Archei in the Brain and Every Joint: On Taoist Concepts of Multiple Souls

Abstract

Ancient Taoist texts has taught on groups of supernatural entities which allegedly dwell in the human body, such as san hun qi po (the Three hun's and Seven po's), san shi (the Three Corpses) and shen zhong shen (the Somatic Deities). This paper purports to argue that the entire conceptual system of these entities is essentially an expression of the archetypal idea of 'multiple souls', akin to primitive beliefs in 'multiple souls' so commonly found throughout the world, albeit more advanced. ('Soul' here refers to some incorporeal existence thought to be linked to the life, energy and/or consciousness of a person, and which departs from the physical body upon the death of the person; a belief in 'multiple souls' means believing that each person possesses more than one 'soul')

The argument unfolds from an anthropological stance, comparing the important characteristics of the above-mentioned primitive beliefs with the relevant Taoist ideas to arrive at the above-mentioned conclusion. Thereby, this paper discusses on the basis of this insight, the advanced status of Taoist somatic entities (actually 'souls') in terms of historical development of religion and humanistic spirit, showing that the conceptual system of these entities embodies the Taoist pro-activity in attaining immortality and the general religious trends of "objectification" and intellectual interpretation.

As a concluding note, this academic exercise points to possible further research along the line of "Taoist somatic entities as souls", namely, an exploration of how Taoism in the Sung Dynasty and Yuan Dynasty responded to the intrinsic problem of the concept of 'multiple souls'.