

Homenagem

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Kristofer Schipper, a Taoist Among Us

Kristofer Schipper, um taoísta entre nós

Kristofer Schipper, un taoísta entre nosotros

*Patrice Fava**

I never imagined the world, my life, or the history of Taoism without Kristofer Schipper. Now we will have to learn to live and work again without him. Fortunately for me and for many of us, he is immortal. We will always miss his presence and his voice, but his books are here, and with them so many memories, conversations, walks, and lectures. He has never been as present as he is now.

The last dinner that brought us together was in January 2020, in a small Parisian restaurant. It stands out in my memory like Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper* painted on the wall of Santa Maria Delle Grazie. Six of his disciples were sitting around him after the lecture he had just given at the Maison des sciences de l'homme: Vincent Goossaert, Marianne Bujard, Fang Ling, Isabelle Ang, Caroline Gyss, and myself. This joyful meal was soon followed by the great pandemic that separated us all. We planned to meet again in Beijing or elsewhere. Rik took with him not only the immense knowledge that made him famous among Sinologists all over the world, but also an incomparable capacity to solve the problems with which one might be confronted. More than anyone else, he was the holder of truths and almost always knew how to clarify an insoluble problem or give meaning to an insecure approach. This genius for interpretation came from his immersion in Taoist circles over many years, but also from his familiarity with the great texts of the religious tradition.

Everyone knew he had been ordained a *daoshi*, but few around him could see the Taoist deep within him. We venerated the scholar, but it was through his practice of the ritual and his

* Associate Researcher of the Ecole française d'Extrême-Orient (Beijing Center) and of the Taoist Research Center of the Renmin University. He is the author of *Aux Portes du ciel. La statuaire taoïste du Hunan: Art et anthropologie de la Chine* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014). E-mail: patrice.fava@foxmail.com.

time in Chinese communities in Tainan and elsewhere that enabled him to cross the immense gap separating us from China, and even more from Taoism. Only a few people close to him are capable of recognizing that his path brought him ontologically closer to what Marcel Granet described as “Chinese thought.” Rik was the first to take the side of the Taoists, to think like them, while maintaining the hindsight of his university years in France and the heritage of his predecessors, from Edouard Chavannes to Max Kaltenmark. From this double apprenticeship, he succeeded in pouring authentic Taoist culture into the system of values in the West. It was due to this decentering that a new reading of the texts and a new teaching from the point of view of the Taoists were developed.

In his lectures at the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Rik kept his audience in suspense for hours. One came out transformed as after a Bergman or Kurosawa film. He knew how to share what he had experienced during the great rituals in which he had participated. There was always this feeling of reality that made the Taoist tradition in all times alive. Granet talked about a civilization that no longer exists, whereas Rik made us discover that it is still alive. Moreover, he had that special talent of a speaker who never loses the thread of his remarks and moves methodically towards his conclusion. At more than eighty years of age, he was still responding to distant invitations, for his own pleasure as much as for making his Chinese listeners understand their own history in another way. The fact that in these days of mourning condolences are coming in from all over the world proves that Rik was heard in China itself, at least in academic circles, and that some people recognize in him an authentic spokesman for Chinese culture. “The Chinese know without knowing” he said to me one day. In my book *L’usage du Tao*, I quoted this little phrase to sum up the fact that Taoism is still largely ignored in China. Indeed, in intellectual circles it is often still said that the Chinese do not believe in anything (*Zhongguoren meiyou xinyang*) or that Taoism is not a “religion.”

