Asian Religions
Praise for *Asian Religions: A Cultural Perspective*

“This book is a unique introduction to Asian religions, in that it combines the scholarly rigor of an established historian of Asian religions with the willingness to engage empathetically with the traditions and to suggest that readers do the same. Its focus is on the traditions in the modern world and their spiritual and experiential dimensions. It takes seriously the possibility that Asian religions, understood in their own contexts (not as mere screens on which to project Western needs and desires), can offer viable options to those in other cultures who may be seeking for meaning beyond the traditions into which they were born.”

*Joseph A. Adler, Kenyon College*

“Randall L. Nadeau has accomplished what only a few have tried, but which has been much needed in the study of religions. He has written a genuinely novel approach to the religions of Asia. The goal of the book is not primarily historical or phenomenological – the volume is designed to stimulate self-reflection and personal engagement to the “wired generation” reader, who wants to find out what kinds of spiritual resources are meaningful for them. The approach is more cultural than theological; practical than abstract; behavioral than conceptual; embedded than distinctive. This is a work that should find its way into Asian humanities, history, religion, and civilization courses.”

*Ronnie Littlejohn, Belmont University*
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I am sitting in a second-story coffee shop, one franchise of thousands around the world. The shop overlooks a busy intersection in central Taipei, a steady stream of busses, private cars and taxis, motorcycles and bicycles passing beneath me, skirting the construction of a new trunk line of Taipei’s ultra-modern rapid transit system. Customers around me are scanning the internet via Wi-Fi, and I see open social network pages in both Chinese and English. Students chat excitedly about their school friends, young men and women relax at the end of a hectic day, and small groups engage in earnest debate about the recent elections.

I have just come from a study session of the Whole Earth Society, one of hundreds of syncretistic groups dedicated to the “dual cultivation” of body and spirit. These groups promote a holistic conception of physical and spiritual well-being that integrates traditional religious teachings with new expressions of human flourishing. Taipei, like many Asian cities, faces challenges to traditional values and lifestyles alongside new opportunities for self-expression and personal growth. In East Asia, education levels are expanding (college enrollments are approaching 90 percent of students of college age), young people are delaying marriage to age 30 and beyond (and the ratio of women choosing not to marry at all is at its highest level in history), and childbirth rates are far below the level of sustainability (Japan’s population is expected to fall by two thirds in the next 20–30 years). These changes have brought about a new focus on self-actualization and personal enrichment, as traditional values of marriage and family are replaced by a search for purpose and meaning that is often at odds with conventional expectations. This is true of every modernizing Asian city – from Seoul and Tokyo to Beijing, Shanghai, and Hong Kong and on to Bangkok, Delhi, and Colombo. The thirst for spiritual self-cultivation, satisfied by groups like the Whole Earth Society, is a pan-Asian phenomenon.

The Whole Earth Society sponsors lectures on world religions, teaches techniques of meditation and physical exercise (massage, yoga, and deep breathing),
and offers courses on healthy eating and traditional arts and crafts. At the same time these traditional pursuits are adapted to modern needs and interests, responding directly to the hectic lifestyles of modern urbanites, the single status of most of its members, and modern technologies of communication and entertainment. Today’s syncretistic religious organizations succeed only to the extent that they are able to marry traditional principles and practices with the individualist values of working young people in the modern world.

The aim of this book is not to describe the Whole Earth Society and similar groups across Asia, but rather to follow their lead in recognizing both the lasting viability and the remarkable adaptability of Asian religions in the modern world. The Whole Earth Society is in some ways representative of a much wider phenomenon: a newly enlivened, global thirst for meaning and purpose. The integration of nature, self, and cosmos has been the goal of Asian religious traditions for centuries, and their practices and insights are rapidly becoming universal in themselves, as cultural globalization has come to include Europeans and Americans (not to mention educated urbanites in other parts of the world) among adherents of Hinduism, Buddhism, and East Asian religious traditions. What is inspiring about the Whole Earth Society (as one representative example) is its ability to respond directly to the interests and aspirations of increasingly cosmopolitan populations, whose members see themselves not just as citizens of Taipei, or Taiwan, or China, or Asia, but as citizens of the world. In this respect they are no different from their Euro-American analogues (the young urban professionals of the “wired generation”), forming a generational cohort that shares an increasingly overlapping set of needs and aspirations. What are these common needs and aspirations? And how are they shared across cultures? Perhaps they are best expressed by a set of common questions:

- No longer satisfied by the unselfconscious religious practices of my parents and grandparents, what kind of spiritual resources are most meaningful to me?
- As I am less interested (for the time being at least) in the traditional religious focus on family responsibilities and domestic life, how can my religious practice inspire me as an individual?
- Busy as I am with my education and career, I do not want to “live to work” but rather to “work to live,” inspired by new experiences and new perspectives – but what kind of life do I want to lead?
- Unwilling to limit myself to a single defining identity (son, student, investor, mother, laborer, engineer, artist, citizen), I seek to develop a multifaceted, protean self – but how can I guide this process in an integrative way, and how can spiritual insight aid me in this process of self-defining and self-becoming?
• Pulled in multiple directions by school, work, family, and society, how can I maintain a coherent sense of self, where the various dimensions of my identity can inspire and complete one another?

