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Differentiation and Integration in Daoism

A member of the Ba minority in South-West China in the second century CE, a female poet of the Tang dynasty, an elite scholar-official of the Ming, and a priest in present-day Taiwan – what do these people have in common? One commonality between the four is that they are ‘Daoists’, either self-styled or labelled so by others. But what is ‘Daoist’ about all these people of different times, places, professions, sexes, and cultures? What defines their ‘Daoist identity’?

Review >
China

By Paul van Els

Previous studies into Daoist identity have often departed from the dated definition of ‘identity’. The identity of a religious tradition, according to this definition, is its essence, or those essential features that remain unchanged throughout its different manifestations. As Christian identity can be accordingly characterized as the belief in one God and in Jesus as his this-worldly representative, Daoism may be explained as the belief in the Dao and the worship of Laozi, the Old Master, as its founder. However, this definition fails to explain the plurality of identities under the Daoist umbrella.

Inspired by the theories of the theologian and anthropologist Hans Mol, the editors of and contributors to this work interpret identity not as a static entity but as a dynamic process. Rather than focusing on the ‘permanence and solidity in the tradition’, they emphasize the ‘continuous interaction of the

two forces of differentiation and integration’ (pp.7–8): in other words, the process of how identity, on the one hand, changes through political and economical developments and through adoption of elements from other traditions (*differentiation*) and, on the other, aspires for stability and continuity (*integration*). Stability and continuity are achieved by setting up – what Mol distinguishes as – belief systems, lineage lines, rituals, and myths.

Part I, ‘Early Formations’, of this volume on Daoist identity discusses Great Peace and Celestial Masters, two movements that have been crucial in the creation of a Daoist identity. Parts II to IV deal with the first three aspects distinguished by Mol; part II, ‘Texts and Symbols’, contains articles on the formation of Daoist belief systems; part III, ‘Lineages and Local Culture’, studies Daoist

lineages vis-à-vis local and popular cults; and part IV, ‘Ritual Boundaries’, concentrates on the formation and reinforcement of Daoist identity through ritual. Contributions to this volume vary in degree of specialization and relevance to the topic at issue. Particularly relevant and enlightening articles include the following.

Kleeman (ch. 1) focuses on the interaction between ethnic identity and Daoist identity in traditional China. He shows how the Daoist tradition has absorbed elements of religious belief systems of minorities; how, conversely, ethnic groups have embraced Daoism; and how, interestingly, a number of traditional expressions of Daoist identity, such as priesthood and certain religious institutions, have survived only in minority belief systems and not in those of ethnic Chinese Daoists.

Yu Xuanji, the Tang dynasty poetess, courtesan, and Daoist nun, is the focus of Cahill’s contribution (ch. 5). Yu, executed at age 25 for murdering her maid, is a controversial figure in Chinese history; up until the present day she has served as a bad example of feminine misbehaviour. Cahill ignores stories about Yu’s life and lets her poetry speak of her identity. Three images that repeatedly appear in Yu’s poems are clothing, boats, and zithers. The second image most clearly reveals her Daoist identity. The boat – that is, the poet herself – takes Yu ‘from one place to another, one state of consciousness to another, and one condition of existence to another. She moves from city to country, public to private, courtesan to recluse. She floats along through life and change, entrusting herself to the Dao.’ (p. 116).

Mabuchi (ch. 6) discusses the Daoist identity of Wang Dao, an elite scholar-official of the Ming dynasty (generally known as a Confucian era) and a student of Wang Yangming (the eminent neo-Confucian thinker). Operating in Confucian surroundings, Wang Dao maintains that Confucius and Laozi express the same ideas and differ only in wording. Wang regards Daoist notions such as *dao* (the Way) and *de* (virtue) as roots, and Confucian terms such as *ren* (benevolence) and *yi* (righteousness) as branches. He criticizes the way that people focus on branches instead of on roots and advocates the Dao as a source of a deeper goodness. Despite his undeniable sympathy

for Buddhist and Confucian thought, his ideas and his commentary on the *Laozi* disclose his Daoist identity and make him ‘a relevant voice in the history of Daoist thought.’ (p. 144).

Both Maruyama (ch. 12) and Asano (ch. 13) call into focus Daoist rituals in present-day Taiwan, the former discussing legal documents used in Daoist rituals of merit. The use of such documents distinguishes these rituals from Buddhist, Confucian, and popular rites, which lack such a textual practice. Asano discusses offerings in Daoist ritual, likewise by distinguishing it from other rites. The two forces of differentiation and integration are clearly visible in his example of meat-offering in Daoism. Though officially proscribed by the Daoist tradition, meat-offerings practiced in folk religion and in Confucian rites made their way into Daoism by popular demand. Nonetheless, Daoists deliberately keep meat-offerings in the periphery and assign it far less importance than other components of offering – such as incense, flowers, tea, or fruit – thus reassuring stability and continuity.

In the end, what is ‘Daoist identity’? The tenor of this book is that no univocal answer to this question exists. Each Daoist interprets and manifests his or her Daoist identity in a unique way. As Shiga concludes, they identify themselves as ‘Daoist’ based on their own idea about what Daoism is (p. 206). The book thus deconstructs the idea of *the* Daoist identity and proposes a Daoist identity that accommodates innumerable individual identities. This novel approach surely is an asset, but also raises questions. For example, such terms as ‘Daoism’ or ‘the Daoist religion’ seem to suggest that there exists a ‘core’ identity with various manifestations. But how to determine this core if practitioners are free to establish their identity through differentiation and integration (leading, in one case, to abstinence of meat, to performance of meat-offerings in another)? Nonetheless, *Daoist Identity* is a refreshing and interesting read that stimulates further discussion. ◀

– Kohn, Livia and Harold D. Roth, (eds.), *Daoist Identity: History, Lineage, and Ritual*, Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press (2002), pp. x+333, ISBN 0-8248-2504-7.

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