

## Goddess Jinhua: A Divine Leader of Demons and Religious Allusions in a Qing Drama

Yizhuo Li\*

*The Magic Box* (*Hunyuanhe* 混元盒), a full-length drama with gods, demons, and supernatural themes, was a regular feature both in the imperial palace and urban theatres of Beijing during the Qing dynasty. It was typically performed as part of the mid-summer celebrations for the Double Fifth Festival (*Duanwu jie* 端午節). The play's central female character is the Goddess Jinhua (Jinhua niangniang 金花娘娘) or Holy Mother Jinhua (Jinhua shengmu 金花聖母), an anti-heroine who, under the Jade Emperor's command, unleashes the Five Poisons (*wudu* 五毒) and other malevolent spirits to create chaos and punish humanity. This divine retribution is triggered by religious excesses of the Jiajing 嘉靖 Emperor (r. 1522–1566), who hired Tao Qian 陶謙, a fictional sorcerer, to practise alchemy in pursuit of immortality. Zhang Jie 張捷, who is a fictional descendant of Zhang Daoling 張道陵 (34–156), the founding patriarch of the Heavenly Master Zhang (Zhang Tianshi 張天師) lineage,<sup>1</sup> embarks on an adventurous journey to vanquish the demons one by one. Ultimately, with the help of Bodhisattva Guanyin, Zhang Jie captures all demons in the magic box (*Hunyuanhe*), gaining himself imperial ordination and restoring peace to the Jiajing Emperor's reign.

The play's title and Jinhua's name were mentioned in the eighteenth-century novel, *The Dream of the Red Chamber* (*Honglou meng* 紅樓夢), by Cao

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\* Yizhuo Li is an assistant professor at the Department of Chinese and History, City University of Hong Kong.

<sup>1</sup> For a study and definition of terms regarding Heavenly Masters, see Vincent Goossaert, *Heavenly Masters: Two Thousand Years of the Daoist State* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 2022), pp. 1–7.

Xueqin 曹雪芹 (1715–1763). In one scene, the servant girl, Qiuwen, makes a pun involving the characters “Jin” and “Hua,” referring to both the names of two maids and the goddess:

When Sheyue and others asked what the women were carrying, they replied, “It’s food gifted from Her Old Ladyship for the two maids Jin and Hua.” Qiuwen snickered, “The play they are performing outside is *The Eight Righteous Heroes*, not *The Magic Box*. Where has this ‘Jinhua’ goddess sprung from?”

麝月等問手裏拿的是什麼，媳婦們道：「是老太太賞金、花二位姑娘吃的。」秋紋笑道：「外頭唱的是《八義》，沒唱《混元盒》，那裏又跑出金花娘娘來了。」<sup>2</sup>

This casual mention suggests *The Magic Box* was staged in urban theatres no later than the time Cao Xueqin lived in Beijing during the early to mid-eighteenth century. Evidently, Cao was familiar with the play—he likely watched it—and it seems plausible for him that a servant girl of the era, like Qiuwen, would also know the play and its characters. The most likely version of *The Magic Box* in Cao’s time, and the earliest extant version, is an early Qing manuscript written in the *Kunqu* 崑曲 operatic style, comprising three *juan* and sixty-nine scenes.<sup>3</sup> According to Fu Xihua 傅惜華 (1907–1970), its former owner, this version was likely used by Beijing opera troupes in urban theatres during the Kangxi and Yongzheng periods (1662–1735).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Cao Xueqin, *Honglou meng bashi hui jiaoben* 紅樓夢八十回校本 [Collated edition of the eighty chapters of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*] (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 1993), p. 586. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> *Hunyuanhe* 混元盒 [The magic box], in *Fu Xihua cang gudian xiqu zhenben congkan* 傅惜華藏古典戲曲珍本叢刊, vol. 139 (Beijing: Xueyuan chubanshe, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> The play might date back earlier to the late Ming period, as its title was recorded under the category of “Ming *chuanqi* 傳奇 drama” in *Yangzhou huafang lu*, though the late-Ming text is not traceable. See Li Dou 李斗 (1749–1817), *Yangzhou huafang lu* 揚州畫舫錄 [Records of Yangzhou painted boats] (Ziran’an woodblock print, 1795; manuscript retrieved from Erudition Database), p. 122a. Fu Xihua, who owned the early-Qing version, suggested the existence of a late-Ming script from which his version was adapted. See Fu Xihua, “Hunyuanhe junben shanbian kao” 混元盒劇本嬗變考 [The evolution of the *Hunyuanhe* play script], in *Fu Xihua xiqu luncong* 傅惜華戲曲論叢 (Beijing: Wenhua yishu chubanshe, 2007), p. 274.

Both Chinese and Japanese scholars have studied the textual evolution and performance history of *The Magic Box* during the Qing dynasty. Dai Bufan 戴不凡 and Yamashita Kazuo 山下一夫 note that a similar narrative also appears in the genre of vernacular fiction (*xiaoshuo* 小說).<sup>5</sup> However, no scholar has yet compared the dramatic persona of Goddess Jinhua in the play with the religious figure of the same name, nor has there been an analysis of the numerous religious allusions embedded in the text. By closely examining and comparing texts across genres, including drama, fiction, gazetteers, and official historical accounts, this paper analyses *The Magic Box* through a religious lens, focusing on Goddess Jinhua. It argues that the play reflects religious history involving emperors from the late Ming to the Qing dynasty and resonates with the local worship of Goddess Jinhua in a suburb of Beijing.

### Religious Allusions in *The Magic Box*

Qing scholars recognized the resemblance of *The Magic Box* to other literary works involving gods and demons. In *Chuanqi huikao* 傳奇匯考, an early-Qing study on theatre, *The Magic Box* is described as a preposterous and unfounded imitation of *Canonization of Gods* (*Fengshen yanyi* 封神演義) and *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西遊記).<sup>6</sup> The episodic structure of demon-conquering adventure and the ending plot of Guanyin to the rescue naturally evoke *Journey*

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<sup>5</sup> Dai Bufan, *Xiaoshuo jianwen lu* 小說見聞錄 [Records of fiction and observations] (Hangzhou: Zhejiang renmin chubanshe, 1980), pp. 271–73. Yamashita Kazuo 山下一夫, “Sinchō kyūtei engeki ‘Kongenkō’ no seiritsu to jōen” 清朝宮廷演劇『混元盒』の成立と上演 [The formation and performance of the Qing-dynasty court drama *Hun-yuan-he*], *Geibun-Kenkyū: Journal of Arts and Letter* 藝文研究 112 (2017): 37–52. For other research on the drama *Hunyuanhe*, see also Liu Chao 劉超, “*Hunyuanhe* yanchu shishu” 混元盒演出史述 [An account of the performance history of *The Magic Box*], *Xiqu yanjiu* 戲曲研究 101, no. 1 (2017): 291–306. Liu Tie, “*Chandao chuxie* zai Qingdai gongting de yanchu” 闡道除邪在清代宮廷的演出 [The palace performance of Chan Daoist *Quashing the Evilness*], *Ming Qing Literature and Documentation* 明清文學與文獻 6, no. 1 (2017): 235–71.

<sup>6</sup> *Chuanqi huikao* [Collected studies of *chuanqi* tales] (Beijing: Shumu wenxian chubanshe, 1993), p. 193.