

BOOK REVIEW

Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks and the History of a Ming Novel

Mark R.E. Meulenbeld

University of Hawaii Press, 2015

288 pages \$57 /£36.43



REVIEWER

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DOI

10.18573/j.2015.10023

Martial Arts Studies is such a new field that many of the most important recent works have been written for other fields: Avron Boretz's *Gods, Ghosts, and Gangsters* [2011] is anthropology, Meir Shaha's *Shaolin Monastery* [2008] is religion, Andrew Morris's *Marrow of the Nation* [2004] is history of physical education. As we define the boundaries of this new field, we must draw on a broad range of existing disciplines, and the lack of common ground will require introductions to and bridges between different disciplines.

Demonic Warfare by Mark R. E. Meulenbeld [2015] is an important book for the field of Martial Arts Studies – even though it does not address martial arts directly. Rather, Meulenbeld skips fifteen hundred years of Daoist history to get to the meat of his subject: Daoist thunder ritual. For readers new to the subject, this is like trying to understand what an iPhone is without having seen a regular phone or a computer. New works in Daoist studies are built on a specific background of ethnology, language, history, and religion. By way of this review, I will attempt to introduce the book to the field of Martial Arts Studies.¹

Meulenbeld's introduction has two main purposes: first, to explain to Chinese literary experts how China's epic novels were cut off from their religious roots in the early twentieth century, and second, to explain the importance of these novels to Daoist ritual studies. The book is organized to be accessible to readers with background experience in one or both of these areas. It must be noted that Meulenbeld explores the relationship between martial arts and militias without ever discussing martial arts directly. He investigates how religious cosmologies and institutions integrated militias into multipurpose rituals of canonization. The only other book I am aware of that delves into the function and organization of Ming dynasty militias is David Robinson's *Bandits, Eunuchs, and the Son of Heaven* [2001]. Robinson examines the ways in which constantly shifting alliances between men of prowess held the empire together in circles of patronage. Anyone interested in the relationship between martial arts and militias will find them both essential reading with little overlap in content.

Demonic Warfare analyzes the historic relationship between Chinese militia organizations, Daoist thunder rituals, and a text called *Canonization of the Gods* (*Fengshen yanyi*). Before the twentieth century, *Canonization* was ubiquitous, but for the last hundred years, it has been largely ignored. In effect, it was intentionally put into the dustbin of history even though *Canonization* is in the same category as the Ming dynasty works which were put forward as the primary representatives of Chinese theatrical

¹ I apologize to Meulenbeld and to readers for not immediately dealing with the content of this work, but without a specialized introduction it will remain largely inaccessible despite being beautifully written.

literature and became a major source of inspiration for Hong Kong Cinema such as *Three Kingdoms (San Guo)*, *Journey to the West (Xi Youji)*, and *Outlaws of the Marsh (Shuihu Zhuan)*.

In the early part of the twentieth century, Chinese intellectuals of the May Fourth movement were desperate to position China as a contributor to modernity. They wanted to cast off the 'sick man of Asia' label and banish any content which mixed theater, martial skills, and religious ritual, for this particular combination was associated with the humiliating defeat of the Boxer Rebellion. This entailed a sorting and re-framing of prominent elements in Chinese culture into two categories, 'treasures' and 'trash'. This process successfully sidelined the religious warfare context of Chinese theatrical literature.

Meulenbeld shows how *Three Kingdoms*, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, and *Journey to the West* were selected by May Fourth activists because they fit the model of modern fiction better than other works in the same category. By presenting their narratives as transcendent universals, they were able to obscure the religious warfare origins of these works. But *Canonization of the Gods* gave away its purpose in the title and the text's religious content was too overt so it was sidelined. These Ming dynasty 'novels' were sacred collections of theatrical rituals of canonization, each containing a hundred or more chapters - standalone rituals each of which was referred to as an opera [*xiju* 戏剧] and strung together by an overarching plot.² Once the historical context was obscured, May Fourth activists like Lu Xun, literature experts in China and the West, and nearly everyone who has tried to read these three works as 'novels' has found them repetitive, with too many characters, and containing side stories that distract from their tenuous plots. And that is because they were not written as novels.

This is important for the field of Martial Arts Studies because the same political movement which 'invented the novel' created the notion of *jingwu*, or 'pure martial' arts. In the aftermath of the Boxer Rebellion (1898-1900), the intense ridicule, heaped upon any combination of martial skills and ritual-theater, created 'martial arts' as a distinct category. Like the designation 'novel', pure martial arts are the result of the forced creation of separate categories demanded by twentieth century intellectuals and politicians.³

On a personal note, my martial arts teachers often promulgated the notion that martial arts were pure, or should be pure; that is, all combat, with no theater or religion. This explanation did not fit my empirical experience. As a professional dancer with a background in ethnology and years of training in Congolese and north Indian dance, I knew that martial skills could be fully integrated into theatrical religious arts. Like these other arts, it was self-evident that Chinese martial arts forms (*taolu*) were embedded with performing skills and theatrical design. My own research has focused on linking this embodied theatricality in the martial arts to religious Daoism.⁴ The greatest contribution of *Demonic Warfare* to the field of Martial Arts Studies is that it describes a ubiquitous historic milieu in China in which combat skills, theatricality, and religion were fully integrated. This historic milieu is called a canonization ritual.

