Matricidal Magistrates and Gambling Gods: Weak States and Strong Spirits in China

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Chinese gods tempt us to think of them as staid and sober imperial bureaucrats. Most of them dress in official-looking robes, live in guarded *yamens* (official headquarters), spend their time reading formal petitions, and respond by giving stern orders to their underlings while glancing over their shoulders at their superiors. Like all proper bureaucrats, they flaunt their ranks and titles, and proudly display encomia from higher officials in front of their offices. When asking my fortune in Taiwan I was typically told to report my full name, address and birthday so the god could pull the right file.

Yet as we learn more about these exemplars of authority, we keep seeing hints of dark pasts and hidden inner lives. Gender immediately raises problems for the bureaucratic image of some important deities — several of the most popular are female. Origin stories also often leave clues of religious retreat, military prowess, self-mutilation, suicide, and other quite non-bureaucratic behaviour. Popular tales and local operas about gods reveal personal lives far from the formalities of the *yamen*. Worse still, all kinds of quite unbureaucratic spirits command worship. Many districts harbour temples to stones, foxes, turtles or dogs, to the pitiful corpses of unwed virgins or the mangled remains of battlefield victims, to inebriated priests or executed...
thieves. Hidden beneath the folds of their dragon robes, many gods harbour unbureaucratic traces of death and desire.¹

Occasionally, communities seem to abandon the bureaucratic facade completely, letting death and desire step out from their hiding places. This paper explores two such cases, one in east-central Guangxi in the 1840s, and the other in Taiwan in the 1980s.

The Xiangzhou region of Guangxi contained very few temples to officially approved bureaucrats. Their most respectable deities were three Daoist hermits, who bore little figurative or literal relationship to the officially approved hierarchy of gods. King Gan rivalled them in importance. While still alive, he had murdered his mother as a stepping stone toward official position, and was known during his lifetime for extorting large payments from the local magistrate.

The second case, from Taiwan, features the popular apotheosis of humble ghosts into powerful patrons, some of them anonymous victims of violent ends and others known criminals, who tend to favour seedy requests from gamblers, prostitutes and gangsters. As shall be seen, one such temple in the 1980s developed into a clear rival of the island's most famous and important temples to more typical gods, attracting thousands of visitors every day to offer cigarettes to seventeen dead bodies and a dog.

These two quite disparate cases force us to ask what conditions the waxing and waning of the bureaucratic image of gods, even though they only begin to suggest possible answers. At a broader level, they pose the old problem of cultural variation in China. How far do social and historical changes condition cultural variation, and to what extent do Chinese instead share a unified culture? The problem first came up sharply for studies of Chinese religion in the classic debate between Maurice Freedman and Arthur Wolf.² Freedman believed in a kind of shared Chinese cultural essence, and argued for the assumption that 'a Chinese religion exists'.³ Wolf argued the opposite: 'We should begin by reconstructing the beliefs of people who viewed the Chinese social landscape from different perspectives ... The fact that an idea was shared by people with such very different perspectives would suggest to me that it was relatively insignificant or that it was easily invested with very different meanings'.⁴ While the debate has been greatly refined in the two decades since then, the basic question remains as vexed as ever.

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¹ Many of these issues will be explored in greater depth in Shahar and Weller, Divinity and Society in China.
The material I present here moves away from one aspect of Wolf's work on religion. His simple triad of gods as bureaucrats, ancestors as kin, and ghosts as the liminal margins disguises much of the troublesome ambiguity and contradiction within the entire system. The image of gods as bureaucrats obscures many of their most interesting features. Yet, at a deeper level, cases like the two I will discuss force us closer to some position like Wolf's: that Chinese religious interpretation moves hand in hand with social change. The difference from Wolf is less in fundamental outlook than in the clearer view we now have of the tensions and pressures inherent in both Chinese religion and society.

The variability of gods suggests two lines of thought that I will begin to explore here. First, it seems reasonable to expect that bureaucrats themselves would strongly promote the metaphor of an equally bureaucratic heaven for popular consumption, and that gods might lose their official covering with a decrease in state power over religion. Second, the social relations of religious interpretation in China appear to have been so loose that a wide set of alternative possibilities lay dormant in the system even under the strongest state control, allowing an easy transition to new sorts of gods when circumstances changed. Perhaps what people shared was not the set of ruling ideas that Freedman expected, but instead a group of unruly ideas, a disorganized set of possibilities that was always ready to move off in different directions.

Matricide and Potent Gods

East-central Guangxi spawned the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom in 1850. One of the fortunate side effects of the upheaval was a fuller description of the area than we usually see for peripheral parts of China. Many Taiping sources supplement the local gazetteers, and scholars have solicited oral histories since the early twentieth century. It is now possible to outline a general picture of god worship in the Thistle Mountain region, a distant hinterland in Guiping county, in the years just before it became one of the early Taiping base areas.

