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Article

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Article

This Ship Prays: The Southern Chinese Religious Seascape through the Handbook of a Maritime Ritual Master

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Abstract: Long kept in the British Library, a liturgical manuscript from the port of Haicheng, Fujian, holds details of the rich system of beliefs that Chinese sailors held. Originally untitled, the text by the shelfmark OR12693/18 is usually referred to as “Libation Ritual (for Ship Safety)” ([*An Chuan*] *Zhuoxian Ke* [(安船)酌献科]). Formerly, it was given scholarly attention mostly due to its addended lists of maritime placenames, which follows Qing-era sea routes across China’s coasts and to the South China Sea. Further inquiry into the manuscript’s terminology, deity names, and maritime knowledge confirms its deep relation to sailors’ lore. By tracing this text into a wide range of sources, this paper demonstrates how manuscript OR12693/18 reflects a cohesive maritime system of beliefs and knowledge. Manifested within the prayer are a hierarchical pantheon, ritual practices, and a perceived sacred seascape. Moreover, it is evident that the manuscript belonged to a tradition of sailing ritual masters who were regular members of the crew onboard junks. As such, this paper offers an analysis of a religious-professional tradition with trans-local aspects, shedding new light on seafaring in pre-modern China.

Keywords: maritime religion; sacred seascape; sailors’ beliefs; Daoist liturgy; trade networks; overseas merchants; Mazu; South China Sea; coastal trade; ship safety



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1. Introduction

From their rise during the Southern Song (1127–1279) until the prosperous 18th century under the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the seafaring population of China, which operated the South China Sea junk commerce, developed elaborate traditions regarding their trade. Sailors, especially from Southern Fujian, prayed to a diverse pantheon of deities. They held rites at ports and out at sea and charted the seascape as a sacred geography, mingling knowledge of oceanic navigation and shipbuilding with religious beliefs. Their complex seaborne religious practice even required the management of a ritual master as a permanent crewmember onboard the ships.

These sailors’ beliefs are laid out in a prayer for a ship’s safe voyage, which is part of a collection of thirty-five Daoist liturgical manuscripts from the Fujianese port of Haicheng 海澄 (also called “Moon Harbor”, Yue Gang 月港), stored at the British Library. The manuscript carries no title; it is usually referred to by its shelfmark OR12693/18 or, according to its procession and purpose, “Libation Ritual (for Ship Safety)” ([*An Chuan*] *Zhuoxian Ke* [安船]酌献科, hereafter ACZK). The text carries no date; judging by the range of dated documents in the same collection, it was copied between the late 17th to early 19th centuries. As it displays elaborate elements of maritime lore on top of a Daoist religious framework,¹ this specific liturgy reflects a broader repertoire of maritime religion that was practiced among the seafaring population in the marine centers of Southern Fujian as well as along their networks of trade.

Most of the background of ACZK has been deduced from its contents and by the other, more detailed manuscripts within the same folio. The British Library only recorded the year of acquisition, 1870, without any further notes. Though the entire folio has been

noticed in passing by early researchers such as Michael Saso (1970, p. 90 fn. 18), serious scholarly examination of the documents commenced only during the 1990s. Since then, ACZK has gained attention largely for the placenames tracing trade routes that are appended to it (Y. Wang 2018, pp. 105–9; Yang 1998, pp. 80–91). The entire collection was cataloged by Hiroshi Maruyama (2012), and aspects of its Daoist legacy have been examined by Hsieh (2014). In view of sailors' religious practice, Qingxin Li (2019) has cited ACZK as part of a broader work on maritime religion, and several others have wrote of related mariners' beliefs (T. Tsu 1996; Y. Tsu 2002; Li 2020; Clark 2006). However, even though the above studies brush upon maritime religion or even delve into fine details of specific practices, none have systematically examined this topic as a structured tradition.

This paper aims to delineate a broad outline of a maritime belief system based on the content of ACZK. By examining the recurring terms, deity names, and toponyms in the prayer, it will be shown that this liturgy binds together a vast range of maritime religious practices which otherwise only appear anecdotally in scattered sources. Taken together, the maritime components of the prayer will demonstrate how various long-standing sailors' traditions culminated in a structured religious system, deeply intertwined with seafaring knowledge of ship operation, weather forecasting, and navigation. It will also be demonstrated that the prayer's origin in the shipping entrepot of Haicheng along with its lists of routes across the entire South China Sea accentuate its role as a religious mechanism belonging to the Hokkien trading network rather than a single locality.² As Dean (2015) and G. Wang (1990) stress, such mechanisms were an essential part of the Chinese overseas networks. Thus, the represented religious tradition, in turn, can be viewed as a core element of the centuries-old incline of southern Fujianese toward seafaring, or, what Chang Pin-tsun terms as the "maritime convention" of Minnan (Chang 1998, pp. 143–55).

2. The Seaborne Ritual Master

Before delving into the details of the ship protection ritual, we must first discuss the settings in which it was performed and the personnel involved. ACZK belongs to a more extensive library of ritual liturgies, which were copied in handwriting as part of the initiation of ritual masters and later used as their handbook for conducting ceremonies or other temple affairs. In this sense, the folio to which ACZK belongs is no different than many other historical collections of Daoist liturgies. However, ACZK is distinct from its accompanying manuscripts; it is particularly unique as a prayer for ship safety. I have only been able to find a few other titles suggesting similar prayers, without access to the body of these.³ The rare example of ACZK has intimate connections to other ship-related prayers and religious descriptions of sailors' practices, and thus, it is one of the best materials that we have to explore the seafaring belief system existing beyond the written record.

Though this maritime religion manifests in a text from Haicheng County, its range of practice spanned the entire South China Sea. The instructions and details within ACZK imply that the ship's blessing was not meant to be performed only at its home port but also at various points along the voyage. This is evidenced in the abovementioned appendix of placenames along sea routes; it is annotated with names of deities that are to be worshipped in each location (Figure 1). The list is a religious-geographical chart for the ritual master, instructing him which divinity to pray to at main ports. Using the placenames on the list, the ritual master could have followed the ship's course and anticipated the places at which to conduct a ritual and to whom (Hsieh 2014, p. 19).

An extensive range of sources confirms that a ritual master was an inherent part of merchant junks' crews. He was called either "Incense Master" (*xiang gong* 香公) or "Incense Manager" (*si xiang* 司香). As early as 1617, the compendium of maritime knowledge *Dongxi Yangkao* mentions this role onboard junks in a description of the sailors' religious practice: "Sailing ships on their way forth and back, each has incense that burns nonstop all day and night. One man is specially assigned as 'Incense Manager'. No one other [than him] handles these matters" (Xie Zhang [1617] 2000, p. 186).

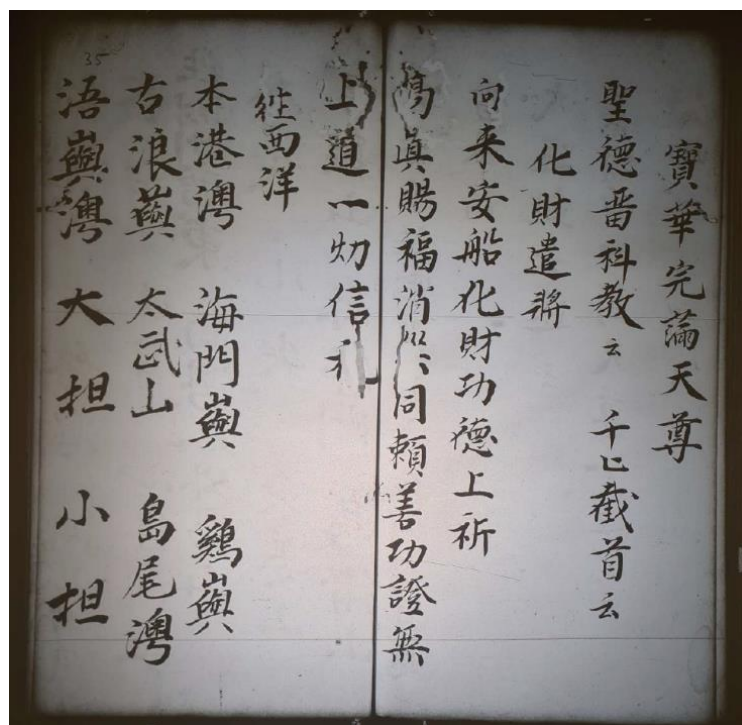


Figure 1. End of the prayer in ACZK (right) and start of the western sea route list (*wang xiyang* 往西洋, left page, from OR12693/18 (n.d.) Zhuoxian Ke, p. 35).

