
Valerie Hansen’s *Changing Gods in Medieval China* can be read as an introduction to local temple cults as well as non-elite local life during the Southern Song period. The history of local cults is integrated into contemporary social, economic and political history, rather than being treated as an isolated phenomenon that can be left to specialists and subsequently ignored. As such this book differs from most other studies on pre-modern religion. Hansen does not focus on one particular cult, nor does she treat a specific ritual and/or doctrinal tradition of Buddhist or Daoist provenance. Her analysis of local cults and their following is built up from contemporary sources, rather than by reasoning backward from the present or by imposing a doctrinal point of view. Since most followers of such cults will not have had much inside knowledge of Daoist or Buddhist ritual and doctrine, this approach undoubtedly reflects their perspective fairly well (Hansen, 24-27).

I find this approach highly commendable, especially as there is a distinct danger of seeing things too much through the perspective of ritual specialists. On the other hand, some of the cults that are important to Hansen’s argument about the rise of supra-local or regional temple cults have been appropriated to a varying extent by Daoist and/or Buddhist priests, specifically the cults of the Five Manifestations (wuxian 五願), the Heavenly Consort (tianfei 天妃) and Zitong 柟潼. The same is also true of other cults which are mentioned cursorily, such as the cult devoted to the deity True Martialty (zhenwu 真武). Furthermore, the Daoist canon in particular contains an abundance of material on local religion, including temple cults. The views of Daoist and Buddhist ritual spe-
cialists and of local magistrates (in their crucial ritual function representing the emperor as Son of Heaven) are an important part of the overall socio-religious phenomenon with which Hansen is concerned, even if they opposed many aspects of these cults and constantly attempted to change their contents. As long as we remain aware of immense tensions between the views of such specialists and those of the local people, we can profit from including their ritual and polemic writings in our source material. At the same time, we need to keep in mind the overall purpose of Hansen’s book, which is limited to temple cults and nowhere claims to analyze local religious life as a whole. Most of the cults that appear in her fascinating study were never appropriated by ritual specialists.

The main sources for this book are anecdotes (mostly from Hong Mai’s 洪邁 book *The Record of the Listener* [Yijianzhi 夷堅志], quoted below as *The Record*) and inscriptions (from the collections included in the *Shihe shiliao congshu* 石刻史料叢書, unpublished material gathered in Taipei and Beijing, as well as from local gazetteers). Hansen has inventively supplemented this material with local gazetteers, collected writings, the Song compilation of administrative law *The Collected Important [Documents] from the Song* (Songhuiyao 宋會要), and the hagiographical collection devoted to the then immensely popular King Zhang of Shrine Mountain (*Cishan Zhang-wang* 祠山張王).

There are numerous other collections of anecdotes that could be used to supplement *The Record*, such as the *Kuiche zhi* 睢車志, the *Guidong* 鬼董, and the *Huhai xinwen yijian xuzhi* 湖海新聞夷堅續志. *The Kuiche zhi* (Record of the Cart Full of Ghosts; completed in or shortly after 1181) was modelled on *The Record*. It covers the same period and contains the same type of anecdotes, including the names of its informants, none of whom appear in this role in *The Record.* The *Guidong* (Overseer of Ghosts; colophon from 1326, compiled circa 1218) includes many Southern Song anecdotes and was compiled by someone who was familiar with *The Record.* The *Huhai xinwen yijian xuzhi* (*The Sequel Record of the Listener [Based on] New Hearsay from the Lakes and the Seas*; circa 1302) was intended as a sequel to *The Record*. It includes many late Southern Song and early Yuan anecdotes. Furthermore, over a hundred previously lost anecdotes from *The Record* – none of them included in the standard Beijing edition of 1981 – have been recently unearthed by various modern scholars. Finally, the Buddhist and
Daoist canons contain valuable collections of miracle tales.

