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**Thomas David Dubois, *The Sacred Village. Social Change and Religious Life in Rural North China***

Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2005, 275 pp.

**Katiana Le Mentec**

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

Translated by Michael Black

- 1 Examining the varied expressions of religious life in a rural district of North China, the historian Thomas David Dubois, in *The Sacred Village*, gives us a glimpse of the world of such practices and beliefs at local level, as well as their evolution since the end of the Qing dynasty. This book is the result of archival research enriched with interviews conducted in the district of Cang (in southeastern Hebei province) at the end of the 1990s, with the author seeking to combine the understanding of the anthropologist with a historical perspective on social change.
- 2 With its account of the mosaic of forces which gave shape, over time, to local religious life, Dubois' book provides new knowledge about the religious institutions in northern China, as well as their processes of transformation and adaptation to village life. The main thesis of the book is the specificity of religious life in the village, which adapts and recreates itself according to local particularities. As Dubois sees it, there is no single model: each entity, which possesses its own identity, has developed a clearly distinct form of religious life. The latter, through the adaptation and reinterpretation at the local level of religious themes common to northern China, is the result of a complex mixture between the institutional religions (such as Buddhism, Taoism or sectarian teachings<sup>1</sup>) and what the author calls "diffuse religion" which corresponds to the mass of beliefs and practices. Dubois takes a functionalist point of view in his

reasoning when he states that some of these religious institutions have survived because of their ability to satisfy needs, whether community or individual.

- 3 The first chapter, based on various demographic statistics, provides the reader with a swift description of the historical, structural, economic and religious framework of the district of Cang, which seems in many ways to be absolutely typical of the north of China. The author describes the sphere of local culture and then focuses on certain characteristics of religious practice in China (requests for divine assistance, visits to the temple, etc.) to which he returns in the conclusion with his concept of "active or passive religiosity" particularly by comparing personal piety, the role of morality and participation in ritual in the Christian religion (a comparison he refers to in several other places in the book). He then sets out elements of religious life in the district, such as the temples and their forms of worship as well as the sects, emphasising the many campaigns aimed at eradicating them since the end of the Qing dynasty. The apparent religious uniformity of religious life presented in the first chapter conceals, however, as the author sees it, "the importance of the local in the formulation and the expression of religious knowledge and the expression of worship" (p 38), which he shares with us in the following chapters.
- 4 The second chapter elaborates and theorises the question of religious life in the village community. Dubois sees the village as bringing together religious institutions, influences and resources. It thus forms for the inhabitants, a significant unit of organisation and personal identification within a relatively closed local cultural sphere. The village makes up a ritual community of worship and sharing of religious resources, which has formed a unique identity, according to the infrastructure, the specialists and the religious traditions which local history has made available.
- 5 In this chapter, the author retraces the evolution of religious life in Cang since the end of the Qing dynasty with an emphasis on the dismantling it was subjected to during the reforms that followed the establishment of the communist regime and on its reorganisation in the 1970s. Having illustrated his subject with a range of contemporary examples of religious life in the village (in some cases centred on a temple or a "sect", Dubois shows that despite the restructurings of the community and the decline of religious life, the village still represents a strong unity and maintains its capacity to mobilise solidarity in the service of the newly-formed community.
- 6 Focusing on how external changes (and political ones in particular) have affected local religion, the author devotes chapters 3 to 7 to presenting and comparing various religious practices and traditions in the north of China, and in Cang in particular, where some have maintained an active presence. To the author each of them has had a distinct influence over time on the development of local religious life and has contributed to satisfying various needs on community, family and individual levels.
- 7 The practice of the *xiangtou* takes up most of chapter three. Coming from a long tradition of healing and shamanic practices, which is still very much present in China, these "healing practitioners" whom Dubois met, use the power of the fox spirits in their treatment. The author explains that, depending on the village, their numbers, their practices, their social role and their relationship with organised religions vary considerably. The chapter introduces the beliefs and practices associated with these religious specialists and then discusses their place in village society. Dubois sees the activities of the *xiangtou*, which are carried out in private places, as not being at the service of the welfare of the community but aimed at "satisfying the needs" and the

expectations of individuals. These practitioners act alone and without any formal affiliation; they are identified with a locality as can be the case with village temples or certain "sects" which the author discusses further on.

- 8 Seeking to show that village religion was and remains an intensely local phenomenon, in the last four chapters Dubois studies the origins, internal organisation, evolution in northern China and adaptation of the various religious institutions which are present in Cang such as monastic Buddhism (Chapter 4), a "pseudo-monastic sect" – the Li sect (Chapter 5), the well-known apocalyptic sect *Yquandao* (Chapter 6) and lastly the "village sects": *taishangmen*, the tradition of the Supreme, and that of Heaven and Earth, *tiandimen* (Chapter 7).
- 9 Dubois notes the almost complete decline of monastic Buddhism in Cang by the end of the Qing dynasty, with the writings having been forgotten and the teachings "absorbed into popular religiosity". It was not until the end of the 1990s, with the reconstruction of a monastery, that this ecclesiastical institution began to grow again. As he sees it, it is only recently that this form of religious affiliation and expression, which is now acceptable, has penetrated the rural district of Cang.
- 10 *Taishangmen* and *Tiandimen*, on the other hand, quickly became independent, and their strong base was in fact built at the expense of their links with the movements from which they originated. The author emphasises that, in Cang, these two teachings show a remarkable continuity in their local organisation and make up a unique and more immediate contribution than any other tradition or practice to the religious life of the village. Dubois explains how these religious teachings, emerging originally from movements that were widespread in the north of China, were transformed, in the villages, into expressions of "local religiosity".
- 11 The book offers the author's reflections on the disappearance or the continuity of these religious institutions in Cang, which seem to be closely tied to this local adaptability, but also to their ability to fill the needs of "day to day religious life" by carrying out the ritual services which are considered to be vital to the well-being of the village. This was the case of the "village sects", *Taishangmen* and *Tiandimen*, whose teachings are strongly inspired by Confucianism and thus seemed orthodox and respectable in the eyes of the population. The *Li* sect, like the *Yiquandao* sect (whose shows historical development the author shows), since it does not carry out any rituals in the name of the community and of its members, has been unable to have any profound influence on the religious life of the village.
- 12 In this, his first book, which is on the subject of the doctoral thesis he presented in 2001, Thomas David Dubois, now an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Singapore, gives the reader a clear and particularly well-structured account. I particularly appreciated his presentation of the practices of the *xiangtou*, a phenomenon which, despite being widespread in China, has been too rarely studied. Also to be commended is the considerable introduction, in a work of history, of the ethnological approach although it is a little too functionalist, and one also regrets that the author was not really able to carry out this research alone and in the local dialect. Lastly, while the book accords considerable and justified space to the impact of policies on these religious movements, there are unfortunately frequent repetitions on the subject between the chapters.
- 13 These few small reservations should not make us forget the book's qualities, in particular the judicious comparison of the introduction at a local level of the various

religious movements. This book has the merit, because of its combined global and local approaches, of being able to interest religious historians as much as sinologists. It will in particular provide neophytes with a very good introduction to religious practices and beliefs at village level in China.