Here, the Incense Master's role does not seem complicated—keeping the incense burning. Qing-era sources shed a bit more light on the sailing priest's role. Xu Baoguang 徐葆光 (1671–1723), an envoy to Ryukyu during the early 18th century, wrote this entry when listing a junk's regular personnel:

Incense Master, one crewmember—[He] is in charge of the oil lamp in front of the Heavenly Concubine and all the water gods' seats. While out at sea, in the morning and evening, [he] offers paper [sacrifice] at the tail hem of the main sail. (Xu 1720, 1.8a)

A ship drawing from the same publication shows a shrine (*shen tang* 神堂) below and behind the main sail (Figure 2), where the lower ropes were tied. From these sources, we learn that religious personnel were indeed required at sea, no less than any other role. Yet these brief descriptions of the Incense Master seem to emit the full scope of his duties since incense burning and paper offerings are only parts of ritual processions.

During the past millennium of Chinese ocean sailing, ships' crews performed a much wider variety of rituals than joss burning and paper offerings (Y. Tsu 2002, pp. 69–86). One such shipborne rite was “launching a colorful ship” (*fang caichuan* 放彩船). In this ceremony, first mentioned in the Northern Song period (960–1127), sailors would carve a ship out of wood or cane, attach a sail made of colorful paper, and release it out to sea carrying food offerings. During the Ming, the ritual was practiced along several sea routes, at points along the coasts of Vietnam, Luzon, and the Pearl River Delta (Hsieh 2014, pp. 18–19). These rituals were practiced onboard the junk and involved the entire ship's crew. They were described by the Portuguese Martín de Rada, who witnessed such a ritual onboard a Chinese junk in 1575:

they said that they had to give a send-off to Nemoa [Niang-ma] (i.e., the goddess Mazu 媽祖) who had accompanied us thus far in order to give us a prosperous voyage. They made a ship-model of cane with sails and a rudder, and they placed a small grilled fish and a scrap of cooked rice inside it with many ceremonies, and thus they launched it in the sea. And in order to expel the devil from the

ship, they all line the gunwales with a stave in each hand. Then come two men, each with a large saucepan of cooked rice which they scatter over the ship's side into the sea, starting at the prow and ending at the poop. Behind them come another two men, armed with scimiters and shields, who go along brandishing their weapons and gesticulating, what time the ship's company beat very noisily upon the gunwales with their staves, and doing many other foolish things. (de Rada [1575] 2010, p. 306)

Though the role of Incense Master is not mentioned in this specific instance, it is highly probable that such an elaborate religious activity was presided over by a professional.



Figure 2. Stern side of a tribute ship (*feng chuan* 封船), in a drawing from Baoguang Xu (1720, p. 8.2a).

The Qing period saw the practice of colorful ship rituals both at sea and on land. In the Chinese closed quarters of Nagasaki, sojourning merchant sailors launched colorful ships as a funerary rite dedicated to those who died at sea, an activity that required several ritual masters, both Buddhist and Daoist (T. Tsu 1996, pp. 43–47). Although performed on land, this ritual was still held by Southern Fujianese sailors, the same ones who sent off ship models while out at sea and took Incense Masters as part of their crew.

One 18th-century example depicts a ship launching procession that was to be performed while en route to Jakarta, when the ship was just off the coasts of Vietnam at a place called Big Buddha Mountain of Yantong (Yantong Da Fo Shan 煙筒大佛山, also Cape Veralla, or, in Vietnamese, Mũi Điện):

When the ship reaches this place, [the sailors] first weave a wooden plank with bamboo, making a small ship with a sail made of assorted colorful paper. They display meat offerings, joss sticks, and gold money as sacrifices. When the sacrifice is over, they place the offerings in the small ship and then release them all to the sea to satisfy it. As the small boat floats away and disappears in a twinkle, they will cross this area safely and soundly. This is called ‘launching a colorful ship’. (Zhu 1763, 6.7b)

Like the above examples, two texts from the same folio as ACZK, OR12693/15 (1769) and OR12693/12 (n.d.), are liturgies for another kind of colorful ship ritual. These are plague-expulsion rituals of the type still performed in present-day Taiwan.⁴ They involve a model ship built just as a merchant junk, loaded with sacrifice, a symbolic crew, and plague deities as passengers. Then, after an elaborate ritual, it is burned. The liturgies for this ritual include evidence of maritime knowledge; both of them are appended with lists of crewmembers’ roles—such as captain (*chuan zhu* 船主), pilot (*huo zhang* 火長), and even Incense Master. Using these professional terms, as also the centerpiece of a large junk model, 8 m long, shows that this tradition was formed and practiced in maritime realms. This is unlike other land-based plague-expulsion rituals involving boats—the most prominent example being the Dragon Boat Festival (Duanwu Jie 端午節), which utilizes river boats as vessels.

Besides the colorful ship ceremony, ocean-going junks hosted numerous other on-board rituals for various purposes. Not all were necessarily conducted by the Incense Master: special prayers were performed for the compass before consulting it for directions (Xiang 2000, pp. 23, 109); in case of emergency, the captain’s duty was to seek Mazu’s aid or, in dire conditions, initiate an emergency ritual called “Rowing of the Water Immortals” (*hua shuixian* 划水仙, T. Li 2004, pp. 274–80); there even were cases where passengers who were state officials were asked to petition to Mazu on behalf of the emperor (Y. Tsu 2002, pp. 75–76). A seafarer’s life was soaked with faith, and their faith was more organized than had been assumed. The examples of an Incense Master and long-standing rituals such as the “colorful ship” demonstrate but a mere fraction of it. Delving into the text of ACZK reveals further aspects still.

3. Gods of the Sea, Gods of the Ship

The opening pages of ACZK are typical of a Daoist ritual, with no hint of its primary intention of ship blessing. They comprise a few short recitations and instructions, followed by long lists invoking divinities by name. Each group of deities ends with an instruction to light joss sticks before invoking the next batch. This long initial part is characteristic of Daoist ceremonies, intending to notify every relevant god to the believers’ following requests (Lagerwey 1987, pp. 54, 68–79). However, the last groups to be summoned are solely related to the seafaring world—protectors of ships, weather and ocean gods, and the divinities of the ship itself. A Daoist expert will find them difficult to recognize for the most part, but these gods were already well established in maritime lore by the time of ACZK’s writing.

The first few groups of invoked deities are arranged according to the Daoist pantheon’s hierarchical system. The starting group is made of nine gods, such as the Celestial Venerable of the Primordial Beginning (Yuanshi Tianzun 元始天尊) who is the supreme divinity of the Lingbao sect; the second group lists nine deities of a lower rank, for example, the Celestial Lords of the Ten Positions (Shifang Tianzun 十方天尊); the third group names ten stellar gods (*xing jun* 星君); the deities in the fourth group are suffixed as *zhen jun* 真君, an even lower rank in the hierarchy. The lists go on to more groups of gods and spirits while gradually focusing on the rite’s specific field of interest—water-related divinities and the maritime sphere.

