

## Goddess Jinhua: A Divine Leader of Demons and Religious Allusions in a Qing Drama

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*The Magic Box* (*Hunyuanhe* 混元盒), a full-length drama with gods, demons, and supernatural themes, was a regular feature both in the imperial palace and urban theatres of Beijing during the Qing dynasty. It was typically performed as part of the mid-summer celebrations for the Double Fifth Festival (*Duanwu jie* 端午節). The play's central female character is the Goddess Jinhua (Jinhua niangniang 金花娘娘) or Holy Mother Jinhua (Jinhua shengmu 金花聖母), an anti-heroine who, under the Jade Emperor's command, unleashes the Five Poisons (*wudu* 五毒) and other malevolent spirits to create chaos and punish humanity. This divine retribution is triggered by religious excesses of the Jiajing 嘉靖 Emperor (r. 1522–1566), who hired Tao Qian 陶謙, a fictional sorcerer, to practise alchemy in pursuit of immortality. Zhang Jie 張捷, who is a fictional descendant of Zhang Daoling 張道陵 (34–156), the founding patriarch of the Heavenly Master Zhang (Zhang Tianshi 張天師) lineage,<sup>1</sup> embarks on an adventurous journey to vanquish the demons one by one. Ultimately, with the help of Bodhisattva Guanyin, Zhang Jie captures all demons in the magic box (*Hunyuanhe*), gaining himself imperial ordination and restoring peace to the Jiajing Emperor's reign.

The play's title and Jinhua's name were mentioned in the eighteenth-century novel, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢), by Cao

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<sup>1</sup> For a study and definition of terms regarding Heavenly Masters, see Vincent Goossaert, *Heavenly Masters: Two Thousand Years of the Daoist State* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2022), pp. 1–7.

Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1715–1763). In one scene, the servant girl, Qiuwen, makes a pun involving the characters “Jin” and “Hua,” referring to both the names of two maids and the goddess:

When Sheyue and others asked what the women were carrying, they replied, “It’s food gifted from Her Old Ladyship for the two maids Jin and Hua.” Qiuwen snickered, “The play they are performing outside is *The Eight Righteous Heroes*, not *The Magic Box*. Where has this ‘Jinhua’ goddess sprung from?”

麝月等問手裏拿的是什麼，媳婦們道：「是老太太賞金、花二位姑娘吃的。」秋紋笑道：「外頭唱的是《八義》，沒唱《混元盒》，那裏又跑出金花娘娘來了。」<sup>2</sup>

This casual mention suggests *The Magic Box* was staged in urban theatres no later than the time Cao Xueqin lived in Beijing during the early to mid-eighteenth century. Evidently, Cao was familiar with the play—he likely watched it—and it seems plausible for him that a servant girl of the era, like Qiuwen, would also know the play and its characters. The most likely version of *The Magic Box* in Cao’s time, and the earliest extant version, is an early Qing manuscript written in the *Kunqu* 崑曲 operatic style, comprising three *juan* and sixty-nine scenes.<sup>3</sup> According to Fu Xihua 傅惜華 (1907–1970), its former owner, this version was likely used by Beijing opera troupes in urban theatres during the Kangxi and Yongzheng periods (1662–1735).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Cao Xueqin, *Honglou meng bashi hui jiaoben* 紅樓夢八十回校本 [Collated edition of the eighty chapters of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*] (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1993), p. 586. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> *Hunyuanhe* 混元盒 [The magic box], in *Fu Xihua cang gudian xiqu zhenben congkan* 傅惜華藏古典戲曲珍本叢刊, vol. 139 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> The play might date back earlier to the late Ming period, as its title was recorded under the category of “Ming *chuanqi* 傳奇 drama” in *Yangzhou huafang lu*, though the late-Ming text is not traceable. See Li Dou 李斗 (1749–1817), *Yangzhou huafang lu* 揚州畫舫錄 [Records of Yangzhou painted boats] (Ziran’an woodblock print, 1795; manuscript retrieved from Erudition Database), p. 122a. Fu Xihua, who owned the early-Qing version, suggested the existence of a late-Ming script from which his version was adapted. See Fu Xihua, “Hunyuanhe junben shanbian kao” 混元盒劇本嬗變考 [The evolution of the *Hunyuanhe* play script], in *Fu Xihua xiqu luncong* 傅惜華戲曲論叢 (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2007), p. 274.

Both Chinese and Japanese scholars have studied the textual evolution and performance history of *The Magic Box* during the Qing dynasty. Dai Bufan 戴不凡 and Yamashita Kazuo 山下一夫 note that a similar narrative also appears in the genre of vernacular fiction (*xiaoshuo* 小說).<sup>5</sup> However, no scholar has yet compared the dramatic persona of Goddess Jinhua in the play with the religious figure of the same name, nor has there been an analysis of the numerous religious allusions embedded in the text. By closely examining and comparing texts across genres, including drama, fiction, gazetteers, and official historical accounts, this paper analyses *The Magic Box* through a religious lens, focusing on Goddess Jinhua. It argues that the play reflects religious history involving emperors from the late Ming to the Qing dynasty and resonates with the local worship of Goddess Jinhua in a suburb of Beijing.

### Religious Allusions in *The Magic Box*

Qing scholars recognized the resemblance of *The Magic Box* to other literary works involving gods and demons. In *Chuanqi huikao* 傳奇匯考, an early-Qing study on theatre, *The Magic Box* is described as a preposterous and unfounded imitation of *Canonization of Gods* (*Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義) and *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西遊記).<sup>6</sup> The episodic structure of demon-conquering adventure and the ending plot of Guanyin to the rescue naturally evoke *Journey*

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<sup>5</sup> Dai Bufan, *Xiaoshuo jianwen lu* 小說見聞錄 [Records of fiction and observations] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1980), pp. 271–73. Yamashita Kazuo 山下一夫, “Sinchō kyūtei engeki ‘Kongenkō’ no seiritsu to jōen” 清朝宮廷演劇『混元盒』の成立と上演 [The formation and performance of the Qing-dynasty court drama *Hun-yuan-he*], *Geibun-Kenkyū: Journal of Arts and Letter* 藝文研究 112 (2017): 37–52. For other research on the drama *Hunyuanhe*, see also Liu Chao 劉超, “*Hunyuanhe* yanchu shishu” 混元盒演出史述 [An account of the performance history of *The Magic Box*], *Xiqu yanjiu* 戲曲研究 101, no. 1 (2017): 291–306. Liu Tie, “*Chandao chuxie* zai Qingdai gongting de yanchu” 闡道除邪在清代宮廷的演出 [The palace performance of Chan Daoist *Quashing the Evilness*], *Ming Qing Literature and Documentation* 明清文學與文獻 6, no. 1 (2017): 235–71.

<sup>6</sup> *Chuanqi huikao* [Collected studies of *chuanqi* tales] (Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 1993), p. 193.

to the West. However, *Canonization of Gods* exerts a deeper influence on the play. Similar to the logic of *Canonization* in which demons are dispatched to punish King Zhou for defiling the divine, Jinhua's release of the Five Poisons in *The Magic Box* reflects a celestial indictment against the secular ruler Jiajing Emperor. The warfare between the righteous and evil divinities, respectively personified by the Daoist Zhang Jie and Jinhua's army of demonic soldiers, also mirrors the narrative structure of *Canonization*.

While the literary creativity of this play may not be particularly striking, its unique array of demons and divinities is worth close examination, as it highlights a religious tradition often overlooked by scholars of Chinese religion. As Mark Meulenbeld's study interprets the novel *Canonization* as a para-liturgical Daoist thunder ritual (*leifa* 雷法) designed to consecrate and control inimical gods as territorial guardians,<sup>7</sup> it is equally significant to explore the religious allusions in drama to illuminate the tensions among diverse religious forces.

