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The Transformation of Gods in Chinese Popular Religion:

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Introduction

In Chinese popular religion, the phenomenon that popular belief in some gods flourishes while the belief in others languishes is constant. The religious belief in Prince Jing of Chengyang (城陽景王) which dominated the Later Han Dynasty would become all but a shadow of its former self, while most of the gods that flourished in the Six Dynasties period would already vanish by the time of the Song Dynasty. Almost all of the gods who are worshipped in modern Chinese popular religious belief like Mazu, (媽祖 the Goddess of the Sea), Guan Di (關帝 Emperor Guan) and the Eight Immortals (八仙 *Ba xian*) originated after the Song Dynasty and took root in popular belief during the Ming Dynasty.

On the one hand, the images of many of the gods are endlessly changing. The members of the Eight Immortals were not fixed until the end of the Ming period and their attributes and forms vary widely from the Yuan to the Qing periods¹⁾.

However, while the forms of particular gods change on the one hand, up to the present it would seem that very little research has been done with regard to the transition in form from one god to another or their imitation. Taking up the cases of the guardian temple deities, Huaguang Dadi (華光大帝) and Zhaobao Qilang (招寶七郎), this brief paper will attempt to argue the possibility that, as belief in them waned, their forms were inherited by other gods.

1 The Form of Huaguang Dadi

Huaguang Dadi is a god who underwent extremely complex transformations; moreover, his character changed greatly with the times. His popularity flourished most during the Ming period. It is thought that at that time Huaguang Dadi was so celebrated that there was not a soul in all of Southern China who did not know of him, and that he was enshrined as a temple guardian deity to protect temples. The statue at

1) Concerning the change in belief in the Eight Immortals, please refer to this author's article, "'Guohai' in *The Eight Immortals' Journey to the East*, Changes in Origin". Nikaido, Yoshihiro 二階堂善弘. *Hassentōyūki ni okeru kakai kojinhonyō*. 『八仙東遊記』における「過海」故事の変容. *Goyōshobō* 五曜書房, 2003. pp. 343-368.



Photo 1. The Huaguang Bodhisattva at Manpukuji Temple in Uji, Japan.



Photo 2. Ma Lingguan at the Hall of Supreme Harmony (太和殿) in Mt. Wudang, China.

Ôbakusan Manpukuji Temple (黄檗山萬福寺) in Uji (宇治) is something able to convey the form of that time. Because this statue still exists, we are able to learn a great deal from it. Namely, in the Ming period Huaguang Dadi was considered a deity who guarded the temple as a “bodhisattva” (菩薩 *Pusa*). Moreover, it can be established that he was three-eyed and beardless in appearance and wielded a weapon called the “golden brick.” (Photo 1)

In Daoism, Huaguang was treated as the gods, Marshal Ma (馬元帥 Ma Yuanshuai) and Ma Lingguan (馬靈官). Although the figure of Ma Lingguan at Mount Wudang (武当山 *Wudangshan*) is clad in armor, as one would expect, it shares the distinctive traits of having three eyes, no beard, and it wields a golden brick in one hand. In other words, this form of Huaguang Dadi is thought to be the standard figure in the Ming period. (Photo 2)

The form of Huaguang depicted in such works as *A Compendium of the Gods of the Three Religions* (*Sanjiao shoushen daquan* 三教搜神大全) and *Journey to the South* (*Nanyouji* 南遊記) is also riding wheels of wind and fire in addition to being three-eyed and wielding a golden brick²⁾. Though Ma Lingguan in the mausoleum at Foshan (佛山), Guangzhou (廣東) has three eyes, he also has a beard and also holds a brush and a book in his hands. (Photo 3) In the White Cloud Temple in Shanghai (上海白雲觀 *Shanghai baiyunguan*), the figure of Marshall Ma holds a halberd in one hand and a book in the other as a golden brick dangles from his neck. It would most likely appear that the figure of Ma Lingguan holding a book was circulating in some locales.

In reality, the deity Huaguang Dadi underwent many complex transformations and fusions. Originally, the connection with The Five Magical Spirits (五通神 *Wu Tongshen*) was strong and later there developed a connection with Wū Xiǎnshén (五顯神). It is thought that Huaguang Dadi is a fire god deity who came into being from the profound influence of esoteric religious teachings.

