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Thematic workshop 1 : Delimiting, Naming, Instituting

CULTURAL INVISIBLE CONTINUITY OF EXCHANGE DYNAMICS, OR THE AREAL CLASSIFICATION FACING REALITY: THE HISTORY OF A TANTRIC CULT BETWEEN INDIA AND CHINA



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PhD title : **The Taoist cult to the Mother of the Dipper : historical and anthropological study on beliefs and practices related to a female astral deity**



Researches made on the history and anthropology analysis of the Taoist cult to the Mother of the Dipper (Doumu 斗姆), a female astral deity that both identity and ritual emerged in the 13th century from the cult to the Tantric goddess of Dawn named Mārīcī (« Ray of Light », Molizhitian 摩利支天), conduct to deal with the hybridation process and cultural framework redrafting of religious symbols and inner meanings through the dialectical and changing frontier between endogenous and exogenous identities and representations within Taoist rituals in China. **Thus epistemology quickly reaches here the critical**

**point where concepts of meaning used in areal disciplines cannot rely anymore on fixed terms and notions** as the historical process of religious fact is shaped in a **continuous movement that overcrosses categories of areal delimitations** and institutionalized ethnocultural identification, particularly when it deals with the multicultural changing context of the wide East Asian region during the Silk roads history. Indeed, this observation leads us **to re-think the science of knowledge of « cultural space »** and how we build and formulate our object of research in a multi situated progressive development.

**1 - HISTORIOGRAPHY OF SCIENTIFIC CONTACTS WITH THE FIELD: THE INHERITAGE OF PARADIGMS AND SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL BIAS TO TRANSREGIONAL ETHNO-CULTURAL CONTINUUMS AND OUTLYING CONFLUENCES**

Because the object of research relies on a large scale of time (6th-12th centuries), space and culture interconnected contexts, **the case of study on the Taoist cult to Doumu-Mārīcī is particularly revealing of the limits of using areal concepts as they convey ideological paradigms and epistemologic bias potential.** Historical and sinological investigations about Taoist and Tantric cult intertwining, need to contextualize the contact interspace between the two systems and thus to understand how the exogenous component had been imported and locally interpreted.

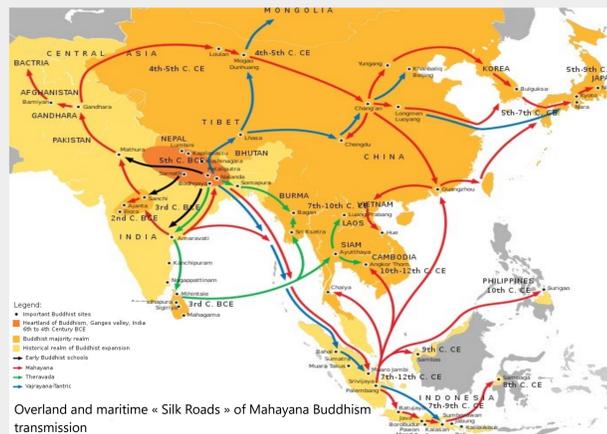


**2 - THE PROBLEM OF USING AREAL TERMINOLOGY: « INDIA » AND « CHINA », WHAT CATEGORY FOR WHAT HISTORICAL TRUTH, AND THE RISK TO INDUCE A DISTORTED AND SHIFTED INTERPRETATION**

Mārīcī is commonly introduced as an « Indo-Persian » deity by scientific works mainly because of the settled form of her well-known Tantric image and rites which spread in East Asia since the 10th century onwards. But when datas produced by Indianists on one side, by Sinologists and Tibetologists on the other side, are cautiously collected, gathered and compared, facts not only invalidate her Indian origin, **but they also raise the sensitive epistemological pitfall induced by the distorted and chronocentric formulation of related geographic areas.**

**3 - FROM WHICH REGION DID MĀRĪCĪ COME? IF THE FIRST TRACES WERE LOST, WHERE AND HOW DID THE PRODUCTION OF IMPORTED SUTRAS CONTINUE FOR THREE CENTURIES WITHOUT LEAVING ANY TRACE OF THE CULT SOMEWHERE IN EAST ASIA?**

From the 6th to the 10th centuries, Mārīcī's cult locally progressed in Sinitized areas, providing an image of her as a young maiden, whereas **no iconographic nor scriptural traces of Mārīcī can be attested anywhere else in East Asia until the 9th century.** The emergence of Mārīcī's cult in present-day Indian cultural area has only been dated by Indianists in the 9th century within the Tantric Vajrayana school which spread out in the **Pala dynastic kingdom** (nowadays Indian Bengal). Her Tantric image was lately settled (wrathful, martial, multi-headed, multi-armed).



