THE "GOLDEN MAN" OF FORMER HAN TIMES

BY

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We cannot of course be sure just when the first idol was worshipped in China. There is however a very interesting account that as early as 121 B.C. the Chinese discovered their western neighbors using what was unmistakably an idol, and that they brought this object back to China and worshipped it there. It is moreover described in such terms that in all probability this was the first idol to arrive in China. Its existence provides interesting data for the history of Buddhism.

Not every anthropomorphic image is an idol, contrary to the impression given by the anti-idolatrous polemic in the Old Testament. An idol is an object, anthropomorphic or theriomorphic in form, that is thought to be inhabited by some divinity. An idol is strictly not an object which itself has any power, but only an object which is the locus of a god. An object which is itself powerful is more properly called a charm.

The ancient Chinese used charms. In the famous case of witchcraft and black magic 亁 in 91 B.C. brought about the rebellion and death of Emperor Wu's Heirapparent, Liu Chü, the proof of his guilt dug up by the inquisitor Chiang Ch'ung
was a wooden image in the shape of a human being, made of T'ung wood). The San-fu Chiu-shih says that Chiang Ch'ung had the "Hu" witches, who were helping him, make and hide this image. Such an image was probably an article used in the widespread form of sympathetic magic in which the person whom it was intended to injure (here Emperor Wu himself) was represented by the image, and certain things (injury, etc.) were done to this image, with the expectation that similar things would happen to the person represented. Anthropomorphic objects used in such magical practises are plainly not idols, even though they might have been considered to have great power.

The ancient Chinese seem to have followed the same practise as that found in the Confucian temple today and in ancestral worship, of using a tablet with the name of the divinity written or engraved upon it to indicate the locus of the divinity. This object was called a 主. Worship was directed to this tablet. For a people who honored the written word, such a practise was quite appropriate. Indeed there is no real difference, except in shape, between the tablet and the idol. Both are powerful and worshipped, not because of any power inherent in the object, but only because they are the locus of the divinity. A tablet functions in precisely the same way that the idol does. A tablet is not however suited to an illiterate people, and is appropriate only among a people with a literature and high reverence for writing. That the ancient Chinese understood correctly the precise similarity in function between the tablet and the idol is shown by the phrase in which Pan Ku refers to the object we shall discuss,

1) 桐木人 HS 45:13B. We shall denote the Han-shu by the abbreviation HS, and quote the paging of Wang Hsien-ch'ien's edition (1900) 漢書補注.
2) 三輔舊事, probably written 3rd cent. A.D.