That said, those Chinese who have had the privilege of hearing Rik, even if only through the films or interviews currently circulating on social media, rediscover the genes of their own culture when listening to him and are surprised at their ignorance. A friend of mine, to whom I forwarded excerpts from one of Kristofer Schipper’s talks, sent me a long commentary in which she expresses shame for not knowing anything about her own culture. She wonders why people around her consider Catholicism a religion and Taoism a superstition. Why do Chinese, she asks, ignore the fundamental place of Taoism in their own culture? The answer to all these questions is at the heart of Rik’s work, consisting of teaching and writing not only on philology, science, and scholarship but also on the undermining work of the missionaries and emperors of the last Manchu dynasty, including reformers such as Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao who were very much

influenced by the Protestant missionary Timothy Richards. That after centuries of opprobrium, culminating in the Cultural Revolution, Taoists are reappearing in many villages and sacred places is quite unexpected. Rik wrote one of his last articles, titled “The Return of Taoism,” on this subject.

No Sinologist can claim to have made as comprehensive and original a contribution as Rik’s. He single-handedly changed the course of Chinese studies and of our image of China. However, he was only able to shake slightly the impregnable citadel of Confucianism, which since the early days of missionary Sinology has continued to occupy center stage in China as in the West. Indeed, the situation of Taoists is still precarious and they remain subject to very restrictive rules. Throughout his career, Rik has sown seeds in arid soil, but some eventually germinated. We scholars of Taoism are, each in our own way, the flowers that have blossomed in the undergrowth of the “burning forest” (*La forêt en feu*) of which Simon Leys speaks. No one can say what the landscape of China will look like in the future, or whether the Celestial Caves and Lands of Happiness he wrote about in his last works will survive the destruction accompanying China’s march toward a new era.

Rik took with him the book he was writing about his years studying to become a Taoist in Taiwan, which would have helped us understand how he came closer to the philosophical and religious world of the Chinese without losing his Western culture. His motivation was not from the hope of New Age mysticism, nor from the curiosity of missionaries essentially concerned with strategies of evangelization. He was driven by long-held passions for the history of art, theater, music, opera, and later for anthropology and *science religieuse*, as this term was understood in the great institution where he taught—the fifth section of Religious Sciences in the *Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes*. He also took with him the article he was preparing on the Qin’an dian, the great Taoist temple in the Forbidden City. Closed for a century, it remains a major witness to the imperial history of the Ming, the last great Chinese dynasty. Rik had many other projects that will not see the light of day, but he left us an immense oeuvre as a pledge of his immortality. For those of us who follow his teaching, he will indeed remain an immortal, like Laozi, Zhuangzi, and all the great figures of Taoism who accompany him.

Rik promised us that he would live to be 120 years old or more, and I sometimes find it hard to believe that he actually left this world on February 18, 2021, the same day I was finishing the last chapter of the book I am writing about *The Divinization of Taoist Masters*. To my mind, Rik has already joined the innumerable masters who belong to the celestial administration. I realize that, for the common mortal raised in the West, putting a portrait of one’s master on a home altar next to the gods of the pantheon while waiting to have his statue made might seem an amusing

fantasy, an idiocy, or an “abomination,” as Matteo Ricci said when he discovered that innumerable cultic images were installed in temples, homes, and public places. Taoism is so distant from our learning that it is almost impossible for a westerner to understand due to his incapacity to change his own ontological background.



Fig.1: Fava, Patrice. The Author's Daoist Altar (Photo by the author).

Rik was right to consider himself the sole repository and holder of the Taoist tradition. Shortly after being accepted into Taoist circles in Tainan, he discovered that the ritual manuals used by the officiants were very similar to those of the Ming Taoist Canon. This was in 1962, a time when it was thought that Taoism had disappeared on the mainland. This tradition in Tainan was to become the living source for the rediscovery of the whole history of Taoism as preserved in the texts that have come down to us. That a foreigner accomplished this immense task is today hailed in China itself. The seeds sown by the great master, whose Taoist name in the records of heaven is Dingqing “The Pure Tripod,” are still sprouting.

