

**Zeitschrift:** Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft  
**Band:** 70 (2016)  
**Heft:** 1

**Buchbesprechung:** Rezensionen = Comptes rendus = Reviews

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 15.07.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Rezensionen – Comptes rendus – Reviews

**Andreyev, Alexandre:** *The Myth of the Masters Revived. The Occult Lives of Nikolai and Elena Roerich.* (Eurasian Studies Library, 4). Leiden and Boston, 2014, xxix + 502 pp., 70 illustrations and 11 colour plates, ISBN 978-90-04-27042-8.

Besprochen von **Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz**, Institut für Religionswissenschaft, Universität Bern, Lerchenweg 36, Postfach, 3000 Bern 9, Switzerland.  
E-mail: Karenina.kollmar-paulenz@relwi.unibe.ch

DOI 10.1515/asia-2016-0007

Einer der kulturellen Höhepunkte, die die 10. Tagung der *International Association for Mongolian Studies* (IAMS) im Juli 2011 in Ulaanbaatar begleiteten, war eine Ausstellung des künstlerischen Oeuvres von Nikolai Roerich<sup>1</sup> (1874–1947), des russischen Malers des *fin de siècle* und bedeutenden Vordenkers der Theosophie und Esoterik, im *Zanabazar Museum der Schönen Künste*. Die Ausstellung wurde von keinem geringerem als dem mongolischen Präsidenten Ts. Elbegdorž eröffnet, und der damalige Präsident der Mongolischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Shagdaryn Bira, beleuchtete in einem Vortrag die Verdienste Roerichs für die wissenschaftliche Erforschung des mongolischen kulturellen Erbes. Auf der Tagung selbst war eine ganze Reihe von Vorträgen der anwesenden russischen Kolleginnen und Kollegen Roerich und seinem Werk gewidmet. Die Tagung stand teilweise im Banne Roerichs, und spiegelte das Interesse wider, das man Nikolai Roerich inzwischen nicht nur in weiten Kreisen der postsozialistischen russischen Gesellschaft entgegenbringt,<sup>2</sup> sondern auch unter Wissenschaftlerinnen und Wissenschaftlern, deren Forschungsinteresse der Mongolei gilt, sowie innerhalb der mongolischen politischen Eliten. In den letzten beiden Jahrzehnten hat das reiche literarische Werk von Nikolai Roerich und seiner Frau Elena, der Begründerin der esoterischen Lehre des *Agni Yoga*, in Russland eine Neuauflage erfahren, und geniesst bis in die höchsten politischen Kreise hinein grosse Popularität. Parallel zur wachsenden Popularität der Roerichs und ihres Lebenswerks ist auch das Forschungsinteresse gestiegen, sowohl in Russland als auch im Ausland, wobei die russische Forschung oft entweder von einer bewundernden, ja sogar verehrenden, oder aber einer

---

<sup>1</sup> Im Russischen: Rerikh.

<sup>2</sup> Einen guten Überblick über die Roerich-Bewegung im postsozialistischen Russland gibt McCannon 2012. Den Hinweis auf diese Publikation verdanke ich Isrun Engelhardt (Icking).

ablehnenden Haltung geprägt ist, die sich auch in den Forschungsergebnissen widerspiegelt. In der englisch- und deutschsprachigen Esoterik-Forschung ist den Roerichs im Vergleich zur russischen Forschung bisher relativ wenig Aufmerksamkeit zuteil geworden.<sup>3</sup> Die nun von Alexandre Andreyev vorgelegte Monographie, die in grossen Teilen auf seinem 2008 in russischer Sprache publizierten Werk *Gimalaiskoe bratstvo: teosofskii mif i ego tvortsy* (Die himalayische Bruderschaft: ein theosophischer Mythos und seine Schöpfer)<sup>4</sup> beruht, aber auch weiteres, seither bekannt gewordenes Material verarbeitet, schliesst für den englischsprachigen Leserkreis daher eine Lücke. Das vorliegende Werk ist die wahrscheinlich detailreichste Studie, die bisher zu den Roerichs und ihrem Freundes- und Adeptenkreis vorgelegt worden ist. Dabei konzentriert sich der Autor nicht auf das künstlerische Werk von Nikolai Roerich, und er ist offensichtlich auch nicht übermässig an Kindheit und Jugend seiner beiden Helden interessiert, denn gemessen am Gesamtumfang nimmt die Beschreibung jener Jahre nur geringen Raum ein. Genauso knapp fällt das letzte Kapitel über die letzten Jahre Roerichs im indischen Kulu aus. Andreyev fokussiert vielmehr auf die Jahre der Emigration, in denen die esoterische Lehre der Roerichs zur vollen Entfaltung kommt. Er versucht quasi ein Psychogramm dieser entscheidenden Jahre im Leben seiner Protagonisten zu erstellen, in denen die Verwirklichung des so genannten „Grossen Plans“, des Entwurfs eines pan-buddhistischen Staats in Zentralasien, im Mittelpunkt stand und ihr Denken und Handeln antrieb. Basierend auf einer Vielzahl von Originaldokumenten, von Briefen und Tagebüchern bis zu offiziellen Archivdokumenten, beschreibt Andreyev, zuweilen bis in das kleinste Detail, das Leben der Roerichs im Exil im Spannungsfeld zwischen alltäglicher Realität und dem Bewusstsein, eine höhere, von ihren beiden „Meistern“ Morya und Koot Hoomi übermittelte Bestimmung erfüllen zu müssen. Es wäre ein Leichtes, den unbedingten Glauben des Ehepaars Roerich und seines unmittelbaren Umfelds an die Existenz und Kommunikation der beiden „Meister“ ins Lächerliche zu ziehen und rationale Argumente gegen sie anzuführen. Angenehmerweise verlässt Andreyev jedoch selten den Pfad des neutralen Berichterstatters. Sein Erstaunen und seine Kritik kleidet er nicht in Worte, sondern in Satzzeichen

---

<sup>3</sup> In den letzten zehn Jahren sind zwei Monographien erschienen, die sich mit Leben und Werk der Roerichs befassen (Stasulane 2005, Waldenfels 2011), und ein Werk, das die Instrumentalisierung des tibetischen Shambhala-Mythos im geopolitischen Kontext der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts aufarbeitet und hier zwangsläufig auch auf Roerich eingeht (Znamenski 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Andreev 2008.

(man beachte die eindrücklichen Ausrufezeichen, die sich hinter vielen seiner Sätze finden). So zeichnet er behutsam den Weg einer Familie mit einer besonderen Mission nach. Besonders eindrücklich und gleichzeitig auch bedrückend ist die Schilderung des Lebenswegs von Sohn Jurij, des berühmten Tibetologen, dem die Forschung die vollständige englische Übersetzung der *Blauen Annalen* (tib. *Deb ther sngon po*), des 1478 verfassten historischen Werks von 'Gos lo tsā ba gZhon nu dpal, verdankt. Seine zaghaften Schritte zur Eigenständigkeit werden rigoros auf dem Altar der Weltanschauung seiner Eltern geopfert. Über die familiären und freundschaftlichen Beziehungen hinaus richtet Andreyev sein Augenmerk auf den geopolitischen Kontext, ohne die Lebensgeschichte der Roerichs letztlich nicht verständlich erscheint. In der Schilderung der beiden Expeditionen nach Zentralasien, die die Roerichs in den Jahren 1925–1928 und 1934–1935 durchführten, gelingt es Andreyev, ein differenziertes Bild der Beweggründe seiner Protagonisten zu zeichnen, die zwischen einer scharf antisowjetischen Haltung zu einer kooperativen und sogar positiven Haltung wechselte. Die Sicht, dass Buddhismus und Kommunismus keine einander ausschliessenden Weltansichten darstellen, sondern im Gegenteil eine fruchtbare Symbiose eingehen können, teilten die Roerichs mit einigen der wichtigsten buryat-mongolischen Persönlichkeiten der Zeit, wie Tsyben Zhamtsarano. Andreyev geht denn auch ausführlich auf die Beziehungen zu den buryat-mongolischen Anführern der buddhistischen Erneuerungsbewegung ein. Während sich das Kapitel über den Aufenthalt der Roerichs in der Mongolei der zwanziger Jahre im Wesentlichen auf eine Zusammenfassung der Reiseberichte der Roerichs beschränkt, enthält das Kapitel über die Tibet-Expedition 1927/28 auch manche für Zentralasienwissenschaftler neue Information über die Beziehungen der Roerichs zum Paṇchen und zum Dalai Lama. Das Lesevergnügen in diesen den Zentralasien-Expeditionen gewidmeten Kapiteln wird leider etwas geschmälert durch die unsorgfältige und oft inkorrekte Verschriftung tibetischer Termini.

Nimmt Andreyev in weiten Teilen seiner Studie die Rolle des neutralen Beobachters und Berichterstatters ein, so verlässt er diese Rolle in seinem „Epilogue: Inquiring into the Phenomenon of the Roerichs' Masters“. Dort versucht er Elena Roerichs Visionen medizinisch zu deuten, als Resultat einer neurologischen, der Epilepsie verwandten Krankheit, die unter anderem Halluzinationen verursache. Ob die Leserin ihm in diesem Erklärungsversuch folgt oder nicht, ist zweitrangig: Es bleibt die beeindruckende Tatsache, dass die Roerichsche sozial-utopische Vision, die sich die tibetisch-buddhistische Vorstellung des nördlichen Landes Shambhala zunutze macht, auch heute noch eine starke Anziehungskraft auf die Menschen besonders in Russland



ausübt. Sie kann sowohl für pazifistische und internationalistische Zukunftsvisionen fruchtbar gemacht werden wie auch für russisch-nationalistische wie die eines Alexandr Dugin.<sup>5</sup> Diesen letzten Aspekt vertieft Andreyev allerdings nicht.

Eine Reihe von Unzulänglichkeiten in dieser bahnbrechenden Studie hätte durch ein sorgfältiges Lektorat vermieden werden können. So liest sich das Englische oft holprig, zuweilen finden sich auch sinn-verfälschende Übersetzungen, so wenn auf S. 35 von einer „protestant message“ die Rede ist. Gemeint ist hier wohl eine „note of protest“. Auf derselben Seite lesen wir „editorial stuff“ anstelle von „staff“. Solche Fehler ziehen sich durch das gesamte Buch. Die russischen Literaturangaben sind zuweilen fehlerhaft in der Transliteration, und oft, aber nicht durchgängig, werden sie in der kyrillischen Schrift gegeben, was für englisch-sprachige Leser, die nicht des Russischen mächtig sind, ein Hindernis darstellen dürfte. Neben diesen in die Kompetenz eines guten Lektorats fallenden Unzulänglichkeiten tauchen auch sachliche Fehler auf wie inkorrekte Transliterationen (auf S. 60 finden wir *Bhagavatgita* anstelle von *Bhagavadgītā*) oder falsche Übersetzungen. Um hier nur einige zu erwähnen: Das Akronym I.H.S. wurde von den Roerichs angeblich als „*In hoc signo victories* (By this you will win)“ (S. 133) gelesen, aber nach Andreyev könnte es auch heißen „*In has salus* (By this you will be saved)“. Das Lateinische muss im ersten Fall korrekt *in hoc signo vinces* („in this sign conquer“), im zweiten Fall *in hoc salus* („in this is salvation“) heißen. Auf S. 29 behauptet der Autor, die Kālacakra-Lehren seien „the highest wisdom known to adepts of Tibetan Buddhism“. Diese Aussage trifft allerdings nur auf die dGe lugs pa-Schultradition zu. Unverständlich ist, warum das auf S. 169 abgebildete Shambhala-Thangka im Musée Guimet ein „Fragment“ sein soll. Das Thangka ist vollständig erhalten, eine Abbildung findet sich in dem Katalog zur Ausstellung „Weisheit und Liebe. 1000 Jahre Kunst des tibetischen Buddhismus“ der Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Bonn aus dem Jahr 1996.<sup>6</sup> Das tibetische Wort „Dorje“ bedeutet nicht „lightning“ im Tibetischen (S. 200). Auf die Transliterationsfehler des Tibetischen ist schon hingewiesen worden.

Trotz solcher Unzulänglichkeiten ist die hier vorgelegte Studie zur Entstehung und Ausformulierung der Roerichschen Weltanschauung ein Meilenstein in der Roerich-Forschung. Darüber hinaus ist sie für die Erforschung der Esoterik im 20. Jahrhundert wegweisend. Dank Alexandre Andreyev kann nun ein bedeutender russischer Beitrag zur Entwicklung esoterischer Weltanschauungen, der oft genug

<sup>5</sup> McCannon 2012: 366.

<sup>6</sup> Rhie/Thurman 1996: 378–379.

von angelsächsischen, aber auch deutschen Forschenden aufgrund mangelnder Sprachkenntnisse ausgeblendet wird, in die zukünftige Esoterik-Forschung einbezogen werden.

## Bibliographie

- Andreev, Aleksandr I. (2008): *Gimalaiskoe Bratstvo: Teosofskii mif i ego tvortsy*. Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo S.-Peterburgskogo Universiteta.
- McCannon, John (2012): „Competing Legacies, competing visions of Russia: The Roerich movement(s) in Post-Soviet Russia“. In: *The New Age of Russia. Occult and Esoteric Dimensions*. Hrsg. von Birgit Menzel Michael Hagemeister und Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal. München/Berlin: Otto Sagner, 348–369.
- Rhie, Marylin M./Thurman, Robert A.F. (1996): *Weisheit und Liebe. 1000 Jahre Kunst des tibetischen Buddhismus*. Bonn: Kunst und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, in Zusammenarbeit mit dem DuMont Buchverlag, Köln.
- Stasulane, Anita (2005): *Theosophy and Culture: Nicholas Roerich*. Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana.
- Waldenfels, Ernst von (2011): *Nikolai Roerich. Kunst, Macht und Okkultismus*. Berlin: Osburg Verlag.
- Znamenski, Andrei (2011): *Red Shambhala: Magic, Prophecy, and Geopolitics in the Heart of Asia*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, Theosophical Publishing House.



