

Demons or Deities?—The *Wangye* of Taiwan

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INTRODUCTION*

One of the great untold stories of Chinese history has been the settlement of South China, and the obstacles those Han Chinese colonists must have faced to survive. Despite the beneficial factors of lower population density and more fertile soil, these men and women faced natural calamities at a great distance from government aid, attacks by southern tribesmen who would not surrender their lands and leave quietly, brigandage in areas where local officials had limited authority, and the threat of contagious disease.

These epidemics must have been especially terrifying and devastating. Willam H. McNeil's *Plagues and Peoples* (1976) and Hans Zinsser's *Rats, Lice, and History* (1934) reveal the great impact epidemics have had on civilization, laying armies low and devastating a city's population more efficiently than any human agent could have hoped to do before the twentieth century. As Han settlers moved to a hotter and humid climate and encountered new parasitic microorganisms, the impact on their fledgling colonies must have been immense. For scholar-officials, demotion or banishment to the southern provinces constituted one of the worst of fates, not only because of the disgrace involved but because of the prospect of an early death from pestilential vapors (*zhangqi* 瘴氣). One can see this in the poems of Du Fu (杜甫), Su Dongpo (蘇東坡), and other documents of that time. For example, in the T'ang scholar Li Xian's (李賢) commentary to the *Houhanshu* (後漢書)

* *Editor's Note:* We refer the readers to the article by Klaus Antoni in the next issue of this journal, Volume 47, 1988, where the author discusses a similar problem as it poses itself in Japan.

there is a passage describing the Lu (瀘) river in Sichuan (四川) which reads: "It is especially known for its pestilential vapors. If one passes it during the third and fourth months, death will surely result. After the fifth month, travellers can cross without harm. For this reason, when [the Three Kingdoms strategist] Zhuge [Liang] 諸葛亮 (181-234) wrote: 'Cross the Lu in the fifth month' he was referring to this peril." (p. 2847).

Epidemics continued to ravage South China's population through the late Ming and early Qing (Dunstan 1975: 1-59), and when those Chinese loyal to the Ming and subsequent colonists settled Taiwan, they faced the same threat. Liu Zhiwan, in his book *Taiwan minjian xinyang lunji*, uses local gazetteers and other sources to show how epidemics disrupted attempts at settlement, both by Han Chinese and the Dutch. For example, one Qing account reads: "This year we moved inward, surrounded and defeated the aborigines, and started to cultivate the land. Forging rivers and climbing mountains, we faced thousands of perils. And on top of all the suffering the soldiers endured came disease, which spread to such an extent that only 27 men in the entire camp (*ying* 營, this would have consisted of 500 men) remained unaffected" (Liu, 1983: 251). One other account neatly summarizes a colonist's chances saying "Although one can get there (Taiwan), most die of disease [the expression here is *shuitu bufu* 水土不服, literally meaning "unable to cope with the land and water"] and those who return are few" (Liu 1983: 248).

Those colonists who braved the dangers of settling Taiwan and South China frequently appealed to spiritual forces to help them quell epidemics, regularly holding festivals which culminated in placing images of the demons causing disease, usually referred to as "lords" (*wangye* 王爺) on a boat (*wangchuan* 王船), which was either floated out to sea or burned. These festivals survive in Taiwan today, one of the largest being held in the town of Xigang 西港, which lies to the North of Tainan, every three years. In the 1985 festival which I witnessed, one could see indications of the fear of demonic forces which had led to the first festival being held. On moonlit streets firecrackers exploded, gongs crashed, and drums banged. In the midst of the noise and light, all of the sixty-plus participating villages joined in one long and often chaotic procession, which included wildly-swinging palanquins, giant ghost puppets and puppets of the *wangye*, young men dressed as ghosts with painted faces, and bloody spirit mediums by the dozens who had mortified their flesh either to demonstrate the power of their possessing deity or personally bear the brunt of the community's accumulated sins.¹ The entire event lasted three days, during which the *wangye* were first

feasted and entertained, but at the end of which they were brusquely sent off on the flames of the *wangchuan*.

These festivals, originating on the mainland and brought over to Taiwan by colonists, have continued up to the present in both areas, despite attempts by Qing officials, the Japanese, and the Communist Party to discourage them. According to 1979 surveys, *wangye* temples outnumber those for any other individual deity worshipped on the island at 684, the nearest competitor, Guanyin 觀音, having only 557 temples dedicated to her, and Mazu 媽祖 receiving offerings at only 509 sites (Chou 1979: 103, 214, 533). What I observed at Xigang and subsequently read has led me to ask the following questions, which will be pursued throughout the rest of the paper: Who are the *wangye*? What does their worship reveal about Chinese attitudes towards disease and demonic forces? Why do rituals associated with expelling pestilential demons tend to be violent ones? Why does the worship of the *wangye* continue to flourish?

