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Henri Maspero's Studies of Religious Taoism and the Spirit of Chinese Aesthetics

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In international Sinology, the studies of religious Taoism in France stand out as a brilliant pearl. Henri Maspero is one of the key scholars in this field. His research not only inherits the philosophical thought of philosophical Taoism, as represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, but also develops an institutionalized religious form characterized by beliefs in immortals and practical disciplines. This reveals the evolutionary path of Taoism from philosophy to religion while highlighting its profound aesthetic dimension: On the one hand, through emphasizing themes such as "the practice of immortality" and "the eternity of life", it religiously and practically embodies the spirit of aesthetics of "creating life" (sheng sheng) in traditional Chinese culture; on the other hand, it offers a unique perspective for the cross-cultural interpretation of the spirit of Chinese aesthetics. Maspero's studies of religious Taoism particularly manifest theoretical elements of the spirit of Chinese aesthetics such as the "theory of form and spirit" (xing and shen theory) and the "cultivation-realm paradigm" (gongfu-jingjie paradigm). In view of this, engaging in dialogue with the spirit of Western aesthetics within the context of cross-cultural aesthetics can not only promote mutual enrichment and innovation between spirits of Chinese and European aesthetics but also open new paths for the construction and development of theory of contemporary aesthetics.

Keywords: Henri Maspero, religious Taoism, philosophical Taoism, the spirit of Chinese aesthetics

France has long been a key center for European Sinology, with the studies of religions constituting an indispensable and significant component of the French Sinological tradition. The formal establishment of the French Sinological academic tradition can be traced back to 1814, when the Collège de France founded Europe's first Sinological chair, titled "Chinese, Tartar, and Manchu Languages and Literature". The emergence of the studies of Chinese religions as a specialized field was marked by the establishment of the chair "Religions of the Far East and Indian America" at the École Pratique des Hautes Études (EPHE) in 1889. Founded in 1868, the EPHE is a key institution within France's elite education system, and its Religious Studies Section was created in 1886. The development of the studies of Chinese religions in France is closely tied to the chairs established within this section. In 1889, the first holder of the chair "Religions of the Far East and Indian America" was the renowned Orientalist Léon de Rosny (1837-1914). In 1907, the chair was split into two, and a new chair, "Religions of the Far East", was established. Its first occupant was Emmanuel Édouard Chavannes (1865-1918), revered in Western academia as the "mentor" of Chinese studies. In 1913, Chavannes's student Marcel Granet (1884-1940) succeeded him. After Granet's death in 1940, the chair of "Religions of the Far East" remained vacant for a time. In 1941, Édouard Mestre (1883-1950) was appointed to the newly created chair of "Religions

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of Indochina". Then, in 1943, the section established a new chair, "Chinese Religions", which can be seen as a continuation of the chair "Religions of the Far East", and it was held by Henri Maspero (1883-1945). However, Maspero tragically died the following year, leaving the chair vacant once again (Cao & Zheng, 2013, pp. 356-357).

In international Sinology, the studies of religious Taoism in France undoubtedly stand as a uniquely distinctive academic cornerstone. Their origins can be traced back to the early 18th century, when missionaries and Sinologists began translating and introducing classics of religious Taoism. However, the true establishment of this academic tradition began in the late 19th century, with the eminent Sinologist Chavannes as its founding figure. Chavannes' three disciples—Paul Eugène Pelliot (1878-1945), Maspero, and Granet—all made significant contributions to the studies of religious Taoism (Cao & Zheng, 2013, p. 377). French studies of religious Taoism pioneered the establishment of systematic research on religious Taoism within a modern academic framework, fundamentally transforming scholarly understanding of religious Taoism and elevating it to an internationally recognized independent discipline. Moreover, whether in terms of research themes, methodologies, or the size and influence of the scholarly community, French studies of religious Taoism have directly led the development of studies of religious Taoism in Europe, the Americas, and Japan. As a result, studies of religious Taoism have gradually come to stand alongside Dunhuang studies as a prominent and highly regarded field in international Sinology. Maspero is one of the most significant scholars in the field of studies of religious Taoism. As the first scholar in both French and international sinology to conduct a systematic and comprehensive study of religious Taoism using modern humanities methodologies, he established the paradigm for French studies of religious Taoism from the late 19th to the early 20th century and constructed a theoretical and methodological framework grounded in textual criticism, incorporating sociological perspectives and structural thinking. He was the first to apply the meticulous methods of Western philology to the studies of *Collected Taoist Scriptures*. By utilizing encyclopedic works such as *Wushang Biyao* and *Sandong Zhunang*, he established a chronological framework for dating Taoist scriptures and proposed the concept of "scriptural clusters" (jingqun) to reveal the internal knowledge structures of Taoist texts and the organizational logic of Taoist communities. His analytical approach implicitly anticipated the hierarchical network thinking of later structuralism. At the same time, deeply influenced by Durkheim's sociological tradition, he interpreted the evolution from pre-Qin religion to religious Taoism from a sociogenetic perspective, treating the sacralization of the "human-land" relationship and its transformation amid major social upheavals as the key to understanding the origins of religious Taoism. Despite the profound theoretical implications of his work, Maspero consistently adhered to a methodology rooted in concrete texts and historical facts, opposing any form of a priori theorization. This approach reflects the distinctive character of French studies of religious Taoism, which emphasizes empirical rigor and the dynamic emergence of research problems, thereby bequeathing to later generations a scholarly tradition that integrates empirical evidence with theoretical reflection (Hu, 2025, pp. 134-137).

