THE CHINESE GODS OF WEALTH

A LECTURE

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THE worship of Gods of Wealth is not only one of the most interestnig of Chinese cults but is also one of those best illustrated by the popular pictures which are on sale every New Year, that being the time when special honour is paid to Gods of Wealth as well as to other gods in the Chinese pantheon. The God of Wealth is called Ts'ai Shên 財 神, of which the English rendering is an exact translation. He is not the only god called after the gift he bestows; there are Yao Wang 藥 王 God of Healing, Huo Shên 火 神 God of Fire, Mên Shên 門 神 the Door Gods, and a host of others. Ts'ai Shên's attributes are further described by his alternative titles, of which the following are examples:— "The Wealth-Augmenting, Fortune-Increasing God of Money" 增 富 廣 運 財 神 Tsêng Fu Kuang Yün Ts'ai Shên and "The Valuable-Gathering God of Wealth" 聚 寶 財 神 Chü Pao Ts'ai Shên.

We have then to consider a sincere religious creed with its tenets frankly avowed. Men desire wealth, and here is a special god to whom they may address their prayers. As to the history of the cult, it is impossible to discuss at length the close relationship between Indian and Chinese iconography. The origins are in many instances traceable to their obvious sources. Thus, even at the present time the title of Ts'ai Shên may be applied to a wealthy man who helps others in their times of need. After his death, people outside his immediate family circle may join in the ancestor-worship performed to honour him by his direct descendants, and a public cult thus arises out of a private one. This implies, of course, that numerous persons give rise to local cults. But, since antiquity has absolute sway over even the most illiterate of Chinese minds, the half-educated members of the learned community would naturally search their memories for a notable personality to whom they might attach an established cult. And so, for reasons which it would be difficult to trace, they would deify as a Ts'ai Shên that famous hero of the Shu Ching 書 經 (Book of History), Pi Kan, who suffered unspeakable tortures at the hands of a degenerate monarch. Another instance of this curious and apparently illogical association is the cult of Kuan Ti 關 帝, commonly called by writers on China the God of War, but who is, in fact, a Wealth God and appears in many household icons with all the paraphernalia of such a

god. Like many other popular Chinese divinities such as the Kitchen God, the God of Wealth is represented as living the same kind of life as his earthly subjects live. A Ts'ai Mu 財母 or Wealth Mother is given to him as his wife, and she watches over the women's quarters.

As to the devotees of the cult of the God of Wealth, probably all China worships him except, it may be, good Christians, Mohammadans and also Europeanized Chinese who have returned to their native land hostile not only to everything that savours of religion but to what they themselves call superstition. Certainly the God is venerated by the entire rustic population which welcomes him on New Year's Eve with extravagant display of reverence. All trades are of course his special concern, and his shrine is prominent in every shop, and this is so much a matter of course that the shopkeepers of Canton, for example, do not style the God Ts'ai Shên, the Wealth God, but simply Shên, The God. In the shrine shown in Pl. I A, there is no image at all but simply the character Shên, 神 God, in gold on a red ground. A censer hangs before the shrine, and thus the cult is here fairly represented save for non-essential embellishments.

But apart from the commercial classes, persons of every other calling worship the God with sincere devotion, their outspoken materialism thus merging into a kind of religious mysticism. Perhaps the less honourable the calling the more devout the worshipper: certainly the most earnest of all his devotees are to be found amongst the humblest class, the enslaved women. The pictures will illustrate the manner in which the God and his associates bless their worshippers with abundance of all things. Money is their chief gift, and therefore coins, gold and silver ingots, jewels and the like are the commonest symbols represented.

But the Gods of Money are many, symbols of wealth being easily personified and deified. There is, for instance, a young genius called Liu Hai 劉海, the history of whose origin from a Taoist legend has been traced by myself in a special monograph in Russian. The symbolic iconography of Liu Hai gave rise to the worship of him as a money-giver, and to his icon were added many other desired things. In a picture displaying all the symbols of wealth and fame sometimes a boy is shown in the *rôle* of Liu Hai, thus conveying the wish that the worshipper may be blessed with male posterity. Coins are strung around his neck, while the fabulous creature known as the three-legged toad greedily devours a coin. This creature is one of the most mystic symbols of the cult, and all the legends of Chinese nurses or

half-learned *literati* fail to explain it. In some instances paired images of Liu Hai are found (Plate 4) and when he appears in the *rôle* of a door-god one picture of him is pasted on each of the double doors. Also he is depicted as a child playing with those symbols of wealth which are his attributes, thus combining good wishes for wealth and male posterity.

