

origins of kiln gods by Martie Geiger-Ho

Though the ritual may vary, the practice of making offerings to the kiln gods in the hopes that they will help produce a good firing goes way, way back.

Kiln gods—that's what potters in the US call mythological guardians that supposedly bring good luck to kiln firings. In China, which has a rich history of kiln god worship and origin myths, the general term for kiln gods is *Yao Shen*, which can either translate to mean roughly the same thing, or depending on how one views and relates to kiln gods, this term can be carried beyond a simple description and imbued with a far greater significance. In Hong Kong and China, the term Yao Shen also carries with it centuries of historical significance because the Chinese practice of worshipping kiln gods is part of a religious system known as popular folk religion.

Unlike kiln gods made in the US, which exist only as generalized concepts that are interpreted according to the potter's individual wishes, most of the kiln gods of Chinese origin are identified as individual deities with specific histories and mythologies that help

to establish them as belonging to a certain town or region. Chinese kiln gods are generally called upon to protect the potters and the ceramics industry of a designated region where they originated, and where they still might be worshipped in their own temples and shrines. In the US, anyone can whip up a kiln god from a lump of wet clay and ritually place it on top of the kiln, but in China, there are guidelines for honoring kiln gods and there are temple committees for overseeing the running of community temples and shrines devoted to these gods.

One of the greatest differences that I have noticed between the veneration of kiln gods in China and notions about their function in the US is the capricious manner in which American kiln gods are fashioned and placed on kilns whenever a person feels like doing so. Unlike the ceremonial scheduling of festival dates for the community worship of Chinese kiln gods, potters in the US usually offer the gods of the firing little votive-like figures whenever a kiln is loaded and fired. In China, if a person wants to communicate with the kiln god, they can visit the temple at any time and pray to the deity with the burning of incense and the placement of money in the collection box for the maintenance and support of the temple. Most temples also have a special incinerator that allows the worshipper to burn various types of paper offerings to both main and minor attendance deities.

Jingdezhen's Kiln God

Some of the well-known Chinese kiln-god myths include that of T'ung Bun, whose deified name, Feng Huo Hsein, translates into English to mean "Genius of the Fire Blast." In this myth, which dates back to at least the 1700's, T'ung Bun was deified after he immolated himself in a kiln firing in Jingdezhen. T'ung made this heroic and final sacrifice in order to make sure that all of the ceramic ware inside the kiln would come out perfectly so that his fellow workmen would meet their quota of porcelain products that the emperor and his eunuchs demanded, thus saving them from severe punishments. (T'ung may have actually fallen into the kiln as the result of a collapse while stoking.) After his death, T'ung's fellow workmen built a temple to him within the precincts of the government porcelain factory and worshipped him there under the title of Feng Huo Hsien.

Kiln Gods in Foshan, Hankou, and Zushan

In addition to the kilns at Jingdezhen, China had many other important pottery producing cities (including Foshan in Guangdong province, Hankou in Hunan province, and Zushan in Henan province). Most of them built their own kiln-god temples. These temples often chose the emperor deities, Shun, Laoqun, and Lei Gong as their protectors.



Fire god of the south Wind Region, commissioned by Master Mei Wending. Nanfeng Ancient Kiln Factory, Shiwan, Guangdong Province.

Shun was a legendary emperor in the distant past. It is said that Shun made pottery on the riverbank, and that he invented earthenware. So of course these associations would make a good candidate for a master pottery god.

Lao Zi was the founding father of Daoism (Taoism). Daoist priests were adept at alchemy, which is why they were masterful at controlling fire. The Daoist Priest Master Li Laoqun, who created the “Eight Diagrams (Bagua) Furnace,” was made a furnace god, or kiln god because of his enormous talents for controlling fire.

Lei Gong was the god of thunder and was closely connected to the phenomena of storms. Because firing techniques were limited in ancient times, their failure or success was often connected to the natural elements. Kiln workers consecrated Lei Gong as a kiln god in the hope of courting his benevolent side.

In addition to Shun Wang, Li Laoqun, and Lei Gong, four other smaller gods were often placed near the kiln. These were the mountain god, the earth god, the cow-king god, and the horse-king god. All four of these gods were necessary for the production of ceramics in some way.

Pottery Master Gods

A number of gods are associated with pottery making in general. According to local legend, Fan Tai Sin Tze, a deity adopted by ancient Hong Kong potters for the protection of their trade, represents three brothers, Fan Yat-long, Fan Yi-long, and Fan San-long, who were all deified for their shared discovery of how to make ceramic ware, which replaced the wooden bowls that had previously been in use. The god Ning Fengzi has several myths associated with him. One states that before he was deified, Ning Fengzi was the chief potter to the great Emperor Huang Di (also known as the Yellow Emperor) and the official in charge of all affairs related to its production. Ning Fengzi was superior in his kiln-firing skills and his artistry was among the very best. One day he was firing the kiln when a stranger passed by and offered to help him. Ning Fengzi agreed to let the stranger help him. The man turned out to be highly skilled and he worked incredibly hard. His firing gave off a smoke of five colors, and when the kiln was opened, the work inside was many times finer than anything Ning Fengzi had previously produced. He was astonished by the knowledge of the passerby and he learned many things from this man, whom he proclaimed to be a master potter.

Ning Fengzhi also helped Huang Di to save his kingdom when he gave wise advice to the emperor on how to defeat an enemy. For all that he had accomplished for the emperor, he made Ning Fengzi one of the “Five Mountain Fathers-in-law.” When this happened, Ning Fengzi was given control over the one hundred gods of Sichuan’s Five Mountains.

Another version of Ning Fengzi’s mythology states that he had been roasting food in his cave and noticed that a lump of mud had fallen into the fire and had become extremely hard. He realized the connection between the heating of the clay and its final outcome as a lump of fired clay, and thus he invented pottery. Soon after he



Fan Sin Kung Pottery God altar. Pottery production prospered in the region of what is now Hong Kong in the middle of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911 CE).

became a master of the craft. Emperor Huang Di noticed his fine work and made him chief of pottery. One day, when Ning Fengzi was firing pottery and he climbed to the top of the kiln’s roof where he planned to drop in more wood through the firing ports, it collapsed and he was buried in the glowing depths of the fire pit. The people who had witnessed this terrible event said that after he had been engulfed by the flames, the smoke from his body then rose from the kiln, and he became immortal. This is how Ning Fengzi became a pottery god and was deified as “Ning Fengzi Zhenren.”

The emergence of pottery came at a time when humanity’s struggle with nature was at a turning point, because the Chinese culture had entered into an age of invention and creativity. People wanted to express their gratitude for these new gifts, and so they conjured up patron deities. Ning Fengzi was a character from a legend, and the invention of pottery cannot be wholly credited to him. However, in stories, he represents the drive and wisdom of people that built the foundation for today’s arts and inventions.

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