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Miao Feng Shan

Abstract

This article is a personal account of a pilgrimage the author took in 1931 to the temple Ling Kung Kuan on Miao Feng Shan. The description of the activities of the pilgrims and the pilgrimage guilds in the article gives the reader a glimpse into popular religious practice in China in the early part of this century. The author, now 103 years old, still vividly remembers her experiences on the pilgrimage over 65 years later.

Key words: popular religion—pilgrimage—guilds—Ling Kung Kuan

ON A ROCKY CLIFF, known as Miao Feng Shan 妙峯山 (Mountain of the Beautiful Peak), amid the mountains about 30 miles northwest of Peking, stands Ling Kung Kuan 靈公觀 (Temple of Divine Response). It is not a large temple but a very important one, for every year from the first to fifteenth of the "fourth moon" there was a pilgrimage. During these days, great numbers of pilgrims streamed day and night to a shrine in that temple. One source states that one year 514,200 pilgrims visited the shrine. Another source estimates that between the 8th and 10th days of that month, 100,000 pilgrims arrive daily. The pilgrims come not just from the surrounding countryside and Peking but from Tientsin and even Shanghai. The shrine to which these pilgrims flock is T'ien Hsien Sheng Mu Pi Hsia Yuan Chün 天仙聖母碧霞元君 (The Heavenly Immortal Holy Mother Princess of the Crimson Clouds of Dawn [hereafter, T'ien Hsien]). Her shrine on Miao Feng Shan is second in importance only to that on T'ai Shan 泰山 where it is the most magnificent building on that sacred mountain. The pilgrims come to lay their petitions before their beloved T'ien Hsien, as she is called in Peking, or to give thanks for favors received. The miracles performed by this "heavenly immortal" have given Miao Feng Shan a great reputation. The lame have been made to walk, the ill have been cured, prosperity has been granted to merchants, and longed for children have been given. One comes there assured that "should any honest man or faithful women have it in their hearts to pay homage, desires will be fulfilled and unbounded mercy manifest."

There is evidence that pilgrimage to Miao Feng Shan began as early as 1629. According to writing in the possession of the abbot, the temple was built in the fifteenth century when Yung Lo was building Peking. A study made by Ku Chieh-kang shows that the temple did not become truly popular until the Ch'ing dynasty. Its importance then is attested by two *p'ai-lou* 牌樓 (arches) erected and inscribed by the emperor Ch'ien Lung.

Miao Feng Shan is not the only mountain in the vicinity of Peking to have a shrine to this goddess. About fifteen miles northeast of the city is the

Ya Chi Shan 丫髻山 (Forked Hair-tuft Mountain) where another shrine to the divine immortal attracts pilgrims, but not nearly as many as Ling Kung Kuan. Two other mountains, Pei Shan 北山 (Northern Mountain) and Tung Shan 東山 (Eastern Mountain), just outside the city open their temples during the first half of the fourth month for fairs, at which agricultural implements are sold. Another shrine to T'ien Hsien on Chung Shan 中山 (Middle Mountain), situated at Tsao Ch'iao 草橋 (Grass Bridge), opens its door on the first day of the "sixth moon," for an exhibition of flowers and fruit trees; here the flower fanciers of Peking come to get their precious plants, and farmers their fruit trees. A fifth temple on Nan Ting 南頂 (Southern Peak) is open the first ten days of the "fifth moon," when "men and women come in swarms." The temple itself is in poor condition, but there is a pavilion there on a small earth hill, in the middle of a stream where one can sit and have refreshments. Then toward evening the people disperse to attend horse racing at Ta Sha Tzu 大沙子.

Of course, in Peking itself there were shrines to T'ien Hsien. In the temple to the Medicine King Yao Wang Miao (藥王廟) there was one. In the Temple to the Eastern Peak (Tung Yüeh Miao 東岳廟) there were three separate shrines each in different areas which, except for the shrine to Tseng Fu Ts'ai Shen 增福財神 (the God of Wealth), were the most popular shrines in that huge temple complex.

Although the name "Ling Kung Kuan" designates it as a Taoist temple, (Kuan is the word used for Taoist temples), it is under the care of Buddhist monks. During most of the year, there is only one monk. The temple gates are closed and only that one monk and the servants are in residence. During July and August, the temple is often used for a summer vacation spot, mostly by foreigners. In May and early June the slopes of Miao Feng Shan are bright with blooming roses. "The roses of Miao Feng Shan are unique," writes HUBBARD. "Some grow wild on the hillside, some are cultivated in pots..." At the height of the blooming season, the rose petals are picked and spread in the temple courtyard to dry. Then they are packed on donkey backs and sent to Peking for sale. The rose petals are used to flavor tea and wine. During the time of the pilgrimage, monks from the monastery Kung Tsi Ssu in Peking take over. After the time of pilgrimage, they will return to that temple. The chief abbot in charge, however, comes from Tientsin from the Ling Kang Kuan Yin Ssu to which he too will return at the end of the festival.

