

BOOK REVIEWS

CHINESE RELIGION: TWO NEW SOURCEBOOKS

Chinese Religion

An Anthology of Sources

EDITED BY DEBORAH SOMMER

NEW YORK AND OXFORD:
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1995
XXIII + 375 PAGES

Religions of China

in Practice

Edited by Donald S. Lopez, Jr.

PRINCETON: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1996
XVI + 499 PAGES

These are the first English language collections of primary texts designed specifically for studying Chinese religion.¹ Both are solid collections of well translated texts, but they are very different from one another; not only do they seldom overlap, but they embody different approaches to the field. Educators now have clear new choices in how they present this subject to their students.

For many years, teachers had to rely on such anthologies as William T. de Bary's *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (1960) and Wing-tsit Chan's *Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy* (1963). Many of the contributors to these new volumes are from a generation that learned from those texts, but they have seen the study of Chinese religion develop in new directions. Both, therefore, seek to help teachers lead their students to a much richer and more accurate understanding of the subject. Each, for instance, seeks to rectify past overemphasis on the notion that China has "three religions"—Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Both stretch boundaries by including texts by and about heretofore neglected segments of Chinese society, such as women. The difference is that Sommer works to expand students' awareness by including new literary genres, while Lopez avoids philosophical texts altogether, and presents only materials that never appeared in earlier anthologies.

Neither volume provides the Chinese characters that advanced students might need. Each suggests further readings on each topic. Sommer's book has no index, but, unlike Lopez's book, it includes a helpful glossary, up-to-date bibliography, and guide to video sources. Lopez employs the pinyin romanization system; Sommer generally uses the more traditional Wade-Giles system, "but in the introductions to selections employing pinyin, I have used pinyin" (viii). In each case, students will sometimes suffer confusion: e.g., those looking up Tao or *Tao Te Ching* will find nothing in Lopez's index, so cross-ref-

erences, both there and in Sommer's glossary, would have helped many teachers and their students.

CHINESE RELIGION An Anthology of Sources

Sommer is familiar with much of the important scholarship in the field, and provides reliable translations—some new, some drawn from earlier publications. She nods to tradition by featuring extracts from "the Classics," both in the Confucian sense (*Changes, History, Odes, and Rites*), and in the modern "Great Books" sense (*Analects, Mo-Tzu, Mencius, Tao Te Ching, Chuang-Tzu*, etc.). Commendably, she also includes texts from "as many genres as possible" (viii), and many will appreciate the opportunity to incorporate discussion of poetry, drama, and *hsiao-shuo* (tales and novels) alongside more traditional treatment of China's "Great Books."

What may disappoint specialists is that while her anthology may, on the whole, be "balanced" among genres, the sections on specific periods sometimes are not. For instance, the coverage of the Han/Wei period consists of just three entries. Many would have hoped for examples of other texts that would have given a fuller picture of Han religion.² More surprisingly, the entire section on the Ch'ing period consists of selections from two *hsiao-shuo* texts. The issue here is not one of personal taste, but one of whether we ought to give students the false impression that late imperial China lacked religious movements, liturgical activities, meditation, or religious thought.

What is laudable is that Sommer's selections emphasize "religious" topics—"Heaven," spirits, sacrifices, and ritual. Yet, some still focus on timeworn issues of intellectual history, such as the familiar Mencius/Hsün-Tzu debate over "human nature." The same is true of the selections on the Sung/Yüan period, of which the first three bow to the canons of Neo-Confucian "orthodoxy." Many religion scholars (like those who helped shape the Lopez book) will debate whether the musings of such Neo-Confucian intellectuals as Chou Tun-i should be highlighted in a sourcebook on "religion." Sommer mitigates such criticism by including brief texts by Chu Hsi on sacrifice, but most specialists today will take issue with the notion that "Sung religion" began with Chou Tun-i.

Overall, Sommer's anthology has substantial merit. It provides flexibility for teachers to cover "religion" in terms of ritual, thought, or personal cultivation, but it does not provide thorough coverage of any given theme or period. Some will object that it still treats "religion" primarily in terms of the stale "great tradition/little tradition" model, with nearly all of the attention on the former. As seen in this volume, "Chinese religion" is still a fairly elitist tradition, dominated by great names. It is difficult to see how it can help students learn the *history* of Chinese religion, for it generally ignores religion as a complex and evolving *social reality*. So while Sommer does step into new territory, she seems hesitant to stray too far from the de Bary/Chan "tradition." On the other hand, nonspecialists who learned about Chinese culture from such sourcebooks will find hers agreeable; it will broaden students' perspective without dismissing what the teacher has already learned on the basis of such earlier models.

