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Barend J. ter Haar, *Telling Stories: Witchcraft and Scapegoating in Chinese History.*

Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2006. X + 382 pp.*

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Barend ter Haar's latest book is a path-breaking study of impressive scope and depth that sheds new light on a number of key phenomena in the history of Chinese communities, including the spread of rumors and the ways in which scapegoats were identified and persecuted. The author, a renowned expert on the history of religion and society in late imperial China, earned his doctorate at Leiden University in 1990 and currently serves at his alma mater as professor of Chinese history. His first book, about the so-called "White Lotus Religion" (Bailian jiao 白蓮教), succeeded in overturning conventional wisdom about Chinese sectarian movements,[1] while his second book explored the beliefs, practices, and political ideology of Chinese secret societies (*mimi shehui* 秘密社會).[2] Ter Haar is currently undertaking research on the cultural significance of violence, the cult of Guan Yu 關羽 (Guangong 關公),

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* I have benefitted from reading Kang Xiaofei's review of this book in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 65:4 (2006), pp. 811-812.

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1 Barend J. ter Haar, *The White Lotus Teachings in Chinese Religious History* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992). See my review of this book in the *Jindai Zhongguoshi yanjiu tongxun* 近代中國史研究通訊 18 (1994), pp. 185-203.

2 Barend J. ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads: Creating an Identity* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1998). See my review of this book in the *Zhongyang yanjiuyuan Jindaishi yanjiusuo jikan* 中央研究院近代史研究所集刊 40 (June 2003), pp. 271-284.

and the Dragon Flower (Longhua 龍華) religious movement.[3]

Telling Stories opens with accounts of rumors that ended up causing collective fears in 1519-1521, including that the Zhengde 正德 emperor (r. 1505-1521) was seeking out young girls for his harem and that mysterious creatures called Dark Afflictions (*heisheng* 黑眚) were tearing people to shreds with their claws. Ter Haar then presents the goals of his study, namely to trace how such rumors spread and examine what they tell us about local society. He places particular emphasis on role of rumors in processes of scapegoating, especially the stigmatization of individuals considered to be marginal. Ter Haar also presents his analytical framework, which has been shaped by Jean-Noël Kapferer's approach of treating rumors as a meta-category in order to pay closer attention to the social and cultural factors that sparked these stories.[4] Another influence may be found in Ralph A. Rosenow and Gary A. Fine's idea that rumors helped to reduce anxiety,[5] as well as Adam Fox's detailed treatment of the importance of oral communication.[6] Ter Haar's main sources for this study include anecdotes (*biji* 筆記), legal records, newspapers like *Shenbao* 申報, and illustrated pictorials like the *Dianshizhai huabao* 點石齋畫報. He also adopts a comparative perspective by considering processes of scapegoating in China and the West.

Chapter 2 ("The Spotted Barbarian and Auntie Tiger") centers on a fear that has

3 See Barend J. ter Haar, "Rethinking 'Violence' in Chinese Culture," in Göran Aijmer and Jos Abbink, eds., *Meanings of Violence: A Cross Cultural Perspective* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), pp. 123-140; "The Rise of the Guan Yu Cult: The Daoist Connection," in Jan A.M. DeMeyer and Peter M. Engelfriet, eds., *Linked Faiths: Essays on Chinese Religions and Traditional Culture in Honour of Kristofer Schipper* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), pp. 183-204; "Buddhist-Inspired Options: Aspects of Lay Religious Life in the Lower Yangzi from 1100 until 1340," *T'oung Pao* 87:1-3 (2001), pp. 92-152. For more on ter Haar's past and current research, see http://website.leidenuniv.nl/~haarbjter/.

4 Jean-Noël Kapferer, *Rumeurs: le plus vieux media du monde* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987).

5 Ralph A. Rosenow and Gary A. Fine, *Rumors and Gossip: The Social Psychology of Heresy* (New York, Oxford, and Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1976).

6 Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

haunted children throughout the world, that of being devoured by were-creatures or bogeymen. In China, this bogeyman was initially referred to as the Spotted Barbarian (Mahu 麻胡), the terror of which may be related to rites for expelling creatures known as *yehu* (variously written as 野胡 / 野狐 / 夜狐; note the importance of foxes, which are discussed in Chapter 5). Such rites featured the use of masks, and may be related to the ancient Nuo 儺 exorcism. Ter Haar then argues that such fears underwent a fundamental transformation during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with were-creatures or bogeymen becoming personified in the form of Auntie Old Tiger (Laohu waipo 老虎外婆; Hugupo 虎姑婆 in Taiwan), a phenomenon that could spark occasional persecutions of elderly women that appear to have resembled the witch-hunts of the West. His hypotheses concerning the possible Chinese origins of Western stories about Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf and the Seven Kids remain to be convincingly proven, but there are clearly some striking similarities, including even dialogues (see Table 3 on page 83). The claim that such stories are exhorting children to become more independent seems overly grounded in Western value systems, however.

