

# DIMENSIONS OF REALITY IN CHINESE TALES

Religious Studies 50 (Section 5)

Macalester College

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Professor Russell Kirkland  
[kirkland@arches.uga.edu](mailto:kirkland@arches.uga.edu)  
<http://www.uga.edu/religion/rk>

Old Main 105

TTh 2:45-4:00 & by appointment

*"How can we contrive to be at once astonished at the world and yet at home in it? How can this world give us at once the fascination of a strange town and the comfort and honour of being our own town?... We need this life of practical romance; the combination of something that is strange with something that is secure. We need to view the world as to combine an idea of wonder and an idea of welcome. We need to be happy in this wonderland without once being merely comfortable."*

-- G. K. Chesterton

What is reality? How do we know? Is the human world the only reality? Or is there another level of reality, a sphere of non-human life that surrounds and suffuses this sphere? In short, can we perceive dimensions of reality that imbue our comfortable, secure world with a sense of wonder?

In this course, we will explore how some Chinese traditionally sought to answer such questions. Instead of concentrating upon philosophical treatises or religious texts, we are going to conduct our exploration through the reading of traditional Chinese tales and stories. Since early times, Chinese literature has abounded in tales of wonder and fantasy -- tales of ghosts and spirits, fabulous voyages, miraculous transformations, and every variety of strange and wondrous event. Those tales were composed at least partly as entertainment. And yet, they also reveal a wide range of attitudes about the nature of the world, the nature of human existence, and the nature of the divine. In these tales, all the realms of being -- animal, human, divine, and demonic -- often impinge upon each other in wondrous and unpredictable ways. It is those realms -- and their interrelationships -- that this course will explore. We will also consider some of the ideas found in Taoist thought and religion, and evaluate the extent to which they might contribute to our understanding of the stories that we read.

You are welcome to chat with the instructor at any time after class, or during office hours. At other times, you may leave me a message (( 6151). You may call the instructor at home at any time that your life is in immediate danger (though one would recommend dialing 911 instead).

**TEXTS** (*Available at the bookstore*)

Course Reader: Readings from this packet are marked below in small caps.

Burton Watson, trans., *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*

Victor Mair, trans., *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio*

Other readings (marked below thus \*) are on reserve at the library.

## **REQUIREMENTS**

- ✍ Regular class attendance
- ✍ Completion of **all** required readings **before** class
- ✍ Two papers on assigned topics [each 30% of course grade]
- ✍ A take-home final exam [40% of course grade]

Constructive participation in class may also be taken into consideration. Incompletes will be granted only by prior arrangement, and only in truly exceptional situations; failure to plan properly for the end-of-semester workload does **not** constitute such a situation.

## **COURSE OUTLINE AND READINGS**

[Recommended readings are in square brackets]

### **Introduction: Common Themes in Chinese Tales**

Handouts: "The Dragon King's Daughter" and "The Herbalist's Strange Adventure"

\* Kirkland, "The Motif of Secrecy in Chinese Tales and Taoist Religious Biography"

### **Dimensions of Reality in Classical Taoist Thought**

*Chuang-tzu*: "Autumn Floods" and "Supreme Happiness": in Watson: 96-117

Watson: 1-23

*Chuang-tzu*: "Free and Easy Wandering": in Watson: 23-30

*Chuang-tzu*: "Tse-yang" (Handout)

### **Early Medieval Tales and Stories: The Six Dynasties Period**

"A Friend from Beyond"

\* "The Dawn of Chinese Fiction": from Ch'en Shou-yi, *Chinese Literature: A Historical Introduction*

"Selections from the Six Dynasties": Kao, *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural* (as assigned)

\* "The Early Supernatural Tale" (from Chang, *Chinese Literature: Tales of the Supernatural*)

\* "The Yellow Bird" and other stories from Yang and Yang, *The Man Who Sold a Ghost*

"Introduction" (part one): Kao, *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural* (pp. 1-21)

\* Kirkland, "Cosmic Trauma and the Human Pharmikon: A Mythic Motif in Medieval Chinese Literature"

[\* "Some Chinese Tales of the Supernatural": Bodde, *Essays on Chinese Civilization*, 331-48]

### **Humans, "Immortals," and the Dimensions of Reality in Later Taoism**

\* Giles, *A Gallery of Chinese Immortals*: 7-14

\* Kirkland, "The Making of an Immortal: The Exaltation of Ho Chih-chang"

\* Kirkland, "Taoism and the Moral Life"

\* "The Mysterious Portal: Legends of Immortals" (from Blofeld, *Taoism: The Road to Immortality*)

### **High Medieval Tales and Stories: The T'ang Period**

"The Island of the Black Coats," "The Fox Fairy," and "A Lifetime in a Dream"

"Selections from the T'ang": Kao, *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural* (as assigned)

\* "The T'ang Ch'uan-ch'i Tale" (from Chang, *Chinese Literature: Tales of the Supernatural*)

"Introduction" (part two): Kao, *Classical Chinese Tales of the Supernatural* (pp. 21-48)

[\* Ma, "Fact and Fantasy in T'ang Tales"]

### **Late Medieval Tales and Stories: The Sung and Ming Periods**

"The Spirit Land," "The Peony Lantern" and "A Strange Encounter"

\* "Sung" and "Ming" (from Chang, *Chinese Literature: Tales of the Supernatural*)

[\* Kirkland, "A World in Balance: Holistic Synthesis in the *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi*"]

### **Stories from Modern China**

"The Raksasas and the Ocean Bazaar": in Mair, trans., *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio*: 139-155

"The Temple of Mr. Ch'eng"

Handout: "Mr. Tung's Fox Tenants"

Handout: "Ch'ing Fiction": from Ch'en Shou-yi, *Chinese Literature: A Historical Introduction*

Handout: *A Jewish Philosopher Contemplates Fox Fairies: Martin Buber*

\* "Liao-chai chih-i" (from Chang, *Chinese Literature: Tales of the Supernatural*)

Mair, trans., *Strange Tales from Make-Do Studio*: as assigned

\* Zeitlin, *Historian of the Strange*: as assigned