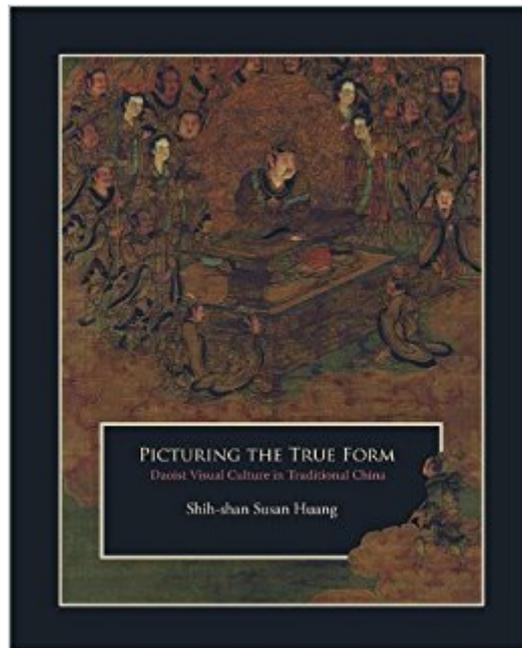


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Picturing The True Form: Daoist Visual Culture In Traditional China (Harvard East Asian Monographs)



Synopsis

Picturing the True Form investigates the long-neglected visual culture of Daoism, China's primary indigenous religion, from the tenth through the thirteenth centuries with references to both earlier and later times. In this richly illustrated book, Huang provides a comprehensive mapping of Daoist images in various media, including Dunhuang manuscripts, funerary artifacts, and paintings, as well as other charts, illustrations, and talismans preserved in the fifteenth-century Daoist Canon. True form (zhenxing), the key concept behind Daoist visuality, is not a static picture, but entails an active journey of "seeing" underlying and secret phenomena through a series of metamorphoses. This book's structure mirrors the two-part Daoist journey from inner to outer. Part I focuses on inner images associated with meditation and visualization practices for self-cultivation and longevity, while Part II investigates the visual and material dimensions of Daoist ritual. Interwoven through these discussions is the idea that the inner and outer mirror each other, and the boundary demarcating the two is fluent. Huang also reveals three central modes of Daoist symbolism--aniconic, immaterial, and ephemeral--and shows how Daoist image-making goes beyond the traditional dichotomy of text and image to incorporate writings in image design. It is these particular features that distinguish Daoist visual culture from its Buddhist counterpart.

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Customer Reviews

This book fills a great void in Western scholarship on Daoism. Daoist culture is in fact highly visual

but most treatments emphasize text with only limited inclusion of visual material, mostly diagrams. The catalogue of the superb exhibit of Daoist art at the Chicago Art Institute, is of great value but tends to emphasize the more elaborate art. Prof. Huang covers this as well but, uniquely, gives substantial attention to the simple visual material that must have been in wide use in the homes of those who could afford it. There are many reproductions of simple illustrations that illustrate widespread beliefs, for example, the internal worms that Daoist medical theory considered the eventual cause of death. Not pleasant to contemplate, but universal in the era before modern treatment of parasitical infestation. All sorts of fascinating visual material is well reproduced. Some of the curiosities included are; talismans of the thunder demons, medical mushrooms in rather fanciful shapes, scriptures in bird script, a turtle carrying a lucky scroll and many more. Compared to the grander temple art and ink painting scrolls which are more familiar outside of China, these humble illustrations give a sense of the daily concerns of ordinary people in traditional China. While I have emphasized the coverage of what might be considered vernacular art, there is much coverage of high art as well, with beautiful examples illustrated. This new work sheds light on important aspects of everyday belief in traditional China that are barely known to non-specialists. It is no exaggeration to say that this is essential reading for anyone with a serious interest in China. Highly recommended.

Quite simply, this is one of the most important books ever published about Chinese art--and I would venture to say, about Chinese civilization in general. Harvesting her own assiduous research and careful pondering, Ms. Huang has produced a text that is both well organized and comprehensive. In fact, it is encyclopedic. With hundreds of apt and clear illustrations, the production of the book is exemplary. For those whose acquaintance with Daoism is limited to the Daode jing, the almost luxuriant proliferation of Daoist deities and concepts in the later imperial era, this book's center of gravity, may seem strange. Yet it is an essential part of Chinese cultural history, showing much symbiosis with the more familiar Buddhist imagery, while remaining distinct. The imagery is also important for the history of Chinese medicine. Since the idea of the cosmic body--the union of the microcosm and the macrocosm--is central to later Daoism I missed a comparison with the Western visual tradition of melothesia. All the same, presented with this rich banquet of imagery, readers are free to make their own comparisons.

I really enjoy perusing this book for its wonderful color photographs as well as its detailed historical discussion of the variety of Daoist visual records.

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