Anyone who has delved into Chinese history has come across the notion of ritual. Confucius framed ritual

² Meulenbeld notes, as does Johnson [2009], that there are examples of local operas, which are composed around the same characters and scenes, and yet are not included in the finished novels. The sources of authority for literary invention were thus, local, and of the same creative milieu that nurtured martial movement.

³ Two excellent primers on this subject are Cohen [1997] and Morris [2004]. Also, see Liu [2009] for a look at how Daoism adapted to this movement and Goossaert and Palmer [2011] for a look at religion generally.

⁴ See Phillips (2008), 'Daoyin Re-Imagined', forthcoming in *Journal of Daoist Studies*, vol. 8; and 'Taijiquan as Enlightenment Theater', in *Daoism and the Military*, forthcoming 2016, Three Pines Press.

propriety and reciprocity as the seeds of all relationships.⁵ Modeling appropriate behavior was understood as a tool for making the world better. In the West, this idea is odd but comprehensible because we have institutions like the Boy Scouts, which seek to foster and mold upright human beings. However, ritual in China goes way beyond the Confucian tradition: ritual was the central organizing mechanism of village life. This is hard to see at first, precisely because modern scholarship is so deeply informed by a Protestant worldview which posits that ritual is vacuous and archaic and that the central organizing principle of social institutions is belief.⁶ In Chinese culture, rituals are more important than beliefs. The question, then, is not ‘who do you worship?’ Rather, the question is ‘how do you make your offerings?’

Demonic Warfare is a powerful interpretive text which contributes to an ongoing academic conversation about the nature of Daoist ritual, which has accumulated a great deal of data over the last thirty years. The common question (‘What is the purpose of this martial art?’) is similar to another question (‘What is the purpose of this ritual?’) in that it can obscure a prominent characteristic of ritual practice – namely, that rituals can accumulate and shed purposes quite easily.⁷

With regard to canonization-ritual operas (*xiju* 戏剧), Meulenbeld has identified several major categories of purpose: they functioned as entertainment; as a way for villagers to learn history and mythology; as part of regular festivals which brought communities together to have fun, trade, problem-solve, allocate resources, designate leadership roles, and organize militias; and as performances before battles intended to invoke the gods to fight either up in the air, running alongside the troops, or as possessing deities controlling individual combatants. The gods in these rituals were ferocious in battle, and in fact, demonic in nature. Canonization rituals told their stories and transformed these demonic warriors into gods while simultaneously enlisting them in the service of righteousness.

The English term canonization comes from Catholicism. The key term *feng* (封) in the title of *Canonization of the Gods (Fengshen yanyi)* literally means to contain or enclose. It implies a container of ritually-correct behavior used for taming or pacifying unruly demons and baleful spirits. In Catholicism, canonization is the process of promoting a martyr to sainthood so that he or she can become a source of solace or power. A martyr is a person who has died prematurely and is credited with transcendent values or a noble purpose. Chinese gods of the theater are often like martyrs. The Catholic hierarchy used canonization extensively to bring peoples on the fringes under its control. For instance, the gods of Haitian Vodou and Cuban Santaria were made into Catholic saints.⁸ A parallel process happened in China.

In every Chinese family, when someone dies of old age, they get a place on the family altar where they are symbolically fed and incorporated into family rituals. In a nutshell, these family rituals resolve lingering and conflicting emotions by acknowledging and carrying forward the positive models and contributions of one’s ancestors. But, a premature and violent death bars a person from inclusion on the family altar. In such an

⁵ Contemporary scholars often use the term **Ru**, or **Ruist**, rather than Confucian. Regardless of the term used, we refer here to the many traditions of scholarship and ritual in historic China which are self-consciously associated with Warring States era literature which developed into theories and practices of statecraft

⁶ One does not have to ‘believe’ to perform a ritual. The vacuity of a ritual may in fact be one of its selling points [Puett 2013].

⁷ As shown by Claude Lévi-Strauss ([1982 (1975)]), the same ritual can even take on opposite meanings from one community to the next. Additionally, Daoist priest and scholar John Lagerwey [2010] recently published an introductory text which surveys the diversity of Daoist ritual which I highly recommend.

⁸ See Deren [1953] and Pinn [1998].

event, the dead become a kind of homeless ghost. Shrines are built to house these spirits, to create a location of forgiveness, and to otherwise resolve old conflicts and commitments. Over time, some of these ghost-spirits (*guishen*) accumulate power (*ling*), can grant wishes, and gradually become more god-like.

