



LUND UNIVERSITY

Defending Paper Gods

Aleister Crowley and the Reception of Daoism in Early Twentieth Century Esotericism

Nilsson, Johan

Published in:
Correspondences

2013

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Nilsson, J. (2013). Defending Paper Gods: Aleister Crowley and the Reception of Daoism in Early Twentieth Century Esotericism. *Correspondences*, 1.1, 103-127.

Total number of authors:
1

Creative Commons License:
CC BY-NC

General rights

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Defending Paper Gods

Aleister Crowley and the Reception of Daoism in Early Twentieth Century Esotericism

Johan Nilsson

E-mail: j.s.i.nilsson@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the representation of Daoism and Chinese religion in the writings of Aleister Crowley. The influence of Asian religions on the occult revival of the late nineteenth century has often been recognized. Even though much has been said about the perception of Indian religious traditions in European and American esotericism, the influence of Chinese religion on the same environment remains lesser known. At a time when the Theosophical Society started Buddhist schools in Ceylon, Crowley traveled through China arguing with Christian missionaries and sleeping in Daoist temples. Later he praised Laozi as a saint in his Gnostic Mass, proclaimed Daoism “the best of all [mystical] systems” and claimed to have received the original and uncorrupted version of the *Daodejing* in a religious vision; all this in an intellectual climate where Chinese religion was widely viewed as stagnant and escapist superstition. Although engaging in aggressive anti-missionary polemics Crowley was actually locked in a position of simultaneous rejection of and dependence on missionary Sinology; a form of dependence deeply intertwined with trends of modernity and secularization in early twentieth century Western esotericism.

Keywords

Aleister Crowley; Daoism; Travel writing; Western esotericism; Western reception of Chinese religion

In 1906 English occultist Aleister Crowley traveled on horseback through the distant Chinese province of Yunnan. The regions he visited were poor,

and home to the dangers of malaria and opium, but the journey was to be the beginning of a lifelong fascination with Daoism. This article explores Crowley as an example of the early twentieth century fascination with Chinese religion within Western esotericism and tries to make sense of his ambivalent relationship towards dominant representations of Chinese culture in the intellectual climate of his times.

The Esoteric Reception of Chinese Religion

In studies of the historical relationship between China and the West there is broad agreement that Western representations of Chinese culture and society underwent a radical change over a period ranging from the 1500s to the colonial expansion of the nineteenth century. Descriptions of the Chinese Empire brought home by early travelers like Marco Polo had a utopian flavor, and the Jesuit missionaries who were active in the country from the sixteenth century had a relatively tolerant attitude towards Chinese culture and religion. They spread the image of a society that was admirable in many ways and in some respects even superior to Europe.

The idealization of Chinese culture reached its peak during the eighteenth century and then transformed radically in line with the expansion of European imperialism in Asia, and the changing values of the West after the Enlightenment. As a result, the Chinese empire came to be perceived as a stagnant and superstitious rival.¹ Nevertheless, studies of Western representations of China conducted by Sinologists and historians like Colin MacKerras, disregard the fact that by the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth there were religious movements in Western societies whose attitudes to Chinese culture and religion differed significantly from those prominent at the time. Within movements related to esotericism, like theosophy or Guénonian traditionalism, there was a widespread interest in Chinese religion. The image of East Asia in the journals and books published by members of these movements had more in common with the idealized China of the Jesuits than with the contemporary image of an empire in decline.

It would be a mistake to interpret these dissenting voices as irrelevant or obscure. In recent decades, research has shown that esoteric movements at

¹ See for example Colin Mackerras, *Western Images of China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Ulrike Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

the time helped to shape the Western image of Asian religions.² Movements such as the Theosophical Society played a significant role in terms of shaping the widespread Western perceptions of India and Tibet. The theosophists also contributed, albeit in their own way and with their own goals and motives, to political developments in India leading up to independence in 1947.³

The influence of Asian religions has come to be perceived as important to developments of esoteric thought around the turn of the last century. Wouter Hanegraaff discusses the issue in the context of the theory of secularization of esotericism in his influential work *New Age Religion and Western Culture*.⁴ However, even though several examples of the Indian influence on turn-of-the-century occultism have been explored,⁵ very little has yet been done with regard to the relationship with East Asian religions.⁶

Although the topic is largely uncharted, there was a widespread interest in Chinese religion, especially Daoism, in the occult environment around the turn of the last century. For example, it is easy to find essays on Daoism in esoteric journals from this period. Journals like the theosophical *Lucifer*, the Martinist *Le Voile d'Isis*, or more general occult periodicals like *The Occult Review*, often published essays on the subject of Chinese religion. Such an interest was shared by many of the movements associated with the esoteric environment of the period. Within the Theosophical Society itself the interest in Indian and Tibetan religion was more pronounced, but subjects related to Daoism and Chinese Buddhism were recurring themes in publications related to the organization.

The Daoism enthusiast, and former member of the French Foreign Legion, Albert de Pouvourville influenced René Guénon and the French traditionalists, and interest in Chinese culture is a recurring feature of Guénon's writings. The same can be said of the journal *Études traditionnelles*

² See for example Åsa Piltz, *Seger åt Tibet! Den Tibetanska Diasporan och den Religiösa Nationen* (Lund: Dept. of History and Anthropology of Religions, Lund University, 2005).

³ On the influence on Indian women's suffrage see Joy Dixon, *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). On Theosophy and the building of Buddhist schools on Ceylon, as well as on connections with the Indian Home Rule Movement see Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* (New York, Schocken Books, 1993).

⁴ Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

⁵ See for example Hugh B. Urban on the influence of Tantra in the West. Hugh Urban, *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁶ Some exceptions exist, e.g. Leonardo Sacco, "La tradizione taoista nel pensiero di René Guénon," in *Aries* 8, no. 1 (2008): 63–89.

that was closely linked to Guénon. The Thelemic movement founded by Aleister Crowley is another example. The interest begun by Crowley was carried on by later Thelemites and is present in the works of authors like Kenneth Grant and C.F. Russell. Crowley placed Daoism in such high regard that he believed himself to be a reincarnation of the mystic Ge Xuan⁷ and wrote paraphrases of Daoist writings. He also frequently and aggressively criticized Christian missionaries for their views on Chinese religion and their methods in spreading Christianity in Asia. Even though his attempt to spread Daoist teachings in the West at a time when the general intellectual climate was hostile to Chinese religion should be of broad interest even outside the study of Western esotericism, his writings on the subject have remained unexamined by historians of religion.

This article will give an overview of the influence of Daoism on the worldview of Aleister Crowley and explore the representations of Chinese religion that appear in his writings. It will also discuss the cultural context constituted by mainstream images of Chinese religion, based on the works of British protestant missionaries, and contrast these with the views of Crowley. Finally, it will explore the idea that although Crowley was an outspoken critic of dominant representations of China in the West, he was ultimately unable to completely free himself from the underlying logic of these representations. In this he reflects important tendencies within the esotericism of his time.

