

Tao Masters: tradition, experience and ethnography*

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ABSTRACT

In this article I analyse the performative dimension that constitutes the transmission of tradition in taoist lineage located in Brazil, from the perspective of the anthropology of experience. The idea of knowing in taoism is based on a practical notion: one knows the legacy of tradition through personal embodied experience. The very possibility of knowing is based upon a personal relation between master and apprentice, inserted on a dialogical and genealogical.

Keywords: body, experience, performance, taoism.

Here I've proposed a theoretical-ethnographic reflection on transmitting tradition in the context of a Taoist lineage¹ in Brazil, focusing on the performatic aspects of this transmission. I understand performance in the sense proposed by Richard Bauman (Bauman et al., 1977), as a way of using language referring to diverse aspects of oral tradition as well as genders of public speech, but I consider that the Taoist case doesn't merely deal with verbal language. For my purposes, the notion of text, and consequently the actual idea of narration, should include speech as well as literature, iconographic material and techniques of the body, and all the ways in which these elements are updated in their practitioners' living experiences. My starting point is the ascertain that Taoist cultural texts consist in a heterogeneous field of knowledge, making reference to distinct aspects of life, whose transmission occurs in an intertextual field, simultaneously encompassing words, voice, image and body.² In this terrain, tradition and experience, collective (*Erfahrung*) as well as individual (*Erlebnis*), converge.

For this reflection, I've used my own field experience, since 1998, in the cities of Brasilia and Sao Paulo, with Tao master Liu Pai Lin's lineage (1904-2000). The greater part of the ethnographical material used here comes from 1998-2000, i.e., field work for my PhD dissertation in Social Anthropology, but with subsequent updates. The ethnography refers to a Chinese lineage, endowed with ancestors famous in the recent history of Taoism in China,³ but transplanted to Brazil in the 1970's, when the master came to this country, initially motivated by his family's visit. Here is an approximate portrait of the group: 1) dissemination in urban space, without the equivalent of a village or a community of the ethnographies of anthropology's

mythical founders; 2) network organization which connects master, disciple, mere students and patients, in a variety of large Brazilian cities; 3) relatively heterogeneous as regards the profile of its effective members, despite them possibly, in sociological terms, being situated in a same socioeconomic grouping, i.e., (a vague definition of) middle level urban groups, with a few exceptions coming from more lower-class origins.

Reducing this description to a minimum necessary, there's a slight predominance of women among effective members of the group, and the majority of practitioners – especially among the disciples – are older than 30. Regarding motivations for a first contact with the tradition, I've mapped out six large themes among my interviewees:

1) a case of serious chronic illness or a general existential crisis 2) psychological or medical professionals, interested in corporal therapies because of the philosophical aspects of these practices; 3) artists: especially dancers, musicians and actors, i.e., involved with questions of rhythm, presence, and movement; 4) practitioners of other forms of *Taiji*, other martial arts or techniques of movement, interested in the aesthetic and philosophical aspects in *Taiji*; 5) descendents of immigrants looking for their cultural roots; 6) I also ran into two cases in which the first contact had been made through employment in the secretary's office within the institutional space of the school. (Bizerril, to be published).

Since Taoists don't configure an ethnic group, being more of an affined association, at first there seems to be a delicate line separating studying Tao philosophy, practicing Taoist techniques of the body, being treated with traditional Tao medicine and considering oneself as a Taoist, from the point of view of identity. Thus, even though living Tao corporal knowledge is part of these practitioners' everyday lives, not all of them relate to such practices as a spiritual tradition. Even among those who do, not all of these adhere in a majority or exclusive fashion to a Taoist way of life.

Mapping out the neo-esoteric scene in São Paulo (Magnani, 1999) situates the two Pai Lin institutes (renamed Shiao Lin, after master Liu passed away in 2000), important nodes in the network which I mapped out ethnographically, such as famous centers of traditional Chinese medicine in the city. However, or maybe precisely for this reason, if we consider the nebulous contours in the galaxy of religiosity in Brazil, one may also include among those who transit in the Taoist scene a relatively lay clientele, but also a New Age public seeking therapeutic experiences, whose meaning is constituted from individual trajectories (Amaral, 2000) – as is characteristic of this urban and contemporary type of religiosity – and not by regularly pertaining to the group nor for any specific commitment to the tradition.

