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Barend ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads: Creating an Identity*

Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998. xiii+517 pp.

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This book represents a major breakthrough in our understanding of the history of secret societies in China (generally referred to in Chinese as mimi shehui 秘密社會 or mimi huishe 秘密會社). The author, Barend ter Haar, is a renowned expert on Chinese local cults and religious movements,[1] whose first book about the so-called "White Lotus Religion" (Bailian jiao 白蓮教)[2] won much praise for successfully challenging much of the conventional wisdom on this subject.[3] In this new study, ter Haar convincingly demonstrates the religious nature of secret societies, explaining how their beliefs and practices were linked to local religious traditions in south China. However, his attempts to treat different secret societies as part of one coherent movement called the "Triads" (Tiandi hui 天地會, Sanhe hui 三合會) are not always convincing, and he fails to provide detailed evidence that Triad lore was spread according to a

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1 For more on his past and current research, see www.let.leidenuniv.nl/bth/index.html, which also contains useful bibliographies on literacy, violence, protest, Yao 瑤/猺 religion, and shamanism.

2 *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992).

3 See my review of Barend ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History*, *Jindai zhongguoshi yanjiu tongxun* 近代中國史研究通訊, 18 (1994), pp. 185-203.

direct and linear pattern of transmission throughout southern China and Taiwan.

Ter Haar's Introduction (Chapter 1) states that his primary goal in researching groups he calls the Triads is to place the study of this topic in the mainstream of Chinese cultural and religious history, as opposed to seeing the Triads as esoteric and exotic (see page 5). At the same time, ter Haar attempts to understand the Triads in the broader context of Chinese religious culture by focusing on what he calls "Triad lore," defined as the initiation ritual, foundation account, and secret signals and jargon transmitted to members (pp. 7, 11). Such lore was transmitted via dialogues, poems, and drawings, and was primarily derived from the oral traditions of south China. Ter Haar also explores how this lore contributed to the formation of the "Triad group," which he defines as a sworn brotherhood based on fictive kinship and possessing a hierarchical structure. Ter Haar takes care to define what he means by the term "Triads," namely groups that identified themselves using the autonyms Tiandi hui or Sanhe hui, possessed a recurrent symbolism based on the number three, performed an initiation ritual with a blood covenant (shaxue weimeng 歃血爲盟), and used the surname Hong 洪 (pp. 15-17).

The Introduction also contains a brief history of the Triads, beginning with the Lin Shuangwen 林爽文 uprising of 1786-1787. However, according to ter Haar's research, in the long run the Triads proved strongest among communities in the Guangzhou 廣州 and Chaozhou 潮州 areas, as well as parts of northern Fujian 福建 and Jiangxi 江西. He notes Triad links to the Taiping Rebellion, and particularly to the Small Sword Society (Xiaodao hui 小刀會) of the Shanghai region. His historical account of the Triads concludes with a discussion of their links to Sun Yat-sen, and how they served as a model for the Tongmeng hui 同盟會 and the Guomindang.

One of the Introduction's greatest strengths is its brilliant analysis of

primary sources and secondary literature related to the study of Chinese secret societies. For example, ter Haar points out that Hirayama Shū 平山周's *Zhongguo mimi shehui shi* 中國秘密社會史 (1912 translation of 1911 Japanese original) was plagiarized from William Stanton's *The Triad Society or Heaven and Earth Association* (1900) (see pp. 28, 32, 36-37). He also notes that the 1912 Chinese translation contained probably the first use of the term mimi shehui for a Chinese audience. Ter Haar also discusses the importance of the mainland Chinese publication *Tiandi hui* 天地會 (1980-1988), which contains important archival materials (p. 29). Based on this source, and his own research, ter Haar maintains that the oldest extant Triad texts date back to Lin Shuangwen 林爽文, while the oldest known initiation manual dates back to 1810 and is from Guangxi 廣西. He also introduces important sources located in the British Museum and the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin (pp. 30-37), as well as key Western accounts of the Triads by W.P. Morgan, William Pickering, Gustave Schegel, William Stanton, and William Stirling (pp. 38-43).

