



## A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF FOLK DEITIES: LAOPATOU, MAZU, AND GUAN GONG

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### **Abstract:**

The cultural origins of folk beliefs around deified entities such as Laopatou, Mazu, and Guan Gong are deeply rooted and have undergone ongoing evolution in contemporary society. This article explores the origins, rituals, and cultural changes related to these three Chinese folk deities. The analysis encompasses their historical evolution, spiritual implications, textual customs, common myths, official acknowledgment, religious assimilation, places of worship, cultural dissemination, growth in tourism, and more factors. The analysis reveals that although they have a common foundation of being previous mortals who became gods, differences arise due to their distinct origins, the degree of canonization they have received, and the continual process of reinterpretation. The article examines the process by which folk beliefs undergo modifications in response to societal transformations, while yet preserving their fundamental principles. This offers valuable perspectives on how to revive traditional practices by incorporating folk deities into efforts to safeguard cultural heritage, foster creative industries, and promote tourism.

**Keywords:** Laopatou, Mazu, Guan Gong, Chinese folk, Folk beliefs.

### **1. Introduction**

Folk beliefs hold a distinct position within Chinese religious culture, living alongside established religions such as Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. An important characteristic is the veneration of individuals who have been elevated to the status of gods, which serves as a manifestation of fundamental principles like as moral uprightness, honesty, and dedication to the welfare of the community. Laopatou, Mazu, and Guan Gong symbolise three prominent aspects of Chinese folk religion associated with mountains, seas, and history, respectively. Their lasting appeal arises from their personification of revered characteristics such as filial piety, courage, honesty, and self-sacrifice. However, as dynamic cultural customs, the rituals and interpretations linked to folk deities constantly undergo changes.

This article offers a comprehensive examination of the cultural changes related to Laopatou, Mazu, and Guan Gong, comparing their respective modifications. This study explores the historical evolution, spiritual significance, biblical practices, legendary accomplishments, official acknowledgment, religious assimilation, places of worship, cultural dissemination, tourist advancement, and other related aspects. The analysis demonstrates the ever-changing character of folk beliefs, as well as the significant differences that arise from the various socioeconomic backgrounds and continuous reinterpretation of the three deities. China's focus

on revitalising traditional culture and incorporating intangible cultural material into contemporary society makes studying the adaptation of folk beliefs a significant pursuit for tradition bearers, researchers, politicians, and practitioners.

## **2. The development and cultural fusion of Laopatou, Mazu, and Guan Gong**

### ***The Origin of Folk Deification***

Laopatou, Mazu, and Guan Gong exemplify three primary avenues of folk deification, since they have all transitioned from historical persons to divine beings through the gradual devotion of the local populace. Their terrestrial origins and embodiment of virtues that are fundamental in Chinese culture contributed to the establishment of a lasting appeal.

### ***Laopatou, the deity of the mountains***

According to folk stories, Laopatou's beginnings can be traced back to a filial son named Sun Liang from Shandong. Sun ventured into the treacherous Changbai Mountains of Manchuria during the late Ming dynasty in search of ginseng to cure his sick mother (Wang & Wu, 2019). Accounts depict him making a solemn promise to locate his missing siblings and act as a protector for all forthcoming cohorts of ginseng excavators. Following his self-sacrifice in the mountains, Sun became renowned as the revered figure Laopatou, also known as the ginseng saint, among the isolated mining villages. These communities are noted for their strong sense of unity and commitment to maintaining confidentiality. Due to his strong familial ties and commitment to safeguarding ordinary people, he became an accessible divinity in folk culture.

### ***Mazu, the deity revered as the guardian of seafarers***

Mazu originated in the 10th century in Fujian as a female shaman named Lin Mo, who has extraordinary abilities to save sailors and fisherman. According to Chinese folklore, Lin has extraordinary powers to forecast storms, salvage overturned boats, and rescue drowning mariners (Chen, 2022). Her benevolent action in safeguarding coastal towns and devotees ultimately resulted in the proliferation of grassroots worship along China's marine trade routes. During the Song dynasty, Mazu's prominence as the most important marine goddess in Chinese folk religion was enhanced by imperial acknowledgment. She became closely associated with the Daoist Queen of Heaven.

### ***Guan Gong: The Embodiment of Loyalty***

Guan Gong, originally known as Guan Yu, was a renowned military leader during the Three Kingdoms Period. He was very skilled in combat and was known for his unwavering allegiance to his sworn brothers Liu Bei and Zhang Fei. The accounts of his achievements were widely documented in Records of the Three Kingdoms and Romance of the Three Kingdoms, which solidified his renown for bravery, integrity, and selflessness (Lü, 2022). From the 12th century onwards, the veneration of Guan as a guardian deity was greatly enhanced by the support of the imperial authorities, leading to an increasing reverence for him among local populations. The apotheosis of Guan Gong exemplified the widespread admiration for his moral exemplar.

Through different paths, these three individuals achieved divinity, transitioning from ordinary people to beloved deities. This transformation was based on their embodiment of values, their accessibility, and their perceived effectiveness as protectors. Their human beginnings endowed

them with a sense of familiarity that is absent in more abstract Daoist and Buddhist deities. However, variations also arose in the extent of their impact, which was determined by the surroundings that shaped their identities, ranging from local mountains to regional seascapes, and ultimately the national arena.

