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City Gods and Their Magistrates

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Because most of the people who lived in late imperial China could neither read nor write and left no written testimony, modern social and cultural historians of this period must wonder at the nature of the people's relationship with the imperial officials who ruled them and often spoke for them in texts. District magistrates were the most obvious and accessible representatives of the centralized state. They presided over many kinds of social events. Their presence was expected, their opinions necessary, for any community of size. However, with only roughly 400 magistrates "on the ground" to rule a population of millions, social order must have been nurtured in ways far more subtle, and stable, than fear of brute force.

Popular religious cults, such as that of the God of Walls and Moats (Cheng-huang shen) or City God, provide rich ground for understanding how people shaped their social world, a world that combined the family, the imperial domain, and the cosmos into an interactive whole. The City God worked in partnership with the district magistrate of the locale: the god ruled in the invisible (*you*) world as the magistrate worked in the visible (*ming*) one. The district magistrate was like a one-person government combining duties of tax collector, administrator of justice, educator, and ritualist. He occupied the lowest level of officialdom directly appointed by the throne and served as a sort of miniature emperor in his district. Every major locality had a City God temple inhabited by a god who held a heavenly bureaucratic rank equivalent to his earthly counterpart. The temple mimicked the magistrate's headquarters in its layout; the god rode in the same kind of sedan chair as the magistrate and had similar sorts of attendants.

As sociologist Maurice Freedman tells us, no easy or fixed boundary existed between "elite" and "popular" practice. Religion did not merely mirror a social landscape; it also provided a means for people to create their social world, with all its divisions and particular perspectives. City gods were not, then, purely the creations of the state. They represent an urban ethos, a sacralization of place in the universe. Communities often took the initiative and proposed likely deceased

candidates for the post of City God, men who had served the local people particularly well. In the City God, the powers of the invisible world were made visible as the spirit of the historical memory of place and people.

Officials and people alike thought both the visible and invisible realms necessary to what we might term the social and natural order of the cosmos. When he took up a new post, the magistrate visited the City God to enlist his help in governing the people of the district. The City God's yearly festival and procession (usually held on his birthday) were noisy, crowded, colorful events. In case of natural disaster, both the people and the magistrate turned to the god for aid. The cult of the City God, shared between imperial official ritualists and popular practitioners, was claimed in different ways by each because its focus was this juncture of parallel worlds. People could also contend for its authority. The magistrate often asked for the god's help in adjudicating difficult legal cases, but common people accused of crimes could also go before the City God, seeking a sign of innocence. And they could appeal his decision up the spiritual administrative ranks.

The sources from the period rarely express such competing claims upon the City God directly. Whether legend, local history, handbook for magistrates, imperial pronouncement, or ritual prescription, they proceed from a consensus about the constitution of both nature and society. Sometimes they seem to agree, sometimes to disagree, but they are always in dialogue with one another about how gods and humans should conduct themselves in their respective worlds. Perhaps the most systematic explanation of presuppositions about a cosmos that contained within it a hierarchically ordered humanity lies in the concept of ritual (*li*).

From the fourth century B.C.E., but especially from the Han dynasty (202 B.C.E.-220 C.E.), ritual had been thought of as a set of principles for order and connection that was both cosmically dictated (natural) and humanly maintained (social). The emperor and his officialdom were duty-bound to perform an intricate round of simultaneous ritual tasks such as twice yearly sacrifices to the God of Soil and Grain; to Confucius; to the gods of wind, clouds, thunder, rain, mountains, and streams, and to city gods. Once yearly, sacrifices were performed for local worthy people: chaste widows, loyal fighters, filial brothers and sons. Ghosts were propitiated three times yearly, and the emperor also sacrificed alone to Heaven and Earth twice yearly.

The four texts below focus on the cult of the City God as a locus of mediation between the visible and invisible worlds, between order and disorder, and between levels of society. They provide different views of the cult that emphasize aspects relevant to the writers' own positions in imperial society. They also describe different possibilities for how human beings can take action in this cosmos.

