Book Review: *Confucianism: An Introduction* and *Daoism: An Introduction*

Littlejohn, Ronnie L., *Confucianism: An Introduction*, I.B. Tauris, 2011, 231 pp, $26, ISBN 978-1-84885-174-0

In *Confucianism: An Introduction* Ronnie Littlejohn has produced a survey of great value for those incorporating almost any phase of Confucian history or thinking into their courses. While a few aspects of Confucian practice and thinking are not addressed as fully as one might wish, overall there are few better historically-oriented surveys available for introductory and advanced introductory use, especially at the college level.

Littlejohn argues that Confucianism is best understood as a religion. Its emphasis on personal transformation and the production of personal and social virtues, as well as its developing an orientation over time of a comprehensive metaphysic of a transcendent Heaven, all point to the religious underpinnings of Confucianism, according to Littlejohn.

Having made his argument, he proceeds to discuss, chapter by chapter, the development of Confucian thinking from earliest times forward. He also addresses the geographical spread of Confucianism, especially from China to Korea and Japan. As part of this historically-oriented survey he discusses in some detail a wide variety of developments and variant forms of Confucianism, rightly reminding the reader that this is a complex and nuanced tradition requiring attention to historical context for a fuller understanding.

This survey has many strengths. Within a Chinese context, it is comprehensive in scope, and to a lesser degree the same case could be made in regard to Korea and Japan. The author has provided many resources to help introductory students gain access to what initially could appear to be the impenetrable vocabulary and history of Chinese culture and Confucian tradition. Littlejohn provides a pinyin pronunciation guide, a timeline of Chinese history, a character (zi 字) glossary, sufficient illustrations and maps, and plentiful inset explanatory boxes and notes to support the introductory student and any others who may need such guidance. One of the greatest strengths of the text is the use of substantial quantities of primary source material, which allow students to engage with the major texts of this text-oriented tradition without necessarily having access to all of those volumes themselves and without having to split their attention between this and some other text. As a practical matter, for those teaching at smaller institutions which perhaps have fewer resources, or teaching a student population that is limited in what it can afford, the inclusion of copious primary texts and sources is a tremendous advantage of using Littlejohn's volume. Another strength of this text is that Littlejohn necessarily makes certain definitional choices (such as arguing that Confucianism is a religion) and in the process carefully offers his reasoning for making such choices. In other words, he is self-aware and does not merely make assertions without supplying the evidence and line of thought that leads to the making of those interpretive choices.

Despite all of these considerable strengths, there are a few areas of relative weakness in this volume. One that immediately appears is the lack of a glossary available for students to

consult when trying to learn the relatively large amount of Chinese and Confucian terminology used. Frequently, Littlejohn describes at first appearance how terms can be understood within the text, but nevertheless having a glossary for students to refer to once they encounter those terms or concepts later in the text would prove helpful. Another weakness is that this survey primarily focuses upon the major texts and thinkers of Confucian tradition and gives a much more cursory glance at Confucianism at a more popular and quotidian level. "Weakness" may be too strong a term for this problem given the fact that the book needs to be of a manageable length and editorial choices must be made, but still, it would be helpful if a bit more attention were devoted to more popular aspects of this tradition. Finally, contemporary Confucianism is given scant attention. Again, this may be due to editorial decisions, but especially for introductory students it tends to be of interest to see how this tradition appears in the world that they in some sense already know, that is, the contemporary world. That said, these weaknesses are relative only, and compared with the overall impressive strengths of the book, do not detract greatly from its overall high quality.

In brief, then, Ronnie Littlejohn's *Confucianism: An Introduction* is a well-written, high quality survey of the development and spread of Confucian history and tradition. It argues for the importance of understanding Confucianism as a religious tradition first and as a political and philosophical tradition after that. This text should be of great value in most introductory courses on Chinese history, culture, sociology, or religion.

Littlejohn, Ronnie L., *Daoism: An Introduction*, I.B. Tauris, 2009, 221 pp, $27, ISBN 978-1-84511-639-2

Daoism: An Introduction, also by Ronnie Littlejohn, is likewise a high-quality, valuable survey of Daoist history and practice. Littlejohn's approach to surveying Daoism is a bit different than his approach to Confucianism, though. This seems to be due to several factors, including that Confucianism, despite its many variant forms, is perhaps more easily recognized as a more or less unified tradition, but at the same time not as initially obviously "religious." On the other hand, Daoism is more obviously "religious" (perhaps), but contains a much greater variety of worldviews and practices, which challenge attempts to argue for any kind of comprehensive "Daoist tradition." In other words, the arguments and observations Littlejohn makes in the case of Daoism are necessarily quite different from those he makes in the case of Confucianism.

Littlejohn addresses these concerns well overall. Particularly in respect to the wide range of diverse practices that generally fall under the label of "Daoism," he creates an image/metaphor of a spreading kudzu vine (an image doubly appropriate given the kudzu's origins in China). The vine branches and spreads, winding and weaving its way in a multiplicity of directions, creating a lush display that in some sense seems chaotic, but in another retains an underlying structural identity. By applying this image to Daoism, Littlejohn can account for, or at least create a defensible argument for, both the multiplicity and underlying shared identity of the stream of Daoist history.

As a result, Littlejohn does a masterful job of exploring many of the twists and turns of Daoist history, moving from earliest times forward until he reaches the contemporary world. He lands upon all of the major variants of historical Daoism in turn. This creates a highly useful text for the introductory classroom. Its strengths are many, including, as in the

case of *Confucianism: An Introduction*, the extensive use of primary source materials within the text. This is a great help to teachers or students with limited access to resources in keeping attention focused on one thing at a time. Littlejohn provides a timeline of Chinese history, a character glossary, copious notes and explanatory insets, and helpful illustrations. He argues for the interpretive choices that he makes, which in itself demonstrates a process that students should be learning. All of these features make *Daoism: An Introduction* a fantastic option for introductory classes.

Not surprisingly, the relative weaknesses of this text mirror those of *Confucianism*. Littlejohn does not provide a glossary of terms for students to make reference to. He explains the meanings of terms on first use, but given the large quantity of Chinese vocabulary used, it is unrealistic to expect students to remember it all after only one encounter. A glossary, then, would help considerably. Littlejohn again focuses upon the elite "masters" shaping historically variant forms of Daoism, and gives less attention to popular movements and practices. He cursorily addresses Daoism in the contemporary world, which could be a topic of great interest to younger students. Perhaps these decisions to emphasize certain aspects of the Daoist kudzu at the expense of others was a necessary editorial or methodological decision, but nevertheless, at the ideal level it would be preferable to include these things rather than slight them. Still, the relative weaknesses are not nearly enough to counter the impressive strengths of the work.

To conclude, *Daoism: An Introduction* is a well-written, useful survey of Daoist history and practice. It should prove useful for introductory and advanced introductory students, as well as more advanced scholars who would like a useful reference. It should prove useful in Chinese history, sociology, religion, and philosophy classes among others. Combined with *Confucianism: An Introduction* teachers have good texts available for a comprehensive approach to China's two primary native philosophical and religious traditions.

Robert Steed, Assistant Professor, Humanities (East Asian Cultures and Religions), Hawkeye Community College.