In this early-Qing script, the scene opens by establishing a clear moral dichotomy: Master Zhang, representing orthodox Daoist authority, is portrayed as a righteous figure, while Tao Qian emerges as a malevolent sorcerer who manipulates the Jiajing Emperor through longevity witchcraft. The character Tao Qian explicitly alludes to the historical figure Tao Zhongwen 陶仲文 (c. 1481–1560), a Daoist priest who rose to prominence after his master Shao Yuanjie 邵元節 (1459–1539) in the Jiajing Emperor's court, given his expertise in ritual healing. Tao Zhongwen gained imperial favour after allegedly expelling the Black Disasters (*heisheng* 黑眚), healing the crown prince from pocks, and predicting a fire during an imperial tour. The Jiajing Emperor's reliance on Tao provoked significant resentment from Confucian elites, casting Tao in a negative light in post-Jiajing historiographies.<sup>8</sup> *The History of Ming* (*Ming shi* 明史) contemptuously documented Jiajing's growing devotion to Daoist rituals and Tao Zhongwen's consequent rise within the imperial court. Tao proposed building a thunder altar in his hometown, Hubei, to celebrate the emperor's longevity, imposing the heavy construction burdens that led to delays and

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<sup>7</sup> Mark Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare: Daoism, Territorial Networks, and the History of a Ming Novel* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Barend ter Haar, "Tao Zhongwen," in Fabrizio Pregadio, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Taoism*, vol. 2 (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 971–72.

demotions of some officials in charge, exacerbating both public and private unrest.<sup>9</sup>

Shen Defu 沈德符 (1578–1642), in his *Wanli ye huo bian* 萬曆野獲編 (*Unofficial gleanings of the Wanli era*), adopts an even more critical stance towards Tao Zhongwen, detailing his horrific alchemical methods. According to Shen, between 1532 and 1535, at Tao's advice, the emperor ordered the selection of 460 teenage girls for alchemical purposes.<sup>10</sup> Tao even presented to the emperor "true essence cakes" allegedly made from the blood taken from the mouth of newborn babies.<sup>11</sup> These atrocious practices align with the dramatic plot of *The Magic Box*, where Tao's evil alchemy provokes heavenly wrath. Jiajing's cruelty and excesses may have incited the 1542 assassination attempt by palace maids who sought to strangle the emperor in his sleep.<sup>12</sup> After this uprising, Jiajing retreated further from state affairs and focused instead on seeking immortality, granting Tao Zhongwen even higher positions.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Tao allegedly persuaded Jiajing to target Buddhism, reportedly burning 20,000 *jìn* of Buddha relics.<sup>14</sup> Though most of the accusations could not be verified, Shen Defu's accounts showcase Tao Zhongwen's notorious reputation among Confucian literati scholars. Unsurprisingly, *The Magic Box*, a drama staged in the imperial court, reflects the prevailing hostility against Tao Zhongwen.

Meanwhile, the imperial Daoist ordination of successive Heavenly Masters persisted during Jiajing's reign, despite frequent impeachment attempts by Confucian officials. While the Ming dynasty was a prosperous time for Master Zhang's lineage, it was faced with internal struggles over hereditary succession, resulting in a century-long division from the reign of Zhengtong 正統 (r. 1436–1449) to Jiajing. Later, during the reign of the Longqing 隆慶 Emperor (r. 1567–1572), without Jiajing's protection, the fiftieth Heavenly Master Zhang Guoxiang 張國祥 (1552–1611) was stripped of high rank and degraded to a

<sup>9</sup> *Ming shi*, "Liezhuan" 列傳, *juan* 307, pp. 7888–96, retrieved from Hanji dianzi wenxian ziliao ku 漢籍電子文獻資料庫.

<sup>10</sup> Shen Defu, *Wanli ye huo bian* (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), "Buyi" 補遺, *juan* 1, p. 803.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, *juan* 18, p. 471.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, *juan* 18, pp. 469–70.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, *juan* 2, p. 51.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, *juan* 27, p. 679.

lowly position.<sup>15</sup> In 1577, the Wanli 萬曆 Emperor (r. 1572–1620) reinstated Zhang's position, when historical anecdotes like *Wanli ye huo bian* discussed above started to impugn Tao Zhongwen. Perhaps under such an existential crisis, supporters of Heavenly Masters produced the play *The Magic Box* to reassert its orthodoxy by depicting Master Zhang as the sole righteous force opposing not only demonic spirits but also the heterodox priests like Tao Zhongwen outside the Zhang lineage.

The worship of Master Zhang as an exorcist against evil spirits was a widespread practice during the Double Fifth celebrations since the Song dynasty. Chen Yuanjing 陳元靚, a scholar from the Southern Song (1127–1279), observed that during the Double Fifth, portraits and clay figures of Master Zhang were sold and displayed on doorsteps.<sup>16</sup> As Richard von Glahn notes, rituals to expel pestilence during the Double Fifth often involved violent combat against terrifying creatures, and it was assimilated into the thunder rituals performed by the Zhengyi School during the new Daoist movements in the Song dynasty.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, Heavenly Master Zhang became intertwined with the religious practices of the Double Fifth. The performance of his combat against diabolical creatures in *The Magic Box* functioned not only as an entertaining spectacle but also as an apotropaic ritual promoting health and auspiciousness.

While Master Zhang's role in eliminating pestilence was a common motif across many regions in China, the design of Five Poisons in the drama likely reflects the Beijing Double Fifth customs in particular. Artefacts collected in the Beijing imperial palace provide material evidence that the Five Poisons

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<sup>15</sup> Goossaert, *Heavenly Masters*, pp. 186–89. See also Tseng Lung-sheng 曾龍生, “Daofa yu zongfa: Mingdai Zhengyi Dao Zhang Tianshi jiazhu de yanbian 道法與宗法：明代正一道張天師家族的演變” [Daoist system and patriarchal clan system: The Evolution of the Heavenly Master Zhang's clan in the Ming dynasty], *Bulletin of the Institute of History and Philosophy, Academia Sinica* 中央研究院歷史語言研究所集刊 89, no. 4 (2018): 711–53.

<sup>16</sup> Chen Yuanjing, *Suishi guangji* 歲時廣記 [Expanded records of seasonal observances], *juan* 21 (woodblock print by Gui'an Lushi 歸安陸氏, c. 1875–1908; manuscript retrieved from Erudition Database), p. 14b.

<sup>17</sup> Richard von Glahn, *The Sinister Way: The Divine and the Demonic in Chinese Religious Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 108–20.

was a pre-existing religious motif in the region's culture before the staging of *The Magic Box*. A ceramic plate from the Wanli period decorated with Master Zhang subduing the Five Poisons demonstrates the tale's prevalence in Beijing at least in the late Ming period.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, a fragrant sachet embroidered with the Five Poisons served as both a charm and a refreshing accessory. Filled with Chinese medical herbs, it was believed to expel evil energies and clear the mind during the summer heat.<sup>19</sup>

What aligns more specifically with Beijing's customs is the composition of the Five Poisons in the drama—namely the toad (*hama* 蛤蟆), the centipede (*wugong* 蜈蚣), the boa (*mangshe* 蟒蛇), the scorpion (*xiezi* 蝎子), and the gecko (*xiehu* 蝎虎). Ming scholar-official Shen Bang 沈榜 (1540–1597), who served in the capital, recorded that during the Double Fifth Festival, women in Beijing often wore talismans shaped like Five Poisons as hair ornaments. These talismans comprised exactly the toad, the centipede, the snake, the scorpion, and the gecko—the same five spectres as in the play.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, they are categorized as “local products” (*tuchan* 土產) in the 1783 gazetteer of Tongzhou 通州, a suburb of Beijing.<sup>21</sup> This specific grouping is quite geographically distinctive, as the composition of the five inimical spirits during the Double Fifth varies across regions. In other records, different animals like the spiders and wasps appear among the Five Poisons. Occasionally, these malevolent spectres also transform into tutelary gods.<sup>22</sup> For instance, as Paul Katz observes,

<sup>18</sup> *Wucai Zhang Tianshi zhan wudu wen xiao pan* 五彩張天師斬五毒紋小盤, Palace Museum, Beijing; see [www.dpm.org.cn/collection/ceramic/227606.html](http://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/ceramic/227606.html) (accessed 14 December 2022).

<sup>19</sup> *Duanwu wudu dai* 端午五毒袋, Palace Museum, Beijing; see [www.dpm.org.cn/collection/utensil/232553.html?hl=%E9%A6%99%E8%A2%8B](http://www.dpm.org.cn/collection/utensil/232553.html?hl=%E9%A6%99%E8%A2%8B) (accessed 10 November 2022). The custom of wearing symbols of the most vicious beings stems from the traditional Chinese medical mindset as “attacking poison with poison” (*yi du gong du* 以毒攻毒).

<sup>20</sup> Shen Bang, *Wanshu zaji* 宛署雜記 [Miscellaneous records of the Wanping County] (1593) (Beijing: Beijing guji chubanshe, 1980), *juan* 17, p. 191.

<sup>21</sup> *Tongzhou zhi* 通州志 (1783), *juan* 9, p. 9a, in Huang Xiwen 黃秀文 and Wu Ping 吳平, eds., *Huadong shifan daxue tushuguan cang xijian fangzhi congkan* 華東師範大學圖書館藏稀見方志叢刊 (Beijing: Beijing tushuguan chubanshe, 2005), p. 293.