### ***The Ethical Aspect of Popular Beliefs***

The essence of apotheosis is the perception of moral exemplarity, where folk deities embody ideals that symbolise the highest level of Chinese cultural qualities. Laopatou, Mazu, and Guan Gong each represented ethical perspectives that were both overlapping and different, which contributed to their popularity among the general public.

### ***Laopatou: A manifestation of unwavering moral uprightness***

The unassuming narratives of Laopatou emphasise the virtues of respect for one's parents, honesty, and assistance towards other miners. Laopatou's care of his mother and his unwavering dedication to locating his siblings demonstrated an exceptional level of filial piety (Zhong, 2021). His integrity was demonstrated through his commitment to fulfilling agreements, such as returning by a specific date and continuing to support ginseng diggers even after his passing. Embarking on a solitary journey into the ominous Changbai mountains and willingly giving up his life for the sake of others exemplified an exceptional display of unselfish bravery and altruism. The plain narratives focused on the virtues of righteousness, perseverance, integrity, and societal accountability.

### ***Mazu: Infinite Benevolence***

Mazu stories revolve around the practice of displaying boundless compassion and employing supernatural abilities to alleviate widespread misery. Her extraordinary feats encompass pacifying tempests, eradicating epidemics, rescuing seafarers from marauders, assisting tormented spirits in the realm of the dead, championing just uprisings against moral decay, and several other remarkable acts (Zhong, 2020). Mazu also convinced vengeful deities to stop tormenting humanity. Her unparalleled benevolence as the rescuer of all individuals in need, irrespective of their social standing, positioned her as the epitome of global deliverance.

### ***Guan Gong: Paragon of Fidelity***

Guan Gong's mythology is centred around his embodiment of resolute righteousness and unshakable allegiance to his sworn brothers Liu Bei and Zhang Fei. He prioritises preserving this covenant above all other considerations. Guan's valour, tactical brilliance, incorruptibility, and unwavering commitment to principles, even in the face of life-threatening dangers, established him as the epitome of loyalty, courage, and honour that is required of exemplary authorities, soldiers, and men (Lü, 2022). Guan's great sacrifice evoked widespread admiration for his unwavering moral integrity.

Although all three deities embody virtue, there are significant differences that become apparent. Laopatou represented fundamental rural principles of benevolence, integrity, and dedication. Mazu had boundless empathy towards the afflictions of humanity, coupled with extraordinary powers to intervene. Guan Gong embodied the Confucian ideals of bravery,

faithfulness, and responsibility. However, its embodiment of fundamental Chinese principles contributed to their long-lasting popularity among the general public.

### ***Mazu: An embodiment of benevolent deliverance***

Mazu's mythology revolves around her extraordinary acts of salvation, which she does via her limitless compassion for humanity. Her greatest ethical attribute is the unwavering display of mercy and intervention to mitigate widespread suffering.

As per anthologies such as Record of the Miraculous Responses of the Heavenly Queen and Goddess Mazu Mazu consistently utilised her extraordinary abilities to safeguard the nation, rescuing individuals from calamities, criminal activities, scarcity, sickness, and premature demise (Lin, 2020).

There are several accounts of Mazu's ability to pacify destructive typhoons, heal widespread plague outbreaks, emit a shielding light to safeguard ships from pirate attacks, lead the spirits of drowned sailors to the afterlife, bring an end to droughts by inducing rainfall, and facilitate extraordinary fishing hauls to alleviate famine (Zhong, 2020). Apocryphal records also claim her assistance to virtuous insurgent groups battling governmental corruption.

Mazu ventured into the realm beyond human existence, journeying to the underworld with the purpose of rescuing tormented souls and convincing the ruler of the underworld to lessen the penalties for lesser transgressions. In addition, she frequently facilitated resolutions to conflicts between divine beings such as the Dragon King and Thousand Mile Eye, employing diplomatic methods to reduce their mistreatment of humans. She transformed troublesome local deities such as the Giant Pig and Qianliyan into benevolent guardians, thus resolving the issues they caused inside the mortal realm (Lin, 2020).

Mazu's consistent acts of rescuing individuals from natural disasters, criminal activity, starvation, illness, and mortality solidified her reputation as the embodiment of empathy and the divine guardian of those experiencing hardship. Her ultimate act of compassion was making a solemn promise to stay on earth, serving people instead of ascending to paradise. The stories of her unwavering assistance gave rise to a sophisticated belief system focused on the altruistic relief of suffering.

Mazu's image as the epitome of compassionate redemption in Chinese folk belief was solidified by her remarkable responses and interventions to help individuals in crises, irrespective of their socioeconomic background, location, or level of danger. Due to her boundless compassion and care for humanity, she became a widely accessible and effective divinity for people from various backgrounds.

### ***Canonization and Scripture***

The level of canonization and the biblical traditions related to Laopatou, Mazu, and Guan Gong varied significantly. The recognition by the imperial authority was crucial in the development of the rich and diverse texts that elevated Mazu and Guan Gong to prominent positions, in contrast to the limited scriptural basis of Laopatou.