The sea-going aspect of the prayer comes into play on page six, where the priest first addresses his audience: “The ritual master unites the life-stars and [heavenly] mansions of all the ship’s personnel” (醮主合船各人宮本命星君).⁵ From this point on, it is clear on

behalf of whom the ritual is performed—“All the ship’s personnel” (*chuan geren* 船各人)—and this form of address is repeated with variations, such as *ben chuan* 本船, “our ship”, a few times later.

Following this line, the text breaks away from the Daoist hierarchy, calling an assortment of divinities: Bodhisattvas, Confucius, mythical beasts, immortals, heavenly generals, and Fujianese local deities. After a few pages listing well-known deities such as Zhenwu 真武 alongside many lesser deities, the invocations turn to deities of the water department (*shuibu* 水部) and other water-related beings—the Dragon Kings of the Four Seas (Sihai Longwang 四海龍王) and the Lady Mother of the Dragon Kings (Longwang Mu Furen 龍王母夫人), for example. The general invocation finally ends with the local gods of Haicheng County, among which Mazu is included under her official title of “Heavenly Concubine” (Tianfei 天妃). Mazu opens the stage to the summoning of the rest of the maritime pantheon.

In the next part of the ceremony, after lighting more joss, the ritual master speaks on behalf of the ship’s crew: “Our ship worships the proclaimed and conferred, state-protector, shield of the people, illuminating Lady Heavenly Concubine” (本船奉祀宣封護國庇民明著天妃娘娘, p. 15a, Figure 3). A list of subordinate ship-protecting deities follows. It starts with Mazu’s saintly family: her father, mother, brother, and two sisters; 20 deities follow, many of which prove challenging to recognize in any other source.

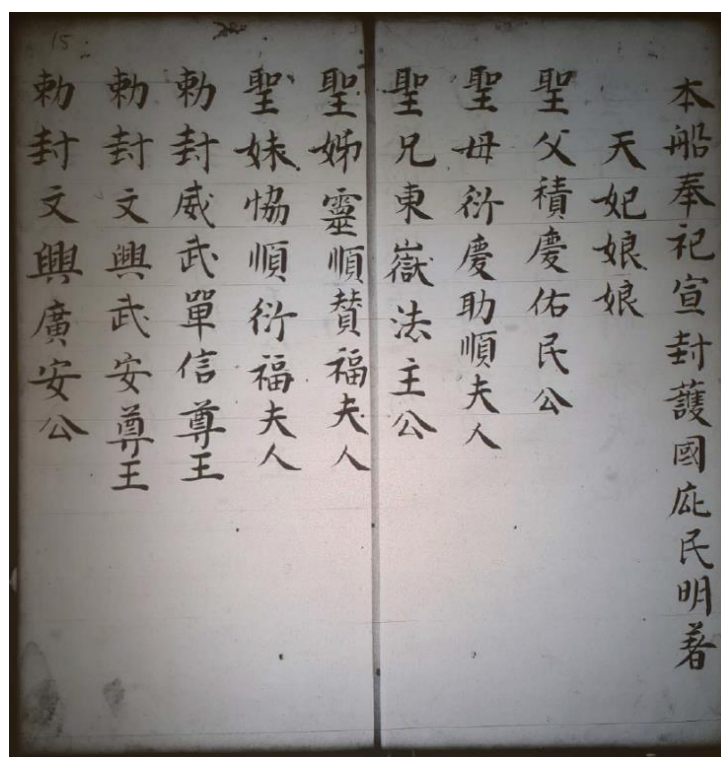


Figure 3. Invocation of Mazu, the Heavenly Concubine (*Tianfei Niangniang* 天妃娘娘, second column from the right) followed by her family members (OR12693/18 (n.d.) *Zhuoxian Ke*, p. 15).

Out of this list of Mazu’s subordinate deities, some stand out as well-known divinities of the maritime sphere. On p. 16a, the fourth line mentions Maozhu the Water Immortal and the Five Venerable Kings (Maozhu Shuixian Wuwei Zunwang 茅竹水仙五位尊王). These were a widespread group of five sailor-protecting deities worshipped as one. As early as the Yuan period (1279–1368), they were already mentioned as Mazu’s “right-hand men and hidden managers of a ship’s faith” (天妃股肱，潛舟司命也, J. Wang 1347, p. 33b). This same group of deities had temples at significant ports, from Songjiang (Shanghai) to Xiamen, and, judging by their frequent appearance in maritime writings, they were the

most ubiquitous sailor protectors after Mazu. In ACZK, it is the same—they are mentioned several times more in the “three libations” section of the prayer, and their temple at Xiamen port, called Water Immortal’s Palace (Shuixian Gong 水仙宮), is noted in the appendix.

The other notable gods attached to Mazu are perhaps the goddess’s most well-known companions. Thousand-Mile Eye (Qian-Li Yan 千里眼) and Fair-Wind Ear (Shun-Feng Er 順風耳) adorn most Mazu temples nowadays as door guardians before the goddess’ hall. Both deities are shown as characters in the famous novel *Journey to the West* (*Xiyou ji* 西游記), albeit as officers of the heavenly throne rather than Mazu (A. Yu 2012, pp. 102, 143). In ACZK, they appear on p. 17a, fourth and fifth lines. These two deities were closely associated with Mazu much earlier. The text which consecrates Mazu into the Daoist canon, titled “Taishang laojun shuo Tianfei jiuku lingyan jing” 太上老君說天妃救苦靈驗經 (Scripture of Lord Lao, the Most High, Speaking on the Numinous Efficacy of the Heavenly Concubine in Relieving Distress), written between 1409–1413, already mentions them as part of the goddess’ troupe (Boltz 1986, p. 226).

Following the group of Mazu subordinates, the prayer proceeds to call the deities of the ship itself. These begin with “our ship’s vat-master [*ben chuan caozhu* 本船槽主], wooden dragon [*mulong* 木龍], and water horse [*shuima* 水馬], the three illuminators” (p. 17). What comes next is a list of the professional gods of seafaring; 14 in total, they include the deities of the vessel’s vital parts, such as the stern’s Rudder Boy (Chuan Weiba Duo Tongzi 船尾把[巴]舵童子) and the Needle-supervising Boy (i.e., the compass needle, Jianzhen Tongzi 監針童子); other divinities that superintend critical procedures of sailing, like a god named the Divine Lord who Indicates Moorings and Recognizes Islets (Zhi wan ren yu shenjun 指灣認嶼神君), or hold power over the environment, as The Divine Lord who Blows Wind and Stirs the Waves (Fa feng dong lang shenjun 發風動浪神君). In addition, two names were incorporated from outside the marine world—the god of the stove, who supervises each household in Chinese tradition (Chard 1995, pp. 3–54), and Lu Ban 魯班, the god of carpentry, believed to preside over shipbuilding.

Though uncommon to find outside maritime lore, these ship deities, as also the previous sailor-protecting gods, are found in various other sailors’ prayers. For example, they appear in several ship-blessing and “launching of colorful ship” liturgical manuscripts from Taiwanese ports, ranging from 1749 to the mid-1800s.⁶ Moreover, several examples of specific prayers to the compass upon the ship’s deck invoke numerous deities responsible for each one of its parts. For instance, the compass prayer opening the maritime routebook *Shunfeng Xiangsong* of the late 16th century calls for the following:

The twenty-four venerated godly great generals, The Needle-setting Son, The Needle-shifting Boy, the water-bowl god, the water-changing lord god, the master with the power of lowering the needle, the divine soldiers who move the needle, the venerated god who guards the base of the directions on the compass [...]. (Xiang 2000, p. 23)

As seen through these examples, sailors venerated each critical part of their equipment as a separate divinity, from the needle of the compass, through the ship’s rudder, and to the vessel as a whole.

