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Kristofer Schipper (1934–2021) and Grotto Heavens: Daoist Ecology, Mountain Politics, and Local Identity

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Abstract

This article explores Schipper's scholarly contributions to the study of *dongtian fudi* (grotto heavens and blessed lands) and specifically situates this project in its broader intellectual context and Schipper's own research. While Schipper was not the first to open discussions on this topic, his research in this direction still offers profound insights, such as the coinage of the concept of "Daoist Ecology" and his views on mountain politics. This article argues that Schipper's work on *dongtian fudi* is a response to the school of Deep Ecology and its critics, and also a result of critical reflection on the modern dichotomy between nature and culture. In Schipper's enquiry of *dongtian fudi*, the "mountain" stands as the central concept: it is not only the essential component of Daoist sacred geography, but a holistic site in which nature and society are interwoven, endowed with both material and sacred significance. Through his analysis of the Daoist practice of abstinence from grain (*duangu*), Schipper reveals how mountains serve as spaces for retreat from agrarian society and state control, and how they embody "shatter zones" where the reach of centralized power is relatively attenuated. The article also further links Schipper's project of Beijing as a Holy City to his study of *dongtian fudi.* For Schipper, the former affirms the universality of the locality (i.e., the unofficial China, the country of people), while the latter envisages the vision of rewriting China from plural localities. Taken together, these efforts point toward a theoretical framework that moves beyond conventional sociological paradigms, one that embraces a total *worldly* perspective, in which the livelihoods of local societies and their daily lives are truly appreciated as a totality that encompasses both nature and culture. Schipper's works related to *dongtian fudi*, though they are rather concise, still significantly broaden the scope of Daoist studies and, moreover, provide novel insights into the complexity of Chinese religion and society.

Keywords: Kristofer Schipper; grotto heavens; *dongtian fudi*; sacred geography; mountain; local societies

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1. Introduction

Kristofer Schipper, arguably the founder of contemporary Daoist studies, very much still defines and shapes the outlook of the field today. However, when it comes to the study of grotto heavens and blessed lands (*dongtian fudi*), whether broadly understood as sacred geography or strictly defined as the Ten Great Grotto Heavens and Thirty-Six Lesser Grotto Heavens as outlined in the tenth century by Du Guangting, Schipper is actually not the pioneer. Following the broad definition of *dongtian fudi* as sacred geography, it is arguably Édouard Chavannes who truly opened this field of inquiry with landmark works such as *Le T'ai Chan* (Chavannes 1910) and *Le jet des dragons* (Chavannes 1919). Chavannes may only represent a relatively early phase of research, but long before Schipper turned to the

formal study of *dongtian fudi*, Michel Soymié (1956) and Franciscus Verellen (1995) had already produced detailed descriptions and paradigmatic studies of individual *dongtian* and the broader system of *dongtian fudi*. Therefore, while this paper is indeed an exploration of Schipper's works on *dongtian fudi* and other related themes, the primary aim is not to recount Schipper's detailed analyses of *dongtian fudi*, but rather to reassess his intellectual trajectory at the turn of the 21st century through his engagement with *dongtian fudi*. In fact, as early as 1960, Schipper had already highlighted the role of mountains, the key theme of *dongtian fudi*, in religious life.[1] Despite his vivid description of mountains and associated pilgrimages, this recognition of mountains' importance did not translate into explicit enquires into *dongtian fudi* until the late 1990s. His "return" to this topic seems to be a rupture that demands explanation: what was it in the 1990s that made him make this transition? How should this project be contextualized within his broader academic concerns and academic career? And does his engagement with *dongtian fudi* signal a new set of theoretical concerns or methodological orientations?

The questions above are the departure points of this article. In view of his entire career, Schipper's *dongtian fudi* project came relatively late. In the 1980s, he coordinated historical research, mobilizing an entire generation of European Sinologists, to produce synopses and annotations of all texts within the Daoist Canon. In the 1990s, his focus gradually shifted toward popular cults that are locally based and have very strong regional characteristics. This interest is marked most clearly by his project "Beijing as a Holy City". His attention turned to local religious organizations and religious experiences across broader geographic areas. This shift in focus also enables Schipper to intellectually move from the relatively confined case study of Taiwan to Chinese society as a whole.

Behind this choice of Beijing as a research focus, Schipper also made a strategic transformation in terms of research object: from relatively rural conditions to metropolitan settings. Much of Schipper's understanding of Daoist scriptures, rituals, and institutions is both grounded in and mediated with his fieldwork among local communities in Tainan, Taiwan. In the 1960s, Tainan, though it had its own town center, was still largely rural. Based on these experiences, Schipper offered the first comprehensive theory of Daoism that integrated its liturgy, social life, and individual practices into a single coherent narrative. For Schipper, it is this Daoism, with its rituals, bodily techniques, and social organizations, that ensures the functioning of local societies and safeguards local autonomy.[2] As such, "Beijing as a Holy City" was both an experiment and a challenge. Schipper wanted to know if this model, originally based on experiences in Tainan, can be transferred to the urban context of a metropolis distant from agricultural life. In the surviving stele inscriptions of Beijing's Dongyue ("East Peak", referring to Mount Tai 泰山) Temple, Schipper discovered that nearly all guilds are organized around divine patronage and operate along the lines of autonomy and self-governance.[3] For Schipper, these findings confirm the broader applicability of the local autonomy model rooted in Daoist traditions.[4]

From Schipper's own accounts (Schipper 1998) in the annals of Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes (EPHE), it is clear that the "Beijing as a Holy City" project was still ongoing in the late 1990s. In the annal of 1998, Schipper was still discussing Mount Miaofeng, Bixia Yuanjun 碧霞元君, and other elements of Beijing's local religious landscape, showing no clear signs of a shift toward studies of *dongtian fudi*.[5] In 2002, he publicly entered this realm of enquiry, with the publication of "The First Grotto Heaven: A Preliminary Study of Mount Huotong in Ningde, Fujian". It seems that, all of a sudden, Schipper jumped from religious practices in Ming and Qing Beijing to *dongtian fudi*. This apparent rupture between "Beijing as a Holy City" and *dongtian fudi* becomes more logical if we pay attention to a minor phase of Schipper's research agenda at the turn of the century, namely his endeavors to explore Daoist Ecology (Schipper 2001).

In the following sections, this paper will first review Schipper's contributions to Daoist Ecology and how it was influenced by major theoretical trends at the time. In both his Daoist Ecology and *dongtian fudi* projects, the mountain is the essential component. This paper will show how Schipper formulated his insights into emancipatory mountain politics and how the mountain stands as the articulation of both nature and culture. In his view, the mountain is at once a type of natural landscape (i.e., mountains offer tangible, material resources) and a cultural symbol of refuge where individuals are free from centralized management and can finally exert agency of their own. In Section 4, this paper will briefly introduce the project of "Beijing as a Holy City" and analyze how this project informed the later *dongtian fudi* program. The core intention behind this unfinished project of *dongtian fudi* was to discover how the agency of non-humans plays into the expressions of locality. After his article on Daoist Ecology, Schipper expanded his notion of the "local": it does not only concern human communities and cultures, but also topography, *flora*, and *fauna*. For him, *dongtian fudi* studies offered the perfect opportunity to rewrite China from *a series of* localities distributed across the entire country. A *dongtian* or *fudi* is never a single isolated site, but a node in an interconnected system. Therefore, for Schipper, *dongtian fudi* offered a feasible method to understand the unofficial China that he was so drawn to from the beginning of his career.

