

BOOK REVIEWS

Guan Yu: The Religious Life of a Failed Hero. Barend J. ter Haar. Oxford University Press, 2017. xv + 285 pp. Hardcover \$97.50 / ISBN 978-0-19-880364-5.

How did Guan Yu, a minor third-century general, become Lord Guan (or Guandi), among the most popular gods in the Chinese pantheon? Barend ter Haar's history of Guan Yu's "religious afterlife," spanning the third to early-twentieth centuries, presents an argument that is likely to stand for some time as the authoritative account of Guan Yu's apotheosis. The main argument of the book is that the god's immense popularity resulted less from the efforts of literati or institutional religion than from the persistent support of common people. Ter Haar suggests that this support was a result both of Lord Guan's efficacious response to lay concerns such as military threats, drought, moral decay and financial decline, and to the "tangibility" of the deity's presence, a product of the rich tradition of written, oral, and pictorial representations that centered on Lord Guan's acts of legitimate violence (*wu*).

The book begins with a survey of earlier scholarship on Lord Guan and a reconstruction of the life of the historical Guan Yu. The scant information that ter Haar cobbles together in the reconstruction sets in stark relief the magnitude of the transformation he examines in the following seven chapters. Chapters 2 and 3 consider the role of religious institutions—Buddhist and Daoist—in defining Lord Guan. Here, ter Haar shows how intersections of institutional religion and local traditions from the eighth to thirteenth centuries laid the groundwork for the later spread of the Lord Guan cult across China. In chapter 2, he describes how Guan Yu's beheading in Jingzhou sparked a local cult aimed at propitiating Guan's hungry ghost. By the eighth century, this ghost had gained enough prestige to be integrated into the founding myth of the Jade Spring Monastery, a prominent Jingzhou Buddhist institution. While Buddhism played only a minor role in the spread of the Lord Guan cult, Lord Guan's incorporation into the Buddhist context, ter Haar argues, allowed him to be "imagined and accepted as a concretely present deity whom one could actually encounter" (45). In chapter 3, ter Haar examines Lord Guan's entrance into the Daoist exorcistic bureaucracy during the Song dynasty (960–1279). The chapter centers on the story of Lord Guan's victory over a flood-causing dragon at the salt ponds of Xie Prefecture, his hometown. This victory, claimed by Daoist Heavenly Master Zhang Jixian (1092–1127), not only enhanced the reputation of Heavenly Master Daoism but elevated Guan's reputation as a de-

ity useful for combating demons. Ter Haar suggests that Daoist exorcists were among those who spread his cult across China from the thirteenth century.

Chapters 4–8, which focus on the concerns of lay people, show that Lord Guan grew in popularity as his expanding constellation of capabilities made him increasingly attractive to people of all social strata. In chapter 4, ter Haar uses temple data from local gazetteers to argue for the central role of “geographically mobile groups” (92) such as salt merchants, ritual specialists, officials, and soldiers in the spread of the cult, a development that accelerated during the Song dynasty and continued through the Qing (1644–1911). Chapter 5 focuses on the ways in which people experienced and identified the divine presence of Lord Guan. Ter Haar examines the rich visual and material culture that propagated and solidified the deity’s distinctive visage, weaponry and personality. Chapter 6 describes people’s reliance on Lord Guan for rain-fall and protection from attack, capabilities that ter Haar traces back to oral histories of Guan’s descent from a rain dragon and his martial acumen. In chapter 7, ter Haar considers the most unlikely of Lord Guan’s attributes, his expertise in the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (an abstruse Confucian classic) and frequent appearance in spirit writing gatherings among educated men. Chapter 8 looks at Lord Guan’s role in maintaining the moral order, often through violent means. The chapter includes vivid stories of Guan punishing corrupt officials, unfilial sons, and licentious examination candidates.

