

Barend J. ter Haar, *Guan Yu: The Religious Afterlife of a Failed Hero*.

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A critical study of the rich religious tradition surrounding Guan Yu 關羽 (Guandi 關帝 / Guangong 關公 / Lord Guan) was long overdue. Bared ter Haar's recent book rises up to the task with commendable thoroughness, a *tour de force* of religious and cultural history analysis. One of the book's many contributions is its treatment of religious practices as inseparable from cultural, political, economic, and social action in the construction of shared memory. No less important is the book's nuanced approach to oral traditions and practices, which, Ter Haar argues, played a more significant role in the history of the Guan Yu cult than written texts that invariably receive excessive attention from scholars. The extensive range and diversity of sources he analyzes in this book is likewise laudable, including local gazetteers, anecdotes, hagiographies, folktales, inscriptions, dramas, morality books (*shanshu* 善書), and precious scrolls (*baojuan* 寶卷).

The overarching argument of Ter Haar's study is that Lord Guan was a martial deity who employed violence for the protection of mankind, but that he also took on many other functions, including bringing rain, maintaining morality, and communicating with his worshipers through spirit writing. He furthermore argues that the saga of the Three Kingdoms, and particularly its famous late-Ming narrative-text editions, was influenced by the cult of Lord Guan, which was well-

established by that point, and not the other way around. Additionally, he contends that our view of the cult should not be limited to the Daoist or Buddhist contexts, but rather understood within a broader cultural framework.

In Chapter 2, Ter Haar outlines the earliest known roots of Lord Guan's local cult in Hubei Province and his incorporation into the founding myth of a Buddhist monastery, and explores his role as a protector of monasteries and keeper of the faith in the Buddhist context. Ter Haar argues that this role was derived from his overall popularity in the region as a protecting deity, and not from his connection to Buddhist principles.

Chapter 3 examines the rise of Lord Guan's reverence as an exorcist general deity as part of the growing importance of Daoist exorcistic traditions during the Song and Yuan dynasties. He traces the roots of Lord Guan's role as an exorcist and protector against flood-causing dragons to a local cult that emerged sometime around the twelfth century near the salt ponds of Xie Prefecture in Shanxi Province, the historical Guan Yu's home region. Ter Haar situates this role within the historical context of the Huizong reign, particularly in regards to the close relationship between the Heavenly Masters and the Southern Song imperial court. Importantly, he shows that belief in Lord Guan as a divine general in late-imperial times was not limited to the religious sphere, and in fact no real boundary existed between the secular and religious in reverence of protective figures like him.

In Chapter 4, Ter Haar examines the development and spread of Lord Guan's cult, which he argues relied primarily on oral and visual traditions relating

to his role as exorcist and protector – part of a larger trend of anthropomorphization of local pantheons. The appendix of this chapter presents, in chronological order, data on the earliest known shrines and temples dedicated to Lord Guan.

Chapter 5 looks at how people experienced the presence of Lord Guan through temple worship, drama performances, spirit writing sessions, and other practices in which sensory experience played a key role in evoking the presence of the deity. Ter Haar focuses primarily on Lord Guan's multifaceted iconography, arguing that there was a strong performative aspect to his visualization. The chapter also discusses the lack of reports of women's worship of Lord Guan, and the misogynistic aspects of his lore.

In Chapter 6, Ter Haar examines several aspects of Lord Guan as a martial deity who employs violence for the benefit of mankind. He focuses on Lord Guan's roles as a rain-bringing god, a protector against violent threats, and a healer of illnesses caused by demonic infestation or moral transgressions. Surprisingly, Ter Haar devotes very little attention to Lord Guan's role as a god of wealth, which he argues appears very late, halfway through the eighteenth century.

Chapter 7 looks at Lord Guan's transformation into a literatus and protector of the educated elites, who communicates with his worshipers through prognostication and spirit writing. This new dimension, which informed his portrayal in the Three Kingdoms, relates to the spread of literacy since late Ming, and is indicative of the literate elite's expectations of this popular deity.

According to Ter Haar, the spread of literacy also contributed to another aspect of Lord Guan's reverence during this period – as a martial keeper of morals and a savior of mankind from an impending apocalypse, a role that he explores in Chapter 8. By analyzing two morality books, Ter Haar restates his overarching arguments regarding the centrality of violence in the cult of Lord Guan and the importance of oral and performative mediums in his reverence.

Chapter 9 ruminates on the development of divine cults in premodern China and Lord Guan's "Confucianization." Ter Haar revisits different models for divine cults in China, noting that while Duara's notion of "superscription" and Katz's idea of "cogeneration" are useful on a large scale, they do not provide adequate tools to understand religious phenomena on local and personal levels. He views Lord Guan's cult as a cultural resource that included limiting rules of interpretation (e.g., a stable iconography), but was also open to its followers, thus allowing a variety of functions to exist side by side.

Although Ter Haar's argument that written narratives' portrayals of Lord Guan during the Ming and Qing were influenced by his cult is convincing, the book does not explore the influence of these texts on the cult after they became popular. Since the Three Kingdoms saga has had a profound impact on popular culture, further research on its impact on the reverence of Lord Guan would complement the current study. It is also regrettable that the book does not examine Lord Guan reverence in modern times, nor discusses his worship outside China. Nevertheless, this comprehensive book is a remarkable achievement and a

valuable resource for scholars and students of China, as well as any reader with an interest in religion and cultural history.

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