

difficult to accept the argument in favor of identifying the Industrial Revolution as the beginning of a great divergence. Furthermore, the different trajectories of social, economic, and institutional development between the two ends of Eurasia over many centuries make it difficult to imagine anything like full convergence of English and Chinese patterns of rural change in the foreseeable future. Partial convergence between English and Chinese patterns of rural change, if it exists at all, did not even begin to occur until the last decade of the twentieth century, when the Chinese government declared its intention to establish a socialist market economy. What *A Century of Change in a Chinese Village* does reveal is the gradual emergence in recent decades, in the context of accelerated economic globalization, of a distinct new pattern of rural change with Chinese characteristics, a pattern that is defined by modification and transformation of existing culture, practices, and institutions, the restoration and rejuvenation of elements of centuries-old culture, practices, and institutions, and the extensive use of Western or Western-inspired technology in daily life.

Oedipal God: The Chinese Nezha and His Indian Origins

By Meir Shahar. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. xvi + 256pp.

Reviewed by Michael E. Naparstek*

University of Wisconsin-Madison

*Corresponding author. Email: naparstek@wisc.edu

doi:10.1017/jch.2019.14

At least since the Song dynasty, Nezha has remained one of the most popular divine figures across the Chinese religious and narrative landscape. The anti-authoritarian antics of this iconoclastic child-god have become a fixture in traditional tales, modern cinema, and ritual performance. While previous studies have noted the religious significance of Nezha in Chinese narrative and exorcistic traditions, Meir Shahar's *Oedipal God: The Chinese Nezha and His Indian Origins* is the first book-length study to specifically focus on this wildly popular and challenging figure.

Shahar's study coincides with current interest in the historical analysis of Chinese gods and their complex origins, such as Chün-Fang Yü's *Kuan-Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokateśvara* (2001) and Barend ter Haar's *Guan Yu: The Religious Afterlife of a Failed Hero* (2017). While *Oedipal God* traces the deity's historical context to fruitful ends, it distinguishes itself by pairing that analysis with an ahistorical concern at the outset. As the title implies, *Oedipal God* pursues the cultural implications of the Oedipus complex in China and, specifically, how the Nezha narrative can serve as window into the Chinese worldview. This work establishes that most taboo of unfilial behavior—patricide—as the defining feature of Nezha's cultural identity and sets it against the backdrop of a dominant Confucian ideology of filial piety in order to ask how this child-deity could become so popular. Unpacking this ostensible contradiction forms the impetus for the work's exploration of the god's origins in India and serves as the lens through which Shahar's sharp

analysis reveals larger insights into Chinese culture that challenge received narratives of family and social order.

Oedipal God approaches the question of Nezha's popularity as the antithetical filial figure through two ambitious approaches that roughly divide the book in half. The first part deploys the Freudian Oedipus complex as an analytical tool to interpret Chinese narratives surrounding Nezha's attempt to kill his own father. The second part aims to account for Nezha's unique stature by tracing the influence of esoteric Buddhism on his identity as a Chinese god that then allows for such a complex and counterintuitive figure to emerge.

Chapter One opens with a brief recounting of the well-known narrative of Nezha, as a child who eventually tries to kill his father, as it appears in the seventeenth-century popular work, the *Creation of the Gods* (*Fengshen yanyi*). The chapter proceeds by arguing that this Nezha patricide narrative serves as a microcosm of the larger theme of regicide that structures the overall plot of the novel. Juxtaposing such episodes as when King Wen knowingly eats his own son as an example of what the author calls the "Chinese... Cronus" (7), Chapter 1 establishes a general theme of animosity between father and son. This theme serves as the jumping off point for the next three chapters, which explore the potential for using the Oedipus complex as a lens through which to view a broader cultural significance of Nezha's popularity.

