

書評 BOOK REVIEWS

Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks, and the History of a Ming Novel, by Mark R. E. Meulenbeld. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. ix, 273 pp. US\$57.00 (cloth).

The “Ming novel” of the subtitle is *Canonization of the Gods* (*Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義), which readers may perhaps know also as *Investiture of the Gods* (*Enfeoffment of the Gods*, *Creation of the Gods*, and *Romance of the Gods* are other English titles for the work, see p. 62). *Canonization* is written in the vernacular and is a product of the 1620s, although much reprinted later. The precise date of its first publication, and its author, remain unknown and perhaps impossible ever to determine (65–66). *Canonization* was wildly popular and widely read up until about 1900, but has fared less well in literary reputation since then, especially in comparison with other works of Chinese literature such as *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jinping mei* 金瓶梅), *A Dream of Red Chambers* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢), and *Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳). This relative lack of critical success is partly a consequence of deliberate choices made by arbiters of taste in Chinese literature, especially May Fourth intellectuals who found the overt religious and martial content of the work difficult to reconcile with their own view of the Chinese novel. In addition to its mythological themes, there are other reasons why *Canonization* and other works of its ilk may fit poorly with the idea of the novel as defined in the West: there are too many chapters, the overall plot is too vague, the huge cast of characters is hard to keep track of, it features too many epic battles, it is populated by strange supernatural beings and impressive magical weapons, and the plot relies on an excess of unlikely miraculous occurrences. The popularity of George R. R. Martin’s series *A Song of Ice and Fire* (adapted for television as *Game of Thrones*) may perhaps allow the contemporary reader a different appreciation for the sprawling scope and long-lasting popular appeal of *Canonization*.

In this study, Mark Meulenbeld is less interested in establishing

the literary worth of *Canonization* or in celebrating its status as a bestseller, and more concerned with what it tells us about Chinese religions, especially in their exorcistic or demon-quelling modes. His approach is to treat it mostly as something other than a novel *per se* and at one point he refers to *Canonization* as a “paraliturgy” (67)—that is to say, a work that is “based on and refers to the facts of ritual.” He prefers not to use terms like “fiction” or “fantasy” (2) in relation to *Canonization*, although I suspect that the latter term may be more analytically useful than one might initially expect. In many ways, then, *Demonic Warfare* puts religion back into our reading of *Canonization*, whence it had previously been excluded by modernist Western conceptions of the novel and its place in society. *Canonization* also shaped religious thought and practice throughout the Sinitic world as much as reflected it. As many readers of this journal will know, it can be hard to understand aspects of contemporary religious practice without some familiarity with this particular novel.

Despite the apparent focus of this book on *Canonization*, in actuality, as Meulenbeld shows us, the novel occupies a tertiary position after both ritual and theatre which do the important preliminary work of recounting the exploits of the gods. The novel comes along later to provide a post-facto overarching narrative for episodes that have been performed elsewhere. Meulenbeld thus follows a similar line to that adopted by Glen Dudbridge and Wilt Idema who have previously paid attention to the popular and performative roots of the Ming vernacular novel. But there is no doubt that his emphasis on the religious/martial world out of which *Canonization* emerged is quite unique. The most significant evidence for *Canonization*'s reliance on earlier types of performance is that the novel ends with long lists of its protagonists who become invested as gods. As Meulenbeld reveals, those lists are far from fictional: they tally with known older ritual pantheons found now in the Daoist canon. Because they meet untimely and violent deaths, such figures are considered ineligible to be included in family ancestral rites, and these unquiet dead might become vengeful spirits if not tamed and brought within the orthodox pantheon. This is done, as Meulenbeld suggests, both ritually in the

world beyond the novel, and narratively within it. Although the deities are not explicitly tied to locales in the novel, in Meulenbeld's view they are indeed local gods who become "canonized" (I think I would still prefer the word "invested" or "enfeoffed") in a trans-local Daoist ritual pantheon. The gods are not isolated individuals in the novel or its ritual system, but are part of a greater network. The novel is thus really concerned with a multiplicity of gods and their relations rather than their individual personalities.

Meulenbeld's key argument (introduced on p. 2) is that "ritual practices form the primary referents in the broad cultural domain to which *Canonization* belongs." The particular rituals in question are martial Thunder Rites (*leifa* 雷法) that first ensnare unruly uncanonical local deities and then transform them into gods who have a place within the officially sanctioned Daoist pantheon. These rituals in fact share the vernacular language of the novel. The secondary argument is that the narrative of *Canonization* exemplifies the possibility for human participants in ritual to perform the efficacy of the gods who are the characters in the novel.