In addition, the compass prayer also invokes most of the maritime pantheon as displayed in ACZK—the wooden dragon, Lu Ban, the stove god, Maozhu the Water Immortal, Thousand-mile Eye, Fair-wind Ear, and quite a few gods of oceanic weather and topography. Notably, this compass prayer dates to the Ming dynasty, c. 1593 (J. Chen 2013, pp. 327–28), at least a century older than ACZK, if not more.

When it comes to the identity and functions of these maritime gods, some have names more telling than others. The god called “Rudder Boy” has an obvious purpose, i.e., he is either in charge of the rudder or the spirit within it. A “wooden dragon” is apparently essential; it is mentioned in the first line of the ship-deities group, but the name itself gives few clues to its function. The “wooden dragon” is mentioned a few times more in the “three libations” part of the ritual, more than most other deities, and thus, clearly, it has a significant role in protecting the ship. Furthermore, it even appears in the

title of another ship-protecting liturgy from Quanzhou, called the “Lingbao-sect maritime lamp wooden dragon ritual of ship safety” (Lingbao hai jiao anchuan mulong deng ke 靈寶海醮安船木龍燈科, Dean 1988, p. 219), and also in contemporaneous sailors’ prayers from Taiwan (Figure 4).

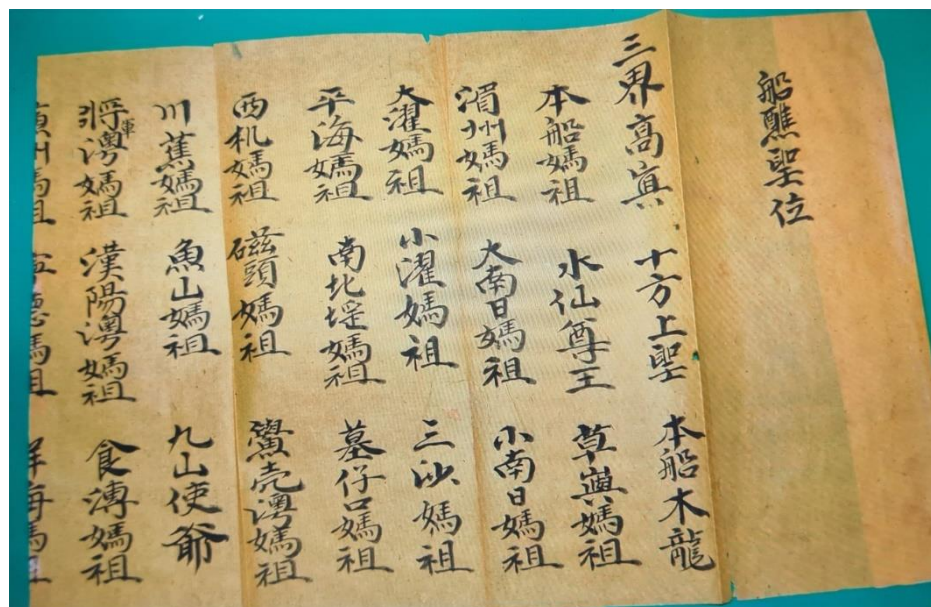


Figure 4. “Holy Places for Ship Rituals” (Chuan Jiao Sheng Wei 船醮聖位), appendix to the liturgical manuscript “Lingbao-sect Calamity Averting Ship Worship Ritual” (Lingbao Rangzai Ji Chuan Ke 靈寶禳災祭船科), dated 1749. It presents a list of deities, some corresponding to the ship and others to sacred shrines along the coast. Notice on the bottom-right: “our ships’ wooden dragon” (*ben chuan mulong* 本船木龍). Photo by Prof. Hsieh Tsung-hui. See (Hsieh 2014, p. 43).

Despite its pronounced significance to sailors, the only historical source to have explained what is a “wooden dragon” is the late-17th-century account by the traveler and scholar Yu Yonghe 郁永河 (b. 1645). After witnessing it during his passage to northern Taiwan in 1697, he mentioned this tradition and its significance in an appendix to his travel writings, as cited by Thompson (1968):

In every ocean-going junk there must be a snake [*she* 蛇], called ‘wooden dragon’ [*mu-long* 木龍]. From the day the ship is completed it has this [snake]. Ordinarily it cannot be seen nor is it known where it stays. If the wooden dragon is seen and the ship sails, she will be lost.

While Yu’s explanation is singular, the relationship between serpents and seafaring has deep roots in Southern Chinese culture. Snake worship and a strong boating tradition were two prominent features in the cultures of Min 閩, Wu 吳, and Yue 越 from before the Han conquest of Jiangnan (Katz 1995, pp. 19–20; Wen 1948, pp. 221–43). As such, hiding a “wooden dragon” on ships accords with a broader tradition of snake worship. The Min considered it an auspicious sign if a snake enters a household. They believe that if a snake was found within the house, it must not be harmed. However, in Quanzhou, the opposite is true—serpents within the home are bad omens. Still, it is considered taboo to kill them (Lin and Peng 1993, pp. 55–56). In Zhejiang, fishermen commonly call their boats “wooden dragons” and paint eyes on their stern to this day, much like the old Fujianese merchant junks (Gu and Xu 2019, p. 71). Similarly, it might be that these “wooden dragons” were believed to represent the ship in its entirety.

Lu Ban (c. 507–444 BC) is also worth further examination since he figures prominently in the compass prayers and was worshipped extensively in ports, shipyards, and decks of junks. Also known as Lu Gongshu 魯公輸, he was a mythic innovative carpenter of

the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BC) attested with many inventions. Evidence of Lu Ban's worship dates back to the Tang period, as testified by a construction workers' manuscript from Dunhuang (Qiao Li 2013, p. 137). Later, carpenters formed a cult around the figure of Lu Ban as he became their professional patron, and during the first years of the Ming era, a religious scripture dedicated to Lu Ban came into circulation—“Artisans' Mirror—the Lu Ban Scripture” (*Lu Ban Jing Jiangjia Jing* 魯班經匠傢鏡). Finally, *Shunfeng Xiangsong* mentions “Oar-builder Master Ban” (Jian Lu Ban Shifu 建櫓班師父), where the surname *Lu* 魯 is added with the wood radical to form *lu* 櫓, meaning scull or sweep (types of oars), thus playing on the deity's name as a double entendre (Xiang 2000, p. 23).

By the Qing period, the worship of Lu Ban spread across sectors of the shipping industry, both private and state-operated. During the Qianlong reign, naval shipbuilders sent to Taiwan established in Taizhong the Skillful Sage Immortal Master Temple (Qiao sheng xianshi miao 巧聖仙師廟), which is the central point of worship to Lu Ban on the island to this day (Qilin Li 2005, pp. 89–90). *Zhinan Zhengfa*, a 17th-century maritime routebook, mentions Lu Ban's name similarly to *Shunfeng Xiangsong*, albeit without the surname variation (Xiang 2000, p. 109). Moreover, in some temples in Taiwan, Lu Ban is a part of the divine group called Water Immortal Venerable Kings (Shuixian Zunwang 水仙尊王), which are arguably new identities that were given to Maozhu the Water Immortal and the Five Venerable Kings (Cai 2013, pp. 118–21). In this capacity, Lu Ban is worshipped as a water deity to this day.

