



A STUDY OF MAZU WORSHIP IN CONFUCIANISM, BUDDHISM, AND TAOISM

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Abstract:

Mazu worship in China was syncretized into elite Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions, as this research shows. Mazu was a Song period Fujian sea goddess revered by coastal villages as a protector. Mazu's identity and powers changed by elite religious influences after the 12th century.

Confucian leaders wrote steles praising Mazu for protecting the nation. Her mythology linked her to orthodoxy through Confucian martyrs. In Buddhism, Mazu was a manifestation of Guanyin, represented with Buddhist imagery and miracle stories. Mazu temples integrated Buddhist ceremonies, monks, and deities, converting her. Mazu became an immortal goddess in Taoism's celestial pantheon, credited with sea-controlling sorcery. Mazu temples had Taoist rituals and symbols.

Integration into elite traditions made Mazu a national goddess from a provincial divinity. It also mirrored China's religious culture, which mixed philosophical and folk traditions. Deified characters like Mazu mediated official and vernacular worship. To expand their influence, clergy deliberately encouraged popular cult absorption. Filiality and cosmic equilibrium helped indigenous deities blend with aristocratic values.

Additionally, Chinese religious culture included spiritual and pragmatic considerations in worship. The deities met supernatural and human needs. Fluid religious identities allowed deities to be reinvented across religions. Ritual functionality was prioritised over theological integrity, allowing syncretism between ideas and rituals. Finally, imperial patronage turned small cults like Mazu's into state dogma.

Thus, Mazu's syncretic growth illuminates Chinese religious history's integration and synthesis and elite-popular relations. Her cult shows how new practices can fit into cultural and religious frameworks.

Keywords: Mazu, folk religion, Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, syncretism

1. Overview

The worship of Mazu is widely recognised as one of the most dynamic and impactful folk religious practices in Chinese society and among diaspora populations. The central figure is the deity Mazu, often referred to as Tianhou or Tinhau, who is worshipped as the compassionate goddess of the oceans and the celestial guardian of sailors. Mazu, as per popular

folklore, was originally a historical figure known as Lin Mo or Lin Moniang. She lived in Fujian province during the late Song dynasty (960-1279 CE) and was renowned for her exceptional shamanic abilities to predict fortunes and heal ailments. It is thought that she achieved direct ascension to the celestial realms at a young age, following her drowning at sea while attempting to rescue her seafaring family members from a severe storm.

After her postmortem elevation to divine status, Mazu started to gain increasing reverence from the nearby fishermen and traders, who believed that her salvific abilities were responsible for several miraculous acts of assistance at sea. During the 12th century, rudimentary shrines devoted to Mazu, an autochthonous deity, started appearing in the coastal areas of Fujian. The religion of this goddess, which was originally limited to a certain location, rapidly grew over China's southeastern seaboard and finally expanded overseas. This expansion was facilitated by the growing maritime commerce networks and Chinese emigration. The Song court, in the early 12th century, formally approved and supported the worship of Mazu, a deity with a large number of devoted followers. This endorsement was granted by the bestowal of an imperial title, which elevated the status of this initially grassroots religious movement and gave it an air of elite credibility. The Ming and Qing dynasties maintained the state's support for Mazu by granting her increasingly extravagant titles and officially endorsing her devotion.

Throughout the years, the indigenous worship of Mazu assimilated and incorporated elements from the esteemed practices of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, gradually evolving into a syncretic religious phenomena. Diverse apocryphal legends concerning Mazu's celestial lineage and the origin of her extraordinary psychic powers. Integrating imaginative Buddhist and Taoist elements. Due to her increasing popularity as a folk deity, Buddhist and Taoist institutions made efforts to officially include her in their respective ecclesiastical pantheons. In addition, the principles promoted by the Mazu cult, such as safeguarding the welfare of the community and maintaining moral excellence, harmoniously corresponded with the ethical standards of Confucianism and enhanced her reputation in the eyes of the government. The cult of Mazu experienced a significant transformation from its early shamanistic roots, which revolved around a woman who was worshipped locally, to becoming an officially acknowledged and widely revered goddess within the diverse Chinese folk religious pantheon. Mazu came to embody a multitude of philosophical and religious influences in a symbiotic manner.