One of the key insights of the book is its presentation of a Daoist *imaginaire* in which disruptive, violent demons are made to submit to Daoist ritual order and become a productive part of the pantheon. While it focuses in part on the social and institutional reality of late imperial Daoism, *Demonic Warfare* also offers a much-needed window into how Daoists fantasized about a better and more orderly world. In many ways, *Canonization* as a work of fiction was able to resolve religious tensions in a way that the state or Daoist institutions could never quite manage on the ground. It may be useful to think of *Canonization* in particular as presenting a fantasy of the total sublimation of violent demons into an ordered pantheon that could never really have taken place in actuality, even though the gods in the novel are grounded in concrete community temples. The actual process of canonization must have been a lot more piecemeal than the totalizing vision of the novel.

Demonic Warfare also offers an opportunity to reflect seriously and at length upon violence and martial values—aspects of Chinese

culture that are often forced to the margins when we consider imperial society. There is a good deal of violence in the novel and the larger ritual/performance culture in which it is based, but how does this square with our notions of a rational, civil, “Confucian” late imperial China? What changes for us as scholars if we put military virtues back at the centre of our reading of Chinese religions? What does the religious landscape look like if we take into account the close relationship between military garrisons and local temples that seems to have been quite common? This is an important book for scholars of Daoism, because it prompts us to think through some of the basic assumptions we make about how Chinese religions function, how they relate to each other and to the state. It also asks us to consider the association between areas that we usually consider discrete such as religion, ritual, theatre, and fiction.

Canonization foregrounds martial valour in its mythical telling of how King Wu of Zhou overthrew the evil last king of the Shang dynasty. In that account, we see that the demons of disorder are not simply eradicated but deliberately incorporated into the greater Daoist pantheon as martial gods. As the name of the work suggests (especially if we think in terms of the “enfeoffment of the gods”) the problem with demons is not their moral qualities (good/bad) or their motivation as much as to whom they owe their loyalty. The gods never lose their martial qualities, they are not transformed from military figures into civil officials, they only pledge allegiance to a different authority.

As Meulenbeld shows, the novel is rooted in local ritual operas which served as entertainment, as ways of teaching and transmitting mythology and history, to teach morality, and to prepare for battle. Performance of these operas was probably important for morale and the construction of military identity when smaller militia units came together to form battalions or divisions. In Meulenbeld’s vision of “demonic warfare” men may fight in local militias, but the actual battles are among the gods who possess or inspire human warriors. The ritual militias and their related gods that he introduces in this book are truly significant for understanding late imperial society, but so far remain much under-appreciated in scholarship. Meulenbeld notes specific links to the deity Li Nezha

李哪吒 (the subject of an excellent new book by Meir Shahar), to the Five Garrisons (*wuying* 五營) and their vernacular rituals (68–69), and also to other divisions of martial deities such as the Thirty-Six Celestial Rectifiers (*tiangang* 天罡) and the Seventy-Two Terrestrial Killers (*disha* 地煞) who act under the command of higher Daoist gods.¹ One important message of this book is that the centrality of combat for Chinese religions in late imperial times needs to be much better recognized. Readers will take away from the book a new appreciation for the importance of martial values for understanding Chinese history, literature, and religion. One hopes that other scholars will take up the task of seeking the roots of this tradition: How far back does this martial/performance/ritual arts nexus go? Can we find it earlier than the Song?

For scholars of Daoism, one of the most appealing aspects of this book is its serious treatment of the practical manifestations of Thunder Magic. The book traces the ritual origins of *Canonization* back to Thunder Magic liturgies of the thirteenth century. Further, it shows how the early Ming empire inherited the ritual corpus of the Thunder Magic tradition through the efforts of the Qingwei 清微 patriarchs of the time. Early Ming emperors, Hongwu (洪武, r. 1368–1398) especially, were keen to regularize potentially dangerous cults to local gods and to incorporate them into an orthodox, Daoist ritual system. Meulenbeld emphasizes the Daoist perspective in this process, seeing senior Daoist figures as explicitly enforcing the structural unity of late Imperial Chinese religion. It is an interesting view of the situation, since other scholars have tended to regard Chinese religions in that period as much more diverse and less subject to overarching institutional control. Perhaps this ordered view of things was indeed what Daoist priests wanted, but one wonders how much it reflects reality? One can see that it was in their interests to ally with the Ming state so as to marginalize the veneration of local “heterodox” or “non-canonical” gods and instead impose an empire-wide Daoist ritual order. Many readers will recognise here another manifestation of a long-standing

¹ Meir Shahar, *Oepidal God: The Chinese Nezha and his Indian Origins* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

concern for Daoist institutions vis-a-vis local religions that dates back to the times of the early Celestial Master community.

In common with many other great works of Chinese literature, *Canonization* has a close relationship to Chinese traditions of history writing and historiography. In this “Daoist imaginary history,” human history is dictated by the Daoist pantheon itself, and local communities partake of a larger trans-local history. Meulenbeld describes local performances of histories that were far removed in space and time from that community and explains how such performances acknowledge powers of history greater than the community (73). One important idea that is reinforced in *Demonic Warfare* is the making of a community through reciting history. That history includes a kind of “shadow history” of episodes that were not deemed appropriate to record in official historiography. At the level of local performance and ritual we discover a kind of vernacular history that is more raw and real than the smoothed out narratives found in the dynastic histories.