The most important community temples in the entire region honoured the Three Generations (San Jie). These were three members of the Feng family, scattered over several centuries, each of whom reached the heights of Daoist perfection. The most recent beatification occurred in the seventeenth century, and the cult began soon thereafter with a temple in neighbouring Gui county. Temples to the Three Generations soon spread throughout the region. People I interviewed remembered six temples in the Thistle Mountain region alone.

The Three Generations are as close as the district came in the 1840s to the model of community bureaucrats we know from more central parts of China. They sponsored community rites of renewal (jiao) every few years, and local

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5 I also conducted interviews there in 1985.
6 See the Guiping xianzhi [Guiping County Gazetteer], 1920, juan 15:10.
elites probably controlled their temples. When one wealthy landlord created an early self-defense force in the 1840s to stem the rising tide of banditry and unrest, he placed the headquarters in the Three Generations temple at Daxuanxu, a major market town near Thistle Mountain.7

Yet as a rule Daoist saints are miracle-dealing mountain hermits, not paper-pushing bureaucrats. The Three Generations had a purely local following with no ties to officialdom either through their origins or through any imperial deification. They recall an earlier Chinese tradition where most gods were purely local saints and worthies, before the state began systematically to promote and coopt local deities in the Song Dynasty, enlisting them as allies and appendages of local government.8 While these temples functioned much like bureaucratic community temples, their roots grew firmly in local history, not national hierarchy.

In contrast, their main rival for community authority did draw on the bureaucratic metaphor, but only to undermine its legitimacy. King Gan had indeed earned high office when he was alive, and at least five local temples honoured him. His cult held jiao rites of renewal, and the local gazetteer mentions no other deities besides King Gan and the Three Generations who performed this major community function.9 In some ways King Gan’s popularity even surpassed that of the Three Generations. I was told that worship of King Gan has revived at some temples in the 1980s, but the standing Three Generations temples remain empty shells.

Both King Gan’s origins and his reported actions while still human mock any claims to bureaucratic respectability, however. A geomancer identified a family burial site that would guarantee high office for him, but only if he took advantage of it immediately. Lacking any convenient corpses, but anxious to answer when opportunity knocked, he slaughtered his mother and buried her in just the right spot. The sacrifice of filial piety to personal ambition worked perfectly, and he quickly rose to secular success as an official, and then heavenly success as a god.

King Gan’s posthumous actions as a deity further enhanced his image. The local magistrate once passed near his temple. King Gan seized a young boy, and speaking through the child’s mouth demanded that the magistrate step down from his sedan chair and worship in the temple. The magistrate


9 Xia Jingyi (compiler), Xunzhou fuzhi [Xunzhou Prefecture Gazetteer] (1897), juan 54:67.
complied, and even went along when King Gan demanded an extremely expensive set of official robes as a gift. The god emphasized his power by abusing the system whose authority and robes of office he claimed. He acted like the local strongmen who sometimes usurped state authority and ran their own little empires where the state grew weak. The local gazetteer also accused the temple of inspiring people to sing obscene songs. Instead of legitimizing government through the bureaucratic metaphor, King Gan rendered it ludicrous.

No other temples rivalled King Gan or the Three Generations in community standing, but several had major followings and none made the least pretence to bureaucratic respectability. The most infamous was the Liuwu temple, because Hong Xiuquan, the Taiping leader, had denounced it for corrupting the population. Local legend tells that a failed official degree candidate fell in love with a woman singing on Liuwu mountain. They sang together for seven days and nights. When they suddenly died on the seventh night, ants buried their bodies. Like King Gan, they would also extort worship out of people, sending anything from snake attacks to stomach aches to plague those who showed too little respect. The paired singing reflects local Zhuang tradition, and the legend clearly fits Han repugnance at what was seen as profligate sexual licence. Much like King Gan, the temple combined images of improper death, reliance on extortion to command worship, and dark hints of sex, with temple origins tied to strictly local history.

Informants also told of a Thistle Mountain temple to Grandaunt Liu (Liu Dagupuo). She was the spirit of a girl who had died young and childless, and who performed many good deeds in both life and death. Such stories are also familiar to us from other parts of China. Dead virgins pose a problem for ancestor worship — they have no descendants to worship them, and they may behave as angry ghosts if left unworshipped. Taiwanese often resolve this problem by building small girls’ temples (guniang miao) where passers-by may stop to burn a little incense. They resemble ghost temples both

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10 This description is based on the Taiping Tianri in Franz Michael (ed.), in collaboration with Chang Chung-li, The Taiping Rebellion: History and Documents (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1966-1971), pp.73-6; Hong Rengan’s confession (also collected in Michael, The Taiping Rebellion, p.1519); Theodore Hamberg’s The Visions of Hung-siu-tshuen and the Origin of the Kwang-si Insurrection (Hong Kong: China Mail, 1854), pp.36-7; Xia Jingyi (compiler), Xunzhou Fuzhi, juan 54:87); and my own interviews.