2) For more specifics regarding Ma Yuanshuai Huaguang, please refer to this author’s paper, “Transformations of Yuanshuai shen in Chinese Taoist Folk Religions”. *Dôkyô Minkanshinkô ni okeru genshishin no henyô*. 『道教・民間信仰における元帥神の変容』. Kansai University Publications Department. *Kansai Daigaku Shûppanbu*. 関西大学出版部, 2006. pp. 180-189.

The beginning form is thought to have been the one enshrined in the Sichuan rock caves during the Southern Song dynasty that Hu Wen He introduced³⁾. This statue is established as the “Wu Tong Dadi” (五通大帝), but it has imposing features, is not three eyed, and is raising one leg.

If we compare this to a typical Ming dynasty figure of Huaguang, it is completely dissimilar. Rather, perhaps we could say that it more closely resembles the figure of Cangwang Quaxian (藏王權現 Jap. *Zao Gongen*) enshrined in Japan. The raising of one leg in particular may suggest an influential relationship. To begin with, Huaguang also has the appellation, “Huaguang Cangwang” (華光藏王). Indeed, this is nothing more than speculation. The reason this figure is raising one leg is because the pronunciation of the Buddhist term for “self enlightenment” (独覚, Jap. *dokkaku*, Chin. *dújué*; Lit. “solitary realization”) became corrupted into “solitary leg” (独脚 Jap. *dokkyaku*, Chin. *dújué* or *dújiǎo*) and this is thought to be reflected in the figure (standing on one leg).

In this way, the form of Huaguang differs significantly from the Southern Song period to the Ming and in addition, there are minor differences in the figures of Marshal Ma (Ma Yuanshuai) and the Five Magical Spirits. However, there would seem to be no doubt that the figure that became widely known in the Ming period took the form of a warrior god with three eyes, no beard, a golden brick and wielding a pike or a halberd, as one might expect. However, during the Qing period, belief in Huaguang Dadi began to fade and because of the decline in mausoleums and statues of deities, we cannot know much more about these figures.



Photo 3. Ma Lingguan at the mausoleum at Foshan, Guangdong, China.

2 From Ma Língguan to Wang Língguan

It can be said without fail that Ma Lingguan is a god enshrined as a guardian deity in Taoist temples, particularly in Taoist temples of the Quanzhen Jiao sect (全真教系). When you go and visit a temple in China and pass through the gates, there is a “Lingguan Hall” (靈官殿 *Lingguandian*). Upon entering, you will see the whip wielding, carriage riding, three-eyed, bearded, menacing visage of the statue of Wang Lingguan enshrined there. (Photo 4)

With regard to the religious services for Wang Lingguan, which thrived from the Yuan to the Ming periods, Nara Yukihiro has expounded on this and has posited a comparison between Wang Lingguan and Ma Lingguan that share the same title “Lingguan” (靈官) or “heavenly marshal”⁴⁾. What Nara points out is that the old Wang Lingguan figures were not three-eyed, but instead were double-eyed and came to have three eyes because of the fusion that occurred with Ma Lingguan. Nara’s insight is highly accu-

3) Hu Wen He 胡文和. *Taoist and Buddhist Sichuan Rock Cave Art. Sīchuān dàojiào fójiào shíkū yìshù*. 『四川道教仏教石窟芸術』. *Sīchuān rénmin chūbǎnshè*. Sichuan People’s Publishing House, 1994. p. 17.

4) Nara Yukihiro 奈良行博. “Taoist Guardian Deities: Lingguan — The Evolution of Belief”. 『道教護法神・王靈官—その信仰の展開』 *Dōkyō gohōshin onreikan – sono shinkō no tenkai* in *The Body, Nature, and Belief in Chinese Ideals*. 『中国思想における身体・自然・信仰』 *Chūgokushisō ni okerushintai shizen shinkō*. Tōhō Shoten, 2004. pp. 471-489.

rate, but here let us further consider aspects other than the three eyes.