An Analysis of the Distinction Between Philosophical Taoism and Religious Taoism

In academic circles, scholars often conflate the three concepts of "philosophical Taoism" (Daojia), "religious Taoism" (Daojiao), and "Daoxue" (often translated as Neo-Confucianism), leading to numerous misunderstandings. Therefore, it is necessary to clearly define and distinguish among them. "Philosophical Taoism" belongs to the category of philosophy and is a school of thought founded by Laozi in the pre-Qin period. "Religious Taoism", on the other hand, falls under the category of religion. As the name of a religion, it originated in the late Eastern

Han Dynasty, specifically with the "Taiping Dao" (Way of Great Peace) founded by Zhang Jiao during the reign of Emperor Ling, and the "Wudou Mi Dao" (Way of the Five Pecks of Rice) founded by Zhang Ling during the reign of Emperor Shun. A relatively consensus view in academia holds that these two early Taoist schools represent the germinal forms of religious Taoism, whereas a fully organized religious community with a complete doctrinal system gradually took shape from the Han, Wei, and Western Jin and Eastern Jin Dynasties through the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Religious Taoism regards Laozi, the founder of Philosophical Taoism, as its patriarch, takes *Laozi* (also known as the *Tao Te Ching*) as the foundational scripture for establishing its teachings, and also venerates *Zhuangzi* as a central classic, requiring its adherents to study and recite it. Its main doctrines include: honoring the Tao (also known as Dao or the Way) and valuing virtue; cherishing life and valuing harmony; embracing simplicity and guarding authenticity; achieving clarity and stillness through non-action; practicing compassion, frugality, and non-contention; believing in the retribution of good and evil; and pursuing the ideal of becoming an immortal through cultivation or achieving divinity through meritorious deeds. From the perspective of intellectual origins, the content of religious Taoism is highly complex. Not only is it closely related to philosophical Taoism, but it also integrates elements from Confucianism, the school of Immortals (Fangxian), the Yin-Yang School, the School of Logicians (Mojia), and other Hundred Schools of Thought, as well as being connected to various esoteric practices (fangshu) prevalent during the Han Dynasties. Furthermore, during its development, religious Taoism mutually influenced and intermingled with Buddhism. Later, religious Taoism gradually constructed a pantheon centered on the "Three Pure Ones" (Sanqing), with the highest deities being the Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning (Yuqing, or Jade Clarity), the Celestial Worthy of Numinous Treasure (Shangqing, or Supreme Clarity), and the Celestial Worthy of the Way and Its Virtue (Taiqing, or Great Clarity, i.e., the Supreme Elder Lord, Taishang Laojun). It is worth noting that the very concept of the "Three Teachings and Nine Schools" (Sanjiao Jiuliu) distinguishes religious Taoism from philosophical Taoism: Religious Taoism is one of the "Three Teachings" (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Religious Taoism), whereas Philosophical Taoism is one of the "Nine Schools" (Confucianism, Philosophical Taoism, the Yin-Yang School, Legalism, the School of Logicians, Mohism, the School of Diplomacy, Eclecticism, and the School of Agriculture). "Daoxue" is an important academic school of thought that emerged in Chinese philosophy during the Song Dynasty, sometimes specifically referring to the Neo-Confucian idealist philosophy of the Song and Ming Dynasties (lixue). The term "Daoxue" officially appears in the *History of the Song Dynasty: Biographies of Daoxue*. Daoxue has absorbed certain concepts from philosophical Taoism and drawn on some theoretical elements from religious Taoism. In summary, philosophical Taoism, religious Taoism, and Daoxue each possess their unique systems of thought, theoretical propositions, and cultural orientations. They are interrelated yet distinctly different, collectively constituting the rich and complex cultural lineage of the "Tao" within traditional Chinese culture.

Turning the perspective to Western Sinology, before 1950, most Western sinologists believed that philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism were two essentially incompatible things. Their main argument was that philosophical Taoism regards death as a natural product and a return to the "Tao", whereas religious Taoism explicitly resists death and pursues immortality through practices such as alchemy and talismanic rituals. Furthermore, the two were considered fundamentally different in nature: Philosophical Taoism was seen as rational, meditative, and non-mystical, while religious Taoism was characterized as magical, devotional, esoteric, and mystical. However, since 1950, under the influence of the works of French scholars Maspero and his disciples, an increasing number of Western sinologists have begun to view philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism as

belonging to a common tradition. It should be particularly noted that European and American Sinologists also tend to distinguish religious Taoism from other indigenous Chinese folk beliefs.

