

Stephen F. TEISER, *The Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988) (275 pp., index, bibliography) (ISBN 0-691-05525-4)

This book describes the formative period of the Ghost Festival (translating its unofficial name *guijie* 鬼節, rather than the doctrinal *yulan pen* 盂蘭盆, cf. Teiser, pp. 22–23), especially during the Tang dynasty. The festival has been one of the major non-denominational religious celebrations in Chinese culture since at least the sixth century. Nowadays, both Buddhist and Daoist priests carry out the rituals for feeding the hungry ghosts. The festival is held each year on and around the full moon (i.e. the fifteenth day) of the seventh month to feed the hungry ghosts, especially those of ancestors suffering in hell. The central myth is that of the monk Mulian, who saves his mother from her deserved punishment in the most gruesome of hells, the Avīci hell. All food that he sends her changes into flames the moment it reaches her mouth, and Mulian is taught by the Buddha that it has to be blessed first by monks at the full moon that marks the end of their summer retreat. The importance of this festival not only teaches us about the importance of filial obedience and respect (*xiao* 孝), but also about the ongoing strength of the mother-son relationship in Chinese culture.

Teiser's approach distinguishes itself from existing historical studies by an extremely open and broad-minded attitude towards the subject and the available sources. He does not confine himself to (or arbitrarily exclude) doctrinal sources, but tries to give all available sources their due (especially in his chapter three, "An Episodic History"), and analyses the different social, literary and religious dimensions of the phenomenon (in the remaining chapters on its mythological background, Mulian as a shaman, the depiction of the underworlds [i.e. the cosmology of the festival], and finally Buddhism and the family).

After an introductory chapter, Teiser discusses the antecedents to the festival, inside and outside China, in Chapter Two. Instead of describing it as an Indian or otherwise foreign custom that was brought to China and transformed there, while remaining essentially foreign, he proceeds with his discussion by taking the fundamental "Chineseness" of the festival as his point of departure. In this respect, it is relevant to add to Teiser's argument that the monks Xuanzang 玄奘 (602–664) and Yijing 義淨 (635–713), who visited India when the festival was already well-established in China, only mention the summer retreat, but never the element of

Mulian saving his mother, nor the Chinese function of the festival in saving one's ancestors. The two travellers also remark that the festival in India was held in different months. As suggested by Iwamoto Yutaka, the specific Chinese date for the festival could have been influenced by the coexisting Daoist *zhongyuan* 中元 festival on that specific date.¹

In Chapter Four, Teiser shows that most elements of the Mulian story can be traced to antecedents in Buddhism, as it existed in China since early times. However, this does not help us in understanding why Mulian of all Buddhist figures became so popular, or why certain elements in the original Mulian stories were selected at the expense of others. This forms the topic of his fascinating Chapter Five, where he points to the interaction between the indigenous shamanic religion and the Buddhist tradition as it gradually entered China, and the way in which this interaction altered both. The earliest Buddhist monks and priests in China often had highly developed shamanic abilities. To my knowledge, Teiser is the first to explore historically the shamanic roots of Chinese religion in a systematic way. Much work still remains to be done on the interaction between early Buddhism and shamanism, the origins of Daoism (both its early phase and later traditions, such as the early Maoshan tradition and the present-day Lü-shan exorcist tradition), as well as shamanism as a separate topic in Chinese history. The shamanistic side of the Mulian figure is not only important from an historical perspective (i.e. the search for origins), but also because shamanism remained very much alive in subsequent centuries and continued to influence people's perceptions of the Mulian myth (i.e. the "emic" framework of interpretation).² Probably, Mulian plays in later dynasties fulfilled the same role that was once filled, during the Han, by shamanic festivals such as the Great Exorcism (*danuo* 大難). Teiser's argument should be placed in the larger context of studies which all point to the residue of shamanistic practices of visits to the underworld in later mythology about hell, such as the Greek story of Orpheus and indigenous Japanese underworld mythology.³

¹ Iwamoto Yutaka 岩本裕, *Bukkyô setsuwa kenkyû* 佛教説話研究 IV (Tôkyô, 1979) 225-245 (original article 1966).

² Cf. the relevant comments in this respect by Kenneth Dean, "Lei Yu-sheng ('Thunder is Noisy') and Mu-lien in the theatrical and funerary traditions of Fukien", in: David Johnson ed., *Ritual Opera, Operatic Ritual: "Mulian Rescues his Mother" in Chinese Popular Culture* (Berkeley, 1989) 47-48.