Unlike the eventual practitioner of *Taiji Quan*, the patient getting a *Tui Na* massage, or the dilettante orientalist, being a Taoist disciple implies voluntary identification with the tradition and daily corporal engagement in a project of self construction, conceived as a "return to origins",⁴ to a metaphorical condition of childhood, a state of spontaneity, completeness and vitality. In a certain way, Taoist techniques of the body may be described as "arts of existence" or "techniques of the self", in Foucault's famous definition (1998, p. 15):

Voluntary and reflected practices through which people don't only fix rules of conduct, but also strive to transform themselves, modifying themselves in their singular selves and turning their lives into a task which carries certain aesthetic values and responds to certain criteria of style.

Being a Taoist master, or disciple, means becoming a link in a genealogical and dialogical chain, in which space and time narratives on the secrets of life and death, inscribed in ideograms, in diagrams, in mythical-poetic images, but especially, in living bodies, are transmitted through internal martial arts,⁵ meditation,⁶ *qigong*⁷ and traditional medicine.⁸ These three universes of techniques of the body are interdependent and constitute the very living tissue of the tradition.

The version of Taoism about which I am reflecting in this article is founded on a pragmatic theory of knowledge. To know is equivalent to an embodied way of being, and not an accumulation of texts and their sophisticated exegesis, as scholars would have it. As such, a separation between theory and practice may not be contemplated. As the actual characteristics of the theme resound the problematic of anthropology of experience, I resorted to the methodological strategy proposed by Jackson (1989), founded on an "empathic understanding", a kind of comprehension that, without separating the symbolic from practice or body, seeks the meaning in interactions and in people's movements and considers bodily practices that surge from these interactions, emphasizing the importance of the anthropologist's bodily participation.

This is to say that, as an important aspect of the transmission of Taoist tradition occurs in a non verbal, embodied and experiential field, it attributes special importance to participation, including the very body of the ethnographer as one of the key tools of field research. I deliberately opted to participate in non verbal communication – which happens when practicing techniques of the body – and leaves me affected by its effects, like a way of having access to a universe of collective experience (*Erfahrung*). This is in conformity with the elementary comprehension that Taoism, being culture, may be learned.

Besides, learning to "do together with" combines with a classic Chinese notion that higher instruction is wordless (Granet, 1997). In the field of practical knowledge (*Praktognosis*), a special kind of dialogism is established, for the researcher as well as for the apprentice. As such, as an ethnographer I was placed in the position of apprentice, in order to integrate myself into the typical ways of interacting of this tradition, while, at the same time, applying more classical methodologies such as interviews and observation.

Two poles of authority of tradition

Speaking about tradition inevitably remits to the problem of authentic continuity, the authorized version, legitimate speech or, as my Taoist interlocutors have said, the notion of "true transmission". This takes us directly to the question of the classic, in general, and the classic text in particular.

Gadamer (1992, 1996) defines the classics as "eminent texts", liberated from immediate contextual determinations referring to their production. They are destined to endure the flux of historical events, to be read and reread by generations of readers. Because of their complex character, they are frequently metaphorical and mythical-poetic, due to the mystery added by the aura of historical and or cultural distance, the eminent texts may paradoxically be defined by an apparent immutability and extemporal quality of an essential message, yet, at the same time, open to new constructions of meaning. Among his classics, the Taoist lineage researched combines that which Stoller (1997) denominates as being histories "from above" (written texts) – principally *Huangdi Neijing Suwen* (*The Yellow Emperor Classic of Internal Medicine*), *Daodejing* (the

Book of the Way and of Virtue) and *Yijing* (The Book of Changes)⁹ – and histories "from below" (objects, songs, gestures and movements) – especially techniques of the body¹⁰ and diagrams.¹¹

Yet the classic isn't complete in and of itself. Another aspect of the question is the necessity of the tradition's representative, i.e., the master: exegete par excellence, personification of embodied knowledge and Taoist virtue. The master is responsible for "living transmission", that is, a performatic update of the classic by way of his own experience, made exemplary. It's through the figure of the master and the narratives, of which he is the author and character, that personal experience (*Erlebnis*) becomes collective experience (*Erfahrung*).

