

The "Descent" and "Ascent" of the Goddess: A Comparative Study of the Evolution of the Images of Hanba and the Queen Mother of the West

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Abstract. Both Hanba and the Queen Mother of the West appear in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, both are female deities, yet the trajectories of their image evolution are diametrically opposed. Hanba descended from the Yellow Emperor's "heavenly maiden" to become a drought demon and a zombie, following a downward path of continuous stigmatization, the Queen Mother of the West, on the other hand, rose from a ferocious deity with a "leopard's tail and tiger's teeth" to become the leader of the female immortals, completing an upward path of continuous sanctification. Through a mirror-image comparison, this paper reveals that the differences between the two are not coincidental but are rooted in the selective shaping of female deities by patriarchal culture—those unable to be co-opted by the mainstream ideology are often demonized, while those acceptable to religious and philosophical systems are idealized and sanctified. These two evolutionary paths collectively reflect profound shifts in ancient China's views on nature, natural disasters, and gender.

Keywords: Hanba, Queen Mother of the West, Iconographic Transformation, Goddess Studies, Gender and Mythology

1. Introduction

Hanba and the Queen Mother of the West are two indispensable figures in the study of Chinese mythology. *The Classic of Mountains and Seas: The Great Wilderness North* records that Hanba "wore blue robes" [1] and assisted the Yellow Emperor in stopping the rain and slaying Chiyu, *the Classic of Mountains and Seas: The Western Mountains** describes the Queen Mother of the West as having "a leopard's tail, a tiger's teeth, and a powerful howl" [1], and as the ruler of disasters, calamities, and capital punishment. Both are female deities, both originate from *the Classic of Mountains and Seas*, and both possess awe-inspiring divine powers—yet over the course of more than two thousand years of cultural evolution, their fates have taken two diametrically opposed paths.

Existing research has examined the Hanba and the Queen Mother of the West in considerable detail. Sun Guojiang outlined the evolution of the Hanba from a pre-Qin celestial maiden to a Ming and Qing dynasty zombie, Gao Zimei revealed the role of the Hanba in Han dynasty shamanic

rituals through tomb murals depicting "a tiger devouring a female Hanba" [2], Regarding research on the Queen Mother of the West, scholars have noted that her divine image underwent a transformation from priestess to tribal chieftain and finally to a beautiful goddess [3]. However, comparative studies analyzing both figures within a unified framework remain scarce. This paper attempts a preliminary exploration in this direction, aiming to offer a comparative perspective for the study of ancient Chinese goddesses. This transformation, however, did not take place in isolation. From the pre-Qin to the Han dynasties, the rise of Confucian ethics and yin-yang Five Element thought reshaped the mythological landscape, subjecting ancient deities to selective screening according to shifting social needs. This paper adopts this socio-cultural context as its basic premise.

2. Same origin, different paths: the primitive images of the Hanba and the Queen Mother of the West in the Pre-Qin period

The Classic of Mountains and Seas: The Great Wilderness of the North records: "There was a person dressed in blue, named Ba, the daughter of the Yellow Emperor. When Chiyou raised an army to attack the Yellow Emperor, the Yellow Emperor ordered Yinglong to attack him in the plains of Jizhou. Yinglong gathered water, while Chiyou summoned the Lord of Wind and the Master of Rain, unleashing a great storm. The Yellow Emperor then sent down a heavenly maiden named Ba, and the rain ceased, he subsequently slew Chiyou. Ba was forbidden to return to heaven, and wherever she dwelled, there was no rain." [1] Here, Hanba is depicted as a celestial maiden dressed in blue who, summoned by the Yellow Emperor, halted the wind and rain to help him secure victory. The account that she "could not return to heaven" after the battle also makes her one of the few deities in mythology who remained stranded on earth while carrying out a mission, the drought caused by her divine power led to her gradual transformation in subsequent folk narratives.

As can be seen from the above accounts, the most fundamental difference between Hanba and the Queen Mother of the West lies in their respective roles. Hanba serves a utilitarian function: she is "summoned" by the Yellow Emperor to stop the rain, and once her task is complete, she loses her reason for existence. The description that Hanba could no longer return to heaven is akin to that of a servant who, having fulfilled her mission, was cast aside. The Queen Mother of the West, on the other hand, holds a sovereign role, she is herself the chief deity presiding over calamities, plagues, and capital punishment, and does not need to be subordinate to any male deity.