**Bo, Wang:** *Zhuangzi. Thinking through the Inner Chapters*. St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2014, x + 221 pages, ISBN 978-19-31-48360-5.

Compte rendu de **Jean François Billeter**, Université de Genève, 32, chemin de la Grabelle, Chêne-Bougeries CH-1224, Switzerland. E-mail: jfbilleter@yahoo.fr

DOI 10.1515/asia-2016-0012

Cet ouvrage a l'avantage d'avoir été traduit avec beaucoup de soin par Livia Kohn, sinologue d'origine allemande spécialiste du taoïsme. L'original, *Zhuangzi zhexue* 庄子哲学, a paru aux presses de l'Université de Pékin en 2004, université où l'auteur (Wang Bo 王博) enseigne l'histoire de la philosophie chinoise. Comme l'indique le titre, son propos n'est pas de traiter du livre appelé le *Zhuangzi*, mais de la pensée du philosophe Zhuangzi renfermée dans les sept premiers chapitres, dits « chapitres intérieurs ». Ce parti suffit à indiquer qu'il en reste à une interprétation tout à fait traditionnelle de l'ouvrage. Il reste fidèle à la tradition dans l'analyse de chacun de ces chapitres. On peut donc recommander ce travail aux lecteurs qui veulent prendre connaissance d'une vulgate déjà très ancienne et que les auteurs chinois actuels, même les plus érudits, ne renouvellent hélas pas beaucoup, ou point du tout. J'exprime ce regret parce qu'une attitude plus critique à l'égard de la tradition et un regard neuf sur le texte pourraient grandement contribuer à en augmenter l'intérêt pour nous, esprits du 21<sup>e</sup> siècle. La première chose serait de rompre avec l'idée que les « chapitres intérieurs » forment le cœur de l'ouvrage et constituent l'expression de la pensée de Zhuangzi lui-même.



**Clower, Jason (transl. and ed.):** *Late Works of Mou Zongsan – Selected Essays on Chinese Philosophy*. (Modern Chinese Philosophy; 7), Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015, xii + 242 pp., ISBN 978-90-04-27889-9.

Reviewed by **Rafael Suter**, Department of Sinology, Institute of Asian and Oriental Studies, University of Zurich, Zürichbergstrasse 4, 8032 Zürich, Switzerland,  
E-mail: rafael.suter@aoi.uzh.ch

DOI 10.1515/asia-2016-1001

Twenty years after “the Confucian among philosophers, the philosopher among Confucians”<sup>1</sup> passed away in 1995, Jason Clower presents a selection of English translations of texts by Mou Zongsan (1909–1995). “If twentieth-century China produced a philosopher of the first rank,” Clower opens his introduction, “it was Mou Zongsan” (p.1). On the one hand, there can be no doubt about Mou’s deeply ingrained Confucianism, and his work bespeaks his familiarity with much of the philosophical heritage of both China and the occident – especially its Anglo-American, but also Graeco-Roman and German compartments. However, people like Yu Yingshi 余英時, Lin Anwu 林安梧,<sup>2</sup> but also mainland-based scholars like Jiang Qing 蔣慶 have criticised Mou for exiling Confucianism into the ivory tower of philosophical speculation, largely disregarding its societal and institutional aspects and their potential relevance for present day China. Likewise, Mou’s exceptional status as a philosopher, suggested by Clower and claimed by many of his students and convinced readers, remains controversial.<sup>3</sup> What is beyond contention, however, is that Mou was not only an erudite and polymath, but also an extremely prolific writer. His studies penetrate the remotest confines of Chinese intellectual history and his collected works comprise several thousand pages in 32 volumes.<sup>4</sup> In the course of the last two decades, Mou

<sup>1</sup> This is how Cai Renhou, one of Mou’s most prominent students and professor emeritus at Tunghai University in Taichung, has characterised Mou in his obituary (Lehmann 1998: 197).

<sup>2</sup> For a short overview in English see Makeham 2008: 176–180.

<sup>3</sup> Lee Ming-Huei, another of Mou’s students, at one point praises his teacher’s “philosophical genius” (Lee 2001: 65). This enthusiasm is not restricted to Mou’s immediate students: In a recent study based on her PhD thesis, N. Serina Chan at least twice asserts Mou’s theoretical “genius” (Chan 2011: 116, 186). On the other extreme of the scale, there are people like Stephan Schmidt who with respect to Mou’s claim that his moral metaphysics has sublated (*aufgehoben*) “the vastly different dualisms” discussed by Mou states that “this is unpersuasive to the point of caricature” (Schmidt 2011: 272).

<sup>4</sup> Mou’s complete works were published by Linking Press in 2003.



Zongsan has become one of the most widely studied twentieth century thinkers in the Chinese speaking world: A full-text search for Mou's name in the mainland-based China Academic Journals Full-text Database yields an impressive amount of 9,452 hits.<sup>5</sup>

In contrast, there have been only a few book-length studies dedicated to Mou in Western languages, in spite of a growing interest in his work. Among the handful of books dealing with Mou's thought, a considerable share of three monographs have appeared in Brill's *Modern Chinese Philosophy* series<sup>6</sup> – the very series which not only includes the anthology under discussion, but whose second installment is Clower's own *The Unlikely Buddhologist* published in 2011. This book is based on his doctoral dissertation (Harvard 2008) and expounds Mou's work on Chinese Buddhism and its significance for his philosophical thought. Given Mou's prominence it is surprising that, so far, only a single one of his dozens of works seems to be available in any Western language.<sup>7</sup> According to the dustjacket blurb, the collection of essays selected, translated and commented by Jason Clower is the very first printed publication of texts by Mou in English translation ever. It thus doubtless meets a long-standing desideratum.

Mou Zongsan has designated his philosophy by the term “moral metaphysics”. His philosophical systematisation of Confucianism not least was aimed at reconstructing the history of Chinese philosophy from a distinctively Confucian perspective. Identifying a specifically Confucian notion of “moral autonomy” as the core of Chinese thought, Mou has chosen Kant's term of “intellektuelle Anschauung” (intellectual intuition), or, more precisely, his own Chinese translation of it, *zhi de zhijue* (智的直覺), literally “immediate awareness of wisdom”, to refer to the kind of intuitive experience of morality that is allegedly testified in the writings of traditional Neo-Confucians. For him, this practical spiritual experience marks the lynchpin of Neo-Confucian discussions about personal cultivation. However, the “loftiest and most profound question in philosophy” (p.103), the problem of the “perfect teaching” (*yuanjiao* 圓教), Mou finds discussed in Chinese Buddhist scholastics. The notion of the “perfect teaching” is pivotal for Mou's reinterpretation of the concept of the *summum bonum* (*yuanshan* 圓善) which in turn marks the very core of his philosophy. Due to the diversity of his intellectual

---

<sup>5</sup> China Academic Journals Fulltext Database, <http://oversea.cnki.net/kns55/brief/result.aspx> (18/08/2015).

<sup>6</sup> Clower 2010, Chan 2011, Billioud 2011. The series was established in 2010. It is edited by John Makeham.

<sup>7</sup> In 2003, Kamenarović and Pastor have published a French translation of Mou Zongsan's *Zhongguo zhexue de tezhi* (The Peculiarity of Chinese Philosophy, Chinese original 1962).

references, Mou in his writings rather liberally combines and interrelates technical terms and concepts from traditions as distant and diverse from each other as Kantian transcendentalism, the Neo-Confucian “teaching of the heart-mind” (*xinxue* 心學), and Buddhist Tiantai scholastics, to name but the most prominent cardinal points of his philosophical universe (cf. also p. 6). Clower, who is familiar with the sprawling intellectual edifices of Chinese Buddhist scholastics which prove at least as important as Neo-Confucian ethics or Kantian idealism for unravelling the intricate theoretical constructions of Mou’s philosophy, is thus excellently prepared for mastering the challenging task of translating Mou’s multifaceted and – at least in part – theoretically highly ambitious texts into English.

In view of the sheer diversity of Mou’s intellectual references and the complexity of his work, the very fact that Clower has succeeded to provide a faithful and highly readable translation without lapsing into technical jargon is admirable in itself. As Clower observes, it is not so much the complexity of Mou’s argumentation which sometimes renders his texts extremely difficult, but rather his tendency to renounce on making his claims more explicit (p. 24). In his interpretation and reconstruction of Chinese philosophy, the need for devising detailed arguments for his specific views on particular problems apparently seemed less urgent to him than the encyclopaedic obligation to cover all relevant developments in China’s intellectual history. Mou’s terminological idiosyncrasies along with the recurrent lack of explicitness in decisive passages of his works have provoked highly controversial assessments of his philosophical references, most obviously so with respect to Kant.<sup>8</sup> In this context it reads like a caveat against underestimating Mou’s familiarity with Kantianism, when Clower relates a case where his understanding of Mou’s use of the recognisably Buddhist term *xiang* (相 “distinctive mark”) profited from taking into account the Kantian implications suggested by Mou’s glosses (pp. 216–217).

Clower starts his introduction (pp. 1–27) with a concise portray of Mou Zongsan and his time. He explains his selection of essays and highlights the most important aspects of Mou’s thought as they emerge in the anthology. His compilation of essays aims to gather texts of a general significance for understanding the major

---

<sup>8</sup> Thus Lee Ming-Huei characterises Mou’s work as an “immanent critique” of Kant’s philosophy directly inspired by a number of systematic difficulties with Kant’s thought (Lee 2001: 65). Hans-Rudolf Kantor claims a Kantian perspective and judges Mou’s adoption of Kantian transcendentalism as outright revisionist (Kantor 1999: 438, 443, 451). Schmidt holds that, from within a Kantian frame of reference, Mou’s claim that man can have intellectual intuition “can only strike one as silly” (Schmidt 2011: 268).

tenets of Mou's thought, although Clower admits that his choice clearly reflects his personal interest in the Buddhist-Confucian relationship (p. 5). Many of the essays included are based on lectures addressed to a general public, as they make "more concessions to clarity than usual" (p. 6). Clower's consideration of Buddhist influences on Mou's thought makes this selection of essays especially valuable, as it focuses on an aspect of Mou's work which, compared to Mou's studies on Neo-Confucianism and his work on Kant, is still underrepresented in the growing literature on Mou's thinking.<sup>9</sup>

Clower arranges Mou's essays in three loosely defined topical groups dedicated to the future of Chinese philosophy, its methodology and problems, and its history, respectively (p. 7).

The first part, "The Future of Chinese Philosophy" (ch. 1–3), gathers three essays by Mou composed between 1990 and 1992. In "Objective Understanding and the Remaking of Chinese Culture" (ch. 1, pp. 31–60), a keynote address at the first International Conference on New Confucianism in 1990, Mou relates his call for a Confucian revival of Chinese culture with an acerbic complaint about the paltry level of scholarship in twentieth century China. He criticises some of the intellectual giants of the Republican period, both his adversaries like Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) and Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990) and his Confucian comrades-in-spirit Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988) and Xiong Shili 熊十力 (1885–1968). In Mou's view, their common failure was their lack in what he calls "objective learning". This concept appears to be related to the comprehensiveness and factual accuracy of one's studies, but also to scholarly impartiality and moral steadfastness. However, the significance of this term appears rather elusive and the concept remains pale, not least in contrast to Mou's harsh judgements on most of his colleagues. Although this text stays rather vague philosophically, its placement at the very beginning of the anthology is nonetheless a convincing editorial decision: It presents Mou's personal view back on the formative period of his thought in his younger years and thus resumes the introduction topically, complementing it with his subjective perspective on the intellectual world of Republican China. Chapter 2, "The Chinese Idea of Settling Oneself and Establishing One's Destiny" (pp. 61–69, 1991), revolves around Mencius's notion of "establishing one's fate" (*li ming* 立命) and emphasises the crucial role of rationality and of people's immanent morality for a successful

---

<sup>9</sup> This is true in spite of Hans-Rudolf Kantor's work on Mou's studies on *Tiantai*-Buddhism (Kantor 1999, 2006), Clower's own publications on the topic (Clower 2010, 2011), and a special forum on Mou Zongsan and Buddhism in the *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* (vol. 38, 2nd issue) published in 2011.

modernisation of China. In “Meeting at Goose Lake – The Great Synthesis in the Development of Chinese Culture and the Merging of Chinese and Western Tradition” (ch. 3, pp. 70–87), Mou’s keynote speech to the second International Conference on New Confucianism in 1992, Mou, encouraged by the withdrawal of Marxist-Leninist materialism from academic discourse in the People’s Republic, conjures the imminent realisation of a new “idealism” (p. 77) combining a Chinese-style “mind-only theory” (*weixinlun* 唯心論) with Western philosophy (p. 83).

