Paper Horses

Traditional Woodblock Prints of Gods from Northern China

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Introduction

In 2020 I bought an album containing seventy-nine woodblock prints of Chinese deities from a dealer in the United States. Each print was numbered with a sticker from one to eighty (#14 was missing), and mounted on card without any explanatory text. They had been in storage for years and the dealer knew nothing more about them.

Intriguingly, it turned out that there was a duplicate set – numbered stickers and all – at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto. This had come from Lewis Calvin Walmsley (1897–1998), a Canadian missionary and teacher who, along with his wife Constance, had worked in China from 1921 until 1949. Though a few of the designs varied, the ROM set covered exactly the same gods as mine, and in the same sequence (#14 was of the Moon Goddess).

Until the mid-twentieth century these types of woodblock print were made and sold on a colossal scale all over China, catering to the insatiable needs of a folk religion whose deities numbered in the thousands. Given this huge reservoir of gods to choose from, the chances of two identical sets being assembled by chance seemed slim – so what was their connection?

The mystery was solved when yet another set came to light in a private collection, still housed in its original brocade-covered folio. On the front was a label reading "Specially made up in China for The Yellow Hall", a rare book dealer and publisher based at Shanghai during the 1940s. It was run by Peter Neumann, one of the city's many wartime Jewish refugees (Neumann later immigrated to the US and worked internationally in educational publishing). It turned out that Yellow Hall had issued two versions of the set, one in the brocade folio, and a cheaper option in a kraft paper wrapper. Both my set and the one at ROM, being loose, were possibly sold in paper wrappers, now lost.

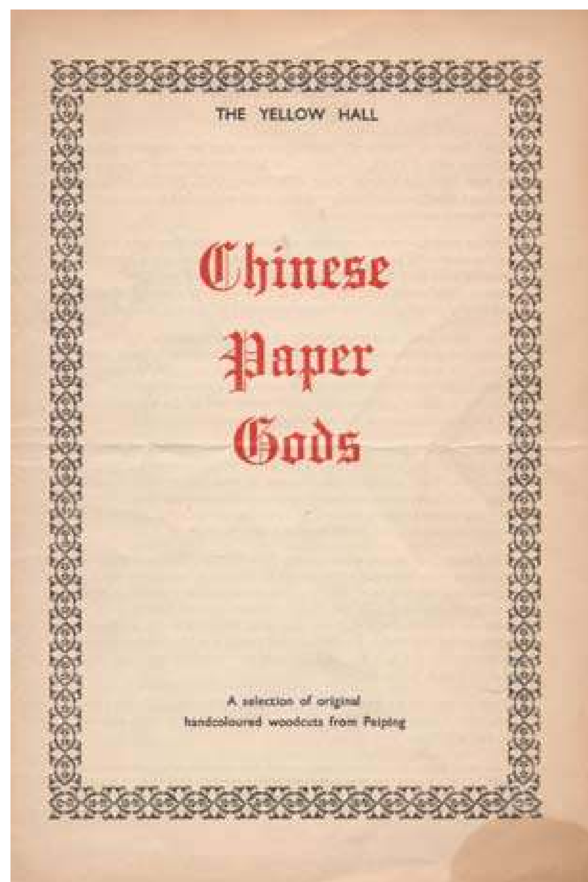
The prints themselves hadn't been made at Shanghai. Accompanying the complete folio was a brief pamphlet in English, titled *Chinese Paper Gods: A selection of original handcoloured woodcuts from Peiping*

(pictured). "Peiping" was the name used for Beijing between 1928 and 1949, and most of the prints had come from there.

The pamphlet also listed a total of ninety-three prints in the folio, not eighty. The final thirteen – missing from mine and the ROM's sets, but included in the private collection – formed their own distinct group: they were far larger, more colourful and accomplished, and, rather than having a religious use, they were for securing domestic prosperity and good fortune. From their style they had been made at Yangliuqing, a renowned printing centre southeast of Beijing near the port city of Tianjin.

As these "extra" thirteen prints were loose, they could easily have been lost from sets sold in the cheaper paper wrappers – or perhaps they were only included with the silk-bound folio version.

The more I explored the history, iconography and mythologies behind these ninety-three prints – which include wealth and weather gods, fox spirits, deified warriors, bodhisattvas, patrons of wine and carpentry, and even goddesses of smallpox and toilets – the more I wanted to write a book about them. So here it is.



