

Review

The State Canonization of Mazu: Bringing the Notion of Imperial Metaphor into Conversation with the Personal Model

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Abstract: Drawing from Stephan Feuchtwang's influential notion of "imperial metaphor," this article explores the role that the state played in the development of the Mazu cult in late imperial China. I argue that the state was central in the canonization of Mazu, elevating her from a polyvalent local object of devotion to a key deity in a national cult that strongly reflected official ideology. State canonization involved three deeply intertwined strategies to standardize, give public recognition, and promote a range of local beliefs and practices: the conferral of official titles, the incorporation of local gods and goddesses into the register of sacrifices, and the construction of official temples. As a result of these interwoven processes, Mazu became associated with domestic defense and warfare, the protection of government officials, and the involvement in political endeavors. As such, the imperial version of goddess worship served to justify and reinforce imperial authority. For all the analytical strength of the notion of imperial metaphor, I contend, however, that it needs to be supplemented with and critiqued by Robert Hymes' "personal model," in order to fully understand the complexity and dynamism of the Mazu devotion, and more generally, of popular religion in late imperial China.

Keywords: imperial metaphor; Mazu worship; personal model; Robert Hymes; state canonization; Stephan Feuchtwang

1. Introduction

According to tradition, the worship of Mazu can be traced back to the early North Song era (960–1127 CE), when some villages in the Fujian coastal region began to worship the spirit of a young girl. According to traditional accounts, Mazu was a historical person, a woman known as Lin Moniang, who was born in the coastal village of Meizhou, in the Putian district of Fujian province in 960, and died in 987. As stated in Mazu's hagiographical records, she lived a virtuous life and refused to marry when she grew up. She died young, but before her death, local people came to believe that she had mystical powers to aid fishermen to overcome storms and reach home safely. After Lin's death, fishermen along the Fujian coast began to report miracles attributed to her. In due time, Lin became one of the most influential goddesses worshiped in Fujian province. Due to its popularity, she was promoted to a state-approved goddess and also incorporated into the official pantheon during the late Song era. This state-approved activity was continued by the imperial governments of the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties.

As a popular goddess in China and elsewhere, Mazu has drawn considerable attention from scholars in the field of Chinese religions. Previous scholarship has revealed a connection between imperial patronage and the popularity of the Mazu cult in late imperial China, primarily through collecting and organizing primary sources on Mazu worship. For example, Li Xianzhang's book, *Study on Mazu Worship* (Maso Shinkō ken kyū), provides a comprehensive historical survey of the Mazu cult

and its spread in Taiwan and Japan.¹ Moreover, Li deals with primary sources on Mazu, dating from 1123 to 1650, with a special focus on her state canonization through honorific titles being conferred upon her by various imperial governments.

To emphasize the strong connection between popular devotions and state promotion, some scholars, following anthropologist Stephan Feuchtwang, argue that “popular religion is an imperial metaphor, which stands in relation to the rest of its participants’ lives, politics, and historical events as the poetry of collective vision . . . It is a metaphor at all times, including the times of imperial or dynastic rule.”² Feuchtwang uses the notion of “imperial metaphor” to describe popular cults in two senses. The first one suggests that popular religious practices, beliefs, and symbols are closely linked to imperial cults and their ideology. More specifically, “the imagery of local cults is set in the same cosmic time as the claims to legitimacy of the ruling dynasty.” In other words, when appropriated by the state, cults like that of Mazu sacralize the imperial narrative of authority, turning human time into divine time. Nevertheless, in the second sense, a metaphor is a representation of reality, one that is not necessarily identical to that reality. This sense points to the fact that the cosmology reflected in local cults was not always featured in the centralized administration of the imperial cult. Despite being tightly intertwined with the state, popular Chinese religions had their own logics, and to characterize those dynamics we need to look beyond the state.

In light of Feuchtwang’s “imperial metaphor,” my study of state canonization of Mazu confirms the strong connection of Mazu worship with imperial ideology. In the state-promoted version of Mazu worship, the goddess is represented as a protector and promoter of state interests. Nevertheless, while the notion of the imperial metaphor is very helpful in analyzing the historical process of state standardizing the devotion to Mazu as an official cult, I will argue that it is too reductive to take into account the religious approaches and experiences of individual worshippers. In order to assess the strengths and limits of the notion of imperial metaphor, I will examine the cult of Mazu through the careful study and textual analysis of official documents and local gazetteers. I will demonstrate the subtle ways in which the state imposed a high level of cultural integration and homogeneity upon regional and local cults, thereby transforming popular religious performance and experience.

I start with the Song dynasty’s policy of granting imperial titles to local deities as one way to incorporate them into the official pantheon. That is followed by a historical survey of imperial titles dedicated to Mazu. These imperial titles functioned to construct Mazu as a state protector, who became associated with the agendas of the imperial state. The second section describes the construction of official Mazu temples, while the third section discusses the historical process of incorporating Mazu into the Register of Sacrifices, through which the imperial government developed a standardized ceremony devoted to Mazu. In line with Feuchtwang, I contend that the process of state canonization operated as an ideological expression of the imperial government, as well as a justification and reinforcement of imperial authority. Accordingly, state canonization of popular deities was an extension of imperial control and surveillance over popular religion. However, such attempts to redefine the character of local religious beliefs and practices from above, and from the center, were not fully successful, as local believers, particularly women, continued to worship Mazu in the context of their everyday lives, in diverse and often personal ways. In this sense, I suggest that we need to bring in the perspective of a “personal model” in order to fully understand the complexity and dynamism of the Mazu devotion.

2. Granting of Official Titles: The Making of a Translocal Pantheon

During the Southern Song era (1127–1279), China experienced one of the most important changes in the religious sphere: the formation of a popular religious pantheon. In previous centuries, most

¹ Li Xianzhang, *Maso Shinkō ken kyū* (Tokyo 1979).

² Stephan Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China: An Imperial Metaphor*, pp. vi–vii.

local gods were worshiped only within the local village, where they originated, rather than being recognized by the central government.

Starting in the late eleventh century, the imperial government began to grant local gods and goddesses titles on a large scale, as a form of state recognition of their perceived importance. Mazu was not the only deity to be promoted by the state. According to Valerie Hansen (1990), during this period, the state granted recognition to figures such as Guan Yu (Emperor Guan), Zhenwu (the Perfect Warrior), Bixia Yuanjun (Lady of Blue Clouds), and Wenchang (God of Literature). Like the devotion to Mazu, all these cults originated locally and became translocal through imperial patronage. The many miracles that Mazu is reputed to have performed for state officials as they projected imperial power and for common people, especially for women in everyday life, made her prominent in the emerging translocal pantheon.

This section explores the administrative procedures of the title-granting system. Specifically, it examines how the imperial government transformed Mazu, originally a goddess worshiped in local communities, into a state approved deity, with the key role of a state protector. In essence, the state ended up appropriating the goddess for its own political and economic aims.³

The Song government developed a bureaucratic procedure of awarding a plaque or a title to a specific deity, who can be either male or female.⁴ That is described in *History of the Song Dynasty (Songshi)*, “Treatise on Ritual” (*Lizhi ba*): All under heaven whose names are recorded in gazetteers, who are beneficial to people, and who have temples and tombs, and who can make cloud and rain in famous mountains and great rivers should be venerated and added into the Register of Sacrifices. According to the second imperial edict of the Xining reign (1068–1077), the names of those who should be enshrined by virtue of responding luminously to prayers, but who are not entitled yet are to be reported. Hence, a chamberlain at the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, Wang Gu (c. 1080), petitioned: “From now on, all shrines without [official] titles should be bestowed temple plaques. Those who have already received plaques should be elevated in stature with [appropriate] ranks, initially marquis, secondly duke, and lastly king. Those who had titles when alive should follow their initial titles. The female deities should be entitled initially as lady, then consort. The initial title contains two characters, and elevated titles have four characters. Thus, the imperial edict will be in charge of deities; and graces and rites will be in order.”⁵

Wang Gu’s petition makes clear that imperial government sets itself as the arbiter of status and power of deities. Gods and goddesses that were worshipped in a piecemeal way could then be compared and ranked according to the number and type of miracles they performed. By recognizing and promoting the deities through a series of titles—from marquis to lord, and then to king—and by increasing the number of characters in a deity’s title from two to four to six, the imperial state established a complex divine hierarchy that mirrored earthly political ranks. By the end of the Southern Song era, the maximum number of characters of a deity’s title was expanded to eight, allowing the imperial government more latitude to determine the rank of the deity. Basically, the higher number, the greater importance of the god/goddess.

In addition to the format of the titles, the central Southern Song government developed a standardized system of administrative procedures for granting plaques and titles.⁶ Local officials forwarded petitions for titles, conducted investigations into a given god’s history of performing miracles, and made recommendations on behalf of the deities. This system started with a petition forwarded to the central government. The format of the petition included the name of the deity,

³ For an interesting parallel case in Northern China and in the republican period in which the state advanced a sacralized figure—in this case Guandi—to exert power over local communities, see Duara (1988).

⁴ See (Hansen 1990), pp. 91–92.

⁵ “Treatise of Ritual Eight” (*lizhi ba*), in Tuotuo (1314–1355) ed. (Tuotuo 1978), *Songshi* (Taipei, 1978), vol. 105, pp. 2553–54.

