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Yao collectibles and Daoism

This is a portion of a Review Essay that appeared in the Journal of the Siam Society 88: 1&2, 222-231 (2000), that discussed the following books:


Why, given the lack of knowledge about Yao, is this material [spirit paintings, spirit medium’s robes, ritual texts, etc.] collected and exhibited? What makes Yao things collectible? For some, an interest in Yao things comes from the appeal of Eastern religions in the West. Just outside the city of Chiangmai in northern Thailand, there is a Center for Daoist Studies. Quite a few of those taking its courses then track down the
nearby shops selling objects such as spirit-paintings to take home with them. The reasons for the exhibit in Munich are doubtless more complex. For one thing, it has funding and an institutional framework, a Yao Project by the Departments of Chinese Studies at the Universities of Hamburg and Munich and the Bavarian State Library, in operation for four years before the exhibit. This institutional context contributes to an explanation of the Chinese textual emphasis and possibly of the lack of ethnographic content concerning Yao. *Botshchaften* does not address the background for the exhibit, there is no discussion of why the items were assembled, who initiated it, and whether the effort was a project by the Library or an individual who subsequently donated a collection to the Library. The collection of Yao manuscripts leads to the Yao Project, and the Yao Project concludes with the exhibit, but it remains a mystery why there was a collection of Yao manuscripts in the first place. Judging from the catalog, the predominant impression that the exhibit gave of the Yao was that they have carried books about. With no indication of conscious irony or play, the exhibit portrays Yao as a library-people.

Some of the reasons for gathering Yao things are related to collectors’ sense of their identity, and have precious little to do with Yao themselves. Yao materials, in spite of their local significance, come to represent a key to outsiders’ personal or historical space that had been sealed off. One example is a major Japanese study of Yao manuscripts and histories in Thailand around 1970, led by Yoshiro Shiratori. It “yielded a collection of almost 2000 items of ethnological material, tens of thousands of photographs as well as many copies of ancient Yao documents.” One motive behind the research effort was the possibility that “the actual origins of the non-Chinese tribes in Central and South China and Southeast Asia [would help to solve] directly or indirectly
the origins of the Wajin, and the formative process of Japanese culture.”¹ Many collectors’ stories are more personal, but also relate to national pasts in international contexts. One concerns a dealer in Yao antiquities in search of his own Chinese roots. A Singaporean Chinese who does not speak Chinese, he became fascinated with the culture and objects of Yao after living in Thailand for some time. To him, various aspects of Yao culture suggested that they were “more Chinese than the Chinese” who had lost much of their supposed essence. Another collector is a Frenchman who grew up fascinated with the exotics of Indochina, and once in Thailand started attempting a collection of things from the Yao in Vietnam. Initially, he supplied the ex-Singaporean dealer with an inventory of the things he would like, and from this the latter gained a sense of how to supply his store that he has run for over ten years since. Both are still collecting Yao things. One of them is thinking about making a museum from his collection while the other already has a private museum. In these life-stories, Yao objects from Vietnam and Laos have to some extent satisfied, in Thailand, longings for the otherwise unattainable essences of French Indochina and Chinese Singapore.²

Museums and collections do not just satisfy already-existing longings, they also contribute to definitions of the world and its components that can refine and/or create particular tastes and desires. An exhibit on Yao manuscripts makes the public conversant about the objects, which in this case is beneficial for the Yao Project vis-à-vis their sponsors. It is likely to also create not only an interest in their work but also a desire for these now-valued and significant but previously obscure or unknown objects. A recent comparable example is a well-illustrated article on intricately embroidered spirit medium’s robes from Lantien Yao in northern Laos, published in a magazine aimed at
textile afficionados.³ I had seen the robes around in “tribal” stores for some time, and I am told that they sold much better once this article appeared. The spirit mediums’ robes, like the manuscripts in the exhibit in Munich, are “Yao” because they are labeled so by experts. Tay in northern Vietnam have the same kinds of robes for spirit mediums, as well as other Daoist imagery and Chinese texts. These are multi-ethnic objects and motifs across the south China borderlands, whose ethnic label is a product of museumizing and marketing.

