

**Steps of Perfection.** Donald Sutton. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003. 418 pages. ISBN 0-674-01097-3.

*Steps of Perfection* represents a solidly ethnographic approach to the study of folk religion in Taiwan and demonstrates the empirical richness of this field of Chinese religion. There are many virtues in this book: 1. explanations of the ritual symbols and their historical development are clear and lucid, 2. description of the field material is concise and detailed, 3. the text is extensively footnoted; references include almost every important monograph on Chinese religion, 4. theoretical issues, such as the relationships between ritual and myth, and between culture and society, etc. are elaborated with documents and fieldwork material. These make this book essential reading for undergraduates and graduate students in anthropology, religious studies, folk art, and Chinese history, as well as other academic readers.

The book is based on fieldwork with nine troupes of Infernal Generals (*jiajiang*) performers, as well as archival research, and is organized into 8 thematic chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate that even in contemporary capitalist Taiwan, the relationship between place and people is intensely inscribed in different layers of territorial ritual. In the jiao cosmic renewal ceremony festival procession, troupes of the Infernal General (*jiajiang*) are indispensable for their exorcism performance. Chapter 3 explores the composition, iconography and mythology of the troupes. Chapter 4 explicates both the public rituals the Generals perform and the internal rituals through which the *jiajiang* are trained and prepare for the public rituals. Choreographies of the troupes' various rituals are explained and diagrammed in chapter 5. The historic development of the troupes from the Qing dynasty, 1646-1895, through the Japanese Occupation period, 1895-1947, and the period of Guomindang martial law, 1947-87, is expounded in chapter 6 and 7. The author concludes the book with a discussion of the changing Taiwanese society and its symbolic representations.

The Infernal Generals are reported on more and more in the Taiwan media, not because of their efforts in reviving traditional folk art, but because of their relation to gangster societies and juvenile violence. Academic research on their history and ritual performance has only recently begun. Prof. Sutton was one of the pioneers who began observing the troupes in Tainan and he has been publishing on the topic since 1990. *Steps of Perfection* is based upon long-term ethnographic and historical investigation. The author traces the history of the Generals back to their origin in Fuzhou in the Qing dynasty, and he traces the origin of the Generals' iconography back to Han Dynasty cosmology. The troupes are composed of about eight to ten characters: the Punishment Bearer, the Civil Messenger, the Military Messenger, Master Gan and Master Liu (in charge of punishment), Master Xie and Master Fan (in charge of arrest), the Masters of the Four Seasons (in charge of interrogation), Civil Justice and Military Justice. Together with the Great Emperors of the Five Blessings whom the Generals escort, they constitute a system of divine justice. The author surmises that this system derived from Fuzhou officialdom. Out of interest in the Chinese martial arts, the author diagrams the choreographies of the troupes' various rituals (pp. 177-206).

The most fascinating discussion is of the ambiguity of the Infernal Generals power. Are the Infernal Generals ghosts or good spirits? Are they arresting human wrongdoers? or banishing evil spirits? or are they escorting the Five Emperors? Because they are betwixt and between, just like Master Xie and Master Fan (these two figures are more popular in Chinese folk religion), the Generals can effectively communicate with both the yin and the yang, this world and the underworld. But unlike Master Xie and Master Fan, who have a standardized legend and subsequently standardized rituals, the Infernal Generals do not have an already synthesized mythology. Their iconography and mythology are adapted to the demands of performance and ritual (p.111). Whereas for Masters Xie and Fan, legend supplies a charter for ritual performance (p.114), myth is here practical, not fundamental; secondary, not primary; contextual, not universal (p.111) Drawing on Chinese folk religion, Sutton brings a new argument to this age-old debate in religious studies.

In his article on "Symbols, song, dance and features of articulation: is religion an extreme form of traditional authority?" M. Bloch (1974) argued for the persistence of religious authority through its symbols, song, and dance. Prof. Sutton convincingly argues that the traditional authorities of Chinese

cosmology and bureaucracy are sustained through the contemporary ritual performances of the Infernal Generals. Yet there is also innovation and creativity in the ways the troupes adapt to the dynamics of modern Taiwanese society. Nevertheless, this creativity is limited by the cultural notions that local people accept ( p.111).

There are still some questions one will ask after reading the book. Such as: 1. Why did belief in the Five Emperors spread from Fuzhou migrants to Tainan to other ethnic groups who migrated from Fujian, especially when these Fujianese ethnic groups had long believed in the Royal Lords (ie, *Wangye* the plague gods)? Was there a contest or competition between beliefs in the Five Emperors and in the Royal Lords? 2. The composition and iconography of the Generals in Tainan is different from what Rev. Justus Doolittle (1824-1880) observed in Fuzhou in 1858. What was the reason for the innovation in Tainan? 3. Why could the Generals be separated from the Five Emperors and develop on their own? This resulted in the popularity of the Generals and the decline of the Five Emperors. 4. Religious activity has flourished in Taiwan in recent decades. Why does modern Taiwan need more spiritual ritual than before? Aside from these questions, some interesting aspects of the Generals' troupes were not explored in depth in the book. While the managers of the troupes, ritual masters, and temple elites were interviewed, the motivations and experiences of the young men who joined the troupes and played the Generals were less discussed. While the choreography of the Generals' movements were delicately drawn, there was no detailed illustration of the face-painting, the colorful costumes, or the *mudra* (hand gestures).

In the concluding chapter, when discussing the relationship between culture and society, Prof. Sutton writes in Geertzian style that culture is a repertoire of symbols or symbolic patterns evolving contingently under the pressure of local interests (p.300). By local interests, Sutton means the temple managers and the ritual masters of the troupes who might add self-mortification to the Generals' performance out of local interests and market needs (pp.274-278). Despite all the efforts of the government and elites from Qing times to the Guomindang (society) to remold the performance of the Infernal Generals (culture), their success has been limited (p.300). The author strongly believes in the persistence of the power of culture and that local interests survive state repression.

Finally, as a local researcher I appreciate Prof. Sutton's wide reference to local Chinese publications on the topic and his addressing local debates such as the difference between ceremonial circles and belief circles.

Hsun Chang  
Institute of Ethnology  
Academia Sinica  
Taipei, Taiwan