consider core religious concepts in their cultural contexts, a mistake that leads to inadequate criticism and conclusions (Burley, 2012). This sort of bias may be almost impossible to discern even in good-willed attempts by Eastern scholars to grasp the original meanings, because the core concepts used in the analysis may evoke other levels of ambiguity. Slingerland's arguments in favour of a "weak dualistic" conception in early Chinese thought are a good example of an approach that does justice to the object, but raises further concerns about the ultimately "correct" notion of

¹ It is also worth mentioning that most charges against Hegel's "Eurocentrism" ignore the points actually raised by his arguments (Jaeschke, 1997).

dualism (Slingerland, 2019: 8-9). In this paper, we aim to avoid the automatic inferences and analogies between Christianity and Platonism that so strongly shape the debate over concepts of soul, spirit, dualism, and immortality (of the soul/spirit). We will not dedicate any time discussing these philosophical traditions or distinguishing them from the Chinese perspective on the abovementioned concepts. While comparisons and distinctions are very helpful, our purpose in mentioning the great Western traditions in the title was to stress the necessity of an *epoché* in this particular matter, since Western prejudices and taboos in academic research on such issues are allegedly significant.

This is not to say, however, that we will enforce anti-Western approaches as more authorized than pro-Western ones. In fact, there is little logic in supposing that any independent conception must oppose any other, because philosophy is also essentially universal – a human endeavour to pursue common meaning and understanding – and comparative or global perspectives show astonishing conceptual consistency across cultures.

It is also relevant to remember that there is often a significant gap between the positions of scholars – including some modern scholars – and the actual beliefs and practices of indigenous populations.

We present illustrative examples of close and fruitful contact between different Chinese conceptions of spirit and the afterlife to show how the relationship between perspectives can emphasize both distinctions and harmony. We also hope that this perspective will shed some light on interreligious dialogue and/or philosophy of religion, in the sense of developing comparisons that are both respectful of identities and peculiarities and relevant to a broader understanding of key philosophical and religious concepts in their more universal sense.

Considering this, this paper argues that (1) some Daoist conceptions of immortality of the soul/spirit present a naturalistic tendency that suggests an empirical origin, (2) other Chinese conceptions of spirit or afterlife are empirically and pragmatically oriented, (3) trying to root empirical elements of afterlife conceptions can be very fruitful to the adequate understanding of such conceptions, and (4) philosophy of religion can profit from a more empirical reading of anthropological features.

2. No one believes in fantasies, but most people believe in spirits

From an analytical point of view, the trickiest and most deceptive fact about the concept of the survival of the soul is the abundance of contradictions among perspectives, religions, and philosophies. One can make very little progress without knowing that virtually all perspectives consider every alternative to be *superstitious*,¹ if not heretical. As a consequence, a global perspective in philosophy of religion seems especially difficult to achieve, for religions and religious philosophies seem to be in sharp contrast.

For those familiar with East Asian literature on death and immortality, the first observations that occur *ad nauseam* sound like “Chinese do not believe in heaven and hell, as Westerners do”, or “Buddhists/Chinese/Daoists are not concerned with life after death”. Once one is caught in this trap, the next natural conclusion is to suppose that these traditions do not believe in spirits, ghosts, the permanence of personality after bodily death, or reincarnation, whereas, in fact, they *usually* do.² This contradiction easily leads readers to feel that they have missed some step(s) in between.

This appears very clearly in Anne Goodrich’s analysis of Ti-yü, a Chinese concept of hell:

Sentences to this prison are not for eternity as in a Western conception of Hell [...] [In Ti-yü] the wicked are punished, and when their wrongdoings, or wrong-thinking, have been paid for, the