⁶ For more details on administrative procedures for granting plaques and titles during the Song dynasty, see (Hansen 1990), pp. 91–92.

a depiction of the miracles performed by him/her, and the names of the people petitioning for a title to be granted to their deity. After receiving the petition, the central government would dispatch an official to verify the evidence of deity's miracles, as reported in the petition. After that, a second official from a nearby prefecture would review the same evidence. Having received the petition, the imperial secretariat would forward the case to the Court of Imperial Sacrifices. The Ministry of Rites was responsible for the final approval of the petition and the conferral of official titles.⁷

While this system centralized considerable religious authority in the hands of imperial officials, it was not a one-way street. The granting title system was not totally controlled by the central government, as local communities could take advantage of this system standardization for their own agenda. Specifically, local officials who responded to petitions depended on local elites to rule, while local elites who supported the gods needed official recognition for their gods as one way to enhance their social status.⁸ Local elites needed local officials' assistance through which they could send petitions for granting titles. Local officials may have supported these same deities to achieve solidarity and economic prosperity in their communities.⁹ In the process of state canonization, local elites also adopted the title-granting system to exert and strengthen their local agency. Following this argument, deities and cults popular in their own region attracted local elites' attention as part of a hierarchical network of patronage. By seeking canonization for a local deity, local elites attained and maintained their positions in local society. In that sense, the popularity of a deity at the local and translocal levels feed into each other. Powerful lineages sometimes claimed an ancestral tie to popular deities to gain official honors for the whole lineage, as in the case of Mazu's association with the Lin lineage at Meizhou Island.¹⁰

The process of Mazu's state canonization unfolded within the confines of this kind of system. Mazu was first granted a temple plaque, and later she was awarded imperial titles. She was promoted first to the status of Lady and then to Consort. According to *The Collected Important Documents of the Song* (*Song hui yao*), the imperial government of the Northern Song dynasty first granted Mazu a temple plaque, Timely Salvation (*Shunji*).¹¹ That was meant as a recognition of her role in saving an imperial emissary from a terrible storm on his way to Korea. As claimed by the emissary, the goddesses helped his fleet pass through rough storms and reach its destination safely.¹² Soon afterward, the Southern Song government bestowed a series of related honorific titles upon Mazu. As recorded in *The Gazetteer of Lin'an* (*Lin'an zhi*), from the Chunyou reign (1241–1252):

The Temple of the Holy Consort of Timely Salvation is located outside of the main gate of Genshan. According to the temple inscription, originally the deity was a daughter of the Lin family from Putian. She manifested miracles time and again and was enshrined in a holy tomb in the Putian district. In the fifth year of the Xuanhe reign (1123), the court bestowed her with a temple plaque, Timely Salvation. In the twenty-sixth year of the Shaoxing reign (1156), she was given the [title of] Lady of Numinous Wisdom. In the thirtieth year of the Shaoxing reign (1160), she was granted [the] additional

⁷ The Board of Rites or Ritual Academy (Liyuan) is an agency subordinated to The Court of Sacrifices (Taichang si) that was responsible for writing ritual regulations and training ritual apprentices. The Court of Imperial Sacrifices, indirectly subordinated to the Ministry of Rites (Libu), was generally in charge of the major state sacrificial ceremonies according to ritual regulations prescribed by the Ministry of Rites and also for recommending imperial titles of popular deities starting from the Song dynasty. For more details on Taichangsi, see *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, (Hunker 2008), p. 476. The Ministry of Rites, one of the core offices of the central government, was generally responsible for "overseeing all imperial and court rituals, for codifying rituals, for supervising state-sponsored education, for monitoring Daoist and Buddhist communities." For more details on Libu, see *A Dictionary of Official Titles in Imperial China*, (Hunker 2008), pp. 306–7.

⁸ See (Hansen 1990), pp. 91–92.

⁹ See (Hansen 1990), pp. 86–95.

¹⁰ See Lin Qingbiao's "Xianliang gang zuci kao", which is included in (Jiang and Zhou 2009b), p. 300. Lin's text contains detailed information the way that one Mazu temple in Xianliang port is closely identified with a powerful local lineage, the Lin lineage, which has dominated this region since the Ming dynasty.

¹¹ The English translation of the title "Shunji" comes from Fullin Shi's "Old Customs and New Fashions: An Examination of Features of Shamanism in Song China," in (Lagerwey and Marsone 2014), p. 255.

¹² See (Li 1995), p. 89.

title [of] Glorious Response. In the second year of the Qiandao reign (1166), the court bestowed an additional title upon her, Exalting Blessing. In the twelfth year of the Chunxi reign (1185), she received an additional title, Virtuous Benefit. In the third year of the Shaoxi reign (1210), the court changed her title to Imperial Consort of Numinous Wisdom. In the fourth year of the Qingyuan reign (1198), she was granted an additional title, Assisting Smoothly.¹³

The Southern Song government granted thirteen titles to Mazu, ostensibly to reward the goddess for her loyalty and miraculous assistance on imperial affairs.¹⁴ Mazu's special contribution in repelling a sea pirates' invasion also led to her promotion as The Lady of Numinous Wisdom and Glorious Response (*Linghui zhaoying furen*). Later, based on a belief that she played a significant role in ending a drought and epidemic, Mazu was promoted from Lady to The Consort of Numinous Wisdom (*Linghui fei*) by the imperial court.

The Song official texts repeatedly provide evidence about how additional and more elevated titles were granted to the goddess for her contribution to the state's safety and prosperity. Specifically, the Song government raised her status to Imperial Consort, and expanded her title to eight characters, the maximum number of characters used to recognize and reward a powerful deity. Mazu's imperial rise, as seen through the granting of higher titles, was closely linked to her exceptional response in saving the local people from flood in the Zhejiang area.

In the third year of the Jiading reign (1210), the tidal waters in Zhejiang province eroded the embankments. [The people] prayed to the goddess and received her [felicitous] response. Consequently, [she] was granted the title, Consort of Numinous Wisdom, Assisting Smoothly, Auspiciously Responding, Brave and Chaste.¹⁵

According to the official records cited above, Mazu's miraculous control of the flood and tidewaters contributed to her promotion in the imperial pantheon of the Song era. This specific contribution was closely linked to the Song government's concerns at that time. As recorded in both *History of the Song Dynasty* and *Local Gazetteer of Lin'an* (*Lin'an xianzhi*), areas around Qiantang river in Zhejiang province were affected by a flood, caused by tidal water from the river. The construction and renovation of an embankment around Qiantang river became one of the main concerns of the Song government, in particular during the Southern Song era. Li Qu (1210–1261), the investigating censor (*jiancha yushi*), wrote a petition, which attested to the fact that the tidal water near the Lin'an area demolished the embankment and destroyed the nearby villages.¹⁶ To protect the local people, the Song government rebuilt the Qiantang embankments during the fourth year of the Baoyou reign (1256). In line with the state's agenda, Mazu was designated as the protector of the embankments along the Qiantang river.

Mazu's contribution to the Song state's safety and prosperity was also reflected in her assistance in the Song government's fight against "barbarians." Specifically, the Song government was threatened by a Jurchen invasion from the neighboring Jin dynasty (1115–1234), which led to the retreat of the Song court to Southern China. The retreat marked the end of the Northern Song era and the beginning of the Southern Song period. During the period of Jin-Song wars, Jurchens' military threat became the main concern of the Song government. In this situation, the goddess became closely associated with Song's fight against the Jin state. Ding Bogui's (1171–1237) ([Ding 2007](#)) *Shunji shengfei miaoji* (dated 1229) further claimed that Mazu's divine manifestation was crucial to Song's triumph over Jin in the second year of the Kaixi reign (1206).¹⁷ This record indicates supposed Mazu's loyalty to the Song government and her contribution in assisting Song's fight against the Jin.

¹³ Shi E (c. 1252) ed., *Chunyou lin'an zhi*, in ([Zheng 2011](#)), p. 269.

¹⁴ See ([Li 1995](#)), pp. 10–14.

¹⁵ Shi E ed., *Chunyou lin'an zhi*, p. 269.

¹⁶ Qian Shuoyou (1216–1277) ed. ([Qian and Zheng 2011](#)), *Xianchun lin'an zhi*, in ([Zheng 2011](#)), p. 271; Tuotuo, *Songshi*, vol. 97, p. 2397.

¹⁷ The original text comes from Ding Bogui's (1171–1237) ([Ding 2007](#)), *Shunji shengfei miaoji*, in ([Jiang and Zheng 2007a](#)), pp. 2–4.

