

THE CULT OF THE CHINESE GOD GUAN YU IN THE STUDIES  
 OF RUSSIAN SINOLOGISTS: FIELDWORK OBSERVATIONS,  
 APPROACHES, METHODOLOGY

EKATERINA ZAVIDOVSKAYA

Lead Research Fellow

Institute of China and Modern Asia, Russian Academy of Sciences

32, pr. Nakhimovsky, Moscow, 117997, Russian Federation

Associate Professor

Bryansk State University

14, ul. Bezhitskaya, Bryansk, 241036, Russian Federation

e-mail: katushaza@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The paper explores materials, methods and approaches used by Russian sinologists to define and analyse the cult of Guan Yu (also known as Guan-gong, Guan-di, etc.), a popular god of the Chinese pantheon, revered by Daoists, Buddhists and educated Confucians, and who was also granted a number of imperial titles. Guan Yu was worshipped in late imperial China as god of war and wealth, paragon of moral virtue and loyalty to the ruler. Published and unpublished materials by Russian scholars shed light on beliefs and practices related to Guan Yu and display an array of methods including translation of original Chinese sources, field observations, scrutiny of numerous written and oral sources as well as mythological motifs. The paper displays how various angles and approaches to the same subject – worship of Guan Yu – allow a multifaceted and wholesome vision of this god’s place in Chinese traditional culture.

KEYWORDS: Guan Yu • Chinese popular religion • fieldwork • legend • motif

INTRODUCTION

Guan Yu (160–219), a 3rd-century general, who was later deified and obtained among others titles Lord Guan (Guan-gong) and Emperor Guan (Guan-di) became one of the most popular gods in the Chinese pantheon, and was revered by Buddhists, Taoists, Confucian scholars and followers of various religious teachings. This paper chooses worship of Guan Yu by the Chinese as a subject that has been studied by sinologists in Russia from late 19th century up to the end of 20th century and delves into new facts and details of this well-studied area of Chinese religion, as well as looking at the methodology and materials used by Russian scholars. This paper will develop the existing research on this important popular Chinese god. The paper introduces studies on the worship of the deity by Russian sinologists Pavel Stepanovich Popov (1842–1913)

and Ippolit Gavrilovich Baranov (1886–1972), uncovers some previously unpublished materials from Vasiliy Mikhaylovich Alekseyev's (1881–1951) Chinese diary, held in the State Museum of the History of Religion (SMHR) in St Petersburg, and summarises the methods and approaches of Academic Boris L'vovich Riftin (1932–2012) in his study of Guan Yu.

#### EARLY STUDIES OF THE CULT OF GUAN YU IN RUSSIAN SINOLOGY: POPOV, IVANOVSKIY

Popov was one of the renowned Russian sinologists of the tsarist period, holding the position of associate professor at the Oriental faculty of St Petersburg Imperial University. Together with Archimandrite Palladiy he was co-author of the first Chinese–Russian dictionary, published in Beijing (Palladiy and Popov 1888). He published a brochure titled *The Chinese Pantheon* (1907), a translation of a work *Collection of Opinions to Clarify the Truth* by the ethnic Chinese Jesuit priest Huang Bolu (1875). Huang's original text represents a critical account of all the seminal deities of the Chinese Daoist pantheon (with only brief mention of Buddhist gods) extracted from a large number of Chinese written sources. After handing his own work over for publication Popov found that the work of Huang had been used by Charles de Harlez (1893). Popov also discovered that Harlez's study had many errors, which he has listed in the introduction. Popov's translation devoted two pages to Guan Yu, including the information that almost all of Qing (1644–1911) China was covered with Guan-di temples:

the Son of Heaven burns incense to him, government generals and rebellion leaders hoping to turn down the dynasty all pray to this god for protection and victory. Boxer rebels held banners with his name in 1900 during their marches to destroy foreigners [...] An address expressing Emperor's gratitude for his miraculous help to the imperial troops is published in the government's herald. (Popov 1907: 13)

Popov's work can be considered one of the earliest mentions of Guan Yu in Russian sinology.

Aleksey Osipovich (Iosifovich) Ivanovskiy (1863–1903) was another professor at St Peterburg University who taught the Manchu language and other courses after 1885. Between 1889 and 1891 he was dispatched to China on a research trip. In north-eastern China he collected large amount of ethnographic and linguistic material, including samples of the Solon and Dahurian languages. According to his field observations in Manchuria in 1891, plain folks in this area worshipped Guan Yu as the leader of nine spirits, therefore his temples in Manchuria were called temples of nine fathers, or temples of nine spirits. These spirits included Guan-gong, the Dragon King (*longwang*), the God of Fire (*huoshen*) with a red face, the Horse King (*maowang*) with four or six hands, the Ox King (*niuwang*), the Medicine King (*yaowang*), the Sprout King (*miaowang*) and the God of Wealth (*caishen*). Sometimes four more deities were added in the form of Bodhisattva Guanyin, and the Earth God (*Tudi*) with two accompanying deities the God of the Mountains (*shanshen*, with a black face) and the General of the Five Roads (*wudao*, with a white face). (The latter two gods wore military attire.) These scant details shed

light on local specifics of the nationwide practice of Guan Yu worship, as revealed in more detail in Alekseyev's materials.



Photo 1. Statue of Guan Yu (Popov 1907: Table II).

Riftin's paper "Legends About Guan-gong and the Worship of Guan-gong" (1993: 1) starts with mention of an early study by one of the founding fathers of Russian sinology, Alekseyev's *Chinese Gods of Wealth* (1928), which summarises Alekseyev's observations of this particular aspect of popular religion during his stays in China, 1907–1909 and 1912. Alekseyev's interest in Guan-gong may have sprung from the results of his expedition across north China in 1907 with French sinologist Édouard Chavannes (1865–1918), or alternatively the abundance of notes on this deity may have been a result of special attention before the expedition.

