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# Daoist Deities and Chinese Popular Religion

Jonathan H.X. Lee

## Introduction

Daoism is a colorful, lively, multidimensional religious tradition in China. Daoism, along with Confucianism, Buddhism and Chinese folk traditions comprise what scholars of Chinese religions like to term "Chinese popular religions." Traditionally, Chinese popular religion has been a term used to characterize the religious landscape of China and that of culturally Chinese areas. It is important to understand "popular religion" as the religious life, ritual, beliefs, values, and ethics among the Chinese peoples. Hence, it could be said that Daoism is a diverse spiritual tradition embedded in an equally diverse cultural-religious landscape.

The "Dao" has generally been translated to mean "the way". Daoism has coexisted alongside Confucianism, which served as the ethical and religious basis of the institutions and arrangements of the Chinese empire. Daoism offered a range of alternatives to the Confucian way of life and point of view. However, the alternative is not mutually exclusive; for a vast majority of Chinese people, there is no separation between Daoism and Confucianism. Or rather, there is no choosing between Daoism and Confucianism. These two traditions are complementary, like *yin* and *yang*. The Chinese personalities will practice both—either at different phases of life, for various rites of passages, during holiday rituals, or as various degrees of personal taste.

Some Daoists believed that spirits pervaded all aspects of nature. Spiritually, these myriad spirits were simply many manifestations of the one Dao, which could not be represented as an image or a particular thing. As the Daoist pantheon developed, it came to mirror the imperial bureaucracy in heaven, earth and hell. The head of the heavenly bureaucracy was the Jade Emperor, who governed spirits assigned to oversee the workings of the natural world and the administration of moral justice. The gods in heaven acted like and were treated like the officials in the human world; worshipping the gods was a kind of rehearsal of attitudes toward secular governmental authorities. Conversely, the demons and ghosts of hell acted like and were treated like the bullies, outlaws, and threatening strangers in the real world; they were bribed by the people and were ritually arrested by the martial forces of the spirit officials. The common person, who after all had little influence on her/his earthly rulers, sought by

way of worshipping spirits to keep troubles at bay and ensure the blessings of health, wealth, and longevity.

The gods of Daoism were once human beings who lived in a specific time, in a particular place, but who displayed exemplary qualities while alive. Upon their death, they were deified. Gradually, legends and myths of their spiritual skills were created, recorded and spread throughout villages and townships. In this essay, I will briefly tell several hagiographies of popular Daoist deities, but this is a small sample of a rich and diverse celestial pantheon.

## Tianhou/Mazu: The Empress of Heaven, Goddess of the Sea

There are several names for the Empress of Heaven—Goddess of the Sea—who is the highest-ranking female deity in the vast and patriarchal Chinese folk pantheon. In Taiwan and Fujian, Tianhou is popularly known as Mazu/Mazupo. The goddess Tianhou/Mazu ranks second only to the Buddhist Bodhisattva Guanyin as a female object of popular devotion throughout cities and villages of China's coastal provinces. Tianhou/Mazu is also popular in the Chinese diaspora in: Brazil (Sao Paulo), Burma, France (Paris), India, Indonesia (Java), Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Penang, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, and the United States (Los Angeles, Honolulu, Houston, and San Francisco).

The cult of Tianhou/Mazu is based on the worship of a maiden named Lin Moniang ("Miss Lin, the Silent One") who is said to have lived from 960-987 C.E. on the island of Meizhou in the Minnanese Putian district of Fujian province. There are numerous myths and legends surrounding her life, but the most widely held belief largely conforms to the same outline. Miss Lin was born on the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of the third lunar month in 960 C.E. into a pious family, variously described as humble fisherfolk or as local gentry. Her father is frequently identified as a virtuous but low-ranking Confucian official/scholar. She is described as having one to four brothers, and sometimes even as many as five sisters. Her conception was made possible by the Bodhisattva Guanyin, who gave her mother a magic pill. In another version, Guanyin of the South Sea (Nanhai Guanyin) visited her mother in a dream and gave her an utpala, or blue lotus, to swallow and fourteen months later she gave birth to Lin Moniang.

