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Christopher Lupke

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Steven Sangren, Filiality, and the Holy Grail of Chinese Anthropology

P. Steven Sangren. *Filial Obsessions: Chinese Patriline and Its Discontents*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. xvi, 381 pp. Hardcover \$99.99, ISBN 978-3-319-50492-6. eBook \$79.99, ISBN 978-3-319-50493-3.

Considered by some Sinologists, such as Donald Holzman, to be the bedrock of the Chinese value system, the fundamental underpinning to ancient Chinese belief in ancestors as celestial beings, and a concept with “metaphysical” status, “filial piety” 孝 or 孝順 or “filiality” is one of the holy grails of the anthropological study of China.¹ Steven Sangren’s recent book on the subject does far more than fill in ethnographic detail on the notion and practice. He endeavors to totally rethink the way scholars view filial piety, applying an arsenal of theoretical tools from Marxian thought to Freudian psychoanalysis in an attempt to penetrate to the core of the notion and account for its remarkable resiliency over three millennia. The primary material that Sangren uses to anchor his study is the Ming dynasty narrative *Fengshen Yanyi* 封神演義 (Investiture of the gods). A layered and linked narrative with a desultory structure which some have called a novel, *Investiture of the Gods* has beguiled Chinese readers for the past several hundred years by touching upon subjects such as myth, religion, local power, father-son struggles, ritual, and dazzling, near-hallucinatory imagery, faith healing, and community narratives.² A *yanyi* narrative, often translated as “historical romance,” has no specifically dictated structure, except to say that they are narrative in form, written in late-imperial vernacular, oftentimes splice together disparate sub-narratives, and, in the strict sense of the original term, are a dramatization of exemplary behavior that is worthy of recording and transmission. *Investiture* was never simply a novel, structurally or in its contents, as the accumulation of narratives in it struck a chord with Chinese readers interested in religion and the relationship between the terrestrial and celestial worlds. As the third book in English published this decade on *Investiture*, with the other two also written by scholars whose focus is religion, belief, and in some ways anthropological disciplinary approaches, Sangren’s book lingers on this narrative because it

forms a nodal point for many of the issues surrounding filial piety. But his goals far exceed the bounds of this single book and contain profound implications, including the way that Daoism fits into the filial calculus as well as a novel explanation for filial piety based on an understanding of desire.

After an introductory overview chapter that outlines his book, Sangren uses chapter 2 to illustrate what the “Chinese Superboy” Nezha, a “boy-god” in Chinese popular myth or legend, means to (culturally) Chinese people in assorted ways or, in other words, “multivocally.” Sangren also introduces the reader to the *Investiture of the Gods* narrative in this chapter. Nezha, who might be a semi-divine born entity, has a tempestuous relationship with his (earthly) father, Li Jing. On one level, the conflict can be understood as one between the ill-behaving son and the father who represents social order. On another, their turbulence provides opportunities to display relations between humans and celestial figures, such as Taiyi Zhenren, who intervenes at key moments. Nezha is rambunctious and destructive, and after inviting “celestial punishment” (p. 19) upon his parents, he kills himself in an act of “filial self-sacrifice” to save his parents. He is then transformed into a spirit. Eventually, Nezha and Li Jing are forced to reconcile to take up the fight against an evil usurper emperor. The tale is set in the Shang dynasty (c. 1600–1046 B.C.E.), but the known narrative of Nezha can only be traced to the Yuan dynasty.

Featured in some Yuan vernacular drama, the best-known version of the Nezha narratives is as an important episode in the vernacular narrative *Fengshen Yanyi*. The Nezha story has been replicated myriads of times in various popular forms. In describing Nezha’s identity as “multivocal,” Sangren notes that the significance of Nezha and his story resonates in four different ways for Chinese: as a “Territorial-Cult God”; as a “Guardian of Altars”; in terms of “Spirit Possession,” because Nezha is often invoked in spirit medium ceremonies; and in popular culture such as children’s books, graphic novels, television shows, movies, games, and toys, all of which are mainly for kids and do not carry “evident ritual significance,” according to Sangren (pp. 27–32). The *Fengshen Yanyi* narrative from the Ming dynasty and its reception is also described in this chapter.

