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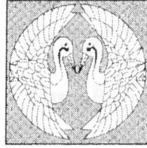
Front cover:

Portrait of the Georgian translators of “Kalila and Dimna”, king Vakhtang VI, and of the poet and scholar Saba Sulhan Orbeliani. Manuscript P 2 in the collection of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, fol. 3a, 22.0×19.0 cm.

Back cover:

Illustration to the story “Disservice”, the same manuscript, fol. 97a, 19.0×22.5 cm.

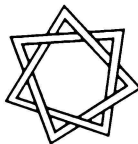
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BOOK REVIEWS

Botschaften an die Götter: religiöse Handschriften der Yao; Südchina, Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, hrsg. von Th. O. Höllman, M. Friedrich. München: Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, 1999, 96 pp., Ill. — *Ausstellungskataloge*, 71.

The book under review here is a catalogue of an exhibition of Yao manuscripts from the collection of the Bavarian State Library, which took place in Munich between November 4 and December 22, 1999. According to its compilers, the edition is somewhat of a compromise between a catalogue and a monograph. The Munich collection of Yao manuscripts — among the largest in the world — contains approximately one thousand manuscripts from various periods. The so-called “Yao project” has received separate financing for more than four years; this exhibition represented the first result of that work.

The Yao are a people who number more than two million and live compactly in the southern provinces of China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, Guangdong, Hunan), as well as in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar (Burma). After the dramatic political events which overtook Indochina in the twentieth century, a part of the Yao emigrated, primarily to the US, Canada, and France. According to Chinese sources, the ethnonym Yao has existed since the eleventh century. The Yao language is part of the Miao-Yao group of the Sino-Tibetan family, and is divided into three branches, although we still do not know when and why this division came about. One of the branches, the Mianjing, is itself divided into two: Yumian and Jingmen (we note that in accordance with Chinese tradition, the name of this group consists of elements from the names of its sub-groups). Manuscripts from the Yumian and Jingmen branch of Mianjing make up the basis of the Bavarian collection of Yao manuscripts.

The book consists of an extensive introductory section and an illustrated catalogue. The introductory part is composed of several sections, each of which was written by a participant in the project and treats a specific aspect of Yao culture.

The first of these sections is on the religion of the Yao. The Yao profess Daoism, which is relatively rare on the scale of an entire ethnos. We do not know how the Yao received and adopted this particular Chinese religion (we add that in the matter at hand one can speak of Daoism only as a religious teaching). Chinese sources indicate that the process took place primarily during the rule of the Ming dynasty (1368—1644). Various groups adopted this Chinese teaching in their own fashion; the Jingmen are considered very orthodox, while the Yumian espouse non-dogmatic Daoism strongly influenced by local beliefs. The Jingmen distinguish two categories of priests: *daogong* high priests and a lower order, the *shigong*. The Yumian recognise only the latter. The Yao pantheon is strictly hierarchical, in full accord with the bureaucratic structure of Chinese religions. Rituals are numerous as an inevitable consequence of the enormous number of divinities. Initiation and burial rituals and sacrifices are of special significance. The goal of all rituals is to ensure that a person occupies his proper place in the strict hierarchy at every stage of his earthly or otherworldly existence.

The next section treats Yao book culture. Books played an important role not only in religious, but also in everyday life: we know of children's textbooks, almanacs, genealogical records, collections of legends, publications on business. The Yao use Chinese writing; only recently has the younger generation of Yao in South-East Asia begun to copy manuscripts in Laotian or Thai writing, which indicates a weakened role of Chinese writing among the Yao who live outside the CPR.

Books are drawn up in accordance with Chinese tradition. Writing is from right to left and top to bottom. Chinese double folios are frequently employed, and we note a preference for expensive Chinese paper, although when necessary texts can be written even on simple packing paper. Ritual books belong to the person who actually carries out the ritual, and he is responsible for their maintenance.

In addition to Yumian and Jingmen manuscripts of primarily religious content, the Munich collection contains the

crowns of Daoist priests, paper masks, wooden seals, and decorated pieces of cloth. These objects were displayed at the exhibition and are reflected in the catalogue, where each is treated in a separate section. This information substantially broadens our understanding of Yao spiritual culture.

