

# **Transfiguration, Spirituality and Embodiment: Perspectives from Christian and Daoist Scriptures**

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## **Abstract**

This paper aims to contribute to the symposium's discussion of the concept of attaining a unity between human beings and heaven. It will do so by critically examining ideas related to Divinisation in Daoism and Christianity, and aim towards establishing a framework for comparing these religious philosophies. In particular the paper will focus on the concept of transfiguration in the Christian tradition, in which religious figures attain a divine appearance as they undergo religious transformation. This concept will be contrasted with Daoist ideas of visualization 存神 in which adepts transform their bodies through the visualization of a unity between their inner bodies and gods.

Key Words : Divinisation, transfiguration, Daoism, Christianity, unity of humans and heaven

**變容、靈性與化身：  
基督宗教和道家經典的觀點**  
**Transfiguration, Spirituality and Embodiment:  
Perspectives from Christian and Daoist Scriptures**

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**摘要**

這篇論文旨在論述研討會關於天人合一的概念的討論。它將批判性地檢視和道家和基督宗教的「神化」有關的各種觀念，並且嘗試建立用以比較這些宗教哲學的框架。它特別著眼於基督宗教傳統裡的「變容」概念，也就是宗教人物在經歷宗教轉化時的顯聖。這個概念會用以和道家的「存神」對比，修道之人藉由內在身體各部位和神真合一的存神而轉化其身體。

關鍵詞：神化、變容、道家、基督宗教、天人合一。

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## 1. Christian and Jewish Traditions

Transfiguration denotes a visible transformation in the physical appearance of a religious practitioner. It is a term that, in the West, is most clearly associated with the story of Jesus that appears in the synoptic gospels (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9: 2-8; Luke 9:28-36; see also 2 Peter 1:16-18). In this story, Jesus led his disciples Peter, James and John up a high mountain. There Jesus underwent a physical metamorphosis in which his “face shone like the sun and his clothes became white as light” (Matt 17:2). The full episode is as follows:

1 And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2 And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light. 3 And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. 4 And Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good that we are here. If you wish, I will make three tents here, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah.” 5 He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.” 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell on their faces and were terrified. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, “Rise, and have no fear.” 8 And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only.

(Matt 17:1-8 ESV)

This is a familiar episode in the life of Jesus, and has received widespread interpretation and treatment by Christian theologians, liturgists and artists. The feast of the transfiguration is celebrated in Catholic churches on August 6th every year, a date fixed by Pope Callixus III in 1456 to celebrate the news that the Kingdom of Hungary had repulsed the Ottoman invasion of the Balkans by breaking the siege of Belgrade. It also ranks as one of the Orthodox Church's twelve Great Feasts.

The most important theme that we can discern in the interpretation of the transfiguration is that it marks a key moment of transition. It is not a full or final revelation, or the end point of a

spiritual journey, but a transformative moment in which a fragment of divine truth is disclosed. The fragmentary or transitional nature of transfiguration can be seen in five ways.

The first is the physical location of the episode. Jesus has led his disciples up a high mountain, (thought originally to be Mount Tabor). The mountain location marks a halfway point between the ordinary, earthly world and the heavenly or divine world, and a halfway point in the story of Jesus who at the end of the gospel narratives will ascend fully into the heavens and completely disappear from view behind the clouds. In the story of the transfiguration, however, the cloud, representing the presence of God, does not swallow Jesus up, but hides the thunderous voice of God who declares Jesus to be his son.

This then points to the second transitory or transitional nature of this story, in which knowledge about Jesus is partially revealed, but the disciples are still not fully aware of who exactly Jesus is, or what it means that Jesus is God's son. The message from God that Jesus is his son does not fill them with hope or wonder but rather fear, and they fall on their face in terror. In this way, the transfiguration is a moment of revelation in which an element of truth about Jesus is disclosed, but it seems as though the disciples cannot fully comprehend this. Moreover, they are instructed not to disclose this information further. There is an element of secrecy and mystery that accompanies this episode in Jesus's life. He is not surrounded by crowds, or preaching a clear and simple message of love to the masses. Rather this is an episode that occurs away from the clouds, in a remote location, with only three witnesses. The transfiguration is certainly a moment of revelation, but it is not a clear, direct or full revelation. It is mysterious, frightening, partial and secretive.