Picture books, collections, and exhibits can create new markets, and thus articulate the relations (and potential conflicts) among scholars, museums, dealers, and local experts, producers, and/or suppliers.⁴ Jacques Lemoine’s book, Yao Ceremonial Paintings, is a case in point. Copiously illustrated with photographs of the paintings and their details and also of some Yao rituals, it has helped to consolidate the market for Daoist paintings.⁵ There already was some market for these paintings in the 1970s, but the book made dealers and buyers better able to attach a set of meanings to the objects, which made them much more valuable. In his Introduction, Lemoine states that he wrote the book “in order to help connoisseurs and collectors understand and appreciate the treasures they have acquired” (8). There are still paintings on the market, and all the better shops have a copy of Lemoine’s book for their customers’ perusal. Like museums, publishers hold an important place in the connections among dealers, experts, and the public. The publisher of Yao Ceremonial Paintings had been an antiques dealer, but turned publisher once he saw that manuscript that Lemoine had.

The presentation of material in Yao Ceremonial Paintings is largely informed by Chinese texts, and the problems of linking the materials to Yao rather than to collectors
and connoisseurs are very similar to those with *Botschaften*. Because the German collection most likely came in the mail and the Project’s team may never have met any Yao, this is maybe understandable. This is less acceptable in the case of Lemoine who did research with Yao in Laos and Thailand. Lemoine’s treatment of Daoism misses some of the very interesting aspects of ritual dynamics, such as the high-level ritual ordinations that are featured in some of the photographs. Chao La, who helped Lemoine find ritual experts to interview, was the son of a high level Mien headman who ruled over more than 100 villages within the French colony and was renowned for his military prowess. Later, Chao La and his older brother led a CIA-supported army during the American “secret war” in Laos. Given that the ritual ordinations are expensive and thus rather exclusive to the better-off, it is quite significant that the photos in Lemoine's book show mass ordinations sponsored by Chao La [I subsequently learned that the ritual took place in the refugee camp in Changkhong, Chiangrai Province, in Thailand]. Drawing on his encounters with Western academics, Chao La wore the cap and gown of a Ph.D. for some of his rituals. He did not pretend to hold a Western academic degree, but wore the outfit because of the analogy between his ritual rank (*to-sai*, “master-teacher”) and that of academics. This lesson in cultural translation is somehow lost on the team behind *Botschaften*, as it is in *Yao Ceremonial Paintings*. In both books, the (Chinese) origins of a text or another object explain its true meaning. I have not learned whether Chao La was a collector of any kind, but his father who had the title Phaya Luang collected all kinds of clocks and had a special room for his collection.

Addressing the issue of Yao as collectors, or as actively deploying aspects of their own culture (or appropriations of “Chinese” culture) for particular aims, would have
required presenting Yao (individuals and groups) as involved in shaping their own realities. The reliance on texts for rendering the significance of Yao religious practices is a way to sidestep the complexities of Yao culture and social life. The ritual ordinations that usually are portrayed as part of the Daoist heritage that characterizes Yao religion do not have a fixed set of references or implications. They are expensive to perform, but people’s motivations for bringing them about have varied by time and place. Among Mien in Thailand in the early 20th century, the focus of Mien social and ritual life shifted from an emphasis on military prowess to success in farming. In northern Thailand in the early 1990s, some Mien performed *kwa-tang* ordinations to influence the position of their household ancestors in the spirit-world, and thereby their own success in farming. I learned of one large-scale *kwa-tang* ordination performed during the 1980s that was held to “preserve Mien culture”; as a reaction to the increasing prominence of Thai culture and society in the everyday lives of Thailand’s Mien. This latter affair was also a one man’s claim to prominence in Mien cultural life in that area, somewhat like Chao La’s anchoring of his prominence through sponsoring spectacular and expensive ceremonies.

