
Kristofer Schipper has been a towering influence on the study of Daoism and Chinese religion over the past five decades, but besides his well-known *Daoist Body* and his monumental *Handbook to the Daoist Canon*, the rest of his published work has been dispersed in obscure and hard-to-find publications. *La religion de la Chine* is a collection of some of his seminal articles originally published between 1979 and 2006, preceded by a new, 83-page essay on the origin of China’s “living religion.” The articles are ordered roughly in historical progression, so that the book covers the entire span of China’s religious history, up to the present and even into the future. Taken as a whole, the collection offers a good overview of Schipper’s views on Daoism and Chinese religion and society, which continue to be debated by scholars today. After a brief discussion of the main argument of the book, this review will elaborate on the points made in some of the key chapters in the book, and end with a consideration of the significance of Schipper’s ideas for the study of Chinese religion and Chinese studies.

*La religion de la Chine* proposes an alternative narrative of Chinese history, society and civilization—one that is grounded in Daoism and the religion of the Chinese people. The dominant narrative of China, centered around its enlightened administrators and its rational state, and which sees China’s history as, in essence, the unfolding of this civilizing process from ancient times until today, is the work of the “Confucian” class of literati, whose heirs are the intellectuals, reformers, and Party leaders of the modern era, and whose prejudices have been transmitted, since Matteo Ricci, to the China scholars of the West. All share a visceral disdain for, and profound ignorance of the life and culture of the common people—known in the past as the habits of the “stupid people”愚民, recently as the backward “superstitions”迷信 of the peasants, or, today, in more positive light, as quaint “folk customs” 民俗 or unorganized “popular faith” 民間信仰. For Schipper, however, the true civilization of China is to be found among the people. Though ignored if not actively suppressed by scholars and officials, it is

organized, it is structured, it is integrated, it has lived uninterrupted from ancient
times to this day, and its core is Daoism.

The alternative narrative of this civilization, constructed by Schipper in La
religion de la Chine, recounts how, in the Zhou and Han periods, the split was
consummated between what is now known as “Confucianism” and “Daoism”—
not merely as two competing philosophical schools, but as two systems of socio-
political and clerical organization—the former finally becoming the ideology and
ritual system of the imperial state and its bureaucracy, the latter providing the
liturgical framework for structuring local communities through their local asso-
ciations devoted to the cult of saints and deities. While the former is a top-down
hierarchy which radiates from the center, the latter is a dense fabric of horizontal,
rhizomatic networks of self-governing, quasi-democratic associations. The cen-
trifugal dynamic generated by the fierce autonomy of these local cults and com-
unities is countered by the unifying dynamic of Daoist ritual and cosmology,
which subdues and integrates local gods into its pantheon. Daoist priests act as
intermediaries between local forces and universal principles, while Daoist saints
and ritual operate as symbolic mediators between the imperial state and local
society. Thus, where the imperial state and its mandarins rarely penetrated deep
into the villages and neighborhoods of traditional China, it was Daoism that
provided the symbolic and social unity of Chinese civilization, among the myriads
of localities within the realm and even extending beyond, into borderland minor-
ity areas and the Chinese diasporic communities of Southeast Asia and elsewhere.
While the dominant narrative of the history of China’s modernization in the
twentieth century typically recounts the struggles around the rejection of Confu-
cianism and the adoption of Western thought, this represents, in fact, a mere
change of ideological clothes of China’s intellectual and governing elite, which
only replicated its disdain for the other, “Daoist” China, and gave it the tools for
its wholesale destruction. And yet, after a century of campaigns and restrictions,
the religion of the Chinese people is still a “living tradition,” whether in the
Peoples’ Republic, in Taiwan and Southeast Asia, or even in the restaurants and
temples of Chinese communities in Europe and North America.

In the first chapter of La religion de la Chine, which is the longest of the book,
Schipper attempts to sketch the genesis of this “living religion,” in the period
leading up to the Later Han, as well as the orthodox reaction to it, and the proc-
esses by which the two currents became separated. The turning point seems to
have been when the rites and history of the aristocracy were codified into texts,
probably around the beginning of the Western Zhou (771-221). The Five Classics
五經 became the reference for rites and the art of government, for what became
the “public religion” of the Confucians. In these works, mythology, epopees, sto-
ries of local gods and cults were not recorded. It was, instead, what Schipper calls
an emerging “religion des mystères,” an initiatory cult analogous to the contem-
porary movements in the Mediterranean region, which transmitted that lore
through the Shanhaijing 山海經, the Zhuangzi 庄子, and other texts. These texts
are replete with references to real and mythical places and to gods associated with