This article will begin by providing an account of Crowley's journey through China during the winter and spring of 1905–1906, a journey that proved to be an influential event in his life, as it was the beginning of his sympathy with Daoism and Chinese culture. The second half will discuss Crowley's understanding of Daoism and its intellectual context.

The Walk Across China

Crowley arrived in China during turbulent times. In the nineteenth century the Chinese empire had been the center of a series of severe conflicts involving the expanding colonial powers of the West as well as internal turmoil based on regional, political, religious and ethnic animosities—from the Opium Wars to the Taiping Rebellion, which although almost unknown in the West was one of the bloodier conflicts in world history.⁸ A few years

⁷ See Stephen R. Bokenkamp, "Ge Xuan," in *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, ed. Fabrizio Pregadio (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁸ The conflict was partly connected to the spread of Christianity in China (as was the

before Crowley's journey through Yunnan the Boxer Rebellion had erupted and a few years later the Qing dynasty collapsed and was replaced by the Chinese republic under Sun Yat-sen.

By the beginning of the twentieth century there had been a British presence in China for about two centuries. Before the time of the first Opium War the British activity in the empire was almost exclusively related to trade. In Canton, the only harbor that was open to the British, the East India Company and a small number of independent merchants had been operating since the early 1700s. By the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century the British made a series of failed attempts to establish closer diplomatic ties with the court in Beijing as well as to convince the Chinese government to lift restrictions on trade.⁹

Yunnan was the focus of Crowley's accounts of his journey, but it was by no means a representative province of the Chinese Empire. Located as it is outside the major Han centers of population, it was perceived as exotic and distant to the inhabitants of the political and economic centers of the kingdom. Yunnan was known for its difficult, mountainous terrain and for malaria that was said to affect Han Chinese and other non-indigenous groups especially hard, a fact that the Qing bureaucracy viewed as an obstacle to the governing of the province. Perhaps the best example of how Yunnan was viewed by its rulers was the fact that criminals or deserters within the imperial army could be sentenced to exile in the province, a punishment known as "military exile for life to an insalubrious region."¹⁰ In addition, Yunnan was at this time one of the world's major producers of opium. It was here that *mafen*, widely held to be the premier Chinese variety of opium, was cultivated. Opium from the district was highly regarded in Europe where it was popular within the French literary drug subculture at the turn of the last century. This subculture exerted a certain influence on Crowley's views on drugs.¹¹ His interest in opium is one of the major themes in the narrative of his Chinese journey.

better known but less deadly Boxer Rebellion).

⁹ Ulrike Hillemann, "At the China Coast," in Ulrike Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁰ David A. Bello, "To Go Where No Han Could Go for Long: Malaria and the Qing Construction of Ethnic Administrative Space in Frontier Yunnan," *Modern China* 31, no. 3 (2005): 283–317.

¹¹ In the beginning of the twentieth century there was a tendency in some writers, occultists and heterodox religious authors to view opium almost as an "entheogen," and to interpret what were known as opium dreams and related states of intoxication as potentially artistically or spiritually valuable. This tendency can be traced back to Thomas De Quincey and English romanticism on the one hand, and to the Western reception of Chinese opium

Some decades before Crowley's arrival the province had been the scene of ethnic and religious violence, and it was to this ravaged land that Crowley arrived in December of 1905. With him were his wife and child, an unknown number of porters, a nurse and his personal servant Salama Tantra. Crowley was used to this way of traveling from his previous two attempts at ascending major peaks of the Himalayas. They traveled in the only way possible—on foot or on ponies and donkeys. Sometimes they camped outdoors; sometimes they lodged in temples or inns.¹² The journey, from the Burmese border in the west, through what is today Tengchong, Baoshan, Dali, Kunming, Mengzi and Hekou,¹³ to the border of Tonkin in the south, took about three months. In March they reached Hanoi, and from there Crowley traveled to Shanghai, where he arrived on the sixth of April 1906. The account of the journey comprises chapters 56 and 57 of Crowley's autobiography. All in all the narrative is relatively brief. Another even shorter description of the journey was published in "The Temple of Solomon the King" in *The Equinox*,¹⁴ but its focus is almost exclusively on the spiritual exercises Crowley performed during the period, which are of no interest to the subject of this essay.

"The walk across China," as it has become known in Thelemic circles, has as a rule been neglected in biographies on Crowley. In the first place this is probably due to the laconic nature of the sources. Perhaps another reason has been the fact that the journey coincides with a period in Crowley's religious development that has often interested his biographers. The focus on Crowley's inner life has tended to distract from the external events, and from his reflections on the experiences of the journey itself.

British travelogues of the Victorian and Edwardian period are often more than the picturesque adventure stories, balancing between romanticizing naïveté and bigoted condescension in their representations of Chinese

smoking during the second half of the nineteenth century on the other. Such ideas were the inspiration for a genre of turn of the century opium fiction, represented by authors such as Claude Farrère and Jules Boissière, but they also pervade works of non-fiction, like a handbook on opium smoking written by Albert de Pourville. In this context opium was often associated with East Asian (especially Daoist) religion and mysticism. Crowley was influenced by this view of the drug and conducted experiments with it himself. Regarding the cultivation of opium in Yunnan and Chinese opium culture in general see Frank Dikötter, *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China* (London: C Hurst, 2004); Yangwen Zheng, *The Social Life of Opium in China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹² The narrative reconstructed here is based on the one published in Aleister Crowley, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley* (London: Penguin Books, 1989).

¹³ Modern names in Pinyin have been given as a rule for Chinese place names mentioned by Crowley.

¹⁴ The relevant part is in *The Equinox* 1, no. 8 (1912).

society, that they may seem to be at first glance. They reveal just as much about their authors and the worldviews of these authors as they reveal about the alien manners and customs of the foreign land they purport to describe. In the case of Crowley and other travelers they represent excellent examples of how representations of Chinese society and culture were created and contrasted with English identity.