My last telephone conversation with Rik, three days before he was rushed to the hospital, gave no indication that we would not see each other again. I had sent him my wishes for the New Year of the Ox and he called to thank me. As I had attached a picture of my altar with all kinds of offerings on it, the conversation quickly turned to the New Year rituals I was celebrating with my mother-in-law, Zhang Aiyun, who came to Beijing to escape the cold of Shandong. I told Rik that under her direction we made incense offerings three times a day during the first three days of the year (the first cup of tea always offered to the representatives of the celestial administration), and that we shared all our meals with the gods and the *taigongs* of my altar, on which the candles had to remain lit. Since the departure of the God of the Hearth, all life revolved around the New Year celebrations. There are surely not many families in Beijing who have a picture or statue of the God of the Hearth in the kitchen!

The memory of the persecutions of the Cultural Revolution, which forced the whole population to get rid of anything related to their relationship with the beyond, discourages anyone from showing their loyalty to the past. Yet it is these references to collective memory that define Chinese identity and give access to the system of thought that persisted within the materialist and Marxist currents permeating the hot hours of the Revolution. The fact that there are still some eminent specialists who repeat after Max Weber that the Chinese ignore transcendence proves the extent to which one can, when living enclosed in academic circles, miss the most obvious realities. More than half of China lives with the liturgical calendar that gives rhythm to the year and maintains close contact with nature. The other half, even if it has distanced itself from tradition, celebrates the New Year with a passion that does not contradict the idea that there is still an eternal China. As a *daoshi*, Rik attached great importance to the festivals of the calendar because Taoist masters are the guardians of immemorial China and of the rules which govern relations with the celestial powers. He instilled in some of his disciples a sense of superiority shared by all masters who possess this liturgical knowledge and have access to the Taoist Mysteries. Sharing the inner world of Taoists gives one the feeling of not completely belonging to the society of his time.

China has invented everything in the field of religion, so much so that a Taoist master can recognize in the infinite variety of belief systems elements similar to his. China has always opposed the technological mastery of the West with its thousands-of-years-old history and the influence of its civilization. The fact that Anne Cheng, holder of the Chair of Intellectual History of China at the Collège de France, titled her seminar “Is China Still a Civilization?” would not disturb the Taoists, who consider themselves the last representatives of imperial China and of the Taoist ecclesia that emerged when the emperors of the Han dynasty were losing their mandate from heaven. The universe in which Taoist masters live is obviously very different from that of Westerners, who have entered what Marcel Gauchet calls the age of disenchantment. Rik lived in the sacred world and deplored the fact that its rules are often ignored. This intransigence made his scholarly work original. In *The Taoist Canon: A Historical Companion to the Daozang*, he drew a line separating texts belonging to the secret tradition of Taoists and those intended for the public domain. The immense Taoist Canon, which had repelled scholars of the past, could become intelligible because it was the fruit of a long tradition, the same tradition that had close links to the liturgy preserved by the Chen family of Tainan with whom Rik trained. Rik succeeded in turning the 1500 works of the Canon, most of which were undated, anonymously written, and seemingly incomprehensible, into an articulated system. He did in his field what Claude Lévi-Strauss had undertaken in his classification and interpretation of myths.

All Rik's work can be subsumed under his concept "Taoist framework," which he knew how to use in the most diverse fields. He did not deviate from Taoist rules for transmitting texts and insisted against the distribution of manuscripts not intended for the general public. The publication of the entire corpus of rituals of Master Chen Rongsheng's lineage by the Japanese scholar Ofuchi Ninji was for him a sacrilege because it made publicly available texts transmitted in manuscript form within a family lineage. I learned from Rik to consider the polychrome statues of Hunan, which I have been studying for more than twenty years, as sacred art and not, as is customarily written, "popular art" (*minjian yishu*). The choice of one term or the other fundamentally changes one's relationship with the statues of the gods of the pantheon as well as with those of deified masters. It was from Rik that I learned the implicit rules of propriety surrounding cultic images, which no one teaches. Never point at the statues; do not touch them or move them. They are beings from the other world who live among us and so we must treat them with respect.