To summarize the invocation section of ACZK, its summoned deities can be roughly divided into two main groups: one is the deities belonging to the Daoist framework, and the other is derived from maritime lore. As a sub-division within the marine gods, we can distinguish between the protective deities, namely Mazu and her list of subordinates, the ship's spirits representing the vital parts of the junk, and other divinities of climatic and topographic phenomena. The same division applies to other prayers from the maritime sphere, namely, the prayers for the compass in historical maritime guides and ship-safety prayers from Taiwan. Many of the evoked deities also appear in these, demonstrating a clear and consistent system of beliefs passed on among generations of sailors.

4. Sacred Geography of the Chinese Coast and Beyond

Though ACZK represents a tradition based in Haicheng, Fujian, it contains an appendix that transcends the boundaries of locality, demonstrating a mobile tradition practiced across the South China Sea. Pages 35b to 44b comprise only toponyms, some noted with names of deities or religious instructions. Four titles divide the place names into groups, each tracing maritime routes when read in order: “To the Western Ocean” (*wang Xiyang* 往西洋, p. 35b), “To the Eastern Ocean” (*wang Dongyang* 往東洋, p. 40a), “down south” (*xia nan* 下南, p. 41b), and “up north” (*shang bei* 上北, p. 42b). Each section starts at Haicheng, which is referred to as “harbor of origin” (*ben gang'ao* 本港灣), and then lists waypoints along a trading line. Each route branches at several points; in these cases, the list follows a single outlet until its destination, then returns to the junction and follows the next one (Figure 5). In total, these routes lead all across the Chinese coast, from Tianjin to Guangdong, and span the entire length of the South China Sea.

Despite its elaborate lists of places along the trading routes, this appendix does not appear to have been used for navigation but rather for religious practice. Instead of providing directions and distances between landmarks, the appendix of ACZK specifies places of worship. Outside the Chinese mainland, it points out areas where “it is good to summon the gods” (*shan zhao shen* 善招神). Along the Chinese coasts, it notes names of relevant gods or temples at the locality; in between the noted locations, it mentions landmarks, such as small islets, where no worship is needed. Using this appendix, a sailing Incense Master could have followed the ship's location and know which are the nearest gods to pray to.

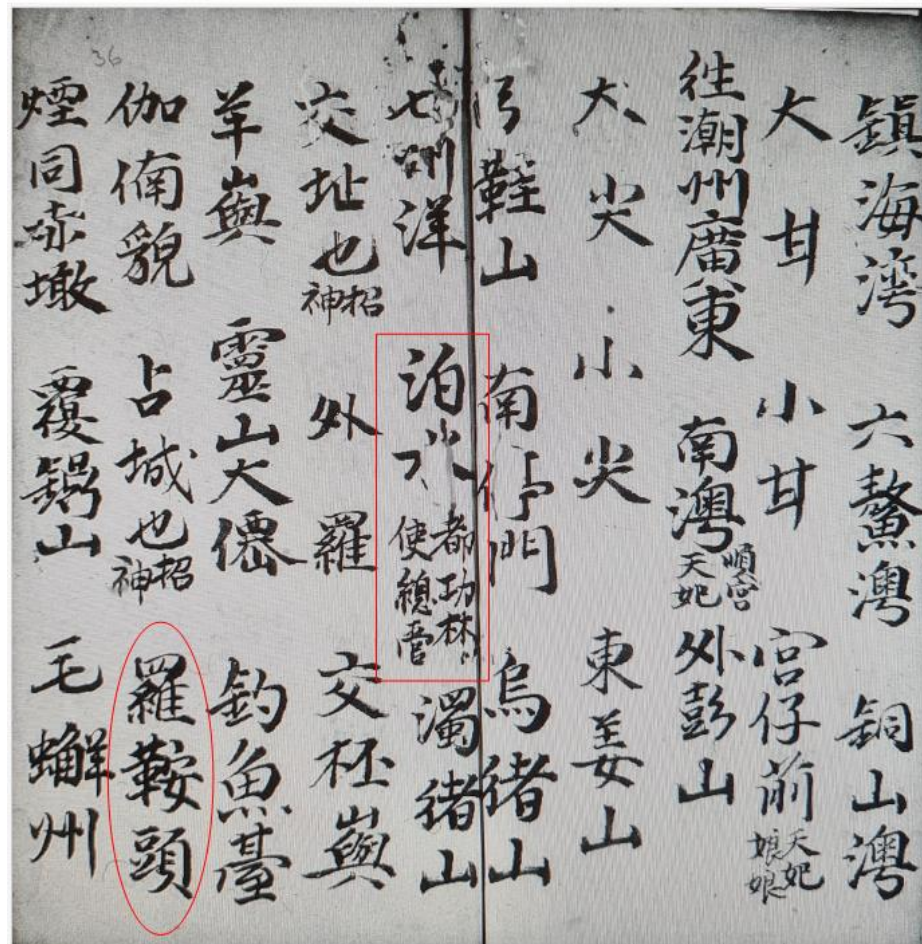


Figure 5. ACZK, the continued route to the Western Ocean, showing places of worship, including Boshui 泊水 (in a red rectangle). The deity and temple names are written in half-sized characters. Luo'an Head (Luo'an Tou 羅鞍頭, circled in red) is a junction; every time it repeats marks the start of a different route, out of nine total in the Xiyang (OR12693/18 (n.d.) Zhuoxian Ke, p. 36).

4.1. The Overseas Routes

The Dongyang and Xiyang sections are especially intriguing because they trace their era's international commercial routes. These terms, meaning "East Ocean" and "West Ocean", respectively, were already standard when ACZK was written, referring to a division between travel zones in Nanyang 南洋, known today as the South China Sea. The eastern division included routes going to the Philippines and then south to the Spice Islands, and the western area covered continental Southeast Asia and most destination in modern-day Indonesia (Brook 2015, pp. 113–14; Ng 1983, p. 47). The appendix of ACZK records a total of nine routes to the western ocean, reaching the ports of Vietnam (Jiaozhi 交趾), Champa (Zhancheng 占城), Cambodia (Jianpuzhai 柬埔寨), Bantam (Xiagang 下港), Timor (Chiwen 池汶), Palembang (Jiugang 舊港), Patani (Dani 大泥), Pahang (Pengheng 彭亨), Johore (Wuting 烏玓), Siam (Xianluo 暹羅), and Jambi (Zhanbei 占陂); the eastern route branches to ports around Taiwan, Luzon (Lüsong 呂宋), Brunei (Wenlai 文萊), and between Luzon to Brunei.

If one were to follow the West and East Ocean routes outside of China, they would be taken on an extensive tour around insular and continental Southeast Asia, from the Philippines in the east to Burma in the west and far south as Timor. The waypoints in ACZK's appendix cover most of the known primary routes, omitting only a few secondary shortcuts and littoral destinations such as the southern Philippines. Japan, Korea, and Ryukyu are also surprising absentees from this section. On the other hand, the western

route specifies ports in Taiwan, which was not a primary destination during the Ming.⁸ These details chart a route map which seems up-to-date with the known sailing habits of its day. More specifically, they clearly represent the trading networks based in Haicheng rather than each and every destination that Chinese sailors reached at that point of time.

In Taiwan and in ports of call outside Qing territory, the chart orders its reader to “summon the deity” or “it is good for summoning”. These instructions can be interpreted in two ways: either to summon a known deity to the ship’s deck or that the local temples are suitable for prayer, albeit without specifying to whom. Both options might have been practiced.