This theme of uncertainty or part revelation and part secrecy is also evident in the disciples' vision of Elijah and Moses. Here the narrative emphasizes two points: the first is that Peter is so convinced of their physical natures that he feels obliged to offer to erect tents for Jesus, Elijah and Moses. The function of a tent is principally to provide shelter from the elements. In offering Moses and Elijah tents, Peter is demonstrating that he regards these historical, deceased figures as possessing the same kind of physical reality as his teacher Jesus. This apparent conviction of their physical reality is then contrasted sharply with the final statement that when the disciples eventually got up off the ground, they opened their eyes and saw no-one but Jesus. In this way the transfiguration narrative brings into convincing physical reality two dead figures, but only for a short period of time. It is not that these figures are ghostly forms that somehow exist permanently as disembodied entities, but rather they seem to be real physical beings but who exist only temporarily.

The fourth aspect of transfiguration concerns the physical transformation of Jesus while on the mountain. The transformation has two elements to it: the first is that of Jesus's face which "shone like the sun;" the second is that of his clothing which became "as white as light."

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.

(Matt 17:2 ESV)

καὶ μετεμορφώθη ἔμπροσθεν αὐτῶν, καὶ ἔλαμψεν τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ ὡς ὁ ἥλιος, τὰ δὲ ἱμάτια αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο λευκὰ ὡς τὸ φῶς.

(Matt 17:2 Nestle GNT 1904)

在他們面前，耶穌變了形像，臉面光耀如日，衣服潔白如光。

(Matt 17:2 CSBT)

These similes denote first of all a transformation of colour, in this case a yellow sun and a white light. Secondly they are transformations of intensity: the face is shining or blazing like a fierce sun; the “white as light” simile similarly indicates a purity of colour, no doubt in contrast to the dusty and dirty garments that the disciples are wearing, having climbed up a high mountain. At any rate, the key transition that the text relates, is in the physical colour and appearance of Jesus’s face and his clothing. Although the text does not explicitly state that Jesus’s physical transformation is a temporary one, it is reasonable to assume that since the story makes no subsequent mention of Jesus’s transformed appearance, this transformation is something that occurred while on the mountain and then faded away.

This physical transformation thus discloses a moment in the overall narrative of the Jesus story that aims theologically at the full revelation of Jesus as both divine and human. In John’s account of Jesus’s post-mortem life, the narrator is at pains to show that Jesus is neither a ghost (a non-corporeal persona) nor a zombie (an impersonal reanimated corpse) but rather has truly hybrid body that is both human and divine, physical and immortal (John 20:24-29). In the story of the transfiguration this hybridity is partially revealed through Jesus’s temporary change in appearance, and prefigures the full disclosure of his divinity in the story of his resurrection from the dead and his ascension into heaven. The story of the transfiguration can thus be seen as a partial, temporary disclosure of Jesus’s hybrid nature.

An important point made by recent commentators is that the act of transfiguration is not something that happens to Jesus in isolation. It is something that is witnessed and reported by the disciples, and takes place in the mysterious presence of Moses and Elijah. The transfiguration thus deliberately implicates Jesus in the community of the Hebrew scriptures, and contrasts Jesus’s appearance with those of his disciples. Dorothy Lee writes: “In the end, it is as much about [the disciples’] transfiguration, the luminous glory shining in the ordinariness of their flesh, as it is about Jesus’ transformation” (Lee 2004: 2; quoted in Howie 2013: 161). Cary Howie goes on to say, “To be transfigured is to implicate others in your own transfiguration” (2013: 161). But inasmuch as the transfiguration is in some sense a social transformation, it is also a disclosure of power and assertion of authority. In the transfiguration, Jesus associates with the great leaders of the Hebrew bible, Moses and Elijah, thereby acquiring their power and status, in contrast to the cowering and fearful disciples. (This hierarchy is most clearly depicted in Raphael’s painting of the Transfiguration, 1516-1520).



