

Zhong kui, the keeper
of hearth and home:
japanese myth with
buddhist
philosophy ...



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Mystery is what the entire Japanese culture is veiled with for a European or American gaze. Intertwining with the peculiar philosophy, the local mythology can make one's head spin – this is true even for connoisseurs of Japanese mythology and culture.

Due to the religion reigning in the Land of the Rising Sun, namely, Buddhism, the local beliefs and superstitions take the most curious shapes, giving birth to the most mysterious and unusual creatures. Zhong Kui, the Demon Queller, or Shoki, as foreigners call this creature, is the keeper of the hearth and home in Japan and one of the most picturesque characters of Japanese legends.

Casting a glance at the work by Gong Kai, Zhong Kui Traveling, one can see the peculiar way the ancient legend is intertwined with just as old philosophy and religion of Japan, Buddhism. Due to the specific Buddhist settings in the background, the picture looks ever more expressive and filled with the spirit of mystery and magic.

However, these two elements are not as incompatible as it might seem. The character taken from the ancient Japanese legends, Zhong Kui can be labeled as a mythological creature, yet he is an element of the Japanese beliefs as well. What is the most incredible is that the fairy-tale character does not come into conflict with the Buddhist ideas – it turns out that the two elements of the Japanese culture can peacefully coexist.

One of the most intriguing and mysterious in its Japanese way artwork depicting the Demon Queller, Zhong Kui Traveling by Gong Kai creates one of the most peculiar visions of the mythological character, intertwining

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Zhong Kui with Buddhist religion. Though these two elements might seem somewhat incompatible, it turns out that the philosophy underlying the both creates completely incredible mixture, all shot through with the Japanese folklore vision of the world:

Shōki typically appears as a portly bewhiskered man. He wears scholar's robes, a hat, and heavy knee-high boots and carries a large sword. His large eyes, bulbous nose, and fierce expression are also characteristic features. In this print Shōki rounds a corner in hot pursuit of a demon. His eyes bulge out as he spies his prey.[1]

Zhong Kui seems to be quite popular among other scholars – there have been a number of studies devoted to this specimen of Japanese mythology. Treated rather like a spirit with a character of its own, Shoki, or Zhong Kui, has gained great popularity with those admiring Chinese culture. As Richard Von Glahn explained,

“ Zhong Kui was a popular motif in literati painting during the Song and subsequent dynasties”[2]. However, Von Glahn also mentions that the common idea of Zhong Kui's image is quite different from the one depicted in the numerous paintings. Thus, h warns, it would be a mistake to consider Zhong Kui as “ an alter ego of the neglected and despised scholar”[3].

On the contrary, Con Glahn claims that the image of Zhong Kui must have been more imposing, and even threatening, since he was the hunter for evil spirits. However, the spirit was not considered to be a boo for the Japanese, since the latter used to honor this creature as the protector of their home.

Defending the place from all kinds of evil spirits and guarding the peace in Japanese houses, this was rather a talisman for the local people:

The use of images of Zhong Kui as protective talismans to guard the home against demonic invasion recalls the legend that Huangdi had portraits made of his fearsome lieutenant Chiyou in order to intimidate criminals and instill a proper fear of the law.[4]

It is also worth noticing that the image of Shoki is closely connected to the ideas of Buddhism, which a number of scholars have already proved.

Because of the interconnection between the Japanese mythology and belief system, their art is filled with spirituality and all kinds of religious allusions. Gong Kai's piece of art is no exception – Zhong Kui's image and the ideas of Buddhism merge in the picture; in fact, Zhong Kui becomes Buddhism itself, embodying the spiritual values of the Japanese people and filling the picture with the sacred sense.

Buddhism as a belief takes its roots so deep that even the wisest cannot trace its origins. However, the core idea of Buddhist religion is as mystic as its origins. Embodying the very essence of Buddhist, Zhong Kui can be the path to cognizing the complicated yet filled with wisdom Japanese religion. It is peculiar that even the way he sits is close to Buddha's pose taken to reach the state of nirvana:

Taking a closer look at what the philosophy of Buddhism is for the Japanese people, one realizes that the picture of Gong Kai is breathing with the ideas

of Buddhism and that Zhong Kui impersonates the essence of Buddhism – in fact, in the given picture he can be even compared to Buddha himself.

