

Book Review

Paul Katz^{*}

Meir Shahar, *Crazy Ji: Chinese Religion and Popular Literature*. Harvard-Yenching Institute Monograph Series, 48. Cambridge (MA) and London: Harvard University Press, 1998. xviii, 330 pages. ISBN 0-674-17562-X (cloth); ISBN 0-674-17563-8 (paper).

Meir Shahar's stimulating study of Jigong 濟公, a meat-eating yet spiritually powerful Buddhist monk who ended up being widely worshipped as a god, is a powerful statement about the complexity and vibrant diversity of Chinese religion. The author, who received his Ph.D. from Harvard University and currently teaches at Tel Aviv University in Israel, has long been recognized as a leading figure in the field, beginning with his publication of an article on Sun Wukong 孫悟空 in the prestigious *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*.¹ In addition, he also served alongside Robert P. Weller as co-editor of the volume *Unruly Gods*, which also contains the early results of his work on the relationship between vernacular fiction and popular religion in China.² *Crazy Ji*, the revised version of Shahar's doctoral thesis, represents the fruits of his long-term research on Jigong as a literary and religious figure. Shahar successfully combines methodologies of literary studies and social history to

* Dr. Paul Katz (康豹) is a professor in the Institute of History at National Central University.

1 "The Lingyin Si Monkey Disciples and the Origins of Sun Wukong," *HJAS*, 52 (1992): 193-224.

2 See Meir Shahar, & Robert P. Weller, eds., *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996.

produce an account that both confirms earlier scholarship about the multivocal nature of Chinese religion and society, while also challenging readers to reconsider problems such as the nature and intensity of resistance in religious contexts, the ways in which Buddhism spread among the Chinese populace, and the importance of humor in Chinese culture.

There can be little doubt of the importance of Shahar's topic. Jigong represents a truly "popular" deity in every sense of the word, worshipped by people representing the entire spectrum of Chinese society. Over the centuries, his devotees have ranged from unscrupulous gamblers to straight-laced sectarians and members of the Buddhist *sangha*, and from literati readers to members of the Boxers (*Yihetuan* 義和團). However, prior to the publication of this book little research had been done on Jigong as either a literary or religious figure, despite the fact that numerous scholars researching phenomena such as the gambling craze known as *Dajiale* 大家樂, spirit-writing (*fuji* 扶乩, *fuluan* 扶鸞) and the Unity Sect (*Yiguandao* 一貫道) have all alluded to the importance of Jigong in their writings.³ *Crazy Ji* represents a major breakthrough in our understanding of Chinese religion and Chinese culture as a whole by clearly demonstrating that religious life in China at the grassroots level is far too complex to be categorized according to old models such as the "Three Religions" (*sanjiao* 三教). Shahar also deserves credit for his in-depth investigation of a difficult problem: the ways in which popular literature influenced and was shaped by religious beliefs and practices. While we may not always agree with the author's conclusions, we should give him credit for the sophisticated manner in which he grapples with these complicated issues.

Crazy Ji is divided into three main parts. Part I ("Daoji the Man") features biographical data on the historical figure who later became worshipped as Jigong, the eccentric Buddhist monk named Daoji 道濟 (d. 1209) who gained renown in the coastal parts of Zhejiang 浙江. Chapter 1, which is based large-

³ See the work of scholars such as Hu T'ai-li 胡台麗, Sung Kuang-yü 宋光宇, and Robert Weller, which is cited in Shahar's bibliography.

ly on epigraphic data in the *Beixian wenji* 北磻文集 (1374) by the southern Song monk Jujian 居簡 (1164-1246), shows that Jigong was a problematic figure who was not included in Buddhist histories of the Song dynasty, and only mentioned (without any biographical detail) in Ming Buddhist writings. Chapter 2 features a thought-provoking discussion of the importance of holy fools in different religious traditions, including Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, etc. The bulk of this chapter is devoted to other eccentric monks associated with Buddhism, including the potbellied incarnation of the Maitreya Buddha known as Budai heshang 布袋和尚.