As such, traditional deciphering strategies of the classics are directly related to the biographies, especially the masters' biographies. Since Taoism is a living knowledge, there's no way of narrating it without making reference to the narrator's own life. A fundamental characteristic of this tradition is the non distinction between cultural heritage and a sequence of biographies drifting in the oral memory of the lineage. There are imbrications between the cultural patterns that characterize the Taoist tradition, in a more general sphere, and ways that are, to a certain degree, idiosyncratic, at the same time innovating and conservative, through which the masters live the version of Taoism that suits them. This conclusion is in consonance with González Rey's (2004) theory of subjectivity, regarding psychology. Meaning is constructed through/based on shared social codes and their unique appropriation through emotionality, itself a product of a singular life history. Seen from this perspective, a non-historical or fundamentalist notion of tradition becomes problematic. Bringing in discussion from another place in the enunciation, it is also worth remembering that there is no "pure" culture, since all cultures are hybrid by definition. In the contemporary world, this aspect is accentuated by the multicultural character of various societies in the Western sphere of influence, which include Brazil. This ethnography is an example: a Taoist group whose master is Chinese, while most of his disciples are Brazilian.

Going back to the question of the place of the text in Taoism, one aspect that makes transmitting the tradition more complex, made effective through the master – disciple relationship, is that the classic is composed of indications and marks of reference. In other words, the written text is only half a text, since its meaning may only be complete through the exegesis of the oral tradition, plus the practitioner's own experience. To comprehend is to progressively live the meanings of the text throughout years of practice. In this context, a Taoist classic or a written instruction for practicing a technique of the body is only one of a number of clues that must be completed through the reader's practical knowledge (Praktognosis) originating from the contact with a "living tradition". It's just like a culinary recipe, or a sheet of music, which are open to multiple interpretations and susceptible to producing numerous results, as a product or performance. In my ethnography, legitimate variability is described in terms of "style",¹² i.e., the particular way in which a practitioner executes a determined technique. These almost "dialectal" variations are recognized as legitimate within the actual "true transmission": my interlocutors spoke of the influence that a certain instructor had on a student in terms of: "he learned Liu Chih Ming's sword" or "in Master Liu's *Taiji* ..." etc.

In the end, the notion of classical text is further expanded by utilizing audiovisual means to register masters' speech as well as their performances of techniques of the body, fixing them down and making them classic. For example, there are hours of recordings of master Liu Pai Lin's lectures. There are also instructional videos on the *Taiji Quan* sequence of 37 movements,¹³ the *Taiji* sword sequence of 54 movements,¹⁴ as well as collections of basic practices and an interview with master Liu Pai Lin,¹⁵ among others.

Teaching and learning the Tao: the place of experience

In the first place, learning the Tao is a multi-sensorial experience: see, hear, read, move around, stay still, perceive external and internal space, and be touched. Given the emphasis on observing nature, I would say that the practitioner emulates two types of master: the primordial master, nature, and the other master, an accomplished human being (Bizerril, to be published).

This multi-sensorial mode of socialization may be fundamentally defined as reiteration. It's through continually repeating a gesture or posture that one may realize its meanings as living experience by way of the effects on the body-consciousness derived from the gesture itself. It's through the interminable variations on a same theme in the master's speech that one may reach comprehension, at some point.

In order to describe situations, in which learning occurs, I've recurred to the notion of *chronotope* (Bakhtin, 1988; Holquist, 1990), understood as a spatial-temporal grouping that may not be dissociated. Even though originally proposed for literary analyses, the *chronotope* may be transposed to the "real" world, with the intent of describing socially constructed spaces in order to transmit the tradition, endowed with keys to the reading, a "situational framework" (Hall, 1976) and its own meta-linguistics. These include formal institutional spaces – such as the Taiji Pai Lin association, the Shiao Lin institutes, the Cemetrac in the city of Sao Paulo –as well as informal spaces – public plazas, parks, gardens and private residencies. These are the key *chronotope* of transmission: the *lecture* and *training* (Bizerril, to be published).

