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## The Cutification of the Gods

Transformations in Folk Religious Visual Culture and Discourse in Taiwan

In Taiwan there is 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 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.

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