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QING DYNASTY STATUES OF THE THREE GODS OF HAPPINESS

1. Introduction

In the Qing Dynasty cults of various popular figures seem to have been very common. The figures could be Taoist groups such as the Sanguan or Sanyuan triad (the Three Auspicious Agents), who guaranteed good fortunes, and Buddhist groups such as the Guanyin and her assistants, who stood for compassion and mercy, or they could be of a mixed religious composition like the triad of the God of Wealth, where the Taoist god is presented together with popular figures. Some of the groups can be traced back to a distant past, and they have been worshipped in temples; some of them have even been installed in their own shrines or halls.

One fairly late group became quite popular in the Qing Dynasty. It is known as the Sanxing triad (the Three Stargods) or as the Fu, Lu and Shou group (the Three Gods of Happiness). Fuxing was supposed to give happiness and Luxing to secure emolument, whereas Shouxing guaranteed longevity. The group is not very old; it probably emerged at the end of the Yuan Dynasty and the beginning of the Ming Dynasty, as has been shown by Mary H. Fong in her article.¹ In the 16th century the group found its most common pictorial expression, where it was accompanied by one or more small boys or youths. The boy or boys symbolized the wish of male offspring for the continuation of the family line. He or they were also connected with the joy of life (*xi*), which was a desire strongly felt by the Chinese.² In some of the pictures the triad is accompanied by five boys or youths. They represented the five wishes of happiness which every Chinese desired to be fulfilled in life. The five wishes were good health, wealth, many sons, long life and fulfilment of ambitions. Later in Qing times the group acquired an iconic status in the vernacular culture.

In her article about the triad Mary H. Fong has concentrated on the origin of the group and especially on iconography in the early phases of the Ming Dynasty. She has not dealt with the sculptured versions of the group, which the present writer wishes to introduce.

2. Dating of the sculptures

The study of the statues is based on pieces kept in Danish, Finnish and Swedish

¹ Mary H. Fong, The iconography of the popular gods of happiness, emolument, and longevity (Fu Lu Shou). *Artibus Asiae* 43 (1983), p. 185.

² *Ibid.* p. 189.

collections. It has not been possible to locate the group in sculptured form from the Ming Dynasty. None of the groups known to the author are dated but possibly belong to the later part of the Qing Dynasty. The majority of the sculptures are done in Chinese figure-stone (agalmatolithe), which has also been used to cut other popular figures. In the National Museum of Denmark there are a few small figures cut in it. They arrived in the Danish Royal Collection of Curiosities before 1690, when they were catalogued. These figures consist of Taoist and popular statues such as the Taoist immortal Li Tieguai and Kuixing (the Demon-queller and the God of Literature). They are about 18 cm high and have, in spite of their round backs, the same facial appearance as the possibly later Sanxing triads. The Sanxing groups are about 11 to 14 cm high, excluding the pedestal.³ The eldest triad arrived in its collection in 1854 and the latest in 1895. The sculptures may be older than their incorporation in the collections, because they were in private hands before their acquisition for the various collections. Taking into account the plentiful pictorial evidence of the Sanxing groups in the late Ming and early Qing Dynasties it is very likely that the Sanxing triad also was produced in sculptured form.

Groups of the Eight Immortals were as popular as the Sanxing group, and, as shown by the old royal collection in Denmark, the Immortals were made in stone, at least from the early Qing Dynasty onwards. Their material, too, was the same in which the later Sanxing triads were cut. So the Sanxing group in sculptured form was most probably in existence in the early Qing and possibly also in the latter part of the Ming Dynasty.

3. Characteristics of the sculptured Sanxing triad

a) In Chinese figure-stone.

All of the triads stand on pedestals, the middle part of which is elevated to emphasize the central figure. This raised part can be an integral section or a separate piece. The pedestal is always in a different colour from the greenish-yellowish tone of the figures. Generally one sees black, reddish brown, or greenish-yellow stone speckled with black stains. To emphasize the appearance of godly status, the pedestals are cut to resemble rocky cliffs, which can certainly be associated with the islands of the immortals. The latter have from early times been figured as steep mountains, as is often seen on the Poshan incense burners of the Han Dynasty.