¹ Philosophers, theologians and priests may render superstitious every and any concept that is not in concordance with their definition. There are plenty of examples, from Immanuel Kant to the Stoics, from Aristotle to church doctrine, but very pedagogical examples can be found in an interview with the Japanese Shinsu Buddhist Rev. Nakatsu Isao: “in Shinsu, [the idea] souls is not taught [...] I can’t deny that there are people who believe in the existence of a soul, which is the general belief of the Japanese people. And there are people whose only connection with Shinsu is ancestor worship, but, in the tradition of the believers of Shinsu, belief in Tanashii (soul) is a spell. We have a religious tradition quite free of such superstition” (Andreasen, 1998: 134). “When a closely related person dies, the very natural belief is that the person goes back to the Pure Land [...] For myself my life is only once but when my life ends that is the Pure Land” (Andreasen, 1998: 135). In other words, the state of persons in the afterlife is more related to transcendence than to an earthly state, which they consider superstitious. Andreasen also insists that the ancestors should not only be respected but worshiped, for they are transcendent (Andreasen, 1998: 135). Now, what does it actually mean to worship nothing, something that does not possess any form of reality or existence? Similar conceptual arrangements, that may suggest some vagueness or even contradiction, are not so enigmatic once we understand that Buddhism, Daoism, and other Eastern systems of thought do not exactly deny a spiritual dimension but, rather, the naïve conception of a spiritual existence that reflects the mundane world. The essence, then, is not to explore or deny our future state after death but to remember that liberation is the achievement of a full existential and psychological presence, without which life here or anywhere else is a delusion.

² The social quantitative research points consistently to this. Konrad Hackett, in a recent article from the Pew Research Center, observed that: “Among the total population, minority shares say they believe in religious figures and supernatural forces. But most Chinese people engage in practices premised on belief in unseen forces and spirits” (Hackett, 2023).

prisoners are released to live in society again or go to Paradise [...] Even the judges and the attendants in Ti-yü hope to pass on to a better life. (Goodrich, 1981: 67)

She also asserts that this concept was brought to China by Buddhists. Now, while the distinction is very pronounced, again, it seems exaggerated to suppose that this is a very sharp contrast with the Western (or any other) popular conception of hell, as the similarities were not striking or very supportive of the possibility of a global perspective. Moreover, indigenous conceptions of hell everywhere seem to bear essential similarities to the Chinese conceptions, which, in turn, are peculiar and distinct from other Buddhist conceptions, raising relevant doubts about the exclusivity of the Buddhist origins of the Chinese conceptions of hell.

An even more relevant point, however, is how to regard the ontological status of the ubiquitous references to spirits and life after death. We know that some ontological status has to be assigned to this basic human experience, for no one will admit or accept that matters of ultimate concern are “nothing but” a byproduct of psycho-cultural biases. The very definition of questions of ultimate concern reflects their existential depth and the fact that people are clearly ready to live and die for them. Therefore, we can only deprive these experiences of ontological significance by being insensitive to their actual, vital relevance to those who experience them. For *our* purposes, however – as philosophers of religion – it is relevant to discern between the possible categories involved in this ontological status, even if such categories are completely irrelevant for the general population.

In philosophical terms, experiences assumed to be objective may enjoy symbolic or natural ontological reality. To say that they enjoy symbolic reality only is not a way to diminish or disavow them in the reductionist sense, for it is not the same as saying that such experiences consist of nothing but subjective interpretation (i.e., illusions). In contrast, assigning to something a symbolic ontological status is to admit that these experiences *operate as real* for those who have them.

Mark Wynn presents a remarkable analysis of a rather typical phenomenon, the sacralization of car accident sites. In many cultures, the sites where car accidents occurred can be sacralised by the loved ones of those who died in the accident. Flowers, candles, and religious symbols may decorate the place, and this ritualistic appropriation of space is clearly not only subjective, because remembering the fatality when passing by would be enough in this case. In contrast, whenever humans manifest their conviction and states of mind through material gestures and objects, it shows that they recognize the objective reality (ontological status) of the connexion “through a certain kind of seriousness” (Wynn, 2021: 23). What Wynn is

emphasizing is “storied identity” and its narrative value for our objective lives, and that it should not be easily translatable in reductionistic terms, even if the ontological status of the narrative and the symbolic value of such experiences are also not described in more naturalistic terms.

We can, therefore, interpret this objective reality as a reality for consciousness – not only in a more idealistic but also in phenomenological and existential ways – or as a reality that demands an expanded naturalism; that is to say, these religious or spiritual experiences actually reflect an objectively graspable connection with the spiritual world. For our purpose here, it is irrelevant to decide between the options, but it is very relevant to mention them for disambiguation.

