

MYTHOLOGY AS DRAMATIC CANON

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The gods of *tang-ki* worship are drawn from folklore.

Mythology supplied the drama of traditional Chinese theatre. Theatre has historically been the ultimate didactic tool used by the Chinese. The ordinary people were largely illiterate so that performance had priority over text. The extent to which a Chinese audience invests a theatrical performance with truth has no parallel in the West.

Storytellers entertained the people with the tales of the gods. Scenes from the dramatised narration and theatrical staging of the stories of the gods replayed in the memories of audience members, and eventually shaped a resource of internalised knowledge of the gods. In this way mythology became a dramatic canon for Religious Taoism (Chinese popular religion).



Plates 1a: A *tang-ki* portrayal of the god Nezha.
Photo: Author



Plate 1b: The legendary Nezha, a warrior god who fights with the flame-tipped lance and the Universal Ring, and who rides on fiery wheels.
Photo: Author

Theatrical performances of the stories of gods and folk heroes shaped the people's ideas of the appearances and behaviours of their gods. A dialectical relationship between theatrical images and religious beliefs developed. Performers used iconic gestures, props, costumes and make-up to portray gods, and in turn their convincing portrayals reaffirmed

the religious beliefs held by their audiences on the iconic images of the gods (plates 1a and 1b). In this way mythology became a dramatic canon for Religious Taoism, and theatre became a tool for the dissemination of religion.

Theatrical images as source of religious iconography:

Theatre supplied Religious Taoism with their god images. This explains the anthropomorphism of Taoist deities. Storytellers had to make sure that their audience could relate with the heroes of their tales, so that these, no matter how fantastic, were portrayed as having human forms. As a secondary benefit, anthropomorphism facilitated enactment. Thus even 'composite' part-animal, part-human deities such as the Thunder god, have their animal features (for example Thunder's monkey's head, falcon's beak and wings) superimposed on essentially human figures. The essential human form of Thunder enables the role to be portrayed in *tang-ki* theatre, by a medium who uses no special make-up or mask.



Plate 2: A Monkey God *tang-ki* made-up and dressed in Chinese opera style. Photo: By kind permission of Victor Yue.



Plate 3: A Monkey God *tang-ki* whose make-up and wig is inspired by a television portrayal. Photo: Author

Mythology supplied theatres with drama, and theatre provided the people with images of the gods. With the advent of the printing press, these stage images were in turn widely disseminated, through adult comic books (which formed the mainstay of literature for the lowly-educated audience), and later through the media of cinema and television. These performed images through years of publication and re-enactment, concretised into

a staunchly held ‘doxa’ or body of performance knowledge. A person grows up watching dramatic portrayals of gods and unconsciously absorbs these performance styles as normative behaviour.

The doxa of *tang-ki* worship is based upon images created by opera and puppet theatres (plate 2), and more recently from television portrayals (plate 3). Devotees judge the authenticity of *tang-ki* possessions against a doxa yardstick. For example if the *tang-ki* of the Monkey God performs like the opera actor in the role, then this is proof of true possession by the god.

Dialectic between iconography and the performed imaginations of the *tang-ki*:

Taoists however believe that the opposite is true; theatre is not the inspiration for the gods, but that the gods inspire storytellers and theatre practitioners. They hold that god images, whether in iconography or *tang-ki* worship, are not reflections of stage portrayals, but are in fact the true images of the gods given to man through direct divine inspiration. For example before starting on a new statue, an image carver will burn a talisman to invoke the god to appear in dreams. In this way the gods tell the image carver how to sculpt the real features of the god. *Tang-kis* attest that their trance performances; what they do, what costumes they wear and what props they use, all are choices of the god made without any cognitive decisions on the part of the human medium. Thus according to the Taoists, the gods themselves inspired the storytellers and the theatrical re-enactments of god images, and not the other way around as a ‘rational’ theory of origins might propose.

But while Chinese opera and puppet theatres enact the legends of the gods, in *tang-ki* theatre, the gods themselves perform. Thus the spontaneous portrayal of the entranced medium is regarded as actual behaviour of the gods and not once removed inspired re-enactments. There exists therefore, a dialectic between the fictions of mythology and the performed imaginations of the *tang-ki*. The *tang-ki* relies on a doxa of performed images to help him in his characterisations of a god, and the improvised actions of *tang-kis* in performance add to the notional store of ‘correct’ god behaviour in a continuous cycle of evolution.