Maspero believes that religious Taoism is a religion of liberation aimed at achieving individual immortality. However, since philosophical Taoism also exhibits a tendency toward mystical experience and the pursuit of immortality, Maspero argues that philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism should not be sharply separated. Therefore, in his posthumous work *Religious Taoism: A Collection of Essays on Chinese Religion and History*, he has referred to what is commonly called "religious Taoism" as "the religious aspect of philosophical Taoism". This terminological choice reflects his emphasis on the intrinsic continuity between the two. Specifically, Maspero has stressed that philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism are not as distinct as commonly assumed, but rather share a common origin in a very ancient religious tradition. He has regarded religious Taoism of the Six Dynasties period as the focal point in the history of religious Taoism, referring to religious Taoism of this period and earlier as "ancient religious Taoism". He has defined "ancient religious Taoism" as "a religion aimed at achieving longevity and immortality, as well as individual liberation". Its practices encompassed techniques for cultivating both the body and the spirit, emphasized the accumulation of good deeds and virtues, and progressed from conscious mental concentration to an unconscious state of mystical union with the Tao. Maspero has believed that from the Tang Dynasty onward to the modern era, religious Taoism has undergone a long process of decline. This was because Taoist priests increasingly withdrew into monasteries, losing their social influence among the common people, while popular Taoist priests became increasingly focused on purely ritualistic practices, leading to the formalization of religious observance. He has referred to religious Taoism that absorbed various techniques and ritual elements after the Tang Dynasty as "popular religious Taoism" or "modern popular religion", distinguishing it from "ancient religious Taoism" with its different characteristics. In light of this, Maspero has argued that despite the temporal distance between the philosophical thought of Laozi and Zhuangzi (philosophical Taoism) and ancient religious Taoism, there is a fundamental continuity between them in both theory and practice, and that no essential difference exists between the two. Maspero has opposed any simplistic opposition between philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism—a position that received support from Joseph Needham, and Kristofer Schipper at the First International Conference on Taoism.

Maspero does not strictly distinguish between "philosophical Taoism" and "religious Taoism" in his works. On one hand, this is because the French term "Taoïsme" itself encompasses both meanings; on the other hand, it reflects his unique understanding of the formation process of religious Taoism. In the essay "Religious Taoism in the Age of Zhuangzi", included in *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, Maspero has used two key terms: "le Taoïsme" and "la religion Taoïste". These two terms imply two core issues: firstly, the relationship between philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism, as already discussed above; and secondly, the historical starting point and periodization of the history of religious Taoism. In fact, early 20th-century Western sinology generally revered the philosophy of the Tao (la philosophie Taoïste, "philosophical Taoism") represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, while dismissing the later religious tradition of the Tao (la religion Taoïste, "religious Taoism") as superstition or "Neo-Taoism", thereby severing the connection between the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi and religious Taoism. Maspero has broken away from the Western criteria for evaluating religion, which are modeled on Christianity, and has proposed that religious Taoism is "the religion of the Tao", encompassing both the philosophical thought and the religious practices related to the Tao. He has particularly emphasized that Laozi and Zhuangzi from the pre-Qin period are not only philosophers but also "great masters of ancient mysticism", and that their thought has already contained cultivation methods similar to those found in later religious Taoism.

Therefore, he has directly applied the term "la religion Taoïste" to describe the intellectual and practical landscape of the pre-Qin period, arguing that religious Taoism had already emerged in the pre-Qin era, and that "the philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi is an inseparable component of religious Taoism" (Hu, 2021, p. 106). This perspective challenges the dominant dichotomy in Chinese academia that views philosophical Taoism as philosophy and religious Taoism as religion. Although it tends to overemphasize mysticism at the expense of philosophical reasoning, it also reveals the inherent transcendental dimension of philosophical Taoist thought, thereby explaining why *Laozi* has been interpreted by both philosophical and religious traditions. Maspero does not simply equate philosophical Taoism with religious Taoism. He has used the term "l'école taoïste" (the school of philosophical Taoism) to refer to the philosophical system of Laozi and Zhuangzi, noting that each chapter of *Laozi* is extremely short, making it difficult to extract a passage that represents the doctrines of Laozi's school, whereas *Zhuangzi* is more logically systematic (Maspero, 1965, p. 408). He has argued that "this school plays an important role in the religious life of the Han dynasty" (Maspero, 1965, p. 402), and that its doctrines, unlike the purely intellectual knowledge of Confucianism or Mohism, are founded on the practice of mystical life (Maspero, 1965, p. 408). Maspero has believed that the formation of religious Taoism results from the fusion of three elements: philosophical Taoism (transformed through the Huang-Lao tradition of the Han Dynasty), the traditions of Fangxiandao (immortal-seeking alchemists) and the wu-xi tradition, and the stimulus of Buddhist institutions (such as the adoption of Buddhist methods for compiling the Taoist canon). This perspective suggests that religious Taoism is not a natural continuation of philosophical Taoist thought, but rather underwent a complex process of "instrumental utilization" and "selective reconstruction" over the course of history. For example, concepts such as "fasting of the mind" (xinzhai) in *Zhuangzi* are developed into religious techniques within religious Taoism (such as the practice of absorbing vital energy, fuqi shu), illustrating a transition from philosophical speculation to religious practices. Meanwhile, the theory of cosmic generation (daosheng lun) provided religious Taoism with a cosmological foundation.

On the whole, Maspero's position reveals a dialectical process of development: On the one hand, it exhibits discontinuity, in that religious Taoism achieves a religious breakthrough by incorporating non-philosophical Taoist elements such as ritual techniques and shamanic traditions; on the other hand, it shows continuity, in that philosophical Taoism provides the legitimacy and conceptual framework for this breakthrough. Implicitly, he presents a three-stage view of development: Pre-Qin philosophical Taoism represents the stage of philosophical speculation; Han Dynasty Huang-Lao thought serves as a transitional form; and from the Six Dynasties onward, an institutionalized religious system has gradually taken shape. This reflects a creative interpretation of the Chinese intellectual tradition by Western scholars, and also reveals the latent religious dimension within philosophical Taoism itself. Although his interpretation of philosophical Taoism as a form of "mysticism" risks oversimplifying its philosophical complexity, it keenly captures the transcendent and unconventional features of Taoist thought, as well as their intrinsic connection to the religious Taoist experience of the "subtle unity of body and spirit", thereby offering an illuminating explanatory path for understanding the historical formation of religious Taoism.