In any case, people who have spiritual experiences are consistently (across cultures and times)¹ strongly persuaded of their objective reality, with a tendency to attribute to these experiences expanded naturalistic reality, and the Chinese case is by no means an exception to the rule.

While closely related, however, the varied Chinese and Daoist conceptions of spirit hold some subtle distinctions, justifying a first consideration about Chinese general thought on the matter. Victoria Harrison reminds us that the Chinese understanding of spirit is more likely the rule than the exception, but that general prejudice against non-Western ideas may lead some to judge the Chinese conception as “exotic”.

One assumption that is culturally shaped and very rarely questioned by analytic philosophers is that the dead are dead and will remain so. [...] A great many people, especially, but not exclusively, in Africa and Asia, however, hold that the dead remain connected to the world of the living, and in this sense, the dead never really die. (Harrison, 2021: 339)

As Harrison explains, this is not to say that non-Westerners² believe in resurrection or in a spiritual world similar to the one depicted in Greek paganism or the Judeo-Christian tradition. That would be exactly the Western explanation for this distinction. The difference is even more fundamental: non-Westerners do not have the concept of death as annihilation, so no theory or belief in an afterlife as another life is actually demanded. Moreover, the dead are not supposed to live in “another world”, distant and apart, but, on the contrary, they are ever present, and

¹ See Moreira-Almeida et al. (2022).

² Native Americans deserve to be included. As a reference, the *History of Philosophy in Brazil*, by Paulo Margutti, stresses that the mentality of the Brazilian indigenous population was heavily marked by animism (recognizing spiritual/anthropomorphic features everywhere) and spiritualism (recognizing actual presence of the spirits of entities and the deceased) (Margutti, 2013).

references to them are much more than just memory and recognition, as their existence was in the past (Harrison, 2021: 340). They definitely live in another world in the sense of another dimension of reality, but not in the – actually anti-intuitive – sense of a separate ontological realm, as some intellectualist doctrines portray it. Although we agree with Harrison, we would also add that the concept of death as annihilation is exotic in the West as well, and only popularized in the last two centuries.

The specificity of the Chinese approach is that it is not based on theoretical expectations and depictions but on essentially practical narratives centred on the *agency* of the people involved – dead or living.

This animist trait of Chinese thought is recognized as having influenced foreign and more conceptual traditions, such as Buddhism (Ziporyn, 2004) and, undoubtedly, Daoism.

3. Philosophical implications of Daoist conceptions of spirit

Compared to the common understanding of the spiritual part of human beings, the Daoist understanding is considerably more abstract and philosophical.

The idea of a tacit interconnection between the living and the dead may be related to the far weaker emphasis that Chinese philosophy gives to the concepts of space and time that shape much of Western intellectual life, but we will leave this idea for future research. What we can assert now is that Chinese Daoist sages, such as Liezi, recognize the primacy of living processes over fixed positions in space and time.

Early Daoist writings usually depict death in a “Socratic” or “Stoic” manner – if the comparison with the Western perspective is not overly abusive here – and the sage's goal is to overcome the idea that death is abhorrent (Michael, 2005: 100).

Richard Wilhelm, who was more a translator of Eastern philosophy to Western terminology than a purist of the original thought, usually associated Daoist philosophy with organicist thinkers such as G.W.F. Hegel and J.W. Goethe. He observed, for example, that the entire life cycle of the plant, from the seed to the large tree bearing fruit, would be regarded as one single process by Daoist thinkers (Wilhelm, 1931: 121-122). As a consequence, argues Wilhelm, Daoist philosophy would also have a more organic and much less disruptive understanding of life and death than Western philosophy.

According to natural law, all beings are born and die, and, when speaking of death, thinkers such as Liezi assert only the inexorability of finite human existence. What has form (形-xíng), Liezi argues, has to reach its end (必归终者也-bìguīzhōngzhěyě).¹ However, while things arise and decay, ever changing, Dao is what never vanishes (道). Since returning to the true form is returning (归-guī) to Dao, returning to the true form (真-zhēn), death may be envisioned as a way of returning the body to earth and the spirit to heaven, hence consummating the natural forms of both body and spirit, matter and mind.