There has been much scholarly attention paid to the narrative, which ranges from allegorical interpretations that view the novel as a veiled attack on the Ming dynasty regime that was contemporary to its writing to Oedipal readings, and some analyses of a more literary/critical nature, such as C. T. Hsia’s, that disregard much of the work’s literary merit. That the work has continued to exert influence and maintain its popularity, Sangren argues, can be attributed in part to the fact that the book is considered by many adherents to the Nezha cult (at least in Taiwan) to be taken as history itself. Sangren has discovered in his interviews and fieldwork over the years that *Fengshen Yanyi* is appealed to as a “historical authority” (pp. 41–42). Sangren draws two main

points from his discussion of the multivocal nature of Nezha and the numerous ways in which the narrative of *Fengshen Yanyi* are viewed: (1) “*Fengshen Yanyi* is employed in different ways” to mean different things to different people; (2) “myth and history are complexly linked in local cultic rhetoric” (p. 43). It should be interjected at this point that recently two other scholarly treatments on Nezha and *Investiture of the Gods* have emerged in just the past few years. Meir Shahar’s *Oedipal God: The Chinese Nezha and his Indian Origins* traces the myth of Nezha back to Hindu mythology. Shahar deals to some extent with the notion of filial piety, especially in conjunction with an investigation of Chinese types of oedipal tales, arguing that the primacy of filial piety in the Chinese cultural tradition shifts the emphasis in such tales onto the theme of infanticide and away from the patricide theme, which is more dominant in the West. Mark Meulenbeld’s *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks, and the History of a Ming Novel* rests at the intersection of religious studies, history, and literary studies. Although Meulenbeld distinguishes this “novel,” as he calls it, from other late imperial novels, which are more characteristic of “literary fiction,” he nevertheless sees it as a literary text at least on some level. Meulenbeld does not foreground the theme of filial piety per se. The result of his analysis is a rich scholarly depiction not just of the work but of its historical context and the way it has been interpreted in various local communities in China and Taiwan with particular respect to ritual.³ What these two other extensive approaches have demonstrated, when taken with Sangren’s, is that the myth of Nezha and its representation in *Investiture of the Gods* and in other modes, continues to engage scholars in compelling ways. Thus, one might venture to speculate that more scholarship on Nezha is highly likely.

Part of the intriguing nature of a book of the sort that Sangren has written, written in the latter part of his career after many years of rumination as well as fieldwork, is that it is filled with insights and some might say asides. In chapter 3, for example, Sangren reprises some of the methods of reasoning that typify his previous scholarship as well as his conclusions from it. In the last pages of this chapter, for example, Sangren begins to unfold his approach that combines Marxism and Freudianism. Sangren’s use of the Marxian notion of alienation will be familiar to aficionados of his scholarship. As he states, “alienation rests in people’s failure to realize that they are themselves the authors of social realities” (p. 71), which is to say that in religious practice people invert the causal relationship between creator and created, imagining celestial beings as “out there” somewhere and not a product of human myth-making. Sangren adds to this the family-centered interest in social theory that epitomizes Freudian theory. He notes, crucially, that both these systems of thought presuppose certain universal claims to social structure. Acknowledging that this universal view is problematic, Sangren nevertheless uses the beginning

and middle of this chapter to contest the commonly held opinion that filial piety is *sui generis* to the Chinese (or perhaps East Asian) discursive tradition. Sangren finds remarkable this view of “an unassimilable kernel of Chinese difference or . . . ‘otherness’” (p. 62) and intends to use this study to “reinvigorate anthropology’s legitimate interest in human commonalities” (p. 58). Although “patriliny” (the dominance of the male genealogical line) is not unique, Sangren laments that it has “come to be [viewed as] a distinguishing characteristic of Chinese culture” (p. 64) despite evidence from other cultures. This argument about human commonalities is necessary for Sangren to advance the assertion in the middle of the chapter that “a conceptual apparatus capable of linking individual desire to the processes of social production” (p. 60) because he ultimately wants to focus on the idea that individuals must reconcile themselves socially and emotionally to other individuals and to social realities, a “universal of human experience” (p. 59). In other words, when we get to the meat of the book, Sangren is going to make an argument based on desire and discontent for why filial piety has been so important in Chinese society.

