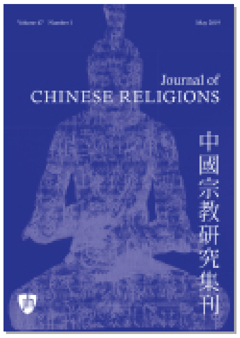
Goddess on the Frontier: Religion, Ethnicity, and Gender in Southwest China by Megan Bryson (review)

Ping Yao



Journal of Chinese Religions, Volume 47, Number 1, May 2019, pp. 90-92
(Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

For additional information about this article
https://muse.jhu.edu/article/723797

[This content has been declared free to read by the pubisher during the COVID-19 pandemic.]

one particular set of concepts, but includes concepts and values of different philosophies and religions as hinted at by Wonsuk Chang in the chapter “Euro-Japanese Universalism, Korean Confucianism, and Aesthetic Communities.”

The critique of “state Confucianism” that was voiced in the second part of this volume and the search for Confucian values that can help in creating a new world cultural order that was the focus of the third part of this volume are continued in this fourth part by Bernhard Führer’s “State Power and the Confucian Classics: Observations on the *Mengzi jiewen* and Truth Management under the First Ming Emperor,” which discusses the peculiar case of censoring Mencius under Zhu Yuanzhang, first emperor of the Ming, and by Wu Genyou in “Striving for Democracy: Confucian Political Philosophy in the Ming and Qing Dynasties,” who addresses the call for political reforms and the promotion of the idea of a division of political power and allowing more freedom for the people that characterized the end of the Ming and early Qing periods, respectively.

In times in which a global free market “aims to free economic life from social and political control on a global scale,” and as such “is not just an economic project, but involves transformation of the very nature of human relationships” (p. 18), there is a growing need to refound human morality. Given the multicultural nature of the contemporary world, such a refounded morality cannot and should not be rooted in one particular religion/philosophy; it cannot only comprise East Asian traditions (let alone be solely based on Confucianism), but should contain moral values that are shared by all people, simply because we all are human beings, endowed with moral ideals.

In this respect, the present work is not only valuable reading for those academics interested in Chinese philosophy in general or in (New) Confucianism in particular, but for all who are genuinely concerned with the moral future of mankind. It is, further, to be hoped that those policy makers who, by their decisions, shape human relations away from their moral fundament, also find food for critical reflection in this book.

BART DESSEIN
Ghent University

MEGAN BRYSON, *Goddess on the Frontier: Religion, Ethnicity, and Gender in Southwest China.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. xii, 246 pp. US$60 (hb). ISBN 978-0-804-79954-6

The study of gender and religion in Chinese history has seen a growing number of excellent research projects and publications since the beginning of the 21st century. Megan Bryson’s *Goddess on the Frontier: Religion, Ethnicity, and Gender in Southwest China* reflects the maturity in this exciting field. Employing the concept of Zomia and the approach of semiotics, this monograph sets out to show how the transformation of a leading deity of Dali, Baijie 白姐 (literarily, White Sister), in four forms, reflects Dali people’s efforts and strategies of crafting its local identity vis-à-vis translocal forces. Zomia, originally a geographical term referring to the huge mass of upland continental Southeast Asia, was used by James C. Scott to designate the resistance of indigenous cultures in this area to digestion by the nation states laying claim to their territories[1] and is extended here to the history of Dali, a frontier region influenced by multiple civilizations from India, China, Tibet, and Southeast Asia without being absorbed by any of them. Bryson further demonstrates that gender intersected with every aspect of the production of Dali identity throughout the past millennium.

---

[1] James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (Yale University Press, 2009).

The book has seven chapters, with the Introduction providing historical and geographical background on Dali and the Conclusion offering reflections on gender symbolism. The chapters in between trace the historical evolution of the deity Baijie. Chapter 1, “Baijie’s Background: Religion and Representation in the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdoms,” traces Baijie’s roots directly to Indian Buddhism. Through a meticulous analysis of texts and artworks, especially the *Nanzhao tuzhuan* 南詔圖傳 (*Illustrated History of Nanzhao*, completed in 899) and *Fanxiang juan* 梵像卷 (*Roll of Buddhist Images*, Lizhen reign, 1172–1175), Bryson shows that, because of its proximity to India, the royal family of Nanzhao Kingdom (649–903) adopted the Indian religion by the second half of the ninth century. The rulers of the Dali Kingdom (937–1253) largely continued the Nanzhao 南詔 religiopolitical traditions: they presented themselves as the Maharaja’s heirs who received a direct transmission from India. Bryson argues that, as a result, the local deity Baijie, first recorded in the twelfth century, appeared as a Buddhist dragon maiden and the consort of Mahākāla, a form of the Indian god Śiva. Such an identity denotes the Dali rulers’ political strategy and religious preference.

