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The spread of mazu belief from shamen island to the Korean peninsula: Focusing on poems and laments

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Abstract

Mazu belief has significant cultural importance as a tradition of marine deities in coastal China and an essential part of Sino-Korean cultural exchange. Shamen Island, located in northeast China, at the junction of the Bohai Sea and the Yellow Sea, functioned as a crucial hub for the most convenient journey from the Korean peninsula to China. Throughout the Ming Dynasty (1368AD-1644AD), Korean envoys traveled to China for political and commercial communication, navigating Shamen Island as a crucial passageway. Their exposure to Mazu legends and worship practices on Shamen Island was meticulously recorded and expounded through literary compositions, especially poems and laments. Through an in-depth analysis of the poems and laments written by Korean envoys during the Ming Dynasty, this study examines Shamen Island's significance in diffusing Mazu culture to the Korean peninsula. The study explores this cultural interaction's topic, target audience, substance, and dissemination impact, reiterating Shamen Island's pivotal role in spreading Mazu belief throughout the Korean Peninsula.

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1. Introduction

Mazu is a significant maritime deity and a profound cultural reverence in China. Originating from the Meizhou Islands in Fujian Province during the Northern Song Dynasty, Mazu was initially a folk sea goddess who protected local fishermen during their voyages. Over time, her influence expanded nationally and globally as it gained official recognition and was introduced to other regions through population movements, commercial trade, and cultural exchange activities. The geographic proximity between the Korean Peninsula and the Shandong Peninsula of China has long facilitated robust diplomatic, economic, and cultural exchanges. Mazu worship spread widely throughout the Korean Peninsula as a result, having a major impact and shaping Sino-Korean cultural exchange history. This made Mazu worship an important component of the East Asian cultural landscape.

The current state of scholarly inquiry into the spread of Mazu belief on the Korean Peninsula focuses mainly on the cultural exchange facts of Mazu belief during the Joseon Dynasties (1392 AD–1897 AD) and the Goryeo Dynasty (819 AD–1392 AD) of Korea through historical analysis and literature study methods. Studies such as Yuan Xiaochun's (2007) examination of Chinese poems written by Korean envoys in the Dengzhou area and Liu Xiaodong and Qi Shan's (2019) investigation into the interaction between envoys from the Joseon Dynasty and Mazu belief are among the limited available studies, which provide reliable documentary and literary sources for communication research. Another area of academic focus involves examining the remaining Mazu temples and altars on the Korean Peninsula, mainly focusing on Chinese activities in Korea and rarely exploring the transmission of Mazu belief among native Koreans and South Korean populations.

Simultaneously, in the research on the communication of Mazu belief, specific attention has been paid to the Dengzhou region in Shandong Province, which has been shown to play a significant role in transmitting Mazu belief. Studies such as Yan Huachuan's (2006) comprehensive review of the spread of Mazu belief in the Shandong region, along with Li Fan's (2015)

contemporary analysis of the current state of Mazu belief in contemporary Shandong, highlight the importance of the Shandong region in the dissemination of domestic Mazu belief, but overlook the crucial role of Shandong in external dissemination.

Existing textual records related to Koreans who came to China frequently mention the toponym Shamen Island. This recurring mention has attracted the attention of the author. Shamen Island may emerge as a pivotal channel and crucial site for transmitting Mazu belief to Korea, with significant research value. Based on the poems and laments of Koreans in the Ming dynasty involving Mazu belief on Shamen Island, investigating the dissemination subject, audience, content, and influence involved in the cultural exchange of Mazu belief, the study explores the role of Shamen Island in the dissemination of Mazu cultural beliefs in Korea. It also points out the geographical and cultural reasons why Mazu culture spread to the Korean Peninsula during the Ming dynasty. It also analyzes the practical and psychological needs of the Sino-Korean dissemination of Mazu culture.

2. The Reasons and Moments for the Dissemination of Mazu Belief from Shamen Island to the Korean Peninsula

The vital role that Shamen Island played in the dissemination of Mazu belief to the Korean Peninsula was attributed to its geographical location, maritime demands, and mature belief system with various worship customs.

Located between the Shandong Peninsula and the Liaodong Peninsula, Shamen Island is also recognized as Chang Island or Miao Island. The national communication between Korea and China lasted from the Goryeo dynasties to the Joseon dynasties of Korea, around the Song Dynasty to the Ming Dynasty of China. During this long-period contact, affected by national policies, the concentrated dissemination of Mazu belief from Shamen Island to Korea predominantly occurred during the Ming Dynasty of China (1386AD-1664AD). When Mazu worship had not matured in the Song Dynasty of China (960AD-1279AD), the Goryeo Dynasty of Korea often sent official envoys to China through maritime passages. However, the relocation of the arrival points of Korean envoys from Dengzhou to Mingzhou (Mingzhou is named Ningbo today) in 1078 AD limited the possible cultural communication through Shamen Island, which was not on the route from the Korean Peninsula to Mingzhou. During the Yuan Dynasty in China (1271AD-1368AD), maritime routes were supplanted by the Grand Canal, which temporarily diminished maritime envoys and commercial ties between China and Korea and also silenced the exchange of marine culture. Sino-Korean relations were at their height during the Ming Dynasty, which also saw much maritime trade. Due to the restoration of Dengzhou port as an arrival point, Shamen Island was once again the most welcomed way for Koreans to visit China.

