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Citation

CHAN, Margaret. 2012. "Bodies for the Gods: Image Worship in Chinese Popular Religion." In *The Spirit of Things: Materiality and Religious Diversity in Southeast Asia*, edited by Julius Bautista, 197-215. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University.

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BODIES FOR THE GODS: IMAGE WORSHIP IN CHINESE POPULAR RELIGION

Margaret Chan¹

THE IMAGE OF THE GODS MAGICALLY APPEARS

In mid-September 2007, hundreds of people descended upon the otherwise quiet neighborhood of Street 42, Jurong West, in Singapore. Many were Chinese. They brought bananas, oranges, and packets of peanuts and set the offerings before a tree upon which, as if by miracle, the image of two monkeys had appeared. The *Sunday Times* newspaper reported on September 16, 2007,² that a few days earlier an anonymous person had placed a sign on the tree. The sign told that three years ago a monkey had come to the tree in search of its father, the legendary Monkey God. A recent car accident had split open the bark of the tree, revealing the image of the simian father and son (see Figure 1, on next page). News of the magical apparition traveled quickly and the crowds came.

Visitors tied brightly colored sashes around the tree and made offerings of joss-sticks and fruit. The tree was declared miraculous. Apparently three car accidents had happened at the spot, but none was fatal owing to the protection from the tree. Some people who had asked the Monkey God image for lucky numbers won second prize in the state lottery.

The Singapore National Parks Board was asked by the newspaper to comment on the phenomenon and came up with a prosaic announcement: several minor accidents over the years had resulted in natural callusing as the tree grew new bark over the injured areas. An associate professor from the department of biological sciences at the National University of Singapore (NUS) was also interviewed, and he

¹ I thank the Office of Research, Singapore Management University, for its kind and generous support of my research through two grants, Fund No. C242/MSS7S012 and Fund No. C242/MSS8S022. I also thank Raymond Goh, Charles Goh, Chung Kwang Tong, Jave Wu, Victor Yue, Julius Bautista, and my anonymous reviewers for their generous contributions towards my research and the writing of this chapter.

² Adeline Chia, (2007, 16 September), "'Monkey' Tree Draws Crowds: Tree Experts say 'Monkey' Figures are Formed by Callusing but Devotees Think Otherwise", *Sunday Times Lifestyle*: L4.

concurred with that opinion. But despite the scientific explanation, the crowds still came.



Figure 1: The Monkey God's image miraculously appeared on a tree in Singapore.
Photo by Charles Goh, used with permission

Residents complained of littering, noise, and traffic jams, and a self-appointed tree custodian began a daily watch. The newspaper quoted a man who said that, with so many people worshipping it, the Monkey God in the tree would acquire even more *lingqi* (灵气, spirit power). Here a fine distinction must be made. It was the Monkey God in the tree, not the tree itself (although nature worship of trees or rocks has a place in Chinese popular religion), that was being worshipped, in the same way that a stone on the hilltop behind the Sempalung temple in the village of Sei Raya, West Kalimantan, is revered not for itself, but because it bears the footprints of Admiral Zheng He (郑和), the deified Ming (明, 1368–1644) explorer.³

³ Johannes Widodo, "A Celebration of Diversity: Zheng He and the Origin of the Pre-Colonial Coastal Urban Pattern in Southeast Asia," in *Admiral Zheng He and Southeast Asia*, ed. Leo Suryadinata (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and International Zheng He Society, 2005), pp. 104–5.

MIRACULOUS MAN-MADE IMAGES

Image worship can be traced to the dawn of Chinese civilization, and the excitement caused by the magical Monkey God tree in Singapore testifies to the currency of this belief in modern times. The Monkey God image, like Zheng He's footprints set upon a stone, noted above, provide representational evidence of the sacred in nature. Image worship, on the other hand, predominantly involves man-made objects. Statues are carved out of stone or wood, or molded using bronze or clay. Nowadays, polyresin or fiberglass is the material of choice for fabricating images. People make images because image worship allows them to assert a hold on their gods.

Human agency is a tenet of Chinese popular religion; the people's will to control their own fate stemmed, as I have argued elsewhere, from a historical response to the state cult of imperial China, which disenfranchised the common people. The worship of Tian (天 Heaven) was a prerogative of the ruling elite, so the people had to create alternative avenues for communing with their gods.⁴ Spirit medium worship was one such method. It was a strategy of power, since through spirit possession gods were able to rise from within the community, and ordinary people could thereby interact face-to-face with their deities. Image worship was another way through which people ensured the presence of compliant gods.

For the Chinese, the relationship between people and their gods is contractual, rather than one involving supplication. Offerings are made for favors. This position was evident to Arthur Wolf in his study of popular religion in contemporary Taiwan; people would offer to ancestors or to deities, but they expected returns.⁵ The devotees who brought fruits and peanuts to the Monkey God tree in Singapore wanted to win at the lottery. The tradition of worship as bargaining extends back to the Shang era (商, 1600–1050 BCE), when gods were promised animal and human sacrifices if they brought bountiful harvests or good health.⁶ But in their dealings with gods, people largely have the upper hand.

Gods are dependent on people to give their spirits materiality through the making of anthropomorphic images, and gods gain power only if their images are worshipped, so that Valerie Hansen, writing on religion in Southern Song (南宋, 1127–1279), noted: "the gods lived, even vied, for human recognition ... Without it, they languished."⁷

⁴ C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society: A Study of Contemporary Social Functions of Religion and Some of Their Historical Factors* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1961), pp. 129–37, 183–86; Stephan Feuchtwang, "School-Temple and City God," in *Studies in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), p. 117; Margaret Chan, *Ritual Is Theatre, Theatre Is Ritual: Tang-ki Chinese Spirit Medium Worship* (Singapore: Wee Kim Wee Centre, Singapore Management University and SNP Reference, 2006), pp. 20–21.

