Superscribing Symbols:
The Myth of Guandi, Chinese God of War

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Historical studies of how myths and symbols change have only recently begun to emerge. They tend to stress the layered and historically stratified nature of myths, each stratum reflecting the concerns of an epoch or a particular group. Marina Warner (1982) has shown how the image of Joan of Arc has been differently interpreted by Nazis, nationalists, and feminists, among many others, and Jacques Le Goff (1980) has demonstrated how ecclesiastical and popular images of Saint Marcellus of Paris came to resemble each other but ultimately always remained apart. James Watson’s stimulating study (1985) of Tian Hou, or the empress of heaven, argues that the outwardly unitary symbolic character of the goddess Tian Hou concealed important differences in what various social groups believed about her. Pioneering as they are, these works are only the start of efforts to probe the enormously complex relationship between change in the symbolic realm and historical change among social groups and institutions.

I hope to advance our understanding of this relationship a step further by suggesting that its complexity lies not so much in the radically discontinuous nature of myths but in the fact that myths are simultaneously continuous and discontinuous. I explore this relationship by examining the myth of Guandi through a concept that I call the "superscription of symbols." Guandi (A.D. 162–220), known originally as Guan Yu before he received the imperial title di in 1615, was the apotheosized hero of the period of the Three Kingdoms. This period, which followed the decline of the imperial Han state (209 B.C.–A.D. 220), has been romanticized in Chinese history as an era of heroic warriors and artful strategists who dominated the battles among the three successor states contending for imperial power. Since then, the myth of Guandi has become increasingly popular in a variety of media—literature, drama, official and popular cults, and the lore of secret societies.

Consider two episodes in the life of the Guandi myth that are separated by more than a thousand years. One of the earliest miracle stories about Guan Yu is derived from a temple stele of 820 A.D. erected when the Yuquan temple in Dangyang County

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in modern Hubei was reconstructed. Here, in the vicinity of Yuquan mountain, Guan Yu was decapitated during the long battle he fought against the enemies of his lord, Liu Bei.

One still night, when the Buddhist monk Zhi Yi (A.D. 538–97) was deep in meditation under a great tree on the mountain, the silence was suddenly filled by a booming voice: "Return me my head." When the monk looked up he saw the ghostly apparition of a figure whom he recognized as Guan Yu, the spirit of the mountain. An exchange followed between the two in which the monk reminded Guan Yu of the severed heads of Guan Yu's own victims. Deeply impressed by the logic of karmic retribution, the spirit of Guan Yu sought instruction in the Buddhist faith from the monk, built a monastery for him, and began to guard the mountain. Later the mountain people built a temple to Guan Yu where they offered sacrifices at the beginning of each new season (Inoue 1941, no. 1:48; Harada 1955:30).

In 1914 the president of the Republic, Yuan Shikai, ordered the creation of a temple of military heroes devoted to Guandi, Yuefei, and twenty-four lesser heroes. The interior of the main temple in Beijing, with its magnificent timber pillars and richly decorated roof, was impressive in the stately simplicity of its ceremonial arrangements. There were no images. The canonized heroes were represented by their spirit tablets only. In January 1915 Commissioned General Yin Chang and the commander of the Model Army Division took their officers and soldiers to the temple to take their military oaths. They subsequently bowed their heads as they filed past a row of wooden tablets bearing the honored names of those who had fought for their nation (Johnston 1921:88).

These two visions of Guandi, reflecting the needs of different social groups a thousand years apart, reveal the discontinuous nature of myth. The first, the vision of a nervous clergy reeling from attacks by a renascent Confucian establishment on the Buddhist faith as foreign and corrupt, seeks to establish one of the great heroes of Chinese culture as a devout follower and protector. The latter, the vision of the fledgling Republican military, seeks to forge new concepts of loyalty to the nation-state. Is Guandi the protector of the Buddhist faith or a Chinese god of war? Whether we speak of them as conceptions of the spirit world or as the embodiment of this-worldly interests, the two visions seem to have very little in common.

But can a myth actually be so radically discontinuous? Do the symbolic materials in a myth exercise absolutely no constraints on what may be inscribed upon them? Indeed, if a myth represents radically discontinuous meanings, if its symbols are pursued by particular groups only for their own particular purposes, how can it continue to impart legitimacy so widely across the culture? On closer examination the two visions of the same figure have at least two common features: the apotheosization of a hero and his role as guardian. This commonality is hardly accidental or insignificant. It is what gives the myth its legitimating power and gives historical groups a sense of identity as they undergo changes.

What we have is a view of myth and its cultural symbols as simultaneously continuous and discontinuous. To be sure, the continuous core of the myth is not static and is itself susceptible to change. Some elements of the myth may and do become lost. But unlike many other forms of social change, mythic and symbolic change tend

\[1\] I have taken the liberty of "superscribing" the original miracle story with a few details from the fourteenth-century version of it contained in the Sanguozhi yanyi by Luo Guanzhong (1961, chap. 77:709–10). Although there are differences between the stele account and the one by Luo regarding the period and the identity of the monk, my borrowings from the later version do not affect the core message of the story in the stele. The differences between the two are discussed by Harada (1955:30).
not to be radically discontinuous; rather, change in this domain takes place in a way that sustains and is sustained by a dense historical context. In this way cultural symbols are able to lend continuity at one level to changing social groups and interests even as the symbols themselves undergo transformations. This particular modality of symbolic evolution is one I call the superscription of symbols.