In the established iconography of the Sanxing triad from the early Qing Dynasty Luxing is placed in the centre of the group. He is a little taller than the two other gods, and this is intensified in the sculptured version by the raised central part of the pedestal. In the examples done in Chinese figure-stone the difference in height varies from 0.1 to 0.8 cm (fig. 1). The painted and embroidered illustrations clearly emphasize the height of Luxing either by his elevated position to the rear of the other two placed in the front or by

³ A single statue which might be one of the Stargods, Luxing, is 16.9 cm high and therefore much larger than the complete Sanxing group. The figure, which was included in the collections of the Danish National Museum in 1940, has on the breast and back of the coat a square emblem with a picture of a jumping carp symbolizing promotion in the career of a scholar. The figure does not carry a tablet or sceptre but an object which looks like a book or wooden clappers. The emblem and the book fit the general appearance of Luxing, whereas the wooden clappers fit the Cao Guojiu figure of the Eight Immortals. Cao Guojiu is sometimes seen holding wooden clappers in his hands as illustration no. 30 in *Chinese Folklore Art*, ed. by the National Museum of History, Taipei 1980, shows.

simply drawing him taller.⁴

Luxing is clothed in a long, loose-hanging outer coat of Ming Dynasty appearance with a belt denoting an official around a rather prominent belly. The belt is cut in the fashion of the upper class to look like the belt adorned with precious stone slabs worn by civil servants. The headgear is also a stiff upright cap of a high-ranking official. The cap has furthermore the appearance of Ming Dynasty headgear than a Qing design decreed by the ruling Manchu class. He is holding a long *hu* tablet in one of his hands, which is resting on his shoulder. The *hu* tablet is most often placed on the side where the Fuxing god is standing, but one example in the collections studied has the tablet on the side of Shouxing. The latter position is sometimes seen in the pictorial versions, too.⁵ The other hand firmly grasps the belt or touches the long pointed beard. The pointed beards of the sculptured figures have been made to grow together with the very long moustaches, which is a feature not so often encountered in the pictured examples (fig. 2). The whiskers are also very long, but shorter than the point of the beard.

Fuxing's beard also consists in some cases of a long moustache and a pointed beard and two long whiskers (fig. 3). But a long full beard is more common. The full beard has a recessed part in the middle from the chin to the end of the point. Shouxing often has this kind of beard, too. In the pictorial version Shouxing's beard is white, in accordance with his identity as the God of Longevity, while both Luxing and Fuxing are embellished with black beards. None of the beards in the sculptured triads bear any traces of paint. As a matter of fact, the paint is only used on a few significant details, such as black pupils, eyelids, eyebrows and a tuft of hair in the case of the child, and red lips, peaches and jewels on the headgear of Fuxing and Luxing. In one case ornamental parts of a single Fuxing statue were blackened with ink. These parts were imitations of curly clouds or vegetation (fig. 5).

Fuxing's height is often the same as Shouxing's. However, sometimes Fuxing is a little taller and in a few cases a few millimetres shorter than Shouxing. In the pictures Fuxing is taller than Shouxing (fig. 2) and a little shorter than Luxing. In the sculptured version the position of Fuxing is not fixed. He is placed either to the right of Luxing or to his left, which is the most usual position in the pictorial versions. The positioning of Fuxing to the left of Luxing (or to the right from the spectator's point of view) seems to have been settled in the paintings at the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, although the reverse position still occurred (fig. 4).

The sculptured versions of Sanxing always portray Fuxing carrying a small child or a boy in his arms. As mentioned above, this child is both a symbol of joy – *xi* – and of male offspring. The male child is most often held in a vertical position but at times he is lying in Fuxing's arms (fig. 1). Most often the child holds a peach in his left hand, while the other arm is raised above the head. The hand of the raised right arm is covered by the long sleeves of the child's coat. Normally Shouxing holds a peach in one hand, which is

⁴ The elevated position is exemplified on a *famille verte* porcelain dish illustrated in Mary H. Fong, *op.cit.* fig. 16, whereas the taller version is seen *ibid.* in fig. 20.

⁵ See for instance in the same figs. 9, 10, and 20. A coloured reproduction of do. fig. 9 is seen in *Ancient Chinese woodblock New Year prints* by Wang Shucun. Beijing 1985, fig. 12

in accordance with the usual picture of him when shown alone. In quite numerous pictorial examples of the Sanxing triad, the child (boy or youth) stands on the ground and reaches out for the peach in Shouxing's hands. In some paintings or woodcuts the child or youth holds the peach (fig. 4) but is still standing on the ground.