Alekseyev's keen eye quickly detected 'religious syncretism' characteristic of the worship of Guan Yu. Prasenjit Duara (1988: 780, 791) proposed the idea of the "superscription of symbols' implying a process in which some of the meanings derived from the myth understandably get lost, but by its very nature superscription does not erase other versions", therefore "the image of Guandi meant different things to different people, what he meant to other people also communicated itself in some degree to others". A recent monograph on the cult of Guan Yu's by Barend J. ter Haar (2017) follows the vein of Duara's discussion "tracing the regionally-specific vectors of Lord Guan's spread [...] He contrasts the gradual diffusion of the cult in North China with the flow of the cult along the arteries of official communication and military presence in the South." (Bonk 2018: 389)

As Alekseyev's successor, with a strong interest in Guan Yu, Riftin was well aware that the so-called Chinese diary represented by hand-written notes with commentaries in Chinese providing explanations of the realities observed by Alekseyev during his expedition across north China are housed at the State Museum of the History of Religion (SMHR) in St Petersburg. Some of these materials were studied and translated by Alekseyev's students in 1950s and included in *In Old China: Diaries of Travel in 1907* (Alekseyev 1958; extended version edited by Riftin in 2012). Hundreds of detailed notes explaining inscriptions on temples and other buildings, as well as various objects and images observed during the expedition, are placed in marked envelopes. In the cause of my project with the SMHR between 2017 and 2019 I gained access to these materials and came to the conclusion that Alekseyev obtained these written explanations from his Chinese tutors after his return from his expedition to Beijing in the autumn of 1907. These diverse notes contain over two dozen mentions of Guan Yu and indicate a proliferation of temples to him in Shandong, Shaanxi and Shanxi provinces, which probably has a direct correlation with the fact that Guan was a native of Shanxi. The following aspects of the cult of Guan Yu, as reflected in these notes, are worth attention.

#### *Information About Guan Yu's Titles and His Position in the Celestial Hierarchy*

Some notes from the Chinese diary indicate Guan Yu's origin in Shanxi province. For example note No. I89a says that Guan-di temple in Taian, Shandong province, had a wooden plaque with the words "Sage of Shanxi". Wooden plaques and paired inscriptions inside the temples, as a product of literati culture, often praise Guan Yu as a pillar of moral virtues, loyal to the ruler. For instance, the inscription on the horizontal

wooden board in Taian temple says: “Genuine energy *qi* of Heaven and Earth” (note No. I82c). The explanation of this phrase is written on the same note: “Emperor Guan is loyal to the Han house, he is not covetous of women, does not love property and wealth. Poor but with higher ideals. Will not be subdued by force, this is how heaven and earth beget righteousness.” Other notes explain which deities have received the title of the ‘sage’ (*sheng*) equal to that of Guan Yu:

Guan-gong is called a Military Sage, [and also] has the name ‘Shanxi man’. Sun Wu-zi<sup>1</sup> is also called a Military Sage, any brave warrior skilled in fighting worships them. Boyi, Yi Yin, Liuxia Hui, even Wen-wang and Wu-wang of Zhou are also called sages, there are those who worship them, [I] do not know which three of them. I have seen a Monastery of Three Sages [*Sanshengyan*], inside it there were three gods – Bodhisattva Samantabhadra [*Puxianpusa*], Manjushri [*Wenshupusa*], Avalokiteśvara [*Guanyinpusa*]. Seeing this I could not help being amazed. Later after checking Buddhist canon, I found the term ‘the Three Female Sages’ (*san nüsheng*), only after that did I feel relieved. (Note No. II176/2-II, III)

Note No. II203/3 provides information about Guan Yu’s position in the Daoist pantheon, the first one of paired phrases in the temple says: “Heaven and earth flow together”, being a quote from the classic work *Meng-zi* by Meng Ke: “High and low merge with Heaven and Earth in one flow”. This is a saying about the higher degree of deification. These words are used to praise Guan-gong, expressing the idea of merging with Heaven and Earth. The second of the paired phrases says:

Jade Emperor of the Middle Heaven’ [*zhongtian yudi*], Jade Emperor is called the Highest God of the Hao Heaven, and [Jade Emperor of the Middle Heaven] is a rank lower by one grade, also call him ‘the Second Jade Emperor’ [...] He may stand next to other gods in Heaven. (Note No. II203/3)

This kind of Guan Yu’s title could be a local peculiarity, since the title Jade Emperor of Middle Heaven is not among official titles bestowed upon Guan Yu. Note No. II192/2b mentions a temple of the Loyal Courageous Prince of Wu’an (*Yiyong wuan wang*). In 1187, Emperor Xiaozong honoured Guan Yu as the Flourishing Loyal Courageous Talented and Helpful Prince of Wu’an (*Zhuangmou Yiyong Wu’an Yingji*). During the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), Emperor Wenzong changed Guan Yu’s title to the Efficacious Loyal Courageous Talented and Helpful Prince of Wu’an (*Xianling Yiyong Wu’an Yingji*). The note says, that

this title was used for Wei Tuo,<sup>2</sup> his demon expelling battling stick is called so for its ability to subdue demons and bring peace to people. Ruling dynasties granted him [Guan Yu] a Duke’s title *gong*, Song’s Yue Fei was also given this title, in our times Guan-gong is called Great Emperor Subduing Demons [*Fumodadi*], I do not know the reason for that. Perhaps thanks to the assistance of the divine power of gods from the netherworld, demons do not dare to show up; in recent years the number of demons has become bigger.

