The Eight Infernal Generals: The Relationship Between Religious Practices and Health in Taiwan

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BACKGROUND

Religion plays a vital role in peoples’ perception of health, illness and life process including death. Religious factors, therefore, have similar impact on health as ethnic and cultural heritage. Practicing religious activities (prayer and attending religious services) that help alleviate health problems are a common social norm in Taiwan. In Taiwan, religious faith is polytheistic and is expressed and manifested by many forms and type of temple activities. One such activity is the “Eight Infernal Generals”, which is a popular religious practice and a major temple activity in Taiwan.

The Eight Infernal Generals

The Eight Infernal Generals were the eight bodyguards of the Great Emperors of the Five Blessings who are responsible for people’s health. Taiwanese believe that the Great Emperors of the Five Blessings have a strong power to clean and eradicate diseases from the Earth. Therefore, it is a common practice for people to hold temple activities and bring sculptures of the Great Emperors of the Five Blessings to each part of their hometown. A troupe would also pilgrimage to other cities and towns in order to expel disease.

The Great Emperors of the Five Blessings

In folk tales it is said that five scholars saw in a dream that the Jade Emperor had sent down the Plague Gods to poison people at the only local well in order to punish their misbehavior. The scholars decided to throw themselves in the well to warn people not to drink water from the well. The Jade Emperor forgave them and bestowed upon them the name The Great Emperors of Five Blessings to symbolize their devotion for protecting people from plaque.

While the Great Emperor of the Five Blessings is responsible for expelling disease from people’s hometowns, the Eight Infernal Generals have the responsibility of protecting the Great Emperors of the Five Blessings and for arresting the evil ones on the streets.

The White Dragon Shrine in Tainan (located in southwestern Taiwan) is the origin of the Eight Infernal Generals. People hold an activity in the temple called the Burning of the King Boat in June of the lunar calendar every year. People believe that the Great Emperors of the Five Blessings will collect the diseases from their hometown and put them in the King Boat, which is then burned to get rid of the diseases.

Followers
Followers of the folk belief paint the faces with the symbols of the Eight Infernal Generals

Pilgrim troupe
Each troupe consists of 13 members at most. Generals Fan, Xie, Gan and Liao and the Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter gods are the main body of the eight general troupes, which is why they are called the “Eight Infernal General Troupe.”