Following Walter Burkert (1979:23), we may define myth as a traditional tale with secondary, partial reference to something of collective importance.\(^2\) The process whereby different historical groups write or depict through other cultural practices their own version of an existing story or myth incorporates their interests or establishes their "social charters" in the sense used by Malinowski. In this process, extant versions are not totally wiped out. Rather, images and sequences common to most versions of the myth are preserved, but by adding or "rediscovering" new elements or by giving existing elements a particular slant, the new interpretation is lodged in place. Even if the new interpretation should become dominant, previous versions do not disappear but instead come into a new relationship with it, as their own statuses and roles within what might be called the "interpretive arena" of the myth come to be negotiated and redefined.

Superscription thus implies the presence of a lively arena where rival versions jostle, negotiate, and compete for position. In this process some of the meanings derived from the myth understandably get lost, but by its very nature superscription does not erase other versions; at most it seeks to reconfigure the arena, attempting thus to establish its own dominance over the others. In this respect it is unlike most other arenas of contestation, where victory is absolute or potentially absolute. The obliteration of rival interpretations of a myth is self-defeating because a superscription depends on the symbolic resonances in the arena for its effectiveness. Just as a word in poetry draws its power from its many half-hidden associations, a myth at any one time represents a palimpsest of layered meanings from which the superscribed version draws its strength.

The Guandi Myth in History

What is most striking about the amazing variety of interpretations of the Guandi myth is that the original story is a very simple one. Guan Yu's biography appears in the Sanguozhi (History of the three kingdoms), written by Chen Shou about sixty years after Guan Yu's death (Chen 1973, 36:939–42). Chen Shou refers to Guan Yu's place of birth in Xiezhou, Shanxi, and his various names. He writes of Guan Yu's friendship and devotion to Liu Bei of the royal house of the later Han. Together with the butcher Zhang Fei, the two friends took the famous "Oath in the Peach Orchard" binding them to protect one another until death. Still later Guan Yu became a general and a governor of a province. Even though he was tempted by the enemy of his lord, Cao Cao, with a marquisate, Guan Yu remained faithful to his oath. In 220 A.D. he was captured by the enemy and put to death.

Chen Shou's brief references to Guandi are not entirely complimentary. There are references to his vanity, overconfidence, and ignorance on matters of strategy (Yang 1981:68). Yet these facts scarcely seem to have affected the future career of the Guandi myth. Over the centuries this basic story has been elaborated and Guan Yu's achieve-

\(^2\)In my usage, the constitutive elements of a myth that impart this sense of collective significance are its symbols, which may be embodied in particular images, events, or event-sequences. I will be mostly concerned with these elements.
ments magnified beyond measure in storytelling and drama. Apart from his well-known role as the god of loyalty, he becomes the god of wealth, the god of literature, the protector god of temples, and the patron god of actors, secret societies, and many others.

The earliest temple dedicated to Guan Yu is the Yuquan temple in Dangyang County in Hubei, where he is said to have been killed. This temple was established in 713 A.D. and was attached to the Buddhist monastery on Yuquan mountain. Over the next two hundred years certain miracle stories became associated with the Guan Yu of Yuquan temple, and when the anti-Buddhist policies of the late Tang abated, his role as the Chinese protector of Buddhist temples (in place of the Indian devas) spread rapidly throughout the empire (Inoue 1941, no. 1:48). Thus did Buddhism also become sinicized. To this day in Taiwan, despite his exalted status, Guandi continues to guard Buddhist temples as a door god (Weller 1987:164). Appealing to a rather embellished version of the earliest miracle story, the Buddhist clergy continues to claim that Guandi remains a steadfast and devout protector of the faith (Johnston 1921:61). One may pause to consider the true direction of the acculturation process: did the Buddhists convert Guan Yu, or did he in fact make them a little more authentically Chinese?

Guan Yu’s career as a protector god of monasteries and temples, launched by the Buddhists, became well established by the ninth century (Inoue 1941, no. 1:48). It did not take long for Daoist temples also to adopt him as their protector god; and during the Song (960–1279) the Daoist claim on Guan Yu was superscribed on his image as a protector. In Xiezhou in Shanxi, where Guan Yu was born, there is a famous lake called Salt Lake. In the Song a Daoist temple was established to Guan Yu at Salt Lake. According to the founding myth, a temple to the legendary Yellow Emperor had originally been built by the lake. However, soon afterward a demon who turned out to be Chi You, leader of the Miao tribes defeated by the Yellow Emperor, began to menace the area. The Daoist Master Zhang was instructed by the imperial court to find a way to put an end to this desecration of imperial honor. The Master invoked the assistance of Guan Yu, who dispatched shadow (yin) soldiers to fight and vanquish Chi You. The temple was founded in order to thank Guan Yu and commemorate the event (Inoue 1941, no. 2:248; Johnston 1921:56).

Inoue Ichii (1941, no. 2:250) believes that Guan Yu’s deification as a Daoist god is specifically communicated through the elaboration of this story in the plays of the succeeding Yuan period (1279–1368). Certainly the founding myth of the Guan Yu temple at Salt Lake has all the ingredients of a Daoist legitimating myth: it draws on a potentially significant element in the story of Guan Yu—his birthplace—and combines it with the sacred geography and ancient history of China; with this as background, it identifies the imperial court as the patron of the Daoists who have successfully invoked the spirit of Guan Yu to restore the imperial honor. Inoue also associates Guan Yu’s role as the god of wealth with his patronage by the Daoists, who were famous for their preoccupation with alchemy.