In the last phrase we may find a certain irony from the author of the note. Guan Yu was granted the title of Almighty Earth Shaking Heavenly Worthy of Three Worlds Holy Emperor Lord Guan (*Sanjie shenwei yuanzhen tianzun guansheng dijun*) by Ming dynasty (1368–1644) Wanli Emperor in 1614.<sup>3</sup>

During the Ming and Qing periods “apart from his well-known role as the god of loyalty, Guandi becomes the god of wealth”, a role that “is associated with his patronage by the Daoists”, “for merchants trading in distant, unknown places, Guan Yu first inspired trust and loyalty (to contract) and gradually became the very source of wealth” (Duara 1988: 781–782). Note No. II93b says that

a common custom all over China is to see Guan-di as the God of Wealth. On the 26th day of each lunar month each shop burns incense, makes bows and prays for protection and flourishing trade. After the Boxer Rebellion of *gengzi* year [1900] this tendency declined a little. People still have the habit of seeing him as the god of wealth. I did not find any record that the state had granted him this title.

Note No. II173/9 tries to explain why Guan Yu is worshipped as the God of Wealth: “I suppose the hidden meaning is that he has miraculous power to protect the country and its people”, “even if I have not seen any evidence of his divine power, I don’t see anything bad in people from the shops worshipping him for protection”.

#### *Fortune Telling and Spirit Medium Planchette Texts by Guan Yu*

Fortune telling as a part of divination with sticks gives an explanation of each divination through marks on a stick. A set of sticks believed to be of Guan Yu’s authorship was called the Miraculous Sticks of Holy Emperor Lord Guan (*guansheng dijun lingqian*). Other deities of the popular pantheon (such as Bodhisattva Guanyin) have similar sets of explanatory notes associated with them. Tossing divination blocks, picking up a divination stick and reading a prognostication slip have been important attributes of Guan Yu temples since imperial times.

Note No. I215/2 provides an explanation of these “sincere miraculous sticks”, saying:

All the poetic lines of these explanatory notes are rather obscure, their words are ambiguous and can be understood either this or that way: one hundred people read [such a] poem and they may have one hundred explanations. People coming with pleas value the miraculous sticks of Guan-di the most [...] It is possible to make sense of them. Because of this, any person picking a divination stick and not seeing a miraculous response [from the god], would not make guesses about its meaning if they were unable to understand the meaning [of the slip]. They do not dare to say that the stick is without miraculous power, instead they say that their prayers were not sincere enough, therefore there is no response.

Guan Yu’s set of divination sticks consists of one hundred sticks with prognostication slips that are believed to be the result of a spirit medium writing session.

One of the notes from Alekseyev’s Chinese diary contains information about the text resulting from a spirit medium planchette writing session (*fuji, fuluan*). Note No. I220/1 mentions such a text called “Newly Ascended Text Cautioning against Impending Disasters by Holy Emperor Lord Guan” (*Guansheng dijun xinjiang jingshiwen*), explaining:

This type of text is [made by] *fuluan* after inviting a god [to descend from heaven], it is written by [a person] holding a spirit writing pen, the phrases in this text are vulgar and plain, obviously they are not written by the ancient one. People concerned about profit and official salary deeply believe in it. While Wen-chang<sup>4</sup> [in his planchette writing texts] preaches that we should cherish paper with characters on it and makes texts cautioning the literati, Guan-di warns against lecherous songs and similar sort of things. *Xiucan* [degree holders] and others making merit-making books<sup>5</sup> [*shanshu*] always write this sort of text with washed hands and with much reverence, in the same manner as writing characters when practicing calligraphy [*zitie*]. [They may] cherish a hope that [if] their text is widely circulated, the god will give [you] wellbeing and an official salary, [you] may aspire to pass exams and join the path of the official.

Alekseyev's (1966: 133) book *Chinese Popular Prints: The Spiritual Life of Old China* mentions that popular prints have reflected how pictures devoted to Guan Yu were a result of spiritism and were believed to bring peace and prosperity. They often contained an image of bamboo as a symbol of high moral standards and were associated with Guan Yu.

Concerning planchette writing practices, Vincent Goosaert (2015: 85) points out that "an unprecedented number of such anthologies were published during the eighteenth century [...] All of these anthologies prominently feature scriptures revealed by the Daoist saints and gods Wenchang, Lüzu, and Guan-di." He also mentions (ibid.: 94) the extant Qianlong period (1735–1796) Guan-di morality book *The Full book of Saint Guan the Emperor*.<sup>6</sup> Ichiko Shiga discovered early editions of the merit-making books produced using the *fuluan* method, which originated in Sichuan and Yunnan provinces. Among them the first woodblock edition of *Map of the Return to [Original] Nature*<sup>7</sup> was produced in Yunnan (1856). Different editions of the book were copied numerous times and circulated across the entire country. The original text included rhymed and prosaic sections and was considered too lengthy, so it was allowed to be abridged as a result of divination and "asking for god's permission" (Shiga 2020: 343). According to Philip Clart (2003: 162), the spirit writing sessions used a stylus, replacing the instrument called the *luan* bird, which "vanished and upon praying to Heaven. The Divine Lord Guan provided them the stylus, the shape of which resembles that of the *luan* bird, as a substitute".

I have not been able to trace any information concerning the above-mentioned "Newly Ascended Text Cautioning against Impending Disasters by Holy Emperor Lord Guan", but it should be noted that the number of *fuluan* texts grew to impressive numbers at the turn of the 20th century along with the rise of various sects and redemptive societies.

