

VON GLAHN, RICHARD. *The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004. xiii + 385 pages. Maps, illustrations, tables, bibliography, glossary, index. Cloth US\$55.00, £36.95; ISBN 0-520-23408-1.

Early on in Chinese history, the imperial state was well aware of heretical practices and supernatural lore that might potentially disrupt the proper duties of the populace and interfere with the governing of a well-ordered society. Unscrupulous officials manipulating the legal statutes for graft, larceny, or other self-serving purposes were said to employ *zuodao* 左道 (sinister doctrines) in their improprieties, but by the end of the Han dynasty (202 BCE—220 CE) the term had become synonymous with suspicious soothe-saying and

the improper propitiation of spirits for selfish gain. Scholars interested in Chinese folklore will benefit significantly from the book here briefly summarized for its extensive treatment of these spirits, which include *shanxiao* 山魃 (mountain goblins), plague demons related to the cult of Zhong Kui 鍾馗, and especially, important details in the development of cults to the Chinese gods of wealth (*Wutong* 五通 and *Caishen* 財神).

Von Glahn's main goal in this book is to assert that "beings best described as specters, fairies, and goblins populated the most intimate sphere of the supernatural and had the greatest impact on the daily lives of ordinary people." He aims to correct their omission in the historical record by "examining the remarkable history of the cult of Wutong within the larger context of China's evolving religious culture" (5). The main thrust of his argument is that Chinese religious culture has historically manifested two basic orientations: "1) eudaemonistic regimes of propitiation and exorcism that regulated relationships between the human and spirit worlds; and 2) an abiding belief in a moral equilibrium inhering in the cosmos itself (though frequently mediated through the agency of divine powers)" (13). The first two chapters draw upon extensive anthropological and archaeological information to provide background on Von Glahn's view of human concepts of the supernatural from the Shang period (ca. 1700—ca.1045 BCE) through the Han dynasty. However, readers of this journal will be particularly drawn to material presented beginning with Chapter 3.

Here Von Glahn engages important literature pertinent to *shanxiao* lore and compellingly links the belief in "changeling spirits inhabiting the wild mountains and forests" with "a greater divide in human affairs: the contested and shifting frontier between civilization and barbarism" (78). Moving between early histories such as *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (*The Zuo Commentary*) and *Shiji* 史記 (*Record of the Historian*), geographies such as the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*), and several later "exorcistic" texts, Von Glahn presents a history of northern Chinese interactions with the exotic extremes of China's subtropic south. He postulates that the image of a one-footed *shanhui* 山揮 beast found in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* likely derived from a mountain-dwelling simian species in southern China, and traces how the term came to take on nefarious and supernatural significance as a "mountain specter" (90–92). In interesting detail, Von Glahn explains how through changing nomenclature and usage, the term *shanxiao* came to be used as a pejorative to describe "violent predators and benign trading partners in the relations with Han settlers" (97).

In Chapters 4 through 7, Von Glahn demonstrates the transformation of the Wutong cult from its origin as five noxious plague causing demons in the early medieval period to its conflation in the modern era as a single divine god. Drawing particularly on information in Daoist scripture in Chapter 4, Von Glahn shows how the "Five Demon Masters" of popular propitiation in the Six Dynasties period (220–581 CE) became the "Five Emissaries of Plague" in the Thunder Magic rituals of Daoist movements during the Song dynasty (960–1279 CE) (115–21). Furthermore, he demonstrates the important role of the cult of Zhong Kui in the spreading and popularizing of the Wutong concept during the Song period. Although Zhong Kui never became the object of worship or sacrifice in a cult of his own, the posting of his image as lord over five demonic beggars on the lunar New Year served as a talisman against illness and increased awareness and interest in the five manifestations of disease (122–28).

Chapter 5 is an extensive treatment of historical factors contributing to the transformation of Song dynasty religious culture where we learn of large-scale canonization projects by the Song court and dramatic social and economic advances in the period. However, this material largely serves as background for Chapter 6, where Von Glahn shows the gradual conflation of the concept of five disease causing demons with the emerging Buddhist-

inspired cult to the *Wutong* 五通 (Five Spiritual Penetrations) in China's southern Jiangnan region and the imperially sponsored cult to the *Wuxian* 五顯 (Five Worthies) throughout the empire. In Chapter 7, Von Glahn ultimately connects developments of the Wutong phenomenon with the arrival of the cult to *Wulu Caishen* 五路財神 (the God of the Five Paths to Wealth) in the late imperial period. He states that "the development of the Wutong cult suggests a pervasive sense of anxiety about money: how to get it, and especially, how to keep it. In the popular mind, wealth was not produced by living virtuously, or through prudent investment and planning. Instead, money was believed to be under the control of malicious and notoriously unreliable supernatural forces" (251).

Von Glahn's study is important for historians, religionists, and researchers of folklore alike for its broad use of sources and detailed attention to a cultural phenomenon over time. Readers might be put off by Von Glahn's often troubling use of Western concepts such as "eudaemonistic" (263), his comparison of the *shanxiao* as "fairies of pagan Europe" (78), or his openly Marxist overtones and conclusions. However, the book is carefully researched and expertly delivered. *The Sinister Way* is an excellent contribution to our understanding of Chinese culture and folklore and well worth our careful consideration.

Neil Edward McGEE  
Columbia University  
New York