As to the first question, it seems that not all deities called *wangye* are necessarily perceived as being responsible for causing epidemics. In fact, it often proves difficult to identify exactly which kind of deity is being worshipped, as this title has also been given to the unknown dead or even piles of bones (Harrell 1974: 198–202; Liu 1983: 227). Therefore it should come as no surprise that anthropologists like Katherine Gould-Martin have reported on deities called *wangye* who actually *cure* disease and whose daily worship resembles that given any other god (Gould-Martin 1975: 115–141). This confusion has arisen in large part because people say *wangye* to avoid naming the true identity of the deities, either deities of epidemics (*wenshen* 瘟神) or demons of disease (*yigui* 疫鬼). This is done because to name the deities would result in dire consequences: 1) It might offend them; and, 2) It would almost certainly summon them, as to name a spirit is generally considered the equivalent of calling it. The extent of this fear of naming can be seen in the frequent use of the homophonic character *wen* (溫; meaning warm) in place of the character *wen* which means epidemics. In Zhejiang the name of the plague god Commander Wen (*Wen yuanshuai* 溫元帥)² is written in this way, and one might even speculate that the prefecture of Wenzhou (温州) in Zhejiang, where his cult has a center, originally took its name from the frequent outbreaks of pestilence which broke out there. In the case of Taiwan, it appears that the more benevolent *wangye* are worshipped individually, while those grouped in threes or fives are the feared bringers of epidemics. It is the latter that this essay will focus on, starting with the various tales about them.

TALES OF THE *Wangye*

At present, approximately five stories about the *wangye* circulate in Taiwan, the number of men portrayed ranging from five to 360. Summaries of these stories can be found in a 1986 almanac entitled *Huangjiayun minli* published in the city of Hsinchu in Taiwan. I have used it for two reasons: 1) The stories here are for popular, not academic consumption, as opposed to those in field reports; 2) They are more current than the versions collected by previous scholars like Liu. They read:

1) When Qin Shihuang (221–210 B.C.E.) unified China he ordered book burnings and burial of Confucian scholars. It is said that at that time in the city of Xianyang (咸陽, in present day Shaanxi 陝西), 360 scholars were buried alive. Because later generations felt sympathy (*tongqing* 同情) for them, these men were given the respectful title of *wangye*, receiving worship and offerings.

2) During the T'ang dynasty there were five presented scholars³ (*jinsi* 進士) named Li (李), Chi (池), Wu (吳), Zhu (朱), and Fan (范) who happened to overhear a number of Deities of Epidemics (*wenshen* 瘟神) secretly planning to put disease poison (*yidu* 疫毒) in some wells to start an epidemic.⁴ In order to save others, these five scholars resolutely decided on self-sacrifice, drowning themselves in the wells where the poison had been placed. Those living in the area, seeing that others had died in the wells, didn't dare touch the water and thus a great calamity was averted. Later these five scholars all ascended to Heaven to become gods, and the villagers, deeply moved by their virtue in saving others, gave them the respectful title of *wangye*. Therefore, in the Quanzhou (泉州) region of Fujian, people call the *wangye* Plague Kings (*wenwang* 瘟王), and every summer construct an exquisite divine boat (*shenchuan* 神船), load it with images of the *wangye*, balls of rice, chickens, sheep, etc., and after having piously worshipped set it afloat on the ocean, believing that epidemics and other calamities will all float away with it.

3) The T'ang emperor Minghuang (明皇; Xuanzong 玄宗, r. 712–756) in order to test the magic powers of the leader of the Heavenly Master Religion, Zhang Tianshi (張天師; all leaders of this religion are considered descendants of its founder, Zhang Daoling (張道陵; fl. 2nd century C.E.), and adopt the title *tianshi*, 'Heavenly Master,' on assuming leadership), ordered a contingent of 360 presented scholars to sequester themselves in a cellar under his palace and perform music at his command. He then summoned Zhang Tianshi and told him that he suffered frequent hauntings by demonic forces and requested his aid in capturing them, whereupon the Heavenly Master drew his sword and drew [charms] in the air while chanting spells. In a flash, the music stopped,

greatly surprising the emperor. When he sent someone to investigate, he learned that all 360 scholars had died. Feeling great sorrow and remorse for what he had done, and in order to console (*diaonian* 弔念) these innocent scholars, he bestowed the title *wangye* on them and ordered all areas of China to build temples and worship them . . . (The rest of the passage goes on to list names of different *wangye*).⁵

