



ANNA SEIDEL MEMORIAL

Imperiled Destinies Debt and Redemption in Medieval Daoism

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Franciscus Verellen
École française d'Extrême-Orient

In this lecture Franciscus Verellen presents his new book *Imperiled Destinies: The Daoist Quest for Deliverance in Medieval China* (Harvard 2019). Spanning eight centuries, the book examines the evolution of Daoist beliefs about human liability and redemption and procedures for rescuing an ill-starred destiny.

The medieval record portrays a world engulfed by evil, where human existence was mortgaged from birth and burdened by increasing debts and obligations in this world and the next. In the second century CE, Daoism emerged as a liturgical organization that engaged vigorously with Buddhism, transforming Chinese thinking about the causes of suffering, the nature of evil, and the aims of liberation. In the fifth century, elements of classical Daoism combined with Indian yoga to interiorize the quest for deliverance. The integrated liturgical order of the Tang encompassed a growing monastic community, lay society, and rituals on behalf of the state.

Daoist sacraments acted on the unseen world, providing relief from apprehensions of death, disease, and loss. Drawing on prayer texts, liturgical sermons, and experiential narratives, Franciscus Verellen pays close attention to the Daoist vocabulary of redemption, the meaning of sacrifice, and metaphors bridging the visible and invisible realms. An imperiled destiny was freed through ritual debt forgiveness and deliverance meant healing, release, or the emergence from darkness into light.

Location

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