

Sisters of the Blood: The Lives behind the Xie Ziran Biography*

Stephen R. Bokenkamp

Abstract

Over the preceding decade, the story of Xie Ziran's "ascent" has drawn much scholarly attention. Scholars have, for the most part, employed historical methods to study the tale, intending to elucidate the origins, psychologies, and socio-cultural backgrounds of Xie Ziran and her fellow practitioners. Basing myself on a thorough recognition of the fictionality of the Xie Ziran story, I attempt here a literary analysis that I hope will show the main features of the image of Daoist priestesses created in this myth. These images may have been promulgated by the priestesses themselves, but they were also constructed by the literati officials who either praised

Stephen R. Bokenkamp (Ph.D. University of California, Berkeley, 1986) specializes in the study of medieval Chinese Daoism, with a special emphasis on its literatures and its relations with Buddhism. He is author of *Early Daoist Scriptures and Ancestors and Anxiety* as well as over thirty-five articles and book chapters on Daoism and literature. Among his awards are the Guggenheim Award for the Translation of a medieval Daoist text and a National Endowment for the Humanities Translation grants. In addition to his position at Arizona State, he has taught at Indiana University, Stanford University, and short courses for graduate students at Princeton and Fudan Universities. He was also part of the National 985 project at the Institute of Religious Studies, Sichuan University during 2006–2013.

* This work is dedicated to Kristofer M. Schipper, whose lively 1965 work *L'Empereur Wou des Han dans la legend Taoïste: Han Wou-ti nei-tchoan*, assigned by Edward Schafer in preparation for my first class on Daoism, first sparked my interest in the religion. I would like to thank Professors Franciscus Verellen and Vincent Goosaert for including me in this effort and am grateful to the two anonymous reviewers for their comments. Their contributions are now invisible and any remaining apparent errors are my own.

or criticized them. Whatever their origins, such constructed images should not be dismissed by scholars as “deceptive creations.” In modern terms, they are advertisements for a group of women Daoist practitioners from the Belvedere of Jade Asterism in the Tang capital Chang’an who practiced conversion, preaching, ritual services, and alchemy, and also had close relations with the women of the inner palace.

Keywords: blood, Daoist women, Tang alchemy, Han Ziming, Tian Yuansu

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