It is well known that the spread of the worship of Guan Yu as a folk deity beyond the confines of sectarian religion was communicated in the vernacular novels and plays of the Song–Yuan transition, particularly the Sanguozhi pinghua (The story of the three kingdoms) and the later Sanguozhi yanyi (The romance of the three kingdoms) by Luo Guanzhong. In these depictions the mortal weaknesses of Guan Yu seen in Chen Shou’s account disappear without much trace, and it is undoubtedly because of them that the divine image of Guan Yu has been nourished in popular consciousness (Yang 1981; Huang 1968:12–14). But these popular media also reflect broad social developments
underway since the Song that promoted the spread of Guan Yu as a deity among merchants, professional groups, rural communities, and secret societies.

Huang Huajie links Guan Yu’s growing popularity in the Ming (1368–1644) and the Qing (1644–1911) to the great socioeconomic changes of the era, which of course also enabled the popular media to spread. As the rural economy became increasingly commercialized, self-sufficient kin-based communities tended to disintegrate. In their place, settlements came to be composed of unrelated kin groups, merchants for whom sojourning had become a way of life, and marginal peoples without a community, such as vagrants and bandits. None of these new groups was able to use bonds of kinship or community to hold the settlements together. As a symbol of loyalty and guardianship, the image of Guan Yu inspired an ethic of trust and camaraderie to hold together “a society of strangers” (Huang 1968:100, 122, 227–29).

Thus certain elements in the myth as it had developed so far furnished common material for various groups; but each group also superscribed the image of Guan Yu to suit its own peculiar circumstances. For rural communities, the image of a trustworthy protector of temples yielded naturally to that of protector of communities, and eventually to those of healer and provider. Li Jinghan, in his massive survey of Ding County, wrote that the common rural folk worshiped Guan Yu to “seek fortune and avoid disaster” (1933:432). For merchants, trading now in distant, unknown, and unprotected regions, Guan Yu first inspired trust and loyalty (to contract) and gradually became the very source of wealth. Turning again to an example from Ding County, when merchants were asked why they worshiped Guan Yu, they replied that they did because Guan Yu was none other than Caishen, the god of wealth (Huang 1968:229). For the rootless bandits and rebels of secret societies, the oath of loyalty that Guan Yu upheld gained an unparalleled salience. All rites and ceremonies among the Triads, for instance, including those performed at the initiation of recruits and the punishment of traitors, took place before the altars of Guan Yu and the founders of the secret society (Yang 1967:64).

Like the Buddhist and Daoist superscriptions, the nonsectarian interpretations of Guan Yu were not random constructions. They built not only on original elements of the myth, but also on one another. Thus the common core was itself an evolving phenomenon; elements not found in any interpretation, such as the mortal weaknesses of Guan Yu in the original description by Chen Shou, naturally fell away. But typically, a particular interpretive focus did not expunge other versions. Indeed, it drew its strength from them: the prestige of the god itself derived increasingly from the evidence of its spiritual pursuit by so many groups over such a long time, because a superscription depends on the symbolic resonances of the image in the culture.

So far we have spoken only of social groups without the instrumental means to impose their image on others. What would happen to the interpretive arena when a particularly powerful group, such as the imperial state, sought to dominate the symbolism of Guan Yu with all the weight of its political apparatus?

The Guandi Myth and the Imperial State

Valerie Hansen’s work on the Song canonization of deities has established the close relationship between the official bestowal of a title on a deity and its flowering as a popular cult. The heretofore unsystematic recognition of local deities by the state became standardized in the Song as titles were granted and the gods were brought into the local register of sacrifices. Officials, elites, and commoners all believed that these titles actually enhanced the divine powers of the deities, and local groups often
lobbied and colluded with officials to gain recognition for locally important gods (Hansen 1987:chap. 3). The imperial state's involvement with the Guandi cult reflected this process; official recognition was encouraged by the popularity of the cult, which in turn further spread the fame of the god. But more important, the efforts of the state remained within the mode of superscription. The state could not, and in most cases did not even seek to, erase local versions of the gods; rather, it sought to draw on their symbolic power even while it established its dominance over them.

Thus we see the imperial state from the Song on lavishing Guan Yu with successively higher and more glorious titles. During the transition from the northern to the southern Song he rises from the status of a god with a ducal title (gong) to one with a princely one (wang), reflecting perhaps the Song need for divine assistance to defend itself against the increasing pressure of attacks from the north (Inoue 1941, no. 2:245). Under the Mongols (1279–1368) he replaces Jiang Taigong as the official god of war (Ruhlmann 1960:174), and by 1615 he is awarded the imperial title di and declared to be Guandi, the supporter of heaven and protector of the empire (Inoue 1941, no. 1:49). It is clear that all dynasties from the Song until the Qing sought to superscribe the images of Guandi and thus to appropriate his symbolism for their own ends, yet deliberately or not these earlier dynasties actually promoted the worship of Guandi in his different aspects and encouraged the different interpretations.

This was the case even during the Ming, well known for its absolutist tendencies. The Ming worshiped Guandi as the god of war in the Baima temple in Beijing, which later became the highest-ranking official temple to Guandi. Official temples to Guandi were also established at battle sites, especially during the Korean wars in the late Ming (Inoue 1941, no. 2:259). The Ming also made substantial contributions to the Guandi shrine in Dangyang County only a few miles east of the original Buddhist temple. The original temple on Yuquan mountain, responsible for the cult of Guandi as a protector god of temples, had itself undergone a revival under the Mongols, who favored Buddhism. Through its patronage of this site, the Ming state drew on the power of the miracle stories associated with the temple and area—the alleged site of Guandi's martyrdom—even as it honored him in the official style. Moreover, while it was writing its official superscription, the Ming government was continuing to promote other aspects of the cult. For instance, it patronized another temple in the Beijing area, called Yuecheng, where Guan Yu was worshiped as a god of wealth, a cult that spread rapidly during this period. Indeed, it became so important that when he received the imperial rank in 1615, it was to the Guan Yu of this particular temple that it was bestowed (Huang 1968:138–41; Inoue 1941, no. 2:249, 253, 257).