The second part of the anthology, dedicated to concepts and problems of Chinese philosophy (ch. 4–6), starts with “Philosophy and the Perfect Teaching” (ch. 4; pp. 91–94), a short discussion of the Buddhist notion of the “perfect teaching” which is pivotal for Mou’s project of synthesising Chinese and Western philosophy. Heading straight towards the problem of the highest good – the core of his moral metaphysics (p. 91) –, Mou bemoans the alleged theoretical slant of modern European and in particular Anglo-American philosophy and contrasts this to the ancient Greek model of philosophy with its pursuit for the good life. As Mou sees it, the Chinese “teachings” of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism represent practical attempts to realise precisely this ultimate goal of philosophy. The outline of Mou’s Confucian critique of the Kantian conceptualisation of the highest good closing this essay shows both the purpose and the philosophical limits of Mou’s endeavour (pp. 92–94). Chapter 5, “Ten Great Doctrinal Disputes in the Development of Chinese Culture” (pp. 95–113), presents Mou’s peculiar perspective on China’s intellectual history. The reason why Clower includes this sketch of Mou’s view on the history of Chinese philosophy is the rationale structuring his presentation: For Mou, Chinese intellectual history revolves around a notion of moral self-cultivation that leads, through the centuries, to an ever increasing awareness of the alleged core of Chinese thought. Mou chooses to present this growing insight into the purported essence of human nature as a series of intellectual disputes each of which marks a decisive advancement towards what Mou regards as a full-fledged notion of moral autonomy. When he eventually arrives at what he considers the pressing conflict of his own time, it becomes evident just how tightly this view on the intellectual past of China is entwined with Mou’s culturalist agenda for its present: The last dispute included is nothing less than the fight between the irreconcilable antipodes of Communism and Chinese culture. “Transcendental Analysis and Dialectical Synthesis”, given as a keynote speech at a conference of East-West comparative philosophy in 1993, forms chapter 6 (pp. 114–122) of the collection. Mou here delineates his own understanding of dialectics as a peculiar method of spiritual cultivation that leads to a higher state through contradictions (p. 114).

He deplores the weakness of Hegel's notion of dialectics which he considers as a conflation of the processes of thinking and being. *This* in fact is nothing less than Hegel's original sin in philosophy, as from here, there is a straight line to Marx and to the calamities of twentieth century China (pp.118–119). One serious consequence of Mou's revision of Hegelian dialectics, inadvertent or not, is the disposal of the latter's crucial insight that the subject and its consciousness are the outcome of a real historical process. True, without the possibility to reach the eventual aim of the dialectics of liberation – the ultimate state of freedom and equality of all human beings – Hegelian dialectics loses its potential to conceive of an end of the struggle for freedom. Still, Hegel speaks about historical subjects, individuals who fight for their freedom. It is precisely this struggle which is thought to drive history ahead, a rationale Mou simply chooses to ignore. In stark contrast to Hegel's concept, Mou's "spiritual dialectics" moreover leads the individual practitioner of self-cultivation to find peace in his insight that, in spite of all the hardship and injustice in this world, he is, on a more fundamental level, "complete here and now" (p.121). Mou's attempt to "avoid" the catastrophes provoked by the untameable struggle for freedom thus not only forsakes the theoretical punchline of Hegelian dialectics, it also replaces real liberation with the merely spiritual freedom of inner consolation.

The third part of the collection, "History of Chinese Philosophy" (ch. 7–10), gathers a series of texts considerably older than those presented in the first two parts. Chapter 7, "Confucian Moral Metaphysics" (pp.125–144), was originally published in 1975 and presents Mou's particular view on Confucianism with its strong emphasis on the "teaching of the heart-mind" (*xinxue* 心學). The prominence of this variant of imperial Neo-Confucianism results from Mou's decision to assess the philosophical value of Neo-Confucian teachings on the basis of the criterion of whether they acknowledge a priority of practical over theoretical reason. For him, the most mature expression of such a prioritisation is the identification of "mind" (*xin* 心) and "reason" (*li* 理) which he somewhat daringly identifies with the Kantian concepts of conscience and moral law: On this rationale, Kant himself fares better than Zhu Xi 朱熹 (1130–1200), but is far behind Mencius (tr. 372–289 BC), Lu Xiangshan 陸象山 (1139–1192) or Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) (p.131). Unlike Zhu Xi, Kant is said to have recognised the priority of practical over theoretical reason: But his conception of the connection of free will and moral law for Mou is inferior to that of the proponents of *xinxue*, as it fails to account for a *principium executionis* of the moral law. This essay thus nicely illustrates how deeply Mou's interpretation and assessment of traditional Chinese thinkers is soaked with Kantian ethics – even if the precise relation between Kantian and Confucian



terms is often left implicit and rather results from what Stephan Schmidt has characterised as a hermeneutic strategy of “translation qua equalisation”.<sup>10</sup> Chapter 8, entitled “Three Lineages of Song-Ming Confucianism” (pp. 145–175), also deals with Mou’s reappraisal of imperial Neo-Confucianism which results in his refutation of Zhu Xi’s and Cheng Yi’s 程頤 (1033–1107) orthodox status due to their alleged failure to appreciate the concrete and creative-cum-practical rather than abstract and theoretical character of the Confucian Way. Chapter 9, “The Rise of Buddhist Learning in the Northern and Southern Dynasties, Sui, and Tang” (pp. 176–199), is Mou’s first lecture in a course on Mediaeval Buddhism held in 1976–1977. In spite of its title, this essay is mainly an excursion through the intellectual history of China from the early imperial era to the twentieth century. Mou seizes the opportunity to present his highly problematic assessment of Qing evidential scholarship according to which there is a straight line from evidential scholarship to the positivist intellectual climate of twentieth century China that allegedly prepared the ground for the rise of the Communist Party. Mou fails to substantiate this claim, and the only commonality between evidential scholarship and the intellectual atmosphere of twentieth century China seems to be the tendency – equally dangerous and contemptible in Mou’s view – to detach erudition from spiritual cultivation. Chapter 10, “The Place of the Tiantai Tradition in Chinese Buddhism” (pp. 201–211), contains a discussion of the concepts of “discriminating” (*fenbie de* 分別的) and “non-discriminating” (*fei fenbie de* 非分別的) explanation which are indispensable for understanding the Tiantai conception of a “perfect teaching” so crucial for Mou’s own philosophy.

In a separate appendix (pp. 213–224), Clower eventually provides a translation of one of the more arcane passages of Mou’s 1975 *Phenomenon and Thing-in-Itself* (translated by Clower as “Appearance and Thing-in-Itself”, see p. 213). It deals with the self-negation of the moral heart-mind and its subsequent transformation into object-oriented understanding. This shows that Clower does not shy away from Mou’s more difficult and problematic texts. It is not only the highly figurative and fleeting language which renders this core piece of Mou’s philosophy so difficult. Not least, it illustrates the extent to which Mou’s thought is entrenched in a kind of metaphysical speculation which tends to remain as opaque as it is likely to alienate many modern academic readers. According to the present reviewer, Mou’s figure of a self-negating infinite cosmic consciousness marks the point where the limits of his essentialist culturalism surface most blatantly. This emerges if one relates it to one of the most striking features of Mou’s thought: his obstinate anti-Communism.

---

<sup>10</sup> Schmidt 2011: 264.



At one point, Mou claims that “my disgust for Marx is not a bias but a true inability to appreciate him” (p. 53). However, Mou’s refusal of Communism strikes one as extremely emotional and hardly ever argued for. Polemically put, there appears to be a hefty dose of irrationality in play here: “Communism is a demonic heresy and should be thoroughly eradicated” (p. 112), and “Mao Zedong was a great devil” (p. 119). Again, in view of the political catastrophes in the aftermath of the Communist seizure of power one can understand Mou’s fervent anti-communism. Still, it is rather surprising that a thinker of his format and with his obsession with the problem of the Modern decided simply to ignore the theoretical aspects of Marx’s critique of capitalist modernity. Mou’s negligence of non-spiritual factors in the course of history is most strikingly reflected in his exaltation of “moral knowing” which at one point he characterises as follows: “The expression of moral knowing on the spot as filiality and reverence for elders and love is something that issues forth in response to circumstances, and the mind that is expressed is an absolute one” (p. 166). This kind of instantaneous moral knowing is precisely what according to Mou is realised in intellectual intuition: As soon as I stand face to face with my parents, I not only suddenly and intuitively know how to act correctly but I cannot but realise adequate filial behaviour. Mou thus *essentialises* morality and defines as human nature a set of social norms of interpersonal relationships. Turning into “anthropological constants”, moral norms are here elevated above the merely accidental course of history and unhinged from their connection to the conditions of particular forms of society. With Mou, the absolute moral mind which warrants the eternal validity of moral norms has the power consciously to negate itself and to provide the conditions for establishing a Chinese modernity which has science and democracy and all the other desirable ingredients of a modern society. Such unswerving confidence and solemn elation almost unwittingly invokes Marx’s and Engels’s wake-up call in the *Communist Manifesto*: In capitalist modernity, a definite end is put to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. The motley of ties that bound man to his “natural superiors” is torn asunder, what used to be holy is profaned. To be sure, the rhetorical pathos of the *Manifesto* itself may today appear as outdated as some of Mou’s moralistic and metaphysical musings. Yet, however moot Marx’s and Engels’s own analysis of the dynamics of modernisation may prove, it could still have alarmed Mou that Hegelian and Marxian historical dialectics after all might be more than mere fanatic devilry resulting from a cataclysmal category error. Mou’s culturalism and moralism at any rate seem a rather unconvincing response to the impositions of modernity – and one suspects that he might have profited from taking intellectually more serious his most passionately abhorred enemy.

Clower's selection of essays by Mou Zongsan is an excellent introduction into the intellectual world of one of the most influential thinkers of China's twentieth century. The essays chosen are very different in character, but their arrangement is well-considered and in their entirety they yield a representative and detailed picture of Mou's vision of Chinese philosophy. Anyone interested in the history of New Confucianism and in the intellectual history of twentieth century China in general will profit from reading this book. The book includes a helpful index which facilitates the reader's orientation, and numerous notes ensure that it is also accessible to a broader public.

*Late Works of Mou Zongsan* doubtless is an impressive proof of Mou's erudition. Whether Mou is the *philosopher* of first rank suggested by Clower is likely to remain controversial also among future readers of this anthology.

## References

- Billioud, Sébastien (2011): *Thinking Through Confucian Modernity. A Study of Mou Zongsan's Moral Metaphysics*. Leiden: Brill.
- Chan, N. Serina (2011): *The Thought of Mou Zongsan*. Leiden: Brill.
- Clower, Jason (2010): *The Unlikely Buddhologist: Tiantai Buddhism in Mou Zongsan's New Confucianism*. Leiden: Brill.
- Clower, Jason (2011): "Mou Zongsan on the Five Periods of Buddha's Teaching". *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 38.2: 109–205.
- Kantor, Hans-Rudolf (1999): *Die Heilslehre im Tiantai-Denken des Zhiyi (538–597) und der philosophische Begriff des 'Unendlichen' bei Mou Zongsan (1909–1995)*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Kantor, Hans-Rudolf (2006): "Ontological Indeterminacy and its Soteriological Relevance: An Assessment of Mou Zongsan's (1909–1995) Interpretation of Zhiyi's (538–597) Tiantai Buddhism". *Philosophy East and West* 56.1: 16–68.
- Lee, Ming-Huei (2001): *Der Konfuzianismus im modernen China*. Leipzig: Universitätsverlag.
- Lehmann, Olf (1998): "'Moderner Konfuzianismus' zwischen Lehre und 'Argumentation'". In: *Der Konfuzianismus: Ursprünge – Entwicklungen – Perspektiven*. Edited by Ralf Moritz, Lee Ming-Huei, Thomas Jansen and Gabriele Goldfuß. Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 196–215.
- Makeham, John (2008): *Lost Soul – "Confucianism" in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse*. Cambridge MA/London: Harvard University Press.
- Mou Zongsan (2003): *Spécificités de la philosophie chinoise*. Translated by Ivan P. Kamenarović and Jean-Claude Pastor. Paris: Cerf.
- Mou Zongsan xiansheng quanji weiyuanhui 牟宗三先生全集委員會 (2003): *Mou Zongsan xiansheng quanji* 牟宗三先生全集, 32 vols. Taibei 台北: Lianjing 聯經.
- Schmidt, Stephan (2011): "Mou Zongsan, Hegel, and Kant: The Quest for Confucian Modernity". *Philosophy East and West* 61.2: 260–302.



**Green, Nile:** *Terrains of Exchange. Religious Economies of Global Islam.*

London: Hurst, 2014, xvii + 395 S., ISBN 978-0-1902-2253-6.

Reviewed by **Ulrich Brandenburg**, Asien-Orient-Institut, Universität Zürich, Rämistrasse 59, Zürich 8001, Switzerland, E-mail: [ulrich.brandenburg@uzh.ch](mailto:ulrich.brandenburg@uzh.ch)

DOI 10.1515/asia-2016-0009

Can religious change be grasped through the lens of the market metaphor, i. e. the model of the “religious economy”? Nile Green, Professor of History at UCLA, shows in his most recent book that the idea of the market place greatly improves our understanding of the ways in which a globally expanding brand of missionary Christianity influenced and thoroughly changed its Muslim competitors during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For Green, religious markets are metaphors for the spaces in which specific sets of religious beliefs are advertised and supplied to their customers and in which religious entrepreneurs exchange techniques and tools to promote their respective beliefs. Green’s book is thus mostly unconcerned with religion’s relation to capitalism. It is about encounters, adaptations and, last but not least, competition in a process of the globalization of religions.