One very important sort of action is mediation: the ability to see two sides of a question, to resolve contradiction or opposition, seems to have been particularly powerful. We can see how this mediation would be necessary in a cosmos structured by the logic of yin-yang polarity. Rather than one element of an opposition

overcoming the other completely (even violently), the point is to encompass the contradiction by creating a total situation that contains them both: often described in Chinese moral teaching as "harmony." Control of creating the social effect of this harmony, symbolized most effectively by people's relationship with their invisible gods and ancestors, was not an abstract matter. Who mediates and how become important questions for these texts.

Further Reading

Angela R. Zito, "City Gods, Hegemony and Filiality in Late Imperial China," *Modern China* 13.3 (July 1987): 333–71; C. K. Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); Maurice Freedman, "On the Sociological Study of Chinese Religion," in *Religion and Ritual in Chinese Society*, ed. A. Wolf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974); Stephan Feuchtwang, "School Temple and City God," in *The City in Late Imperial China*, ed. G. W. Skinner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1977).

The following legend was collected by Jiang Xiaomei in his *Taiwan Stories* (*Taiwan gushi*), vol. 2 (Taipei, 1955). The cast of characters and their relationships are particularly interesting because we see the roles of district magistrate, City God, and imperial son laid side-by-side for comparison. We can also see the realms of the Chinese world, visible and invisible, interact. The imperial son disappeared in a storm and was given up for dead and only reclaimed through the offices of the City God and his magistrate, partners in governance. In the following I have used "imperial son" instead of "prince" to translate a Chinese term whose two characters literally mean "great son," for two reasons: to highlight the importance of sonship in sacrificial mediation of gods and humans, and to preserve the sense, present in the Chinese original, that *all* sons serve this function, not only princes.

The City God of Xinzhu, Taiwan

The City God of Xinzhu possesses much magical power (*linghun*), and countless numbers of people have come from north and south to burn incense, kneel, and bow. Here is the story of how the Xinzhu City God received his titles from a Qing dynasty (1644–1911) emperor.

Once, when the emperor's son was at the seaside with his wet nurse, he was fascinated by the fishing boats and leapt about upon them. When waves washed in and the boats bobbed higher, he was even more delighted. Suddenly a great wind came up and bore the boat containing the imperial son and his wet nurse to a far-off sea. When they discovered that their son was lost, the emperor and empress were worried and sent people to search, but they found nothing.

The boat in which the wet nurse and the imperial son sat floated to a lonely island in the southern sea. The island's chief kindly saved them, and when he saw that the imperial son was talented, and since he did not have a son himself, he kept him as his own and raised him. The wet nurse, having been at sea so long, got sick after arriving on the island and died. The imperial son grew bigger day by day. He practiced spear-throwing and archery daily, sometimes going into the mountains to hunt or to the sea to fish. He happily passed his days.

Time passed as "brightness and shade passed like arrows; the sun and moon shifted." The imperial son had grown to adulthood. Although the island chief loved him dearly, the son daily thought of his old land and his father and mother. He thought that if he had the chance, he would return there.

Once he announced he wished to fish in a far sea, prepared provisions, and left the chief's lonely island, going north in a small boat. Days later he came to Fragrant Hill, on Xinzhu's coast in Taiwan. After coming ashore, he went to stay at the hostel of Mazu's Temple (patroness of fishermen and the most popular deity on Taiwan).

That night Xinzhu's district magistrate dreamt that Xinzhu's City God came to him, saying: "The imperial son is in the temple on Fragrant Hill. Go quickly to greet him." The next day the district magistrate took a great palanquin to Fragrant Hill Temple to check, and in the Mazu Temple he discovered a stalwart youth of extraordinary power. The magistrate hastened to kneel and say humbly: "The imperial son is under our eaves, brightening this poor place. This petty official was slow in coming to greet you respectfully. Please forgive him."