Some scholars have pointed out that "among the ancient, time-honored deities, 'gui' (ghosts) are female, while 'shen' (gods) are male." The Mountain Ghost, Hanba, and even the Queen Mother of the West "can also be referred to as 'gui'" [4]. However, the seeds of their divergent fates were already sown in the Pre-Qin period: instrumental goddesses were prone to being forgotten or stigmatized, while sovereign goddesses were more likely to be co-opted and elevated. The Hanba's function was singular and carried negative connotations—limited to causing drought—whereas the Queen Mother of the West's role was vast and linked to more abstract concepts such as the West, capital punishment, and the Mandate of Heaven. The latter was clearly more conducive to subsequent cultural glorification.

Furthermore, the *Book of Songs* also contains a related record, in "The Milky Way" from *The Great Odes*, it reads: "The drought has become so severe that it has parched the mountains and rivers. The drought demon runs rampant, causing terror and scorching like fire." [5] Scholars have debated whether the drought spirit in *The Book of Songs* and the female divinity in *Classic of Mountains and Seas* were originally separate figures. This paper follows the view that these two traditions merged into the composite Hanba during the Han Dynasty. The *Mao Commentary*

explains: "Bà is the god of drought." While the *Classic of Mountains and Seas* still preserves a positive narrative of Hanba assisting the Yellow Emperor in slaying Chiyou, Hanba in the *Book of Songs* appears as a personified symbol of drought. Therefore, in pre-Qin texts, Hanba's association with calamities and portents had already become apparent. In contrast, the Queen Mother of the West did not exhibit a similar trend toward simplification or negative portrayal in pre-Qin texts. On the contrary, in the *Chronicles of King Mu*, she already appears as a "tribal chieftain," marking the beginning of her transformation from a "monster" to a "human sovereign."

3. The beginning of a divergence: the separation of two evolutionary paths during the Han dynasty

The Han dynasties marked a pivotal period in the deterioration of the Hanba's image. The *Classic of Divine Wonders* (Shenyi Jing), a work falsely attributed to Dongfang Shuo during the Wei and Jin dynasties, describes the Hanba as "two or three chi tall, bare-chested, with eyes on top of her head, and moving as swiftly as the wind" [6]. From a celestial maiden "clad in blue robes" to a monster that is "bare-chested" and has "eyes on top of her head," her appearance was thoroughly "alienated" and "demonized". As Sun Guojiang points out, the pre-Qin worship of nature deities gradually declined during the Han dynasty, the divine aspect of the Hanba was rejected, her feminine identity was called into question, and her image consequently took on a more malevolent form [7]. The negative evolution of the Hanba's image—from a deity to a ghost and then to a zombie—occurred primarily after the Han dynasty and was not fully established until the Ming and Qing periods [7].

Han Dynasty tomb murals provide compelling visual evidence of this. A category of murals, exemplified by the "Divine Tiger Devouring the Female Hanba" mural in Western Han Tomb No. 61 at Shaogou, Luoyang, primarily depicts three figures: the drought deity Hanba, a divine tiger with two wings, and a bear standing upright. Some scholars believe that the bear (Fangxiangshi) commands the divine tiger to devour Hanba, and this imagery may correspond to the shamanic rituals of the Han people [2]. Here, Hanba is no longer an object of worship but rather one to be expelled and devoured, having fallen from the divine altar to the sacrificial altar below.

The Han dynasty was also a pivotal period for the rise of the image of the Queen Mother of the West. In the *Inner Biography of Emperor Wu of Han*, the Queen Mother of the West is portrayed as a divine female figure of radiant dignity and grace. Some scholars have pointed out that the evolution of the Queen Mother of the West's image followed a trajectory from "a priestess wearing a mask to sacrifice to malevolent spirits in the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*, to a tribal chieftain skilled in song and dance in the *Chronicles of King Mu*, and finally to a beautiful goddess in classical texts from the Qin and Han dynasties onward" [3]. In Han Dynasty stone reliefs, the image of the Queen Mother of the West had already "moved away from that of a divine figure wearing a victory cap and evolved into the image of an ordinary woman with a high bun" [3]. Elite rewriting was not the only factor. Mass-scale folk worship of the Queen Mother of the West in Han society reflected popular demands for blessings and disaster relief, laying the social ground for her shift from an ominous to an auspicious goddess.