#### *Local Peculiarities of the Guan Yu Cult*

Alekseyev's travel notes reveal local peculiarities of Guan Yu worship observed across north China. Alekseyev visited the Guanlin, or 'Guan forest', temple near Luoyang in Henan prefecture, which was believed to be the place where Guan Yu's head was buried. Note No. I220/1 says:

There is a stele in Guanlin, at the top of which a statement says that it is a burial hill of Guan-di. To note, Guan Yu kept hold of Jingzhou. He was killed by the people of Wu [kingdom], his land was cut from Henan, in this place there is another tomb. I do not know if that is true. In our days people plant a lot of pine and cypress trees on this tomb, which have grown into a forest, [therefore] the burial ground is called 'forest'.

Note No. I220/5 has a description of the temple hall:

There is a book scroll on the table in front of the god, weapon to the right, because during his lifetime he liked reading *The Spring and Autumn Annals*,<sup>8</sup> he also liked dancing with the crescent shaped knife with a long shaft [people call it the spring and autumn knife]; two people are attending next to him. [The two statues] with a black face and a white face are Zhou Cang and Guan Ping, who hold a book by Confucius and a pen respectively. The person next to them holding a pen is making records. To note, Zhou Cang and Guan Ping are two generals subordinate to Guan-gong. Since they are holding a book and a pen, it must be a civil Guan-di [*wenguan-di*]. If it were a military Guan-di [*wuguan-di*], Zhou Cang and Guan Ping would hold a knife and a sword. Outside the hall are four young grooms, three civil and one military. The civil Guan-di is not supposed to have too many military attendants. But holding his horse requires a warrior. The sculptor made the statue this way because he was driven by desire for personal gain.

Note No. I220/4 provides interesting details on the Temple of Double Guan-di (*Shuang-guan-di miao*) with statues of two Guan Yu:

Two gods sit next to each other, one in civil attire, the other in military attire. There are two buckets with divination sticks next to each of them. Outside the hall there is a holy horse for each of the gods, and each has statues of Guan Ping and Zhou Cang next to them. Before the abolition of the state exam system, those who wanted to try either of the paths [in civil service], those who went to the capital for exams, and literati liked to pray at the temple of the civil Guan-di while people from the army liked praying at the temple of the military Guan-di. The person who created these statues had an idea that Guan-gong could read *The Spring and Autumn Annals* and *The Art of War* and could fight bravely for a just cause in the military field. Guan-di was talented both in civil and military arts and so one statue could be enough. Unfortunately, people do not find it comfortable, civil and military officials cannot get along, each of them only considers their own business and [they] worship anything with the appearance of a god or demon. To meet the sincere needs of the visitors to the temple, two statues were erected. Those who see them do not find it strange, they consider it reasonable to have two statues. In front of this temple stands Guan-di in civil attire. At the back there is Guan-di in military attire. The statues are not sitting together, but still the idea is that [they sit alongside each other].

These notes from Alekseyev's expedition with Chavannes show the importance of the ambivalent nature of Guan Yu in the eyes of the local officials and gentry, showing Guan Yu's status as a military god of wealth who was worshipped by merchants and shop owners. Guan Yu was among the gods depicted in so-called pantheon paper



icons,<sup>9</sup> which were very popular in the Beijing area. Alekseyev (1928: 3–4) mentions various associations related to Guan Yu:

Another instance of this curious and illogical association is the cult of Kuan Ti, 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.

Further, Alekseyev comments on the emergence of civil and military wealth gods, saying that the civil Ts'ai Shên is worshipped by blacksmiths, while manual trades worship the military god (the same deified Kuan Yü) (ibid.: 9).

To sum up, Alekseyev was one of the pioneers of fieldwork in China, whose broad scope of interest and solid basis in Chinese classics allowed him to draw far-reaching conclusions about the syncretic nature of Guan Yu among the wide population of the late Qing and early Republican periods. Some observations about Guan Yu's role as a god of wealth resonate with Baranov's fieldwork results from north-eastern parts of Republican China.

#### BARANOV

Baranov, a Russian sinologist, lived and worked in Harbin for almost half a century. He published a lot on popular religion and deities in China in *The Herald of Manchuria* (*Vestnik Man'chzhurii*), a periodical for Russian emigrants, in the 1920s and 1930s. In his publication titled *In the Chinese Temples of Ashihe*<sup>10</sup> (1926), Baranov provided a detailed account of what can be learned about Chinese popular religion in the local temples. Notably, the town of Ashihe had two temples to Guan Yu: the Eastern Temple of the Old Master (*donglaoye miao*) and the Western Temple of the Old Master (*xilaoye miao*). Baranov also mentions that this god was particularly honoured during the Ming and Qing dynasties and that therefore his temples were seen as temples that protected the state – *huguosi* (Baranov 1999: 147). The hall of the temple devoted to Guan-di also has a statue of his loyal general Zhou Cang with a statue of a dragon next to him. Baranov mentions that the walls inside this hall are covered with paintings depicting Guan Yu, including scenes from literary works featuring this god (ibid.: 153). In another short publication, *The Chinese New Year*, Baranov (1999 [1927]: 65) expresses an opinion similar to Alekseyev's. He bases his conclusions on observations of paper icons of a wealth god, where “*Caishen* [god of wealth] is often combined with the image of Guan-di, a god of war and wealth. Only the shops make prayers in front of such paired images”. Notably, in Baranov's case the civil god of wealth is not called civil Guan-di.