Maspero: His Life and Representative Works

Maspero is an outstanding scholar in the field of French Sinology, renowned for his exceptional academic contributions and hailed as "the figure of ancient China". His representative work, *La Chine Antique* (1927), has been profoundly influential and widely admired. Maspero adopted the Chinese name "马伯乐" (Ma Bole) by

phonetically translating his surname "Ma" into the character "马" and creatively incorporating "伯乐" (Bole), inspired by the allusion of "Bole appraising horses". He grew up in an academic family with a strong affinity for Eastern cultures. By secondary school, he had already established a foundational understanding of chronology and cartography and developed an interest in the languages of the Far East and the ethnology of ancient peoples. His father, Gaston Maspero, was a renowned archaeologist and Egyptologist, as well as a founder of the French Institute of Cairo. His elder half-brother, Georges Maspero, served as a government official in French Indochina and engaged in Far Eastern studies. His uncle, Paul Henri Benjamin Balluet d'Estournelles de Constant, graduated from the Oriental Languages School of France and had a long diplomatic career, representing France in dealings with the Ottoman Empire, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and Tunisia, among others. In the summer of 1902, Maspero graduated from the Faculty of Arts at the Sorbonne and, following his father's advice, traveled to Egypt to prepare a thesis for the advanced diploma in History and Geography. Utilizing locally available papyrus materials, he completed his thesis, "Egyptian Finance Under the Ramessides", and passed the diploma examination in 1904. However, he did not pursue further studies in Egyptology, instead deciding to turn to the study of Chinese. In the autumn of the same year, Maspero enrolled in the Oriental Languages School to systematically study the Chinese language. Over the next three years, in addition to solidifying his linguistic foundation, he continuously participated in courses and seminars conducted by scholars such as Cordier, Chavannes, and Lévi at the Oriental Languages School, the Collège de France, and the École Pratique des Hautes Études. He systematically studied Chinese history, geography, Sinological methods, and Buddhist knowledge, laying a solid foundation for his future engagement in Chinese Studies.

Maspero visited China twice, in 1908 and 1914. During his first visit in November 1908, he traveled to Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Hangzhou, returning to Hanoi via Hong Kong in May of the following year. On this trip, he closely observed Chinese folk customs and Buddhist religious practices, and witnessed the funeral of Emperor Guangxu—experiences that profoundly shaped his later research on Chinese popular religion. He also acquired ancient Chinese texts, including collectanea and local gazetteers, for the École française d'Extrême-Orient. He returned to China in May 1914, shifting his focus to archaeological fieldwork. He planned to survey Hangzhou, Shaoxing, Yuyao, Ningbo, Taizhou, and Tiantai in eastern Zhejiang, and then proceed via Huzhou and Jiaxing to Nanjing. However, the outbreak of World War I cut short his work in Zhejiang. During this survey, he photographed all remaining relics such as reliquaries, sculptures, and bas-reliefs. For the numerous inscriptions, he followed the model of Ruan Yuan's *Records of Inscriptions on Metal and Stone in the Two Zhejiang Regions* (*Liangzhe Jinshizhi*), selecting rubbings based on the Yuan Dynasty as a dividing line: After the Yuan, only exceptional examples were taken; before the Yuan, priority was given to materials related to surviving relics, classical texts, or Buddhist sutra engravings. These materials hold significant value in terms of content, dating, and calligraphy (Xie, 2025, pp. 37-39).

In 1911, Maspero was appointed a professor at the École française d'Extrême-Orient. Following the death of Chavannes, who held the Chair of Chinese Studies at the Collège de France, in 1918, Maspero returned from Hanoi to Paris the following year to succeed his former teacher. As a full-time researcher and university professor, he continues to lead the development of French sinology. Maspero is renowned for his encyclopedic knowledge, with scholarly interests spanning historical linguistics, ancient astronomy, pre-Qin cultural history, the geography of the Tang Dynasty's Southern Yue region, philosophical Taoism, religious Taoism, and popular beliefs. He not only extensively engages with the work of sinologists around the world but also pays close attention to the research of modern Chinese scholars, such as Guo Moruo's studies of oracle bone inscriptions. Although

Maspero's erudition is vast, he has particular focal points, with the study of religious Taoism being the most prominent. He is widely recognized as the founder of professional studies of religious Taoism in the West, making foundational contributions to the interpretation of its doctrines, the analysis of its rituals, and the organization of its texts. When he enters this field, it is virtually uncharted academic territory. Before him, only Chavannes has produced the first systematic study of Taoist rituals. Although Pelliot keenly recognizes the importance of Taoist studies, brings back numerous relevant manuscripts from Dunhuang, and scatters incisive textual analyses throughout many of his papers, countless unresolved questions remained. Granet, despite frequently expounding the profound mysteries of Taoism in his lectures at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, rarely commits them to writing (Maspero, 1971, p. 3). Among them, what Maspero is most renowned for is his exploration of the history of religious Taoism, particularly the interactions between religious Buddhism and Taoism. At the Collège de France, he has taught a course titled "The Origins of Religious Taoism",[1] with a focus on analyzing the theory of "the Conversion of the Barbarians by Laozi" (Laozi Huahu). He points out that this narrative is essentially a strategic construction by religious Taoists seeking to establish a connection between Laozi and the Buddha, thereby using religious Buddhism as a means to promote the Tao. This insight runs through his entire research on religious Taoism, yet it has received insufficient attention to this day. In fact, it was only after 1930 that his academic interests gradually shifted toward the study of religion, particularly the study of Chinese religious Taoism. In this regard, his scholarly achievements can be said to have created a new academic field, even though most of his works in this area were published only after his death (Shaughnessy, 2017, p. 461). Indeed, it was not until the late 1920s that Maspero fully devoted himself to the study of religious Taoism, and his accomplishments represent a pioneering breakthrough in the studies of *Collected Taoist Scriptures* in Western academia.