4) In the early years of the Ming dynasty, 360 scholars took passage on a ship to cross the ocean and participate in the palace examinations (*dianshi* 殿試). Unfortunately they ran into a powerful typhoon in the waters off Fujian and the ship went down with all hands, after which their souls (*linghun* 靈魂) wandered back and forth in the world of men, refusing to go to Heaven. When Taizu (太祖; the Hongwu 洪武 emperor, 1368–1399) heard of this he ordered a large ship to be built to house their spirits, gave them the posthumous title of *wangye*, and decreed that temples should be built for their worship throughout the empire.⁶

5) When the Qing soldiers crossed the passes and destroyed the Ming, 360 presented scholars refused to serve foreign invaders and suffered martyrdom (*xunguo* 殉國). It is said that when their spirits ascended to Heaven that the Jade Emperor (Yuhuang Dadi 玉皇大帝) was so moved by their patriotism (*zhongzhen* 忠貞) that he issued a special order to give them the title of *wangye*, and instructed them to descend to the world of men (*xiafan* 下凡) and watch over (*xunshi* 巡視) people's good and bad deeds (pp. 120–121).

The belief that these spirits are in effect patrolling the world has manifested itself in the processions held during plague god festivals which are known in Taiwan as "Tours of Inspection in Place of Heaven" (*daitian xunshou* 代天巡狩), the term being taken from the imperial tours (called *xunshou*), which can be traced back to the Zhou dynasty (Wechsler 1985: 161–169). As far as can be ascertained, plague gods were seen as performing tours of inspection at least as early as the sixteenth century, as one text from Zhejiang entitled *Zunsheng bajian* (遵王八牋) contains a charm which reads "The Heavenly Emissaries have already passed through" (*tianxing yi guo* 天行已過) and was designed to fool the real Emissaries who had yet to arrive (Ch'en 1942: 53).

ANALYSIS

Whoever the *wangye* may have been before assuming this title, what strikes one immediately about all these stories is the violent and tragic nature of their deaths. What could account for this, and what could account for the violent rites enacted during their worship? One way

to answer this question might be to consider the suffering people underwent when afflicted with diseases like cholera, smallpox, malaria, bubonic plague, etc., all of which the colonists on Taiwan knew and dreaded. As people witnessed the agonizing deaths of those they loved they would have felt threatened by an invisible force they couldn't fight. In attempting to come to grips with the cause of this calamity, they might personify it in the form of the young men described in these stories, perhaps expressing the feeling that only those who had suffered greatly in their own lifetimes could inflict such pain. But while these stories express sympathy for their plight, the underlying theme remains that these beings caused epidemics and threatened the welfare of the entire community. Therefore, the strongest possible measures had to be taken against them, which would explain the violence seen in the rituals.

A closer look at the above five stories reveals some striking features, one being that all the characters in them are scholars. On the one hand, their learning and pursuit of a career in the officialdom makes them worthy of respect; nevertheless, an important element of these stories is that these young men never attain their ultimate goal, a high post in the bureaucracy, something that accounts for their reluctance to leave this world after their death. Not only do they die young, their deaths are either premature or violent: at the hands of others, by suicide, or by drowning (considered a bad form of death leaving behind dangerous ghosts [Jordan 1972: 56–59]). Finally, they all attain a position in the Heavenly Bureaucracy, giving their stories a happy ending.

Put all these elements together and you find a profile of the ghosts so often seen in Chinese fiction and drama: 1) Those who die accidentally or before they are old enough to fulfill social obligations such as getting married or worshipping their ancestors, known as souls of the dead (*wanghun* 亡魂); and, 2) Those murdered or whose death is brought about by others, who return from the grave to wreak revenge, known as vengeful souls (*yuanhun* 冤魂). In a sixth century collection of stories about such ghosts written by Yan Zhitui (顏之推; 531–591) entitled *Tales of Vengeful Souls* (*Yuanhunzhi* 冤魂志), these spirits frequently use disease as a weapon to torment and eventually kill their persecutors (Cohen 1982, especially stories 26 and 59). Either type of demon can cause great harm by inflicting disease, and when they do so the usual recourse is to call on the local folk or Taoist priest to help placate or exorcise them.