Before we get to the “meat,” however, Sangren inserts one more, albeit critical chapter, on spirit possession and its link to the production and content of mythic narratives. This is particularly important for a literary studies scholar, because Sangren delineates a porous border between the written narrative of a *yanyi* such as *Investiture* and other spirit narratives that may inhabit different discursive realms, such as temples, the practice of rituals, the observation of holidays and such. In other words, Sangren does not acknowledge the literary distinction between the *Investiture* text and the social text, if you will, an important insight that not only reminds us that *Investiture* is not necessarily foremost a literary work. This insight goes a long way toward debunking the dismissal of the literary merit of the text. The account of spirit possession discussed in this chapter embodies the concept of alienation, for in order for one to believe the medium is possessed, one has to posit the activity as something occurring from outside oneself, moving from the supernatural realm into the body of the medium, and possessing it as an *external* agency. Thus, if we presume that such spirits are in fact created by “us,” they must be thought by the believers, the producers, as not being the products of belief, but as being the agents through which an intervention of some kind is sought. They are externalized or “alienated,” as Sangren says, because the efficacy they hold is not created or possessed by the medium but by this external agent. The descriptions of these activities are precisely the “spiritual narratives” that form the cultural context for the kind of narrative contained within *Investiture of the Gods*.

Chapters 5–7 are among the most theoretically dense deliberations on Chinese filiality in existence. Sangren begins in chapter 5 by explaining how

the “splitting” of the representation of the father in the Nezha myth is critical to the complex notion of filial piety. The simplest and most concrete avenue into understanding Sangren’s abstruse account of filial piety is the recognition that the Nezha myth actually contains two fathers: the celestial Taiyi and the mundane father Li Jing. Each of the father figures symbolizes different things in the father–son relationship. Li Jing forms a classic oedipal conflict with Nezha and carries with it the desire to destroy, overcome, and replace the father. Taiyi, on the other hand, intervenes to rescue Nezha at a critical moment and in so doing becomes an “alter father figure” (p. 150) who protects Nezha and prevents him from committing patricide. It is from this bifurcated image of the father, if we can consider Li Jing and Taiyi as a sort of symbolic convergence of patriarchal ideals, that leads us to the critical point at the heart of Sangren’s argument, which is that filial piety is both the logic informing an authoritarian hierarchy and, following Wei-ming Tu, an “ego-ideal” (p. 135). What this means is that filiality is the mechanism for asserting authority, the ideological means for inducting sons into a socially acceptable, well-integrated behavior in a hierarchical system. But it also is an ego ideal, which means that the image of the father is something powerful on its own that the son aspires to emulate. In appropriating from Tu, Sangren sees the other dimension of the son’s relationship to the father as being the exaltation of the father as a model for the son’s development into manhood. This “splitting of the fatherly personae” (pp. 136–137) allows for a sort of dialectic consisting of both resistance to the father and veneration at the same time. The lasting appeal of Nezha to the Chinese audience, Sangren continues, rests in this seemingly contradictory but intertwined feature of the story: it contains both the “tensions intrinsic to Chinese father-son relations,” and it is a display of an “archetypal fantasy of radical autonomy” (p. 153).

In chapter 6, Sangren brings a certain notion of desire into the argument. In combining the work of Jean Piaget, Jacques Lacan, Pierre Bourdieu, and Karl Marx (among others), Sangren builds a sinuous and somewhat turbid argument that the network of social practices tied to patriliney “manifest and constitute a mode of production of desire” (p. 168). Sangren connects Piaget’s notion of schemas with Bourdieu’s probably better known (and more fashionable) notion “habitus” to assist in the construction of a theory of filial behavior. Sangren also utilizes Piaget’s concepts of assimilation and accommodation to explain the two different extremes of filial thinking. In the middle of this chapter, Sangren embarks on a discussion of desire as “lack,” a common idea from Lacan, but the argument is quite fraught and requires further elucidation. If there is one thing I would hope Sangren does it would be to return to the ideas in this chapter and elucidate the various points more systematically.

The paradox of ancestor worship, which is in tune with Sangren's earlier argument about filial behavior being a dialectic of both the socially integrated subject and an assertive ego, is the subject of chapter 7. In his discussion of ritual in this chapter, for which he draws upon the landmark work of Angela Zito from the 1990s, Sangren finds the paradox of ancestral worship noteworthy. Although ancestral worship is the ritual display and practice of the son's subservience to the father and ancestors, the central actor in the ritual, ironically, is precisely the son. The son as the agent puts the focus entirely on him and removes it from the object of that ritual behavior, the parents, and the ancestors. Sangren returns to the question of Nezha's allure to Chinese audiences and adds to it the observation that the Nezha myth is a true fantasy. Nezha's story illustrates how fathers are necessary figures but that a relationship with them does not have to be "paid for" with the common currency of filial submission. Nezha comes to terms with the father figure without the filial submission, a potentially appealing possibility because it affords the subject a father figure while avoiding subjection. Sangren utilizes the assimilation and accommodation categories of Piaget, wherein "assimilation" would be intuitive, often socially unacceptable behavior and "accommodation" would be closest to Wei-ming Tu's account of Confucian self-realization. Tu, an ideological nativist, argues that Chinese selfhood is superior to that of the West, because selfhood must be achieved through dialogue with others. That is, Chinese subjects are more socially integrated. Sangren speculates that the Piagetian term "accommodation" fits well with Tu's self-realization, accomplished along with the recognition of others, and that "assimilation" comports well with the "filial obsession" of the childish and unwieldy Nezha.