The first chapter of the book, “Invention of the Novel,” takes us back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century when the academic study of Chinese literature was first formed. It tells us how the privileging of literary fiction divorced late Ming novels like *Canonization* from the environments in which they were formed—very religious environments in fact, replete with temples, ritual operas, and multiplicities of gods. This explains the odd situation in which we find ourselves: these novels have so far largely been studied in an artificially created environment from which religion has been rigorously excluded to the detriment of scholarship.

Chapter two, “King Wu’s Sacred History,” offers a cultural history of *Canonization* in which Meulenbeld traces back the origins of the novel to its ritual/performance roots. Chapter three, “Demonic Warfare During the Yuan,” links Daoist thunder rituals to the formation of an integrated network of communities and their divine (demonic) warriors who are their local gods. In the fourth chapter, “Demonic Warfare During the Ming,” Meulenbeld shows how Thunder Magic liturgists implemented this new network to serve the early Ming emperors. “The Order of the Ming Novel,” the fifth chapter of the book, takes the arguments of the other

chapters forward into a detailed analysis of the late Ming vernacular novel and its surrounding cultural sphere. There is also a brief conclusion that restates the arguments set forth in the book.

Scholars of Daoism will appreciate how Meulenbeld makes use of both Daoist liturgical materials and other sources beyond the canon such as gazetteers, official histories, and anecdotal collections to tell this important story. But I hope the readership will not be confined to scholars of Chinese religion and history and that literary scholars will also take seriously what it has to say and take up the task of examining religion in other great works of Chinese literature. Scholars in ritual studies, theatre and performance studies, as well as military history should take much from this work too. Given that the novel, religion, and theatre are all modern Western constructs, from a disciplinary point of view it would make more sense for scholars of China to come together and read *Canonization* and other such works on their own terms.

While the book is very thorough in its coverage, the subject matter raises a few questions that pertain to making sense of the key issues at stake. For example, is “exorcism” the right word for some of the processes here, even though Meulenbeld wants to use the term loosely (8)? Are the demons actually exorcised (driven out), or just pacified or “contained” as he suggests at one point (68)? Perhaps a word like “sublimation” or “transformation” might better fit the case. In any case, this study would have offered a good opportunity to consider the appropriate terminology for the rituals it discusses. Other key terms, like “demon” itself, could have been explored at greater length. A related question is whether the baleful spirits of the violently killed are indeed actually the same kind of demon as the plague demons who seem to be the heroes of the novel. The book needs a little more consideration of how the victims of violent death become gods—it would be very helpful to be shown that process theoretically worked out in pre-modern Chinese sources, rather than attributed to “common Chinese theology” (67). I noted one minor typographical error: the caption to figure 6 on p. 93 gives Patrice Fava’s surname as “Fara.”

Demonic Warfare offers a stirring and convincing vision of a late imperial China in which “men and gods thus fight shoulder to

shoulder in a liturgical network of divine protection” (3). Meulenbeld has found an effective way in which to present an enchanted world full of powerful spirits and numinous forces. He introduces material that many readers will not have encountered before, and he patiently reveals the significance of that material. Readers should find this book very stimulating for further enquiry. It opens a vista on a ritual culture in pre-modern China that must have been very diverse indeed—soldiers, professional entertainers, and Daoist priests seem to have participated in the ritual operas that were the precursor to *Canonization*. The novel itself acts as a kind of imagined community, and that may be a useful way to think about other texts of the time. *Canonization* exemplifies the power of narrative to bring trans-regional and trans-temporal order to a diversity of locales and their gods.

This study shows that Daoism is highly pertinent to the study of local religions in late imperial China, thus going against the usual scholarly trend that would see trans-local institutional religions like Daoism as mostly irrelevant to the understanding of local traditions and practices. Meulenbeld is much more comfortable in not seeing a sharp divide between local popular religion and the text-heavy institutional traditions of Buddhism and Daoism. In his view, while ritual communities may have had some autonomy, they also consciously partook of larger Daoist networks of ideology and practice. At the same time, Daoist priests were trained not only in the high rituals of the tradition, but also in local rituals that tamed unruly deities. Thus, he provides us with a much richer and more integrated view of the Daoist church in action in late imperial times. *Demonic Warfare* treats local cults with the seriousness and respect that they deserve, while also giving due weight to the greater enterprise in which Daoist ritualists were engaged.

One hopes that not only will scholars of late imperial Chinese religions read the vernacular novel but also that literary scholars and historians will take seriously the rich religious contexts in which these novels were created and circulated. Scholars of Daoism may have to exhibit some patience with the first chapter of the book, in which the argument is oriented more towards the field of

literary studies, but they will be amply rewarded by the remainder of the book, which engages meaningfully with a broad range of Daoist ideas and practices in late imperial China. Overall, I hope this excellent study will inspire future scholars in multiple disciplines to look deeper into the intricacies of late imperial Daoist ritual theory and practice.

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