The temple itself consists in a cluster of small buildings. The main entrance to the temple is on the south side of the mountain. A few old cypress trees grow beside it. The largest of the buildings has two rooms, a small one in front and a large one behind. It is here the pilgrims come, for it is the shrine to the T'ien Hsien. Beside her sit her assistants. On her left sit

Yen Kuan Niang-niang 眼光娘娘 (the Lady of Eyesight) and Sung Sheng Niang-niang 送生娘娘 (the Lady Who Delivers Babies to Their Correct Home). On the right is Tzu Tsun Niang-niang 子孫娘娘 (the Lady of Sons and Grandsons) and Pan Chen Niang-niang (the Lady of Smallpox and Measles). In front of this building is a deep pit for the burning of incense. No ordinary incense burner is large enough to hold the amount of incense burned to this deity during the first half of the fourth moon. The smoke here forms a canopy and the light of the flames can be seen for miles.

On each side of this building are smaller shrine buildings that each have only one room. On the left is the shrine of Ti Tsang P'u Sa 地藏菩薩 (the King of the Underworld). On the right is that of Yao Wang (the King of Medicine). These three buildings face south. On the west is a shrine for Wang Nai-nai (Mother Wang) and one to Ts'ai Shen (the God of Wealth). On the other side of the courtyard a shrine of Wu Sheng 五聖 (the Five Saints) and one to Wen Wang 文王 (the King of Literature). Behind this group is a little temple to Pai I Kuan Yin 白衣觀音 (the White Robed Goddess of Mercy). Still further off, on a prominence of its own, is a building dedicated to Kuan Ti 關帝 (the God Kuan). During the time of pilgrimage these shrines are more or less neglected. All attention is focussed on T'ien Hsien.¹

T'ien Hsien is the granter of life. She grants life to babies, new life to the ill, and prosperity to all. She is said to be the daughter of the "Lord of Life and Death" who is the god of T'ai Shan, one of China's most sacred mountains. Some claim, however, that she is the daughter of Yü Huang 玉皇 (the Jade Emperor) the high god of the Taoists. Legend has it that her worship began in Sung dynasty times. The emperor Chen Tsang found a stone image in a pool on T'ai Shan. He had a replica made of it in jade and set it up beside the pool. It attracted much attention and soon so many people came to worship it as the "Jade Lady" that a sanctuary was built for her that grew to be the most magnificent building on T'ai Shan. Maspéro traces the worship of such a life-giving goddess to the Han Dynasty. Undoubtedly she descended from "Lady Who Grants Children" of the T'ang dynasty.

The "Lady of Eyesight" is also the daughter of the god of T'ai Shan (or the Jade Emperor). T'ai Shan is the mountain of the east where the sun rises and gives light to the world. This daughter of his gives light to the human eye. Her image is usually seen with paper or silk eyes dangling on or near her image; these are offerings from those whose eyes she has helped. Sung Sheng Niang-niang escorts the baby to the home to which it has been granted so that it wont go to the wrong house.

Tzu Tsun Niang-niang is sometimes called "Holy Mother Bringer of Conception." She is a another daughter of T'ai Shan and Hsi Wang Mu

西王母 (the West King Mother). In front of her are small china babies. These china dolls are taken home and kept until the longed for real baby arrives. Then they are returned to the goddess with offerings of gratitude.

Ti Tsang Wang 地藏王 (King of the Underworld) is the Buddhist bodhisattva Kshitigarbha (the Earth Womb). Gradually Kshitigarbha became the supreme god of the dead. By the time of the seventh century, his worship was very popular. Although overlord of the underworld or hell, he is not a condemner of souls or one to lure souls to hell. His task is one of salvation, to save souls from the torments of hell. China took this figure from India and, as was the custom of the Chinese, turned the Indian deity into a Chinese one, claiming that it was a Chinese monk named Mu Lien 目蓮. Legend has it that when this monk's mother died he went to the underworld to see if he could release her by taking her torments on himself. He was told he could not and that the only way her soul could be released from hell was to have all the monks "under heaven" say prayers for her soul. Mu Lien returned to the upper world and persuaded all the monks to pray for his mother's soul. She was released and reborn, this time as a dog. Mu Lien is credited with the introduction of masses for the dead that are still being said in China.