<sup>22</sup> Von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, p. 115. See also Meulenbeld, *The Demonic Warfare*, pp. 85–89.

the Five Commissioners of Epidemics (*Wuwen shizhe* 五瘟使者), dating back to the Six Dynasties, were both feared and revered by local people in Zhejiang for their association with plagues. Their collective birthday coincides with the Double Fifth, the fifth day of the fifth month.<sup>23</sup>

A play painting (*xihua* 戲畫) titled *The Biography of the Five Poisons* (*Wudu zhuan* 五毒傳),<sup>24</sup> preserved in the Palace collection, vividly captures the specific theatrical array of the five demonic soldiers: four male spectres with painted faces—the toad, the centipede, the gecko, and the scorpion—are composed with dynamic martial poses. A female figure, the red boa, wears a crown decorated with a pair of pheasant feathers (*lingzi* 翎子) usually representing martial roles. Among different versions of *The Magic Box*, the gender distribution of the five roles in this painting illustrates that of the eighteenth-century Kun opera script from Fu Xihua's collection.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, it is reasonable to infer that the writing and staging of the anthropomorphized Five Poisons during the Double Fifth Festival in Beijing are reflective of these popular local customs, which featured the same Five Poisons and were closely associated with the same festival.

## The Goddess of Li'ersi

While it is evident that *The Magic Box* draws heavily on the religious history and festival customs of the late Ming dynasty, the prototype of Jinhua remains elusive. The “Three Ps” model—persona, practice, and place—put forward by Noga Ganany offers a useful framework for identifying the mysterious goddess

<sup>23</sup> Paul R. Katz, *The Cult of Marshal Wen in Late Imperial Chekiang* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 51.

<sup>24</sup> See Ning Xiao 寧霄, “Qingdai Duanwu guojie qijian de xiqu yanchu” 清代端午過節期間的戲曲演出 [Theatrical performances during the Dragon Boat Festival in the Qing dynasty], *The Forbidden City* 紫禁城, no. 6 (2017): 85.

<sup>25</sup> Notably, a later Palace version in the Kun-Yi 崑弋 operatic style reassigns the scorpion's gender from male to female. In this version the scorpion is referred to as the Lute Fairy (Pipa xiangu 琵琶仙姑), likely inspired by the scorpion seductress in the *Journey to the West*. See *Hunyuanhe* (the Palace version), in *Kun-Yi ben xi* 崑弋本戲, vol. 1, *Gugong zhenben congkan* 故宮珍本叢刊, vol. 668 (Haikou: Hainan chubanshe, 2000), p. 119.

Jinhua in a religious context.<sup>26</sup> In the play, Jinhua is described as a “ferocious deity” (*xiongshe* 兇神)<sup>27</sup> who governs water regions and is dispatched by the Jade Emperor to punish the misconduct of the Jiajing Emperor. She embodies a dual persona: a tutelary protectress and a ruthless troublemaker.

In Scene 10, where Jinhua gathers the demons, she introduces herself as follows: “If I enjoy proper sacrifices [*xiang sai* 享賽], the boats shall pass smoothly. A little delay will certainly incur disaster.”<sup>28</sup> This self-claim aligns with the capricious and dangerous nature of “ferocious deities” or “inimical gods,” as defined by Mark Meulenbeld—spiritual forces that pose a threat to society unless properly controlled,<sup>29</sup> or satisfactorily appeased. Such spirits are believed to haunt humans in society, until receiving proper sacrificial rituals that would deliver (*du* 度) them to the divine realm. Jinhua’s demand for “sacrifices” (*sai* 賽) and her implied threats suggest a connection to this tradition. Despite occasionally unleashing chaos, her role as a protector of boats and water transport is also implied in her monologue.

Jinhua’s major act in the play is gathering the Five Poisons and other demonic soldiers for a roll call in Scene 10. “First, Madam White Fox. Second, Elder Priest Centipede. Third, Lady Boa. Fourth, Scorpion Spirit. Fifth, Green Stone Spirit. Sixth, Black Stone Spirit. Seventh, Gecko Spirit. Eighth, Toad Spirit.”<sup>30</sup> Each responds when called. As previously discussed, the Five Poisons among all demonic beings are particularly representative of the Double Fifth customs. Jinhua’s role as their leader further indicates her possible association with the Double Fifth Festival.

The locations that Jinhua dispatches her demons in the play also provide clues to trace her sacred geography in religion. Among the mentioned places, a small village named Li’ersi 里二泗 in Zhangjiawan 張家灣, mentioned as a site where Jinhua dispatches her demonic subordinate Madam White Fox, caught

<sup>26</sup> Noga Ganany, “Origin Narratives: Reading and Reverence in Late-Ming China” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2018), p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> *Hunyuanhe*, in *Fu Xihua cang gudian xiqu zhenben congkan*, pp. 63–74.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare*, p. 61. Similarly, what Richard von Glahn calls “morally ambivalent” deities or even “demonic” in nature may also apply. See von Glahn, *The Sinister Way*, pp. 180–221.

<sup>30</sup> *Hunyuanhe*, in *Fu Xihua cang gudian xiqu zhenben congkan*, p. 76.

my attention.<sup>31</sup> These are not fictional geographies but precise references to places in a suburban prefecture of Beijing—Tongzhou, a vital transport junction where the Grand Canal terminated. The village Li'ersi, situated in central Tongzhou, was the location of the Youmin Monastery (Youmin guan 佑/祐民觀). According to Wan Biao 萬表 (1498–1556), a regional canal transport commander, this monastery served both as a religious site for transport workers to pray for safe passage and an administrative office for canal transport affairs. Wan Biao noted the monastery was rebuilt on the former site of the Li'ersi temple, with its reconstruction attributed to a Zhengyi Daoist priest named Zhou Congshan 周從善 (fl. 1535–1542), who sought imperial patronage from the Jiajing Emperor in 1535.<sup>32</sup>

Based on textual research and fieldwork I conducted in today's Li'ersi, which I will elaborate on later, it appears that the Goddess of Li'ersi worshipped at the Youmin Monastery inspired the portrayal of Jinhua in the play. Known as the Holy Mother Jinhua (Jinhua shengmu), this local goddess was revered at least from the late Ming to the Qianlong period (1736–1795) of the Qing dynasty. As a water protectress, her temple festivals coincided with the Double Fifth celebrations, including Dragon Boat racing on the canal. Notably, the author Cao Xueqin mentioned in the beginning, who was familiar with the play and the Goddess Jinhua, died in 1763 and was buried in western Zhangjiawan, close to the site of the Jinhua worship.<sup>33</sup>

Evidence of Jinhua's role as a protectress of water transport survives on damaged stone steles in the monastery's yard, though written documents scarcely show relevant information. One stele, erected in the year 1768 during Qianlong's reign, bears the inscription of four large characters "Jinhua

<sup>31</sup> The palace version in the Kun-Yi operatic style mentions the village Li'ersi. See *Hunyuanhe*, in *Gugong zhenben congkan*, vol. 668, p. 166. The Prince Che version in the Pihuang operatic style mentions Zhangjiawan to which Li'ersi was affiliated. *Hunyuanhe*, in *Qing Chewangfu cang xiqu quanbian* 清車王府藏戲曲全編, vol. 12 (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2013), p. 109.

<sup>32</sup> Wan Biao, "Youmin guan li cao ting shi ji" 祐民觀理漕廳事記 [Record of the Youmin Monastery's management of canal transport affairs], in *Wanluting gao* 玩鹿亭稿, vol. 3 (*Siming congshu* 四明叢書 edition, 1938), pp. 1a–3a.

<sup>33</sup> Cao died in the year 1763 of the solar calendar, but on the Lunar New Year's eve which was still the twenty-seventh year of the Qianlong reign (c. 1762–1763). See *Tongxian zhi* 通縣志 (Beijing: Beijing chubanshe, 2003), p. 19.

Shengmu” 金花聖母 (Holy Mother Jinhua) in decorative script engraving on its top board. Though severely mutilated, the remaining text describes Jinhua as “cultivating her mind in the lucent palace of the water court [*shuifu* 水府], expelling evil forces, and exalting the Way.”<sup>34</sup> This description corresponds with her theatrical persona as a water deity living in the “water court,”<sup>35</sup> though in this play she gathers rather than repels evil forces.

Jinhua’s divine power, like that of other Chinese goddesses, particularly attracted women worshippers. Another Qianlong-era stele, situated to the west of the aforementioned one, features the inscription “*kun yuan liu fang*” 坤遠流芳 on the top board, meaning “women’s virtuous reputation spreads afar.” Interestingly, this stele suggests that Jinhua’s followers primarily consisted of women, many of whom were female merchants involved in small-scale businesses selling goods such as pigments, tobacco, arrows, fruits, and hats.<sup>36</sup> Today, the site functions as an all-female Daoist monastery, reflecting Jinhua’s enduring association with women’s blessings.