architecturally and in the nature of their spirits. The names of the dead may be known, unlike true ghosts, but they suffer similarly from the lack of a proper place on an ancestral altar. Even such a magnificent goddess as Mazu had a very similar story of origin. Unlike Mazu, however, Grandaunt Liu never enjoyed any state recognition, and maintained more of the ghostly aspects of a girls’ temple. Yet, unlike those little shrines, she had a major local following of her own. Neither exactly a ghost nor a local religious worthy, she was clearly no bureaucrat in any sense.

Temples to Pangu (sometimes called Panhu or Panwang) also dot the region, with at least five in the area around Thistle Mountain. Many Chinese know Pangu as a legendary creator of the world. Yet these local temples instead have close ties to Yao origin myths, although my informants said that members of all ethnic groups worshipped there, at least in the early twentieth century. The local Pangu tradition stems from a confusion of names with Panhu, a dog described in the *Hou Han Shu* [History of the Later Han Dynasty].\(^3\) The emperor offered his daughter in marriage to anyone who could quell a powerful bandit force. When the dog Panhu showed up one day with the bandit general’s head in his jaws, the daughter insisted on keeping the promise. The odd couple’s six sons and six daughters fathered the Yao.

This tale may contain elements of Han chauvinism, but Pangu/Panhu is quite clearly a central Yao deity. Yao informants in Guangxi told tales of Pangu helping them on legendary migrations through southern China, and showed me several ritual texts featuring Pangu. No version of Pangu resonates at all with the bureaucracy, and this one instead conjures up images of dog worship and totemic ancestors. The inevitable contact with non-Han groups in peripheral areas was one factor undermining the bureaucratic image.

One other odd story rounds out the group. The Qiansa temple, an important nearby shrine, commemorated a vagrant who had thrown cow dung into a river. The dung transformed itself into rocks, creating a passage over the river.\(^4\) Temples and stories like these were not unique to Thistle Mountain. Unlike Thistle Mountain, however, more central areas of the Chinese empire never allowed similar temples to develop on such a large scale, at least not without undergoing a transforming rectification first. In Guangxi, gods brazenly displayed their purely local loyalties (not one of the major popular deities had state recognition), their willingness to use brute force to compel worship (demanding, like King Gan, a gift of official clothes), and their close ties with death and desire — from matricidal King Gan to suicidal lovers to dead virgins.

\(^3\) Lu Simian, *Lu Simian dushi zaji* [Lu Simian’s Notes on Reading History] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1982), pp.1-7.

\(^4\) Personal communication, Zhong Wendian, Department of History, Guangxi Normal University.
Weak States

The consistent undermining of the bureaucratic metaphor at this place and time suggests that the local secular bureaucracy itself was struggling for control. Indeed, the mechanisms that might ordinarily allow the state to tighten the reins on local worship were collapsing in peripheral Guangxi in the 1840s. Thistle Mountain shared many of the characteristics of Chinese internal peripheries that sapped official power, and the events of the time had further weakened the state.

Like many comparable parts of China, east-central Guangxi had large populations of non-Han minorities. A large population of Yao maintained many of their own traditions, and practised swidden agriculture high in the mountains. An even larger group of Zhuang had been largely sinicized by the mid-nineteenth century, but still spoke Zhuang. They also retained some Zhuang traditions, like the paired singing of young couples that had inspired the story of the Liuwu temple. There were also some Cantonese-speaking Chinese (or perhaps fully sinicized Zhuang) and a large group of fairly recent Hakka immigrants. As usual in such situations, exchange among these groups accompanied their inherent tensions. Yao spirit mediums and healers, for example, had a broad influence, as did their Pangu temples. Many people were bilingual — Hakka and Zhuang people communicated in Cantonese. By the 1840s, the *pax sinica* that had kept ethnic tensions down to a simmer began to break down in the area, providing further evidence of weakening state control. Large-scale ethnic feuding became endemic during this decade, with battles sometimes involving thousands of people.

Typically peripheral, the area itself was physically cut off even from the nearest county seat. When I travelled there using modern transportation in 1985, the trip still required almost half a day, beginning with a ferry ride (there are no bridges in the area), a long drive until we abandoned the car where it became stuck in the mud, a wet walk to a rickety little ferry, and a final walk to the local settlement. In the 1840s the county seat (itself considered a backwater) had little direct control over areas like Thistle Mountain. The lack of any significant inland naval force further weakened the chances for control, as the state often ceded domination of the main water transport routes to pirates.