Since ancient times, Taoist theology has regarded Taoist masters who passed away (*yuhua*) as divine functionaries. A special ceremony, called *jiaolu* (transmission of the register) or *songdu* (crossing from one world to another), is reserved for them. In this ceremony, the *yang* part of their ordination certificate must be transformed by fire (*hua*) to join the *yin* part that was burned at the time of ordination. Rik gave me permission to reproduce in my book *Aux portes du ciel* his ordination certificate, which he kept on the altar of his temple Tongxuanjing at the top of Mount Tianyuan in Fuzhou. The certificate is a charter of investiture of high symbolic value and of primary documentary interest. It indicates the identity of the initiate with his date of birth, the star of the Big Dipper constellation on which he depends, his rank, his title, the celestial office to which he belongs, the names of his altar and his pure room (*jing*), all the liturgical objects he received at ordination, and the celestial marshal (*yuanshuai*) attached to his service. Rik was ordained in Tainan in 1966 under the guidance of Zhang Enpu, the representative of the sixty-third generation of Celestial Masters. One can refer to Rik's chapter "Masters of the Gods" in *The Taoist Body* for his description of an ordination and his translation of a "certificate of immortality" from a nineteenth-century Quanzhou manuscript. Never before had this subject become so topical. Now I can't help but wonder when and how Master Dingqing will enter the Taoist celestial administration.

These days, the theology and cosmology at the foundation of this great rite of passage to the afterlife adhere neither to the political correctness prevailing in China nor to the triumphant atheism of the West. Rik's following a different path was necessary to revalorize, one might even say reinvent, the whole of the Taoist tradition, which had been doomed to elitist sarcasm or irrelevance for such a long time. The resistance to such a strong intellectual current is one of the triumphs of anthropology and of the kind of history so well illustrated by Georges Duby or Jacques

Le Goff, who rewrote the history of our Middle Ages. Jean-Marie de Groot paved the way for field studies in Fujian province, but he did not put in parallel, as Rik did, the living tradition as it had been perpetuated and the philosophical and religious heritage going back to Laozi and Zhuangzi. The famous distinction, established by the Confucians, between philosophical Taoism (*daojia*) and the emergence of a religious movement (*daojiao*) in the second century CE is still the subject of dissension in the field, despite the many demonstrations Rik has made, notably by rereading the work of Zhuangzi. The scope of the history of Taoism is so limitless that there will certainly be new *vade mecum* titled “What is Taoism?” But for the moment the only book that really answers this question is Schipper and Franciscus Verellen’s *The Taoist Canon*.

I have often said that a Taoist master who dies is a library that burns. Many lineages of Taoist masters have indeed been interrupted in the course of history, and Rik himself did not train any disciples in the Quanzhou liturgical tradition he inherited. However, he did bequeath to posterity not only a considerable scholarly oeuvre but also very important collections of photographs, manuscripts, statues, paintings, and ritual objects, which will have to be inventoried as were the library, texts and collections of André Breton. There were as many differences between these two men as there were similarities. Both had a natural authority and were constantly attracting new people ready to share their ideals. Breton left his mark on our modernity, Kristofer Schipper changed the way Chinese history is written. On the model of the Association of Friends of André Breton, an Association of Friends of Kristofer Schipper should be founded as a gathering place for all those who owe an essential part of who they are to Rik. This unique heritage, largely unknown outside a happy few, should be shared with the wider scholarly community for the good of the future of Taoist studies, on which the very survival of the Taoists also depends. To this should be added the records testifying to his interventions all over the world. With the exception of Joseph Needham, no Sinologist has an international stature comparable to Rik’s.