The material legacy of Mazu temples effectively embodies the continuous blending of religious beliefs, where revered figures from Buddhism such as Buddha and Bodhisattvas, deities and immortals from the Taoist celestial hierarchy, and esteemed Confucian role models are all worshipped in harmony alongside Mazu by her followers. The versatile and blended identity adopted by Mazu, as well as her widespread popularity, exemplify the cultural rationale that underlies Chinese folk religion. This religion skillfully combines and harmonises diverse influences from both influential and grassroots sources, while still maintaining connections to local native customs. Examining the phenomenon of Mazu worship offers valuable insights into the intricate developmental path of Chinese popular religion and its adept management of its interaction with formal, officially sanctioned, and institutionalised traditions.

2. Methods of Research

This study employs a historical and textual methodology to examine the progression of Mazu devotion. An analysis of both primary and secondary sources is conducted to trace the origins and development of Mazu devotion.

Primary sources encompass a range of materials such as Mazu temples, artefacts, imperial decrees, steles, inscriptions, manuals, and hagiographies. These sources provide detailed information about the stories and rites associated with the cult. They offer valuable perspectives on the indigenous Mazu religious rituals and advancements at the grassroots level.

The analysis of secondary sources such as scholarly comments, local gazetteers, and anthologies is conducted to provide a contextual understanding of Mazu worship in relation to wider socio-cultural changes in China. An analysis is conducted on the progression of titles bestowed to Mazu by the imperial court, which serves as an indicator of the government's sentiments.

Through the comparison of various textual sources from different time periods, significant stages and pivotal moments in the evolution of Mazu worship can be discerned. The evolving rituals, ideologies, and institutions of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism demonstrate more profound interrelationships.

By conducting a thorough examination of written inscriptions and visual representations, researchers can reveal the presence of blended symbols and themes that provide insight into Mazu's mixed cultural and religious identity. The use of literary elements in hymns and stories serves to emphasise common cultural themes, facilitating her integration into esteemed traditions.

3. Research Study Results

3.1 The origins and early development of Mazu worship may be traced back to its inception in history

The origins and initial development of Mazu worship can be traced back to textual sources, which indicate that it originated as a localised shamanic cult in coastal Fujian province. As stated in the 1281 local gazetteer *Xianxi Zhi*, Mazu was first regarded as a female shaman from a lineage on Meizhou Island, located off the coast of Fujian. She was known for her prophetic power to predict fortunes and ominous events. It is reported that she passed away at a young age before her time. This early representation of Mazu as an indigenous spirit-medium illustrates the emergence of her worship from the prevalent shamanic beliefs and practices that were present throughout the southeastern seaboard during the late Song Dynasty.

Nevertheless, a meticulous examination uncovers remnants of ancient religious syncretism. The 1252 temple inscription *Linghui Miaomu Ji* identifies the birthplace of Mazu as the legendary Purple Forbidden Enclosure, a site that symbolises the celestial regions in Taoist mythology. This implies efforts to portray her as more than only a regional sorceress. In addition, a literature from the Yuan dynasty attributes the acquisition of shamanic abilities to the exceptionally gifted kid Mazu, who obtained them upon becoming the apprentice of *Xuantongzi*, a deity associated with Taoism and the ground. The origin legends already

demonstrate the integration of Buddhist and Taoist supernatural components with the native shamanic cult of Mazu.

The reign of Emperor Huizong in the 12th century was a significant moment in the development of Mazu worship. This was due to the recorded instances of maritime miracles, which were believed to be the result of Mazu's divine intervention. As a result, the imperial court acknowledged and recognised Mazu's importance. In the year 1111 CE, Huizong formally conferred the honorific title of "Lady who Calms the Waves" upon Mazu's humble temple. This concession bestowed imperial status upon the cult of Mazu, therefore promoting her from a local folk spirit to a goddess of national significance. Throughout the following decades, the state bestowed a series of honours, solidifying Mazu's status as a highly revered deity.

