Shawn, Arthur


For historians, the pharmacological recipes contained in the *Daoist Canon* present a voluminous, yet relatively untapped resource for studying the intersections of medicine and religions in medieval China. As these prescriptions include details about how Daoist adepts supposedly procured, prepared, and used these medicines, we can glean a great deal about what adepts might have consumed to heal bodily ailments. And since authors of these texts also claim that these substances would aide adepts transcend the human realm, historians can use these texts to analyze prevailing ideas of the cosmos and adepts’ quest to become gods.

Shawn Arthur’s new book makes a major contribution to the study of both the medicinal and religious cultures of an early collection of recipes, the second fascicle of the *Lingbao wufuxu* (hereafter *Wufuxu*). Perhaps the most important features of Arthur’s book are the resources he provides to decipher the esoteric vocabulary and hyperbolic claims commonplace in these kinds of texts. Chapter two, for instance, contains an excellent overview of the basic structure of a recipe (e.g., a description of how herbs should be collected and/or grown, the methods by which an individual prepared these concoctions, the proper way to consume them). Chapter seven also offers great insights into how a single pharmacological object creates a complex (and thus interesting) analysis of the disparate ways in which consumers incorporated one medicinal substance into their lives. Furthermore, there are appendices detailing the contents of the *Wufuxu* and provide useful etymological details on the pharmacological substances. These features alone make this book a useful resource for historians of religion to consult when studying the *Wufuxu*’s recipes or similar texts of medieval China.

This book is less helpful in the middle chapters where Arthur argues that a historical study of these prescriptions provides ‘a clear snapshot of a particular set of dietary and religious practices’ (3), as if to imply that we can directly gaze on a historical community by closely reading one text. What is missing from this ‘snapshot’ approach to recipes, however, is a nuanced picture of the kinds of people who might have produced (wrote, copied, or miswrote) and exchanged these texts. For over a decade, scholars have studied the dissemination of recipes and drug lore, and have clearly demonstrated that these recipes were texts with high symbolic capital and closely guarded transmissions.
(See Campany 2009, 62–87; Chang, 173–224; Hsieh; Kominami; Stanley-Baker). These studies have been particularly helpful in illuminating the communities, adversaries, sponsors, and bureaucracies that shaped the reception of these prescriptions. Since many of these features require scholars to look at narrative materials not seen within recipes (e.g., scriptures, histories, inscriptions), Arthur’s ‘snapshots’ of the recipes miss essential contextual matters. He does not even situate this second juan within the larger ritual system of the Wufuxu, a topic that previous studies have explored in detail (Raz 2004, 124–86).

It would be unnecessary for Arthur to devote his entire monograph to issues of readership and textual transmission, but without this frame of reference, his claims about the ‘redactors’ who made this text or the ‘readers’ who purportedly used the recipes are quite tenuous. For instance, Arthur posits that the redactors and readers were ‘ancient Daoists’ and belonged to a ‘Daoist tradition’. The problem is not Arthur’s choice of words to describe the redactors (‘Daoists’ seems a fine choice to me), but rather the way he attempts to ‘recreate’ their ‘worldview’ by relying on the ‘inherent logic’ imbedded in the Wufuxu (102). Without immediate textual (not to mention social or ideological) context pertaining to the motivations that inspired or shaped this text, how can Arthur possibly know its inherent logic?

One way that Arthur attempts to ‘recreate’ the Wufuxu’s ‘inherent logic’ is by studying contemporary Daoist ascetics in China and America. Since these present-day adepts use similar dietary practices, Arthur provides four reasons why it is ‘useful to recognize that modern Daoists support many of the ancient claims that the Wufuxu makes’. First, contemporary experiences confirm that prolonged fasting is possible despite the fact that it seems impossible to the ‘scientifically oriented Western mind’. Second, interviewing current practitioners demonstrates that recipes like those in the Wufuxu are beneficial. Third, it shows the need to develop a Western scientific terminology for further analysis of Daoist dietary regimens. Finally, Arthur suggests that since the historical text lacks explanatory details, we might study the modern transmission of these practices among adepts to learn why the Wufuxu redactors guarded their texts in such secrecy (152–53).

As intriguing as this topic of contemporary dietetics might be, it is simply out of place in a historical study of ‘ancient Daoists’. This hermeneutic assumes that there is an underlying epistemology to all of what Arthur calls the ‘Daoist tradition’. Reifying Daoism in this manner gives the impression that the Wufuxu validates the ideological and soteriological goals of contemporary ‘Daoists’ (both in China and the U.S.). I fear that Arthur’s affiliation of historical texts and current practitioners comes dangerously close to falling within