

The Cutification of the Gods: Transformations in Folk Religious Visual Culture and Discourse in Taiwan

Teri Silvio

Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, Taiwan

Abstract:

In December 2007, the Family Mart convenience store chain in Taiwan produced a series of one-inch tall cute vinyl figurines of Buddhist and Taoist deities, given as prizes in exchange for proof of purchase stickers. This series started a craze for cute deity toys (*shenming gongzai*), especially among young urban office workers and small business owners.

This paper looks at the variety of ways that Taiwanese people interact with deity toys. There is a continuum between treating these images as if they were *shen xiang* (images worshipped in homes and temples) and treating them as purely commercial objects with no religious significance. The vast majority of people see them as somewhere in between. Where people fall along this continuum tends to be more related to gender and class identities than to whether people identify as believers or not.

The confluence of cuteness and divinity highlights the similarities between the imagined worlds of gods and those of anime, manga, and commercial logo characters. The paper examines some of the key terms which link the ontology of gods with that of cartoon and logo characters: intimacy, fate, luck, and imagination. The discursive border-crossing of these terms attests to a conception of “belief” as the realization of a potential relationship between the real and the virtual, rather than a rigid ontological stance.