More importantly, the potential sources and research questions have been restricted by Hansen’s somewhat old-fashioned decision to confine the scope of the book to the Southern Song (here referred to as Medieval China). The author does argue convincingly (pp. 4-10) why she excludes the Tang-Song transition, but she is not convincing as to why she starts from 1127 and even less convincing why she ends in 1276. The practice of discussing the Tang and Song together or the Southern Song independently derives from old conventions that originate in political and military history. My own research suggests that in many ways the non-elite social, cultural and religious history (histories) of the Lower Yangzi region do not show a significant (or at least noticeable) break in 1276, but continue in many ways throughout the Yuan dynasty. This holds especially true for the cults studied by Hansen. Actually, the wars and rebellions of the late Yuan, followed by the ideological clampdown of the early Ming period have had much more drastic effects on local life in this region. I make this point, because we have many excellent sources on temple cults during the Yuan that can be used to advantage to increase our understanding of Southern Song society, and because certain trends become much clearer when we take the Yuan into consideration as well. Furthermore, one of the most often used Southern Song sources on Hangzhou, the Record of a Dream on a Millet Cushion (Mengliang lu 夢梁錄), dates from after the fall of the Song anyhow, most likely from circa 1304.

Hansen (pp. 22-23) rightly stresses that Hong Mai attempted to be faithful in recording people’s stories, even if he changed the medium from the spoken vernacular to the classical written language. She argues for Hong Mai’s reliability as a transmitter and informant on the basis of strong similarities between two versions of a Guanyin miracle, one presented to Hong Mai by an informant and the other recorded in an inscription. I do not think that the essential quality of Hong Mai’s anecdotes (or their usefulness as a source on Southern Song life) is located in their reliable depiction of particular events. After all, he and his informants were recording on the basis of their own personal backgrounds and preferences from an ever-changing oral tradition. This phenomenon can be illustrated nicely with the story of Straw Clothes He, of which we have two longer versions, preserved in The Record (probably circa 1197) and Yue Ke 岳珂’s Tingshi 程史 (1214), and a
short one in Fan Chengda's history of Suzhou Prefecture, the *Wujun zhi* (1192). Each version contains substantially different details, while preserving the overall characterization of this man as an eccentric, who was well connected with the court and the higher classes, and who occupied himself with healing, fortune telling and writing poems. In a sense, none of these three versions is more (or less) true than the other.

In constructing her picture of local temple cults during the Southern Song, Hansen pays little systematic attention to worshipping practices (liturgy). This has probably been caused by her decision not to incorporate materials from Buddhist and Daoist doctrinal traditions. However, it must be stressed that liturgical practice(s) existed independently of these two canonical traditions. Sadly, therefore, there is no systematic treatment of burning incense and sacrifice, despite the fact that the Earth God, whose words are quoted by Hansen (pp. 50-51) from a Southern Song play, talks about little else than his sacrificial gifts and the lousy food he gets. Of course, sacrifice was absolutely essential to the maintenance of a cult. In one story told by Hong Mai, someone is visited in a dream by a figure in yellow clothes (clothes clearly form another interesting topic for further investigation). A woman living next to him wonders: "Recently, there has been a temple east of the house of Prefect Qian to which the people of the township flock to burn incense, could it be this deity?" The protagonist "then took incense and spirits with him to go and pay an audience." The state of a cult's "incense fire" conventionally serves to indicate its popularity. Since long before the Song, burning incense has been the minimal act of religious worship, more essential than statues or other types of representation of a divine being. It is revealing that in an early Song instance a deity designates the new spot for his shrine by moving the incense burner through the air.

One of the major objections shared by Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist ritual specialists alike against the liturgical practices of local cults was the thirst of these deities for "bloody food (xueshi 血食), i.e. animal sacrifice." For instance, the sacrifice of large numbers of oxen in the cult of King Zhang of Shrine Mountain was an essential element of the cult's liturgy over the centuries (mentioned cursorily by Hansen, pp. 157-159). The ox symbolized water as a life-giving force and was linked to earth as a provider of fertility. At the same time, this crucial sacrifice was an ongoing
bone of contention with Confucian officials, because they perceived it as a waste of useful animals.\textsuperscript{18} These sacrifices (which continued despite official prohibitions) may well have been the principal cause why this cult lost its former prominence in Southern China after the Yuan period, and never became the subject of Daoist or Buddhist liturgical attention, unlike virtually all other regional cults which arose during the Song-Yuan period.

