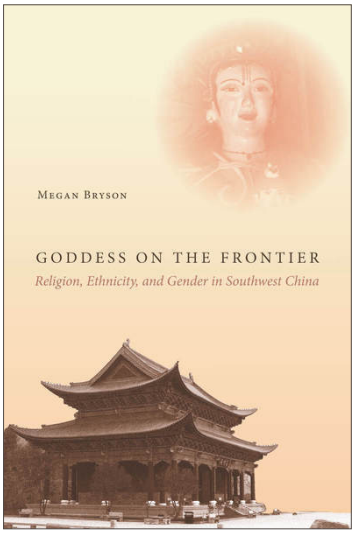
Book Review



Bryson, Megan. *Goddess on the Frontier: Religion, Ethnicity, and Gender in Southwest China*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. 246 pages.

Megan Bryson in *Goddess on the Frontier: Religion, Ethnicity, and Gender in Southwest China* explains and examines the various myths and roles of a goddess named Baijie. This is an original study on an overlooked figure from an understudied region of Asia. Such an undertaking is welcome, since it adds new knowledge and encourages further consideration of a region that is generally underappreciated in modern scholarship. Bryson's study contributes to a larger concern in scholarship regarding gender, particularly in connection to Religious Studies. The topic of this book is unique and presents a number of challenges, primarily with regard to the acquisition and analysis of primary sources. Additionally, fieldwork was carried out that allowed for a discussion of Baijie in present times. Some of the theoretical considerations of this monograph, however, require further consideration in my opinion, as I will discuss below.

The focus of Bryson's study is on the evolving identities of Baijie in southwest China, starting in history from the kingdom of Dali (937–1253). There, this goddess was originally the consort of Mahākāla, but this role was by no means static. Baijie came to refer to the mother of Duan Siping, who founded the kingdom of Dali. Yet Baijie could

also refer to a widow martyr of the eighth century. The detailed descriptions of the elements that comprised these different forms and their evolution over the course of one-thousand years are well executed and clear. There are additional explanations and theories concerning how Baijie was connected to socio-political power at different points in history.

One consistent element of Baijie's identity, as Bryson explains, is that Baijie is uniformly female, and she appears exclusively in the Dali area of Yunnan in China. This region is important since it is positioned along the periphery of the borders of China, India, Tibet and Southeast Asia. Bryson describes this as a 'frontier zone' (2), but we might seek further clarification as to what frontier means and according to whom. We see some discussion of this on page 12: 'Frontier zones are places where different groups encounter each other and different kinds of boundaries—political, cultural, economic—overlap'. Did the people of Dali think of themselves as living in a frontier region? On page 23, Bryson clarifies that 'Nanzhao and Dali paid tribute to the Tang and Song courts and in doing so adopted a subservient role, but this does not mean Nanzhao and Dali rulers blindly accepted the terms of Chinese discourse'. This is an important observation. Although these polities used Chinese script, we need to remain aware that they were separate from China. Chapter One provides a good discussion of these problems.

Goddess on the Frontier is interested in discussing multifaceted identity through local and translocal forces; a multicultural context must therefore be grasped. It is stated that:

> Chineseness, the other universalizing discourse in Dali, exists in tension with two kinds of centrifugal forces, those of localization and of 'barbarism'. Localization threatens the notion of a cohesive Chinese culture; scholars of religion have long discussed the relationship between universalizing and localizing forces, sometimes framing them as official versus popular or classical versus vernacular. (7–8)

I found these statements (which are foundational to the rest of the book) perplexing, since I cannot think of how these theoretical concepts would have been applicable in premodern contexts.

Moreover, one can summon a number of counter arguments against such constructions. The diverse cultural makeup of China during the Tang-Song periods, for example, was neither uniform nor demanding of some universal assimilation to a specific standard, at least outside of official bureaucratic operations. If one were to use this term, then a detailed definition of 'Chineseness' is necessary, since strong regional differences and norms ought to be recognized. 'Chineseness' according to whose definition? On page 9 we read:

> Chineseness, like Buddhism, contrasts its universalizing masculinity with localizing femininity. These discourses homologize masculine universality with texts, institutions, and hierarchies while homologizing feminine locality with oral traditions and looser sociopolitical organization.