The imperial son did not realize the fellow's true intentions and dared not reveal his real status. He said: "I am not the imperial son. Who are you?"

The magistrate answered: "I am Xinzhu's district magistrate. Last night in a dream I received the City God's command and only then did I know the imperial son was 'lighting up the neighborhood.' Please take this palanquin, come into the city, and relax."

When the imperial son heard the story his heart eased, and he admitted he was the emperor's son. He went with the magistrate to his residence and received his hospitality. A few days later the magistrate escorted the imperial son to the capital to report. Because his son had been lost for over ten years, the emperor thought he was already dead and never imagined seeing him again. Brush and ink cannot describe his happiness. The Xinzhu magistrate's worthy service deserved the favor and grace of the emperor and he was immediately promoted. Xinzhu's City God likewise received the emperor's entitlement: "Awesome and Magical Duke, City God of Xinzhu."

Huang Liuhong, the author of the following text, was born in 1633 and lived until at least 1694, the date of the preface to his woodblock print handbook for district magistrates, *A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence* (*Fuhui*

quanshu). He served twice in that capacity in the 1670s. His thirty-two-chapter book of advice covers matters as diverse as tax collection, the proper etiquette for an arriving magistrate, controlling the secretarial staff, administering justice, community self-help organization, famine relief, and education. Chapter 24 discusses "Rites and Ceremonies." Besides four sections on the City God (two of which are translated below), Huang also details proper protocols for audience with the emperor, spring and autumn sacrifices to Confucius, receiving imperial edicts, the civil service examination, local banquets, and honoring chaste women and filial sons. Huang's entire book has been translated by Djang Chu as *A Complete Book Concerning Happiness and Benevolence* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1984).

Worshipping the City God

The district magistrate governs the visible, or manifest, world and the City God the invisible. Generating benefit and warding off harm for the people are the duties of the magistrate. Bringing down blessings and warding off natural disasters are the duties of the City God. The magical power (*ling*) of gods depends upon their connection with people. Sacrifice, through integrity (*cheng*, the feeling of integration of self and cosmos), leads to wisdom (*ge*, the knowledge of the ethical relationships that structure the world). The invisible becomes apparent through effort in this manifest world. People of cities must pay their respects to the gods and the gods will respond. They must be reverent in their sacrifice and then it will be accepted. They must exert themselves in doing their duties in this world so they can enter into communication (*tong*) with the invisible world.

If there is a response from the god, then that magical power that depends upon the actions of the people through their magistrate (the word *ren* includes both) is present. Wisdom comes with acceptance of the sacrifice, a wisdom that grows from integrity. The manifestation of the invisible world shows that we have entered into communication, and achieving this manifestation depends upon action in the visible world.

If there is no such action, even if there are gods, they will not respond. Even if there are sacrifices, they will not be accepted. Even if there is an invisible world, there will be no communication with it. Thus the governance of this world and the invisible one will be at odds and there will be no mutual trust between them. In such circumstances, even if magistrates and gods have the power to encourage prosperity and ward off harm, it may happen that there will be neither prosperity nor preservation from harm. Why?

When magistrates have intentions that they cannot fulfill, they ask the gods who then silently probe the petitioners. If sincere intentions are lacking, there cannot be a sincere request. Without a sincere request, then the governance of the visible and invisible worlds will be at odds.

Conversely, if the intentions of the petitioner are intimately concerned with

the ills of the people, if he is truly anxious on their behalf, then he will take as fundamental the task of ridding them of suffering and plan for their happiness and prosperity. I, however, am fearfully deficient and my power as an exemplar (*de*) is too weak to move Heaven. Because the gods' governance of the invisible world approaches closely and enters into communication with the Lord on High (*Di*), they can replace magistrates to emanate concern to the people below, beseeching fate to ward off disaster and bring luck down upon the people. When luck falls upon the people, prosperity is generated. When calamity has been warded off, harm is avoided. What magistrates and people want, the gods will give them. Serve the gods on behalf of the people; do your duty because of the gods. In considering the people's happiness and the uprightness of duty, who would dare not respect the gods?