Given the preoccupation of the imperial Chinese state with establishing a monopoly over the channels of communication with the spirit world, it is hardly surprising that it would wish to control the flourishing Guandi myth. But the Ming state sought to secure its control not by ridding the myth of those symbols that did not directly support its own version of Guandi as a warrior loyal to state authority; it sought, rather, to bring Guan Yu's various aspects within the ambit of imperial patronage and thus became the patron of patrons. In this way, its efforts contributed to the many images of Guandi found in the popular imagination down to the twentieth century: a hero who was a protector and also a provider, and a warrior who was loyal to constituted authority but also to his oath.

The Qing superscription of the Guandi myth was distinctive partly because it was more systematic and partly because it was orchestrated with institutional changes.

3There is some controversy about the date when the imperial title was actually conferred. However, we can be fairly certain that it took place in the late Ming (Inoue 1941, no. 1:49).
As their predecessors had done, the Qing promoted Guandi to ever-higher statuses in the official cult. By 1853, during the Taiping rebellion, his worship was raised to the same level in the official sacrifices (sidian) as that of Confucius (Qingshi 1961, juan 85:1070). The high point of the superscription process was the compilation of his hagiography, the Guandi shengji tuzbi guanjji (A complete collection of the writings and illustrations concerning the holy deeds of Guandi [abbreviated as GSTQ]), which represented a massive effort to Confucianize Guandi. This compilation was published first in 1693 and reedited four times in the Qing.

There were elements in the story of Guandi’s life that might have been viewed dubiously by the Confucian orthodoxy. Not only was he very little known of his background and early life, but the vernacular Romance of the Three Kingdoms had also played up his record as an outlaw—a righteous outlaw, to be sure, who killed an exploitative magistrate, but an outlaw nonetheless (Roberts 1976:7). There were other ambiguities with respect to his loyalty to constituted authority: there is an episode where he permits Cao Cao, the archenemy of the prince he served, to escape so that Cao Cao was able to continue to menace the state. Moreover, the spread of his worship as the god of wealth and as a patron god of various sectional interests was probably not particularly congenial to the Confucian mode of regarding its heroes.

The occasion of the 1693 compilation was provided by the alleged discovery of Guandi’s genealogy among some bricks in a well in his birthplace in Xiezhou. Because of his obscure origins, one of the projects was to root him firmly as a respectable practitioner of filial piety. The fourth preface to the text begins with a literary exegesis on the complementarity of the values of loyalty and filial piety. The author writes, “It is by relocating filial piety that one gets loyalty. It is also said: if you seek loyal sons seek them at the gate of the filial son” (GSTQ, 4th intro.). After recording the events of Guandi’s life that clearly reveal his loyalty, the author laments that until the discovery of the genealogy, there was no real way of verifying Guandi’s parentage or whether he had really been filial. The discovery of the genealogy reveals how Guandi deeply understands the great principles of the Spring and Autumn Annals . . . his fine spirit, which resides in heaven, must necessarily be able to forget the benevolence and grace of his ancestors. He recalls these virtues to transmit them to later generations. Thus his heart of pure filiality is greater than loyalty and righteousness, which are of but one lifetime.

(GSTQ 4th intro.)

In 1725 three generations of his ancestors were awarded the ducal rank, and sacrifices were ordered to be performed to them twice a year throughout all the official temples to Guandi in the empire (Daqing lichao shilu [1725] 1937, juan 31:3a).

Other passages speak of his mastery of the Confucian classics: “People have always spoken of his courage and have not known of his knowledge of li [principle]. Guandi liked to read the Spring and Autumn Annals. When on horseback, his one free hand would always hold a volume” (GSTQ 2d intro.). Indeed, the work attributes his loyalty to his having understood the subtle meaning of the Annals. In contrast to Sima Qian, who represents the scholarly ideal, Guandi is depicted as representing the activist ideal, the Confucian sage who “protects the principles and perfects the exercise of power” (shoujing daquan; GSTQ, 3d intro.). Finally, his divinity is linked to the greatness of the empire: “Guandi’s divinity [jing] resides in heaven. Sacrifices to him in the temple are held on an elevated plane in order to manifest his awesome dignity. He has silently assisted in the well-being and long peace in the empire. Herein lies his merit of protecting the state and harboring the people. Is this not great? (GSTQ 4th intro).
No matter how thoroughgoing it was, such a literate superscription might have gone unnoticed in society if it were not also accompanied by institutional changes. These changes, implemented in 1725, were of a piece with the massive administrative reorganization undertaken by the Yongzheng emperor to enhance the power of the imperial state. Of all the Daoist, Buddhist, and nonsectarian temples to Guandi in every county capital, the most well endowed was selected as the official Guandi temple (often known as Wumiao, or Temple of Military Culture) by the local authorities, and here sacrifices were to be conducted regularly to Guandi and his ancestors. These temples were then brought under the command of the highest Guandi temple of official worship, the Baima temple in the capital (Daqing lichao shifu [1725] 1937, juan 31:3a). This structure was modeled on the hierarchy of Confucian temples (Wenmiao, or Temple of Civil Culture) through which the imperial state had incorporated the literati into an officially sanctioned empirewide system of reverence.