Yao Wang is the spirit of one of the great doctors of China, sometimes one holds that position, sometimes another. The immortal Lü Tung Pin 呂洞賓 is popular among the doctors of Peking. Usually the king of medicine is Pao P'u tzu 抱朴子, a name given to Ko Hung 葛洪 of the fourth century, the greatest alchemist in Chinese history. He gave the earliest description of leprosy and of small-pox and believed that life could be prolonged through a system of breathing. He performed many magical cures. Sometimes the king of medicine is said to be Hua T'ou 華佗, a man of the third century, the greatest Chinese surgeon who ever lived. He was the first in the world to use anesthesia and, with its help, open the abdomen. He introduced the use of the needle in acupuncture and was the first exponent of hydrotherapy and of the body's need of exercise.

Wen Ch'ang 文昌 (the God of Literature) is a star deity, and is one of the stars of the Big Dipper. Legends have made his origin the spirit of one or another of the great scholars of old. He was worshiped by those taking the government examinations, by those seeking office, by writers, by book sellers, and others.

Kuan Ti is the deified hero of the third century, Kuan Yü 關羽 (Duke Kuan). He is renowned for his bravery, his skill in battle, his loyalty, his integrity, and his learning. As head of the military establishment in heaven, he is often called the "God of War." He is also a god of wealth, a god of literature, and a god who grants children. No evil spirit dares to come where



FIGURE 1. Miao Feng Shan 1931: Gamble, Goodrich, Hummel (from left).*



FIGURE 2. A pilgrim's hat.



FIGURE 3. A pilgrim's hat.



FIGURE 4. A pilgrim carrying out a vow saddled and bridled.



FIGURE 5. A pilgrim nailed to a temple's doorpost.

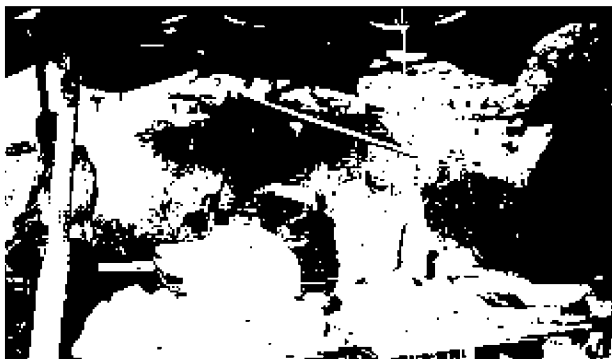


FIGURE 6. A tent serving noodle soup.



FIGURE 7. Society (guild) flags.



FIGURE 8. The Lion Society.



FIGURE 9. Cane dancers.



FIGURE 10. Society boxes to carry material.



FIGURE 11. A temple courtyard.

he is present. He is the patron of innumerable crafts. Even the Communists have honored him as the example of loyalty to the ruler.

Wu Sheng are also known as Wu Hsien 五仙 (the Five Spirits). Their names indicates five roads or five directions and they are the spirits of wealth of the five roads. They are sacrificed to for success in business and worshiped by merchants on the fifth day of the first moon. The "Five Spirits of the Road" were part of the "Five Domestic Sacrifices" of olden days.

There are two stories about Wang Nai-nai in the *Peking Chronicle* 18 May 1937. She is said to be a woman who lived at the South Gate of Tientsin. She had learned the art of curing disease through the use of charms. One day her nephew was on his way to call on her. He met her on the way and asked where she was going. "To Miao Feng Shan," she replied. The youth, nevertheless, continued on to his aunt's home and when he arrived he was told that his aunt had just died. He told of having just met her on the road. All were surprised and declared that she must be immortal. A shrine was built for her on Miao Feng Shan to which people, especially those from Tientsin, come to pray.

Another tale makes Wang Nai-nai live in the time of Kuang Hsu 光緒. She was a great devotee of T'ien Hsien and went on pilgrimage to the deity's shrine every year, exhorting her fellow pilgrims on the goodness of that goddess. One day snow fell during the pilgrimage and she was frozen to death. Her body was set up in the shrine near that of her beloved T'ien Hsien. More than likely, Wang Nai-nai is another form of Hsi Wang Mu (the West King's Mother), who is often called Wang Mu (Mother Wang).

Ts'ai Shen (God of Wealth) is, as the name implies, worshiped for success in making money. He is the spirit of the prime minister of Chou Wang who was the last emperor of the Shang dynasty. He is honored because he dared criticize the emperor for his lack of concern for the well being of the country and the people, and was killed for it. In recent years, the position of Ts'ai Shen has been assigned to Kuan Ti.

Pai I Kuan Yin (White Robed Goddess of Mercy) is, of course, a special form of Kuan Yin (the Goddess of Mercy). She is celebrated and adored for her ability to grant children. Her images are often like those of the Madonna and Child in the western world.

