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Reflection on Professor James Robson's Talk "Buddhism and Daoism in Medieval China"

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On March 15, 2018, McGill University's "Buddha and the Other" lunch lecture series continued with a talk "Buddhism and Daoism in Medieval China" delivered by Professor James Robson from the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations at Harvard University. Throughout the presentation, Prof. Robson inquired into the relationship between Buddhism and Daoism, further proposing an alternative to perceive the interplay of these two religious traditions in China. Students and faculty members from McGill's East Asian Studies, History, Philosophy, and Religious studies attended the talk.

Prof. Robson began with a review of the recent scholarship on the same subject matter. Most scholars tended to interpret the interaction between Buddhism and Daoism through the syncretic model. Scrutinizing this model, Prof. Robson revealed the underlying assumption of syncretism; that is, each religious tradition in China persisted as an entity in-itself and as a *sui generis* pure category, only to be fused together later in Chinese history. In his reflection upon this presumption, Prof. Robson pinpointed how such categorical purity was nothing but a scholarly invention. As an alternative, the pluralist model was put forward by Prof. Robson. By nature, this model was not defensive, namely, not to defend

the interconnectedness of the two religions, but rather served as an approach to specific religious landscape in China.

As per Prof. Robson, this pluralistic view of Chinese religiosity could be illustrated by several images in Buddhist art. For instance, a sixth-century stele with carved images of Laozi and Shakyamuni Buddha back to back was unearthed in Sichuan. Further, at the bottom of many excavated money trees, one finds images similar to the Buddha. According to Prof. Robson, these visual representations, especially the stele of Laozi and Buddha, as side to side and back to back, perfectly encapsulated the complementarity and tensions between Buddhism and Daoism.

As an approach, the pluralist model could advance one's understanding of at least three types of phenomena. First, drawing on his previous research on Mount Heng (Hengshan 衡山), widely known as the Southern Sacred Peak (*Nanyue* 南嶽),¹ Prof. Robson explored the way in which one could deepen comprehension of the mutual constitution between Buddhism and Daoism. Recognized as an ideal place for religious practice, Mount Heng attracted both Buddhist and Daoist clergy. *The Record of the collected highlights of Nanyue* (*Nanyue zongsheng ji* 南嶽總勝集), for instance, preserved stories about the Master Huisi 慧思 (515-577), the third patriarch of Tiantai Buddhism, who employed Daoist longevity techniques to attain immortality. Aside from the complementarity, there existed tensions as well, between Buddhists and Daoists, which can be inferred from the story of the flying stone. As related in this story, several monks were penalized for not revering Daoist deities.

This dynamic relationship between Buddhism and Daoism subtly influenced the distribution of Buddhist and Daoist temples in pre-modern Nanyue. A map in Li Yuandu's 李元度 (1821-87) *Nanyue zhi* 南嶽

¹ James Robson, *Power of Place: The Religious Landscape of the Southern Sacred Peak (Nanyue 南嶽) in Medieval China* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2009).

志 (Gazetteer of Nanyue) published in 1883 showed that Daoist and Buddhist temples occupied the northern and southern side of the mountain respectively. The pluralist model enabled one to enrich the knowledge of the eclectic religious landscape of this sacred mountain in medieval China.

The second phenomenon that could be approached through the pluralist model is talismanic writing, which has been present in a wide range of Buddhist and Daoist writings. For a long time, scholars tended to attribute talismanic writings appearing in Buddhist texts to Daoist influence, insofar as Daoists were considered the first to compose talismans as characters written by Daoist deities.² Nonetheless, Prof. Robson cast doubt on this interpretation. As a matter of fact, talismans in Buddhist texts predate those in Daoism. Through the pluralist model, Prof. Robson proposed to view talismanic writing as a ritual stemming from local religious practices, subsequently being refined by Buddhist and Daoist clergy.

Towards the end of his talk, Prof. Robson discussed a third phenomenon which can be approached by the pluralist model; that is, the translation of Buddhist texts. He focused his attention on the *Forty-Two Chapter Sutra* (Sishierzhang jing 四十二章經), the scripture which was identified as the first sutra available in the Chinese language. This sutra is preserved in both the Buddhist and Daoist canons. Many scholars proclaimed that this sutra was a Chinese fabrication, since the original Sanskrit version of the text was yet to be found. Nevertheless, Prof. Robson intended to approach this text differently. It was not hard to discern Confucian and Daoist ideas in the Chinese versions of the sutra. After comparing several different translations, Prof. Robson highlighted how

² James Robson, "Signs of Power: Talismanic Writing in Chinese Buddhism," *History of Religions* 48, no.2 (2008): 130-169.

the version in the Daoist canon referred to the Buddha's first five followers as the followers of the great Dao. As such, the pluralist model facilitated one's comprehension of how in premodern China, the mixture of Buddhism and Daoism was a commonplace in people's daily life.

In conclusion, Prof. Robson referred back to the stele of Laozi and Buddha, which, according to him, perfectly epitomized the correlation between Buddhism and Daoism. Prof. Robson's talk will be succeeded by a talk on "Buddhism and Compassion" by Ms. Julia Stenzel from the School of Religious Studies at McGill University.

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