On March 17, 1945, shortly before the end of the European theater of World War II, Maspero passed away in the Buchenwald concentration camp in Nazi Germany, having suffered from prolonged forced labor that led to severe exhaustion and illness. Maspero's posthumous manuscripts were later compiled by his student and colleague Demiéville and published in three volumes under the title *Mélanges Posthumes sur les Religions et l'Histoire de la Chine* (1950). The second volume, entitled *Le Taoïsme* (religious Taoism), includes Maspero's lectures delivered during his lifetime as well as some unpublished manuscripts written during the war. In 1971,

[1] The courses taught by Maspero are as follows:
1921-1922: Les origines de la religion taoïque (The origins of religious Taoism);
1927-1928: Quelques aspects du taoïsme des premiers siècles de notre ère (Some aspects of religious Taoism in the early centuries of the common era);
1933-1934: Le taoïsme au VI siècle de notre ère d'après un pamphlet anti-taoïste, le *Siao tao louen* (Taoism in the sixth century CE: Based on an anti-Taoist pamphlet, *Xiaodao Lun*);
1934-1935: Le taoïsme dans les pamphlets bouddhiques du VI siècle, suite de la traduction du *Siao tao louen* (Religious Taoism in sixth-century Buddhist pamphlets, with a continuation of the translation of *Xiaodao Lun*);
1935-1936: Le taoïsme dans les pamphlets bouddhiques du VI et du VII siècle (Taoism in sixth- and seventh-century Buddhist pamphlets);
1937-1938: Histoire du bouddhisme dans ses rapports avec le taoïsme avant les Tang (History of religious Buddhism in its relationship with Taoism before the Tang Dynasty);
1938-1939: Querelles entre taoïstes et bouddhistes en Chine avant les Tang (Controversies between Taoists and Buddhists in China before the Tang Dynasty);
1940-1941: Taoïsme et bouddhisme avant les Tang (Religious Taoism and Buddhism before the Tang Dynasty);
1942-1943: Le rôle respectif de l'abstention des céréales, des régimes diététiques, de la nourriture de souffles, de l'alchimie et de la méditation pour la recherche du salut dans le taoïsme antérieur aux Song (The respective roles of grain abstinence, dietary regimens, breath nutrition, alchemy, and meditation in the pursuit of salvation in religious Taoism before the Song Dynasty);
1943-1944: L'organisation et le culte de l'église taoïste jusqu'aux Tang (The organization and cult of the Taoist church until the Tang Dynasty).

this second volume was republished separately under the title *Le Taoïsme et les Religions Chinoises* (Religious Taoism and Chinese Religions). In 1947, Demiéville also wrote a lengthy memorial article, "Henri Maspero et l'avenir des Études Chinoises" ("Henri Maspero and the Future of Chinese Studies"), to express his remembrance. Demiéville has a deep understanding of Maspero and, together with him, devotes himself to Chinese studies. Therefore, this article is not only of great value for understanding Maspero's academic contributions but also carries profound significance for the future development of overseas Chinese studies. At the time, the French academic community published a large number of articles in memory of Maspero, which were later collected and published as *Hommage à Henri Maspero* (1984) in his honor. Subsequently, Chinese scholar Li Wei translated Demiéville's memorial article into Chinese, which was published on May 3, 1948, in *Ta Kung Pao* in Tianjin, introducing the most comprehensive bibliography of Maspero's works to Chinese academia for the first time. In 2014, *A Selection of Maspero's Sinological Works*, translated by Xian Xiaodi and other Chinese scholars, was published by Zhonghua Book Company. In 2019, Hu Rui's translation of *Maspero's Academic Works on Religious Taoism* was published by Religious Culture Publishing House.

Maspero's views on the study of religious Taoism have been inherited by later French Sinologists and continue to have a profound influence to this day. His research on religious Taoism is primarily carried forward and developed by his student Maxime Kaltenmark (1910-2002). Between 1949 and 1953, Kaltenmark worked at the Sino-French Research Center in Beijing, where he immersed himself in Chinese culture and folk customs. In 1953, he published the French work *Le Lie-sien Tchouan* (*Annotated Translation of the Liexian Zhuan*), which is the earliest existing Western-language annotated translation of *Liexian Zhuan*, an important hagiography of religious Taoism. In 1957, Kaltenmark was appointed as the chair of the "Chinese Religions" seminar in the Fifth Section of the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris, where he lectured on the history of religious Taoist thought. In 1965, he published *Lao Tseu et le Taoïsme* (*Laozi and Taoism*), a work later translated into English and German, which has become a key introductory text in the fields of philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism. In addition, Kaltenmark authors numerous other works related to religious Taoism, including the *Lingbao Five Talismans* and the *Thought of the Taiping Jing*.