2. Nature/Culture: From Deep Ecology to Daoist Ecology

In the 1980s and 1990s, the profound environmental consequences of the Industrial Revolution started to be increasingly concretely felt. Ecological crises emerged into public consciousness and began to shape contemporary life as well as discussions about the future of the planet. As Bruno Latour has observed, such developments constitute a form of warfare—total war on a planetary scale, akin to the two world wars of the twentieth century (Latour 2017, p. 9). Some scholars began to propose solutions. In this section, I will first briefly review key ideas in Deep Ecology, and how Schipper's coinage of Daoist Ecology responds to and furthers discussions on nature, environment, and Daoism. The school of Deep Ecology starts with the realization that purely scientific and factual observation of ecosystems and the environment simply cannot suffice (Devall and Sessions 1985). Hence, many at that time started to advocate an approach of Deep Ecology, emphasizing "basic intuitions and experiencing of ourselves and Nature which comprise ecological consciousness" (Devall and Sessions 1985, p. 55). According to Arne Naess (1973), the first proponent of Deep Ecology, there are two ultimate norms or intuitions underlying this system of thought: self-realization and biocentric equality. The former aims to break series of confinements that isolate and imprison ego from "our family and friends to, eventually, our species" (Devall and Sessions 1985, p. 67), whereas the latter wishes to extend the right to self-realization to all things in the biosphere. In other words, biocentric equality wishes to put humans on par with non-humans and reduces the role of humans to that of an ordinary citizen of the biotic community (ibid., p. 68).

Deep Ecology as outlined above has many characteristics of a political manifesto; it hopes to construct an eco-friendly new world based on the absolute equality among members of the biotic community and inhabit it with new people who cease mining nature in fulfillment of their excessive desire. Radical and revolutionary as it may appear to be, the intellectual route that Deep Ecology inscribes actually resembles a "return" or "re-discovery" of existing historical and non-Western traditions. In the specification of self-realization, authors of Deep Ecology explicitly state that "in keeping with the spiritual traditions of many of the world's religions, the deep ecology form of self-realization goes beyond the modern Western self" (Devall and Sessions 1985, p. 66). In fact, in their preface, Devall and Sessions (1985, p. ix) enunciate that "we may not need something new, but need to reawaken

something very old, to reawaken our understanding of Earth wisdom". These are all clear gestures toward premodern non-Western traditions.

It is precisely in this quest for these other insights and ideas in other historical contexts and regions that drives many to dive into other traditions for inspiration. Daoism, perhaps also benefitting from its promotion by famous authors such as Ursula LeGuin, then becomes an increasingly popular intellectual resource that many hope to further excavate. Indeed, the correlative cosmology, pursuit of spontaneity, and unique praxis of wuwei (non-action) in Daoism align with this theoretical atmosphere very well, and seem to resonate with the ecological turn. However, it should also be noted that this interest in Daoism is also colored with, if not partially fueled by, Orientalism. N. J. Girardot, James Miller, and Liu Xiaogan (Girardot et al. 2001, pp. xxxvii–lxiv), the main organizers of a 1998 conference, in their introduction to their volume of *Daoism and Ecology*, write that the real reception of Daoism in the West may be very close to a light, picturesque, and over-romanticized "sitcom religion" (ibid., p. xxxix). This caricatured impression may be shaped by popular culture's fascination with the mystical aspects of *wuwei* (無為, non-action), in danger of reducing Daoism to an ethereal philosophy of "emptiness" or passivity.

Also in this volume, Jordan Paper offered a rigorous examination on the relationships between Daoism and Deep Ecology.[6] He noticed that what is often focused on is not the Daoist tradition as such, but "what was assumed to be such traditions" (Paper 2001, p. 107). Scholars of Deep Ecology do not really differentiate Daoism from other traditions in the Chinese intellectual landscape. In some places, their tones sound remarkably similar to those of *Mahayana* Buddhism, rather than Daoism (ibid., p. 113). Moreover, for them, Daoism seems to be an ahistorical construct that remains consistent or even homogenous throughout history. In other words, they do not care about the fluctuations in the interpretive system of Daoist that frequently lead to alterations in meanings across historical periods (ibid., p. 118). In fact, this Daoism, as celebrated and alluded to in Deep Ecology, is very much of Western origin, and promoters of Deep Ecology seem to believe that this "Western Daoism can solve a crisis assumed to be brought on by and unredeemable through Western thinking" (ibid., p. 116). This is clearly self-contradictory. Paper's evaluation of Deep Ecology, therefore, equally merits particular attention: it "contains no sustained argument, but rather bits and pieces of poetry, ritual, etc., considered relevant to the theme of the work" (ibid., p. 113).

If Paper's analysis above is an ideological critique of Deep Ecology, the empirical enquiries that explore actual conduct in non-West regions regarding the environment may simply further embarrass claims that intellectual traditions there offer some magical cures, or effective treatments at least, for environmental issues today. These areas, despite being equipped with such advanced eco-friendly ideas, are also historically afflicted by issues such as deforestation and soil pollution. Edward H. Schafer (1913–1991), a well-known American Sinologist, in his pioneering work of "The Conservation of Nature under the T'ang Dynasty", already noted that "conceptions of beauty led to acts of conservation", but despite repeated edicts from the monarchs demanding conservation, "there was no permanent embodiment of these advanced ideas in constitutional forms, and so they were ultimately ineffective" (Schafer 1962, pp. 292, 308). Wide-ranging sources have actually all attested to the historical reality: these early formulations of environmental ethics did not "inhibit environmental destruction" (Robson 2025, p. 30). This disjuncture, if narrowly understood as the discrepancy between Daoism and environmental practices in history, may be explained by Jame Miller's reading of Daoism (Miller 2017, p. xx) not as a tradition preaching "social harmony and quietism", but countercultural forces that "are materially embedded in cultural forms" and capable of "undermining the social and economic power

of rival".[7] Or, it only attests to what Robson (2025, p. 30) concluded, the distance between philosophy of nature and concrete environment practices.