Other acolytes of the God of Wealth are a pair of genii called Ho Ho Êrh Hsien 和合二仙, Twin Genii of Harmony. There is great difference of opinion as to their origin, and some investigators, who do not know or wish to know Chinese, might affirm that they are divine *gemini* of the Castor and Pollux type. My own researches have not discovered any lucid text explaining their true origin, and for the time being the question must remain unsettled. But a Chinese legend may show how the idea generated in the ordinary Chinese mind. They are said to have been brothers, born of different fathers, who started a large business together and made quite a fortune. Then discord transformed them into open enemies. Seven generations came and went without ending the feud, but at last through the benevolent intervention of some supernatural being the eighth generation saw their descendants friends once more. Though no theory satisfactorily explains their true origin unless recourse is made to the unscientific method of combining my own conjectures with those from native sources, it is clear that these two genii are worshipped by the merchants, who understand the value of union and peaceful harmony in business, and the dependence of wealth upon happy partnership.

A simple example of their iconography (Plate 5) shows their smiling expression. Moreover, the two rebus-reading attributes, *ho* 荷 lotus, and *ho* 盒 box, indicate their names without the need of written characters. But such a simple representation is rarely met, and this idea of the *entente cordiale* is too abstract for Chinese popular taste in pictures intentionally crowded with the greatest number of attributes that space allows in order that poor folk may enjoy as many blessings as possible for the farthing price of a picture. And so the Ho Ho formula, though varied in many ways, is always translated in terms of money: "Harmony and Union bearing Wealth," "Harmony and Union offering Valuables, piling them up and helping to grow rich," etc. Even when not expressly mentioned, financial satisfaction is always implied: "Harmony and Union—as you like it," "Harmony and Union—all things to your satisfaction." But

by far the most frequent symbolic combination is that of money and valuables. The Ho Ho are shown standing on a floor strewn with such things, they offer money in their hands and so on. The picture may be complicated (cf. Plate 6 A) by the box held by one of the Genii. This box is half-opened and from it issues a cloud full of every symbol of riches, gold and silver ingots, pearls, jade, coins, etc., all pouring down into a basket or pan in a glowing mass. The complexity may not stop even there; for often a similar cloud issues from the mouth of another greedy presentment called a coin-dragon. In addition to coins and ingots the Ho Ho may bestow other symbols of happiness. For instance, a bat and a *shou* 壽 character, meaning long life, may be found and read rebus-like as " happiness and longevity ", thus granting whatever may be desired. The bat stands as a symbol for happiness because the word for it, *fu* 蝠, is a homophone of the word for happiness 福.

It is perhaps necessary to explain some of the symbols commonly portrayed in most of the pictures representing the cult of the God of Wealth. The " jewel-collecting pan " without doubt has its origin in some more abstract notion, and many legends are current concerning an ancient origin, but the following story was obtained in answer to questions among Chinese at the present day.

" A man of Nanking was fishing in the Yang-tzŭ River when a rough-looking pot was drawn into the net. ' Well,' said the fisherman, ' I shall use it for my dog's food.' And he gave his dog food from the pot. A strange thing happened—the food never came to an end. The fisherman's wife, coming out to see the marvel, bent over the pot and a hairpin fell in. In a moment the pot was full of golden pins. They then threw in cash and every valuable they possessed with the same result, whereupon they washed the pot and set it in the best room and began to collect money in it. They not only grew richer and richer themselves but also used the pot to help other people who came to marvel at the miracle, for which reason they were given the title ' Living Wealth Gods '."

Other strange though common symbols are the " precious horse " and the " coin-dragon ". The horse is laden with a bowl of rich jewels, and its origin may perhaps be allied with the Buddhist symbol of a horse, or more particularly that horse which carried the precious books brought back from India by the famous pilgrim Hsüan Chuang. Thus the simple expression " precious horse ", implying " book-treasure-bringing horse " has been rendered literally as a " horse with valuables ",

referring to coins and other things more tangible than the Buddhist books.

As to the " coin-dragon ", it is represented as a living chain of strung coins having all the animation of the dragon proper. I do not know the origin of the symbol, but I am inclined to suspect that manipulation of the half-learned *literati* who, knowing the common association of the symbolical word for Heaven, *ch'ien* 乾, with its implied meaning of dragon, conceived the idea of combining the two in rebus form, and thus, instead of " Heavenly Dragon " or " Hidden Dragon " as is read in the first line of the *I Ching* 易 經, Book of Changes, they read " Coin-Dragon ". True, there is a story in a seventh-century historical document explaining the coin-dragon as a fifth-century superstition, but I doubt if this can supplant or even improve upon the hypothesis just stated.