The story of the transfiguration is thus not simply a story about the disclosure of Jesus's hybrid nature, but is also an act of religious politics in which Jesus is placed within the lineage of Moses and Elijah, the great patriarch and prophet of the Israelite religion. Relevant here is the transfiguration that occurs to Moses when he climbs Mount Sinai to receive the ten commandment from God. In this story, one result of his encounter is that "the skin of his face shone" though he is unaware of this himself. The narrator gives the reason for this as "because he had been talking with God" (Ex 34:29). The full story is as follows:

29 When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. 30 Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. 31 But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. 32 Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. 33 And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. 34 Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, 35 the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

(Exodus 34:29-35 ESV)

Like the transfiguration of Jesus, Moses climbs a mountain, encounters the voice of God, and when he descends, everyone notices that his skin is transformed.

Although Elijah does not experience a transfiguration of the same nature as Moses and Jesus, he is clearly associated with mountain gods: he defeats the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18:38) after which he slaughters all 450 of them; he then summons rain from the top of the same mountain; and in the next story he goes to live in a cave for forty days on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8) after which he experiences God in a whirlwind, a fire and then as a "low whisper" (1 Kings 19:12). There is no mention in this stories of a direct transfiguration of Elijah's appearance while on the mountains, but clearly Elijah is associated with the power of the mountain God, imaged as thunder, fire, and slaughter. The Elijah narrative culminates with his ascension into heaven in a whirlwind, accompanied by chariots and horses of fire (2 Kings 2:11).

In all three stories, therefore, we can see various elements of a tradition of transfiguration narratives involving encounters with a mountain God, and the experience of sound, thunder, fire, light. In the case of Moses and Jesus this results in a temporary transformation in their personal appearance. In the case of Elijah this results in the transformation of nature, bringing about rain,

wind and fire. In all three cases, transfiguration is associated with ascension, authority and the appropriation of divine power.

Elements of this tradition continued to be incorporated into Christian religious narratives. In the Acts of the Apostles, when Stephen is arrested and brought before the council, the narrator notes, “And gazing at him, all who sat in the council saw that his face was like that of an angel.” Just before he is stoned to death, he gazes up at the heavens and receives a vision of “the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.” Again, there is a glimpse here of a tradition in which the encounter with God provokes some transformation in appearance. Just as the transfiguration of Jesus prefigures his eventual death, resurrection and ascension, so also in this case, the transfiguration of Stephen “with a face like an angel” prefigures his fuller vision of God in the heavens, and his eventual gruesome martyrdom.

The tradition of transfiguration also continued in the material culture of Christianity as it emerged in the classical Mediterranean. According to Brownstein (2001) “images of the transfiguration were among the most common that were used to decorate reliquaries, vessels that contained body parts that joined the spiritual and the physical worlds.” In this tradition, the physical remains of saints are placed in reliquaries, decorated with images of the transfiguration, and are objects of veneration among Christians. Again, the transfiguration denotes a religious hybridity in which death and life, the material and the spiritual are fused together.

## 2. Daoist Perspectives on Transfiguration

While it might be thought that Daoism operates from a fundamentally different general cosmology than Western traditions, I would like to approach Daoism in the same way that I have approached Christianity above, namely from the perspective of the stories of transformation and transfiguration that occur within it. In this regard, the Daoist tradition is probably far richer than Christianity in providing accounts of the material transfiguration of religious practitioners. Whereas, for the Biblical tradition, such accounts are reserved for a tiny number of the very highest prophets, patriarchs and martyrs, the Daoist tradition produced a wealth of such stories as part of the everyday reality of religious life. One reason for this is the focus on the body in Daoist religious practice: given that so many of its practices are related to and allied with a wide variety of Chinese somatic disciplines and longevity traditions, it is not surprising that the product of Daoist religious practice should be manifest in the transformation of the physical body of the adept. A second reason is perhaps the reluctance on the part of Christian and monotheistic traditions to ascribe attributes of divinity to human beings. Although monotheistic traditions can never completely eliminate the tendency of religious narrators to describe their subjects in extraordinary or supernatural terms, the number of people of whom such terms may be predicated without compromising the singular divinity of God is understandably small.

