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Review of Boretz, A. (2011) Gods, ghosts, and gangsters : Ritual Violence, Martial Arts, and Masculinity on the Margins of Chinese Society

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GODS, GHOSTS, AND GANGSTERS: Ritual Violence, Martial Arts, and Masculinity on the Margins of Chinese Society. *By Avron Boretz.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011. ix, 274 pp. (Maps, B&W photos.) US\$29.00 paper. ISBN 978-0-8248-3491-3.

In very readable prose Avron Boretz presents us here with an excellent analysis of a Chinese subculture in which violence, both real and ritual, plays an important role. His study is based on extensive fieldwork over many years in Taidong (eastern Taiwan) and less intensive in Dali (Yunnan) as well. As he points out, it was not obvious to the people he met that their martial deities, ritual exorcisms and spirit soldiers deserved scholarly attention. We might add that the same is true of the academic world in general as far as China is concerned. We are lucky that Boretz thought otherwise and has provided us with this detailed and fascinating ethnography. This lack of interest is in sharp contradiction with Chinese popular culture, which abounds with fictional narratives based on this subculture that is known as the world of the Rivers and Lakes (*jianghu*).

Carrying out ethnographic research is quite a challenge in a subculture in which violent crime plays an important role, including violent enforcement, trafficking, theft and robbery, and the like. The gangsters are an important topic, but this is not a book about crime; instead, it focuses on their social and religious values and activities. Boretz also talks about the role of exorcist rituals, especially the enactment of martial deities and values, in the larger context of local festivals. And finally, he discusses the way in which some of these activities more recently became part of more folkloric or touristic identities. All in all, however, the book is about a subculture of socially marginal men who struggle for economic survival and their creation of a male identity. This is not **the** male identity, although elements of it could very likely also be found in the male identity of other layers of Chinese society. As such this book is not only important as a case study in Taiwanese and Yunnanese local and religious life, but also as a much needed contribution to the still developing field of male gender studies in China.

The gangsters of this study place themselves in the ritual role of demonic figures, who are essential to the successful functioning of local ritual life, since they ritually defend the community or area, but all the

same they are demonic and therefore by definition dangerous, feared and marginal. By performing this ritual role they do not necessarily become part of the majority and only receive grudging respect. So why do they do it? As Boretz points out, performing this role provides them with self-respect and allows them to participate vicariously in majority society.

One way of extending the material to the larger cultural space of which the fieldwork sites of Taidong and Dali are a part, would be by looking at research into bandit subcultures in pre-1949 China. I am thinking of a detailed study by Phil Billingsley on banditry in northern China in the 1920s and 1930s, but one might also look for comparisons at Joseph Esherick's work on the Boxer rebellion and the research of Robert Weller, or by myself and others on the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace. (For these and more references, see my bibliography on violence in China, at <http://website.leidenuniv.nl/~haarbjter/violence.htm>.) In all of these instances one finds men, often younger men, who construct themselves in the image of demonic figures, whether by choosing special nicknames or becoming them through possession and enacting them in exorcist rituals. The special role of "evil youngsters" in traditional temple festivals is well-attested since the eleventh century and might be quite similar to the role of our "gangsters" in Taidong today. Our main problem is the lack of sources, but there is enough to indicate that what Boretz attests so eloquently for Taidong was much more widespread in pre-1949 China than he might expect. Similarly, the violent extravaganzas of the Bai Torch Festival in Yunnan and the Blasting of the Handan deity in Taidong have clear parallels elsewhere. Well-documented examples are the Bun Climbing festival on Cheung Chao island in Hong Kong or Stealing from Orphans (=Hungry Ghosts) elsewhere in the Fujianese world (including Taiwan), all of which were long prohibited because of the accidents that were prone to happen. Such festivals are not necessarily a feature of marginal communities, such as those studied by Boretz, but forms of traditional culture that have survived in many communities with appropriate changes to their times.

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