The long outer coat worn by Fuxing has been lifted up and tucked behind the knotted girdle to reveal the long under-robe, which nearly covers the shoes. The knotted girdle has long, loose-hanging ends forming two decorative lines on the outer garment. This arrangement of clothes is similar to the attire worn by Shouxing. Fuxing's headgear is cut to resemble a soft cap with a crown topped by a raised stiff bridge on the back, all covered by a down-hanging smooth cloth. The cloth normally reaches down to the upper part of the shoulders, but in a few examples it stops short of the neck of the cap and leaves two ribbons dangling down to the shoulders. This type of cap and the long, loose-hanging garment point to a gentleman, who has retired from official life. It corresponds well to the idea of Fuxing guaranteeing happiness and a prosperous family, as is stressed by his holding a male child.

Shouxing is supporting himself on a stick, which is cut to look like wood. The top of the stick is formed like the root of a tree. The root is nearly always attached to Shouxing's head just above his ear. The lower point is often placed in front of his foot on the same side as he holds the staff. Less often the point is in between the feet. Shouxing frequently holds the staff on the same side as Luxing has his tablet resting on his shoulder.

In his other hand Shouxing most often displays a rather large peach, holding it at the navel. In one example Shouxing touches the point of his full beard instead of carrying the usual peach. Strangely enough, in that group the child does not hold a peach either. Shouxing shows his characteristically bald, high head and pointed skull. The forehead has two or three formalized U-shaped wrinkles combined with an equal number of wrinkles following the soft curves of the eyebrows. At the nape of the neck, the remaining back hair has been drawn together, tied with a cord and covered by a small piece of loose-hanging cloth. The ends of the ribbon used to tie the hair decorate the upper part of Shouxing's back in two fairly straight lines. The whole appearance of Shouxing in the sculptured Stargods cut in Chinese figure-stone coincides with the accustomed picture of the Stargod of immortality manufactured in other kind of materials.

The arrangement of the three figures in the triad has been influenced by the desire to create an impression of symmetry. If Shouxing shows his staff on the outer side of the group, Fuxing frequently balances this by holding the child or boy on his outer side. The various attributes, e.g. the *hu* tablet, the staff, the peach and the child, do however create a slightly asymmetrical impression, since they are normally placed to one side of the person. To regain a more symmetrical impression Fuxing and Shouxing can be bent a little towards the upright figure of Luxing or turned slightly outwards away from Luxing. Furthermore, in order to make the figures more lively, several details in the figures have been cut in curved lines. This applies to the loose hanging sleeves, the hems of the coats and now and then the long beards. As such, the sinuous lines of the details disturb the overall symmetrical appearance, but they give the figures a more distinctive character.

b) In other materials.

Besides Chinese figure-stone other materials were also used in sculpturing the star gods. In the National Museum of Denmark there is a group made of wood which differs somewhat from the figure-stone groups. The wooden triad entered the museum in 1900. The greatest disparity is shown in cutting Luxing higher than the two other figures. In spite of the fact that he stands on the same level as Fu and Shou, he is 5.5 cm taller and is also more heavily built. Further he carries a *ruyi* sceptre instead of the *hu* tablet seen in the figure-stone triads. His headgear does not have the down-curving parts but consists solely of a vertical crown. Fuxing's cap exhibits more decorative features in comparison with the figure-stone examples. The child in his arms is truly a child in its own nakedness. Behind the group there rise interlaced clouds terminating in typical *ruyi* heads like the crown of the sceptre carried by Luxing. The colouring of the wooden triad is naturally different from the stone triads and consists of a red lacquered background and a thin shiny layer of bronze gilding.