The large-scale conferral of plaques and titles reflected the imperial agenda of the Southern Song dynasty, and was meant to obtain blessings for the ruling dynasty and its subjects. The Southern Song era witnessed a critical transition in Chinese history, “the turn to locality in the twelfth century.”¹⁸ Scholars, such as Valerie Hansen (1990) and Mizukosh (2002), have pointed out that the retreat of the Song court to Southern China marked a major shift from the national to local sphere of interests, which included a gradual increase in the granting of titles and honors at the local level as a way to rebuild local alliances.¹⁹ These scholars argue that the Southern Song’s unstable political situation is a major reason for the extensive conferral of noble titles to deities associated with local cults.²⁰ For example, Emperor Gaozong (r. 1127–62), who was responsible for the reconstruction of the entire government in South China, decreed that “in the prefectures where the court had taken refuge (namely, Whenzhou, Taizhou, and Mingzhou), the Court of Imperial Sacrifices should issue promotions to the gods of all shrines that already had name plaques and noble titles, and confer titles or plaques on gods and shrines that had one but not the other. The local authorities were also to perform sacrifices to mark the conferrals.”²¹ Gaozong’s case demonstrates how the Southern Song state resorted to powerful deities for supernatural protection from foreign invasion, along with the construction of a new form of cultural orthodoxy in the south, in their struggle against the Mongol threat.²² Standardizing the pantheon popular deities was a way to articulate this orthodoxy and to bring blessings on the ruler and the state. This strategy of state management of popular cults was also adopted by subsequent dynasties.

The imperial government of the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) continued this type of state-supported activity.²³ According to *History of the Yuan Dynasty* (*Yuanshi*), Kublai Khan (1215–1294) conferred Mazu a new title, Celestial Consort (*Tianfei*), in 1278.²⁴ Compared to the imperial titles granted by the Song government, the Yuan court upgraded her status from consort to celestial consort. As previously noted, all these titles were conferred on the goddess for her “meritorious service” to the state. Here is a listing of imperial titles granted by the Yuan government, with a special emphasis on Mazu’s role as a state protector, from *History of the Yuan Dynasty*:

On the fourteenth day of the eighth month, during the fifteenth year of the Zhiyuan reign (1278), the imperial court ordered to canonize the Divine Goddess of Quanzhou with a title, Celestial Consort of Illustrious Manifestations, Numinous Wisdom, Assisting Righteousness, Virtuous Blessings, and Remarkable Salvation, Who Protects the State,²⁵

In the sixth month of the twenty-fifth year of the Zhiyuan reign (1288), the imperial government decreed to confer an additional title, whereas Celestial Consort of Illustrious Manifestation of the South Sea became Celestial Consort of Extensive Protection and Illustrious Manifestation;²⁶

¹⁸ See (Hymes 2002), p. 4.

¹⁹ On the study of the Southern Song’s religious policy and political context, see (Hansen 1990); also see (Mizukosh 2002).

²⁰ See Patricia Ebrey’s article, (Ebrey and Watson 2015), pp. 92–95. Ebrey argues along the same lines that key changes in the political environment of the Southern Song help to explain the granting title system.

²¹ The original text comes from (Xu 1957), “Li,” 42.1a. The English translation comes from Patricia Ebrey’s article, “Song Government Policy,” (Ebrey and Watson 2015), p. 94.

²² John Lagerwey, “Introduction,” in *Modern Chinese Religion I: Song-Liaio-Jin-Yuan* (960–1368 AD), p. 8.

²³ Borrowing insights from Mizukosh Tomo’s article “Maintaining gods in medieval China” (2002), foreign regimes, Jin and Yuan, continued to support some local cults, which were recognized by Song dynasty. Due to the supports of local officials, the majority of shrines maintained their influence in both the Jin and Yuan dynasties. In a case study of the Zhenze temple, Mizukosh gives the reasons for the bestowal of imperial titles “as a response to prayers and the manifestation of hidden power so that people live in peace and are without drought year after year” (p. 84). More important, the responses to prayers were associated with the stability of the Jin and Yuan dynasties.

²⁴ The original text comes from Song Lian (1310–1381), ed. (Song et al. 2007), *Yuanshi*, in (Jiang and Zhou 2009a), pp. 8–9.

²⁵ See Song Lian ed., *Yuanshi*, vol. 10, p. 8. The English translation of the title “Mingzhu” comes from Vivian-Lee Nyitray, “Becoming the Empress of Heaven: The Life and Bureaucratic Career of Mazu,” in Elisabeth Benard and Beverly Moon eds., *Goddesses Who Rule* (Oxford, 2000), p. 170.

²⁶ See Song Lian ed., *Yuanshi*, vol. 15, p. 8.

On the twentieth day of the second month, during the third year of the Dade reign (1299), the imperial court bestowed to the Sea Goddess of Quanzhou an elevated title, Celestial Consort of Illustrious Manifestation Who Protects the State and Guards the People;²⁷

On the nineteenth day of the tenth month during the second year of the Tianli reign (1329), [the imperial court] elevated the Celestial Consort to Celestial Consort of Extensive Salvation, Beneficent Wisdom, Illustrious Manifestation Who Protects the State and Guards the People;²⁸

On the twelfth day of the tenth month of the fourteenth year of the Zhizheng reign (1354), an imperial edit bestowed an elevated title to the Sea Goddess, Celestial Consort of Extensive Salvation, Beneficent Wisdom, and Illustrious Manifestation, Who Assists the State, Protects the Emperor, and Guards the People.²⁹

All these titles stressed Mazu's role as "goddess of protecting the state and guarding the people." In other words, lauding her in this way enabled the state to present its interests as thoroughly compatible with those of its subjects, understood not as a collection of disparate villages, but as a unified people.

The role of Mazu, as a symbol of imperial power and a protector of Yuan state's prosperity, is further attested to by her protection of grain transportations. An imperial edict issued by Emperor Shizu (r. 1260–1294) of the Yuan dynasty states that:

It was only because of you, goddess, that the waterway for the grain ships is protected. The grain transportation system relies on you for its survival. Your august power and majestic response are remarkably manifested.³⁰

Another imperial edict issued by Emperor Shizu emphasizes Mazu's contribution to the imperial state, affirming that "she was able to protect the grain transportation every year and benefit the state; she defended the country with loyalty; with her compassion and wisdom, she kept the people safe . . .".³¹

The above edicts indicate how the cult of Mazu was linked with the state's economic and political concerns, that is, with the state's stability, which was heavily dependent on the efficient operation of the grain transportation system. Officials of the Yuan government stressed the significance of Mazu's assistance in water transportation, through which the Yuan government shipped grains from the South to Dadu, the Yuan capital. In "Preface to the Shrine of the Celestial Consort" (*Songci tianfei liang shizhe xu*), composed by Ju Ji (1272–1348), who held the position of grand academician (*daxueshi*), we find clear reference to the crucial role of grain transportation during the Yuan dynasty.³² Starting from Emperor Shizu, the imperial government transported grains from the south to support the capital in the north every year. In order for the Yuan government to have successfully provided sufficient food for thousands of officials and the general populace, it needed an efficient system of sea transportation. Given the unpredictability of the seas, the vulnerability to pirates and other bandits, and the rudimentary technologies and practices of navigation, the officials in charge of the grain transportation and the seafarers often sought and relied on supernatural forms of protection. Therefore, it was in the interest of the emperor to recognize and uphold Mazu's role in "protecting the state and guarding the people."

The successive granting of official titles to Mazu continued during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644). In the seventh year of the Yongle reign (1409), Emperor Chengzu (r. 1403–1424) bestowed on her an imperial title, Celestial Consort of Sublime Numinosity, Glorious Response, Magnanimous Humanity,

²⁷ See Song Lian ed., *Yuanshi*, vol. 20, p. 8.

²⁸ See Song Lian ed., *Yuanshi*, vol. 33, p. 8.

²⁹ See Song Lian ed., *Yuanshi*, vol. 42, p. 9.

³⁰ See Song Lian ed., *Yuanshi*, vol. 15, p. 8.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ju Ji (1272–1348) ([Ju 2007](#)), "Songci tianfei liang shizhe xu," in ([Jiang and Zheng 2007b](#)), p. 11.

and Universal Salvation, Who Protects the State and Guards the People (*huguo bimin miaoling zhaoying hongren puji tianfei*).³³

The official documents of the Ming dynasty stress Mazu's important role in protecting official envoys from sea storms. For example, two inscriptions at Tianfei temples, in Liujia gang (1431) and Changle (1431), make reference to Mazu's divine protection of imperial envoys from dangerous storms at sea.³⁴ As stated in "Record of Celestial Consort's Numinous Response" (*Tianfei zhishen lingying ji*).

In the midst of the rushing waters, it happened that, when there were billowing waves, suddenly a divine lantern was seen shining at the masthead; as soon as that miraculous light appeared, the danger was appeased, so that, even with the peril of capsizing, one felt reassured that there was no cause for fear.³⁵

The Liujia gang and Changle inscriptions suggest that the granting imperial title was inseparable from the Ming government's policy and ideology, especially its maritime policy. Specifically, Emperor Chengzu initiated seven Ming-era maritime voyages of the Chinese "treasure" fleets between 1405 and 1433. Admiral Zheng He (1371–1433) was commissioned to command the treasure fleets for the expeditions, which are well-known as "Zheng He's voyages to the Western Seas." The voyages served to showcase Chinese power and wealth to the known world. These maritime journeys were part of the Ming government's plan to expand the nation's tributary system and sphere of influence through both military and political supremacy, thus incorporating various states into the greater (Chinese) world order, under Ming suzerainty.³⁶ The cult of Mazu, then, is not only connected with the protection of the imperial state but with the projection of its power.