Another liturgical issue is discussed by Hansen in more detail (pp. 129-132, 144, 146-147, 157-158), namely whether deities can be worshipped outside their region of origin. I agree with the author (p. 129) that this is not a theological debate, if only because terms such as “belief” and hence “theology” are not appropriate to the Chinese context. However, it is not merely a political debate either, since it concerns matters of liturgical propriety. Two main opponents of such worship of regional deities were Chen Chun – a disciple of Zhu Xi – and Huang Zhen – a posthumous follower of Zhu Xi. As we know, liturgical propriety was an important Neo-Confucian concern.\textsuperscript{19} At the very end of her book (p. 166), Hansen links these criticisms to the fact that during the Southern Song the local elites were turning away from the ritual-political centre and orienting themselves more and more towards the places where they lived. She then connects this with her argument that merchants were a principal source of support for regional cults. However, regional cults were certainly also supported by these local elites and I would not connect these criticisms with this particular development.\textsuperscript{20} Rather, I would see them as part of an attempt on the part of Neo-Confucian literati to return to what they considered to be the proper ritual (liturgical) forms of worship as these had purportedly existed before the Han dynasty.

In an important chapter, Hansen analyzes the Chinese imperial state’s granting of ranks and titles to local deities as a form of legitimation and – by the same token – state control.\textsuperscript{21} When reading this chapter, one cannot help being reminded of the contemporary practice whereby the state provides individuals with diplomas or little flags that testify to their mastery of certain hygienic standards (for instance, foodshops) or having participated in certain cultural festivals (for instance, local puppet performers). Part of this state involvement is substantial, but much also reminds us of the granting of ranks and titles in the past. In February 1993 an exhibition was organized by the Quanzhou Municipality to support its claim of being the birthplace of the martial arts tradition
of the Southern Shaolin Monastery. The place of honour and the largest amount of exhibition space was not given to the available textual and material evidence, but rather to the calligraphy of auspicious phrases by highly placed persons from the political and cultural bureaucracies and a wealth of newspaper articles in support of this claim. The symbolic use of titles and phrases by representatives of the state is still an important means of legitimation.22

The focus of Hansen’s book is on the temple deities and their relationship to individual followers. She is, of course, well aware of the social groups (or networks) behind these cults. Thus she discusses briefly a case of competing claims by rival groups with different deities with regard to the same miracles (pp. 72-73, 124-126), and analyzes the social networks behind the petitions for titles (pp. 95-104). However, I would have liked to learn more about the fact that the focus of local social organization was the temple cult. Neo-Confucian critics, such as Chen Chun and Huang Zhen, give us a very clear impression of the degree of self-organization by local communities with different functionaries and rotating leadership.23 The upkeep of a cult was probably a financial burden on the local people (a dimension much stressed by Chen Chun and Huang Zhen), as much as it was a way of expressing and enhancing local solidarity and individual prominence.24

An unresolved issue concerns the question of the group responsible for spreading the regional cults all over southern China. Hansen argues for the decisive role of merchants, but this is actually very hard to prove. The remarkable fact about the Song is that so many different social and professional groups were travelling, ranging from merchants and peddlers to officials, soldiers, monks and priests, pilgrims and so forth. Since all of these groups would have used the same commercial trade routes if they travelled long distances, the marked distribution of regional cults along these routes helps little in ascertaining the social background of the people who transmitted cults (pp. 139-140, 164-166). As Von Glahn points out in his review, Daoist and Buddhist priests were also involved in spreading cults. He proposes pilgrimages as an important medium for the spread of a cult, but concrete evidence is slim here as well.25 I think we have no choice but to acquiesce in the fact that at least for the pre-Qing period our sources are simply insufficient for making definitive generalizations on the involvement by particular social or professional groups in spreading
specific cults. The only thing that we are able to do is to stress the contributory role of particular groups in specific cults, for instance Buddhist priests in the case of the Five Manifestations cult or Sichuanese natives and Daoist priests in the case of Zitong. We can also investigate the role of merchants and other social or professional groups in founding, maintaining and spreading cults without restricting ourselves to specific individual cults.