The main body of the book is divided into two parts. The first part, entitled "Performance," extends from Chapters 2-5, and examines the contents and cultural significance of the Triad initiation ritual. Chapter 2 opens with a detailed analysis of the importance of incense in Chinese culture, which can be seen in rituals such as "division of incense" (fenxiang 分香) and the fact that many leaders of social and religious organizations were frequently referred to as "master of the [incense] burner" (luzhu 爐主). Ter Haar describes the importance of incense in the Triad foundation account (discussed in Chapter 9; see below), particularly the appearance of an incense burner inscribed with the words "overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming" (fan Qing fu Ming 反清復明) that appeared to monks from the Shaolin Monastery (Shaolin si 少林寺) and their followers. He also notes that Triad leaders were referred to as "masters of incense" (xiangzhu 香主). Chapter 2 also focuses on the importance of the

bushel (dou 斗) in Chinese rituals especially offerings (jiao 醮) and "assemblies for worship of bushels" (lidou fahui 禮斗法會) and Triad initiation ceremonies. Ter Haar points out that the Triad bushel was little different from that used for the other Chinese rites mentioned above, as both contained swords, scissors, a mirror, a ruler, and five-colored flags. However, the Triad bushel was also a symbol of enclosed territory or sacred space, identified in Triad lore as the "City of Willows" (Muyang cheng 木楊城).[4]

Chapter 3 is a thorough account of the Triad initiation ritual. Ter Haar considers the Triad initiation to be a rite of passage, marked by the candidate's having to cross all manners of boundaries and passageways, especially water, mountains, and man-made constructions such as walls and gates. Ter Haar combines a number of sources to present an account of one such ritual, and uses the data to make a number of important observations, including the fact that candidates had to dress in mourning (sangfu 喪服) with disheveled hair (pifa 披髮) and travel from east to west. He also points out that the Triad initiation ritual featured the candidate's symbolic death and attainment of rebirth, including the passage through a gate that was supposed to symbolize the vagina, a fire-walking ritual, the blood covenant, and the ritual washing of new members. The initiation ritual concluded with the establishment or solidification of community sentiment by means of feasting and drinking.

Chapter 4 discusses the history and function of the blood covenant in Chinese society. I have published extensively in English and Chinese on this subject,[5] and will not discuss it further here. This chapter also explores the

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4 Ter Haar also notes that the term City of Willows can be traced back to the Six Dynasties, where it was a part of millenarian beliefs about the Maitreya Buddha (Mile fo 彌勒佛) and Prince Moonlight (Yueguang pusa 月光菩薩) that featured a safe haven known as Huacheng 化城 (literally the "City of Transformations") or Yangzhou 楊州 (not Yangzhou 揚州); see pp. 93-94.

5 Kang Bao 康豹, "Hanren shehui de shenpan yishi chutan —Cong zhan jitou shuoqi" 漢人社

nature of the Passage through the Gate of Swords (guo jianmen 過劍門) ritual and its non-Han origins (pp. 167-170). Chapter 5 focuses on the Triad blood covenant, particularly its role in transforming candidates into Triad members. Ter Haar pays particular attention to the structure of this ritual, which can be divided into the oath (meng 盟) and the curse (zu 詛), according to practices that had existed in ancient China. However, the Triads were unusual in omitting the City God (chenghuang 城隍) from their rituals. Ter Haar speculates that this might be due to this deity's links to the state cult, but one should also remember that Triad blood covenants could feature Guangong 關公, who too was part of the state cult (p. 192). In addition, Chapter 5 considers the significance of joining the "Hong family," and notes that the Triads were structured as quasi-lineages, with some being divided into "houses" (fang 房) and having their own ancestors/patriarchs (zu 祖) (p. 208). Ter Haar notes that in some Triad groups members were forbidden to marry female relatives of sworn brothers, apparently due to the incest taboo (p. 212).