I am unaware of any emic source in Classical Chinese that would offer such a characterization of China or Buddhism, in which the masculine is associated with universality while the feminine is connected to locality. Scholars are free to exercise an etic interpretation of data, but in this case, I am unable to conceive how this approach would be objectively applicable to premodern Dali or China.

On page 9 it is said:

> Whereas localizing discourses challenge the universality of Chineseness, the notion of barbarism reinforces Chineseness as a discrete and cohesive category by constituting the other against which it defines itself. In fact, barbarism is only the *apparent* opposite of Chineseness that conceals the latter's true opposite, namely, localizing forces.

I think that 'barbarism' is a loaded word in modern English, but the problem is that this term has no real equivalent in Classical Chinese. The etymology of 'barbarian' is traced back to Greek barbaros, meaning foreign, ignorant, or strange. There were words to describe or generally refer to foreign peoples in Classical Chinese, such as *yi* 夷 or *hu* 胡 for example (and all these terms are often uniformly translated as 'barbarian' by some scholars), but 'barbarian' is definitely

a pejorative in English, so caution ought to be exercised when using this word. Chinese Buddhists in the Tang would not have thought of Indian monks as 'barbarian' as we would understand it. Cultural chauvinism was not necessarily so widespread when we consider how favorable not only Chinese Buddhists were toward foreign monks (and Brahmins). We also need to consider the receptive nature of Chinese *materia medica* to foreign substances and knowledge. If one were to limit the discussion to the agents of the state, one could still point to emperors who embraced foreigners and clearly did not have a negative or dismissive perspective toward them. Also, 'Chineseness' is not a concept I have encountered in Classical Chinese (including writings by Japanese authors who wrote in Chinese about China from a Japanese perspective).

The topic of 'barbarian' vs. Chinese is again brought up in Chapter Three, which addresses developments that occurred under the Mongol Yuan dynasty and then the Ming dynasty. It is explained that 'Zhou Jifeng, a Jiangxi native who edited the Zhengde-era (1506–1521) *Yunnan zhi* (Yunnan gazetteer) credits Ming Taizu with bringing civilization, especially Confucian values, to the barbarians of Yunnan' (88). Again, is 'barbarian' really conveying the meaning of the Chinese? A citation of the original source material is necessary. The book, however, does not cite the source material in the original Chinese (the only Chinese characters are found in illustrations, photographs, and the 'List of Chinese Characters' appended at the end of the book). This is frustrating, since I would like to know how the original text reads and, moreover, how the author would punctuate and translate it.

Moving on, *Goddess on the Frontier* examines Baijie's forms throughout history, working chronologically from the Nanzhao kingdom to the present day. The first chapter addresses the background to the emergence of Baijie during the Dali kingdom, where we find an excellent discussion of diplomatic and cultural relations with China. I especially appreciated the detailed discussion of the attested diplomatic and cultural contacts. There is also a critical discussion of the sources for the reconstruction of Buddhism in Dali, which is well done. One important observation is that 'despite the Dali kingdom's close proximity to Tibet, India, and Southeast Asia, there is little evidence

that Dali elites drew on the Buddhist traditions of those countries' (50). This particularly helps to frame the environment in which Baijie evolved. The chapters look at four specific identities of Baijie: namely, as a Buddhist goddess, the mother of Duan Siping, a widow martyr, and a deity of a village. Bryson utilizes a diverse array of sources to construct the history of the evolving identities of Baijie, including histories, iconography, gazetteers, literature, and ritual texts, among other materials, including interviews conducted at Baijie temples in Dali throughout 2007–2008 (the use of fieldwork to augment and build upon the mostly textual and iconographical content related in earlier chapters is welcome and innovative).