One spring in 1931, my husband and I decided to take this pilgrimage to Miao Feng Shan (figure 1). So on a beautiful April day we set out with another couple. We drove as far as a car could go, then joined the flow of pilgrims on foot. The path ran through a valley lush with the new green of spring and exuberant with the flowering peach and apricot trees. All were celebrating the spring and new life. The sun shone brightly and there was happiness in the air. Most of the pilgrims were on foot but some rode don-

keys and at least one we saw was in a sedan chair. All were going forward with hope and devotion in their hearts. We met pilgrims returning from the temple carrying pilgrim staves in their hands; some with great paper flowers on their heads (figures 2, and 3) often wearing a semi-turban made of yellow squares of cloth purchased at the temple and wound around their heads. They called out to us as we met, "Carry home happiness" (*hui chia tai fu* 回家帶福) with the same spirit the Americans greet each other with "Merry Christmas." There was merriment as well as sacredness in this pilgrimage. On our way we passed a few small shrines such as that to Ling Kuan 靈觀, a deity that keeps the path free from evil spirits so the pilgrims can travel safely. We reached a small village and then began the steep, three thousand foot climb up to the temple. Every so often, there was a small temple or shed where a pilgrim could rest and be refreshed with a cup of tea, free for the asking. It was an arduous climb, especially for those who stopped every third step to kneel and touch their foreheads to the ground, and for those who dressed in the crimson garb of criminals with saddles on their backs and a bit in their mouths while they climbed the mountain on all fours (figure 4). We learned that the young men were climbing the mountain in the latter manner to fulfill a vow made the year before to the goddess that they would return to her shrine in this manner if she would cure their ailing parent. Apparently, she had done so.

We saw another example of deep religious devotion. Near the top we passed an old shrine in very bad shape. A man sat there with his cheek nailed to a wall and with a cloth spread at his feet to hold offerings made by passersby for the repair of the shrine (figure 5).

We reached the gate to the temple—a beautiful archway that served to frame the mountain scenery beyond—and entered the courtyard. All was bustle. A canopy had been erected over tables at which steaming bowls of noodles or millet were offered free to all who wished to eat (figure 6). A group of men, whom we learned were merchants from Tientsin, were kneeling before the shrine to T'ien Hsien, one holding in his hands a tube of yellow paper on which was written the names of those petitioning the god and those making the offering to her. This was burned and via the smoke would reach the "High God of Heaven" and the goddess. The air was sweet with the smell of incense. We were greeted by one of the monks and escorted to the guest room. The temple guest rooms were small, holding not more than a camp cot. They were on a terrace at the very edge of the high cliff which presented one with a glorious view of the mountains and the plain to Peking. To wake up there before sunrise and look at the clouds snuggling between mountain peaks catching the glow of dawn and the sun turning the clouds crimson, is an experience that one never forgets.

We went back to the crowd milling around in the courtyard. At one side I spied a shoe maker. My shoes had suffered a lot on the trip up. I asked if he could repair them. He said he could and did. When I asked how much I owed him, he laughed and said, "Nothing." So it went with all things needed by the pilgrims. They were furnished with food, drink, lodging, and even entertainment. All this service was given by special guilds that took responsibility for particular services (figure 7). One guild repaired the roads and paths, sweeping them clear of stones, making a smooth path for the pilgrims. Another guild furnished lights all along the way so those who traveled at night could see their way. The booths were set up by one guild while another furnished the tea. Food was the service of one, free salt another. Not only were shoes repaired but clothes also. There were tin and coppersmiths, menders of broken china cups and plates. Offerings to the gods were also supplied for those who had not brought their own. Everybody shared and helped each other.

Everyday there was entertainment. One day there would be lion dancers (figures 8, and 9), another acrobats or stilt dancers, or fancy flag pole balances, or plays were performed—all of which were done by special guilds. The performers, whatever they did, needed costumes, makeup, and other items. This equipment was carried up the mountain in round wooden boxes, festooned with bells which jingled as they hung from the jouncing pole carried over the shoulders of the delivering carrier (figure 10). The ringing of the bells added to the gaiety of the occasion. From the top of little poles that surrounded the boxes hung flags bearing the name of the guild to which they belonged.

A pilgrimage to Miao Feng Shan was a memorable event. We started home the next day feeling that our trip had been well worthwhile. Just how worthwhile we did not learn for a few months, but before the year was out our friends had a baby girl and my husband and I had twins. Had we pleased the goddess?

NOTES

* The photographs for figures 1, 2, 7, 8, and 9 were provided by The Sidney D. Gamble Foundation for Chinese Studies. The photographs for figures 3, 4, 5, 6, 10, and 11 were provided by the author.

1. Derk Bodde gives a different list of deities. He omits many listed here and adds Hsi Shen (God of Joy).

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