The book's second part, entitled "Narratives," extends from Chapters 6-10. Here ter Haar presents a detailed analysis of Triad beliefs and political ideals, as well as the Triad foundation account, before concluding with a discussion of the nature of Triad lore as knowledge. Chapter 6 begins with a discussion of what ter Haar terms the "demonological messianic paradigm." According to ter Haar's research, Chinese religion featured two different messianic paradigms. The first involved religious practices largely inspired by Buddhist messianism,

會的神判儀式初探── 從斬雞頭說起, *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Minzuxue yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院民族學研究所集刊, 88 (2000), pp. 173-202; Paul R. Katz, "Divine Justice: Chicken-beheading Rituals in Japanese Occupation Taiwan and their Historical Antecedents," in Wang Ch'iu-kuei 王秋桂, Chuang Ying-chang 莊英章, and Ch'en Chung-min 陳中民, eds., *Shehui, minzu yu wenhua zhanyan guoji yantaohui lunwenji* 社會、民族與文化展演國際研討會論文集 (Taipei: Center for Chinese Studies, 2001), pp. 111-160.

such as the emphasis on adopting a vegetarian diet as a means of both changing one's lifestyle and improving one's moral standing in order to prepare for the apocalypse. The second, which can be found in Triad texts, was the demonological messianic paradigm, namely the threat of imminent disasters combined with the hope of rescue by a youthful savior (usually an imperial descendent surnamed Zhu 朱 or Li 李) who possessed a range of ritual techniques, including using protective amulets (fu 符) and summoning spirit soldiers (yinbing 陰兵, tianbing 天兵, shenbing 神兵).[6] One of the most important texts that expressed the demonological messianic paradigm was the *Scripture of the Five Lords* (*Wugong jing* 五公經), which contains vivid descriptions of an apocalypse occurring in yin 寅 or mao 卯 years, as well as savior figures who possess various treasures (especially swords and seals), issue proclamations, and command spirit soldiers. This text also emphasizes the importance of amulets and banners (qi 旗), which enhance the savior's legitimacy while also providing protection from harm. Ter Haar then proceeds to briefly discuss non-Triad uprisings from the 17th and 18th centuries that appear to have been inspired by the demonological messianic paradigm, but devotes most of the chapter to a long discussion of Ma Chaozhu 馬朝柱 incident, which took place in the border region between Hubei 湖北 and Anhui 安徽 from 1747-1752 (pp. 236-253).

Chapter 7 explores the messianic elements of Triad lore. Ter Haar begins with the ideal of overthrowing the Qing and restoring the Ming, which featured a savior named Zhu (after the last Ming imperial prince; also referred to as the

6 The Ta-pa-ni Incident (噍吧哖事件), which I am now studying, contains elements of both of these messianic paradigms. See Paul R. Katz, "Religion, Ritual, and Resistance: The Significance of the Xilai An (西來庵事件) Incident, 1915." Paper presented at Religious Thought and Lived Religion in China: A Conference in Honor of Professor Daniel L. Overmyer on his Retirement. Vancouver, British Columbia, September 14-15, 2002.

"King of Light" or Mingwang 明王). Another aspect of Triad messianism was the character Wan 萬, based on accounts of the Shaolin monk Wan Tixi 萬提喜, who was the reputed founder of the Triad movement. Triad messianism also featured the belief in the City of Willows as a safe haven, as well as a fascination with numbers and dates that may derive from the *Scripture of the Five Lords*. Ter Haar discusses some early 19th century incidents that appear to show the presence of the Triad demonological messianic paradigm, including those involving Du Shiming 杜世明 and Li Lingkui 李淩魁, as well as Li Laowu 李老五. For example, the incident involving Du Shiming and Li Lingkui featured amulets, banners, and the belief in a rescuing force of spirit soldiers (p. 294). Chapter 7 concludes with ter Haar's speculations about what might have caused the messianic paradigm to decline in importance among the Triads (pp. 289-290, 304-305).