#### RIFTIN'S STUDY OF GUAN YU: MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Academic Riftin's unique approach to the cult of Guan Yu sprang from his research into visual and textual (written and oral) representations of the Ming novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*<sup>11</sup> and Guan Yu as one of its leading protagonists. Unlike the majority of scholars of Chinese religion, who are historians or anthropologists by training, Riftin, as an expert in philology, folklore and literature studied Guan Yu as a deity via novels,

and vernacular and oral literature. His articles and monographs address the interconnections of the written novel and storytelling, as well as written and oral episodes from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (Riftin 1970; 1997a). Riftin's doctoral dissertation was published in 1970 as the monograph *Historical Romance and Folklore Traditions in China: Oral and Literary Versions of "The Romance of the Three Kingdoms"* (for the Chinese translation see Riftin 1997a). According to Vibeke Børdahl's review, this is a comparative analysis of written and oral (or oral-derived) sources. The written sources include the *History of the Three Kingdoms*,<sup>12</sup> the popularised 14th century version the *Folk Book of the History of the Three Kingdoms*<sup>13</sup> and the 14th century novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong in various transformations. Børdahl (1998: 197) adds:

Other genres close to oral tradition and performance, such as legend and drama, are also taken into consideration. As for the oral sources, focus is on the storytelling genre (*pinghua*)<sup>14</sup> of the twentieth century, i.e. the author bases his writing on published editions of stories told by storytellers of the Three Kingdoms who performed them in China in the 1950s and early 1960s.

After this monograph Riftin shifted focus to Guan Yu as the protagonist of oral tales, legends, dramas and visual images. His work present a profound discussion of various legends and vernacular literary pieces related to the biography of this warrior, which maintained a separate oral tradition of narrating about Guan Yu. Gaining access to new mainland Chinese materials addressing oral tales and legends about Guan Yu allowed Riftin to systematise these narratives using a theoretical framework proposed by Soviet folklorists and literary theorists. Close study of the *Hero of a Fairy Tale: Origins of an Image* by Eleazar Moiseyevich Meletinskiy (2005), *Morphology of the Fairy Tale* by Vladimir Yakovlevich Propp (1998 [1928]), and *The Folk Heroic Tale* by Viktor Maksimovich Zhirmunskiy (1962) provided Riftin with a theoretical framework to systematise types of motif in vernacular literature featuring Guan Yu, the most important of which are listed below.

#### *Folklore Motifs about Guan Yu*

Riftin's book *Legends about Guan-gong and the Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (1997b), includes the above-mentioned article "Legends about Guan-gong and Worship of Guan-gong", originally published as part of conference proceedings (Riftin 1993) and seminal for understanding Riftin's approach to the cult of Guan Yu. Upon checking large amounts of writing by the Chinese literati, Riftin found that members of the educated elite rarely wrote anything on Guan Yu in their essays and literary sketches (*biji xiaoshuo*). This fact points to the larger importance of this hero for the less educated part of China's population, specifically merchants and peasants. Yet, a recent study by ter Haar (2017: 19) shows "abundant evidence about the way in which educated people refashioned the deity and numerous accounts of their memories of different forms of divine intervention".

Riftin's study (1993) contains interesting analysis of the legends of Guan Yu's birth. He points out that legends about the birth of a hero usually appear later than legends or epic tales about the hero's deeds, followed by an epic biography of the hero. The same

logic is applicable to Guan Yu despite him being a historical figure. Based on collections of folk tales and legends about Guan Yu published in mainland China starting from 1980s Riftin concludes that Guan Yu's birth has been associated with the fire dragon, which explains worship of Guan Yu as a God of Fire (*Huoxingjun*). Other types of motif related to Guan Yu's birth are Birth from Blood (T.541.1, Thompson 1955–1958) and the Blood of the Dragon (B11.2.13). The Birth from Blood motif can be found in the folklore of Greece and the Tinguang people of the Philippines. According to Bacil Kirtley's *A Motif-Index of Traditional Polynesian Narratives* (1971) motif T.541.1 is also widely present in the folklore of the Pacific region. The Blood of the Dragon motif is less widespread than Birth from Blood (Riftin 1993: 5). Based on a number of records, Riftin concludes that these local oral narratives have preserved only scant traces of the archaic mythical motif of the miraculous child born after the intercourse between a woman and a dragon. In some folk tales Guan Yu's unusual birth is connected with the Buddhist monk. Popular prints showing pantheons of gods collected by Alekseyev on Putuoshan island, the centre of Chinese Buddhism, show Guan Yu depicted together with Buddhas. Next to Guan Yu Confucius is portrayed holding a patra, meaning that they are both depicted as Buddhist deities (ibid.: 7). Apart from the above discussed legends connected to motifs of epic poetry, another type of narration, this time about Guan Yu's miraculous deeds, was called temple legends. These started emerging together with the formation of the cult of Guan Yu around the Sui (518–618) and Tang (618–907) dynasties (ibid.: 14). Their typology and structure differ from more archaic oral narrations of the above-discussed type.