16 Xia Jingyi (compiler), *Xunzhou Fuzhi, juan* 54: 77.

Indeed, local gazetteers lamented a startling increase in river piracy and bandit attacks during this period. With names like Big-head Goat, Big Carp, and Wild Boar Arrow, bandit leaders led gangs numbering in the hundreds and more. One disheartened contemporary suggested that thirty to forty per cent of the province practised banditry by 1854. The sudden surge in river piracy and other banditry in the 1840s resulted indirectly from the Opium War, which had put many inland water workers out of business by opening up new ports. Many of these people put their old skills to new uses, moving from the trade routes of Guangdong to the safer bandit havens of peripheral Guangxi. At the same time, the reopening of some played-out silver mines brought another group of rootless and hardened vagrants into the area. The inexorable rise of the Taiping rebellion at the end of this decade, trampling over feeble state attempts to stop it, illustrated just how weak the state really was by then.

As these changes increasingly immobilized state control over the area in the 1840s, new local strongmen rose to exercise their own alternative authority. The first references to what local sources called ‘rice lords’ (mifan zhu) appeared at the beginning of this decade. In fact, they offered examples of the much broader pattern of Chinese peripheral strongmen that Johanna Meskill has described. Usually wealthy and well-connected to begin with, such strongmen controlled private forces of armed braves, serving as both local patrons and plunderers. They managed local institutions at the same time

18 Xia Jingyi (compiler), *Xunzhou fuzhi*, juan 55; Qiu Bin (compiler), *Pingnan xianzhi* [Pingnan County Gazetteer] (1883), juan 18; Xie Xingyao, *Taiping tianguo qianhou Guangxi de fan Qing yundong* [Anti-Qing Movements in Guangxi Around the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom] (Beijing: Renmin chubanshe, 1950).

19 Yan Zhengji, ‘Lun yuexi zei Qing bing shi shirno’ [All About the Guangxi Bandits and the Qing Army], in *Taiping tianguo lishi bowuguan* (compiler), *Taiping tianguo shiliao zongpian jianji* [Selected Historical Sources on the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom], vol. 2. (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1962 [1854]).


as they preyed on their enemies. The strongest ran private empires, controlling both armed force and wealth, and effectively replacing civil government in some places.

This coincidence of timing, where a feeble officialdom accompanied a rising panoply of unexpected gods, suggests that the bureaucratic metaphor thrives mostly where the state itself is strong and effective. The data from Guangxi on the eve of the Taiping rebellion suggest, at least as a first and tentative hypothesis, a kind of Skinnerian regional variation in gods. Core areas, with a strong state presence closely integrated with local elites, helped shape gods toward the bureaucratic model. Peripheral areas, however, with their non-Han influences, difficult transport, and alternative authorities, left the field open to gods beyond the bureaucracy. Kenneth Dean sees a similar pattern in Fujian, where cults with the closest ties to official Daoist and government circles thrived closest to administrative centres, while strictly local cults prospered in more peripheral regions.

While regional variation cannot explain all the permutations of Chinese deities, as I will show for Taiwanese ghosts below, it does begin to suggest how religious alternatives relate to social and political contexts. At the same time, however, peripheral religion in nineteenth-century Guangxi offered little true innovation. Even its strangest features existed as hints lying in the chinks of more central religious practice elsewhere in China. While some of the deities abandoned the bureaucratic metaphor (like a dung-tossing beggar or dead lovers), the most important deities carried on a hidden dialogue with the bureaucracy, as the localism of the Three Generations and the criminal/official career of King Gan grew significant only by contrast to more official deities. This was no new language of religion, incomprehensible to more central areas, but instead a very different proportioning of ideas with a broad base throughout China. The keys to the variation lay both in sources of political authority, and in an unsystematic but widely shared set of ideas.

Note that this variation is less true for the goddesses. The state never opposed goddesses in the pantheon, but happily accepted many of them, even though real women were never bureaucrats. Goddesses could still be held up as paragons of loyalty or kindness. Yet there was political pressure even on goddesses. Many female deities combine the image of a loving mother with that of a threatening wife. They may appear holding babies, but many died as virgins — a fundamental breach of filial piety. Mazu (who began as such a dead virgin) went through the cleansing of successive state deifications. Grandaunt Liu, on the other hand, was able to achieve prominence in her relatively threatening form only in a place like peripheral Guangxi in the 1840s.

Mischief and Biased Wealth

Taiwan in the 1980s was no economic periphery, nor was the state at all weak by any standard definitions. Yet the 1980s saw skyrocketing worship of another set of spirits that undermined the idea of bureaucracy. Popular religion in Taiwan had increased hand in hand with economic development, quite in contrast with the prescriptions of earlier modernization theories. Yet in the 1980s, when Taiwan stood on the verge of recognition as a fully ‘developed’ country, the fastest growing segment of popular religion involved spirits of bandits, drunkards, unknown corpses and others who offered little help to bureaucratic propriety. Hardly any place in China could be more different from 1840s Guangxi — socially, politically, and economically — but both pushed religion in directions that seem far from our usual model.

