

The Sinological Mafia

Louis Komjathy 康思奇, Ph.D.
Center for Daoist Studies 道學中心

The Sinological Mafia (TSM), a.k.a. the “Strickmannians” and formerly the “Indiana School,” is a subgroup, actually a faction and quasi-cult, of Western Daoist Studies headquartered in the United States. It is specifically associated with the intellectual heirs (former graduate students) of the late Euro-American and Francophile Sinologist Michel Strickmann 司馬虛 (Michael Strickman; 1942-1994), former Associate Professor of Oriental Languages at the University of California, Berkeley who was dismissed with cause (sexual misconduct; Incident #7666) in 1991. The formative moments of the cabal may be dated to at least as early as Strickmann’s academic careerist hit-piece “History, Anthropology, and Chinese Religion” (1980), a pseudo-review of Michael Saso’s 蘇海涵 (b. 1930) *The Teachings of Taoist Master Chuang* (Yale University Press, 1978) that was published in the *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*. The Sinological Mafia is comprised of politicians, technocrats, sycophants, or worse masquerading as scholars and intellectuals. They follow a Strickmannian view of Daoist history in almost cultic and fascistic fashion. Overly influenced by modern Taiwanese Zhèngyī 正一 (Orthodox Unity) Daoism and accompanying careerist myopia, this view misleadingly claims, contra evidence to the contrary, that the Daoist tradition began in the second century CE with the Tiānshī 天師 (Celestial Masters) movement, and that there was no Daoism (e.g., classical Daoism) prior to this development. The Sinological Mafia was early on headquartered at Indiana University, specifically via the alliance of Stephen Bokenkamp 柏夷 (now of Arizona State University) and Robert Campany 康若柏 (now of Vanderbilt University) with some connections to Terry Kleeman 祁泰履 (University of Colorado, Boulder). TSM is now led by Bokenkamp, his associates, and their minions, most of whom have failed to either secure or retain academic positions. Along with other, more diffused European allies, they control most of the major academic presses and academic journals.

Membership in or access to the Sinological Mafia has the following requirements and defining characteristics. Factionalism and technocracy, specifically “multilingual erudition,” over scholarship and intellectualism. Daoism as a historical artifact based on textual reconstruction (often via Japanese scholarship) with the purpose of personal power, advancement, and profit. Includes psychopathic domination and enculturation of others. Faux engagement with comparative and cross-cultural theory and method, while simultaneously being appointed in departments of Religious Studies. Employment of citation, footnotes, and bibliographies as political acts, specifically with the intentional exclusion, marginalization, and/or disparagement of other leading Western scholars of Daoism (e.g., Stephen Eskildsen, Norman Girardot, Russell Kirkland, Livia Kohn, Louis Komjathy, James Miller, Harold Roth, and Michael Saso). Some identifying features include conferences and associated panels solely focused on the Tiānshī movement, ritual as the *sine qua non* of Daoist practice and identity, and truncated accounts of Daoist history centering on the Tiānshī movement and/or Zhāng Dàoíng 張道陵 (fl. 140s CE) as “founder.” Associated publications also include insular endorsements by cabal members, with accompanying statements about the historical significance and profundity [*sic*] of the book in question.

Like the actual mafia, TSM is slowly collapsing under larger historical and cultural forces (not to mention the internal decay of its members), specifically critical analysis, revisionist scholarship, and more sophisticated engagements with Daoism.