Aware of such discrepancies between thought and practice, at the time of the late 1990s, scholars of Daoism themselves struggled to firmly establish connections between Daoism and contemporary ecological theories. Girardot, Miller, and Liu openly acknowledged that scholars remained unclear on three essential questions: First, does Daoism truly contain concepts analogous to ecological thought? Second, what kind of contribution can Daoism make to contemporary environmental issues? Thirdly, if Daoism does offer ecological thoughts, how to explain the ecological crises that have been striking China frequently in historical times and at present? These three questions inform the 1998 international conference on Daoism and Ecology, to which Schipper's article "Daoist Ecology" (Schipper 2001) contributed. In fact, as Schipper revealed in 2012, his acquaintance with Ecology did not start in the late 1990s, but went way back into the 1950s (Schipper 2012, p. 33). During his youth in the Netherlands, Schipper joined the Netherlands Youth Association for Nature Studies (NJN, *Nederlandse Jeugdbond voor Natuurstudie*), and was quite active in environmental issues and Ecology in general. Schipper was also fully aware of the dangers of Orientalist interpretations of Daoism. Therefore, his paper "Daoist Ecology: An Inner Transformation—A Study of Early Daoist Precepts" (Schipper 2001) endorsed two important missions: (a) to be hands-on with authentic Daoist texts and faithfully report these textual insights; (b) explain what these Daoist texts might offer toward addressing the issue of contemporary ecological crises.

Schipper's 2001 article itself clearly revealed that he closely followed the latest theoretical trends, but he was never satisfied with purely theoretical articulations and constructions. For Schipper, philosophically reorienting toward nature with Daoist insights was only helpful to some extent, but it was simply insufficient for really engaging with ecological issues. He insisted that concrete and feasible actions are key to responding to ecological crises. These practices concern not only individual behaviors, but also the creation of durable institutional frameworks and sustainable mechanisms capable of addressing environmental problems in a systemic way. Accordingly, at the very beginning of his paper, Schipper made clear that Daoism is not merely a philosophy about nature but takes "consequential action" (Schipper 2001, p. 79). He asserted unequivocally that Daoism possesses its own ecological system of thought, but one that differs from modern ecological discourses (Schipper 2001, pp. 79–80). This Daoist system is not a political manifesto shouted from the rooftops, but a gentle call for inner transformations.

Such an emphasis on practice was Schipper's response to those critics who accuse Daoism of lacking detailed actions, and, in many ways, this is also consistent with his general methodology in Daoist studies; Schipper's acquaintance with Daoism started with ritual, concrete forms of human activities. In fact, his definition of Daoism, apart from the sociological dimension of safeguarding local autonomy, was heavily influenced by Frits Staal's (1990, p. 155) concept of orthopraxis (i.e., Daoism is not defined by a set of beliefs, but by the right actions it prescribes). In "*Le monachisme taoïste*" ("The Daoist Monasticism", originally published in 1984), Schipper rejected the notion that religions are primarily doctrinal or ideological. For him, religion no doubt had a dimension of belief, but it also meant "a system of practices specific to a group that this religion is, thus, the expression of what is felt to be the very raison d'être of this group" (Schipper 2008, p. 179).[8] What Schipper implied here is that any religion needs to satisfy three prerequisites: (a) the religion must correspond to a group of people; (b) the religion should reflect the living experiences and conditions of this group; and (c) the religion should have its own social organization so that activities at the group level can be held to ensure the existence and continuity of the religion itself. Precisely in the social organizations Daoism invents and its ability to shape its

own institutions, Daoism can offer the most to contemporary ecological responses. Schipper's focus on practice and community led him to primarily analyze the content of the One Hundred and Eighty Precepts (180 Precepts hereafter) in his "Daoist Ecology", whereas the philosophical contribution Daoism makes to the conception of nature is only briefly alluded to. Despite being short in length, his tour of the philosophical aspects of Daoism regarding nature is still inspiring. Schipper argued that Daoism presents a radically different conception of processes of becoming civilized (*wenming* 文明) compared to the West; the closer one is to nature, the more civilized one becomes.

This certainly means that nature, not culture or society, is the dominant defining category. What Daoism, according to Schipper's reading of some early texts, truly advocates is a transformation of culture and society in order to be better aligned with nature. In other words, civilizedness (*wenming*) is defined not in its own degrees or levels, but its proximity to nature. This further implies the intertwined relation between these two categories. Discussions of culture cannot be separated from discussions of nature; nature also cannot be separately articulated without being mediated by culture first. Such a framing of the Daoist stance on nature/culture may reveal Schipper's shift to a relational and network-based ontology.[9] Nature and society are not two distinct systems, but mutually embedded within a single web of relations. In other words, there is no such thing as a separate nature or a separate culture; they penetrate concurrently into every relation and every node of this web.

For Schipper, precepts are a distinctive genre. They set out parameters of a group and, in many ways, can be read as the textualization of some general group practices. In the 180 Precepts, Schipper pointed out the fundamental principle in Daoist Ecology: respect. It is beyond a simple catchphrase of respect for nature, but stems from appropriately handling relationships between men and women, the elderly and the young, and extends to the full diversity of lifestyles, customs, and cultural expressions. The 180 Precepts emphasize avoiding harm caused by reckless or careless behavior, particularly that inflicted upon animals and plants. When summarizing the precepts, Schipper (2001, p. 84) carefully listed rules related to animal ethics: "do not kick domestic animals," "do not watch animals copulate," and "do not without good cause make horses run and gallop while pulling a chariot". These precepts not only anticipate the principles of modern animal ethics but also assert the dignity of animals. On the other hand, these rules should not be understood nor dismissed as anthropocentric projections of human values onto animals. Rather, they place humans and animals on the same ethical plane. Within the framework of Daoist Ecology, nature and society are of similar, if not identical, constitutions. In this sense, nature is society, and society nature.

It is within this vision of an entangled world that the Daoist principle of *wuwei* acquires tangible feasibility. Schipper argued that certain ecological aspects of the 180 Precepts can be traced back to the *Zhuangzi*, where the self-sovereignty of all beings is premised on nature not being subordinated to culture or society. The *Zhuangzi* affirms not only the agency and subjectivity of humans, but also the intrinsic agency of all things in the surrounding world. Again, such an affirmation of non-human agency should by no means be taken as proofs of anthropocentrism. Daoist Ecology, as interpreted by Schipper, strives to avoid all forms of projection, judgment, or interference imposed upon non-human entities from a human perspective, whether deliberate or unintentional. However, this radical respect for all beings dictates an ontological shift at the individual level. Each member of a community must first realize the universality of agency; it can be possessed by not only humans, but also by non-humans, including plants, animals, and even things. No doubt, such a transition is difficult. Hence, Schipper introduced the practical strategy of inner transformation.

This process of inner transformation also has traces in the 180 Precepts. Precepts are issued with the authority of Laojun (老君, the cosmic deity), but their observance generally depends on an individual's openness, an inward recognition of one's relationship to and unity with the Dao. The order of nature is simultaneously the order of the body. The disorder of the external world can be resolved through the rebalancing of internal bodily states. As Schipper (2001, p. 92) put it: "the outside crises and dangers can only be overcome by transforming them within us, by purifying and reshaping them through the harmony of our body". Here, Schipper captured the analogist ontology in Chinese thinking. The body and the world are different, but there are established relationships of correspondence between them. In this thinking, this correspondence forges a continuum between one's body and the world (Fava 2023, p. 366). Everything, even the entire world, envisioned by Daoist Ecology is located on a vast net jointly woven by nature and culture/society. Civilization, viewed from this perspective, is anchored in the mutual reference of both nature and society. The disorder of nature can be rectified by the order of society; the disorder of society can, in turn, be healed by the order of nature. At the end of "Daoist Ecology", Schipper concludes that Daoism undoubtedly has its own ecology and offers unique insights into how to foster concrete responsible actions and practices.