Part II (“Crazy Ji the Fictional Character”) is the longest portion of the book, extending from chapters 3-5 (pp. 49-169). Before starting Part II, readers might choose to consult Appendix A (“Extant Written and Transcribed Oral Fiction on Jigong”), which contains brief yet detailed summaries of the texts treated in these three chapters. Chapter 3, which is based on the novel *Qiantang hu yin Jidian Chanshi yulu* 錢塘湖隱濟顛禪師語錄 (1569), explores the images of Jigong as a mad monk yet powerful religious figure. Shahar points out that this novel appears to combine two different texts: Text A, probably based on Buddhist lore, which portrays Jigong as Chan master; and Text B, vernacular accounts containing evidence of Wu 吳 dialect, which reveal Jigong as a deity who saves others. Chapter 4, which treats Jigong’s images of clown and moral exemplar, focuses on the novels *Zui puti* 醉菩提 (before 1673) and *Jigong quanzhuan* 濟公全傳 (1668), texts that present Jigong as symbol of both resistance and sanctioned morality. This chapter also contains a brief discussion of the *chuanqi* 傳奇 drama entitled *Zui puti*. Chapter 5, the longest of the book, explores Jigong’s portrayal in northern Chinese oral literature and his links to martial arts traditions. Shahar examines the importance of *guci* 鼓詞 as a key form of popular fiction, and their influence on the *Jigong zhuan* 濟公傳 (1859), a prosimetric drum song (*shuochang guci* 說唱鼓詞). However, the bulk of this chapter is devoted to what Shahar considers to be the most influential work about Jigong, the *Pingyan Jigong zhuan* 評演濟公傳 (1898-1900).

This novel, which probably derives from an earlier *guci*, depicts Jigong as a champion of martial arts who aids the weak and rights wrongs. Shahar convincingly demonstrates the links between this novel and the oral culture of late nineteenth-century north China, and also notes that it may have played a role in shaping the beliefs and practices of the Boxers.

Part III (“Jigong the God”), which consists of one chapter (Chapter 6), contains a detailed study of the complex development of Jigong’s cult. Shahar describes scattered evidence of Jigong’s early cult growth in Zhejiang, but focuses on the importance of spirit-possession, spirit-writing, and spirit-painting in Taiwan. His work clearly shows that Jigong was a multivocal religious figure. On the one hand, he was worshipped by gamblers hoping to strike it rich in the Dajiale lottery, as well as members of so-called “black societies” (*hei shehui* 黑社會) in Malaysia; on the other hand, members of spirit-writing groups worshipped him as a guardian of traditional moral values, a phenomenon most clearly seen in the *Diyu youji* 地獄遊記, an immensely popular morality book produced during a series of spirit-writing sessions. Shahar also makes the important point that Jigong’s cult in Malaysia was not restricted to members of black societies but also included members of moralistic religious societies such as the *Dejiaohui* 德教會. This chapter also contains a fascinating account of a spirit-painting organization known as the *Zhengzong shuhua she* 正宗書畫社, which was founded by a mainland army doctor in Taipei and continues to exist today. Shahar also explores Jigong’s links to the Unity Sect, noting that one of its key leaders during the 20th century, Zhang Tianran 張天然, declared himself an incarnation of Jigong. The chapter concludes with discussion of Jigong’s reincorporation into Buddhism, including the enshrinement of his statue in some Five-Hundred Arhat Halls (*Wubai luohan dian* 五百羅漢殿) and the inclusion of his hagiography in temple gazetteers from Zhejiang.

In the book’s conclusion, entitled “The God’s Laughter,” Shahar undertakes a brilliant analysis of an overlooked but core element of Chinese religion — its emphasis on humor. As Shahar points out, not only do humorous

deities like Jigong, the Eight Immortals (Baxian 八仙) and Budai heshang enjoy immense popularity, the most simple and popular form of Chinese divination, casting wooden or bamboo divination blocks, includes the possibility of the gods answering with laughter (*xiaobei* 笑杯; *chhiu-poei* in Southern Min). In answer to the problem of why the gods should find worshippers' questions to be funny, Shahar speculates that their laughter might be of a soothing nature. Whether this hypothesis is correct or not remains to be seen, but after reading Shahar's analysis there seems little doubt that humor has long been a key facet of Chinese religion. The only question is why sinologists have overlooked this for so long.