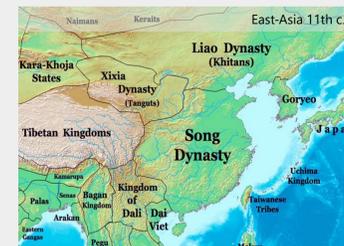
**4 - COMING FROM INDIA AND EMERGING FROM FROM PAN-INDIAN OR BUDDHIST CULTURE ARE TWO DISTINCT PHENOMENONS. THE SAME IS TRUE FOR SANSKRIT AS A TRANS-REGIONAL, PAN-ASIAN ERUDITE LANGUAGE**

Buddhism with Sanskrit as a main trans-areal scholar language, conveyed both continuity and discontinuity within multiple distinct local cultural anchors through this trans-areal region and successive historical periods. In the multi ethnocultural East Asian context, **this trans- and multi- dynamic pattern converged into the common phenomenon of permanent symbols borrowing and reformulation of cults such as Mārīcī's one.** India and China as determined and instituted cultural areal categories did not exist yet.



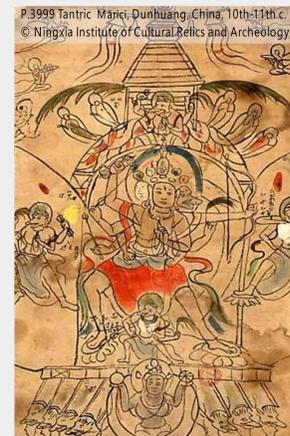
The use of denominations like « India » and « China » in our study case, are empire or nation-made ideological concepts that do not refer to a uniform and homogeneous territorial and cultural reality over centuries.

Secondary Silk Roads were numerous and divergent, linking distinct geographical areas and several intermediate populations, all of which were outlying to the so-called main routes crossing regions that are historically considered as high valued axes.



**5 - SO, HOW TO THINK ABOUT THE CULT TO MĀRĪCĪ?**

Mārīcī's cult is particularly relevant as it is dedicated to travellers which is the most eloquent metaphor of transterritoriality, thus crossing ethnocultural spaces of beliefs that were not fixly delimited but permanently reshaped while territories were incessantly destabilised by military conquests. **As a cultural fact in migration, its local anchoring was thus subject to tensions and dynamics contingencies of symbolic exchanges at stake, that merged in outlying places and potentially remained a peripheral product in a larger scale of the « Chinese » and « Indian » respective framework of their dominant empowered culture.**



**7 - ON WHAT BASIS AND HOW DID CHINESE TAOISTS GAIN ACCESS TO THE TANTRIC CULT?**

Local-made Tantric images remain an obvious vector of transcultural contact in those regions that still conveyed many Asian ethnics and cultures but were mainly under Tibetans domination. The Tantric version of Mārīcī, from which Taoism borrowed her cultural image and some ritual components since the 13th century to elaborate Doumu's cult is late, originated from Pala culture, reformulated within the Tibetan cultural matrix, and reappropriated locally within the local symbolic systems in the outlying areas of the Chinese dynastic culture and power centre. **Logics of making gods like Mārīcī are unlinear in time and space.**

**8 - MULTI SITUATED PRODUCTION OF CULTURE IN EAST ASIA**

The inherent complexity of the cultural fact in a transterritoriality process always moves through **multipolarized transversal dynamics that escape categories.** Mārīcī's cult's reflects an unlinear chronological evolution through the plurality of multi-situated interplays in intercultural tensions driven by different local core centres, themselves being outlyed to other centres of power or cultural production, in a translocal, cross-bording network of back-and-forth dynamics of influences and permanent transformations through time and space. **« India » and « China » are a long-term historical and cultural building process** shaped in a continuum of Asian transareal dynamics without borders.



**9 - COULD WE SET UP OUR THINKING IN THE INTER/TRANS PHENOMENON VALUE, AS A FULL NEW OPEN-UP CROSS-AREAL CATEGORY, A SYMBOLIC SPACE OF JUNCTION THAT CONVEYS ITS OWN UNIT OF MEANING AND RESONANCE ?**

Understanding the production of meaning through time and space implies to shift the epistemological perspective to an **interrelated transformative process** that relies on new conceptual categories rooted in an innovative academic language of transversality. **Thinking « dynamics » instead of « areas ».** Plurality of changes can be thought as a new referential of areal unity from the dynamics of exchange and transformation which are the core value of this meta-geographical space along the Silk Road history.