
PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

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CHINESE ZHIMA PLATES HELD IN RUSSIAN COLLECTIONS, PART II, GOD OF WEALTH [1]

Arguably the most popular deity in folk religion, the cult of Caishen or God of Wealth can be found in almost every part of China. The *zhima* are burned at his offerings. The deity himself is identified with several different people from several different places. However, for the sake of convenience they may be classified into two major categories, the *wen* (civilian) God of Wealth and the *wu* (military) God of Wealth. One easy way to distinguish them is their attire and the object they are holding. The Wen God of Wealth wears a civil official's robe and holds an official's tablet in hands. The Wu God of Wealth dons a military general's armour and is usually wielding a sword.

One historical figure commonly identified as the Wen God of Wealth is Bigan (比干). A loyal official of the Shang Dynasty (17th—11th BC), Bigan had the ill fortune to have his heart ripped out by his dissolute king so the king could use it to cure his favourite concubine's illness. Dying a martyr, Bigan's loyalty won the Heavenly Jade Emperor's accolades and he was made the God of Wealth. Because he has no heart, he will not favour one side in a transaction over the other. Fairness thus makes him an ideal arbiter in the trade business. Common people who worship the Wen God of Wealth purchase a piece of his *zhima*, offer sacrifices to him early in the New Year, and burn the *zhima* after the ritual.

Another popular Caishen is Zhao Gongming (趙公明). Usually depicted as a red-faced military general astride a tiger, swinging a sword overhead, Zhao Gongming is said to be a disciple of the Daoist Heavenly Master Zhang, capable of commanding lightning and thunder, and of expelling epidemic demons. Whenever cases of injustice arise, he makes sure the grievance is amended and the wrong put right. The same principle, when applied to commerce, is the assurance that fair trade is guaranteed under his protection. Zhao Gongming is also said to be a Muslim. Hence one should avoid pork dishes in his offerings. Zhao Gongming is very popular among businessmen. Temples dedicated to his worship can be found almost everywhere.

The Caishen icons in *Kunstkamera* appear to be mostly of the civilian type. The composition of such icons customarily consists of the following. A disproportionately large God of Wealth, dressed in an official's robe, holding a tablet. He is usually accompanied by a pair or two of proportionately smaller subordinates. One such pair that commonly stand on either side of him are the Immortal Official of Affluence (“利市仙官”) [2], and the Lad Who Brings in Money (“招財童子”). In front, there is an offering table with incense burner, candleholders, or other objects symbolizing wealth. The offering table in *fig. 1* displays three objects. The horse in the middle is supposed to carry the offerings and the prayers to heaven to the God Himself. On each side are gold or silver ingots and a pile of coins.

Sometimes, underneath the offering table, there are also additional symbols of wealth. In *fig. 2*, there is a “聚寶盆” (Treasure Bowl) underneath the offering table. The motif of the Treasure Bowl comes from a folk story describing how a man who saves the lives of an army of frogs is rewarded with a magic bowl that multiplies whatever is put into it. Subsequent versions of the folktale developed the motif further and turned it into a bowl full of ingots, luxurious coral stems, fire pearls, and precious stones.

In *fig. 3*, a measuring scale is placed underneath the offering table, with several ingots next to it. It is understood that by offering to the God of Wealth, there will be so much gold and/or silver ingots that flow into the family/business in question that one needs a scale to measure them.

In all the *zhima* featured here, we find either one or more “foreign people” serving as the subordinates of God of Wealth, or simply as a pictorial motif. The motif comes from a widely-known folk legend known as “Foreign Man Presents Treasure”. The foreign man here is usually identified as being of Middle Eastern origin. According to the legend, foreign people from the Middle East area are especially adept at identifying and appraising exotic treasures. Their expertise in treasure connois



