Review

Oedipal God: The Chinese Nezha and his Indian Origins, by Meir Shahar. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015. 312 pp., £49.95 (hb), ISBN 9-780-824-847609.

Reviewed by: Brian Collins, Ohio University.
collinb1@ohio.edu

Keywords: Buddhism; China; comparison; mythology; Oedipus; psychoanalysis.

Nezha is a child-god who has been popular in Chinese religion and literature since his myth took shape in the seventeenth-century mythological novel *The Canonization of the Gods*. The Nezha story is a Chinese transformation of the Indian myths brought over with Tantric Buddhism about the Yakṣa prince Nalakūbara, son of the god of death, later supplemented with elements of Kṛṣṇa mythology. The popularity of the myth is remarkable for flaunting China's regnant notions of Confucian filial piety and a careful examination of it provides an entry point into the larger diachronic study of the adoption of Tantric Buddhism in China as well as the synchronic study of the supposed universality of the Oedipus complex.

Nezha's conflict with his father Li Jing, for which he is best known, begins when he brings the Dragon King's wrath down upon his family by killing his son. After his father becomes furious at his son for causing this disaster, Nezha commits suicide, an act that placates the Dragon King's anger but not that of Li Jing. After his death, Nezha's mother builds a temple for her son, because he has appeared to her in a dream and said that doing so would bring him back to life. When Li Jing discovers the temple, he destroys it, prompting Nezha to return to earth in a body created for him by the Taoist Immortal Taiyi and attempts to murder his father. But the gods (or an Immortal) step in and stop the attempted patricide by granting Nezha's father a *stupa* that will keep his son's rage under control.

In this careful study of the myth's many transformations from the Sanskrit purāṇas to Japanese anime, Meir Shahar asks two questions: The first is whether the Freudian Oedipus complex can be used to understand a myth about patricide in a society built on Confucian values, where there was 'an inextricable link between the private realm of filial piety (*xiao*) and the political sphere of loyalty (*zhong*)' (p. 5). The phrase 'Oedipus complex' is rendered most often in Chinese as *Edipusi qingjie* ('Oedipus emotional knot') or *lianmu*

qingjie ('attachment-to-the-mother emotional knot'), which is significant, since it primarily characterizes the complex in the socially acceptable terms of attachment to the mother rather than aggression toward the father. The second question Shahar asks is what the Nezha myth can tell us about the role of Tantric Buddhism in shaping Chinese ideas of divinity. The Freudian and Confucian questions take up the first four chapters of the book, while the next five chapters focus on Tantric Buddhism.

Chapter 1, 'Sons and Fathers', compares the Nezha story with that of King Wen, the legendary leader of the Zhou armies and Earl of the West, which likely goes back to the Warring States period (475–221 BCE). After learning that King Wen has been imprisoned by the evil Shang ruler King Zhou (written with a different character from the name of Wen's army), his son Bo Yikao comes to the court to ransom him. But before he gets the chance to do so, he runs into trouble when he spurns the sexual advances of the king's consort, prompting her to have him killed. King Zhou then decides to test his prisoner Wen's reputation for sagacity by serving him meatballs prepared from his own son's flesh. If Wen cannot recognize what he is eating, King Zhou reasons, then he must not be a sage after all. Knowing what is on the king's mind, Wen pretends not to know what he is eating and consumes three balls of Bo Yikao's flesh. Then, believing that Wen is not a sage and therefore not a true threat to his throne, King Zhou decides to release him, a decision he comes to regret when he is subsequently deposed by King Wen and the armies of the Zhou.

In later versions of the tale, King Wen subsequently vomits out the pieces of his son he ingested and they become rabbits, 'rabbit' and 'vomit' being homophones (*tu* and *tu*) in Chinese. As an aside, I will note that it is impossible (at least for this reviewer) to read the myths of Nezha and King Wen without thinking about the association in American English caused by the near-homophonic resemblance of the words 'Oedipal' and 'edible'. Likening the Nezha myth and the King Wen myth to Oedipus and Cronus, respectively, Shahar concludes that there is an Oedipal conflict in Chinese culture like there is in the Ancient Greek myth, but one that has to be understood on its own terms.

