

The Changing Functions of the Door Gods in China

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Abstract: This article illuminates the evolving functions of the door gods in Chinese culture, detailing China's medieval, premodern, and modern periods in relation to how these door gods were viewed, which changed from exorcism to prayer and then to political propaganda. Mary Douglas's grid and group theory is applied to examine the type of the society and the symbol system produced. This article points out the significant transformation of the door god paintings during the Great Cultural Revolution period and proposes a hypothesis about changes of possible subjects on the paintings. All of the evidence of the metamorphosis underscores the dynamism and distinctiveness of local beliefs in China.

Keywords: culture study, door gods, folk religion study, ethnography, Grid and Group

1. Introduction

This article delves into the evolving functions and cultural significance of door gods throughout various historical epochs in China. During the Middle Ages, the belief in door gods as exorcists was widely acknowledged within the spiritual realm of the Chinese populace. In the Tang and Song dynasties, the pantheon of door gods expanded immensely, encompassing a diverse array of both fictional and historical figures. As the commodity economy flourished, reverence for door gods surged across different regions and social strata. In contemporary times, political influences have become an integral aspect of the door gods' belief system. The deities not only served as instruments of political propaganda but also merged with the stature of political leaders, transforming the door gods into symbols of political culture.

2. Door Gods in the Medieval Period

The medieval era of China, spanning from the Han to the Tang dynasty (3rd to 8th century), witnessed the emergence of door god paintings as a predominant folk-art form, primarily serving an exorcistic function.

The earliest written mention of door deities can be traced back to the works of Wang Chong, an Eastern Han philosopher and literary critic. In his *Discourses in the Balance* (Lunheng 论衡), he cites a now-lost segment from *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (Shanhai Jing 山海经). This classic, believed to have been composed during the warring-states period, stands as one of China's seminal texts on the supernatural. Within its pages, it narrates the tale of Shen Tu (神荼) and Yu lei (郁垒), guardian spirits who stationed at the Gate of Ghosts (Guimen Guan 鬼门关), a mystical portal nestled between the branches of a peachwood tree. Tasked with detaining malevolent entities attempting to

traverse the gate, these guardians later found mention in other significant texts, such as the Book of the Later Han (Hou Hanshu 后汉书). This text alludes to an emerging tradition of affixing peachwood boards adorned with depictions of Shen Tu and Yu Lei [1], believed to be powerfully protective, emblematic of righteousness, and adept at warding off malevolent spirits. It is pivotal to recognize that The Classic of The Mountains and Seas exemplifies the evolution of Chinese religious practices and deity veneration in tandem with societal shifts. The majority of the supernatural tales within this text are not mere remnants of bygone civilizations, but are, in fact, a novel amalgamation of the previously documented cultures, crafted in response to the specific societal needs of the Warring States period [2].

It is noticing that the Door God was not worshipped in isolation, but was an integral part of the Chinese folk belief system. Alongside the Door God, there was a Kitchen God for the stove, a Guanyin statue (the Goddess of Mercy) for the hall, and a land god for the land. In the early days, the primary function of the Door God was to ward off evil spirits. This was especially evident during festival ceremonies, where a series of rituals would be observed [3].

3. Door Gods in the Pre-modern Time

Door god paintings in Pre-modern China acquired an additional function: invoking blessings. The Tang Dynasty signaled the conclusion of the Middle Ages, while the Song Dynasty heralded the onset of the modern era. This division of Chinese dynasties is based on Naito Torajiro's theory of Tang-Song Transition Indeed. Notably, the Tang Dynasty represented the zenith of aristocratic politics, where political matters were deliberated within the Three Departments and Six Ministries System. The emperor, being part of the aristocracy, was expected to acknowledge the privileges of the nobility, ensuring that no individual wielded absolute power;

Conversely, the Song Dynasty marked the rise of monarchical dictatorship. The aristocracy's influence waned, and the emperor emerged as the ultimate authority. It is also significant to highlight that the Song Dynasty witnessed a swift expansion of commodity economy in China. Miyazaki Ichisada, the disciple of Naito Torajiro, expounded on this, noting that the Song Dynasty leaned towards capitalism. The merchant class ascended, urban areas became commercial hubs, and the nation amassed considerable wealth. Consequently, the populace's focus on worldly life intensified [4].