#### *Visual Representations of Guan Yu*

Another aspect studied by Riftin in great detail was images and visual representations of Guan Yu in books illustrations, woodblock prints, temple epigraphy, etc. His long paper in Chinese, "Preliminary Findings on Images of Guan Yu", was included in the collection of Riftin's studies on Guan Yu published in Taiwan (Riftin 1997b: 93–167). This study, based on unique material, analyses images of Guan Yu starting from the Song woodblock prints (the earliest known woodblock print produced in Shanxi is housed at the State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg) to popular prints of the early 20th century. Riftin lists the following types of image of Guan Yu: 1) temple sculpture; 2) book illustration in woodblock editions of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, *pinghua* tales, drama; 3) temple murals; 4) printed editions of religious literature; 5) paper icons, *zhima*,<sup>15</sup> which were burned after worshipping a deity; 6) popular woodblock prints, called *nianhua*.<sup>16</sup> Scrutiny of the earliest extant illustrated editions of *The Three Kingdoms* narratives allowed Riftin to conclude that Guan Yu images from the Yuan dynasty edition *Fully Illustrated Folk Book of the History of the Three Kingdoms*<sup>17</sup> shows the hero on horseback with a Green Dragon knife (*qinglongdao*), although in scenes of daily life he is depicted without weaponry, standing (sometimes sitting) behind Liu Bei's. Illustrated editions of the Ming novel *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*<sup>18</sup> have similar types of image, although the composition is different from the *pinghua* edition: 1) Guan Yu is shown in battle scenes defeating enemy generals; 2) he is shown on horseback in the midst of battle; 3) he is shown as a secondary character watching the battle.

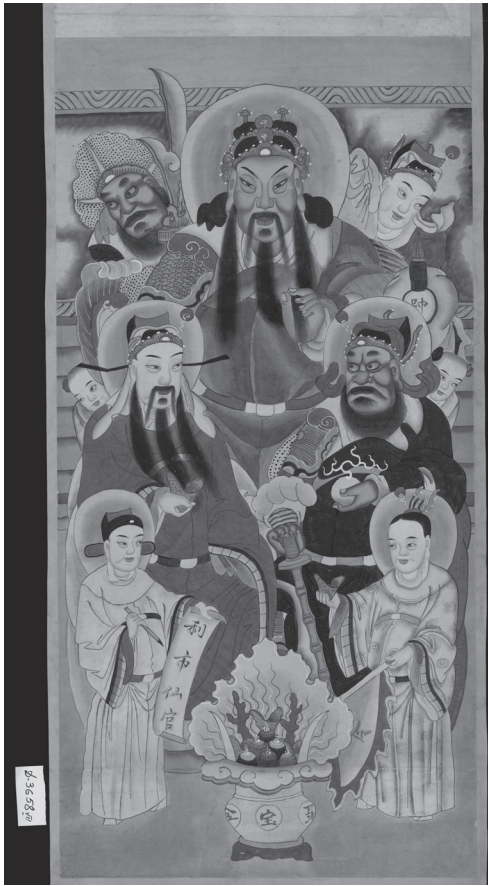


Photo 2. Icon with Guan Yu and other gods of wealth. SMHR, No. D-3658-VII.

Riftin's life-long interest in Chinese popular woodblock prints allowed him to trace connections between *The Romance of Thee Kingdoms* and visual representations of episodes and heroes from the book in woodblock prints. According to his observations, there are more than 500 types of popular print showing scenes from the Three Kingdoms novel in private collections and museums across the world. The Three Kingdoms' heroes were more widely received than heroes of any other novel. Another large study by Riftin (1999) matches popular prints from collections all over the world to each chapter of *The Romance of Three Kingdoms* displaying its tremendous popularity (Riftin 1999). Importantly, the majority of these images are theatrical scene prints (*xichunianhua*) displaying scenes from the plays based in The Three Kingdom's narratives. The earliest of these popular prints were produced in the 17th and 18th centuries, including both ordinary narrative prints illustrating a scene from a novel, and theatrical popular prints showing the same scene as it had been staged. The overwhelming number of prints with Guan Yu are theatrical, proving that drama played a crucial role in establishing Guan Yu's popularity among the wider public.

Paper icons and other religious prints depicting Guan Yu are closer to the subject of this study. Riftin's discussion of this type of religious image is based mainly on the pieces from SMHR in St Petersburg, which holds an impressive number of coarse paper icons (*zhima*) and large coloured icons depicting Guan Yu as a member of the popular pantheon. For instance, icon No. D-3658-VII (Photo 2) serves as an illustration of Guan Yu's role as an important figure sitting in the top row, his generals Guan Ping and Zhou Cang behind him. Below are two gods of wealth, one military and one civil. The military god of wealth, with a dark face, is probably the Zhou dynasty (1046–256 BC) Daoist alchemist Zhao Ming-gong (also worshipped as a military god of wealth) holding a shining pearl and a weapon. Below are two gods in charge of market profit. Remarkably, Guan Yu presides over the other two gods of wealth, making up a sort of trinity.

Riftin's study takes a close look at the paper icons housed at SMHR, showing the presence of a considerable number of icons printed for the worship of Guan Yu on certain days of the year. Print No. D-3385-VII (Photo 3) can be taken as an example of portray-

ing Guan Yu as an emperor, the plank above his head giving his full official title, God of Loyalty Assisting Military Spirit Awe-Inspiring Benevolence and Courage Protector of State and People Sincere Pacifier and Helper Divine Great Emperor of Proclaimed Virtue (*Zhongyishen wuling youren yongweixian huguo baomin jingcheng suijingyi xuande guansheng dajun*), pointing to the fact that he was also widely revered as a paragon of loyalty, not just as a military god of wealth. He is wearing an imperial hat and robe and holding an imperial scepter, a *gui*, with generals Guan Ping and Zhou Cang on either side of a table with candles and offerings to the god.



Photo 3. Paper icon. SMHR, No. D-3385-VII.

## CONCLUSION

The paper focused on one of the most important gods from the Chinese popular pantheon, Guan Yu, originally a third century general who was given official titles by emperors starting in the Song dynasty. Guan Yu was widely worshipped by officials, military men, merchants and peasants in his different incarnations across late imperial China. This study accumulated the most noteworthy results of research related to this deity conducted by the Russian sinologists between the late 19th century and the end of the 20th century, the main contributions coming from academics Alekseyev and Rifting. They not only collected immense amounts of first-hand material and field data, but also provided ground-breaking analysis. Guan Yu's cult was both acknowledged and supported by the state, and also became an important part of popular culture thanks to legends, novels, plays and prints.

