

Richard von Glahn, *The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. xii + 385 pages.

Richard von Glahn, the UCLA history professor who is well known for his work on Song–Yuan–Ming (960–1644) Chinese history, has written a study about the “sinister way” *zuodao* 左道 of Chinese folklore and religion that is

based on his research in China in 1991–92 and 1996–97. Von Glahn’s work is valuable specifically because he does not focus on the elite or institutional religions of China, as many scholars do. Instead, he emphasizes that Chinese religious culture is manifold and local; his attention is on “vernacular” religion, a term he prefers to “secular.” The work builds upon other recent studies of popular Chinese religion, including Terry Kleeman’s *Great Perfection*, a work devoted to a study of the rise and spread of Celestial Masters Daoism; Robert Hymes’ *Way and Byway*, which explores local religion in the Song Dynasty (960–1279); and Kenneth Dean’s *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China*, a work based on research in many of the same areas as von Glahn’s.¹

Von Glahn uses the “sinister way” to refer to teachings and practices of Chinese *fangshi* 方士, whom he associates with sorcerers, conjurers, and experts in the mantic arts and their requisite techniques for dealing with ghosts, demons, and sinister spirits. Von Glahn aligns himself with the view that no clear separation can be made between institutionalized and elite religion in China, on the one hand, and diffused and vernacular religion, on the other. He therefore follows the stream of important work done by Kristofer Schipper (*The Taoist Body*) and Kenneth Dean (*Lord of the Three-in-One*).² However, von Glahn does not take any notice of the growing consensus that associates *fangshi* with *daoshi* 道士 or of the fact that their teachings form the basis even for classical works of Daoism, such as the *Daodejing* 道德經 and the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. Neither does von Glahn comment on Martin Palmer’s controversial work, *The Jesus Sutras*, which argues that Tang Dynasty (618–907) expressions of Christian–Daoist and Christian–Buddhist practices existed at Louguantai (near Xi’an).³

Nonetheless, von Glahn does a fine job of providing a rich array of Chinese folktales regarding ancestors, ghosts, and gods; the Han (206 B.C.E.–220 C.E.) dynastic cult of the dead; *shanxiao* 山魃 (mountain goblins); the plague demons and epidemic gods; and the cult of Wutong 五通. He makes references to most of the best-known sources but neglects some that surely would have been of great use to him: the *Spellbinding* text from the pre-Qin (221–206 B.C.E.) period, Ge Hong’s 葛洪 (283–343) instructions for making talismans to protect travelers in the mountains from *shanxiao*, the role of celestial diagrams in local religion from the Song to Qing (1644–1911) dynasties, and even the expression of local religion in the plays of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) dramatist Tang Xianzu 湯顯祖 (1550–1616).

Readers will find very informative the author’s data about popular images of the supernatural that are reflected in the material culture of China, including bronze artifacts, stele, paintings, and performance arts. Von Glahn understands well that an appreciation of the religion of the common people does not come merely from written texts. The culture embedded in objects also contains significant value in the study of folklore and religion.

The author offers a careful analysis and ample evidence for his claim that the two major moments of transformation of Chinese religion occurred during the Han Dynasty and the Song Dynasty. However, some readers will still argue that the rise of the Celestial Masters (a millennial movement in the second century C.E.) and the influx of Buddhism into China should not be overlooked as fundamental agents and processes of change.

Von Glahn divides his book into seven chapters. In discussing Han mortuary practices, he points out how fascination with ghosts became the basic trope of a genre of folklore known as *zhiguai* 志怪 (“annals of the strange”) literature (p. 73). He next explores folk traditions about changelings. Unlike many researchers, he is careful to provide the physics or “science” of ghosts and changelings in Chinese intellectual history. His fascinating discussion of the importance of the physics of the Wuxing 五行 (Five Phases) to such beliefs is one of the greatest strengths of the work. Another important inclusion von Glahn makes that many scholars omit is a discussion of the emergence of the ledgers of merit and demerit in the Yuan (1271–1368) and Song dynasties. This section would have been stronger, however, if von Glahn had shown how the transmission of the moral culture of China through these texts was closely linked with the village lecture system through the Qing Dynasty.

The final two chapters of the work are dedicated to a very detailed analysis of the development of the cult of Wutong. Von Glahn provides the basic structure of the Wutong folklore as follows: a person makes a pact to become rich with a *shanxiao*; wives and daughters are subsequently seduced and raped by the Wutong spirit; and, ultimately, tragedy and violence befall the family which gained the wealth, often with the wife/daughter wasting away (p. 187). The author shows how several aspects of the Wutong legend merged into the literary figure of the Buddhist bodhisattva Huaguang 華光, especially in theatrical performances and in the plot of the work *Journey to the South*. Von Glahn’s exploration of the Wutong cult is very engaging and nuanced, and, to some extent, it is the highlight of the book.

Overall, von Glahn has provided an informative work that traces many beliefs in Chinese vernacular religion and folktales. The inclusion of a considerable number of figures and tables helps readers gain a tangible picture of the vernacular gods in Chinese religion. The work includes most of the essentials that a scholar would expect: use of Chinese *pinyin* 拼音, a glossary of Chinese characters, a detailed bibliography, and a helpful index. Due to its subtlety and complexity in portraying its major themes, the book is best suited for graduate students and scholars whose fields are in Chinese religious culture, folklore, philosophy, religion, history, or anthropology.

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Notes

¹Terry F. Kleeman, *Great Perfection: Religion and Ethnicity in a Chinese Millennial Kingdom* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998); Robert P. Hymes, *Way and Byway: Taoism, Local Religion, and Models of Divinity in Sung and Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Kenneth Dean, *Taoist Ritual and Popular Cults of Southeast China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

²Kristofer Marinus Schipper, *The Taoist Body*, trans. Karen C. Duval (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Kenneth Dean, *Lord of the Three in One: The Spread of a Cult in Southeast China* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

³Martin Palmer, *The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity* (New York: Ballantine, 2001).