This is not in contradiction with the widely asserted distinction between Daoism and the current philosophical depictions of – and prejudices against – dualism, and many studies reject the dualist interpretation as Westernized (Michael, 2005). Slingerland, on his turn, tackles this problem with great precision, showing that the strong rejection of dualistic conceptions by some researchers is heavily influenced by the very specific debates involving cartesianism or substance dualism, and the largest part of these discussions does not contribute to the understanding of other dualistic conceptions, such as the Chinese ones (Slingerland, 2019: 12-14). In contrast, Daoism presents an integrative monistic vision that does not neglect processual dualities (Ames, 1989: 48). In a way that resembles yin–yang symbolism, dualities are recognized as nonhierarchical, noncontradictory, complementary, and constitutive parts of the whole.

By affirming that the body is perishable matter by its nature, Liezi does not necessarily mean an ontological dualism that implies the inferior nature of the body. According to the nature of matter, perishing is exactly what it is supposed to do, and only ignorance leads to negative judgments about the way things are. Considering this, wisdom is the right understanding of the consequences of the nature of things and how to administer different and even conflicting natures in balance (Lee, 2005). This is why Daoist practices such as Tai-Chi, Qi Gong, and others strive for the transformation of both body and spirit to bring them to a state of harmony.

In the words of Wang Bang Xiong, the most profound meaning of this pursuit of harmony is the *authentic nature of original virtue* (天真本德-tiānzhēnběndé) (Xiong, 2010: 56). To achieve this, authenticity would be the main proof of original virtue, and the methods of self-cultivation are not meant to “master the body” or to “overcome what is physical” but, rather, to “spiritualize the body” and “to embody the spirit”. In this dialectical movement, the sage grasps the fluidity and naturalness of Dao running through body and spirit.

¹ All original terms from Liezi (2020).

The fact that Daoist spirituality is greatly concerned with the body is telling about the very point we are trying to make in this paper, for it makes clear these Daoist references of spirituality are oriented to the *concrete practicality of life*, to reality as experienced, not as imagined or presupposed in theory.

The dialectics of the Daoist depiction of spiritual life – more in the sense of the dynamic duality of all processes than in the sense of the Platonic method to understand it – also allow us to speculate about a corporeal nature of discarnate spirits in new, subtle bodies more akin to the eternal nature of the spirit (神-shén). In fact, not only would the spirits have bodies, but our bodies in the material life would be profoundly spiritual in some sense. There would be no space to consider matter, living beings, society, and politics as separate; they are all deeply interconnected as they are all spiritualized.¹

We should not indulge in contrasting original and more philosophical notions as necessarily opposed to the popular ones, even if here and there some concepts and beliefs may be depicted as “wrong” or “popular” by academic or even by traditional Daoist literature. Daoists from the first times were supposed to prevent evil spirits from entering their bodies by cultivating spiritual energy (Lagerwey, 2011: 10). This is just one example of a principle that reconciles “popular” notions of an afterlife and spiritual world with the classical Daoist understanding of organic integrity and balance.

Some sources, however, suggest that their writers were not ready to wait patiently for a better state in the afterlife. In contrast, echoing Plato’s warnings about the necessity of “get used” to spiritual life before death, many Daoist masters recommended exercises that could best lead us to a certain familiarity with it. By controlling spiritual energy (Wang et al., 2011), one becomes closer to the natural and innocent way of newborns, manifesting *wúxín* (not-mind) and *wúwéi* (not-action).

Emulating newborns, those who practice this wisdom are in perfect harmony (和-hé) and perfect constancy (常-cháng) (Xiong, 2010: 251), becoming capable of “remembering” the innate essential, luminous naturalness, the precious pearl hidden by layers of illusion and error. The difference is that newborns manifest this quality because they do not have the means to build an artificial schism in themselves and their relationships, whereas the sages manifest the

¹ The ancient sage and commentator He Shang Gong argues, “He who follows the permanent path has to practice inaction to cultivate the spirits [that exist in his body]. On the other hand, he has to grant tranquillity to the people, promoting peace and stability [in the country]”. By that, he meant that the Dao of longevity and the Dao of spontaneity (naturalness) would be conducive to both a healthy life and a virtuous leadership (Laozi, 2016: 5).

same virtues through an educated and trained effortlessness. The pure and natural way of the baby and that of the masters are radically distinct in this respect.