The terminology of the book is at first confusing. Green tries to establish a set of analytical categories which correspond to the market metaphor – as he already did in his previous book *Bombay Islam* (2011). Religious societies become “firms”, missionaries are “entrepreneurs” and practitioners are described as “customers”. While this may lead the reader to some misunderstandings in the beginning, it fulfils the purpose of making her rethink the language and categories through which Islam and religion are generally understood. Green’s purpose, as he states it, is to conceive of Islam not as a discursive tradition in Talal Asad’s understanding but “as an internally competitive field of social actors and organizations” (p. 10). He challenges the idea that there exists a single global Islam and insists that, on the contrary, locally differing forces of supply, demand and competition led to very heterogeneous forms of Islam.

*Terrains of Exchange* is a contribution to global history, written in seven micro-historical case studies broadly connected to the Iranian and Indian contexts. These episodes are organized in a roughly chronological order ranging from the early nineteenth century up to the eve of the Second World War. They form three larger segments entitled “Evangelicals” (ch. 1–3), “Innovators” (ch. 4–5) and “Exporters” (ch. 6–7) which highlight a trajectory leading from early Muslim responses to the Christian missionary challenge to adaptations and

re-inventions of Islam in local market places on to the global propagation and spatial expansion of new forms of Islam. Underlying this trajectory is the assumption that the British Empire from the early nineteenth century onwards should be understood as an “evangelical empire” in which numerous actors endeavoured to convert Asia to Christianity. Green contends that the impact of the Christian missionary movement among Muslims was significant although the number of converts remained small. This is important since the significance of Christian missionaries and their relation to the imperial project remain a topic of controversy.<sup>1</sup> Green’s book is an impressive reminder that missionaries and the urge to proselytize should not be overlooked in the study of imperialism.

Chapter one takes the reader to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge where professors of Oriental languages like John David Macbride and Samuel Lee did not only pursue scholarly interests but were deeply engaged in missionary activities. What is ironical is that in order to refute Islam and translate the Bible into languages like Arabic or Persian they needed assistance from Muslim co-operators and converts and laid the foundation for the emulation of their methods in Muslim lands.

Chapter two deals with Christian missionary printing in the Arabic alphabet and the spread of print technology to Iran and the Middle East. It mainly follows the activities of the Iranian student Mirza Salih Shirazi who was sent to Britain in 1815 where he got exposed to Christianity and the evangelical enterprise. Mirza Salih chose to make use of the opportunities which missionary endeavours towards Muslims offered and became an apprentice Bible printer, learning how to print Christian works in Arabic and Persian. Returning to Iran, he managed to take a printing press with him and later went on to pioneer the first Iranian newspaper.

Chapter three moves the scene from Britain to Iran and to the Russo-Iranian border where European missionary societies had outsourced the work of translating the Bible into Persian. Looking at several examples Green demonstrates how “a series of talented, ambitious and mobile Muslim translators used Bible work as an opportunity to access missionary firms’ technologies, contacts and capital and to redirect them towards their own agendas” (p. 109). Native co-workers in the translation projects could hope for knowledge and language skills, social capital and not least financial benefits.

Chapter four moves on to India and introduces the religious market of the princely state of Hyderabad in the early twentieth century. This market

---

<sup>1</sup> For a recent contribution which denies a larger importance of missionary activity see Motadel 2014: 1–31.

was characterized by its plurality and the appearance not only of Christian missionaries but also of missionary Hinduism and different varieties of missionary Islam. The chapter traces the emergence of a purified, scripturalist and “disenchanted” Sufi movement under the leadership of Mu‘inullah Shah. In this episode, capitalism enters into the picture as Mu‘inullah’s success was partly due to the demands of the flourishing textile industry for a strong work ethic.

Chapter five then presents a very different, “enchanted” version of Islam which in this case is shaped by a Hindu, “showing that it is not necessary to identify or be identified as a Muslim to produce Islam” (p. 36). This is the story of how the prime minister of Hyderabad in his writings represented the former Muslim soldier Taj al-Din Baba, who after being diagnosed mentally ill was seen by many as a holy man, as a miracle-worker. In doing so, he not only satisfied his own spiritual needs but at the same time promoted Hyderabad’s project of Hindu-Muslim unity against growing sectarianist movements.

Chapter six looks at the activities of Muhammad Sadiq, a missionary for the Ahmadiyya movement in New York, Chicago and Detroit between 1920 and 1923. While he preached the Ahmadi version of Islam with considerable success especially among African-Americans the techniques and strategies he used were shaped by the experiences in the contested Indian market places. First inspired by Christian missionaries, they now found their way back into a Christian country.

Chapter seven retraces the construction of the first mosque in Japan by the Indian merchant community of Kobe. Here again, the skills used in planning and fund-raising were adapted from the model of church-building projects by Christian missionaries. Fittingly, the construction works were entrusted to a Czech architect who had proven himself in the building of several churches in Japan. The opening of the mosque in 1935 was hailed as a milestone in the global outreach of Islam and its emancipation vis-à-vis the other religions in Japan, not least as a missionary force.

Taken as a whole, *Terrains of Exchange* makes for a highly enlightening read and constitutes probably the best account of the sense of competition which drove and motivated religious actors during the long nineteenth century. It deepens our understanding about the emergence of modern missionary movements in Islam and about the ways in which local competition could lead religious actors to global action. Each chapter in itself is well-written and highlights an important stage in the reshaping and remodelling of Islam in the face of competition, with the outcome of different forms of successful Islams.

Minor points of criticism concern the composition of the last chapter where Green goes at considerable lengths to inform the reader about the role of religion



in Japan since the Meiji Restoration and the development relations between Japan and Middle Eastern Muslims. As not all this background information seems to be necessary to grasp the main points of the chapter some more stringency would have been beneficial. A rather amusing mistake is made in one of the illustrations of the same chapter, where the Russian Tatar pan-Islamist Abdürreşid İbrahim is confused with the Indian merchant V. H. Toorabally (p. 240).

A larger question which remains is whether the usage of the market metaphor leads us as stringently to the variety of different Islams as Green affirms. In the end, markets can also be conceived as creating standards and criteria to determine what should be labelled as “Islam” and what should not. In this sense the outcome of the market would not only be a set of different Islams but a new global understanding about the essence of Islam as well.

Another point which is not addressed satisfactorily in Green’s market framework consists of the identitarian aspects of religion and ultimately the question why Christian missionaries failed to convert larger numbers of Muslims or why Islam remained numerically insignificant in Japan. Why would most people not change their religious allegiance more often if they encounter an innovative product on the market? While Green in his case studies points to savvy local competition in Hyderabad or the nationalist environment in Japan which hampered foreign imports, this cannot serve as a general rule. Staying within the metaphor of the market, a general question would be in how far religions – conceived as products – are perfect substitutes or if there are deeper loyalties at play.

The positive impressions, however, far outweigh any criticism which can be made. This book cannot be recommended highly enough.

## Bibliography

- Green, Nile (2011): *Bombay Islam. The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840–1915*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Motatel, David (ed.) (2014): *Islam and the European Empires*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**Landry-Deron, Isabelle (ed.):** *La Chine des Ming et de Matteo Ricci (1552–1610). Le premier dialogue des savoirs avec l'Europe.* Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf/Institut Ricci, 2013, 242 pp., ISBN 978-2-20409-617-1.

Reviewed by **Rui Magone**, University of Lisbon, Lisboa, Portugal. E-mail: [maguorui@gmail.com](mailto:maguorui@gmail.com)

DOI 10.1515/asia-2015-0061

*La Chine des Ming et de Matteo Ricci (1552–1610)*, carefully edited by Isabelle Landry-Deron, who is best known for her seminal monograph on Jesuit historiography of China,<sup>1</sup> contains the proceedings of an international conference that took place in May 2010 at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of Matteo Ricci's death. The book's structure is identical to the one adopted for the conference, consisting of the three main sections: "Quelle Chine? Quels Réseaux?" (pp. 15–71), which is thematically focused on Ricci's personal networks in China; "L'expérience des autres religions" (pp. 73–145), which is concerned with Ricci's perspective on Chinese religious beliefs; and "Échanges scientifiques" (pp. 147–209), which is devoted to Ricci's scientific impact in China. Preceded by an "Introduction" authored by the editor (pp. 7–14), its content consists of a total of 13 chapters, including two contributions, authored by Jean Dhombres and Pierre Léna, that were not part of the 2010 conference program. These additional chapters have a somewhat paratextual status, not only because of their position at the main text's very end, which makes them look like postscripts to the book under review, but rather because they were in fact written by non-sinologists who happen to be luminary figures in the French scientific community. Their presence provides the volume with a somewhat glamorous patina that does not affect the main text's sinological substance too much, even though Pierre Léna's text, "La science, un pont entre les cultures" (pp. 203–209), is clearly off the topic as it is less focused on Ricci and Ming China than on presenting the international work of the French "Main à la pâte" foundation, which aims at improving the quality of science and technology teaching in primary and middle schools. Another paratextual decision made by the editor was to drop the title originally used for the conference, namely "L'échange des savoirs entre la Chine et l'Europe au temps de Matteo Ricci (1552–1610)", and rename its proceedings in a way that better reflects the volume's content (specifically the many contributions that are not primarily

---

<sup>1</sup> Landry-Deron 2002.

concerned with the scientific exchange between Ricci and the Ming literati elites), while being broad enough as to attract both expert readers and less specialized audiences. In other words, this is not just the proceedings of a conference on Ricci and his times. Rather, it is a full-fledged mainstream publication in which known content has been paratextually revised, also by adding an extensive “Bibliographie” (pp. 211–224), an “Index des noms de personnes” (pp. 225–229) and an elegant cover featuring a portrait of Matteo Ricci sitting with his friend Xu Guangqi (1562–1633) in a highly stylized literati setting. As such, it is part of the historical series issued by Éditions du Cerf, a highly productive and popular Catholic publishing house whose range of interests revolves around religious topics, in particular the history of Christianity.

The book’s topic is obviously not new. Since the publication of Henri Bernard’s *Le Père Mathieu Ricci et la société chinoise de son temps (1552–1610)* (Tianjin: Hautes Études, 1939) a lot has been written about this subject. And unavoidably, also in an attempt to reach readers other than just specialists, this volume reiterates a lot of our received and frequently repeated knowledge about Ricci. But it does so in an interesting manner by making palpable why Ricci’s encounter with China is still such a rich and captivating historical narrative worth being told over and over again. There is, first of all, the thrill of adventure. For someone born in a peripheral mid-sized town in Italy to travel all the way from Europe to the heart of the vast Chinese empire was by no means a small achievement in the sixteenth century. True, compared with his most famous predecessor Marco Polo (ca. 1254–1324), Ricci’s mode of traveling was fairly institutionalized. He voyaged within the Jesuit networks that were logistically supported by the Portuguese Padroado. Yet, as Isaia Iannaccone shows in his short contribution carrying the suggestive title “Le voyage de Matteo Ricci et des jésuites en Chine. Science, typhons, pirates, naufrages, maladies” (pp. 149–153), these voyages were far from safe. The ships connecting Lisbon with China via Goa were slow and fragile vehicles of transportation, and as such exposed to all sorts of dangers, both from within (scurvy and other health hazards, insufficient navigation skills) and without (uncharted rock formations, unpredictable weather conditions, pirate attacks). In the space of a few pages, Iannaccone, digesting previous scholarship on this topic, succeeds in conveying to his readers the precariousness of Ricci’s long voyage to Asia aboard the *São Luís*. In spite of the many dangers involved, Ricci survived the long trip to China, where the actual adventure began for him. His first main challenge was linguistic. Unlike modern foreigners who can rely on legions of Chinese language teaching courses and materials in all kinds of formats, Ricci had to literally start from scratch since little to almost nothing was known about the Chinese language back then. In other words, while trying to learn Chinese, he was also

observing it from the perspective of a proto-linguist. In her illuminating contribution, “La connaissance de la langue et de l’écriture chinoises au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle en Europe”, Viviane Alleton discusses Ricci’s reflections on the Chinese language using as her main source the French version of Nicolas Trigault’s (1577–1628) edition of Ricci’s notes about China.<sup>2</sup> Her chapter shows that Ricci did not just learn and describe the Chinese language. In fact, over the years his knowledge of Chinese became so impressively solid that he was able, with the assistance of stylistically high-skilled Ming literati, to create a fairly large number of neologisms that are still used actively in modern Chinese. His excellent command of Mandarin allowed him to interact with the Ming elites at ease and, moreover, on a very high level. As a result, he succeeded in establishing powerful networks based on which he was able to ultimately gain access to the Forbidden City. This long “ascent” to Beijing, which started out in the peripheral Zhaoqing in Guangdong Province and took decades to complete, is elegantly retold by Michel Cartier in his contribution “Le statut de Matteo Ricci en Chine” (pp.17–27). But Cartier does more than just that. He draws in fact attention to one paradox that is right at the core of the Ricci saga: despite his rapidly growing success and notoriety, Ricci always had a formally rather insecure and brittle status during the many decades he spent in Ming China. To a certain extent, he was like a refugee, tolerated and later on appreciated on Chinese soil, but never sure if and how long he could stay in the land of his choice. However, this did not deter him from keeping on doing what he had come to do in the first place.