One of the great unknowns of the Song period is the degree of literacy. Von Glahn criticizes Hansen for underestimating the “imbrication of scripture and lay religion”. To a certain extent this may be true, but more so in those specific cases where the text-oriented traditions of Buddhism and Daoism appropriated local cults. However, while agreeing with Hansen (pp. 13-16) on the fundamentally oral nature of these cults (not to be confused with the much larger sphere of non-elite religious life as a whole), I wish to make two supplementary remarks. First of all, the Southern Song is not only the period of the first widespread of regional cults, it is also the first period in which we have such a large number of inscriptions from local cults. These cults as such were not new and we also have much older records by the literati in the form of “Tales of the Extraordinary (zhiguai)”, but now local people themselves hired literate people to compose elaborate texts for their cults and paid stone cutters to hew these texts into stone. Secondly, the Southern Song and Yuan saw the first hagiographical collections of local cults, such as the Daqian menglu 大乾夢錄 (Record of the Dreams of [the God of] Daqian) of Ouyang Hu (first edition probably late Southern Song, new edition slightly before 1312), the Zudian Lingyingji 祖殿靈應集 (The Collection of Divine Responses of the Ancestral Palace) of the Five Manifestations (quoted in a Yuan source, judging from its contents most likely a Southern Song compilation), the Cishan zhi 祠山志 (Record of Temple Mountain, the oldest extant prefaces to the 1886 edition date from 1295 and 1314), Wenchang huashu 文昌化書 (The Book of Transformations of Wenchang) of Wenchang the Divine Lord of Zitong (extant in differing Song and Yuan recensions), Xinbian Guanwang shiji 新編關王事蹟 (New Compilation of the Exploits of King Guan) of Guan Yu (prefaces by the compiler of the new compilation from 1264 in Sichuan and from 1308 by a reader). Clearly, writing was important to the self-image of the followers of local cults, even if the cults themselves continued to function predominantly in an oral milieu. The role of texts and literacy in pre-mod-
ern Chinese culture as a whole remains an understudied terrain, desperately awaiting more scholarly attention.

In Appendix III Hansen mentions the decline of nature gods (pp. 182-183). This is quite a complicated and understudied issue. First of all, her overall statements must probably be qualified for different regions and different periods. In the north, fox cults have continued to exist until today, even if foxes are often perceived as beings that can transform themselves into men. In the south, other nature cults also continued to exist, such as those devoted to snakes and frogs. However, there does seem to be a long-term trend where nature cults either disappeared (in the same way that nature itself was being transformed increasingly over time, with a considerable speeding up of this process from the Song onwards) or were transformed into cults for humans. Zitong himself evolved from a serpent cult and many late imperial earth god cults are transformations of former earth cults (she 社) devoted to trees and stones. In some ways, the Southern Song temple pantheon already looked very much like the nineteenth and twentieth century situation that we know so well from ethnographic descriptions. However, at the time this was a major revolution and it is the great merit of Valerie Hansen’s study to have made this clear to us for the first time.

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2 Thanks to Judith Boltz, A Survey of Taoist Literature: Tenth to Seventeenth Centuries (University of California, Berkeley, 1987), the use of such materials has become a feasible option for non-Daoism scholars as well.

3 Just how much can be attained by combining these different sources, is demonstrated by Judith Boltz’s fascinating article “Not by the Seal of Office Alone: New Weapons in Battles with the Supernatural”, in Patricia Buckley Ebrey and Peter N. Gregory eds., Religion and Society in T’ang and Sung China (University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 1993), 241-305.

4 Compare Richard von Glahn’s excellent review of Hansen’s book in the Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies 53: 2 (1993), esp. pp. 619-622. Although I would agree with him with respect to the overall point he makes on including Buddhist and Daoist sources and points of view, I disagree with his contention that “... the most prevalent cults in the Song (and afterwards) centred on deities consecrated by established religion ...”. This could easily be a misunderstanding derived from local gazetteers, since – hardly surprisingly – these tend to focus on precisely such well-established cults. In some regions the standardization of the pantheon had progressed very far by the late Qing, but for instance in Taiwan today or in the
Ningbo region formerly one can still find a wide variety of different cults outside the reach of “established religion”, in other words Buddhist and Daoist ritual specialists.