Admittedly, Schipper' treatment of the 180 Precepts may have very little to offer in terms of policy or institutional changes. In some places, the overwhelmingly New Age tendency to pursue individual peace seems to echo conservative, anti-activist, or even reactionary sentiments. Schipper concluded his readings on the 180 Precepts with "thus, [they] never speak of protests to the higher authorities, of political actions, revindications, demand for justice and peace, but only of respiration exercises, of inner harmony and individual peace" (Schipper 2001, p. 92). For those who are directly confronted with ecological crises and other structural issues, the statement above is indeed somewhat indifferent, if not aloof.[10] Not as an excuse for Schipper, but this attitude of distancing from politics may have something to do with his Second World War trauma, where a vision for bettering-off had been weaponized and turned into a nightmare for the entire human race. Perhaps what Schipper wished to articulate here is not that one should bear suffering in silence, but to cautiously examine available options and not be fooled by empty promises.

Overall, Schipper's attempt at Daoist Ecology, with the hindsight of scholarship today, may look "incomplete in its obfuscation of the more forceful methods", such as punitive rituals on nature (see Meulenbeld 2024), but still for the first time enable attention to wider phenomena of Daoism and firmly validate the proposition of Daoist Ecology.

3. Mountain Politics: Sacredness and "Shattering" Governance

In many ways, Daoist Ecology highlights the centrality of nature and environment in the worldview of Daoism. Nature is not the abyss that society struggles against, but the ground that sustains society. Society, in turn, also shapes and interacts with its conception of nature. A yet-to-be-explored theme in Daoist Ecology is the mountain (*shan*, 山). It is also the symbol that connects and bridges Schipper's early phase of Daoist Ecology research and the *dongtian fudi* project. As aforementioned, the earliest evidence of Schipper's interest in mountains is his 1960 paper, entitled "*Les pèlerinages en Chine: Montagnes et pistes*" ("The Pilgrimage in China: Mountains and Traces") (Schipper 1960). In this paper, Schipper analyzed famous mountains in both Daoism and Buddhism. As the wording "traces" suggests, the central focus is the sociological dimension of group-coordinated activities of traveling to and touring these sacred sites. As a case study, Schipper also vividly depicted the lively scene of the pilgrimage of organized crowds to Mount Tai (泰山) and Mount Miaofeng (妙峰山). However, in this paper, mountains are indeed gods, but stand rather silently in the background and only serve as the necessary physical setting that allows

the pilgrimage (i.e., human activity) to happen.[11] Schipper's work on Daoist Ecology profoundly changed this conceptualization. In "Daoist Ecology", Schipper (2001) proposed that the locus of Daoist Ecology is firstly the conservation of mountains. He pointed out that efforts to conserve mountains reflect a fundamentally different political vision—one that considers not only the human or cultural significance, but also the materiality and holistic presence of mountains. In this section, I will first analyze the role of mountains in Schipper's theorizations, and then argue that, in Schipper's view, mountains *embody* an emancipatory political alternative.

First, it is important to clarify that the mountain under discussion is never simple landscape categories of mounds of rocks and earth; rather, it is always a sacred site in collective belief or memory. In "Daoist Ecology", Schipper (2001, p. 82) explained that the mountains he studied are places where early Daoist priests and communities gather, "holy places dedicated to and consecrated to the cult of gods and saints and where sacred things were kept". For Daoism, such mountains served as a "refuge", "a place for those who wished to escape the calamities of the world and where they could dwell in peace" (ibid.). Such definitions of mountains actually reveal two cornerstones of what may be called mountain politics (my coinage). First, sacred mountains are not part of the profane world; they are shielded with, if not constructed by, fabric of the sacred, and thus they constitute their own independent sacred space. The sanctification of a mountain is also the construction of sacred geography. Second, the mountain embodies an alternative world beyond the reach of the profane. "Daoist mountains are immanent expressions of the divine bureaucracy".[12] In fact, it is this fabric of the sacred that has the full capacity to shield the mountain from the potential subjugation of the profane and ensure its long-term conservation and bio-diversity. Therefore, during moments of hardships, the mountain can take on the function of a sanctuary and protect people from famine as well as other disasters.

However, the sacredness of the mountain is by no means an invention of Daoist communities alone, but a result of the accumulation of cultural elaborations since early China, long before the documented birth of Daoism. From the early Zhou period, bronze vessels are decorated with flat-topped, stair-like patterns. Ling Li (2019) and Hung Wu (2024, p. 22) argued that these are not wave or band motifs, but mountain forms, either in three or two dimensions. Inside these patterns are often images of wild beasts and mythical creatures, while the outer areas depict human activities such as hunting, gathering, and sacrifice. Hung Wu (2024, p. 40) argued that such iconography reflects a dualistic worldview that sharply divided the mountain wilderness and human civilization. It is also a semantic structure that places the supernatural and chaotic natural world in opposition to, but also parallel with, the orderly human realm (ibid.).

Hung Wu's division between "mountain-wilderness" and "human-civilization" may have been implicitly influenced by the schema of the opposition between nature and culture/society in the modern period. However, China, even today, is still very much an enchanted world; ghosts, demons, and deities are still natural inhabitants of this world, along with humans.[13] Perhaps the wilderness depicted on early bronzes is not disordered chaos waiting for cultural refinement, but marks a unique form of existence along with and very different from human societies. In this sense, Hung Wu's conception aligns more closely with Durkheim's opposition between the sacred and the profane. The stair-step motifs and bold mountain patterns on bronze vessels do not represent a simple two-dimensional boundary; on the contrary, they signal a profound ontological rupture between the sacred and profane. The mountain is not merely distant or wild; it is the very axis of the sacred. The unordered artistic depictions of this realm, to some extent, reflect humanity's inability, at that time, to freely traverse the boundary between the sacred and the profane or to treat the sacred as an object of contemplation. In other words, humans then were still

attempting to imagine and represent the sacred. Yet what is clear enough is that they have sensed a sacredness they might never truly reach, and thus closely linked mountains with the divine.

If these bronze patterns mark the emergence of a visual language for mountains as sacred, then by the Han dynasty this language had matured into its full capacity. The incense burner, *boshan lu* (博山爐), a representative artifact of the time, represents a mountain in miniature, imbued with sacred significance. Schipper had long been attentive to the cosmological symbolism embedded in these objects. Although early Daoist practices do not allude to any mediation through icons, Schipper (1993, p. 7; 2005) argued that in the ritual of submitting the petition, when visualizing the gods, Daoist followers may have used *boshan lu* to facilitate their visions. Jin Tao (2023) went a step further and argued that in the Pure Chamber (*jingshi* 靜室) of each Daoist household, there may be a *boshan lu*. As the smoke wafts through the incense burner's holes on the lid, it is as if vapor ascends from the grotto heavens in the mountains and transforms into true clouds floating in the sky. Immediately, the room itself also transforms into a sacred extension of Mount Kunlun 崑崙山 (Schipper 1993, p. 6).[14] The Daoist priest in this setting becomes a transcendent wandering the sacred peaks.