In Chapter 2, 'Patricide and Suicide', Shahar focuses on the cultural context of the specific forms of violence in the Nezha myth. In the Qing period (1644–1911), when *The Canonization of the Gods* was at a high point in its popularity, the prevailing attitude toward patricide classed it as an unforgivable sin. Following the Confucian principles of corresponding micro- and macro-level hierarchical relationships, it was equated to the political crime of regicide. Shahar argues that the only reason Nezha is able to escape punishment for his crime is that he committed suicide first. The suicide functions as a dense nexus of ambivalence and interrelated cultural values, which Shahar teases out in this chapter with a wide-ranging survey of diverse sources, including the *Inferno*, Ming-era (1368–1644) legal documents, and modern

sociological studies. The suicide is consistent with filial piety because it saves his father from the vengeance of the Dragon King, but is also readable as an act of protest against his father. Shahar argues that it is the ambiguous pre-emptive self-punishment that allows the Chinese worldview to embrace him as a deity.

Chapter 3, 'The Chinese Oedipus', carefully makes the case implied by the book's title. Freudian psychoanalysis, Shahar explains, came to China (where it remains a relatively popular form of psychotherapy) in two waves, the first in the 1930s and the second in the 1980s. Both of them had significant impacts on the development of Chinese literature and literary theory. Chapter 3 introduces another myth to read alongside those of Nezha and King Wen—the story of the monk Mulian, who journeys into hell to save his damned mother. The Mulian myth illustrates an important point: the intensity of the mother-son bond in Chinese culture. Freud himself acknowledged that the Oedipus complex would always be shaped by the specificities of the culture that surrounded it. And the primacy of the son's relationship to his mother in China, which continues even after his marriage, is one such specificity. Because of the normative closeness of mother and son, there is no need to repress the desire to possess the mother in the Chinese Oedipus complex. This situation, combined with a deeply internalized expectation of filial piety, sets up different template from the one Freud recognized. This culturally specific template channels the forces of attachment and aggression that fuel the Oedipus complex in ways that result in a number of different variations of the Nezha myth. These variations are the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 4, 'Teenage Delinquent or Revolutionary Martyr', is the last chapter to deal mostly with the Oedipal aspects of the Nezha myth, surveying plays, ballads, stories, movies, comic books and operas about Nezha, from the past three centuries. After an informative introduction to the transition from oral to written literature in the eighteenth century, Shahar examines three eighteenth-century transcribed oral narratives from Beijing, Taiwan and Fujian. He demonstrates that, despite their geographic dispersal, all three closely follow the model of *The Canonization of the Gods*, placing their emphasis on the cruelty of Nezha's father.

But a new trend emerges in the post-revolutionary 1970s, when Nezha's story spreads to Japan and becomes the subject of cartoons and comic strips. In the cartoon version of Nezha, the father-son conflict is replaced by a more general kind of heroism, and in the lauded 1979 animated movie *Nezha Wreaks Havoc in the Ocean*, he becomes a symbol for a specific type of heroism: the communist revolutionary variety. At the end of the chapter, Shahar takes us through the transformation of Nezha into an Asian animated James Dean in *Teenage Nezha* (1992), based as much on *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) as *The Canonization of the Gods*.

In Chapters 5 ('Divine Warrior') and 6 ('The Child-God'), Shahar moves the focus of his inquiry from the psychoanalytic interpretations of the myth to

a history of religions approach, concerning himself with the Chinese adoption of Tantric Buddhism from India. 'Divine Warrior' expands beyond literature to look at hagiography and iconography, beginning with the Southern Song period (1127–1279), where, as a Tantric deity, Nezha had both a peaceful form and a wrathful form with three heads and six arms in which he vanquished demons who opposed the Buddhist dharma. Shahar notes that his early development was also heavily influenced by Daoism, especially his arsenal of magic weapons, which included a wheel of fire, a gold brick and a fire-tipped spear.

In the next chapter, 'The Child-God', Shahar turns to the regions where Nezha is most popular (Southern China, Taiwan and the borderlands of the former empire) and brings temple worship, festivals and spirit possession cults into his field of analysis. It is through this last topic that Shahar rejoins the threads of Tantric Buddhism and psychoanalysis, arguing that rituals in which the patricidal god possesses a female medium and is then supplicated by mothers praying on behalf of their children is a way of '[mitigating] Chinese family tensions' (p. 140). This chapter also gives the reader what is possibly a first in the history of the history of religions: an interview (through a possessed medium) with the god himself, who flatly denies any animosity toward his father or untoward attachment toward his mother. But then, Freud would not have expected otherwise.

