

Cultural Interpretation of the Phenomenon of Abandoned God Statues in Quanzhou City

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore the stories behind wandering deities and the dilemmas they face in modern society. The study begins with the phenomenon of abandoned deities in families in Quanzhou City, and analyzes in depth the reasons behind them, their rituals, and the changes in the relationship between humans and gods within the urban space. By observing and analyzing these abandoned deities, the paper attempts to reveal the interactions between society and religion, as well as the profound changes in people's beliefs and spiritual pursuits. The study not only focuses on the academic depth, but also emphasizes its practical significance for the protection and inheritance of religious beliefs and cultural traditions. It is hoped that through the study of "wandering gods", intercultural understanding and dialog will be promoted, social justice and human rights issues will be emphasized, and a new home will be found for these wandering gods, so that they can be reintegrated into the bloodline of the city with a new identity.

Keywords

Minnan beliefs; wandering gods; resigning gods; treatment.

1. Introduction

In Quanzhou, a city with a long history, gods are everywhere, either enshrined in temples or housed in stores, guarding every corner of the city. However, there are some "wandering gods" - they stand alone under the neighborhood fence, unattended, without worship, as if abandoned by modern society. These "wandering gods" have not only aroused curiosity about the phenomenon of urban religion, but also touched off a deeper reflection on the complex relationship between faith, culture and social change.

As the saying goes, "it is easy to invite a god, but difficult to send him away". While existing studies of household gods in the academic world have focused on the activities of "inviting" and "sending" gods, this paper focuses on providing a new dwelling place for "wandering gods" to "live" in the city with a new identity. Specifically, this paper takes Quanzhou City in Fujian Province as a field site, focuses on the phenomenon, causes and rituals of family abandonment of idols, and on this basis discusses the relationship between humans and gods in the urban space, probing into the reasons for the emergence of the "wandering gods" and proposing corresponding solutions.

These studies can help us better understand and protect the religious beliefs and cultural traditions of a particular community or region, reveal the interactions between society and religion, explore people's pursuit of religion, beliefs and spirituality, promote intercultural understanding and dialog, and focus on social justice and human rights issues.

2. Concept and Definition of Wandering Gods

Wandering deities refer to deities that do not have a fixed temple or place of worship; they may be placed on street corners or in public places rather than being worshipped in specific temples or shrines. These left-behind deities have a nature similar to that of “wandering deities”.

They may have lost their original temple or place of worship and been left in public spaces or abandoned villages. They are not continuously worshipped and managed, and become wandering gods. Despite their abandonment, these deities still have some religious and cultural significance. They may represent part of local history, beliefs and cultural traditions and are considered valuable cultural heritage. Some people may still give some respect and offerings to these deities when appropriate, but they do not have a fixed temple or monastery for people to come and worship.

3. Types of Developmental Context of Folk Beliefs in Southern Fujian

3.1. Developmental Background

Scholars believe that the earliest ethnic group in Fujian is the Min. During the Warring States period, the Yue ethnic group from the Zhejiang region came south to central Fujian and merged with the Min ethnic group to form the Min-Yue ethnic group. The harsh natural environment of the Min-Yue region gave birth to totem worship, such as in order to scare away water monsters, the Min-Yue people will be the body of the snake pattern, resulting in the phenomenon of snake totem worship, which is in fact the ancient sorcery “imitation art”. In the early years of the Eastern Han Dynasty, Taoism immortal thought was introduced into Fujian, and Min Yue witchcraft culture, the formation of Min Yue witch now beliefs, Min Yue ancestor worship culture has had a great impact on the Min Yue people. Another more representative example is the Mazu faith in southern Fujian. After the Jin Yongjia Rebellion, the Han people moved south to southern Fujian input abundant labor force at the same time, but also brought such as Wenchang Temple, Chenghuang Temple, Guandi Temple, seven temples and other religious buildings and corresponding folk beliefs, folk culture, greatly enriched the southern Fujian folk beliefs in the content and form [1].