The paucity of primary sources in Chinese is an issue pointed out in Chapter One. I noticed in the bibliography no reference to the *Cefu yuangui* 冊府元龜 (Prime Tortoise of the Record Bureau) of 1013, which is a valuable compendium of 1000 fascicles. The whole text has been digitized and is searchable on CTEXT. A search for *Nanzhao* 南詔 reveals 127 results. Other texts that could be consulted include the *Tongdian* 通典 (Comprehensive Account) of 801 and *Tongzhi* 通志(Comprehensive Chronicle) of 1161. I noticed in the bibliography also the large absence of Japanese secondary sources. A search on CiNii (https://ci.nii.ac.jp/) results in dozens of articles that deal with Nanzhao and Dali. *Goddess on the Frontie*r would have only been enriched had these and some Japanese monographs been consulted, such as *Seinan Chūgoku minzoku no kenkyū: Nanshōkoku no shiteki kenkyū* 西南中国民族史の研究 ： 南詔国の史的研究 [The historical studies of the tribes in South-west China: the historical studies of the Nan-Chao Kingdom] by Fujisawa Yoshimi 藤沢義美. This work addresses the intersection and relationship between Nanzhao and Han Chinese cultures, and would have been very helpful in fleshing out the proposed idea of 'Chineseness'.

Chapter Two looks at the identity of Baijie Shengfei (Holy Consort White Sister) through sources of Dali. I especially appreciated the iconographical explanations, but some of the theoretical considerations perplexed me. For instance, it is argued that Baijie Shengfei 'provides a lens for examining how and why the ruling class of Dali kingdom used gendered religious symbols to present their politico-religious identity. Dali rulers articulated this identity primarily in relation to notions of

Chineseness, and their use of gendered religious symbols engaged in the discursive framework of Chinese and barbarian identities that was current in the Tang-Song dynasties' (51). The theoretical framework introduced earlier is employed here. Yet, I must wonder, what exactly is a 'gendered religious symbol'? Is a feminine deity to be considered 'gendered' in contrast to a masculine deity? Is 'gendered' in opposition to a different normative concept? Some clarification is given:

> As a modern discourse, gender constitutes a potential threat to the project of avoiding anachronistic readings of Dali kingdom sources. Like ethnicity, gender tends to be universalized and perceived as natural or biological. The work of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler has done much to challenge this view as it relates to both gender and sex, but even more than ethnicity, gender's applicability to any cultural context is all too often assumed. (53)

It is further clarified that 'examining masculinities as another dimension of gender also obviates the frequent conflation of gender with femininity, which renders masculinity as normative.' I found this part confusing: are we affirming the existence of a male-female binary in source material or rejecting it in favor of another framework? The analytical categories proposed here and sudden deferential nod to Foucault and Butler seem out of place. I think reference to medieval Chinese metaphysics and philosophy would be more pertinent to a discussion of gender in premodern Nanzhao/Dali, since their intellectuals would have been well aware of the relevant literature. Just as an example, the *Wuxing dayi* 五行大義 (Great Meaning of the Five Phases) by Xiao Ji 蕭吉 (c. 530–610) reads, 'The five phases mutually reproduce one another, meaning that different types change into one another, like how male and female are of different natures, which allows for propagation 凡五行相生, 謂異類相化, 如男女異姓, 能至繁殖'.[1] I think that relying on period sources that describe and define gender—in this case, as a strict binary and as intrinsic nature—is far

[1] CTEXT version: https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=599847. Read *xing* 姓 ('surname') as *xing* 性 ('nature').

more helpful, in my opinion, than evoking Foucault and Butler.

Chapter Five shifts to the present day and is based on fieldwork carried out by Bryson, with additional reference to the shaping of worship during the Republican and PRC periods. There is a lot of critical discussion of the status of minority religions in twentieth century China, which I thought was well executed. The developments under the PRC and their policies toward religion were also brought up, which is without a doubt important to discuss. The field research carried out by Bryson offers innovative information about Baijie's devotees, who are primarily middle-aged and senior women (154), which is illuminating and descriptive. This sort of approach is welcome, since it steps away from strictly text-based prescriptive forms and engages with the living religion and the experiences people have with the goddess in question, which as Bryson explains can differ from public representations. I think this same research methodology could be similarly employed with any number of other deities.

In summary, I think *Goddess on the Frontier* provides solid philological and iconographical analysis of Baijie, complete with a robust survey of the relevant socio-political environments throughout history. The engagement with the modern lived religion connected to Baijie is also well done. The theoretical elements and speculative statements, however, in this book are sometimes problematic in my view.

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