The question is: Of the myriads of people who die prematurely or before their time, what enabled a select few to attain the status of *wangye*? I think the answer to this question lies in the theories advanced by David Jordan (1972) and Stevan Harrell (1974), both of whom show that the usual recourse when one has failed to exorcise a ghost is to

deify it. Such a process seems to have occurred for the *wangye* themselves. As repeated prophylactic rituals failed to prevent deaths during epidemics or their recurrence, certain demons perceived as powerful enough to resist exorcism were given the title *wangye* and offered sacrifice as a form of appeasement. Although the stories cite sympathy or admiration as lying behind their deification, such feelings alone could not perpetuate their widespread worship. Certainly, the first stage of the process was dying in a way which attracted other people's attention; beyond that however, these demons had to persist in causing trouble and appearing either in dreams or through possession before receiving worship. While this is not to say that all *wangye* worship is a form of extortion by the dead, one cannot overlook the fact that behind these stories lies a centuries-old tradition of violent rituals designed to prevent epidemics, and that such rituals could not have been aimed merely at souls people felt sorry for but at those they *feared*.

In a way, the *wangye* lie on a plane between that of ghost and god. Once ghosts feared and despised, now treated as deities and offered sacrifice, they differ from more standard Taoist and Buddhist deities in that they are known only by their surnames and rarely perform any positive function such as bringing rain, aiding in battle, or helping conceive a male child. The festivals dedicated to them include both entertainment for them in the form of banquets and opera (treatment accorded to gods) and entrapment through Taoist charms on a boat, which is either floated out to sea or burnt (clearly exorcistic in nature).

Their ambiguous nature can also be seen in the title they bear. On the one hand *wangye* would be used when addressing imperial princes whose title ended with the word *wang*. However, Chinese fiction of the Ming-Qing era provides a different perspective. For example, in the seventeenth century tale *An Unofficial History of True Zen* (*Chanzen yishi*), a group of bandits call their leader *dawangye* (大王爺) (23: 9b and 10a), while in a Ming novel about the exorcistic deity Zhong Kui (鍾馗) entitled *The Biography of the Demon Slayer* (*Zhanguizhuan*) local ruffians use *wangye* in addressing their chief (p. 27). The story *Traces of Immortals in the Wild* (*Luye xianzong*), written in the eighteenth century, describes a demon king (*yaowang* 妖王) who refers to himself as *dawangye* (p. 539). The word *ye* also appears in other compounds such as *laoye* 老爺, *yeye* 爺爺, and *daye* 大爺, used when addressing one's father, an official, or any male of superior rank and/or status. During the Qing dynasty, one of the titles used when addressing the emperor was "Lord for Myriad Years" (*wansuiye* 萬歲爺). In all cases, but especially for the term *wangye*, the feeling of fear equals, if not outweighs, any feelings of respect. Calling a bandit chief *wangye* proves especially significant,

as it implies that in most people's minds holders of that title were not necessarily benevolent.

Given the ambiguous nature of the *wangye*, should one call them demons or deities? Based on the nature of the stories about them and the way they are treated in rituals, it would seem most appropriate to stick with the word demon. Yet at the same time we should be sensitive to the fact that no one on Taiwan *calls* the *wangye* demons. This is not to say that they aren't considered dangerous spiritual forces, but at least in name the word demon (*gui* 鬼) is not used. Therefore, I will refer to them as demons causing epidemics, except for when translating specific titles.

FOREBEARERS OF THE *WANGYE*

At this point, I would like to shift the discussion from contemporary beliefs on Taiwan and consider their roots in Chinese tradition perhaps risky because differing belief systems must have existed in different places and at different times. Yet one can still see a common thread in the midst of this patchwork, due to the continuity amidst diversity that is one of the striking characteristics of Chinese culture. For example, it seems that all the spirits discussed below, regardless of region or time, died untimely or violent deaths.

The worship of *wangye* in South China and Taiwan occurred relatively recently in Chinese history, traceable only as far back as the late Ming. From the beginning though, Chinese people suffered from epidemics and used ritual to prevent them. For example, in the "Yueling" (月令; a calendar of rituals to be observed during the year) section of the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記), one passage reads: "[In the last month of spring] orders are given for the ceremonies against pestilence throughout the city; at the nine gates animals are torn in pieces in deprecation (of the danger):—to secure the full development of the healthy airs of spring. If . . . [the governmental proceedings] proper to summer were not observed, many of the people would suffer from pestilential diseases; the seasonable rains would not fall; and no produce would be derived from the mountains and heights" (Legge 1967, I: 266–267).