Chapter 7, 'Biological and Spiritual Fathers', treats a theme that is very common in the psychoanalytic study of Indian mythology: the supplemental father in the form of the guru that is the result of the cultural emphasis on the guru-disciple relationship. In the Nezha myth, this role belongs to the Taoist Immortal Taiyi (or the Buddha in earlier versions), who raises Nezha from the dead after his suicide. Shahar also examines a theme that arose in the Song period (960–1279) in which Nezha's suicide involves him returning to his parents the elements of his body that each had bequeathed him (flesh to the mother, bone to the father) before seeking refuge in the Buddha. He also looks at Nezha's myth alongside that of Miaoshan, a girl whose father has her executed after he cannot dissuade her from becoming a Buddhist nun. Miaoshan too is resurrected or reborn, in the form of a monk. And later, when the father is deathly ill, he goes to see the monk, who saves the father by lopping off his own hands and gouging out his own eyes to prepare a medicine to cure his illness. When the father realizes that the monk whose self-sacrifice has saved him is his daughter reborn, he converts to Buddhism. The chapter concludes by tracing the Chinese origins of Nezha to a fragmentary myth from the Tang period (618–907) in which he holds a dharma assembly and prepares to kill his father there, only to abandon the intention when Amitabha Buddha arrives.

Chapter 8, 'Esoteric Buddhism', and Chapter 9, 'Nezha, Nalakūbara, and Kṛṣṇa', finally trace the Nezha myth to its Indian origins. After entering Chinese consciousness through Sanskrit texts translated during the Golden

Age of Buddhism in the Tang, Nezha grew in popularity among Tantric Buddhists thanks to four main factors: his association with his father, the god of death Vaiśravaṇa (Kubera); his appearance in ritual compendia composed by Vajrabodhi and Amoghavajra; his fearsome iconography with three heads and six arms; and his mythic conquest of a water dragon. The last piece of the puzzle, so to speak, is Nezha's transformation from an Indian warrior into a Chinese child-god, which Shahar attributes to the grafting of the extremely popular myths of the child Kṛṣṇa onto the character of Nezha, a process that may have also resulted in the development of a hybrid deity named Naṇa, pictured in some thirteenth-century Hindu temples in Quanzhou. The book concludes with an epilogue that slots the author's study of Nezha into the larger story of Tantric Buddhism in China, but (unfortunately) leaves out any final thoughts on the Oedipal nature of the deity.

The book is meant to be an examination of the myth's development in reverse historical order (though this is not always the case), which is why we do not encounter the germinal Tang-era version of the myth about the dharma assembly until the seventh chapter. Even so, I cannot help but think it would have been useful to introduce the Tang material in the introduction (which does give a brief standard chronology on pages x-xii), even if Shahar were then to proceed from latest to earliest as planned. I am not convinced that Shahar's decision to tell the story backwards made the book any more effective or readable.

Even so, from the perspective of someone with a deep interest in using psychoanalysis for cross-cultural comparative mythology but very little knowledge of the Chinese material, Shahar's study of Nezha does an admirable job providing enough background to make the book useful to non-specialists without being cumbersome. *The Oedipal God* is much appreciated as a welcome addition to the store of excellent studies of a single Asian deity, which includes Doniger's *Śiva: The Erotic Ascetic* (1973), Rigopoulos's *Dattātreyā: The Immortal Guru, Yogin, and Avatāra* (1998), Lutgendorf's *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey* (2007), and Courtright's *Gaṇeśa: Lord of Obstacles, Lord of Beginnings* (1985).

Without taking anything away from Shahar's success in making his work accessible to non-specialists, I would also add that accessibility to non-specialists has become essential to scholarly monographs. No publisher or author wants to think they are writing *only* for the small number of people in their subfield. But expanding a book's audience requires more than simply cross-listing it as 'Religion/Asian Studies' or 'Religion/Anthropology' in the publisher's catalogue. An author must have a broader audience in mind while researching, writing and editing the book, long before it is time to fill out the pre-publication questionnaire. Shahar, we can conclude, has done just that.