It is evident that the "elevation" of the Queen Mother of the West involved a threefold transformation: from a "malevolent deity" to a "benevolent deity," shifting from a bringer of calamities to a bestower of blessings, from a "monster" to a "beauty," with her beast-like features gradually stripped away, and from a "regional deity" to a "national deity," rising from a deity of the West to become the head of the female immortals in the entire Daoist pantheon. These three transformations all began during the Han dynasties and were completed in later periods [8, 9].

This process of transformation was inextricably linked to the cultural context of the Han dynasties, characterized by beliefs in calamities and omens as well as the study of prophecies and esoteric texts. Theories of natural disasters and omens flourished during the Han dynasties, and concepts such as the correspondence between Heaven and humanity, as well as Yin-Yang and the Five Elements, profoundly influenced people's understanding of natural disasters. The stigmatization of Hanba was closely tied to this intellectual backdrop, droughts were interpreted as warnings from Heaven regarding moral failings in human affairs or as the mischief of ghosts and spirits, and Hanba, as the personified deity of drought, bore the brunt of this blame. At the same time, the study of oracles and prophecies, along with the trend toward the historicization of mythology, provided the Queen Mother of the West with an opportunity to be incorporated into the orthodox discourse system. Although both fall within the discursive framework of calamities and auspicious omens, the key difference lies in how each relates to "calamity". Hanba is inherently the embodiment of drought, "Bà" literally means "drought deity," and she is inextricably bound to the symbolic position of "calamity". It was later selective cultural reinterpretation, rather than her original functions per se, that amplified her auspicious features and ultimately brought about her divine ascent. Gradually endowed with positive attributes such as bestowing blessings, granting longevity, and overseeing the elixir of immortality, she transformed from a symbol of 'disaster' into a symbol of 'auspicious omens' [3, 9]. Thus, while Hanba was ostracized due to her association with "disaster," the Queen Mother of the West was elevated because of her association with "auspicious signs" (immortals and omens of good fortune). Within the same cultural mechanism, two diametrically opposed outcomes emerged. Besides the ideological constraints of patriarchal culture, grassroots folk beliefs, the inherent functional differences of the two goddesses themselves, and the historical context of disaster responses also participated in shaping their images.

4. The path to maturity: the final realization of two images from the Wei and Jin dynasties to the Ming and Qing dynasties

From the Wei and Jin dynasties through the Song and Yuan periods, the image of the "Hanba" underwent further literary and folkloric transformations. Supernatural fiction from the Wei and Jin dynasties exaggerated the Hanba's demonic and eerie characteristics. During the Song and Yuan periods, a belief emerged that a ghost-like child born to a woman was considered a Hanba. Zhu Yu's *Pingzhou Ketan* records a folk legend in which a woman gave birth to a ghost-like infant, commonly referred to by the people as a Hanba, in the late Ming dynasty, Zhou Lianggong's *Shuying* documents a barbaric custom prevalent during severe droughts in the Central Plains, where a rumor spread that a certain woman had given birth to a Hanba leading a crowd to douse the mother with water in an attempt to alleviate the drought—a practice that reflects the infiltration of mythological concepts into real-world violent customs [7, 10]. The stigmatization of the Hanba did not remain confined to textual representations but permeated acts of violence against real women—a classic example of how mythological concepts exert a tangible influence on social practices.

From the mid-Ming Dynasty onward, the Hanba gradually evolved into the image of a zombie, giving rise to the custom of "beating Hanba's skeletal stake." "Beating the Hanba" was a custom prevalent in northern regions during the Ming and Qing dynasties to ward off droughts, involving the desecration of graves and the destruction of corpses to pray for rain. During the Jiaqing reign of the Qing Dynasty, due to frequent incidents of grave desecration in which the corpses were falsely accused of being Hanba, the Qing court added supplementary provisions under the "Exhumation" section of the *Laws and Regulations of the Great Qing* to specifically punish such acts of grave desecration and corpse destruction. From "heavenly maiden" to "ugly woman" to "ghostly child"

and finally to "zombie," Hanba underwent a complete trajectory of "downward" stigmatization [7, 10].

In contrast to the Hanba's continuous demotion, the Queen Mother of the West continued her "ascension" after the Wei and Jin dynasties. Daoism portrayed her as a female immortal in charge of the elixir of immortality and ultimately established her status as the "leader of the female immortals." The theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements positioned her as the embodiment of "Yin" and created the King Father of the East as her counterpart, making her an indispensable part of the Yin-Yang cosmology [8, 9]. In folk belief, she was widely venerated by both official and popular sectors under the title "Queen Mother" [8].