During the Song and Yuan dynasties, Quanzhou's overseas commerce flourished, and Quanzhou played an important role in the exchange and collision of Eastern and Western civilizations. Extraterritorial religions such as Catholicism, Christianity, and Islam were imported into Minnan from overseas with a steady stream of missionaries. These foreign religious cultures and the inherent beliefs of witchcraft and traditional Chinese Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist beliefs and cultures in the Fujian area merged and discarded each other, and after localization, they gave rise to new forms of cultural expression and religious branches [2].

At the end of the Ming and beginning of the Qing dynasties, there was a large-scale migration of people from southern Fujian to Taiwan. Generally speaking, it seems that the folk beliefs in Taiwan are highly homologous to those in southern Fujian, and some folk beliefs in Taiwan are almost copies and replicas of those in southern Fujian, such as Mazu and other “gods and goddesses of southern Fujian” and Minnan-style palaces and temples, which are uncountable, and it can even be said that the gods and goddesses of southern Fujian have been duplicated and replicated in Taiwan. Quanzhou is an important starting point of the “Maritime Silk Road”, and the unprecedented development of overseas trade in Quanzhou has resulted in a large number of coastal residents going abroad to do business and settle down. Quanzhou is an important city for the wide spread of Minnan faith and culture overseas.

3.2. Types and Characteristics

In the Quanzhou City area, there are a variety of gods that people worship in their homes, often varying according to the beliefs and traditions of individuals and families. First of all, there are the protective deities of each area. From the Tang and Song dynasties to the end of the Qing Dynasty, the urban area of Quanzhou has gradually evolved from the old system of the former city halls and the former dynasty, to the old system of the compartmentalized houses, into the four corners of the thirty-six pavements and ninety-four realms (from the Ming Dynasty onwards, the city was the realm of the pavements, and the townships outside of the city were set up with the map.) Realm as a unit of the realm of the Palace enshrines each "community" of the respective protection of the God (store within the city realm God, outside the city to block the realm of the God) a realm of the Lord Gong, realm of the Lord of the identity of the different Taoist deities and also princes and generals, Quanzhou custom in the Buddha's birthday, Pudu is also related to this. "This place was known as the Buddha's Kingdom in ancient times, and the streets are full of saints" was written by Wang Shouren, and is from 'The Record of Transmission'. It means that this place was originally known as the Buddha's Kingdom, and the streets were full of saints. According to legend, when the Kaiyuan Temple was in its heyday, there were thousands of people, and the great monks from home and abroad had gathered here, so Quanzhou was known as the "Buddhist Kingdom of Quannan".

In addition to the protection deities of each "community" that are enshrined on a territory basis, there are other deities that are commonly enshrined at home in the Quanzhou area:

(1) Family God: Families usually enshrine a family god, which represents the guardian deity of the family. This may be the God of Land, the God of Wealth, the Goddess of Mercy, or the Goddess of Mercy, Guanyin, etc., chosen according to the family's beliefs and traditions. The Goddess of Mercy is a very common object of faith in Quanzhou, and may be enshrined in the family for blessing and compassion; the God of Land is considered to be the guardian deity of the land, and is especially honored in rural areas, and many families will enshrine the God of Land in their homes for a good harvest and peace of the land; the God of Fortune is considered to be a symbol of wealth and good fortune, and many families enshrine the God of Fortune in their homes in the hope of bringing wealth and prosperity.

(2) Ancestor's Spirit Seat: Many families have an ancestor's spirit seat in their home, where they enshrine their ancestor's tablets or photos to express their respect and prayers for their ancestors.

(3) Emperor Wenchang: Emperor Wenchang is the god of academics and culture. Some families make offerings to Emperor Wenchang in the hope that their children and grandchildren will achieve academic success.

(4) Other deities: Depending on personal and family beliefs, other deities may also be worshipped, such as Guan Di, Mazu, and Wu Fu Xing Jun.

4. Reasons for the Emergence of "Wandering Deities"

After visiting and investigating, we found that the root cause of this phenomenon is that believers lack the proper rituals of resignation due to some subjective or objective factors. When the functions of the gods are not clear, or when they are not willing to "show their spirit" and reveal their divine intentions, most of these idols are abandoned on the streets, in other temples or in the middle of nowhere, or even have their limbs chopped off and their five senses destroyed, which is to say, they become what we see as "abandoned gods! That is to say, they have become the "abandoned gods" that we see.