What is especially captivating about Ricci’s missionary career in China – and the book under review is very good at making this aspect palpable – is that it led to a cultural encounter of the highest order, in which, unlike in the undeniably more violent nineteenth and twentieth centuries, two civilizations approached each other via the pen rather than the sword. True, Iberian schemes to conquer the Middle Kingdom militarily did exist, at least on paper, but this early modern phase of Sino-Western relations was primarily a peaceful one. Besides adventurism, this is indeed one aspect that makes the Ricci saga so appealing, especially to those living in our conflict-ridden age of globalization. In her very accessible overview chapter, “Les activités scientifiques de Matteo Ricci en Chine” (pp.169–183), Claudia von Collani shows the extent to which Ricci’s peaceful approach relied in fact on his large literary production in Chinese. His many publications, a large part of which revolved around scientific topics, circulated in the empire, thus reaching a considerable number of readers,

---

2 Ricci/Trigault 1978.

some of whom, intrigued by the novelty of European ideas wanted to know more and hence felt the urge to write directly to Ricci or to visit him and engage with him in face-to-face conversations. But not all of these European ideas found resonance in China, as Jean-Claude Martzloff discusses in his contribution “Pourquoi avoir traduit Euclide en chinois. La raison d’un choix et ses conséquences” (pp. 155–168). According to him, Ricci’s project to translate Euclid’s *Elements* was motivated less by a scientific than a metaphysical agenda. As Ricci had learned from Christophorus Clavius (1538–1612), his famous teacher at the Collegium Romanum, the mathematical disciplines edified the soul and allowed the spirit to aptly contemplate divine objects. In short, geometry, especially its demonstrative side, gave access to the Truth. By contrast, from a Chinese perspective, as Martzloff convincingly shows, Euclid’s demonstrations and their metaphysical implications were deemed both irrelevant and obscure, and, later on, in the nineteenth century, appropriated as an inferior variant of indigenous ideas that originated in Chinese antiquity. To what extent, then, did Ricci’s scientific and other activities have a transformative impact on the intellectual landscape of late imperial China? Thierry Meynard’s stimulating contribution, “Ricci et les intellectuels chinois aujourd’hui” (pp. 107–131), presents different responses to this question as they were elaborated by three leading Chinese intellectuals, all born in the 1950s. Did the Ming *Weltanschauung* diverge from European epistemic traditions in such a radical fashion that it could not process what Ricci and the Jesuits had to offer it intellectually, as Ge Zhaoguang contends? Or did it absorb some of these new ideas in order to establish a new tradition, i. e., Confucian monotheism, as Zhang Xiaolin argues? Or was it the other way round, as Li Tiangang suggests: had Catholicism in its late sixteenth century Jesuit version become universal enough in its outlook as to be absorbable by any culture without causing any significant cultural tensions? None of these responses is conclusive, of course, but they all reveal the strong impact that Ricci’s legacy has had on modern Chinese historiography.

*La Chine des Ming et de Matteo Ricci* provides its readers with more than just a good sense of the Ricci saga, thus allowing them, especially those new to the topic, to discover for themselves why Ricci’s biography and what he has achieved in China remain a source of fascination for experts and lay audiences alike. Rather, it also shows how sophisticated this field of research has become compared to the first half of the twentieth century when Henri Bernard wrote his then groundbreaking book on Ricci. Since then archival materials extant in Rome, Lisbon, Goa, Macao, and Beijing have become much more accessible to scholars, partly also as digital resources, and the field as such has turned into a still sizeable yet highly productive industry with experts from different areas of



knowledge exploring Ricci's life and achievements from various perspectives. Based on their findings, it has become possible to magnify any aspect of Ricci's career one wishes to know more about. Frédéric Wang's contribution "Matteo Ricci et les lettrés de Nankin" (pp. 29–42) is paradigmatic of this development. Focused on the fifteen crucial months that Ricci spent in Nanjing at the turn from the sixteenth to the seventeenth century, Wang immerses his readers in the complex world of Ming literati culture. Not only does he manage to get us acquainted with Ricci's most important contacts during these months, he also brings the many figures involved into context while highlighting the relevance of Wang Yangming's (1472–1529) legacy to the Confucian networks Ricci was trying to plug into in Nanjing. A similar inner, i. e., Chinese rather than Jesuit, perspective on Ricci is provided by Shenwen Li in his chapter "Les deux voyages de Matteo Ricci à Pékin. Gagner la capitale de l'empire céleste" (pp. 43–58). While making palpable the xenophobic atmosphere the Ming empire was shrouded in at that time, Li succeeds in zooming in all the way onto the Forbidden City, to the pompous imperial audience Ricci was invited to and which the emperor, weary of state affairs, declined to attend. The zooming function is also applied by Noël Golvers in his brilliant article "La 'bibliothèque' occidentale de Matteo Ricci à Pékin. Quelques observations critiques" (pp. 133–145), which tries to reconstruct the collection of books that Ricci had at its disposal in Beijing, especially when he was composing his many treatises on various topics, ranging from astronomy to mnemotechnics. Golvers makes an important distinction between texts that were materially available to Ricci, on the one hand, and his so-called "patrimoine de lecture", on the other hand, i. e., all the texts that were within his reach because he could access them physically, had systematic excerpts therefrom (commonly known as *adversaria*), or had incorporated them into his memory via studious reading. This approach to Ricci's mind is definitely less flamboyant than the one used by Jonathan D. Spence, who in his bestselling *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1984) created the impression that Ricci was a living library with a memory as vivid as Funes, the infamous Borgesian character who could not forget anything he had read or experienced.<sup>3</sup> The sober evidence painstakingly gathered by Golvers does not necessarily question Ricci's formidable memory, but it gives us a more realistic sense of how the Jesuit worked as an author, specifically how he accessed the great amounts of knowledge he needed for his prolific literary production.

---

<sup>3</sup> Borges 1944.



The book under review does not only zero in on Ricci and his career in China. It also pans out to look at him and the Jesuit mission from a bird's-eye perspective. Françoise Aubin's contribution "Au-delà de l'Empire chinois. Les bouleversements dans l'Asie intérieure au temps de Matteo Ricci" (pp. 75–88) gives us an impressive *grand tour* of what was going in Central Asia in Ricci's time and the extent to which this impacted China proper, including the Jesuit mission. Her chapter infuses historical energy into our rather static images of late imperial China while making palpable the degree to which the Ming empire's vast territory was in fact brittle and fragile. To a certain extent, the contribution by Jean Dhombres, "Comment analyser l'échange des savoirs entre la Chine et l'Europe au temps de Matteo Ricci?" (pp. 185–201) also allows us to zoom out of the very limited and rather linear view we tend to have of the cultural transfer that took place between Europe and China via the Jesuit mission. Complementing Martzloff's chapter on Ricci's translation of the *Elements*, Dhombres sketches out the complex evolution of geometrical traditions in Europe before and after the publication of the influential commentary to the *Elements* by Clavius, showing that the epistemic culture the Jesuits introduced in China was far from being static and uniform.

While looking at its main protagonist from a close range as well as from a more panoramic perspective, the book under review also tries to make visible, albeit to a much lesser extent, some of the historiographical filters that have been used in the making of the Ricci saga. Most notable in this aspect is Zvi Ben-Dor Benite's contribution "Ricci et les 'musulmans de Canton'. A propos du premier dialogue des jésuites avec l'Europe" (pp. 89–106), which basically traces back a short remark made by Ricci on Muslims in Guangzhou all the way from its original text to the version revamped by Trigault for his aforementioned edition of Ricci's notes on China, thus making palpable the qualitative differences between first-hand sources and illustrious publications with a propagandistic agenda. This chapter is philology at its best, revealing a brilliant hermeneutical mind attempting to prove that Ricci's disparaging words about Muslims in that particular note were actually a veiled critique of Portuguese colonialism. Ben-Dor Benite's interpretation may be valid, but it does not seem to be entirely unaffected by historiographical preferences – most salient in Spence's *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* – which tend to portray the Jesuit Ricci as an enlightened man of the Renaissance, i. e., erudite, rational and critical. This image tends to phase out one crucial aspect – arguably the driving force – in Ricci's life: religion. In fact, Ricci's faith in God and the impact it had on his everyday life in China is something that is altogether missing in the book under review. If we choose to count in religion, a somewhat different, less suave Ricci tends to emerge from the extant sources, at least occasionally. In his recent

biography of the Jesuit, Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia provides us with a glimpse of the religiously zealous Ricci literally shouting at his Buddhist opponent Abbott Xuelang Hong'en at a banquet that took place in Nanjing in 1599.<sup>4</sup> And even though Hsia himself tends to portray Ricci as level-headed and rational, it becomes clear from his account of Ricci's life that the Jesuit was a strictly observant practitioner of Catholicism who believed in signs of divine favor and the miraculous.<sup>5</sup> In fact, Ricci's double persona as religious missionary and scientific popularizer embodied a conflict that emerged already in the beginning years of the Jesuit mission to China. It revolved around the question as to what extent religion was expendable in relation to science, the one aspect of Jesuit culture the emperor and the elites in Ming China felt most attracted to. This conflict, as was extensively shown by Liam Brockey in his *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), became an overtly nationalistic one when in 1685 the authority of the Portuguese Padroado, until then the only official logistical sponsor of the Jesuit mission to China, was challenged by the king of France Louis XIV, who sent six mathematically highly trained French Jesuits directly to China on the grounds that they were scientifically more advanced than any Jesuit who could reach China via the usual Padroado channels. Considering this legacy, it is perhaps no great surprise that modern historiography has tended to favor the 'scientific' rather than the 'religious' Ricci. It was the former who laid the foundation for what turned the Jesuit mission into a success story that is appealing to our modern world, namely science. In this kind of historiographical operation, Ricci's anti-Lusitanian sentiments underscore his rational outlook, including his disdain for the parochial, irrational and ultimately religious dimension of the Jesuit China mission.

Interestingly, the manner in which *La Chine des Ming et de Matteo Ricci* is organized encourages its audiences to read the Ricci narrative mainly as a success story. Its contributions approach Ricci from a perspective that knows and advertises the outcome of the long adventure which started out in little Macerata and culminated in the glorious Forbidden City. Less palpable, by contrast, is the sense of failure underlying this seemingly perfect narrative. It seems that the most efficient way to provide this perspective is to stick as much as possible to the chronology of events. This could be the main reason why Ronnie Hsia's biography of Ricci succeeds in capturing any reader's attention. It assumes the viewpoint of Ricci as a human agent who moves forward in

---

4 Hsia 2010: 194–198.

5 See e. g. Hsia 2010: 255–256.

time without any knowledge about his future. Through this perspective we understand much better the contingencies of Ricci's intellectual development, in particular the extent to which inventiveness and improvisation, failure and despair were an integral part of his everyday life in the many decades he spent in Ming China. This applies to his career as scientific author as well. Not everything Ricci wrote was as successful as the translation of Euclid's *Elements* he completed with Xu Guangqi. In fact, the *Qiankun tiyi* (On the structure of Heaven and Earth), Ricci's 1608 Chinese adaptation of *In Sphaeram Ioannis de Sacro Bosco Commentarius* compiled by his teacher Clavius in 1570, even though it was later included in the prestigious late eighteenth century *Siku quanshu*-collection, turned out to be a fiasco. But this translation effort was not entirely in vain. It resulted in a text published in 1615 that was much shorter and more accessible than Ricci's rather indigestible work, namely the *Tianwen lüe* (Epitome of Questions on Heaven) authored by Manuel Dias, Jr. (1574–1659) and a substantial team of palace examination graduates. Obviously, failure and success derived not just from a single individual's efforts. Rather, they had a collective dimension, based on which the Jesuits were able to develop and refine their proselytizing strategies in China, both on a macro- and micro-level. To give but one single yet significant example: Michele Ruggieri (1543–1607), who arrived in Guangdong Province before Ricci, was naïve and somewhat erratic in his efforts as Jesuit missionary in Ming China. Moreover, nobody could understand his heavily accentuated spoken Chinese. But it was by observing and assessing Ruggieri's achievements and many mistakes that the Jesuit mission was able to correct its initial course while realizing that solid Chinese language skills were an indispensable tool for networking with the Ming literati elites.<sup>6</sup>

It goes without saying that *La Chine des Ming et de Matteo Ricci's* kaleidoscopic rather than linear approach to its subject is fascinatingly diverse and informative. But this publication is definitely less apt at conveying the unidirectional and shaky vision of human agency than the recent conventionally chronological biographies by Ronnie Hsia or Michele Fontana.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as a scholarly publication with an agenda that is focused on celebrating – in close collaboration with the Jesuit Institut Ricci of Paris – the 400th anniversary of Ricci's death, it is naturally more concerned with the Jesuit's achievements than his setbacks, thus inadvertently shrouding its main protagonist in a thin yet tenacious veil of hagiography.

---

<sup>6</sup> See chapter 5 of Hsia 2010, which provides an excellent treatment of this Jesuit missionary.

<sup>7</sup> Fontana 2010.

To sum up, the book under review does not excel at newness. But it digests wonderfully for French reading audiences the most recent and important research findings in the internationally fast expanding field of Ricci studies. It provides multiple and fascinating perspectives on Ricci's career in China, using both microhistorical and synoptic registers. Even though it does not entirely succeed in penetrating or at least making visible the many historiographical agendas that have shaped our images of Ricci and his missionary activities in China, it is nevertheless an important publication, also because it aims at sharing expert knowledge with a rather heterogeneous lay readership in a manner that is similar to Ricci, who – as we know, also through this publication – did not say much that was new. His expertise rather lay in trimming and framing it differently so as to be able to persuasively reach new and often quite challenging audiences.