Benjamin Penny (2000) notes seven major collections of hagiographic texts that describe the transformations in the lives of Daoist practitioners as they aim toward the attainment of immortality or transcendence. The largest of these is the *Lishi zhenxian tidao tongjian* (*Comprehensive Mirror through the Ages of Perfected Immortals and Those Who Embody the Tao*, CT 296, 53 j.), by Zhao Daoyi (fl. 1294–1307), which contains some 900 biographies (see Boltz 1987: 56). Penny’s analysis of the hagiographic literature reveals five major categories of

transformative powers that may be attained by the Daoist immortal. The first is the general ability to transform things in the natural world. Commonly this involves food and wine, “either feeding many people from a single serving or making food and wine from inedible objects” (Penny 2000). Penny goes on to note that this basic ability to transform things also extends to the adept’s body, conferring the ability to disappear into the surroundings, or to multiply one’s form and occupy several locations at the same time. This leads to Penny’s second category, which is most akin to the Biblical concept of transfiguration, namely the attainment of an “extraordinary body.” Penny writes (2001):

The signs of aging have been expunged from them; they have black hair, all their teeth (including some regrown) and youthful complexions. In addition, immortals often appear to have extraordinary abilities. They can walk great distances in a day, run at great speeds, possess great strength and are impervious to extreme temperatures (see Robinet 1986). Like the perfected in the Zhuangzi, they can “enter water without getting wet and fire without getting burnt”—an almost proverbial statement in the texts. Some can enter walls or dive into the earth; others know how to fly or levitate. Some may have auras above their heads; others yet again show signs of wondrous, even freakish, physiognomy (see Kohn 1996).

Given that the focus of these practitioners’ religious quest is the attainment of immortality, it is not surprising that this should entail some transformation within the body of the practitioner. It is within this broad category of somatic transformation that I would like to relay some of the findings of my 2008 study of one particular hagiography, that of Perfected Purple Yang (*Ziyang zhenren* 紫阳真人). This hagiography, prized with the Highest Clarity (*Shangqing* 上清) tradition of Daoism, narrates the quest of Zhou Ziyang 周紫阳 to attain the rank of a perfected immortal (*zhenren* 真人). He does so by embarking on a journey through China’s mountains to seek guidance from teachers and, crucially, to obtain a vision of increasingly powerful immortal gods who will guide him in his quest. The mode of spiritual practice advocated in this text is that of visualization (*cun* 存) in which the adept closes his eyes and visualizes an encounter with the god that takes place within his own body, with the consequence that it is gradually transformed into an immortal body. Like the Biblical story of the transfiguration, the text is replete with imagery of light, sunshine and visualization.

An early clue to this can be found at the beginning of the story in which Zhou Ziyang meets his first teacher Huang Tai. The text notes:

Each time that Lord Zhou had heard of methods of immortals, he had been told that immortals’ pupils were square; though Huang Tai’s external appearance was threadbare, his eyes were square and his face bright. (Trans. Miller 2008: 114)

The description of a bright or shining face (*mianguang* 面光) is similar here to the description of the transfigured Jesus in the Chinese translation of the Bible: “臉面光耀如日” (Matt 17:2 CBST). It is fairly easy to suggest that that bright or shining faces like that of Moses, Jesus or Huang Tai, function as cross-cultural marks of some kind of spiritual transformation. To put it another way, the tradition of transfiguration narratives suggests that spiritual transformation is not something that is solely discernible in interior, spiritual or ethical attitudes, but rather in the outward appearance of the practitioner.

As Zhou continues his religious quest he attains a second transfiguration which closely mirror's Penny's second category of transformation, namely the attainment of superhuman powers. The text notes:

Within five years he could see beyond a thousand *li*, his body became so light that he could [jump] over ten *zhang* and walk five hundred *li* per day. He could make himself visible or invisible, present when seated and disappeared when standing. (Trans. Miller 2008: 130)

Of importance here is that the superhuman powers are described as the product of a transformation of Zhou's body. It is not that he develops immense muscles or magical abilities so much as his body attains a remarkably subtlety and lightness. Since his frame is so insubstantial, he can move with amazing speed, and seem to appear and disappear at will. This story should be read not as the magical manipulation of nature, but rather as a second mark of transfiguration, that of attaining a remarkably light or ethereal nature. Reading back through the lens of the inner alchemy tradition that emerged several centuries later in Chinese tradition we can say that Zhou's practice entailed the refining of the coarse material force or vital energy (*qi*) of his body into more subtle, light, and spiritual forms.