⁵ Arthur P. Wolf, "Gods, Ghosts, and Ancestors," in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 161–62.

⁶ David N. Keightley, "The Making of the Ancestors: Late Shang Religion and its Legacy," in *Religion and Chinese Society, 1: Ancient and Medieval China*, ed. John Lagerway (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong and École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2006), pp. 9–11.

⁷ Valerie Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China, 1127–1276* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 48.

CHINESE POPULAR RELIGION AS WAY OF LIFE

In the foregoing discussion, I moved from an account of a miraculous tree in modern Singapore to describe religious practices in contemporary Taiwan, beliefs of the Song era, and rituals of Shang times. It is necessary at this point to offer some justification for this broad scope, which takes knowledge from a variety of sources over a span of four thousand years of history and from countries geographically spread over China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. I will begin with a definition of the term “Chinese popular religion” as it is used in this text, an explanation that is necessary in view of the scholarly contestation surrounding the notion.⁸ A self-reflexive note should be useful, for it will place and explain my early understanding of Chinese religion as largely shaped by the beliefs of my paternal grandmother.

In my childhood, religious notions were a part of the everyday. I knew then (as I know today) never to step on offerings found on the sidewalks. I recall the matter-of-fact attitude that governed our practices. For example, when my grandmother died, the officiating Daoist priest said we had to use well-water to wash the body. But we did not know where to find a well in urban Singapore, so the priest said we might fetch water from a tap in a public place. The Chinese popular religion I know follows C. K. Yang’s description of a total diffusion of the theological into the secular.⁹

My research into Chinese popular religion, which began in earnest in 1998, continually reveals ancient ideas that echo in current observations in the field (my research has taken me to China, Taiwan, and much of Southeast Asia), and in my memories of childhood experiences, so that I see in Chinese popular religion a confirmation of Catherine Bell’s description of religion as a sociocultural system that includes fundamental values, traditional practices, and attitudes that unite people across class and region.¹⁰

Chinese popular religion is clearly a “little tradition” in terms of Robert Redfield’s concept of a great tradition of the reflective few, and a little tradition of the largely unreflective many, where the great tradition of a civilization is often an outgrowth of the little tradition.¹¹ Robert Weller, however, refuses the notion that there might be a unity termed Chinese religion when viewed against the reality of the wide diversity of religious practices across China.¹² More recent methods of analysis, however, reject a priori synthetic entities such as religious institutions or traditions, and instead view culture as a dynamic system for the production of

⁸ This is not the place to enter into the debate, and I refer readers who are interested in the discussion to Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*; Maurice Freedman, “On the Sociological Study of Chinese Religion,” in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 19–41; Hill Gates and Robert P. Weller, “Hegemony and Chinese Folk Ideologies: An Introduction,” *Modern China Symposium on Hegemony and Chinese Folk Ideologies* 13,1 (1987): Part I, pp. 3–16; Catherine Bell, “Religion and Chinese Culture: Toward an Assessment of ‘Popular Religion,’” *History of Religions* 29,1 (1989): 35–57; and Stephen F. Teiser, “Popular Religion,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 54,2 (1995): 378–95, among others.

⁹ Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, pp. 24–25, 294–300.

¹⁰ Bell, “Religion and Chinese Culture,” p. 42.

¹¹ Robert Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture: An Anthropological Approach to Civilization* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1956), pp. 70–72.

¹² Robert P. Weller, *Unities and Diversities in Chinese Religion* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, and London: Macmillan, 1987).

meanings. Under this epistemology, unity and diversity are intrinsic to the dynamics of cultural holism.¹³ As Paul Steven Sangren argues:

Chinese religion is inseparable from the entire spectrum of discourses and texts (including, in addition to written and printed texts, all kinds of rituals, shamanism, architecture, economic transactions, knowledge, even daily conversation) through which meaning is produced, reproduced, and fought for ...¹⁴

In these terms, Chinese popular religion exists as a dynamic of ideas from Daoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, as well as from folk beliefs and spontaneous improvisations. Stephen F. Teiser enumerates the variety of resources that scholars have mined for insight into Chinese religion, including archaeological discoveries, historical manuscripts, private commentaries on urban life, epigraphic evidence, compilations of ghost stories, poetry, popular literature, vernacular prose and drama, and hagiographies and liturgies.¹⁵ The material spans thousands of years and covers all regions where there are communities of Chinese people. In my discussion, I, too, have relied on an eclectic range of writings and added ethnographic findings into the mix. As practices such as the carving of god images and the *kai guang* (开光, enlightening) rituals have been well documented elsewhere,¹⁶ I will not deal with these topics. Instead, I have accumulated evidence to put together a hermeneutic theology of image worship in Chinese popular religion.

FICTION AS *LOCUS CLASSICUS*

Meir Shahar proposes vernacular fiction as the main medium for the transmission of god cults,¹⁷ and I have argued that mythology has provided Chinese popular religion with a dramatic canon.¹⁸ Ancient storytellers and balladeers captured the imagination of the people with their tales of valiant warriors and supernatural heroes, and continued exposure to these stories through theater and books has concretized the images of the gods in the minds of the people to form an internalized repository of religious knowledge. All characters are anthropomorphic; a monkey, a pig, even sea creatures are essentially human. This has allowed and allows for an easy relationship between people and their gods. Gods ascribed with human aspirations can be expected to behave like people and be similarly pleased with offerings of food or theatrical entertainment.

¹³ Bell, "Religion and Chinese Culture," pp. 42–43.

¹⁴ Paul Steven Sangren, "Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy, and the Structure of Value in Chinese Rituals," *Modern China* 13,1 (1987): 63.