Mazu's close connection with the Ming government's maritime policy is further proved by a stele held at the Palace of Taifei in Nanjing, written in 1416 by Emperor Chengzu. Titled "The Imperial Constructed Stele of the Palace of Celestial Consort of Magnanimous Benevolence and Universal Salvation" (*Yuzhi hongren puji tianfigong zhi bei*), it states: "To transmit the virtues of imperial China and civilize the people living in remote areas, Emperor Chengzu dispatched emissaries."³⁷ In the same text, Emperor Chengzu emphasizes the goddess's divine assistance in guiding the treasure fleet to safety amid storms. Mazu's cult was, thus, not simply linked with the material infrastructure of imperial power—the waterways and grain transportation system—but also with the transmission of Chinese culture beyond the borders of the Middle Kingdom.

Official promotion of the Mazu cult reached its heyday during the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), starting from the nineteenth year of the Kangxi reign (c. 1680). According to the *Veritable Records of the Qing Shengzu* (*Qing shengzu shilu*), Mazu lent her supernatural support during the military campaign of reclaiming Xiamen from Zheng Keshuang (1670–1707), whose family occupied Xiamen (around 1645) and later Taiwan (1661), starting from Zheng Chenggong (1624–1662). Subsequently, Emperor Kangxi (r. 1661–1722) conferred to Mazu a new title, Celestial Consort of Sublime Numinosity, Glorious Response, Magnanimous Humanity, and Universal Salvation, Who Protects the State and Guards the People (*huguo bimin miaoling zhaoying hongren puji tianfei*).³⁸ Similarly, General Shi Lang (1621–1696) (Shi 1960) attributed his military achievement of reclaiming Taiwan from Zheng Keshuang

³³ See "Li," in Xufu (1428–1499) ed. (Xu 1987), *Ming huidian* vol. 96.

³⁴ "Loudong liujia gang tianfei gong shike tongfan shiji bei," in Qian Gu (1508–1579) ed. (Qian 1987), *Wudu wensui xuji*, vol. 28, pp. 36–38.

³⁵ The inscription in the Tianfei palace of Changle is entitled as "Changle tianfei zhi shen lingying ji," in (Jiang and Zheng 2007a), p. 45. The inscription is preserved in The Exhibition Museum of Zheng he's Historical Relics in Nanshan of Changle city (Nanshan Zhenghe shiji chenlie guan). For the English translation, see (Needham 1959), p. 558.

³⁶ For detailed information on seven Ming-era maritime voyages of the Chinese treasure fleets, see (Dreyer 2007) and (Shi 2006).

³⁷ The original text comes from The Stele of the Palace of Taifei in Nanjing, entitled "Yuzhi hongren puji tianfeigong zhi bei" (the imperial-constructed stele of the palace of celestial consort of universal salvation and magnanimous benevolence), in (Jiang and Zheng 2007a), pp. 42–43.

³⁸ The English translation of this title comes from (Boltz 1986).

to the aid of Mazu.³⁹ Soon after, the goddess received a higher title, Compassionate Celestial Empress of Illustrious Manifestations and Illuminous Response (*zhaoling xianying renqi tianhou*) from Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735–1796) in 1737.

Qing official documents refer to fifteen divine manifestations of Mazu in three major spheres of state affairs. The first one refers to protecting imperial envoys dispatched to Ryūkyū (Okinawa). For example, it was claimed that Mazu saved several imperial envoys, such as Zhang Xueli (traveling to Ryūkyū in 1662–1663), Wang Ji, and Lin Linchang (traveling in 1682–1683). Those envoys were sent to perform investiture ceremonies for the king of Ryūkyū, formally acknowledging him as king on behalf of the Chinese imperial court, thus making him a tributary subordinate.⁴⁰

The second sphere of state concern that involves Mazu is military affairs, especially Qing's conquest of Taiwan. There is considerable evidence in Qing official documents about this specific role of Mazu, such as the memorials to the throne presented by officials who were commanded to conquer areas in Taiwan. Wan Zhengse (1637–1691), the provincial commander of naval forces (*shuishi tidu*) in Fujian province; Yao Qisheng (1623–1683), the grand governor-general (*da zongdu*); and the general Shi Lang all submitted memorials to Emperor Kangxi. In the memorials, they attribute their military achievements of reclaiming Xiamen, areas of Taiwan, and the Penghu Island from Zheng Keshuang to Mazu's divine aid.

As for previous dynasties, the third sphere of state affairs involves Mazu's divine protection of grain transportation. In the memorial presented by the provincial governor of Jiangsu, Tao Shu (1779–1839), Mazu is credited with saving thousands of grain ships from sea storms at Heishui yang.⁴¹

In contrast to the Song dynasty which needed internal cohesion in the face of external threats and a tenuous hold on local patronage networks, Mazu's contributions to these three spheres of state affairs during this later period were closely tied to Qing's imperial agenda of expanding its supremacy to Taiwan and Penghu. The pertinent official documents stress Mazu's divine protection of the Qing warships and soldiers in suppressing the "rebel" forces in Taiwan. This type of state construction of Mazu's image also served as a key source of political legitimacy for Qing's military campaigns. According to a memorial submitted by Chan Jibu, the investigating censor (*jiancha yushi*) responsible for making an inspection tour of Taiwan in 1724, "When the Qing military forces were conquering Penghu island and Taiwan, Mazu and [an army of] heavenly soldiers appeared in the skies, celebrating the victory of Qing forces."⁴²

All these examples indicate that the title-granting system was deployed in order to incorporate local deities such as Mazu into the state-approved pantheon, which served as both a vehicle for and a symbol of imperial power. State appropriation and re-interpretation of the popular cult centered on Mazu, which involved official recognition of the deity and the miracles she performed in order to protect the state, throws into high relief the active agency of imperial governments in the religious sphere. Over time, the goddess's functions came to encompass responsibilities that the state traditionally delegated to male gods, expanding from internal governance to the outward projection of imperial political and cultural power, going from the safeguarding of officials and the protection of the populace from banditry to ensuring success in military endeavors. Granting titles and temple plaques to Mazu served to justify the state policies of different imperial governments. As we have seen, each imperial government highlighted certain aspects of Mazu's perceived contributions, in response to its evolving political concerns and economic interests.

³⁹ See Shi Lang (1621–1696), *Jinghai jishi* (Taipei, 1960). The bestowal of honorary titles to Mazu was followed by successive emperors. During the reign of Emperor Tongzhi (1856–1875), the title granted to Mazu consisted of sixty characters.

⁴⁰ (Jiang and Yang 2003), pp. 115–16.

⁴¹ (Jiang and Yang 2003), pp. 224–25.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 2–3.

3. The Construction of Official Temples Devoted to Mazu

In addition to granting titles, imperial governments also standardized cultic worship of Mazu through the construction of temples dedicated to the goddess, which were located in administrative centers throughout the empire. This policy started during the Song dynasty. As shown in two edicts issued by the Song government, constructing and repairing local temples dedicated to state-approved deities became the responsibility of local officials. An edict from 1127 stipulates that the prefecture where an officially recognized temple is located should allocate money to maintain and fix it. An 1130 edict is more specific. In it, the central government instructs certain counties to use leftover money in their budgets for temple repair to deal with the damage caused by Jurchen attacks.⁴³

Southern Song local histories provide abundant evidence of the construction of Mazu temples sponsored by both the imperial and local governments. Prefects and magistrates were obliged to construct and maintain official temples dedicated to Mazu. According to Li Xianzhang and Chen Jiarong, the Song government sponsored the founding of Mazu temples in the following provinces: Fujian, Zhejiang, Guangdong, Jiangsu, and Shandong.⁴⁴

The Yuan dynasty also witnessed the large-scale construction of Mazu temples in both the northern and southern parts of China. As noted in *History of the Yuan Dynasty*, “Her temples were named Numinous Compassion. There were temples dedicated to her in Zhigu, Pingjiang, Zhoujing, Quanzhou, Fuzhou, Xinghua, and so on.”⁴⁵ The areas listed above were significant to the grain transport system of the Yuan government, functioning as the waterway terminals. To protect the grain ships, the Yuan court initiated the founding of official temples in honor of Mazu. In line with the granting titles system, constructing official Mazu temples indicated that the Yuan government presented Mazu as a protector of grain transport, which as previously noted was a major concern of the Yuan dynasty. Here, sacred and political geographies and religious and political spaces overlapped.

Ming official texts also contain several records concerning the construction of Mazu temples sponsored by the imperial government. For instance, Ming Emperor Chengzu ordered the construction of a temple outside the capital city of Nanjing.

On the eighth day of the ninth month during the fifth year of the Yongle reign (October Eighth 1407), the Temple of Celestial Consort at Longjiang was newly constructed. [The Imperial court] dispatched the vice minister at the Court of Imperial Sacrifices, Zhu Zhuo, to deliver a sacrifice and eulogy. At that time, the eunuch Zheng He returned home after visiting several tributary states, such as Kozhikode [Calicut, in present day Kerala, India] and Malacca (nowadays a state in Malaysia). He reported that the goddess was numinously responding to [their prayer]. Therefore, this edict was issued.⁴⁶

The construction of an official Mazu temple at Longjiang provided Emperor Chengzu with a valuable source of legitimacy, which bolstered his political authority and helped him achieve his political ends. Through the temple, the emperor demonstrated public patronage to the goddess and, thus, positioned himself to legitimately demand patronage from his subjects among whom Mazu was popular.