The Spirit of Chinese Aesthetics From the Perspective of Maspero's Studies on Religious Taoism

The term "Tao" represents the "highest belief, core doctrinal principle, supreme category of religious philosophy, and the highest category of aesthetics of religious Taoism" (Pan, 1995, p. 12). The "Tao" in religious Taoism is no longer merely the abstract and conceptual existence depicted by Laozi and Zhuangzi, but has been concretely transformed into a practical pursuit of the immortal ideal. Maspero's studies of religious Taoism inherit the philosophical Taoism represented by Laozi and Zhuangzi, while also developing an institutionalized religious form characterized by beliefs in immortality and religious practices. In this process of transformation, the originally abstract and elusive "Tao" has gradually become concretized and mystified, turning into the central object of faith and practices. Religious Taoism regards *Zhuangzi* as an important scripture and reverently titles it *True Scripture of Southern Florescence*. Within it, certain theological concepts and cultivation theories of religious Taoism have been inspired to some extent by Zhuangist thought. For example, the construction of its highest deity draws on Zhuangzi's metaphysical interpretation of the Tao, while the theoretical basis for certain ascetic practices can be traced back to cultivation concepts found in *Zhuangzi*. Thus, *Zhuangzi* holds profound influence within the doctrinal system of religious Taoism. Maspero particularly points out that "the characteristic

of religious Taoism is the quest for a mystical union that can be achieved without the need for complicated rituals" (Maspero, 2007, p. 3). This pursuit of union with the eternal "Tao" is essentially a "direct path" that reaches the ultimate reality through embodied practice. It enables the practitioner to transcend finite existence and realize the religious ideals of "longevity and enduring vision" and "ascending in broad daylight as an immortal". This ideal not only embodies a profound concern for life and the philosophy of "creating life"—as expressed in *The Book of Changes*: "The great virtue of heaven and earth is called life"—but also reflects a respect for the laws of nature. It advocates that "all things act according to their own Tao", emphasizing that every being in the universe should follow its own time, find its proper place, and realize its inherent nature, as stated in the *Scripture of the Hidden Talisman*: "Observe the Tao of heaven, and follow its actions". In this context, the religious practices of religious Taoism may also be viewed as the unfolding of an aesthetic ideal. For instance, the creative concept of the Tang Dynasty painter Zhang Zao—"taking nature as one's master, finding the source in one's own heart"—may have been shaped by the philosophical Taoist idea of "the Tao following nature", while also seemingly integrating the religious Taoist holistic approach to body, nature, and the cosmos. Together, these reflect an aesthetic tendency toward a symbiotic resonance between the self and the universe. Thus, Maspero's studies of religious Taoism not only reveal the evolutionary path from philosophical Taoism to religious Taoism but also highlight its profound aesthetic dimension. On the one hand, by emphasizing themes such as "immortal practices" and "eternal life", it ritualizes and actualizes the spirit of aesthetics of "creating life" in traditional Chinese culture. On the other hand, it offers a unique perspective for the cross-cultural interpretation of the spirit of Chinese aesthetics, where faith, practices, and aesthetics intertwine and interpenetrate, together constructing a complete system that is both transcendent and grounded in real life.

In his speech at the *Symposium on Literary and Art Work* on October 15, 2014, President Xi Jinping has proposed the important proposition of aesthetics of "the spirit of Chinese aesthetics". He defines "the spirit of Chinese aesthetics" as follows:

> Chinese aesthetics emphasizes conveying one's aspirations through objects and embedding reason within emotion; it emphases brevity and conciseness with disciplined restraint; it emphases the unity of form and spirit and the profundity of artistic conception; and it highlights the integration of knowledge, emotion, will, and action. (Xi, 2015, p. 29)

The "three 'emphases' and one 'integration'" here constitute "the most precise articulation of the spirit of Chinese aesthetics", and "these three 'emphases' capture the core essence of the spirit of Chinese aesthetics with a profound internal logical connection" (Zhang, 2016, p. 30). Based on President Xi Jinping's working definition of "the spirit of Chinese aesthetics", we can theoretically distill the relevant core concepts as follows: "conveying one's aspirations through objects" can be summarized as the "theory of aspiration-expression"; "embedding reason within emotion" can be interpreted as the "theory of emotion-reason relationship"; "brevity and conciseness" can be summarized as the "theory of language-meaning relationship"; "the unity of form and spirit" can be formulated as the "theory of form and spirit"; "the profundity of artistic conception" can be elevated to the "theory of artistic conception"; and "the integration of knowledge, emotion, will, and action" can be further refined into the "theory of emotion-will relationship" and the "theory of cultivation-realm". In Maspero's studies of religious Taoism, the theoretical aspects of the "theory of form and spirit" and the "theory of cultivation-realm" are particularly embodied. The following sections will provide a detailed analysis of these aspects.

The *Huainanzi* states in the chapter "Precepts on the Spirit": "The spirit is received from Heaven, while the physical form is endowed by Earth". This statement emphasizes that the union of form and spirit gives rise to a

human being. In other words, "form" and "spirit" are two distinct types of existence that together constitute a person, each with its own independent origin and characteristics. This view differs from the binary opposition of flesh and soul in Western intellectual traditions. The spirit originates from Heaven, and the form from Earth; thus, the status and value of the former are naturally regarded as higher than those of the latter, implying a value judgment that "the spirit is nobler than the form".

> "The Tao of Heaven and Earth is vast and expansive, yet it still regulates its radiance and cherishes its spirit. How then could human eyes and ears endure prolonged toil without rest?—When the spirit is abundant and the vital energy does not scatter, there is order; with order comes balance; with balance comes penetration; with penetration comes spiritual efficacy. Then, in seeing, nothing is unseen; in hearing, nothing is unheard; in acting, nothing is unaccomplished. Thus, sorrows and troubles cannot enter, and evil influences cannot attack. (*Huainanzi*, "Precepts on the Spirit")

This passage reflects the cultivation practices of philosophical Taoism, emphasizing the "refinement of both form and spirit" in both a physical and spiritual sense, and pursuing balance and harmony between them.