From day one, Miss Lin demonstrated herself to be unique. As a baby she had been mute, not making any sounds or even a little cry during the first few months of her mortal life, which is why her family named her the "Silent One." As a young girl, she was credited with several special qualities and with a wide range of special traits and skills for someone her age. By the age of five, she was said to have been inspired by an image of Guanyin, and to have been able to recite the Guanyin jing. By age eight she was credited with being well-versed in the Confucian classics. By the age of ten, Miss Lin set her heart on the Buddha and began studying the sutras and the practice of meditation, which was unusual for someone her age. Hence, by eleven she was renowned for her knowledge of the principal Buddhist sutras. Her manners were beautifully impeccable; her demeanor graceful; she carried herself with dignity to the extent that no one dared to question her. So by the age of 13, after acquiring a noble and fair reputation as a young, virtuous girl, to no one's surprise she found favor among the religious figures of her village.

Then one day, she was accepted as an inspired disciple under the tutelage of a religious master Xuanton who frequently visited her family. The master said to Tianhou, "You, being born with a heart full of compassion and good virtue, are destined to be the savior of the mortals." Thereupon, he became her teacher in Daoist inner alchemy and practices, in addition to Buddhist meditation. Many years later, through her perseverance and sacrifice, Tianhou gained incredible spiritual achievement and insight. Casting slight variations in these accounts aside, Miss Lin was endowed with great spiritual powers that she gladly used in the service of others, out of her innate sense of compassion.

Two core events occurred in her mythic life. First, by age 16 while playing with a group of friends by an old water well, she encountered a Daoist Immortal or old water spirit. The friends immediately fled upon seeing the Immortal except Miss Lin, who knelt down and greeted the Immortal with sincere respect. Afterwards, the Immortal presented her with a bronze talisman/charm and disappeared. Soon after, Miss Lin used the charm to exorcise evil spirits, heal diseases, help others whenever possible, and perform many shamanic tasks. More importantly, from that day on, she had magical powers that enabled her spirit to travel outside her body, a special talent that she would invoke many times as a mortal before her apotheosis as an immortal goddess.

The second core incident occurred later on, wherein Miss Lin seemed to have fallen asleep or become entranced at her weaving loom. While in this state of dreaming (or trance), her spirit drifted far out to sea saving her father and brother (or brothers) in a capsized boat amidst a violent storm. In a number of versions, she was unable to save one of her brothers. In other versions, it was her father that she was unable



*Tianhou/Mazu*



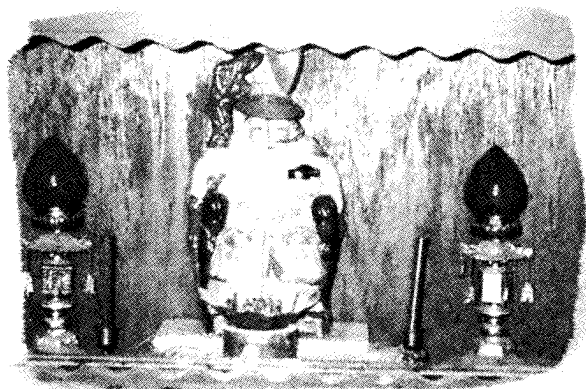
*Lu Dongbin*



*Magistrate Bao*



*Guandi*



*Tudigong*

to save, due to her mother calling her back to waking-life in the midst of her rescue. As a result, Lin Moniang was inconsolable. When the survivors subsequently returned to port with vivid recollections of having seen or heard her in the storm, her reputation as a miracle worker spread to neighboring villages along the Fujian coast.

The process by which Miss Lin transformed from mortal girl, to goddess, to the Empress of Heaven is a seemingly straightforward one. Miss Lin's dedication in helping her family and others in perilous situations, especially while at sea, coupled with her many magical powers, earned her the respect, support, and devotion of her early believers, and continues to do so.

### **Lü Dongbin: Celestial Healer**

Lü Dongbin is one of the best-known Daoist Immortals. He was born in 789 C.E. in Northern China. He was originally an official of Jiujiang, Jiangxi, holding the top imperial degree, who became a recluse in the historic Lüshan (Lu Mountain). There is a legend concerning Lü Dongbin having a dream which led him away from desiring worldly life and riches. In the dream he saw himself returning home from his journey and being promoted to a very senior office. From there he rose within a few years to the highest of post in the emperor's court. For nearly fifty years he was favored with blessings and showered with fortune. Emperors would listen to his words and heed his advice; governments quaked at his anger and favors were bestowed on his command. One day, he offended the new emperor who found delight in having a powerful man like him dismissed. Immediately all his enemies poured in on him. The emperor soon concluded that Lü Dongbin was an enemy of the state and ordered him into exile, in addition to having his entire family executed. Alone in exile in a far away land, he suddenly woke up and realized that it was all but a dream. The shock of the dream was enough to convince him that the way of power and riches was not the "true Way." Hence he began his search for immortality, with studies in inner alchemy and magic.