Hence, the textual evidence demonstrates the process by which the worship of Mazu became centred around a shamaness who was deified locally in Fujian. This exemplifies the widespread presence of grassroots shamanic cults along the southeast coast. Nevertheless, the incorporation of Buddhist and Taoist components demonstrates the attempts made by followers of Mazu to elevate her position beyond that of a local guardian deity. The court's acknowledgement accelerated her metamorphosis into a revered deity of national significance, surpassing her regional roots. This paved the way for her syncretic development into an exemplary fusion of several high-ranking and popular religious elements.

3.2 Assimilation into elite customs

Starting from the 12th century, the characteristics and authority associated with Mazu in her religious following were gradually formed and modified due to the impact of prevailing Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist ideologies among China's intellectual class. As Mazu worship gained popularity beyond its local origins, these influential mainstream traditions reinterpreted Mazu as a model of moral excellence and methodically raised her status:

Confucian exegesis:

Mazu was transformed in Confucian representation into an exemplar of virtuous femininity, characterised by qualities like as kindness, decency, benevolence, compassion, filial piety, and unwavering dedication to the well-being of her family, society, and nation. The imperial edicts specifically praised Mazu for her qualities in generously safeguarding the nation and its people. This rhetorical device became widespread in the state-sponsored mythmaking and canonization surrounding this popular deity. Local government officials and intellectuals created elaborate commemorative inscriptions that highly praised her exceptional Confucian traits, while integrating her worship into the moral principles of Confucianism.

One method of incorporating Confucian values was through the modification of genealogy, which altered Mazu's ancestry to connect her ancestral line with esteemed Confucian martyrs, wise individuals, and loyal heroes who possessed the highly valued traits upheld by the tradition. Later Qing dynasty hagiographies asserted that she hailed from a distinguished lineage of Confucian officials who had selflessly devoted themselves to upholding loyalty and morality. This resulted in the fusion of Mazu worship with the principles

of Imperial Confucian orthodoxy. These mythical elements were used to confirm her ethical nature and position among the revered figures in Confucianism.

Buddhist integration:

The Buddhist clergy and hagiographers endeavoured to integrate Mazu's identity into their own traditions by portraying her as the embodiment or living manifestation of Guanyin, the highly revered Chinese Buddhist deity associated with benevolence and empathy. Representations of Mazu in both sculpture and painting began to adopt conventional Buddhist imagery, depicting her adorned in elegant garments and seated in graceful and flexible positions evocative of the Bodhisattva Guanyin. Tales recounted her superhuman skills to accurately foresee misfortunes, heal illnesses, and safeguard sailors from storms and accidents due to her boundless empathy, clearly associating her with the miraculous powers ascribed to Guanyin in Buddhist mythology. In addition, the integration of Buddhist deities, rituals, clerics, and iconography into the design and practices of Mazu temples facilitated the assimilation of her devotion into the Buddhist pantheon.

Taoist integration:

The Taoist clergy aimed to officially include Mazu into the vast Taoist heavenly pantheon as an immortal goddess or accomplished practitioner, while reinterpreting her shamanic abilities and maritime miracles as expressions of esoteric Taoist magical practices. The mythic stories about Mazu extensively integrated fundamental Taoist concepts and symbols. For instance, they portrayed her smoothly sailing in a calabash vessel across the seas or using talismans and mystical incantations to defeat monsters that troubled the oceans. Taoist liturgies, ordination ceremonies, and symbols were incorporated as customary elements in Mazu temples and worship etiquette. In hagiographies, her story was altered to assert that she had attained immortality and transcendence through the study of sophisticated yin-yang cosmology, astrology, and alchemical arts, under the direct guidance of Lord Zhenwu, a prominent martial Taoist deity. By means of this syncretism, her worship was incorporated into the realm of esteemed Taoist rituals.

Therefore, the popular and informal worship of Mazu experienced a significant expansion and integration into the complex teachings, ceremonies, and symbolic representations of organised Taoism. As a result of this integration, she was able to receive great respect and admiration, being placed on the same level as revered Taoist deities and immortal beings inside the esteemed celestial hierarchy.