### ***The Absent Writings of Laopatou***

Laopatou has a limited amount of written records, consisting mainly of oral narratives and brief references in local gazetteers. The mythology surrounding him is primarily based on folklore that revolves around the discovery of ginseng and his self-sacrifice in the Changbai mountains. These stories have been transmitted through generations within certain mining groups (Wang & Wu, 2019). The limited canonization achieved through narrative writings constrained the extent of his impact.

### ***The Theology of Mazu's Abundance***

Conversely, Mazu created a vast collection of religious texts in Chinese folk religion. Her mythology incorporates Daoist, Buddhist, and shamanic principles into a refined theological structure documented in stone inscriptions, imperial canonizations, official biographies, morality manuals, and collections of miracles (Lin, 2020). The various scriptures documented Mazu's extraordinary reactions and spiritual dominance.

### ***The Diverse Canonization of Guan Gong***

Guan Gong received extensive recognition and commemoration in various forms such as historical accounts, novels, dramas, collections of moral examples, and visual depictions. The Records of the Three Kingdoms and the Ming classic Romance of the Three Kingdoms immortalised his actions, solidifying his reputation as the epitome of fidelity (Lü, 2022). A variety of writings systematically documented Guan's merits for the purpose of imitation.

The voluminous scriptures that raised Mazu and Guan Gong to the highest level of Chinese folk devotion were compiled with the crucial support of imperial patronage. On the other hand, the narrow literary basis hindered Laopatou's ability to expand and become part of mainstream culture.

### ***The historical canonization of Guan Gong***

The mythology of Guan Gong was solidified via the act of commemorating him in historical records, novels, dramas, moral anthologies, and visual narratives. These mediums captured his essence as the personification of faithfulness. His moral exemplarity and cultural eminence were solidified through Imperial support.

The primary sources that establish Guan Gong's identification originate from historical accounts of the Three Kingdoms period, particularly Chen Shou's Records of the Three Kingdoms, composed in the 3rd century CE. This influential essay commemorated Guan's military achievements and unwavering allegiance to his sworn brothers Liu Bei and Zhang Fei. Nevertheless, his portrayal remained fairly simplistic, depicting him solely as a valiant warrior (Lü, 2022).

Guan's loyal personality was extensively elaborated upon in the 14th century historical novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms by Luo Guanzhong. The vivid fictional representation saw him as the ultimate embodiment of righteousness, prioritising morality above all other considerations. For example, Guan firmly rejected the advances made by the enemy's women, including Cai Yan and Xiao Qiao, demonstrating unwavering integrity.

Guan's remarkable acts of bravery in the novel, such as defeating enemy commanders in one-on-one combat and traversing five passes unaccompanied, established him as the epitome of

daring, expertise, and selflessness. The individual's steadfastness in not yielding, while being significantly outnumbered, exemplified unwavering allegiance. The fictitious narrative's portrayal of Guan's immortality had a profound impact on readers from all walks of life (Lü, 2022).

In addition to being documented in historical records and novels, Guan's values have been deeply embedded in Chinese opera, folk stories, poetry, visual arts, as well as temples and shrines. Zhao (2015) highlights that his persona was highly esteemed in both material culture and performance tradition, making him a cultural exemplar.

Significantly, the support of the imperial court hastened the rise in popularity of Guan Gong. In 1102 CE, the Song Emperor Huizong granted Guan the prestigious title of "Marquis of Loyalty and Righteousness," which established a precedent for future canonization. Zhu Yuanzhang, the founder of the Ming dynasty, held great admiration for Guan and bestowed upon him the greatest honour, while also providing support for related locations. During the Qing period, the veneration of Guan Gong became an established practice throughout the entire country. This was achieved through the imperial promotion of temples, schools, and ceremonies, which aimed to strengthen loyalty to the Confucian principles that Guan Gong represented (Wang, 2020).

To summarise, Guan Gong's moral exemplar was deeply ingrained in Chinese culture through many literature and imperial recognition. The legend of this deity sparked widespread devotion among the common people, as well as influencing other forms of artistic expression such as visual arts and operas. Additionally, it played a significant role in the merging of religious and philosophical beliefs, which was not commonly found in lesser-known folk deities. Guan Gong's enduring importance is upheld by the rich scriptural legacy that surrounds him, which effectively captures his virtuous loyalty and serves as a model for future generations to emulate.

### *Acts and Myths*

The particular actions and myths linked to each deity varied significantly depending on their own life experiences. Although Laopatou had a minor role in local oral stories, Guan Gong and particularly Mazu had extensive mythology that documented their extraordinary adventures, which contributed to their fame.

### *Laopatou's Subdued Tales*

The oral traditions associated with Laopatou are somewhat restricted in terms of both breadth and magnitude when compared to those of Mazu and Guan Gong. Being a rather obscure folk deity, his mythos is primarily limited to specific narratives involving ginseng diggers in the Changbai Mountains region of Jilin.

Within these specific storylines, Laopatou typically assumes a peripheral, supporting position rather than taking centre stage as the primary protagonist with intricately crafted achievements. Traditionally, he is portrayed as offering counsel, admonitions, or modest assistance to human figures, namely the excavation experts and their apprentices (Wang & Wu, 2019).

For example, Laopatou may manifest in dreams to provide instructions on the correct rites to be performed prior to visiting the mountains, or to caution characters against sitting on tree

stumps that serve as his altars. Nevertheless, Laopatou remains a subordinate character as the excavators assume the main focus. There are just a small number of vivid tales that provide detailed explanations of his own personality or actions.