Although *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley* contains no detailed reflections on the religious life of Yunnan, Crowley made some scattered remarks on things he saw during his journey; among other things he mentions religious art. However, the aspect of religious life that most interested Crowley was the presence and activity of foreign missionaries in the province. It is easy to dismiss the recurrent attacks on missionaries in *Confessions* as just an expression of Crowley's well known antagonism towards Christianity, but his assertions on the subject are linked to attitudes and ideas connected with the Western perception of Chinese religion. They are also the beginning of a growing fascination with Daoism that would always retain an element of hostility towards the influential missionary narrative of Chinese religion as decadent and ready to be replaced by a vibrant and modern Christianity.¹⁵

As has been stated above, during the sixteenth to eighteenth century discourse on Chinese culture in the West was dominated by Jesuits, and during the nineteenth and early twentieth century representations of China were shaped by mainly British, protestant missionaries. The differences between these two groups can be schematically summarized in the following way. The Jesuits regarded Chinese culture as admirable, considered parts of Chinese religion compatible with Christianity, and aimed their missionary efforts at nobility and the elite in order to create acceptance for their own religion. The protestant missionaries viewed Chinese culture as decadent, and held that it was impossible to combine Chinese religious practices with life as a Christian. Unlike the Jesuits they focused their attention on the masses.¹⁶ Moreover, the protestant missionary movement often had connections to European merchants and to the colonial projects of their home countries. Even if British missionaries sometimes were in disagreement with their countrymen, for example on the subject of the opium trade, they were often sympathetic towards Britain's colonial and

¹⁵ Almost forty years later, in the last years of his life, he would still publish comparisons between Christianity and "Chinese Thought" where the former is severely criticized. See for example the paragraph on the "Prince of disks" in *The Book of Thoth*. See Aleister Crowley, *The Book of Thoth* (Stamford: U.S. Games Systems, 2002).

¹⁶ Eric Reinders, *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies: Christian Missionaries Imagine Chinese Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

economic expansion. They frequently regarded the spread of Christianity as the only way to convince the Chinese of the value of free trade.¹⁷

It would be unfair, however, to characterize the accounts of Chinese religion by protestant missionaries as entirely polemical and hostile. There was of course a certain amount of diversity of opinion among missionaries even during the nineteenth century, and there was debate and disagreement within the missionary societies. Several pioneering Western Sinologists and students of Chinese languages were also missionaries, among them the famous James Legge. Missionary Sinologists made some of the first translations to European languages of historical texts relating to Confucianism, Daoism and Chinese Buddhism.¹⁸ Despite this, it cannot be denied that the principal attitude of the missionaries was hostile. Daoism and Buddhism were seen as problematic expressions of superstition and idolatry hindering the modernization of Chinese society. When the Taiping rebels destroyed Daoist and Buddhist temples in the 1850s and 1860s, many Western missionaries expressed their support.¹⁹ The missionary view of Chinese culture was to a large extent shaped by their understanding of the Christian reformation as well as by common nineteenth century tropes of degeneration. Eric Reinders states the following:

[The] protestant narrative of Christian history was superimposed onto Chinese history: a degeneration from an original pure community to institutional idolatry, followed by (at least the possibility of) a Reformation. Protestant history pictured Christianity as having fallen from a bright early moment into centuries of ritualism until it had been purified in the reformation.²⁰

It is worth pointing out that Crowley was never such an obvious opponent of missionary ideology as one might imagine. Although the religious ideas he would develop obviously stood in opposition to Victorian and Edwardian evangelicalism in many ways, there were also deep similarities. A suspicion has existed for some time among several of Crowley's biographers about the possible similarities between some areas of Thelema and the Plymouth Brethren ideology that had shaped Crowley's upbringing.²¹ With the recent tendency in the academic study of religion to treat Crowley and other expressions of early twentieth century esotericism as serious objects of

¹⁷ Hillemann, *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*, 66.

¹⁸ Reinders, *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies*, 98.

¹⁹ Reinders, *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies*, 28.

²⁰ Reinders, *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies*, 25.

²¹ See e.g. Richard Kaczynski, *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley* (Tempe: New Falcon Publications, 2002), 101.

research, a certain influence from protestant theology on Crowley's writings has been recognized.²² In this context it could be said that Crowley shared many of the values inherent in the Victorian work ethic that permeated much of missionary ideology (such as the value of self-improvement and the ideal of actively engaging society).

The missionary condemnation of Chinese religion often had these values as its point of departure. It frequently attacked Buddhism for being apathetic, feminizing and unworldly. It is not impossible that Crowley, if circumstances were different, would have shared in this criticism. It is clear that passivity and inactivity could be problematic concepts for him. This being said, Crowley's encounter with Western missionaries in China was characterized by violent dislike—almost, it seems, by actual violence. In *Confessions* he describes a confrontation between a missionary and a group of locals participating in a religious procession. According to Crowley, the missionary had reacted violently when he saw the image of some unidentified deity being carried through the village as a part of a Chinese New Year celebration:

...instead of attending to his own affairs [he] took it upon himself to insult (in wretchedly and comically illiterate Chinese) some villagers who happened to be carrying an idol in procession as part of the festivities of New Year's Day (January 25th). He might as well have spoiled a children's party on the ground that the fairy stories which amused them were not strictly true. The action was morally indistinguishable from brawling in church. I may not believe in the liquefaction of the blood of St. Januarius, but I see no reason for inflicting my incredulity on the people of Naples. The villagers naturally resented the ill manners of this brainless boor and told him to shut up. He immediately began to scream that he was being martyred for Christ's sake. I told him that if I could have brought myself to touch him, I would have thrashed him within an inch of his life.²³

Crowley's main point of criticism of missionaries in China was that they were uninformed in their approach and misled by an irrational belief in the superiority of their own particular version of Christianity. How, he asks in *Confessions*, could these people expect to convert Buddhists and Muslims when they were completely ignorant of the beliefs and practices of these

²² See Henrik Bogdan "Envisioning the Birth of a New Aeon: Dispensationalism and Millenarianism in the Thelemic Tradition," in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²³ Aleister Crowley, *Confessions*, 483.

religions? Apparently he brought up the subject with missionaries he met on his journey. In *Confessions* the following resigned statement can be found:

Dr. Clark, the medical missionary of Talifu, received us with great courtesy and hospitality. I found him a sincere and earnest man; more, even an enlightened man, so far as it is possible for a missionary to be so; but that is not very far. I found him totally ignorant both of canonical Buddhism and of local beliefs. I tried to point out to him that he could hardly hope to show the natives the errors of their way of thinking, unless he knew what that was. But he declined to see the point.²⁴

Paraphrasing the *Daodejing*

At the time of his journey Crowley had yet to develop any clear views on the Chinese religions. It would be a while before he tried to formulate his own opinion as anything other than a negation of the attitudes formulated by the missionaries he encountered on his journey. During the following decades his interest in Daoism would become a growing component of his esoteric system. In the preface to his own edition of *Daodejing* he states:

The philosophy of Lao-tzu communicated itself to me ... This process, having thus taking root in my innermost intuition during those tremendous months of wandering across Yunnan, grew continually throughout succeeding years.²⁵

References to Chinese religion are relatively rare in Crowley's works from the first years after the journey through China. Daoist texts like the *Daodejing* and the "Writings of Kwang Tzu"²⁶ became required reading in his new magical order of the A.: A.:, but otherwise Daoist religious figures, usually Laozi, are mentioned mostly in the context of lists of examples of religious traditions that also include Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Cabbalist texts, figures, and concepts. In *The Equinox* 1:2 an advertisement appears for the recently published 777 where it is stated that "[f]or the first time Western

²⁴ Aleister Crowley, *Confessions*, 488. Crowley's enthusiasm for Chinese culture, and criticism of missionaries, did not stop him from mistreating his porters, however. In *Confessions* he does not deny beating servants for what he believed to be breaches of discipline.