Though existing *boshan*-style incense burners predate the beginnings of the Tianshidao, the tripartite visual structure seems to be quite compatible with the three tiers of Daoist cosmology: heaven, earth, and water.[15] The base of the *boshan lu* tends to depict dragons emerging from waves; the bowl-shaped middle often depicts the ocean; and the lid is sculpted into towering peaks with mythical creatures roaming the terrain. The base and the bowl-shaped middle can be interpreted as representations of the realm of water; the mountain lid represents the realm of earth. Heaven is most vividly expressed when the incense smoke wafts through these holes on the lid and gradually fades away in the sky. Regardless of whether the mountain in miniature described by the *boshan lu* represents Mount Kunlun or Penglai, it symbolizes a sacred microcosm. These allegedly cosmological connotations show that the mountain, in the Chinese imagination at that time, was never just a geological formation. It is inaccessible by ordinary means, but home to the forces of divine order. When Schipper described the mountain as a refuge or sanctuary, what he invoked is this sacredness forged by the long cultural history of mountains.

So far, our analysis of Schipper's understanding of the mountain has primarily emphasized its cultural and symbolic dimensions. However, as mentioned above, Daoist ontology does not differentiate between nature and culture; they are always fused, interwoven, and entangled altogether. In this light, what accompanies the symbolic layer of the sacredness of the mountain must be its non-symbolic, or material, aspects (i.e., a series of practical supports that the mountain offers).[16] In Schipper's formulations, these frequently mean the resources (such as plants, herbs, and stones) the mountain can offer. Therefore, with the joint aspects of both resources and sacredness, the mountain transcends the singular category of either material resource or cultural symbol of refuge, and exerts its full impact on ordinary people as a unitary entity. These impacts, interpreted in political terms, very much mean the suspension of the power of the (central) authority and its governance. In fact, the mountain, as a landform that rises prominently above its surroundings, poses severe logistic challenges to projections of power and authority. Any attempt at the deployment of violence, such as sending or maintaining military forces, or the performance of everyday administration, such as taxation, involves heavy fiscal burdens for an authority to maintain its presence in these areas. Therefore, the mountain creates spaces of relative autonomy, free from the impositions of an authority. Only in such conditions can individual agency finally be reclaimed and revitalized.

Schipper fully articulated the political implications of the mountain for the first time in Chapter 9 of *The Taoist Body*, in the section titled "The Abstinence from Grains" (*duangu* 斷谷). The whole of Chapter 9 ("The Immortals") can be read as an extension of the previous Chapter 8 ("Keeping the One"). As the title of Chapter 8 implies, it describes techniques of Daoist cultivation. The title is also the unifying theme that Schipper found in the kaleidoscope of these techniques. Naturally, Chapter 9 should present the outcome of all these practices: the attainment of immortality. In this chapter, Schipper surveyed accounts of numerous immortals and argued that abstinence from grains is a frequent attribute among these divine figures. For Schipper, *duangu* is not wild imagination; it is a concrete and recommended practice that offers profound implications for how humans respond to their living conditions. In the context of an agrarian society, such a proposition admittedly seems out of place. Grains were the staple food and primary energy source at that time; foregoing the main means of survival is deeply counterintuitive. Schipper immediately noted this paradox; he explained that the issue was not grain per se, but the process and mode of production of cereal cultivation, which required collective labor and centralized organization, and thus subjected peasants to systems of taxation, demographic control, and imperial administration.

Thus, for Schipper, beneath grain abstention lies an implicit critique of the agricultural order. Agriculture, while ensuring the material basis of survival, also inherently triggers political exploitation, constraints, and ecological crises. In a sense, Schipper is indeed a precursor to the insights of the thinkers of the Anthropocene. He recognized that agriculture is not merely a mode of cultivation essential for human survival, but also a planetary-scale transformation of the Earth. Through agriculture, humans profoundly altered the planet's geology for the first time (Schipper 1993, p. 170). In the specific case of China, Schipper noted that the unification of the Qin and Han Empires was accompanied by agricultural expansion: animal domestication and large-scale grain cultivation spread outward to broader regions of China, yet this also led to the introduction of household registration and social control (*bianhu qimin* 編戶齊民) on an unprecedented scale.

During this process, the peasantry became the first victim. Schipper wrote that peasants now became thoroughly chained to the land, tethered by taxes, conscription, and bureaucratic controls:

> "The peasants depended entirely on agriculture and were forever tied to their land through all kinds of fiscal and administrative measures. As a result, the rural communities became an easy prey to all the ills of sedentary civilization: ever higher taxes, enslavement to government through corvée labor and military draft, epidemics, periodic shortages and famines, and wars and raids by non-Chinese tribes from across the borders." (Schipper 1993, p. 168)

Thus, Schipper grasped the dual nature of agriculture. On the one hand, it ensures a stable food supply and safeguards survival; on the other hand, agriculture itself is inherently fragile. It demands highly organized human labor and, even more critically, political structures to command it. Consequently, this inevitably renders individuals more exposed to centralized political power, while large-scale environmental modification also intensifies ecological crises. In this sense, *duangu* (grain abstention) as a practice does not reject grain itself, but rather the agricultural system that produces it. Put differently, Schipper's core thesis on *duangu* is that it constitutes an "art of not being governed" (Scott 2009, p. x), fundamentally a resistance to state managerial systems. This resistance differs markedly from the literati's conventional retreat into spiritual solace after political disillusionment. Instead, it seeks material disengagement, particularly at the economic base, by evading the agricultural tax system entirely and securing subsistence beyond agrarian dependence.

To materially resist governance requires securing material sustenance. In other words, *duangu* requires specific contextual support. Only in a mountainous context does a comprehensive subversion of the centralized governance system become possible. As *Baopuzi neipian* (抱扑子內篇, DZ 1185) illustrates, a complete *duangu* method necessitates the use of mineral drugs (*shouzhong shiyao*守中石藥), material gifts of the mountains (DZ1185, 15.1b-2a). In fact, the method of *duangu* is conditioned upon the maximal utilization of resources available in forests and mountainous areas. On this point, Schipper's understanding of the mountain is not only earlier, but also more nuanced than Scott's account. In *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Scott primarily frames mountainous terrain as a topographical barrier that delays or obstructs state power, creating "shatter zones" (Scott 2009, pp. 6, x). In contrast, Schipper not only identifies mountains as demarcating peripheries of power but also highlights the potential empowerment they afford to people. Practices such as *duangu*, rooted in mountainous life, entail people regaining their mobility (Schipper 1993, p. 169).