The third mark of transfiguration that is recounted in Zhou's hagiography occurs after taking a herbal medicine designed to kill the three death-bringing worms inside the body. The text recounts: “He swallowed the *shu*-herbs for five years and his body produced a glossy sheen so that it was possible to see right through to his five organs.” Again this echoes other transfiguration narratives in emphasizing light and radiance. His flesh becomes glossy and translucent so that it is possible to see into the interior of his body, to the system of organs and vital energy that pervade the subtle body of the adept, but which are ordinarily obscured by the thick, dull flesh of ordinary mortals.

Zhou then proceeds on a religious quest through China's sacred mountains with the goal of obtaining a vision of the Three Prime Lords 三元君. When finally he achieves a vision of the Three Lords, it comes as no surprise that they are described as fully transfigured beings: “Lord Wuying was dressed in a brocade of gold essence and a rich damask gown in vermilion and blue, [like] the red sun shining through the dawn clouds and dazzling the sky” 光赤朝霞，流景曜天 (Trans. Miller 2008: 146). Images of radiance, sunlight and dazzling colours again mark out Lord Wuying, one of the three Prime Lords, as a thoroughly transfigured being. The three lords then provide Zhou with further religious instruction, and eleven years later, the story relates that Zhou

“rode through the clouds on a dragon-pulled chariot and ascended to heaven in broad daylight” (Miller 2008: 150). The moments of transfiguration thus prefigure an eventual ascension, like Elijah and Jesus, through the clouds into the heavens.

Both Biblical and Daoist narratives bear witness to what I have called a tradition of transfiguration, in which spiritual transformation is revealed through the appearance of the religious practitioner. In the Biblical tradition this occurs in the context of encounters with God, especially on mountains, in which the change in physical appearance appears to be a reflection of the proximity of the practitioner to divine power. In the case of Jesus this transformation prefigures his final apotheosis and ascension into heaven. In the case of Zhou Ziyang, his spiritual life is marked by moments of physical transfiguration that culminate in his vision of three resplendent immortal beings who pave the way for his final ascension into heaven in a dragon-pulled chariot.

### 3. Towards a Comparative Theology of Transfiguration

In the third part of my paper I would like to consider some of the implications of these narratives of transfiguration for contemporary spirituality and for our understanding of subjectivity. I would like to set this consideration against the general power of Cartesian dualism in framing modernity as the hierarchical demarcation of the visible material world from the invisible, spiritual world. Along with this ontology goes the notion that subjectivity is bound up in abstract concepts such as human rights, freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, etc. In this regard what is essential about liberal human subjectivity is its mentality rather than its corporeality. To put it the other way round, corporeality is not essential to subjectivity. As Kathryn Hayles (1999: 5) notes, “Identified with the rational mind, the liberal subject *possessed* a body but was not usually represented as *being* a body. Only because the body is not identified with the self is it possible to claim for the liberal subject its notorious universality, a claim that depends on erasing markers of bodily difference, including sex, race, and ethnicity.” Hayles’s intention is to critically assess how it was possible for cybernetic posthumanism to posit that subjectivity could be predicated of data and information separate from materiality and bodies, a notion imaged by William Gibson in his novel *Neuromancer* as “data made flesh” (qtd. in Hayles 1999:5). In the wake of Hayles’s work, posthuman philosophy has sought to reinscribe posthumanism within the body, to understand and imagine how consciousness and identity are distributed within and among bodies, and to grasp how information and data as concepts that are predicated on the systems that make them possible, rather than wholly abstract entities.

