

From “Jardin en Miniature” to Eco-Culture: An Insight of Taishan Belief Culture in Sinology Studies during the Late 19th and 20th Centuries

Fen Tian

School of Foreign Languages and Literature, Taishan University, Tai'an, China
Email: susanhai227@163.com

How to cite this paper: Tian, F. (2021). From “Jardin en Miniature” to Eco-Culture: An Insight of Taishan Belief Culture in Sinology Studies during the Late 19th and 20th Centuries. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 9, 288-294.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2021.910020>

Received: September 29, 2021

Accepted: October 24, 2021

Published: October 27, 2021

Copyright © 2021 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

Sinology studies have focused on the study of Taishan Belief Culture when their writers were studying Taishan culture. A historical record shows that this focus varies due to the authors' knowledge of Dongyue Dadi and Bixia Yuanjun beliefs which are regarded as the major beliefs in Taishan culture. However different, the theme of the belief described is similar as they all reflect the relationship between human and nature, which can be regarded as an aspect of eco-culture study. This paper firstly illustrates how these sinology studies describe the two major beliefs about Taishan; then analyzes how they are related to eco-culture, and finally provides a conclusion that not only are the two beliefs closely related to eco-culture but they reflect a harmonious existence between human and nature from the records of foreign cultural literature.

Keywords

Taishan Belief, Eco-Culture, Sinology

1. Introduction

Rolf A. Stein, the famous French sinologist, stated (Stein, 1943) that the holy mountain Taishan was a small garden (jardin en miniature) from the traditional understanding that Taishan held the power to give life to all the people, and their soul would come back to the mountain after their death. He further explained that since ancient times, Chinese etymologists had always explained that burial

(葬) is to hide (藏) and ghost (鬼) is to return (归)¹. The mythical landscape of the home of the deceased (“return to ancestors”) was similar to that of the place of birth (“escape ancestors”). Therefore, the hiding place in this tomb was the return of a micro universe. That was the reason why Taishan had such unique and sacred characteristics. It was in charge of the birth of all people and the return of people after death. Stein’s understanding is based on the traditional core meaning of Taishan belief, that is: God of Taishan held the power of administering human life and death. On the basis of this belief, Stein regarded the reincarnation of life as a “miniature garden” and death as a return. He explains “burial and hiding” and “ghost and return” with etymology, which not only confirms the core meaning of Taishan belief from the perspective of text and culture, but also demonstrates the charm of the sacred mountain on the basis of reincarnation. At the same time, it also deeply plants the ecological state of harmonious coexistence of “man and nature”. This state is similar in Heishan (黑山) of the Liao Dynasty and Chishan (赤山) of the Wuhuan people. In fact, the beliefs carried by these two mountains are not well-known, especially in Heishan of the Liao Dynasty. Since traditional beliefs of mountains and rivers are in common, there will be similarities in cultures among different nationalities, which provides ideas for exploring Taishan belief in foreign literature. According to literature review from CNKI website, studies of Stein’s focus are on Tibet Culture and Civilization, and studies of Chishan and Heishan are from the aspect of historical archaeology; there is no study that associates three aspects of Taishan belief culture, eco-culture with Stein’s “jardin en miniature” from the aspect of sinology.

After a thorough collecting and sorting out of documents, it is found that Taishan Belief is often discussed in foreign documents (mainly in English and French), involving the two core contents of Taishan Belief: Bixia Yuanjun Belief and Dongyue Dadi Belief. Some of these foreign literatures are simple descriptions; some are based on the translation of Geography of Taishan, Taishan Chronicles, Dai Lan and other documents; others trace their origins, just like sinological academic research. On this basis, by combing the research on the two mainstream beliefs of Taishan in foreign literature, this paper discusses the expression of Taishan Belief from the perspective of the foreign literature aspect, summarizes the similarities and differences, and analyzes the background and reasons for the differences so as to find how Taishan Belief is related to eco-culture.

This paper applies the methodology of historical illustration and comparison-contrast, by firstly illustrating how these sinology studies describe the two major beliefs about Taishan, the sacred mountain in China and the world, then analyzing how they are related to eco-culture, and finally providing a conclusion that not only are the two beliefs closely related to eco-culture but they reflect a

¹The characters 葬 and 藏 are similar in pronunciation and meaning. The same rule goes to 鬼 and 归.

harmonious existence between human and nature from the records of foreign cultural literature.