Essentially, the three prevailing cultural traditions - Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism - assimilated the veneration of Mazu into their respective ideological systems and religious organisations. However, the results were significantly different:

Confucian officials prioritised the utilisation of Mazu as a means to demonstrate loyalty to the imperial state and uphold virtue within societal responsibilities. The Buddhist clergy sought to establish a connection between Mazu's extraordinary abilities and Guanyin in order to assert their authority over her worship. Taoists endeavoured to incorporate Mazu into their extensive array of gods and mystical rituals. These paths illustrate how a single local deity served as a medium for expressing many agendas. However, these assumptions also expose the

belief that heavenly powers necessitate cultural advancement and institutional control, thereby confirming the acceptance of popular worship within the privileged perspective.

3.3 Mazu Worship and its shared religious culture

The incorporation and veneration of Mazu as a deity in Chinese folk religion clearly demonstrates the intricate blending of formal institutional traditions based on philosophical theories and unorganised local customs that has historically characterised Chinese religious culture. Several prominent features of this religious framework are noticeable:

Deities acting as intermediaries in the "Middle Way"

The rise of deified ancestors, historical figures, and local heroes as patron deities who occupied a syncretic middle ground between official state traditions and community-based cults was a defining characteristic of Chinese religious culture.

Mazu exemplified this by surpassing her putative human roots as a Fujianese shamaness and becoming revered as a divine goddess, embodying values, abilities, and symbolism derived from esteemed Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist traditions. However, she maintained her unique connections to the sea and her local Fujianese heritage through traditional religious practices. Chinese religious history is replete with several instances of deified paragons, warriors, and ancestors who have attained a revered status by occupying an intermediary space through the process of syncretism. Prominent examples include Guan Yu, Wenchang Dijun, and different tutelary gods associated with certain territories.

The veneration of these figures symbolised a "moderate approach" that bridged the gap between the folk religion centred around local cults that sought tangible earthly advantages, and the formal philosophical religions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism that emphasised abstract principles and spiritual deliverance. The deified patrons, exemplars, and progenitors served as a bridge for integrating the two.

Exclusive patronage of integration

The intellectual elites and educated scholars of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism actively worked to intentionally incorporate popular folk cults, such as the worship of Mazu, into their own religious traditions and practices. The sponsorship of assimilation emerged as a result of the desire to expand their institutional influence and moral authority among the general population. It also served the purpose of gaining support and legitimacy from the ruling power by incorporating local native beliefs into a broader philosophical religious framework.

The deliberate actions of the elite can be observed in the mythic transformation of Mazu into a Taoist immortal, Buddhist incarnation, or Confucian exemplar. Additionally, her worship has been incorporated into the temples, liturgies, and rituals of these three traditions. The promotion of syncretic iconography and hagiography further demonstrates the elite's intention to assimilate her cult for their own purposes. However, the results also influenced and changed the discussions among the privileged, uncovering dynamic interactions.

Frequently encountered religious ideas

The cultural and religious notions often found in Chinese society created a framework that allowed for the incorporation of local folk worship into the beliefs and practices of the elite. Concepts such as filial devotion and reverence for ancestors, the balance and interconnectedness between humans and spirits, and the mutual exchange between the living and the deceased, served as cultural links.

Mazu's identity and powers evolved in a syncretic manner, drawing upon commonly valued themes in both philosophical and folk religions. For example, the traditions that claim Mazu's lineage from old Confucian martyrs is connected with the deep respect for ancestors in her worship. Tales of her assistance to spirits in the realm of the dead invoked profound cosmic linkages. The stories of her extraordinary benevolence towards worshippers emphasised the mutual exchange between deities and mortals. The assimilation was facilitated by this cultural-conceptual framework.

The simultaneous existence of spiritual and pragmatic elements

In Chinese religious culture, the acceptance of both supernatural and practical worldly matters was allowed, without considering them to be contradictory. Deities revered for safeguarding, prosperity, recuperation, fertility, and affluence could fulfil both spiritual and earthly roles for followers, whose material existence was intricately linked with faith in supernatural powers.

The cult of Mazu demonstrated this by attributing a wide range of benefits, remedies, and favours to her divine benevolence. These included guaranteeing safe delivery of babies, promoting marital harmony, facilitating recovery from illnesses, ensuring success in exams, fostering wealth in business, and providing safety during sea voyages. The powers attributed to her were fashioned by the practical needs of her followers. Furthermore, the incorporation of philosophical ideas into a syncretic absorption added spiritual aspects to her religion.