In same way that Hayles and others have sought to put data back into the flesh, not with the goal of reasserting liberal notions of subjectivity and agency, I would like to consider transfiguration narratives as a way in to reassert a hybrid subjectivity that is irreducibly construed of both materiality and spirituality. The important question first of all is the metaphysical relationship between spirituality and materiality, and secondly the ethical ramifications of such a metaphysics. I would like here to make a theological argument in favour of a notion of subjectivity in which spirit and body are mutually constitutive of each other within a paradigm of transformation and growth. By this I mean that our materiality in part constitutes human subjectivity and our spirituality: there is no essential self that somehow transcends human

materiality. This point is well taken in orthodox Christian theology. The notion that Jesus's fleshly nature was simply a phenomenal manifestation of his divinity, that he merely appeared to be born, suffer and die, was widely condemned by the early church as the heresy of docetism. Instead, orthodox Christian theology generally regards Jesus's physical travails and his execution as being essential elements of his divinity. In this way the somatic transformations that Jesus underwent in the transfiguration, and, more significantly, his suffering, death and resurrection were necessary for the full revelation of his divine nature.

Whereas the Christian tradition emphasizes physical suffering in the material transformation of Jesus, the Daoist tradition as recorded in Zhou Ziyang's biography seems emphasize more life-affirming or life-enhancing transformations in the human body as constituting the possibility of the ultimate transformation of the human subject. At the same time, both traditions indicate the tension between the spiritual transformation of the individual and social norms. That is to say, social normativity does not reside in or prescribe an abstract concept of individuality, but rather is predicated upon normative ideas of the physical body. As a consequence, the religious practitioner who engages in transfigurative spiritual practice necessarily creates social tension precisely because of the material transformation of the body. This is simply to make Foucault's point that social norms have the function of regulating physical bodies as much as mental ideas, and that it is through the disciplining of bodies that societies regulate normative ideologies.

In the Jesus story, the transfiguration produces terror among his disciples and he instructs them to speak to no-one of what they have seen (Mark 9:9). Similarly, following his resurrection the women to whom he first appeared "fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8). When bodies are transfigured, transformed, reanimated or resurrected, they differ radically from socially normative bodies, becoming in effect "terrorist" bodies that provoke widespread social anxiety.

In the story of Zhou Ziyang, the transfiguration of Zhou's body also produces social alienation. Early in Zhou's life, the text notes that he regularly got up early in the morning to absorb the dawn *qi*. The text says.

His father considered this strange and asked him what kind of activity he practiced. Lord Zhou remained kneeling for a long time, then replied: "I, Yishan, deep in my heart love the splendor of the sunlight and its eternal radiance. This is the only reason why I worship it. (Miller 2008: 111)

The point here is that Zhou's spiritual practice involved engaging in a disciplinary program in which he kneeled before the sun at dawn and engaged in the absorption of solar *qi*. From the father's perspective this practice or bodily habit was not something was not socially normative. In the narrative this first produces the sense that Zhou's spiritual life is going to take him away from conventional society. I would like to argue that it is not his ideas, his theology or any sense of disembodied spirituality that marks out his social difference, but his performance of socially abnormal physical disciplines.

This narrative continues this theme of social alienation when Zhou refuses to meet an important official who visits his father's house. Finally his father forces him to greet the visitor, but Zhou refuses again to engage him in conversation (Miller 2008: 60). In interpreting this story, it is important to note that the greeting of a visitor is a social activity that not only involves the communication of ideas, but involves ritual, gesture and the performance of ritual movements of the body. Whereas Zhou is perfectly content to kneel before the sun and absorb its qi, he is unwilling to perform the rituals of greeting a distinguished visitor. Again this is an issue of how spiritual practice necessarily involves physical gestures and material transformations of the body. In this case Zhou's activities, his habits of the body, are socially awkward, precisely because social normativity requires conformity to certain bodily gestures and practices. The ritual disciplining of the body and the transfiguration of the flesh that occur in spiritual practice are somatic processes that have social and political consequences.

#### 4. Disfigured, Transgendered and Transfigured Bodies

The notion that spiritual practice invokes physical transfiguration and thereby social meaning has important consequences for how we think about human bodies and their relation to human rights and what we regard as essentially human. In the final section of the essay I would like to offer some brief reflections as regards the implications of this spirituality of transfiguration for issues of disability and transgender identity.

The first point is to recognize that stories of transfiguration image human bodies as susceptible to physical transformation in ways that invite social hostility. Stories of transfiguration are thus about the nexus of relationships between the spiritual, the somatic and the social. The transfigurations of the body are both spiritual transformations and also provoke transformation in social relations. The Daoist tradition anticipates this in the stories of disability and other physical transformations that occur in the *Zhuangzi*. Perhaps one of the most famous examples of this is in the story in the of Master Yu, who in his old age, became so hunched over that his abdomen was higher than his head.

