
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