Woodblock printing in China

Woodblock printing is a way of mass-producing a picture or text. The surface of a fine-grained block of wood is planed flat and the design drawn onto thin paper and pasted face down onto it. Everything but the design is cut away through the paper using small knives, chisels and gouges, leaving a raised image standing proud from the surface of the block. Paper is pressed on to the inked image and then peeled away, producing a print. The entire process is done by hand, with separate craftsmen specialising in designing, cutting and printing.

Using multiple colours slows things down: a fresh block has to be cut for every colour, and carefully

registered during printing so that each of these colours ends up exactly where it should in the finished picture. But the printing process can run at surprising speed. At the Bakong scripture monastery at Dege in Sichuan province, I've timed two monks – one doing the inking, one applying and removing the paper – printing monochrome prayer sheets at the rate of ten per minute.

The blocks themselves eventually wear out: fine detail breaks off, textured areas rub smooth, the wood cracks. How long this all takes depends on usage and the type of wood, though printers in Japan can make several thousand impressions before the wear begins to show. Given the sheer volume of demand for prints in China a century ago, it's unlikely that blocks lasted in good condition for more than a year, though some worn blocks clearly remained in use for far longer than this.

But a fresh copy of the original design can be recut on a new block, as long as one of the early, crisp impressions was kept. This is then simply pasted face down onto a new block and cut as before through the paper, allowing the same design to be produced indefinitely. The Yellow Hall sets were assembled in the 1940s, but comparisons with single prints in other collections suggest that some of the designs date back to the nineteenth century.

Woodblock printing in China seems to have originated for copying religious texts, and the oldest dated example is an illustrated volume of the Buddhist Diamond Sutra, made on 11 May, 868 AD.

An industry mass-producing prints for public consumption developed during the Song dynasty (960–1279 AD) – a contemporary painting by Li Song (李嵩) shows decorative prints pasted up on the gateway and inner doors of a mansion, as the family inside celebrate the Spring Festival. By the nineteenth century, every town in China had a woodblock-printing studio or two, churning out literally millions of prints a year between them.

Each region developed its own distinctive style, and popular workshops marketed their wares right across the country via an extensive distribution network. When missionary Anne Goodrich visited the Renhe Paper Store in Beijing in 1931 and bought one of every woodblock print they had in stock, her collection (now held by the C.V. Starr East Asian Library at Columbia University, New York) included designs from workshops as distant as Tianjin (130km away), Zhuxian Zhen (660km), Shanghai (1300km), and even Foshan, over 2000km away in southern China.

By far the majority of these popular prints were single-sheet, multicoloured pictures, ranging in size from about 20cm x 20cm to over a metre across. The many different types included *nianhua* (年畫), bright posters of auspicious subjects used to decorate the home at Chinese New Year, and guardian door gods

Cutting a woodblock, Zhuxian town, Henan province. The original design is either drawn straight onto the wood, or made on paper and pasted face down onto the block. Everything but the design is then cut away.

(*menshen* 門神 or *huwei* 戶尉), pasted up in pairs on the front gates of houses to scare off malignant influences. Most of the final thirteen "extra" prints in this collection (#81–#93) are colourful *nianhua* and *menshen*.

Zhima: Paper Horses

And then – as featured in #1–#80 of this collection – there were *zhima* (紙馬), small prints of folk deities used to placate hostile spirits or solicit the favours of benevolent ones. Rather than representing the actual incarnation of a god, the image on a *zhima* print was more of a postal address, ensuring your request was directed to the correct deity. They were sent on their way by being burned: *zhima* means "paper horse", a fitting name for something meant to swiftly carry your prayer to the heavens. (They were also known by other names, including *shenma*, 神馬, "spirit horse".)

The earliest surviving *zhima* dates back to the Ming dynasty (1368–1644 AD) but, as they are especially fragile things, it's reasonable to assume that they were in use earlier than this. *Zhima* were never intended to be long-lasting works of art, however. Printed at speed on cheap, tissue-thin paper, they were made and bought in bulk, and expected to be destroyed soon after purchase.

Even so, there were several grades. The better-quality were neatly printed, coloured and positioned on the paper; they were used where the print might be on display before being burned. At the other end of the scale were made-up packets of mixed "hundred god" prints – not necessarily literally this number – to burn as a collective set at New Year (see #93). As these were never going to be examined individually, the quality was generally far rougher.