Maspero believes that the adept must first achieve the transformation of the physical body through "nourishing the form" (yangxing), and then strengthen the foundation and cultivate the vital essence through "nourishing the spirit" (yangshen), in order to make the physical body eternal. To this end, they must diligently engage in various practices. These practices fall into two distinct categories of techniques. On the material level, "nourishing the form" consists of eliminating the causes of decay of the material body, and, through the ingestion of elixirs and the circulation of breath (xingqi), condensing within the body an immortal embryo; this embryo gradually grows, and when fully developed, it transforms the coarse mortal body into a light, subtle, and immortal body. On the spiritual level, "nourishing the spirit" aims to strengthen the unity of the personality and enhance its control over the various spirits dwelling within the body. Through techniques of concentration and meditation, it ensures the permanent abode within the body of the deities, vital souls (hun), and corporeal souls (po) that are essential for sustaining life. The former strengthens the material body as the vehicle of life; the latter perpetuates life itself by consolidating all the supernatural beings residing within the body. Maspero continues his discussion: "nourishing the form" can only prolong the physical body, but the spirits dwelling in the body constantly wish to depart. Once they leave, the person dies. If one cannot retain them within the body, even the most precious elixirs and secret recipes may prove futile. The methods of "nourishing the spirit" primarily involve inner visualization (neishi), establishing contact with the spirits inside the body, and ultimately retaining them there. This is a necessary condition for achieving longevity, and most adepts of religious Taoism stop at this stage. But this is only the elementary level. The higher adept must transcend this stage and attain the mysterious realm of union with the Tao—not only making the physical body immortal but also merging with the great Tao itself. This is the highest goal of the adept's practices in religious Taoism (Maspero, 2010, pp. 44-45). Maspero quotes a passage from Sima Chengzhen's *Zuowang Lun* (*On Sitting in Forgetfulness*), section "Attaining the Tao":

The Tao possesses supreme power, transforming both body and spirit. When the body accords with the Tao, it becomes one with the spirit. The unity of body and spirit is called the "spiritual being" (shenren). The spiritual nature is empty and harmonious, and the body, being identical with it, knows no decay or extinction. Thus there is neither death nor birth. When hidden, the body is like the spirit; when manifest, the spirit is like the body. Hence one may tread on water and fire without harm, stand in sunlight without casting a shadow. Existence and disappearance are within one's control; one can go in and out without hindrance. Though the body is a coarse and dross substance, it still attains such ethereal wonder—how much more so when spiritual wisdom deepens and extends further.

Maspero cites this passage to illustrate that the Tao, as a fundamental transcendental power, can completely transform both the physical form and the spirit of a person, enabling them to reach a state where form and spirit are unified and merged with the ethereal and empty Taoic body. This unity transcends the subject beyond the dualism of life and death, thereby attaining absolute freedom, impervious to water and fire, and autonomous in matters of existence and extinction. Ultimately, even the body as a material vehicle can become ethereal and sublime, while the spiritual intellect reaches even greater infinity. This embodies the ultimate ideal of "attaining truth through the body" within the concept of form and spirit in religious Taoism—that is, achieving a state of unity with the Tao described as "nourishing and refining over time, transforming matter into spirit, refining spirit to subtlety, and becoming one with the Tao; dispersing the single body into myriad dharmas, and merging myriad dharmas into one body". In this process, "form" and "spirit" are often connected and interact through the medium of "Qi" (vital energy). Qi is the energy that fills life and bridges form and spirit. This model is continuous, dynamic, and holistic. As Ye Lang states in his essay "On the Spirit of Chinese Aesthetics", "the spirit of Chinese aesthetics is not a fixed, static entity, but a dynamic and ever-evolving collective" (Ye, 2025, p. 73). This perspective resonates with the theory of Qi in the transformation of form and spirit within religious Taoism, further highlighting its fluid and integrative characteristics in both philosophical and aesthetic senses.

As is well known, "realm is a person's attitude toward life. It encompasses one's emotions, desires, aspirations, interests, longings, and pursuits, representing the entirety of one's spiritual world, condensed from their past, present, and future" (Ye, 2025, p. 73). In Maspero's studies of religious Taoism, the elevation of spiritual attainment is not only concerned with transcendence on the mental plane but is also intimately linked to concrete moral practice and physical cultivation, revealing a unique path of self-cultivation that integrates ethics, inner nature, pneumatology, and cosmology. In his book *Taoism and Chinese Religion*, Maspero points out that the biographies of eminent Taoists demonstrate that the pursuit of immortality typically begins with the performance of good deeds. For instance, both the *Book of the Later Han* and the *Yu Qian Classic* emphasize that Taoist practitioners accumulate the karmic conditions for immortality through meritorious acts such as helping and saving others. This concept reflects the notion of "achieving divinity through merit and virtue" in religious Taoist cultivation—namely, that religious moral practices serve as the foundation for attaining immortality (Maspero, 2010, p. 45). It should be noted that religious Taoism does not attempt to defy the natural laws of life; rather, its ideological core is rooted in a profound awareness of the finitude of life. It is a practice that, on the premise of acknowledging that the "Tao follows nature" (Dao fa ziran), actively employs cultivation techniques to optimize and extend life, thereby fully manifesting human subjective initiative. Zhuangzi advocates the concept of "regarding life and death as equal" (qi sheng si), not to erase the difference between life and death, but to view them as part of the great process of transformation, just like the four seasons in sequence. As "Knowledge Rambling in the North" in *Zhuangzi* says: "Life is the companion of death, and death is the beginning of life". In "The Great and Venerable Teacher", Zhuangzi clearly states that "life and death are fated, just as the constant alternation of night and day is natural. That over which people have no control is the nature of things". One can only face death with composure, achieving a state of "being-toward-death" (xiang si er sheng). This stance does not prevent Zhuangzi from also valuing "nourishing the body" and "preserving the physical form". In "The Sign of Virtue Complete", he emphasizes that "the Tao gives him his features, Heaven gives him his form. Do not harm your body with likes and dislikes". Moreover, taking as models the divine beings described in "Wandering in Absolute Freedom"—those on "Miao Guyi Mountain" who "do not eat the five grains, but suck the wind, drink the dew, ride on the clouds, drive flying dragons"—and the enlightened ones in "The Great and