## NOTES

1 Sun Wu-zi or Sun Wu (4th century BC) was the author of the military classic the *Art of War* (*Sunzi bingfa*).

2 Wei Tuo (Sanskrit Skanda) was a guardian of Buddhist monasteries and protector of the teaching of Buddhism.

3 Note No. I40 mentions that a small monastery for subduing demons (*Fumoyan*) worshiped Guan Yu: "Guan-di often assists state soldiers, kills bandits from the White Lotus Rebellion, was given the title of Great Emperor Subduing Demons (*Fumodadi*) during the Jiaqing years [1796–1820]". The information that the title was given during those years is erroneous, yet the relationship between Guan Yu and the White Lotus Rebellion (1796–1802) is worth attention.

4 Wen-chang, the patron of literacy, the literati and those who take official exams.

5 Merit-making or morality books (*quanshu*, *shanshu*) were a widely circulating genre of literature in imperial China advocating moral virtues and postulating retribution for misdeeds.

6 *Guansheng dijun quanshu*, compiled by Peng Shaosheng and prefaced in 1772. It has not been republished and the author of this paper is not informed of its location.

7 *Fanxingtu*, believed to be authored by Guan Yu. The author of this paper is not informed of current whereabouts of its first edition.

8 *Chunqiu* by Confucius (Kong-zi).

9 Pantheon paper icons (*baifenr*), a type of votive paper icon (*zhima*) depicting a set of almost all Daoist and Buddhist gods sitting in several rows, were produced using woodblock printing on coarse cheap rice paper, sometimes with added hand coloring. They were part of worship and offerings to gods on certain dates and were burned upon completion of worship.

10 Ashihe is a river in contemporary Heilongjiang province as well as the name of a town close to Harbin.

11 *Sanguo yanyi* by Luo Guanzhong (circa 1330–1400) belonged to the early Ming period, it is considered to be one of the most renowned classical Chinese novels.

12 *Sanguo zhi*, written in the 3rd century by Chen Shou, is a historical account of the Three Kingdom period (220–280 AC).

13 *San guozhi pinghua* was a Yuan dynasty work in the *pinghua* folk tale genre based on Chen Shou's *History of the Three Kingdoms*.

14 *Pinghua*, literally 'a simple tale', a Chinese folk tale genre that originated in the Tang and Song dynasties.

15 *Zhima*, a woodblock print icon of one or several gods of the Chinese popular pantheon.

16 *Nianhua*, 'New Year pictures', also termed *mubanhua* 'woodblock picture' is a type of popular woodblock print picture. It has an auspicious meaning and was hung on domestic walls or doors during Lunar New Year and replaced each year.

17 The unique early illustrated edition of *Quanxiang sanguozhi pinghua* is stored in the National Library of Japan's Cabinet Library.

18 *Sanguozhi tongsu yanyi*, the earliest edition of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* by Luo Guanzhong, is dated to the Ming Jiajing era (1507–1567). It is different to the more widespread version of this novel, which has 120 chapters annotated by Mao Zonggang (1632–1709).

## SOURCES

Archive of the State Museum of the History of Religion (SMHR). Fund 45 (V. M. Alekseyev), inventory No. 1, files No. 1–21. Expedition material, 1907–1909.

Chinese Diary: Notes:

No. I40

No. I82c

No. I89a

No. I220/1

No. I220/4

No. I220/5

No. I215/2

No. II93b

No. III173/9

No. III176/2-II

No. III176/2-III

No. III192/2b

No. II203/3

Paper Icons:

No. D-3385-VII

No. D-3658-VII

## REFERENCES

Alekseyev, Vasilij Mikhaylovich. 1928. = Alexiev, Basil M. 1928. *Chinese Gods of Wealth: A Lecture Delivered at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, on 26th March 1926*. Hertford: London School of Oriental Studies; China Society.

Alekseyev, Vasilij Mikhaylovich. 1958. *V starom Kitaye: Dnevnik putestestviya 1907 g.* Moskva: Izdatelstvo Vostochnaya literatura. [Алексеев, Василий Михайлович. 1958. *В старом Китае: Дневники путешествия 1907 г.* Москва: Издательство Восточная литература.]

Alekseyev, Vasilij Mikhaylovich. 2012. *V starom Kitaye*, edited by Boris L'vovich Riftin. Moskva: Vostochnaya literatura. [Алексеев, Василий Михайлович. 2012. *В старом Китае*, отв. ред. Борис Львович Рифтин. Москва: Восточная литература.]

Alekseyev, Vasilij Mikhaylovich. 1966. *Kitayskaya narodnaya kartina: dukhovnaya zhizn' starogo Kitaya*. Moskva: Nauka. [Алексеев, Василий Михайлович. 1966. *Китайская народная картина: духовная жизнь старого Китая*. Москва: Наука.]

