

The Religion of China: The Living Tradition

La religion de la Chine: La tradition vivante, by Kristofer Schipper.
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Kristofer Schipper has been a towering influence on the study of Daoism and Chinese religion over the past five decades, but, besides his well-known *Daoist Body*¹ and his monumental *Handbook to the Daoist Canon*², the rest of his published work has been dispersed in obscure and hard-to-find publications. *La religion de la Chine* is a collection of some of his seminal articles originally published between 1979 and 2006, preceded by a new, 83-page synthetic essay on the origin of China's "living religion." The articles are ordered roughly in historical progression, so that the book covers the entire span of China's religious history, until the present and even into the future. Taken as a whole, the collection offers a good overview of Schipper's views on Daoism and Chinese religion and society, which continue to be debated by scholars today. After a brief discussion of the main argument of the book, for the benefit of non-Francophone and non-specialist readers this review will elaborate on the points made in some of the key chapters in the book, and end with a consideration of the significance of Schipper's ideas for the study of Chinese religion and Chinese studies.

La religion de la Chine proposes an alternative narrative of Chinese history, society and civilization – one which is grounded in Daoism and the religion of the Chinese people. The dominant narrative of China, centred around its enlightened administrators and its rational state, and which sees China's history as, in essence, the unfolding of this civilizing process from ancient times until today, is the work of the "Confucian" class of literati, whose heirs are the intellectuals, reformers and Party leaders of the modern era, and whose prejudices have been transmitted, since Matteo Ricci, to the China scholars of the West. All share a visceral disdain for, and profound ignorance of the life and culture of the common people – known in the past as the habits of the "stupid people" 愚民, recently as the backward superstition 迷信 of the peasants, or, today, in more positive light, as quaint "folk customs" 民俗 or unorganized "popular faith" 民間信仰. For Schipper, however, the true civilization of China is to be found among the people. Though ignored if not actively suppressed by scholars and officials, it is organized, it is structured, it is integrated, it has lived uninterrupted from ancient times to this day, and its core is Daoism.

¹ Kristofer Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, trans. Karen Duval. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.

² Kristofer Schipper and Franciscus Verellen, eds. *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

The alternative narrative of this civilization, constructed by Schipper in *La religion de la Chine* recounts how, in the Zhou and Han periods, the split was consummated between what is now known as “Confucianism” and “Daoism” – not merely as two competing philosophical schools, but as two systems of socio-political and clerical organization – the former finally becoming the ideology and ritual system of the imperial state and its bureaucracy, the latter providing the liturgical framework for structuring local communities through their local associations devoted to the cult of saints and deities. While the former is a top-down hierarchy which radiates from the centre, the latter is a dense fabric of horizontal, rhizomatic networks of self-governing, quasi-democratic associations. The centrifugal dynamic generated by the fierce autonomy of these local cults and communities is countered by the unifying dynamic of Daoist ritual and cosmology, which subdues and integrates local gods into its pantheon. Daoist priests act as intermediaries between local forces and universal principles, while Daoist saints and ritual operate as symbolic mediators between the imperial state and local society. Thus, where the imperial state and its mandarins rarely penetrated deep into the villages and neighbourhoods of traditional China, it was Daoism which provided the symbolic and social unity of Chinese civilization, among the myriads of localities within the realm and even extending beyond, into borderland minority areas and the Chinese diasporic communities of Southeast Asia and elsewhere. While the dominant narrative of the history of China’s modernization in the 20th century typically recounts the struggles around the rejection of Confucianism and the adoption of Western thought, this represents, in fact, a mere change of ideological clothes of China’s intellectual and governing elite, which only replicated its disdain for the other, “Daoist” China, and gave it the tools for its wholesale destruction. And yet, after a century of campaigns and restrictions, the religion of the Chinese people is still a “living tradition”, whether in the Peoples’ Republic, in Taiwan and Southeast Asia, or even in the restaurants and temples of Chinese communities in Europe and North America.

In the first chapter of *La religion de la Chine*, which is the longest of the book, Schipper attempts to sketch the genesis of this “living religion,” in the period leading up to the later Han, as well as the orthodox reaction to it, and the processes by which the two currents became separated. The turning point seems to have been when the rites and history of the aristocracy were codified into texts, probably around the beginning of the Western Zhou (771-221). The *Five Classics* 五經 became the reference for rites and the art of government, for what became the “public religion” of the Confucians. In these works, mythology, epopees, stories of local gods and cults were not recorded. It was, instead, what Schipper calls an emerging “religion des mystères,” an initiatory cult analogous to the contemporary movements in the Mediterranean region, which transmitted that lore through the *Shanhaijing* 山海經, the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and other texts. These texts are replete with references to real and mythical places, to gods associated with these places, with discussions on immortality and death. The figures who appear in the *Zhuangzi* are literati and artisans, farmers and slaves, men and women: this mystery movement was composed of people from all backgrounds and places; it ignored social rank, and its concerns revolved around the purpose of life and death. Its masters, the *fangshi* 方士, were initiated artisans, like the butchers and carpenters who feature prominently in the *Zhuangzi*.