The book's next two chapters ("Organ-snatching and Foetus-theft" and "Westerners as Scapegoats") concern a topic that ter Haar and other scholars have examined in previous research, the fear of having one's life-force stolen or misappropriated.[7] Chapter 3 traces back to the Six Dynasties era rumors about organ-snatching and kidnapping by creatures known as *chang* 倀 / 猖 or malevolent stars like the Celestial Dog (Tiangou 天狗). Ter Haar also discusses sorcery involving the use of Camphor and Willow Deities (Zhangliu shen 樟柳神), which often resulted in marginal figures being persecuted, much like the soul-stealing

7 Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys: The Boxers as Event, Experience, and Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Philip A. Kuhn, *Soulstealers: The Chinese Sorcery Scare of 1768* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

(*jiaohun* 叫魂) fears studied by Philip Kuhn. Chapter 4 shows that rumors about missionaries engaging in such dark practices date back to the time of Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), and may derive in part from misunderstandings of Western medical techniques such as cataract operations and caesarian sections. Ter Haar provides a detailed analysis of one 1861 text entitled *Factual Record for Removing Evil* (*Bixie jishi* 辟邪紀實), which describes missionaries using body parts to prepare an elixir of life, as well as the importance of *Shenbao* 申報 in helping spread rumors in urban areas that contributed to the outbreak of the Yangzi River Valley Riots of 1891. This chapter concludes with an examination of anti-missionary rumors in the Boxer Rebellion, as well as their links to the demonological messianic paradigm.[8]

Chapter 5 ("Demon Birds and Vicious Foxes") focuses on fears of animals like foxes (*huli* 狐狸) and creatures known as Dark Afflictions. According to ter Haar, such fears differed from those discussed in previous chapters in that they involved attacks on the surface of the body, not internal organs or fetuses. The first half of this chapter also includes brief treatments of rumors about vicious "soul-birds" (including chickens!), demons, and even flying hats. However, the chapter's second half shifts back to topics covered in Chapter 3, namely scares that swept through the cities and towns of the Lower Yangzi during the 1550s featuring human scapegoats in the form of marginal outsiders with the power to steal souls by magically manipulating paper figures (*zhiren* 紙人) or clipping queues (*gebian* 割辮). Such fears also involved organ snatching, albeit of breasts and testicles, which are not internal organs. Ter Haar refers to these as "mixed scares", and hypothesizes that extensive commercialization, as well as large numbers of itinerant marginal people traveling through urban centers and competing with their residents for the resources necessary

8 For more on this paradigm, see Barend J. ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads*, pp. 224-236, 448-449. See also William T. Rowe, *Crimson Rain: Seven Centuries of Violence in a Chinese County* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 5-8.

to prosper (or simply survive), might explain their occurrence (pp. 242-243), but admits more research is needed.

The book's penultimate chapter ("Wicked Women and Evil Emperors") begins by describing the exhumation and desecration of corpses of old women blamed for causing droughts. Here, ter Haar makes the important point that the Drought Demon (Hanba 旱魃), old women, and unmarried women all symbolize the loss of fertility (pp. 282, 285), but overlooks the importance of Brigitte Baptandier's research on the cult of Lady Linshui (Linshui furen 臨水夫人), which provides fascinating information on the relationship between water, blood, and Chinese conceptions of female fertility.[9] The second half of this chapter concerns fears of imperial harem recruitment that resulted in mass marriages ("marriage panics"), including the great harem recruitment scare of 1566-1568, which had the added element of widow remarriage. One point that could have been explored in greater detail is that Chinese emperors, while feared and perhaps stigmatized, do not appear to have been conceptualized as scapegoats.

