

PREFACE TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE

THE DIVINE, THE DEMONIC AND THE BEYOND IN BELIEF, NARRATIVE AND PRACTICE OF CENTRAL AND EAST ASIA

ALEVTINA SOLOVYEVA
 University of Tartu

This volume looks at the traditions of Central and East Asia, beliefs about deities and demons, ancestors, epic heroes, miraculous entities and strange events. They are embodied in myths, legends, fairy tales and ghost stories, ritual practices, and the teachings of religious and philosophical schools. They connect, and have connected, humankind with natural and supernatural surroundings today and historically.

The volume is based on papers selected following the second International Asian Studies Conference in October 2021, organised by the Centre for Oriental Studies (University of Tartu, Estonia) and the Institute for Oriental and Classical Studies (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Russia) in cooperation with the College of Transcultural Studies (Beijing Normal University, China).¹ As was the Conference, so this special issue is dedicated to the memory of the remarkable sinologist and folklorist academician Boris L'vovich Riftin (1932–2012). In Asia, he is also known by his Chinese pseudonym Li Fuqing, the name under which he taught and wrote in Chinese about culture and folklore in Taiwan and China (Li 1998). His work contributed to international Asian Studies, and especially to research on the folk traditions, mythologies, religions, literature and arts of peoples in Central and East Asia.

Boris Riftin was born in St Petersburg to a family with scholarly traditions, including the study of languages and cultures of ancient Mesopotamia by his uncle Aleksander P. Riftin, who had a particularly strong influence on his early interest in Oriental studies (Berezkin 2012: 261). As his own area of professional devotion, Riftin chose China. His education and academic career started in 1950 at the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Leningrad State University, and developed for decades in what was a complicated period for Oriental Studies. The 1950s to 1970s were characterised by a lack of older scholars due to the persecutions of the 1930s, harsh state censorship, official propaganda and forced isolation from the international academic community. In addition, Soviet scholars were barred not only from Europe but also China, due to the Cultural Revolution and later crisis in relations between the People's Republic of China and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Despite these factors, Riftin gained unique competencies, knowledge and data on cultures in Central and East Asia, conducted valuable research on Han and other Chi-

nese peoples, Taiwanese indigenous traditions, collected Dungan folklore in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and China, investigated Mongolian epic and storytelling traditions, discovered and researched ancient and medieval Chinese manuscripts, literature, mythology and folklore, popular prints, ritual practices and many other topics. He wrote more than 300 books and articles in Russian, Chinese and German, with his last works still being published today (Riftin 2022). Many of his works are also translated into European and Asian languages. He had been in close contact with many colleagues from the West and the East. They remember him as a true scholar, living for his research and wishing to share it generously with everyone despite their status or age. He was extremely well educated and knowledgeable, and at the same time extremely simple in his behaviour, relations with people and ability to render complex matters in plain words. He was sincere and open. His disciples, including the current author, attest that he was also a remarkable lecturer and teacher.

This volume includes articles from Riftin's younger colleagues and scholars who wished to join us with their research contributions, all relating to his wide field of interests.

The article by Aglaia Starostina, "The Saint Euplus Miracle in China: The Local Version of a Motif Complex", represents a cross-cultural study and discusses a Eurasian motif complex built around the illusion of water. The author involves this motif to analyse the development of Chinese plots that include the popular image of the magic paintbrush. The article deals with a combination of the magic paintbrush and the borrowed motif complex centred around water that miraculously appears or the illusion of it in Chinese oral and written traditions. The article involves data from Chinese folklore, Tang dynasty literature and a study of the exceptionally curious Chinese compilation of strange stories from the 7th to 10th centuries, *The Extensive Records of the Taiping Era*.

Rostislav Berezkin contributed to the volume with the research about "New Religious Teachings and Narrative *Baojuan* in the Late 19th Century: The Example of the *Complete Recension of the Scroll of Mulian*". In his article, Berezkin focuses on analysing the 19th century Chinese source of the story of Mulian, a loyal son who goes down the hell to rescue his mother, which was popular in Asian Buddhist traditions. The author analyses the content and specifics of this text, as well as the history and development of the genre. *Baojuan* represents prosimetric texts on religious and often mystical topics that formed in the environment of Chinese folk religion and was used by different religious schools to promote their ideas. Berezkin also investigates the usage of this text in the late religious teachings of 19th-century China.

