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It's Not Just 8/8/08: A Year of Chinese Anniversaries

Kenneth Pomeranz

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One thousand years ago (1008 C.E.) The Song Emperor, the goddess of Mt. Tai, and transformations of Chinese religion:

I’ve been waiting awhile to post another “round number anniversary” piece, figuring I’d let discussions of Tibet take precedence while it remains in the news – but it looks like that could be a long while. Meanwhile, choosing this anniversary may be a bit self-indulgent, since I’ve been writing about this goddess off and on for years – but bear with me.

The story starts when Song Zhenzong, the not-very-successful emperor (r. 998-1023), claimed that he had received a Heavenly Letter, communicating instructions and approval from above. While many officials and literati expressed doubt about the legitimacy of this sacred text, the emperor further announced that in gratitude for receiving it, he would journey to Mt. Tai (a sacred mountain in Shandong province), and perform the ancient feng and shan ceremonies, in which emperors reported to heaven on their accomplishments. These ceremonies were quite rare; they were only supposed to be performed when the realm was peaceful and prosperous, so to undertake them was to make a big (and contested) claim. It also turned out to be the last time these rituals were ever performed, unless you count the re-enactments for tourists that began about 10 years ago – but that’s another story.

At any rate, while digging at the top of the mountain (probably to set up an altar), the emperor’s men uncovered both a spring and a statue of a female figure. The statue was said to be that of a goddess of Mt. Tai, and it was later claimed that this goddess had been known to the ancients but somehow forgotten since then. In fact, up to that point only a god of the mountain was worshipped: he was officially understood as a rather abstract nature spirit but also figured in the popular imagination as a sort of lord of the underworld.

Over the next few centuries, worship of this goddess spread gradually until she had almost completely eclipsed the god of the mountain, and taken over (in the popular mind) his key functions, including regulating the length of human lives. Her main temple on the mountain received at least half a million pilgrims per year by the early 1600s and other shrines for her sprouted around the country (mostly, but not exclusively, in the North). Since the 18th century, her following has narrowed, but she remains very popular in North China today. She is associated both with human fertility (she is one of the deities women go to if they have trouble conceiving, or if they want to make sure their baby is a boy) and with prolonging the lives of elderly relatives. A previously unknown fifteenth century temple to her was recently unearthed in the process of building the Olympic village in Beijing; a much larger temple that housed one of her most popular altars until the Revolution has recently re-opened as a museum of popular religion.

But back to history. The unexceptional-sounding events of 1008 capture a lot of important aspects of Chinese cultural/religious politics in the making. First, the emperor reached for authority by claiming that he received a written letter from Heaven: not a vision, a rainbow, a golden statue, or whatever. The exceptional importance of the written word in Chinese life goes back a long way, to be sure; but it’s also something that grows over time, and the Song was a crucial era for this. A bit earlier, sacred scrolls produced by lay people had begun appearing, containing new accounts of popular Buddhist and Daoist deities and usually written in fairly easy repetitive Chinese – these texts stood in sharp contrast to the earlier Buddhist scriptures laboriously translated from Sanskrit by learned monks, and were part of a massive shift of religious authority towards lay people and practitioners who competed for their favor in a sort of marketplace, rather than clergy ordained by a religious establishment living off vast tax-free endowments or government revenues. (The latter half of the preceding Tang (645-907) dynasty had been marked by the dissolution of many such endowments, by order of the state.) This boom in more or less vernacular religious literature would continue for centuries, reaching a crescendo of sorts in the late Ming (around the same time as the European Reformation). And it was probably in
the Song that people began submitting requests to local gods by writing them out (or having someone do it for them) and burning the paper – a practice which continues today. It became increasingly common for the gods to answer in writing as well.

Second, the incident highlights the complicated religious role of the emperor, and the ways in which various other parties restrained it. On the one hand, as the Son of Heaven, he had enormous charismatic power – only his sacrifices were acceptable to heaven for many purposes (just as a son’s sacrifices are best for nourishing an ordinary parent in the other world). On the other hand, these sacrifices were highly ritualized, and attempts to innovate frequently provoked struggles. For instance, new deities continued to be recognized throughout the imperial era – but the emperor had little role in this process. It was dominated on the one hand by commoners who claimed to have witnessed miracles (or recorded that others had done so), and on the other by a bureaucracy that checked such claims, evaluated (and often altered) the stories of the candidates’ earthly lives to highlight appropriate virtues, and so on. Even the strongest emperors (such as the first Ming Emperor) usually failed when they tried to alter the pantheon single-handedly.

Third, the eclipse of the old god of Mt. Tai by the goddess (Taishan niangniang, Bixia yuanjun, or various other names) over the next few centuries was part of a more general transformation one scholar has called “the feminization of compassion.” Its essence was the rise of a new group of female deities – including Guanyin and Tianhou (on Taiwan, Mazu), who remain the most important goddesses in the Chinese world today. These goddesses frequently took on functions previously associated with very hard-nosed male gods. The male deities resembled bureaucrats – either in being “by the book” hanging judges who would condemn you for minor infractions, or by being corrupt, arbitrary, and terrifying. The females, on the other hand, were conspicuously non-bureaucratic. They oversaw their domains with far greater mercy; they also would accept the prayers and offerings of all comers, while the older gods often excluded despised people (prostitutes, vagrants), people who were outside their geographic jurisdiction, or people who lacked the proper rank to address them directly. These goddesses represented a fundamental shift in the religious landscape in more inclusive and humane directions.

If you want to push it a bit, you could call this phase two of an even larger and longer-term religious shift. In pre and early imperial times, lots of popular religion centered around very fierce deities that were either monsters of some sort with horrible appetites to be appeased (i.e. animal sacrifices to these deities were often said to be a replacement for the people that they had devoured in the bad old days) or associated with the natural landscape (e.g. rivers) or dangerous, inhuman forces (e.g. plague). In short worship centered on those gods was much more about appeasing power than honoring or identifying with virtue. Gradually, most of these spirits were superseded by anthropomorphic deities, who were often based on government officials – and who were often said to be entitled to worship in part because they were the ones who had vanquished the monster/god. (This kind of story was often also a representation of the conquest of some local population by the Han Chinese and/or the subordination of some local potentate by the expanding Chinese state). These bureaucratic gods were far more virtuous and reasonable deities than the old monsters, but still pretty tough – like the god of Mt Tai, who presided over various subterranean hells, and judged the newly dead, assigning most of them to a term of gruesome tortures before their soul could move on. That those gods in turn began to balanced – or sometimes even replaced – by goddesses like Guanyin (whom missionaries later called “the Chinese Mary,” noting her importance, her virginity and her more or less unlimited mercy) marked a very important shift in the way people saw their relations with the cosmos. The goddess of Taishan – sometimes conflated with Guanyin, by the way – was another important figure in this transformation.

So, they may not have a single dramatic moment to match tacking 95 theses to the church door or putting witches on trial, but the religious struggles of 1008 are worth remembering. And a happy 1000th to you, Bixia!

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