



**Religious Experience and Lay Society in T'ang China: A Reading of Tai Fu's *Kuang-i chi*, by Glen Dudbridge. Cambridge Studies in Chinese History, Literature and Institutions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. ix+256 pp. Maps. ISBN: 0521482232**

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Drawing upon his knowledge and understanding of literature, book culture, and vernacular culture of pre-modern China, Glen Dudbridge offers, in his unique reading of *Kuang-i chi* 廣異記 (The great book of marvels), insights into the religious experiences of lay society individuals of eighth century China. However, an inquisitive reader must ask the following questions: Can *Kuang-i chi*, a medieval collection of tales of encounters with the other world by the minor T'ang Dynasty official Tai Fu 戴孚 (fl. 760-780, *chin-shih* 757), be used for the purpose of the study of religious culture? How? and to what extent? What approaches would be effective in inquiring such a text and what kinds of conclusions can be drawn? Though not explicitly setting forth these questions, Dudbridge's work serves as answers to them through explicitly defining the nature of *Kuang-i chi* to his study, discarding conventional categories and establishing new ones in his analysis, and associating *Kuang-i chi* to the "vernacular," instead of official, or "centralized," religious culture (p.63-4). Using a sharp historical focus on the collection, Dudbridge concentrates on the dynamics of change in religious practices of T'ang Dynasty that is rooted and reflected in such a vernacular religious culture.

Besides *Kuang-i chi*, Dudbridge cites extensively, with accurate and often thoroughly annotated translations, from 176 primary sources, including official history, such as *Shih chi* 史記, *Hsin T'ang shu* 新唐書, *Chiu T'ang shu* 唐書, *Tuz-chih t'ung-chien* 資治通鑑, classics such as *Shih ching* 詩經 and *Lun-yü* 論語, collections of unofficial records and anecdotes, such as *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi* 太平廣記, *I-chien chi* 夷堅志, various local gazetteers, epigraphical texts, poetry collections, texts of religious canon such as *Tao tsang* 道藏, and other historical records such as maps, exam records and geographical documents. The 134 secondary studies he uses include literary, historical, cultural, social, anthropological, and religious studies from both western and Chinese scholars. To have such range of discussion in one coherent and well focused study of a collection shows the effort put into and the quality of Dudbridge's work.

The seven chapters of the book can be divided into two functional sections with chapters one to three building up Dudbridge's own interpretation frame of *Kuang-i chi*, and chapters four to seven offering four case studies to further illustrate the vernacular religious culture reflected in *Kuang-i chi*. Chapter one, "A sequence of voices," opens the discussion with three tales as a sampling of the collection. This chapter not only sets out to establish Dudbridge's extremely readable style through out the book, but also introduces his basic approach to the *Kuang-i chi* stories – the structural analysis distinguishing inner and outer stories that "each speaks for a distinct set of perceptions" (p.14). The inner story represents the "mythological property shared between subject, author, and society at large," while the outer story "creates a distance from all this" and locates the narration in its historical context (p. 15). Also in this chapter, Dudbridge declares that, taking a similar perspective as that of De Groot, he will treat *Kuang-i chi* as "a literature record, not of fantasy or creative fiction" (p.16) and as "a record of its times" (p.17). Chapter two, "A contemporary view," offers a full translation of *Kuang-i chi's* original preface. Written by Tai Fu's friend, the poet and painter, Ku K'uang 顧況 (d. 806+), the preface traces the long tradition of documenting the spiritual world and serves as a justification of *Kuang-i chi*. For each of the titles mentioned in Ku K'uang's preface, Dudbridge provides annotated bibliography, as well as detailed contextualization for historical figures and events, resulting in a thorough study of the historical context for the writing of *Kuang-i chi*. The chapter itself is a demonstration of one of the obvious and significant contributions of Dudbridge's work: the amount of information and detail offered, both in the text and in his well-researched footnotes.

Chapter three, "The dynamics of Tai Fu's world," is where Dudbridge presents his main idea. In the first section, "Flawed oppositions," he argues against the paired antithetical categories commonly used in analyzing Chinese society, such as northern and southern, centre and provinces, rural and urban, elite and popular, etc. In depth analysis often causes their boundaries to "dissolve into complexity" and "lose definition" (p. 46). Using the subject categories in *T'ai-p'ing kuang-chi*, the extensive tenth century collection of accounts outside of official history, as a reference frame, Dudbridge points out that *Kuang-i chi's* focus is on the spiritual world with "little direct attention to the affairs of secular society" (p.48). In order to effectively analyze *Kuang-i chi's* stories, he creates the paired antithesis of seen and unseen worlds that corresponds with the structural antithesis of outer and inner stories, with the unseen world represented in the inner story and the seen world in the outer story.

