

Material culture has been neglected as a primary source of information in the field of Asian religious studies despite the extraordinary amount of information available, especially in the field of visual resources. The gap between material culture and religious studies, however, is narrowing as scholars in both fields begin to employ the materials available to them. Essential to the two books considered here is the use of material culture to broaden and deepen the understanding of religious practice. In the first one, the field study of a specific popular religious rural cult is accomplished, in the absence of texts, through the study of its images, spiritual mediums, and social contexts as material expressions of its beliefs. The second book, a collection of scholarly essays on Asian religious practice, presents a variety of material resources ranging from unconventional uses of calligraphy, a newspaper, charms, and talismans, to more traditional forms of religious expression such as sculpture and places of reverence. In each essay knowledge is acquired from nontextual sources.

Wei-ping Lin’s new book is fascinating and engagingly presented. It examines, on a firsthand level, popular beliefs and rituals in rural and urban Taiwan. The book’s two parts correspond to the rural and urban spheres; there are three chapters in the first half and two in the second. The introduction provides an overview of the elements: icon, spirit medium, and their social context. The author observes the transformation that occurs when rural traditions are brought to the city with the migration of the population. The original gods function differently in their new circumstance, transitioning from permanent in location to mobile, from independent to being subsumed in a hierarchy of gods. These developments are the result of changes in the relationships between the spiritual manifestations of the gods, the role of their images in rituals, and the efficacy of their spirit mediums. This investigation demonstrates the way religious practices respond to social changes. Most important here is the significance of “the material culture which is viewed through its cultural mechanisms, social consequences and material forms” (8). In the introduction there is a review and assessment of the scholarly literature, the varied approaches to the subject, and the need for a new approach that utilizes material culture
to better understand the whole picture; the ensuing chapters are written from the perspective of firsthand observation.

The book begins with an analysis of how icons physically represent the spiritual power of gods. Lin points out that this embodiment of the potency of the deity is static, and only a spirit medium can access its force. There is an informative description of the making of the images, from the consecration of the materials to the formation of the image and its transformation into a dwelling place for the deity. It is here, as an Asian religious art historian, that I am frustrated by the author's apparent unfamiliarity with the long tradition of image making, which is ancient and has remained remarkably consistent since its beginnings in India and early adoption in China. Lin describes images as if they are unique and without precedent. For example, she attributes the creation and physical appearance of the icon to the meditative inspiration of the spirit medium. But an ancient and continuous tradition of codified rules has long regulated the creation of icons—informing not only their appearance and attributes but also the rituals for awakening the deity. Clearly this is not of any immediate interest to the author, but I mention these points as a possible exploration for the future. This gap is not really the fault of the author, for there is a great divide between experts in religious studies and those interested in sacred art.

Although the author goes far in understanding the “materialization” of religion, there is a need to recognize its long history, which by the twentieth century informed not only Buddhism and Daoism, but also popular religion. Also, although the gods are named, they are not always identified nor are their roles described; this is particularly egregious in the case of Avalokiteshvara. Here, too, a historical perspective on the religious traditions is lacking. The author, who points out that these rituals do not derive from a sacred canon of texts but from shamanistic practices, distinguishes the forms of statues made for the gods, the sticks and rituals used to summon the spirit guardians of the five directions, and the wooden tablets used for ancestral worship. The gods belong to the clans of the village, and migration and other events can bring about changes in the ranking of the deities and their functions. Chapter 2 similarly describes from personal experience the way in which the spirit medium is selected: it is not an inherited position, and the initiation rituals imitate the life, death, and rebirth cycle. In this way the spirit medium finds and activates his power to access the god. Also discussed are the ways in which the medium assists with different kinds of life events and various problems. Chapter 3 focuses on the recent history of rural worship by looking at the events that occurred in the functioning of a local temple during the era of Mao (1949–1970) and analyzing the many changes that transpired. Elucidated here is the relationship