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 to us.

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. We apparently have a range of prior familiarity with the issues, both historical and conceptual, that our course will engage; I am prepared to adjust our schedule to accommodate those differentials, and I invite your feedback throughout the semester.

As the 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. I am amenable to adjusting this schedule depending on the interests of the class, but I have certain interests that I want to maintain. These can be summarized in terms of three basic foci: 1) I would like to maintain a general chronological orientation; 2) There are certain thematic foci that I think are critical; and 3) I want to ensure that you come away from the course with a methodological sense of how religious studies as a discipline approaches our topic. As long as your recommendations recognize these interests, I will be very amenable to your suggestions for adjustments.

TEXTS: The required texts for this course are Laurence G. Thompson’s Chinese Religion; Deborah Sommer’s Chinese Religion: An Anthology of Sources; Donald Lopez’ Religions of China in Practice; 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 and the study of religion more generically. You will be expected to have our assigned texts in front of you during class. (25% of final grade)
2) The class will be divided into smaller groups, 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. Each presentation will be expected to locate the discussion in space and time (with appropriate maps and timelines). Any additional study or discussion notes may warrant additional credit—especially as they relate the study of Chinese religion to cartography. (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, but at least 24 hours before our in-class discussions. THESE ARE IMPORTANT! READ ON! Your task here 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 for our work more generally. You should not ordinarily do a paper in the same week that you are leading discussion. Note: Your colleagues will be required 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 required contributions to the seminar.) You should establish a schedule for yourselves for these assignments; don’t wait until April to begin posting/responding. You should plan on posting your reflection papers at least once each month (January through April or February through May) —posts that do not follow this schedule will be discounted. You will revise one of these working papers and submit it by the last day of class (May 8) as representative of the way you have engaged the materials of the course. (25% of final grade, based on total timely contributions in this area.)

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.
REL 222: Class Schedule

I. Orientations

Jan 21  Introduction to the course, texts, methodology, and evidence
*Orientations
*Video: “A Question of Balance”
Reading for Thursday: Relgs of China in Practice [= RCP]: Intro (3-20)
Jan 23  “The Problem of ‘Three Teachings’”
Reading for next week: RCP (21-37)
Thompson, Chapters 1-2

II. Some Methodological Issues

Jan 28  “The Problem of ‘Popular Religion’” (RCP)
Jan 30  Early China: Theories and Practices (Thompson)
Reading for next week: Sommer, 1-70; 105-112
RCP, Chapter 1

III. Early Evidence

Feb 4  Oracle bones and other evidence (Sommer, 3-39, and RCP)
Feb 6  Confucian Matters (Sommer, 41-70)
Reading for next week: Thompson, Chapters 3-5 and Appendix 1
RCP, Chapters 17-18
Sommer, 101-104

IV. Scholarly Synthesis and Historical Evidence

Feb 11  Three Scales of Religion (Thompson)
Feb 13  Ritual Practices (RCP and Sommer)
Reading for next week: Robinet, Introduction and Chapter 1
Sommer, 71-98
Thompson, Chapter 6
RCP, Chapter 8

V. “Taoism”: Preliminary Reflections

Feb 18  The Problem of Classification Redux (Robinet and Sommer)
Feb 20  Synthesizing a “Way” (Thompson and RCP)
Reading for next week: Robinet, Chapters 2-3
RCP, Chapter 2

VI. Taoism: From Movements to “Tradition”

Feb 25  Moving Toward “Tradition”
Feb 27  A Southern Voice: Who was Lao-zi?
Reading for next week: Robinet, Chapters 4-6
RCP: Chapters 10-12; 20, 27
VII. Taoist Developments

Mar 3  Discussion of Robinet (From Ge Hong to the Ling-bao School)
Mar 5  Texts (RCP)

Reading for next week: Thompson, Chapter 8
RCP: Chapters 28, 19
Bell, review*

VIII. Complications

Mar 10 Historical Evidence of Social Effects (Thompson and RCP)
Mar 12 Robinet as a “Matter of Interest” (Bell)

SPRING BREAK (March 15-28)

Readings for Week IX: Sommer, 119-43
RCP, Chapters 5, 6, and 32
Stevenson, “Death Bed Testimonials”*

IX. Buddhists Arrive and Begin to Thrive

Mar 31 Buddhism in China (Sommer)
April 2 Some Case Studies (RCP and Stevenson)

Reading for next week: Sommer, 169-180
RCP: Chapters 31, 23, and 5

X. New Developments?

April 7 A Literati Bureaucrat; Unending Sorrow (Sommer)
April 9 Ritual Elaborations (RCP)

Reading for next week: Thompson, Chapter 7
Sommer, 183-198; 227-232
RCP: Chapter 7

XI. New Consolidations

April 14 NO CLASS—Research and Reading Day
April 16 Confucian Speculations

Reading for next week: Thompson, Chapters 9-12
Sommer, 281-307
RCP, Chapters 34 and 35

XII. New Syntheses

April 21 Moral Configurations (RCP)
April 23 Modern Practices and Critiques (Thompson and Sommer)

XIII-XIV. STUDENT PROJECT PRESENTATIONS