

Aux portes du ciel: La statuaire taoïste du Hunan: Art et anthropologie de la Chine, by Patrice Fava. Paris: Les Belles Lettres / Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient, 2013. 656 pp. €55.00 (paper).

Field research on Daoism began in Taiwan with Kristofer Schipper's pioneering research in the 1960s; then, beginning in the 1980s, with the work of Kenneth Dean and John Lagerwey, Fujian became a new center for ethnographic research; in the past decade, Hunan has been the focus of an increasing number of studies, conducted by such scholars as James Robson, Alain Arrault, David Mozina, Mark Meulenbeld, and Georges Favraud, often in collaboration. The "discovery" for academic research of the rich and thriving Daoist liturgical culture of Hunan can be attributed to the French visual anthropologist Patrice Fava, producer of several ethnographic films on Chinese society and religion, a disciple of Schipper and of the surrealist poet André Breton, and collector of Daoist art and statuary. In 1992, Fava purchased some old wooden statues in a street market in Yangshuo, near Guilin; he discovered, dissimulated in a cavity within the wood, carefully folded consecration documents, *yizhi* 意旨, indicating the dates when the statues were made, the names and addresses of the sponsors, stories, and long lists and images of talismans and strange creatures. The documents, which reminded him of texts and images unearthed at Dunhuang and Mawangdui, all came from the same region in central Hunan province. Later, he discovered similar statues in other markets. While many statues date from the late imperial era, others are from the Republican or even contemporary periods, demonstrating the existence of a living tradition. While some statues represent popular deities, others are of real persons, typically Daoist priests, ritual masters, divine generals, exorcists, female spirit mediums, ancestors, patriarchs, and healers. The sponsors of the votive statues were often disciples or descendants of the person consecrated. Daoist priests are not usually represented as statues in Chinese religion, indicating the distinctive nature of this statuary tradition. In 1999, Fava, together with Schipper, visited the epicenter of this tradition in Xinhua district, Hunan province, where he met with several Daoist priests, sculptors, and mediums, who initiated him into a

vibrant regional religious culture. This was the beginning of a series of field trips that allowed him to unlock the mysteries of the statues, which are typically found on the family altars of the local people. *Aux portes du ciel: La statuaire taoïste du Hunan* (At the Gates of Heaven: The Daoist Statuary of Hunan), a richly illustrated and detailed volume, is the result of Fava's painstaking researches on this still little-known tradition.

Aux portes du ciel is part textual and visual ethnographic thick description, part art catalogue, part systematic inventory, part personal narrative, and part theoretical discussion. The author takes the reader with him as he discovers the statues in the markets, meets the Daoist masters and sculptors, examines the statues, and observes their rituals. Here we find detailed and abundantly illustrated descriptions of two *jiao* 醮 rituals (56–95, 136–154), the *Duchangyuan* 都猖愿 ritual (100–114), which is the subject of Fava's award-winning 2005 documentary film *Han Xin's Revenge*, a funeral (154–175), an ordination ritual (192–239), a *kaiguang* 開光 ritual for the consecration of statues (336–347), and the *Qiang Taigong* 躡太公 ritual in which the masters “dance” with deity statues (356–377). These descriptions are placed in the context of the lives and work of the priests, female spirit mediums, and sculptors, and are interspersed with studies of the myths associated with the rituals, statues, and/or popular deities of the region, including the Wuchang 五猖, Zhang Wulang 張五郎 (114–129), Han Xin 韓信 (100–114), Huangdi 皇帝 and Chiyou 蚩尤 (184–191). With the author, we visit a village with sixty resident Daoist priests to study their altars (176–183), examine the location of the pantheon in paintings and ritual spaces (278–310), and engage in an ethnographic exploration of the Huashanjiao 華山教 lineage of sculptors (320–335). At several points in the book, Fava also discusses various aspects of the statues, including a typology of statues at the altars of the priests (181), their possible origins (311–319), the *yizhi* documents concealed in the statues (348–356), the votive and exorcistic functions of the statues (381–385), and so on. Throughout the account, specific statues are used as illustrations, drawing on the *yizhi* to tell the story of the statue and its sponsor, the master, immortal or deity it represents, and the figures

