Deities of the Indigenous Snake People in Religious Marionette Plays

Fan Pen Chen

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/ballinst_alterity

Part of the Indigenous Studies Commons, Other Arts and Humanities Commons, and the Other Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lib.uconn.edu/ballinst_alterity/13
Deities of the Indigenous Snake People in Religious Marionette Plays

By Fan Pen Chen

Abstract: Hagiographies of cult figures of the mainstream Han ethnicity have traditionally portrayed competing shaman leaders/deities of indigenous peoples of southern China, the Other, as demons and sprites (animals with the ability to transform into humans), making their defeat, displacement, and massacre more righteous and palatable. Such tales are not necessarily merely those of subjugation and vilification, however. The clash between the dominant culture and the Other resulted in manifold manifestations. Based on six “sacred” string-puppet plays on the Goddess Chen Jinggu and the Snake God Jiaomang, from southeastern China, this chapter shows how the indigenes, who were once known as the snake people, competed with and reacted to the invading culture and vice versa. Although most of the Goddess’s plays denigrate and annihilate her nemesis, the snake demoness, persistent influence of snake deities can be detected. In one of the Goddess’s plays, the snake “demoness” is allowed to be worshipped as a local deity. Similarly, the sanctity of a local deity, a snake god who may have been a local shaman leader, has been preserved. The Snake God Jiaomang and his three sons continue to be worshipped in pockets of Fujian. Their legitimation was enabled through appropriation, through their becoming “human,” and through fighting for the Chinese state and emperor.

Keywords: puppet, representation, race and ethnicity, snake cults, Chen Jinggu
Hagiographies of cult figures of the mainstream Han ethnicity have traditionally portrayed competing deities of the indigenous peoples of southern China, the Other, as demons and sprites, making the subjugation, displacement, and massacre of both the indigenes and their deities more righteous and palatable. However, in Fujian in southeastern China, religious marionette plays of local deities are not merely those of subjugation and vilification. Certainly, the main feat of Goddess Chen Jinggu (the second most important goddess of Fujian) of the mainstream Han ethnicity was her defeat of a most powerful snake demoness, an indigenous deity. One detects, however, persistent influence of snake deities. Snake cults never disappeared. This paper will connect snake cults with the indigenous people of Fujian and show how they competed with and reacted to the invading Han culture through religious marionette plays.

Shuowen jiezi (ca. 100 BCE), a dictionary on etymology, glosses the character-word for “min” which refers to Fujian, as “Yue people of the southeast. [They are] descendants of snakes.” The character-word for “man,” which means “barbarians,” is glossed in the same dictionary as “Southern barbarians. [They are] descendants of snakes.” (Xu 1987 reprint, 673) Indeed, snake cults, snake totem, and snake worship proliferated in southern China during antiquity. As late as the early 20th century, the Dan People (boat people who are survivors of the indigenes) residing in the Minhou region of Fujian still referred to themselves as descendants of the snake. According to a Ming dynasty author Guang Lu (1604–1650), “The Dan People worshipped paintings of snakes in their shrines and called themselves the descendants of the dragon” (Lin 1993, 54). (The dragon, with its imperial connotations, was adopted as an euphemism for the snake.) The Qing dynasty (1644–1911) Dongxi xianzhi also notes, “The [Dan] People are all descendants of snakes. Hence, they always worship snake deities when they perform sacrifices” (He 2004, 12). Southern China was once a mostly watery realm replete with lakes and marshlands. The “snake” indigenes embraced water activities before shallow lakes and marshlands were drained for agriculture by migrant Han People and the Chinese government.

So, what happened to those indigenous populations during the long process of expansion by the Han People of the northern central plains into southern China starting during the first millennium CE? Aside from taking to or remaining on the rivers as the Dan People had done, what happened to the indigenes? Although formal historical records tend to be reticent on this topic, many natives were undoubtedly massacred or displaced to less agriculturally desirable lands, such as the mountains. Many also became absorbed into the mainstream. Given that local deities of the
Chinese vernacular religion were all deified historical figures (many of them were local leaders or shaman priests/priestesses, in contrast to the majority of the Buddhist and Daoist deities), their legends/hagiographies were essentially elaborations based on folk memories. Hence, what happened to snake cults and their deities provides an indication of the process of subjugation, transformation, co-optation and amalgamation of the indigenes.