The catalogue itself presents 55 descriptions: a carefully selected colour photograph of a page from the manuscript which best conveys its distinguishing characteristics, and a detailed description of the manuscript in the following form:

- title (if one exists) in Chinese phonetic transcription, in Chinese writing, and German translation;
- time of writing;
- place of writing;
- information about owners;
- information about copyists;
- information on language — Jingmen or Yumian, the presence of Thai or Laotian bilinguals;
- presence of illustrations;
- number of pages;
- format;
- call number.

This is followed by a free-form description of the text in terms of form and content. Each description is signed by a participant in the project.

The lack of a Yao transcription is somewhat of a disappointment, as the texts appear entirely Chinese without it.

One should note the broad chronological sweep of the manuscripts: the earliest date to the 1720s, the majority to the nineteenth century, and also there are many undated manuscripts. It is valuable that old manuscripts are augmented by manuscripts from the twentieth century, from its beginning up to the 1970s. On the one hand, this reinforces the unbroken nature of the Yao literary tradition; on the other, it demonstrates the irrevocable nature of change: packing paper, inscriptions in ballpoint pen or magic marker, the presence of Laotian or Thai explanatory notes. The material objects — masks, crowns, and scarves — are from the beginning of the twentieth century. While they are formally not old, they are entirely traditional.

Drawings in the manuscripts are usually monochromatic and rarely show tints of another colour. They infrequently explain the content of the text; more often, they are typical Daoist talismans.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of the manuscripts are accompanied by information about owners and copyists, which is undoubtedly a consequence of the well-developed tradition of using personal seals, especially among Daoist

religious figures. A special article in the first part of the catalogue discusses these seals.

Manuscripts were selected for the catalogue in order to present the fullest possible sense of their contents.

Naturally, the overwhelming majority of manuscripts are connected with Daoism. One can enumerate texts of the Daoist canon, liturgy, many manuscripts on the performance of burial rituals, the exorcism of evil spirits, and healing. In essence, these are manuscripts that Daoist priest use when performing rituals. Added to this are various calendars and horoscopes, as well as objects of material culture — masks, crowns, scarves covered in magical signs. One also finds, however, collections with works of the Confucian classics. Among the more unusual manuscripts is a song book from the 1970s written on American packing paper (Cat. No. 2). Four publications give one a sense of special works of Yao literature: two (Cat. Nos. 11 and 12) recount the Chinese mythological story of Pan-gu and the creation of the world, linking these events with the history of the Yao clans themselves. We note that one of these texts was written in 1797, the other in 1955. Two other texts (Cat. Nos. 17 and 55) contain the purely Yao legend of King Ping, who inherited control over the Yao from Pan-gu. The entire story of the transfer of power and ascent of King Ping, which took place, according to tradition, in 1260, is presented in the form of documents and legal acts also drawn up in 1260. A separate chapter in the first part of the book deals with research on these “documents”. Both manuscripts are long, illustrated scrolls which present in detail the history of the Yao, closely interwoven with Chinese history. In the manuscript under catalogue number 55, a page is reproduced where we find the story of Sun Wu-kong and Zhu Ba-ze from the journey of the Tang monarch Xuanzang to India in search of *sūtras* and the story of the Song military commander Yue Fei and the Ming emperor Tai-zu. Clearly, the exhibition and catalogue do not represent the end goal of the project's participants. The written texts of the Yao should serve as the basis for a fundamental study of the Yao religion. Much work remains to be done on the classification and analysis of manuscripts (we remind readers that the catalogue presents only 55 examples of a thousand). The result should be a catalogue in the series *Verzeichnis der Orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland*, the publication of which we all eagerly await. For the texts, descriptions, and research presented in the exhibition catalogue are extraordinarily interesting, and the introduction of Yao religious manuscripts into scholarly circulation will be of value for scholars of religion, book historians, specialists on the culture of South-East Asia, and Sinologists.

T. Vinogradova