represented in the talismans included in the *yizhi*. Part 3 of the book then contains a detailed catalogue of some forty-three or so statues, with beautiful color photographs of the statues and of the *yizhi*. Close-ups of the illustrations and talismans included in the *yizhi* are often provided. This is followed by a descriptive catalogue of liturgical implements, including command tablets (*lingpai* 令牌), Tianpeng rulers (*Tianpeng chi* 天蓬尺), fly-whisks (*fuchen* 拂塵), masters' knives (*shidao* 師刀), divinatory blocks, seals, and robes.

Aux portes du ciel is indeed a virtual museum, replete with beautiful and fascinating objects. Reading the book, I felt I was perusing the catalogue of an extraordinary exhibition, which has, alas, never taken place. But perhaps it should be so—these are not decontextualized pieces, transformed into *objets d'art* for the purely aesthetic gaze of the modern viewer. The true exhibition is not in a museum, but in central Hunan itself, in the lives of the makers and users of the statues. This is a truly *ethnographic* catalogue, in which the objects and their stories are seamlessly woven into the rich context of their local usage, bringing them to life. Or, put another way, this is a truly *visual* ethnography of Daoist ritual, in which descriptions of the rituals are lavishly illustrated with stunning professional photographs of the rites, the priests, their implements, and the statues. This book breaks down the boundaries between ethnology and art history, with neither discipline shortchanged in the process.

What do we learn from this marvelous cornucopia? Fava argues that the statues are the visible and tangible evidence of what he calls “Daoist society”—the network of Daoist priests (*daoshi* 道士), ritual masters (*fashi* 法師), and other specialists of Daoist arts, including healers, exorcists, carpenters, fortune tellers, geomancers, sculptors, artisans, musicians, patriarchs, midwives, warriors, hunters, and charismatic sectarians. These figures use talismans and diagrams, make paraphernalia and liturgical instruments, and practice exorcistic and magical healing arts. While in this world many of these figures do not explicitly claim a “Daoist” identity, these are the types of people who are, in this regional tradition, typically divinized by being consecrated as a statue and placed on an altar. Through the *kaiguang* ritual, these figures are turned into

priests, immortals, and deities, thus entering the Daoist pantheon (429–431).

While Fava makes a strong and passionate argument for the existence of this Daoist society, and engages in a polemic against scholars such as Robson and Arrault, whose analyses have not highlighted the Daoist characteristics of the statuary (424–426), the concept of “Daoist society” and its sociological dynamics are only vaguely defined and analyzed in the book. Overall, *Aux portes du ciel* is not a rigorously organized work; it is more of a wandering tale, in which an enthusiastic and erudite guide walks us through the field site, introduces us to the local people, takes us to their rituals, and lovingly shows us his precious statues and tells us their stories. After six hundred pages, the reader is infected with Fava’s passion, but remains bewildered. That seems to be the intention: perhaps, as Fava argues against other scholars who seek to uncover the “rational structures” of Daoism and Chinese religion, the exuberance of Daoism defies rationality (152–153). Fava often evokes Guillaume Appolinaire, André Breton, Marcel Griaule, Michel Leiris, and Jean Rouch, and compares the Hunan statues to the Kachina dolls of the Arizona highlands, or to the masks of the Dogon of the Bandiagara cliffs of Mali, bringing Daoism into an illustrious lineage of interactions between French ethnology, primitive art and surrealism. The very oversignification, or perhaps nonsignification, of Daoist talismans and rituals opens the imaginary to new realms of fantastical vision, aesthetic and bodily consciousness, and spiritual flight. *Aux portes du ciel* is a masterpiece of visual ethnography. It should be required reading for any serious student of Daoism or of Chinese culture and religion; we can only eagerly hope for the publication of English and Chinese versions, so that it can be read and appreciated by a broader audience.

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