2. List of Research in Bixia Yunajun Belief and Dongyue Dadi Belief

2.1. Bixia Yuanjun

In 1843, Bishop Lodovico Maria (dei Conti) Besi mentioned in a letter (Besy, 1844) that he met a group of old women in holiday costumes on his way to Taishan. They were a branch of Chang-Chai (named for being vegetarians in their life) from Henan Province. They felt that their life was coming to an end (the youngest was 78 years old and the oldest was 99 years old), so they came from the south of Henan Province, 300 miles away, to remind the goddess they believed in. In view of their abiding by the rules all their life, they prayed to realize the happy reincarnation of their soul. Inferring from the characteristics of time and believers, the Goddess that these elderly women wanted to remind was Bixia Yuanjun, praying to bless them to realize the reincarnation of soul happiness. This is a relatively early article in French literature on the belief of Bixia Yuanjun. It can not only see the far-reaching impact of the belief, but also see that Bixia Yuanjun offers rewards for doing good deeds, gives good faith, and realizes the cycle of happiness. This is a concept of “Immortality” and a merited reward for austerities. Just such austerities and such deep-rooted belief forced Besi to sigh, “Poor women! I feel that one day they will complain about their austerities from the bottom of their heart...”.

When Alexander Williamson introduced Bixia temple, the main temple on the top of the mountain, he mentioned the position of Bixia Yuanjun and the sacrificial forms of people with different demands for her: This deity is held in great veneration all over the province. Sick people, unfortunate people of all kinds, and especially childless women, go there and burn incense, and pray before her image (Williamson, 1870). Williamson’s description of Bixia Yuanjun had the power of curing sick people and bringing a family an heir is also expressed by W. O. Elterich in 1894 (Elterich, 1894).

James Legge believed that the highest praise for Bixia Yuanjun was that she maintained the harmony and consistency of nature, especially the consistency derived from human offspring. Women without children would go up the mountain to pray Bixia Yuanjun for help to realize their inner demands. Therefore, James Legge used the *sacred mother* to express his recognition of and respect to the great achievements of Bixia Yuanjun from the bottom of his heart (Legge, 1905). As to the calling of Bixia Yuanjun, Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson called Bixia Yuanjun the “Lady of the mountain”, he even praised her to be Venus of Lucretius—“goddess of procreation, gold as the clouds, blue as the sky,” for she was the kindly mother “who gives children to women and heals the little ones of their ailments” (Forster, 1934). Walter Kenrick Fisher called her “Jade Girl of Taishan”. He also introduced the process of self-cultivating of the Jade

Girl—Yv Ye into the goddess of Taishan (Fisher, 1916). C. W. Mateer focused on the mythological development of Yuanjun from “Jade Girl” to “Taishan Laomu”. He also commented that the pilgrims basically came to pray for a certain degree of happiness (Mateer, 1879). John Livingstone Nevius mentioned Laishan Holy Mother is Holy Mother of the Great Mountain who was the patron of female pilgrims (Nevius, 1894). Helen Gougar described the calling of “Taishan Lao Nai Nai” (the venerable grandmother) to Bixia Yuanjun by the people with greatest respect (Gougar, 1905).

2.2. Dongyue Dadi

Dongyue Dadi Belief can be found in translations such as the English and French versioned “Siang-kuoh sz' kung-sun hoh han shan”, a Yuan Dynasty Zaju (Milne, 1849). William Milne also mentioned the God of Taishan (Dogyue Dai) in 1844, but not in detail. These two both mentioned Dongyue Temple was to sacrifice the God of Taishan (Dongyue Dadi), who was very powerful.

In 1859, Joseph Edkins introduced that Dongyue Dadi was the main god of Taishan, the sacred mountain of Taoism. Dongyue Dadi was in charge of the punishment of the past and the future. He administered the two systems of hell: one of the ten halls of hell and one of the thirty-six ghost gates. Adhering to the grace of God, he found those who were corrupt and fraudulent then saved them. This is the early record in foreign literature of the close relationship between Taishan and Taoism, and great power of Dongyue Dadi (Edkins, 1859).

C. W. Mateer explained how and why Taishan got the fame. Taishan was called Dongyue or Eastern holy mountain. It was said that the pronunciation of “Yue” (岳) was similar to that of “Jue” (桷), which meant to measure, i.e. to judge virtue and fault through measurement. In ancient times, Taishan was also called “Daizong”: “Dai (岱)” meant growth. So Taishan was the place where all Yin and Yang matters were originated from. Mateer also told the legend that Yanxi helped Song Zhenzong treat scabies with the help of Dongyue Dadi (Mateer, 1879).

