Nezha and Miaoshan: Myth, Desire, and Chinese Patriliny

Online talk by

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Abstract: The stories of Nezha (a rebellious son) and Miaoshan (a filial daughter) invite a wider consideration of Chinese patriliny 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?