All the *zhima* in this collection are monochrome prints, with any colour brushed on quickly by hand. A red rectangle highlights the deity's face, and sometimes colours it in; blue, green or purple is mostly used on borders; while yellow, adding a regal touch to robes, has almost completely faded away. The prints are generally about 25cm square, but comparisons with identical examples in other collections suggests some were originally 25cm x 30cm, and have been cropped.

As for quality, many images show wear, suggesting that the blocks used were fairly old. There are also regular signs of over-inking – which gives a blotchy, blurred image – or under-inking, producing a faint and "dry" finish. Sometimes the blocks were so carelessly squared to the paper that one side of the image has simply been lost over the edge.

Of course, none of this affects their appeal as examples of traditional folk art, but given these lower-end production values it's likely that the Yellow Hall's *Chinese Paper Gods* sets started life as "hundred god" packages. Neumann presumably bought them ready-made, added the thirteen Yangliuqing prints and a

brochure, wrapped them up, and sold them on.

Most *zhima* follow a standard design. A central deity sits behind an altar table set with an incense burner and candles, flanked by four attendants, two at the back and two at the front. One of these attendants usually holds a cloth-wrapped wooden box containing an official seal, the deity's symbol of authority from the Yellow Emperor.

With the exception of somewhat androgynous Buddhist figures, adult male deities are almost always bearded. Civil officials sport court headgear or a crown, and hold a *hu* (笏, a ceremonial tablet made of bamboo, ivory or jade); military officials wear armour and a red-tasselled helmet, and brandish a weapon (or have their attendants hold it for them). Demonic gods follow the warrior pattern. Female deities are placid and benign, usually with ornate hairdos and a beaded cap.

Sometimes an anonymous design serves for multiple deities, which can only be told apart by the name tablet at the top (see #65a, #75 and #76). As demand for specific gods varied through the year, it obviously saved a printing studio considerable effort and expense – not to mention storage space – if all they had to do was change the title of an existing generic image, rather than cut an entirely new block every time one was needed.

However, many of the prints do have deity-specific iconography, such as animal familiars under the table, or associated items held by the attendants or laid as offerings on the altar. And a few break completely with the template, showing the deities acting out their functions – riding rain dragons, shooting down the heavenly hound, or wheeling riches to their front door.

Chinese beliefs and deities

Folk religion aside, there were three widespread, organised belief systems in nineteenth-century China.

Confucianism was founded by The Great Sage, Confucius, who lived in the fifth century BC. Confucius formulated a moral code to guide human relations, a hierarchy of etiquette, protocol and ritual reaching from the humblest daughter-in-law (the lowest rung of the ladder) to the nation's ruler, heaven's representative on Earth. Despite revering the memory of ancestors, and entertaining the notion of deities and spirits, Confucians didn't place much emphasis on an afterlife – at death the body decayed and the soul was dissipated. Confucianism enjoyed strong support amongst conservatives, and was typically demonised by radicals and reformers.

Daoism, the philosophy of The Way, was epitomised in writings attributed to Laozi, a semi-legendary contemporary of Confucius. If the Confucians were concerned about human relations, Daoists investigated the intrinsic forces governing the cosmos,

Printing at Zhuxian town. The cut block is laid face-up on a bench, and inked using the large brush. Paper is laid on top and the ink transferred by rubbing the back of the paper with a long pad. Too little ink and the image will be faint; too much and you get blotches – and there's a good chance the paper will stick like glue to the wood, tearing holes when it is peeled away.

believing that understanding them would bestow immortality. With some notable exceptions, Daoists were more likely to be shamans, alchemists, magicians or hermits rather than politicians. Their world was well-populated with all kinds of spirits, but Daoism only became an organised religion in response to the arrival of Buddhism in China from India during the first century AD.

Buddhism is a religion of morality, believing that behaviour in this life determines how you are reincarnated in the next; the ultimate goal is to become a perfected being and enter nirvana, thus escaping the otherwise endless cycle of rebirth and suffering. Guidance can be sought from bodhisattvas, those who qualify for nirvana but choose to remain on Earth to aid humanity. Buddhism introduced the idea of hell to China, alongside a whole host of alien deities derived from Indian and central Asian sources. Confucians tended to scorn Buddhism as a foreign, non-Chinese faith.