Perhaps a century ago, or perhaps much longer (no one really knows), a fishing boat washed up on the shore at the northernmost tip of Taiwan. The local people had no idea who the seventeen corpses on the boat might be, nor how the dog that accompanied them had remained alive. They followed the usual tradition when one stumbles across bodies or unknown bones in Taiwan: they buried the men in a common grave and erected a tiny shrine so that people might make occasional offerings to these otherwise unworshipped and pitiful spirits. The only odd bit of the story concerned the dog, whose unbreakable loyalty to his masters caused him to leap into the grave along with the bodies, to be buried alive by the villagers. The dog was the eighteenth of what the local people politely (and euphemistically) named the Eighteen Lords (Shiba Wanggong).

The little shrine followed the fate of most such ghost temples, gradually deteriorating over the years, and receiving only occasional worship. By the 1960s, it was little more than a vague mound with a gravestone and an incense pot, occasionally worshipped by a bored soldier standing coastal sentry duty. A decade later, however, its transformation commenced. Taiwan began to build its first nuclear power plant not far away, and the little grave was slated for destruction as the bulldozers strengthened the cliffs along the shore. When a number of accidents began occurring on the site, some of the workers began to worry about ghosts. Their fears were confirmed one day when a backhoe, poised to tear up the Eighteen Lords’ grave, suddenly froze and defeated all attempts at repair. At this point, workers and local inhabitants mobilized in


defense of the shrine. The government finally gave in, agreeing to ‘respect local customs’ and to recreate the shrine at the new, higher ground level.

Not only had the previously forgotten shrine brought the state itself to do its bidding, it had done so in front of an audience of workers from all over Taiwan. Community and worker pressure pushed planners to make the newly rebuilt temple larger and fancier than any ghost temple previously built in Taiwan. Within a few years it rivalled the island’s most important god temples in popularity, attracting thousands of people every night, and thoroughly tying up traffic on the coastal road for hours. While ghosts have been transformed into gods by worshippers in the past, these eighteen continued to celebrate their ghostliness on a grander scale than ever before, often brazenly inverting standard bureaucratic god practice.28

Even though half of the new temple had god images of the Eighteen Lords, the main centre of worship remained the grave mound and two larger-than-life bronze statues of the dog that flanked it. The dogs themselves attracted most attention, as members of the invariably raucous crowd would stroke them and empower amulets by rubbing them over the dogs. Worship peaked in the small hours of the morning (the yin, ghostly time) instead of the daylight of the yang gods. Even more unusual, the original grave had been preserved as an underground room, directly below the replica with its dog statues. Those who knew about the basement room would go down there to experience the Eighteen Lords’ power even more strongly. The necessities of the temple’s construction at a higher ground level meant that the original grave and its incense pot now pushed up directly against a subterranean wall, leaving little room for worshippers to stand or kneel. To top it off, people would offer a burning cigarette rather than sticks of incense in the pot. Worshipping underground and late at night, fondling a bronze dog, and offering cigarettes in lieu of incense, the cult of the Eighteen Lords turned bureaucratic god worship on its head.

Ghosts will do anything in exchange for worship — unlike proper bureaucratic deities, who will not deal with improper requests. Ghost shrines have the reputation of pandering especially to those who cannot go to the official-like gods, like gangsters, gamblers and prostitutes. The Eighteen Lords played up to this reputation. So many people went that they could not all have been underworld figures, but clearly people found a thrill in going to a temple that claimed this element of disreputability and danger. Visitors are always warned about pickpockets, who frequent the place both to worship and to ply their trade in the thick crowds. The very carnival atmosphere at this temple plays up the contrast to other gods; there are even real carnival attractions on the way from the parking lot to the temple.

Relations with the Eighteen Lords have resembled contracts with mobsters more than the respectful petitions to proper gods. The Eighteen

Lords would do anything at all, but punishment for not paying them was quick and dire. Proper gods, on the other hand, respond out of goodness to appropriate requests (although they are happy to accept appropriate gifts in return). Many of the requests to the Eighteen Lords concerned profit (to which even the stuffiest gods have no objection in China), but especially profit from gambling on an illegal lottery, or a killing from the stock-market craze that swept Taiwan in those years, or from less than strictly respectable business practices.