The main narrative surrounding him revolves around a sombre story of him selflessly losing his life in the treacherous mountains to protect future generations of ginseng hunters. Although displaying kindness, this isolated dramatic incident lacks diversity in comparison to the huge collections of Mazu and Guan Gong. Laopatou's limited effect was primarily confined to specific Changbai mountain settlements, rather than gaining widespread national recognition.

Unlike Laopatou, Mazu has an extensive collection of legends in Chinese folk belief, making it one of the most abundant and diverse. The extent of her mythology and her magical abilities can be likened to those of prominent Daoist and Buddhist deities.

Notable compilations of Mazu's extraordinary feats consist of the Daoist manuscript titled "Records of the Miraculous Responses of the Heavenly Queen" from the early 16th century, and the Hokkien anthology known as "Chronicles of the Miracles Performed by the Heavenly Consort" from the 17th century. These collections gather numerous anecdotes that emphasise Mazu's exceptional abilities (Zhong, 2020).

The key themes revolve around Mazu's benevolent intervention in various maritime situations, such as safeguarding ships from storms, pirates, and accidents at sea, rescuing sailors and fishermen from drowning, guiding lost souls to the afterlife, resolving conflicts among deities, advocating for leniency in the punishments of the underworld, bestowing protective blessings upon communities, healing illnesses, and supporting virtuous endeavours (Lin, 2020).

She has demonstrated remarkable abilities in subduing typhoons, alleviating droughts through rainfall, and summoning divine winds to assist travelling merchants. In addition, she confronted and subdued malevolent entities that were causing trouble in nearby settlements, such as the Giant Pig and Qianliyan. Mazu's narratives bestowed upon her absolute dominion over both the metaphysical and terrestrial domains.

Mazu's extraordinary interventions to aid humanity have been compiled into anthologies, giving rise to an intricate messianic mythology that portrays her as the foremost benevolent deity in Chinese popular faith.

### ***The Exalted Epic of Guan Gong***

Guan Gong gained popularity due to his remarkable achievements that were recorded in historical documents and celebrated in imaginative writing. His enormous mythos as the ultimate warrior and epitome of moral virtue sparked the creation of theatrical performances and visual exaltation throughout the entire nation.

The foundation of Guan's mythology is derived from Records of the Three Kingdoms by Chen Shou, which documented his unparalleled combat skills and unwavering loyalty during the tumultuous Three Kingdoms period. Nevertheless, his portrayal in the 3rd century book remained rather simplistic, depicting him primarily as a valiant military leader (Lü, 2022).

Guan's faithful nature got great dramatisation and elaboration in the 14th century historical novel Romance of the Three Kingdoms. The vivid and imaginative presentation of the

character enabled him to rise as the perfect embodiment of moral goodness, solidifying his status as a revered hero in Chinese culture (Zhao, 2015).

Guan's notable achievements in the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* were defeating enemy commanders Hua Xiong, Yan Liang, and Wen Chou in one-on-one combat, while being significantly outnumbered. His courage in combat and skill to triumph over exceedingly difficult circumstances solidified his renown as an unbeatable warrior-deity.

Acts demonstrating Guan's unwavering allegiance and incorruptibility were equally significant. The individual's steadfast commitment was exemplified by his unwavering refusal to surrender, even in the face of being encircled from all directions. Guan, being morally honest, also declined the advances of seductresses such as Cai Yan and Xiao Qiao who were dispatched to corrupt him.

Guan's image was further enhanced by the episodic tales of him displaying magical skills. Merely the sight of his menacing countenance was sufficient to compel adversaries to yield. Guan also demonstrated telepathic capabilities by transmitting information to Liu Bei across great distances.

During the early Ming dynasty, Guan's reputation as the embodiment of bravery, integrity, and faithfulness had solidified. He achieved a revered status through theatrical performances, operas, moral narratives, and artistic representations in temples, serving as a source of inspiration for grassroots worship (Shi, 2021).

To summarise, Guan Gong's grandiose mythology as the ultimate warrior and epitome of moral uprightness elevated him to the status of a revered Chinese folk hero, whose heroic deeds inspired widespread admiration throughout the nation.

### ***Recognition by the imperial authority***

Attaining imperial recognition was essential in promoting folk deities from a local to a national level of importance. Although Laopatou never received recognition, the authorities actively promoted Mazu and Guan Gong as cultural paragons.

### ***The Extensive Patronage of Mazu***

Mazu received imperial support during the Northern Song period, where she was formally recognised as the foremost guardian of China's coastal regions. During the Qing era, she had achieved the utmost rank and titles that a Chinese divinity could receive, signifying her evolution into a revered figure as the "Guardian of the State" (Lin, 2020).

During the period spanning from the Song to the Qing dynasties, Mazu received progressively higher titles from a total of 14 emperors in more than 30 official canonizations. The Jiajing Emperor of the Ming Dynasty bestowed a wide range of prestigious titles, encompassing 36 designations that represented her various responsibilities as a guardian of the seas, a saviour during calamities, and a protector-deity of great significance.

In 1690, the Qing Kangxi Emperor bestowed upon Mazu the exceptional title of "Holy Mother," therefore elevating her stature even further. Successive Qing emperors augmented her titles to the utmost extent of 60 characters. The imperial decrees also formally



acknowledged more than 60,000 sacred shrines devoted to Mazu around the country, indicating her semi-official elevated position (Zhong, 2020).