The Ming central government not only sponsored the construction of Mazu temple at Nanjing, the early Ming capital, but also ordered local governments to sponsor building official temples. For example, *General Gazetteer of Great Ming Dynasty* (Ming yitong zhi, 1461) mentions that local officials of the Huai'an prefecture and Lüshun prefecture, in the Liaodong area (present day Liaoning province), were responsible for the construction of Mazu temples in their regions.⁴⁷

⁴³ *Song huiyao*, “Li 20”: 4a; and *Song huiyao*, “Li 20”: 4a–b.

⁴⁴ For more detailed information on the construction of Mazu temples during the Song dynasty, see (Chen 1998).

⁴⁵ The original text comes from *Yuanshi*, ed. by Song Lian, in (Jiang and Zhou 2009a), p. 10.

⁴⁶ Zhang Fu (1375–1449), ed. (Zhang 1962), *Ming taizong shilu* (Taipei, 1962), vol. 71, p. 994.

⁴⁷ The original text comes from *Daqing yitong zhi*, vols. 13, 15, collected in (Jiang and Zhou 2009a), pp. 11–12.

Similar to granting imperial titles, constructing official temples in honor of specific deities served to canonize the local deities as well as to promote and project the imperial ideology. For example, after taking over Taiwan, the Qing government sponsored the construction of new temples in Taiwan's administrative centers, as recorded in the local gazetteer of Taiwan prefecture. When the Qing government first took over the administration of Taiwan in 1727, the general surveillance circuitor (*xundao*), Wu Changzuo, initiated the construction of a Mazu temple, a Guandi temple, and a Guanyin hall in the southeast area of Taiwan.⁴⁸ District magistrates in Taiwan prefecture were obligated to sponsor the construction of official Mazu temples in their designated districts. According to Harry Lamley's study, during the Qing dynasty era, the construction of official temples and shrines devoted to Mazu and other state-approved deities functioned to sanction the Qing government's eventual takeover of Taiwan. He states that "This new seat of government was expected to play a civilizing role in the Ko-ma-lan region and to advance Chinese culture here."⁴⁹ To promote Chinese culture in Taiwan, the Qing officials imported images of Tianhou, Guanyin, and Guandi. Subsequently, they sponsored the construction of official temples for each of these important deities. In sum, Mazu temples served as a material means to inscribe the Qing government's agenda on the Taiwanese landscape and to conquer and "civilize" the local population.⁵⁰

The system of patronage that enabled the imperial construction and maintenance of Mazu temples became firmly integrated into the process of state canonization. Official Mazu temples located in administrative centers were required to perform officially-sanctioned liturgies for the benefit of the state. The highest-ranking official in each administrative center was charged with the duty of performing an official ceremony at a Mazu temple twice every year. In this respect, the local officials functioned as a clerical class who ritually re-enacted the politico-religious authority of the authoritarian state, through (and at) the temple.

4. Incorporation into the Register of Sacrifices: Standardizing Official Ceremonies

In addition to granting titles and constructing official temples, state canonization of popular cults also involved other strategies, such as incorporating popular deities into the Register of Sacrifices (*sidian*). As C.K Yang notes, the system deployed in the Register of Sacrifices makes a distinction between official and popular cults, setting up a hierarchy between rituals performed with the right liturgy by state-sanctioned officials and those led by local, grassroots religious specialists, operating with practices passed through oral traditions.⁵¹ The practice of keeping a register of sacrifices can be traced back to the *Book of Rites*.⁵² In imperial China, including the Tang dynasty, the register of sacrifices primarily recorded the sacrificial rituals performed by the imperial government. It also contained detailed information regarding the categories of offerings and the sites for performing rituals. In the Song era, the Register of Sacrifices referred to a list of ceremonies performed by the emperor and his officials, including ceremonies and rituals performed by local officials at local shrines. Preparing and participating in ritual performances was one of the main responsibilities of local officials. By incorporating the cults of popular religion into the Register of Sacrifices, the imperial state was able to organize popular cults into a system of official rites, with corresponding status in the official pantheon.

Following Song's policy, the Mazu cult was incorporated into the official pantheon under the administration of the Imperial Board of Rites, which standardized sacrifices dedicated to Mazu in

⁴⁸ "Chongxiu Taiwan fuzhi," (1760) in (Zheng 2011), pp. 210–13.

⁴⁹ Harry Lamley's "The Formation of Cities: Initiative and Motivation in Building Three Walled Cities in Taiwan," (Lamley 1977), pp. 195–96.

⁵⁰ (Watson 1985), pp. 302–3.

⁵¹ On the distinction between official and popular cults, see (Yang 1961), *Religion in Chinese Society*, pp. 145–46.

⁵² On the definition of the register of sacrifices, see Patricia Ebrey's article, "Song Government Policy," (Ebrey and Watson 2015), pp. 113–14.

accordance with the regulations of the Register of Sacrifices starting from the mid-eleventh century. As recorded in *Songhui yao*, prefects and magistrates were obligated to perform official ceremonies at local Mazu temples recognized by the Song government twice each year, in the mid-months of spring and autumn. This is further attested to by “Eulogy of the Holy Consort” (*Shengfei zhuwen*), written by the prefect of Quanzhou, Zhen Dexiu (1178–1235) (Zhen 1978).⁵³ Based on extant records, Zhen Dexiu was responsible for performing sacrifices at the Mazu temples in Quanzhou during his term as a local official.

Even though the Mazu cult was recognized and standardized by the Song government by incorporating it into the Register of Sacrifices, Song official documents do not make clear references to the imperial government sending envoys to deliver sacrifices at Mazu temples or shrines. Nor is there detailed information of official ceremonies performed at registered Mazu temples. In other words, despite the standardization, at this point, the performance of rituals was still not fully centralized. It was from the Yuan dynasty onward that the imperial governments issued imperial edicts to dispatch envoys to perform official ceremonies at Mazu temples, according to “Treatise on Sacrifice” (*jisi zhì*) in the *History of the Yuan Dynasty*.

The goddess of the South Sea, Lady of Numinous Wisdom, was indeed exceptionally responsive when it came to the protection of maritime transportation during the Zhiyuan reign (1264–1294). As a result, she was canonized as Celestial Consort, whose divine title had reached ten characters. Her temple was named Numinous Compassion. There were temples dedicated to her in Zhigu, Pingjiang, Zhoujing, Quanzhou, Fuzhou, Xinghua, and so on. Since the Huangqing reign (1312–1313), the court had dispatched envoys to deliver incense for sacrifice in all of these places.⁵⁴

The same text continues to give a thorough account of the official sacrifice to Mazu performed in the Pingjiang area. It includes lists of participants, sacrificial offerings, and the format of the eulogy used to honor the goddess. As recorded in the text, the rituals were led by envoys dispatched from the court. The officials in charge of grain transportation in the Pingjiang area, along with other local officials, were obliged to participate in the official ceremony, once again demonstrating the interplay of economics, politics, and religion. In addition, this text contains details concerning offerings, including the sacrificial meat and wine. After presenting the offerings, the official prayer text dedicated to the Celestial Consort was announced by the envoys. This prayer included the time of the ritual, the names of envoys sent by the emperor, and the imperial title granted by the court. It functioned to express the emperor’s sense of reverence for the deity.

The imperial government of the Ming dynasty followed Song’s strategy of incorporating a popular cult into the state pantheon through inscribing Mazu’s name into the Register of Sacrifices’ system. As shown in Taizu’s edict of 1368:

During the first year of the Hongwu reign (1368), the imperial court commanded officials in the prefectures and the counties to search out whoever deserved to receive sacrifices, including deities, famous mountains, rivers, sagely emperors, wise kings, loyal officials, and martyrs. All those who made contributions to the state and were benevolent to the people were to be reported to the state and recorded in the Register of Sacrifices. Officials were dispatched to deliver sacrifices every year. During the second year of the Hongwu reign (1369), the imperial court decreed officials to offer seasonal sacrifices dedicated to deities who were listed in the Register of Sacrifices.⁵⁵

The imperial edict above suggests that incorporating popular cults into the Register of Sacrifices functioned to standardize and exert control over those popular cults. The popular deities recorded in the Register of Sacrifices were supposed to make contributions to the state and people. Ming official texts also contain detailed references about the standardization of the official rituals and sacrifices

⁵³ Zhen Dexiu compiled four eulogies in honor of Mazu during 1232 to 1233. See *Xishan xiansheng zhenwen zhonggong wenji*, vol. 15, in *Siku quanshu*, vol. 162, p. 1286.

⁵⁴ See *Yuanshi*, (Jiang and Zhou 2009a), p. 10.

⁵⁵ See “Li 4”, in *Mingshi* (Zhang 1974), p. 1307.

dedicated to Mazu. For example, *Veritable Records of the Ming* (*Ming shilu*) provides information about the dates, the rank of sacrifices, and the officials dispatched to perform rituals.