As Stephan Feuchtwang has pointed out (1977:584), official temples in cities were rarely for exclusive official use; they were places where the official and nonofficial populace could mix. Whereas it was principally the gentry that frequented the Confucian temples (which often included an image of the literary god, Wen Chang) during the official worship of Confucius, the Guandi temples were frequented by members of the gentry, merchants, and others, with commoners outnumbering the gentry (Feuchtwang 1977:585). Indeed, Feuchtwang notes that in Taiwan and southeastern China “merchants desirous of converting their wealth into status and moving into the literati class would contribute to the building of official temples. . . . An example of this face-improving enterprise—an even better one than the building of temples to Kwan-ti [Guandi] and Ma-tsu [Tian Hou], who were popular in all classes of the population—was the building of temples dedicated to both Confucius and Kuan-ti, often called Wen-wu miao and often founded in conjunction with the establishment of a private school” (1977:584). The image of Guandi had developed a distinct association with Confucian and imperial culture, and it was through the hierarchy of official temples that the orthodoxy communicated its superscribed image.

The imperial superscription of Guandi did not, of course, stay the growth of his popularity in his other roles, particularly as a god of wealth or as a protector of local communities. Nonetheless the institutional changes accompanying the imperial superscription enabled elites—both gentry and nongentry—to demonstrate their allegiance to the official image, and thus the changes succeeded in considerably reshaping the interpretive arena of the Guandi myth. The myth now came to be dominated by official images while other images were compelled to reorient and redefine their status in relation to them. To illustrate my point I will turn to evidence from local society in North China in the Qing and the Republic.

The Guandi Myth in Popular Culture

Many of the materials for the arguments in this section are taken from ethnographic and epigraphic records from the North China plain of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Guandi was probably the most popular god worshiped in the villages of

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4 The most important of these are the six-volume Japanese rural surveys known as Chūgoku nisō kanbō chōsa, conducted between 1940 and 1942 and first published in 1952. Here they will be referred to as CN followed by the volume number. Other sources include the surveys of the Japanese scholar Yamamoto Bin, who collected folktales and legends from all over North China during the 1930s and 1940s, found in his Chūgoku no minkan denshō (1976). See also Li 1933 and Gamble 1968.
North China. The numerous temples and stelae set up for him in the villages surveyed are eloquent testimony to that fact. Although the popularity of Guandi can hardly be attributed solely to imperial patronage, the image of Guandi found in the villages does indeed reflect the elevated status he occupied as a result of imperial honorings. Apart from Guandi, the earth god, Tudi (tutelar deity of villages), was perhaps the most commonly found god in North Chinese villages (Smith 1899:140). But Tudi was viewed very differently from Guandi. The following exchange was recorded in Shunyi County, Hebei:

Q: What is the difference between the Tudi temple and the Guandi temple?
A: Tudi is concerned with only one village, but Guandi is concerned not merely with one village but also with the affairs of the entire nation.
Q: Do outsiders worship at the Tudi temple?
A: They do not. Even if they do nothing will come of it.
Q: What about Guandi?
A: People can come from anywhere. Anyone may visit a Guandi temple anywhere. (CN, 1:213)

In Wu's Shop village near Beijing an informant was asked:

Q: Which is superior, the Tudi temple or the Guandi temple?
A: The Guandi temple is superior. Tudi looks after the affairs of only this village. But Guandi is a great being and does not handle the affairs of this village only. He is not merely a god of this village. (CN, 5:431)

The two gods represented distinctly contrasting symbols. Tudi was seen as a subordinate god uniquely in charge of the affairs of a particular village, whereas Guandi was seen as a great being, symbolic of the nation and worthy of being worshiped by everybody. Community-based religious cults in late Qing China, such as those to Guandi and Tudi, were indirectly linked to the state cult and official religion and formed an important part of the sprawling infrastructure of popular orthodoxy. Tutelary deities such as Tudi and Chenghuang (the city god) had been assimilated into the official religion in the bureaucratic mode. As is well known, Tudi symbolized the village as a discrete entity, but he was seen as an underling of Chenghuang, who in turn was responsible to a higher deity. In other words, these gods were celestial bureaucrats with distinctly parochial jurisdictions. Guandi, on the other hand, appears to have borne a relationship to the bureaucratic order similar to that of the emperor, with whom he came to share the title di. He transcended a particular territorial identity and symbolized the relationship of the village with the outside—with wider categories such as the state, empire, and national culture.

Guandi was not the only god who symbolized these wider identities; he shared this status with Tian Hou, or the empress of heaven, in the southeastern coastal provinces. But in the rest of China, I know of no god who was more identified as a representative of Chinese culture than Guandi. And it is this identification of Guandi with the more extensive orders of Chinese civilization that attracted an upwardly mobile rural elite to the official interpretation of Guandi and enabled it to be successfully installed in rural society. The stelae dedicated to Guandi in many villages through the Qing period show that of all the possible interpretations of Guandi—as a god of wealth, as a protector of temples, as a hero loyal to his vow—the one found most frequently was the one that invested him with Confucian virtues and loyalty to established authority.
There were five stelae dedicated to Guandi in Cold Water Ditch village in Licheng County, Shandong. The texts of the stelae were sometimes drafted by degree holders from the county seat and sometimes by lower-degree holders from the village. Other stelae mentioned no gentry titles at all and simply recorded a brief text with the names of the village leaders and contributors. The earliest, dated in the Kangxi period, begins:

It is said that in ancient times sacrifices were made and temples were built to honor those who have brought merit [gong] to the dynasty, who have been virtuous among the people, who have glorified honor and integrity [mingjie]. . . . At a time when above and below were confused and the proper principles [gengju] had disintegrated, there arose a special person who was loyal and acted appropriately to his status [erjie buju yiming bugou]. He caused evil ministers and sons of robbers to know their position. He was granted the heavy responsibility of seeing that they did not confound righteousness [dayi] and create disorder. . . .