Crazy Ji also contains four extremely useful appendixes: Appendix A, about extant fiction on Jigong; Appendix B, a list of 38 sequels to the *Pingyan Jigong zhuan*; Appendix C, about extant pre-20th century dramas about Jigong; and Appendix D, on literature about and by Jigong (including spirit-writing texts authored by the mad monk) distributed in Taiwanese temples. The book is also graced with 20 illustrations and photos.

The main contribution of this book is that it provides vivid and striking data on the multivocality of Chinese culture. Shahar's research reveals that Jigong was a complex and diverse figure, whose image varied widely in different works of fiction and drama. Moreover, Jigong's cult proliferated among many diverse social groups while assuming a wide variety of forms, including temple worship, spirit-writing, and spirit-painting. Jigong's cult also embodied strong elements of resistance, and Shahar perhaps puts it best when he states that, "In certain localities, Jigong's name has been invoked simultaneously by those transgressing social norms and by those struggling to preserve them" (219).

The book has no major flaws, but some might criticize Shahar for tending to overexaggerate the potential impact of literary works on popular beliefs and practices. For example, his claim on page 185 that representations of Jigong as a Robin Hood-like figure in Malaysian black societies, "could have been based

only on Jigong's image in the *Storyteller's Jigong* (*Pingyan Jigong zhuan*)," (italics added) is both too simplistic and unsubstantiated. The same could be said of Shahar's assertions that Zhang Tianran was influenced by *Pingyan Jigong zhuan* (p. 198), or that the compilers of Jigong's hagiography in the *Lingyin si zhi* 靈隱寺志 (1663) were influenced by novels (p. 212). At the same time, however, Shahar does deserve credit for showing that the hagiography of Jigong in the *Jingci si zhi* 淨慈寺志 (1805) was based on novels, including a lost work entitled *Jidian benzhuan* 濟顛本傳 (pp. 213-215).

In conclusion, it is worth noting that Shahar's study of Jigong may prompt scholars to seriously reconsider the ways in which they study the history of Buddhism, particularly from the perspective of this religion's influence on Chinese society. Inasmuch as he was a practicing member of the *sangha*, Jigong certainly deserves to be considered as a "Buddhist" deity, yet he was also a problematic figure who did not appeal to the Buddhist establishment. This lack of support from the upper levels of the Buddhist hierarchy appears to have had little or no impact on his cult's success, however, and Shahar has shown that popular images of Jigong eventually worked their way into more "orthodox" or "standard" Buddhist texts. It is also somewhat surprising that few Buddhologists seem to have found it necessary to research Jigong's cult, despite its immense popularity and its links to the history of Buddhism in late imperial China. In an important article on the study of Chinese Buddhism, Erik Zürcher once pointed out that the overwhelming mass of material most scholars use to study Buddhism derives from dynastic histories (*zhengshi* 正史), biographical sources like the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, and historical compilations like the *Fozu tongji* 佛祖通紀. Such sources generally present only one aspect of Buddhism in China—the doctrines, monastic regulations, and meditation rituals that appealed to the *sangha* and members of the elite responsible for their compilation. In light of this, Zürcher's claim that "...our picture of Chinese Buddhism as a historical phenomenon is not merely unbalanced, it is distorted beyond all proportions" seems to have some merit.⁴ Studies like

Shahar's provide us with an opportunity to rethink and perhaps even revise such perspectives.

⁴ See Erik Zürcher, "Perspectives in the Study of Chinese Buddhism," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1982): 161-176. See also the comments by Jacques Gernet in *A History of Chinese Civilization*, trans. J.R. Foster, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 215, as well as Stephen F. Teiser, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, pp. 17-20.