RELIGIONS OF CHINA IN PRACTICE

The Lopez sourcebook is a different matter. It is part of a series, *Princeton Readings in Religion*, that is designed to overturn all such models. Rather than expand the usual corpus of important Chinese

texts, Lopez discards it entirely; the Confucian “classics” are completely gone, as are such familiar texts as the *Tao Te Ching* and *Mencius*. His volume “provides a different configuration of texts in an attempt better to represent the range of religious practices” (v). He recruited twenty-nine of North America’s leading specialists to provide translations of texts that were ignored in earlier anthologies, including “ritual manuals, hagiographical and autobiographical works, and folktales” (v). Stephen F. Teiser added an expert introduction explaining the state of the field.

In some senses, this volume clearly provides a more accurate picture of premodern Chinese religion than earlier collections, or even Sommer’s.³ It shifts the focus away from the “leading thinkers” of Chinese tradition, and onto the ways that religion was actually practiced in traditional Chinese society. Moreover, it scraps the usual chronological organization of materials, and even the labeling of entries as texts of “Confucianism,” “Taoism,” etc. Instead, it lists texts under such rubrics as “The Unseen World,” “Communicating with the Unseen,” “Rituals of the Seen and Unseen World,” and “Earthly Conduct.” Prefatory charts list “Contents by Tradition” and “Contents by Chronology.” Of the thirty-seven readings, ten are listed under Buddhism, ten under Taoism, nine under “popular religion,” and four each under “minority religions” and “state religion.” None are listed under “Confucianism,” though specialists today tend to stress long-ignored religious aspects of that tradition.

Though the volume’s unconventional organization will not harmonize with current pedagogical models, it does no great violence to the realities of Chinese religion; correlating the “unseen” with the “seen” is a theme of the ancient Confucian text *Chung-yung* (which, ironically, is nowhere mentioned in the book), and the categories are fluid enough to be applied to any tradition. But the reason for this radical new arrangement is that through most of Chinese history, there were really few sharp boundaries separating Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian beliefs and practices. The illusion of such boundaries owes (1) to the traditional need of Westerners to identify mutually exclusive “religions,” comparable to those of the West; and (2) to the assumptions of modern Neo-Confucians. Such assumptions were absorbed into earlier anthologies, including those of Chan and de Bary (and also into that of Sommer, though she urges readers to look beyond it). Lopez and colleagues, however, have broken that spell.

But while Lopez’s readers may be liberated from the pitfalls that plagued most other sourcebooks, they face new problems. For instance, Lopez’s volume forces teachers to discard the deeply mistaken notion that “Taoism” consisted of a set of philosophical texts (*Lao-Tzu*, *Chuang-Tzu*, etc.). Instead, it generally presents texts of Taoism as defined by the Taoists of traditional China themselves, e.g., ritual and meditation texts of the “Taoist church” of the Six Dynasties period. (It has little Taoist material from later periods, mainly because few scholars have yet studied such material.) These facts pose a challenge for teachers who are not specialists in the subject; they must abandon virtually every reading and every lecture they have ever used in teaching students about it. Teiser’s introduction, and introductions to the pertinent readings, help give some idea of the realities of the Taoist tradition, but that tradition remains poorly understood. This volume does little to help teachers integrate what they know about *Lao-Tzu* and *Chuang-Tzu* with the radically different Six-Dynasties Taoist texts presented here, or with “Daoist Ritual in Contemporary Southeast China.” (selection 24).

Accordingly, some teachers will conclude that Lopez went too far. Sommer also challenges readers to stretch their thinking about Chinese religion, but tries to integrate new material into a corpus of readings with which today’s teachers are familiar. She shows students and teachers that new understandings of Chinese religion are necessary, and points (albeit gingerly) in new directions. She attempts to contribute to the evolution of the field, whereas Lopez seems to disdain evolution and demand absolute revolution.

Neither approach is wrong, but the volumes are directed at different audiences. It would be simplistic to surmise that Sommer’s serves nonspecialists while Lopez’s serves specialists. Even specialists may find the Lopez volume awkward to integrate with some of their existing teaching strategies, especially at the undergraduate level. As scholars, we all welcome the Lopez volume, which will contribute to expanding knowledge in our field. But as teachers, many may decide to assign students such a limited number of its readings that we will simply place it on library reserve, rather than expect students to purchase it. For graduate students and advanced undergraduates who aspire to specialize in this field, the Lopez book provides essential new perspectives. Yet, its limitations notwithstanding, Sommer’s book may more effectively serve the pedagogical needs of many of today’s teachers in undergraduate courses. Some teachers might consider using both together, showing students different ways in which to understand “Chinese religion.” ■

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NOTES

1. Laurence G. Thompson’s *Chinese Way in Religion* (1973) mixes selections from primary sources and writings from Western scholars.
2. Possibilities range from the texts of “Huang-Lao” thought that were unearthed in the 1970s to writings on the Queen Mother of the West, a goddess who was the focus of a Han religious movement and a body of later literature.
3. Unlike Sommer, who includes a section on the Modern Era. (i.e., post-1911), Lopez includes few texts on twentieth century China. Even those generally focus on minority religions, showing that Lopez did not consider the Chinese response to modernity to be a part of his project.