This temple was the largest and most famous of its kind, but it was far from unique. Several other ghost temples also achieved some prominence at roughly the same time, and a great many saw increased worship because of their success at stock-market and gambling advice. At least three tombs to typically ghostly violent deaths became quite important. The closest to respectability was Li Yong, a general killed fighting aborigines in the nineteenth century. More typical, during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan, was the thief Liao Tianding, a sort of Robin Hood. He was murdered in his sleep by a brother-in-law who wanted the reward on his head. A similar shrine honours a mainland soldier who turned to bank robbery, supposedly to support a friend’s child. He was shot by firing squad. While each of these has a generous side that has no part in the story of the Eighteen Lords (whose respectable bit was instead the loyalty of the dog), each died a ghostly death, thrived beyond official control, and maintained a very ghostly flexibility about honouring all kinds of requests.

The same decade also brought a sudden popularity to a handful of gods — invariably those who were least bureaucratic and most mischievous. As I was paying my bill at a restaurant one evening, the small altar near the cash register (typical of many Taiwanese businesses) caught my attention. An image of the Cloth-Bag Buddha (Budai Heshang) sat in the middle — the fat and jolly character with a big bag of goodies slung over his shoulder, all ready to hand out to people. He appears widely in Taiwan, but more as a decoration than an important object of worship. While some people say he was an incarnation of the future Buddha, Maitreya, they treat him more like Santa Claus. This image, however, had a burning cigarette hanging from his lips, strongly reminiscent of those cigarettes for the Eighteen Lords. Ceramic dog images bought at the Eighteen Lords temple also get burning cigarettes stuck in their mouths.

The Cloth-Bag Buddha and his sack of presents readily symbolizes the idea of easy wealth that falls into one’s lap. The woman who took my money in the restaurant described him as ‘the God of Biased Wealth’ (Piancai Shen), an innovative term to my knowledge, contrasting with the well-known ‘God of Wealth’ (Cai Shen). ‘Biased wealth’ is a technical term in Chinese fortune-telling, which refers to unearned gains. The Cloth-Bag Buddha just hands out wealth willy-nilly, while the Eighteen Lords demand a contractual payment. Yet both celebrate sources of wealth outside any standard channels — and worship of them is linked by that irregular ritual of burning cigarettes. Not
coincidentally, at the Eighteen Lords temple the next most popular sales items after the ceramic dogs are images of the Cloth-Bag Buddha.

More standard gods have not been left out of the resurgence of popular religion in Taiwan, but a handful stand out from the rest for their rapid growth. In each case, the deity undermines the bureaucratic metaphor. The most important beneficiaries have been Ji Gong (the wine-besotted monk), Taizi Ye (Nuozha, the patricidal child), and Sun Wukong (popularized in the West as the mischievous Monkey). Officially registered Ji Gong temples, for example, increased in Taiwan from twelve to one hundred and twenty between 1981 and 1986. It is safe to assume that a great many more remain unregistered. Like the Eighteen Lords and other ghostly temples, and like the God of Biased Wealth, these deities thrived in the 1980s because they would not be held to the proper moralities of the bureaucratic metaphor.

This entire set of unbureaucratic deities happily gave stock-market tips, illegal lottery advice, and help in the shadier sides of the capitalist market. From executed bank robbers to unidentified corpses to a monk who mocks his own (already unbureaucratic) discipline, this group stands out for its challenge to bureaucratic order. Most of them are eccentrically individualistic, and none of them have the associations with community morality that typifies most gods in the standard metaphor. These particular gods’ places of worship rarely functioned as community temples, and ghosts never played a role as organizers of communities. Their followers constituted neither congregation nor community, as the deities themselves stood idiosyncratically independent from organized lines of power.

Gambling and Modernity

Like east-central Guangxi in the 1840s, Taiwan in the 1980s lavished its worship on a collection of quirky and ominous characters, at least in comparison with upright bureaucrats. The deteriorating state in Guangxi provided a pivot for an explanation there, but Taiwan’s political system certainly showed no similar signs of weakness (unless one somehow takes increasing democracy for weakness). The explanation instead lies in the specific nature of Taiwan’s economy during that decade, and in the inability of a modernizing government to maintain its influence over religion.

This embodiment of religious individualism in Taiwan — where community gods lost ground to deities with no community basis, serving the selfish ends of isolated individuals — grew at exactly the same time as Taiwan’s small-enterprise-based capitalism has thrived. The relationship of


30 Ibid.
the individual to the marketplace in capitalism, with its associated breakdown of communal ties, has been recognized since Marx’s writings on alienation and Durkheim’s on anomie. The situation grew particularly intense in Taiwan in the 1980s, when many people felt that rising labour costs and a changing world market threatened the small, labour-intensive enterprises on which they had built their wealth. While they recognized the threat, they saw no plausible alternative kinds of investment. The result was a huge increase in unproductive investment — the booming illegal lottery, an exploding stock-market, and skyrocketing land prices. The boom in unearned wealth finally went bust in 1990, when the stock-market lost seventy-five per cent of its value.