Like contemporary Taiwanese, the Chinese during the Zhou dynasty performed rituals to prevent epidemics, the difference being that in the *Liji* specific deities are not mentioned, the ritual experts of that time perceiving improper observance of the rites or a disharmony in the cosmic forces as causing calamities. The majority of people living at that time did blame demonic agents for causing epidemics though, and attempted to exorcise them in a ceremony known as the Great Exorcism (*Da Nuo* 大難), held at the end of the lunar year. Accounts of this rite

like the one taken from the *Houhanshu* below, remind one in many ways of the festivals performed in Taiwan today, particularly with spirit mediums carrying weapons driving off unnamed demonic forces. “One day before [the end of the year] there is the Great Exorcism, which is called the ‘expulsion of pestilences’ (*zhuyi* 逐疫). In this ceremony, one hundred and twenty lads from among the Palace Attendants of the Yellow Gate (e.g. eunuchs), aged ten to twelve are selected to form a youthful troupe. They all wear red headbands, black tunics, and hold large twirl-drums. The Exorcist (*fangxiangshi* 方相氏), [his head] covered with a bearskin having four eyes of gold, and clad in a black upper garment and a red lower garment, grasps a lance and brandishes a shield” The account then goes on to describe the commencement of the ceremony and the kinds of spirits invoked to drive off the demons of pestilence. It continues: “[Then the Exorcist and the lads chant] ‘May all these twelve spirits drive away the evil and baneful. Let them roast your (the demons’) bodies, break your spines and joints, tear off your flesh, pull out your lungs and entrails. If you do not leave at once, those who stay behind will become their food’ [Then they] dance and shout, going everywhere through the front and rear apartments (of the palace). They make three rounds, holding torches, with which they send the pestilences forth [Meanwhile] in the various bureaus, each official wears a wooden animal mask, with which he can act as a leader of those participating in the Exorcism” (Bodde 1975: 81–82).

Although the account here describes the ceremony as it was performed in the capital, it seems reasonable to assume that it was celebrated in the countryside as well, or indeed that it may have derived from ancient rural exorcistic rituals. Perhaps one should not compare a Han dynasty festival in North China to a modern one in Taiwan. Still, when one sees half-naked young men (some with painted faces) running through the streets of Xigang and cutting their flesh with a variety of weapons, as well as the spirit dancers and huge ghost puppets, one can begin to see some similarities to the *Da Nuo* and begin to imagine what it must have been like.

In ancient China, everyone played a role in the *Da Nuo*. Even Confucius, the man who never spoke of “prodigies, force, disorder, and the gods” could not ignore it, as one passage in Book Ten of the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) reads: “When the villagers were exorcising evil spirits (literally “holding the *Nuo*”), he stood in his court robes on the eastern steps” (Lau 1979: 103), the steps being where the host should position himself. The Master may or may not have approved of such rituals, but in the society of his age, he could hardly decline to recognize them, since their purpose was to benefit the entire community.

Observance of the *Nuo* rite continued through the Song (960–1279), but seems to have declined in popularity as time went on. Furthermore, the *Da Nuo* seems mainly to have been a northern Chinese ritual, and as the Han population shifted South it attempted to ritually cope with epidemics on occasions like the Dragon Boat Festival and others, usually falling amidst the fifth or sixth lunar months and perhaps derived from the cultures which had once flourished in the areas the Han moved into.⁷ New deities like the City Gods (*Cheng Huang* 城隍) and a group of five deities known variously as the Five Saints (*Wu Sheng* 五聖) or Five Popular Ones (*Wu Tong* 五通), took over the function of regulating epidemics. A Song collection of notes (*biji* 筆記) entitled *Qidong yeyu*, written by Zhou Mi (周密, 1232–1308) describes taking a child infected with smallpox before the City God to determine its fate as one of the procedures current at that time (pp. 138–139). Furthermore, a gazetteer from Liuhe (六合) county in Jiangsu contains records of prayers offered by the district magistrate Dong Bangzheng (董邦政, fl. 1550) to the City God during an epidemic (10: 34a-b). Relying on City Gods to prevent epidemics should come as no surprise, since they were frequently petitioned and at times even coerced into action during disasters like epidemics, droughts or floods (Cohen 1978: 245–265).

The Five Saints, whose worship dates from the T'ang and flourished from Song to Qing, also performed a variety of functions, a major one being preventing the spread of contagious disease. The stories concerning their origin (especially the one in Zhao Yi's (趙翼, 1727–1814) *Gaiyu congkao*) indicate that they might belong to the *yuanhun* category. According to Zhao, the Ming emperor Taizu had a dream shortly after ascending the throne in which the thousands of soldiers who had died for his cause appeared before him. Out of their myriads he chose five of them to receive blood offerings (*xueshi* 血食) in temples throughout South China. This story might be related to tale number 4) from the almanac, in which Taizu ordered temples to be built in honor of those scholars who died attempting to sail north to take the palace exams. Zhao's work also indicates that these deities were feared for their propensity to haunt others (*zuoshui* 作祟), one form of which was to make their victims ill (pp. 773–774).