Von Glahn also discusses the fascinating case of the recital of the *Duren jing* 度人經 as an example of the appropriation of local temple cults by canonical ritual traditions. He bases himself on the mentioning of murals devoted to this scripture, but these were part of the principal Daoist monastery of Suzhou, the Heavenly Fortune Belvedere (*tiangqing guan* 天慶觀), and not of a temple devoted to a local cult of the kind discussed by Hansen. As for the “audience” of these murals, we have no evidence that it included non-elite non-literate groups, as von Glahn suggests. We only know that certain members of this monastery enjoyed the favourable attention of the imperial court (cf. Fan Chengda 范成大, *Wujun zhi* 壬郡志 [Songyuan fangshi congkan] 31: 1a-3b), which might actually mean that non-elite groups would have been excluded from the monastery.


6 Mr. Shen 沈, *Guidong* (*Zhibuzhuzhai congshu*). The author refers twice explicitly to The Record, in Guidong, 1: 14b-15b (Hong Mai, *Yijian zhi* [Zhonghua shuju, Beijing, 1981], ding 9: 608-609) and 4: 6b-7a (to the lost *Yijian zhi* collection gui, although a very similar incident involving the same ritual specialist is discussed in *Yijian zhi*, zhiyi, 5: 831-2).

7 Anonymous, *Huhai xinwen yijian xuzhi* (Zhonghua shuju, Beijing, 1986). This book is used by Hansen only to a very limited extent.


9 Figure 1; “Titles Granted to Popular Deities Year by Year” (Hansen, p. 80) and a remark from Shen Gua (Hansen, p. 131) suggest that the late eleventh century might have been a much more natural cut-off date.

10 Take for instance the less known *Xishang futan* 席上腐談 by Yu Yan 俞琰 (*Biji xiaoshuo daguan*, fourth series) from the Yuan period. It states (shang 6a) that Zhenwu was worshipped by households in the Lower Yangzi region as a deity against fire disasters. This little detail matches nicely with the story by Hong Mai (Hansen, pp. 29-31 and 171-172), where he also appears as someone who flies around the house, yet fails to repel ghosts. If his task was indeed primarily to protect against fire, this lack of attention to ordinary ghosts suddenly makes eminent sense. Incidentally, Zhenwu unites his hair before flying off to free his numinous powers, in the same way as was done by exorcist specialists from early on. See for instance Donald Harper, “A Chinese Demonography of the Third Century B.C.”, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45: 2 (1985), p. 476, esp. note 46.

11 The spread of regional cults and the compilation of hagiographies for individual cults (discussed below) are cases in point.


13 See also Charles E. Hammond, “T’ang Legends: History and Hearsay”, *T’angkang Review* XX:4 (1990), pp. 359-382, who stresses that Hong Mai’s predecessors, the Six Dynasties and Tang “Tales of the Extraordinary (zhiguai 志怪)” were also composed as a record.

14 *Yijian zhi*, bu 12: 1657-1660; Yue Ke, *Tingshi* (*Siku quanshu*) 1039: 427-428 (3: 9b-11b) and Yue Ke’s final comment on 1039: 429 (12b-13a); *Wujun zhi*, 31: 3a-b.
15 Yijian zhi, zhigeng: 4: 1168.

16 (Baoqing) Guiji xuzhi 會稽續志 (Song Yuan fangzhi congkan) 3: 19b-20a (7131-7132). Or take the spread of cults through incense fire from a mother temple (all Southern Song instances), e.g. (Yanyou) Siming zhi 四明志 (Song Yuan fangzhi congkan) 15: 12b and 18: 39a. (Zhizheng) Siming xuzhi 四明續志 (Song Yuan fangzhi congkan) 9: 11a, (Jingding) Yanzhou xuzhi 兩州續志 (Song Yuan fangzhi congkan) 9: 6a, and so forth.