I am currently the magistrate of Tancheng. Being ashamed of my own weak inadequacy, I must call upon the City God for luck in order to obtain abundance and health for the people. I have renovated his temple, replaced his sacrificial vessels, refurbished the temple guardian statues, and augmented his festivals. Because these things were done with integrity and respect, when locusts came, our crops were unharmed; when hail struck causing calamity, the winds ceased immediately. When I prayed for sun, it rose in the sky; when I prayed for rain, sufficient sweet drops fell. In innumerable instances, my requests never went unanswered.

We must realize that the City God is also an official in charge of protecting the locale. Being attached to an area expressly to govern it he, of all the gods, is the quickest to respond. If the magistrate will rely upon three things—the people (as those he represents, *ren*), his own integrity (*cheng*), and the care and performance of duties in this world—he will know that my claims are not exaggerated. I append a sample of requests.

PETITIONING THE CITY GOD TO DELIVER US FROM LOCUSTS

On [fill in date] during the Kangxi reign, this official dares to petition the City God of the district, addressing him thus:

"The spirit and the official each has duties. In this locale, we ward off natural disaster and hinder human evils."

At this time, as the peasants are in the fields with the grain not yet harvested, the locust eggs from last season are being hatched in the earth. Already half of the second cycle of wheat has been contaminated. Ten days ago, locusts came from the southwest, fluttering their wings and crawling over our fields. The people rushed around, wailing as though at a funeral, or at the end of the world.

I humbly prayed to the god, but the god has not yet rendered judgment. Can this heavenly disaster be so difficult to salvage? Can the approach of the Grave-Sweeping Festival in the spring have anything to do with it? Or is it that I have been so rude in carrying out my duties that my essential integrity cannot lead

to correct wisdom? When the people cannot prevent disaster, they implore the magistrate. When the magistrate cannot prevent disaster on their behalf, he prays to the gods. The god is awesome and dwells above; can it not carry petitions made by officials and the people to the Lord on High?

We comprehend the inevitable nature of disasters like the locusts, which can completely blanket a thousand *li* of land. Tancheng County, a little pill of a place, a tiny mole, cannot escape. This is all to say that we humans have exhausted our means to save ourselves. But you do not think this way. Unlike us, you can perceive such disasters before people or their officials.

God—you govern the invisible world. Do not allow our grain to suffer; do not allow the locusts to lay eggs in our fields, so that we might have an autumn harvest. Only by your grace, your magical power, do we dare to beseech you.

Local gentry compiled and edited gazetteers about their villages, towns, or counties. They included geographies, maps, descriptions of local sights and temples, tales of special customs or foods, and biographies of worthy people. When temples were renovated, commemorative texts, such as the two imperial messages below, were inscribed in stone and often included in the gazetteer. The inscription of the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1723–1735) can be found in a woodblock edition of the *Gazetteer of the Department of Shuntian* (*Shuntian fuzhi*) (1886), j. 6:19b–20a. Shuntian was the administrative unit, slightly larger than a county, that contained the imperial capital city of Beijing.

In this stone stele inscription, the Yongzheng emperor describes the classic cosmos of orthodox Neo-Confucian philosophy, with references to the harmony of yin and yang. Employing the language of agriculture, he discusses the cosmos of “self-so-ness” or “natural necessity” of the Dao. He emphasizes the actual sacrificial rituals of officialdom and uses many metaphors from its domain. One important question that this text poses is: Where is the king and how does he rule in a cosmos of self-regulatory resonance?