A passage from chapter 62 of the novel *Outlaws of the Marsh* (*Shuihuzhuan*) indicates that these deities had died violent deaths at the hands of others and that new candidates assumed this title over time. At that point of the novel, Song Jiang (宋江) and his fellow outlaws had captured a famous Supernumerary (*yuanywai* 員外) named Lu Junyi (盧俊義) and spent many weeks trying in vain to get him to join their band. However, on Lu's return home he finds that one of his servants

has accused him of joining the bandits and he eventually receives the death sentence. As he is about to be beheaded (he ends up being rescued at the last minute and becoming an outlaw), the executioner says: "Circumstances are forcing us to do this. We've already arranged a seat for you in the Temple of the Five Saints (*Wushengtang* 五聖堂) ahead. You can go there and claim it!" (Shapiro 1981: 1016). While one cannot be sure that Lu or any of these men were worshipped as demons of epidemics, it is clear that they died violently and this fact, combined with what we know about *wangye* beliefs in Taiwan, could lead one to speculate that in some areas of China the Five Saints were the pre-modern *wangye*.

Other stories which might have influenced beliefs in Taiwan can be found in collections like the Ming *Sanjiao yuanliu soushen daquan* or the



Fig. 1. The Commissioners of the Five Epidemics (from the *Sanjiao yuanliu soushen daquan*, 1909 edition).



Fig. 2. Yang Ren with the fire fan (from *Fengshen yanyi*, 1923 edition, *juan* 12, chapter 93).

novel *Fengshen Yanyi*. The former describes a group of deities (see Fig. 1) known as the Commissioners of the Five Epidemics (*Wuwen shizhe* 五瘟使者), who are said to have appeared in the year 599 carrying: a spoon and earthenware vase; a leather bag and a sword; a fan; a club; and a jug of fire. Their arrival signalled impending pestilence, and, as no remedy could be found, the emperor was forced to give them titles and enshrine them in temples where they were to be worshipped on the fifth day of the fifth month (pp. 156–157). In the novel *Fengshen yanyi*, the Taoist hermit Lü Yue (呂岳) and his four disciples fought on the side of the Shang kings, against the Zhou, using implements like swords, flags, and umbrellas to spread epidemic disease among the Zhou forces. Yang Ren (楊任) finally overcame them with a fire fan which burned up the weapons and Lü himself (see Fig. 2). Lü's disciples also died in battle, the five eventually being put in charge of the Ministry of Epidemics (*wenbu* 瘟部) after the Zhou victory. Anne Goodrich's work contains photographs and a description of the group as worshipped in the Temple of the Eastern Peak (Dongyuemiao 東嶽廟) in Peking in 1927 (Goodrich 1964: 111–118).

The cults of these two groups of deities appear to have been less widespread than the others discussed above, perhaps because their stories appear to belong to a written and not an oral tradition. How-

ever, one story from the *Lüyuan conghua* (1825) recounts that when the prefecture of Jiading (嘉定) in Sichuan was being ravaged by an epidemic in 1808, an official from Jiangsu named Xu Gongding 徐公鼎 dreamed that the Commissioners of the Five Epidemics told him that they would not desist until the Lantern Festival (held on the 15th day of the first month). Although it was only the fifth month at the time, he proclaimed that the new year had arrived, and held a two-week festival in their honor, whereupon the epidemics stopped (p. 380). This shows that at least in Xu's mind, the Commissioners were responsible for epidemics, although one cannot assume that the people of Jiading shared the same belief system as an official from Jiangsu. While they went along with his idea for changing the calendar, they might not have been worshipping the same deity or deities during that two-week period.

