

Creeds, Rites and Videotapes: Narrating religious experience in East Asia,
edited by Elise Anne DeVido and Benoît Vermander.
Taipei: Taipei Ricci Institute, 2004.

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In the introduction to this volume collecting contributions to a colloquium held at Fu Jen university (Taipei) in 2001, the editors propose the study of religious narratives as a fruitful angle for analyzing and comparing the growing diversity of religious forms in contemporary East Asia, as “new religious movements appear every day” and traditional faiths and practices “experience revivals and changes induced by external influences”. Narratology indeed appears to be a promising approach, including not only mythology, hagiographies, conversion stories, and even ritual as the enactment of narratives, but “videotapes” as well. Indeed, video and digital recording are now ubiquitous in religious life, with the production and showing of video recordings becoming an essential form of religious narration: in Elise DeVido’s paper (chap. 4) on Master Zheng Yan of the Ciji Foundation, for example, she describes how groups of participants at four-day Ciji retreats are constantly videotaped by an AV crew, while seeing themselves in the recordings which are simultaneously projected on TV screens placed in all meeting rooms and public spaces, and then, at the closing ceremony of the retreat, watch a screening of the official, edited videotape of the retreat.

Although the book offers a few intriguing examples of the applications of “narrative” to the study of religion, the concept is not clearly defined in the introduction, nor are any clear methodological guidelines given. The result is an eclectic collection of essays which have little coherence, some of them barely touching on narratives at all, or understanding it so broadly as to have no analytical usefulness. The chapters range from a philosophical study of 6th-century Tiantai Buddhist scholastic monk Zhiyi (Hans-Rudolf Kantor, chap. 9) to a literary critique of Japanese writer Oe Kenzaburo’s work. Perhaps the volume’s most interesting cluster of papers concerns new religious movements and phenomena in Asia, touching on the Ciji Foundation (DeVido, chap. 4); Japanese New Religions (Kisala, chap. 5); conversion to Christianity among aboriginal Taiwanese (Chien, chap. 6); the social significance of Falungong (Vermander, chap. 7); the funeral business in Taiwan (DeVido, chap. 10); and the evolution of the religion of the Yi minority in Southern Sichuan province (Vermander, chap. 11). Owing to my personal interest in the social scientific study of religion in contemporary Asia, I found

plenty of interesting and useful data in these papers, but the notion of the narrative is not sufficiently developed or applied to draw any significant conclusions from a comparison of the cases presented.

The book itself ends on a more practical and inspiring level, with José Mario C. Francisco (chap. 12) exploring how narratives can be used in the context of interreligious dialogue, discussing the case of efforts to reduce conflict between Christians and Muslims in the Philippines. In contrast to religious laws and principles, which are rigid and not conducive to dialogue, narratives are open-ended and foster emotional identification between people of different backgrounds, opening the possible of the intertwining and even the mutual weaving of narratives of people of different faiths.