For much of the 1980s, profit appeared less as a product of hard work and smart decisions, and more as a result of luck, greed and insider connections. At the same time, the crisis of economic confidence accentuated the common tooth-and-claw image of the economy as one side of petty entrepreneurial competition. With small business under tight pressure, and with the stock-market and gambling dens booming, success appeared increasingly as the result of self-serving utilitarianism rather than community morality. That is, it fit desperate ghosts and idiosyncratic gods more than moralizing bureaucrats. These capricious deities matched the capricious nature of profit itself. What had been an odd, weak undercurrent in popular religion had a stronger pull than the more standard gods in the unusual conditions of that one decade.

China had long had a developed commodity economy and clear ideas about individual competition, along with the more standard Confucian ideas of hierarchy and order. Yet a strong state and traditional elite apparently held the religious side of the market economy in check, at least in the more central parts of China. It burst its bonds in modern Taiwan because the state had given up almost all control over religious interpretation, although it was in no sense politically weak like the state in Guangxi a century earlier. From the founding of the Republic of China in 1911, its leaders had been dedicated modernizers, as much in the cultural as the economic sense. Their resulting dedication to ‘rationality’ over ‘superstition’, along with their Western-style guarantees of religious freedom, resulted in the sanctioning of organized textual traditions as religion, while most popular practice was damned as superstition, and discouraged.31

The official approval of religious freedom but discouragement of ‘irrational’ ideas led to numerous halting and ineffectual attempts at religious control after the Nationalist Party regained the island from Japan.32 None of

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this was systematic, however, and the real increase of civil liberties in the 1980s undercut all attempts at religious control. By renouncing a religion of its own and embracing Weberian rational bureaucratic principles, a modernizing state like Taiwan finds it very difficult even to attempt to influence religious interpretation. Unwilling to actively discourage popular religion by the 1980s, its only real option was to ignore popular beliefs. While state and elite control over religion had been weak in late imperial times, it collapsed completely in modern Taiwan, and the absence allowed a new apportioning of religious practice. By basing its legitimacy on bureaucratic rationality, the state had undermined its claims about ultimate values, leaving a void that religion has stepped in to fill. In a very limited but important sense, then, Taiwan’s state in the 1980s was just as weak as Guangxi’s in the 1840s — for both had lost any significant control over popular religious practice.

Conclusions

These two cases of how unusual deities rivalled and even overshadowed their staid and bureaucratic godly colleagues occurred in two places that were as different as could be and still be Chinese. Guangxi in the 1840s was a peripheral frontier with a collapsing social and political order, about to be torn apart by one of the largest rebellions in history. Taiwan in the 1980s was a political centre with a thriving modern economy. Yet both places embraced spirits of questionable Confucian morality, known more for suspect deaths, sex, drunkenness and gambling than for dedication to bureaucratic order. Could the same processes really have been at work in both places?

Negotiating Power: Neither Guangxi nor Taiwan invented new kinds of gods. Odd as they were in relation to the standard bureaucratic metaphor, they still would have had some familiarity to Chinese anywhere. China, after all, always had competing and complex social, economic and political worlds — from the undercurrents of competition and jealousy in the ideally harmonious family, to the political and even military control of local elites beneath the state, to markets and individual profit motives in a system that officially frowned on merchants. Added to the absence of effective, unified control over religious interpretation, it should be no surprise that an undercurrent flowed through Chinese religion everywhere. From seductive fox fairies to patricidal sons, a hint of desire unbound lay in the cracks of a religion that claimed to worship upright officials.

The collapse of political control over religion in both Guangxi and Taiwan brought this hidden side of religion strongly to the surface. The Guangxi case suggested that a Skinnerian regionalization of China might also map variations in the power of the bureaucratic metaphor, where peripheral areas encourage gods beyond the bureaucracy. Adding the Taiwan case, however, allows us to focus more clearly on just one aspect of regional variation — the nature of political control. Nineteenth-century Guangxi resembled modern Taiwan only in the frailty of state control over religion, and
not in other major features of regional variation like geographic marginality or economic system. Such political weakness may develop more easily on peripheries, but the periphery is only one form of weakness. Peripheries themselves will vary historically along these lines, with the 1840s marking a low point for Guangxi. At the same time, Taiwan shows how a very comparable weakness can develop from quite different roots — the specific politics of modernity in a strong state rather than the strongman politics of a collapsed state.

Not surprisingly, these two examples suggest that the bureaucratic metaphor dominates hidden desires especially where the bureaucracy itself dominates alternative social and political arrangements. Weak though state and local elite control over religion was in China, it did manage to keep alternative gods on the sidelines when it held the upper hand. Where other forms of power began to take over, from local strongmen to a fickle market, the mechanisms of attempted control faltered. In short, these cases clearly suggest that gods beyond the bureaucracy thrived, especially where the state began to lose the struggle for overarching control.