¹⁵ Teiser, "Popular Religion," pp. 379–80.

¹⁶ See, for example, Lin Weiping, "Conceptualizing Gods through Statues: A Study of Personification and Localization in Taiwan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50,2 (2008): 454–77.

¹⁷ Meir Shahar, "Vernacular Fiction and the Transmission of Gods' Cults in Late Imperial China," in *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*, ed. Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), pp. 184–211.

¹⁸ Chan, *Ritual Is Theatre*, pp. 42–55.

David K. Jordan considers the Ming (明) novel *Fengshen Yanyi* (封神演义, Creation of the Gods), which he attributes to Lu Xixing (陆西星) or Xu Zhonglin (许仲琳), to have been the most important influence on popular understanding of Daoism as a religious system,¹⁹ a view I share, so that I have used the passages from *Fengshen Yanyi* as the *locus classicus* for my discussion on image worship. *Fengshen Yanyi* is a magical telling of the defeat of the Shang dynasty and the establishment of Zhou. The last king of Shang, Zhou (纣, not to be confused with the Zhou 周 dynasty, 1046–256 BCE), was an evil man, so that the righteous had a duty to go to war to overthrow his empire. An iconic hero who came forward in this conflict was Nezha (哪吒), son of Lijing (李靖).

NEZHA'S STATUE

I begin with the part of the story that follows Nezha's suicide in atonement for his killing of the son of the Dragon King of the East Sea.

Nezha is dead, but his soul travels to Fairy Primordial, his immortal protector. Nezha is instructed to visit his mother in a dream to ask her to build a temple to her late son and set up within it a statue of Nezha. Fairy Primordial explains that if his image is worshipped for three years, Nezha will be reincarnated in human form, enabling him to fight for Zhou against the forces of Shang.

All was done according to this plan. A stream of devotees came to offer to Nezha's statue, a lifelike image seated on a pedestal in the main hall. Half a year passed, and the people's worship of his image enabled Nezha to regain part of his shape and his voice. In turn, Nezha granted the wishes of the people, bringing them peace and prosperity. But one day, Lijing, Nezha's father, learns of the temple. Thinking that his son was cheating the people, Lijing smashed the image and had the temple set on fire.

On that day, Nezha's soul was not in the temple. He returned at dusk to find it had been burnt down. Nezha was enraged against Lijing, for by smashing Nezha's image and burning down his temple, the father had left Nezha with no place to live. Nezha returns to Fairy Primordial. Anxious that Nezha should be reincarnated in time to fight the Shang armies, Fairy Primordial assembles lotus flowers and leaves in three piles to represent heaven, earth, and man. He then adds lotus stems, broken into three hundred pieces to represent the three hundred bones. Fairy Primordial mixes his own vital energies with a little golden elixir and adds this brew to the arrangement. He then grasps Nezha's soul and throws it into the center of the assemblage. There is a tremendous bang, and Nezha is reincarnated into a handsome man of white face, red lips, shining eyes, and a sturdy body sixteen feet tall.²⁰

This story presents us with many insights into image worship, chiefly; 1) a spirit incarnates itself into the mortal world in order to do work for man; 2) the spirit needs an effigy in order to reincarnate; 3) worship of the image by ordinary people empowers the spirit on which the image is modeled; and 4) the spirit is not always in

¹⁹ David K. Jordan, "Brief Guide to the Most Influential Chinese Novels of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties (XIIIth to XIXth Centuries)," <http://weber.ucsd.edu/~dkjordan/chin/hbnovels-u.html>, last modified November 17, 2011.

²⁰ Gu Zhizhong., trans., *Creation of the Gods, Vol. 1* (Beijing: New World Press, 1996), pp. 155–58.

the image, so that the image is less a body that contains the spirit than it is a portal that provides spirits access to the mortal world.

IMAGES PERMIT SPIRITS TO INCARNATE THEMSELVES AND DO WORK FOR MAN

In order to learn about the role of images in worship, I spoke to two Singaporean Daoist priests, Master Jave Wu (Daoist name Xiao Huajun, 孝华君), of the Zhengyi (正一) sect, and Master Chung Kwangtong (庄光栋, Pinyin Zhuang Guangdong, Daoist name Weiyi, 惟义), of the Quanzhen (全真) sect. Both said that the image was not the god, but was an aid to religious contemplation. Respect was accorded the image, because it was a representation of the god. "Would a person be pleased if you treated his photograph disrespectfully, as if you hit the photo with a shoe?" asked Master Chung. I propose that Master Wu and Master Chung represent an institutional view, which is at variance with the popular understanding of the function of images.

Institutional Daoism is liturgical. It has a clerical order, and the pantheon and rituals are modeled after the state bureaucracy.²¹ But Chinese popular religion, as it is practiced by the ordinary people, is founded on personalized relationships between gods and people.²² Stephan Feuchtwang, in his discussion of religion and authority, notes how commoners require an everyday responsiveness from the statues of their gods; in contrast, the state officiant "expects only the rarer, more selective, event of loyal rescue by some less concrete spiritual appearance."²³

While the orthodox view is that statues are aids for visualization, the popular belief is that image worship is about getting gods to do work. Thus, Nezha was reincarnated to fight in the ranks of Zhou against the Shang armies. Barend Ter Haar recounts a folklore tale of the salt lake district of Xiezhou (解州), in Shanxi (山西). During the Yuanyou era (元佑, 1086–1093), salt production declined due to problems that were held to be caused by the monster Chi You (蚩尤). The deified Guan Yu (关羽) appeared to the people in dreams to tell them that, while he would deal with Chi You, only Zhang Fei (张飞), the god's sworn brother, could defeat Chi You's wife.²⁴ Accordingly, the people set up an image of Zhang Fei in the local temple. That evening, there was a violent thunderstorm, and the next morning the people found the statue of Zhang Fei holding a chain wrapped about a piece of rotten wood. The wicked wife of the monster had been captured, and subsequently the yield of salt increased tenfold.

