

The Gods in Goal: An Examination of the Deities Enshrined in Imperial Prisons of the Qing Dynasty

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Abstract

The Prison God temple was a distinctive feature of imperial China. At all levels of government from the capital to the county, anywhere with a jail, there was a temple within to be worshipped by prisoners and jailers. The worship of the prison god was part of the official imperial system of cults. The Prison god was often the sole deity available for the inmates to pray to. Some confessed their (true) crimes and sought absolution; some prayed for fair or better treatment behind bars; and some longed for a quick imperial pardon. Those suffering from wrongful convictions might pray for eventual exoneration. Religious belief and legal justice were intertwined in this sacred space.

This paper details the establishment of several temples in the Imperial prison during the Qing period and traces the worldly identities of the temples' principle deities. They included three major figures. First is Gao Yao, the Minister for Law of the legendary sage-king Shun who was regarded as the primogenitor of the criminal justice system in China, and worshipped statewide as the conventional Prison God. Second is Ašitu, a Manchu warden who released prisoners on a one-day parole to allow them to rejoin their families on the New Year's Eve. He committed suicide when one of the paroled prisoners failed to return by the deadline. He was later

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enshrined as a caring guardian to protect the inmates. Third is Yang Jisheng, a Ming royal courtier who was framed, imprisoned, and tortured in the Imperial Prison, and eventually executed publicly. Yang was later promoted as the embodiment of royalty, and several shrines were erected to commemorate him.

These three shrines in the Central Prison symbolically encapsulated various memories, both individual and collective, of the praying prisoners, supervising jailers, and the caring deities. By exploring personal writings, official documents, and stele inscriptions, this paper argues that, while these shrines were all built in the prison of the Ministry of Justice, the deities enshrined in each did not all play the same roles as the Prison gods. They were worshipped and treated differently by both the jailers and prisoners.

Keywords: Prison God, Prison of the Justice Board, Gaoyao, Ašitu, Yang Jisheng