During the Spring and Autumn period of the late Zhou, it was at the Jixia academy 稷下學宮 of Qi, which took the Yellow Emperor, Huangdi 黃帝, as its ancestor, and which Schipper compares to the intellectual ferment and freedom of ancient Athens, that this nebulous mystery cult coalesced into the more fully-formed Huanglao 黃老 school. Through

contacts with the nearly cult of Master Anqi 安期生 near present-day Qingdao, the cosmology of the Mysteries combined with local deity cults and developed the notion that access to immortality and divinization was potentially accessible to anyone and even to any being. The individual initiate, through his alignment with Dao, acquires powerful virtues; when he displays charity and uses his powers to aid the common people, he becomes an object of worship, a popular saint, and a god. Thus, the individual self-cultivation of the Daoist mystic is organically linked to the communal local deity cults of Chinese religion.

While the Huanglao school was a key foundation of the sacred regime of the Qin and Anterior Han, it was resisted by the orthodox literati, who gained the upper hand during the reign of Emperor Wu 漢武帝 (140-87 BC), who created a new academy to collect the Classics, established a new cult to Heaven, and, under the hand of Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, invented new rituals. The Huanglao arts were called “Daojia” 道家 by Sima Qian 司馬遷 and others, giving a new label to the stigmatised knowledge.

Rejected at court, the Daoist tradition returned to the people, and became the organized voice of popular resistance and hopes. It was out of this tradition that Chinese millenialism emerged. It first appeared in the *Taipingjing* 太平經 of 33 BC, followed by the Xiwangmu 西王母 millenarian cult and the Wang Mang 王莽 revolution, all of which took inspiration from the Mystery religion of initiations and immortality. After the Han restoration, the state was even more strongly committed to classical orthodoxy, owing to its fear of revolutions and revolts. Although the state’s attitude later relaxed, the popular millenarianism continued and erupted with the Way of Heavenly Masters 天師道 in 142 and the Taipingdao 太平道 in 166, which led to the fall of the Han in 220.

The repression of the Heavenly Masters caused the movement to disperse and spread to North China; by 300, it seems to have reached the rural population and aristocracy all the North. Then, it spread South after the invasion of 317. The ritual system of the Heavenly Masters aimed to aid not only humans, but gods as well, in their progression towards immortality, allowing the priests to integrate local deity cults into their pantheon and liturgy. A new compilation of authentic texts in 437 by Lu Xiuqing 陸修靜 did not include the Confucian classics. This was the beginning of the Daoist Canon, “signaling the divorce between Daoism and Confucianism” (p. 95)

Schipper further develops some of these points in chapter 2, “Millenialisms and messianisms in ancient China,” in which he discusses the role of Daoism in the spread of Buddhism in China. Indeed, the first aspect of Buddhism to become popular was the fusion of Buddhist eschatology with Daoist millenialism; under Daoist influence, the expectation of Maitreya – which, in Indian Buddhism, was foreseen as aeons away -- came to be seen as imminent. The Maitreya cult was most popular during the mediaeval period (3rd and 4th cent.), and became the main vehicle for millenial fervour. At the same time, it diminished in Daoism, which became more institutionalized in different polities. The Buddhist apocalyptic sutras were never admitted into orthodoxy, however; millenial groups were repressed, and finally assimilated to “White Lotus” heresies.

The subsequent chapters focus on different aspects of the role of Daoism in the structuration of local society and religion. Chapter 3, “The covenant of purity in Daoism,” argues that the *qingyue* 清約 institution in the Heavenly Masters movement had the effect of transforming the structure of communal religion, shifting power from priests to lay assemblies. By this covenant, gods refuse animal sacrifice and priests cannot be paid a salary. Instead, it is the community – the *hui* 會 – which receives funds and offerings. This meant

that priests could not live on their ritual services full-time, and needed to find other employment; on the other hand, the *hui* (originally the *zhi* 治) obtained a permanent source of income; they thus became free associations based on members' contributions, managing their own funds and assets, only using part of them to pay fees to priests when needed, on a contractual basis. Over time, the institution of the *hui* (in some places called *gongsi* 公祠, or "common management") became a vehicle for the collective ownership of a significant portion of China's wealth. At the same time, it was the organized assembly, rather than individual clerics, which became responsible for the collective salvation of the community. Thus, through the institution of the *qingyue* of the Heavenly Masters, we can trace the origins of what Schipper has often called the "local democracy" of traditional Chinese *hui*, in which it is lay assemblies which, formed to ensure the communal cult with the assistance of Daoist priests, also govern local community affairs.