²⁵ Aleister Crowley, introduction to *Tao te Ching, Liber CLVII* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1995).

²⁶ The citation can be found in Aleister Crowley ed., *The Equinox* 1, no. 8 (1912) and refers to Legges edition of "The Writings of Kwang Ze," published in *The Sacred Books of the East* series.

and Qabalistic symbols have been harmonized with those of Hinduism, Buddhism, Mohammedanism, Taoism, &c.” The example is typical and suggests that although Crowley was aware of Daoism (not banishing it to the nebulous category of “&c.”²⁷) he viewed it as a not very differentiated part of what he considered to be humanity’s great expressions of religious truth.

It is also interesting to note that references to Chinese religion are rare in what Crowley considered to be the most important “magical workings” of the period. Chinese imagery is conspicuously absent from the visions recorded in *The Vision and the Voice* and *The Paris Working*, as are Chinese terminology and Chinese concepts (more or less) from the interpretations of those visions. There are some exceptions: a handful of enthusiastic endorsements of Laozi and Daoist writings, as well as Crowley’s interest in divination inspired by the *Yijing*.²⁸ The overall impression up until the end of the First World War, however, is one of a somewhat vague and lukewarm interest. If it is true, as he later stated, that he studied the *Daodejing* during the whole of this period, his study left few marks on his writings.²⁹

At the end of the First World War, Crowley’s interest in Daoism seems to have deepened, as it from 1918 became more visible in his writing. In 1918 Crowley authored a paraphrase of the Oxford professor and missionary James Legge’s translations of the *Daodejing* and the *Qingjing jing*,³⁰ a result of an attempt to explore the texts using esoteric visionary techniques. According to Crowley, a spiritual entity called Amalantrah showed him Laozi’s “original” version of the *Daodejing* and made it possible for him to see mistakes in Legge’s translation—apparently unhindered by the fact that Crowley didn’t speak any dialect of Chinese.³¹

Despite the fact that he had visited China, and despite his own visionary experiences, Crowley’s interpretation of Daoism was largely based on texts included in the famous *Sacred Books of the East* series published by Oxford University Press. The series incorporated translations of writings related to religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Daoism. A closer look at Crowley’s sources reveals that a relatively small selection of texts seems to have been the foundation of his understanding of the subject. Most prominent among these were The *Daodejing*, the *Yijing*, the *Qingjing jing* and the *Zhuangzi*. In every case these texts are English translations of

²⁷ Presumably left for Scandinavian pre-Christian religion and the likes, if we consider the actual content of 777.

²⁸ Crowley mostly used the transliteration “Yi King,” following Legge as usual.

²⁹ He makes the claim in Crowley, introduction to *Tao te Ching*.

³⁰ Transliterated “Khing Kang King” by Crowley.

³¹ Crowley, introduction to *Tao te Ching*.

writings considered to be representative of Daoism by Western Sinologists.³²

If we look for influences beyond the realm of the written word the matter becomes more challenging. It is difficult to rule out the possibility that Crowley came into contact with living informants who influenced his view of Chinese religion. It seems reasonable, for example, that he discussed the subject with people he met on his journey through China. It seems equally reasonable that he visited Chinatown when he lived in New York, and it is not beyond the realm of possibility that he could have met English-speaking Daoists there. There seems to have been a marked increase in his interest in Chinese religion during his stay in the city. However, the possibility that Crowley's view of Daoism was colored by such contacts in any significant way is contradicted by the fact that his interpretation of the religion, as we will soon see, is more reminiscent of the Daoism of late nineteenth century Sinologists than any of the popular Chinese expressions of the religion that existed at this time. Perhaps it is also telling that Crowley, who freely shared stories of his talks about yoga with Hindu teachers like Ponnambalam Ramanathan, or with strangers he met on the road in India,³³ never mentions anything similar with regard to Chinese religion. However, the possibility that such contacts could have exerted a limited influence on his views, concerning his interpretation of Yijing-based divination, for example, cannot be completely ruled out. Among other things this means that Crowley's chief sources of information on Daoism were texts translated by James Legge. The irony of Crowley having to rely on the work of a famous missionary seems not to have been lost on him³⁴ and was probably one of the reasons he created his own paraphrase of the *Daodejing*, as a way to escape Legge's "uninitiated" perspective.

Crowley's version of the *Daodejing* was written in the summer of 1918 during his stay on a small island in the Hudson River, called Esopus Island in his account of the story.³⁵ The book was never published during his lifetime, but Crowley often circulated the manuscript among his friends and disciples. Decades later, in *Magick Without Tears* (1954), he mentions his hopes of finding a publisher.³⁶ Crowley's version of the text is not as different from that of Legge as one might imagine. Even though he changed almost every passage of the book, many of the changes pertain to matters of

³² I will not pass any judgment on that assessment here. The proper place of specific Daoist writings within the history of Chinese religion is a subject of major controversy.

³³ See for example the story of the "villagers" of Madura in Crowley, *Confessions*, 255.

³⁴ He complained of what he perceived to be Legge's Christian bias as early as 1909. See "Reviews" in Aleister Crowley ed., *The Equinox* 1, no. 2 (1909).

³⁵ Sometimes spelled Aesopus.

³⁶ Aleister Crowley, *Magick Without Tears* (Tempe: New Falcon Publications, 1994), 231.

style. Often Crowley simplifies Legge's rather verbose text with no (or only slight) changes in meaning. In chapter 25, for example, Legge's "It may be regarded as the Mother of all things"³⁷ becomes "It is like the All-Mother."³⁸ The most easily noticeable changes in content are probably the addition of terminology from Western esotericism, Indian yoga, and Crowley's own religious system. Words such as "Samadhi,"³⁹ "zelator,"⁴⁰ and "magick" all appear in Crowley's version of the text, even though they obviously have nothing to do with its original cultural context.⁴¹

To get a reasonably accurate view of Crowley's interpretation of Daoism it is helpful to study his *Daodejing* along with relevant passages in his works in general. In this way it could be argued that his understanding of Daoism is constituted by a couple of central themes that often recur in his writings. One such theme is the principle of *laissez-faire individualism*. Legge's version of the *Daodejing* contains several sections that are easily read as endorsements of this point of view. One of the clearest examples is chapter 57, verse 3:

Therefore a sage has said, "I will do nothing (of purpose), and the people will be transformed of themselves; I will be fond of keeping still, and the people will of themselves become correct. I will take no trouble about it, and the people will of themselves become rich; I will manifest no ambition, and the people will of themselves attain to the primitive simplicity."⁴²

In Crowley's text this element is retained or even strengthened. It is probably a reasonable guess that passages like this were one of the things that attracted Crowley to the *Daodejing* in the first place. Similar views are a unifying theme running through his writings, and by focusing on them Crowley's construction of Daoism becomes tied to his views of the social, philosophical and mystical aspects of Thelema.

