Alain Arrault. A History of Cultic Images in China: The Domestic Statuary of Hunan. Translated by Lina Verchery. The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2020.

NAQUIN, SUSAN
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY : PROFESSOR EMERITA OF HISTORY AND EAST ASIA STUDIES

https://doi.org/10.5109/4843144

出版情報：Journal of Asian Humanities at Kyushu University. 7, pp.123-126, 2022-03. Kyushu University, School of Letters, Graduate School of Humanities, Faculty of Humanities
バージョン：
権利関係：

Review

Alain Arrault. *A History of Cultic Images in China: The Domestic Statuary of Hunan*. Translated by Lina Verchery. The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2020.

BOOK REVIEW BY SUSAN NAQUIN

There were thousands of gods in China before the modern era; today, a few are well researched but most remain unstudied and unknown. *Shen* 神 is a capacious category, and lines are blurred between ancestors, immortals, demons, and deities. For the better-documented last millennium, the names and identities of some of these supernatural beings were recorded in texts, particularly those written by devotees and ritual specialists, but scholars have fractured their study into Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian sectors. The once immense number and variety of gods have discouraged attempts at comprehensive histories.

These objects of worship in material form—as statues, paintings, tablets, and prints—were not only housed by the millions in homes and workplaces but also concentrated in temples which, like the churches of Europe, were everywhere in dynastic China. Such images have not been considered worthy of collection or preservation until recent times, and repeated anti-superstition campaigns during the last century generated waves of destruction. Even now, religious images of the last five hundred years are undervalued and remain on the fringes of Chinese art, in the shadows of the more admired works of earlier eras. Their importance to the study of Chinese culture has not yet been fully realized.

Alain Arrault's 華瀾 *Cultic Images* focuses on surviving wooden statues from central China, especially those from the province of Hunan 湖南, and it is a promising investigation into the history of Chinese deities through physical objects. A professor and director of studies at the École française d'Extrême-Orient, Arrault has been working with these materials for two decades and, together with a number of colleagues from France, North America, and China, has shown how they can serve as a foundation for a history of gods as well as a window into the religious practices of everyday life.[1]

Cultic Images is a composite of scattered articles in French and English that consolidates the work of Arrault, but it is also an introduction to other scholars who have been—and still are—working with such statues from this hitherto unstudied part of China. Because of its composite origin, the book consists of six chapters of uneven length. To approach the subject from the big picture before seeing the details, I recommend reading

1 An introduction to the early work of some of this group and to the religions of central Hunan may be found in *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 19 (2010), an issue dedicated to "Religions et société locale: Études interdisciplinaires sur la région centrale du Hunan / Interdisciplinary Studies on the Central Region of Hunan."

the introduction and conclusion first, then chapter 4, and then chapters 1, 2, and 3 where the statues are closely analyzed.

The more than three thousand "cultic images" analyzed in the book are defined loosely as statuettes "designed for religious worship" (p. 1). They come from three different collections formed in China from the 1970s to the 1990s, but they share characteristics that allow them to be considered together. Nearly all are three-dimensional statues made of wood, mostly single figures about 20 centimeters (9 inches) in height; many have internal chambers containing documents and other matter. Their small size, single-family donors, and references to protection for the family allow Arrault to term them "domestic statuary" representative of "household cults" (p. 25). They date primarily from 1780 to 1980, but especially 1880–1950. Chapter 4 is a good introduction to the statues, their interior compartments, the consecration ritual that brought them to life, and domestic altars more generally.

Color photographs of these once painted statues punctuate this book and add to our appreciation of them. Interpretations of their poses, gestures, attributes, and symbols are scattered throughout the text. Although each figure is shown from the front and as a stand-alone object, photos (undated) in chapter 4 illustrate how they are arranged on altars, some wrapped in red paper, alongside other images in other media.

The three collections whose owners have allowed their materials to be part of Arrault's data are those of Yan Xinyuan 顏新元, with 1,362 statues collected in Hunan in the 1970s by exchange and purchase; Patrice Fava 范華, with 911 purchased at antiques markets, especially in Beijing, from the 1990s on;[2] and the Hunan Provincial Museum 湖南省博物館 in Changsha, with 870 statues acquired from a 1984 customs seizure of goods intended for sale in Hong Kong antique stores (p. 9). Each collection has its particular biases,[3] of course, but this cooperative endeavor has produced a database in French and Chinese that is the basis for Arrault's details and generalizations.

