Book Review. Gods, Ghosts, and Gangsters

Marc L. Moskowitz, *University of South Carolina*
that were made concerning features of Daoist history. Unfortunately, the author preferred to rely on a few not always reliable secondary works. And yet, the book should be on the shelves of any good Far Eastern library. It can be recommended as an introduction to the vast and varied field of Buddh-Daoist intellectual interaction.

FLORIAN C. REITER, Humboldt-University, Berlin

Gods, Ghosts, and Gangsters: Ritual Violence, Martial Arts, and Masculinity on the Margins of Chinese Society

For many university students Chinese religion is an almost insurmountably dry topic. In Gods, Ghosts, and Gangsters, Avron Boretz demonstrates an unparalleled ability to bring both temples and their patrons alive for the reader. The book is amenable to a multilayered audience in that it would be equally at home in an introductory China course or an upper division or graduate level seminar on religion or masculinity.

The introduction lays out the general concerns of the book in exploring the overlap between masculinity, religion, and gangsters in both the PRC and Taiwan. In it, Boretz introduces issues of patriarchy, potency, and violence in both religious imagery and practices.

The second chapter, “Violence, Honor, and Manhood,” explores several important themes that run throughout the book. This includes the complex interplay between textual precedents, as seen in both traditional literature and religious texts as well as in the lived contemporary moment. Boretz also provides a historical overview of different manifestations of Chinese manhood ranging from the refined (wen 文) and the martial (wu 武), to romantic scholars (caizi 才子), Confucian gentlemen (junzi 君子), and rugged Robin Hood figures (haohan 好漢).

Chapter 3, “Taidong: The Mountains and Beyond,” primarily focuses on the author’s fieldwork in the city of Taidong 臺東, Taiwan. He begins with a historical introduction of the area and fluidly connects Taidong’s remote location with the frontier-oriented rugged masculinity that continues today. He touches on tensions between aboriginal communities and Han Chinese resentment. He also introduces the gangsters and martial artists that live in the area and the seemingly fluid relationship between temple and gangster life.
In the fourth chapter, "Fire and Fury," Boretz introduces the reader to his second field site in Dali 大理, located in the Yunnan province of the PRC. Here he writes about the Bai Torch Festival. He then returns to Taidong to explore a religious festival devoted to the relatively unstudied deity Handan Ye 寒單翁. In this festival, a male volunteer becomes the corporeal form of the deity as worshippers shoot fireworks into his bare flesh. When his burns or other injuries are no longer bearable, a new volunteer takes his place. Thus, religious belief and gangster bravado intermix in a mutually legitimating process between the sacred and the profane.

The next chapter, "Tales from the Jianghu," provides a brief history of gangster societies and their performed identities. This includes religious performances and the expressed loyalty to one's parents and fictive kin in the form of one's "brothers" in the gangster groups. Boretz explores the long history of overlap between gangster societies and religious practice. Self-flagellation in religious procession is interpreted, correctly I think, as blood sacrifice. Cheek-piercing rods, dancing through fire, and martial arts are other displays of hyper-masculinity that are presented in this context. The importance of honor and physical expressions of masculine endurance ranging from tattoos to ritualized violence connect their religious and secular lives. This chapter has particularly vivid depictions of the people involved, both in the context of religious processions and in their daily lives. In this fashion the reader is introduced to the ways that worshippers' individual personalities, and larger social tensions between different groups, are enacted in the religious sphere.

The chapter "Wine, Women, and Song" explores the realm of hostess bars and karaoke bars as men use women and alcohol as social lubricants. The chapter connects with the rest of the book in the context of male honor and the underlying potential of violence in his gang-oriented cohort. It is a less obvious fit for readers whose primary interest is religious studies. Arguably the chapter provides a better sense of their lives as a whole, but so would a closer examination of family, childhood, prison, or a range of other dimensions in their lives. The inclusion of this particular aspect of their secular lives would have profited from a bit more theoretical grounding with the book's religious focus. As with the rest of the book, this chapter is expertly written and insightful, so those concerned with gender can explore this chapter with pleasure. Those who are more interested in the religious dimensions will have to decide whether or not they care to assign this particular chapter in class, however.

Chapter 7 is a brief conclusion that ties together various themes of the book, drawing on ancient literature and the contemporary moment in relation to varying roles available to these men at the margins.