Chavannes did great contribution to study of Dongyue Dadi (Chavannes, 1910). He explained that the worship of Taishan displayed all kinds of natural forces, local deities and great masters of Chinese mountains. Because of its special functions, Taishan occupied a prominent position in religion and history. Taishan itself was a God. Successive dynasties had given him different degrees of titles, making him the object of official worship and sacrifice. Generally speaking, Dongyue Dadi had two main functions: a stabilizing role in preventing earthquakes and floods and in fertility management, bringing together the power of breeding and harvest. Just as the emperor established harmony and virtue among people through his wise government, Taishan maintained the natural order of the world through its regulatory role. Taishan was appointed as the intermediary between the human monarch and the Heavenly Emperor. So Taishan had a unique ability to rule the East, the origin of all life. Taishan was also in

charge of the future after the death of life and was the place of return after the end of life. In addition, due to the intervention of Buddhism, the original Taishan worship had become a kind of morality: The trial in hell under his control proved that the moral concept of those who should be punished or rewarded in another world depended on whether their behavior was good or bad when they were alive.

2.3. Bixia Yuanjun and Dongyue Dadi

There are also studies simultaneously talking about Dongyue Dadi Belief and Bixia Yuanjun Belief. Emmanuel-édouard Chavannes studied Taishan culture comprehensively and gave a thorough introduction of Bixia Yuanjun and Dongyue Dadi, pointing out their relations of being father and daughter, the development of how Bixia Yuanjun got such popularity and her power equaled to Guanyin in the south of China in Ming Dynasty (Chavannes, 1910). Under Chavannes' influence, C. Blanchet commented that Bixia Yuanjun was a goddess supplemented into the belief was the result of women's active part in the religious ceremony (Blanchet, 1911). Heinrich Hackmann discussed the relation between Dongyue Dadi and Bixia Yuanjun, and further proposed how Bixia Yuanjun replaced the former to be more authoritative in Taishan (Hackmann, 1914). Reginald Fleming Johnston even equated the function of Taoist goddess Bixia Yuanjun with Tian Hou (Johnston, 1913). Mrs. Enders preferred Bixia Yuanjun very much and she gave the similar introduction in 1924 (Enders, 1924) and 1925 (Enders, 1925) respectively as what Chavannes had stated. Henri Doré also discussed the relationship between Dongyue Dadi and Bixia Yuanjun in 1920 (Doré, 1920) and 1931 (Doré, 1931). Dwight Condo Baker regarded Bixia Yuanjun and Dongyue Dai as two patrons of the east. He also told many legends about Bixia Yuanjun, and the poetic calling of the goddess showed her power of bringing timely wind and rain to the crops (Baker, 1925).

3. Discussions

From the above illustrations, the relation of Bixia Yuanjun Belief and Dongyue Dadi Belief, and their corresponding identities and relations form a typical understanding of Eco-culture.

Firstly, from the historical books such as Records of History; Book of Rites, etc. Taishan was already a sacred mountain. Both the positions of Bixia Yuanjun and Dongyue Dadi clarified people's striving for a consistent and harmonious life. Dongyue Dadi held power from the very ancient times but later Bixia Yuanjun replaced the power in Taishan as more and more pilgrims were longing for a good, happy and prolonged life which was thought to be brought by Bixia Yuanjun especially in the Ming and Qing dynasties. So they would sacrifice and made pilgrimages no matter how hard or far-away.

Secondly, that the callings of Taishan Nai Nai, Sacred Mother etc. and that the relationship between Dongyue Dadi and Bixia Yuanjun were regarded as filled

with mankind's emotions and feelings. When far-away pilgrims came to worship the sacred mother or Taishan Nai Nai, they must have the feeling of motherly affection. As the relation between Dongyue Dadi and Bixia Yuanjun, what had stated clearly is the father-daughter relation between them; however one replaced the other in power in the sacred mountain. And they both were important as God and Goddess in Taoism. So conferring human personality to God or Goddess is a good way dealing the relation between man and super-nature.