Chapter 8 contains a stimulating discussion of Triad political ideals. Ter Haar begins by examining the idea of imperial legitimation in China, which featured the belief in the Mandate of Heaven (tianming 天命), four-character phrases with the terms tian 天 and dao 道 (for example titian xingdao 替天行道), the concept of dynastic time as a "revolution" (yun 運), imperial surnames and treasures, written messages from the gods, and calamities and omens. Ter Haar correctly points out that legitimation ideology was not restricted to China's ruling classes, but also circulated among the general populace. The rest of the chapter examines Triad political ideals, including overthrowing the Qing and restoring the Ming, the belief in Prince Zhu, and the importance of seals and swords. These ideals appear to have been present as early as the Lin Shuangwen uprising, which featured the practice of posting proclamations declaring the movement's legitimacy. Triad political ideals persisted throughout 19th and early 20th centuries, and ter Haar presents a vivid case study of how these ideals were promoted by the Small Sword Society

during the Taiping Rebellion, and influenced Sun Yat-sen and the Tongmeng hui.

Chapter 9 focuses on the Triad foundation account, the earliest Chinese version of which dates to 1810 and the earliest Western version to 1849. According to this account, the Triads arose during the Ming-Qing transition, beginning with Li Zicheng's 李自成 rebellion and the birth of Prince Zhu. The foundation account places great emphasis on the victory of Shaolin martial monks over the Manchus, followed by their betrayal and persecution.[7] During the monks' flight, an incense burner inscribed with the words "overthrow the Qing and restore the Ming" magically appeared, which inspired Wan Tixi and his followers (totaling 108 individuals) to perform a blood covenant and identify themselves as members of the Hong family, thereby founding the Triads (pp. 371-373). Ter Haar explains that the plot of the foundation account centers on the theme of "fall from grace," and shares many characteristics with plots of some vernacular military romances.[8] Ter Haar also makes the fascinating observation that the Triad foundation account is in many ways similar to the foundation accounts of the Luo Sect (Luojiao 羅教), the Eight Trigrams Sect (Bagua jiao 八卦教), and the Green Gang (Qingbang 青幫) (see p. 397). This chapter concludes with an appendix that summarizes theories about the present location of the Southern Shaolin Monastery (Nan Shaolin si 南少林寺).

Chapter 10 treats the issue of Triad knowledge. According to ter Haar, Triad knowledge was an object to be obtained, and candidates had to pay Triad

7 For more on the history of Shaoliin martial monks, see Meir Shahar, "Ming-Period Evidence of Shaolin Martial Practice," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 61. 2 (December 2001), pp. 359-413.

8 See C.T. Hsia, "The Military Romance: A Genre of Chinese Fiction," in Cyril Birch, ed., *Studies in Chinese Literary Genres* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 339-390.

leaders to acquire it. In this sense, the Triads were similar to Taoism and some sectarian traditions, which also featured the practice of giving gifts or money to a master in order to learn esoteric or specialized knowledge. Ter Haar maintains that Triad lore did not need to be internalized or understood, because for the Triads participation in ritual performances proved more important than comprehending doctrines. In short, knowledge could be purchased, but did not require analytical understanding. Ter Haar also explores the importance of Triad lore in building a sense of community, noting that rituals, stories, and banquets functioned to create ties that linked men together in a hierarchical system based on fictive kinship. He concludes that Triad language was not meant to be secret, but instead fostered a sense of community (p. 442).

The book's conclusion (Chapter 11) focuses on Triad lore and its origins in southern Chinese oral traditions, while also presenting a "new history" of Triads. Here ter Haar attempts to show that the Ma Chaozhu incident served as an important precedent for the Triads (pp. 452, 456-457), and restates his argument about the importance of Triad lore in creating group identity.

