

REVIEWS



China



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

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AT A TIME when Taiwan was still the major field site for anthropologists studying “Chinese culture,” religion was one of their major concerns. Later on, when China itself opened up for long-term field research and “traditional religion” perhaps became somewhat of a less fashionable concern for anthropology at large, research interest on religion in Taiwan also seemed to fade away. At the beginning of Boretz’s fieldwork, in the Taiwanese town of Taidong during the 1980s, it was the martial aspect of religion that was his main focus. But in the many years of fieldwork that followed, Boretz not only worked in additional field sites, for instance in the Chinese province of Yunnan, but also shifted his attention from deities to the mostly working class men that participate in their cults and the lives they live.

Both in China and Taiwan Boretz worked with people he describes as part of the *jianghu*, or “rivers and lakes.” In Chinese fiction and popular imagination this term refers to a fictional world of vagabonds and outlaws, in which *yiqi* or “honor” is the highest-valued moral quality. Boretz however uses it to refer to an existing class of people: “the marginal world of drifters, outlaws, con artists, thieves, bodyguards, loan sharks and debt collectors” (16). They form “a diverse class of people who live by their wits, skill, and, sometimes, brutality,” in “a world that can exist only beyond the stability and security of village and family and conventional occupations” (33). Although the fictional image of the *jianghu* bears only slight resemblance to the “facts of daily life,” the values associated with it have a major impact on its real-world denizens.

According to Boretz, *wen*, the “civil” or “literary,” and *wu*, the “military” or “martial,” are fundamental categories of Chinese thought. As such, they inform two

distinct types of masculinity. Of the two, it is the martial type of masculinity that is associated with the *jianghu*, both the fictional and its real-world counterpart. Violence is an intrinsic part of the logic of Chinese religious ritual and in Taiwan many “brothers” of the *jianghu* are active participants in temple cults. The violence, which is not always just symbolic, provides them with a space for self-production and self-performance.

This insight, supported by convincing ethnographic evidence, discloses an interesting layer of meaning of Taiwanese religious rituals. Entranced participants in procession troupes do not just attack other mediums because of historical conflicts between their temples, but do so because ritual performance is a space of creative agency, in which agents are able to act out their “fantasies of supernatural powers, of knight-errant heroics, as well as cruel violence” (16). This is also part of what happens during the “Blasting of Lord Handan,” a yearly ritual that has been carried out in Taidong since the 1950s. In the ritual, men embody Lord Handan, a locally worshipped deity, without however being possessed by him. They mount a sedan chair and are blasted with firecrackers, sometimes resulting in serious wounds and burns. Here too, the “exaggerated performance of culturally valorized traits of masculinity” (106) is one of the factors that accounts for the appeal the ritual has, on both its participants as well as its audience.

Performance of the *wu* form of masculinity is not limited to religious rituals. It can be seen in the lives of the men outside of the temples, for instance in their nights of drinking, a practice that is as culturally shaped as the rituals. In addition, and this is where his fieldwork in China comes in, the *wu* form of masculinity is not limited to Taiwan. Boretz argues that in China, where temple cults have developed in a distinct way since 1949, comparable ideas of masculine identity exist among working-class men, although performance in religious contexts is much rarer. According to Boretz, these forms of masculinity in China and Taiwan are “rooted in the frustration of desire inherent in the patrilineal Chinese family but deeply exacerbated (more so in the mainland than in Taiwan or Hong Kong) by exclusionary national educational, economic, and political structures that create a vast underclass” (174). Educational, economic, and political structures are not the only differences between Taiwan and China, and perhaps it could be interesting to see whether and how changing family structures in both places influence the “frustration of desire” inherent in it.

Gods, Ghosts, and Gangsters is an insightful ethnography of a layer of society that is often neglected in the study of China and Taiwan. It is based on an admirable amount of fieldwork, part of which, as Boretz himself writes, he probably would not have been able to carry out if not for his interest in martial deities and (very active) participation in some of their rituals. Even if it were men rather than deities that later became the focus of his research, his insights on the self-performative aspects of ritual are valuable and important for the anthropology of religion in general.

Hidden somewhere in a footnote is Boretz’s translation of the final lines of Tang poet Li Bai’s “Song of the Knight-Errant”: “Who then would waste precious time locked in the study, poring over useless books until his hair turns white?” In this

line, Li Bai supposedly refers to “the vanity of those who grow decrepit searching for the secret of longevity” (220). From the references in the book to seances in secluded shrines, meetings of local underworld figures and nights of drinking, it is clear that being locked up in a study, poring over useless books is not the only way that leads to scholarly achievement.

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