Thirdly, from the Han dynasties (more can be found in View of life and death in the Eastern Han Dynasty by Yu (2005)), the mainstream belief that Dongyue Dadi was regarded as being in charge of people's state after death and Bixia Yuanjun was regarded as being able to bring an offspring to a family is in itself a life recycle. This belief of life recycling is a sustainable development which holds the past with the present and future. This is what Rolf A. Stein believes that Taishan is a mini-garden (Jardin en miniature).

4. Conclusion

Taishan Belief mainly composed of Dongyue Dadi Belief and Bixia Yuanjun Belief has provided an idea of eco-culture: the harmonious existence of human and nature; the continuum and recycle of life; and natural mountain and cultural mountain with sustainable development from the ancient times up to now. Thus the study is a try to associate Taishan Culture with eco-culture studies, to highlight the importance of natural studies with social studies on the one hand; and on the other hand to make Taishan Culture not only the historical studies but also the present and future studies. In addition, the specific belief studies which were regarded as only beliefs in the past can also be broadened into the studies of culture at present. All in all this paper gives a new and broad view of Taishan culture studies besides what has been discussed in Fate or Future?—A Discussion of Taishan Pilgrimage around the 19th and 20th Centuries (Tian, 2019).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Baker, D. C. (1925). *T'ai Shan: An Account of the Sacred Eastern Peak of China* (p. 119). The Commercial Press, Limited (Shanghai).
- Besy, M. (1844). *Mission de la Chine, in Annales de la propagation de la Foi* (pp. 421-422). Oeuvre de la propagation de la foi, A Lyon, Chez L'editeur des Annales.
- Blanchet, C. (1911). *Revue de l'histoire des religions* (Tome LXIII, pp. 73-77). Ernest Leroux, Editeur.
- Chavannes, E.-È. (1910). Le T'ai Chan: Essai de monographie d'un culte Chinois. *Leroux*, 30, 1-28.
- Doré, H. (1920). *Recherches sur les superstitions en Chine (Researches into Chinese superstition)*. Tusewei Printing Press.

- Doré, H. (1931). *Recherches sur les superstitions en Chine (Researches into Chinese superstition)*. Tusewei Printing Press.
- Edkins, J. (1859). A Sketch of the Tauist Mythology in Its Modern Form. *Journal of the North China Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 3, 313.
- Elterich, W. O. (1894). *A Chinese Goddess-Tai shan Nai Nai or the Mother of Mt. Tai*. (Vol. XV, p. 422). Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, No. 1334, General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.
- Enders, E. C. (1924, February 27). Tai Shan and the Jade Lady: Most Popular of Taoist Deities. *The North-China Daily News*.
- Enders, E. C. (1925). *Temple Bells and Silver Sails*. D. Appleton-Century Co.
- Fisher, W. K. (1916). The Oldest Place of Worship in the World. *The Scientific Monthly*, 2, 521-535.
- Forster, E. M. (1934). *Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson* (pp. 149-150). E. Arnold & Co.
- Gougar, H. M. J. (1905). *Forty Thousand Miles of World Wandering* (p. 266). Monarch Book Company.
- Hackmann, H. (1914). *A German Scholar in the East. Travel Scenes and Reflections* (p. 88). Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner.
- Johnston, R. F. (1913). *Buddhist China* (pp. 148, 166, 268). Soul Care Publishing.
- Legge, H. E. (1905). *James Legge* (pp. 190-195). The Religious Tract Society.
- Mateer, C. W. (1879). T'ai San—Its Temples and Worship. *The Chinese Recorder and Missionary Journal*, 361-369, 403-415.
- Milne, W. (1849). Siang-kuoh sz' kung-sun hoh han shan. *Chinese Repository*, 18, 129.
- Nevius, J. (1894). *Demon Possession and Allied Themes* (p. 395). Publishers of Evangelical Literature.
- Stein, R. (1943). Jardins en miniature d'Extrême-Orient. *Bulletin De L'École française d'Extrême-Orient*, 42, 1-104. <https://doi.org/10.3406/befeo.1942.5492>
- Tian, F. (2019). Fate or Future? A Discussion of Taishan Pilgrimage around the 19th and 20th Centuries. *Advances in Journalism and Communication*, 7, 109-117. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ajc.2019.74007>
- Williamson, A. (1870). *Jouneys in North China, Manchuria, and Eastern Mongolia; With Some Account of Corea*. Smith, Elder & CO.
- Yu, Y.-S. (Translated by Hou, X.) (2005). *Views of Life and Death in Later Han China*. Shanghai Classics Publishing House.