Imperial support of Mazu not only involved canonization but also served as a symbolic means for the state to protect important coastal areas crucial for maritime trade. Therefore, emperors strategically endorsed and propagated her worship as a cultural safeguard of the Chinese country.

### ***Guan Gong as an Exemplar of Devotion***

Guan Gong received official recognition from the imperial court during the 12th century and was progressively esteemed by subsequent ruling dynasties as the ultimate embodiment of martial excellence, dedication to public service, and adherence to Confucian principles, serving as a role model for government officials.

In 1102 CE, Emperor Huizong of the Northern Song Dynasty bestowed the title of "Marquis Zhuangmou" to Guan Yu, thereby recognising him as a revered symbol of divine culture (Wang, 2020). Guan Gong's popularity was greatly enhanced by the support of the imperial patrons, which had a significant impact on both the upper echelons of society and the general public.

During the Yuan period, Guan emerged as a widely recognised guardian deity with widespread popularity. As the religion expanded, the Hongwu Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang of the recently established Ming dynasty had a specific fascination with promoting Guan Gong to a prominent position.

Zhu held immense admiration for Guan, regarding him as the epitome of martial prowess, bravery, and unwavering commitment to duty and moral integrity. In 1376, Zhu bestowed the prestigious title of "Saintly Emperor Guan" as a tribute to his virtuous nature. Zhu additionally initiated and financially supported the construction of numerous Guan Gong temples across China with the aim of promoting reverence towards this paragon of loyalty (Lü, 2022).

The fervent promotion of Guan Gong worship by the founder of the Ming dynasty successfully established the cult as an official institution throughout the country. Guan Gong attained veneration as the embodiment of exemplary Confucian principles anticipated from government officials and military personnel, particularly loyalty.

Under the Qing dynasty, the support and sponsorship of Guan Gong by the imperial court reached its highest point. In the 18th century, Guan Yu was given a level of respect and treatment that was almost on par with the esteemed philosopher Confucius. Both deities were honoured with numerous state-sponsored temples and elaborate rituals throughout China. According to Zhao (2015), honouring Guan was seen as a sign of both Confucian moral excellence and the adoption of Manchu culture.

To summarise, beginning with the Song dynasty, subsequent ruling dynasties progressively enhanced the reputation of Guan Gong by bestowing upon him increasingly prestigious imperial titles and constructing temples supported by the state. Guan exemplified the loyal principles that emperors desired officials and subjects to imitate, achieving unparalleled national recognition.

### ***Religious integration***

While folk deities may originate from popular devotion, their incorporation into prominent philosophical and theological traditions can significantly enhance their influence and attractiveness. Mazu and Guan Gong were fully assimilated into the Chinese theological framework, whereas Laopatou remained a localised figure with restricted cultural connections.

### ***Laopatou's Solitude***

Laopatou occupies a rather isolated position in the northeastern Chinese folk pantheon, as it has not achieved the same level of assimilation into elite society that has allowed Mazu and Guan Gong to gain statewide recognition.

Laopatou, a deity within the ethnic religious traditions of Manchuria, primarily held significance among the Han Chinese population. He was not assimilated into the indigenous Manchu shamanic religion, indicating his foreign heritage. Laopatou's veneration was primarily limited to itinerant ginseng excavators from the provinces of Shandong and Hebei (Wang & Wu, 2019).

Despite having ancestral ties and being well-known in his hometown of Shandong, Laopatou's limited influence in northeast China hindered broader dissemination. Furthermore, his failure to assimilate into the philosophical ideologies of Confucianism, Daoism, or Buddhism limited his appeal to a narrow group of devout followers.

Unlike Guan Gong, who was revered by scholars as a symbol of Confucian fidelity, or Mazu, who had a dual Daoist-Buddhist identity, Laopatou did not have the same intellectual appeal among the elite. His lack of widespread recognition limited his influence to small mountain settlements.

Although Laopatou displayed virtuous virtues through acts of benevolence and sacrifice, their limited cultural integration into the esteemed religious sphere produced in less widespread influence compared to Mazu and Guan Gong. His appeal was mostly limited to a local community without the backing of institutional sponsorship and advanced theological understanding.

### ***The Syncretic Appeal of Mazu***

Mazu's influence was greatly expanded by the assimilation of Daoist, Buddhist, and Confucian components into her theology and depiction. The multidimensional nature of Mazu worship enabled its influence to extend across several social classes, ranging from modest seaside believers to scholar-officials.

Mazu's mythology adeptly fused Daoist and Buddhist principles with indigenous shamanic folk beliefs associated with the sea. The depiction of her incorporated characteristics such as the cranes and immortality peaches associated with the Daoist Queen Mother of the West, as well as the compassion and mercy of the Buddhist bodhisattva Guanyin. This fusion of many cultural elements had a strong impact on both elite and popular cultures.

In the early 16th century, the Daoist sage Lin Lingfu commissioned the creation of the first anthology of Mazu miracles, thereby providing intellectual support from the elite. Mazu's

expanding legend led to her being bestowed with official Daoist and Buddhist designations, such as being recognised as the embodiment of the Bodhisattva Guanyin. Mazu was also associated with maritime cultural figures, like the renowned General Qi Jiguang (Zhong, 2020).