Another prominent theme in the *Daodejing* is the concept of *non-action*; "the sage manages affairs without doing anything," as Legge's version of the text states.⁴³ There are many examples in both versions, and the concept is strongly associated with Daoism in Crowley's writings in general. Even so, when approaching the subject there is a slight tendency for him to let the

³⁷ James Legge, trans., "The Tao Teh King," in *The Sacred Books of the East*, ed. Max Müller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), 27.

³⁸ Crowley, *Tao te Ching*, 40.

³⁹ A mystical trance, or state of the mind, important in both Buddhism and Hindu yoga.

⁴⁰ A degree in Crowley's initiatory order, the A.:. A.:.

⁴¹ Crowley, *Tao te Ching*, 25, 42, 57.

⁴² Legge, "The Tao Teh King," 101.

⁴³ Legge, "The Tao Teh King," 48.

concept of non-action blend into both the principle of laissez-faire and the idea of action without “lust of result” that is advocated by *The Book of the Law*. An example of the former can be found in a comment to chapter 7 of the *Daodejing* where Crowley states that it is only “unnatural action” that should be avoided, meaning any violation of the principle of laissez-faire.⁴⁴ This is quite clearly a departure from the concept of non-action as described by Legge.⁴⁵ Crowley’s interpretative efforts, as well as the fact that he often returns to the subject, seem to imply that he was both attracted and troubled by the concept.⁴⁶ Perhaps, for him, it was difficult to harmonize with the “solar phallic,” manly vitalism of Thelema. If so, at least he did not try to censor the celebration of weakness, water, femininity and passivity that is suggested by many passages of the *Daodejing*. “All men know that the soft overcometh the hard, and the weak conquereth the strong” is his rendering of the beginning of chapter 78 verse two.⁴⁷

In placing focus on these themes Crowley’s interpretation of Daoism did not depart all that much from other interpretations of his day. Crowley’s version of the *Daodejing* simply brought it more in line with what he perceived to be the universal essence of mysticism, as well as with his own religious system of Thelema. To Crowley, universal mysticism, although theoretically found in every culture, was in practice a mixture of late nineteenth century occultist kabbalah and ritual magic in the tradition of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, as well as a version of yoga more or less close to the system presented in the *Yoga sutras* of Patanjali, interpreted by people such as Ponnambalam Ramanathan, Swami Vivekananda, Sabapati Swami, and Allan Bennett.

After the First World War it is possible to find more references to Daoism in Crowley’s works, and he also identified more strongly with this religion. Some of the more interesting examples of this are his belief that he was in fact a reincarnation of the Three Kingdoms period Daoist figure Ge Xuan⁴⁸ and his creation of the fictional character of Simon Iff. Simon Iff

⁴⁴ Crowley, *Tao te Ching*, 22.

⁴⁵ In Legge’s version non-action is never limited in this way. That is, the principle is not understood as a prohibition against violating the freedom of others. Crowley’s interpretation of non-action as an exhortation of action without “lust of result” is closer to Legge’s interpretation. See for example the comment to chapter 29 where he states that: “The Tao forbids action with a personal purpose, and all such action is sure to fail in the greatest things as well as in the least.” Legge, “The Tao Teh King,” 72.

⁴⁶ See for example the discussion in Aleister Crowley, *Moonchild* (London: The Mandrake Press, 1929), chapter five.

⁴⁷ Crowley, *Tao te Ching*, 96.

⁴⁸ See Stephen R. Bokenkamp, “Ge Xuan,” in *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, ed. Fabrizio

was the protagonist of a series of detective stories Crowley started writing in the winter of 1916–1917. For some years he continued to write about the character that—correctly in my view—has often been regarded as an idealized self-portrait of Crowley in old age.⁴⁹ All in all he created more than twenty short stories portraying the adventures of Simon Iff, most of which were never published in his lifetime.⁵⁰ Simon Iff also makes an appearance in Crowley's novel *Moonchild* (published in 1929 but written in 1917). Considering that the character is an idealized mouthpiece of Crowley himself, the Daoist leanings of this esoteric detective are particularly noteworthy. Simon Iff is said to have spent ten years in China. "I was ten years in China. I've smoked opium as hard as anybody," as he puts it in "Outside the Bank's Routine" (1917).⁵¹ His years in China gave Simon Iff a taste for the Daoist scriptures. About his enthusiasm for the *Daodejing* it is said that "he had read it every morning for forty years without once failing to find something new in it";⁵² he refers to the text in several of the stories and often talks of "the Tao." His distaste for missionaries becomes apparent in "Desert Justice."⁵³ In *Moonchild*, Simon Iff's discourse on Daoist non-action comprises a large part of chapter five.

It is no coincidence that Crowley's enthusiasm for Daoism manifested itself through writing. As I will argue, Daoism, for Crowley, was an expression of "Chinese wisdom" or philosophy more than anything else. That is to say, what interested him in Chinese religion were the ideas, not the practices. There is, however, one major exception to this tendency: the *Yijing*.

Crowley's interest in the Chinese classical text the *Yijing*, and the divinatory practices that are traditionally connected with it, dates back to the time of his Chinese travels. As early as 1907, the year after the journey that took him through Yunnan, he authored the short *Liber Trigrammaton* that deals with the subject.⁵⁴ It seems reasonable considering the time frame that

Pregadio (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁴⁹ See Kaczynski, *Perdurabo*, 248; William Breeze, introduction to *The Simon Iff Stories & Other Works*, ed. David Stuart Davies and William Breeze (London: Wordsworth, 2012).

⁵⁰ The first stories were published in the periodical *The International* from 1917–1918. Recently a collection of all surviving stories has been published as Aleister Crowley, *The Simon Iff Stories & Other Works*, ed. David Stuart Davies and William Breeze (Ware: Wordsworth, 2012).

⁵¹ Crowley, "Outside the Bank's Routine," in Crowley, *Simon Iff*, 82.

⁵² Crowley, "The Monkey and the Buzz-Saw," in Crowley, *Simon Iff*, 203.

⁵³ Crowley, "Desert Justice," in Crowley, *Simon Iff*.