While earlier scholarship has explained Guan Yu’s apotheosis and the spread of his cult in broad strokes, ter Haar offers a finer-grained analysis of local variations and the specific mechanisms that propelled the god to fame. Prasenjit Duara’s classic article on the superscription of symbols (1988) is closest to ter Haar’s book in its approach. Both scholars examine the symbolisms that accrued to the god over time and both demonstrate Lord Guan’s capacity for encompassing multiple, sometimes contradictory, meanings. However, ter Haar goes well beyond Duara in his innovative examination of when and how these developments took place, tracing the regionally-specific vectors of Lord Guan’s spread. For instance, he contrasts the gradual diffusion of the cult in North China with the flow of the cult along the arteries of official communication and military presence in the South. Ter Haar’s attentiveness to the limits of Lord Guan’s abilities also adds nuance to Duara’s rather open-ended description of how Guan Yu’s image changed over time. “The deity,” ter Haar notes, “had a very specific iconography with limited room for variety” (253). Most conspicuously absent from Lord Guan’s interventions was assistance for the needs of women, such as safety in childbirth. Worship of Lord Guan was largely “a male affair” (148).

Ter Haar also contributes to our understanding of the relationship between violence and religion in China. Scholarship by Terry Kleeman, Richard von Glahn, Paul Katz, Jimmy Yu, Mark Meulenbeld, and many others has demonstrated the persistence of violent deities and rituals in Chinese religion. Ter Haar's major contribution is to show how a deity's reputation for efficacious violence could contribute to the spread of their cult. He offers numerous examples to support this view, only a few of which can be mentioned here. He shows, for instance, that Guan's assistance in war—where he often appeared in command of spirit soldiers—made soldiers and officers among his most devoted followers and temple patrons, and prompted official canonizations that, in turn, elevated Lord Guan's local status. Elsewhere, he argues that the experience of the deity was enhanced by the visceral narratives of his violent deeds, which made the god “tangible” to those who heard them (151). Ter Haar also provides fascinating analysis of connections between Lord Guan's violence and his perceived efficacy for an array of non-violent purposes. In one origin story, Guan Yu became incarnate from the blood of a rain dragon executed by the Jade Emperor. This story, ter Haar suggests, may have laid the symbolic groundwork for his later role as a rainmaking deity in North China. Overall, ter Haar emphasizes that Lord Guan's violence was nearly always represented as an expression of martial force used “in a positive way,” termed *wu*, rather than *bao*, or “violence for the wrong purpose” (12). This classification made it possible for state and non-state actors alike to participate in the promotion of Lord Guan's cult.

The book's attention to the role of the military in spreading the Lord Guan cult is one of its most important interventions in scholarship on violence and religion in China. In this regard, the book not only challenges the tendency among scholars to view the military in China as a marginal group with little cultural impact, but suggests the need for greater research into the ways in which the military—the largest and most mobile institution of the pre-modern Chinese state—transmitted practices and beliefs across the empire. This aspect of the book complements recent scholarship by Michael Szonyi (2017) on Lord Guan temples in Ming garrisons in South China. Regrettably, ter Haar has little to say about the long-term effects of these military ties at the local level. How, or to what extent, were the temples established by military men transformed into sites of worship for the community at large? How did the Manchu-ruled Qing dynasty's vigorous promotion of Guan, during and after their military conquest of China in the seventeenth century, affect his reception at the local level? Were Manchu efforts to claim the deity contested or resisted, or was the god capacious enough to be at once a protector and aggressor?

Ter Haar's study draws on a vast array of primary sources, making the book valuable as a starting point for those interested in further study of Lord Guan. Among other sources, he refers to hagiographical collections, local gazetteers, stone inscriptions, temple statues, Korean travelers' diaries, literati anecdotes, and collections of prognostication slips. If the book has any shortcoming, it is the sheer amount of information that can, at times, overwhelm its main arguments.

These minor quibbles aside, ter Haar's book is a magisterial survey of the development of the Lord Guan cult that is essential reading for all interested in the relationship between religion and violence in the Chinese tradition.

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