The book's conclusion (Chapter 7; "Communication and Stigmatization") features a thoroughgoing discussion of the factors contributing to the rapid spread of rumors, including extensive migration and urbanization, people living in cramped spaces, and the importance of oral traditions. Ter Haar convincingly demonstrates that the prevalence of rumors could indicate the weakness of the state in terms of controlling local society, yet also eloquently argues that such stories allowed people to define and attempt to cope with their anxieties, serving as "a means for re-creating a kind of meaningful order, allowing people to select, ignore, or stress certain kinds of information" (p. 344). The book concludes with a brief discussion of rumors and

9 Brigitte Baptandier, "The Lady Linshui: How a Woman Became a Goddess," in Meir Shahar & Robert Weller, eds., *Unruly Gods. Divinity and Society in China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), pp. 105-149.

panics in the PRC, a topic that has been treated in greater detail by Steven A. Smith.[10]

Telling Stories presents compelling accounts that vividly elucidate the ways in which scapegoating could be used as a means of marginalizing people, expelling outsiders seen as threats, or even settling scores against local enemies. Ter Haar also notes the importance of an accused person's own networks and connections, which could be critical when it came to surviving false accusations. He further makes the fascinating observation that violent punishments of scapegoats can be viewed as public exorcisms, with victims being stigmatized and redefined as "inner demons."[11] This book is particularly noteworthy for its extensive bibliography, as well as four maps showing the spread of rumors and panics, seven detailed tables, and ten illustrations.

As in the case of most pioneering research, *Telling Stories* does suffer from a few weaknesses. In particular, one wishes that ter Haar had attempted to formulate a systematic typology about rumors and their spread that takes the following factors into account: type of threat, type of scapegoat, areas rumors spread in, and times rumors occurred. Ter Haar touches on these issues at a number of points in the book, including the hypothesis that early identification of the scapegoat could prevent collective fears from occurring (p. 126), a discussion of the differences between "local marginals" and "marginal outsiders" (pp. 192, 338-339), and a preliminary analysis of the elements that could prompt rumors to spread (such as famines, epidemics, war, banditry, dynastic change, or the ascent of a new emperor; pp. 343-344). In most

10 Steven A. Smith, "Talking Toads and Chinless Ghosts: The Politics of 'Superstitious' Rumors in the People's Republic of China," *The American Historical Review* 111:2 (2006), pp. 405-427.

11 Norman Cohn, *Europe's Inner Demons: An Enquiry Inspired by the Great Witch-hunt* (London: Chatto-Heinemann, 1975). See also Barend ter Haar, "China's Inner Demons: The Political Impact of the Demonological Messianic Paradigm," in Woei Lien Chong, ed., *China's Great Proletarian Revolution: Master Narratives and Post-Mao Counternarratives* (Lanham and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), pp. 27-68.

cases, however, such factors are not treated in much depth. While the data are limited, it would have been useful for ter Haar to attempt a more systematic examination of exactly what sorts of historical contexts cause rumors to become relevant and spread rapidly through communities.

Another problem is the use of the term "witchcraft," which figures prominently in the book's subtitle. As ter Haar and Kuhn's research has clearly shown, most scapegoats/victims tended to be men (beggars, monks, itinerant fortune-tellers, etc.), something that seems rather different from the witch-hunts of Western history. Ter Haar's data does include persecutions of a female beggar (pp. 125-126) and a nun (pp. 149-150), while Chapter 2 features lengthy accounts from the *Random Jottings from the Studio of Imprints in the Snow* (*Yinxuexuan suibi* 印雪軒隨筆; 1840s), Yuan Mei 袁枚 (1716-1797)'s *What the Master Did not Say* (*Zibuyu* 子不語), and the *Occasional Records of Conversations at Night* (*Yetan suilu* 夜譚隨錄; Qianlong 乾隆 era). However, while these stories suggest that women may have been persecuted, their veracity remains largely unknown, and it seems particularly striking that the midwives and female medicinal practitioners so often tortured and killed in the West do not seem to have suffered extensive victimization in China.[12] Another problem is whether all of the phenomena covered in this book actually fit the definition of witchcraft, especially rumors about the imperial harem. It would have been useful for ter Haar to provide a more systematic discussion of this term and its meanings in the context of Chinese culture, as well as compare and contrast it with the more familiar term "sorcery."

Taken as a whole, however, *Telling Stories* succeeds in providing innovative

12 This is not to deny that some late imperial writings portrayed women as threatening forces. For more on this point, see Victoria Cass, *Dangerous Women: Warriors, Geishas, and Grannies of the Ming* (Lanham and London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999); Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in China's Medical History, 960-1665* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

analyses of many fundamental issues in the history of Chinese religion and society. While macrohistorical studies like this one inevitably raise complex questions that cannot be fully answered, they also provide an inestimable contribution to the field by providing the inspiration for future research.