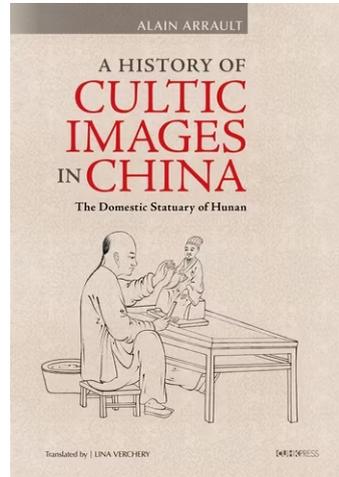


# Book Review

Alain Arrault. *A History of Cultic Images in China: The Domestic Statuary of Hunan*. Translated by Lina Verchery. Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2020. 260 pp.



In this innovative study of Hunan's popular religion, Alain Arrault focuses on the 'household cult' of domestic, small sized (20 cm or 9 inches high), wooden statuettes originally painted, which are still made and venerated in the southern province of Hunan, China. Placed on a small altar of a home, the statuettes are exclusively used for the family's private devotion; they are, therefore, not found in temples or ancestral halls. The oldest statuette, kept in the Hunan Museum Collection, Changsha, is dated 1609 by the inscription carved on its back, suggesting that this cult was already present in the late Ming. Most statuettes date from 1780 to 1980. The author has catalogued some 3,143 statuettes, the majority Buddhist, a smaller number Daoist, and a few being nonreligious or secular in character.

The tridimensional, devotional statuettes belong to three different collections:

1. the Patrice Fava Collection, started in the 1990s, consists of 911 statuettes acquired in the Beijing antique market, representing Buddhist, Daoist, and Hunan's local gods;
2. the Yan Xinyuan 顏新元 Collection, the largest with 1,362

- statuettes, was assembled in Hunan in the 1970s;
3. the Hunan Museum Collection with 870 statuettes derives from the Changsha Custom's seizure in 1984 of ten containers of statuettes intended for sale in the Hong Kong antique market.

Rather than adopt an art historical approach and examine questions of style and aesthetics, Arrault is concerned with examining the relationship between written testimonies and archeological remains. A peculiar characteristic of this type of religious art consists in the 'Consecration Certificate', which was originally inserted in the statuettes' hollowed core. In this way both the interior and exterior, in different ways, played a specific role: the statuette was the object of devotion, while the document supplied its identity, whether Buddhist, Daoist, or even popular: like the Bodhisattva Guanyin, the God of the South Peak, and the God of the Kitchen with his consort, respectively. Some certificates also contain lively stories, the protagonists being both women and men. The Consecration Certificate, moreover, indicates the statuette's site of production, whether in Central or in North-Eastern Hunan; lastly, it attests that the production still continues to this day.

The lengthy Chapter 2 pays particular attention to the god images themselves and starts by dividing them into the categories of national, local, and family divinities; this information is supplied by means of detailed lists and tables. The ancestor category, which constitutes roughly ten percent of the images dated Qing or post Qing, ought to be further investigated as it might offer additional insights on the practice of ancestor worship. Photographic material, representing once living persons, could have been included in this category.

Chapter 3 addresses initiation into religious orders, but does not precisely discuss its temporal process, that is, how long it took. In one case, an unspecified master began this process in early childhood and underwent five years of initiation. This is, however, an exceptional case since in most of the other mentioned examples the initiation's process lasted two years and sometimes even one.

An important and unique aspect in the development of Hunan's cultic images consists in placing, during a consecration rite, a variety

of objects inside the statuettes' hollow interior. They are sacred writing, like excerpts of sūtras and dhāraṇīs (incantation formula); others are symbolic relics such as small reliquaries and precious objects like pearls. All these objects are meant to enable the presence of the divinity within the statuette and imply, as well, its power.

In short, the statuettes shed light on family devotional practices in Hunan which the author confirms to be presently still alive and well.

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