On the first day of the first month during the seventh year of the Yongle reign (1409), [the goddess] accepted sacrificial offerings at the imperial ancestral temple. The imperial court granted the Celestial Consort the title Celestial Consort of Universal Salvation, Magnanimous Benevolence, Glorious Response, and Wondrous Efficacy; and a temple plaque, The Palace of Celestial Consort of Universal Salvation and Magnanimous Benevolence. The state dispatched officials to offer a sacrifice on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month and on the twenty-third day of the third lunar month. [Therefore,] this was issued as an edict.⁵⁶

As shown in the above quotation, there were two dates set aside for sacrificing to Mazu: the fifteenth day of the first lunar month and the twenty-third day of the third lunar month.⁵⁷ On these days, the imperial government would send ritual specialists from Taichang ci to perform official ceremonies and sacrifices in Mazu's honor. In terms of the rank of sacrifice, Mazu was incorporated into the royal ancestral temple (*taimiao*) system of sacrifices. These were normally associated with the royal family temple, where emperors and royal family members regularly worshiped and offered sacrifices to their ancestors. This illustrates the significant place occupied by Mazu in the official sacrifices system: Mazu was honored by being incorporated into the imperial sacrifices offered at Ming's royal ancestral temple.

The Qing government established a more routinized and standardized approach to the official rituals dedicated to Mazu. She was incorporated into the official sacrifice system, as can be seen in the regulations presented in the Qing's Register of Sacrifices from 1733. Since then, the highest ranking bureaucrat in every part of the country—each province, prefecture, and county—had the duty of worshipping Mazu during the spring and autumn. In addition to the spring and autumn sacrifices, Qing emperors also issued edicts to dispatch officials from the central government to deliver sacrifices on behalf of the emperors. Qing official texts, such as *Collected Statutes of the Great Qing from the Kangxi Reign* (*Kangxi daqing huidian*), stipulated the proper rules, procedures, and materials to be used in official rituals, including the arrangement of orchestras, literary formats of eulogy, ritual garments, honor guards, and the lists of officials who could witness the events.⁵⁸ To give a sense of the ritual etiquette involved, the following is a sketch of the official rituals dedicated to Mazu.⁵⁹

The ritual preparations involved the participants purifying themselves for two days. Everything had to be put in order on the day of the ritual, including the three sacrificial animals that would be sacrificed and the many sacrificial instruments used at the occasion. Members of the music office (*jiaofang si*) played the music. The cantors (*zanyin guan*) would lead the sacrificer (*chengji guan*) up to the left gate and into the dressing room. After purifying themselves, the officials assumed their assigned positions in the temple hall. The ceremony began with the ritualist "welcoming the deity" (*yingshen*). The sacrificer and his assistant presented incense to the deity in front of the altar three times and performed a ritual sequence of bow, prostration, and rising. The ritualist then announced that he would "proceed with the first sacrifice." Silk, libations, and prayers were offered on the altar by the officials. The master of prayer read the written prayers, placed them on the altar, prostrated thrice, and withdrew. The proceedings of the second offering and the final offering included two libation offerings: The master of wine offered the wine vessel at both the left and right sides of the altar and then returned to his place. The ceremony ended by "bidding farewell to the deity" (*songshen*). All the

⁵⁶ *Ming taizu shilu*, vol. 87, in (Jiang and Zhou 2009a), p. 11.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ The original text comes from *Kangxi daqing huidian*, collected in (Jiang and Zhou 2009a), pp. 197–99.

⁵⁹ For the original text of the official ceremony in honor of Mazu, see Shen Tingfang (1692–1762) ed. *Fujian xuzhi* (1769), vol. 14, collected in (Zheng 2011), pp. 11–12.

officials performed three prostrations and nine kowtows; and the prayers, silk, and food were sent away to be burned.⁶⁰

The official ceremony dedicated to Mazu reveals a hierarchical and highly structured moral universe. All the detailed rites and offerings were based on the imperial ideology of proper ritual (*li*), which universalized respect and loyalty towards authority and tradition. These values were construed as the natural way for human beings to behave properly. The performance of appropriate rituals and sacrifices dedicated to heaven, earth, river, mountains, and various deities were perceived to be crucial for the prosperity of the dynasty. This can be seen in Liu Qi's (1203–1250) *Inscription of the Anchoring Temple of the Center* (*Zhongzhen miaoji*), which states: "The Lord of the empire must perform rituals at the appropriate times, sending envoys with offerings ... by this means the sacrificial ritual is emphasized, the way of sincerity and reverence is illustrated, and great blessings are sought through communicating with the gods."⁶¹ The significance of proper ritual and its connection with the empire's prosperity is also emphasized in an edict issued by Ming Taizu in 1370, which reads in part: "The primary principle of the state is ritual ... at the beginning of the founding of Ming state, [we] take ritual as our great affair."⁶² In other words, the state, with the emperor at the top, presents itself as having a monopoly over the proper rituals to demonstrate publicly respect and loyalty to the gods and goddesses, who, in turn, bestow social harmony, political stability, and economic well-being upon the empire.

The ceremonial forms incorporated into the official sacrifices were prescribed by the law: the writing of the prayer texts, the duration and procedures of the pre-sacrificial purification, the rank and number of the participants, the music and choreography of the dances, the types and number of offerings, and the selection of the sacrificial animals.⁶³ The official liturgies performed in late imperial China devoted to the deities incorporated into the Register of Sacrifices, imperial ancestors, and to Confucius, have a strong family resemblance, and by and large share a common template. The state rituals are all organized around the sequence of preparing the ceremony, greeting the spirits, presenting the offerings, and sending off the spirits. We will see that the standardization and centralization of the cult of the Mazu cult were part and parcel of the construction of an "imperial metaphor."

5. Mazu as an Imperial Metaphor

The three facets of state canonization discussed in the previous sections, in particular granting titles and incorporating deities into the Register of Sacrifices, contributed to reinterpreting Mazu in terms of what Feuchtwang called "an imperial metaphor," which sanctioned existing sociopolitical institutions.⁶⁴ The state and imperial authorities attempted to appropriate local cults for their own purposes and impose their own definition of official religion.

The official religion was a sacred expression—i.e., a metaphor—of the socio-political power of the centralizing state, in the sense that the state pantheon and official ceremony reflect and reinforce this power. The underlying concept here is one of homologies: structural similarities between different fields of social action, which lead to their resonance with each other. In other words, there are close correspondences between cosmic and earthly orders that determine the whole of Chinese society and culture. Specifically, the bureaucratic system of imperial government influenced the fashioning of the supernatural pantheon, with various gods corresponding to government officials. Similar to the imperial bureaucracy, the celestial pantheon is a hierarchical system, where every god occupies a

⁶⁰ For the English translation, I paraphrase David Johnson's English translation of an official ceremony dedicated to Guanyu, another popular local deity, which offers a portrait of what a state ritual dedicated to Mazu may have looked like. See David Johnson, *Spectacle and Sacrifice: The Ritual Foundations of Village Life in North China*, pp. 306–8.

⁶¹ The original text comes from (Yan 2002). For the English translation, see (Chen and Chen 2014), p. 156.

⁶² Jinglong Li (1964–1966) ed., *Ming taizu shilu*, vol. 14, p. 176.

⁶³ See (Taylor 1990), pp. 134–35.

⁶⁴ See Stephan Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China: An Imperial Metaphor*, pp. 65–68.

specific place and performs distinct functions. Gods in lower positions are subordinate to higher gods. At the ultimate top of the celestial bureaucratic system is the Jade Emperor (*Yuhuang dadi*), whose role corresponds to that of the Chinese emperor. The city gods assume an intermediate position, while household and local gods, such as the stove god and earth god, fill the lower ranks of the celestial bureaucracy. Gods occupying lower ranks need to make official reports to the Jade Emperor through proper bureaucratic channels and procedures. The official cults were organized as part of the territorial division of the empire, centered on administrative hierarchy down through prefectures to villages, and to households.⁶⁵ The higher territorial unit, city or prefecture, was guarded by the city god (*Chenghuang*), who occupied a higher position in the celestial bureaucracy, above the stove god and the earth god, who worked under his authority. The lowest rank of the celestial bureaucracy was based on the smallest territorial unit, the household, overseen by the stove god.

The system of granting titles expanded the state pantheon by integrating local gods into the celestial bureaucracy. The titles conferred to popular gods corresponded to official titles in the imperial bureaucracy, such as Lord, King, and Emperor for male gods; and Lady, Consort, and Empress for female deities. In the case of the Mazu cult, the goddess was incorporated into this celestial bureaucratic system by the granting of a series of titles: Lady, Celestial Consort, and Celestial Empress. She was also appointed to the role of a state protector in charge of water transportation. What's more, Mazu's increasing popularity on the ground lead to a series of progressively more prestigious titles. Just like a government official or servant, she ascended the bureaucratic hierarchy through a certified accumulation of merit. As in the case of the Song dynasty, Mazu's special contribution in ending a drought and an epidemic led to her promotion from Lady to The Consort of Numinous Wisdom. In essence, Mazu's role was fixed in terms of her relative rank within the official pantheon by granting her specific imperial titles.