Chapter 8 considers the role of women in the filial network and makes some very important and fundamental points about the heteronormative, patriarchal configuration that has informed Chinese society for so long. Without replicating the anti-traditionalism of May Fourth-styled critiques of "the tradition," Sangren recognizes that the ideology of filiality is designed in large measure to exclude women from positions of power, from accumulating family wealth, and from asserting ownership or control over the family. Much of the material in this chapter has been uncovered by previous anthropological and sociological scholars working on kinship and filiality, such as Margery Wolf, Francis Hsu, Maurice Freedman, Myron Cohen, and Martin Whyte, as well as historians such as Patricia Ebrey. But no book-length treatment of filiality can ignore the fact that the subjugation of women is a direct byproduct of filial thinking. This does not prevent Sangren from pointing out that women are typically seen as acting more filial than men, an interesting irony. In fact, the myth of Miaoshan, which figures as a counterpoint in some ways to that of Nezha, diverges in a critical way: Nezha, in the face of the unbreakable bond between father and son, nevertheless seeks to obliterate it; Miaoshan, when

confronted with the ostensibly unsalvageable bond between father and daughter, is able to recuperate it.

Two things could have been added to this chapter that would have increased its value. First, a mention of the One-Child Policy and its bearing on filial behavior should be inserted here. This is an important issue, and some scholarship has established that in family arrangements on going in China today, the wife is often now shouldering multiple filial roles, is more likely to behave in a filial manner, and that may move her into the role of filial inheritor of the family's responsibilities, and, possibly, property.⁴ Second, it would solidify the value of his work if Sangren could expand his analysis to include some sort of treatment of queer studies. Since procreation is a fundamental imperative of filial conduct, what is one to do if they do not or cannot procreate? This question has led to a great deal of queer literature and cinema, beginning with Bai Xianrong's 白先勇 pathbreaking 1977 novel *Crystal Boys* 孽子, and films such as Ang Lee's 李安 *Wedding Banquet* 喜宴 (1993) and Tsai Ming-liang's 蔡明亮 *The River* 河流 (1997). It would be interesting to see what Sangren would come up with were he to apply his theoretically manifold analytic apparatus to this question.

It may be somewhat controversial that in the next chapter Sangren argues that his theory of desire is genderless. He acknowledges that patriliney takes a toll on both men and women, and that it does so in different ways. I wonder about the title of this chapter: "Women as Symptom: Beyond Gender?" Can we plausibly assert that we are "beyond gender"? He does properly remind us in this chapter of two important things that each occupies one of the extremes of patriliney. On the one hand, ideologies, such as the ideology of filial piety that supports patriliney, are "built upon fantasies that exploit the desires of people" (p. 287). The desire for general things such as security or an identity within a community, or more specifically, such as sons, reassurance that one will be cared for in old age and commemorated after death: these desires are exploited by the ideology of filial piety on which the patrilineal social order is predicated. This is part of the regenerative fuel of desire that perpetuates the patriline, the obsession with filial piety, and the exploitative social structure that results therein. And while women are marginalized in this structure, they are not eliminated (it would be difficult to do so, since they are the ones who bear the children). The role of women in this enterprise is essential, for not only are they the vessels through which biological reproduction must occur, they also serve a role in the ideological legitimation of the social formation. Women become caretakers in the husband's family and in particular are the primary nurturing figure of sons. They also gain power through their sons. I would add to Sangren's argument by noting that women are also alienated from the structure that they have been recruited to help perpetuate, biologically, socially, and ideologically. Sangren has a fascinating section in the middle of this

chapter about sons who rescue their mothers, a common theme in Buddhist hagiographical texts.⁵ The saving of the mother by the son illustrates the fact that mothers are dependent upon their sons. This chapter is provocative and creative and filled with ideas, but I have a feeling that the issue of gender both as a political issue and an academic subject is going to continue to undergo tremendous changes in the immediate future. Therefore, we will be revisiting the issue of gender and filial piety very soon and very often.