A paradoxical dynamic in Tai Fu's world is thus discovered: on one hand all stories depend on the concept of the separation of the seen and unseen worlds, on the other hand, all are accounts of happenings when the two worlds come face to face to

each other. The T'ang society in Tai Fu's accounts regards the unseen world as "alien and apart", but at the same time it "systematically binds and assimilates it to its own institutions," constructing an unseen world very much alike to that of T'ang China (p.52). The understandings of the bureaucracy system, money transactions, social customs of such an unseen world are discussed with many stories cited as examples, to show that death, the great leveler, has broken down the many conventional categories of society when it comes to the perceptions of the unseen world. Dudbridge also points out that Tai Fu's language has shown no interest in the orthodox/heterodox opposition among religious doctrines, and concludes that *Kuang-i chi* represents the perceptions of a lay society and reflects a "vernacular" religious culture that is "open to participation by the whole community" (p. 64).

In the second section, "Movement in time," Dudbridge finds in *Kuang-i chi* evidence to support Fernand Braudel's model of three levels of historical change, and argues that Chinese religious culture, instead of being static, were evolving simultaneously at many different speeds (p.65). The first level is the underlying, long lasting patterns of social behaviors and religious beliefs, for example, the sacrificial use of blood food, reflected in *Kuang-i chi* stories as the imperceptible historical change. The second level is the measured movements in historical time, such as the spread of local cults to national ones, and the intermingling of Taoist and Tantric ritual practices in mid-Tang (p. 73). The third level is the history of events, such as the An Lu-shan 安祿山 (703-57) rebellion, appearing directly in stories of *Kuang-i chi*. Though Dudbridge shows that all three levels are reflected in *Kuang-i chi* from the perspective of vernacular religious culture, large amount of primary texts and secondary studies on religious movements are employed to make the point sufficiently clear.

Chapter four to seven each offers a case of religious phenomenon and demonstrates how the stories of *Kuang-i chi* can be used to illustrate these topics. Chapter four, "The worshippers of Mount Hua," is built solidly on historical contextualization. The first section "The temple and its cult" is representative of the vast range of primary material Dudbridge uses, including official histories, mountain and temple stele texts, topographical work such as *Shui-ching chu* 水經注, liturgical texts used by imperial court, anecdotal stories, and poetry. This section provides a well-researched historical background against which stories of *Kuang-i chi* are brought into discussion in the following section "A vernacular mythology." The antithesis of seen/unseen worlds effectively demonstrates *Kuang-i chi* accounts as the entrance to the private world of the worshippers and show "how the temple's divine population was perceived to interact with secular human society" (p.106). Structural analysis, also effectively, reveals the inner stories as the vernacular mythology of Mount Hua, and the outer stories as the "known social situations" that led to the development of various sub-cults (p.108). By "known social situations," perhaps Dudbridge is aware of the strong impression one gets from this chapter that the understanding of such a "vernacular" religious culture related to Mount Hua perhaps pre-exists his analysis of *Kuang-i chi* stories. It is clearly not derived from the analysis of *Kuang-i chi* accounts, but rather from the extensive background study based on the many primary texts in the first section of this chapter. And Dudbridge's discussion of *Kuang-i chi* stories is in fact an effort to show how they fit into this big picture of vernacular religious culture. This calls for a second look at the slightly misleading title of the book, which could imply a picture of religious experience and lay society of T'ang China drawn from the reading of *Kuang-i chi*, when in fact, Dudbridge's work is more of a reading of *Kuang-i chi* against such a picture of vernacular religious culture reconstructed, through excellent scholarship, from other sources. It is not to undermine the value of Dudbridge's work as his reading of *Kuang-i chi* in turn enriches the understandings of the vernacular religious culture with accounts of individual experiences.

Chapter five, "Yü-ch'ih Chiung 尉遲迴 at An-yang 安陽," is an essay of source criticism and comparative study of a haunting story. Dudbridge pieces historical, epigraphical and anecdotal evidences together to provide the background story of the sixth-century historical figure who committed suicide and later came back in various versions of loosely matched eighth century accounts as a ghost. Structural analysis reveals an inner story of spirit possession and an outer story compared, with Alan Gauld's characteristics of story types, to a world-wide literature of poltergeist reports (p. 133). In chapter six, "Victims of the Yüan Ch'ao 袁晁 rebellion," Dudbridge identifies in several *Kuang-i chi* accounts hints of social and economic conditions that enrich the official records of the rebellion, and argues that they preserve "the oral history of a remote age" (p.138). Here he acknowledges that the inner/outer story analysis of these accounts yields "little analytical gain" (p.141), showing a critical understanding of the application range of his own analytical methods. Subject wise, chapter six deals with the phenomenon of soul-speech, *ling-yü* 靈語, where the unsettled souls of the newly dead speak through dreams or living person, and the mythological background for the tales of stolen treasure. Chapter seven, "Mating with spirits," deals with the religious practice of spirit marriage, *ming-hun* 冥婚. At the end of the book, Dudbridge provides a summary of all the extant stories in *Kuang-i chi* for reference purposes.