⁵⁴ Later published in Aleister Crowley, *The Holy Books Volume III* (London: Privately published, 1909).

his interest in the subject originated in his experiences in China. As with Crowley's interest in Daoism in general, however, his fascination with the *Yijing* grew with time. It especially gained momentum just after the First World War. For example, the 1907 diary *John St. John* never mentions the *Yijing*, while the diary for 1919–1920 is full of references to it.⁵⁵ The much simplified the divinatory technique used by Crowley consisted in throwing a handful of sticks or coins on a surface and interpreting the pattern in which they fell.⁵⁶ In the 1920s and 1930s he made many important decisions on the advice of the *Yijing*. The decision to place the Abbey of Thelema, his experiment in communal living, in the Sicilian town of Cefalù, was one. Crowley tried to gain a better understanding of the practice in his usual way, by connecting it to the kabbalah, and later to the tarot. In *The Book of Thoth*, his work on the tarot, the symbols of the Chinese text are often compared to the tarot cards. He was proud of his studies. In *Magick Without Tears* he writes:

...my personal researches have been of the greatest value and importance to the study of the subject of Magick and Mysticism in general, especially my integration of the various thought-systems of the world, notably the identification of the system of the Yi King with that of the Qabalah.⁵⁷

Crowley would continue to consult the *Yijing* for the rest of his life.

Challenging the missionary Dao

Even if the content of Crowley's *Daodejing* didn't diverge all that much from Legge's translation it is clear that Crowley's estimation of Daoism differed from the influential protestant understanding of Chinese culture. This is seen when Crowley's understanding of Chinese religion is compared with important themes in the representations of the subject in the broader culture of Victorian and Edwardian Britain, especially those that expressed the dominant discourse represented by protestant missionaries and missionary

⁵⁵ Aleister Crowley, "John St. John," *The Equinox* 1, no. 1 (1909). Aleister Crowley, "The Magical Record of the Beast," in *The Magical Record of the Beast 666*, ed. Kenneth Grant and John Symonds (London: Duckworth, 1972).

⁵⁶ Several traditional methods for divination by the *Yijing* are mentioned in Legge's introduction to his translation of the text. Crowley developed his own technique. James Legge, "Introduction," in *The Sacred Books of the East vol 16*, ed. Max Müller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882).

⁵⁷ Crowley, *Magick Without Tears*, 2.

Sinologists. Perhaps it would not be too much of an exaggeration to say that these views opposed each other on some levels. However, as we shall see, this did not exclude important similarities on others. Crowley did not regard Chinese religion as stagnant in relation to any of the common nineteenth century concepts of the evolutionary classification of religions or less systematic notions of degeneration common in missionary writings. This line of thinking was common in writings on Asian culture, whether stated explicitly, or implicit in the idea that other religions should learn from Christianity.⁵⁸ In Crowley's syncretic thinking, Daoism was represented instead as one of several "traditions" that could offer something to Western students of esotericism. There are several indications that Daoism had a particularly strong position in this system. Discussing the subject of founders of religion and their presumed mystical experiences in *Book Four*, Crowley writes:

Lao Tze is one of our best examples of a man who went away and had a mysterious experience; perhaps the best of all examples, as his system is the best of all systems. We have full details of his method of training in the Khang Kang King, and elsewhere. But it is so little known that we shall omit consideration of it in this popular account.⁵⁹

Even though there are several examples of the same kind, too much should not be read into them. After all Daoism could never compete with yoga or occult ritual magic in the style of the Golden Dawn with regard to influence on Crowley.

The obvious syncretism of Crowley's religious views, and the apparent ease with which he incorporated influences from very different religious traditions and esoteric systems into his own worldview, was at least partly based on his belief in universal mysticism. This belief, in turn, was a reflection of an attitude that was commonly shared by esoteric thinkers long before Crowley, which Faivre called "the praxis of concordance" (one of the two secondary components in his definition of esotericism)⁶⁰ and viewed as the will to see a common core in diverse religious traditions.

Earlier expressions of this kind of thinking often rested on some version of perennialism that explained the common core of the world's religions by postulating a *philosophia perennis*, the teachings of which constituted the

⁵⁸ Reinders, *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies*, 41.

⁵⁹ See Aleister Crowley, "Mysticism," in Aleister Crowley, *Book 4 I-IV* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1994), 10.

⁶⁰ See for example Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press), 14.

essence of all, or some, of the now existing religions.⁶¹ Crowley never embraced this kind of historical explanation; instead he argued that the essence of religion is systematized knowledge based on mystical experiences that constitute a way of gaining empirical knowledge of a transcendent reality.

The idea of the foundation of religion as uniform and shared implies that it can be revealed by comparative studies, hermeneutical interpretation of sacred texts, and through spiritual practices, which of course was the means favored by Crowley.⁶² This view of the essence of religion as mystical experience created a certain ambivalence in Crowley's writings because it could be understood both in terms of biological reductionism and supernaturalism.⁶³ To summarize, it is not the historical background that makes mystical traditions or experiences appear a certain way (though it might be the nature of the brain), instead it is the mystical experiences that shape the historical religions. One of the clearest articulations of this position in Crowley's writings can be found in the rather obscure, semi-pornographic *The Scented Garden of Abdullah the Satirist of Shiraz* (1910). It deserves to be quoted in full:

Now the revealing of one is the revealing of all: for from Fez to Nikko, there is one mysticism and not two. The fanatic followers of el Senussi can suck the pious honey from the obscene Aphorisms of Kwaw, and the twelve Buddhist sects of Japan would perfectly understand the inarticulate yells of the fire-eaters of el Maghraby. *Not that there is or has ever been a common religious tradition*; but for the very much simpler reason that all the traditions are based on the same set of facts. Just as the festivals of Spring all the world round more or less suggest the story of the Crucifixion [sic] and Resurrection, simply because the actual phenomena which every man is bound to observe in Nature are essentially the same in every clime: so also is Mysticism One, because the physiological

⁶¹ See Faivre, *Access*; for some further examples see Mark Sedgwick, *Against the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁶² See for example the subordination of ethical considerations to mystical experience in his discussion of yama and niyama in Crowley, "Mysticism," in Aleister Crowley, *Book 4 I-IV* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1994). Crowley's position on the value of intellectual interpretation is summed up nicely in the expression "experience and some knowledge of comparative religion" from the chapter on "Dhyana" in the aforementioned source.

⁶³ In connection with this, Marco Pasi's remarks on Crowley's interest in scientific naturalism are particularly interesting. See Marco Pasi, "Varieties of Magical Experience," in *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, ed. Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

constitution of mankind is practically identical the wide world over ... We have then the right to buy our pigs in the cheapest market...⁶⁴

Contrary to what the context or the tone might suggest, the views expressed here were meant to be taken seriously and the argument would reappear in several of Crowley's books. It did so in the context of Daoism too. In his preface to the *Daodejing*, Crowley claims to have studied "all varieties of Asiatic philosophy" and remarks: "The physiological and psychological uniformity of mankind guaranteed that the diversity of expressions concealed a unity of significance."⁶⁵

Crowley didn't just place a higher value on Daoism than most of his contemporaries because he saw it as a part of a universal expression of religious truth. His understanding of Chinese religion deviates from the dominant discourse in other ways too. To begin with it should be noted that Chinese religion ("Chinese philosophy," "Chinese Thought" or any of the other expressions used by Crowley) almost exclusively meant Daoism. After his Buddhist period around the turn of the century Crowley almost completely lost interest in the religion.⁶⁶ He never had any specific interest in Chinese Buddhism. Predictably enough the same goes for Confucianism. Master Kong and his disciples are rarely mentioned by Crowley. The list of saints in Crowley's Gnostic Mass begins with Laozi but never even mentions Kongzi. Nor did he ever show any interest in Chinese, Islamic, or Christian movements.