With regard to how Wang Lingguan appears in sacred Buddhist texts, it is as this author has already pointed out⁵⁾, but in the *Daofa Huiyan* (道法会元)⁶⁾ Wang Lingguan appears frequently as a representative of the Fire God (火神 *Huoshen*). However, curiously, we almost can't see that form in the *Fahai Yizhu* (法海遺珠)⁷⁾. Based on that, we can deduce that the belief in Wang Lingguan was a relatively recent development in comparison to Ma Lingguan, Zhao Xuantan (趙玄壇 “the God of Martial Fortune”) and the like.

To wit, there exists a lag between the flourishing of the belief in Ma Lingguan and Wang Lingguan. Ma Lingguan Huaguang flourished from the Yuan to the Ming periods and declined afterwards. Belief in Wang Lingguan flourished from the Ming period and even though it declined briefly in the Qing period, it remains to this day. There are still parts of Guangzhou and Fujian which preserve belief in Huaguang.

Aside from having three eyes, there are many other commonalities between the two deities. The fact that they ride chariots, that they are fire gods, and that they are considered fierce warrior gods. On the other hand there are also differences. Ma Lingguan is a god of fortune, he wields a golden brick in his hand and he has no beard. Wang Lingguan does not have the strong characteristics of a god of fortune — he wields a golden whip and he has a beard.

That Wang Lingguan brandishes a golden whip is thought to probably have been influenced by Puhua Tianzun (普化天尊), the Supreme God of Thunder. Namely, because Wang Lingguan inherited more forms than Ma Lingguan, the probability that his form changed under the influence of other gods is high. From here, as one might expect, this is likely reflected in the fact that Wang Lingguan developed into a comparatively new god.

The question is, why has Wang Lingguan come to be used as a guardian deity in Taoist temples? In comparatively old Taoist texts like the *Daofa Huiyan*, there is scarcely anything that suggests the reason. Or, there is the possibility that Wang Lingguan succeeded this function from Ma Lingguan as well.

Of course, Ma Lingguan, as one of the Four Great Marshalls – Ma (馬), Wen (溫), Guan (閔), and Zhao (趙) Lingguan serves the function of a temple guardian deity. Further, as you can understand from the example of Manpukuji Temple in Uji, the possibility he is being treated as a temple guardian deity in Buddhist temples is high.

Speaking of Wang Lingguan, on the other hand, there is also actually an example of him being treated as a temple guardian deity in a temple. Mount Jiuhua (九華山) in Anhui (安徽) is famous as the sacred ground of Ksitigarbha (地藏菩薩 *Dizang Pusa*) and in many of its temples Lingguan Halls are placed in front of Tianwang palaces and Wang Lingguan is worshipped therein. (Photo 5)



Photo 4. Wang Lingguan at the White Cloud Temple, Shanghai, China.

5) “Transformations of Yuanshuai shen in Chinese Taoist Folk Religions”. *Dōkyō Minkanshinkō ni okeru genshishin no henyō*. 『道教・民間信仰における元帥神の変容』. Kansai University Publications Department. *Kansai Daigaku Shūpanbu*. 関西大学出版部, 2006. pp. 206-213.

6) *Daofa huiyan* 『道法会元』. (Zhengtong daoze 『正統道藏』 正一部 S.N.1220)

7) *Fahai Yizhu* 『法海遺珠』. (Zhengtong daoze 『正統道藏』 太平部 S.N.1166)

First of all, as to why the Fire God is enshrined as a temple guardian deity, the implication that it will avert fire is strong. Because of this, besides Ma Lingguan and Wang Lingguan other deities like Huode Xingjun (火德星君) are also worshipped. It is surmised that perhaps because faith in Ma Lingguan waned, the characteristics of a temple guardian deity were transferred to Wang Lingguan. On the other hand, however, the temple guardian deity for modern temples is Guandi (關帝 the God of War). The function of Huaguang as a temple guardian deity were transferred to Wang Lingguan and Guandi variously, and the quondam form of the temple guardian deity can only be confirmed at Manpukuji Temple (萬福寺) in Uji. Whereas some deities decline, no doubt the functions of those deities change in form and are transferred to and inherited by other deities.



Photo 5. Wang Lingguan at Mount Jiuhua in Anhui, China.