Again, the purpose of this naturalness, of effortless action and harmonization with the Dao, is not to transcend “this life” in favour of a new, purely spiritual one. The reason why many Daoist and Chinese scholars in general strongly reject Western notions of immortality of the soul/spirit, God, and the afterlife has to do with the fact that such notions are heavily marked by the idea that the transcendent is not applicable to this world, that we should expect a better/next life, and that a gap exists between Creator and the creatures. In rejecting these alien notions, however, many “anti-Western” commentators also discard the animist and spiritualist elements that are components of Chinese philosophies.

It is correct that *shén*, for example, does not correspond to the Western ghostly vision of a discarnate spirit but to the immanent spiritual nature of things (Michael, 2005: 64). This observation must be reconciled, however, with the fact that Chinese thought admits the immanent presence of the dead in the same world and reality we live in. In simple words, spirit and matter are two different natural and fairly independent processes, but there is no reason to conclude that two completely different ontological realities is the only way to accommodate the practical spirit-body duality.

Commenting on the expression “the mystery of the vision” (玄覽-*xuánlǎn*), in the tenth chapter of the Dao De Jing, master He Shang Gong says that “the sage shall receive the Dao quietly, and pursuit it with spirit” (Laozi, 2016: 110). Contrary to many contemporary self-help and well-being approaches to spirituality, however, it is not enough to tell someone that she needs to engage in quiet effort to be one with the Dao. This state is the result of long practice, only achievable through decades of experience, and the belief that teachings cannot abbreviate the personal path coincides with another decisive feature of Chinese mentality: praise to the elders and worship to the ancestors.

Pervading streams of thought, religions, and subcultures, the great respect for elders is a fundamental philosophical stance of the Chinese people. This attitude not only represents the rational respect for maturity and expertise inevitably acquired by time but also the somewhat mystical or ontological belief that elders are closer to what they are supposed to *be*. This closeness to their true nature is not a consequence of any social recognition but a natural consequence of the fact that they lived, and it is by living longer that we learn the worth of simple things and become more natural.

Additionally, according to Liezi, the lack of balance and harmony leads to illness and premature decay, so that unsettled souls live less. The virtue of naturalness (自然-zirán), therefore, should not be understood as an abstract or ideal virtue in opposition to the embodied life, for one of the expected consequences of naturalness, one of the consequences of spiritual practice, we could say, is a healthy and long life.

Unconventional as it is, the Daoist concept of spirit is not necessarily in contradiction with more popular beliefs but offers a thoughtful and enlightened way of evaluating what spirit actually implies. It sounds overly simplistic to say, as some authors do, that Daoists do not indulge in popular conceptions of afterlife or spirit in any possible way, but, as in the case of Buddhism, the distinction is rather clear. While Daoist sages do not negotiate their higher concepts in the market of popular belief, rejecting both superstition and trivial expectations of a continuing life, it is also an exaggeration to say they oppose them in every way. In fact, it would be odd for the Daoist spiritual–naturalist conception of life if most people were radically wrong.

4. The Chinese practical approach to death and afterlife

Analysing the contrast between Chinese “folk-psychological” or general concepts of spirit and afterlife, on the one hand, and the Daoist concept, on the other hand, they both seem to highlight a well-recognized feature of Chinese thought: pragmatism.

Harrison argues that one basic cognitive difference between the Western and the Chinese understanding of knowledge is that the former identifies knowledge with vision and clear sight, while Chinese philosophy places a heavier emphasis on action and identifies knowledge with the adequate “way” of doing and living (Harrison, 2015: 317-318).

This distinction fosters terminological complexity that can lead to the most intense hermeneutical clashes, even though the conceptual contrast is not so sharp, thereby forcing us into a state of constant terminological revision to allow constructive dialogue in favour of a global or integrative perspective in philosophy of religion.