A group of three ivory figures beneath an old pine tree has a more problematic identity (fig. 6). The two outermost figures sit on an imitation stone table, while the central figure stands behind them and the table. The lack of ordinary attributes and head-gear indicates another possible identity of the group. There are many groups of three religious persons in the Taoist pantheon and among the mixed popular figures, which could be placed under a pine tree sitting at a stone table. From the Taoist pantheon one could choose the Sanguan triad (the Three Agents of Good Fortune) or perhaps even the Three Pure Ones, the very important Sanqing triad. In a popular context the group of the Holy Sages representing the three major religions in China — Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism — is a more probable identification. In this context the three figures would be personifications of Kongzi, Laozi and Śākyamuni. They can furthermore be connected with the three Stargods, if Kongzi is identified as Luxing, Laozi as Shouxing and the Buddha as Fuxing.⁶ This mingling of a new religious group and an older group of a controversial status began in the late Ming Dynasty. It corresponds to the growing popularity of gods who bestow good fortune and keep away evil influences in life. The figures of the three religions had never really been accepted by the governing classes, and their worship and depiction was suppressed as heathenism. An imperial decree banning their depiction and veneration as a group dates back at least to the Northern Song Dynasty (1106).⁷

The Stargod group has further been manufactured in porcelain. This material was in very common use in portraying popular religious figures such as the Goddess of Mercy, Guanyin. The present writer has not found an entire Sanxing triad made of porcelain, but in the National Museum of Finland there is a tall enamel porcelain figure, 46.5 cm high, which has a lot of features in common with Fuxing (fig. 7). The figure holds a small boy in his arms and is clothed in a loose-hanging coat, wearing on his head the informal cap of a retired civil servant. The boy holds a fruit in his left hand and raises his right hand

⁶ Discussed in detail by Mary H. Fong, *op.cit.* pp. 191-194.

⁷ Mentioned by J. J. de Groot, *Sectarianism and religious persecution in China*. Amsterdam 1903, p. 79.

above his head. The gentleman's coat is decorated with flowers and a few symbolic patterns. Among the patterns are peaches, cranes, baskets and a geometrized *shou* character (i.e. longevity). In some of the flower petals one can vaguely see characters such as *ji* (auspicious), *mei* (beautiful) and *xi* (joy). The whole appearance of this porcelain figure points definitely to its identification as Fuxing of the Sanxing triad. The statue arrived at the museum in 1961 but it is certainly much older. Judging from the high quality of the enamelled glaze and the few details drawn up by unfired ink, the figure could easily date from the early 19th century.

4. The use of the Sanxing triad

Because the triad was not enshrined in temples, the group was worshipped in homes. Many of their illustrations were woodcuts used at the Chinese New Year ceremonies. Together with other gods close to the family household, they reported on the activities of the members of the family in the previous year to the higher heavenly gods. On the basis of this report the fate of the family and of each of its member was determined for the coming year. Offerings and prayers to the Sanxing group were then thought to smooth away possible troubles. Although Fu, Lu and Shou were not especially mentioned in connection with the ceremonies, in contrast to the Kitchen God (or the God of the Stove), Zaojun, and the God of Wealth, Caishen, they were in any case among the favoured gods of families.⁸

In the winter of 1932, during her fieldwork, which concentrated on the religious life of peasant women in North China, Brunhild Körner noticed the importance of the triad in connection with the securing of prosperity and good health. The group was very much favoured among the house-gods and was thought to come from the world of the Star-gods. The peasant women made offerings to the Fu, Lu, and Shou triad on birthdays, their own or their children's. The prayers accompanying the offerings were very similar to the prayers addressed to Guanyin (the Goddess of Mercy) for fertility, protection of children, and help in gynaecological problems.⁹

The group might also have had a role to play in the Star Festival celebrated on the eighth or the fourteenth day of the first month, when the constellations were worshipped.¹⁰ Their designation as Stargods was also apparent in some areas, where a marriage charm could contain the position of the planets and the constellation, headed by a picture of the triad.¹¹

⁸ Juliet Bredon & Igor Mitrophanov, *Das Mondjahr*. Berlin 1937; on pp. 97-98 their use is mentioned in connection with the home altar of the families at New Year. The triad is illustrated opposite p. 425 with Fuxing in the middle.

⁹ Brunhild Körner, Die religiöse Welt der Bäuerin in Nordchina. (Reports from the scientific expedition to the North-Western provinces of China under the leadership of Dr Sven Hedin, publ. 43 = The Sino-Swedish Expedition VIII:8.) Stockholm 1959, pp. 46 and 28 respectively. The triad is incorporated in a picture of the Peach festival of Xiwang mu (the Taoist Queen of Immortality). The group appears on clouds in the uppermost right corner of the scene. *Ibid.*, tab. VIIIC.