Among these deities, there are still Guanyin Bodhisattva, Guan Sheng, and Di Jun, who are considered to be higher-ranking deities, so there is also the possibility that the statues were

abandoned due to other factors, such as relocation, breakage and replacement, objections from the landlord, or a change in the original worshipper's clan, and so on. In the process of social change and population migration, certain deities may be abandoned or carried to new areas, e.g., the demolition of Baisha Village has resulted in many aborigines not being able to reasonably relocate their original deities. This may result in deities becoming "wandering deities" in the old environment; in the process of religious spread and integration, there may be interaction and integration between different religious beliefs and deities. Certain deities may be transferred from one religious system to another, or new belief practices may be formed in the process of fusion, resulting in "wandering deities".

5. Process of Inviting Deities

5.1. Ceremony of Inviting the Gods

The first step is for the store to buy the desired deity and invite it back from the temple, and then the store is responsible for opening the light, or chooses to open the light in the temple, or entrusts the temple to worship for a period of time. After the ceremony, the store owner or the temple's monks and priests go to the home of the party to look at the feng shui and the location of the site, and give advice on how to place it. Finally, during the journey to the home, the deity should be wrapped in a red cloth and cover his eyes, and he should hold the deity on the way and not land on the ground, and if necessary, he needs to buy a bus ticket or air ticket for him.

5.2. Farewell Ceremony

In exploring how to say goodbye to the idols of God and Buddha in an appropriate manner, we faced certain challenges. We found few precise guidelines to follow. It seems that people in ancient times rarely experienced a separation between human beings and their gods, and therefore it is difficult to obtain clear guidance even when seeking answers from the gods and Buddhas themselves. Unlike the joyous ceremony of "inviting the gods", the ceremony of "sending off the gods" should be as unknown as possible, and on the whole should be characterized by concealment and obscurity, so as to avoid arousing undesirable social opinions.[3]

In traditional resignation ceremonies, it is usually necessary to find a suitable Buddhist temple, Taoist temple or Buddhist store and have the appropriate rituals performed by professionals. Depending on the deity, the specifics of the ceremony may vary. The wish of the devotees is to invite these "wandering deities" back to the heavenly realm through a specific ceremony of abdication, i.e., to recall the deities attached to the idols to the heavenly realm through the ceremony.

The specific steps of the ceremony are as follows: first, a medium from the temple is asked to draw a talisman; then, the statue of the deity in distress is placed on a table and fruits and cookies are prepared; then, a prayer is recited: "Please ask the Jigong Living Buddha (or the ascended God of Fudoshin) to be the master of the gods and invite them to return to Heaven, and return to Heaven to deliver the decree as soon as possible!" At the same time, the talisman is wrapped around the incense burner. A god who has gone through the process of "handing over the decree" symbolizes that he has already detached himself from the idol and returned to the Heavenly Court. At this point, the wooden idol can be cremated in the fireplace, and its ashes are then washed away by the sea. As for the porcelain idols, they are shattered after the resignation ceremony and buried in the earth, allowing time to make them one with the earth. This process marks the final destination of these fallen idols.

6. Common Ways in Which The Family Resigns from The Gods

This paper is based on field interviews to categorize the way people deal with their gods after they no longer make offerings, and substitutes valuation because it is more difficult to collect comprehensive data due to the secretive nature of their behavior.