Wooden statues of similar size from sub-Yangtze China have been saved by others and preserved outside of China (important collections known to me are listed in the appendix; I hope there are others). These Hunan ones are, however, significantly distinguished by the presence of the documents found inside 44 percent (my calculation) of the statues and dating from the sixteenth to the twentieth century. These texts and some carved inscriptions endow these statues with rare and important information about their creation and use.

Stored in sealed cavities, such "consecration certificates" (*yizhi* 意旨) provide talismans, dates, places, and names, as well as information about makers, donors, and ritual masters. Sometimes accompanied by *materia medica*, these rolled up paper texts, many translated here, are the fascinating basis for Arrault's discussion of gods, ancestors, teachers, ritual practices, and much else. Some provide surprisingly lively stories that feature women as well as men. Although also discussed in earlier articles, these documents are a considerable strength of the volume.

Chapter 2, which comprises two-thirds of the book, looks closely at the god images themselves, dividing them into loose categories of national, local, and family divinities, and combining analyses with detailed tables and lists. Arrault acknowledges the difficulties of making such distinctions between the spheres of different gods and of separating ancestors from revered teachers. The multiplicity of names used for such divinities and the accumulation of heterogeneous stories about them make the task especially challenging. Given the political pressures that may have led to the destruction of temples during the last century, is it possible that some of the statues here treated as domestic might once have been intended for a public altar? Arrault explicitly links taller statues with multiple family donors as "collective cults," and he notes that the larger ones (mostly in the Hunan Museum) might have originally been for temples. From my own research on god images in northern China, I agree.[4] In any case, such distinctions may say more about our concerns than those of their original creators and users.

Ancestors, perhaps only 10 percent of the pool, are an interestingly complex category and deserving

2 Fava's collection of these and other related objects is presented at length and with large, generous illustrations in his *Aux Portes du ciel, la statuaire taoïste du Hunan*. For the wood used in those statues, see Mertz and Itoh, "A Study of the Wood Species."

3 The varied routes and reasons behind the movement of such objects from their original places of worship into the hands of collectors (poorly conveyed by words such as discard, gift, or sale) are not discussed.

4 Naquin, *The Gods of Mount Tai*.

of more research. The relationships expressed in the certificate documents provide fresh insight into the actual practice of ancestor worship (better studied in other parts of the Chinese world through fieldwork). The statues that represent once-living people complement the research on ancestral portraits, most of which are Qing or later, and they should be integrated with a study of the ancestral photographs that are now also placed on altars and on graves.

Ancestors are not so easily disentangled from "masters of a specific initiation lineage," a most interesting if confusing category that includes teachers, daoists, and craftsmen along with more conventional "deities." Considered together, they help us notice and better understand both the importance of such ritualized relationships among the lay population and the complexity of hereditary transmission of ritual knowledge and status. "Masters," a translation of *zushi* 祖師 or *shizu* 師祖 (and variants), encompasses expertise in "vocations that require initiation" as well as similar figures who were associated with various "teachings" (*jiao* 教). Chapter 3 concentrates on seventy examples of such teachings, with extensive consideration of a few. A "Daoist" dimension, often mentioned in earlier works on these statues, is not emphasized here, and we see instead a heterogeneity that is a plausible reflection of a society in which organized standardization of ritual expertise at the local level was weak.

These databases and the accounts recorded on the certificates that were preserved inside the statues are powerful tools for bringing order to the initial chaos of so many images that are otherwise difficult to sort out. Together, they are a good introduction to this dimension of highly personalized belief about which we know little, and they deepen and diversify our understanding of "domestic," "worship," and "cult." They also provide a basis for comparison with, and a helpful model for, research on those many comparable wooden statues that lack such documentation.

The region studied by Arrault and his colleagues is usually designated as "Hunan," or "central Hunan," pointing to the politically defined province from which most of the statues come and where research on local religion has been concentrated. Most statues come from modern Anhua 安化, Ningxiang 寧鄉, and Xinhua 新化 counties, and Arrault characterizes the whole as "central and northeastern Hunan." In Chinese, it seems to be called Xiangzhong 湘中, the middle reaches of the Xiang River, a designation that suggests a shared geographical niche. The problem of how to define spatially meaningful units of religious culture within the larger sphere of "Chinese religion/religions" is one without an easy answer but a focus on the province seems more convenient than consequential.[5] I agree with Arrault that "local" is marginally better than "popular" (p. 164), but both words are relative terms, helpful when compared to something specific but not when used casually.