According to Buddhists, Mazu embodied important qualities such as compassion, knowledge, and assistance for those who are suffering. She was revered as a living embodiment of a bodhisattva, delivering teachings on Mahayana salvation. The mythology surrounding Mazu's visits to sacred Buddhist locations and her assistance to monk Xuanzang's pilgrimage to India served to strengthen her position and reputation.

The complex nature of this identity allowed the worship of Mazu to spread throughout various socioeconomic classes. Mazu preserved conventional principles such as childbearing and safeguarding the community for coastal inhabitants. She epitomised Neo-Confucian principles such as education and moral refinement for scholar-officials. Mazu's appeal effectively connected both the elite and popular spheres of practice.

### ***The Varied Dedication of Guan Gong***

Like Mazu, Guan Gong gained reverence from a wide range of religious and philosophical traditions, which enhanced his cultural significance. Guan attracted loyal and dedicated followers among scholars who followed Confucianism, clergy who practiced Daoism, and Chinese Buddhists who followed the Mahayana tradition.

The Confucian intellectuals revered the Loyal Emperor Guan as the epitome of virtue, loyalty, and duty. He was presented as the epitome of authentic Confucian values, creating moral anecdotes and operas to encourage imitation. Guan also achieved renown as one of the Five Cultural Deities who oversee literature and the martial arts.

Guan Yu was appointed as one of the primary Guardian Marshals for religious ceremonial processions by Daoists. He was bestowed with the prestigious title "Supporter of the Han as Perfected Warrior" in addition to possessing profound supernatural abilities and an extended lifespan. The Daoist mythos enhanced his formidable protecting abilities.

Chinese Mahayana Buddhists included Guan Yu into their religious practices by recognising him as the heavenly protector Sangharama Bodhisattva. This role involved his being a devoted follower of the Buddha and having the responsibility of protecting monks and monasteries (Lü, 2022). Temple entryways are adorned with statues of the formidable Guan.

Guan Gong's versatile identity allowed him to infiltrate several aspects of China's religious landscape and garner adherents ranging from the nobility to the general public. The diversified representation greatly enhanced the cultural value he possessed.

### ***Religious Rituals and Locations of Worship***

The worship places and rituals differ between local institutions for Laopatou and grand statewide and worldwide centres dedicated to Mazu and Guan Gong, reflecting their distinct levels of spread and support.

#### ***Laopatou's Local Shrines***

Laopatou worship centres are localised and mostly found in villages situated in regions such as Changbai Mountain. The majority of these typically include of humble individual altars or small shrines that contain a simple figure used for the purpose of presenting incense, flowers, and prayers. The restricted infrastructure mirrors the narrow appeal of Laopatou.

### ***Mazu's Grand National and Global Cult Centres***

On the other hand, there are more than 5,000 Mazu temples worldwide, spread over 20 nations, which demonstrates her rise to become one of China's most important gods. Notable locations include of the extensive pilgrimage complexes at Meizhou Island, Tianhou Palace in Tianjin, and Chaotien Temple in Taiwan, which can accommodate a large number of visitors and pilgrims. The extensive infrastructure of Mazu reflects her extraordinary prominence and widespread popularity across the country.

### ***The Magnificent State Temples of Guan Gong***

In both China and worldwide, there are tens of thousands of Guan Gong temples. The Guandi Temple in Henan, Guan Gong Temple in Shanxi, and Guan Yu Shrine in Sichuan have been favoured by emperors and officials for many years, demonstrating Guan's esteemed status. These websites showcase his role as an exemplar of moral uprightness for individuals of various social classes and occupations.

The impressive size and magnificence of the worship places dedicated to Mazu and Guan Gong are a testament to their status as prominent folk deities, supported by both imperial and intellectual sponsorship. Conversely, the restricted infrastructure of Laopatou constrained the extent of his effect.

### ***Religious Rituals and Locations of Worship***

The worship venues and rituals differ between local institutions for Laopatou and the grand statewide and worldwide centres dedicated to Mazu and Guan Gong, reflecting their distinct levels of spread and support.

### ***Local Shrines in Laopatou***

Laopatou worship centres are limited to small-scale local establishments that are mostly found in specific localities, such as the villages located in Changbai Mountain. The majority of sites typically comprise modest personal altars or small one-room shrines that contain a simple figure used for offering incense, flowers, and prayers. The restricted attraction of Laopatou is evident in its simplicity and limited infrastructure.

On the other hand, the significant Mazu and Guan Gong temple complexes mentioned below possess intricate ceremonial halls adorned with intricate statues, vast premises, and amenities capable of hosting thousands of pilgrims and guests. The grandeur and magnitude of these deities reflect their status as prominent figures in Chinese folklore.

### ***Mazu's Grand National & Global Worship Centres***

There are more than 5,000 Mazu temples worldwide, spread over 20 countries, which demonstrates her spread through maritime networks and her evolution into one of China's most revered gods (Lin, 2020).

A prominent national pilgrimage site is the extensive temple town located on Meizhou Island in Fujian province. This location is widely regarded as the origin of Mazu worship. The Tianhou Palace temple in Tianjin municipality has a long history, dating back to the Yuan period. The Chaotien shrine in Beigang, Taiwan, is a prominent Mazu shrine that showcases her significance as the protector and supporter of Taiwan.