According to the 1783 gazetteer of Tongzhou, festive activities celebrating the Goddess of Li’ersi, including fairs and performances, were held annually during the Double Fifth Festival in the fifth lunar month. During this month, “the Li’ersi Goddess Temple [Li’ersi niangniang miao 里二泗娘娘廟] also holds a temple fair and incense-burning gathering on the first day. During the Double Fifth Festival . . . dragon boat performances are held in the canal as entertainment.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, *The Magic Box*, a play linked to Double Fifth and featuring the Goddess Jinhua, likely reflects the local worship of Jinhua at the Youmin Monastery in Li’ersi.

Nonetheless, questions remain about the characterization of Jinhua. In local religious records, she appears entirely benevolent, serving as a protectress of water transport and women, and even expelling evil forces. However, in the play, she is portrayed as a martial leader of demonic soldiers. Why is Jinhua

<sup>34</sup> See also Feng He 馮鶴, “Tongzhou Youmin guan xiaokao” 通州佑民觀小考 [A brief study on the Youmin Monastery in Tongzhou], *Zhongguo Daojiao* 中國道教 3 (2012): 18.

<sup>35</sup> *Hunyuanhe*, in *Fu Xihua cang gudian xiqu zhenben congkan*, p. 60.

<sup>36</sup> Feng He, “Tongzhou Youmin guan xiaokao,” p. 19.

<sup>37</sup> *Tongzhou zhi* (1783), 4b–5a, in *Huadong Shifan Daxue tusuguan cang xijian fangzhi congkan*, pp. 284–85.

referred to as a ferocious deity in the play? Further investigation into fictional narratives may provide answers that are often omitted from official records.

## Granny Jin in Literature and Religion

Jinhua's persona in the eighteenth-century Kun opera is portrayed by the *laodan* 老旦, a role type (*hangdang* 行當) that specifically plays characters of elderly female characters. This raises an intriguing question: what kinds of figures are typically depicted as elderly women or grannies in literature or in religion? Victoria B. Cass, in her chapter on "grannies" in Ming society and folklore, notes that these figures often occupied private spheres associated with birth, marriage, and healing. However, they were also perceived as potentially dangerous visitors capable of bringing trouble and even disaster, particularly by male officials who sought to regulate and limit their influence within households.<sup>38</sup>

A comparable figure to better understand Jinhua's role as an elderly goddess in both theatre and religion is Granny Wang (Wang nainai 王奶奶), as discussed in Susan Naquin's comprehensive research on Beijing. Granny Wang is a subordinate of Our Lady of Mount Tai (Bixia Yuanjun 碧霞元君). According to legend, before becoming a local deity, Granny Wang was a peasant woman and a devout follower of Bixia Yuanjun. Some said she tragically froze to death on Mt. Miaofeng 妙峰山. Posthumously enshrined there, she was understood as the ruler of animal gods from local shamanic cults.<sup>39</sup> These spirits, often referred to as immortals (*xian* 仙) by Beijing people, included four or five categories of animals, such as the fox, weasel, hedgehog, and snake. Naquin, citing Li Wei-tsu, notes that the animal gods often possessed female mediums, granting them healing powers, which made them widely venerated in Beijing households.<sup>40</sup> The case of Granny Wang, therefore, sheds light on the religious status of Jinhua as a local "ruler" of animal spirits in Tongzhou, including the Five Poisons and foxes.

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<sup>38</sup> Victoria B. Cass, *Dangerous Women: Warriors, Grannies, and Geishas of the Ming* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), pp. 47–64.

<sup>39</sup> Susan Naquin, *Peking: Temple and City Life, 1400–1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), p. 545.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 527.

Interestingly, the resonance of the elderly Jinhua extends to a fictional narrative (*xiaoshuo* 小說) in which she is explicitly referred to as Granny Jin (Jin nainai 金奶奶), a cunning old fox in the guise of an elderly lady.<sup>41</sup> This appears in an 1832 woodblock print titled *The Magic Box and a Complete Biography of the Five Poisons* (*Hunyuanhe wudu quanzhuan* 混元盒五毒全傳), though some scholars suggest that the narrative model may date back to as early as the Ming dynasty.<sup>42</sup>

Written in coarse vernacular language with frequent errors, the fiction has a darker and more sinister narrative than the drama version. Early in the story, Granny Jin has saved a young scholar from a demon and marries her daughter to him. She then manipulates the scholar into inadvertently releasing the Five Poisons, creating chaos. The Daoist Heavenly Master Zhang is dispatched by the imperial court—this time by the Yongle 永樂 Emperor (r. 1402–1424) instead of the Jiajing Emperor—to suppress the demons. Nevertheless, Master Zhang fails in his mission, while Granny Jin stages an elaborate act of subduing the Five Poisons, thereby taking credit and earning the trust of the imperial family. Although Master Zhang recognizes Granny Jin's true identity as a fox spirit, he is unable to thwart her schemes due to his lack of military prowess. When the emperor asks Granny Jin what rewards she desires, she requests that Master Zhang stamp seals on the garments of her daughter and herself. The seal is called the Magic Seal of Five Thunders (*Wulei shenyin* 五雷神印), or Thunder Seal, a Daoist talisman used by the Heavenly Master to subdue demons.<sup>43</sup> Initially, Master Zhang refuses, as he recognizes that their garments are made from demon skins. However, after Granny Jin subdues demons and even heals a royal princess, both the Empress Dowager and the Yongle Emperor pressure Master Zhang to comply, citing her meritorious deeds. Ultimately, Master Zhang grants Granny Jin and her daughter the seals, enabling them to achieve immortality and ascend to the divine realm.

<sup>41</sup> *Guben xiaoshuo jicheng* 古本小說集成 (Fujingtang 富經堂 woodblock print in 1832, reproduced by Shanghai guji chubanshe).

<sup>42</sup> Dai Bufan, *Xiaoshuo jianwen lu*, pp. 271–73. Yamashita Kazuo, “Sinchō kyūtei engeki ‘Kongenkō’ no seiritsu to jōen,” pp. 37–52.

<sup>43</sup> The plot about the seals varies across different literary genres. In the drama, Jinhua orders two stone spirits to steal Master Zhang's Thunder Seal and attempts to break his power by stamping it on a human skin, but the plan fails.

Granny Jin's complete victory in the fiction by successfully deceiving the imperial family serves as a frivolous mocking of Master Zhang's religious authority and the imperial Daoism he represents. The stance of this fiction is complex. On one hand, it exposes Granny Jin's manipulative scheme of releasing and subduing the plaguing demons. On the other hand, it tacitly condones her use of any means necessary to fulfil her spiritual goals, while simultaneously undermining and emasculating Master Zhang. This depiction of Granny Jin aligns closely with the archetype of devious elderly female troublemakers who combine menace with a sense of humour.<sup>44</sup>

The motif of cunning grannies in literature, often portrayed as old female foxes, also appears in the Ming novel *Quash the Demon's Revolt* (*Pingyao zhuan* 平妖傳). In this narrative, the mastermind behind the chaos is an old fox named Auntie Holy (Sheng gugu 聖姑姑). Just like the narrative in the fiction version of *The Magic Box*, Auntie Holy cunningly offers to solve the very turmoil she orchestrates, to gain reverence and fortune from local people. The novel's author, Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1646), wrote that such old foxes living for thousands of years, often referred to as “celestial foxes” (*tianhu* 天狐), are highly adept at casting spells and deceiving people into worshipping them and offering sacrifices.<sup>45</sup> Notably, in *Quash the Demon's Revolt*, the old fox Auntie Holy aids her daughter's incarnation Hu Yong'er in becoming the queen of a rebel regime and fiercely defends her daughter's licentious lifestyle. Similarly, in the fiction version of *The Magic Box*, the old fox Granny Jin seeks to transcend both her daughter and herself. The old female foxes helping their daughters attain status and privilege probably reflects a broader religious pattern in which fox deities protect their female followers within local religious traditions. Kang Xiaofei's study on the cult of fox spirits (*huxian* 狐仙) highlights that women of lower social status sometimes invoked fox possession as a means to resist arranged marriages.<sup>46</sup> Although such women, empowered by perceived eccentricity, were often scorned by the male elite, their marginality allowed them to challenge patriarchal social norms and assert their agency.

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<sup>44</sup> Cass, *Dangerous Women*, pp. 60–64.

<sup>45</sup> Feng Menglong, *Pingyao zhuan* 平妖傳 [Quash the demon's revolt] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1997), p. 13.

<sup>46</sup> For the study of the fox cult, see Kang Xiaofei, *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 80.