This earliest form of Baijie is carefully examined in Chapter 2, “Holy Consort White Sister: Baijie Shengfei and Dali Buddhism.” Bryson finds that Baijie was identified as Baijie Shengfei 白姐聖妃 (Holy Consort White Sister) in three ritual texts among the Fazang si 法藏寺 scriptures, and as Fude longnü 福德龍女 (Dragon Maiden of Good Fortune) in *Fanxiang juan*. Such duality, she argues, reflects the Dali rulers’ efforts in engaging the Tang-Song discursive framework of barbarian identity, i.e., associating barbarism with nudity and unrestrained female sexuality. While the iconographic elements of Baijie images were clearly Indian, in merging her with a local dragon goddess, fully clothed, Baijie did not pose a challenge to the gender norms of Chinese tradition.

Chapter 3, “Little White Sister: Baijie Amei, Dragons, and Kingship in Ming Dali,” provides a substantial analysis of various texts, including Yuan, Ming, and Qing records of the region, unofficial histories by locals and outsiders, gazetteers, as well as funerary inscriptions from the Dali area. Dali was conquered by the Mongols and lost its independence. It would eventually become part of the Yunnan Province under the People’s Republic of China. Byrson’s analysis shows that during the Ming period, while Baijie Shengfei persisted, another form of Baijie, Baijie Amei 白姐阿妹 (Little White Sister), emerged. Baijie Amei was highly popular in the Xizhou 喜洲 area of Dali and her evolution reflected the multilayered forces at play. The two major players were the rulers of the Bai 白族 kingdom and the Xizhou Yang 喜洲楊, the dominant local clan. The Yangs claimed to be related to the royal lineage of the Bai Kingdom, which traced its origin to King Aśoka. Consequently, Baijie Amei was depicted as the mother of Duan Siping 段思平, founder of the Dali kingdom, as well as the adopted daughter of the Yang family. However, the most telling aspect of this form of Baijie is that she became pregnant after encountering a disguised dragon, a prominent trope of Chinese legend. As such, Bryson argues, Baijie and her gendered roles perfectly reflected the semiotic system of Ming Dali: she was both a translocal dragon mother and a local daughter.

Chapter 4, “Lady of Cypress Chastity: Baijie Furen in the Ming and Qing,” provides an excellent account of the local elite’s effort in countering Chinese influence while presenting Dali as a civilized culture. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Baijie Furen

柏節夫人 (Lady of Cypress Chastity), said to be an eighth-century widow named Cishan 慈善 (kindness) who committed suicide rather than marry her husband's killer, gradually overshadowed Baijie Shengfei and Baijie Amei. She was not depicted as a sexualized minority, but as a woman who embodied the highest feminine virtue in the Confucian tradition. Such depiction shows the changing gendered representations of collective identification in Ming and Qing Dali. Bryson suggests that writings about Baijie Furen/Cishan were a way for local literati to represent Dali culture and history as equally advanced as that of the Chinese heartland. It was, therefore, a local response to Qing court's civilizing project in the Southwest.

Chapter 5, "Baijie the Benzhu: Village Religion in Contemporary Dali," is based on oral interviews Bryson conducted at Buddhist temples throughout Dali prefecture during 2007 and 2008, as well as contemporary writings on Baijie. In comparing the two sets of sources, Bryson reveals that gender and ethnicity intersect differently when *minzu* 民族 (race) discourse is invoked and when it is not. She finds that urban, educated males, both Han and Bai, who shape public representation of Bai ethnic identity, are more likely to place Baijie within Bai ethnic culture; on the other hand, to rural middle-aged and elderly women, Beijie's gender and her village identity as *benzhu* 本主 (local lord, tutelary village deity) are the reasons they worship her.

In the conclusion, Bryson points out that the evolution of Baijie worship reveals how people in the frontier zone of Dali have developed local identities through encounters with translocal forces, and how this process is gendered: "Frontier encounters do not just involve cultural, ethnic, or political differences, they also engage gendered symbols in ways that intersect with other kinds of identity and self-representation" (p. 167). More importantly, Baijie's gendered symbolism intersects differently with these different forms of representation, and yet, all these forms invoke "Dali's regional identity in ways that tie her to Chinese notions of femininity" (p. 170).

This is an outstanding work of scholarship on gender and religion in Chinese history. Bryson selected a perfect case study to shed light on how people in frontier zones develop regional identities from a range of possibilities, and the role gender plays in these possibilities. The research was thorough, and her analysis is very sound. The author seems to have exhausted all the primary sources available and cited and referenced important secondary sources, especially most recent mainland Chinese scholarship on Baijie and Dali.

Bryson stresses that translocal forces entered Dali from multiple directions, but Dali elites, in asserting their agency, did not draw equally from each source. It would be interesting to see what influences they resisted and why. For example, as much as Tibetan culture influenced Dali, it somehow did not extend to Baijie worship. In addition to strong influence from China and India, Bryson finds similarities between the birth of Baijie Amei (from a plum) and the Burmese legend of the mother of King Kyanzittha (from a bael fruit). One must wonder if any Tibetan legends have themes that are similar to some forms of Baijie since Mahākāla was strongly associated with Tibetan Buddhism.

Overall, this book is a great addition to the scholarship on gender, Buddhism, anthropology, and Chinese history, and will be an excellent text for upper division and graduate classes on gender and religion in Chinese history as well as on research methodology.

PING YAO
California State University, Los Angeles