Chapter 9, on "Royal lords and plague gods," through an ethnographic study of a *jiao* 醮 communal ritual in Xigang (Taiwan), examines how the event is constituted and interpreted by local assembly chiefs, Daoist masters and the populace, each of which play complementary roles and give it different meanings. The next chapter, a study of the *fenxiang* 分香 networks of the Baosheng dadi 保生大帝 cult in Taiwan, uncovers the significance of these networks of hundreds of temples, spanning several regions, channeling economic, cultural and political exchanges. Clearly, this is not some unorganized folk religion of illiterate peasants, but a highly organized institution, which continues to live after 800 years, and has left monumental traces. The Baosheng dadi cult provides a structure for a variety of groups which may be more or less interested in religion, trade, education, common surname or origin. What they all have in common is the desire to "belong and participate in a circuit of communication and cooperation." (296).

The canonization of Baosheng dadi by the Emperor in 1165, as for so many other gods, gave imperial status and official rank to the saint (which could be exercised in his name by local elites), creating a powerful rallying point for local interests, in effect creating and legitimising a kind of autonomous kingdom under each god. But these "kingdoms," though they are each rooted in different regions of Fujian, are not strictly territorial: rather than creating territorial boundaries, they create networks extending outward from their home territory. Furthermore, *fenxiang* networks are not hierarchical; each temple remains independent. *Fenxiang* networks span and cross administrative boundaries, permitting horizontal links and negotiations between jurisdictions, which are impossible according to centralized hierarchies.

Chapter 13, on "Liturgical structures and civil society in Peking", draws on epigraphic materials and surveys written in the republican period to consider the role in urban social life of this religious system. There were at least 1000 temples in Peking at the beginning of the 20th century, and several hundred guild halls which were also temples. Each temple had at least one association, if not several and even, for the main temples, dozens. The Dongyuemiao 東岳廟 had several associations using it; it was "the headquarter of the city's associations". This fabric of organizations integrated the entire population. The associations governed much of city life -- some guilds were more powerful than the state, collecting obligatory contributions which were actually taxes. Associations and their temples also played a judicial role, and provided training, social services, and funerals for their members, and were cultural centres, providing venues for theatre, chess, and martial arts clubs. The basis of this civil society was its religious foundation. Many associations, in their documents, mention only their religious side without a hint of their professional guild

dimension. The saints which these associations worshipped were officially canonized. Their cult of the canonized saint gave them cover and legitimacy. Through the cult, they were recognizing the emperor's authority. The Confucians hated this, but the arrangement allowed for the integration of the state and commercial elites. By canonizing saints, the emperor coopted them into his own cult.

The fabric of this "civil society" was destroyed by the modernizing "convert temples to schools" movement launched at the turn of the 20th century, discussed in chapter 14, which caused not only the annihilation of Chinese religion, but the destruction of their social life and of everything that had meaning for the Chinese. The Daoist Canon itself was almost lost in the destruction; it was only thanks to a reprint by the Commercial Press, purchased by university libraries, that saved it from oblivion and made possible the emergence of Daoist studies, which have, in Schipper's words, saved Daoism from extinction (chapter 15). In the final chapter, on the "gene bank of culture", Schipper makes a case for the importance of the slow and painstaking work of research in the humanities, which amounts to preserving the cultural gene bank of the species, and which goes against the drive for short-term productivity in contemporary academia. It is from the interbreeding of the "genes" of different cultures, in space or in time, which gives birth to new civilizations.

Much of the material in *La religion de la Chine* is now well known in the field of Daoist studies; other points remain speculative or debatable. As in the seminars he formerly gave at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Schipper deploys his textual mastery and his unparalleled experience of field research to offer far-ranging and often daring insights on the broad sweep of Chinese history, with an infectious passion for Daoism. Besides the many nuggets and inspiring questions for debate or future research which the reader will find in this book, most significant is the alternative, Daoist-centred narrative of Chinese history and society which is constructed by the book, and which Schipper has been elaborating and promoting throughout his career.

The past few decades of scholarship in the history and anthropology of Chinese religion have completely overturned the old narrative of a China devoid of religion, in which a rational, enlightened elite of scholars and philosophers guided the superstitious and ignorant masses. The centrality of *religion* to Chinese history and society, and increasingly sophisticated models of the structure and dynamics of Chinese religion, are now established facts in the field of Chinese religious studies and anthropology – even if they still remain largely ignored in many other fields of Chinese studies. But the centrality of *Daoism* to the religious dimension of Chinese culture, is still far from being a widely accepted proposition. This is partly due to contested definitions of Daoism itself -- with Schipper sometimes claiming, in oral comments, that all or most of Chinese religion should be subsumed under Daoism, just as Indian religion is called "Hinduism"--and partly due to historians' and anthropologists' lack of training in Daoist ritual and history, making it difficult for them to perceive Daoist structures and continuities. The alternative narrative of China presented in *La religion de la Chine* is thus a fresh challenge for our understanding of Chinese religion – and, even more so, of Chinese history, politics and civilization as a whole. It deserves to be considered and debated by scholars in all fields of Chinese studies.

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