In this way Crowley turned the hierarchy of religions often implicit in missionary and Sinological writings of his day upside down. Christian missionaries, beginning with the Jesuits, had traditionally viewed Confucianism as the most developed (or least reprehensible) form of Chinese religion.⁶⁷ Crowley and other writers on esotericism in the early twentieth century (like Guénon or de Pouvoirville) were early examples of the growing esteem of Daoism (or parts of it) during the second half of the century.⁶⁸

At this point, however, we would do well to stop and ask the question what Crowley *did not mean* by Daoism. Interestingly enough, in defending the religion Crowley made no real effort to deny missionary charges of idolatry

⁶⁴ Aleister Crowley, introduction to Aleister Crowley, *The Scented Garden of Abdullah the Satirist of Shiraz* (Chicago: The Teitan Press, 1991), 13.

⁶⁵ Crowley, introduction to *Tao te Ching*, 3–4.

⁶⁶ He even developed distaste for it.

⁶⁷ See for example Reinders, *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies*, 23–24.

⁶⁸ On the growing interest in Daoism in the West during the 20th century see J.J. Clarke, *The Tao of the West* (London: Routledge, 2000).

or polytheism. Instead he chose to ignore those aspects of Chinese religious culture that hostile critics labeled as such. Even if these religious expressions hardly bothered him the way they did members of the China Inland Mission or The London Missionary Society, they did not fit his views of the simplicity of Chinese religion, nor did Daoist monasticism or, apparently, the Chinese pantheon in any of its forms. There are almost no references at all to Chinese deities in Crowley's writings, not even the *xian* seems to have interested him that much, even though the idea of immortal spiritual masters would have fitted nicely with his belief in the secret chiefs. Ignorance is not a very good explanation, though a lack of information probably played a part.⁶⁹ Crowley had, after all, visited Chinese temples, and would have known that there were Daoist monks and cults devoted to specific deities, even if he didn't know the finer points of, say, Daoist alchemy.

Paper gods

If we are to explain why Crowley ignored many of the elements of Daoism as the religion was actually practiced by the majority of its adherents,⁷⁰ we must look closer at a specific aspect of the Western representation of Asian religions, namely the focus on textual and archaic expressions. This aspect is interesting because it so clearly reflects and exemplifies broader trends in the development of Western esotericism in Crowley's time. It will then be clear that even though Crowley deviated from the dominant contemporary representations of Chinese religion in terms of his high regard for Daoism, he was in some ways dependent on the logic implicit in these representations.

A distinct tendency in Western interpretations of Asian religions well into the twentieth century was the fact that the archaic was valued higher than the contemporary, and written expression of philosophy or theology was valued higher than practice. If contemporary religious practice deviated from the archaic theory, it was a sign of decadence. As Reinders argues:

⁶⁹ After all, if we were to add up the sources on Chinese religion mentioned by Crowley himself his real knowledge of the subject would have been somewhat slim.

⁷⁰ For a detailed account of what Daoist religious life could look like at the beginning of the twentieth century see Vincent Goossaert, *The Taoists of Peking, 1800–1949: A Social History of Urban Clerics* (London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

The study of what was worthy in Chinese religion was for many years almost entirely a textual matter. Disparities between the ideas of the classical texts and observed practices in Chinese temples were explained as degeneration.⁷¹

This tendency was not only visible in the interpretation of Chinese religion, it was also apparent in Western writings on Buddhism in the same period. Philip C. Almond, who has studied interpretations of Buddhism during the nineteenth century, writes concerning this religion that:

It was to become progressively less a living religion of the present to be found in China, Nepal, Mongolia, etc. and more a religion of the past bound by its own textuality. Defined, classified, and understood as a textual object, its contemporary manifestations were seen in the light of this, as more or less adequate representations, reflections, images of it, but no longer the thing itself.⁷²

Crowley was heavily influenced by Orientalist writings in his understanding of Buddhism.⁷³ And it is obvious that the inclination to prefer textual expressions of religion was a constitutive pattern of Crowley's understanding of Daoism. After all if James Legge hadn't chosen the specific handful of texts he chose from the vast Daoist canon, Crowley's understanding of what constituted Daoism could have been very different. That choice was hardly random, nor was Crowley a completely passive or completely unconscious recipient of other people's ideology. He embraced the basic pattern valuing the ancient and textual above the contemporary and practical.⁷⁴

Crowley saw Daoism as something unchanging and unified, rather than as subject to historical change and divided into different movements and sects. He saw it as something that could be embraced as an autonomous individual, rather than as a member of a community. Even though he himself was a member of several occult orders, there is nothing in his understanding of Daoism that makes it necessary for anyone interested in this religion to submit to priests or other religious specialists. Lastly, he saw it as something primarily theoretical. It is true that he did practice a form of divination based on the *Yijing*, which he understood as Daoist. This is in

⁷¹ Reinders, *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies*, 33.

⁷² Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 25.

⁷³ His interpretation of this religion was influenced by concepts such as the canonical-popular dichotomy underlying many early studies of Buddhism.

⁷⁴ Paradoxically perhaps, since it didn't fit that well with the almost sacralized modernism of *The Book of the Law*. But Crowley seems to have treated non-Western religious traditions differently in this regard.

itself interesting and constitutes a rare exception, at a time when interest in East Asian religions in the West was almost exclusively an intellectual pursuit. It does not, however, change the fact that for Crowley Daoism was predominantly about texts and ideas rather than practices. If it had been otherwise, he would perhaps not have gone so far as to follow in the footsteps of his mentor Allan Bennett, who ended up as a Buddhist convert and monk, but he would probably have shown a greater interest in the temple cult, monasticism, magic, alchemy, etc. that constituted Daoist religious practices.

As has been stated above, the belief in a shared essence of the world's religions has been common within esotericism since early modern times. It has been noticed several times however, by Faivre, Godwin and Hanegraaff,⁷⁵ among others, that this perennialist perspective was both vitalized and transformed in the nineteenth century as a result of the rise of the scientific and comparative study of religions and the growing amount of information that was made available by this enterprise.⁷⁶ One of the results was the rising interest in Asian religions exemplified by the Theosophical Society or by Crowley's interest in Indian and Chinese religion. Crowley's dependence on tendencies within the Sinology of his time is an interesting example of secularization in one of the senses explored by Hanegraaff in *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, that is in the sense of esotericism implicitly making the secular, academic study of religion a spiritual authority. This reliance on the academic study of religion by individuals like Crowley had consequences. One of these consequences was that the perspective and values of scholars and translators like Max Müller, Thomas Rhys Davids or James Legge came to color the views of those, like Crowley, who used their works as a way to access the sacred texts of Buddhism, Hinduism or Daoism.