Thus, the portrayal of deities and demons in such narratives often synthesizes a diverse spectrum of lore drawn from religious contexts and literary motifs. Jinhua's fictional depiction as a cunning fox granny likely derives from a rich amalgamation of cultural and religious traditions. While the drama version of *The Magic Box* presents Jinhua and Master Zhang differently, as it was created by and for a different audience from the fiction version, Jinhua's persona as an elderly female deity remains consistent across various genres.

### Possible Cantonese Origin

Jinhua in the play and Granny Jin in the fiction allude to local religious practices in Beijing, occupying a space between the orthodox Daoist pantheon and shamanistic worship of inimical, often animalistic, deities. However, as far as my research indicates, no hagiographical account of Jinhua, not even a mention of her name, exists in local gazetteers or historiographies of late imperial China. The sole evidence is the title “Holy Mother Jinhua” clearly inscribed on a Qing-dynasty stele discussed before. Nevertheless, a lone piece of evidence, though unsupported by other documentation, does not always represent a dead end for scholars; instead, it may suggest a collective secret or something highly controversial.

One contemporary hagiographical depiction of Jinhua is found on an information board at the Youmin Monastery which I visited during a field trip to Tongzhou. The board states, “The Holy Mother Goddess Jinhua [Jinhua shengmu niangniang 金花聖母娘娘] is the only combined goddess formed by merging the incarnations of Lady Jinhua [Jinhua furen 金花夫人] who blesses childbirth and the Divine Concubine [Tianfei 天妃 or Mazu 媽祖] Lin Moniang 林默娘 who saves people at sea.” According to the Qing-dynasty Tongzhou gazetteer, the Youmin Monastery was once known as the Temple of the Divine Concubine (Tianfei miao 天妃廟),<sup>47</sup> possibly suggesting an earlier historical merging of Jinhua and the Divine Concubine in local religious practices.

The narrative on the information board blends hagiographies of these two goddesses, incorporating the Cantonese records of Jinhua and the Hokkien

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<sup>47</sup> See *Tongzhou zhi* 通州志, *juan 2* (woodblock print, 1883), pp. 46b–47a.

records of Mazu. The first half, adapted from a Qing Cantonese account, tells a completely benevolent tale of the virgin girl Jinhua saving a magistrate's pregnant wife from difficult labour. After this miraculous manifestation, Jinhua was venerated by the local community. Before long, she passed away in a sitting posture (*zuohua* 坐化) and achieved immortality. However, the original Cantonese record complicates the narrative with unsettling elements:

Some said that the goddess was a virgin. The wife of a local magistrate was about to give birth, but she suffered for days and was almost tortured to death. She dreamed of a deity telling her that, for successfully giving birth, she should invite the Jinhua girl to the house. The family secretly searched around and found Jinhua. As soon as Jinhua came to the mansion, the wife indeed gave birth to a son. After this, no one dared to marry the goddess. The goddess was so ashamed that she drowned herself in the lake. Guangdong people built her statue to offer sacrifice. The surname of the goddess was Jin and Hua was her first name. People at that time called her Young Girl Jinhua. However, because she could bless people for childbirth, she was not supposed to be categorized as a virgin, so she was referred to as a “lady” instead.

或曰，神本處女，有巡按夫人方媿，數日不下，幾殆。夢神告曰：請金花女至則產矣。密訪得之，甫至署，果誕子。由此無敢婚神者。神羞之，遂投湖死。粵人肖像以祀。神姓金名花，當時人呼爲金花小娘。以其能佑人生子，不當在處女之列，故稱夫人云。<sup>48</sup>

This excerpt from *Yue xiao ji* 粵小記, compared to the Beijing account, introduces a darker tone, intertwining supernatural benevolence with tragedy and societal shame: after saving the woman from difficult labour, Jinhua was ostracized in the marriage market, leading to her shame and tragic suicide in the lake. Toward the end of the quote, it is more vaguely implied that since she blessed childbirth, she could no longer be considered a virgin. According to an earlier Cantonese note from the Ming dynasty, Jinhua's profession was a female shaman, aligning with her divine power in this record.<sup>49</sup> Celibacy is often the

<sup>48</sup> Huang Zhi 黃芝, *Yue xiao ji* 粵小記 [Brief records of Guangdong], in *Qingdai Guangdong biji wuzhong* 清代廣東筆記五種 (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2006), p. 392.

<sup>49</sup> Zhang Xu 張翹 (1455–1514), *Nanhai zayong* 南海雜詠 [Miscellaneous odes to the Southern Seas] (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2010), pp. 80–81.

voluntary lifestyle of female religious practitioners, like the legendary female divinity Princess Miaoshan 妙善, a previous incarnation of Guanyin. Although the trouble of celibacy was also indicated in Miaoshan's story, where her choice irritated her father, her renunciation of marriage on religious grounds ultimately enabled her spiritual triumph and deification, becoming what Glen Dudbridge describes "a charter for celibacy."<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, in Jinhua's story here, the anxiety surrounding her unmarried status runs deeper—not a charter, but a shame. Jinhua's shame at remaining celibate in this record likely reflects the gendered perspective of the male author and, more broadly, the patriarchal society of the time. In that context, marriage was considered an indispensable step to fulfil womanhood, transforming a daughter into a wife and mother. Thus, the depiction of celibacy as shameful in *Yue xiao ji* was more of a biased interpretation by male literati. In fact, some celibate women in Cantonese society would identify themselves with the goddess Jinhua. Scholarship showcases that Lady Jinhua in Guangzhou, beyond being a fertility goddess, also serves as a spiritual solace for "self-grooming girls" (*zishu nü* 自梳女), women who remain celibate for their entire lives.<sup>51</sup>

Unfortunately, I have not found additional evidence to suggest the Cantonese origin of the Li'ersi Jinhua in Beijing. Although this single piece of evidence on a contemporary information board may seem insufficient to draw a deeper connection—in fact, identifying two or more deities with the same name as belonging to one tradition is always challenging and even implausible—it is still worthwhile to compare the two manifestations of Jinhua in Beijing and Guangdong. According to my research, both share divine personas associated with blessing women and facilitating water transport within the spectrum of the *yin* 陰 energy which embodies female power.<sup>52</sup> Additionally,

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<sup>50</sup> Glen Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miaoshan* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 102.

<sup>51</sup> Jiang Yanping 蔣艷萍, "Jinhua dan de wenhua yuanyuan yu shehui gongneng kaocha" 金花誕的文化淵源與社會功能考察 [The cultural origins and social functions of the Jinhua Festival], *Tanqiu* 探求, no. 6 (2022): 100–102.

<sup>52</sup> For the Cantonese Jinhua's divine power in protecting water transport and women's professional careers, see He Zhangni 賀璋靚 and Cai Pengchong 蔡彭沖, "Guangfu minjian xinyang zhong de nüshen xinyang tanlüe" 廣府民間信仰中的女神信仰探略 [A brief exploration of goddess worship in Cantonese folk religion], *Shijie zongjiao yanjiu* 世界宗教研究, no. 4 (2016): 81–83.

both are linked to the Double Fifth Festival,<sup>53</sup> an association that is even more idiosyncratic than their governance over women and water. Furthermore, both are occasionally paired with the Divine Concubine, or Mazu,<sup>54</sup> which warrants further investigation.

While the controversy of the northern Jinhua is only implied by the absence of written records, official prohibitions against the Cantonese worship of Jinhua, likely due to its shamanistic nature, are clearly documented in Guangdong history. For instance, Jinhua's temple in urban Guangzhou experienced state-ordered destructions and subsequent local reconstructions throughout late imperial China, as noted in a local gazetteer:

It is unknown since when Jinhua's temple was established.<sup>55</sup> In 1469, the governor Chen Lian rebuilt the temple. Wei Xiao [1483–1543] demolished it during Jiajing's reign [1522–1566]. Cantonese people transferred the goddess's statue to the Shi'ao village on the southern bank. Afterwards, the old temple was rebuilt which is nowadays the temple on the Immortal Lake Street. During Qianlong's reign [1736–

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<sup>53</sup> In a Cantonese gazetteer of the Qing dynasty, the time of Jinhua's death was specifically associated with the Double Fifth Festival. It recorded that she drowned while watching the Dragon Boat racing (*jingdu* 競渡) in the fifth month. See *Guangzhou fuzhi* 廣州府志 [Gazetteer of the Guangzhou prefecture], *juan* 163 (woodblock print, 1879; manuscript retrieved from Erudition Database), p. 7a.