The story says that one day an emperor of the Liang dynasty saw a great black snake coiled up with smaller snakes around it. His attendant ladies were wont to worship a black snake which they called a Coin-Dragon, referring no doubt to its elastic rings. They thought that this must be one of the same species. " So they took," says the story, " copper coins in thousands and threw them over the snake to repress its evil influence." Thus it would seem that at that period the coin-dragon had no auspicious significance.

The idea of wealth in both ancient and modern China is peculiar in that it is frequently combined with the desire for high official rank. The oppressed people, seeing how rapidly and inevitably the holding of an official position was followed by the acquisition of a fortune, regarded the two as inseparable. Hence the combination of words, *fu kuei* 富 貴 wealth and rank—an expression of very ancient origin—which explains a large number of pictures representing a strange variety of good wishes for rank and honour. Of course in old China, which was at once both autocratic and democratic, the way to official honours was always open, through the medium of the literary examinations, to the whole nation, excepting only a few classes regarded as unworthy. Thus, as even the peasants could by this means attain wealth and honour without having inherited either, popular pictures deal extensively with the subject. Many formulæ of these good wishes exist, some mere repetitions like " Brilliant fame, wealth and rank " *Jung hua fu kuei* 榮 華 富 貴, whilst others include further wishes, such as " Long life, wealth and rank " *Ch'ang ming fu kuei* 長 命 富 貴.

The use of amulets of great variety illustrates the general tendency to outspokenness in wishing oneself good luck: "Shop opened; great luck: each and everything entirely prosperous." Or, to add to the inscription an enigmatic aspect and so concentrate the attention upon it, it might be written in fanciful style combining several characters into one compact form. The inscription in Plate 10 which is so arranged reads: "Attracting wealth; importing valuables," the reverse being a parallel to this: "Yellow gold a myriad taels." Still more outspoken is the inscription found on some pictures: "Buy the picture and grow rich," which I believe to be the pith of the whole cult.

Now, as to the religious cultivation of Ts'ai Shên, an inquiry into the features of his temples forms no part of this lecture, but some of the parallel stanzas to be seen there show the rigid way in which the half-learned people treat the deity:

"Upright and just, he holds the power of wealth;
Sage, lucid, he bestows luck and happiness."

"For the growth of wealth there is a great path.
Hundreds of fortunes—from heaven they grow."

"He is the fount of all the world's wealth and bestows on us luck and joy.
He grasps the myriads' source of fortune, ever blessing us with full abundance."

The competence of the God being such, he is cultivated, as later illustrations will prove, with an outspokenness as complete as his power over money.

Another method of treating the God merits perhaps a brief introduction. Confucian teaching propounded a theory which had more than two millennia of success. With the example before him of the founding of the Chou Dynasty in which he himself lived, Confucius demonstrated the ideal state. An ideal dynasty, says the Confucian school, must be prepared by the enlightened virtue of an individual possessing all the characteristics and qualifications of the ideal ruler and finding his inspiration in some authoritative classic which discusses human rulers and human fortunes. Thus will be founded the ideal dynasty that shall profit the founder's son, to whose lot it will fall to strike the fatal blow against the vicious ruler no longer permitted by Heaven to rule the empire.

This dualistic conception of the two-fold nature of good rule has been stereotyped by common minds as well as by the common practice of governments into the division of civil and military offices, prominence being given naturally to the former in accordance with Confucian ideals. But later history, the facts of which have never been other than a mockery of Confucian ideals, gives ample evidence that the military element has always been kinder than the civil, which most frequently consisted in sheer and atrocious exploitation. The next step was taken with the deification of brave generals such as Kuan Yü 關羽, and thus in the heavens the distinction between the two was but a fanciful one, and moreover both are regarded as auspicious to the special needs of their worshippers when the separation into civil and military gods of wealth is made. In order that the distinction between them might be kept clear some artificial classification of the worshippers was necessary. Thus booksellers honour the civil Ts'ai Shên while blacksmiths, cutters of every kind, and all manual trades worship the military God, the latter being as has already been suggested, none other than the deified Kuan Yü.