In the *lecture*, verbal communication predominates, in master Liu Pai Lin's case, double-voiced, proffered in Chinese with consecutive translation. However, this isn't merely a theoretical moment. Throughout my fieldwork, I had never done an ethnography of a lecture that didn't make explicit or implicit reference to the sphere of Taoist practices. In general, the lecture is concluded with a collective execution of a technique. Speech on the Tao contains a contextual dimension, and, in a precarious way, because it depends on practice in order to be understood. Differently from a sinological exegesis on the classic, whose analyses are proportionately less contextualized, the lecture integrates cosmological and philosophical aspects with biographical passages, with the intent of suggesting an attitude about life or revealing the efficiency or importance of a technique. From the point of view of its thematic constellation, speech on the Tao is necessarily about life and death.

To serve as an illustration for this affirmation, I've summarized a lecture given on October 10, 1998.¹⁶ Discussing the importance of a specific technique, "root respiration",¹⁷ in which the master makes reference to the interdependency between two aspects of life, one of which is visible and the other invisible, indicating the non-distinction between spirituality and a long life, as well as the importance of maintaining healthy kidneys¹⁸ in order to achieve longevity. He spoke of his daughter's death by flu after having an apparently successful kidney operation, but that he was against. The master used his daughter's case to exemplify how energy from the kidneys wastes away because of the pressures of the stresses of modern life. He added that, thanks to training, he feels the "root"¹⁹ pulsing constantly, even when he's not training. Without having knowledge and practicing the secrets of conserving one's life, a spiritual search is just like trying to construct a tall building without solid foundations. He detailed the ways of executing practice, the best time to train and the importance of training. 18 minutes of practices conducted by the master followed, after which he showed the firm skin and muscles on his legs and arms,

rolling up his sleeves and suspending the hems in his pants in order to demonstrate, with his health and longevity, the long-term effects of practice. What's curious is that this knowledge of the "root", considered a secret of the *Kunlun* (the name of a mountain chain on the border of the Tibetan plains) and *Jin San* (Golden Mountain) lineages is a simple process, yet, at the same time, difficult to transform into reality because it demands long and constant practice.

What's not clear in my rather succinct ethnographical description is the necessity to call attention to the fact that master Liu Pai Lin's qualities as a narrator, capitalized on by him being a traveler as well as an old man, who has seen distant lands and detains knowledge about the past, just like the two paradigmatic narrators in Benjamin's well known reflection (1985). Simultaneously, there is a tie with the past and the native land of Taoism.

Training may be understood as a prerequisite to learning Taoist practices, in which, even if not exclusively, non-verbal communication predominates. All depends on being able to observe and repeat patterns of attention, posture and movement, unchaining a determined psychosomatic state. As a chief model, the master personifies the tradition thanks to his mastering the techniques of the body and their effects. The dialogue between master and apprentice is directly conditioned to the experience accumulated by each practitioner. Due to my previous training in martial arts, dance and yoga, compatible with Taoist techniques of the body, I was helped in my fieldwork, thanks to a previous ability of observing and repeating movement, balance and posture.

Training in Taoism is different from its equivalent in most artistic performances as such, because there is no distinction between learning and the presentation, nor between the performers and the audience external to the proper space in which the performance takes place, except in the context of demonstrations/presentations which only happen sporadically and usually are more aimed at publicizing Taoist practices than an aesthetic exposition of these practices.

Thus, *training* seems to be an end in itself, and not a means of preparing for a presentation. If the public may be defined as the performance target, the analogous distinction between Taoist trainings would be between teacher-student, all active participants who, as such, watch the performance "from inside". If the theatrical performance fundamentally depends on the audience being addressed (Schechner, 1985), Taoist training is different for being a private or even an individual performance instead.

The primary objective of *training* is the actual transmission of a collective experience (*Erfahrung*) – from which the training sprouts. Through it, a *habitus*, a way of being in the world, is incorporated, being practiced so as to become spontaneous in daily life. Far from being merely an individual experience of living (*Erlebnis*), Taoist training is endowed with predictable results, documented by tradition.