<sup>54</sup> In Canton (Guangzhou), a seventeenth-century record suggests that Lady Jinhua was equated with the Divine Concubine at temple festivals in spring. See Wu Qi 吳綺 (1619–1694), *Lingnan fengwu ji* 嶺南風物紀 [Records of Lingnan's local features] (Qing Wenyuange Sikuquanshu; manuscript retrieved from Erudition Database), p. 45.

<sup>55</sup> Scholarship on the Cantonese worship of Jinhua suggests it might have emerged during the Song-Yuan period before the Ming dynasty. See Liu Zhenggang 劉正剛 and Huang Jianhua 黃建華, “Minjian xinyang de zhengtonghua quxiang: Ming-Qing Guangdong Jinhua furen xingxiang de yanbian” 民間信仰的正統化取向——明清廣東金花夫人形象的演變 [The orthodox orientation of folk beliefs: The evolution of the image of Lady Jinhua in Ming-Qing Guangdong], *Anhui shixue* 安徽史學, no. 5 (2012): 11. The scholars Luo Yiyang 羅燦英 (2016) and Zeng Keqi 曾鈞錡 (2019) follows this periodization. However, I have not found any record from the Song-Yuan period that mentions Jinhua.

1796], the scholar Weng Fanggang [1733–1818] inspected the schools around Guangdong. Passing by the Immortal Lake Street, he saw men and women visiting temples and worshipping the goddess. The street was so crowded that it could not even allow one sedan to pass through. Weng was irritated and commanded officials to destroy the temple. Therefore, Jinhua's temple in the Shi'ao village once again took up the sacrificial sanctuary.<sup>56</sup>

神廟不知始自何時，成化五年巡撫陳廉重建，嘉靖中魏校毀之。粵人奉神像于南岸石鰲村，其後復建故處，即今仙湖街廟是也。乾隆間翁覃溪學士（方綱）視學粵東，適至仙湖街，見男女謁拜，肩輿不能過，怒，命有司毀之。于是復奉祀于石鰲村。

In another official gazetteer from Guangdong, Jinhua's temple is explicitly labelled as an “illicit cult” (*yinci* 淫祠), referring to illegitimate deity worship excluded from the imperial sacrificial pantheon.<sup>57</sup> The Qing official Wu Rongguang 吳榮光 (1773–1842) from the Guangdong region recorded a list of such illicit cults, including that of Jinhua, and argued emphatically that those cults should be completely eradicated.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> *Guangzhou fuzhi*, juan 163, pp. 7b–8a.

<sup>57</sup> *Guangdong tongzhi* 廣東通志 [Gazetteer of Guangdong], juan 7 (woodblock print, 1822; manuscript retrieved from Erudition Database), p. 11a. I adopt Paul R. Katz's translation of *yinci* as “illicit cults” or “illicit sacrifices,” focusing on the state-society friction. *Yinci* describes those vernacular worships that did not receive the imperial recognition. The censorship of these religious activities was usually implemented by scholar-officials in the government. Other translations of *yin* include excessive, licentious, and profane, focusing more on the sexual and moral implications, which, to some extent, is also applicable to this case of Jinhua's sacrifice. For explanations and controversies regarding the translations of *yin*, see Katz, *Demon Hordes and Burning Boats*, p. 28.

<sup>58</sup> Quoting Wu Rongguang, “Since Shaanxi people pursued immortality and Guangdong people revered ghosts, the consequent abuses penetrated shrines in wilderness, old trees, wild stones and broken steles, which were excluded from the sacrificial canon of the imperial state. However, the old and the young all flooded to these cults in which men and women mingled together. Whereby those monks, nuns, and temple attendants got the chance to make deceitful words, claiming they could predict good or bad luck and weal or woe, to deceive people for money in

(Continued on next page)

The destruction of Jinhua's temple was part of a large-scale campaign to eliminate illicit cults in sixteenth-century Guangdong. This campaign was led by the Ming governor Wei Xiao 魏校 (1483–1543) under orders from the Jiajing Emperor, the same emperor accused in the play *The Magic Box*. The setting of Jinhua's punitive acts against Jiajing may allude to—or at least align with—the historical suppression of her worship. However, these so-called illicit cults constituted a significant part of vernacular religion in southern China and proved impossible to fully eradicate, despite stringent political censorship. The demolition of Jinhua's temple in the Ming dynasty merely resulted in a new temple being constructed across the river, thereby broadening the geographical scope of her worship. Governor Wei Xiao who carried out these temple demolitions also faced veiled criticism from the Cantonese people. Rumours circulated that because Wei destroyed many temples and shrines, he offended furious ghosts (*gui* 鬼), leading to the untimely death of his son.<sup>59</sup> These rumours from worshippers about ghostly retribution further resonate with Jinhua's portrayal in drama as a ferocious deity (*xiongshen* 凶神) who haunts the human world to exact heavenly vengeance.

Faced with state prohibitions, local worshippers in Guangdong adopted an effective strategy of preserving their goddess: integrating the Jinhua cult as a subordinate sacrifice into legitimate deities, usually from Daoism or Buddhism, such as Mazu and Guanyin. Scholars refer to this method as “joint sacrifice”

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(Note 58—*Continued*)

incense, which was indeed harmful to minds and customs. [Illicit cults] should be completely prohibited, including Wutong, Wuxian, and frog deity in Jiangsu and Zhejiang areas; the Great Sage Equalling Heaven, Lady Jinhua, and God of Three Realms in Fujian, Guangdong, and Guangxi areas; as well as the dark god and mountain goblins in Hunan area.” See Wu Rongguang, *Wu xue lu* 吾學錄 [My compiled studies], vol. 11 (woodblock print by Wushi Yunqing Guan 吳氏筠清館, 1832; manuscript retrieved from Erudition Database), p. 84. Von Glahn and others contributed to the research about Wutong, Wuxian, and mountain goblins (*shanxiao* 山魃). And because of the popularity of *Journey to the West* (*Xiyouji* 西遊記), the vernacular cult of the Great God Equalling Heaven (Qitian dasheng 齊天大聖) received relatively broad attention. Others, including Lady Jinhua, however, have been neglected for long.

<sup>59</sup> Liu and Huang, “Minjian xinyang de zhengtonghua quxiang,” p. 9.

(*fusi* 祔祀), which generally involves sharing offerings.<sup>60</sup> As previously discussed, the hagiographical account found at the Youmin Monastery in Beijing claims that Jinhua is a “combined goddess” of Jinhua and Mazu, mirroring the two goddesses’ joint sacrifices in Guangdong.

Today, the pantheon at the Youmin Monastery enshrines five goddesses, comprising not only the Divine Concubine Mazu (Tianfei Mazu 天妃媽祖), but also the Mysterious Woman of Nine Heavens (Jiutian Xuanü 九天玄女), Guanyin (Guanyin shengmu 觀音聖母), the Earth Mother (Dimu 地母), and the Queen Mother of the West (Yaochi shengmu 瑤池聖母 or Xiwangmu 西王母) who occupies the central position as the leading goddess of the monastery. In fact, the Cantonese Jinhua also joined the sacrifice of the Queen Mother as early as the late Ming times. Luo Yiyang’s research examines the joint worship of Jinhua and the Queen Mother at the Monastery of Five Immortals (Wuxian guan 五仙觀) in Guangzhou, dating back to the period between 1522 to 1625.<sup>61</sup> In Zhang Xu’s *Nanhai zayong*, a 1505 record of Jinhua’s hagiography, the lake goddess Jinhua is regarded as a banished immortal and the Queen Mother’s sister, providing a narrative foundation for the Jinhua cult to be assimilated into the Queen Mother’s shrine later.<sup>62</sup> Luo argues that the integration of Jinhua and the Queen Mother is rooted in their shared narratives of premature death as young girls, which imbued them with extraordinary divinity. The Queen Mother’s Daoist investiture dates back to the Six Dynasties, and later she gradually became a maternal protector and nurturer of young girls who died prematurely, like Jinhua.<sup>63</sup>

The association of Jinhua with the Divine Concubine and the Queen Mother—both of whom also enshrined at the Youmin Monastery in Beijing—

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<sup>60</sup> *Fusi* or *fu* 祔 (not *fu* 附) originally means in the ancestral temple, the deceased is joined with the spirits for a combined offering. For the joint sacrifice of Jinhua and other goddesses, see Liu and Huang, “Minjian xinyang de zhengtonghua quxiang,” p. 12; He and Cai, “Guangfu minjian xinyang zhong de nüshen xinyang tanlüe,” p. 75; Luo Yiyang, “Ming Qing shiqi Wuxian daoguan yu Jinhua xinyang kuixi” 明清時期五仙道觀與金花信仰揆析, *Guangdong di'er shifan xueyuan xuebao* 廣東第二師範學院學報 36, no. 2 (2016): 110–11; Jiang, “Jinhua dan de wenhua yuanyuan yu shehui gongneng kaocha,” pp. 97–98.

