

Reviews

Poul Andersen, Simon Heilesen and Birthe Mølhave: *Kinesiske Religioner og Livsformer* (Chinese Religions and Ways of Life) Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1990. 313 pp.

The present book is one in a recent string of publications for popular consumption by Danish teachers and scholars on East Asian religions. According to the brief introduction the target audience is primarily high school students and participants in adults evening seminars on the subject of foreign religions. As such the book is meant to be a pedagogical tool through which the reader may gain an insight into the basic patterns of beliefs and practices of the religious traditions in China. The book consists of a combination of introductory essays and translated passages, mainly from the classical literature. It is divided into five chapters as follows:

1. "Views on Life and Popular Religion". With contributions by various authors (pp. 16-59). On the basis of several secondary sources this chapter is meant to serve as a general introduction to Chinese society and culture, and is as such designed to place Chinese religion in its proper cultural and historical context. It includes sections by Søren Egerod, Birthe Mølhave, the Qianlong emperor, Pu Yi, Pearl S. Buck, Jan Myrdal, a former Maoist, and lastly a section by Poul Andersen dealing with Chinese popular religion. This last section is clearly the most well-written, and also the most qualified contribution to the introductory chapter. However, it is highly questionable whether Daoism is the sole supplier of ingredients to popular religion as it is argued here. Generally speaking much of the material in this chapter is redundant if not useless, and one could have wished that the editor had made a more qualified selection. The current Chinese cultural project under the direction of Professor Eric Zürcher in Leiden could have been of much help.

2. "Daoism" by Poul Andersen (pp. 60-119). This chapter on Daoist religion is a tour de force with translations of passages from

several of the seminal canonical works of the tradition. It demonstrates the author's impressive grasp of the tradition, its history, lore and practices, which enables him to give a useful and comprehensive introduction to the religious developments of Daoism. He has done us all a service by placing the teachings of Laozi and Zhuangzi in their proper light, not as examples of Chinese philosophy, but as the forefathers of the Daoist religion. Along the same lines he also does not present Daoist religion as later superstition, but shows that it is actually the mainstream of Daoism. This is easily the most complete and informative of all the chapters, and adds considerably to the value of the book.

3. "The Confucian Tradition" by Birthe Mølhave (pp. 120-213). This is the longest chapter of the book, and attempts to account for the tradition from the time of the Master up to the present. Accordingly, it endeavours to incorporate such aspects of Confucian-based practices as ancestral worship, respect for the elder, Confucian rituals, the Confucius temple in Qufu. Generally the chapter lacks the overview that one would expect of a venture of this kind, and consequently certain themes and aspects such as Confucian rituals and the person of Confucius have been emphasized at the expense of other equally important issues, including Neo-Confucianism, which is not properly introduced. The author neglects to account for the decline and eventual break-up of the Confucian tradition during the Nan Bei Chao period, which is highly important for the understanding of the development during the Sui and Tang periods, where many government officials, although officially representatives of the Confucian educated elite, became Buddhists and Daoists. Another example is the section on poetry during the Tang, which is presented as an aspect of Confucian thought. This is simply incorrect, and none of the examples given have the least to do with Confucian maxims. Wang Wei (p. 175) is actually one of the Buddhist officials. In the section on Han Yu (p. 177-80), Han Yu is presented as someone, who "stabilized" Confucianism. This is also not correct, he was neither an original thinker, nor was he in any way representative of an anti-Buddhist movement, although, of course, he expressed strong anti-Buddhist sentiments at times. His merit lies chiefly in his being a major literary figure. Generally speaking this chapter is

unstructured and the author's understanding of the historical development of the tradition is weak.

4. "Chinese Buddhism" by Simon B. Heilesen (pp. 214-275). Although both instructive, well-written, and with a good selection of important text-passages, this chapter is marred by the lack of a proper pictorial material. One wonders why, as the general editor elsewhere has not spared fine colour reproductions. Again this chapter could have benefitted from the Chinese cultural project by Eric Zürcher. Still, it introduces a number of teachings, and masters of the Chinese Buddhist tradition, in Danish for the first time, and is as such an original contribution.

5. "Maoism" by Birthe Mølhavé (pp. 276-309). The chapter contains a selection of addresses by Mao, and a few pieces of Communist propaganda, both Chinese and Western, mainly from the early 1970s. A few unrelated photos from the student demonstrations in the Tiananmen Square, June 1989, seem misplaced in the present context.

With the exception of the final chapter, which this reviewer feels is redundant, the division of the book is both logical and reasonable. The idea of having an introductory chapter dealing with Chinese cultural institutions as an entrance to Chinese religion as a whole, is very good and shows a fine sense of pedagogical awareness. However, it is a pity that the selection of sources presented in this chapter is as weak as it is.

The pictorial material, with the exception of that in the chapter on Buddhism which is outright hopeless, is generally very fine and of high quality. Especially the photos of the Daoist rituals are superb, and they help enhance the value of the book as a tool of reference.

With a project as ambitious and presumably as expensive as the present publication, one expects that a number of standard formalities and requirements are met. Such requirements include a proper overview of the topic to be dealt with, a standard vocabulary and style, uniform pictorial presentation of the various traditions treated, a qualitative selection of primary material, etc. However, this book does not meet many of these requirements. In fact it blatantly ignores several of them, with the result that one is left with a feeling of fragmentation of the material in which the individual chapters and sections by different authors often do not

'speak' with each other.

Another serious problem lies with the way the material has been weighted. We can see how the editor have consciously placed the Confucian tradition centrally in Chinese religion, something which is not so easy to understand, since this tradition as a religious belief system played a relatively minor role in the life of the average Chinese. Daoism was definitely a much more dominant religious tradition than Confucianism in Chinese society from the Eastern Han onwards, and a stronger emphasis on this material would have been in order. Ironically, the greatest and most pervasive of all of China's religions, namely Buddhism, is given the least space in the book, and consequently one is left with the impression that its importance in Chinese religion was minor, or at least that it ranked well below the other two traditions. Such an impression does not correspond with the rich historical and cultural sources, which clearly show that Buddhism was much greater as a religion than any of the other two traditions in terms of number of adherents, clergy, institutions and literature during most of imperial China from the Nan Bei Chao period (from the 4th to the 6th century A.D.) and up to the early Qing.

One may well argue that Maoism is a Chinese religion, but apart from the widespread personality cult which surrounded Mao, and the fundamentalist dogmas and beliefs which characterize Chinese Communism as such, it should primarily be seen as the ideology of a now largely out-moded political system, and not as a religion. It is also difficult to envisage Maoism as a 'way of life', especially if we approach the phenomena from the points of view of the history of religion or intellectual history. For these reasons the present reviewer feels that the fifth chapter does not belong in a the book of this kind.

When the pros and cons have been weighed, it still remains that the present book is by far the most qualified presentation of Chinese religion to appear so far in the Danish language. Despite its drawbacks and lack of homogeneity, it provides a lot of information on hitherto little known aspects of China's spiritual culture. One is even tempted to wonder whether the book is not too scholarly for high school students, but that remains to be seen. With regard to future publications on Chinese and East Asian religions, one hopes

that the prestigious publishing house Gyldendal will appoint a general editor with a more professional training in the area under discussion than has been the case here. This will limit the number of formal errors, which is indeed the greatest shortcoming of *Kinesiske religioner og Livsformer*.

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