A good example of such complexity is the following text from the *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy*:

Religious Daoism possesses specific features that originated in the second century CE, during the later Han dynasty, and have continued into contemporary times. [...] Daoism is polytheistic, presenting a pantheon of gods, spirits, and ghosts: it has absorbed the traditional religious practices of the Chinese people, including offering sacrifices to the ancestors [...] and dispelling evil spirits. Unlike other religions, Daoism is not concerned with life after death. (Liu et al., 2015: 476)

Now, while this declaration is certainly true, it is also dangerous to mistake “is not concerned with” with “rejects” life after death, for the same paragraph asserts the belief in spirits and ghosts. This is frequently confusing for most Western philosophers of religion, who expect a direct relation between the concept of the survival of human personality to bodily death and the concept of an afterlife. It is equally challenging to explain why some authors refer to Daoism as monistic, whereas here, it is referred to as polytheistic. This is a very good example of why terminology and usual categories of the philosophy of religion have to be very carefully explained in almost every text.

A bit further on, in the same text, it is stated that only with the school of Complete Perfect Daoism, already syncretic with Buddhism and Confucianism, did Daoist sages start pursuing “spiritual immortality instead of physical” immortality (Liu et al., 2015: 484). In other words, rather than a simple, homogeneous position, the historical development of the concept across the many branches seems to be a more faithful depiction of the conceptual scenario.

Another recurrent feature of the Chinese conceptions is the frequent nontheological status of the spiritual experience. Spirit apparitions in dreams or daily life are not necessarily regarded as revelations and special occurrences. In contrast, they are sometimes banal to the point of not deserving to be mentioned, and sometimes, only the lack of contact with the spirits of the deceased may be a matter of concern. An episode involving Confucius can be very enlightening:

The close association of religious experiences and humanistic concerns is also clear in those experiences through the media of dreams. Dreams play a crucial role in many religions and are believed to have revealed ultimate truths to religious founders, shapers and believers. Confucius deplored the decline of his physical and psychological conditions when, for a long time, he did not have a dream in which he consulted his sage, the Duke of Zhou. This implies that he might have frequently dreamed of the Duke, the spiritual mentor and ethical model, in the past. (Xinzhong and Badham, 2007: 42)

Far more striking is the record on mediumship among children in an ancient chronicle from Yijian Zi. The chronicle tells the story of a priest who, incapable of communicating with a spirit, induced a small boy into a mediumistic trance to interrogate it about a case of murder. “The boy said, in the voice of a woman: ‘My name is Qingxi. I died before my allotted time. Up to now, I have not yet been reborn. Originally, it was not my mistress who killed me; yet, it was because of her that I died’” (Davies, 2001: 89).

There are six relevant theses presupposed by this very short narrative: (1) communication with deceased people is a rather ordinary fact; (2) mediumship or communication with the dead is not a privilege of priests – in fact, for many cultures, children can be more adequate to the task because of their lack of discernment and knowledge; (3) “the boy said, in the voice of a woman”, connotes that basic personality traits of the deceased can be identified in the communication; there is not only knowledge *about* the dead but also identity traits *from* them; (4) “died before the allotted time” implies an allotted time for each individual; (5) “not been reborn, yet” suggests that the spirit expects to reincarnate; and (6) specific information that could be helpful for the living. It is not at all uncommon that spiritual communications across cultures present a similarly large number of presuppositions, some not well defined by religious doctrine (Moreira-Almeida et al., 2022).

This context shows that some Chinese indigenous conceptions of spirit – heavily associated with Daoism – reveal the universal human experience of mediumship but are also strongly oriented toward the practical consequences of information about the deceased and the afterlife.

Another source stresses that “the ancestor, though dead, is a person with rights and duties” (Freedman, 1967: 99, as cited by Wolf, 1974: 146). What does this mean exactly, and what are the implications of such statements to our actual lives? It is certainly not a vague reference to the possible survival, or the possible state of our personality, after bodily death but a pragmatic statement about the *function* of the spirits in the cosmos, that they enjoy the full status of human beings, with rights and duties.

Finally, the question of whether it is possible to acknowledge small children as ancestors is also very salient.