But gods were not summoned only to do grand tasks such as fighting wars. Valerie Hansen writes of a total assimilation of the gods into the everyday lives of the people during the Song era. The gods became members of the household since statues were installed on most home altars.²⁵ People could talk to their gods directly

²¹ Emily Martin Ahern, *Chinese Ritual and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

²² Weller, *Unities and Diversities*.

²³ Stephan Feuchtwang, "Historical Metaphor: A Study of Religious Representation and the Recognition of Authority," *Man* 28,1 (1993): 47.

²⁴ Barend J. Ter Haar, "The Rise of the Guan Yu Cult: The Daoist Connection," in *Linked Faiths: Essays on Chinese Religions and Traditional Culture in Honour of Kristofer Schipper*, ed. Jan A. M. Jan De Meyer and Peter M. Engelfriet (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 197–98.

²⁵ Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*, p. 16.

through their images, and the gods, like people, desired paper cash and meat. Gods were also fastidious about their images being true likenesses and insisted that their statues be kept in good repair.

Hansen notes that people catered to the wishes of the gods, but, in turn, demanded a direct response from those same gods, so when bandits could not get the permission from the deities to burn down a city, they attempted to drown the god images. A local magistrate praying for rain ensured that he had secured the attention of the god by imprisoning its image; he also threatened to destroy its temple if rain was not produced in three days.²⁶

The Song era saw the rise of Chinese mercantilism, and the gods were quick to learn about doing business. Hansen wrote of a god who answered people's worries about a famine not by sending good harvests, but by assuming human form in order to broker grain supply deals.²⁷ In modern Singapore, the prevalent obsession is to win at the lottery, and an efficacious deity is one who knows how to pick lucky numbers for the state 4D (four digits) draw.

The direct intercession of gods acting through their statues is particularly apparent in Lin Weiping's report of worship in a village in southwestern Taiwan. When there was illness, Lin reports, the villagers would take home the temple images to keep close watch on the patient.²⁸ In modern Singapore, there is a similar tradition. *Fushen* (副身), literally "auxiliary bodies," are small replicas of the main altar image. The portable statues are taken out in religious processions when gods tour the precinct of the temple to bless the people and exorcise evil spirits, and they are installed in homes when worshippers need the focused attention of their gods, as in times of sickness. But there are cases that demonstrate people's even more direct dealings with statues as bodies of gods.

The Imperfect Deity (十全老爷) is worshipped for good health, for as his statue shows, this god is willing to bear bodily imperfections, such as weak eyesight, an amputated leg, or crippled hand, on behalf of his worshippers (Figure 2, on the next page). Lin writes of villagers who believed in the efficacy of the physical substance of the image, scraping the wood of the statue or taking bits of red yarn from the hair on its head to incorporate these materials into medicines.²⁹ Far from performing the abstract function of being an aid for religious contemplation, the very material of the image was ingested in a form of worship that was meant to demand solutions to everyday worries and afflictions. Such close, physical relationships required gods who would think and act as humans, and anthropomorphism facilitated the spread of cults. However, personalization did more than just popularize the gods; anthropomorphism took on theological import as well. A brief incursion into art history traces the development of Chinese religious imagery in popular religion.

²⁶ Hansen, *Changing Gods in Medieval China*, pp. 48–58.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 75–76.

²⁸ Lin, "Conceptualizing Gods through Statues," pp. 470–71.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 471.



Figure 2: The Imperfect Deity takes on the bodily pains of worshippers, including poor eyesight, amputated leg, and crippled hand. Photo by Raymond Goh, used with permission

ANTHROPOMORPHISM MADE ACCESSIBLE GODS

Early institutional Daoist and Confucian beliefs posited that heavenly forces, having neither matter nor form, could not be reproduced in three dimensions.³⁰ This is why the fifteenth-century Tian Tan (天坛) Temple of Heaven in Beijing, where the emperors of Ming and Qing (清, 1644–1911) worshipped, contains no images.

The idea of the formless heaven can be traced to the Shang cult of the ancestor, which was designed to achieve the impersonalization of the dead.³¹ The ancestors were represented by wooden tablets that were worshipped in regulated rituals that did not allow any individuation of particular personalities. This practice was elaborated upon during the Zhou dynasty; the tradition of the ancestral tablet, a

³⁰ Ann Paludan, *Chinese Sculpture: A Great Tradition* (Chicago, IL: Serinda, 2006), p. 230.

³¹ Keightley, "The Making of the Ancestors," pp. 26–29.

wooden plaque bearing little more than the name of the deceased, developed from forms of worship that evolved during this time.

It has been argued that the evolution of Daoist anthropomorphic images was inspired by Buddhist statuary. Ann Paludan records that the earliest known Buddhist images found in China date to the second century, whereas the Daoists began to make votive images only from the fifth century onward.³² Although Daoism had developed from being a philosophy to becoming a religion from the first and second centuries, early religious Daoist statuary was confined to depictions of fantastic creatures and beings. Mythical sage-heroes, legendary rulers, and immortals were sometimes shown in relief, mainly on mortuary objects, but never in independent three-dimensional forms. The Chinese did, however, make figurative sculptures—significant for my thesis—but these only depicted ordinary human beings at work: warriors, servants, farmers, and dancing girls.³³ These lifelike figurines were placed inside tombs for the utilitarian purpose of serving the dead.

