

The Ranking of Gods in Chinese Folk Religion

By

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In the polytheistic religion of present day Taiwan, different deity cults compete for control over ritual territory, and for the allegiance of worshippers. Success or failure in this competition may result in a change in rank of the gods involved and the spread of their cults to new areas. Where the dynamic nature of this process has been noted, the question of ranking gods often partakes of a circular logic: Gods are popular because they are powerful and they are powerful because they are popular. Such an explanation fails to account for the reason why some gods change rank readily while others may remain fixed in static hierarchies.

This paper attempts to explain the principles which lie behind the mobility or stasis of gods by drawing upon parallels in the organizational principles of family and community religion.

As I explain elsewhere (Baity: 1975), the popularity of community gods is a result of their proven efficacy, which leads to the spread of the cult. No cult spreads unless its God is efficacious, and this in turn depends upon the willingness of the deity to make efficacious answers to worshippers in return for their worship. Since the most efficacious gods are those which respond to the widest number of worshippers, across kinship and ethnic lines, no ancestor is likely to become a community god, because his particularistic ties prevent him from responding to non-agnates. Most gods in Taiwan have as a result, developed from "hungry ghosts" that is, people who died without having descendants and came to be worshipped by the public at large (*ibid.*). Such spirits never become tied into the fixed private hierarchy of ancestral worship, for to receive public worship a spirit must eschew any attributes of the ancestor. Even generational articulation in a family line must be avoided because generations suggest descendants and these would be an anathema to the would-be god. Generations also conflict logically

with the god's claim to immortality, for the sequence of many generations suggests the relative mortality of each. Though the lack of children originally provides the impetus for the transformation of the ghost into a god, it also impedes the spread of his cult. Whereas the family is propagated in time and space through biological offspring, how is the deity with no progeny to assure the spread of his cult into new areas, which is essential if the god cult is not to face extinction? The deity cult must also maintain centralized control over any spread if it is not to split into competitive branch cults which may surpass the original in popularity and prestige, thus destroying its very *raison d'être* for growth.

The cult thus faces several related problems in coping with growth. It has to maintain its public character, retain control over branch cults, and at the same time provide the original cult with material incentives for making the spread possible.

These conflicting demands are met through the process of *fenshen* (splitting bodies) by means of which a deity statue is duplicated and invested with the spirit and power of the original, thus providing additional statues to serve as the foci of branch cults in other areas.

The duplicate statue is carved and initially placed on the altar of the temple enshrining the original, covered with a piece of red paper to prevent it from being possessed by the wrong spirit before the investiture ceremony. At this time the paper is removed and a priest endows the statue with the life and spirit of the original by painting in the eyes (called "opening the eyes") with a vermilion or blood tipped brush. The statue is now ready to be taken to a private home, another temple or left on the original altar to become more "irradiated" with the power and efficacy of the original. If it is taken away a stick of burning incense or incense ash from the censer is taken along and placed in the new locale. Such duplicate statues are generally available for a price or temple wishing to start a branch cult. Thus they provide both the means and the economic rationale for the spread of cults.

As a result of this process however, gods develop many features of the family system. Although the *fenshen* are believed to be possessed by the same spirit¹ as the original. In fact, *fenshen* come to be con-

1. The concept of *fenshen* seems originally to have been based on the notion of "transformation bodies" (*huashen*) by which the adept or deity could appear in different places or times simultaneously. On the mainland Maspéro (1971: 99) notes that some deities with many temples could not reside in all at the same time, and so appointed other minor local spirits to represent them. This solution is unknown to me in Taiwan.

ceived as having slightly differing individual attributes than their "parents", and are ritually treated as "descendants" creating a series of generational ranks in which the original deity is of the first rank, the *fenshen* forming a second, the *fenshen* of the *fenshen* a third, and so on as long as the deities keep splitting. Likewise within each generation of *fenshen*, the first to be made may be considered the eldest brother or sister deity in rank order of their manufacture. Though the creation of ascriptive ranks based on birth order, introduced an element of familism into the community religion which is based ideally on achievement status, this also reconciled for the god, the ideal of immortality with that of descendants without his suffering as the ancestor would, the concomitant burden of privacy and stasis which would be inimical to the process of cult formation.

Both the *fenshen* process and the "opening the eyes ceremony" closely resemble the processes for "dotting" the tablet of a recently deceased ancestor before it is permanently installed on the home ancestral altar. It also resembles the process called *fenhuo* ("splitting the fire") by which ancestral tablets are installed in branch households following the division of the inheritance between siblings. There are however important differences between deity statues and ancestral tablets, though both are believed to serve as the temporary residing place of a spirit. These differences reveal important structural differences between community and family religious beliefs and practices.