He [Guandi] did not accept a fief from the bandit Cao Cao and remained loyal to the house of Han. Is this not merit to the dynasty! He eliminated the danger of the Yellow Turbans and executed the disorderly soldiers. . . . Is this not virtue for the people! He searched a thousand li for his [sworn] brother. Finally, he died the death of a martyr [shashen cheng ren]. Is this not to bring glory to honor and integrity?

(CN, 4:390)

Although the values of Confucian orthodoxy are written everywhere in this text, nowhere is there any explicit demonstration of allegiance to the Qing dynasty. Indeed, inasmuch as this is an early Qing stele, the references to Han loyalty might even be construed as a statement of opposition to the alien Manchus. But by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the effects of Qing superscription are everywhere evident. A text composed by a lower-degree holder of the village in 1819 and bearing the names of village leaders reads thus:

A chapter in the Book of History says: "There are times when a good man is afraid that there are not enough days; and when an evil man is also afraid that there are not enough days." Thus we know the godly way [shendao] establishes religious teachings in order to bring happiness to the good man and harm to the evil man.

Now, the lord Guansheng of Shanxi despises the nine evils with extreme severity. On the fifteenth day of the ninth month of 1813, the White Lotus invaded the precincts of the capital and the imperial court was put in danger. In very little time, the blessed god of the armies, with the brilliance of his divine powers, pushed back the White Lotus. He caused them to submit to the law and executed every single one of them. . . .

The leaders of our village and others have saved their humble possessions and put together some money to build a new temple and a new image.

(CN, 4:391)

The alleged appearance of Guandi on the side of the imperial forces during the White Lotus rebellion of 1813 was something the Jiaqing emperor had himself publicized (Naquin 1976:338–39), and the Qing bestowal of a title on Guandi following the rebellion in 1815 was doubtless related to his role in the rebellion (Inoue 1941, no. 2:266). It may well be that the promotion of the imperial image of Guandi in local society was connected with this event; at any rate, the stelae in this and other villages from the Jiaqing reign (1796–1820) are replete with references to Qing honorings of Guandi (CN, 4:391; CN, 1:192; CN, 6:151–52).

Whatever Guandi may have actually meant to the ordinary peasants, the Qing state had managed to superscribe the image of Guandi all the way down to the villages—a remarkable achievement for a premodern state in a vast agrarian society. It
could reach into the bowels of this society because it was able to forge a symbolic system that accommodated the aspirations of the rural elite. The Guandi cult exemplified this accommodation perfectly. Local leadership in rural society was often expressed by elite patronage of popular deities and the management of temple ceremonies. By their patronage of the multi-vocal image of Guandi—in the building, repair, and management of temples, for example—these elites were able to articulate their leadership aspirations in society and at the same time identify themselves with a set of symbols that was prestigious and Pan-Chinese in scope (Duara 1988: esp. chap. 5).

The Confucian image of Guandi perpetuated by the state and rural elites as a protector of the empire and its institutions did not replace the other images of him. It is clear that neither the elites nor the state could fully appropriate the popular symbolism of the Guandi myth. Nor would their superscription have been effective if they had. Yamamoto Bin’s collection of folktales from North China in the 1930s and 1940s contains stories about Guan Yu that are simply local tales and nothing more (1976: 73, 75, 118, 151). Then too, ordinary villagers prayed to him for all kinds of benefits including rain and those from his healing powers (CN, 5:433). This seems to have been the case for peasants all over North China, where he continued to be worshiped in his generalized aspect as a provider and protector of communities (Li 1933: 432; CN, 3:55; CN, 6:84–85). Although this characterization of Guandi is not in the least incompatible with the imperial and Confucian characterization, it does not invoke the state and Confucian culture symbolically in the same manner as the depictions in the stele do.

Yet the imperial superscription was not without impact on folk culture. Occasionally it was assimilated into a kind of layered or imbricated imagery of Guandi in the popular consciousness. Guandi often appears in extremely popular morality books (shanshu), urging people to perform meritorious deeds to attain salvation. These books reflect a folk morality that is an amalgam of orthodox Confucian and heterodox beliefs. In these books we frequently see Guandi in his Confucian mode: there are allusions to his fondness for the Spring and Autumn Annals and to his alleged qualities of filial piety and righteousness. At the same time, however, he expresses his faith in Buddhist notions of retribution and other beliefs. In one passage Guandi even espouses the syncretism of popular religion by pronouncing that Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism all emanate from the same source (Harada 1955:37).

In the following stele from Hou Lineage Camp village in Changli County, Hebei, we observe an instance where the official image of Guandi was assimilated with older associations of him as the source of prosperity. This stele was emplaced in 1864 when the temple to the god of wealth was repaired:

_A Stele Commemorating the Reconstruction of the Caisben Temple and the Creation of an Image of the Saintly Sovereign Guan_

His image is molded and painted to create awe of his divine authority. It will thereby attach importance to his teachings and his favors, which have always been the same.

Our village of the Hou banners has of old had a temple to the god of wealth. Alas, it had become covered with brambles and smoke. In the past we had repeatedly improved the temple, but for three years the yield of the land had been very poor. Now Tai sui [the star god presiding over the yearly cycle] is aligned to the sun. As a tribute of thanks we gathered to discuss the expansion of the temple. In this way we enhance our admiration of Guandi’s protection of righteousness [yi] and his preservation of the institutions of the empire [gang]. We wish to burn incense and make offerings to him.
We scattered the gold of Dannapati. We contributed money generously and brought a carpenter as capable as the famous Gongshu. We gathered artisans who were brilliantly skillful. There are now dragons dancing on the beams in abundant numbers. May wealth and honor be eternally renewed (fugui changchun).