Taoism is a phantasm, he told me one day. The term is striking. It could be applied to all religions, all ideologies, and all utopias, but its strikingness comes mainly from the fact that Rik used “phantasm” in place of “belief,” a word he carefully avoided. The word “religion,” translated into Chinese as *zongjiao*, was also problematic for him. Rik excised the word “popular” (*minjian*), which in academic works is inevitably associated with “belief”, “Taoism”, “religion”, “temple”, “pilgrimage” etc. For him, Taoism is a scholarly and erudite culture. His life’s work was a challenge to the clichés inherited from the colonial era and, later, from Marxism. Although their itineraries are very different, Rik’s intellectual approach can be compared to that of Marcel Gauchet, who wrote a new philosophy of history based not on infrastructure and modes of production but on the religious heritage of the West.

Now that he is no longer with us, the assessment of Rik's work will certainly occupy those who claim to follow his teaching and those who believe they have discovered flaws in it, even if they recognize that it remains unique and irreplaceable. The fact that it has been said in some academic circles that there is no theory in Kristofer Schipper's work is mainly due to the fact that there is no theological exegesis in Taoism. The Taoists never felt the need to explain what they were doing, but it was in their rituals that they put their theory. In a memoir published a few days after Rik left us, Vincent Goossaert writes: "Over the years, I have taken to comparing him to visionary mathematicians who clearly see deep patterns where many others see factual fog." Referring to the work of the great anthropologist Philippe Descola, I have shown that Taoists remain the authentic guardians of both the analogical ontology of *yinyang wuxing* and of the animism that is called *wanwu youling* in China. Such are the deep patterns of Taoism that are shared by those who continue, implicitly, to live in the cosmology of *yin* and *yang* and also naturally follow the precepts ensuring communication with heaven (*tianren heyi*), notably through the calendar and often through the associations (*wenhui* or *wuhui*) to which they belong.

Whether he was addressing a large audience or a limited one, Rik always tried to get his listeners to see the greatness of Chinese civilization through the prism of Taoism. He had a global vision of Chinese history and the history of religions, but within that he recognized the multiple facets constituting Taoist identity and its contribution to the intellectual history of China. The numerous slippages and misunderstandings that marked the last centuries of the empire, and then the new era opening with the Republic, were most often thought of as misunderstandings, for lack of having been able to take into account the truths conveyed by the Taoists. In France, two interpretations of Chinese history are in opposition. Jacques Gernet put forth the point of view of Wang Fuzhi and other thinkers of the eighteenth century who explained that the seizure of power by the Manchus was due to the general weakening of a country too preoccupied with Buddhist and Taoist scholasticism. On the other hand, Rik tended to see the sidelining of Taoism as a consequence of the cultural and political decadence of the Manchus. Rik's work, which has been a plea to change the telling of official Chinese history essentially devoted to Confucianism, includes three major books accompanied by translations of the *Daodejing*, the *Lunyu* and the *Zhuangzi*, which for the moment exist only in Dutch.

In spite of the many tributes coming from Chinese circles, it must be said that Rik's work has only reached a small and marginal elite there, and that its impact has been very superficial. His different points of view are hardly shared. It is possible to admire a man without really knowing the depth of his thought. Indeed, it is necessary to rid the influence of Marxism to approach the spirit that animates Taoism from the inside. In China this is very rarely the case. Not only does

Taoism not represent Chinese culture, it is considered a “popular religion” (*minjian zongjiao*). “Popular” denotes unofficial, but also connotes inferiority to imperial religion too quickly associated with Confucius. But what about the Ming Taoist temple Qin’an dian, which is located on the north-south axis in the Forbidden City? Rik compared it to a village temple because the same ceremonies were performed there as in the interior of the country. Although an inventory of all the objects of the Qin’an dian was recently made and published, the temple is still closed. No visitor today can easily imagine that the Forbidden City was the great religious center of the empire for four centuries. It is where the rivalries between the three great doctrines of Laozi, the Buddha, and Confucius played out. In today’s official version of history, it is inappropriate to talk about the religion of the emperors. The sixty temples in this magical place welcoming thousands of visitors every day are still unknown and inaccessible.