Under this newfound mobility afforded by mountains, individuals can largely shed the constraints imposed by the natural–social order, ultimately realizing the Daoist ideal of free and easy wandering (*xiaoyao you*逍遙遊). In Schipper's own words, the mountain offers freedom in two dimensions: "rejection of their sedentary life and the peasant condition" (Schipper 1993, p. 170). Only within the mountain can true autonomy and individual agency emerge. Schipper's readings here may be on the verge of idealization, but there is no doubt that Daoism as a counterculture (borrowed from Miller's wording) can indeed offer emancipatory potential. Such proposals, as fantastical as they may be, are inherently rebellious in the eyes of the establishment. The modern audience should not simply ignore the quest for emancipation on the grounds of impracticality; these are real attempts that have been made by real people before. For Schipper himself, these accounts of mountain politics and *duangu* are also the long-lasting monuments that attest to his personal pursuit of individual emancipation, in addition to his humanistic concerns in general.

4. Writing China from the Perspective of Locality: Beijing as a Holy City and Dongtian Fudi

Arguably, Schipper's lifelong research on Daoism can be summarized as the discovery, elaboration, and, finally, passionate defense of locality. In this light, projects of Beijing as a Holy City and *Dongtian fudi* at the end of his academic career are part of his call to re-examine China holistically through the lens of diverse local traditions. This section will first briefly walk through studies in the "Beijing as a Holy City" project in order to show in what aspects the project of *dongtian fudi* can be read as a continuation of the former enterprise.

In *La Religion de la Chine*, Schipper frequently lamented how Confucian discourse, utilized by the central authority, obscured everything happening at the local level (Schipper 2008, p. 28). For Schipper, there were always two Chinas. The first is the official China, of bureaucrats, of imperial administration, of central government, and of Confucianism; the second is the unofficial China, of ordinary people, of local expressions, of local authorities, and of Daoism (Schipper 1982, p. 11). Thus, for Schipper, the emphasis of locality was both a form of resistance to Confucian orthodoxy and a rejection of central power. This is why, in the first chapter of *The Taoist Body*, Schipper framed Daoism's origins as follows:

1. Conflicts between the central authority and localities escalated during the Warring States period. In these engagements, localities started to assert their own unique identities (Schipper 1993, p. 9).
2. The central authority used Confucianism as their ideological tool, countered by local societies through regional and unofficial religious practices (ibid.).

3. Local communities adopted Daoist organizational models and belief systems, and sought protection from Daoism to preserve their own autonomy, whether by gaining recognition within the Daoist system to negotiate with the state (Schipper 1995, p. 102) or by directly mobilizing Daoist ideas to resist central authority (Schipper 1993, p. 9).

For Schipper, Daoism was, first and foremost, a discursive and intellectual resource positioned against the central state. It stands at the heart of the central–local divide, becoming the protector of localities.[17] The relationship between Daoism and localities mirrors Chapter 10 of the *Laozi*: "To produce but not to own, to act but not to control, to nurture but not to dominate". Schipper (1993, p. 129) saw Daoism as the mother to local society, offering unconditional protection. Such a reading might come from his textual studies into *Taishang laojun zhongjing* (DZ 1168), *Taishang huangting waiijing yujing* (DZ 332), *Santian neijie jing* (DZ 1205), and *Hunyuan shengji* (DZ 770). For Schipper, these texts consistently revealed that the ideal Daoist body cultivation hopes to achieve is actually the state of a pregnant mother, which likely shapes his view of Daoism's selfless nurturing role toward localities. If the above is a theoretical and textual argument, in his real-life encounters with Daoism, Schipper also repeatedly emphasized that while Daoist priests provide liturgical services to local communities, they do not undermine local autonomy. On the contrary, the ability to hire priests and to make decisions proves the local leaders' independence and agency. In other words, it is strong local societies that command Daoism at their service, not Daoism imposing itself onto locality (Schipper 1993, p. 57, pp. 80–81).

In fact, Schipper's notion of local society is very likely to have been mediated by Pierre Clastres' conceptions in *Society Against the State*.[18] In this seminal piece, Clastres challenges the Marxist evolutionary development that progresses from primitive society to the final ideal of communism, and rejects the Marxist principle that the economic base determines the political superstructure. He argues that (a) primitive society is not the result of a subsistence economy, but that it instead chooses to maintain such modes of production despite advancements in overall productivity (Clastres 1987, pp. 194–96) and (b) the state is not a natural development of primitive society, but constitutes "a separate power" that the internal organization would simply not allow its emergence without external interference (ibid., p. 214). "Primitive society, then, is a society from which nothing escapes, which lets nothing get outside itself, for all the exits are blocked; it exercises absolute and complete power over all the elements of which it is composed" (ibid., p. 212). In this system, even the chiefs who may be able to lead the group occasionally are closely monitored and checked by society. Clastres further argues that what is conferred to them is not power (to subjugate), but prestige associated with speech (ibid., p. 215). Essentially, chiefs are "prisoners of both their desire for prestige and their powerlessness to fulfill these desires" (ibid., p. 210). In many ways, Schipper's local society resembles this model of primitive society. Inside a local society, there is a mechanism that closely monitors every member to ensure overall democratic and egalitarian functioning and the resistance to the centralization of powers within the group. The position of the priests is also very similar to those of the chiefs in Clastres' examples.[19] Priests may wield some or even considerable influence over the group, but they are never allowed to have true decision-making capacity and are actually controlled as well as managed by the local society itself.

This focus on locality was also shaped by Schipper's fieldwork in Tainan. In fact, Schipper's first encounter with Daoism was heavily mediated by the existence of locality and its concrete social organizations. One of the phenomena he observes is the *xianghui* (香會, lay association). Schipper (2002b, p. 32) discovered that the incense burner (*xianglu* 香爐) served as the anchoring object of the entire association; a new burner signified the formation of a new *xianghui*. The leader of the association, the burner host (*luzhu* 爐主), was elected annually during the deity's birthday celebration through divination blocks

(*jiao* 筊): the candidate who received the affirmative divine response assumed the role.[20] The burner host primarily undertook socioeconomic responsibilities, managing the association's collective funds and properties (Schipper 2002b, p. 33). In Tainan's *xianghui* and other forms of local organizations, Schipper found the vibrant local agency he had long sought; he even identified elements of democracy and equality in both the selection mechanism of the *luzhu* and the internal relationships among members. However, this discovery occurred in China's peripheries. Schipper remained deeply curious about how such local autonomy might manifest in broader China, particularly in more urbanized areas.

In his research on the Dongyue Temple and Mount Miaofeng pilgrimage, Schipper once again encountered forms and expressions of locality centered around Daoist religious practices. Similarly to the case of Tainan, he found the existence of associations (*hui* 會) and believed that all such associations, whether occupational guilds (*hanghui* 行會) or regional lodges (*huiguan* 會館), possessed religious attributes (Schipper 1997, p. 12). According to estimates based on the number of temples in late Qing Beijing, Schipper reckoned that there was one temple for every 700 people or 200 households (Schipper 1997, p. 18). Considering that each temple was maintained by at least one association, with larger temples accommodating multiple associations, it is safe to conclude that nearly every resident of Beijing at that time engaged with this vast liturgical structure. Stele inscriptions in the Dongyue Temple revealed that the guild of the sculptures of jade established the Zhongshan danchen hui 眾善撣塵會 (association of the multitude of benefits obtained through the cleaning of the temple) to clean the temple from the 15th to 28th day of the third lunar month, also distributing the collected dust to members' homes (Schipper 1997, p. 13). On the 23rd day of the third month, the Jinglu hui 淨爐會 (association for cleaning the incense burner) would clean the incense burners and similarly distribute the incense ashes to members (ibid.). The Baizhi xianhua hui 白紙鮮花會 (association for offering paper and fresh flowers) established by the flower guild would decorate the temple during New Year and provide free paper flowers for pilgrims to bring blessings home (*daifu huijia* 帶福回家) (ibid., p. 14).