<sup>61</sup> Luo, “Ming Qing shiqi Wuxian daoguan yu Jinhua xinyang kuixi,” pp. 106–12.

<sup>62</sup> Zhang Xu, *Nanhai zayong*, p. 104.

<sup>63</sup> Luo, “Ming Qing shiqi Wuxian daoguan yu Jinhua xinyang kuixi,” p. 109.

could be traced in Cantonese history. In other words, the coexistence of Jinhua and Mazu, or Jinhua and the Queen Mother, in contemporary Beijing religion may be linked to an earlier parallel tradition that flourished in Guangdong during the Ming and Qing dynasties. However, none of the goddess statues at the Youmin Monastery today is dedicated to Jinhua. Her identity in Beijing seems ineffably concealed and overshadowed by the Divine Concubine. It would not be surprising if her cult had been imported from the Cantonese tradition, which, as I have examined, was frequently suppressed during late imperial China.

Despite being a controversial practice, the Jinhua cult in Guangdong achieved religious legitimacy through joint sacrifices initiated by local worshippers, ensuring its survival and potential spread to other regions. In his research on the spread of temple cults in Fujian, Barend ter Haar examines how the transmission of Fujian temple cults beyond local boundaries was closely tied to regional trade networks and migration patterns, often involving communities of merchants, monks, and migrants. These cults usually spread from urban commercial centres to broader regions.<sup>64</sup> Ter Haar's framework may provide a helpful model for understanding the possible spread of the Jinhua cult, which likely followed the water route and urban commercial hubs, such as Guangzhou, Hangzhou,<sup>65</sup> and Tongzhou, locations where Jinhua's name appears in records. If the geographical references from relevant fiction and drama are taken into account, Jinhua's traces could also extend to the Poyang 鄱陽 Lake situated along the midstream of the Yangtze River<sup>66</sup> and Huai'an 淮安 prefecture located on the Grand Canal.<sup>67</sup> It is not impossible that the worship

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<sup>64</sup> Barend J. ter Haar, "The Genesis and Spread of Temple Cults in Fukien," in E. B. Vermeer, ed., *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Leiden; New York: Brill, 1990), pp. 349–96.

<sup>65</sup> A record of the West Lake in Hangzhou notes that "the Temple of Lady Jinhua is efficacious in bringing the birth of sons. The sacrificial temple festivals dedicated to her are the most spectacular ones." The ritual involving flower petals implied in the poem aligns with a Cantonese record. See Shen Dacheng 沈大成 (1770–1775), "Xihu zashi" 西湖雜詩 [Miscellaneous poems of the West Lake], in *Xuefuzhai ji* 學福齋集 [Collected works from the Xufuzhai Studio] (manuscript retrieved from Erudition Database), vol. 4 (1774), p. 4a.

<sup>66</sup> In *The Magic Box*, Jinhua claims her origin from the Poyang Lake.

<sup>67</sup> The fiction *Hunyuanhe wudu quanzhuan* sets in Huan'an.

of Jinhua was transmitted from Guangdong via a hydrographic network during the late Ming period, including the Beijiang 北江 and Ganjiang 贛江 rivers to reach Jiangxi, then through the Poyang Lake into the Yangtze River to reach Hangzhou, and finally through the Grand Canal to reach the Tongzhou bay area near the capital.

Nevertheless, discrepancies remain between the northern and southern manifestations of Jinhua. For instance, the Cantonese Jinhua is frequently depicted in hagiographies as a young girl (*xiaoniang* 小娘) prior to her death, with the title “lady” (*furen* 夫人) added posthumously, akin to the Lady of Linshui 臨水夫人. However, the Beijing Jinhua is predominantly referred to as Holy Mother (*shengmu* 聖母) and her characterization in the drama is initially an elderly lady—though later adaptations have transformed her into a younger female figure.<sup>68</sup> These differences are not unexpected, as such transformations often occur alongside the transmission of religious practices to accommodate distinct local culture and customs. The popular narratives surrounding Jinhua, along with legends of other deities and demons, may also have been disseminated, merged, and modified during this process. While it remains challenging to assert with certainty that the Beijing Jinhua originates from the Cantonese Jinhua, the comparison between these two manifestations offers a compelling lens to explore and better understand the complex and controversial nature of this goddess as depicted in drama.

## Symbolic Warfare and Imperial Intervention

Having analysed Jinhua through a religious lens, the demonic warfare between Jinhua and Master Zhang in *The Magic Box* reflects two layers of conflicts. First, it embodies the tension between state Daoism, represented by the imperially ordained Master Zhang, and the local cultic traditions, represented by the local goddess Jinhua. In late imperial Chinese society, the Heavenly Masters systematically integrated folk cults into Daoist bureaucracy

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<sup>68</sup> The Goddess Jinhua portrayed by the famous *dan* actor, Mei Lanfang 梅蘭芳 (1894–1962), is a younger female beauty. See Lu Qing 魯青, *Jingju shizhao* 京劇史照 [Historical photos of Peking opera] (Beijing: Yanshan chubanshe, 2019), p. 45.

by licensing practitioners and local deities.<sup>69</sup> In his study of the Ming novel *Canonization of Gods*, Mark Meulenbeld highlights how fictional writings often reflect the patronage of Daoist temples that incorporate local territorial gods into the imperial liturgical structure.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, the eventual eradication of the Five Poisons and the reconciliation between Jinhua and Master Zhang likely symbolize the religious incorporation of the Jinhua cult into the Daoist pantheon.

Second, the play's narrative showcases a military confrontation between the heavenly Jade Emperor, who dispatches demonic soldiers led by Jinhua, and the secular Jiajing Emperor, who employs the Daoist Heavenly Master to suppress them. The Jade Emperor's trial of the Ming Jiajing Emperor reflects a common logic in secular society that natural disasters like plagues, floods, and droughts are brutal punishments from heavenly agony, often instigated by the misdeeds of reigning rulers. However, in the play, it is the Jiajing Emperor—the punished party—who eventually triumphs in the warfare by relying on the martial power of the imperial Daoist warrior, the Heavenly Master Zhang. Meulenbeld suggests that the participation of the unruly beings serves as “occasions” for protagonists to display martial prowess.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, in the eighteenth-century version of *The Magic Box*, Jinhua's malicious participation underscores the formidable power of the male protagonist, Master Zhang, in quelling demonic forces. It reflects criticism of the secular emperor while extolling the Way of Heavenly Masters in pacifying demons through Thunder Rituals. Thus, this dramatic writing aligns itself with ordained Daoism, rather than the imperial emperor per se.

However, a nineteenth-century palace adaptation of *The Magic Box* eliminated the critical stance against the imperial authority. The performance record of *The Magic Box* in the imperial palace dates back to the reign of the Jiaqing 嘉慶 Emperor (r. 1796–1820) during the Qing dynasty. In 1802, under Jiaqing's commission, the play was expanded from sixty-nine scenes to

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<sup>69</sup> Vincent Goossaert's recent monograph examines in detail the socio-religious role of the Heavenly Masters in Chinese society. See Goossaert, *Heavenly Masters: Two Thousand Years of the Daoist State*, pp. 220–63.

<sup>70</sup> Meulenbeld, *Demonic Warfare*, pp. 132–67.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

eighty-five scenes and rehearsed in the palace.<sup>72</sup> However, by 1819, Jiaqing suddenly ordered the play to be abridged into thirty-two scenes. In this shortened version, the plot highlighting the Ming Jiajing Emperor's misconduct and subsequent criticism was deliberately removed.

Additionally, this version of the play adopted an alternative title, *The Chan Daoist Quashing the Devils* (*Chandao chuxie* 闡道除邪, shortened to *Chan* hereafter).<sup>73</sup> The word *Chan*, literally meaning “lucidity,” directly draws inspiration from the Ming novel *Canonization of Gods*, where the Chan teaching (Chan *jiao* 闡教) representing the righteous faction, opposes the villainous Jie teaching (Jie *jiao* 截教), comprising inimical gods. This revised title emphasizes the dichotomy between the “Chan” Daoist and the “evil” forces represented by Jinhua and the Five Poisons. By reframing Jinhua and Master Zhang within this binary, this adaptation unequivocally demonizes Jinhua as a female villain opposing a male hero.

