



Gods of Mount Tai: familiarity and the material culture of North China, 1000–2000

by Susan Naquin, Leiden, Brill, 2022, US\$305.00 (eBook/hardback)

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BOOK REVIEW

Gods of Mount Tai: familiarity and the material culture of North China, 1000–2000, by Susan Naquin, Leiden, Brill, 2022, US\$305.00 (eBook/hardback)

Susan Naquin has made a significant contribution to the study of history, religion, and religious material culture of northern China in the second millennium, focusing on the gods of Mount Tai, a sacred mountain in Shandong. Chapter 1 is the author's exposition of the methodologies used in this work. After that, the book is divided into four parts and 15 chapters. Part I provides the religious landscape of Mount Tai from around 1000 to the mid-16th century. The chapters examine the emergence and subsequent transformations of Jade Maiden, a key figure among the gods of Mount Tai. Part II explores the social reach of the worship of Jade Maiden, from her popularity among the common people to gaining acceptance among the elites and members of the court. The time span stretches from around 1400 through 1630, roughly corresponding to the Ming dynasty (1368–1643). Part III investigates the expansion of the worship of the Jade Maiden and other gods geographically and temporally from the late Ming through the end of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Interwoven into these chapters are discussions of topics such as pilgrimage, economics, material culture, the gods' relationship with the state, identity, and regional centres. Part IV is a sequel to Part III and studies similar issues in the period up to the end of the 20th century. In doing so, the ambitious work casts a broad historical overview of the religious beliefs and practices in northern China surrounding the gods of Mount Tai despite dynastic and political changes.

For those looking beyond the specificity of the worship of the Jade Maiden and other gods of northern China, the most engaging piece is the opening chapter. While it articulates the author's intent as well as the parameters of the study, it is also the author's manifesto of her methodologies as a historian of religious culture. Following her previous research on topics such as pilgrimage and Beijing temples, the author continues her abiding interest in studying the religious beliefs and practices of people from broad social backgrounds, from non-elites (whose lives and beliefs often were not recorded in any historical texts) to elites and members of the court and imperial families. Necessitated by the nature of the subject of her investigation, Naquin goes beyond examining primary textual sources such as local gazetteers to extensively use fresh material evidence in her study. God images, ritual paraphernalia, and temple architecture – the materiality of religion – are documented, studied, and analysed to support her original interpretations.

As the book's title suggests, Naquin foregrounds two key concepts – familiarity and material culture – in constructing her thesis. She writes, 'One aim of this book is to examine and illustrate how religious beliefs and practices manifested themselves materially over time. Another goal is to show how geographically specific religious buildings and objects might, in turn, have affected expectations about divinity and defined the culturally familiar' (23). She observes that the study of material culture requires 'an understanding of materials, producers, and technologies' (27) and that the attention to 'production, utility, and multiplicity' pertains to understanding experiences and memories of the commonplace and the local. The author's study of material culture to understand the beliefs and practices of people is tied to the second concept of 'familiarity'. Naquin describes familiarity as a cultural force and as an important agent in the process of change, arguing that 'cultural familiarity and geographic contiguity affected the communication and replication of religious ideas and practices' (4). Through the

study of the worship of the Jade Maiden manifested in material objects and in temple architecture and how that became commonplace, she demonstrates that ‘the arc of her trajectory from unusual to exciting to familiar to routine’ (29) was a gradual process.

Highlighting the importance of the study of material culture, Naquin participates in the recent ‘material turn’ in the humanities. However, her characterisations of the binary divide between the study of art and artifacts (and the implied opposites of art versus craft, artists versus artisans, elite versus non-elite patronage, etc.) and what other art historians of China have been doing (or neglecting) seem unnecessary (23–25). No doubt the aesthetic values of the scholar–official class loom large in the study of Chinese art history and have contributed to a skewed perspective historically. But the field itself has moved far beyond this narrow viewpoint, and many art historians, especially those who study ritual art and religious art, have embraced the methodologies Naquin describes for quite some time. That said, Naquin’s efforts are laudable and can serve as a corrective to historical studies that traditionally privilege textual over visual evidence. At more than 500 pages and amply illustrated with maps and images, the volume displays an impressive body of fine-tuned and erudite scholarship, and it will be a key reference work for a long time.

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