For instance, the placename list of the western route notes a deity called Dugong Linshi Zongguan 都功林使總管 at a place called Boshui 泊水, off the coast of Hainan Island (Figure 5). This is a deity commonly known as Lord Du (Dugong 都公).⁹ The routebook *Shunfeng Xiangsong* instructs to worship him while passing the island of Wuzhu 烏豬, located in the same vicinity near Hainan: “Wuzhu Island, the depth at mid-sea is eighteen *tu*;¹⁰ summon Lord Du to board the ship, and on the way back and forth launch a colorful ship to send him off” (Xiang 2000, p. 33). In all examples, Lord Du is to be summoned at around the same vicinity—the perilous passage around the south of Hainan, known as the Qizhou Sea (Qizhou Yang 七洲洋). Known for centuries due to its treacherous waters, sailors prayed on entering and leaving it (Qingxin Li 2019).

In another example, *Dongxi Yangkao* tells of the presence of protective deities onboard in times of emergency:

During times of danger at every junk, the gods must manifest their efficacy to warn the crew. The fire [in the oil lamp] would slightly increase brightness, and the deity would fly upon the junk. The entire crew will kow-tow until the light increases yet more, fly behind the altar’s screen, and halt. This is a day when the god protects the ship well. (Xie Zhang [1617] 2000, p. 186)

As these examples clarify, various deities were perceived to board the ships as an everyday practice and in emergencies. However, it is also clear that ACZK orders the summoning mostly in ports; therefore, some of the veneration could have been done on land.

While docking at port, ship crews might have preferred to disembark and pray at local temples or use the shrines onboard their junk. As ACZK suggests, while abroad, they would summon deities from afar rather than pray to specific local ones. Since many of ACZK’s specified ports already had Chinese communities and local temples at the time of writing, it is unclear why no deity is mentioned by name outside of Chinese territory and in Taiwan, which was already under Qing control. In all other locations along the Chinese coast, for this matter, the relevant deities’ names are mentioned, usually corresponding to actual temples. Perhaps, it is an indication of a territorial aspect to the maritime pantheon of gods, ascribing each deity to a territory on the mainland and at coastal islands.

Veneration outside of the ship was also a feasible option. Worshipping in local temples on foreign soil was common for sailors long before the Qing. As early as 1124, Xu Jing wrote of a place called Clam Cave, just off the coast of the kingdom of Koryō, “On the mountain ridge there is a dragon shrine, and seafarers passing by without fail come here to sacrifice to it” (Xu [1124] 2016, p. 232). During the Ming, official envoys to Ryukyu who conventionally disdained sailors’ ‘superstitions’ did not avoid addressing local divinities, especially in times of danger (Y. Tsu 2002, pp. 74–79, 85–86). Later sources from Japan, written about the same time as ACZK and onwards, elaborate on many more instances in which Chinese sailors petitioned to worship at local temples on Japanese soil.¹¹ The accumulating evidence tells us that worship on foreign soil was common and carried out enthusiastically within local temples outside of Chinese communities. Bearing this in mind, it seems natural for shipborne religious experts to chart foreign places that fit their spiritual needs.

4.2. The Coastal Routes

The coastal routes in ACZK are charted right after the overseas ones. These lists of placenames and deities represent the networks of coastal trade that departed from Haicheng and the places of worship along the way. The southern route, titled “down south” (Figure 6), goes to Guangdong, and the northern one, “up north” (Figure 7), specifies a few branches, with the furthest going to Tianjin. Nearly all the toponyms in these routes are noted with a specific deity’s name, but none instruct the summoning of an unknown deity from afar. Many of these gods correspond to historically existent temples in these harbors, as Wang Yuanlin demonstrates regarding the southern route (Y. Wang 2018, pp. 105–9). Of the mentioned deity names, Mazu’s is the most popular by far, appearing more than all the others combined (see chart 2 in Qingxin Li 2019). Numerous places of worship are noted along the way, so much so that clearly, no ship would have stopped to pray at each one. It seems likely that the crews prayed from afar when passing by at least some of these shrines or that each of the noted places was only a potential stopover, in which the ship could call for various reasons.

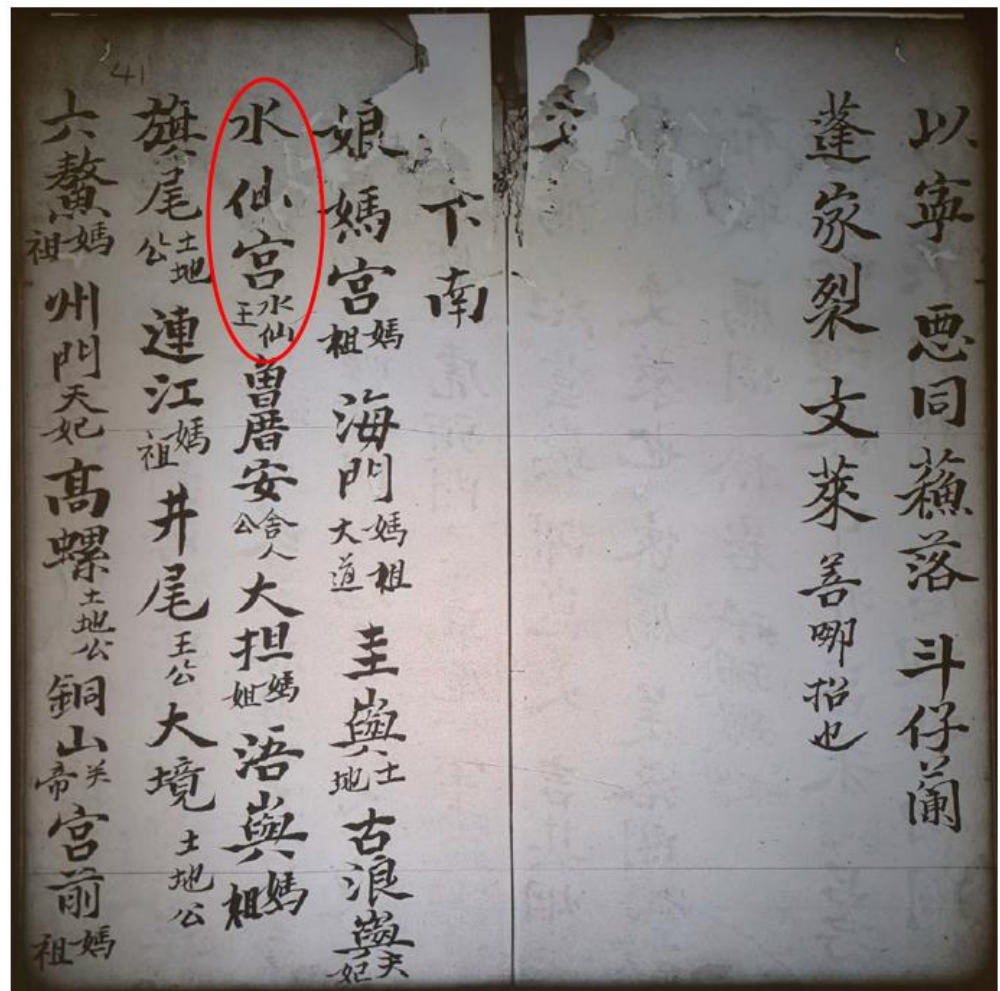


Figure 6. Beginning of the “down south” route (left page). The Water Immortals Palace is circled in red. The half-sized letters underneath read “Water Immortal Kings” (Shuixian Wang 水仙王). In OR12693/18 (n.d.) Zhuoxian Ke, p. 41.