The official ceremony dedicated to Mazu was a ritual expression of an imperial vision of the world. As Feuchtwang notes, the official religion reflected the nature of imperial cosmology, focusing on the harmony of the universe. This imperial version of cosmology can be viewed as the tripartite division of the universe, including heaven, earth, and humanity.⁶⁶ The Register of Sacrifices was hierarchically rank-based, reflecting a vision of the cosmic order of heaven and earth, linked by the emperors. To be specific, deities of the official pantheons were necessarily "fixed in their relative ranks because they were linked to the abstract powers of the cosmic hierarchy or to their roles in history."⁶⁷ In line with their ranks in the official pantheon, the official rites were further divided into different levels of ritual importance. The deities were ritually ranked by whether they received animal offerings of *shaolao* (lesser lot), which included a sheep and a pig, or *tailao* (greater lot), which included an ox, a sheep, and a pig.⁶⁸ Incorporating Mazu into the Register of Sacrifices and performing rituals and sacrifices appropriate to her rank indicates that Mazu became integrated into the imperial cosmology, signifying the harmony of the cosmic order.

In keeping with the imperial metaphor, Mazu's official ceremony legitimized the emperors' authority. The dates of the standard sacrifices and the offering items had to be first approved by the emperor. The dispatched official and the local officials obligated to perform the ceremony were representative of the emperor, and thus they ritually enacted the emperor's attitude of reverence for the deity. In addition, the official prayers written for the sacrifices devoted to the deities elaborately illustrate the emperor's authority. Specifically, the prayers make it clear that the emperor sent officials to Mazu temples to announce the imperial title of the goddess granted by the court and to reward her contributions to the imperial government.

⁶⁵ See Stephan Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China: An Imperial Metaphor*, pp. 65–66.

⁶⁶ See Stephan Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China: An Imperial Metaphor*, pp. 65–68.

⁶⁷ See (Taylor 1990), p. 129.

⁶⁸ English translation refers to (Sterckx 2011), p. 89.

Given that the celestial bureaucracy viewed deities as officials with divine authority, human interactions with divine authority were mediated by either lower levels of gods or by religious priests. As we have seen in regard to the official ceremony dedicated to Mazu, the dispatched and local officials served as mediums, communicating with the goddess by means of offering sacrifices and performing rituals. The officials asserted their authority and represented themselves as the legitimate and only reliable sacred mediators. Only the state and its agents could take charge of the official ceremonies devoted to the deities recognized by the state.

All these features embodied in the imperial pantheon and state rituals led Arthur Wolf to assert that in Chinese religion gods function as divine officials operating within a bureaucratic system.⁶⁹ In his classical study of religion in modern Taiwan, Wolf has drawn attention to the marked correspondences between the popular pantheon and the social order. He observed a tripartite division of the supernatural into gods, ancestors, and ghosts, which appeared to be the cosmic projection of three categories of social life: government, family, and the strangers or outsiders who don't belong to the same kinship ties. Wolf writes:

“The conception of the supernatural found in San-hsia is thus a detailed reflection of the social landscape of traditional China as viewed from a small village . . . the mandarins, representing the emperor and the empire; second, the family and the lineage; and third, the stranger and the outsider . . . The mandarins became the gods; the senior members of the lineage, the ancestors; while the stranger was preserved in the form of the dangerous and despised ghosts.”⁷⁰

This classic formulation means that the popular pantheon mirrored the Chinese sociopolitical structure. In the same vein, state canonization was founded on the principles of bureaucratic authority and hierarchy, derived from the model of the imperial government. Wolf's model of divinity as a reflection of social relations offers important insights in understanding Chinese religion as a product of social and historical processes. Yet, this model is too simplistic, failing to capture the complex and fluid dynamics of the relationship between Chinese gods and their devotees. Does the idea of gods as bureaucrats as part of an imperial metaphor mean religion was always over-determined by the political sphere? Is popular religion, particularly, the devotion to the goddess, simply a state ideology? Is the imagery of and devotion to the gods by and among common people, like women and fishermen, nothing more than reflections of the interests and vision of state officials? In answering these questions, I recognize that the notion of an imperial metaphor is valuable to reveal the undeniable homologies between official ideology and an official version of goddess worship constructed by the state. However, when it comes to the multiple representations of the goddess and worship practices among different religious groups, we need to bring in other interpreting models.

6. Beyond the Imperial Metaphor? Enter the Personal Model

The official cult of Mazu shows that there are clear homologies between, on the one hand, religious worldviews, practices, and institutions; and on the other hand, socio-political ideologies and power structures, confirming Feuchtwang's reading that the goddess, and popular religion more generally, functioned as an imperial metaphor. Nevertheless, understanding the complexity and dynamism of Chinese religion only from the prism of the bureaucratic model promoted by various imperial governments is too reductive, because it reduces diverse religious practices and symbolic systems to a single variable—the socio-political logic of the state. Such a top-down approach fails to take into account the religious approaches and perspectives of individual worshippers, which scholars such as Robert Hymes have termed the “personal model.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ ([Wolf 1974](#)), pp. 131–82.

⁷⁰ ([Wolf 1974](#)), p. 175.

⁷¹ For the detailed definition of the “personal model,” see [Hymes \(2002\)](#), pp. 4–5.

In a study of the Three Lords cult at Mt. Huagai (present days in Fuzhou of Fujian province), Hymes defines the personal model in terms of diverse, unmediated and intimate divine-human relations:

"The personal model represents gods as extraordinary persons . . . when gods or godlike figures are encountered by humans on earth . . . hierarchy between gods and humans or between gods themselves are usually dyadic instead of multileveled, and based in a variety of connecting principles, including descent, teacher-student or master-disciple ties; gods' authority or special power as inherent in the person of the god, rather than delegated; human interactions with divine authority as unmediated, direct; gods' relations to places and their inhabitants as either inherent or founded in the god's own choice."⁷²

Through the textual analysis of the historical document featuring the Three Lords in Mt. Huagai, entitled *Verities of the Three Perfected Lords*, Hymes offers a case study of a "personal model" of a devotional cult.⁷³ A miracle story recorded in *Verities of the Three Perfected Lords* recounts how the Three Lords rescued a worshipper's family from a collapsed mountain due to the fact that "the family called on the Three Immortals and had sacrificed to them for generations."⁷⁴ In other stories, the individual worshiper made vows to offer sacrifices to the Three Lords or visit the Immortals' peak in exchange for their aid. In all these cases, Hymes notes that "vows or prayers serve as an alternative channel of direct communication and exchange for a lay population."⁷⁵

This personal model enables us to see the relationships between the gods and humans in a more intimate, lived scale, more in terms of relations between students and teachers, rather than as parts of an official and centralized hierarchy. The personal model recognizes that, in daily life and its moments of severe tribulation, the relationship between humans and gods is characterized by variegated forms of direct communication and exchange, rather than one mediated or fully controlled by a hierarchy of sanctioned religious and political officials who impose a unified orthodox ideology and practice. The offerings employed by common people are gifts of gratitude for the gods' responses and their assistance in matters of everyday life, rather than having to do with the affairs of the state.

Beyond Hymes, other prominent scholars in Chinese religious study have raised questions about interpreting gods and goddess solely as "imperial metaphors." Steven Sangren points out that female deities, such as Mazu, cannot be associated with "the conception of deities as imperial officials," since many of them "seem to be confined primarily to territorial cults . . . and their meanings contrast sharply with those of the male bureaucratic deities."⁷⁶ Here Sangren emphasizes Mazu's connection with individual worshipers, like fishermen and pilgrims, like mothers praying for the health of their children, not bureaucrats working for the imperial government. Similarly, James Watson offers another perspective to deal with the different representations of popular goddess worship.⁷⁷ Watson explores the transformation of Mazu as a religious symbol, which "is traced through several links in the power hierarchy of traditional China."⁷⁸ His discussion of Mazu starts with state bureaucrats, but then "passes down to the local elite, then to educated peasants, illiterate tenants, and finally to illiterate women and boat people," with each level offering its own specificities, even while framed within an overarching imperial ideology.⁷⁹

⁷² For more information of the cult of Three Immortals, see Hymes, *Way and Byway*. The cult of Three Immortals can be traced back to southern Song. The elite families were involved with the cult of Three Immortals from the perspective of a personal model not a bureaucratic one. Local elites' preference for a personal model of local cults is inseparable from the shift of elite strategies in the Southern Song.

⁷³ Hymes, *Way and Byway*, pp. 57–73.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 63.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 67.

⁷⁶ See (Sangren 1983), pp. 5, 10.

⁷⁷ See (Watson 1985), pp. 292–324.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 295.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

While acknowledging the explanatory power of the imperial metaphor reading, especially in analyzing the historical development of the Mazu cult, I find Hymes' "personal model," which focuses on the common people, as well as the lived experiences of the believer, particularly helpful. My research on the way women approached the Mazu cult shows how taking these personal experiences into account is crucial for arriving at a more accurate and complete understanding of the Chinese people's devotion to the goddess.⁸⁰

This is particularly important in late imperial China, in which the dominant Confucian cosmos operated through a patriarchal social structure grounded on and reflected by a hierarchical household, with husbands and fathers governing and with a strict separation of domestic and public realms. According to Dorothy Ko, a man "was responsible for keeping order in the familial, local community, government, and the world at large. His private morality was the root of public good. A woman's contribution was limited to the ordered household whose field of activities was also confined to the domestic and private."⁸¹

Women's approaches to the Mazu cult in late imperial China were varied. They included daily practices as well as participation in temple festivals and pilgrimage. Despite this diversity, an examination of the ways Chinese women interacted with the goddess reveals two underlying features that dovetail with Hymes' personal model: (1) female devotees' relation to the goddess was deeply intimate, connected to the private sphere, that is, to their domestic and everyday lives: praying for having children, their children's health, and their family's prosperity; and (2) women approached Mazu "informally." Indeed, women were absent from the formal, official rituals held on behalf of the goddess in late imperial China.