The nature of *Kuang-i chi*, as perceived by Dudbridge with regard to Fernand Braudel's three levels of historical change, can be summed up as a "manifestation" of the long-lasting patterns of beliefs (p. 65); a "window" to observe measured movements in the development of cults and ritual practices (p. 73); and an echo of public events of the historical period (p. 74). Though it "cannot claim authority of factual accounts" (p. 115, 133), it reveals "a known historical perspective" (p. 135), possesses archaeological values (p. 180), and preserves an oral history of remote age (pp. 138, 146). Dudbridge treats *Kuang-i chi* as a source of vernacular religion that "reflects a conservative, back-looking vision of changes in religious movements" (p.75). In so doing, Dudbridge implicitly rejects the conventional dichotomy of labeling the text either religious or literary,<sup>1</sup> either documentary or fictional. Thus he is able to take his discussion beyond the scope of pure literary studies and situate the text in its social historical background, as well as the religious culture of its time. By choosing such a text of "vernacular" nature as the focus of his study, Dudbridge moves beyond the conventional historical political readings of

<sup>1</sup>More on this topic, see the discussion in the review of this book by Prof. William H. Nienhauser, Jr., in T'oung Pao 通報 LXXXV, Second Series, Leiden: Brill. Vol. 85, Fasc. 1/3 (1999), pp. 181-189.

texts, as is often the case in the study of T'ang literature, and onto the new territory of the history of perspective, or mentality, reflected in the text.

However, one issue remains unclear. As Dudbridge implies, the perspective and experience recorded in *Kuang-i chi* are those of the individuals of the lay society of T'ang China. This idea seems to neglect the distance between Tai Fu, the author of the collection, and the individuals participating in the events recorded in *Kuang-i chi* accounts. Though very little information on Tai Fu is available to today's scholars, much less is there on Tai Fu's informants, the question is still valid: transmitted to us first through Tai Fu's unknown informants, then through the writing of Tai Fu himself, can the *Kuang-i chi* accounts represent the experience of the individuals in action? Perhaps, difficult as it is due to the lack of information, more discussion, even hypothetical discussion, on the role of Tai Fu and his informants would clarify the notions of "experience" and "perspective" that lie at the center of Dudbridge's work.

Due to his focus on the "vernacular" religious culture, Dudbridge implicitly discards conventional labels such as "Confucian," "Buddhist," and "Taoist" in his discussion on lay society experiences. Together with his explicit discussion on the ineffectiveness of conventional antitheses of regional and social divisions, and his use of different sets of antitheses, such as the seen/unseen worlds, inner/outer stories, and official/vernacular mythology (p. 136), Dudbridge takes a stance in line with that of many scholars, such as Freedman,<sup>2</sup> who argue for a set of basic beliefs and practices underlining Chinese religion. To Dudbridge, this is the basic religious culture in the Chinese lay society which he then labels "vernacular."

However, the term "vernacular," used in a similar sense to that of vernacular literature, is sometimes "expressed in terms of an orthodox/heterodox antithesis, even though the *Kuang-i chi* itself is virtually silent on the matter" (p.63). This is elaborated in the following passage:

"For various reasons it would not be enough, nor even particularly useful, to draw here a picture of the political and literary culture of the middle T'ang, as it would be in studying a book from the orthodox literary tradition. Tai Fu is not writing formal prose; his book does not belong to the orthodox tradition; it has no significance in public life; it does not address the public issues of its day. Nor does Tai Fu show any interest in advancing a particular doctrine." (p. 64)

Here Dudbridge seems to be setting up two antitheses in correspondence with the antithesis of orthodox/heterodox literary tradition: first, the antithesis of the political and literary culture and the vernacular culture, and second, the doctrinal, or institutional, religion and the vernacular religion. To Dudbridge, *Kuang-i chi* belongs to the heterodox and the vernacular both in the sense of literary tradition and that of religious culture. However, often times such antitheses suffer from exactly the same blurriness of boundaries and definitions as Dudbridge points out in his own discussion. In this book Dudbridge warns against the danger that is "not only the tendency of external analysts to seek convenient, relatively simple patterns for grasping a society that would otherwise overwhelm with its complexity, but the very same tendency practiced and bequeathed by the Chinese scholarly tradition itself" (p. 47). Perhaps, his warning can be extended to include a third aspect – the tendency of seeking simple patterns in defining and relating the nature of a text to the social situations reflected in it?

As William of Baskerville in *The Name of the Rose* says, "books are not made to be believed, but to be subjected to inquiry,"<sup>3</sup> Dudbridge's work demonstrates the effective use of many possible tools of inquiring a text such as structural analysis, source criticism, textual transmission, comparative studies of genre and story type. It is also a lush display of the ways of approaching the topic of religious culture through a text such as literary and philological approaches, contextualization and historicization, and the application of theories. Besides the insights into the understanding of basic Chinese religious practices in T'ang Dynasty lay society offered by Dudbridge's discussion, as a benefit, this book can also be taken as an example of research methods, as well as a rich source of primary and secondary material related to the topic of religious culture of T'ang China. Overall, Dudbridge's *Religious Experience and Lay Society in T'ang China: A Reading of Tai Fu's Kuang-i chi* is a book that can be highly recommended to both students and scholars of pre-modern China.

<sup>2</sup>Maurice Freedman, "On the Sociological Study of Chinese Religion," in Arthur P. Wolf ed., *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp.19-41.

<sup>3</sup>Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*, Translated by William Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p.316.