Major temples in Beijing at that time were closely interconnected. Dongyue Temple had connections with both Baiyun Temple 白雲觀 and Pantao Temple 蟠桃宮, serving not only as a hub in the temple network but also as the headquarters of the entire religious structure (ibid., p. 18). Schipper pointed out that the departure times of different guilds for the Mount Miaofeng pilgrimage were coordinated at Dongyue Temple. In Schipper's description, this pilgrimage was an extraordinarily grand yet orderly event. The guilds negotiated their departure times in advance, forming massive processions without interfering with each other. Tea stations set up by various guilds lined both sides of the pilgrimage route, and paper guilds would provide paper flowers to every pilgrim (ibid., p. 15).

One goal of the "Beijing as a Holy City" project, as reviewed above, was the reconstruction of religious life during the Ming–Qing period using newly discovered materials such as stele inscriptions. This reconstruction primarily uncovers the social traces of faith-inspired practices, revealing connections between temples and monasteries, documenting how communities voluntarily form associations and collectively establish rules for communal life, and recovering forgotten local histories of guild interactions that are omitted from official records. Through this project, these narratives, that are often overlooked in traditional historiography, finally return to modern readers' awareness.

The project itself is still ongoing toady, and collections of stele inscriptions continue (e.g., Bujard 2013, 2017). However, Schipper already presented the core thesis of the project then, and he outlined the social networks centered around guild associations. In a sense, this project is Schipper's feasibility test for writing China through localities on two levels: First, it examines whether localities can serve as a universal perspective for understand-

ing China. As China's imperial capital during Ming–Qing times, Beijing embodies central state power in its most concrete form. Through the case of Dongyue Temple, Schipper demonstrated that even in Beijing, where central power was so intensely concentrated, local identities still articulated vibrant and powerful self-expressions under pressure. This suggests that in regions with varying degrees of central influence, equally or even more remarkable local characteristics must exist, awaiting discovery, preservation, and documentation. Second, it offers strategies of how to write China from the perspective of localities. In Schipper's vision for this project, though interactions between the imperial government and local societies are also included, the primary focus was still on uncovering and depicting histories and experiences of groups excluded from official narratives. In this sense, Schipper's work truly presented ordinary people's lives during the Ming–Qing period. While still unable to capture individuals' specific thoughts and feelings, it successfully illustrated the daily work undertaken by commoners ignored in official records, and their crucial roles in maintaining societal structures.

While giving credit to the approach of "Beijing as a Holy City", the limitations of this project should also be recognized. Under Schipper's supervision, the project produced very detailed statistics on the quantity and distribution of temples within Beijing's inner and outer cities. However, more grounded analyses of Beijing as a *city* are still needed to supplement and interpret these statistical results, particularly regarding its physical geography (topography, landforms, and terrain) and human geography (urban morphology and functional zoning). Drawing insights from Daoist Ecology and mountain politics, Schipper, in the *dongtian fudi* project that he embarked on after the Beijing project, achieved the organic integration of natural environments, geographical considerations, and social analysis. In this way, the *dongtian fudi* project represents both the direct continuation of and significant advancements in "Beijing as a Holy City". Schipper recognized that localities can only be comprehended holistically; they always transcend individual analytical categories and point toward a totality. This totality encompasses the full spectrum of social lives, from ordinary people to elites, as well as the comprehensive influence of physical geography and geology on human existence. Moreover, it includes how humans transform and utilize these given conditions to shape their own identities and modes of self-expression.

In his article "The First Grotto-Heaven: A Preliminary Study of Mount Huotong in Ningde, Eastern Fujian", arguably Schipper's only formally published *dongtian fudi* enquiry, he put his new theoretical reflections into practice. The core investigation of this paper was primarily textual, with Schipper exploring why Mount Huotong 霍童山 came to be recognized as the first *dongtian*. He identified concrete evidence from the Shangqing scriptures regarding Tao Hongjing's 陶弘景 travels to Huotong. With the place name Jin'an (晉安), which refers to Fuzhou during the Six Dynasties period, Schipper concluded that the Mount Huotong in Ningde 寧德 was indeed the Nanhuo 南霍 visited by Tao Hongjing. It is the association with Tao Hongjing that established Mount Huotong among the *dongtian fudi* sacred geography.

Beyond the article's main argument, two seemingly incidental details merit particular attention. First, Schipper deliberately preserved Tao Hongjing's detour due to "pirates along the southern coastal route" (南路有海掠, 不可行), which forced him to travel via Dongyang 東陽 and Chiyan 赤岩 in present-day Zhejiang Province before reaching Quxi 瞿溪 (Schipper 2002a, p. 7). Piracy is certainly a human activity, but needs to be facilitated by natural conditions such as the weather on the sea as well. This detail demonstrated Schipper's emerging focus on the agency of one's surrounding, the subtle interactions between individuals and their environment that shape historical contingencies. It is this circuitous route that allowed the child prodigy Zhou Ziliang 周子良 to meet Tao Hongjing, to

become Tao's disciple, to accompany him to Nanhuo, and eventually to return with him to Mount Mao 茅山. Second, Schipper explicitly stated in the conclusion that the association of Mount Huotong with the Shangqing tradition alone cannot fully account for its status as the first *dongtian*. What proves decisive is the materiality of the mountain and, more broadly, the natural world. As Schipper clarified: "the reason Mount Huotong became a *dongtian* is not simply because it contains a Huolin Cave, but because it produces various precious medicinal herbs. This abundance of rare herbs, in turn, stems from its uniquely favorable natural environment" (ibid., p. 8). Schipper's statements here very much echo the dual formation of Daoist mountains analyzed above. Using Miller's terminology, what is behind *dongtian fudi* is also the materiality that the mountain offers, which enables the locative imagination and allows the transfiguration that Daoism advocates and prescribes (Miller 2017, pp. 91–92).[21]

Here, it becomes evident that the *dongtian fudi* project represents an update and an evolution of Schipper's lifelong Durkheimian framework, which treated religion primarily as an avenue to understand a given group. In other words, prior to Daoist Ecology and *dongtian fudi*, what Schipper truly studied in Daoism were people and communities. The *dongtian fudi* project is the first explicit implementation of the notion that human society should not be abstracted from nature and that no such isolated society exists. Schipper discovered that each subject of study is, in fact, a nexus of relationships within the vast web of the "world"—where nature and society intertwine. Thus, he expands Marcel Mauss's concept of religion as a "total social phenomenon" into a far more expansive dimension. It is on this unprecedented scale, through the innate plurality that *dongtian fudi* provide, that Schipper sought to preserve a transhistorical, total vision of China.