The "elevation" of the Queen Mother of the West involved a key cultural mechanism: she gained legitimacy through continuous "theorization." Daoist religious theory and the philosophical theories of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements successively provided systematic justifications for her sacred status [8, 9]. In contrast, Hanba never received a similar theoretical framework, she was neither incorporated into the Daoist pantheon nor endowed with any positive philosophical significance, remaining confined to the realm of folk superstition.

The "demotion" of Hanba and the "elevation" of the Queen Mother of the West, along with the Queen Mother's aesthetic transformation from a "beast with a leopard's tail and a tiger's teeth" to a "beautiful immortal" [3, 8, 9], appear on the surface to be expressions of respect and elevation for female deities, but in reality, they implicitly reflect the dominant logic of patriarchy—on the surface, the Queen Mother of the West's transformation from a ferocious deity with "a leopard's tail and a tiger's teeth" to a gentle and beautiful immortal woman appears to be a beautification and elevation of the goddess's image, yet this process also implicitly carries the imaginative and disciplinary overtones of later mainstream culture regarding female imagery. Hanba, however, was completely discarded because she could not be transformed or co-opted. This reveals two fundamental strategies employed by patriarchal culture in the selective shaping of female deities. First, co-optation and exclusion. Female deities capable of being incorporated into the mainstream ideology (Daoism, the theory of Yin-Yang and the Five Elements, and state rituals) were "whitewashed" and granted exalted status, whereas female deities that could not be co-opted were stigmatized or even demonized. The Queen Mother of the West was co-opted by Daoism, her ferocious traits were aestheticized, and her role as a bringer of calamity was downplayed. Hanba, having been co-opted by no religious system, saw her association with disaster continually amplified. Second, aestheticization and demonization. The Queen Mother of the West's appearance gradually evolved from "a leopard's tail and a tiger's teeth" to that of a "beautiful immortal," undergoing a continuous process of aestheticization, Hanba's appearance gradually evolved from "clad in blue robes" to "bare-chested," "with eyes on top of her head," and "a zombie" [1, 6, 10], undergoing a continuous process of demonization. Both of these processes serve the same purpose: to incorporate female deities into the aesthetic and moral framework of patriarchy. Both textual trends could be read as attempts to fit goddesses into certain aesthetic and moral frameworks shaped by patriarchal values, though other social and folk-religious forces were simultaneously at work.

5. Conclusion

The transformation of the images of Hanba and the Queen Mother of the West forms a highly dramatic mirror image in the history of ancient Chinese goddesses. Hanba followed a "downward" path: from a celestial maiden to a drought demon to a zombie, her image steadily deteriorated until she ultimately became a figure to be banished and destroyed. The Queen Mother of the West, on the other hand, followed an "ascending" path: from a malevolent deity to a human monarch to a female

immortal, her image was continually idealized until she ultimately ascended to the pinnacle of Daoist goddesses.

These two diametrically opposed evolutionary paths show observable patterns that lend support to an interpretive hypothesis about how patriarchal societies may selectively reshape female deities. This pattern does not constitute proven historical causation. Function-specific, male-subordinate goddesses tightly bound to disaster show a higher tendency toward stigmatization and demonization in transmitted texts; goddesses with broader jurisdiction, independent divine standing, and compatibility with religious-philosophical systems tend to receive idealization and sanctification. This generalization derives from the two case studies in this paper and is not a universal law for all Chinese goddesses. Local folk cults could produce different developmental paths for female divinities. The "descent" of Hanba and the "ascension" of the Queen Mother of the West are, in fact, two sides of the same cultural mechanism: the former is the excluded "other," while the latter is the assimilated "one of us."

The theoretical significance of this comparative study lies in the fact that it not only fills an academic gap in the comparative study of Hanba and the Queen Mother of the West, but also reveals, from the perspective of gender politics, the long-neglected logic of power in the evolution of ancient Chinese mythology. The stories of Hanba and the Queen Mother of the West remind us that mythology is never purely poetic imagination, but rather a projection and expression of specific social power structures. In the modern adaptation of traditional mythology, how to confront this historically inherited gender bias and how to engage in critical reflection while preserving mythological resources are topics worthy of further exploration.

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