(CN, 5:377)

This stele, which bore the names of the village leaders and two degree holders, was erected in the presence of the county magistrate himself. It demonstrates the actual process of imperial superscription in the village as the official image of Guandi is written over an older cult of the god of wealth. This kind of superscription was probably not uncommon in the 1860s when the imperial order was briefly reinvigorated after the devastation of the midcentury rebellions. But neither the state representative nor the villagers seemed to be particularly put out by the close relationship in the text between Guandi and the god of wealth, by the collocation of "honor" and "wealth." Commenting on this relationship more generally, Basil Alexeiev writes, "Another instance of this curious and apparently illogical association is the cult of Kuan Ti [Guandi], commonly called by writers on China the God of War, but who is, in fact, a Wealth God and appears in many household icons with all the paraphernalia of such a god" (1928:1). The official superscription of Guandi in the stele, with its references to his righteous preservation of imperial institutions, did not result in any diminution of Guandi’s association with the god of wealth and the promise of prosperity.

On the other hand, a powerful superscription effort such as that of the Qing state could reorder the interpretive arena of the myth and bring alternative interpretations into a new relationship to it. There were situations when the image of Guandi as the god of wealth among some groups had to negotiate its status in relation to the official image. We have mentioned that when merchants in Ding County were asked why they worshiped Guandi they replied that they did because he was Caishen, the god of wealth. Their interlocutor wondered how this could be when Zengfu was already considered the god of wealth. The traders hastened to answer that there were actually two gods of wealth, Guandi and Zengfu. Whereas Zengfu was the civilian god of wealth, Guandi was the military god of wealth (Huang 1968:229; see also Harada 1955:35). This point of view was apparently common. Alexeiev observes (1928:9) that booksellers honor Caishen as the civilian god of wealth "while blacksmiths, cutters of every kind, and all manual trades" worship Guandi as the military god of wealth. The division between civil and military temples was a basic feature of the imperial and early Republican state cult (Johnston 1921:48, 85). The popular image had not gone away, but it had learned to accommodate itself to the prestigious official image.

Sometimes the prestige and lofty claims of the imperial image gave it a power by which the imperial establishment was able to subordinate and even mobilize oppositionalist images of Guandi to its cause. This was the case during the Taiping rebellion in the middle of the nineteenth century, when Guandi was elevated to the same status as Confucius in the official rites, thus attaining full stature as the protector of the Chinese ecumene. The Taipings, a Christian-inspired rebel group, had appeared to threaten not merely the imperial state but also the very foundations of the Confucian system.

Rural elites led by the gentry, which mobilized the resistance and ultimately defeated the Taipings, were able to draw antistate secret society members into their local armies. Although monetary inducements were doubtless important in attracting the secret societies, Huang Huajie (1968:230) believes that the appeal to the image of Guandi was more significant. These societies were formed by the uprooted underclass elements of "the rivers and lakes" (in the language of the Water Margin) for whom
Guandi’s oath and heroic death forcefully symbolized the sworn brotherhood that they used to fashion a community of their own. For them, the oath symbolized loyalty to brotherhood, not to the state that had been their enemy. Yet under circumstances when it could be demonstrated that Chinese civilization itself was under attack by the foreign-inspired Taipings, the identification of Guandi with the nation and Chinese civilization, shaped to a great extent by the imperial state and the elites, could be mobilized in defense of the imperial order. After all, had Guandi not defended the house of Han from the rebellious Yellow Turbans?

The renegotiation of statuses could be complex. Although a nonofficial version might clearly defer to the official imagery of Guandi, as in the following Buddhist depiction, it is not at all clear whether nonofficial characterizations necessarily suffered a net loss in the process. In 1894 the bubonic plague spread widely over southern China. By means of a planchette, Guandi revealed himself to a Buddhist or Buddhistic society in Canton, the “Society for the Performance of Good Deeds,” and expressed his views on the causes of the plague as well as the way to eliminate it (Portengen 1898:461–8). Guandi referred to the many titles granted him by the Qing dynasty as well as his varied celestial offices. He revealed that he was in charge of the Department of Epidemics, where he supervised a thousand ghosts and functionaries to inspect human activities and morale. Guandi disclosed that the ultimate cause of the plague was the moral decadence of the people, who were dishonorable, wasteful, and deceitful. People were to avoid the plague demons by practicing filial piety, loyalty, and honesty and by chanting a liturgy. In addition, the rich were to demonstrate their virtue by making charitable contributions. As a sign that they were truly complying with the demands of the god of war, households were instructed to draw his halberd and beneath it write the ten characters of his name and title. The sign was then to be attached to the doorway of the house, which would keep away the plague demon. Guandi then advised the people on practical measures such as burning water-purifying amulets in family wells and mixing insecticidal drugs in the drinking water. It was widely acknowledged that the plague was being spread by water from wells and canals that had been poisoned by dead rats.