3 Zhaobao Qilang and Qianliyan

I have shown in a separate paper that there was a god called Zhaobao Qilang (招宝七郎) who served as a temple guardian deity in the Song period and that after faith in him waned, religious rituals in which he is observed have all but disappeared in China⁸⁾.

This Zhaobao Qilang possessed the traits of a sea god in particular. In addition, he takes the distinctive pose of raising one hand and looking far off into the distance. (Photo 6)



Photo 6. Zhaobao Qilang at the Zuiunji Temple (瑞雲寺) in Hirado (平戸), Nagasaki, Japan.

The figure looking afar undoubtedly lends itself to the suggestion of the protection of sailing vessels. Because of this it is quite conceivable that this figure would be used as a god of the sea or a guardian of ships.

Among those deities assuming postures which scan the horizons, the most famous modern deity is Qianliyan, celebrated as one of the subordinate of the sea goddess Mazu. If you visit a Mazu shrine, needless to say, there are always two figures guarding Mazu in front; Shunfenger (順風耳 “Favorable Wind ears”) with a hand to one ear and Qianliyan (千里眼 “Thousand League Eyes”) with a hand raised as he scans the horizons. (Photo 7)

With regard to the influence from Zhaobao Qilang to Qianliyan, unfortunately we know nothing concrete. However, there is a high possibility that when faith in

8) Nara Yukihiko 奈良行博. “Zhaobao Qilang Daquan Xiuli as Sea God and Temple Guardian Deity” 「海神／伽藍神としての招宝七郎大権修利」 in *Hakusan Chūgokugaku* 『白山中国学』 Vol. 13. Society for Chinese Studies Tōyō University *Tōyō daigaku chūgoku gakkai* 東洋大学中国学会, 2007. pp. 43-54.



Photo 7. Qianliyan at Sôfukuji Temple (崇福寺) in Nagasaki, Japan.



Photo 8. Qianliyan at the Nanhai Temple in Guangzhou, China.

Zhaobao Qilang as a sea god faded and transferred the functions to Mazu, Qianliyan inherited his form.

The reason is that it is surmised that Qianliyan did not originally take the ‘scanning the horizon’ pose. The Qianliyan in the Nanhai Longwang (南海龍王 Dragon King of the South Sea) Temple in eastern Guangzhou, Guangdong has three eyes like Huaguang but is not scanning the horizon.

In the first place, the Dragon King of the South Sea Temple (南海神廟 *Nanhai shenmiao*) has retained more religious fidelity to the past than the Four Brothers of the Dragon King of the Four Seas (敖氏四兄弟 *aoshisi xiongi*), who, today, is generally thought to be the Dragon King (龍王 *Long Wang*). Of course, many of these are statues that have been re-created and so it is all the more questionable as to why these figures at modern Mazu shrines generally lack the ‘scanning the horizon’ pose.

As for the previously mentioned rock caves in Sichuan introduced by Hu Wen He, there is a figure of Qianliyan from the Song period that has been preserved, but this figure of Qianliyan also is not striking the ‘scanning the horizon’ pose⁹⁾. It is surmised that perhaps Qianliyan did not strike the ‘horizon scanning’ pose in the past, but began to take on that pose later under the influence of Zhaobao and other deities.

Indeed Qianliyan’s development is quite complex. First of all, both Qianliyan and Shunfenger were not originally subordinates of Mazu. According to the study of Zhou Xiaowei, Qianliyan and Shunfenger first appeared in the *Journey to the West*, (“西遊記” *Xiyouji*) as the Jade Emperor’s (玉皇上帝 *Yu Huang Shang Di*) subordinates and became Huaguang Dadi’s subordinates in *Journey to the South* (“南遊記” *Nanyouji*). Further, in *Journey to the South*, both deities were addressed as the old Li Lou (離婁) and Shi Kuang (師曠)¹⁰⁾. The two are also confused with the famous door gods, Shen Tu (神荼) and Yu Lei (鬱壘).

However, from these characteristics, it is natural to think of Qianliyan and Shunfenger as sea god related deities. Surely, it can be considered quite a matter of course for these two deities to be

9) Hu Wen He 胡文和. *Taoist and Buddhist Sichuan Rock Cave Art. Sīchuān dàojiào fójiào shíkū yìshù*. 『四川道教仙教石窟藝術』. *Sīchuān rénmin chūbǎnshè*. Sichuan People’s Publishing House, 1994. p. 16.