³ E.g. Yamaguchi Masao 山口昌男, "Jigoku izen—Shâmanizumu no nihonte-

As Teiser (pp. 208–213) stresses emphatically, the Ghost Festival linked the general population and the monastic community closely together in a cycle of exchange of material gifts and religious benefits, centering on the central Chinese virtue of filial piety. Of course, Buddhism and religion, in general, could never have survived if they had been radically world-renouncing and antisocial. Such an attitude is only viable for small religious groups. In studying the social history of Buddhism (broadly defined) in China, one is constantly struck by the integration of this religion into Chinese society. Arguments about the antisocial nature and foreign provenance of Buddhism are part of the anti-Buddhist polemics by a very small literate elite and need not be taken as serious statements about the acceptance of the religion by society as a whole.

Teiser (pp. 191–195) automatically assumes that the Ghost Festival and the Mulian myth appealed most strongly to the unlettered Chinese of medieval times, rather than the social or intellectual elite(s), doctrinally more sophisticated monks, or those lay believers who adhered to Amitâbha and Maitreya devotionism or Buddhist messianism. He does so on the basis of the implicit assumption that people have consistent worldviews and of the, as yet unproven, notion that there is a distinction between the religious beliefs of different social groups. I would hesitate to generalize on the basis of the extremely limited number of opinions expressed by members of the educated elites in Buddhist sources as to the opinions of their own social groups as a whole. Furthermore, being highly literate has never precluded people from holding beliefs that seem (at least to an outsider or modern scholar) to be incompatible with their level of education. For instance, the anecdotal literature of the Tang, and before, contains many accounts of literati visiting the underworld.

As Teiser himself is the first to point out, his study in no way exhausts all the material available on the Ghost Festival and certainly not on the Mulian mythology. The 1989 conference volume edited by David Johnson provides some idea of the kind of work that can still be done. An interesting anthropological study which deals systematically with the Ghost Festival on Taiwan is Robert Weller's *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Seattle, 1987). Something which strikes me when reading later ethnographical reports of the festival is the much more violent and exorcistic

ki tenkai 地獄以前：シャーマニズムの日本的展開”，in: Sakamoto Kaname 坂本要, *Jigoku no sekai* 地獄の世界 (Tôkyô, 1990) 3–14 (original article in *Dentô to gendai* 伝統と現代 1969: 1).

nature of the struggles with ghost and demons during the nineteenth and twentieth century festivals and Mulian plays, compared with the Tang accounts used by Teiser.⁴ Is this the result of the distorted perspective of Teiser's sources, which are, after all, rather few in number (as well as limited in geographical and social scope), or are we indeed dealing with the increased fusion over time of the festival with shamanic exorcist traditions? How important were the mother-son and other familial relationships in the later festival? To answer these questions, we need to look more closely at the available material from the Song, Yuan and Ming dynasties. Finally, it would be valuable to carry out a systematic comparative study of the Chinese and Japanese Ghost Festivals, which are documented in ample detail—both in terms of written sources and iconography. Because the two festivals share the same historical roots, an investigation of the similarities and differences between them would be extremely instructive on the way in which these two societies use religion.

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Arthur WALDRON, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990) (296 pages, with extensive bibliographies of primary and secondary sources, figures, maps, glossary of Chinese characters, index) (ISBN 0-521-36518 X)

Arthur Waldron's book demonstrates, with a wealth of detail from Chinese and Western sources, that the idea of one continuous Great Wall, starting with the wall built at the order of the First Emperor of the Qin, and continuing on the same site until the present-day walls were erected during the late Ming, is an historical myth. In fact, even the nature of the Qin walls themselves is extremely unclear, and of the subsequent dynasties few built any walls along the northern border at all (significant wall-building was undertaken by the Northern Qi [550–574], the Sui [589–617] and the Jin [1115–1234]; none were built by the Tang [618–907], the Song [960–1276] and the Yuan [1271–1368]). Furthermore, none of the later walls continued the Qin or Han walls, but they all ran their separate courses, dictated by the specific policy demands of their own times. They were built of stamped earth, which was a cheap building material, but which also decayed very rapidly. Most of the Ming walls were also built of this material and the massive,

⁴ This remark is inspired by David Johnson's fine contribution "Actions Speak Louder than Words: The Cultural Significance of Chinese Ritual Opera", in Johnson (1989) 1–32.