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HRS 190

Reading Analysis

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The Immortals and Everyday Religion by Kristoph Schipper

(1) Both of these readings reflect on the Asian religion of Taoism and the beliefs and customs that people involved in the religion follow. It is clear that the religion is highly based in nature and that all aspects of nature are important in fulfilling your duties as a Taoist member. Food is a major aspect of many of the festivals and ceremonies, but also the Earth and its inhabitants play a central role. In *Everyday religion* Schipper discusses the importance of the temple in each community and how from the very beginning process of it being built the whole community is involved. Schipper then goes on to talk about the importance of food in many of the festivals and ceremonies practiced throughout the year. In *The Immortals*, Schipper discusses how the myths of these eight beings help people live a life of sustainability by following their example. Schipper also talks about many ancient practices such as alchemy and its importance for the way in which the Taoists can live sustainable when it appears that there is nothing to use in which to survive. Both of these writings carry the evident theme of sustainability and how the people of this culture view sustainability and use the lands resources to be wealthy.

In *Everyday Religion* the importance of temples and their architecture is told to us by explaining their meaning to the community. “The local temple was the most beautiful building, the pride of the area” (20). They brought the community together “They were always built by an association or a local community. In the cities, they were often the work of a merchants' or artisan' guild, or even that of the inhabitants of a given district. In the countryside, they were

erected by all the members of a village community or regional association” (20-21). The temples being built by its community members and eventually the people that will be attending the temple is important because it gives a sense of pride for the town. Once built these temples are used to hold all ceremonies, community gatherings, family meetings, religious gatherings, etc.

“A community as well as truly communal house, it is a place for casual and formal meetings. The elders go there daily to discuss village affairs. Grandmothers, the family delegates in religious matters, go there every day with offerings of incense to fill the lamps with oil. Music and theater associations, along with clubs for boxing, reading, chess, charity, pilgrimages, automatic writing, medical research, kite flying, and cultural associations of all kinds create their headquarters in the temple, and find here as well a place of worship for their particular patron saint” (22).

The temples could be considered a place of sustainability since they were the center of all community events. All of the things that went on there allowed the community to discuss what was the best way in which to survive together, live together. It would be the people in charge of the temple to organize the year's festivities and plan among the community who would help with what. It was rare that the government intervened in the ongoings of the temples and their festivities.

Schipper then goes on to discuss the calendar and the festivals that take place in accordance with the “sacred nature of the calendar” (23). One important festival is that which marks the renewal of spring. A few days before the date of the renewal old fires are put out and only cold foods are eaten for the few days until a new fire is lit and the renewal of spring and the hearth fire has taken place. On this day they visit the tombs of their dead ancestors and consume the rest of the leftovers from the previous days' cold meals, but wrap them in rice pancakes and fry them – hence the “spring rolls” that we know of in Chinese cuisine. Most of the festivals belong to the lunar calendar and are celebrated by the community as a whole. “each has its own characteristics, its own foods, rituals, and legends” (25). The Chinese

New Year begins on the first day of the lunar month and ends on the fifteenth day, while the festival of Universal Salvation occurs on the fifteenth day of the seventh month. The Universal Salvation festival is dedicated to those who have died a violent death or accidental death. These souls are considered deprived and food is laid out for them which is then eaten by the community later. "Villages take turn during the first half of the seventh month inviting each other to come 'eat the Universal Salvation'. Current governments have tried to reduce this "waste" first by allowing only one day for the festival or by prohibiting it all together"(26). It is later stated that the food is not wasted and that these people only feast during these times, otherwise they eat within their means and what they can afford. During the festival of the New Year, this is the last offering made to the Earth for the year, families send off the Hearth god, god of the Kitchen, up to heaven to report on their fortunes for the coming year. On this day he is offered a New Year cake made of sweetened glutinous rice who's consistency will make his teeth stick together so that his report will be difficult to understand. Once the old year has been sent out, the new year is welcomed with purchasing new clothes and cleaning the house. Just before midnight offerings are made to the ancestors of rice bowls that are stuck with red paper flowers, an offering meant to show that at the end of the year the food reserves are not used up and that the household is still prosperous.

"To each moment of the cycle corresponds a definition of unity as wells as particular prophylaxis, and both are expressed through food. A special food is associated with each seasonal festival: with New Year it is rice cakes; with the renewal of spring, spring rolls; with the Fifth of the Fifth, steamed dumplings of glutinous rice, packed in bamboo leaves; with the fifteenth of the eighth, moon cakes. These foods are appetizing, but also necessary at the appointed time" (31).

All of the festivals provide occasion to eat a lot of food. "the frequent festivals, at least every ten or fifteen days, allow the people to alternate and to enhance their frugal diet with rich foods" (31). These festivals create a rhythm to these peoples lives and allow them to embrace the variety

of foods that they would otherwise not get to on a diet of mainly cereal. Many of the festivals foods involve using elements from nature to create the offering. Bamboo leaves and (i imagine) rice that has been grown in their own yards would be used to create these meals. There would not be any use of frozen foods or trips to the supermarket to pick up the offerings for the ancestors later that evening.