The main theme in the hagiographies of many local deities, mostly shamans/shamanesses originally, is the subjugation of sprites. Described as demons, the sprites are animals that can assume human form, perform magic (just like shamans and deities), and require human sacrifice. They were in fact older gods and goddesses seen through the perspective of competing, victorious new religious cults. They invariably lost combats with the new deities and were thus annihilated and displaced. The main difference between these “demon” sprites and the triumphant mainstream deities seems to be the fact that the former cults practiced human sacrifice, while the latter promised protection without such demands. Human sacrifice was a prevalent ancient practice that may have originated with the desire to give one’s best to the deities. However, it came to lose its appeal when newer cults proved just as effective without such drastic offerings. The example of a snake sprite “demoness” who was subjugated and displaced as a cult will be mentioned in conjunction with the discussion on marionette plays related to this topic.

Not all subjugated snake sprites were annihilated. In some more remote regions, their hold on the populace was so deep-seated that new cults would absorb them into their pantheon. In the elaborate temple complex of Sanping Mountain of Zhangzhou in southern Fujian, the main deity (the Buddhist Patriarch Sanping, a deified Buddhist monk who lived from 781–872 CE and proselytized Buddhism locally) is “served” by dark-faced attendants with protruding teeth known as Snake Attendant Gods. Small shrines dedicated purely to a Snake Attendant God can also be found. Harnessing of the power of snake deities also survives through an important ritual implement named the “snake whip” (See Figure 1). This whip, which consists of a carved wooden snake head and a coiled, braided rope body, seems to represent snake gods. It is still used in cult rituals throughout Fujian (particularly in the south) by cracking the whip in conjunction with incantations, including in rituals of cults that had displaced snake cults.
Figure 1. (2018). Snake gods, also known as “snake whip” as a ritual implement, in a Dan People boat temple in Zhangzhou, Fujian. Photo by Fan Pen Chen.
Temples that feature snake gods are not common but can still be found. A surviving boat temple of the Dan People has been preserved as Intangible Cultural Heritage. Above the altar, which features statues of several Daoist and Buddhist deities, are three snake heads with rope bodies (similar to the “snake whips”), which definitely represent snake gods here. A Snake God Temple has been rebuilt in Zhanghuban. This temple was originally dedicated to a snake god, but then changed its name. When the village was flooded to build a dam, the local government decided to revert its name back to Snake God Temple in its new location. They also restored an old tradition of snake handling by locals during its main festival to attract tourism. Temples of snake gods stud Minhou, Fuqing, and Pingtan. The tales of these gods as reflected in religious marionette plays will be recounted below.

Snake Deities in Religious Marionette Plays

Marionette plays that feature snake deities include those that enact the hagiographies of Goddess Chen Jinggu, whose main exploit was the subjugation of a snake demoness, as well as those of Banana Python God, a snake transformed and co-opted by the mainstream culture. An 8th-century shaman priestess who became a goddess after her untimely death, Chen Jinggu (also known as Foster Mother, Lady Bordering the Water, and Lady Chen the Fourteenth) is the second most important goddess of Fujian. The most important accomplishment in her hagiography consists of her vanquishing serpent deities, in particular a female snake “demoness” who demanded regular sacrifices of a boy and a girl. Chen Jinggu’s ancestral temple is built atop the original temple of this snake goddess. A hole with the statue of a snake in it is still found underneath the main statue of Goddess Chen Jinggu in this ancestral temple. Hence, her cult most likely displaced a more ancient snake cult.

