

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. x + 273 pp. US\$50.00 (hardcover), US\$29.00 (paperback).

This ethnographic monograph explores the strong presence of martial elements in Chinese popular religion and provides insight into the fascinating experiences of the marginal Chinese men who venture into the violent world of martial ritual performance. Based on two decades of field research in two peripheral places, Taidong in southern coastal Taiwan and rural Yunnan in southwest China, Avron Boretz writes a sensitive account of these men and their struggle for masculine identity and honorable order under traditional patrilineal family structures. One major finding is that the domain of violent martial rituals enables disadvantaged performers and devotees to gain a sense of masculine dominance and charismatic power that would otherwise be unavailable to them.

Boretz traces the origin of the book to his passion for the Chinese martial arts as a college student, and he presents himself as an insider to the circle of Chinese martial arts practitioners. By giving voice to some alienated male practitioners of violent martial ritual, he unpacks the ritual tradition of Chinese popular religion and makes a major contribution to the understanding of popular culture, of which popular religion and ritual have been an integral part.

A central theme of the book is the logic and identity of the wild social universe, the “rivers and lakes” (*jianghu*), which can be viewed as both a fantasy fueled by the popular media and a social reality for the marginalized working-class men. Much of the material in the book explores the connections between the *jianghu*, martial arts and Chinese popular religion and shows that the *jianghu* is not necessarily a destructive social force but a constitutive element of the moral order of the local society. For working-class Chinese men, who have few opportunities of upward mobility, the *jianghu* represents a way of life which embodies their much-desired Chinese *wu* masculinity and male solidarity.

Boretz was able to blend in with the life of the *jianghu* by drinking distilled grain liquor (*baijiu*) with his informants and participating in martial rituals as a temple procession troupe performer in Taiwan. His discussion of his access to the underworld and reflections on his ethnographic intention and encounters help to contextualize the analysis. The study also draws insights from anthropology, history, cultural studies, Sinology and religious studies. Boretz does an admirable job of integrating anthropological fieldwork with historical and literary analysis. He juxtaposes Chinese classics such as *The Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*) with the ethnographic text which he produced through prolonged fieldwork, to paint a historically informed, vividly detailed picture of gender orders, everyday practices, ritual processes and the cultural and ritual logic of Chinese society.

Chapter 5 is perhaps the strongest ethnographic chapter in the book. By telling the stories of several Taiwanese temple procession troupe performers and spiritual mediums, it reveals the “symbiotic relationship between exorcistic, martial cults and *jianghu* society” (p. 120). Boretz shows that martial ritual performance is both informed by *jianghu* ethos and mythology and reinterpreted by members of today’s

jianghu society; he further shows that *jianghu* fantasies and concepts continue to shape local discourses and interactions in the Chinese underworld. The chapter also provides tales of social marginality experienced by different groups of people in Yunnan. They include revenge-seeking college students, tough truck drivers and merciless police officers. Boretz notes the often blurred and fluid boundaries between violent gangs and marginal men embracing martial masculinity and *jianghu* identity. The ethnographic findings suggest that the connection between the ritual performance tradition of Chinese popular religion and *jianghu* society may be stronger among working-class men in Taiwan than among those in mainland China where popular religion still bears the stigma of feudal superstition and where temple troupe processions can only be found in remote rural towns.

Boretz also gives a first-hand account of the embodiment of masculinity in male-dominated entertainment institutions such as KTV clubs, bars, teahouses and other drinking establishments (see Chapter 6). He shows how a non-élite form of Chinese masculinity is played out at the intersections of drinking, karaoke singing and consumption of hostesses. A striking feature of the male-centered Chinese carousing culture is that those involved in drinking and singing are usually men of similar age and socio-economic status, who try to build male solidarity and perform masculinity. By providing companion services, sexually available hostesses play an indispensable part in fulfilling masculine ideals. Brothers of the *jianghu* must learn both to express and to control their sexual desire, as “putting one’s own sexual desire above male solidarity (*zhong se qing you*)” is considered a “pathetic weakness” (p. 190). According to Boretz, the practice of carousing can be seen as a game of control and indulgence and a site for the negotiation of social power and male subjectivity. He concludes by suggesting that carousing provides a ritual context for the production of identities and relationships in accordance with “the patrilineal social structure and the patriarchal ideology that defines the limits of meaningful action and subjectivity within that social structure”. This point could have been strengthened by connecting carousing practices in public venues with the private domain of the patrilineal Chinese family.

Nevertheless, the ethnography demonstrates convincingly that ritual violence plays a vital part in the expression and construction of masculine solidarity for Chinese men on the social margins, and that these men’s involvement in violent rituals and gang subcultures is fostered by patriarchal Chinese social institutions and the fundamental tensions between fathers and sons in the traditional Chinese family. Future studies in broader comparative perspective might help us to find out to what extent the close association of non-élite masculinity and ritual violence holds true across China, where divergent family power structures may have developed in the uneven process of urbanization and industrialization.

The book covers many significant themes in Chinese studies, and one finds numerous insightful observations in the main text as well as in the footnotes. This beautifully written ethnography will not only appeal to anthropologists and other

specialists of Chinese religion but will also attract a wide readership interested in popular culture and everyday life in Chinese society.

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As Normal as Possible: Negotiating Sexuality and Gender in Mainland China and Hong Kong, edited by Yau Ching. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010. xii + 218 pp. HK\$195.00/US\$25.00 (paperback).

This rich anthology features work by nine emerging and established writers and highlights the range of current gay and lesbian studies scholarship on contemporary Hong Kong and greater China. The collection is divided into three thematic sections, entitled “Traveling Bodies”, “Communities” and “Representations”, and encompasses topics such as the social geography of lesbian bars and cafés in Hong Kong, a safe-sex educator’s lively account of her symbolic wedding to a gay man and a lesbian as a strike against marriage normativity, and a stimulating analysis of gender performance in two indie Chinese films. The individual essays variously provide foundations for new areas of inquiry, significant interventions in established debates, and much-needed materials for English-language classrooms.

Travis Kong’s important study examines the self-understandings and motivations of 30 Han Chinese “money boys” (*aka* MBs, male sex workers who serve men) in Beijing and Shanghai. *Contra* dominant pathological and public-threat paradigms characterizing male prostitutes as, respectively, hapless rural victims of urban decadence or vectors of HIV and other STDs, Kong emphasizes the MBs’ agency. Prostitution affords them access to the cultural cosmopolitanism and material consumerism that are perquisites of urban citizenship, and is thus a means of erasing their largely rural origins. Kong’s findings thus resonate with Zheng Tiantian’s work on female prostitution in contemporary Dalian (*Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Postsocialist China* [University of Minnesota Press, 2009]). Many MBs also identify the freedom and flexibility of working for oneself and the ability to pursue sexual relations and live as gay men as important incentives for becoming a prostitute. Nonetheless, MBs’ visions of their public and private selves are affected by the disdainful assessments of both gay and dominant society. They are dismissed as having low *suzhi* (human quality) and contributing to social chaos. Most informants divide work sex from personal sex (albeit not always clearly) by viewing the former as meaningless and the latter as intimate and affectively rich. This division, in turn, affects condom use: while condoms are normally used at work, they are rarely used in relations with their wives, girlfriends or boyfriends. These contestations underscore the labor of refashioning the self in contemporary urban China.

Amy Sim examines sexuality, migration and work in her discussion of lesbianism among Indonesian women migrants in Hong Kong, whose numbers now equal those of the long-established population of Filipina domestics. The incidence of same-sex relations is unclear (one study argued that 40 per cent of Filipina