

Philip Clart and Paul Crowe ed., *The People and the Dao: New Studies in Chinese Religions in Honour of Daniel L. Overmyer*, Monumenta Serica Institute, Sankt Augustin, Steiler Verlag, Nettetal, 2009, 542 pp., Illustr., Glossary, Index.

The seventeen papers gathered in this volume were presented during a conference held in September 2002 at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, and entitled “Religious Thought and Lived Religion in China: A Conference in Honour of Professor Daniel L. Overmeyer on His Retirement”. The long list of sponsoring institutions and of scholars gathered from China and various parts of the world, all mentioned in the Introduction to the book, gives an idea of the importance of the event. Some readers nevertheless might just regret that the traditional high quality of this *Festschrift* published by the Monumenta Serica Institute had made them wait for a few years before getting access to these “New Studies in Chinese Religions”.

The generous Introduction, by Philip Clart, presents elegantly the Contents of the book. It has three Parts, of six or four chapters each, loosely ordered under three headings. First, “Popular Sects and Religious Movements”: here we find historical studies on the evolution of religious movements during Ming and Qing times, be they historically from popular or Confucian, Daoist or Buddhist traditions, or geographically situated in China proper or Taiwan, Singapore or Malaysia, or even Thailand... What follows are “Historical and Ethnographic Studies of Chinese Popular Religion”, where historical research and contemporary field work (for instance in Fujian or in Taiwan) blend harmoniously. In the last part, entitled “The Religious Life of Clerics, Literati, and Emperors”, the contributions take another turn: through the study of written documents (a manual of spirit-writing, some hagiographical accounts, an encyclopedia of dreams, imperial memorials and archives), scholars explore how ‘religion’ was lived in different milieus.

This brief summary might perhaps suggest the inner tension inherent in religious studies and which has characterized Professor Overmeyer’s academic career, as Randall L. Nadeau analyses in his paper (pp. 23-35) and entitled “A Critical Review of Daniel Overmeyer’s Contribution to the Study of Chinese Religions”. “For Daniel Overmyer,” writes Nadeau, “the study of Chinese religion begins ‘from the ground up’ with the common religion of the people in their village communities and homes. What this means in practice is a careful description of the rich traditions of Chinese popular religion in their own terms, without the imposition—and often in explicit defiance—of the grand theories of Western scholarship and of the dismissive attitudes of Chinese officialdom.” (p. 27). Such statement explains eloquently the importance and the influence of Daniel Overmeyer’s important books, like *Folk Buddhist Religion: Dissenting Sects in Late Traditional China* (Harvard East Asian Series, No. 83, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1976, 269 pp.), or *Precious Volumes: Introduction to Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Harvard-Yenching Monographs Series, 49, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Asia Center, 1999, 444 pp.), or more recently *Religion in China Today* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003). In his lifelong studies, as Nadeau stresses, “Overmeyer employed historiographic, ethnographic, and textual methods of research, and ranks among precious few scholars who have crossed disciplinary boundaries with such skill.” (p. 30). It is along these criteria that the contributions to this volume would have to be positively and critically appreciated.

A last observation is perhaps appropriate here: the concluding contribution to this volume, by Barend J. ter Haar from Leiden University, focuses on “Yongzheng and His Buddhist Abbots”. It is fitting to place such a fascinating narrative in its historical context which, in the West, has been centred on the religious controversy related to the Chinese rites, and the persecutions that have followed under Yongzheng’s rule. As in this year 2010 is celebrated the fourth centenary of Matteo Ricci’s death (May 11 1610) in Beijing, it is worth remembering, thanks to these “New Studies in Chinese Religions”, how complex “Religion in China” has ever been: a ‘quest’ as seems to suggest the title given to this volume, *The People and the Dao*. Ricci, through trials and errors, had started to discover it.

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