It's also worthwhile to distinguish the *class*, in which the collective training is characterized by a relatively marked distinction between teacher and student, and mere *collective training*, in which practitioners of varied levels of experience practice together, but without an explicit didactic relationship.

Utilizing the classification proposed by Schechner (1985), I would say that the in the *chronotope* of Taoist transmission, that which predominates are the "transport" performances, i.e., those in which the *performers* are transported to another type of reality endowed with other spatial and temporal references, yet in the end are given back to the ordinary world. In this case, during a series of "transportations", Taoist practitioners end up being transformed by experiences lived out

in lectures and trainings. But it's also possible to consider that a practitioner's particularly profound experience may be thought of as a "transformation".

It may still be observed that neither of the *chronotope* described may be separated in terms of theory and practice. The fundamental distinction between them depends on which element predominates. What's at stake is the form of silent communication between them, typical of Hall's (1966, 1976, 1982, 1984) *Proxemics* project, characterized by a specific sensorial world and a characteristic rhythm, a social mode of kinesthetic spatial organization. This author sees a determinant relationship between successful communication and unconscious synchronicity in patterns of movement used by people interacting (Hall, 1976). I frequently observed this situation in the collective practice of *Taiji Quan*, whether in the classes or in collective training. It seems that simply practicing together contributes towards deepening the comprehension of the technique.

Updating the tradition, as experience, is characterized by what Carvalho (1993b) defines as an "aesthetics of opacity". In other words, Taoist knowledge uses a "veiled" expression, difficult to describe, but easy to feel. *Taiji Quan* movements, executed by an advanced level practitioner, possess a subtle quality. Possible martial applications, in their precision and intentionality, are merely suggested, and almost unperceivable in their content to untrained eyes.

The performatic expression of experience assumes the form of an ostensible demonstration: conquering longevity, health, graciousness, vivacity of spirit and spontaneity are indications of understanding the Tao, of spiritual accomplishment. The master literally incorporates knowledge. At ninety something years of age, Liu Pai Lin was old, but not visibly decrepit: skin and muscles still firm, flexible tendons and articulations, well preserved teeth. A living and quick intelligence was visible in the shine in his eyes, and he was capable of working straight for hours and hours as a doctor or lecturer, apparently without exhausting himself. Part of his prestige derived from that which he constantly expresses in his body.

Thus, the body is an indication of achievement. This learning is inscribed in the body, and can be described in terms of a tactical episteme, poetically formulated by Michel Serres (2001). What we are may be defined by the marks engraved on the body, just like a tattoo: the action of time that imprints wrinkles, blemishes and scars on the skin, or in the case of Taoist practices, paradoxically, by the spontaneous reduction of deeper and more obvious marks; but also biographical memory as sensorial memory, the marks of experience on the senses, yet also on the corporal structure and its kinetic characteristics. We thus know the world like someone who perceives a texture, by the marks it imprints on our bodies; we know others' bodies by the marks the world imprinted on them. Body and soul, one's own and someone else's body, body and world find themselves mixed together, with no absolute borders to define where one begins and where the other ends.

Doing an ethnography of Taoism

By adopting a field methodology centered on the inter-subjective experience of both the natives and the ethnographer, I suffer the biographical consequences of the ethnography itself: there's no way of doing an ethnography of the body without feeling the effects of this ethnography on the skin. This means confronting not only the obligations springing from an academic lifestyle – measured in wrinkles, bags under the eyes, discreet gray hairs popping out precociously, muscle tension, poor sleep and tired eyes – but also the alterations produced in the body and the identity

of the ethnographer for immersing himself in the native's world, in this case, principally by the effects of "transportation" and the "transformation", coming from the training sessions.

A theme that Carvalho has already taken up (1993a), Anthropology is as much academic knowledge as a way of life, from whose constituting characteristics are derived hybrid subjects. Without reducing the discussion to autobiography or personal depositions, this ethnography exemplifies Jackson's affirmation (1989) in which a change of corporal or cultural habits is preceded by learning and practicing new techniques. In this case, the change of habits ended up as a side-effect of the ethnographical experience.