Daoist temples during the late Han (汉, 206 BCE–220 CE) period were small and primitive, with designations such as “Thatched Hut” and “Peaceful Cottage.”³⁴ In the period of the Southern and Northern dynasties, Daoist temples began to receive some royal attention, but the sponsorship of Daoist art right up to the Sui (隋, 581–618) era came mainly from citizens: clerics, farmers, merchants, generals, and nobles. The majority of Daoist sculptures of the period were stelae, so that although the gods were depicted figuratively, these figures remained essentially two-dimensional representations.³⁵ This situation changed during the Tang (唐, 618–906) dynasty.

The royal family of Tang proclaimed its members to be descendents of Laozi (老子),³⁶ and to promulgate this notion, the rulers commissioned statues of Daoist deity Laozi modeled in their own images. Thus evolved the design for sacred sculptures in the round, and where Daoist imagery hitherto was concerned with the exposition of a god’s spiritual states of consciousness, Tang statues were notable for their humanistic vividness. The Tang rulers distributed these images to the people for worship, and, in the process, set the standard for religious images produced by artisans throughout the country.³⁷

The anthropomorphic design was firmly established by Song, and in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, sculptures of the gods became far more human than ever before.³⁸ The statues became increasingly ornate over time, and Ming and Qing temple images wore brightly colored clothes and often had gilded faces.³⁹ Modern god statues are rich in iconographic detail. The gods are easily identified by emblematic props; for example, Nezha is unmistakable due to the Wind-Fire Wheels on which he rides and for his Fire-Tipped Lance and Universal Ring. The faces of the gods are painted in flesh tones or with designating colors; Guan Yu, for example, is

³² Paludan, *Chinese Sculpture*, pp. 174–75, 229.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

³⁴ Liu Yang, “Images for the Temple: Imperial Patronage in the Development of Tang Daoist Art,” *Artibus Asiae* 61,2 (2001): 193–94.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 252–55.

³⁸ Laurence Sickman, cited in Hansen, *Changing Gods*, p. 53.

³⁹ Paludan, *Chinese Sculpture*, pp. 461–62.

marked by his bright red face, a detail that reflects his description in popular literature.



Figure 3: The regal but impersonal Tiangong. Photo by Margaret Chan

Art history links the development of the human-like religious image with the popularization of religion. Before the first century in India, the Buddha was represented only in aniconic forms, such as by a tree or a wheel. In order to spread the religion to the masses, the purely intellectual concepts of the Buddha gave way to the iconolatriy and rituals characteristic of the popular Indian non-Aryan consciousness.⁴⁰ Liu Yang has argued that the Tang rulers had sculpted gods exuding a warm humanity in order to popularize among the common people the ideology that claimed the divine ancestry for members of the ruling house.⁴¹

However, this did not mean that all the gods became human and accessible. The legacy of the notion of remote supreme beings, in contrast with the more responsive personal deities, continues in Chinese popular religion today. The statues of Tiangong (天公), the Heavenly Emperor, are not seen on home altars, and people

⁴⁰ Amanda K. Coomaraswamy, "The Origin of the Buddha Image," *The Art Bulletin* 9,4 (1927): 287, 297–300.

⁴¹ Liu, "Images for the Temple."

instead address the open sky when they supplicate him. Tiangong's image on temple altars shows him seated, looking impassively into a board that he holds in front of his face. Tiangong is an emperor, so mortals cannot look directly into his eyes (Figure 3, on previous page).



Figure 4: A vivid depiction of Da Er Ye Bo, Elder Deity of the Underworld.
Photo by Margaret Chan

In contrast, Da Er Ye Bo (大二爷伯, Elder and Second Granduncles), spirits of the underworld, are depicted as tall-and-thin, short-and-fat individuals with lolling tongues and staring eyes set beneath bushy eyebrows that grow down to their chins. Although the two are frightening to look upon, they are favorites with the people, who address them in familial terms and ply them with beer, stout, and cigarettes, and even smear opium on the mouths of the statues. Da Er Ye Bo, I am told, can always be counted on for lucky numbers. They are not so exalted as to be unaware that poor people need a little spare cash occasionally from the lottery (Figure 4, on previous page).

Ann Paludan also commented on an apparent degree of abstraction in the depiction of Chinese statuary that is in direct ratio to the rank of the subject; the

lower the status of the person on which the statue was modeled, the more lifelike the representation. Thus, we see that the personalizing of the image follows a system for the establishment of social rank. For this reason, dead emperors and nobility were not depicted in statuary within their tombs, but lifelike figurines of servants and soldiers were found aplenty. The same concept apparently serves the depiction of ritual rank. The spirits that are to be served need not be manifest in a figurative image, but spirits who are to be put into service must be conjured up through the anthropomorphic image (see Figure 5, on next page).

Lin saw in the process of personification—when a block of wood is carved into a human shape—the symbolic process of objectifying a formless deity for worship.⁴² I read beyond that, finding in anthropomorphism a strategy of magic that gives power to worshippers. Images are not chiefly made so that worshippers may contemplate or adore the gods; they are made to incarnate spirits that can be set to work. Nezha was incarnated to fight in the Zhou armies, and Zhang Fei's statue was set up in the temple so that he could capture Chi You's wife. My arguments consider the fact that anthropomorphism is unnecessary with regard to the notion of an object being imbued with a spirit. Stones and trees, for example, are often worshipped, but anthropomorphism is necessary to enable a spirit or divinity to enter the earthly realm to serve humans.

SPIRITS VESTED IN OBJECTS

Recalling the Nezha legend, we note that for the soul to be reincarnated, humans were obliged to make a lifelike statue that had to be worshipped for three years. When the process got truncated, the Fairy Primordial, being an immortal, could finish the job using a mystical arrangement of parts of the lotus plant. Also from the *Fengshen Yanyi*, we learn of another incident, during which an effigy is used to trap souls.