Textual sources from the Song dynasty offer detailed insights into the evolving role of Door God paintings during the New Year's celebrations. Notable works include The Chorography of Wujun (Wujun Zhi 吴郡志) by Fan Chengda (范成大), The Records of Guests (Bintui Lu 宾退录) by Zhao Yushi (赵与时), The Numerous Records of West Lake Old Man (Xihu Laoren Fansheng Lu 西湖老人繁胜录) by Xihu Laoren. Specifically, The Numerous Records of West Lake Old Man mentions merchants who "... sold door god [prints] as tall as a person, gold lacquered peachwood charms and boards, Zhong Kui [prints], and treasure gate [prints] [5]." In The Eastern Capital: A Dream of Splendor (Dongjing Menghua Lu 东京梦华录) by Meng Yuanlao (孟元老), he paints a vivid picture of daily life in the Northern Song capital of Bianliang (present-day Kaifeng) during the year 1102-1125. In the section describing the activities of the twelfth lunar month, Meng observes, "as the New Year Festival approaches, all the printers in the marketplace sell door gods, [prints] of Zhong Kui, peachwood boards, and peachwood charms..." [6]. These references underscore a shift in the purpose of door god paintings. While they were initially intended for sacrificial rituals, they increasing found commercial appeal. This shift mirrors the populace's heightened focus on worldly matters, a reflection of the Song Dynasty's flourishing economy. Furthermore, the association between the door god paintings and the Spring Festival hints at its evolving function.

Beyond their commercial appeal, the Song Dynasty still upheld the sacrificial significance of door god paintings. Mengliang Lu details the annual Nuo exorcism procession, in which both the door god and gate god participate [7].

The subsequent Yuan dynasty, initiated by ethnic minorities, did not impede the continuity and growth of door god painting traditions, a custom deeply rooted in Han culture. The prominence of Door God paintings persisted from the thirteenth century to the seventeenth century spanning both the Yuan and Ming dynasties. Historical records reveal that door god paintings were not only ubiquitous among the ordinary people, but also held favor with the aristocracy. Miscellaneous Notes from the Government of Wan (Wan Shu Za Ji 宛署杂记) meticulously documents the quantities allocated for the purchase of door god paintings and peachwood charms by government officials. During this era, popular dramas and novels epitomized the cultural zeitgeist. Consequently, many door god painting subjects were inspired by these literary and theatrical works. Characters like Zhao Gongming (赵公明), the Daoist Master Burning Lamp (燃灯), the Ghost of the Pot, the Celebratory Gathering of the Transcendent Officials of Blessing Wealth, and longevity, and the Agitated Door God were all integrated into the art. These depictions were often accompanied by the rich narratives surrounding them.

As secular culture advanced and novels and dramas gained traction, the pantheon of recognizable and revered figures expanded. Heroines like Mu Guiying (穆桂英), and Hua Mulan (花木兰) were also celebrated as door gods.

During the Qing Dynasty, the tradition of Door Gods persisted, retaining its significance in New Year celebrations. The burgeoning world of secular novels further enriched the imagery of door gods, with many drawings' inspiration from these literary works.

To encapsulate, door gods primarily represented esteemed military generals and immortals from Chinese tales, mirroring the nation's hierarchical culture. Mary Douglas's grid and group theory positions pre-modern Chinese society in the upper right quadrant, characterized by both a strong grid and group. Such societies typically exhibit a consistent reverence for authority and its symbols, with beliefs anchored in a moral and punitive deity. [8] In this context, cultural symbols remain steadfast. For example, when seeking blessings of prosperity, Zhao Gongming, the god of wealth, would come to mind for the Chinese. For aspirations of academic success, Zhong Kui would be invoked. This form of worship is pragmatic, mirroring individual's desire through the veneration of specific symbols, rather than a mere adulation of these figures.

4. Door Gods in the Modern Era

Modern age in China commenced with the fall of the Qing dynasty, ushered in by events of the Opium War and Self-strengthening Movement. This transition led to the establishment of the Republic of China. However, this republic system was short-lived, soon giving way to the tumultuous warlord era marked by intense factionalism. During this period, door god paintings took on a distinctly political role, serving as vehicles for propagating revolutionary ideologies. The strategy was akin to introducing new concepts within familiar frameworks, akin to "new wine in old bottles," making complex political ideas more accessible to the general populace.

With the onset of the Chinese civil war, there was a marked politicization of folk customs. Newspaper reports indicate that in areas under Communist Party control, figures like Chiang Kai shek and other Kuomintang Party leaders were depicted in Yangko, a traditional Chinese folk dance, to denigrate him. [9] It was only with the commencement of the Anti-Japanese War in 1931 that class-based conflicts evolved into national ones. The political propaganda inherent in folk customs became increasingly pronounced, and this role was progressively integrated into door god paintings. As previously mentioned, the association of door god paintings with the Chinese New Year was

significant. In the 20th century, under the Communist Party of China, the working class emerged as the primary leadership force, aligning with the peasant class to form a worker-peasant alliance. This alliance actively championed and expanded traditional folk celebrations like the Spring Festival, especially in rural communities.