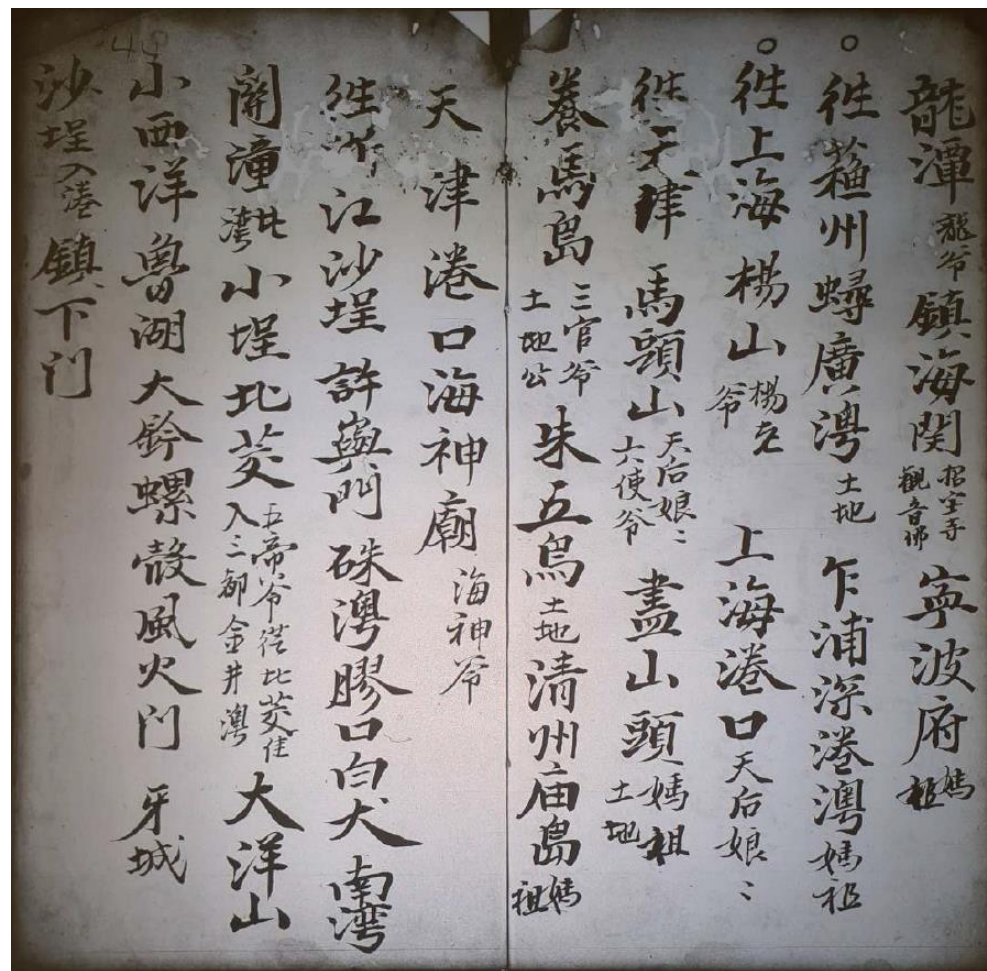


Figure 7. Last pages of the “up north” route, ending the entire text of ACZK (OR12693/18 (n.d.) Zhuoxian Ke, p. 44.

One such reason is that some places of worship also had commercial value, as ships often docked to acquire goods and fill their stores before selling at the destination (Antony 2003, p. 63). The “down south” route, for example, mentions a stop at Tongshan 銅山 (today Dongshan 東山 Province, Fujian), which was a considerably large port town where merchants would gather (Y. Wang 2018, p. 109). However, most places on the coastal routes are not of this kind; they are smaller islets used as landmarks for navigation. These are much less likely to have been mentioned due to commercial reasons.

The smaller islets and coves along the way are recorded because they were safe havens for stopovers. Usually, ships would rather spend the night at anchor, shielded from the open sea and preferably from pirates (Antony 2003, p. 63). The island of Nanri 南日 on the northern route was one such haven, as seen in old sailing charts instructing the way onto its harbor (Zheng 2018, pp. 191–92). According to ACZK, Mazu is to be worshipped on this island. At other times, ships would encounter severe weather that required them to stop at the closest port or, more severely, blow them out of their course to unforeseen harbors. In some recorded cases, journeys that were supposed to take a few weeks ended in months, during which ships and their crews were forced to wait for good weather at unplanned locations.¹² Even the most minor natural harbors were attached with a protective deity as life-saving sanctuaries, as long as they could host a ship.

Some ports of call at further stops were used to resupply. While sailing the littoral, Chinese vessels preferred to stop and replenish fresh food and water at points along the way rather than to sail directly to their destination carrying huge provisions (K. Chen 2018, p. 139). This habit is evident in a similar list to that of ACZK, found in notes of a Qing

navy commander. The assorted notes of Admiral Dou Zhenbiao 甯振彪 (1786–1850) contain a list titled “Respected Deities” (*Jing Shen* 敬神), which instructs places of prayer and replenishment along the northern coastal route. Spaces like Shanghai, Qitou 旗頭 near the Zhoushan 舟山 archipelago, and Ci’ao 慈澳 in today’s Xiangshan 象山 County, Zhejiang, are noted by Dou with the words “a bowl of food” (*cai wan* 菜碗) in addition to their relevant deities. At other places, he recorded a “blessing from the gods” (*shen fu* 神福, F. Chen 2013, p. 192). Dou’s list reaches Manchuria, even further than Tianjin, a journey of ten days or more if departing from the Fujian vicinity (Ng 2017, p. 364). Thus, a stopover around Zhejiang halfway through would make sense in favorable conditions.

Another kind of temple mentioned in ACZK’s route lists is those near the original port of departure, Haicheng. Some of these are so close to home that it seems curious for ships to have stopped there. The southern route specifies six stopovers while still sailing on the Jiulong River, Haicheng’s short outlet to the sea. These nearby temples were vital since ships used them to wait for favorable weather conditions before setting off for the open ocean. Junk captains would not compromise optimal sailing conditions; thus, they preferred to stay as long as needed before departing for open-sea sailing, even if that meant stopping along the short first leg. While waiting, the crews could pray for their journey’s success.

Yu Yonghe experienced this method to the fullest extent as he voyaged to Taiwan, which should have taken only two days in optimal conditions. First, his ship was shaken by waves for three whole days while at anchor in front of the Water Immortals Palace (Shuixian Gong 水仙宮) at Xiamen, the fifth placename in the “down south” list in ACZK (Figure 6). The temple accommodated the waiting crew, although Yu chose to stay at a different place nearby (Y. Yu [1697] 2004, p. 16). Then, Yu’s ship sailed for a full day, reaching the island of Dadan 大擔, only one short stop away, where ACZK mentions Mazu as the venerated deity. A day later, the ship stopped nearby at Kinmen due to a lack of winds. At that point, Yu concluded that “on the ocean, one is afraid of the wind but should be more afraid of no wind” (Y. Yu [1697] 2004, pp. 19–23). This firsthand account emphasizes that ocean voyages, be they along the coast or overseas, were no simple endeavor right from the start, and an intimate acquaintance with the safe stopovers was necessary throughout. Moreover, temples played an extra role as roadhouses in the maritime sanctuaries.

Last, it should be noted that other than shelter and supplies, the places of worship were noted for their perceived religious efficacy. This can be seen through another similar list that is appended to a “launching of a colorful ship” liturgy from Gaoxioang, Taiwan, dated 1749. The appendix is titled “Holy Places for Ship Rituals” (Chuan Jiao Sheng Wei 船醮聖位, Figure 4). It presents a list of places related to Mazu in a structure much like the northern route of ACZK and Dou Zhenbiao’s notes. Like in the other lists, the placenames refer to actual locations along the coast, mainly from Fujian to Zhejiang. One such location is Mazu’s ancestral temple on the island of Meizhou 湄洲. Sailors would sometimes stop there, especially to venerate the goddess; it is one of the few places mentioned in the above three religious route lists and highlighted in coastal navigation charts (Xun Zhang 1980, pp. 100–1). In other accounts, crews reported how they dropped anchor at Putuoshan 普陀山 just for worshipping Guanyin (Ishii 1998, p. 149).