Avron Boretz' *Gods, Ghosts, and Gangsters* is a marvelous success. He provides an important new voice in focusing on the central themes of violence in Chinese religious practice which is all too often ignored in favor of textual emphasis on harmony. He also provides exceptionally rich ethnographic detail taken from almost twenty years of participant
observation on both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Boretz subtly connects religious beliefs and practices with literary traditions and their modern day manifestations. He introduces locations, religious practices, and people with a vivid eloquence that makes the reader feel like he or she is there—one can virtually smell the temple incense at the turn of each page. Overall, *Gods, Ghosts, and Gangsters* is one of the best anthropological explorations of Chinese or Taiwanese religion that I have read.

MARC L. MOSKOWITZ, University of South Carolina

*Ancestral Memory in Early China*


In his monograph on ancestral memory that is soon to be joined by a projected companion volume on “Public Memory in Early China,” Kenneth Brashier analyzes early Chinese relationships between the living and the dead as mediated through cults and ritual prescriptions, uncovering a surprising variety of attitudes toward the deceased in the process. While the chronological focus is on the Han 漢, he also draws on Warring States and early medieval evidence, including Buddhist texts. Anyone wishing to learn more about one of the salient features of Chinese culture will do well to study this book whose frequent use of tables, diagrams, and bullet points usefully complements the clarity of the author’s exposition. Brashier’s most instructive contribution is his multifaceted discussion of how people in ancient China conceived of their relationship with deceased ancestors, and how they reconciled the inevitable fading of memories with the imperative to remember, honor, and nourish the dead.

The introduction explores the “Han tree of knowledge” in order to reconstruct the deep structure of early imperial thought. It describes four all-pervasive conceptual metaphors for knowledge: a tree growing from a single root but separating into ever finer branches and twigs; a system of increasingly smaller watercourses springing from a shared source; a net of roads converging on the same destination; or a kin group descended from a common ancestor. According to Brashier, such a way of conceptualizing knowledge was more inclusive than the
ancient Greek model of adversarial debate. Arising from one single origin, conflicting viewpoints were believed to partake of universal truth, albeit to varying degrees.

The genealogical metaphor aptly illustrates the significance of lineage as a cognitive structuring device (p. 34). Yet, doubts remain as to whether this extensive exploration of metaphors is strictly necessary to interrogate the “adversariality” inherent in the somewhat monolithically conceived “Western religions” that supposedly color the “manner in which Western theorists analyze religions” (p. 40). If “Western religions” means varieties of Christianity, it would be more precise to say so. If the reference is to the Abrahamic religions, then the statement calls for qualification as they are not all “Western.” Moreover, it is not easy to discern the implied link between pagan adversariality and monotheistic intolerance. And finally, however knowledge was conceptualized by ancient Chinese thinkers, they were no strangers to bitter ideological disagreements.

Brashier himself draws attention to such caveats (p. 45), and to his great credit here, as elsewhere (pp. 74, 227), he cautions against single-minded adherence to explanations that he himself has painstakingly built. By repeatedly highlighting the limitations inherent in investigations of past mentalities and ideas, he injects a healthy dose of skepticism into cultural and intellectual history. His willingness to do so demonstrates his admirable intellectual honesty.

The first of the five main parts analyzes the ritual canon as an “Imaginary Yardstick for Ritual Performance.” Brashier presents these normative texts as scripts stipulating the comportment of mourners, their sacrificial schedule, the creation of a sacrificial space, and the system of “structured amnesia” (p. 65). The latter limited the number of ascendants receiving worship at any given time by expunging from the temple the generations that intervened between the most recent and the most distant ancestors. While ritual specialists aimed to codify sacrificial practice, the reality of ancestral worship likely differed from their ideals. As Brashier explains, the extent to which lettered and unlettered parts of the population subscribed to ritual rules remains elusive and defies easy generalization (pp. 74-99).

Part II explores structured amnesia by outlining the “history of remembering and forgetting imperial ancestors” from the Qin 姬 (221-207 BCE) to the Wei 魏 (220-265). Thirteen case studies illustrate how emperors and court officials negotiated between dynastic interests, ritual norms, and practical considerations, each pulling political actors into different directions. The number of ancestors potentially deserving of worship increased with every deceased emperor and, if left unchecked, threatened to add to the economic burden and procedural complexity of the state sacrificial system; ritual prescriptions only eventually coalesced into a recognized canon and, in any case, did not provide neat solutions for every eventuality; insurrections and usurpations made imperial ancestral worship a critical element of dynastic legitimacy; and succession to the throne transpired often in a less than orderly fashion that called for retrospective adaptations of the officially recognized line of descent.