Two very different voluminous (enough for performance lasting twenty days) marionette plays on Goddess Chen Jinggu have been transcribed and published: Biography of the Foster Mother: a Siping Marionette Opera of Shouning, Fujian (Wu and Ye 1997) and Biography of the Lady: a Luantan Marionette Opera of Shanghang, Fujian (Ye and Yuan 1996). I have also seen the climatic episode of “Chen Jinggu Subdues the Southern Snake” from Lady Chen the Fourteen: a Marionette Opera from Taishun, Zhejiang, which was performed from memory (see Figure 2). The play was so sacred that the performer had to cleanse himself and have a table with offerings (incense, liquor and fruits) set up before the performance (see Figure 3).
Figure 2 (2008). Chen Jinggu as a shaman priestess before she became a goddess. From Taishun, Zhejiang. Photo by Fan Pen Chen.
Figure 3. (2008). Offerings to Goddess Chen Jinggu when her tale was being performed at Taishun, Zhejiang. Photo by Fan Pen Chen.
Although in most of the marionette plays of Goddess Chen Jinggu her most significant accomplishment is her subjugation of the above-mentioned snake demoness, the snake sprite remains a goddess in one of the Goddess Chen plays and among some scriptures of shaman priests. In the marionette play from Shanghang, the snake demoness is eventually cast into the bottom of an abyss. But at one point, the Buddhist Bodhisattva Guanyin made her a sworn sister of Goddess Chen Jinggu and bestowed upon the snake sprite charge of one of the four seasons, along with Goddess Chen and her two other sworn sisters (Chen 2019, 195–97). Such contradictory details on the snake demoness serve to indicate the fact that the original snake deity continued to wield influence in remote regions of Fujian.

The same happened to a snake god who originated in a mountain in Fuqing. Known as Banana Python (Jiao Mang), this snake god was so influential that he survived as a local cult. He was supposed to have been subjugated by another local god. The hagiography of the local god Zhang Shengjun (born around 1024), who is still being worshipped, asserts his displacement of a snake god. According to a biographical ritual invocation of the god, Zhang Shengjun “was bestowed a willow-leave sword from Guanyin, with which he hacked a snake sprite and turned it into stone…. Returning to Fuqing, he subdued the Snake God.” (Ye 2008, 250). Snake deities may have been fairly prevalent and had to be subdued for the establishment of new cults. Since Banana Python hailed from Fuqing, the snake god mentioned in Zhang’s invocation likely referred to Banana Python. Subjugation in the hagiography of another cult did not constitute the annihilation of Banana Python’s cult, however. In fact, Banana Python and his wife and three sons are still widely worshipped in central eastern Fujian (see Figure 4). Unlike snake deities who were relegated to being defeated demons or attendants of more powerful, later deities, Banana Python and his sons were co-opted by Buddhist deities, Daoist deities, and the Confucian state (the Chinese imperial state). Significantly, too, Banana Python did not demand human sacrifices exacted by the deities of other, older indigenous cults, including snake cults. In fact, in one version of his story, Banana Python was sublimated by Bodhisattva Guanyin precisely because he preferred a diet of banana leaves to that of human flesh. Hence, the survival of his cult was predicated upon amalgamation with the preferences and culture of the mainstream Han People.
Figure 4. (2018). Banana Python God and his wife at his temple in Minhou, Fujian. Photo by Fan Pen Chen.
I saw episodes of two very different marionette plays on this Banana Python snake god titled *Great Sublimation* and *Sublimation of the Celestial*. Sublimation refers to the elevation of sprites/demons to humans/deities by Daoist or Buddhist deities. The former is performed in Fuqing, the central-eastern part of Fujian, based on a hand-copied playscript, while the latter is performed in Yong’an, among the mountains of central Fujian, based on memory. The python is sublimated by Jade Emperor of the Daoist pantheon in the former; in the latter, “it” is sublimated by Bodhisattva Guanyin of the Buddhist pantheon. The two versions vary significantly, but they have both retained certain central elements. Jiao Mang, Banana Python, was a sublimated snake who lived in Huangnie Mountain. I believe that he may have been a local chieftain. He subjugated a monkey sprite and a rabbit sprite who became his warrior assistants (see Figure 5). He also kidnapped a “human” (probably Han Chinese) girl for a wife who bore him several sons. In the version from Fuqing and a collection of folk tales, they had eleven sons. Bent upon exacting revenge, the wife’s brother acquired Daoist magic and massacred eight of the sons before his sister begged him to spare her three youngest sons. These three sons became illustrious officials or generals who served the Chinese state and became deities, along with their parents. In the Yong’an version, there were only three sons, whom their uncle’s Daoist tutor bid him not to slay. Thus, although intermarriage and massacre occurred during the confrontations between the snake people and the “humans,” this particular oral memory eliminated the massacre and made the hagiography less violent and more palatable. Banana Python never served the Chinese state himself, but the fact that his sons did allowed for the survival and worship of these snake gods, whose statues look fully human (see Figure 5).
Figure 5. (2008). Banana Python (center) with a servant, two divine generals, and his warrior assistants, Monkey Sprite and Rabbit Sprite. From Yong’an, Fujian. Photo by Fan Pen Chen.