When large numbers of people were killed in battle, they left behind a lot of ghosts made from the energy of unresolved conflicting emotions like vengeance, sorrow, and regret. In Chinese religious cosmology, if these baleful spirits are not appeased, they linger in wild animals, trees, grass, and rocks, and become the causes of all future violence. Canonization rituals were performed before battles to clarify the intentions of the combatants and to infuse them with demonic powers by enlisting reformed resident demons and baleful spirits of past conflicts. This fact is indispensable for understanding the historical origins of Chinese martial arts. Canonization rituals after battles attempted to enlist all the dead, especially the leaders of the losing side, into the service of a new order. In a very simple and direct way, honoring the enemy's dead created a basis for the survivors to save face, go on with their lives, and eventually forgive. Conquered peoples, along with their local spirits and heroes, were transitioned to righteous demon warriors and incorporated into a heavenly hierarchy. These cosmic orders became the organizational frameworks for the creation of militias and a form of literature.

Demonic Warfare looks specifically at the role Daoist thunder rituals play in the process of canonization. *Canonization of the Gods* tells the story of the child-god Li Nezha who commits suicide, kills dragons, and becomes the leader of the thunder gods. These gods ride around on fire wheels and use magical thunder and lightning weapons to catch baleful spirits. The predecessor of the thunder gods is the Indo-Tibetan bird-god Garuda who catches snakes and fights dragons; in China, it was a half-human, half-bird god with a hammer and a spike; and in Japan, it was the Tengu, the original sword masters of the samurai.⁹

In the capital city of Beijing there is a sort of national shrine to war dead called The Temple of the Eastern Peak. It was the central temple of all militia organizations in which Li Nezha was enshrined. The overarching narrative of *Canonization of the Gods* pivots around this temple where baleful spirits are maintained as a source of power for creating militias under the command of the thunder gods. Rituals invoking Li Nezha, as the head of the thunder gods, were done outside the front gates of a city or temple. Canonization tells the story of how they were ritually incorporated into a national network.

Li Nezha is a badly behaved son transformed into a powerful protector deity. The same pattern, in which the unruly become protectors, is visible with the *jaijiang* demon troops described by Boretz and in the story of the once-wild Monkey King who finds both immortality and enlightenment. In fact, it is a common narrative of martial theater in general. The very meaning of the martial arts term *gongfu* implies this transformation from unruly to disciplined, from dangerous to meritorious.

Meulenbeld shows how Chinese literature grew out of the ritual theatricality of temple culture, which was a complex organizational network used to organize militias and other forms of sanctioned violence.

In case it is still not obvious, what is called Chinese opera comes from a martial ritual of canonization which also became a form of literature. These martial operas were scalable for both small- and large-group warfare. When local militias banded together under a military command structure, they performed these plays and staged narratives in which local gods and demons worked together toward a common goal.

9 This was the subject of Meulenbeld's dissertation.

One of the reasons Chinese theatrical literature is difficult to read is that the magical abilities of these ghost-god (*guishen*) characters contain layers of metaphor and presumptions of cosmological knowledge that are not explicated in the individual stories. In other words, they are rituals of social organization first and stories of cosmological pedagogy second. The substantial entertainment value they once had was built around their value as cultural pivots of meaning. Martial arts cinema ('electric shadows' [電影] in Chinese) is a reminder of this once-unified realm of theater, religion, and violence.

Demonic Warfare gives us a context for martial arts to exist as theater with martial skill embedded in a religious framework. For Martial Arts Studies, it triggers questions: Should we look at martial arts forms as rituals of canonization? Does the modern dojo transform conflicting emotions into righteous causes, viz., demons into gods? If martial arts forms (*taolu*) tell stories, what kind of stories do they tell? Are they fragments of canonization rituals or are they intact rituals obscured by time and distance? Are forms ritual movements abstracted from a narrative? Martial rituals functioned by infusing would-be combatants with an active cosmology of ritual actions, thereby giving meaning to violence in historic time, mythic time, and regional locale. Can martial arts still perform that function? Meulenbeld focuses on the role of Daoist priests in performing and codifying these rituals, citing evidence that, during the Yuan dynasty, generals performed plays on the stage (which means that professional, low-caste actors must have been part of this process, too). These ritual plays were performed by professional actors, by militia participants, and by Daoist priests. Because this ritual culture appears to have been extremely diverse, the significance of all of this is going to take time to sort out.

This book is another nail in the coffin of the early twentieth century idea that at some time in the past there was a pure form of martial arts devoid of religion and theatricality. It is *Demonic Warfare* all the way down.

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Journal DOI

10.18573/ISSN.2057-5696

Issue DOI

10.18573/n.2015.10013

Martial Arts Studies

Journal design by Hugh Griffiths