As these examples demonstrate, the religious charting of the Chinese coasts was done according to an intimate acquaintance with the littoral trade and was also used as a practical tool during the voyages. Thus, a closer examination of each mentioned place and its history might prove beneficial for studying the fine details of Qing-era maritime navigation. In addition, a closer look at the religious habits of these locations, the hagiographies of the less-common deities, and tracing the toponyms may reveal much more. These, however, are beyond the scope of this paper.

5. Conclusions

As the detailed manuscript of ACZK reveals, sailors’ religious practices were sophisticated and structured. While most sources dealing with the maritime world mention fragmentary anecdotes, ACZK conflates terms and practices recorded in numerous writings

into a single prayer. By far, it presents the most exhaustive set of maritime-religion components in a single text. Exploring these maritime components demonstrates a belief system encompassing overseas and coastal trade networks, navigation methods, and seafaring techniques. This system included a vast pantheon of deities led by Mazu as the paramount goddess, rituals for daily routine and emergency, a religious charting of the South China Sea, and specialized personnel. It is a unique tradition of the overseas sailors based in southern Fujian.

The seafaring religion in the Haicheng manuscripts indicates a larger sphere of practice than the region from which it originated. Besides invoking local deities, ACZK notes divinities from all across the Chinese coastline for whom to pray, making it evident that the ship blessing ritual was carried to diverse places. This trans-locality corresponds to Haicheng's role as a maritime hub and the center of China's overseas private commercial activities for decades. Moreover, ACZK includes deities from various other places than Haicheng—most notably, the belief in Mazu originated in Putian, but additionally, Maozhu the Water Immortal and the Five Venerable Kings were originally local gods at Yongjia 永嘉 County, Zhejiang Province (J. Wang 1347, pp. 33b–34a). Even the crowd of sailor devotees was most likely diverse, as junks comprised motley crews from various ports, common sailors who drifted between ports in search of jobs (Ch'en 1994, pp. 209–11; Antony 2003, pp. 74–75). As such, the tradition was influenced by localities along the network of places through which its adherents travelled back and forth.

The details of ACZK reveal that maritime religion was deeply embedded in professional practice. Sailing the high seas involved harsh risks, reliance on equipment, and unpredictable weather, which drove mariners to form a practical set of beliefs focused on their safety and successful journeys. From the patron deity of shipbuilding, Lu Ban, through the spirit of the ship manifested in the “wooden dragon” and those of its vital parts and to gods of oceanic weather and topography, sailors held beliefs regarding every aspect of their trade. In doing so, they animated oceanic phenomenon and parts of the ship itself, ascribing them to specific patron deities—a perception which deviates somewhat from the more common Chinese tendency of worshipping anthropomorphic beings or dragons.

The geographical features of ACZK's appendix supplement a religious chart to maritime navigation, which demonstrate an outward world view, outside of China. Despite being based in Fujian, the sailors operated all across the South China Sea, and thus, they also perceived it in spiritual terms. As the appendix to ACZK shows, places along the Chinese coasts were perceived as the domains of various deities, and overseas ports were required with summoning protective deities from afar. In this sense, the sailors held a trans-local belief, focused on the “Mediterranean” of Southeast Asia (Lombard 2007).

Because of the intimate relation between religion, geography, and professional conduct, the maritime religious traditions changed along with the Chinese seascape; as the age of sail gave way to steamships during the 19th century, so did the maritime belief system gradually transform. With no more wind-driven junks to operate, the traditional Chinese way of seafaring was fundamentally altered, along with its assorted beliefs. Though many maritime-religious elements persevered among coastal communities and fisherman, there are no more Incense Masters to be found, nor modern versions of grand maritime safety rituals upon merchant ships, at least to my own knowledge. Nonetheless, this tradition was once one of the core foundations of the seafaring parts of Chinese society. It belonged to sailors who operated a vast commerce network by all standards, and thus, it is a religious tradition worthy of further discussion.

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Notes

- ¹ This same collection is mentioned by Kenneth Dean as an example to an entire category of Daoist cults, which had ‘less pronounced official connections’ and therefore only a small portion of their texts entered the Canon, whereas their liturgies could ‘still be found in the local manuscript collections of local Taoists’. See (Dean 1995, pp. 30–31). In this regard, my usage of the term ‘Daoist’ in this paper refers to the popular form of Daoism, as practiced by non-institutional followers and priests and often mixed with other forms of religious traditions, such as in this case—a maritime belief system.
- ² Haicheng’s Moon Harbor became the most important smuggling port during the Ming ‘sea-ban’ (*haijin* 海禁), and an important hub for foreign trade after the lifting of the ban. It was replaced from this role by the adjacent port of Xiamen in 1727, though, as seen through ACZK, seafaring and maritime culture remained an intrinsic part of daily life. See (Lin 1984, pp. 142–53; Ng 2017, pp. 33–34, 162).
- ³ Most similar is in (Dean 1988, pp. 219–21), titled QZ.16 靈寶海醮安船木龍燈科 [Lingbao-sect maritime lamp wooden dragon ritual of ship safety]. Two more items in the same catalog, PT.5 and PT.6, are also rituals for ship safety. See a comparison of excerpts from ACZK to newer ship-protecting prayers from Tainan in Maruyama 2012, pp. 9–12. However, all the above are currently unavailable to view.
- ⁴ Jiang provides an analysis of a modern plague-ship ritual (*song wang jiao* 送王醮) which includes a role call of the ship’s crew, according to the crewmembers’ names in an old junk. See (Jiang 2011, pp. 24–42).
- ⁵ The pages in the entire British Library Daoist collection OR12693 were not numbered originally, but were added with Arabic numerals, probably at the British Museum where the text was first collected. This paper follows these.
- ⁶ Many of the charted manuscripts in (Hsieh 2014, pp. 40–42), contain various mentions of ship deities of the same kind. I thank Prof. Hsieh Conghui for introducing me to his collection of Taiwanese old manuscript photos, most of which are held at private masters’ collections and inaccessible to the public.
- ⁷ I thank the anonymous reviewer for his identification of Zhanbei as Jambi, which I was initially unable to identify.
- ⁸ For example, the Ming-era rutter *Shunfeng Xiangsong* does not specify any Taiwanese port along its route guide, while the later *Zhinan Zhengfa* gives directions to the same ports in Taiwan mentioned in ACZK.
- ⁹ *Dongxi Yangkao* describes Lord Du as a sailor who followed Admiral Zheng He in his voyages and later died at the entrance to the Pearl River estuary. He was deified and worshipped there ever since. See (Xie Zhang [1617] 2000, p. 186).
- ¹⁰ *Tuo* 托 is an old Minnan-dialect measure of water depth, measuring about 1.6–1.7 m.
- ¹¹ In some cases, the Chinese sailors’ enthusiasm to come ashore and worship was an excuse to get off their junk, as the Japanese authorities confined them on deck. See (Y. Tsu 2002, pp. 79–86).
- ¹² This chaotic nature of seafaring is most pronounced in the reports of Chinese junks to the Japanese authorities in Nagasaki, a most valuable primary source on the actual voyages of overseas merchants. Some of these are translated in Ishii (1998). See for example the statement by a Chinese crew who spent more than nine months trying to reach Nagasaki from Kelapa, were blown off course multiple times to several random ports, and lost four crewmembers along the way, pp. 243–45.

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