The study of Hunan statues has been fruitfully accompanied by fieldwork and historical research and Arrault's bibliography is an excellent introduction to this increasingly rich multilingual literature on local religious practices in interior south-central China. Although the idea of a "Chinese" religion is powerful, these scholars know that this is an area where "minority" peoples (Yao 瑶, She 畲) have become mixed during the last millennium with Han immigrants, including Hakkas 客家人. If assumptions about unchanging and essentialized identities are set aside, a close examination of this area can illuminate not only its history but its changing social composition and churning mixture of religious belief and practices. Arrault writes that "in central Hunan we have an example of a local society that is open, polymorphous, and multipolar, still immune to the unification that is enforced by institutions, ideologies, and political and academic discourse" (p. 169). Immune? I doubt it, but this book does, as the concluding pages argue, reveal how this important heterogeneity does "resist oversimplification" (p. 167).

All living religions change, but the acceleration of the last century that affects us all has been exacerbated in China by the jarring waves of targeted and powerful political attacks. The effect of such policies on the selective survival of the statues analyzed in *Cultic Images* is not much discussed. Chinese and foreign scholars are doing good work on the still sensitive religious scene of twenty-first-century China, but historians fret about the dangers of "salvage ethnography" while fieldworkers struggle to find the words to describe the relationship to "traditional" practice—is it survival, revival, reinvention, transformation, or revolution?

Like anthropologists and filmmakers who help future historians by studying present practices as they flash by, the data on Hunan statues provides a valuable

5 For more on materiality as a basis for religious culture, see Naquin, "Material Manifestations."

late twentieth-century snapshot of religious and material culture. Alain Arrault and his colleagues have, moreover, set an example for other existing-but-unexamined Chinese gods that survive in the museums, temples, homes, and public security bureau depots of China, and in museum storerooms, private collections, auction catalogues, and online auctions in other parts of the world. The history of Chinese deities does not have to be only textual. I hope this book and other work on Hunan statues will inspire the study of today's gods through their images, in whatever media and wherever they are found.

Appendix: Comparable Collections of South China Wooden Images of Gods

- In the 1870s–1890s in Taiwan, some 110 statues were collected from converts, including non-Han people, by the Canadian missionary George Leslie Mackay 馬偕 (1844–1901). First donated to Knox College, and then transferred to the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, where they are in off-site storage and not easily accessible. See: Wikipedia entry for Mackay.
- In the 1880s, at least 320 were commissioned in the Amoy area of Fujian by Jan Jakob Maria de Groot (1854–1921). They can now be found in Leiden (Museum Volkenkunde) and Lyon (Muséum d'histoire naturelle). See R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Catalogue of the Pantheon of Fujian Popular Religion," *Studies in Central and East Asian Religions* 12/13 (2001), pp. 95–186.
- In the 1890s, some 400 were commissioned in "South China" by Otto Franke, then a German diplomat, for the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin; of these, about 100 survived World War II. See R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, *The Beaten Track of Science: The Life and Work of J. J. M. de Groot* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), p. 68.
- In the 1950s–1980s, from his base in Hong Kong, Foreign Service officer Keith Stevens (1926–2015) collected statues from Guangdong, Fujian, and Taiwan. They were variously exhibited and extensively written about by Stevens in the *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (between 1972 and 2007). After his death, about 1,000 were put up for auction in the UK on 4–6 October 2016, and dispersed.
- In the 1970s, from his base as a United States diplomat in Taiwan, Neal Donnelly (1933–2015) acquired more than 200. Their whereabouts are unknown to me. See Neal Donnelly, *Gods of Taiwan: A Collector's Account* / 台灣的神像 : 一名美國文物收藏家研究紀事. Taiwan: Yishujia Chubanshe, 2006.

Reference List

Fava, Patrice. *Aux Portes du ciel, la statuaire taoïste du Hunan: Art et anthropologie de la Chine*. Préface de Kristofer Schipper. Paris: Les Belles lettres; École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2013.

Mertz, Mechtild, and Itoh Takao 伊東隆夫. "A Study of the Wood Species of 73 Deity Sculptures of the Hunan Province, from the Patrice Fava Collection." *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie* 19 (2010), pp. 183–214.

Naquin, Susan. "The Material Manifestations of Regional Culture." *Journal of Chinese History* 3:2 (2019), pp. 1–17.

Naquin, Susan. *The Gods of Mount Tai: Familiarity and the Material Culture of North China, 1000–2000*. Leiden: Brill, 2022.

Stuart, Jan, and Evelyn Sakakida Rawski. *Worshiping the Ancestors: Chinese Commemorative Portraits*. Washington DC: Freer Gallery of Art & the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2001.