## Bibliography

- Bernard, Henri (1939): *Le Père Mathieu Ricci et la société chinoise de son temps (1552–1610)*. Tianjin: Hautes Études.
- Borges, Jorge Luis (1944): "Funes el memorioso". In: *Ficciones*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sur, 145–148.
- Brockey, Liam (2007): *Journey to the East: The Jesuit Mission to China, 1579–1724*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Clavius, Christophorus (1570): *In Sphaeram Ioannis de Sacrobosco Commentarius*. Rome: Helianus.
- Fontana, Michele (2010): *Matteo Ricci. Un jésuite à la cour des Ming*. Translated from the Italian by Robert Kremer et alii. Paris: Salvator.
- Hsia, Ronnie Po-Chia (2010): *A Jesuit in the Forbidden City: Matteo Ricci, 1562–1610*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Landry-Deron, Isabelle (2002): *La preuve par la Chine. "La Description" de J.-B. Du Halde, jésuite, 1735*. Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales.
- Li Madou 利瑪竇 [Matteo Ricci] (1983–1986): *Qiankun tiyi 乾坤體義*. In: *Yingyin Wenyuange siku quanshu 影印文淵閣四庫全*. Taipei: Taiwan shangwu yinshuguan, vol. 787, 756–806.
- Ricci, Matthieu /Trigault, Nicolas (1978): *Histoire de l'expédition chrétienne au royaume de la Chine, 1582–1610*. Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.
- Yang Manuo 陽瑪諾 [Manuel Dias, Jr.] (1965): *Tianwenlüe 天問略*. In: *Tianxue chuhan 天學初函*. Taipei: Xuesheng shuju, vol. 5, 2619–2718.



**Meulenbeld, Mark R.E.:** *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks, and the History of a Ming Novel*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015, 273 pp., ISBN 978-0-8248-3844-7.

Reviewed by **Philip Clart**, Sinologie, Universität Leipzig, Schillerstr. 6, Leipzig D-04109, Germany. E-mail: clart@uni-leipzig.de

DOI 10.1515/asia-2016-0011

This important new work puts forth arguments concerning primarily three subjects: the novel *Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義 (Canonization of the Gods), the cultural context of the Ming vernacular novel, and the relationship of Daoism and popular religion. The *Fengshen yanyi* serves as the case-study through which Meulenbeld develops his arguments on the latter two issues; as a reviewer I applaud this long-overdue study of an important, though hitherto neglected narrative text of the Ming period, but have some reservations when it comes to the extension of the insights drawn from this case-study to the wider field of Chinese religions.

The *Fengshen yanyi* has not received much critical attention in post-nineteenth-century scholarship in spite of its wide spread and popularity among readers in late Imperial China. In chapter 1 (“Invention of the Novel”), Mark Meulenbeld convincingly traces this neglect to the development of “literature” as a field of academic inquiry *sui generis*, i. e., as subject matter to be examined primarily in aesthetic terms as authorial creation. When applied to the vernacular novel in Ming and Qing times, this agenda led scholars to separate novels from their cultural context and focus instead on the aesthetic qualities of the texts themselves, understood and evaluated as “conscious fictions” (*yishi zhi chuangzao* 意識之創造) and “individual creations” (*duchuang* 獨創), in the influential phrasing of Lu Xun 魯迅 (p. 44). This perspective led to the canonization of a handful of “masterworks” such as *The Journey to the West* and *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, whose literary interpretation was largely isolated from their extra-textual context. In the case of *Journey to the West* as a religiously-themed novel, this meant that the rich religious content had to be reread metaphorically as addressing the human condition more generally rather than remaining tied to a surrounding religious culture that would limit the possible readings of this declared masterpiece. Having its roots in the age of Chinese modernization, Meulenbeld argues, the modern discipline of literary studies presupposed a secular (or even secularist) outlook that could appreciate novels of the late Imperial period only if their religious elements could be sublimated



by means of symbolic or metaphoric readings; works not amenable to such readings were regarded as being of low quality. Furthermore, a secularist perspective implied that the religious subject matter, being obviously (“scientifically”) untrue, must also be “conscious fiction”, albeit in the case of novels like the *Fengshen yanyi* of a less savoury type, namely, exaggerated phantasies and lies playing on popular superstitions. Meulenbeld rightly rejects the anachronism and ideological bias of this viewpoint and insists instead on reading Chinese novels as part of the cultural whole in the midst of which they emerged. The *Fengshen yanyi* is, of course, a grateful candidate for such a contextualized reading, as its impact on the Chinese religious imagination has long been recognized by folklorists and students of Chinese religions. However, Meulenbeld’s analysis goes far beyond the conventional view of narratives like the *Fengshen yanyi* serving as repertoires of stories and figures that are then taken up in local religious practices, local operas, and folk art. His core argument in this book is that the *Fengshen yanyi* itself is the product of a religious culture and only to be understood as such. The culture in question is thunder ritual (*leifa* 雷法), a complex of exorcistic rites based on the premise of conquering demons and then pressing them into the service of the ritualist against other demonic beings. Two ritual compendia, the *Daofa huiyuan* 道法會元 (Unified Origins of the Dao and Its Rituals) and *Fahai yizhu* 法海遺珠 (Forgotten Gems from the Sea of Rituals), contain thunder ritual texts from the Southern Song to the early Ming, i. e., significantly preceding the *Fengshen yanyi*, which was first printed only around 1625. Not only do these ritual texts contain most of the *Fengshen yanyi*’s protagonists as ritual agents, the sequential structure of the rites foreshadows the novel’s plot as a struggle between two forces ending in the canonization (bestowal of divine titles and ranks) of all demons and spirits involved. Therefore Meulenbeld argues that the novel is fundamentally a narrative elaboration of thunder rituals in that it both explains the provenance of their demonic agents and replicates in its plot the ritual structure. This interpretation is convincingly argued and documented, and should encourage us to revisit at least some late Imperial Chinese novels with a view towards re-conceptualizing them in relation to their religious contexts. Readings of the *Journey to the West* as based on an inner-alchemical (*neidan* 內丹) structural and procedural blueprint have already been offered in recent years and hold out the promise of exciting new discoveries to be made by a retooled literary analysis.

If *Fengshen yanyi* is closely tied to a type of ritual text and ritual performance, what can we learn from it and its wider context about the religious culture of Ming China? Meulenbeld follows up on this question by addressing the role of thunder rituals in the Ming dynasty with regard to their role in local

communities (chapter 3) and on the national level (chapter 4). He argues that thunder rituals are a key area where Daoism furnished models, procedures, and structures that informed local understandings of the spirit world, shaped institutions of local self-defence (such as militias), and integrated local communities into translocal and transregional networks headed by temples to the Emperor of the Eastern Peak (Dongyue Dadi 東嶽大帝). This ordering and integrating functionality of thunder rituals accounts for early Ming imperial reliance on and patronage of Daoist ritual specialists, who integrated the state cult shrines for the city gods and altars for baleful spirits (*litan* 厲壇) into the same hierarchies, with temples of the Emperor of the Eastern Peak as the key higher-order node. In short, Daoist liturgical networks are seen to be connecting and integrating state cult and popular religion into a larger cultural system at local, regional, and national levels. Daoism thus emerges as the cultural glue that held Ming society together. Meulenbeld here enters a long-standing debate about the relative autonomy of cultural subsystems in late Imperial China, in particular that of popular religion. He is clearly in favour of a view that accords Daoism a pivotal function in the cultural integration of late Imperial society and is critical of the notion of popular religion as a religious system with norms, notions, and procedures of its own, employing Daoist and Buddhist religious specialists only on its own terms. He accuses “theories that make categorical distinctions between popular religion and institutionalized religion” of “ideological bias”, tracing their championship of the “ordinary people” to “Marxist notions of class difference and perhaps modern democratic tastes” (pp. 17–18). By contrast, Meulenbeld sides with Kristofer Schipper and others in regarding local communities in south and southeast China (the regions he limits his claims to) as connected into larger networks by means of Daoist ritual (see his discussion on pp. 17–23). Here I beg to disagree to the extent that this becomes a generalized claim of Daoist hegemony in and over popular religion, reducing the latter to a passive sphere without agency or originality. Pushed to the extreme, this view would completely absorb popular religion into Daoism if it were not for the nagging awareness that it still maintains some kind of separate presence. Meulenbeld is somewhat at a loss as to how to refer to that presence, usually still using the term “popular religion”, often (though not always) qualified by being placed within quotation marks or called into question by the attribute “so-called”. Other terminology includes “local religion” (p. 17), “common Chinese theology” (p. 67), “the mongrel world of local religious diversity” (p. 68), and “the nameless elements of popular religion” (pp. 116–117). If popular religion is indeed a mongrel hodgepodge of nameless elements, then surely it makes sense that “the relational framework of the novel would offer a unified vision for the population at large who otherwise are not acquainted with systematic visions of

their socioreligious environment” (p.169), doesn’t it? I do not question Meulenbeld’s findings of the important role played by thunder rituals and their specialists in shaping the ways local communities in the Jiangnan region, and perhaps more widely in southern China, interacted with the world beyond their immediate borders, be that by the organization of local militias or by visits to higher-order temples of the Eastern Peak. However, this is a very partial (in both meanings of the word) view of the religious landscape of late Imperial Jiangnan. We have numerous studies of other aspects of local religious life in this area and time period, which provide quite different perspectives, for example, the spread of lay Buddhism and elite patronage for Buddhist monasteries in the late Ming, or the activities of organized popular religious movements such as the Non-Action Teachings (Wuweijiao 無為教) studied by Barend J. ter Haar in another book published by University of Hawai’i Press shortly before Meulenbeld’s work.<sup>1</sup> We also have Taiwan-based ethnographic studies of the management of religious diversity at the local level, which demonstrate a much more complex—and more interesting and challenging—picture than that provided by Dao-centric or any other reductionism.<sup>2</sup> In short, it is my considered opinion that Mark Meulenbeld’s study adds an important piece of the puzzle of local and regional religious life in late Imperial Jiangnan, but it is not a piece that rearranges the whole picture.

Before concluding this review, let me briefly address some minor points. Missing from the bibliography are a couple of earlier monographs on the *Fengshen yanyi*, the one by Zeng Qinliang even specifically addressing its relationship with popular religion.<sup>3</sup> Since the existing scholarship on the *Fengshen yanyi* is not unmanageable in scope, one would have expected at least a brief discussion of these predecessors.

Meulenbeld’s style is excellent throughout and the copy-editing meticulous, making this a highly readable and closely argued book. My only criticism in this regard extends to the concept of “Five Quarters”. Usually, the Chinese term *wufang* 五方 is rendered as “five directions”, which in my view is a perfectly serviceable translation. “Five Quarters”, by contrast, is as etymologically jarring as a trilogy in four parts or a duet for three voices.

Having commended the publisher’s careful copy-editing, I should add praise for the beautifully designed cover jacket and overall appearance of the book.

---

<sup>2</sup> Jordan 1976; Weller 1987.

<sup>3</sup> Zeng 1985; Li 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Zeng 1985; Li 2011.

However, it is a pity that the book uses endnotes instead of footnotes and provides no in-line Chinese characters. Both these features force the reader to do a lot of back-and-forth checking in the endnotes and the Chinese character glossary. While endnotes unfortunately have become standard for most publishers, University of Hawai'i Press books often do provide in-line Chinese characters, so I wonder why this enlightened (and technically not overly cumbersome) option was not chosen here.

To sum up, this is an important work that should be read by all students of Chinese literature and Chinese religions. For the study of the Chinese novel it provides a convincingly presented argument against literary reductionism and for a contextualized reading of late Imperial Chinese literature. When it comes to Chinese religions, it itself runs the risk of reductionism by over-generalizing its findings; in and of themselves these findings are very valuable for our understanding of local religious life in late Imperial Jiangnan, but their empirical shoulders are perhaps too narrow to carry the weight of Meulenbeld's more general argument about the Daoist domination of popular religion.

## Bibliography

- Jordan, David K. (1976): "The Jiaw of Shigaang (Taiwan): An Essay in Folk Interpretation". *Asian Folklore Studies* 35.2: 81–107.
- Li Aihong 李愛紅 (2011): *Fengshen yanyi de yishu xiangxiang yu jingdianhua yanjiu* 《封神演義》的藝術想像與經典化研究. Ji'nan: Qilu Shushe.
- ter Haar, Barend J. (2014): *Practicing Scripture: A Lay Buddhist Movement in Late Imperial China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Weller, Robert P. (1987): *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Zeng Qinliang 曾勤良 (1985): *Taiwan minjian xinyang yu Fengshen yanyi zhi bijiao yanjiu* 臺灣民間信仰與封神演義之比較研究 (2nd rev. ed.). Taipei: Huazheng Shuju.



**Richter, Antje:** *Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013, 235 pp., ISBN 978-0-295-99278-5.

Reviewed by **Kathrin Leese-Messing**, Sinologie, Asien-Orient-Institut, Zürichbergstrasse 4, Zurich 8001, Switzerland. E-mail: kathrin.leese-messing@aoi.uzh.ch

DOI 10.1515/asia-2015-0070

The period of early medieval China, roughly referring to the time from the late Eastern Hàn 漢 dynasty until the re-unification of the Chinese empire under the Suí 隋 and Táng 唐 dynasties (ca. 200–600 A.D.), remains one of the periods of Chinese history that has attracted less scholarly attention than it deserves. Antje Richter's book on the epistolary culture of early medieval China may serve as an example for this observation. While the general image of this period is still one of confusing political and cultural complexity, it is, nonetheless, generally agreed to be a highly important phase whose dramatic changes deeply affected Chinese culture. One historic change that unfolded its full effect during this period was the usage of paper and the subsequent flourishing of manifold literary genres. Among others, the early medieval period is also the first time in Chinese history providing us with not only a few isolated epistolary pieces, but with an "impressive flourishing of letter writing" (p. 11) resulting in a huge corpus of transmitted letters. It is thus the period in respect to which epistolary writings become tangible as a *genre* in the first place. That said, Richter is absolutely right in stating that this period is particularly well-suited as an introduction to Chinese letter writing (p. 11).