Lemoine’s omission of what goes on in social life, in spite of his research, only reinforces the sense that the significance of Yao and their religion resides in texts whose privileged interpreters are foreign scholars literate in Chinese. From this perspective, what I view as the lack of knowledge about Yao in *Botschaften* is not a mistake that should have been corrected. It is the very essence of the presentation of Yao to collectors and the interested public in the West. The focus on Daoist texts and imagery is both an individual and collective engagement with the Mystic East, somewhat like the Western interest in Tibetan Buddhism. Both *Botschaften* and *Yao Ceremonial Paintings* provide
material and visual guides for cultural travel to an Orient of Western imagination where
Yao realities, the social and historical complexities of what takes place in highland
villages, are besides the point.

Notes:

1 Name Egami, “Preface,” in *Ethnography of the Hill Tribes of Southeast Asia* (Yoshiro Shiratori, ed. Tokyo: Sophia University, 1978), 280-81, quote from p. 281. The term “Wajin” refers to a pre-historic Japanese people/race distinct from Ainu. The latter are an indigenous population viewed as primitive compared to the civilized Japanese. Studying Yao and other peoples as possible clues to “the formative process of Japanese culture” has many parallels in anthropological practices elsewhere, as a displaced reflection on nation, progress, and difference more generally. See Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (New York: Routledge, 1988).


5 Lemoine had written articles on the subject for aficionado magazines, one for *Connaissance des Arts* (Paris, August 1979) and another for *Arts of Asia* (Hong Kong, January 1981).

6 The three photos of Yao people and villages in *Botschaften* are all from other people’s publications.

7 This history may help identify the ordination chant that is written on the back of a care-package from the U.S. Chao La’s access to American supplies for his “secret army” and his followers, as well as his emphasis on Mien ritual practices, make him a likely candidate as the sponsor of the ordination ritual. The exhibit’s emphasis on “Yao” misses such important particulars. On Chao La and his political context, see Alfred McCoy, *The Politics of Heroin* (New York: Lawrence Hill, 1991), 283-386.

8 *Yao Ceremonial Paintings* contains two pictures from a second-level (to-sai) ordination (p. 26) that show a ritual specialist and Chao La climbing a sword ladder, the latter wearing the cap and gown of a “Western” academic. The pictures show a crowd of ordinands wearing “Daoist” robes with the “Western” caps. Lemoine makes no comment on the outfits.


10 For a discussion of these changes in Mien ritual practices, see Hjorleifur Jonsson, “Moving House: Migration and the Place of the Household on the Thai Periphery.” *Journal of the Siam Society* 87
Lemoine has castigated “anthropologists lacking knowledge of written Chinese” for not recognizing that Yao have a unilateral, patrilineal kinship system. His criticism is aimed at Douglas Miles, whose work showed very clearly that at least among Mien in Thailand, descent was bilateral. There is a patrilineal rhetoric to Mien kinship, and people’s lineage position can be altered with a single ritual to fit this ideal. Though a ritual of re-filiation, an outsider becomes directly linked to the set of ancestors that the household has relations with. Any Mien adult that goes through this has first to be ritually separated from the household of his previous affiliation. Yao genealogical books present the ideal world of patrilineages. Confronted with a mis-match between rhetoric and practice, Lemoine relies on what the texts say. For Lemoine’s critique, see his “Yao Religion and Society” in Highlanders of Thailand (John McKinnon and Wanat Bhraksasri, eds. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1983), 194-211, quote from p.209. The issue of re-filiations places ritual rank in a new light. Once a man has ordained to kwa-tang rank, he cannot be incorporated into the household of another lineage. See Yoshino Akira, “Father and Son, Master and Disciple: The Patrilateral Ideology on the Mien Yao of Northern Thailand,” in Perspectives on Chinese Society: Anthropological Views from Japan (Suenari Michio, J.S. Eades, and C. Daniels, eds. Kent, Canterbury: Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1995), 265-73. Viewing ritual ordinations as something Yao collectively “have” or “do” fundamentally misconstrues the local and politically varied significance of these practices.