Normally an ancestral tablet is kept on the domestic altar of the oldest son and serves as the ritual focus of a group of siblings who may reside elsewhere. If the younger brothers move away, following the division of the inheritance, they cannot usually carry with them tablets or duplicates of tablets belonging to ascending generations, but only "generalized" tablets representing all of the ancestors (Freedman 1970: 174). Thus the ability of the ancestral tablet to be duplicated is severely restricted, because it is the symbol of the unequal hierarchical ritual and corporate rights of family members tracing descent from the ancestor (*ibid*: 166ff.). One occasion on which a duplicate tablet *can* be made, is when it is to be placed in an ancestral hall, clan hall or Buddhist temple (*ibid*: 167-8). However the worship conducted in ancestral halls is of a "collective" nature, and different from that intended for individual ancestors in the domestic cult (*ibid*: 176). Thus when duplicates are made of tablets, they are either generalized tablets, or individual tablets destined for general worship. So jealously and rigorously maintained are the rights symbolized by the tablets that taboos prevent them

from being moved from or on the ancestral altar (cf. Ahern: 1973: 119). Thus tablets are inherently "static" and "unmoving", mirroring the static hierarchical kinship relations which are predicted upon the rank order of birth.

This static nature of the tablet contrasts sharply with the mobility of the deity and the movement of its statue in space.² Except for the main deity figure in each temple which must remain immobile, all of the *fenshen* on the altar are free to move about. Because the community god is not tied to private proprietary interests, but rather believed to belong to the community as a whole, community members are also free to keep these statues in their homes, and to take them with them should they move to a new area.

Unlike ancestral tablets which we may say are "generalized upwards" deity statues are always "individualized downwards" with the *fenshen* taking on increasing individuality. They are given specific names to distinguish between them, and are believed, though sharing in the essence of the "parent" to have individual attributes specific powers and vastly varying efficacious powers. It is this "individualization" of efficacy which permits gods to compete with one another in the community, but as we shall see, the ability of any *fenshen* to compete with its "parent" is severely restricted.

Among deities which are *fenshen* from one another, the ranking system closely follows that found in the family, as the links in both are automatically generated by the process of fission itself. Because the relation to the "parent" is analogous to that of child and parent, these relationships are not amenable to change. The original deity and temple always remains dominant over any subsequently split-off branch cults. The "parent" is always ritually superior to the *fenshen*. Even if this latter should at some later date become particularly efficacious, part of this efficacy will reflect upon the parent as well. Likewise all *fenshen* may be seen as spatial extensions of the original deity, and any area controlled by a *fenshen* is *ipso facto* part of the administrative area of the parent. This principle limits the degree to which any *fenshen* can rise in rank at the expense of its parent, and serves to centralize control of branch cults in the hands of the original cult.

Because the *fenshen* is believed to be part of the original in substance, it is believed by many temple managers that the number of *fenshen* from any deity must be limited, because each draws some of its

2. Baity (1972) *Moving and Static Gods*. Unpub. mss.

strength and power from the original. It is feared that too much splitting will weaken the deity. This too, acts as a restraining force in the spread of the cult, enhancing the prestige and control of the original through scarcity by limiting the number of *fenshen* available to new temples.

The nature of these status relations between parent and child deities sheds light on the ancient practice of the deity "patrolling" the area of its administrative control. Formerly, in the Ch'ing dynasty, when the custom was more prevalent than today, informants report that statues of the Ma-tsu from Meichou island on the mainland were invited to Tanshui each year at the time of the goddesses' birthday. The "patrol" served not only to define the ritual area controlled by the god, but also to trace the lines of descent between the deity and the *fenshen*, and to reinforce the rank distinctions between them. This was symbolized by the payment of money by the subordinate cult, in exchange for infusions of the higher deities' power through the process of "irradiation". This process, (called *kuahsiang* "hanging incense") by which a deity is invited to a temple or a private home is still very popular on a reduced scale in Taiwan today, yet is still one of the principal means used by temples to generate income. In the above manner we see that the practice of *fenshen* ties together in a single equation a god's rank status, territorial control, wealth and spread into a single system.

To reiterate, though each community god is ideally freely competitive with all others, in fact gods related through *fenshen* ties are "fixed" in their hierarchical relations to one another. The fact that community religion partook of these contrasting principles of ranking poses the question to which degree are gods really mobile and to what degree bound by ascriptive ties. Clearly the inherently static features of familism cannot explain the process by which community gods compete for dominance. Can we assume that there is *no* competition between gods of the same type, and that each accepts his rank passively? Such an assumption would be unwarranted, for gods of the same type in many cases compete vigorously. Thus there must be two systems of ranking gods of the same type, one which permits competition and one which does not.