The document apparently represented a familiar mode of harnessing the authority of the gods to mobilize the population during an epidemic to undertake both ritual and practical countermeasures. Francis Hsu (1983:11–24, 35–50) reports similar developments in Yunnan during the cholera epidemic of 1943. Hsu also shows how the causes of the epidemic were thought to be rooted in socioethical factors. In this way, the goals of social welfare came to be inseparable from the spread of religious ideas. In the text cited above, social mobilization is mixed up with the consolidation of Buddhist faith and practice. These are revealed in the concern with retribution, the chanting of liturgies, and the call to the rich to make charitable contributions. But more important, the authority of these messages is attributed to Guandi—and it is a Guandi who very much partakes of the imperial characterization of him. The passage is replete with Guandi’s various high-sounding titles and with his own references to Qing honors of him, his official position in the celestial bureaucracy, and the Confucian virtues of filial piety and loyalty. What we have here is the deployment of the official image of Guandi not only to mobilize the populace but also to shore up the claims of an otherwise politically powerless entity—the Buddhist society that received the planchette.

I have only been able to find a French translation of the original text. Many thanks to Carol Benedict for bringing this text to my attention.
Conclusion

Although the image of Guandi meant different things to different people, what he meant to one person also communicated itself in some degree to others. We have seen how the different versions were linked in a semantic chain: a warrior loyal to his oath has his loyalty transferred to constituted authority; a hero protecting temples, communities, and state is turned metonymically into a provider of health and wealth. The semantic chain constituting the Guandi myth developed historically, reflecting the changing needs of state and social groups as they wrote on earlier symbolic inscriptions. Some elements, notably those in the original story that served the image of no particular group, fell away, but the conative strength—the strength to impel, inspire, and motivate—of any single interpretation derived from its participation in this evolving semantic chain.

The evolution of symbols along a semantic chain, their simultaneously continuous and discontinuous character, enables us to see the relationship of symbolic change to social change. Even when an agency such as the centralizing Qing state seeks to dominate a symbol thoroughly, the very mechanism of superscription necessarily requires the preservation of at least some of the other voices that surround the symbol. A symbol draws its power from its resonances (and sometimes its dissonances) in the culture, from the multiplicity of its often half-hidden meanings. It is precisely because of the superscription over, not the erasure of, previous inscriptions that historical groups are able to expand old frontiers of meaning to accommodate their changing needs. The continuity provided by superscription enables new codes of authority to be written even while the legitimacy of the old is drawn upon. Thus symbolic media focus the cultural identities of changing social interests pursuing sectional ends, even as the symbols themselves undergo transformations.

At any one point in time, the interpretive arena of a myth sustains a cultural universe that enables the communication and negotiation of worldviews. The struggle to survive within this arena may be desperate, and so also the effort to dominate, as with the Qing. But although the Qing state was able to reorder the interpretive arena of the myth, its hegemony was never absolute. Indeed hegemony within a superscribed domain is rarely absolute. No matter how intolerant the Qing government may have appeared to be, over the long run its capacity to police symbols was restricted. In the end it had to be satisfied with a nominal acceptance of the official version by particularly defiant subaltern groups. This was precisely what made the arena of superscription so lively: it was an arena in which subordinate groups such as the Buddhists of the plague text were able to mobilize the hegemonic image to their own considerable benefit but also one where both dominant and subaltern groups could draw on each other’s images for their own purposes. By participating in the interpretive arena of the myth, the Confucian imagery could even occasionally have its authority enhanced by its deployment for nonhegemonic ends.

Much of the strength of the Qing state at its height derived from its ability to represent its authority in popular culture, particularly with the techniques of superscription. Superscription enabled the imperial state to create an authoritative image of Guandi with which rural elites could identify and which peasants and other social groups could acknowledge without renouncing the dimensions of Guandi that were more immediately relevant to them. However, consider what happened to the Chinese state when it sought to transform society while undermining the interpretive arena in which it had once participated—in other words, when it attempted to change society and culture simultaneously.
The twentieth century in China was a time when the Guandi cult and, indeed, most other religious cults had begun to wane (Duara 1988:chap. 5). The origins of this decline can be traced to the turn of the century, when the Qing state and its republican successors launched on a course of modern state building. Modernizing state builders in North China sought to confiscate temple properties and destroy the institutions of village religion in order to use the resources to build modern schools and police forces. As ideological modernizers the republican regimes also carried out several campaigns against popular religion and “superstition,” inadvertently clearing the ground for the communists in the process. To be sure, these regimes probably had little knowledge of the momentous consequences their actions would have. Overtly, superscription of the Guandi myth was not abandoned. The republican state continued to honor him, and it is even said that the bonds of loyalty among the Guomindang secret police were written on earlier superscriptions of the Guandi myth by members of the secret societies.

But in assaulting such community institutions as temples and religious associations, which had been the foundations of the Guandi cult, the modernizing regimes were destroying the institutional underpinnings of mythic superscription and attacking one of the most important means by which both state and elite had been able to reaffirm continuously their alliance and conception of the social order. They eliminated the means of maintaining the authority of the state in local life at a time when this very state was engineering important changes in rural society.

The only way a modernizing regime could launch a simultaneous attack on social arrangements and the domain of culture was by building strong organizational foundations in local society. None of the republican regimes was ever able to build such strong organizations. Lacking these foundations, the government needed to sustain at least, if not to strengthen, its authority in the cultural realm in order to engage social issues. Yet by assaulting religious institutions these regimes undermined the very means of communicating their authority in Chinese society. The bleak record of republican regimes in rural areas has a good deal to do with their inability to create a viable alternative to the Guandi myth to serve as a symbolic framework of identification and communication between state and peasant.

Glossary

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List of References

Abbreviations

CN Chūgoku nōon kankō chōsa [Investigation of customs of Chinese villages]
GSTQ Guandi shengji tuzhi quanji [A complete collection of the writings and illustrations concerning the holy deeds of Guandi]

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