When a family or individual no longer wishes to worship certain deities, the way of handling these deities can vary according to the differences in personal beliefs and traditions in order to avoid causing offense or disrespect to the beliefs and culture. The following are some common ways of dealing with them:

1. Transfer or donation: If one no longer wishes to worship certain deities, one may choose to transfer them to other people or families with similar beliefs, or donate them to temples or religious institutions so that others may continue to worship them.
2. Handing over to religious institutions: Many religious institutions accept deities that people no longer wish to worship, and they will manage and dispose of them properly. You can contact your local temple, church, or other religious institution and ask if they accept these deities.
3. Proper storage: If you do not wish to transfer or donate them, you may choose to properly store the items of these deities, such as placing them in a specific area or box and making sure that they are kept clean and honored.
4. Enshrinement or temple: Some families may choose to place these deities in temples or religious institutions so that they can be worshipped and consecrated by professional administrators.
5. Follow traditional rituals: Some faith traditions may prescribe specific rituals to deal with deities that are no longer being worshipped. For example, a ceremony of resignation from the deity may be performed to signify the end of the worship relationship.
6. Consult religious leaders or elders: In case of confusion or doubt, consult local religious leaders, elders or members of the faith community for advice and counsel.

It is important to respect personal beliefs and traditions, and to handle deities that are no longer worshipped with respect and reverence. Depending on the circumstances, refer to the local religious and cultural context to ensure apt handling.

7. Disposal

7.1. Common treatments

When people no longer wish to worship certain deities, the way in which they are properly disposed of may vary depending on personal beliefs and cultural traditions. Some people will choose to dispose of these deities properly to avoid causing offense or disrespect to their faith and culture. Here are some common ways of handling them:

Organize Ceremonies: Some people will organize specific ceremonies to properly dispose of deities that are no longer being worshipped. This may include a thanksgiving offering, a departure ceremony, or other appropriate rituals to honor the deity and end the offering relationship.

Burial or interment: Depending on specific beliefs and traditions, sometimes people choose to have a deity that is no longer being worshiped properly buried or interred. This may include burying them in a specific place or placing them in a suitable site such as a cemetery or public temple.

It is important to handle deities that are no longer being worshipped with respect and reverence in accordance with personal beliefs and cultural traditions.

7.2. Other treatments

Historical and cultural legacy: Treat these deities as if they were left over from historical temples or religious sites. They may have been centers of faith for local residents in the past, but over time the temples may have been abandoned or remodeled, but the objects of the deities remain, and we make small shrines based on their locality to appear on the city streets with a new, homed image.

Community commemoration and cultural significance: Sometimes objects of the gods are kept in public places or villages as part of the community's commemoration and cultural heritage. They may represent past history and beliefs, and can be regarded as valuable cultural assets. We can gather these wandering deities into a public place, build community public spaces and public sculptures with memorial significance, and intervene in the creation of public environmental space by means of design. To study the extent and manner of community protection, maintenance and participation in the wandering gods, and the impact of such participation on community cohesion and cultural inheritance.

Lack of proper disposal: Sometimes, families or individuals no longer worship their gods, but lack the proper disposal methods or knowledge, resulting in the objects of the gods being left behind. This may be due to a lack of relevant cultural education or counseling, or because of a lack of appropriate institutions to receive these deities and provide appropriate places and institutions to guide people in the proper handling of the left behind deities. For example, in the north of Taiwan there is the Shengwu Palace, and in the south there is the Retreating Deity Deity Handling and the Levitation Center for fallen deities and non-worshipping deities.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, the phenomenon of wandering deities in and around Quanzhou City, Fujian Province, has been explored, a unique cultural phenomenon that not only reveals the diversity of local religious beliefs, but also reflects the impact of social change on traditional belief practices. Through the combing of historical documents and fieldwork, we found that the creation of wandering deities is related to a variety of factors, including ethnic integration, the combination of Taoism and witchcraft cultures, and the import of foreign religious cultures.

We study the specific steps of the resignation ceremony, a ritual that not only honors the gods but also passes on traditional culture. This paper also explores the homecoming of wandering deities in modern society, including the organization of ceremonies, burial or interment, and preservation as historical and cultural legacies. These practices reflect people's respect for the gods and the importance they attach to their cultural heritage. At the same time, we also point out the challenges faced in dealing with wandering deities, including the lack of relevant knowledge and appropriate ways of handling them.

Overall, the phenomenon of wandering deities is not only a manifestation of religious beliefs, but also a testimony of cultural heritage and social change. By studying this phenomenon, we have not only enhanced our understanding of religious culture in the Quanzhou area, but also provided ideas and suggestions for protecting and passing on this valuable cultural heritage.

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