This book makes a number of impressive contributions to the study of Chinese secret societies. Firstly, ter Haar convincingly breaks down the traditional dichotomy between so-called "secret religions" (mimi zongjiao 秘密宗教) and "secret societies" (mimi shehui 秘密社會), which he notes was first proposed by Tao Chengzhang 陶成章 in a 1911 essay later reprinted in the series *Xinhai geming* 辛亥革命.[9] Ter Haar also points out that this dichotomy derives from the Qing-dynasty distinction between "networks of teachings" (jiaomen 教門) and "gathering bands" (huidang 會黨) (p. 460).[10] Instead of

[9] See Tao Chengzhang 陶成章, "Jiaohui yuanliu kao" 教會源流考, in Chai Degeng 柴德賡, et al., eds., *Xinhai geming* 辛亥革命 (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 1957), pp. 99-111.

[10] See also Chuang Chi-fa 莊吉發, *Zhenkong jiaxiang: Qingdai minjian mimi zongjiaoshi*

using these dichotomies, ter Haar prefers using the term "new religious groups" to encompass both sectarian religions and secret societies. Some may quibble with his choice of terms, but this hardly detracts from the significance of his analytical breakthrough.

The book's second contribution is its convincing portrayal of Chinese secret societies as religious organizations. No longer will scholars have any reason to doubt the religious nature of Chinese secret societies, as ter Haar's discussions of the importance of incense (pp. 55-63) and the safe haven of the City of Willows (pp. 55, 63, 80-83, 85, 94-95, 275-277), as well as his detailed account of initiation rituals as rites of passage (pp. 89-97, 110-136) and the demonological messianic paradigm (pp. 224-236) clearly show the central role of religious beliefs and practices in terms of attracting members and defining a sense of identity. Ter Haar also correctly points out that these beliefs and practices were not new or unique, but deeply embedded in traditional Chinese culture. For example, the structure of written covenants was very similar to that of Taoist memorials (shuwen 疏文) (pp. 195, 198-199), while the altar and blood covenants can be traced back to ancient religious practices (pp. 6, 86, 187-189).

Ter Haar also deserves credit for his clear analysis of the distinctions between Chinese oral and written traditions. For example, he makes the important point that traditional Chinese novels largely belonged to elite culture despite the fact that they contained elements of vernacular (baihua 白話), and may have had less of an impact on secret societies than dramas and other oral performance traditions (pp. 9-10). One of the most fascinating aspects of ter Haar's research is its revelation of the importance of drama in Chinese secret societies. Ter Haar shows that the initiation ritual in many ways resembled an

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yanjiu 眞空家鄉：清代民間秘密宗教史研究 (Taipei: Wenshizhe chubanshe, 2002).

opera, and was even referred to in some sources as "singing operas" (changxi 唱戲). Initiations were often divided into acts, featured the performance of "performing immortals" (banxian 扮仙) and "Dancing the Advancement of Office" (tiao jiaguan 跳加官), contained dramatic dialogues between candidates and masters, and were accompanied by singing in operatic style (pp. 140-141). Secret society manuals also show leaders wearing make-up and assuming poses seen in traditional Chinese opera, and some known leaders of secret society uprisings dressed in theatrical costumes (pp. 142, 248, 300, 357). At the same time, ter Haar also points out the importance of writing to members of secret societies, and argues persuasively that written liturgical texts were inherently conservative and less subject to change than oral accounts (pp. 194-198).

The book's greatest weakness may well be its attempt to treat those secret societies founded in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and among overseas Chinese communities after the Lin Shuangwen uprising as belonging to one single movement known as the Triads. Ter Haar argues that Triad lore was "surprisingly consistent" from the 1780s to the 1970s, and that this justifies "treating all information on Triad lore as one coherent corpus, unless there are clear and significant indications of change over time" (pp. 7-8). He also claims that "a rigidly historical approach would have fragmented the available sources to the point of making any kind of analysis impossible" (p. 8). His point about the similarities between the groups he has researched is a valid one, but he also admits that "there was usually very little cohesion between individual Triad groups" (p. 149), that Triad lore could vary by place or time (p. 9), and that individual teachers adapted prophecies and claims to meet their own needs (p. 253).