The only way the person who dies as a small child can achieve security as an ancestor is to “return” a generation or two after his death” [...] “the family may “discover” an ancestor who died as a child [...] the person who died as a child is now grandfather’s older brother, and can therefore be accorded a place on the family altar and worshiped as an ancestor. (Wolf, 1974: 148)

The categories here are also not very difficult to discern, for the essence of ancestor worship is defined exactly through the contrast with the impossibility of granting the same privilege for a child. Therefore, the practical concern with the performance, the deeds, and the success of a full life has precedence over the spiritual essence that both children and the elderly share in common. If life has a purpose, then it is logical to expect and suppose that the honourable elders are those who have fulfilled it entirely. While small children can have a future chance to prove their dignity in practice, through their deeds, they can only have a place among the ancestors if something suggests they already achieved this status in a previous existence. In more Daoistic terms, we could say that, first, one has to prove that she or he achieved the enlightened state of a serene being in harmony with her or his inner nature; only then can one be called immortal in the deeper sense of the word.

One example of syncretic fusion can make the relationship clearer. According to Livia Kohn, a perfect match between the Daoist concept of freedom and shamanic practices was achieved in southern China in approximately 200 BC. The conjunction produced a conceptual pair similar to Indian or Platonic doctrines, where liberation or spiritual/intellectual freedom is equated with the concept of an objective afterlife. Additionally, as in the case of many forms of mystical ascension around the world, this form of Daoist culture produced techniques and efficient means to liberation, i.e., immortality. In her words,

These techniques are documented in a collection of shamanic songs known as the *Chuci* (Songs of Chu) associated with the southern poet Qu Yuan (340-278) and dated around 200 B.C.E. They contain songs and dances to entice the deities to descend, and relate to trance techniques and ecstatic flights that would allow practitioners to join the gods in their own realm. One poem in particular, known as *Yuanyou* or “The far-off journey”, outlines the growing confidence of the ecstatic traveller in the otherworld and describes how he communicates with various divine beings and takes control of entire trains of spirit followers. He eventually reaches the cosmic center of all, the inner clarity of the cosmos at the Great Beginning, in a state of total sensory oblivion, openness, and vagueness. (Kohn, 2015: 49)

She concludes, “Growing from this combination of Zhuangzi’s mental freedom and shamanic techniques of ecstasy, the belief in a new state of spiritual attainment arose, which came to be known as immortality or transcendence” (Kohn, 2015, 49).

This story shows, even if only anecdotally, that Daoism could find a good ally in indigenous spiritual beliefs and bear fruit that would still be recognizable to both traditions, as *they are essentially practical*.

5. Conclusion

We hope that our comparative analysis between Daoist and indigenous Chinese conceptions of spirit and afterlife has not given the impression that we are indifferent to the distinctions. In fact, authors such as Wei Ping Lin emphasize that indigenous practices should not be equated with canonical doctrine. Lin argues that spirit mediums – the main phenomena of her analysis – should not be understood in terms of organized religions and that the features of their practices make them difficult to reconcile with more traditional approaches, from Daoism, Buddhism or Christianity, for example (Lin, 2005: 54). We agree that each distinct aspect of religious practice deserves careful scrutiny and categorization to clarify whether, how and to what extent each practice, belief or rite is connected with which aspect of a tradition.

Great traditions are, by definition, complex, for they swallow a multitude of neighbouring religious or spiritual expressions while giving birth to new ones. This process occurs because religious and spiritual traditions are organized attempts to make sense of, channel, and potentialize matters of ultimate concern, and this metaphysical nature does not allow them to avoid anything that manifests itself in the living experience of their communities.

It is not a great surprise that Daoism and Chinese indigenous spirituality have amalgamated over the course of history, but the way this happened deserves more careful analysis and continued study. In particular, this relationship can be a very fruitful source of reflection for philosophy of religion, whether specialized in Chinese studies or in global and theoretical contexts. From our (global) perspective, the specific interaction between the Daoist tradition and Chinese indigenous spirituality regarding the concepts of an afterlife and spirit seems extremely promising, as it offers insight into how this relationship developed from a very pragmatic point of view.

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