According to tradition, while Lü Dongbin was at Lüshan, he was given a magic sword by a fire dragon, a sword he used to perform many miracles. With his sword he is able to subdue any evil spirits, capture them and tame them. He trained under the tutelage of Zhong Liquan, the greatest of the immortals, until he gained immortality. Lü Dongbin is the ancestral patron of the pharmaceutical/drug business by reason of his ability to mix the elixir of life. An ailing devotee may visit Lü Dongbin's shrine and consult him for a remedy with the use of the canister containing a hundred bamboo sticks. The devotee will shake the canister until one stick magically falls out. S/he would note the number and deliver it to the prescription shop on the temple grounds or to a nearby herbal medicine shop to have it proscribed. Occasionally, he is popularly venerated as

a doctor of the poor. Lü Dongbin has two main key functions; mainly as a celestial healer, and as a protector from inauspicious spirits.

### Magistrate Bao

The righteous magistrate Bao (999-1062 C.E.) was a historical figure who achieved some eminence during the Song dynasty. He lived during a time of relative peace and prosperity. Bao Cheng, as a magistrate, was well-placed to line his pockets but he did not do so. He stood out as an honest man and an impartial administrator of the law. He was a magistrate in the Song capital (present day Kaifeng county). Ironically, the virtues that led to his promotions also led to his demise when he was accused of nepotism and was transferred away from the capital.

Historically magistrates were posted to a county where they were the most senior official—and therefore, in theory, held the most power. Their job was to administer their district, collect taxes, assess families, register land, maintain horses and staging posts, repair roads, decide in cases of dispute and bring criminals to justice. Although in theory the magistrate was the most powerful person in his domain, in practice, large landowners, local gangs, guilds and lords were often able to manipulate him and the law. If the magistrate was not careful he could have been broken by these interests; if he made too many demands on the local populace they would rebel; if lawlessness and partiality were too apparent, word of it would reach the governor to whom the magistrate was directly responsible. Hence, the role of magistrate required a careful balancing act at the best of times, and magistrate Bao was not immune to these challenges.

Magistrate Bao was deified because he was viewed by the state as a symbol of "control" and "pacification." By deifying magistrate Bao, the state expressed its faith in his ability to pacify the populace. And in turn the people accepting him expressed their faith in the state, and at least minimally agreed that there were benefits to be gained from serving the state. For this to be true, the possibility for justice at the hands of its agents has to exist, or at least seem to exist. Therefore, by deifying magistrate Bao, the people also expressed their faith in the possibility for justice. The first story of Baogong appeared 150 years after his death; these oral traditions were finally recorded on paper during the Ming dynasty.

### Guandi: God of Wealth, War and Literature

Guandi, prior to his deification, was a historical figure who lived from 162-220 C.E. The legendary account of his life and apotheosis is given in the *Sanguo zhi* (History of the Three Kingdoms), or in the novel *Sanguo zhi tongsu yanyi* (The Romance of the Three Kingdoms). The novel is about events and heroes at

the end of the Han dynasty when central control was weak and military and civil leaders jockeyed for power. Guandi was born in the Shansi province and lived during a period of chaos, of shifting allegiances and of military unrest when the Han dynasty fell and the country was temporarily separated into Three Kingdoms, each headed by a self-styled emperor. Sun Quan established the Kingdom of Wu in southern China; Cao Cao established the Kingdom of Wei in central China; and Liu Bei established the Kingdom of Shu in the west in Sichuan.

Guandi's story starts in 184 C.E. when prefects and governors throughout China called for volunteers to fight against the Yellow Turbans. Three men, Guan Yu, Liu Bei, and Zhang Fei, met together by accident and discovered that they were united in a common purpose; hence they decided to become blood brothers and pledged their loyalties to one another. From the very first moment, Guan Yu commanded respect and was the personification of integrity. Guan Yu, at the time of their meeting, was an outlaw—a tale that explains his status as outlaw also explains his iconographic "red face."