When we consider what factors make for a position of dominance of a god in the community religion, we may distinguish three for analytical purposes. First is the efficacy of the god. Second is the absolute chronological age of the deity or the temple, third is the relative age of the deity compared to others of the same type. Here we may further distinguish between generational rank based on direct descent, e.g.,

mother and daughter *fenshen*, and age rank based on older and younger *fenshen* within the same generation or other same name deities who are not descendants of one another.

Efficacy

Efficacy is the means by which a god transforms its miracles into popularity and what eventually is a mandate for control of the area in which the deity is popular. The relative rank of different gods is symbolized by the size of their ritual area. Although pure efficacy is sometimes hard to distinguish from ascriptive criteria such as age, for analytical purposes the two are considered as distinct, and efficacy based purely upon achievement.

Efficacy is the primary mechanism by which totally unrelated gods compete with one another. Efficacy may also be the basis for competition between different *fenshen* in the same generation, in which case it may displace age differences in importance, and likewise it may serve to rank gods who share the same name but who cannot or do not trace direct descent. But efficacy is not a factor in determining the respective ranks of parent and *fenshen* deities.

Age

It might be assumed that absolute chronological age would provide an important means of ranking temples and deities, since it held in almost universal reverence in China, so we might expect the oldest temples always to be dominant within any area. Sometimes this is the case in Taiwan. A well known example is the Ma-tsu temple in Peikang, considered by most to be the oldest on the island and the main Ma-tsu cult if not the dominant cult of all in Taiwan (Tseng: 321). In other parts of Taiwan many old temples retain their predominant position, but on the face of the evidence we cannot maintain that age is the only or even the most important criterion of rank. If this were true we should expect that in each area the oldest gods are the most important and this is not the case. Indeed the "City Gods" of Taipei and Tanshui ("Pearly Ocean" City God and Ch'ing-shui Tsu-shih) were relatively late arrivals, and their cults arose in response to particular conditions (Baity: 1975).

Generation rank

If efficacy is most important in ranking unrelated deities so genera-

tional criteria are most important in the case of related *fenshen* gods. The importance of generational ranking is clearly underlined by the attempts of all deities that are *fenshen*, to attempt to trace their origin to as high a generation as possible. In N. Taiwan, many cults claim that their gods came from the mainland centuries earlier and are *fenshen* of the most important gods there. For example the Ma-tsu temples in Taipei, Kuantu and Tanshui all claim that their statues are *fenshen* from the same temple on Meichou island, which is thought to have been the home of the historical Ma-tsu and which has remained the center of her cult. Likewise the Lungshan temples in Tanshui and Taipei which enshrine Kuan-yin both claim her statue originated from the same temple in Anhai village, Fukien province. The same principle holds true for other major cults. Whatever the authenticity of these claims, their effect is to place these various *fenshen* on the same generational level and on an equal footing as regards ritual precedence. Each plays down any claim to superiority on the part of the others. It also meant that any cult will try to obtain its *fenshen* statue from as high a generation original as possible.

Temples built during the Japanese occupation (1895–1945) and recently since 1949, can no longer obtain *fenshen* from temples on the mainland, and as a result most of their gods are *fenshen* from Taiwanese temples and form a third generation. Accordingly they are unable to claim an equal generational depth with the older Taiwanese temples. Such cuts normally recognize their ritual subordination to their parent cults, and engage in regular *kua-hsiang* services with them, which resemble the ancient but now defunct visits between Taiwanese and mainland cults.

Age rank within the same Generation

Deities of the same generational level may belong to cults established in different temples or they may be housed together on the same altar. In either case the process of fission of *fenshen* in time means that each *fenshen* can be ranked in order of age the first *fenshen* being the oldest, the last the youngest.

When *fenshen* of the same generation are enshrined in different temples, they may all be referred to collectively by the place name of their temple. Thus we have “Tanshui Ma-tsu”, “Sungshan Ma-tsu”, “Kuantu Ma-tsu”. When *fenshen* of the same generation are enshrined on the same altar, they are generally known by their individual names

which usually follow their order of manufacture. Thus we have "Tsu-shih #1", "Tsu-shih #2", or "Great Tsu-shih", "Old Tsu-shih", etc., in certain cases where the individual statue is particularly efficacious and popular it may be named after some particular individual trait as in the case of the "Falling Nose Tsu-shih" of Tanshui.³

We might think that the relative rank of same generation deities would depend upon their respective ages, so that within a given temple Tsu-shih #1 would be more powerful and efficacious than "Tsu-shih #2", or that the Taipei "Tsu-shih" having split from the mainland in the 18th century would be dominant over the "Tanshui Tsu-shih" which apparently came from the mainland in the 19th century. This tends not to be the case however, for the respective ranking of these gods appears to derive not from their age but from their demonstrated efficacy alone.