In some ways, this was fundamental in order to gain access to the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) of Taoism, since certain themes were only taken up by my interlocutors after I was able to formulate my questions based on my personal experience with the training sessions. Many different aspects lived in practice – especially sensations of altered psychosomatic states, understood in a native perspective as "manifestations of true energy" – are only commented on among practitioners.

In this context, an academic discussion on "extraordinary" experiences, lived by anthropologists in the field, is necessary (Bizerril, to be published; Goulet; Young, 1994; Stoller, 1989, 1997). These should be taken even more seriously precisely because they correspond to the "ordinary" experiences of the natives. The authors defend an experiential approach, focused on participation. This is especially true in Goulet e Young's analyses (1994), in which this kind of strategy presumes understanding the context of the performance and the inter-subjective construction of reality.

The ethnographer's experiences lived out in determined performatic frameworks, possessing an obvious and relatively consensual meaning among the natives, connotes that systematic participation involves learning verbal and non-verbal codes of communication. This delving into another's cultural reality induces experiences coherent to this reality (Goulet; Young, 1994). This is why participation may be thought of as an end in and of itself, since by utilizing his body in the same way and in the same environment as the natives, the ethnographer constructs a common inter-subjective territory, based on his understanding of the other's world in a field of practical activity consonant with the collective experience of the natives (Jackson, 1989).

In my ethnography, the hypothesis that I've proposed is that Taoism's conception is another kind of knowledge about the body. Thus, the effects of techniques of the body are derived from themselves, resulting in the adoption of certain postures and the practice of certain patterns of movement – generally slow, continuous and circular – followed by immobility, and not by expectation or self-suggestion, as in the classic model of symbolic effectiveness.

I'd like to underscore the importance of not giving into the temptation of reifying the dichotomy between ethnographer and native. Most of my natives are urban middle-class Brazilians, i.e., not so sociologically distant from the ethnographer, although not identical to him. Negating empathy, as formulated by Geertz (1998) doesn't serve this research, nor do several other ethnographic experiences common in Brazil and in the Third World in general (Bizerril, 2004).

On the other hand, the ethnographer's position is distinct from the apprentice's, in his cultural readings of Taoism, the objectives of these readings and living experiences or experiences gathered from hearsay. This is especially true regarding what Bakhtin (Morris, 1994) would call "implicit dialogue and polemic", that permeate the ethnographical narrative on Taoism – especially concerning theoretical discussion irrelevant for Taoists.

Breaking down Stoller's reflection (1997) on the role of the ethnographer by using his comparison with the *griot* from Western African societies, I think we should consider the ethnographer as a *performer*, when he practices participant observation, or, let's say, "observant participation", but also by applying more formal methods, such as the interview. The researcher's double inscription in the field, simultaneously from within and without, his liminal place by definition, presupposes specific usages of language and body, especially a specific and ambivalent sense of these uses, subject to misunderstandings on both sides: the natives, the ethnographer and the academic community of which the ethnographer is part.

Where the ways separate from the Way

For me, the ethnographer's position is a moment in the process of constructing knowledge. In order to trace a borderline between the ethnographer and the Taoists, I point towards questions of temporality, finality and narrative plausibility – there are two narratives, two performances, and at times these may overlap.

Unlike the Taoists, the ethnographer doesn't dispose of a sufficient amount of time to gain a mature comprehension of the Tao. Field research is limited by institutional and financial factors, but also by its own nature, because proximity is necessarily followed by distancing. When talking about the finality of the ethnographer's narrative, it's more plausible for the ethnographer to narrate Taoism than to narrate the Tao, described by Laozi ²⁰ as impossible to nominate or describe (*Daodejing*, poem 1) even though comprehensible through direct experience. In this context, the anthropological method is limited: there's a difference between describing a lifeworld from a visitor's point of view and exploring this world as its inhabitant.

However, by capitalizing on such differences, the dialogue between Taoism and Anthropology, or, more precisely, between particular versions of each, may be enriched thanks to a mutual "surplus of vision" (Bakhtin, 1992), i.e., by each side putting forth new and unusual questions to the other. Yet are these positions irreducible?