Ekaterina Zavidovskaya's article is dedicated to the cult of the Chinese god Guan Yu, a third-century general and character made famous in the Chinese classical novel the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Guan Yu was one of the most popular deities in the Chinese pantheon revered by Buddhists, Taoists, Confucian scholars and followers of various sects alike. Guan Yu is also an active figure in folklore, narratives and everyday rituals among various peoples in China. Zavidovskaya's article regards the worship of Guan Yu as a subject that has been studied by sinologists in Russia during the 19th and 20th centuries. (The cult of Guan Yu is also one of the topics of the research conducted by Riftin.)

Elizaveta Volchkova presents her research on the *jian*, 'the ghost of the ghost', a peculiar figure found in Chinese vernacular belief and practice. This character has a

long history going back to the Tang period of the 7th to 10th centuries, and is still present in contemporary culture. Volchkova's research adds significant features that help the reader understand the perceptions of death and post-death existence, the nature of the soul(s), and the netherworld in Chinese folklore and religion. The author discusses the history and development of the character and the motifs, beliefs and practices connected with this special kind of ghost. The research involves numerous early and modern sources, chronicles, novels, contemporary ritual practices and internet resources, including the sale of magical paraphernalia.

The article by Mark Bender, "Seeking an 'Ideal Place' in a Nuosu Origin Epic", introduces the long-term study of and fieldwork research on the *Book of Origins*, a major ritual text of the Nuosu, a subgroup of the official Yi (Yizu) ethnic group in southwest China. The narrative, existing in both written and oral variants, is part of a living tradition, especially among priests and folk singers, in the Liangshan Yi autonomous region in Sichuan province and nearby Yunnan province. The epic narrates the creation of the sky, earth, various species of plants and living creatures together with cultural institutes through the frame of genealogy. The tropes of genealogy and migration intertwine in the storyworld as clans descended from the couple seek an ideal place to settle and prosper in the local environment in a pattern that resonates with other epics from the southwest and the Southeast Asian Massif. The author discusses the content and plots of the book and shows its influence on the contemporary life of the Nuosu community.

The article by Ilya Gruntov and Olga Mazo, "Cat Spirits in North-western China: Worship Practices, Origin, and External Relations", examines the beliefs, narratives and practices connected with cat spirits. Beliefs about this character are spread among various ethnic groups, including Han Chinese, Tibetans, and Monguors. Cat spirits represent ambivalent entities, capable of being family helper spirits, wealth spirits and harmful evil spirits, especially towards neighbours. The authors analyse the image, diverse plots and ritual descriptions dedicated to the cat spirits in north-west China, as well as the origin of this peculiar supernatural character and its ties with other figures of the everyday life beliefs in regions local to this area.

Dmitrii Nosov's article "How to Defeat a Demon: The Function of the Oirat Folk Narrative about Burning the Female Devil" introduces the results of a case study, based on archive materials, that investigates this popular plot and attempts to uncover the functions and probable genesis of one group of satirical tales that have spread among Mongolian peoples. The main character in these tales is Argachi, a smart, cunning person, a rogue who has various adventures, including struggling with this annoying demoness. A comparison between the Oirat story from Xinjiang and a similar narrative recorded from the Khalkha Mongols shows that the strategy of behaviour described in the stories effectively gets rid of this malicious, but not very intelligent, mythological character.

Gregory Delaplace contributed to the volume with the article "A Concern for the Invisible: Dwelling with Sensitive Horses and Vanishing Graves in Mongolia". Delaplace's work introduces theoretical discussion about research on mythological beliefs and dealing with the supernatural that is significant for the fields of folklore studies, ethnology and social anthropology. The article discusses the terms and aims of such research and formulates an approach, elaborated by the author, of an anthropology of the invisible. The aim is to detect and compare the variety of pragmatic ways in which different

human collectives deal with things that *appear*. The article demonstrates this approach on the rich fieldwork data collected by the author in Mongolia in the 2000s.

It seems sensible for international academia in general, and our humanitarian disciplines in particular, to keep track of developments as we go through different periods. The experiences of different generations, as illustrated through the research carried out in these fields by our teachers, as well as older and younger colleagues, encourages us to remember, revise and share worthy academic traditions.

The organisers of the International Asian Studies conference dedicated to the memory of Boris Riftin are very grateful to the *Journal of Ethnology and Folklore* and its editors for this volume. We would also like to thank all of the authors for their contributions and for sharing their research and ideas.

NOTES

1 Regular organising committee of the conference and publications: Ilya S. Smirnov (HSE University), Alevtina A. Solovyeva (University of Tartu), Olga M. Mazo (HSE University; Tel Aviv University), Elizaveta V. Volchkova (HSE University), Aglaia B. Starostina (HSE University; Institute of Oriental Studies Russian Academy of Science).

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