In *The Immortals* a similar tone is applied to the use of sustainability and the importance of following tradition and religion. Schipper begins by telling of the different immortals and how they came to be. The moral of most of these stories is that anyone can become immortal by following the Taoist way which is staying one with nature and respect for nature. He tells us of one story about a boy who disappears while tending his sheep. His brother searches for him for forty years and finally finds him, still a young boy. The brother asks where all the sheep are and sees white rocks on the side of the mountain. When the little boy takes his brother to the rocks he realizes that they are thousands of sheep. The brother stays on the mountain and becomes immortal like his younger brother, and he immediately becomes younger. The moral is that anyone can become immortal and “one has only to get rid of the trouble of keeping those sheep – these animals multiply perfectly well on their own – and to live from the mountain” (165). The brothers have been absorbed into nature.

Another topic in this reading is that of Abstinence from Grains. The section about this idea tells again the story of the immortals and how they do not eat grain.

“This cutting off is related to a whole complex of concepts and attitudes concerning different aspects of the body. Not to eat grains is, as we have already seen, tied to the ideas about the powers of corruption and death within our bodies...The conclusion of recent studies on the harmful effect of excessive amounts of carbohydrates in the form of sugar and bread, have led some to see the Taoists abstinence from cereals as the result of an ancient empiricism in matters of diet” (167).

To avoid taxing and war some peasants would flee to the mountains where natural vegetation still was intact. These places became sanctuaries and rules from religious groups such as do not cut down trees, kills the bird or pollute the springs and streams were put in place. These people survived in the mountains, not on grains like the people who did not flee and stayed cultivating the land, but by survival diets that sustained them. Master-Who-Embraces -Simplicity states “the best remedies against hunger, according to the author, are alchemical drugs, but, he says, the ordinary man can also survive on a diet of pine nuts and roots...This diet in the long run even causes better health and the possibility of a longer life”(169). by being able to survive on the land around you and even increase your health and longevity is a good example of sustainability. These people fled not knowing what they were going to do once escaped, and found a way in which to live their lives that was more beneficial than that of staying on the land.

Schipper then tells us about a story of a woman who lived in the forest and when she was found the men did not know what she was because she was covered in hair and moved like she had wings. When she was finally captured they realized that she was a woman who was about 200 years old. she had been living in the woods on pine needles and nuts. She was brought back to the capital and fed cereal and grains. After two years all her hair fell out and she died. If she had not been captured she probably would of become immortal. “In addition to the question of survival for the calamities befalling the world – and from those that will befall it in the future, for this theme also has its eschatological aspects- we also find the idea of an increase in mobility for one who is able to abstain from cereals” (169). Such a person can live from what the environment has to offer. Schipper also talks about agriculture and how although it has helped us move along into an age of technology it also has brought with it overpopulation, destruction of the natural environment, capitalization and other evils. When we think about sustainability we

think about using the land to benefit us in a way that is also productive and non-harmful to the environment. The Taoists “wanderer” could be compared to our Kingsolver who uses the land beneficially and embraces the natural environment.

Finally the idea of Alchemy as a way to suppress hunger and live from the land is discussed. It was not so much to make gold but to refine raw ingredients found in nature “and thus to discover the ultimate and fundamental element, the seminal essence of the world, which, once absorbed within our bodies, might confer immortality” (175). An Alchemical research done in Medieval China produced many different drugs, one of which was called “Eat-Cold powder”. the immediate effect sharpened the elevation within the body making you drink a lot and eat cold things. By harvesting natural minerals, products from the earth, the Chinese were able to come up with remedies that were given by the earth and its environment to help stimulate the body, or they could be detrimental, but were natural, sustainable. Schipper ends by saying that the secret of the immortals is knowing how to die when you want to and when you should die. They teach us how to live and how to pass from one world to another smiling, drunk, dancing to the rhythm of nature.

(2) The authors tone is one that is informative. He tries to present us the myths and aspects of the religion that relate to the festivals and the notion of living off the land and surviving in the wilderness. He attempts to be educational and yet at the same time you can sense some excitement in his tone about the myths and the life of a wanderer. The theme of sustainability is clear, especially in *The Immortals* when he talks about using nature to create remedies and suppress hunger. By using nature one can live a long life that is also healthy. In *Everyday Religion* we see more of a food culture and the role that food plays in each of the important festivals held year round. Food has a significant meaning and the different types have

specific functions that they must perform for the festival or superstition. It can be compared to our holiday traditions such as an Egg on Easter or a Turkey on thanksgiving. Each type of food holds some meaning to the culture and its participants.

(3) The greater meaning behind all of this is that in almost every culture we see food playing a major role in its festivals or religious activities. It seems like there is always some holiday that involves a large feast in which the community can come together and share the wealth. This helps not only the individual but the community be sustainable and embrace each other. When the readings talked about the whole community coming together to help build the temples and partake in the festivities I was reminded of the Movie that we watched with the small organic garden in LA. It made me think of how they came together and built something for the whole community to share in as a focal point for their lives. I also thought of Kingsolver, although not so extreme by any means, but she went into an unknown territory and began to live a life that she thought was more in touch with the earth and its inhabitants, plant and animal, just like the wanderers or the peasants that fled to the mountain and found a way to live sustainably in an environment that was unfamiliar to them.