Steven Sangren's book *Filial Obsessions* is a transformative intervention into the study of filial piety in the Chinese context, family structure, especially patriline, the imbrications between narratives of the written text and cultural or community narratives, and densely packed theoretically informed thinking about desire, childhood development, fantasy, alienation, subjecthood or subjectivity, intergenerational relationships, relations between the terrestrial and celestial realms, ritual, gods, and adherence to the rule of law and decorum. Most of all, it is a profound and radical rethinking of the notion of filial piety that goes well beyond the realm of ethnographic treatments which abound in Chinese anthropological scholarship. Sangren confronts a classic Chinese narrative, the *Fengshen Yanyi*, and in particular the child-god character in it, Nezha, and exhausts the theoretical landscape in an effort to account for his staying power in Chinese discourse through the centuries as well as his omnipresence in a wide variety of other genres, media, and venues. Scholarly contemplations of filial piety are a moving target, so we are bound to encounter further interventions on this subtopic in Chinese cultural studies. Sangren will not have the last word. At the core of his text resides a multifaceted theoretical approach that links the issue of filial piety with that of desire. Sangren would do well to continue to unpack that argument in subsequent articles. It is highly complex and recondite. The book clearly represents the fruits of at least one decade of focused work and, more broadly, an entire career of thinking about the issues of filial piety, self-formation, power, and gender in Chinese society. This is an important discussion of the subject that all scholars interested in the anthropology of Chinese societies must read. It may be controversial in some ways, but it demands serious attention, discussion, and debate.

Christopher Lupke

Christopher Lupke (Ph.D. Cornell University) is professor of Chinese cultural studies at the University of Alberta and Chair of East Asian Studies.

NOTES

1. See Donald Holzman, "The Place of Filial Piety in Ancient China," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118, no. 2 (April–June 1998): 185–199. Holzman observes, "[T]he Chinese gave filial piety an extremely exalted position—treated it as something one might almost call an absolute, a metaphysical entity, something so exalted in their minds that it

becomes difficult for us of another culture to appreciate it today" (p. 185). I agree with Holzman that the importance, perhaps singular primacy is a better way of putting it, of filiality in Chinese philosophical thinking and social practice is so firmly ensconced that it is difficult for Western scholars to truly appreciate how vital and determinative of a notion it is. But Sangren will contest this presumption in chapter 3 of his book.

2. Ironically, one of the most important articles in English on *Investiture* is C. T. Hsia's 1974 survey of it and others that he categorizes as the genre "military romance," this being the first full-blown example written, presumably, by a single author. An interesting line of pursuit would be to revisit Hsia's notion of "genre" with respect to this work, as it is debatable both on the grounds of what a genre is and whether this text can be fitted into a generic mold. Nevertheless, Hsia's minute and penetrating analysis made great strides in advancing the knowledge and appreciation of the work among English-language based scholars, despite the fact that ultimately Hsia viewed the work as an unsuccessful narrative characterized by "tedium." See his "The Military Romance: A Genre of Chinese Fiction," in *Studies in Chinese Literary Genres*, ed. Cyril Birch (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 339–390; Rpt. In C. T. Hsia, *C. T. Hsia on Chinese Literature, Vol. I* (New York and Chichester, UK: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 135–170.

3. See Meir Shahar, *Oedipal God: The Chinese Nezha and His Indian Origins* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015) and Mark Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks, and the History of a Ming Novel* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015).

4. Francine Deutsch examines how filial piety and patrilineality are affected by China's One-Child Policy. See her "Filial Piety, Patrilineality, and China's One-Child Policy," *Journal of Family Issues* 27, no. 3 (March 2006): 366–389.

5. There is actually considerable scholarship on the nexus between filiality and Buddhism in Chinese history. Early on, Kenneth Ch'en argues in "Filial Piety in Buddhism" that the accommodation that Buddhism made to such things as filial piety was the lynchpin of Buddhism's acceptance in China as a major religion. See his article published in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 28 (1968): 81–97. Several of Wilt Idema's prolific translations and/or co-translations feature the connection between filial piety and Buddhism. See, for example, *Personal Salvation and Filial Piety: Two Precious Scroll Narratives of Guanyin and Her Acolytes* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); *Filial Piety and its Divine Rewards: The Legend of Dong Yong and Weaving Maiden with Related Texts* (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 2009); and *The White Snake and Her Son: A Translation of the Precious Scroll of Thunder Peak with Related Texts* (Indianapolis: Hackett Press, 2009). Stephen Teiser's *Ghost Festival in Medieval China* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) is filled with references to filial piety as well.