

DUBOIS, THOMAS DAVID. *The Sacred Village: Social Change and Religious Life in Rural North China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005. 275 pages. ISBN 0-8248-2837-2.

The Sacred Village is a historical and anthropological study of aspects of the religious life of Cang County (Cangxian 滄縣) which is part of Cang Prefecture (Cangzhou 滄州) in Hebei 河北 Province. Cang County is about one hundred kilometres south of the major Chinese city of Tianjin 天津 and the main city of the prefecture (also confusingly called Cangzhou) is located both on the Grand Canal and on a major railway line. This may give the impression that the people of the county live at a thriving hub but, as DuBois points out, until 1949 most peasants in this region conducted their lives on foot and that "until the late 1980s, the world of most peasants was restricted to the distance that could be travelled on foot in the morning so as to return in the afternoon" (24–25), which amounted to about fifteen kilometres.

One of the great strengths of DuBois's work is his conjunction of the historical and the contemporary and he is fortunate that there exist historical records of the districts he conducted fieldwork in, or of areas close enough to be illuminating. This fieldwork was conducted, "over the course of 1997–1998, and again during the summers of 1999 and 2002 [when] I made eighteen trips to Cangzhou, in each visit remaining for three to six days" (9). DuBois, and other scholars working on Chinese religions in the People's Republic, must be envious of the opportunities of their scholarly forebears, often missionaries, who were able to live "in the field" for extended periods, such as the great Willem Grootaers (1911–1999)

whose pioneering works on northern Chinese religion were published in *Folklore Studies*, the predecessor of this journal in the 1940s and 1950s. Apart from the notes he took during fieldwork, DuBois was able to consult two nineteenth century Chinese surveys of villages and households, the relevant local gazetteers, memoirs and reminiscences of leaders of various sectarian movements preserved in the Tianjin Municipal Library, and government records of the suppression of the Yiguandao 一貫道 in the early 1950s for this study. *The Sacred Village*, therefore, stands as a notable representative of one of the most welcome recent trends in the study of Chinese religions: works that both engage with present realities as well as grant the current situation historical depth. This, of course, makes great demands on researchers who must be able to marshal the scholarly apparatus of traditional Sinology and simultaneously address the very different demands of the contemporary social sciences, as DuBois does with aplomb.

The core of the book is a series of studies of various religious activities in his chosen site. *The Sacred Village* is introduced by a first chapter on rural Cang county and a second on the relationships between religious activities and the village itself. In the subsequent chapters he explores the continuing presence of *xiangtou* 香頭, spiritual healers who use the power of fox spirits (a topic superbly addressed by Li Wei-tsu, 1948), monastic Buddhism, and four different types of “sectarians,” namely the Li sect (Zailijiao 在理教, also known as the Temperance sect), the Way of Penetrating Unity (Yiguandao), the Teachings of the Most Supreme (Taishang men 太上門) and the Heaven and Earth Teaching (Tiandi men 天地門).

One nagging question concerning *The Sacred Village* is to what extent the religious activities DuBois’s analyses account for what is, or was, going on in Cang county. He does, to be sure, briefly discuss the positions of Christianity and Islam pointing out that their presence is largely confined to the city of Cangzhou. However, in a discussion of temple reconstruction and repair, we find reference, amongst other buildings, to a Dongyue miao 東嶽廟, a Daoist Temple of the Eastern Peak located in Cang county. But questions, for instance, of how this temple is used (if it still exists), if any Daoist priests are associated with it, and how it relates to other religious activities are not addressed. Indeed, a reader may wonder whether Daoism is present at all, any more, in Cang county. Another way of phrasing this question might be to ask whether DuBois has selected certain religious features of life in Cang county, or has attempted complete coverage. I might note in passing that one of the notable features of Grootaers’s work was his concern for completeness (see, in particular, GROOTAERS 1995).

One of the inevitable characteristics of studies of one locality is that readers will almost certainly be unfamiliar with the place. While reading *The Sacred Village*, I often had the impression of not being entirely sure of where the particular village under discussion precisely was. Unfortunately no detailed map of the county is provided which marks all the villages and religious sites mentioned in the text. Such a map would also have enabled readers to locate the villages in relation to one another, especially important as some of the most interesting work in DuBois’s book has to do with religious networks. *The Sacred Village* could also have benefited from another map (or perhaps a short series) showing the shifting boundaries of the county (and indeed the prefecture) over time. The reason for this is that the relevant administrative boundaries changed several times over the duration of DuBois’s study, a function partly of the shift from Imperial to Republican to Communist regimes but also responding to the growth of Tianjin. A good example of why this is relevant is that the data DuBois presents in relation to the suppression of the Yiguandao in 1951 refers to the 1949 county boundaries and county names. These are different from those he presents in his map of the prefecture with current boundaries and names (16) and, in

addition, by my count from the tables concerned (140–41) there appear to have been only eleven administrative divisions in 1949 whereas there are twelve now.

DuBois begins *The Sacred Village* by relating a wonderfully vivid incident of a woman fulfilling a vow she made to the deified scholar Dong Sihai that he recorded in his fieldwork. At times in the book such anecdotes and observations leap out and we see the religious life of the people of Cang County come to life. It is, perhaps, inevitable in the approach DuBois has chosen for *The Sacred Village* that his analysis tends to leech the actual religion out of his discussions. For this reader, at least, more concentration on, say, what the content of the rituals is and how they are performed would have been welcome. To take one example, funeral rituals seem to be able to be performed by most of the groups concerned in this study but the question of whether the nature of those rituals differed from group to group goes unanswered. I suspect DuBois has much of this, and other fascinating material in his fieldwork notes—I only hope that he can make it available to readers in some form.

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