The whole package of adaptations made during the later years of Jiaqing's reign—including abridgement, title change, and the removal of criticism against the Ming Jiajing Emperor—probably stemmed from Jiaqing's major concern about the rampant unrest of the time. As Prince Zhaolian 昭槲 (1776–1830) recorded, in the wake of the 1813 Eight Trigrams Uprising that threatened the imperial palace, Jiaqing prohibited the performance of lengthy grand dramas, replacing them with monthly auspicious plays aligned with imperial ideology.<sup>74</sup> Another notable peasant uprising led by Lin Qing 林清 (1770–1813) took place in Tongzhou in 1813, where the worship of Jinhua was situated.<sup>75</sup> By

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<sup>72</sup> Based on the comparison of the palace records with versions of scripts, the Japanese scholar Yamashita Kazuo concludes that the *Box* script collected in the Capital Library in Beijing is most likely the one restaged for the Jiaqing Emperor. See Yamashita Kazuo, “Sinchō kyūtei engeki ‘Kongenkō’ no seiritsu to jōen,” pp. 37–52.

<sup>73</sup> Su Xiang 蘇翔 and Hao Chengwen 郝成文, “*Chandao chuxie* tigangben de niandai panduan yu wenben jiazhi” 《闡道除邪》題綱本的年代判斷與文本價值 [Dating and textual value of the *Chandao chuxie* promptbook script], *Zhonghua xiqu* 中華戲曲 52, no. 1 (2016): 294. For a copy of the script, see *Chandao chuxie*, in *Kun-Yi ben xi*, vol. 1, pp. 207–58.

<sup>74</sup> Zhao Lian 昭槲, *Xiaoting zalu* 嘯亭雜錄 [Miscellaneous records from the Xiaoting Pavilion] (manuscript retrieved from Erudition Database), p. 8a.

<sup>75</sup> *Tongxian zhi*, p. 19.

further elevating Master Zhang as the righteous imperial warrior and removing any faults of the ruler from the narrative, the Jiaqing Emperor sought to facilitate pacifications of rebellious forces in society, expecting to reinforce imperial authority and restore social order.

## Conclusion

Characters and plots in *The Magic Box*, performed in Qing theatre often during the Double Fifth celebrations, allude to local religious history and customs in Beijing, including worship practices tied to state Daoism represented by the Heavenly Master Zhang, and societal deities represented by Jinhua.

Depicted as an elderly female leader of the Five Poisons and other demonic spirits, Jinhua's persona in the play evokes the religious archetype of grannies worshipped in local shamanistic cults, who often governed efficacious but dangerous animal gods. Historically, a Beijing goddess named Holy Mother Jinhua, likely inspiring the dramatic portrayal of Jinhua in *The Magic Box*, may belong to the granny tradition. Enshrined at the Youmin Monastery in Li'ersi at least from the late Ming to the Qianlong period, this Jinhua goddess, celebrated during the Double Fifth gatherings, embodied divine power over canal transport and women's professions. Nevertheless, the lack of written documentation about her worship, except for inscriptions on steles, suggests some extent of controversy, as it may have been related to local shamanistic practices that were frequently banned or regulated by state officials.

The Beijing Jinhua's divinity can be compared to the goddess of the same name in Cantonese religious traditions. The worship of Jinhua in Guangdong, officially labelled as an "illicit cult," faced repeated imperial demolitions during late imperial China. Nevertheless, the Jinhua cult persisted through joint sacrifices with legitimate goddesses in the Daoist pantheon, including the Divine Concubine Mazu and the Queen Mother of the West, both of whom are also enshrined at the Youmin Monastery in Beijing. The mobility of Cantonese worshippers may have facilitated the northward transmission of the Jinhua cult from Guangdong to Beijing via hydrographic networks centred on the Grand Canal.

During the dissemination of texts and rituals, different authorships and spectatorships—from urban entertainment venues to the imperial palace—produced distinctive representations of the same narrative model. In the case

of *The Magic Box*, the drama in a more refined language style depicts Jinhua's demonic turmoil as decisively pacified by the imperially ordained Daoist master, while the palace adaptation further casts Jinhua as an evil villain and Master Zhang as the righteous hero. In contrast, the more vernacular fiction largely inverts the balance of power between the two adversaries. The fictional Master Zhang is portrayed as martially incompetent, while Granny Jin intelligently and skilfully manipulates events to promote her daughter and herself. This reversal of power dynamics reflects contrasting stances and preferences across literary genres. Unlike the drama, which emphasizes the orthodox righteousness of the Heavenly Master Zhang, the fiction appears to disdain it.

The play and its later adaptations also reflect political problems faced by emperors, from Jiajing in the late Ming to Jiaqing in the Qing dynasty. As a descended heavenly soldier tasked with punishing the Jiajing Emperor, Jinhua's confrontation with Master Zhang symbolizes not only the struggle between local cultic traditions and imperially ordained Daoism, but also the tension between the divine power of the Jade Emperor and the political authority of the secular emperor. Later, during the Qing dynasty, the Jiaqing Emperor, troubled by ongoing uprisings, removed all possible criticisms of imperial authority in new adaptations of *The Magic Box*.

Overall, this case study of *The Magic Box* illustrates that forces of malediction and sanctification are often interchangeable and closely tied to the religious dimensions embodied by the demonic-divine fluidity in literature and drama. The literature and religion surrounding the figure of Jinhua vividly encapsulate the Chinese proverb, "As the Way [*Dao* 道] rises one foot, the Demonic [*mo* 魔] rises ten," which also appears in *Journey to the West*.<sup>76</sup> The proverb, extended in meaning, translates as "As virtue rises one foot, vice rises ten," describing the difficulty of eradicating evil forces, whether in religious battles or moral cultivation. Perhaps it ultimately implies the futility of the initial attempt to quash the "demons," as the demonic itself remains a relative and fluid construct in Chinese culture.

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<sup>76</sup> "Dao gao yi chi, mo gao yi zhang" 道高一尺，魔高一丈。See Wu Cheng'en 吳承恩, *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 [Journey to the West] (Changsha: Yuelu shushe, 1987), Chapter 50, p. 388.

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# Goddess Jinhua: A Divine Leader of Demons and Religious Allusions in a Qing Drama

(Abstract)

Yizhuo LI

This study explores the complex interplay between drama, religion, and cultural history through an analysis of the Qing-dynasty play *The Magic Box* (*Hunyuanhe*), focusing on the central figure, the Goddess Jinhua. Depicted as a martial anti-heroine leading the Five Poisons and other demons, Jinhua's character embodies religious and cultural tensions. The play, staged during the Double Fifth Festival, intertwines Daoist and local religious motifs to narrate a celestial conflict triggered by the Jiajing Emperor's excesses in practising alchemy and pursuing immortality. Drawing from diverse sources, including drama, fiction, and historical accounts, this paper examines Jinhua's religious significance, linking her portrayal in the play to the local worship of the Holy Mother Jinhua in Beijing's Tongzhou district. It situates Jinhua within broader cultural patterns, comparing her to Cantonese traditions where her worship, often classified as an illicit cult, persisted through joint sacrifices with sanctioned goddesses. The study also traces narrative adaptations across literary and performative contexts, revealing shifts in political and ideological interpretations. By investigating Jinhua's dual role as a protector and disruptor, this paper sheds light on the evolving intersections of local religion, state Daoism, and late imperial political culture, highlighting the dynamic and fluid construction of divine and demonic identities in Chinese culture.

**Keywords:** Jinhua *The Magic Box* (*Hunyuanhe*) divine and demonic  
local religion state Daoism

# 金花娘娘：清代戲曲中的邪神統帥與宗教隱喻

(提要)

李依卓

本文以清代大戲《混元盒》中的核心人物金花娘娘為切入點，探討戲曲、宗教與文化史之間的複雜關係。《混元盒》通常於端午節期間上演，融合道教與民間信仰元素，敘述因嘉靖帝沉迷煉丹之術、追求長生之法而引發的天界衝突。金花娘娘在戲中是一位武藝超群的反派女傑，統領「五毒」等邪祟報復人間，其形象體現了宗教與文化的張力。本文結合戲曲、小說及歷史文獻等多重文本資料，剖析金花娘娘的宗教意涵，並將其戲中形象與北京通州地區「金花聖母」的地方信仰相聯繫。本文進一步將金花信仰置於更廣闊的文化脈絡中，與廣東的宗教傳統相對照。在廣東地區的史料中，金花信仰常被歸類為「淫祠」，卻透過「附祀」於正統女神的方式得以延續。此外，本文追溯《混元盒》敘事在文學與表演語境中的不同改編，揭示政治與意識形態詮釋的流變。透過探討金花娘娘作為「庇護者」與「破壞者」的雙重角色，本文闡明了地方信仰、國家道教與明清政治文化的動態交集，呈現中國文化中神魔身份流動而多元的建構過程。

**關鍵詞：** 金花 混元盒 神魔 地方信仰 國家道教