“Do you resent it?” asked Master Si.

“Why no, what would I resent? If the process continues, perhaps in time he'll transform my left arm into a rooster. In that case I'll keep watch on the night. Or perhaps in time he'll transform my right arm into a crossbow pellet and I'll shoot down an owl for roasting. Or perhaps in time he'll transform my buttocks into cartwheels. Then, with my spirit for a horse, I'll climb up and go for a ride. What need will I ever have for a carriage again?”

(Trans. adapted from Watson 1996: 80)

The point that I would like to make about this story is first of all the recognition that transformation is something that occurs first and foremost within the physical world. For the Daoist then, the pattern for the ultimate spiritual transformation of the self, is the Dao itself which

does not exist in some eternal or nonmaterial realm but rather undergirds the processes of change and transformation which exist in the natural, material world. Secondly, the narrator is here attempting to point out two possible responses to material transformation: the first and, according to the narrator, false choice is to resent the transformations of the body. The cause for resentment lies in positing an idea of the self that can somehow exist independent of the materiality of the flesh. Rather, the story indicates, it is the materiality of the flesh, and therefore its susceptibility to change and transformation that constitutes the possibility of having a self at all. There is, the story suggests, no ultimate self beyond the transforming, disfiguring flesh. The subversive power of the story lies in the fact that Master Yu not only does not resent his current disfiguration, but regards this as the foretaste of a yet greater dis- or trans-figuration in which he could attain superhuman powers. In this regard his disfiguration is not to be viewed pejoratively, even though it could lead to physical pain and social ostracism. Rather his disfiguration is regarded positively as a mode of transfiguration, which discloses yet again the relentless power for change and transformation that is nothing less than the irrepressible vitality of the Dao.

The second point that I would like to make concerns the relationship between gender and body. This is the point made by Howie (2013) in her essay on transfiguration and transgender persons. She writes: “Transfiguration—within the darkness that is both the setting for and the very stuff of our changeable flesh—is not something restricted to transgender bodies; or, rather, it is the sing, the name, for that which, in every body (without exception), crosses over, exceeds itself, and thereby intensifies—instead of relinquishing—what it has been” (2013: 158-9). She goes on to write that “a transfigured body would be a body solidified as what it has always been; on the other hand, a transfigured body would be a body absolutely broken, a body made new, made other, wrenched out of one shape and into a (limited or limitless) process of reshaping (162). In other words the process of transfiguration implies both the intensification of the self within the body (becoming more clearly what the self has “always” been) and also at the same time the rupture of becoming something new. The relevance of this theology of transfiguration for issues of transgender identity is clear. Howie invites us to imagine the process of transforming and transgenering one’s body as a spiritual process of transfiguration in which the individual becomes more intensely his or herself and at the same time becomes something new. In so doing the former patterns of social relations are disrupted and new patterns of relationship and sociality emerge.

The tradition of transfiguration thus invites consideration as spiritual process that is ineluctably implicated in the material transformation of the flesh. This transformation produces social anxiety since the performance of sociality with a transfigured body can no longer be the same as it was before. The spirituality of transfiguration thus invites an ethical awareness of the way in which bodily difference, whether through disfigurement, disability, gender transformations or other queer sexualities, produces social difference that may be a cause for anxiety and even terror on the part of socially normative bodies and communities. It also invites an approach to spirituality which does not insist on spiritual identity as something eternal and immutable, and liberated from the horrifying karmic flux of time and change. Rather it suggests that the material transformations of the body are to be celebrated as possibilities for the spiritual transformation of the individual. Narratives of transfiguration suggest that the socially unconventional transformation of the body may be regarded as marks of spiritual power. In this regard the spirituality of transfiguration embodies a transgressive social politics that resists the

normative performance of social scripts that constitute modern conceptions of agency and individuality. Narratives of transfiguration posit that spirituality identity is not properly located in some disembodied, “authentic” sense of “self.” Rather, spiritual identity can come to be understood as inscribed within the transfigurations of the flesh and the concomitant transgressive performance of embodied social scripts.

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