The book does not claim to represent an exhaustive survey of all that could be said about early medieval Chinese letters. With 150 pages of text and an additional 40 pages of endnotes, it serves as a first introduction to the topic. Yet, the book offers a significant contribution by making "the social practice and the existing textual specimens of personal Chinese letter writing from this period fully visible for the first time", both for researchers within the field of Chinese studies and for other disciplines engaging in epistolary research (p. 10). In the long run, Richter also hopes that her book may serve as an encouragement for "a more confident and consistent use of letters as historical and literary sources" and for further research in this field (pp. 10–11). This is indeed desirable, since – as Richter clearly demonstrates in her introduction – epistolary research has so far only played a marginal role in Chinese studies, especially if compared to all the research that has been dedicated to other cultures' epistolary writings (pp. 5–7). She also points out that examining letters is by no means a marginal enterprise merely concerning a special genre of Chinese literature,



but that it might yield further “insights into personal communicative culture and the historical, literary, and intellectual developments” (p.10).

Richter’s book is divided into two main parts, of which Part I (comprising two chapters) addresses general aspects concerning “Materials and Concepts of Letter Writing”, and Part II (comprising three chapters) engages with “Epistolary Conventions and Literary Individuality”.

The first chapter of Part I (“Materiality and Terminology”) offers an overview regarding the material, cultural, infrastructural and terminological foundations of early medieval Chinese letter writing.<sup>1</sup> In the sub-section on “Calligraphy and Letter Writing”, for example, Richter draws our attention to the importance of aesthetic handwriting as a particular feature of Chinese letter writing, which developed during the early medieval “calligraphic turn” (p.23). This is an important point, since it shows that letters were (or rather had the potential, for some people, to be) a lot more than “just” information sent from one person to another. In their artistic dimension, letters also bore strong social implications in terms of a distinctive – and *distinguishing* – feature of elite culture.

Since Richter wants to centre her book on personal letters, the last sub-section of chapter 1 aims at finding a definition of personal letters as opposed to official letters. This turns out to be a rather complex task. Richter refers to personal and official letters as “two fundamentally different types of written communication”, of which she defines the personal type as being “written because of personal motives and intentions that are largely independent of the writer’s official standing” (p.41). One point which Richter includes into her discussion of these definitional issues is the question in how far early medieval texts themselves differentiated between personal and official letters. On the one hand, Richter acknowledges a “certain hybridity as belonging to the genre” (p.41) and an “unreliability of genre labels” (p.40). She explains that personal letters were often labelled as “*shū*” 書, but that “this criterion is not comprehensive enough, because *shū* covers only letters written to equals or inferiors” (p.40). She further refers to some examples of letter designations showing that “[p]ersonal letters addressed to superiors were often labeled *jiān* 箋 (memorandum), a word used to designate a subgenre of official communication, which, however, was not applied consistently” (p.40). On the other hand, Richter also claims that early medieval books like Xiāo Tǒng’s 蕭統 (501–531) anthology *Wénxuǎn* 文選 and Liú Xié’s 劉勰 (fl. 5<sup>th</sup> century) *Wénxīn diāolóng* 文心雕龍, medieval China’s outstanding work on literary thought, do indeed distinguish

---

1 The chapter is divided into five subheadings: “The spread of paper”, “Calligraphy and letter writing”, “Writers and transporters of letters”, “Terminology”, and “The Genre of Personal Letters”.

between personal and official letters, since they “treat or collect them in separate chapters” (p. 41). At this point, the reader is left wondering why Richter does not refer to these works more explicitly here, e. g. by citing the particular expressions used by these texts to differentiate between the two. We are, however, informed later on (in the second chapter of Part I, dealing with “Letters and Epistolary Thought”) that within the *Wénxīn diāolóng*, personal letters are dealt with in the chapter titled “Shūjì” 書記 (ch. 25). But we further learn that this chapter does not only deal with personal letters, but also with certain kinds of official communication (p. 60), and that the chapter often uses “shūjì” even more generally, in the sense of “written records” (e. g., p. 52). While parts of the chapter indeed seem to focus on letters deserving the label “personal”, this is definitely not true for the whole chapter, and even the passages that focus on personal letters do not provide us with anything close to a clear-cut terminology. Regarding the alleged differentiation within the *Wénxuǎn*, we get to know (again in the second chapter)<sup>2</sup> the different expressions this work uses for the (mostly hierarchically) differentiated kinds of “official communication”, and that within this work, “written communication labeled *shū* [書] is always personal.” Furthermore, shortly after classifying the nine “memorandums” (*jiān*) in ch. 40 of the *Wénxuǎn* as a “genre of official communication”, Richter also claims that “more than half” of these memorandums “are personal” (p. 64). This suggests that we are not simply dealing with a label “not applied consistently” here. If the *majority* of *jiān* in this chapter is to be classified as “personal”, the question arises if *jiān* should be designated as a “genre of official communication” at all. On a more general level, these observations make Richter’s above-mentioned assertion (from p. 41) – that the *Wénxīn diāolóng* and the *Wénxuǎn* do differentiate between personal and official letters by treating or collecting them separately – somewhat questionable.

While a more precise discussion of this subject might have been desirable, Richter’s exhibition of these “difficulties of definition” (p. 41) nevertheless discloses an important insight: The category of “personal letters”, which makes good sense to us today, may not have been equally plausible for people of early medieval China. Maybe the category itself implies a certain kind of thinking about individuals or relations among individuals that was less common in the discourses of early medieval (and even later) times. As demonstrated by the differentiation of letters largely (though not only) based on the hierarchical relationships between senders and addressees (as we find it in the *Wénxuǎn*),

---

<sup>2</sup> Besides the information we find on letter writing in the *Wénxīn diāolóng* and the *Wénxuǎn*, Richter also explores the respective parts of Cáo Pī’s 曹丕 (187–226) essay “Disquisitions on Literature” (*Lùn wén* 論文) in this chapter, see pp. 45–47.

social hierarchies played a much greater role than the degree of personal intimacy when different kinds of literary pieces (today referred to as “letters”) were to be designated and distinguished. Richter’s discussion of these definitional problems thus manifests the importance of scrutinizing our own, modern paradigms – without necessarily having to discard them as analytic tools. Creating a critical distance to our own categories might not only make the earlier categories seem less “unreliable” or “hybrid”. Searching for the paradigms behind the earlier categorizations may even reveal some historical insights on its own. Another aspect of this paradigmatic incongruence is explicated by Richter in an illuminating fashion: While our perception of letters, and especially personal letters, is closely linked to the notion of *privacy*, Richter makes the important observation that the letters we know from early medieval China – including those whose contents we are inclined to categorize as “personal” – are characterized by a striking degree of *publicity*: As Richter accurately sums up her findings on this aspect, “we may safely assume that most received personal letters were written in view of a wider audience and probably designed to this end” (p. 43).

One of the biggest challenges that research on the epistolary literature of early medieval China involves (and which Richter openly concedes in her introduction) is the “problematic nature of [its] corpus” (p. 9). Apart from the fact that the transmitted letters are “unlikely to be representative” (ibid.) of early medieval letter writing in general, even more serious objections may be raised regarding their transmissional history. These challenges might be interpreted as so far-reaching as to finally leave the bulk of the book’s contents with a question mark. Most of the available letters or letter fragments – a corpus of more than 2000 pieces – have been handed down to us because they were incorporated into historiographical works and literary anthologies from different periods.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> It would have been helpful for the reader to learn a little more about the composition of this corpus. This especially concerns questions regarding the traceability of the letters’ transmission: How many of the letters (or parts of letters) were transmitted in which works or which kinds of works? How many of the letters found in anthologies are traceable back to earlier sources (like histories), that is, the sources the anthologies used to collect the letters? Such information would have conveyed a better overview regarding the paths of transmission as well as the time spans lying between the alleged origin of the letters and the origin of the earliest extant works in which they were transmitted. This additional information might also be desirable for Richter’s – generally very helpful – online table of “non-official letters from Early Medieval China” (<http://spot.colorado.edu/~richtea/table.pdf>; 28/11/2015), where – so far – only the anthologies are listed as sources, that is, besides the few examples from the medieval anthologies *Wénxuǎn* 文選 and *Yīwén lèijù* 藝文類聚, almost exclusively Yán Kějūn’s 嚴可均 (1762–1843) *Quán shànggǔ Sāndài Qín Hàn Sānguó Liùcháo wén* 全上古三代秦漢三國六朝文. The traceable earlier sources, which this anthology used (like medieval dynastic histories), remain unmentioned. Besides the transmitted letters, which constitute the basis for Richter’s

Usually, we have no idea how they got in there (pp. 7–8), that is, which intermediary (and potentially tampering) steps we are supposed to imagine between the initial mailing of the letter and its final incorporation into the transmitted works. If we cannot exclude the possibility that the transmitted letters represent altered (i. e. at best only slightly “abridged” or “embellished”, see p. 8) versions of the original manuscripts or even (as a worst-case, but by no means far-fetched scenario) utter *inventions* by the authors of the (e. g., historical) works citing them,<sup>4</sup> then any interpretation of the letters’ contents and even their treatment as letters becomes somewhat problematic.<sup>5</sup> The invention scenario has often been discussed regarding one of the earliest and most famous Chinese transmitted letters, i. e. the Western Hàn historian Sīmǎ Qiān’s 司馬遷 (ca. 145–ca. 86 BC) letter to his friend Rèn Ān 任安, which several scholars have reasonably argued to be an invention by the Eastern Hàn historian Bān Gù 班固 (32–92 AD), who may have inserted it into his *Hànshū* 漢書 as an “artistic device” in order to invoke a certain (and none too complaisant) picture of his precursor Sīmǎ Qiān.<sup>6</sup> There is no offhand reason to assume that such suspicion should be any less applicable to letters found in historiographical texts of early medieval times, in which forged letters (just like the historians’ other alleged primary sources) might well have been used by the authors in order to underline or design a certain point of view or narrative.

We need to distinguish, however, between different kinds of approaches to these letters. The problem sketched above is especially grave when it comes to the interpretation of particular contents of letters in relation to the contexts under which they allegedly were written, or when it comes to speculations about conjectured consequences that a letter itself might have engendered in a certain historical situation. A letter by Shěn Yuē 沈約 (441–513) to Xú Miǎn 徐勉 (466–535) that Richter discusses on pp. 99–101 may serve as a case in point:

---

book, there is a growing corpus of archaeologically recovered letters from the period (see pp. 9–10). Richter very rarely mentions examples from these archaeological sources and explains that “only the smallest portion of them has been published or is otherwise accessible” (p. 9). She also mentions the “difficulties of deciphering” these manuscripts (p. 10).

4 Richter shortly mentions the “problem of forgery” on p. 9.

5 One doubtful case brought up by Richter herself is Cáo Zhí’s 曹植 (192–232) famous letter on literature, identified by Richter as a case in which “one may wonder if this text was ever a letter at all or is rather an essay in disguise” (p. 83).

6 On the view of Sīmǎ Qiān’s letter being Bān Gù’s “artistic device” employed to contrast his own view with Sīmǎ Qiān’s, see the recent discussion of this case in van Ess (2014: 685–691), especially pp. 690–691. Richter herself mentions the case of the alleged Hàn dynasty correspondence between Sū Wǔ 蘇武 and Lǐ Líng 李陵, which is “commonly regarded as an early medieval fabrication” (p. 83; p. 178, no. 28).



In this letter, Shěn Yuē elaborates on his poor state of health and asks Xú Miǎn to put in a good word for him with the emperor, Liáng Wǔdì 梁武帝 (r. 502–549), hoping that the latter might allow his petition to retire early from his post for health reasons. In the *Documents of the Liang* (*Liángshū* 梁書), the historiographical work via which this letter came down to us, the citation of the letter is followed by the information that, despite Xú Miǎn's intervention, the emperor finally did not accept Shěn Yuē's wish. Having mentioned this alleged background of the letter, Richter brings into play the idea that Xú Miǎn might not only have spoken on behalf of Shěn Yuē in front of the emperor, but that he might have forwarded Shěn Yuē's letter to the throne. Richter then turns to the concrete contents of the letter: At one point, Shěn prognosticates that he might not live for much longer and that "if it goes on like this day after day without stopping, I will leave behind for my Sage Lord [i. e., Liang Wudi] an irrevocable regret" 若此不休,日復一日,將貽聖主不追之恨. Richter states that the emperor might have perceived this very diction as "presumptuous and almost threatening", and that this "rhetorical flaw" might have led to the emperor's decision not to grant Shěn's wish (p.101). The whole scenario is, of course, by no means impossible, but yet highly speculative. It hinges upon the diction of a particular sentence (whose threatening potential might as well be contested), found in a letter on which we have no information that it was even made available to the emperor. It might be rendered even more speculative if we take into account the fact that we have no idea where the historiographer got this letter from or in how far he felt free to modify its diction. At any rate, the possibility of the letter being a product of the historiographer's manipulation (in one or the other way) can hardly be surmised to be any more speculative than the above scenario proposed by Richter.