The Text of the Stone Tablet Written by the Yongzheng Emperor for the Beijing City God Temple

The Domainal Family has received the mandate of Heaven to rule. Of the many gods it gently enfolds there are none in the sacrificial canon that are not treated with seriousness and respect. How much more shall it be for those gods of the environs of the Imperial City, within the hub of the emperor’s chariot? From the harmony of yin and yang, for correct wind and seasonal rain, for a dense population, for a proliferation and luxuriance of growing things, for a glowing, a flowing, a growing, a showing, and for help toward a lush begetting, one turns finally to the protection of the gods.

In the past, the capital had a god who was sacrificed to in the City God Temple. Officials for the Ministry of Rites would sacrifice at appropriate times for the enjoyment of the god. I do worry that the appearance of the temple is not solemn and that we thus we lack the means to show our respect.

In the first month of 1726, money was especially sent from the public treasury and officials ordered to restore the temple. The work was completed by the fifth month. The wood carving and clay modeling, the decorativeness of pillars painted in precious cinnabar, the expansion meant the temple looked even better than before—good enough to show fitting thanks for the splendor of the gods and to add to the beauty of the city. Officials of the Ministry of Rites built a pavilion, polished a stone, and requested bestowal of this text.

I think that the “Six Sacrifices of Request” in the ancient classic *The Rites of Zhou* (*Zhouli*) and the text of “Complete Order” in the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu*) both beg for luck for the people by means of beseeching and thanksgiving for the merits of the gods. At present, all within the seas is at peace and the ten thousand of the world have attained their proper place and function. An abundance extends, happiness is great. Our well-being has been safe for a long time. The state of the kingdom can be compared to a perfect sacrifice: Our wine is sweet and our ox-victim whole; our vessels are clean and all is prepared.

Only when the gods have taken up our offerings and been thus infused with life do we have a sense of wisdom (*ge*). The way to feeling this sense of wisdom lies through integrity (*cheng*). With integrity one can enter into communication (*tong*). This communication allows us to know “rising and falling, the high and low” (that is, the relations between people and gods, the visible and invisible worlds) and the bestowing of luck upon the people. As such, it is sufficient to achieve the unhindered success of the yearly harvest, the happiness of the villages at work, and an increase of benefits day by day. There is nothing inappropriate about using this power to the fullest extent.

I now wish, together with the people, to rely happily upon this power. Today the temple’s appearance is new: the time is commemorated. Let those temple officials who have duties in this temple courtyard chant the words inscribed on this stone that they should learn how to fix their integrity within and show composure without. Let the ritual vessels be laid out precisely and the sweeping of the temple be pristine that the far-reaching aroma of sacrifice may be sweet in accordance with my thinking on the respectful performance of sacrifice to Heaven and Earth.

The following inscription was also collected into the *Gazetteer of the Department of Shuntian* (1886), j. 6:20b–21.a). In it, the Qianlong emperor appears less interested in metaphysics than in history. His overt depiction of the importance of imperial action and intervention contrasts with the views of his father, the Yongzheng emperor, in the previous text.

During Another Renovation Carried Out in the 28th Year of the Reign of the Qianlong Emperor (1763) an Imperial Stone Stele Was Erected

The emperor says: Mention of the "Walls and Moats" first appears in the *Classic of Changes* (*Yijing*). The usage of the terms in any detail discusses them as a sacrifice to the walls and moats of a city, one of the eight Imperial Thanksgiving sacrifices under King Yao. In the classic text the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (covers events from 721 to 481 B.C.E.), thought to have been edited by Confucius, the country of Zheng beseeches the four walls and the country of Song offers horses, but these accounts are incomplete. From that time on, the official histories make no mention of the cult of the City God. In his *Collection of Old Accounts* (*Jigu lu*), Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072 C.E.) of the Song dynasty (960–1279) selects Tang dynasty (618–907) writer Li Yanbing's "Record of the Gods of Walls and Moats" and comments, "The sacrificial canon does not contain this."

Let us further examine Song writer Wang Yinglin's (1223–1296) *Record of Perplexing Studies* (*Kunxue jiwen*), which cites: "In northern Ji in the sixth century, Mu Rong sacrificed at the temple of the city in Yan in Hubei Province." Therefore we can see that there are citations of "temple feasting" for pre-Tang times.