Ter Haar's discussion of Triad autonyms is also somewhat curious, especially since it is not at all clear that every single group ter Haar has studied used the autonyms Tiandi hui 天地會 or Sanhe hui 三合會. In fact, following

the Lin Shuangwen uprising and the state's subsequent persecution of secret societies, very few groups dared to openly refer to themselves using these autonyms. Ter Haar has identified one such group, which existed in Guangdong in 1807 (see pp. 426-427). Other groups from the 1780s and 1790s are also labeled "Tiandi hui" in archival sources, but it is not clear whether the term is an autonym, exonym or label.[11] Ter Haar also attempts to identify the Triads as a distinctive movement by emphasizing their use of symbolism involving the number three, initiation ceremonies accompanied by a blood covenant, and the use of surname Hong. At the same time, however, he also admits that some so-called Triad groups in the northern Fujian and Jiangxi regions practiced blood covenants without mentioning this surname (p. 204).

A related issue involves the thorny problem of how to distinguish between groups ter Haar identifies as Triads and earlier or contemporary groups with many similar characteristics, including blood covenants, fascination with sacred numbers, beliefs in saviors with imperial surnames, legitimation ideology, etc. As ter Haar vividly demonstrates, associations of males featuring initiation rituals and the demonological messianic paradigm existed long before the Lin Shuangwen uprising,[12] making it extremely difficult to prove that so-called Triad groups were significantly different from other secret societies that were not bestowed the exonym or label "Triad" in Chinese sources. Consider for example ter Haar's treatment of the Ma Choazhu incident of 1747-1752, which he describes in Chapter 6 and comments on in further detail in the book's conclusion. On the one hand, ter Haar maintains that this incident

11 David Ownby, *Brotherhoods and Secret Societies in Early and Mid-Qing China* (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 43.

12 For more on this problem, see Robert Anthony, "Demons, Gangsters, and the Origins of the Heaven and Earth Society," paper presented at the Institute of Taiwan History Preparatory Office, Academia Sinica, March 26, 2002.

"should not be reduced to the status of a Triad precursor or even a proto-Triad group" (p. 452), only to speculate in the very next paragraph that survivors of the incident may have transmitted their messianic prophecies to Fujian shortly before the Lin Shuangwen uprising, thereby causing the first Triad networks to come into being (see also p. 456).

In the end, ter Haar's insistence on trying to construct a single linear history of one unified and coherent religious movement appears to be a methodological quagmire. Perhaps most ironically, the methodology ter Haar employs in this book to study Chinese secret societies appears to be at odds with the breakthroughs of his first book on the White Lotus Teachings. Ter Haar's research on the White Lotus was most noteworthy for demonstrating that during the Ming-Qing era there was in fact no one religious movement known as the White Lotus Teachings. Instead, the term "White Lotus Teachings" usually appears in Ming-Qing sources as an exonym or label. Ter Haar's first book also pointed out that many links between groups identified by the Chinese state as heterodox or rebellious were often artificial constructions formed by officials under pressure from the emperor to round up individuals or groups perceived as enemies of the state.[13] Finally, ter Haar showed the fallacy of trying to write a single history of the White Lotus Teachings based on a wide range of sources from different parts of China written during different eras. However, in this study of Chinese secret societies, ter Haar appears to follow in the footsteps of previous scholars by not always considering whether terms like "Tiandi hui" appear in the sources as an autonym, exonym, or label, and he also uses sources from different places and times in attempting to construct a linear history of the Triads.

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[13] Philip A. Kuhn arrived at a similar conclusion in his study of soul-stealing panics; see *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

Despite this book's methodological problems, it undoubtedly represents the single most important study of Chinese secret societies ever published to date. The depth of ter Haar's research, combined with the sensitivity of his analysis, has provided a new perspective on this important facet of Chinese history, and set a shining standard future scholars will be hard-pressed to match.