As regards questions concerning life and death, Taoism has a specific space in the contemporary world, by formulating a narrative founded on confidence and knowledge of the body and nature, instead of seeking control of an imperfect nature, as is characteristic of the hegemonic biomedical episteme. This involves a combination of respect for individual bodily differences – as would seem becoming in a more individualist (urban) social universe – and seeking harmony with the rhythm of the cosmos – being based on a notion of totality that includes subject, society and world. This narrative possesses its own paradoxes: 1) the ambivalence of nature, which generously donates to those who know its secrets, yet takes indifferently from those who don't; 2) the spontaneity obtained through an almost Spartan discipline, throughout years of regular daily training.

The Taoist worldview, at the same time non-essentialist (Izutsu, 1983) and embodied in every sense, describes a world endowed with incessant movement, expressed in the gestures of *Taiji Quan*, in the *Yijing* diagrams and in the words of the *Daodejing*, for example. The notion of change (*yi*), in the *Yijing* philosophy, resonates as a version of a world in a process of change, yet in the sense of occupying a different position, less pessimist and anxiety-causing than the lucid descriptions of contemporary theorists, such as Zygmunt Bauman (1998, 2003, 2004).

To a certain extent, the Taoists' "returning to the root" is a parallel way of existing in the contemporary world, a possible antidote to the frenetic rhythm of the metropolis, by proposing an anticompetitive rhythm in life, slower and less utilitarian. As such, narrating Taoism may be an opportunity to rescue cultural critique in Anthropology, once an important aspect of the discipline, as a modernist project, at the start of the Twentieth Century, as indicated by Clifford (1998).

The Taoist body presents itself as the opposite of the body-as-impediment or as an accessory to identity, described in detail by Le Breton (2003). Referring to the various hegemonic manifestations of constructing the post modern body, this author claims that anatomy has become an accessory, an emblem of the self, or an obstacle to its expression. If urban Brazil may be partially and marginally implied in the definition of the West, then the project formulated by Taoism (in terms of "integrating nature" or "returning to origins") constitutes itself as a living counter discourse, a different embodied project of personhood.

The problem here is formulating alternatives to the relationship between happiness and a healthy body, without recurring to biomedical technology, by machining the body through *bodybuilding*, or hiding the marks of time with cosmetics or surgery. At the same time, it is possible that embodied systems of constructing the self, such as *Yoga* or *Taiji Quan*, are successful in today's urban world not only because of the transnational networks of circulation of people and goods, nor because of the bankruptcy of modern promises of happiness through the market or science, but also because of their compatibility with the contemporary focus on corporal well-being, with the fear of illness and decrepitude, as well as an embodied sociability, which, according to Le Breton (2003), characterizes this moment in the history of Western societies.

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* A previous and longer version of this discussion may be found in Bizerril (to be published).

1 In the context of Taoism, the lineage may be understood as a genealogical chain used for transmitting tradition, characterized by temporal continuity, but not necessarily by spatial continuity.

2 Here I'm emphasizing a specific cultural conception of the body, to a wide measure compatible with traditional Chinese medicine. In this context, the body is not a mere biological "fact", but imbricated in a cosmological network, which connects the seasons, spatial directions, five colors and five energies (metal, water, wood, fire and earth). From a Taoist perspective, the body possesses a visible aspect – material – and an invisible aspect, constituted by the "Three Treasures": spirit (*shen*), energy (*qi*) and essence (*jing*).

3From whom Liu Pai Lin was a direct disciple, such as: Liao Kun, of the *Long Men* (Door of the Dragon) lineage, famous school of alchemy within the Northern Chinese tradition, or Liu

Beizhong, whom the sinologist Despeux (1994) mentions in his classic book on *Taiji Quan*.

4 The "path of return" refers to a reverse in the natural movement that leads to illness, decrepitude and death. From a Taoist perspective, the path that leads to preserving one's health and awakening spirituality passes through serenity. In Wu Jyh Cherng's, a Taoist monk of the Orthodox Unitarian Order, (Lao Tse, 2001) translation of the *Daodejing*, it is said: "Regressing to the root is called quietude/ Quietude is called return to living/ return to living is called constancy/ Understanding constancy is called enlightenment".