¹⁰ Juliet Bredon states that pictures of auspicious gods, among them the Sanxing, took part in the ceremonies at the Star Festival. *Op.cit.* pp. 156-157.

¹¹ See Henri Doré, S.J., *Researches into Chinese superstitions* II. Transl. with notes by M. Kennelly and others. Shanghai 1916 (reprinted in 1966), fig. 151 (opposite p. 227).

Sometimes the triad is pictured in the company of the Eight Immortals of Taoism. The Eight Immortals were quite popular in the Qing period, and many pictures and sculptures of them have survived to this day (fig. 8). When the Three Gods of Happiness and the Eight Immortals were joined together, it was probably an attempt to strengthen the effects of good fortune for the families.¹²

5. Conclusion

The use of the triad seems in the latter period of Imperial China to have been confined to the private sphere. The sculptures were probably placed close to the home altars, and they surely formed part of the household gods. The ultimate goal for the household gods was to secure the best possible success for the family in all aspects of life.

The iconography of the sculptured Sanxing seems to be of a definite pattern. All the stone sculptures examined show very little variety in appearance, and it seems that statues in other materials follow the same lines as the stone figures. Compared to pictures there are more differences, but the basic features of the three figures are identical.

The uniformity of the sculptured stone groups could have been caused by their manufacture in one workshop and in one period of time. They have, however, arrived in Europe during the course of several years and they exhibit many variations in detail. Thus it is not likely that they were produced in one workshop or in a limited period of time. Some "stray members" of the group, which have arrived in the collections without their companions, demonstrate at times a distinctive character of their own. On the other hand, they could have been manufactured as souvenirs for Westerners eager to buy curiosities. Perhaps some of the groups given a late date could have been made for sale to foreigners, but that cannot have been the rule, since they were first of all well-established religious figures whose sculpturing followed a standard iconography. All in all the stone figures formed a part of Chinese religious sectarianism in the firm tradition of the quest for a happy and peaceful life.

¹² The Sanxing are probably also mentioned by P. J. Dols in his observation of a religious procession in connection with a sacrifice at the Temple of Heaven and Earth (previous to 1937) on the 9th day of the first month. Dols is a little unclear in his statement about the figures, but he writes about different banners with the Eight Immortals, the Śākyamuni (Buddha) figure, the Laozi figure, and a figure who might be Kongzi. These last three figures could equally be the Sanxing triad. — P. J. Dols. *Fêtes et usages dans la province de Kan-sou. Annali Lateranensi* I (1937), p. 215.



Fig. 1.
The three Stargods,
the Sanxing triad,
in greenish Chinese
figure-stone.
Shouxing to the
right has red speck-
les in the stone.
H. of the figures
from 12.8 to 13
cm.
(The National
Museum of Fin-
land, Helsinki.)



Fig. 2.
The Sanxing group.
Handcoloured woodcut
print from Beijing.
(A. Nachbauer & Wang
Ngen-joing, *Les images
populaires chinoises*.
Peking 1926.)



Fig. 3.
The Sanxing triad
in greenish Chinese
figure-stone.
H. of the figures from
13.3 to 14.1 cm. 19th
century. (The National
Museum of Finland,
Helsinki.)



Fig. 4.
A painted Sanxing
group on marble.
32 x 32 cm. Early
19th century.
(Collection of
Lennart Trey,
Porvoo, Finland.)

Fig. 5.

A single Fuxing figure in greenish Chinese figure-stone.
H. 14.3 cm. 19th century.
(Dept. of Asian and African Studies, Univ. of Helsinki.)



Fig. 6. A triad beneath a pine tree in ivory. H. 9.3 cm. Early 20th century?
(The National Museum of Finland, Helsinki.)

Fig. 7.

A single Fuxing porcelain figure in polychrome enamel.
H. 46.5 cm. Early 19th century.
(The National Museum of Finland, Helsinki.)





Fig. 8.
Embroidered silk banner.
The inscription is surrounded
by the Sanxing group on the top,
by symbols of longevity at the
bottom and by the Eight Immortals
at the sides.
165.5 x 45.5 cm. 19th century.
(Museum of Applied Arts, Helsinki.)