Conclusion

Crowley's journey through Yunnan was the beginning of a lifelong sympathy towards Chinese culture, as he understood it. Originally vague and nebulous, his sympathy later developed into an interest in Daoism, a religious system Crowley interpreted as an expression of a universal religious mystical truth.

⁷⁵ See for example Joscelyn Godwin, *The Theosophical Enlightenment* (Albany: State of New York Press, 1994); Antoine Faivre, *Access*, 14; Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*.

⁷⁶ It reappeared in "triumphant form" in the nineteenth century as Faivre puts it.

In a climate largely skeptical to Chinese religion, Crowley praised Laozi and the wisdom he believed could be found in the *Daodejing*.

Crowley was severely critical of Christian missionary endeavors in China. He also understood the road to spiritual truth as primarily a practical one. Nevertheless, his Daoism was colored by the focus on the textual and on archaic expressions of religion that protestant missionaries shared with early Sinology and the academic study of religion. As a non-Chinese speaker he had to turn to the emerging Western study of East Asian religion for information on Daoist worldview and tradition. In this way, values and patterns of interpretation entered Crowley's writing from a source in relation to which he was ambivalent at best. Although engaging in aggressive anti-missionary polemics, Crowley actually became locked in a position of simultaneous rejection and dependence with missionary Sinology, a form of dependence deeply intertwined with trends of modernity and secularization in early twentieth century Western esotericism.

Crowley's interest in Daoism and Chinese religion lived on within the Thelemic movement. Later in the century examples of this are easy to find. Kenneth Grant, Crowley's one time secretary and prolific Thelemic writer, was fascinated by Chinese sorcery, and Crowley's interpretation of the *Yijing* influenced occultist Louis T. Culling, who dealt with the subject in his books, published in the 1960s and 1970s. When we turn to the broader perspective, however, considerably less is known.

The question of whether the occult movements of the early 1900s exerted any influence on the wider cultural interest in Chinese religion later in the century is impossible to answer in a satisfactory way without further research. Any such research will have to determine if the tendencies and patterns that shaped the understanding of Chinese religion in individuals such as Aleister Crowley continued to influence later interpretations of East Asian religion, or if these were molded by other patterns, emanating from other intellectual environments, other ideological conflicts, and other interpretative efforts.

Bibliography

- Almond, Philip C. *The British Discovery of Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Bello, David A. "To Go Where No Han Could Go for Long: Malaria and the Qing Construction of Ethnic Administrative Space in Frontier Yunnan." *Modern China* 31, no. 3 (2005): 283–317.
- Bogdan, Henrik, and Martin P. Starr, eds. *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

- Bogdan, Henrik. "Envisioning the Birth of a New Aeon: Dispensationalism and Millenarianism in the Thelemic Tradition." In *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, edited by Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr, 89–106. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Bokenkamp, Stephen R. "Ge Xuan." In *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, edited by Fabrizio Pregadio, 444–445. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Clarke, J.J. *The Tao of the West*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- Crowley, Aleister. *Book 4 I-IV*. York Beach: Samuel Weiser 1994.
- . *The Book of Thoth*. Stamford: U.S. Games Systems, 2002.
- . *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*. London: Penguin Books, 1989.
- . "Desert Justice." In Aleister Crowley, *The Simon Iff Stories & Other Works*, edited by David Stuart Davies and William Breeze, 319–332. Ware: Wordsworth, 2012.
- . "John St. John." *The Equinox* 1, no. 1 (1909): 1–139.
- . "Reviews." *The Equinox* 1, no. 2 (1909): 385–392.
- . "The Magical Record of the Beast." In *The Magical Record of the Beast 666*, edited by Kenneth Grant and John Symonds, 83–300. London: Duckworth, 1972.
- . *The Magical Record of the Beast 666*, edited by Kenneth Grant and John Symonds. London: Duckworth, 1972.
- . *Magick Without Tears*. Tempe: New Falcon Publications, 1994.
- . "The Monkey and the Buzz-Saw." In Aleister Crowley, *The Simon Iff Stories & Other Works*, edited by David Stuart Davies and William Breeze, 203–216. Ware: Wordsworth, 2012.
- . *Moonchild*. London: The Mandrake Press, 1929.
- . Introduction to Aleister Crowley, *The Scented Garden of Abdullah the Satirist of Shiraz*. Chicago: The Teitan Press, 1991.
- . *The Simon Iff Stories & Other Works*, edited by David Stuart Davies and William Breeze. Ware: Wordsworth, 2012.
- . Introduction to *Tao te Ching, Liber CLVII*. York Beach: Samuel Weiser, 1995.
- Dikötter, Frank. *Narcotic Culture: A History of Drugs in China*. London: C Hurst, 2004.
- Dixon, Joy. *Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.
- Faivre, Antoine. *Access to Western Esotericism*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Godwin, Joscelyn. *The Theosophical Enlightenment*. Albany: State of New York Press, 1994.
- Goossaert, Vincent. *The Taoists of Peking, 1800–1949: A Social History of Urban Clerics*. London: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter. *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*. Leiden: Brill, 1996.
- Hillemann, Ulrike. *Asian Empire and British Knowledge*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Kaczynski, Richard. *Perdurabo: The Life of Aleister Crowley*. Tempe: New Falcon Publications, 2002.
- Legge, James trans. "Introduction." In *The Sacred Books of the East, Volume 16*, edited by Max Müller, 1–55. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1882.
- Legge, James trans. "The Tao Teh King." In *The Sacred Books of the East, Volume 39*, edited by Max Müller, 45–124. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891.
- Sacco, Leonardo. "La tradizione taoista nel pensiero di René Guénon." *Aries* 8, no. 1 (2008): 63–89.
- Mackerras, Colin. *Western Images of China*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Müller, Max, ed. *The Sacred Books of the East*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891.
- Pasi, Marco. "Varieties of Magical Experience: Aleister Crowley's Views on Occult Practice."

- In *Aleister Crowley and Western Esotericism*, edited by Henrik Bogdan and Martin P. Starr, 53–87. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Piltz, Åsa. *Seger åt Tibet! Den Tibetanska Diasporan och den Religiösa Nationen*. Lund: Dept. of History and Anthropology of Religions, Lund University, 2005.
- Reinders, Eric. *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies: Christian Missionaries Imagine Chinese Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.
- Urban, Hugh. *Tantra: Sex, Secrecy, Politics, and Power in the Study of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Washington, Peter. *Madame Blavatsky's Baboon*. New York: Schocken Books, 1993.
- Zheng, Yangwen. *The Social Life of Opium in China*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.