Venerable Teacher" who "sleep without dreams, wake without worries, eat without relish, breathe deeply", Zhuangzi teaches the way of centering emptiness (zhong xu), which is to "follow the central meridian as the constant course, thereby protecting the body, preserving life, nourishing one's parents, and living out one's years" ("The Preserving of Life"). Furthermore, Zhuangzi defines life and death in terms of the gathering and dispersing of qi (vital energy): "Human life is the gathering of qi. Gathering constitutes life, dispersing constitutes death". He concludes that "throughout heaven and earth, there is but one qi" ("Knowledge Rambling in the North"), incorporating all life and death into a unified naturalistic worldview (Li, 2017, pp. 35-36). Maspero points out that the description of the "spirit man of the Guye Mountain" in the "Wandering in Absolute Freedom" chapter of *Zhuangzi* implicitly contains a set of cultivation techniques for achieving longevity and becoming an immortal. These include abstention from grains ("not eating the five grains"), breath control ("drinking wind and dew"), concentration and meditation ("the spirit congeals"), as well as a method of spiritual travel and transcending the cosmos to communicate with the gods ("riding on clouds and mists, driving flying dragons, and roaming beyond the four seas"). He believes that the last of these techniques is prevalent in Zhuangzi's time but is gradually lost or declined in theoretical status in later periods. On this basis, Maspero has interpreted Zhuangzi's self-cultivation practices as a progression of spiritual refinement: above all, achieving purification through the "fasting of the mind" (via purgativa). The "fasting of the mind" comes from the "Human World" chapter of *Zhuangzi* and refers to a spiritual form of fasting, distinct from ritualistic sacrifice. Zhuangzi defines the fasting of the mind as "waiting with an empty mind", emphasizing the attainment of a state of emptiness and clarity, thereby transcending sensory limitations. After purification, one enters a state of "ecstasy", allowing one to align with the Tao and attain the highest realm of wonder. Ultimately, one reaches the state of "wandering"—that is, absolute freedom and supreme, blissful spiritual carefreeness (Maspero, 2015, pp. 34-38).

Maspero points out that the cultivation methods for seeking truth and achieving immortality in religious Taoism primarily include practices such as circulating breath (also known as "absorbing breath", "ingesting breath", or "refining breath"), conserving essence (cherishing vital energy), strengthening essence (enhancing vital energy), and consuming elixirs (taking medicinal pills or herbs) within the framework of religious Taoism (Maspero, 2018, p. 106). Among them, the practices of circulating qi are one of the most central and widely discussed techniques. The discourse on self-cultivation (gongfu) focuses on how adepts employ specific techniques to achieve a transformation of body and mind, and qi circulation is precisely such a form of gongfu. Through methods such as breath control (inhalation and exhalation), guided stretching (daoyin), and concentrated visualization (cunsi), it enables qi to circulate orderly within the body and undergo continuous sublimation. It is noteworthy that practices like qi circulation are not merely a form of physiological training but also a discipline of spiritual cultivation and willpower tempering, with the ultimate aim of connecting the individual's vital energy to the fundamental energy of the cosmos. In fact, qi can be regarded as the foundational substance of the "theory of cultivation-realm". The object of gongfu manipulation is qi, while the elevation of the spiritual realm is manifested as a qualitative transformation of qi—for example, from coarse qi gradually refined into essence qi and primal qi, ultimately reaching the "pre-natal one qi" that unites with the Tao. What the theory of the spiritual realm describes are precisely the states of body-mind integration and levels of Tao-realization attained through the cultivation of gongfu. Texts such as the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Canon* and the *Treatise on Primal Qi* point out that all things in existence are endowed with primal qi. The highest state of cultivation is the complete unification of the qi of the individual microcosm with the qi of the Tao as the ultimate source—that is, "the ultimate unity of qi-transformation and Tao-transformation". In a word, in Maspero's view, performing good

deeds and accumulating virtue are the starting point, but only through sustained and refined technical practice can one ultimately attain the state of union with the Tao and achieve transcendence to immortality.

The attention of European and American Sinologists to philosophical Taoism and religious Taoism may be seen as an attempt to seek a "remedy" from the East. They hope that these wisdoms can help reconcile the will to power in Western culture and compensate for certain deficiencies in its religious concepts and spiritual dimensions. Aesthetics, as an important component of culture, plays a key role in promoting the creative transformation and innovative development of outstanding traditional Chinese culture. Within the context of cross-cultural aesthetics, in-depth dialogue with the spirit of Western aesthetics can not only facilitate mutual learning and innovation between spirits of Chinese and European aesthetics but also open up new paths for the innovation and development of theory of contemporary aesthetics.

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