During this era, numerous folk customs underwent transformative changes to align with revolutionary ideals. For example, new theatrical works were purged of what the Communist Party termed "toxins" from traditional dramas. This specifically referred to elements of feudalism, superstition, and lasciviousness. In the northern regions of China, a stronghold of the Communist revolution, the Xinhua Daily reported on the Party's innovative approach to the Lunar New Year: "... Sixth, the Communist Party compiled new Spring Festival couplets on behalf of the masses in order to resist the enemy or write them out to give to them". [10] From the resistance during the Anti-Japanese War to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the eradication of feudal superstitions remained a central theme. The veneration of traditional deities was actively reimagined, emphasizing figures emblematic of revolutionary ideals. Mao Zedong epitomized this shift.[11] Contemporary newspapers documented how many regarded Chairman Mao as a living deity, possessing unparalleled power, and revered him during the Spring Festival. This fusion of utilitarian deity worship and tangible benefits allowed "Chairman Mao" to supplant traditional gods, becoming the central figure of the worship for peasants in the liberated areas of North China. By the year's end, items related to Chairman Mao were among the most sought-after commodities in both rural and urban markets. [12] From the latter stages of the Anti-Japanese War, the "Chairman Mao statue", viewed by the Chinese Communist Party as a symbol of revolutionary authority, began permeating beyond political realms, marking its presence in broader societal spaces.

Door Gods paintings experienced significant transformation during and in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Analyzing the evolution of the Door Gods from both historical and sociological lenses provides a window into the shifting values and beliefs of Chinese society during this volatile period.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), Chairman Mao mobilized urban teenagers to form groups known as the Red Guard. He urged these Red Guards to challenge traditional values and "bourgeois" norms and to hold party leaders accountable through public criticism. Mao believed that such actions would benefit both the young and the scrutinized party officials. This movement was encapsulated in the directive to "break the Four Olds"—namely, old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. Consequently, the tradition of painting door gods, a longstanding folk practice, came under fire, being labeled as a relic of feudal superstition. Rampant destruction campaigns led to the widespread obliteration of traditional door god paintings, with many being burned or torn apart. Only a fraction of these artwork survived and even these underwent significant alterations. Notably, the background color of the paintings shifted from the natural white of the paper to a symbolic red, emblematic of the fervor of the Great Cultural Revolution.

From a semiotic standpoint, color, color words, and color symbols are distinct concepts. While color symbols, composed of specific colors, differs from the metaphorical use of color words in natural language, they offer the clarity of a discourse context. This clarity removes personal interpretations of colors, establishing a unified symbolic meaning. Color not only serves as a stylish language but also mirrors societal evolution and can even hint at future societal trajectories. Post Paris Commune, there emerges a collective understanding associating the color red with the revolutionary spirit of communism. Consequently, symbols like "red flags," "red armbands," and "red scarves," became emblematic of this cause. The color red, along with its associated symbols stood as a beacon of revolution. In contrast, opposing ideologies sought to demonize this color, labeling communists as "red bandits," "red devils," and so forth. During the Cultural Revolution in China, Chairman Mao aimed to reinforce his communist ideals, especially given his concerns about urban social

stratification in a country with deep-rooted elitism. He believed that certain measures introduced after the Great Leap Forward revealed a warning commitment to the revolution among his peers. As a result, he strategically employs the tactic of unifying concepts through color symbolism. Hence, “red” became the defining hue of the revolution.

Based on the evidence presented, I posit a bold hypothesis: during the inception of the People’s Republic of China, the sole door deity was Mao Zedong, the nation’s leader and Chairman. This theory is further corroborated by an album called *Forbidden Memory: Tibet During the Cultural Revolution*. The Tibetan region, a Buddhist stronghold of China, experienced profound transformations during the Cultural Revolution. of the campaign against the "Four Olds" lends weight to my assertion. Notably, traditional religious symbols like the cow hair thin streamers, the large gilt vase, hexagonal bells, the golden Dharma wheel, and the rain Peony Xianglin groove were removed. In their place, the five-star flag was raised, and numerous Red Guards, armed with red-tasseled spears, erected a massive portrait of Mao Zedong. This photo album provides a plethora of visual evidence, chronicling the devastation of the Da Zhao Temple and the destruction of over 3,000 Buddhist temples in Tibet. The Da Zhao Temple, both religiously and culturally, stands a testament to millennia of history. Its significance is intertwined with the history of Lhasa. The extent of the temple's desecration underscores the revolution's intensity. In addition, many lamas, foreign agents, and kashas -the three major powers in Tibet – were publicly shamed, donning hats labeled "Bull Demons, Snakes and Gods". The revered Buddha image was supplanted by a portrait of Mao Zedong, symbolizing the transformation of a deeply Buddhist region into a bastion of communist ideology. Consequently, door god paintings from this era served dual purposes: they were instruments of political propaganda and also emblematic of an almost cult-like adoration of Mao.

5. Conclusion

Across three different historical epochs, the significance and purpose of door god beliefs underwent profound evolution. The door deities transitioned from being specialized figures with a sole exorcistic role to multifaceted entities bearing political relevance, cultural diversity, and commercial value. This metamorphosis underscores the dynamism and distinctiveness of local beliefs in China.

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