Despite ongoing advances in shipbuilding, navigation technology, and optimization of maritime routes, the ocean remained a place of unknowns, hazards, and complexities for people of the Ming dynasty. This struggle with the sea has cultivated a widespread belief in maritime deities among coastal nations. Korea and China both had numerous indigenous maritime deity traditions, which enabled Mazu to play an intermediary role in the communication between the two regions. Apart from the cultural basis for communicating marine beliefs, the Mazu belief on Shamen Island also met

the Korean envoys' practical nautical necessities and spiritual needs. Shamen Island was the entry point for Korean vessels accessing the Bohai Sea; however, it was not seaworthy. Given the challenging maritime conditions, ships navigating the Bohai Sea had to seek refuge on Shamen Island, awaiting favorable winds to continue their journey. Poor shipping conditions called for rituals that sought divine help for safe voyages. These rituals, reinforced by narratives emphasizing the magic presence of Mazu, became ingrained as a behavioral tradition and even regarded as a form of taboo that all voyagers must obey. Before embarking on journeys to China, Korean vessels held the ritual imperative of invoking Mazu, emphasizing their belief in and reverence for Mazu worship.

Finally, the mature form of the Mazu belief on Shamen Island in the Ming Dynasty provided a vital foundation for disseminating Mazu belief to Korea, meaning that the Mazu belief observed by the Korean envoys was a mature form of belief centered on numerous rituals. Around 1060, the faith in Mazu was first spread by Fujian sailors from southeastern coastal China to Shamen Island. Since the establishment of a Mazu temple in 1123, the Mazu belief on Shamen Island has continually matured and evolved, giving rise to seasonal activities predominantly centered around Mazu's birthday and ceremonial days and various worship customs. By the Ming dynasty, Shamen Island had comprehensively prepared to showcase and disseminate Mazu worship to Korea.

3. Shamen Island's Mazu belief in Korean Poems and Laments in the Ming Dynasty

The poems and laments of the Mazu belief of Shamen Island, recorded by Korean envoys during the Ming Dynasty, are predominantly collected by *Yanxinglu* (燕行录, *A Record of*

Going to China) and its sequel *Yanxinglu Xuji* (燕行录续集, *The Sequel of the Record of Going to China*). Furthermore, textual records related to Shamen Island's Mazu belief and its rituals are also present in works such as Shen Yuedao's *Lanzhaiji* (懶齋集, *Lanzhai Collection*), Li Qi's *Xuetingji* (雪汀集, *Xueting Collection*), Hong Hao's *Wuzhu Xiansheng Yigao* (无住先生逸稿, *Wuzhu Collection*), and Jin Yu's *Qianqu Yigao* (潜谷遗稿, *Qianqu Collection*). This chapter focuses on the poems and laments within these documents, providing a detailed analysis of the subject, content, and influence of disseminating Mazu belief to Korea.

Primarily, the authors of these poems and laments are predominantly envoys, including well-known political and literary figures in Korea, such as Li Chongren 李崇仁, Li Ji 李穰, and Li Zhan 李詹, alongside the prominent diplomat, philosopher, and scholar Zheng Mengzhou 郑梦周, who was once the Imperial Advisers of Goryeo's Ministry, and Quan Jin 权近, a well-known Confucian and litterateur who also held high positions in government and academia in Korea. The importance of Korean envoys as pivotal figures in disseminating Shamen Island's Mazu belief stemmed from their obligation to mission record and their social influence in Korea.

Compared to interpersonal communication, the transtemporal and spatial reach of the written word significantly amplified the spread of these texts, surpassing the more traditional oral

transmission. With universal literacy in the literature and driven by the literary trend of writing Chinese poems, these Korean envoys were inherently driven to articulate their experiences through Chinese lyrics. Their scholarly works were later well recorded in their collected works, such as Li Chongren's *Taoyin Xiansheng Shiji* (陶隱先生詩集, *Poems Collection of Taoyin*). Furthermore, as diplomatic officials, they had official needs to record the experience of the mission through logs and reports, evident in records like Director of the Board of Rites Yin Xuan *Baishagong Hanghai Lucheng Riji* (白沙公航海路程日記, *Baisha voyage diary*) and *Jiahai Chaotian Lu* (駕海朝天錄, *Records of traveling across the sea to meet the Ming Emperor*) by An Jing, who was the ad hoc envoy to express gratitude to the Ming Dynasty. The inherent need to document the envoy's experiences and the publication of these poems collections, logs, and chronicles facilitated the accessibility of Shamen Island's Mazu belief. These texts were disseminated and preserved on the Korean Peninsula, expanding the audience beyond sailors and officials to a broader Korean populace and encouraging their understanding and dissemination. Moreover, as these envoys were often influential figures in Korean literary and political circles, they notably bolstered the propagation of Shamen Island's Mazu belief across the Korean Peninsula.