17 See Rolf A. Stein, “Religious Taoism and Popular Religion from the Second to the Seventh Centuries”, in Holmes Welch and Anna Seidel eds., Facets of Taoism: Essays in Chinese Religion (Yale UP, New Haven, 1979), pp. 53-81, and the example of Zhu Xi’s visit to the Temple of Five Manifestations, mentioned by Hansen, p. 141. For this reason, the domestication of cults such as Guan Yu and Ouyang Hu consisted of making them vegetarian. See Barend J. ter Haar, “The Cult of Guan Yu” (unpublished manuscript) and “The Genesis and Spread of Temple Cults in Fukien”, in E.B. Vermeeren ed., Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1990) esp. p. 363.


20 Hansen, pp. 146 and 157. The original text by Chen Chun is even more detailed on this issue. On Huang Zhen’s background, see Chang Bide 昌彼得 ed., Songren zhuanji ziliao suoyin 宋人傳記資料索引 (Dingwen shuju, Taibei, second and expanded edition 1984-1990) 4: 2870-2871.

21 This chapter has been taken up by others as well, such as Dean (1993) passim and Kojima Tsuyoshi 小島敏, “Seishi to inshi: Fuken no chihōshi ni okuru kijutsu to ronri 正祠と淫祠：福建の地方志における記述と論理” Tōyō bunka kenkyūjo kiyō 114: 87-213.

22 See also Richard C. Kraus, Brushes with Power: Modern Politics and the Chinese Art of Calligraphy (California University Press, Berkeley, 1991).

23 Helen Siu, Agents and Victims in South China (Yale UP, New Haven, 1989) and Prasenjit Duara, Culture, Power, and the State (Stanford UP, Stanford, 1988) have established this important point for the Late Imperial and Republican periods.

24 For instance Yijian zhi, zhiwu 6: 1100.


26 This statement is based on a survey of the collections of inscriptions used by Hansen.

27 Liu Xun 劉_exc, Yinju tongyi陰居通義 (Congshu jicheng) 30: 311-314.


29 Zhang Guangzao 張光耀, Gishan zhi 社山志 (1886).

30 Terry Kleeman, A God’s Own Tale: The Book of Transformations of Wenchang,

51 Chongbian yiyong wuan wang ji 重編義勇武安王集 (Beijing tushuguan guji zhenben congkan 北京圖書館古籍珍本叢刊, Shumu wenxian, Beijing, n.d.), prefaces to the Yuan-precursor pp. 366-367.


This excellent book is a study and translation of the Hua shu 化書, a sacred text of the late twelfth century which played an important role in the establishment of the nationwide cult to the god Wenchang 文昌 (sometimes known as the “God of Literature”) in late imperial China. Prospective readers should not be misled into thinking that this is “only” a translation. By focusing on the Hua shu, Kleeman has tapped into a rich mine of information about religion, culture, and society at a formative period in Chinese history. The cult to Wenchang and its literary output, in which the Hua shu plays a key part, are typical of an important strand in late imperial religion, one which arose from a new accommodation between popular religion and Daoism during the Song period, and which was reinforced by official recognition from the state. A God’s Own Tale is an in-depth study of the Hua shu within its wider context, and makes a significant contribution to our understanding of Song dynasty religion as a whole.

A God’s Own Tale begins with a substantial introduction which takes up more than a quarter of the book. This traces the history of the Sichuan cult to Zitong Dijun 柴潭帝君 (the “Divine Lord of Zitong,” Wenchang’s alter ego) which produced the Hua shu, then discusses the provenance, content, and significance of the Hua shu itself, and finally summarizes the subsequent history of the god Wenchang in late imperial times. Zitong Dijun is first recorded in the fourth-century Huayangguo zhi as a serpent deity dwelling atop a mountain near Zitong in northern Sichuan, later anthropomorphized and given the surname Zhang, and granted official titles by Tang and Song emperors in 755, 881, and 1004. By this time his cult had spread from its original center at Zitong to the Chengdu plain, where it merged with cults to other deities, such as Transcendent Zhang, the protector of children. In Song

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