The situation is more complex than just bureaucratic versus unbureaucratic gods. The two cases I have discussed, after all, were very different from each other, although neither featured bureaucratic gods. Guangxi developed its own versions of community cults to major gods, preferring hermits and a matricidal rogue to capture the usual role of bureaucrats. Even the Taiping Christian God who showed up in the 1840s was another unbureaucratic god who oversaw a communitarian congregation. In Taiwan, on the other hand, standard community gods held their own, while the newly popular deities catered entirely to individual followers with no claims to community. Guangxi saw an unbureaucratic self-definition of community, while Taiwan played up idiosyncratic gods and hungry ghosts who never defined communities. In Guangxi, the state had collapsed and left the field open for new community identities. In Taiwan, however, state power in communities was as strong as ever, but a kind of capricious capitalism had thrived. Ghosts and pariah gods fit neatly with the idea of an amoral individualism that saw greed held back only by the threat of enforcers to carry out contracts. The particular nature of weak state control over religion thus relates closely to just how gods move beyond the bureaucracy, leading to very different patterns in Guangxi and Taiwan.

Do any of these alternatives to the metaphor of gods as bureaucrats constitute a kind of counter-hegemony? While the apparently systematic rejection of bureaucracy makes the claim tempting, neither case allows a simple affirmative answer. Guangxi not only retained the community structure of standard god temples, but many of its deities derived their significance by way of contrast with bureaucrats, thus relying on the system they questioned. King Gan certainly undermined the bureaucracy; yet he also drew his power from the bureaucracy — gaining legitimacy both by humiliating a real official and by working as an official himself. In Taiwan, the bureaucratic gods
continue to thrive; the explosion of interest in gods beyond the bureaucracy supplements the system without fundamentally changing it.

Yet the very existence of these alternatives at least provides the kernel of an entirely new view of the world. Taiping ideas, which were certainly radical by Chinese standards (monotheism, egalitarian economics, and even a ban on sexual intercourse), thrived in the same fertile fields as King Gan. By redefining community values, Guangxi planted the seeds of possible alternatives. Taiwan’s innovations, however, involved individuals each out for their own gain, and it is much harder to see how an organized movement for change might grow out of alienated ghosts. Nor does any radical change in religion seem likely unless bureaucratic gods themselves begin to disappear. These religious variants thus not only reflect political and economic changes; the religious form itself also shapes political potentials.

Unruly Ideas: Religion defines values and shapes identity. As a result, it forms a natural part of the negotiation of power and self, from the level of the family to the nation as a whole. Religious variation correlates with broader social variation because religion actively shapes the definition of the world, not because it simply reflects society in a naive Durkheimian way.

Yet not all religions appear to permit variation to the same degree as Chinese religion. The key to Chinese religion’s great flexibility is the lack of a powerfully unified orthodoxy. Had China ever succeeded in rooting out all alternatives to the bureaucratic metaphor, it would have ended up with a powerful religious tool of the state so tied to the imperial system that a flexible response to the changing political conditions of the twentieth century would have been difficult. In great contrast to the Western traditions, Chinese memorized no catechisms and made no confessions; most temples had no priests, and most priests had no congregations. Much of the mechanism of interpretive control in Christianity, Judaism or Islam was absent in China. The meaning of a complex ritual or of a god would always be up for grabs.

Even the storytellers, opera troupes and popular novels that carried much information about the gods were wide open to variant performances and readings. Stories about a god in a temple, for example, might take a very different line from stories about the same god in a vernacular novel like Fengshen Yanyi. Such media, in conjunction with ritual performance and local stories, constituted the primary means for disseminating the complex and contradictory images of gods, and for promoting specific local variants.

None of these complexities prevented people from trying to push religious interpretation in certain directions. But the amorphous control over meaning did make it nearly impossible for them to succeed completely. The late imperial state made the most obvious attempts to push its own versions of things. Yet the state cult itself had little effect beyond the officials who ran it, and state cooptation of deities by granting them official rank still left plenty of
room for alternative interpretations on the ground. The state apparently succeeded in promoting a bureaucratic understanding of gods where it was strong, but even then alternative interpretations waited in the shadows.

The result for China was the lack of either a shared orthodoxy or a shared set of structuralist ruling ideas. Yet China also clearly had a unified religion, in the sense that variations drew on a set of common themes. The bureaucratic metaphor did not dominate at all times or in all places, but everyone recognized it. The set of alternatives, contradictions and inconsistencies also spread widely. Dead virgins, parent killers and unidentified corpses occur over and over, and bring up contradictions in real family and political relationships that the metaphor of gods as bureaucrats covers up. The very unruly nature of this set of ideas has given Chinese religion the power to adjust to radically new kinds of social conditions. In contrast to the old state cult, which naturally died with the old state, change without transformation has been easy for popular religion largely because gods beyond the bureaucracy kept the doors open.

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