The mythical stories recorded in *Tianjin tianhou gong huanghui tuce* (*the Pictorial Record of the Palace of Celestial Empress in Tianjin*, 1884) illustrate these underlying patterns.⁸² When their children got sick from smallpox, women would invite female religious specialists to their house and, under their suggestion, women would pray and make offerings to Mazu both at home and temples, asking her to protect and heal the children. At the grassroots level, these female religious specialists often served as spirit mediums to communicate between the goddess and female devotees, by-passing the need to rely on male Daoist priests or Confucian masters as sanctioned mediators or to attend official temple ceremonies.

In a second example, female devotees in the Putian area would welcome a Mazu statue from the Meizhou temple and worship it at their home shrines with daily offerings of incense and other sacrifices.⁸³ In both cases, it is worth noting here how the goddess operated in the private sphere, not mediated by state-sanctioned religious elites. Additionally, women would often recite the goddess's name during prayer, observe a vegetarian diet, and chant sutras at home.

Despite not being in charge of the Mazu temples, women did engage in public expressions of their devotion through temple visits and their participation in other public religious activities, such as pilgrimage and temple festivals. Just as for their domestic religiosity, the focus of women's visits to temples and of their public cultic practices, such as praying, offering incense and sacrifices, and consulting spiritual mediums, was Mazu as a goddess of female fertility and as a protector of the family, not as a representative of the state and an expression of imperial power. The mythical stories in *Huanghui tuce* indicate that the most prevalent motivations among female Mazu temple visitors in late imperial China were praying for the birth of a son and for children's good health growing up.⁸⁴ Sometimes, the visit would involve popular rituals like "tying down a clay doll" (shuan wawa) that

⁸⁰ See ([Zhang forthcoming](#)).

⁸¹ See ([Ko 1994](#)), p. 144.

⁸² See *Tianjin tianhou gong huanghui tuce* in ([Zhou and Zhou 2011](#)), pp. 167, 180.

⁸³ See ([Jiang and Zhu 2011](#)), p. 340.

⁸⁴ See *Tianjin huanghui tuce*, pp. 167, 180.

was common among women in the Tianjin area.⁸⁵ On both the first and the fifteenth day of every month, a wave of married women who still had not become pregnant would flood into the Mazu temple to perform the ritual. First, female devotees offered burning incense to Mazu and bowed to her with respect. After that, they would use red chords to tie down clay dolls, placing them in front of the statue of the goddess. As each woman tied down the doll, she repeated: "Good child. Please come home with me."⁸⁶ If the female devotee succeeded in giving birth, she would come back to the temple to thank Mazu for granting her a child. In addition to burning incense and worshipping the goddess, returning female devotees also deposited ninety-nine clay dolls in front of the statue of the goddess, so that other women who desired children could perform the same ritual. This act shows a keen gender awareness and sense of solidarity by Mazu's female devotees: Their concern and desire to bear sons were not just a personal matter but a plight faced by other women they might never meet. Leaving 99 clay dolls behind provided the material means for these women to receive Mazu's miraculous intervention.

It is clear, then, that women's domestic religious practices and their temple visits helped them to develop their own version of the cult of Mazu. Indeed, there is no record of men participating in visits to Mazu's temple to pray to the goddess to deal with their personal and familial concerns. Women approached Mazu as a personalized deity who took care of their childbirth and health problems. In praying to the goddess, a female devotee would make a vow, like promising to offer a sacrifice or live a vegetarian lifestyle. After Mazu answered efficaciously to their prayers, female devotees would visit the temple with offerings as an expression of gratitude for Mazu's help. The *Huanghui tuce* vividly recounts how sizable crowds of women, young and old, gathered at the main street and the entrance of lanes and alleys, and waited for the arrival of goddesses' sedans.⁸⁷ Some old ladies made vows for their granddaughter, who had been sterile for over ten years, that the goddess grant them babies. Other grandmothers made vows for their granddaughter-in-law to give birth to a great grandson. In their vow-making (*xuyuan*), they also promised that "We will offer sacrifices on the Mazu temple and pay homage to the goddess by opera performances."⁸⁸ Offering sacrifices and opera performances dedicated to the goddess were ways of vow-fulfilling (*huanyuan*) for female devotees.

In other words, the interactions between Mazu and women devotees were often intensely personal and reciprocal. Female devotees saw the goddess as a motherly figure who provided protection for them and their children. Through praying to the goddess, they addressed their personal and family concerns, and established a direct and intimate relationship with the goddess. Such unmediated contact with the goddess stands in tension with the hierarchical and bureaucratic model. In fact, although women did not play a leading role in the associations in charge of organizing public and official events dedicated to Mazu, they would, very often, engage in their own ritual activities at the margins of temples, beyond the supervision of the male religious and political officials. Thus, we need to expand our analytical focus beyond the interests, ideologies, and practices of large institutions and the religious or political elites and include the myriad of encounters with the divine at the local level, as well as the ways in which common people drew from their local religious resources to meet the challenges and needs of daily life. While it is always essential to keep in mind that people act within structures of power and in relation with dominant secular and religious institutions, we must recognize that religious agency is exerted not uni-directionally, only from the central state down to the everyday life in the periphery, but also in the personal and domestic spheres which ordinary people inhabit (Hall 1997; Orsi 2005). Given the sharp separation between the public sphere, which was controlled by multi-layered bureaucracies led by men, and the private realm, in which women were

⁸⁵ See (Luo 2009), p. 134. This ritual was also recorded by a painting titled "Dajie shuan wawa" (The Lady Tying Down A Doll), a new year wood blocks printing from Yang Liuqing, Tianjin bowu guan, dated to the Guangxu reign (around 1871–1908).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ *Tianjin huanghui tuce*, p. 167; also see Yang Yikun (1753–1807) (Yang 2009), "Huanghui lun," in (Luo 2009), p. 209.

⁸⁸ *Tianjin huanghui tuce*, p. 167.

mostly confined and which they had responsibility to reproduce, the study of popular religiosity at the personal and domestic levels in late imperial China will have to pay particular attention to the variable of gender ([Zhang forthcoming](#)).

7. Conclusions

Imperial state apparatuses actively shaped religion, culture, and society in late imperial China, playing a central role in the translocal spread of popular cults like that of Mazu. Nevertheless, divinities and the nature of divine–human relations cannot be simply explained in terms of the mechanical reproduction of a bureaucratic system in the religious arena or the uncontested projection of imperial authority. The state canonized version of the Mazu cult only represented one, albeit very important, aspect of Mazu worship. Rather, the interactions and overlaps between the bureaucratic and personal models provide a clearer and more complete picture of the Mazu cult in late imperial China. The process of state canonization emphasized the bureaucratic model as a strategy to standardize the local cult and promote the imperial ideology, while downplaying the personal model favored by ordinary people. In addition, even within the imperial model of gods as bureaucrats, we should recognize the possibility of different interpretations or views. We saw how imperial officials had to negotiate with local leaders in the process of promoting a particular divinity.

We have seen how the process of state canonization, through granting titles, incorporating into the Register of Sacrifices and constructing official temples in honor of the goddess, sought to standardize the Mazu cult in line with imperial ideology. Specifically, title granting and official ceremonies were controlled under standardized bureaucratic procedures. Through granting titles and enlisting Mazu into the Register of Sacrifices, the local goddess was absorbed into the celestial bureaucracy, interpreting her in terms of the imperial metaphor. The goddess was represented as an official belonging to a divine hierarchy, vouching for the expansion and preservation of imperial authority. Accordingly, human interactions with her came to be regulated and mediated by the specialized services of imperial officials.

However, my research on women and Mazu in late imperial China shows that the state's construction of the goddess in terms of the imperial metaphor did not mean that the official version of the Mazu cult was totally accepted by the local communities. Women devotees did not worship the goddess as a symbol of state ideology. Instead, women approached her primarily as a potent protector who efficaciously responded to personal concerns in their daily lives. In particular, female devotees saw Mazu as a key source of religious inspiration, offering support as they faced the demands, pressures, and constraints of being a wife and a mother.

That leads to a crucial question regarding the interactions between the canonized version of the cult and the popular forms of Mazu worship. When approaching popular devotions, it is not a matter of rejecting Feuchtwang or Hymes and assuming an unproductive dualism between the imperial metaphor and the personal models. Rather, we need to hold them in tension and reciprocal critique and deploy them according to the specific religious phenomenon at hand. Recent works by scholars such as Steve Paul [Sangren \(1983\)](#); Robert [Weller \(1987\)](#); James [Watson \(1985\)](#); and Michael [Szonyi \(2002\)](#) point in this direction. The creative tension between the imperial and personal models reflects the need to study the dialectics of structure and agency, collectivity and individuality, the macro and the micro, and domination and resistance in the study of (Chinese) religions, which are dynamic, complex, and varied.

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