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Nezha and Miaoshan: Myth, Desire, and Chinese Patriliney

Online talk by

Dr. P Steven Sangren

Hu Shih Distinguished Professor Emeritus
Cornell University

10 a.m. Tuesday, February 16, 2021



Dr. P. Steven Sangren is Hu Shih Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Chinese Studies and Anthropology at Cornell University. Dr. Sangren received his B.A. from Princeton University and (after three years' service in the United States Navy) his Ph.D. from Stanford University. His work focuses on Chinese culture and society—especially, gender, religion, and mythic narrative. Drawing inspiration from Marxian and psychoanalytic traditions he aspires to understand how culture

accommodates desire. He is author of *History and Magical Power in a Chinese Community* (Stanford University Press) and *Chinese Sociologies* (Athlone). His latest book, *Filial Obsessions: Chinese Patriliney and Its Discontents* (Palgrave Macmillan), is an analysis and critique of Chinese patriliney and gender ideology.

Abstract: The stories of Nezha (a rebellious son) and Miaoshan (a filial daughter) invite a wider consideration of Chinese patriliney as a “mode of production of desire.” Such stories exemplify a genre of Chinese hagiographies that, taken together, constitute an important, culturally specific, medium of speculation upon the nature and production of personhood and gender identity. They also implicate a variety of conceptual and methodological issues surrounding the interpretation of myth, ancestor worship, gender ideology, and the psychological complexity of filial sentiments. Most broadly, their analysis also raises issues of general significance for understanding culture’s operations in linking individual desire and culturally specific social arrangements. Is desire best understood as a “cultural construction” or as a human universal?



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