These establishments possess grand prayer halls featuring impressive Mazu statues, accompanied by offerings. They also have vast premises, stelae, and peripheral shrines that can accommodate a large number of pilgrims, particularly during yearly celebrations. The impressive infrastructure demonstrates Mazu's exceptional status and widespread popularity.

### ***The Magnificent State Temples of Guan Gong***

Likewise, there are tens of thousands of Guan Gong temples in both China and outside communities. Historically significant places that have been frequented by officials and emperors for millennia include the Guandi Temple in Henan, the Guan Gong Temple in Shanxi, and the Guan Yu Shrine in Sichuan (Lü, 2022).

The distinguished temples house intricate ceremonial halls adorned with colossal Guan Gong statues, as well as opera stages, libraries, auxiliary buildings, stele pavilions, and training grounds situated within extensive temple compounds. The venues featured ceremonies conducted by emperors and scholars to honour Guan as the ultimate Confucian loyalist and exemplary figure for the nation. Their grandeur illustrates Guan's status as a prominent Chinese folk god.

The unassuming nature of Laopatou's community shrines and rituals dramatically juxtaposes with the magnificence and abundance of the massive facilities that support statewide cults dedicated to Mazu and Guan Gong. The magnificence and magnitude reflect their supreme position advanced by imperial and academic support.

### ***Patterns of diffusion***

The distribution of beliefs is closely interconnected with the locations of worship venues. Mazu and Guan Gong achieved widespread presence through their ability to navigate the seas, support from the government, and efforts to convert others, whereas Laopatou remained limited to a specific location.

### ***Regional mountain systems***

The dissemination of knowledge about Laopatou primarily occurred through oral tradition and written documents amid close-knit communities of ginseng gatherers in the Changbai Mountains of Manchuria. Laopatou's cult was primarily confined to the provinces of Jilin and Heilongjiang because to its seclusion and limited popularity (Zhong, 2021).

The act of worship was mostly practiced by temporary visitors from the provinces of Shandong and Hebei who were in search of ginseng. These individuals formed a self-contained occupational community. Their isolation and the limited attraction of Laopatou as a patron of miners prevented broader dissemination. He is not widely recognised beyond northeast China.

### ***Coastal Commercial Networks***

Conversely, the Mazu belief spread quickly from its original location in Fujian, China, through the maritime trading routes of the Song-Yuan era. The cult of the Chinese settlers was disseminated throughout Asia, primarily in port cities, where merchant associations constructed significant temples across the Sinosphere.

Mazu's influence spread as a result of the movement of sailors, fisherman, and sea traders, who saw her as their protector. The worship of her became widespread in coastal China and helped with the assimilation of Chinese communities abroad (Zhong, 2020).

### ***Imperial State Promotion***

Similarly, Guan Gong achieved widespread presence throughout the nation mostly through official declaration by emperors. The imperial endorsement and financial support of Guan temples spread his worship throughout every province, establishing him as the supreme symbol of loyalty and righteousness for both government officials and citizens to honour.

Guan's political advancement, ability to attract many groups and social strata, and embodiment of fundamental Confucian values led to a rapid spread of influence, a phenomenon that Mazu also experienced. On the other hand, the regional seclusion of Laopatou hindered its distribution.

Cultural heritage and tourism are closely linked, as the revival of folk beliefs is driven by the incorporation of worship practices, mythology, and related locations into the field of cultural tourism. Mazu and Guan Gong were heavily promoted by the government as tourism symbols, which increased their economic significance.

### ***Lack of developed folklore charm***

The local authorities endeavour to enhance the cultural significance of Laopatou by constructing new temples and organising traditional ceremonies such as the "Laopatou Festival". Insufficient marketing and research efforts have resulted in little awareness of Laopatou beyond the confines of the mining industry (Wang & Wu, 2019).

The absence of broad appeal hinders the progress of tourism growth. Laopatou's traditions necessitate significant improvement through research, cultural creations, and promotions in order to surpass limited and narrow areas.

### ***Creation of a recognised and distinguished brand for a specific location***

UNESCO acknowledged Mazu worship as intangible cultural asset due to its inherent cultural significance and its ability to preserve collective memory. Meizhou, like with other prominent temples, combines traditional rituals with contemporary facilities, making it a popular global attraction that draws millions of visitors each year (Lin, 2020).

The cultural tourism surrounding Mazu's primary worship locations is based on her rich cultural traditions, connections to area history and identities, and spiritual significance. She delivers persuasive destination branding.

### ***The Institutional Appeal of Guan Gong***

Guan Gong temples are well-known cultural landmarks with substantial infrastructure. The Yunchang Temple Fair enhances the traditional Guan Gong worship by incorporating opera,

fairs, and pilgrimage, so adding liveliness to the event. Cities use his cultural heritage for tourism, as Yuncheng has established temples and a Guan Gong cultural park as tourist attractions (Lü, 2022).

The prestigious institutional background and embodiment of beloved Chinese characteristics by Guan Gong make him inherently appealing for tourism. His existing cultural knowledge and resources support both spiritual and economic growth.