In general, the number five appears frequently in the stories about demons causing epidemics, and might provide a link between the traditional and more modern versions, especially since many of the *wangye* on Taiwan are still worshipped in groups of five. It is certainly significant that the lords, saints, commissioners, and ministers responsible for epidemics usually number five. Furthermore, the fact that the date for sacrificing to the Five Commissioners is the fifth day of the fifth month suggests a connection between the Dragon Boat Festival and rituals to exorcise demons causing epidemics. Today the festival centers on the dragon boat races said to symbolize efforts to rescue the poet Qu Yuan 屈原 (ca. 340–290 B.C.E.), who drowned himself in the Miluo 汨羅 River as a form of political protest. However, the practices of putting certain pungent herbs above the door to one's house or giving charms/packets of herbs to children to wear hints at the original prophylactic nature of this rite. In his 1964 monograph on the Dragon Boat Festival, Göran Ajimer drew on Chao Wei-pang's annotated translation of the Ming writer Yang Sichang's piece on the Hunan ritual, as well as materials from the *Gujin tushu jichenq*, to state that it represented a combination of fertility rite and ancestor worship. I would question this interpretation, as Yang's piece clearly shows the paramount importance of spirit mediums hurling live animals into the water as a prophylactic sacrifice (Chao 1943: 8–11). Rivers were often considered dangerous because of the pestilential vapors they emitted (see account above on p. 198). A story in the *Soushenji* shows why: these rivers were often considered to be inhabited by ghosts (of drowning victims) who inflicted illnesses on passers-by (p. 156). Based on these pieces of evidence, I would hypothesize that in its earliest form, the Dragon Boat Festival, represented an attempt to prevent epidemics by placating the demons who lived in

rivers with animal and perhaps human (Eberhard 1968: 396) sacrifices.

Finally, one also sees beliefs about individual demons causing disease, such as the young black-faced malaria spirit the Qing writer Yuan Mei (1715–1797) described as dancing around his bed during a bout with malaria (Ebrey 1981: 182), the Smallpox Goddess (*Doushen niangniang* 痘神娘娘), or the Lord of Epidemics (*Wenshenye* 瘟神爺) described in chapter 39 of *The Story of the Stone* (*Shitouji* 石頭記). At that point of the novel a relative from the country had lied to Jia Baoyu (賈寶玉) about a shrine to a local goddess which had fallen into disrepair, something he seeks to remedy by raising contributions. But when he sends one of his pages to take a look at the shrine, the boy reports that: “This was no she. It was an ugly great Plague God with a blue face and red hair!” (Hawkes 1977: 275). This description resembles the one of Lu Yue in *Fengshen yanyi*, as he is said to have had a blue face, red hair, long teeth, and three eyes. These accounts should also be taken into consideration when analyzing Chinese beliefs about epidemics, but it would be difficult to link them to the Taiwan *wangye*.

CONCLUSION

In the end, what the above accounts reveal is that more than one tradition existed in China concerning spiritual forces responsible for the spread of epidemics. Only through thorough regional studies will we be able to uncover the nature of these beliefs and how they found expression in local folktales and festivals.⁸ In my dissertation research on the province of Zhejiang, preliminary results indicate a system in some ways similar to that on Taiwan, yet with important differences. In a work entitled *Surviving Customs of Hangzhou* (*Hangsu yifeng* 1863), a long passage describing the cult of the Loyal and Defending King (*Zhong jing wang* 忠靖王) notes that while of undetermined age, it is the most popular one in the area. The story about this “King,” whose surname is *wen* (溫; homophone for 瘟?), is strikingly similar to story 2) from the Taiwan almanac (see above p. 200), in that this young scholar overheard plague demons poisoning the wells and cast himself in so that no one would drink the water. He is worshipped individually, and his birthday is celebrated on the 18th day of the 5th month (pp. 10–12). A 1986 publication from Zhejiang entitled *A Simplified Gazetteer of Zhejiang Customs* (*Zhejiang Fengsu Jianzhi*), which contains data compiled from local gazetteers and field work (unfortunately the editors do not always indicate which sources they used), also supplies information about this cult, noting that festivals were held in the regions of Wenzhou, Shaoxing (紹興), Jiaxing (嘉興), Huzhou (湖州) and Lishui

(麗水) (see pp. 216–217, 277–278, 328, 401, 578). Even in these different parts of Zhejiang one can see wide variation, from the date of the festival to the form it takes—even to the nature of the Loyal and Defending King as defender against or inflicter of epidemics.

Much more work needs to be done to trace the origins and development of this cult. Yet even through this preliminary research, one can make some comparisons between Zhejiang and Fujian. In his studies of plague beliefs in Fujian and Taiwan, Liu states that the stories of the 360 scholars (stories 1), 3), and 5) on pp. 200–201 above) represent the mainstream in this region's religious system, while the story about throwing oneself down a well represents merely a branch of this (Liu 1983: 227). From what we have seen from Zhejiang, this story occupies a more central place in that religious system. Whether this tradition spread from Zhejiang to Fujian or *vice versa* cannot be determined as yet, but at least the current state of the data might inspire scholars to explore plague god traditions in other regions for comparative purposes.