If Rik was always on the side of the Taoists against their opponents, he took care not to isolate them from the current of history. On the contrary, he showed that they have at all times been part of it. That this truth still applies today is unfortunately recognized by only a few Chinese anthropologists who have managed to leave their campuses and go into the hinterland, where rituals are held every day under the guidance of Taoist masters.

Rik became best known in China through his lectures, seminars, and his research center in Fuzhou. He fascinated his listeners, including Party officials, who gave him both personal and institutional support. He shared with them a history of which they were unaware, and which, during the era of liberalization in China, appeared to them an essential part of their heritage that could be developed, including for tourist purposes. Rik always avoided superficial judgments. In all areas, he demonstrated an original way of thinking that developed from a Taoist vision of history. But he did not seek to import any Taoist spirituality into the West, as is so common. Rik was the opposite of the hidden sage. When he arrived in Fuzhou, he intended to become, as he put it, “a local personality.” His rediscovery of the thirty-six Celestial Caves and seventy-two Lands of Happiness, which are part of the great Taoist institutions, has recently attracted a large number of researchers because he demonstrated to the world in a completely new way that the Taoists were the first environmentalists almost two thousand years ago. In accordance with their religious precepts, they developed a remarkable system protecting nature and animals. The World Wildlife Fund agreed to provide logistical support for this intrepid dive into the history of Taoism. Extending his interest in the field of ecology, Rik was working on a very ambitious program on the country’s great holy places. The source of these research programs, which had not attracted the attention of any Chinese scholar, was to be found in the Ming *Taoist Canon*, which Rik had been exploring since he entered the prestigious Ecole française d’Extrême-Orient and then lived with Taoists in Taiwan for eight

years. Claude Lévi-Strauss told him “You have gone to Rome,” when he discovered the pioneering anthropological work Rik was doing off the beaten track of Sinology. Whatever subject Rik addressed, he gave his audience the feeling of having been on the ground.

I have often said that my Taoist vocation was born, even if I was not clearly aware of it at the time, during a lecture by Rik in the Salle de géographie on Boulevard Saint-Germain in 1967. He had been invited by Jacques Pimpaneau. I was then in my second year of Chinese at the Ecole des Langues Orientales. The slides he projected of a ritual in which the presiding master mimed his ascent to Heaven under a blue paper parasol were instantly engraved in my memory. By sharing his experience in Taiwan, Rik revealed to us that the Mysteries of China still existed, whereas those of ancient Greece, so well-studied by generations of Hellenists, were only distant memories. However, it took several years before revolutionary China would show its other face, with its holy places, its incense associations (*xianghui*), and the return of Taoist masters everywhere.

Before Mao’s stranglehold of his country and his people began to loosen, a detour to Taiwan was part of the itinerary of all the great Western Sinologists working on Taoism. In China, Taoist studies began very timidly and with many difficulties only in the 1980s, but over time it has become more and more fruitful. Unexpectedly, they realized that the Taoist tradition studied by Rik in Tainan and reported on in his numerous works became very useful for understanding the particularities of many local traditions. Rik’s work served as a reference for describing new spaces and transmissions that had followed different paths.

My first visit to Hunan was in the company of Rik and Yuan Bingling. I wrote about it extensively in my book *Aux portes du ciel* published ten years later. I remember that Rik was the first to recognize, based on the few cultic statues I had brought back from a trip to China, that it was absolutely necessary to continue to explore this completely new thread of Chinese religious history. My discovery of Hunan Taoism was in the wake of my apprenticeship in Tainan with Master Chen Rongsheng, whose ritual repertoire I recorded. All these video tapes were carefully preserved like treasures by Rik.

Rik’s sudden and unexpected departure has caused a shock wave that is still spreading. These few pages, which quickly filled my computer screen, have no other ambition than to testify to the personality of Kristofer Schipper and to some aspects of his work for those who did not have the chance to know him personally.