- Baranov, Ippolit Gavrilovitch. 1926. *Po kitayskim khramam Ashikke*. Harbin: Tipografiya Kitaysko-yustochnoy zheleznoy dorogi. [Баранов, Ипполит Гаврилович. 1926. *По китайским храмам Ашикэ*. Харбин: Типография Китайской восточной железной дороги.]
- Baranov, Ippolit Gavrilovitch. 1999 [1927]. *Kitayskiy novyy god*. Kharbin. [Баранов, Ипполит Гаврилович. 1999 [1927]. *Китайский новый год*. Харбин.]
- Bonk, James. 2018. Book Review: *Guan Yu: The Religious Life of a Failed Hero* by Barend J. ter Haar. – *Journal of Religion and Violence* 6 (3): 388–391. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5840/jrv20186361>.
- Børdahl, Vibeke. 1998. Book Review: *Sanguoyanyi yu minjian wenxue chuanton* by Li Fuqing (Boris Riftin). – *Chinese Literature: Essays, Articles, Reviews (CLEAR)* 20: 197–201. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/495272>.
- Clart, Philip. 2003. Moral Mediums: Spirit-Writing and the Cultural Construction of Chinese Spirit-Mediumship. – *Ethnologies* 25 (1): 153–189. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/007129ar>.
- Duara, Prasenjit. 1988. Superscribing Symbols: The Myth of Guandi, Chinese God of War. – *The Journal of Asian Studies* 47 (4): 778–795. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2057852>.
- ter Haar, Barend J. 2017. *Guan Yu: The Religious Afterlife of a Failed Hero*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- de Harlez, Charles. 1893. “Shen-Sien-Shu” *Le Livre des esprits et des immortals: Essai de mythologie chinoise d’après les textes originaux. Mémoires de l’Académie royale des sciences, des lettres et des beaux-arts de Belgique* 51. Bruxelles: F. Hayez. <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/276425#page/233/mode/1up> (accessed February 14, 2023).
- Goossaert, Vincent. 2015. Spirit-Writing, Canonization and the Rise of Divine Saviors: Wenchang, Lüzu, and Guandi, 1700–1858. – *Late Imperial China* 36 (2): 82–125. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/late.2015.0007> (accessed February 14, 2023).
- Huang Bolu. 1875. *Jishuo quanzhen*. Shanghai: Shanghai Ciumutang.
- Kirtley, Bacil F. 1971. *A Motif-Index of Traditional Polynesian Narratives*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai’i Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvp2n3hb>.
- Meletinskiy, Eleazar Moiseyevich. 2005. *Geroy volshebnoy skazki: proiskhozhdeniye obraza*. Moskva: Tsentr gumanitarnykh initsiativ. [Мелетинский, Елеазар Моисеевич. 2005. *Герой волшебной сказки: происхождение образа*. Москва: Центр гуманитарных инициатив.]
- Palladiy (Petr Ivanovich Kafarov) and Pavel Stepanovich Popov. 1888. *Kitaysko-russikiy slovar* 1–2. Pekin: Tunven’ ven’guan’. [Палладий (Петр Иванович Кафаров), Павел Степанович Попов. 1888. *Китайско-русский словарь* 1–2. Пекин: Тунвэнь вэньгуань.]
- Popov, Pavel Stepanovich. 1907. *Kitayskiy panteon. Sbornik Muzeya po antropologii i etnografii* 6. Sankt-Peterburg: Tipografiya imperatorskoy akademii nauk. [Попов, Павел Степанович. 1907. *Китайский пантеон. Сборник Музея по антропологии и этнографии* 6. Санкт-Петербург: Типография императорской академии наук.] [https://lib.kunstkamera.ru/files/lib/mae\\_eas\\_vi/mae\\_eas\\_vi.pdf](https://lib.kunstkamera.ru/files/lib/mae_eas_vi/mae_eas_vi.pdf) (accessed March 3, 2022).
- Propp, Vladimir Yakovlevich. 1998 [1928]. *Morfologiya volshebnoy skazki*. Moskva: Labirint. [Пропп, Владимир Яковлевич. 1998 [1928]. *Морфология волшебной сказки*. Москва: Лабиринт.]
- Riftin, Boris L’vovich. 1970. *Istoricheskaya eropeya i fol’klornaya traditsiya v Kitaye (Ustnyye i knizhnyye versii “Trojetsarstviya”)*. Moskva: Nauka. [Рифтин, Борис Львович. 1970. *Историческая эпопея и фольклорная традиция в Китае (Устные и книжные версии «Троецарствия»)*. Москва: Наука.]
- Riftin, Boris Liovich. 1993. *Guangong chuanshuo yu guangong chongbai*. – *Minjian xinyang yu zhongguo wenhua guoji yantaohui*. Taipei: Hanxue yanjiu zhongxi, 1–19.
- Riftin, Boris L’vovich. 1997a. *Sanguo yanji yu minjian wenxue chuantong*, transl. by Yin Xikan and Tian Dawe. Shanghai: Shanghai gujichubanshe.
- Riftin, Boris L’vovich. 1997b. *Guangong chuanshuo yu sanguoyanyi*. Taipei: Hanzhong wenhua.
- Riftin, Boris L’vovich. 1999. *Sanguo gushi nianhua tulu (shang, xia)*. – *Lishiwenwu* 11: 32–50; 12: 5–22.



- Shiga, Ichiko. 2020. Qingmo minchu yuexidiqu de shantang: jiantan shijiu shiji mo shuyi liuxing yu jiuquejing de guangsan. – “Fuluan wenhua yu minzhong zongjiao” guoji xueshu yantaohui, *Foguangdaxue*: 339–370.
- Thompson, Stith. 1955–1958. *Motif-index of Folk-literature: A Classification of Narrative Elements in Folktales, Ballads, Myths, Fables, Medieval Romances, Exempla, Fabliaux, Jest-books, and Local Legends*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Zhirmunskiy, Viktor Maksimovich. 1962. *Narodnyy geroicheskiy epos*. Moskva: Goslitizdat. [Жирмунский, Виктор Максимович. 1962. *Народный героический эпос*. Москва: Гослитиздат.]