Chapters 2 through 4 directly address the book's driving question of how such a story could become so widely popularized in a Confucian-dominated worldview that prizes filial piety as a pillar of society. Here, the book makes one of its main claims—that the Nezha narrative reveals a distinctly Chinese characteristic of the "Oedipus" theme, one that demands Nezha's own self-sacrifice to first precede the seemingly unthinkable attempt on his father's life. Drawing from examples of filial conduct from the classic trope of children sacrificing their own flesh for their parents' survival, Chapter 2 concludes by arguing that Nezha's own suicide should be viewed as an act of filial sacrifice profound enough to allow for such a heinous crime to remain palatable to Late Imperial audiences. Chapter 3 asks the titular question of whether Nezha can be the "Chinese Oedipus" by incorporating the second part of the Oedipus complex, sexual desire for one's mother. Noting previous scholarship on the Oedipus complex in China and the potential role Nezha plays therein, the author poses the rhetorical question, "Does the Nezha myth evince a Chinese Oedipus complex? Fan Sheng, Steven Sangren, and this author certainly think so, even though admittedly the Freudian theory is hard to prove." (41) The lack of overt sexual interaction between Nezha and his mother in the *Fengshen yanyi* narrative necessitates a more nuanced reading. Chapter 3 then sets this relationship against the backdrop of the Chinese literary tradition of subtle sexual tension between sons and mothers to demonstrate how Nezha does embody both sides of the Oedipus complex. Building off of the author's prior work (*Unruly God: Divinity and Society in China*, 1996), Chapter 4 delves into the popular identity of Nezha across different media from Late Imperial opera to contemporary anime. Framing the inquiry around Nezha's rebellious character, Chapter 4 maps the different, and sometimes conflicting, ideals projected onto the figure of Nezha, identifying how various aspects of the Oedipus complex form the vocabulary of his iconic figure.

Chapters 5 and 6 shift focus to establishing the social and historical context for Nezha's popularity as a deity. Chapter 5 situates Nezha in the long literary and ritual traditions of martial gods and divine warfare. Drawing from recent scholarship on the relationship between "religion" and "literature" as it pertains to the *Creation of the Gods*, this chapter traces Nezha's violent encounters and martial appearance across

the Late Imperial literary landscape that identify him both as a Daoist and Buddhist god. This sets the stage for Chapter 6, which explores contemporary ritual contexts of Nezha as a popular deity across the Chinese religious landscape. Based mainly on the author's recent fieldwork undertaken in Macau, Taiwan, and around southern China, Chapter 6 details the multiplicity of Nezha's identity as a child-god, from the principal icon in local temples to a figurine on a commuter's dashboard. Nezha's identity as the Oedipal god is then acutely analyzed in conjunction with his role in the bodily violence of spirit-medium practice, where the author notes how "Nezha is a spirit-medium deity par excellence not only because he is a child, but because he is an unfilial one." (138)

Chapters 7 through 9 shift to contextualize the Nezha narrative within Buddhist antecedents. Chapter 7 returns to the issue of fathers and sons in the *Fengshen yanyi*, noting how Nezha's relationship with the Daoist god Taiyi serves as a substitute for familial relationships in ways that mirror the Buddha's relationship with the sangha. By then tracing the roots of this narrative to antecedents in Sanskrit texts that came to China during the Tang, Shahar shows how Nezha's reconciliation through forging a relationship with a spiritual father resonated particularly within Chinese Buddhist circles. After locating Nezha's "paternal" relationship within Buddhist contexts, Chapter 8 explores the Tang antecedents of the Nezha narrative in esoteric Buddhist sources—identifying the "father" as the divine warrior-king Vaiśravaṇa, and identifying Nezha as his son, Nalakūbara, who enjoyed cult veneration during the period. Chapter 9 then accounts for familiar elements of the Nezha narrative not found in early Tang sources, such as the incendiary encounter with the Dragon King, by looking to India, where Sanskrit literary traditions of Nalakūbara intertwine with traditions of Kṛṣṇa as a child-god. On the strength of that connection, the author suggests that, "Nezha and the Kṛṣṇa incarnation of Viṣṇu share significant similarities. The two gods are toddlers, and their respective myths pivot upon the concealment of divine might under a misleadingly fragile appearance. The two child-gods are motivated by similar oedipal urges and perform identical heroic feats." (185) While a direct linear link between the Sanskrit Kṛṣṇa narratives of India and the Chinese Nezha narratives is difficult to trace, Shahar makes a strong case for the book's final provocative conjecture that "The legends of the Chinese child-god Nezha might have been influenced by the myths of his Indian counterpart Kṛṣṇa." (185)

Oedipal God ends with an epilogue that raises the question of why it should matter that Nezha, a Chinese god, has its roots in Indian traditions. This line of inquiry runs throughout the study, though at times it is subsumed under the success of the work's breadth. If the book suffers, it is from a sense that it is trying to do too much at once, and would benefit from a slower pace to allow more room for the author's insight and analysis. The ambitious nature of the book raises challenges that accompany deploying comparative models and the search for the origin of such a larger-than-life figure. Shahar's careful scholarship rises to the challenge and navigates the multiple dimensions of Nezha's identity with aplomb, highlighting both the author's range as a scholar and the richness of the subject matter for asking bigger questions. In sum, *Oedipal God* demonstrates the critical significance of Nezha in the broader Chinese worldview and serves as a resounding call to reexamine Chinese religious and literary figures in broader discourse.