Yao Bin (姚宾), who fought for Shang, used magic in an assassination attempt on Zhou Prime Minister Jiang Ziya (姜子牙). Yao created a Soul Snatching Trap that used a straw effigy marked with Jiang's name. At the head of the trap, Yao hung three lamps, and at its foot he placed seven lamps. Then Yao let down his hair, took up a sword, and walked in a sacred mandala pattern around the image. Yao performed this ritual three times a day, reciting charms and burning talismans in the hope that in twenty-one days he would be able to steal away the souls of Jiang, thus causing the latter's death.⁴³

Yao's intention in creating a Jiang surrogate was to kill the man, not to trap his spirit to serve as a familiar. Thus, the straw effigy was not made to be as lifelike as the Nezha statue. The three lamps at the head, and the seven lamps at the foot, of the Jiang effigy, relate, respectively, to the three *hun* (魂) or *yang* (阳) elements that are contained in the bones of a person, and the seven *po* (魄) or *yin* (阴) elements that are contained in the flesh.

⁴² Lin, "Conceptualizing Gods," pp. 464, 471.

⁴³ Gu, *Creation of the Gods*, pp. 475–83.



Figure 5: This nanny goddess' bare breasts and swollen belly unmistakably mark her for duties as a wet-nurse, that is, her job is to see that babies do well.
Photo by Margaret Chan

In the grave, the *po* souls decompose together with the flesh, leaving the *hun* in the bones. To ensure that the *po* spirits do not remain to harm the living descendants, secondary burials of the remains may be ordered. The purpose of secondary burials is purification, for it involves the collection of bones from the grave, which are scraped clean of any remaining flesh before reburial.⁴⁴ Thus we note that ancestral spirits can be both beneficent and harmful. This is probably the reason why, even as

⁴⁴ Emily Martin Ahern, *The Cult of the Dead in a Chinese Village* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1973), pp. 165, 175–76, 181, 203–5; James L. Watson, “Funeral Specialists in Cantonese Society: Pollution, Performance, and Social Hierarchy,” in *Death Ritual in Late Imperial and Modern China*, ed. James Watson and Evelyn S. Rawski (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, and London: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 113–14; Timothy Y. Tsu, “Toothless Ancestors, Felicitous Descendants: The Rite of Secondary Burial in South Taiwan,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 59 (2000): 1–22.

early as the Shang era, ancestral worship was made to impersonalized spirit tablets, and Zhou rites prescribed the number of generations of ancestors that could receive worship according to the believer's social position. The royal house would offer sacrifices to no more than seven generations of ancestors, the common people only to two generations. An exception was made for the founding ancestor, for whom sacrifices continued to be made throughout all generations, for he was the symbol of the collective identity of the lineage.⁴⁵

In order to facilitate continued worship, some families make personalized statues of their first ancestor and set these up in temples. These images keep the ancestors close to living descendants. Conversely, depersonalization in aniconic spirit tablets keeps the ancestral spirits at a distance from the mortal realm. This is why, while a photograph of the deceased is used to receive worship at the funeral, it must be replaced on the family altar in forty-nine days, at which time an impersonal plaque bearing the name of the deceased is set up in its stead.

Thus, the continuity of the spirit within the mortal realm depends on the existence of a body, and Yu argues as much, pointing to Han attempts at preserving the corpse.⁴⁶ In this light, it is interesting to note Eduard Erkes's suggestion that King Wu (武王) of Zhou might have taken the coffined body of his father, King Wen (文王), into battle against the Shang.⁴⁷ Erkes has also proposed that the personator (a living representative of the dead) or a wooden statue of the dead king, riding in a chariot, led the armies of the Zhou.⁴⁸

THE IMAGE, AS DOES A CORPOREAL BODY, NEEDS SUSTENANCE

There is a crucial difference between the anthropomorphic image and aniconic ancestral tablet. In the tale of Ding Lan (丁兰), one of the Twenty-four Exemplars of Filial Piety, Ding Lan is said to have made an image of his dead mother (other versions say he made images of both his father and mother) and treated it as though it were the living woman. The image was no ordinary aniconic ancestral tablet, for we learn that Ding Lan's wife, jealous of her husband's attentions to the image, pricked the statue so that it bled. The reason why the statue of Ding Lan's mother had special corporeal qualities was because it was anthropomorphic, as we know from its representations in popular illustrations. A lacquer painting on a first-to-second-century basket found in Lolang shows Ding Lan with the clearly humanlike statue of his mother; art historian Dietrich Seckel judges this depiction to be the first pictorial document of a portrait statue in Chinese art.⁴⁹

The fact that a spirit needs a body, or an image shaped like a body, in order to remain within the mortal realm is also illustrated by a ritual performed at secondary

⁴⁵ Yü Yingshih, "'O Soul, Come Back!' A Study in the Changing Conceptions of the Soul and Afterlife in Pre-Buddhist China," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 47,2 (1987): 379–80.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 380. For details on Han jade burial suits, see Edmund Capon and William MacQuitty, *Princes of Jade* (New York, NY: E. P. Dutton, 1973).

⁴⁷ Eduard Erkes, "Idols in Pre-Buddhist China," *Artibus Asiae* 3,1 (1928): 8.

⁴⁸ In *Ssu-ma Ch'ien* [Sima Qian, 司马迁], *The Grand Scribe's Record. I. The Basic Annals of Pre-Han China*, ed. William H. Nienhauser, Jr., trans. Cheng Tsaifa, Lu Zongli, William H. Nienhauser, Jr., and Robert Reynolds (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), p. 59, it is suggested that King Wu brought the spirit tablet of his father to war.