5 Barehand techniques and techniques using weapons, especially the sword, pertaining to *Taiji Quan* and *Bagua Zhang*. Here, I've given emphasis to the explicitly martial aspect of practice, which was never the most fundamental point, and has become even more secondary in the last few years, with the changing orientations of the master himself, who, as he got older, started emphasizing practices more oriented towards health and serenity.

6 *Jing zuo* ("sit in calmness"), but also meditation postures in which one stands up, such as the classic "posture of the universe" or "standing like a tree".

7 Generic term that refers to a vast repertoire of techniques whose objective is to captivate, concentrate, circulate and emit vital force (*qi*). In Master Liu Pai Lin's School, most techniques don't emphasize pulmonary respiration. This is why I haven't described *qigong* as breathing techniques so as to avoid misunderstandings.

8 In Liu Pai Lin's transmission, the main therapeutic technique is *Tui Na* massage, supplemented with herbal medicine. In his son Liu Chih Ming's case, however, acupuncture has precedence over massage.

9 I used, respectively, Veith (1972), Wu Jyh Cherng (Lao Tse, 2001) and Wilhelm's (1991) translations.

10 The repertoire to be chosen is vast: a) internal martial arts: *Taiji Quan* sequences of 37 and 108 movements, *Bagua Zhang* (eight palms, five elements, 64 palms), *Taiji* sword, *Bagua* sword (single – according to Liu Pai Lin – and double – according to Liu Chih Ming); b) gymnastics: exercises to make the nine folds more flexible, exercises to strengthen internal organs or *Ba dua jin* (the Eight Silk Cloths), the eight forms for stretching tendons; c) *qigong*: turtle respiration, 12 forms of *qigong* (according to Liu Pai Lin), 10 forms of *qigong* (simple and advanced forms, according to Liu Chih Ming), inner training of *Taiji* (or root breathing, pulsation of the five hearts); d) meditation "sit in calmness" (diverse techniques of varying degrees of complexity); e) self massage, etc., etc., etc.

11 Just like the pre and post natal configurations of the *Bagua*, the *Luoshu* and *Hotu* diagrams, which come from the *Yijing* (Book of Changes), among others...

12 In the general universe of Chinese martial arts, and particularly in *Taiji Quan*, style has a much ampler meaning. It's a synonym for a school with specific techniques, which function as distinctive signs. As such, for example, there are four *Taiji* styles known worldwide: Chen, Yang, Wu e Sun. The *Taiji* Pai Lin seems to be a variation of the Yang style, in its patterns, the names of its movements and by the logical sequence of its movements.

13 In this recording from the 1980's, the master, himself, is present (in the first scenes) as well as L. L., one of his first disciples and collaborators. L.L. currently runs another institution, responsible for publicizing *Liangong* on a national level. More recently, A., who lives in Santos, the first Brazilian disciple of the master, produced a new instructional video about the same sequence and some basic exercises.

14 Produced in the 1990's, starring Liu Chih Ming, with the collaboration of L. L. Another video on the sword is currently being produced with the participation of R. F., disciple of masters Liu Pai Lin and Liu Chih Ming, which received an award in the world kung Fu tournament, with a presentation of the sword.

15 Produced, edited and distributed (only for practitioners) by E. R., who produced the Brasília video, which documents the master's training courses in Unipaz.

16 Description based on the corresponding notes in my field notebook.

17 Described in a succinct way, this is a *qigong* technique done standing, which consists in suspending and relaxing the *Tai Yuan* (spherical region approximately 10 cm, located four fingers below and behind the belly button), accompanied by the pulsation of the palms of the hands and feet. From a Taoist point of view, the main objective of this practice is restoring full vitality by absorbing energy from the Earth.

18 It's worth remembering that traditional Chinese medicine is functional and not anatomical-physiological medicine. Thus, "kidneys" aren't only internal organs meaning a physical structure, but their functions, relations with other organs in the body – in this case, bones – and their association to one of the five energies, water, associated to the essence (*jing*).

19 See note 16.

20 Spelt according to the *pinyin* transliteration of Chinese terms, the same as Lao Tzu or Lao Tse.