

## Rezensionen

**Berthier, Brigitte:** *La dame-du-bord-de-l'eau*. Nanterre: Société d'ethnologie, 1988. 311 pp., fig., ill., ph. (Recherches sur la Haute Asie, 8) Prix: FF 144,00

In an endeavor to throw fresh light on the status of women in traditional Chinese society the ethno-sinologist Brigitte Berthier focuses her considerable talent on a body of legends which accreted around the figure of Chen Jinggu, also known as the Water-Margin goddess Linshui furen. By means of a close analysis of the written material and a description of the goddess's cult the author reveals unsuspected layers of misogyny embedded in a popular Daoist sect.

The first part of the book scrutinises the "Linshui pingyao," a collection of the tales from various sources which, if they do not form a coherent whole, do refer to the major themes of the goddess's myth. At the age of seventeen Chen Jinggu leaves home to escape a forced marriage; later we find her searching for a teacher willing to instruct her in the magic arts. Having found a Master she refuses to be initiated into the mysteries of childbirth and motherhood; consequently she cannot deploy the full range of magical power available to the true demon-queller. In the struggle which pits her against such demons as White Serpent, Great Crevasse, and the Cinnabar-Cloud Monkey she is sometimes defeated. They, for their part and like all living creatures, hope to attain the Dao. To this end, they must nourish their vital principles by combining in themselves the forces of *yin* and *yang* which alone can create the mystic Embryo and allow them to emulate Lao zi who obtained the Dao by engendering himself. But, as malevolent beings, they are forced to pursue their goal by devious means. Hence, female demons often turn themselves into beautiful women who deprive men of their *yang* essence during the sexual act. As demon-queller Chen Jinggu must rid victims of these vampires and subjugate any demon she encounters by changing his or her nature. Her confrontation with the Cinnabar-Cloud Monkey, who suffers from an excess of *yang*, is a case in point. By castrating him Chen Jinggu simultaneously enrolls him as a helper and enables him to become receptive to *yin*, thus launching him on the correct path to the Dao. But Chen Jinggu also has another dimension; she is chief rainmaker of the short-lived kingdom of Min (909-949). In this capacity she forfeits her life by dying of a hemorrhage induced by a self inflicted abortion; a sacrificial act which produces rain and leads to her subsequent deification.

While such legends lend themselves to a Freudian interpretation, other episodes require a thorough knowledge of Chinese mythology and its symbols to decode their meaning. Through a labyrinth of shifting reality, where insects turn into grains of rice and magpies into oyster, B. Berthier proves a skilful and erudite guide. However, the reader who may wish to retrace his steps is prevented from doing so by the absence of an index.

The second part of the book deals with Chen Jinggu's cult as the author observed it in Taiwan. Death has transformed Chen Jinggu into the Water-Margin goddess, protector of women and children. Her cult enlists the help of female mediums to perform exorcist rites in order to strengthen the "flower," an exclusively feminine symbol. Mediums alone are competent to enter the enchanted garden where these plants, which represent a woman's spiritual being, grow. If a "flower" is damaged misfortune will strike its human counterpart. A medium must then be dispatched to investigate and seek advice from the goddess. In this connection it is a pity that the work of J. M. Potter who first witnessed and described a "flower" ceremony (cf. Arthur P. Wolf [ed.], *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*. Stanford 1974: 297-232) should have slipped through the net of B. Berthier's research. But the author's close acquaintance with a medium gives her insight into the lives of these women who, to function as conduits for divine wisdom, must relinquish their identity and become "empty vessels"; a symbolic death which mirrors that of the deity they serve. For, as B. Berthier is led to conclude, there is no place in human society for women who reject their assigned role of mothers and childbearers; only by being translated to a different plane, where they pose no threat to the status quo and the privileges it confers on male members of the community, do they find acceptance.

Some inconsistencies in the reference material, and in the use of Chinese graphs, should not detract from the value of this elegant study which should appeal to all those interested in Chinese mythology, folklore, and popular religion.

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**Bidou, Patrice y Michel Perrin (coord.):** *Lenguaje y palabras chamánicas*. Quito: Ediciones ABYA-YALA y el MLAL, 1988. 186 pp., mapa, fig., ilustr. (Colección 500 Años, 1)

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