• What is my role as an individual vis-à-vis a wider community – a role not limited to my family or country but extending to the world as a whole? What does my spiritual understanding of myself and my spiritual work, both mental and physical, contribute to my sense of global citizenship? Though my interests are intensely personal, I recognize that they are shared with my cohort, which includes not just the citizens of Taipei (or London or New York), but the citizens of every country and the adherents of every religion.

In reading through these questions, you may have picked up on their individualistic emphasis. While “individualism” is a modern Western phenomenon (with its own history and cultural contingency), it is increasingly the driving motivation and self-conception of educated persons around the world. It is no longer accurate to describe individualism as exclusively Western or to generalize an individualist West in contrast to a collectivist East. Indeed the thesis of Western individualism in contrast to Eastern collectivism is an overstated generalization, even when applied to traditional culture. And this is all the more true today, when the individualist tendency is as pronounced in Asia as it is in the West. This is partly a function of globalization and Western “influence,” but even more of the modern development of societies around the world, as they become more diverse and decentralized, and of economic trends that favor creativity, mobility, and adaptability. More and more, the scope of cultural self-expression (including spiritual self-cultivation) is focused on the individual, interacting with natural, social, and global environments.

So this book is directed primarily to individuals. Its goal is to stimulate self-reflection and personal engagement. It is my hope and expectation, as author, that the reader will ask, and ask repeatedly: “What does this mean to me? How does this resonate with my own experience and understanding? How might I be able to apply this insight or practice to my own life?” In teaching courses on Asian religions to students in Texas, USA, I urge my students to think of their education as an exercise (“exercise” means application and action, not just passive learning) in what I call “sympathetic imagination” – imagining oneself sympathetically or empathically as “believing” and “doing” what “other people” in “other religions” believe and do. Only in this way can they begin to understand others (the practicality of which should be obvious in today’s interpenetrating world) and only in this way can they begin to appreciate the power and potential of Asian religions in their own lives. Sympathetic imagination often leads to creative adaptation – going far beyond passive understanding.
I have taught a course on Asian Religions for 20 years at Trinity University, a liberal arts college with selected pre-professional programs in San Antonio, Texas. I have emphasized both humanistic and more “practical” benefits of the study of religion – including self-reflection, appreciation of human diversity, and cultural understanding, as well as in the service of international trade, government diplomacy, and global citizenry. This orientation – with head in the clouds and feet on the ground – is one that I have learned to embrace, and it has forced me to examine the role of religion in culture more deeply than a purely humanistic approach alone would permit. Religion is embedded in the economic, political, and social dimensions of human cultures. It shapes and is shaped by worldly pursuits. This is the basic orientation of this book.

I am indebted to Trinity University for granting me an administrative leave in spring 2012, after seven years as chair of the Department of Religion, affording me the time to devote to this project. During that semester I was in residence in the Department of History at National Chengkung University in Tainan, Taiwan, Republic of China, and I am indebted to the former and current chairs, Professors Cheng Wing-sheung and Chen Heng-an, for their hospitality. I also benefitted from conversations with Professor Tsai Yen-zen of the Institute of Comparative Religions at Chengchi University in Taipei on the category of “religion” as a means of comparative cultural analysis and understanding. Finally, I wish to express my special appreciation to Tang Ming-jer, president of Tunghai University, for his commitment to holistic education and interdisciplinary research in the humanities and in natural and social sciences.

I am grateful to Mackenzie Brown, Bradley Kayser, Fernando Triana, and to friends new and old for inspiring me to write a book that would be interesting not only to scholars or students, but to a general audience of interested readers: I have tried to address you as my conversation partners in writing this book. I am indebted to my anonymous readers and to Rebecca Harkin, General Editor of Religion at Wiley Blackwell, for helping me to sharpen the language and to address errors and infelicitous phrasing in early drafts; whatever errors or misleading generalizations might remain are my responsibility. And I am forever grateful to my wife and my children for their understanding and support through the transition rites, both painful and immensely satisfying, of high school and college graduations, and bold steps forward in life. Thank you, Ruth, Miranda, and Adrian. You have all inspired me to take risks, to find joy in others, and to find self in family. It is to you that I dedicate this book.