### ***Modern Expressions and Principles***

The prevalence of current media portrayals and scholarly investigations into a traditional deity demonstrates their enduring vigour and significance. The traditions of Mazu and Guan Gong continue to evolve, giving rise to contemporary cultural manifestations alongside continuous academic research.

### ***Limited research and product offerings***

Research and discussion of Laopatou are primarily limited to cultural studies that focus on the specific context of mining towns in Changbai Mountain. There are hardly many media depictions or commercial products associated with Laopatou. The available ones are mostly found in ginseng trade journals and local souvenirs (Wang & Wu, 2019).

The limited modern advancement of Laopatou customs in popular culture, business, and education indicates a decreasing significance beyond specific target audiences.

### ***The enduring presence of Mazu in popular culture***

Conversely, Mazu remains a subject of significant academic research, which examines her cultural heritage, the development of her beliefs, distinct local traditions, and her significance for coastal communities and the Chinese diaspora.

Mazu is a prominent figure in various forms of popular media, including novels, films, television plays, anime, comic books, digital arts, video games, and souvenirs, which demonstrates her lasting and widespread cultural influence. Her many mythology and iconic representation as a caring guardian of the sea have demonstrated great flexibility in being incorporated into several contemporary cultural expressions (Zhong, 2020).

### ***The Universal Values and Representations of Guan Gong***

As one of China's most widely recognised historical personalities, Guan Gong is the subject of vigorous multidisciplinary examination. Scholars examine his changing cultural symbols, spiritual roles, philosophical integration, and embodiment of loyalty and justice.

Guan Yu is a prominent figure in several forms of media, including films, dramas, web fiction, video games, commercial art, and martial arts. He is widely recognised as a symbol of unchanging heroism, duty, and sacrifice, appealing to multiple generations (Lü, 2022).

Overall, the current mobilisation of Laopatou is restricted compared to the continuous reinvention of Mazu and Guan Gong, which is achieved through mass culture, comprehensive research, and embodiment of inspiring values. This suggests that Mazu and Guan Gong have been more successful in maintaining their status as living traditions. The harmonisation of yin and yang in the context of worship The topic of discussion is Mazu and Guan Gong.

### ***The Significance of Yin-Yang Balance***

The ongoing popularity of Mazu and Guan Gong is rooted in their personification of complementary yin and yang forces, which serves as a significant philosophical foundation. In Chinese cosmology, yin symbolises the qualities of being cold, passive, and associated with the female life-giving principles, while yang depicts the characteristics of being hot, energetic, and associated with male forces. Attaining a state of equilibrium between yin and yang is regarded as crucial for maintaining optimal health and equilibrium.

#### ***Mazu exemplifies the embodiment of compassion as a manifestation of the Yin energy.***

Mazu embodies the yin qualities of fostering, compassion, and safeguarding. She is the most prominent female divinity in Chinese folklore, and she is deeply nurturing and dedicated to promoting the well-being of humanity through gentle influence. Stories depict her as skillfully leading wayward spirits to paradise, pacifying tempestuous oceans, and mending societies by compassion and sagacity, without resorting to coercion. Mazu embodies the yin attributes of compassion and peace.

#### ***Guan Gong, also known as Righteous Yang***

Conversely, Guan Gong represents the masculine qualities of power, faithfulness, and righteous aggression. He acts as a formidable deity, actively annihilating wickedness and maintaining moral standards with his renowned guandao weapon. His yang attributes encompass exceptional combat skills, unwavering devotion, and a readiness to selflessly preserve moral values. Guan Gong embodies the masculine qualities of bravery and integrity.

#### ***Harmonisation that is complementary.***

Mazu and Guan Gong collectively represent the harmonious combination of yin feeding and yang protection, which are crucial for the overall welfare of society. Mazu provides sanctuary to devotees by her unwavering benevolence, while Guan Gong ensures protection by actively opposing malicious entities. They create a whole and balanced pair, blending feminine and masculine qualities in perfect harmony. The equilibrium and attractiveness of their fundamental models exemplify the significance of yin-yang fusion in Chinese cosmology.

This philosophical aspect helps clarify their lasting importance as they offer archetypal patterns for attaining harmony and balance. Mazu and Guan Gong achieved broad appeal by incorporating yin and yang attributes into their syncretic theology and symbols. Their harmonious embodiment of these elements enabled a full portrayal of Chinese cultural ideas.

### **3. Conclusion**

The development of Chinese folk deities exemplifies the ever-changing character of grassroots belief systems, which are deeply connected with society as living traditions. Laopatou, Mazu, and Guan Gong exemplify how their common human roots, together with their distinct historical development paths, extent of recognition, and absorption into wider cultural contexts, have shaped their evolution and ongoing reinterpretation. Mazu and Guan Gong attained widespread recognition both within their country and internationally due to certain attributes, although Laopatou's reputation was limited to a particular region.



China's focus on revitalising intangible cultural assets highlights the importance of harnessing traditional beliefs, as demonstrated by these incidents. Grassroots traditions may face difficulties if they do not actively improve their cultural foundations, adaptability, and modern-day significance. However, with careful adjustment and wider relevance, dynamic folk beliefs can offer enduring motivation. The incorporation of folk deities into cultural tourism, modern media portrayals, and moral teaching can help preserve their vitality. The Chinese pantheon, with its broad range of deities, deserves thorough examination and careful restoration to shed light on timeless human ideals.

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