Today in the realm under Heaven, from the county, through department and prefecture, all the way to the province, at all administrative levels, no one has failed to found temples. The capital City God temple is especially looked upon as a standard by all under Heaven. None are its equal.

City gods are often titled and given imperial rank according to the differential system of relations between directors and subordinates. As the gods prevent disaster and ward off evils, so the domain respects their merits.

However, we hear of the common people performing exorcisms, crowding in on each other's toes, and babbling away. They take a person as the god and call upon him as a proxy (*shi* literally means "corpse" and denoted the son who impersonated the dead ancestor of his father at ancestor veneration ceremonies). For example: "Our prior administrator, Loyal Gan of the Yu family." Or "Loyal Min of the Yang family." Putting it like that is nearly correct, like Bao Zhi's records of the Nanyang Department in which he takes the man Xiao of Xiangguo as the City God. Unfortunately, the people do not think of the Yus and Gans as loyal officials of the Ming period (they forget why these men were elevated to that position and lose sense of their historical and actual connection to the throne).

This temple has been standing since the Jin (1115–1234) and Yuan (1206–1333) dynasties. So what is its genealogy? Actually ever since the area north-west of Peking and Hebei provinces were formed, there have been cities and thus their guardian gods. So what were their genealogies?

Within the past few years, we have ordered officials of the Board of Works

to mend the walls and dredge the moats in order to fulfill the protection and safety of the inhabitants. We have ordered them to penetrate to the depths with a diffusion of moist beneficence. Our motto is: Perfect the people and then expend effort on the gods. Only in this way will there be, in the end, a concrete result. Thus our efforts will not consist in merely hauling dirt and raising beams.

I have deferentially availed myself of the Grand Bestowal from Blue Heaven above, which extends to the entirety of the social and natural cosmos, to beyond the wilds. The various kingdoms and settlements of the western border are under our military control: they are called "nomadic kingdoms." Even those who have never heretofore had the protection of walls and moats have already arranged themselves in fortifications and started plowing. Raising walls that link up and extend, damming up a waterway that surrounds and entwines, they not only wall the cities as with golden teeth, they have moats full of rushes as well.

There is a desire to lead (*feng*) the masses of people in faraway, out-of-sight, out-of-hearing places. There is not one who goes unjudged and unpardoned by "the Gentleman in the Capital." Why should not places with only one wall and one moat share in the fortune of the capital City God temple? And how much more should this be the case for the populous, crowded areas in provinces, prefectures, departments, and counties?

Restoration (*xiu*) was carried out in the fourth year of the Yongzheng reign (1726). As the years passed the temple started to crumble. Now in the twenty-eighth year of the present reign (1763), the first lunar month, we have gathered the planners from the Board of Works and used funds from the Inner House to renovate (*xin*) thoroughly. From the bedchamber, main hall, the eastern and western inner walls, the kitchen and bathhouse to the outer wall and ceremonial archway, the temple is now enlarged and sturdy and accords completely with standards for such things.

One oddity we did not change: the statues of the city gods from the provinces, which are lined up to the right and left of the side gate, each holding insignia of office. Although investigation showed that such an arrangement has no canonical reality, we do not think it was a mistake to let them stand there. Since the tableau resembles the coming and going of district magistrates, departmental and prefectural officials, as well as city governors who have come to the capital for audience, we left it standing and did not disturb it.

How auspicious that the work was finished in the twelfth month, just in time for feeding the spirits of the Hungry Ghosts Festival. We therefore went in person to watch the rites and when they were finished composed a hymn to commemorate the occasion, ordering it to be cut into the stele. The sacrificing officials were ordered to have it set to music and use it at the sacrifice.

Each year during the autumn months choose an auspicious time and send officials to sacrifice. Carry out the usual sacrificial rites.