Three main topics pertaining to Shamen Island's Mazu belief are mostly reflected in the poems and laments that have been distributed. These are the Mazu rites, the revelation of Mazu's heavenly essence and her miraculous existence in the material world, and the remarks regarding Mazu's protective qualities. Most of the documented stories of Mazu devotion are gloomy. Take the lament address of a Korean delegation written in 1624. During their visit to Shamen Island, they participated in a Mazu worship activity with local suggestions to sail smoothly. The lament oration of this worship said about the aim of conducting this worship, "In the evening, the boat sailed in front of the Goddess Temple, we write to pray to the Sea God,"¹ and recorded the process of their sacrifices to the Gods. These laments reveal the recurring Mazu worship activities by Korean envoys on Shamen Island, depicting purpose-driven behavior imbued with a sense of adaptability to local customs.

The narratives of Mazu's divine nature and miraculous presence are prevalent in poems and laments, constantly evolving. Under the pens of Korean envoys, Mazu's persona continually underwent glorification and strengthening, reflecting the growing esteem and superstition attributed to Mazu by these envoys. For instance, in 1623, in the Korean delegation's depiction of Mazu, she was portrayed as a figure of considerable honor, "Nianguang is an honored name of a female. Formerly, a girl died and became a Sea God, capable of commanding the gods of the four seas to help the people; thus, she was placed in the temple to be worshiped."² This simplistic expression only detailed Mazu's identity without further portraying it. By 1626, in one lament oration of Mazu worship on Shamen Island made by another Korean delegation, Mazu was perceived as "the primordial essence of pure ying, governing the domain of pure yang. Long renowned for her sanctity in past eras, she was now granted increased favor during the auspicious age,"³ thereby transforming Mazu into a divine figure deriving essence from the cosmos, enriching the history of her benefaction. By

1629, Mazu had transformed into the foremost among the many sea gods, having control over the winds and rain and exerting a supernatural influence, "The Hairuo god and the dragon King follow her command, with the Wind God and the Rain God also obeying her. The safe passage of thousands of large ships at sea depends entirely on its shelter."⁴ The images of Mazu that were constantly mythologized underscored the ever-increasing superstition and reverence of the envoys towards Mazu and the ever-consistent elevation of Mazu's influence.

Simultaneously, the records of Mazu's miraculous presence and her interventions on worldly issues continued to thrive in poems and laments. For example, in the *Guanguanglu* (觀光錄, *Sightseeing Record*), Li Zhan recorded, "As the Boat arrived at the sea mouth of Dengzhou (that is, Shamen Island), the ice did not melt. The boatmen were all fearful, but Piao Pingli prayed to the Heavenly Mother (Mazu) in the room with joss sticks and threw poe divinations to ask for auspicious. Suddenly, at midnight, the ice melted. At dawn, they safely disembarked, realizing the wondrous response from Mazu."⁵ They attributed their successful voyage to the blessings of Mazu, believing it to be a result of divine intervention, leading to more devout worship and prayers. By 1632, Korean envoys had conducted frequent offerings and regular worship of the sea god, portraying the escalating influence of Mazu worship on the Koreans.

The comments on Mazu's protection of voyages were documented in poems and laments. Most of these expressed gratitude and praise for Mazu's efficacy and benevolence. For example, in 1626, during the voyage of the Korean envoys' mission to the Ming Emperor to pay tribute, winter solstice, and holy celebrations, the fleet encountered fierce headwinds. Minister Jing Shangxian wrote the *Changshandao Tianfei*

Jiwen (長山島天妃祭文, *Lament to Mazu on Changshan Island*) and conducted the Mazu worship. Subsequently, the winds shifted in favor. In response, Jing Shangxian composed *Jitianfei Yingsongqu* (祭天妃迎送曲, *A lament song for Mazu*), praising Mazu's miraculous power, acknowledging that "what could be my return for the virtues of your divine? I will sing praises through myriad ceremonies for eternal times,"⁶ emphasizing the perpetual devotion to Mazu. However, some poems provided an objective attitude and expressed skepticism. For example, when returning from a Chinese voyage in 1389, an envoy Quan Jin wrote in his poem *Jiuyue Chuer Chuan Fa Shamendao Daifeng* (九月初二船發沙門島待風, *Waiting for Wind on a Boat Departing Shamen Island on 2nd September*) that "I benefit from your blessing, so I pray to you in my heart"⁷ while he quietly hoped for the blessings of Mazu for a smooth journey. However, after facing persistent adverse winds and navigation problems for the fleet, he later wrote in *Yesu Zhouzhong* (夜宿舟中, *Stay on the Boat in the Night*) that "Mazu always goes against expectations"⁸ and "whether I stay or go is at Mazu's arbitrary decision,"⁹ expressing doubts and self-deprecation, suggesting uncertainty regarding Mazu's divine intervention.

