REL 222.01: Chinese Religious Traditions

Spring, 2006

Class: T: 10-11:50 A.M.; Th: 10-10:50 A.M. Steiner 306
Office Hours: MTW: 1:15-2:05 P.M.

Edmund T. Gilday
Office: Steiner 302
Ext. 4227
gilday@grinnell.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course is designed to introduce the major trajectories of traditional Chinese religious culture. In addition to developing a deeper understanding and appreciation of the ways Chinese people have experienced and made sense of the world(s) in which they have lived, we will consider how we as students of religion can make sense of and appreciate ideas and practices that are for most of us quite literally foreign. I would like as much as possible to conduct the course as a seminar. That means that each of us must be responsible for not only thorough preparation for but also vigorous participation during each class session. As the preliminary schedule below suggests, you will have ample opportunity to explore in greater depth areas of particular interest to you, and to share your interests with your colleagues. Because of the newly-revealed diverse backgrounds of participants, I have finalized only the first half of the course schedule; we will together decide on the (type of) readings we’ll concentrate on during the second half.

TEXTS: The required texts for this course Deborah Sommer’s Chinese Religion: An Anthology of Sources; Donald Lopez’ Religions of China in Practice; Herbert Bingarette’s Confucius; and Isabelle Robinet’s Taoism. Additional readings will be available under “Course Documents” on the electronic Blackboard (and indicated by * in the schedule).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1) You are of course expected to attend all class sessions and contribute actively to class discussions. That means that you are expected to do a critical reading of the assigned material for each class in advance of the relevant meeting. A quick glance at the contents of each selection will alert you to its place in the week’s agenda. In the beginning of the semester, I will post study guides on the Discussion Forum to help orient you to the readings assigned for the following week. Thereafter, you will take on more responsibility for leading discussions (see #2, below). In any event, each of you will need to read the assigned material carefully so as to a) understand and be able to articulate in class what the author is saying; and b) reflect thoughtfully on how the material contributes to our understanding of Chinese religious traditions. (25% of final grade)

2) The class will be divided into groups of 2-3 students each, and beginning in Week 3 these groups (on a rotating basis) will be responsible for initiating our discussions. The presenters will post a preliminary “study guide” at least 48 hours in advance. Other members of the class will then respond thoughtfully to this report at least 24 hours in advance of class (see #3, below). In class, the presenters will provide a concise overview of the material assigned for the day and then highlight key issues to stimulate the class to further discussion. (25% of final grade)
3) Over the course of weeks 2-11, each student will be responsible for posting a total of **FOUR** "occasional" 2-page reflection papers, which must be made available on the Discussion Forum during the week we are discussing your topic. Your task will be to summarize and reflect on one issue from that week’s reading that you judge to be **both** central to the reading and provocative or puzzling or revealing. **You should not ordinarily do a paper in the same week that you are leading discussion.** (Note: Your colleagues are encouraged to comment on your working papers, and every paper MUST be commented on by at least one other member of our class within 24 hours of the initial posting. Everyone--please note this expectation in terms of your expected contribution to the seminar.) You will revise one of these working papers and submit it by the last day of classes as representative of the way you have engaged the materials of the course. **(25% of final grade)**

4) You will be invited to carry out a **research project** on a topic of your choice **(25% of grade)**. This is an opportunity for you to pursue in some depth a problem or topic that emerges during the course of our inquiries. I will require documentation of these projects, including an annotated bibliography to be made available to all members of the seminar at the time of presentation. In order to engage each participant as fully as possible, I will offer the following options for this requirement:

**OPTION A: Term paper** (12-15 pages): a research project that addresses a problem/issue that interests you **and** that contributes to the way we think about Chinese religion(s).

**OPTION B: Collaborative research report**: oral "panel" presentation on a topic or theme that two or more students work on together and that will engage the class in serious critical discussion.

Each **research project** alternative will involve a number of **required** stages, which will be detailed in class and on the electronic Blackboard. I will provide a list of possible topics early in the semester to help you narrow your options and begin to focus.
Preliminary Class Schedule

I. Orientations

Jan 24  Introductions
Reading for Thursday: *Religions of China in Practice*, Intro (3-20)

Jan 26  “The Problem of ‘Three Teachings’”
Reading for next week: *Religions of China in Practice* [= RCP]: Intro (21-37) and Chapter 1

II. Some Methodological Issues

Jan 31  “The Spirits of Chinese Religion”
Feb 2  Oracles
Reading for next week: Sommer, 1-70; 105-112

III. Early Reflections

Feb 7  “Confucian Matters”
Feb 9  Pan Chao’s “Lessons for Women”
Reading for next week: Fingarette, Preface and Chs. 1-3

IV. Modern Reflections

Feb 14  Confucius—a Critical Interpretation
Feb 16  Interpretation (continued)
Reading for next week: Fingarette, Chs. 4-5

RCP: Ch. 4 (“City Gods”) *******

V.  Feb 21  Interpretation (continued)
Feb 23  “Confucianism” (?) on the Ground
Reading for next week: Robinet, Intro (1-23)
Sommer, 71-98

VI. “Taoism”: Preliminary Reflections

Feb 28  The Problem
Mar 2  Samplings from early texts
Reading for next week: Robinet, Chs. 1-2

RCP: Ch. 2

VII. Basic Ideas

Mar 7  Discussion of Robinet
Mar 9  “Lao-zi”
Reading for next week: Robinet, Chs. 3-4 (53-113); Bell* (*= on Blackboard);
Sommer, 145-51; Campany*
VIII. Complications

Mar 14  Historical Evidence of Social Effects
Mar 16  Robinet as a “Matter of Interest”

SPRING BREAK

I am eager to turn this critical historical narrative into one of methodological critique. After the break, I’d like to concentrate on particular case studies, informed by primary texts, of what happened after the introduction of Buddhist ideas and practices into the mainstream of Chinese intellectual and practical experience. I am hopeful that we will all be prepared to entertain historical cases that challenge the stereotypes that have emerged in our considerations so far. With this hope in mind, I will suggest readings on various more specialized topics that track the historical and thematic elements that we identify together as “significant” to our interests. (We will of course debate this issue as well.)

I will make recommendations of readings and orientations, but will also respond positively to suggestions from the class. I want to include certain essays, but am eager to learn of others, and to include a diverse range of “matters” in our considerations.
Set-up

1) Index Cards

2) Syllabus and Expectations

3) CriticalIntro of Interests

What specific interest motivates you? Which “tradition” seems to animate you?

GROUPS?