It needs to be stressed, however, that Richter rarely lets herself be carried away to such speculative interpretations concerning the contents of particular letters with regard to their alleged historical contexts. On the contrary, her approach generally features a very cautious handling of the sources. She mostly uses them in exactly the way that – regarding their problematic transmission – suggests itself as most plausible, namely, by distilling some more general phenomena that can be identified as typical characteristics of early medieval Chinese letters. The identification and exemplification of such typical characteristics constitute the pivot of Part II of the book, titled "Epistolary Conventions and Literary Individuality".

The first chapter of Part II ("Structures and Phrases") deals with the typical compositional parts of letters, i. e. letter openings, letter bodies, and letter closings, and, additionally, with terms of address and self-designations typically used in epistolary writings. While many of the transmitted letters came down to

us in an incomplete form missing opening or closing (or both), the examples of those still including these frames suffice to give quite a good impression of how typical epistolary structures must have looked like in early medieval China, and how particular topics like health or weather reports (pp. 89–93) were characteristically woven into these structures.

All of the three chapters of Part II (the other two are titled “Topoi” and “Normativity and Authenticity”) abound with well-chosen and carefully translated examples concerning particular characteristics of letters, which Richter uses very successfully to illustrate the epistolary culture of the period. This is especially true for those aspects and examples that make epistolary literature tangible as a genre in itself, like the use of particular phrases, topoi, interepistolary references and allusions typically used within the letters. For example, we learn that many early medieval letters refer to earlier epistolary works or letter writers that were obviously regarded as exemplary models or as pioneers of an evolving epistolary tradition, sometimes by explicitly mentioning the writers’ names (e. g., pp. 69–70) or by way of subtly alluding to them (e. g., pp. 80–81; p. 107). We further get a vivid impression of how epistolary topoi like “lamenting separation” (pp. 119–127) and “the limits of writing and language” (pp. 134–138) were – sometimes rather conventionally, sometimes more artistically – woven into the fabric of many epistolary writings. And we get to know many established epistolary conventions, like the comparison between the effects of receiving a letter with the mood-enhancing effects of the drug plants *xuān* 萱 and *sū* 蘇, just to give one of the many interesting examples (p. 104). Richter also regularly hints at respective parallels or differences with regard to typical conventions or topoi within the European epistolary tradition.

The book closes with a “Conclusion” (p. 151 ff.), which is presented less as a summary of the previous findings than rather as a meditation on the relevance of epistolary studies in general. While not everybody may eagerly agree with Richter’s philosophical insertion that research on letters “may help us to fathom what it means to be human” (p. 153), one certainly must applaud Richter for illustrating with her book the huge potential of letters as sources for many aspects of early medieval Chinese culture. Richter has exemplarily fulfilled her self-imposed task to “make epistolary culture fully visible”, and to make “Chinese letters more accessible for future research and appreciation” (p. 152). The whole field, of course, still leaves ample room for further research. First of all, letters are not only promising sources regarding the field of epistolary studies itself, but, as Richter correctly mentions, they provide us with unique information on many aspects of Chinese culture, like language, history, philosophy, religion, everyday life, psychology, medicine, trade, law, etc. (p. 152). As for the field of epistolary research itself, one question that might deserve



attention in the future is in how far we can discern certain historical developments in letter writing, either within the scope of early medieval China or in comparison to later periods: Do typical topics, expressions, phrases, topoi or other conventions change significantly over time? And are there any identifiable regional differences within the corpus of epistolary literature? The archaeologically recovered letters, whose number and accessibility will most likely increase during the next years, also promise to provide many new insights into these issues. Future scholars dealing with any of these topics and questions will certainly not only be encouraged by Richter's book to intensify research on Chinese letters, but they will also benefit greatly from the solid and comprehensive groundwork provided by this important introduction.

## Bibliography

van Ess, Hans (2014): *Politik und Geschichtsschreibung im alten China. Pan-ma i-t'ung*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

**Urio, Paolo/Ying, Yuan:** *L'émergence des ONG en Chine: Le changement du rôle de l'Etat-Parti*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2014, 289 pp. with notes, references, and index, ISBN 978-3-034-31583-8.

Reviewed by **Simona Grano**, Asien-Orient-Institut, University of Zurich, Zürichbergstr 4, 8032 Zurich, Switzerland. E-mail: [simona.grano@aoi.uzh.ch](mailto:simona.grano@aoi.uzh.ch)

DOI 10.1515/asia-2016-0008

The book under review explores the emergence of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in China and the changing role of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in dealing with the increasingly varied galaxy of organizations and groups, comprising the country's Third Sector. In particular the book focuses on organizations active within the realm of social services.

Comprising seven chapters and a brief conclusion, this book is divided into three main thematic areas: the first centres on the autonomy of Chinese NGOs vis-à-vis the Party/State, in light of the socio-political and juridical context these organizations live in; the second examines the impact of international funding on the development of Chinese NGOs and debates whether such “external aid” facilitates the transfer of Western values and ideas to China, while the third sketches the profile and individual stories of the founders of some of the most important NGOs currently operating in China.

Underlying the book are several important questions the authors seek to answer: in which specific sectors did NGOs emerge; what is the profile of the founders and personnel of these charitable NGOs; to which degree are Chinese NGOs affected by the financial donations of the Party/State; what is the impact of international sponsors on Chinese NGOs and; how autonomous are Chinese NGOs.

At the start of book the authors, Paolo Urio and Yuan Ying, contextualize the issue under research by briefly analysing Deng Xiaoping's market-oriented reforms and the far-reaching effects these have had on the population, on society, on the Party/State and on the job market, which in 1978 was practically non-existent.

In fact, the analysis in Chapter 1 starts by detailing the consequences of introducing a system of market competition among state-owned enterprises, which led to great numbers of laid off workers and to the slow dismantling of the *danwei* system. These actions also represented the end of several “cradle-to-grave” welfare services, such as health insurance for millions of individuals who were suddenly left to their own devices. The authors identify the State as the major obstacle to the country's process of smooth development, as also discussed in several debates within China in the 1980s.

Urio and Ying devise the case of China as especially interesting in light of the fact that even though the CCP has retained its hegemonic position after launching its modernisation reforms, it has nevertheless remained open towards the introduction of market-based mechanisms. In this introductory chapter, the authors already provide some tentative conclusions, and claim that the State is still firmly in control when it comes to regulating the Third Sector domain. It may have relinquished or distanced itself from specific peripheral regions but it monitors and keeps strict control in urban centres. Thus, in the opinion of the authors, the development of new charitable NGOs active in the social domain of China is simply the result of the gradual adaption and transformation of the control practices that the State exercises towards society. In fact, the State supports (feebly) some social actors and re-orientes international donations and funds towards the domains that the State itself considers more appropriate to serve its own interests; these would be the domains which provide social services at local levels but are politically non-sensitive.

In the second part of this first introductory chapter the authors dive into a literature review, mostly of French sources such as Béatrice Hibou, about the Chinese State's changing role. Urio and Ying furthermore review the work of other civil society experts, such as Jude Howell and Tony Saich, among others, to show that the Third Sector is never completely void of relations with the State, as it can entertain various interactions with it, for instance under the form of financial donations.

Hereafter, the authors offer an explanation in regards to the rationale behind the approach chosen for their research: namely, a qualitative approach centred on the analysis of the strategies of new emerging actors and stakeholders, which in turn have led to the development of new types of social structures. Urio and Ying claim that the associative domain in China has evolved and grown largely outside of the governmental sphere, and that, yet, it is indispensable for such groups to be able to rely on good relations with the authorities in order to thrive and survive. The authors pinpoint the positioning of these charitable NGOs as "sandwiched" between the State and citizens; because of the numerous relations they entertain with the Party/State, these associations can never be completely independent from it.

The State, on its part, can either regard these associations as positive, whenever they fill a gap in providing services that the State itself is not able to offer, or negatively, if they position themselves as political entities or entertain conflicting and adversarial relations with the authorities. The State therefore sets a number of administrative measures aimed at curtailing their freedom, such as limiting the number of NGOs active in one specific sector in a given geographical area, to name but one of the most significant.

Chapter 2 contextualizes the emergence of NGOs around the world and in China. The analysis begins by introducing the philosophical and religious origins of charitable NGOs in Europe, which the authors trace back to religious associations such as the Jesuits, who founded schools and other institutes to assist those in need. The chapter continues by establishing a link between the emergence of NGOs in Europe and the end of the Cold War as a specific reaction to the dysfunctions of states and market economies. Urio and Ying pinpoint several factors which have played a role in the rise of NGOs, starting from the 1980s: 1) the crisis of the developmental State; 2) the expansion of neoliberalism and the United Nations' Millennium Declaration; 3) the technological and communications' revolution; 4) the global environmental crisis and emerging ideas of sustainable development.

In the final part of Chapter 2, the specific context and dimensions under which NGOs have appeared in China is finally presented. Against the backdrop of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms this section describes how the country's rapid economic modernization created a new mass of urban poor and brought forth the right conditions for the emergence of the Third Sector. In the authors' definition, the emergence of charitable organizations is precisely this: an answer to the increased vulnerability of society.

Chapter 3 presents in detail the socio-juridical context in which charitable NGOs have emerged in China. In the first part of the chapter Urio and Ying analyse the changing attitude of the State towards NGOs, since the establishment of the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) in 1949, through the study of the legal directives and regulations set up by the government for these groups. This part is divided into three chronological periods: "The New China Epoch" (1949–1965); "The Cultural Revolution" (1966–1976); and the period since the modernization reforms launched by Deng Xiaoping in 1978.

In the second and final part of the chapter the authors illustrate the main features and requirements of the legal system in place to regulate several aspects pertaining to the civil society sector, ranging from these groups' official registration to their fiscal and financial management.

Chapter 4 deals with the diversity of Chinese NGOs; its goal is to sketch, with the help of official surveys, a general overview of the development of NGOs offering public services since 1988, this being the year in which official data and figures start being available to the public.

The chapter is divided into two parts; a first one which focuses on the variety of officially recognized organizations and a second one which presents the point of view of many Chinese scholars in regards to the correct designation and different categories of existing NGOs.

Chapter 5 deals with the relationship that Chinese NGOs entertain with the authorities concerning the type of funding they receive. The authors support

their analysis with the data collected by Chinese scholar Jia Xijing, based at Qinghua University. Towards the end of the chapter the authors make use of concrete examples of cases, encountered in their fieldwork, to portray the more “privileged” categories of NGO and set forth the conditions these need to fulfil in order to become eligible for financial support on part of the government.

Chapter 6 analyses the relationship of Chinese NGOs with international donors. It starts by linking the presence of International NGOs (INGOs) in China with the more or less covert intent to foster the establishment and development of a democratic regime in the country an issue, which is highly sensitive for the CCP, who considers it a threat to its own hegemonic position. This chapter attempts to find out whether, in light of such difficult positioning vis-à-vis the Party/State, foreign NGOs have completely forsaken this basic ideal of working for the establishment of a liberal democracy in China or whether they have merely toned down their stance while remaining faithful to their fundamental values and goals in a more discreet way. The chapter focuses mostly on the financial and monetary aspect of donations and funding to dissect the relationship between foreign and Chinese NGOs.

Finally, chapter 7 sketches the personal background of the founders and employees of some of the leading social groups with whom the authors have carried out extensive interviews, in an attempt to deepen their insight into the dynamics of China’s complex and varied NGOs’ galaxy. Specifically the analysis centres on the social profile of the founders and staff of such associations and continues, in the second part of the chapter, to analyse the increasing professionalism of such charitable groups.

In the conclusions Urío and Ying claim that the State, since 1978, has diminished its influence on both society and on the economy, abandoning the totalitarian and absolute control it had exercised during the Mao Zedong era. In this changing context the authors have tried to understand and situate the emergence of NGOs; in China these groups’ development is shaped both by the (partial) retreat of the State as well as by the limitations it nevertheless still imposes on them. Within this apparent contradiction some social groups which have emerged offer services that the State itself cannot provide while others represent a threat to the State.

The authors conclude by enumerating the various progresses made by China for instance in the economic sphere and, even though aware of the many limitations that remain in place for individual freedom, shine a light on the recent improvement of the law on working contracts, which limits the power of employers, increases safety measures in case of layoffs and includes some mechanisms for the automatic renewal of working contracts for temporary work.

At the end of the concluding chapter, the authors address what is in store for the future. They enumerate some possible scenarios, and identify the most likely one; China will move (and partly already has) towards an organizational model, which is based on Confucian values, economic efficiency and social equity. At that point, China will de facto become one of the main constituents of a new multi-polar world, together with the United States, Europe (or the Euro-zone), Latin America and, in due time, Africa. If, the authors conclude, both foreign and domestic NGOs alike will be able to contribute to such a realization, then China will truly gain back its status of a great culture and great world power.

To conclude, the chapters are generally well-structured. Due to the interesting and readily accessible nature of the topic at stake, this book represents a valuable reading for both experts of China's Third Sector, as well as for policy-makers and a more general readership alike.

This study is important because it contributes to the body of work on China's changing State/society relations and contentious politics, studying how citizens and groups cope with an authoritarian system which allows only limited action in regards to individual grievances of a various nature.

The research is well-written and original in its choice of case studies; in fact, it chooses to analyse NGOs and associations which have been only sporadically looked at in the past such as the YMCA (Young Man's Christian Association); furthermore, the book presents us with very much needed overview of the crucial factors which allow the Third Sector to grow in China, despite the Party/State's still authoritarian and hegemonic behaviour.