Thus, Eliot claims that the shapes that the religion took in Japan could be called rather patriarchal. With help of religion, the Japanese managed to maintain the existing structure of society for an endless number of decades! According to Eliot, this was rather natural process in Japan:

In Japan, there has survived the old pagan spirit (pagan for want of a better word and in no sense a reproach) which identifies religion with Government, with law, with family duties and festivities. They are identified in the strictest sense: religion does not regulate them: they are religion.[5]

Taking a closer look at the picture, one can see the typically patriarchal features in it, with the caste system which has obviously come from India into the Japanese culture. Thus, it can be concluded that the picture also provides another missing link between the Indian and Japanese cultures. Indeed, the crowd that surrounds Zhong Kui and carries him towards the light of cognition reminds of the Indian processions led by the rajah.

Another trait that connects the image of Zhong Kui to Buddhism and the Buddhist theories is the calm and peaceful atmosphere that surrounds the procession. Despite the agitation caused by the presence of the Demon Queller, there is certain air of Buddhist meditations. According to Alldritt, “ he performs a Taoist dance to chase off ghosts who are hesitant to go back to the world of darkness”[6].

What also must be noted is the specific way in which Shoki and the demons around him are depicted. In spite of the fact that one might be surprised with the lack of palette tints, the cast of colors which the painter used can be explained rather easily.

Because of the fact that the Japanese art was subject to the influence from the other countries, the Japanese artists were trying to preserve their national identity as far as they could, which resulted in the typical Japanese palette, the tints of yellowish with the strokes of black on the sandy surface. Famous for their minimalism in art, namely in painting, the Japanese artists could maintain the balance between the valuable ideas which the West brought to them and the national identity which they were so eager to preserve.

This predetermined the use of such palette which could reprint the Buddhist idea of the world, with the careful observation of the world and thoughtful and fruitful meditations. With help of the peculiar philosophy of theirs, the Japanese people managed to keep the most peculiar features of their philosophy intact and safe from the influence of Europe.

All shot through with the idea of caste differentiation, the picture of Shoki speaks of the Japanese society with its huge number of social ranks and layers. Explaining the core idea of the Japanese caste differentiation, Gillman helps to clarify the details of the picture by Gong Kai: “Nonetheless, as in China, Japan wasn’t immune from attacks by the native on the foreign”[7]. It is worth noticing that the paintings depicting the Demon Queller and his

miraculous work gained most popularity during the reign of the Yuan Dynasty, as Little claims:

The Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) has been described as “ the greatest epoch of Zhong Kui representation”, 147 and while this might be disputed were there more surviving examples of Zhong Kui paintings from the Tang, Five Dynasties, and Song periods, it is true that some of the finest known depictions of the Demon Queller are from the Yuan period.[8]

It is quite peculiar to see the way culture changes under the influence of the adopted religious beliefs. Being Chinese religion, Buddhism, intertwining with the Japanese vision of the world, gained the traditional Japanese minimalism shade. As Jordan emphasizes, it was namely the Chinese influence that affected the Japanese manner of depicting religious issues:

Throughout Japan’s medieval era, many family-centered schools, such as the Takuma, altered their styles under the influence of Chinese Chan (Zen) Buddhism and Began to paint in the fashionable monochrome ink style.[9]

Another aspect which is worth paying attention to is the opposition “ man vs. nature” which the Japanese philosophy has always been engaged with.

Considered as “ a magical control of and defense against evil”[10], this spirit is the child of the Japanese Buddhism. It is worth noticing that Zhong Kui is positioned neither by the painter, nor by the mythology as the creature attacking the evil spirits – on the contrary, the Devil Queller remains calm until demons start playing their tricks. What Zhong Kui does is protecting, not attack, which is truly Buddhist concept. In the picture, the Demon Queller bends the demons to his will, yet he does not harm them.

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Filled with the air of Japanese refinement and the ancient myths, the picture makes one plunge into the depth of the mythology and philosophy of Japan, the country of mystery and legends. With help of the peculiar Buddhism setting the picture becomes even more expressive and at the same time mysterious.

Creating the cultural and mythological background for the character, the Buddhist ideas add specific flair of safety, grandeur and solemnity to the picture. There is no doubt that Gong Kai created a piece which reprints the peculiarities of Japanese culture like no picture ever did.

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