
Ever since Michel Strickmann’s 1982 essay, “The Dao among the Yao,”¹ brought the topic of Yao Daoism to the attention of Western scholars, we have been waiting for someone to answer the many questions raised in that seminal article. With this book by Eli Alberts, based on his doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania, some of those questions are finally answered. Alberts discusses the history of scholarship on the Yao, the historical interaction of non-Chinese ethnic groups in South China with the Chinese, the significance of this history for interpreting the Yao and their religious beliefs, and finally, the role of Daoism in the Sinification of the non-Chinese peoples of what is now southern China and northern Southeast Asia. His comments on all of these topics are informative and sometimes thought-provoking, but leave many unresolved issues that I hope he and other scholars will continue to pursue.

Alberts first takes up the history of scholarship on the Yao, asking whether Strickmann did in fact discover something new, and why we were so long unaware of the Daoist affiliations of the Yao. He performs a useful service by showing that scholars writing on the Yao from Qing times on were aware of their Daoist religious practices. The Yao possessed well-known Daoist scriptures that were also in use in the Chinese communities surrounding them, and used these scriptures to perform Daoist rituals in the Chinese language, in ritual settings that were similar to those in use in contemporary Han communities. Alberts notes that there are some indigenous Yao elements in their rites, which was evident in the ritual paintings reproduced in Jacques Lemoiné’s Yao Ceremonial Paintings (1982) and, indeed, in the work by Shiratori Yoshirō² that led Strickmann to write his article, but does not tell us much about these non-Chinese elements introduced into Yao Daoist practice, their significance in the texts, or their role in Yao ritual practice. He does make some useful observations concerning the curious way that modern Chinese ethnographers, hoping to find a source of pure, primitive religion among the Yao, gave short shrift to the Daoism that they saw practiced there.

Alberts next takes up the Panhu 現巫 myth of the Five-Streams Man 五溪蠻, recorded first in the Hou Hanshu 後漢書, noting that the myth is today told among some Yao populations. He also traces early references to southern minorities, including some variant of the word yao 火, meaning “corvée labor,” equating the Moyao 莫蠻 of the Tang to records of a Yao people 婆人 under the Song. This argument raises several issues that require further elucidation: the Panhu myth,

like the Linjun 禎君 myth discussed in the following chapter, is a teleological myth intended to explain why the group in question enjoyed a special dispensation from the Chinese state absolving them from normal taxation, but makes no mention of corvée duties, which would seem, in light of their name, to be the central concern to these groups. Further, the name of the Tang group would seem to indicate that they do not perform corvée whereas Song sources record that the distinguishing characteristic of the widely dispersed non-Chinese group(s) called Yaoren is that they do. Finally, how do we know, when a historical source links an ethnic group to the Panhu myth, that this is indeed an indigenous belief, and that it did not arise from some literate person reading the historical account of the Panhu Man? In fact, modern Chinese minorities have often turned to classical Chinese texts to find their supposed origins, just as the modern Miao claim to descend from the Sanmiao mentioned in the Book of Documents, and earlier Chinese authors linking non-Chinese living in Hunan with the Panhu Man never state that the myth was alive among these people in their day. Alberts also links the myth to Tao Qian’s account of the Peach Flower Source 桃花源, pointing out that Tao Qian was a contemporary of the Hou Hanshu compiler, Fan Ye (399-445), but does not offer evidence that the material in the Panhu Man entry really dates to Fan Ye’s time; elsewhere he indicates that it is based on Han-period source material. The parallels between the two accounts are intriguing, especially because Alberts links the theme to the current Yao practice of Meishan Daoism, also from this same region, but the temporal gaps are too great and the evidence too sparse to be wholly convincing.

The following chapter is an extended recounting of the legends of the Ba people, largely following my own 1998 work Great Perfection: Religion and Ethnicity in a Chinese Millennial Kingdom. The Ba were among the earliest followers of Celestial Master Daoism, and like the Panhu were termed Man, and treated in the same chapter of the Hou Hanshu. Nonetheless, it is difficult to see the point of Alberts’s exposition, which breaks no new ground. The Ba were certainly distinct from the Panhu Man, perhaps totally unrelated in both language and descent. Unlike the Panhu Man, they formed a political entity that appears first in the seventh century BCE, interacting with, intermarrying with, and serving as mercenaries to the state of Chu. Moreover, although the Ba are often today linked to the Tujia 土家 people because of some similar myths about tigers, the Tujia cannot be traced historically through medieval and early modern Chinese history, as Alberts claims to do with the Yao. Moreover, the Tujia today are not Daoist. It seems just as likely that the Ba, like their close neighbors the Shu, were wholly assimilated into Chinese culture and have no modern descendants whatsoever. In any case, Alberts presents no evidence that the Ba people ever interacted directly with the Panhu Man.

In his penultimate chapter, Alberts turns to Daoism. Here he draws on Anna Seidel’s work to argue that “the Celestial Master—and later the Daoist priest—inherited the cosmo-political role and position of the Han dynasty emperor” (p. 100). The decline of the Han was undoubtedly an important factor in the rise