Flexibility in religious identities

The flexibility of religious identities was another notable characteristic, as gods venerated within Chinese religious culture demonstrated extraordinary adaptability in being integrated into many pantheons across time. As diverse traditions adopted and incorporated them, their identities changed and developed, acquiring new symbolic meanings, interpretations of doctrine, visual characteristics, and stories of miracles.

The extensive transformation of Mazu, starting as an indigenous shamaness and eventually becoming a Taoist immortal, Buddhist incarnation, and Confucian exemplar, vividly exemplifies the remarkable adaptability and flexibility of her beliefs and practices. As she integrated into various religious systems, her characteristics as a divinity were transformed and revitalised while yet maintaining some coherence. The ability of this culture to adapt and blend different elements allowed for a continuous process of syncretism.

Emphasising the importance of functionality above uniformity

The emphasis on practical ritual function and devotion, rather than theological coherence and regularity, allowed for the resolution or dismissal of apparent inconsistencies

between the principles of many aristocratic traditions and the real syncretic cult worship that took place.

Mazu temples amalgamated Buddhist commemorative ceremonies, Confucian ancestral tributes, Taoist exorcisms, and indigenous communal feasting customs focused on worldly matters such as prosperity. Traditionalists occasionally criticised such combinations as heretical, but adherents of folk religion, unconstrained by strict religious doctrines, accepted adaptable and practical worship that incorporated a variety of rituals. The prioritisation of practice over theory enabled the blending of different beliefs and practices, known as syncretism.

Government support for religious practices

Religious integration in China was greatly influenced by imperial patronage and state recognition. The throne aimed to legitimise popular local cults, like as the cult of Mazu, by assigning them names, honours, and seals of authority, so bringing them under the control of the imperial bureaucratic order.

This transformed lesser-known regional deities into officially recognised figures with a widespread reputation. The incorporation of initially grassroots cults by the state, in order to promote approved cultural values, facilitated their integration into the hierarchical structures of elite Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist institutions. Mazu's development from a localised tutelary deity to a nationally esteemed goddess was directly accelerated by court patronage.

In conclusion

The various aspects of a common religious culture described earlier facilitated the syncretic integration of Mazu worship into Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Her equivocal situation between the aristocracy and the common people was assisted by deification, ancestralization, and localization. The dialectical connections between academic disciples and grassroots devotees facilitated her cultural advancement. The compatibility with synergistic philosophies was facilitated by common notions, fluid identities, functional emphases, and governmental patronage.

This cultural phenomenon elucidates the natural progression of Mazu, originating as a regional Fujianese folk cult and transforming into a representation of the amalgamation of Chinese religious beliefs. Mazu reflects a varied range of influential factors while maintaining its distinctiveness and frequently experiencing conflicts with established teachings. An analysis of these processes provides profound insights into the intricacies of Chinese religious history and the dynamics of how traditions interplay and develop.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrates the transformation of Mazu, once an indigenous shamanic cult in Fujian, into a widely acknowledged goddess in the Chinese folk pantheon. This evolution was achieved by incorporating aspects from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Her fluid and mixed identity mirrors the various cultural framework of Chinese religion, rather than a cohesive theological structure.

The syncretic veneration of Mazu exemplifies the unique Chinese approach of harmoniously blending the "three teachings" at the grassroots level, challenging the notion that folk customs are a debased rendition of scholarly doctrines. Instead, the elite and folk strands of society rely on one other - the discourses of the elite influence the worship practices of the general population, which in turn modifies those discourses.

Although Mazu initially emerged within a regional maritime setting, her integration into the imperial Confucian system also enabled her to become a global deity revered by Chinese communities abroad. The cult exemplifies the fusion of universalizing traditions and local distinctiveness in Chinese folk religion as it expands beyond its initial context.

Comprehending Mazu worship offers broader perspectives on Chinese religious culture, which is a fusion of high-level theories and everyday rituals that reciprocally shape one another. Additionally, it elucidates the mechanisms by which regional cults might attain wider cultural influence, both within China and internationally.

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