Fig. 1

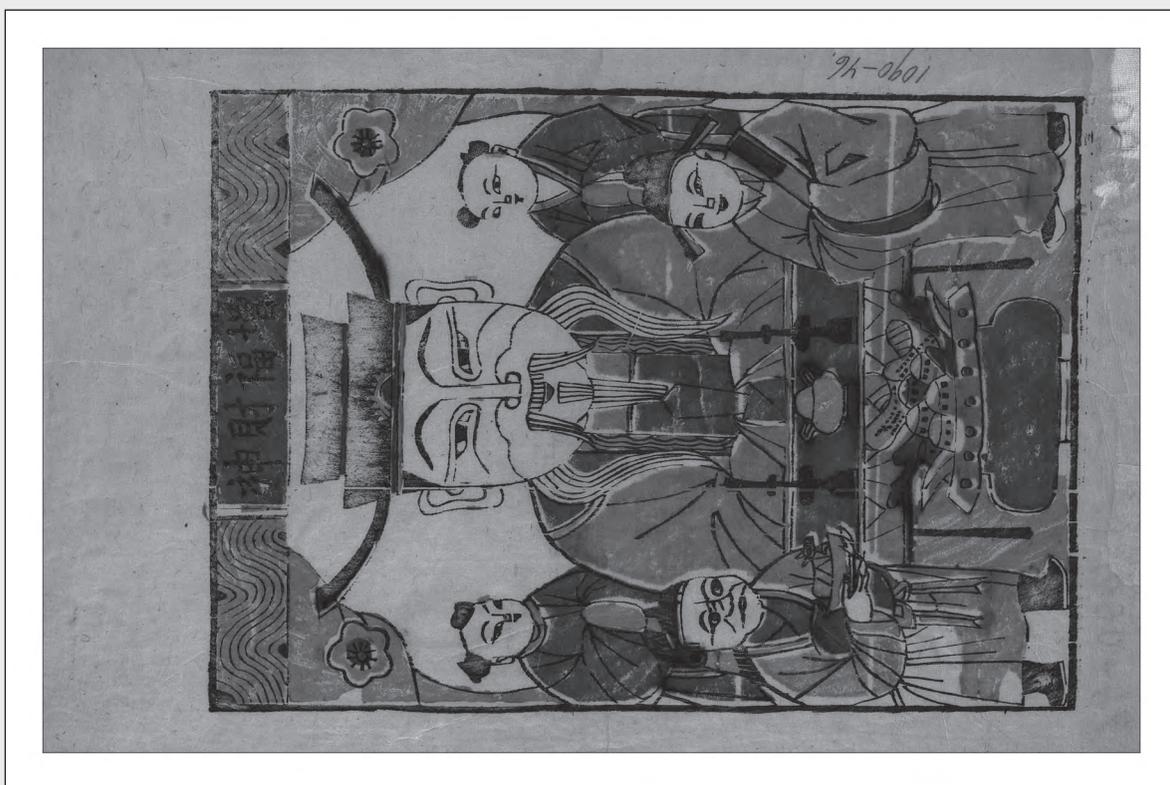


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

seurship makes them a popular wealth-related motif. Their depiction in Chinese arts includes features such as a high nose, curly hair and / or moustaches, round and protruding eyes (as opposed to the elongated Asian eyes), a round collar instead of a crossed Han-style collar line, a short lower garment, a robust build, and a distinct pointy hat. Sometimes the foreign man bares his chest, as the man in *fig. 5* does.

A typical scene of “Foreign Man Presents Treasure”, illustrates a foreign man holding a precious object, such as a Treasure Bowl, Treasure Vase, ivory, or coral stem. For example, the pairs in front in *figs. 1, 3, and 5* are holding ivory and a coral stem. Both *figs. 3 and 5* show the man underneath the offering table pouring treasures (out of a cornucopia shaped vase) into a Treasure Bowl. The ox crouched in an offering plate in *fig. 2* is an agricultural symbol of virility. Though not commonly seen in God of Wealth *zhima*, it is related to fortune and wealth as well. Oxen are needed to till the land which grows the crops that turn into food and wealth.

The two deities printed in *fig. 5* are the Master and Madam of Fortune, sometimes identified as Fan Li and

his wife, the famous beauty Sishi. Fan Li was a politician of 5th century BC in the Yue Kingdom. He assisted the defeated King of Yue to regain his territory from the Wu Kingdom. At the height of his career, Fan Li sensed the envious suspicion of his King and decided to quit the court and retire to the coast. Seeing fame and wealth as a merely peripheral, many times did Fan Li renounced everything and start all over again. Every time he built an enormous fortune from scratch. His remarkable capacity for making money has earned him a place in the God of Wealth's pantheon.

The *zhima* displayed here are destined to be burned after the worship ritual. There are, however, prints of Gods of Wealth or other wealth icons that are printed and coloured elaborately. For example, one such piece features another popular wealth motif, a money tree growing out of a Treasure Bowl. It is said that when shaken, the branches of the money tree will shed coins and ingots. Prints like this are used to adorn domestic walls or shrines and remain there for a long period of time.

Notes

1. I am indebted for Polina Rud' (Kunstkamera Museum) for her kind help in checking details of the plate description.
2. “利市仙官” is sometimes worshipped separately, as shown in *fig. 4*.

Illustrations

- Fig. 1.** Caishen icon “Foreign Man Presents Treasure”. Woodblock print with hand-painted colour. Paper, aniline dye, gouache, 24.5×35.9 cm. Beijing, beginning of the 20th century. Collection of B. Iu. Pilsutskii, 1907. MAE RAS, call No. 1090-44. Courtesy of the Museum.
- Fig. 2.** Caishen icon “Foreign Man Presents Treasure”. Woodblock print with hand-painted colour. Paper, aniline dye, gouache, 24.9×39.5 cm. Beijing, beginning of the 20th century. Collection of B. Iu. Pilsutskii, 1907. MAE RAS, call No. 1090-46. Courtesy of the Museum.
- Fig. 3.** Caishen icon “Foreign Man Presents Treasure”. Woodblock print with hand-painted colour. Paper, aniline dye, gouache, 51.5×54.6 cm. Beijing, beginning of the 20th century. Collection of A. I. Ivanov, 1915. MAE RAS, call No. 2469-22. Courtesy of the Museum.
- Fig. 4.** Caishen icon “Foreign Man Presents Treasure”. Woodblock print with hand-painted colour. Paper, aniline dye, gouache, 52.9×53.9 cm. Beijing, beginning of the 20th century. Collection of A. I. Ivanov, 1915. MAE RAS, call No. 2469-29. Courtesy of the Museum.
- Fig. 5.** Caishen icon. “Foreign Man Presents Treasure”. Woodblock print with hand-painted colour. Paper, aniline dye, gouache, 52.2×55.1 cm. Beijing, beginning of the 20th century. Collection of A. I. Ivanov, 1915. MAE RAS, call No. 2469-9. Courtesy of the Museum.
- Fig. 6.** Caishen icon. “Foreign Man Presents Treasure”. Woodblock print with hand-painted colour. Paper, aniline dye, gouache, 52.5×52.7 cm. Beijing, beginning of the 20th century. Collection of A. I. Ivanov, 1915. MAE RAS, call No. 2469-11. Courtesy of the Museum.