In Li Zhan's *Shuangmeitang Qiechang Wenji* (雙梅堂篋藏文集, *A Literary Collection Hidden in a Suitcase in Shuangmeitang*), he mentioned Shamen Island's Mazu that Voyagers constantly pray to Mazu, throwing Poe divinations

to seek favorable winds. Goodwill within a person's heart determines their fortune. How could divine power be privately used by the gods?"¹⁰ emphasizing that fortune and misfortune were self-acquired, dismissing the superstition of Mazu's protective guidance and describing the lament rituals at Shamen Island as "absurd." In Li Chongren's *Tianfeimiao Ciyun* (天妃庙次韵, *Verses at the Temple of Mazu*), he indicated that "The power of Mazu is not verifiable, it is spread simply by word of mouth,"¹¹ which implies that most of the tales of Mazu's miraculous interventions were mere hearsay. These literary pieces reflect the opposing views of Korean envoys towards Mazu, particularly during the late Goryeo period when Buddhism faced criticism in the courts and among the public who advocated Neo-Confucianism to combat religious ad. Mazu belief, as a form of folk superstition, clashed with Confucian principles, which opposed the idea of ghosts and gods, leading some envoys to scrutinize and critique Mazu, considering it superstitious. These poems and laments show that the Ming Dynasty Korean envoys frequently engaged in Mazu worship on Shamen Island to seek smooth sailing, documented through poems and laments. These writings captured the essence of the rituals and portrayed Mazu's image, deepening the awe and fear toward Mazu among the Koreans. Additionally, these texts served as materials for subsequent envoys to expand and reinforce Mazu worship on Shamen Island. However, some envoys recorded Mazu worship with skepticism and negation. They merely observed rituals as spectators or performed utilitarian Mazu worship for practical purposes, lacking sincere faith and devotion. However, these Korean envoys' literary competence and political influence made these poems and laments exquisite literary works and pivotal mediums for disseminating Mazu worship.

4. Conclusion

Shamen Island is a central site for disseminating Chinese Mazu belief to the Korean Peninsula. Due to its geographical location, maritime necessities, mature local faith in Mazu belief, and deep oceanic worship customs of gods, Shamen Island played an essential role in this external cultural dissemination. Through an analysis of poems and laments, it becomes evident that during the Ming Dynasty, numerous Korean envoys came to China and paused at Shamen Island. These envoys conducted extensive Mazu worship activities on the island, seeking blessings for smooth voyages, which they meticulously documented in writing. This practice reinforced Mazu's reverence among these Korean diplomatic envoys. It significantly facilitated the propagation of Mazu belief across the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, a fraction of these envoys maintained a skeptical or hostile attitude towards Mazu belief; nevertheless, their documentation of Mazu belief remained an objective part of this historical record. Shamen Island developed as a center during the Ming Dynasty, when Mazu belief, transported by every Korean diplomatic vessel, regularly made landfall on the Korean Peninsula in poems and laments. This sustained dissemination profoundly influenced Mazu worship in the Korean region.

Notes

1. “薄暮，移舟神女庙前，为文祭谢海神。”
2. “娘娘乃女号之尊名。昔者，有一女子死为海神，能号令四海之神、河伯、江神，故自前敕封娘娘圣女庙。”
3. “以太阴之元精，主纯阳之大界。显圣久称于历代，膺宠遂隆于昌辰。”
4. “海若随指喉，龙王作喉咽。风伯暨雨师，维时顺算毕。龙骧几万斜，皆赖神阴鹭。”
5. “行舟至登州海口（注：沙门岛群岛），俄而冰合不果行。舟人皆危惧，与朴评理望天妣（注：即妈祖）于乔房，香火以祷，掷环斑袞吉。夜半潮退，忽焉冰解。迟明乘三板登岸，乃知感应神妙如此。”
6. “神之德兮何酬？咏万祀兮歌千秋。”
7. “利涉赖阴功，默默心有冀。”
8. “迟违人事非。”
9. “去住任神妃。”
10. “行人灌酒天妃宫，手掷环玦祷好风。人心动静自吉凶，天君岂肯私玄功。”
11. “感通真莫测，赖尔庙官传。”

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