⁴⁹ Dietrich Seckel, "The Rise of Portraiture in Chinese Art," *Artibus Asiae* 53,1/2 (1993): 10.

burials in South Taiwan. When the remains from a primary burial are collected, the teeth are pulled from the skull and discarded without ceremony at the old grave. Timothy Tsu interprets this as an action meant to deny teeth to the spirit of the dead so that it cannot “eat up” the good fortune of the descendants: “Purification ... is thus achieved by a double denial: the ancestor is denied not just a fleshy human form but also the ability to ‘eat’ like a human. Not being able to eat presumably also prevents the ancestor from ever regaining the flesh he or she has lost, and so ensures his or her continual existence as a skeleton.”⁵⁰ A reverse action, the feeding of a spirit through food offerings to its image, will ensure that the spirit remains tied to the mortal realm and is strong enough to be able to fulfill the wishes of devotees.

On the island of Pulau Ubin, in the northeast of the main island of Singapore, there is a temple to Dabogong (大伯公). Although Dabogong is regarded as a humble god of a locality, the Ubin community celebrates their Dabogong’s feast day on Vesak day, usually reserved for celebrating the birthday of the Buddha, for they explain that their Dabogong has attained Buddhahood. When I attended the Dabogong Vesak day celebrations on May 31, 2008, I understood why the god had been promoted. His worshippers were zealous in their attentions, presenting Dabogong with much incense and paper money, a Chinese opera, and a pop concert, as well as a freshly slaughtered pig and a freshly slaughtered goat. Dabogong, although a Buddha, retained his Daoist appetite for meat.

These animal offerings are extraordinary in the Singapore context because presentations of raw meats have virtually disappeared on the mainland on account of food hygiene considerations. But this is not the only reason why these offerings deserve our attention. Symbolically, the pig and the goat served up in their elemental state constitute an offering usually reserved for Tiangong, the Heavenly Emperor. Foods served to gods follow ritual prescriptions. In China and Taiwan, Tiangong is likely to receive uncooked whole animals, always offered in an elemental state, so that if chicken is served, the bird would be raw, it would be plucked, but three feathers would be stuck into its rump. In Singapore, the higher spirits such as the San Qing (三清, Three Pure Ones), and also Tiangong, would be offered fruits and vegetarian foods. Warrior gods are served large slabs of cooked meats, such as whole roasted pigs or stewed duck and chicken, and spirit soldiers are served dishes cooked for human consumption. The offerings given to Dabogong on Pulau Ubin, which were fit for the Heavenly Emperor, proclaimed the humble god’s rise to the highest rank on the divine hierarchy and added to Dabogong’s *lingqi* or spirit power.

Thus, it is clear, the gods are, in fact, the souls of the dead. Statues are corporeal bodies (being literally called golden bodies, *jin shen*, 金身), through which spirits can enter the mortal realm to do work. Having bodies, the gods can move about the place. But when vested in the aniconic image of a typical ancestral tablet, spirits remain, as in the Soul Snatching Trap, locked to a spot. Philip Baity notes as much, arguing that the potential mobility of the deity being represented marks one difference between god images and ancestral tablets; while the ancestral tablet is kept only on the domestic altar of the eldest son (or in the ancestral hall), the statue may be carried about.⁵¹ The practice of *fenshen* (分身, to have the body divided, as happens with the Singaporean *fushen* replica deities, discussed earlier), or of

⁵⁰ Tsu, “Toothless Ancestors,” pp. 14–15.

⁵¹ Philip C. Baity, “The Ranking of Gods in Chinese Folk Religion,” *Asian Folklore Studies* 36,2 (1977): 76–78.

duplicating god images, allows the worship of the god to spread to different localities. Because replica statues allow the god to move about while, at the same time, remaining at headquarters, so to speak, this has permitted Singaporean deities to catch the travel bug. Many go on pilgrimages to the mother temple in China, flying in planes cradled in cloth slings worn about the neck of a devotee.

IMAGES AS PORTALS BETWEEN SPIRIT AND MORTAL REALMS

This notion of the mobility of gods reinforces Lin's arguments that one of the reasons for image worship is the localization of communal gods. The statues tie the gods to their temples. Lin recounts that the main god of the community he studied had, in fact, abandoned his statue in the village. However, the god remained responsive to the prayers of the community. Through his spirit medium, the god explained: "Were it not for this rotten piece of wood ... which makes my heart unable to part from you, I would simply leave."⁵²

So far we have noted how the personalizations of religious statuary imbue remote gods with a humanity that helps to popularize their cults. Personification has allowed formless gods to be objectified, but, crucially, personalization is a magical process. The anthropomorphic image, as contrasted with the aniconic, gives a spirit the body it needs to exist and act in the human world, but the soul is not tied to that body. Gods appear to people in dreams, they possess and speak through spirit mediums, and, in fact, gods can be simultaneously present at different places at one time. Thus gods do not exist inside their images; remember that Nezha, for one, was away from his temple when his father smashed his image. Yet people go to temples and pray looking upon statues. The orthodox view is that the images are foci of attention; the popular reading is that statues are loci for the spirits. Both perspectives converge insofar as they recognize that gods are not confined within the physical limits of their statues, and they agree insofar as they sense the presence of gods who are close enough to listen and respond.

I have explained the situation by referring to the image of a deity as a metaphorical portal, rather than adopting the more popular suggestion, which defines the image as an abode for the god. Recalling the stories of Nezha and the Soul Snatching Trap set by Yao, we note how the image functions to enable transitions; Nezha's spirit has to become incarnate, Jiang's souls have to be snatched away from his corporeal body. In both instances, the image functions as a device that enables movements between spirit and mortal realms—hence, the notion of a portal. I have argued that it is the condition of the image as a "double-nature-being" that enables the image to serve as a magical doorway.⁵³ Continuing the metaphor, anthropomorphism may be regarded as the key that opens the door.