What looking at these tales has helped to show is certain general characteristics of this belief which were prevalent throughout all of China, especially that these demons were once men who had died violently, and that epidemics represented a form of heavenly retribution. In the *Liji* this occurred if correct rituals were not held at the proper time. Later on though, people saw heavenly retribution as a form of punishment for the sins of the individual. For example, a passage in the *Heartfelt Responses of the Supreme Lord (Taishang ganyingpian 太上感應篇)*, a morality book popular from the Song to the present, reads: “If [those sinners'] guilt be not expiated by death, they will suffer by various evils; by water, by fire, by theft or by robbery, by loss of property, by disease and illness, and by ill-repute, to compensate for any unlawful violation of justice” (Suzuki and Carus 1906: 64). From this might have developed the idea of Ministers of Epidemics or *wangye* conducting Tours of Inspection in Place of Heaven to check up on the conduct of each individual and punishing those evil-doers by making them sick. While we may never be able to completely reconstruct the way *wangye* worship arose and eventually spread to Taiwan, examination of beliefs in premodern China can clarify our understanding of the cults studied by anthropologists today.

There are a number of areas that could be pursued in greater depth; in fact, many of the questions raised at the beginning of the paper remain largely unanswered. For myself, two major problems seem of greatest interest for future work: 1) The development of cults of disease demons over time; and, 2) The varying ways people in the same community might perceive the same cult.

Concerning the first problem, it seems that cults for young men who died tragic deaths constitute a later development in the history of disease demon worship, perhaps starting no earlier than the Ming dynasty. I would speculate that a long progression occurred, starting from worship of natural forces like rivers to animals to women to men. Of interest is the fact that in Song dynasty sources like the *Yijianzhi* (夷堅志), epidemic demons (in Huzhou) are seen as snakewomen. If one further considers that in the famous story "The White Snake," the snake-woman lived in a house in Hangzhou haunted by the ghosts of those who had died in an epidemic, the picture becomes even clearer. Perhaps over time cults to snake-women in Zhejiang became superseded by cults to the Loyal and Defending King, but more work needs to be done on this before conclusions can be drawn.

As for the second problem, I have already suggested above that different people from different levels of society might not perceive a deity in the same way. In particular, one might consider gender differences. In his paper on the Mazu cult, James Watson has dramatically shown how women's perceptions of it differed from men's (Watson 1986: 320-321). Furthermore, in a recent article Stevan Harrell has shown how gender differences influence the way people perceive ghosts (Harrell 1987: 97-116). While in exploring Taiwan beliefs, he did not look at the *wangye*, perhaps further research might show the varying ways in which men and women feel about these deities.

Despite the fact that we remain unsure as to the origins of the *wangye* cult, it is clear that a belief system has lasted into this decade both in Taiwan and China (Dean 1986: 191-210). Why is this so? One reason might be that even though many of the killer epidemics have been wiped out, as long as man remains threatened by disease he will continue to believe in demons who cause it and gods/saints who can cure it.⁹ Another possible explanation is that *wangye* are no longer seen as specifically responsible for causing disease but have come to represent all evil forces which threaten the community. Most people in Xigang, when asked as to the purpose of the festival, replied that it was "to ask for peace and harmony" (*qiu pingan* 求平安), disease being only one of a number of dangers to that peace. If this is the case, we can expect worship of the *wangye* to continue in Taiwan and China albeit in new and different forms, no matter how the society might change as it modernizes. Beliefs and practices adjust to the needs of a specific community at a certain time, but general hopes and fears seem to be the one constant in a flow of change.

NOTES

1. For a more detailed account (albeit of the 1979 festival), see Liu 1983: 285-400.
2. His hagiography can be found in the Taoist Canon (*Daozang* 道藏) book 557.
3. All translations of official titles are based on Charles O. Hucker 1985.
4. This bears a striking resemblance to the charges of well-poisoning levelled against the Jews during the Black Death (Ziegler 1969: 96, 109).
5. This story differs markedly from that preserved by Henri Doré when he was in Rugao (如皋; in present-day Jiangsu 江蘇) in that Doré's account mentions: 1) The number of scholars as being five, 2) the emperor as being Taizong (太宗, 627-650), 3) these scholars receiving various weapons from Zhang Tianshi to inflict diseases on the emperor and coerce titles from him.
6. According to Liu Zhiwan, this story is most prevalent in Taiwan (Liu 1983: 227).
7. For example, the Dai minority races Dragon Boats for their New Year festival.
8. One should also consult ritual texts in the Taoist Canon, especially in books 29, 84, 566, 756, 931, 1055, and 1063. The Buddhist Canon, too, might prove rewarding.
9. It would certainly be interesting to explore how many people have turned to religion in light of the AIDS epidemics.

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