Guan Yu became an outlaw because he killed a local official and the official's uncle on behalf of his neighbor's daughter who was distressed because she was about to be taken in as their concubine. Guan Yu had to flee after the murder and his only way out was through the Tongguan mountain pass. Fearing that he would be recognized, he stopped by a mountain stream and washed his face; there he noticed that his face had turned red due to the mineral deposits in the water. Afterwards, he told the officers at the pass that his name was Guan, a common surname around that area.

When in 189 C.E. the reigning emperor died without leaving a direct heir, a succession of warlords ascended the throne and declared themselves emperors. The last of these was Cao Cao, the most efficient and ruthless of them all. In one year he rose from being a minister without a base or an army to a general with both. Cao Cao succeeded in getting 300,000 Yellow Turbans to surrender to him, after which he organized a disciplined army and became a power to be reckoned with.

Since Guan Yu had proven himself at arms time and again with his sword "Black Dragon" and his horse "Red Hare," his skills were wanted by Cao Cao. Eventually, Cao Cao was able to capture Guan Yu; Guan Yu agreed to submit on three conditions, the most important of which was that he be able to rejoin Liu Bei if he heard news that his blood brother was still alive. The conditions were accepted and Cao Cao attempted to compromise Guan Yu in a hundred ways. He allocated Guan Yu the same quarters as Liu Bei's wife and concubines who had also been captured, but Guan Yu deflected this trap by standing outside their door the entire night holding a candle. Cao Cao promoted Guan

Yu to the rank of "General," and presented him with many beautiful serving girls and presents of gold and silk. Cao Cao's efforts to compromise Guan Yu were unavailing. When news of Liu Bei reached Guan Yu, he left everything he had been given by Cao Cao, and taking his sisters-in-law and his own body of personal guards forced his way through six mountain passes. Key to Guan Yu's character is that throughout his entire episode with Cao Cao, he showed such a fine appreciation of his duties that even Cao Cao could not feel he had been deserted. In fact, it was Cao Cao, upon receiving Guan Yu's head, who ordered a wooden body to be fashioned to fit the head and ordered full military honors to be accorded him in burial.

The story of Guan Yu and his rise to Guandi is one of the most illustrious examples of a historical man's deification, not unlike Tianhou's. Like Tianhou, Guandi's cult was co-opted by the state; he received numerous promotions in rank and title starting in 1102, when the Song Emperor Huizong adopted him and promoted him to "Duke" in the "official" religion. In 1128 Emperor Gaozong promoted him to "Prince," and in 1594 Ming Emperor Shenzong (1572-1620), finally granted him title of "di," "god" in his eight characters title of *Xietian huguo zhongyi dadi* ("The Loyal and Grand God Who Assists Heaven and Protects the State"). In 1813 Emperor Renzong promoted him to "Military Emperor" for personally preventing his assassination.

Guandi is worshipped not for his might, but because he is the embodiment of "right action," of integrity, bravery, righteousness and loyalty—all key Confucian traits. Guandi is venerated for certain aspects of wealth, in addition to literature, which suggest his move onto Confucius' territory whereby Confucius is patron of "internal harmony" and Guandi is patron of "external harmony" in that he secures the frontiers from external threats. He functions as a protector from all forms of evils. Today Guandi is dually venerated as a god of war as well as literature and as a god of wealth. After the Taiping Rebellion had been successfully stamped out, the Qing dynasty added the title of "fuzi," "teacher" thus elevating Guandi to the ranks equal to that of Confucius. Guandi's deification began forty years after his death and reached its culmination nearly four-hundred years later.

### Huang daxian: Refugee God

Huang daxian was once a human being living in China many centuries ago. A brief "autobiography" of Huang daxian was written by a Daoist medium while in a trance. The medium wrote it down as he received it using a stick with which he drew the characters on a table. The "autobiography" relates the life-story of a man named Huang chuping. Here I will reproduce part of the story:

"I was originally a goatherd on Mount Jinhua, which lies to the north of Jinhua prefectural town in Zhejiang. To the north of Mount Jinhua there is a mountain called Mount Red Pine; I lived on this mountain. It was a place where people rarely came. The mountain side was thickly wooded, and the clouds hung heavy over it. When I was young my family were poor, and we often did not even have chaff to eat. When I was eight years old I began to herd sheep and continued until I was 15, at which time I was fortunate to receive instruction from an immortal elder. He led me into a cavern, and there prepared the medicine of immortality by nine times transforming cinnabar. Thereafter I cast aside all worldly matters. My elder brother Cho Hei searched for me for more than 40 years without success, and it was only after he met a Taoist who was skilled in divination that he could find me, and we were reunited. My elder brother asked where my sheep were, and I replied that they were [grazing] on the eastern slope of the mountain. When we went to find them, all we could see were white stones lying all over the place. I called to the stones, and they all turned back into sheep! From that time onwards my elder brother took up Taoist practices, and he is now also ranked among the host of immortals...My family name is Wong, and my given name is Cho Ping. I was born in the Jin dynasty and am a native of Danxi...Since I lived in seclusion on Mount Red Pine, I am also known as 'Immortal Master Red Pine.' However, I am not the same person as the immortal with this name who accompanied Zhang Liang on his travels. If I did not make this clear, then no one would know anything about it; thus I have set down this autobiography." [Graeme Lang and Lars Ragvald, *The Rise of a Refugee God: Hong Kong's Wong Tai Sin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3-5.

The "autobiography" is inscribed on a large plaque behind the main altar in the historic Huang daxian Temple in Hong Kong. Graeme Lang and Lars Ragvald report that their research seemed to show that Huang daxian's success as a god had occurred only in Hong Kong. Worship of Huang daxian in Guangdong before 1915 must have been very localized, or very small-scale, or very short-lived. Mr. Leung Yan Ngam was the man who brought the cult of Huang daxian to Hong Kong in 1915, from Guangdong, and established the first shrine to this new god in the colony. Six years later an organization was established to collect funds to build Huang daxian a temple. The efficacy of Huang daxian quickly spread throughout the colony. Lang and Lars suggest that Huang daxian's success in Hong Kong depended on the way groups of people reacted to plague, revolution, war, political turmoil, and massive urbanization during the period between the 1890s and the 1970s.

## Tudigong: God of the Earth

Tudigong is a tutelary deity also known as the Chinese god of agriculture; he is a local god, specific to each location, earth or soil. He is seen to carry two functions. 1) To police the "ghosts," the inauspicious spirits not cared for as ancestors. These ghosts are creatures of the soil, spiritual residues of the most material part of the human being, often represented in experience by bones uncovered in digging a foundation or plowing a field. It is Tudigong's task to protect the living from the inauspiciousness of these unhappy, wandering spirits. 2) To spy on the affairs of the people within a community that he is overseeing and report regularly to his superiors. Clarence Day in *Chinese Peasant Cults*, mentioned that all local events and proceedings must be duly reported to Tudigong: births, marriages, misfortunes, deaths, and so on.

Tudigong was originally a steward by the name of Zhang Mingde who lived during the Zhou dynasty (1122- 247 B.C.E.). He was the servant of a high official who traveled a great deal on business. Zhang Mingde's responsibility was to bring his master's daughter to him, but one time they encountered a mean snowstorm. In order to protect his master's daughter he used his own body as a shield to keep her warm and in doing so, he sacrificed his own life to save hers. News of his bravery and loyalty (two key Confucian traits) reached his master, who upon hearing it, ordered a temple to be built in his honor. The King of Zhou later had him deified as Houtu. In this myth of his origins, he is depicted as someone with clear Confucian virtues in his observance of his social role, duties and loyalty.

There is also a popular myth that introduces his wife Tudipo, or "earth granny." She was originally known as the goddess of cemeteries. Tudigong and Tudipo on a popular level are viewed as being "one." She represents the *yin* element of the partnership while he represents the *yang*. In her myth, it is said that before Tudigong was sent to earth the Jade Emperor questioned him on his plans. He answered that he wanted to help people by bringing them wealth and happiness. His wife replied by suggesting that his plans were not achievable. She said that the world needed both poor and rich people—if everyone were rich this would lead to problems.

## Conclusion

Daoist deities are important in Daoist rituals, rites, and beliefs. The vast majority of Chinese people will seek various deities at various times to ask for assistance in maintaining good health, gaining wealth, and insuring longevity. Daoist deities reflect human qualities that are ennobled as well as eccentric. Daoist deities teach the art of living and surviving by conforming to the natural way of things. They not only teach

the art of living, they assist ordinary human beings in maneuvering through the disorder of life.



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