

China Research Seminar Series (Michaelmas 2020)

The Divine Ox

The Draft Animal as Incarnate Deity in Chinese Religion and Literature



Professor Meir Shahar

Tel Aviv University

5pm, 2 December (Wednesday), 2020 (via Zoom)

Please register in advance for this seminar:

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Abstract

Chinese peasants depended upon draft animals for a living. Their gratitude for the animal that toiled for their sake was expressed in its perception of a benevolent deity. The ox was conceived of as a god who sacrificed his own body for the peasant's sake. The merciful deity descended from Heaven for the express purpose of succoring humanity as its beast of burden. The divinity of the ox was articulated in astral as well as Daoist terms. The toiling beast was conceived of as the incarnation of a star and as a Daoist divinity. Most commonly, however, it was expressed in Buddhist terms. The ox was described as a benevolent bodhisattva – the Great Strength Bodhisattva – who vowed to redeem the peasant as his animal companion. The application of the bodhisattva concept to draft animals is a striking example of the integration of Buddhism to Chinese rural religion. This paper will trace its origins from late-imperial times back to the Medieval period.

Speaker

Professor Meir Shahar received his PhD in East Asian Languages and Civilizations from Harvard University in 1992 and is currently the Shoul N. Eisenberg Chair for East Asian Affairs at Tel Aviv University. His research interests cover the fields of Chinese religion and literature, Chinese martial-arts history, the impact of Indian mythology upon Chinese culture and, most recently, Chinese animal studies. He is the author of *Crazy Ji: Chinese Religion and Popular Literature* (1998); *Oedipal God: The Chinese Nezha and his Indian Origins* (2015); and the *Shaolin Monastery: History, Religion, and the Chinese Martial Arts* (2008). His Hebrew-Language publications include *The Chinese Religion* (הדת הסינית) (1998) and a translation of Wu Cheng'en's *Monkey and the Magic Gourd* (קוף ודלעת הקסמים). He also co-edited *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China* (1996), *India in the Chinese Imagination: Myth, Religion, and Thought* (2013); *Chinese and Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism* (2017), and *Animals and Human Society in Asia: Historical, Cultural and Ethical Perspectives* (2019). He is currently writing a book tentatively titled *Chinese Animal Gods: Draft Animals, Buddhism, and Chinese Religion*.