5. Conclusions

This paper presented a detailed examination and contextualization of Schipper's work on the *dongtian fudi*. The methodology guiding Schipper's unfinished efforts on *dongtian fudi* represented Schipper's culmination of decades of Daoist scholarship and his extensive engagement with Western theoretical traditions. Amidst the ecological turn of the 1980s–90s, Schipper extensively engaged with Deep Ecology, and may have come to recognize the fundamental interwovenness of nature and society; that there exists no society that can be abstracted from nature for isolated analysis, just as there is no nature that remains unmediated by social discourse. Moreover, Schipper proposed an alternative definition of civilization: no longer as separation from nature, but as respect for and kinship with the natural world. In his ecological approach to Daoism and throughout the *dongtian fudi* enquiry, Schipper accorded particular significance to the mountain as both a cultural symbol of concentrated sacredness and a material site embedded with natural resources. For Schipper, the mountain represented a form of politics: it embodies the potential for resistance against both the agricultural economic base and its corresponding political–economic systems in agrarian societies. In other words, only in the mountains could truly autonomous individuals emerge. This persistent focus on mountains naturally followed from Schipper's longstanding intellectual commitment to examining localities, the counterpoint to central state power.

Only with the lens of locality can Schipper's "Beijing as a Holy City" be understood as the precursor to his *dongtian fudi* research. By demonstrating how even in Beijing, the ultimate concentration of central authority, one could identify the distinctive locality of the city itself, Schipper effectively argued that what truly permeates China is not state-projected discourses, but rather these everyday encounters and experiences of locality. The *dongtian fudi* project then became the practical implementation of this writing strategy. Through examining different *dongtian fudi* sites and how their discursive sacred layer endowed by

culture/society and their materialities variously intervene in local daily life, Schipper substantially expanded the scope of studies of localities.

In this sense, Schipper's new approach upgraded the Durkheim–Mauss sociological tradition. Humans are not merely social beings, but also natural beings, or, more precisely, humans are nature/society hybrids. Through the *dongtian fudi* project, Schipper hoped to give voices to concrete individuals situated in this hybridity. Simultaneously, the project represented a subtle revision of his Daoist model: Daoism no longer simply protected localities, but rather emerged as the complex interface between geography, geology, and human society proper.

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Notes

1 In fact, as Vincent Goossaert (2021) suggests, the official name for Schipper's study on dongtian fudi should be "Sanctuaries of Nature", and the foundation for this project is named Aishan 愛山 (loving mountains). The naming clearly attests to the role that mountains play in this project. Regarding the foundation, the official website is www.aishanfoundation.org (accessed on 17 April 2025). As I attempt to access it in 2025, it has ceased operation. During my visit to Peking University in November 2024, Prof. Cheng Lesong kindly revealed to me that Schipper originally intended to set up an office for the Aishan Foundation at Peking University.

2 Arguably, Schipper's conceptualizations of local societies may have received substantial influence from Calstres' formulations in *Society Against the State*. I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out this connection. For detailed readings, please see my discussions in Section 4.

3 For details, please see discussions in Section 4.

4 For the model itself, please also see my discussion in Section 4.

5 Arguably, "Beijing as a Holy City", especially in discussions of Mount Miaofeng, touches upon the notion of sacred geography, but the theme of *dongtian fudi* is never explicitly mentioned, nor addressed in detail.

6 The version I cite in this paper is from the edited volume of *Deep Ecology and World Religions: New Essays on Sacred Grounds*.

7 It should be noted that Miller's conception of Daoism here still seems to be only a "subjunctive vision of what Daoism *could* contribute to an ecologically sustainable world" (Meulenbeld 2024, p. 85).

8 Original in French: "un système de pratiques propres à un groupe, et que cette religion est ainsi l'expression de ce qui est ressenti comme étant la raison d'être même de ce groupe".

9 It should be noted that neither "ontology" nor "agency" used in this paper appears in Schipper's vocabulary. These wordings are my renderings after carefully examining Schipper's works. Similarly, Fava (2023) also uses the term "ontology" to unpack some of Schipper's readings and to understand Daoism in general. In fact, the second half of Fava's memoir is entitled "*De la pratique* à *la théroie: Le tournant ontologique*" ("From practice to theory: the ontological turn"). In this section, Fava suggested that Schipper, as in *the Taoist Body*, had already identified Chinese ontology as being of both analogism and animism in Philippe Descola's categories (Fava 2023, pp. 364, 405). Miller (2017, pp. 37–40), in his interpretations of Daoism, used the wording of agency to highlight the aspect of "transaction" of subjectivity in understanding *wuwei* (non-action).

10 I thank the anonymous reviewer for highlighting the conservative attitude in Schipper's conclusion.

11 I thank the anonymous reviewer for highlighting the notion of mountain gods in the Daoist tradition and referring to Chavannes as well. My statement here only wishes to emphasize that in the 1960 paper, the mountain seems to be clouded over by descriptions of the lively pilgrimages.

12 I thank the anonymous reviewer for such a beautiful clause on the connections between Daoist mountains and the divine bureaucracy.

13 For the enchantment of modern China, please consult Fava (2023) and Menheere (2020).

14 Schipper does not explain why he chose to read the mountain represented by the boshan lu as Mount Kunlun; Hung Wu (2024) in other places tended to read them as Mount Penglai 蓬萊山.

[15] This observation comes from my personal communication with Dr. Lennert Gesterkamp. I thank him for walking me through the correlation between the *boshan lu* and Daoist cosmology of heaven, earth, and water.

[16] My vocabulary of "symbolic" and "material" does not wish to reproduce the modern dichotomy of nature/culture into Daoist ontology, but to firmly emphasize that they are mutually dependent and that mountain politics is only possible when these two aspects are functioning together. I thank the anonymous reviewer for advising caution in the word choice.

[17] For Schipper's detailed discussion, please see the first chapter of *La Religion de la China*, "La tradition vivante".

[18] I thank the anonymous reviewer for making this connection.

[19] Note that Clastres' exemplification also involves the role of the prophets. He also admits that in the prophetic discourse "there may lie the seeds of the discourse of power" (Clastres 1987, p. 218). Clearly, Schipper does not wish to push his priests in this powerful direction; hence, I read Schipper's priests into Clastres' category of chiefs.

[20] Admittedly, the confirmation through divination may engender the reading that divine agencies (or Daoism) somehow constrain local societies. It may be true to some extent, but note that the power to nominate is still in the hands of local societies. In my personal observation of such methods of divination, there can always be a second chance to *validate* the choice of the candidate.

[21] Transfiguration denotes "a moment in the divinization or sacralization of the individual, a moment that can be understood as a shift in the identity of the religious practitioner"; locative imagination highlights that "it is only through the immediate, local context (meaning sites, lineages, and communities) that one has the possibility to engaging in transfigurative practice".

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