There was some rivalry between these beliefs, and over the centuries each cycled between official acceptance and suppression, but they were not always considered incompatible. The widespread, elastic view was that "Three Teachings Flow Into One", and Chinese folk religion drew on all of them for inspiration, adding mythological beings, local spirits, cosmological bodies, deified historic characters, animist concepts, and patrons of trades to create a vast, eclectic pantheon.

The heavenly realm in folk religion closely mirrored the earthly bureaucracy, complete with emperor, ministers, departments and offices. The difference was that heaven was populated by gods, spirits and demons in charge of material concepts such as health, wealth, and longevity. Problems in the real world, or concerns about status in the afterlife, could be solved by petitioning the relevant deity with prayers and sacrifices – much as it was often necessary to sweet-talk and bribe an earthly official.

Not all gods were worshipped everywhere. For example, the protector of seafarers, Mazu, is familiar in coastal regions of southern China, but largely unknown inland (there's no use for a maritime god in landlocked Yunnan province). A rain deity in this collection, Hudu, seems to have had followers in only one remote corner of the country.

Necessary posts – deities of fire, health, wealth, weather, farming, even the rulers of the underworld – might be filled by different spirits in different areas. A single deity might serve multiple functions, in the way that the Stove God is also the Overseer of Fate, or be assigned varying origin legends around the country, and so be worshipped for different reasons from place to place. None of this inconsistency is surprising, given the number of sources Chinese gods are drawn from: their mythology is an intriguing tangle, not a neatly tied-up package.

How many deities this all adds up to is anyone's guess. The oldest source of names and backstories is *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* (山海經), a bestiary of about 345 weird mythical creatures collated over two thousand years ago. The sixteenth-century popular novel *Creation of the Gods* (封神演義), which charts the overthrow of the Shang dynasty by the Zhou around 1046 BC, names another 356 warriors killed during the course of the story who are later deified and given their place in the heavenly bureaucracy. Other classic novels add to the pile, such as *Journey to the West* (西遊記), a fantastical account of the Tang monk Xuanzang (602–664 AD) and his seventeen-year journey to India to collect Buddhist scriptures. Taking into account purely local figures and those not mentioned in general sources, there's no doubt that several thousand gods must once have been worshipped across the Chinese world.

The *zhima* prints in this book are a drop in this enormous ocean, covering just a few score deities, or groups of deities. And these represent only gods popular in Beijing – and even then, only what shops

Woodblock archive at a studio in Zhuxian town, Henan province.

had in stock at the time of purchase. The selection might have varied considerably through the year according to periodic festivals, deities' birthdays, the proximity of the shop to specific temples, and so on.

Deity worship and woodblock printing today

If Chinese temples elsewhere in Asia are anything to go by, many in mainland China would once have housed a broad mix of folk, Buddhist and Daoist figures, whatever the temple's "official" purpose or denomination happened to be. But even as Peter Neumann assembled the Yellow Hall print sets in the 1940s, the gods depicted on them were under threat.

The reform movements which followed the abdication of China's last emperor in 1912 saw a wave of government-sponsored iconoclasm sweeping China. Wanting to create a modern society, free from old superstitions, in 1928 the Nationalist authorities abolished money-making, animistic or legendary gods, declaring in no uncertain terms that "temples and their idols should be razed to the ground so that nothing remains." A similar agenda was pursued by the Communists after they came to power in 1950, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76).

Neither the Nationalist nor Communist governments were successful in wiping out folk religion, but they certainly managed to water it down. Today, temples in mainland China tend to be dedicated to a fairly standard cast of characters, and while domestic figures such as the Stove God are still remembered – if not widely worshipped – many minor deities seem to have vanished completely.

Aside from the decline in gods, woodblock printing itself has been struggling in China since the introduction of mechanical lithography during the 1930s. Remaining studios have survived by opening up museums and marketing their products not as decorative or religious pieces, but as tourist souvenirs and collectable artworks.

The traditional use of woodblock prints persists in a few places, however, especially amongst the Bai ethnic group of Yunnan province. At Shangguan village outside Dali, the workshop of sixth-generation craftsman Zhang Ruilong (张瑞龙) still produces hundreds of different *zhima* of local gods, spirits and demons, which are sold at shops and market stalls across the region. Perhaps one day the techniques will spread from here back into the rest of the country, and woodblock prints will once again be made in their millions.