Before closing this lecture we must give expression to the wealth-mania in its fullest extent. This may be done by the translation of some couplets over a picture which it is not necessary to show here :—

" Money is a good fellow, round and square alternately. He will run everywhere. Have you money ? Then be glad. Without money no step can be taken. How difficult ! With ten-thousand in your pocket try hard and you may attain to any nobility, any rank. Such things are handed down from generation to generation. The rich eat and drink what they like from finest dishes with music and song, but the poor man wears his dirty shirt all his life. If you have money, fear not to go wherever you like, even to Yünnan or Kueichou. The years pass until you have a good fortune. Then you buy rank and a button for your cap and you dress in excellent furs. Then you pack up your wealth, hire satellites, armed with foreign pistols, and return home. Everyone comes to congratulate you on becoming a Ts'ai Sh'ên, and to admire you. To sum up, all other words and things are useless. The best is money—I say it most emphatically."

Such statements are generally received with prolonged pleasure, and simple folk are especially fond of pictures bearing the formula : " Truly a living Ts'ai Shên comes to our house " written in nine characters each composed of nine strokes, 眞是活財神來到

恒 家 (see Plate 24), and they like to fill in with ink one of these strokes every day through the eighty-one days of winter cold.

But it would be unjust to leave the subject thus. There are good and bad people in China as elsewhere, and it must not be imagined that this thirst for wealth, however marked it may be, is common to all the Chinese. No! There are people in China who despise the money-seekers, and think it their duty to caution others against that blinding vice, and who therefore spend their money on printing pamphlets which express quite different ideas on human life and its aim. In conclusion I will translate one such pamphlet :—

" The next vice [after others previously enumerated] is a passion for the venerable brother of copper, which is square inside and round outside. No matter to what class they belong, men are happy only when they have money. Look at a child! Small though he be, his eyes, when he sees a coin, are red with passion. Every house welcomes money. People smile pleasantly ; but a sword is hidden in the smile and sticks are prepared, ready to whistle through the air. A greedy mob of brigands stands by to wrest away your gains. Is there a single man in the world who realizes how deadly is the poison of money ? Then why let your heart be entangled by the hurtful thing ? Be advised then, you who have lofty aspirations, and do not run after money. Think a little of your future life ! "

The translation of a satirical pamphlet may be added :—

" The whole day he hurries about his business. Then he feels hungry. Having eaten enough he thinks of his dress. Now he has eaten enough and is well dressed. But he is not satisfied. He wants a pretty girl in the house. One is not enough, so he takes several. No, he is not pleased : there is neither chair nor carriage to wait for him. Now there are chairs and carriages and horses in plenty. But there is not enough land to bring in an adequate income. Land is bought. No—he lacks social position. Well, he buys seventh, fifth, third, first rank . . . and now he is a minister of state. But no—he wants to be the Emperor himself. Now he is the Emperor, but he is still dissatisfied with his possessions. Immortality is his next aim. The absurd idea haunts him. And what then ? A coffin with a long cover. Take your sorrows with you and ' clear off '."

And here is the antithesis : the song of him who is content :—

" Happiness is all man desires. The pity is that people do not know how to be content with what they have. Think a little of others who toil continuously, which you do not. That should make you

happy. Others suffer, but you are free from ills. Others are anxious, but you are quiet. Others die, you live. Some are hungry and cold, but not you. Some must walk fast with their burdens while you stroll along at your leisure. Some are not married, but you are. There are others in prison, but you suffer no persecution. Some may be stupid, but you are wise, and so on. I say you must not weep over your apparent inferiority to others. Say, ' Oh ! How many are in worse case than I.' Step aside and think, and you will understand that your good luck is no further away than your own nose."

And now to conclude : I hope that this lecture may be accepted as ethnographical only, since my observations were addressed to persons with ethnographical interests, and the subjects of the pictures belong to the same class. This terrible longing for material happiness, first and last of human desires, far from being common to the whole Chinese people, is strongly opposed by the Chün Tzŭ 君子, the " gentlemen " of the Confucian teaching, who may still be found in China. They do not buy these pictures, therefore in order to get them explained I have always had to address myself to the simple-minded rustics who are the real admirers of them. " Wealth and honour unworthily obtained are to me as a fleeting cloud," says Confucius in his *Dialogues* 論語, comparing a poor disciple with others struggling for wealth. We might of course become ironical over the way in which Chinese officials, nominal followers of Confucius, treated this saying of their Master, but we cannot shut our eyes to the fact that a parallel exists in other countries where the ideal of poverty preached by the founders of religions is in no way realized by the self-styled followers of those doctrines.

The sinologist of ethnographical disposition would do well to seek some consistent facts so that he may make for himself a useful vocabulary, expressing not traditional explanations but real facts. If the religion of Ts'ai Shên be carefully studied with full documentary evidence, the very bed-rock of Chinese popular religion will become evident. Further study will prove that at heart it is a materialistic religion—a question much disputed by persons who have not studied the illuminating pictures which illustrate this lecture.