10) Zhou Xiaowei 周曉薇. *An Examination of Journey to the West Texts. Siyouji congkao*. 『四遊記叢考』. *Zhongguo shehuikexue chubanshe* 中国社会科学出版社 China Social Science Press, 2005. pp. 139-147.

worshipped in the Temple of the Dragon King of the South Sea.

4 Minister of Works Dharsi

In the Temple of the God of the South Sea in Guangzhou there is one more fascinating deity enshrined. This is the statue of the Minister of Works Dharsi (達奚司空 *Daxisikong*). It is commonly known as the Boluo (波羅像 *Boluo xiang*) statue. (Photo 9)

To wit, just as Zhaobao Qilang and Qianliyan, the figure is raising its hand to scan the horizon. Further, this deity, as one would expect, is enshrined as one of the sea gods. The commonalities among the three figures are many. Though this statue has been re-created, it is considered to be based on ancient legend.

Only, with regard to the origins of the Minister of Works Dharsi, there are points less clear than Zhaobao Qilang.

According to legend, Dharsi (Daxisi) was the brother of Bodhidharma who came from India and possessed divine supernatural powers. He came to Guangzhou and had an audience with the South Sea God, and the Dragon God of the South Sea paid respect to Dharsi's divine powers and invited him to rule the South Sea with him. In response to his request, Dharsi scanned the horizons for signs of ships and conditions of the skies every day from the seashore until one day he collapsed petrified in that very posture. People praised his meritorious service and gave him the title, Minister of Works Dharsi.¹¹⁾

Of course, this kind of story is merely legend at most.¹²⁾ As Huang Miao Zhang pointed out, Bodhidharma came to China during the Liang Dynasty (502-557 B.C.E.) of the Six Dynasties period, and because the establishment of the South Sea God Temple occurred during the Kai-Huang period (581 B.C.E.) of the Sui Dynasty, the eras do not coincide at all¹³⁾. The description of Bodhidharma's brothers is extremely dubious to begin with.

There is an aspect we cannot simply overlook as legend, however. This is actually because this South Sea God Temple was not originally the Temple of the Dragon God of the South Sea—it was called the Boluo Temple and the Minister of Works Dharsi was thought to have existed before this, to begin with. Regarding this, there have been many theories that he was an envoy from the Indian country of Magadha who was deified, but ultimately, it is difficult to consider these as historical fact.

However, there is a surprisingly large number of commonalities between Zhaobao Qilang and the Minister of Works Dharsi. For example, both are sea god figures who pose with their hands raised to



Photo 9. Minister of Works Dharsi at the Nanhai Temple in Guangzhou, China.

11) Huang Miaozhang 黄淼章. *The Nanhai God Shrine* 『南海神廟』 *Nanhai shenmiao*. Guangdong People's Publishing House 廣東人民出版社 *Guangdong renmin chubanshe*, 2005. pp. 48-49.

12) *Ibid.* p. 50

13) *Ibid.* p. 51

scan the horizons, Zhaobao Qilang is the child of Ashoka while the Minister of Works Dharsi is the brother of Bodhidharma, they possess backgrounds of having come from India in legend, and they wear the robes of a Chinese official, among other commonalities. Historically speaking, if we suppose that belief in the Minister of Works Dharsi originated in the Sui and Tang Dynasties, and belief in Zhaobao Qilang flourished in the Song Dynasty, it is possible to assume that there was influence from Dharsi to Qilang, although it is still mere speculation. We can also conclude from the characteristics of sea gods that the statues coincidentally corresponded.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have chiefly argued that the temple guardian deity, Huanguang Dadi's, three-eyed trait was later transferred to Wang Lingguan, and that the postures of sea gods scanning the horizon was transferred to Minister of Works Dharsi, Zhaobao Qilang and Qianliyan. Because I cannot exclude the possibility of coincidental correspondence for this kind of transfer of deity poses, in the end, I shall only point out the probability. It is also rather difficult to conclude that it is completely by chance, however. In order to reinforce my theory, I hope to analyze an even greater number of examples of temple shrines.