**Video Recordings**

I include excerpts of video recordings from “Chen Jinggu Subdues the Southern Snake,” *The Great Sublimation*, and *Sublimation of the Celestial*, available at this link on YouTube. In “Chen Jinggu Subdues the Southern Snake,” Goddess Chen, who was a shaman priestess before she died and became a goddess, performs shamanistic ritual dances to transform the snake sprite (in the form of a beautiful woman) into a demon (watch the face) and summon two divine warriors. At the end of the episode, Goddess Chen draws the demon out as a snake, and orders the divine generals she kept in midair to swoop down and attack it (see Part I of video).

In the first episode of *The Great Sublimation*, the Daoist Jade Emperor in Heaven notices an intense waft of incense penetrating up into his heavenly court and thinks that it is a special offering for him from a pious believer. He dispatches an attendant to the mortal realm to find out who it is. The celestial official reports that the incense issued from a log of agarwood (a most precious wood) burning in a kitchen stove, attended by a python. (The python was apparently attracted by the
incense and just happened to be there. It had been cultivating itself for a thousand years, however, and was destined for sublimation.) Thereupon, Jade Emperor sends the attendant back with his jade seal. The celestial official stamps the python’s head three times with a seal as a reward for its piety (see Part II of video), thus enabling the python to sublimate into a human. The python is sublimated into a boy and later decides to transform himself into a man to have more clout (see Part III of video).

Sublimation of the Celestial is the most elaborate in terms of the rituals that accompanied the marionette play of Banana Python. Clothed in priestly garb, the main performer chants incantations and presents documents to the snake god before he sets out into the wilderness. A table has been converted into an altar and more rituals are performed before a wild banana tree, which houses and represents the snake god, is dug up and brought back to the area of the stage. The banana tree is on stage when the python appears around it before Bodhisattva Guanyin sublimates it. But before and after that scene, the tree is placed to one side of the stage so the “god” can watch the unfolding of its own story. In the video recording, Banana Python turns into a handsome young man after his sublimation. He meets a Daoist celestial tutor, subdues the rabbit and monkey sprites, abducts a human girl for a wife and has a child (see Part IV of video).
Appendix: Video Information

Video 1
Timestamp: 0.00-2:58
Title of performance: “Chen Jinggu Subdues Southern Snake”
Name of artist: Xu Maobao
Place of performance: Taishun Da’an, Fujian
Year of performance: 2008

Video 2
Timestamp: 2:59-3:44
Title of performance: The Great Sublimation
Name of artist: Lin Songsheng
Place of performance: Fuqing Cangxia, Fujian
Year of performance: 2015

Video 3
Timestamp: 3:45-4:16
Title of performance: The Great Sublimation
Name of artist: Lin Songsheng
Place of performance: Fuqing Cangxia, Fujian
Year of performance: 2015

Video 4
Timestamp: 4:17-7:44
Title of performance: Sublimation of the Celestial
Name of artist: Wang Hua
Place of performance: Yong’an Qingshui, Fujian
Year of performance: 2008
References


Fuzhou: Fujian renmin chubanshe.


Fuzhou: Haichao sheying yishu chubanshe.

About the Author

Fan Pen Chen is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of East Asian Studies at the State University of New York at Albany (SUNY Albany). She was born in Taiwan, attended high school in Seattle, and received her BA degree from Yale University and her MA and PhD from Columbia University. She has authored the following books: *Chinese Shadow Theater: History, Popular Religion, and Women Warriors; Visions for the Masses: Chinese Shadow Plays from Shaanxi and Shanxi; Marionette Plays from Northern China;* and *Journey of a Goddess: Chen Jinggu Subdues White Snake Demon.* She has also written dozens of articles on women in Chinese history and literature, Chinese drama, puppet theaters and popular religion. She is a board member of Chinese Theatre Works and a board member and treasurer of CHINOPERL (Chinese Oral and Performing Literature), a national academic association.