CONCLUSION: ANTHROPOMORPHISM AS A MAGICAL CONDITION

The magical condition of the "double-nature-being" is revealed when we learn that the Chinese regard the puppet—the anthropomorphic image imbued with the potential for motion—as the performing deity. This explains why the Chinese believe that puppets can self-animate. The character for puppet, *kui* 傀, is illustrative of its

⁵² Lin, "Conceptualizing Gods," pp. 471–74.

⁵³ Chan, *Ritual Is Theatre*, pp. 133–49.

magical ontology as a “double-nature-being,” for it combines the 亻, human radical, with that of 鬼, ghost or spirit. Even in Western linguistic terms we note a “double-nature-being” significance. First we note that 傀 is an iconic signifier, as Chinese characters are ideographs. The referent is the magical being that is both human and spirit in nature.

The power of puppets is revealed in an account in the *Shi Ji* (史记). The Shang emperor Wu Yi (武乙) committed sacrilege by fashioning idols, which he called heavenly gods. These images were clearly puppets and anthropomorphic, for Wu Yi drafted people to operate them so that he could play games of chance with them. When the heavenly gods did not win, Wu Yi humiliated them by hanging a leather pouch above them filled with blood, which he shot with an arrow, thereby drenching the images with blood. Wu Yi paid for this deed by being struck dead by lightning—a favorite revenge of the gods.⁵⁴

Belief in the potency of puppets has not faded away completely in the present day; we note that the Chinese always store puppets with their faces covered to prevent them from self-animating. The guardian deity of Min (闽) language opera is Hai Ji (孩儿, pinyin Hai Er, Child), an articulated wooden child that many anecdotes describe coming to life, to run and play, at night. Marionette theater (as against glove puppetry or opera) is considered to be the most sacred form of theater by the Chinese. The string puppets are seen as animated god statues, and the combination of the anthropomorphic image with mobility (as if quickened by the spirit) is the reason why the puppets are the most powerfully exorcistic of ritual devices. Pregnant women do not watch marionette theater lest the spirit of the puppet enter the womb and the child be born floppy, like a marionette.

The belief in the efficacy of the puppet is not surprising, for it appears as an animated wooden deity. But the human actor wearing a mask has also been designated as *kui* (傀),⁵⁵ that is, as “double-nature-being.” Poo Muchou writes that the character 鬼 appears on oracle bone inscriptions as, possibly, the graphic representation of the death mask or the mask of a shaman.⁵⁶ Thus the character 傀 is an ideograph of a person wearing an exorcistic mask. The mask enables the human actor to become the image of the character portrayed, and is therefore a device of sacral transfiguration. *Nuo* (傩) drama traces its origins to the performances of ancient shamans wearing masks. Till today, *Nuo* masks are revered as the very gods themselves and are kept in temples. Before a performance, the masks are paraded through the village, and people make offerings of food and incense to them. Actors pray to the gods to possess them, and when they don the masks, they are transmogrified into *xi shen* (戏神), the gods of performances themselves.⁵⁷

The tradition of the mask acting as a sacral device of transfiguration continues in modern Min theater rituals, when the god of fortune himself opens the show. He is an actor who becomes the anthropomorphic image of the god by the

⁵⁴ S. Ch'ien, *The Grand Scribe's Record*, p. 49.

⁵⁵ William Dolby, “The Origins of Chinese Puppetry,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41,1 (1978): 98.

⁵⁶ Poo Muchou, “The Concept of Ghost in Ancient Chinese Religion,” in *Religion and Chinese Society, 1: Ancient and Medieval China*, ed. J. Lagerway (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong and École française d'Extrême-Orient, 2006), p. 175.

⁵⁷ Yu Qiuyu, “Some Observations on the Aesthetics of Primitive Chinese Theatre,” trans. Hu Dongsheng, Elizabeth Wichmann, and Gregg Richardson, *Asian Theatre Journal* 6,1 (1989): 17.

wearing of a mask. After the ritual, the mask is wrapped in a red cloth and stored away, both to keep the mask out of the gaze of common folk, as well as to contain the power of the mask. The tradition of the masked actor is perpetuated in the painted faces of Chinese opera performers.⁵⁸ Daoist priest Jave Wu told me how, in the past, sacred characters would be written on the face of the actor before it was painted in order to protect the actors from possession by the spirits. Then, opera garments would often have the phrase *jie yong* (借用), “borrowed for use,” written on the inner hem, to reflect the belief that the costumes rightfully belonged to spirits.

On the opera stage today, the mystical tradition of the painted mask is now largely lost, and only the makeup for Guan Yu (who we met in the tale of the salt lake monster) is believed to be transformative. However, the painted mask as a ritual device that allows a spirit to enter into a mortal being is employed in contemporary spirit-possession ceremonies by *jiajiang* exorcists (家浆, infernal generals). *Jiajiang* are Taiwanese exorcists who, when possessed, are held to be somewhere between being humans and gods or ghosts.⁵⁹ They are dressed in costumes and wear distinctive painted masks that transform them into the image of the possessing demigods. The statue of a god, the puppet, the masked *Nuo* actor, the painted and costumed *jiajiang* exorcist; all are images, “double-nature-beings,” and, as such, are magical portals that allow the spirit to enter into the earthly realm to serve man.

⁵⁸ Rinnie Tang, David Harris, and Bernard Schmidt, “From the Funeral Mask to the Painted Face of the Chinese Theatre,” *TDR: The Drama Review—Masks* 26,4 (Winter 1982): 60–63.

⁵⁹ Donald S. Sutton, “Transmission in Popular Religion: The *Jiajiang* Festival Troupe of Southern Taiwan,” in *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China*, ed. Meir Shahar and Robert P. Weller (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), pp. 212–13. See also Donald S. Sutton, *Steps of Perfection: Exorcistic Performers and Chinese Religion in Twentieth-Century Taiwan* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Asia Center, 2003).