In Tanshui the "Falling Nose Tsu-shih" though not the oldest *fenshen* is believed to be the most efficacious and as a result his for *kuahsiang* services for an entire year may be reserved in advance on the first day of the year. In addition, the cost of his services may run two or three times higher than for the other *fenshen*. Likewise in Kuantu the Ma-tsu #2 is considered by the local inhabitants to have particularly efficacious powers because of her role in suppressing an epidemic over sixty years ago. As a result the inhabitants of ritual areas around the temple all wish to sponsor her patrol of the area, and invite her to visit and must cast lots to determine which area will have that privilege. Here we may also conclude that the phenomenon of efficacy is independent of the age-rank of the deities involved, and that same generation gods compete openly with one another.

In addition the competition of these gods does not encourage the custom of visits or *kuahsiang* services between them, for few temples are willing to pay for borrowing a deity whose superiority is contested. Thus the Kuantu, Taipei and Tanshui Ma-tsu *fenshen* rarely visit each other even though their temples are only a few miles apart. In contrast visits between totally unrelated and competitive deities are quite common; likewise when the ritual hierarchy between two similar gods is recognized by both, god visits are quite common. Thus the Peit'ou Ma-tsu which did not originate from the mainland invites the statue from the temple

3. The most famous deity in the area, whose sobriquet reveals the propensity for his nose which is pasted on with incense ash and water to fall off if he has been slighted, a situation which can only be rectified by earnest entreaty on behalf of the miscreant.

at Kuantu, which did, for the deity patrol parade each year and also maintains *kua-hsiang* relations with other old famous Ma-tsu temples in Peikang, Hsinkang and Lukang, because she is trying through the process of irradiation to enhance her own power and efficacy.

In summary, the process of *fenshen* answers the need of a deity cult to spread in space, and perhaps answers a need of a god to belong once again to a family and a lineage. Although god and ancestor may be seen as antithetical spirits, belonging to community and family religions, to some degree the features of one system are replicated in the other. The community cult is only able to solve the shortcomings imposed on it by the nature of its god, by adopting some features of the family cult. The converse is true as well, for the family has to give ritual recognition to competition and social mobility in the community sphere as evidenced by their members' achieved status on the basis of wealth or education.

One of the ways family cult organization reflects community social mobility is in the difference, noted by Freedman, between what he calls "A" and "Z" types of lineage organization (1958: 131ff). "A" lineages tend to be small and undifferentiated, with leadership concentrated in the hands of the oldest members of the senior generations (*ibid.*). Just as in lineages of gods, dominance follows the hierarchy of the generations though not always that of age ranks.

In "Z" type lineages, which are larger and internally differentiated, power and rank do not follow the lines of age and generational levels, but tend to be monopolized by the wealthier or educated gentry members (*ibid.*). Such a system of ranking appears similar to that which obtains between unrelated or brother and sister *fenshen* deities whose rank is based on their efficacy which is equivalent to wealth in the community religion.

In the community, wealth and efficacy ideally are equated with rank while in the family ideally they are not. The substitution of wealth for age seems to bend the ideally age-based status relations of the family ideology, while in community relations this is the norm, for in community relations between lineages for power and leadership, wealth always dominates. Thus in the community religion wealth plays an important role in the selection of the "lucky man" to head the *chiao* services, and analogously it is the most efficacious god which controls the largest ritual territory. However the community does not permit unlimited social mobility for all of its gods and here too the ideal is bent to preclude competition between gods and their own *fenshen*. The reason for "fixing" their relationships in a static hierarchy has already been sug-

gested: it derives from the concomitant need for any cult to assure its spread through the production of *fenshen* while simultaneously ensuring that such a spread is not inimical to the ritual supremacy or economic well being of the parent cult.

Both family and community then allowed for social mobility in what might otherwise have been static hierarchies but did so in different ways, paradoxically so in considering the general characteristics of "family" and "community" religions: whereas in family lineages demonstrable differences in wealth appear to take precedence over ranking by age or generational criteria; in deity lineages we suggest that demonstrable generational ties always take precedence in ranking, over efficacy.

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