

## Article

# Cultural Exchange in the East Asian Seas in Light of the Acceptance of Mazu Beliefs by Japanese Sea Gods

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the local beliefs of the sea gods in Japan, represented by the Sumiyoshi Sanjin 住吉三神, and their acceptance of the foreign culture of Mazu 媽祖. While there are many differences between the two in terms of their backgrounds, functions, and identities, the evolution of Japanese sea god beliefs has been characterized by a gradual acceptance of Mazu culture, culminating in the co-culturing of the two in shrines. This paper adopts an empirical research design to compare the local beliefs of the sea gods in Japan with the culture of Mazu and to analyze the reasons for their acceptance of Mazu culture from the perspective of the other. This article argues that the Japanese sea gods accepted Mazu for two reasons: the tangibility of Mazu's beliefs and the superb spirituality of Mazu's beliefs. Superb spirituality means effective protection, both in terms of safety at sea and swiftness in rescuing shipwrecks, and in terms of the smooth running of the fishing industry.

**Keywords:** Japanese sea gods; Mazu beliefs; East Asian seas

## 1. Introduction

Mazu is a folk belief that has spread around the southeastern coast of China, but has also been influential in East and Southeast Asia and has had a profound impact on overseas Chinese. As an important part of maritime civilization, the belief in Mazu has prompted scholars to explore it from a variety of perspectives, and the results have been quite fruitful. A number of scholars have focused on topics related to Mazu's beliefs and the development of tourism resources (Shuo et al. 2009; C.-P. Lin 2021; Zhang 2021), while others have devoted their attention to Mazu and literary production (Poceski 2015) and literary acceptance (Lee 2016). Geographically, Mazu studies are most richly diversified in Taiwan (Park 2018; Tischer 2020; Zhou 2022), followed by East Asia (Sang 2016), including Japan (Ng Wai-ming 2020), South Korea (Moo 2017), and Southeast Asia (Gyeng 2022), including Vietnam (Fraszczak 2018). However, there is little literature exploring themes related to the exchange of Mazu beliefs between China and Japan. Chinese scholars pay more attention to the external transmission and fixation path of Mazu culture. For example, Lin (2018) clarifies the path of transmission of Mazu's culture to the Ryukyus, Nagasaki, East Japan, and modern cities; Lin and Lian (2019) focus on the spread and development of Mazu's culture in Japan. In contrast, Japanese scholars have taken an interdisciplinary perspective from anthropology, literature, and geography, resulting in a richer and more diversified perspective on the study of Mazu's beliefs, such as Fujita's (2006) 'Ancient Mazu statues and the belief in Funadama god in early modern Japan' and Ogata's (2021) 'Historical anthropological research on the reception of Mazu beliefs and belief in funadama in Japan', from anthropology, and Fujita's (2007) 'Sea of Japan exchange and Jurchens from documentary sources', from the literature. Takahashi's (2009) 'Historic Geographical Profiles of the Belief in Voyage Goddess' explores different aspects of the Mazu faith from a historical and geographical perspective, providing a broader perspective and research ideas. However, the above-mentioned literature provides the author with a sense of the problem, as there is a wealth of research based on how the belief in Mazu was spread in Japan, but very little attention has been



**Citation:** Li, Zhuang, and Kehua Liu. 2023. Cultural Exchange in the East Asian Seas in Light of the Acceptance of Mazu Beliefs by Japanese Sea Gods. *Religions* 14: 361. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14030361>

Academic Editor: Xiaohuan Zhao

Received: 22 November 2022

Revised: 6 March 2023

Accepted: 7 March 2023

Published: 9 March 2023



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paid to the aspect of its reception by the local Japanese belief in the sea god. Moreover, few Chinese scholars have considered why the Japanese sea gods accepted Mazu culture from the Japanese perspective, namely from the other perspective. What is the other perspective? This paper argues that most Chinese scholars focus only on how Mazu culture has spread overseas. What are the history and current status of transmission? In the position of other countries, Mazu culture is in fact a foreign culture, so how did these countries overcome their ‘rejection’ and absorb Mazu culture? This should also be a key concern. Only by thinking clearly about why a culture is accepted by the target country can that culture spread more widely. Therefore, it is necessary to consider what is the reality of the Japanese local belief in the sea gods from a Japanese perspective. What are the similarities and differences between the two? Why did Japan’s belief in the sea gods evolve in such a way as to accommodate the foreign culture of Mazu? In this article, these questions will be analyzed.

This paper will adopt a comparative religious approach, first comparing the native Japanese sea gods with Mazu. Comparison is one of the most indispensable methods in the study of religion. As both Heraclitus and Saussure observed, meaning is constructed through contrast (Freiberger 2019b). Specifically, this paper will be developed using a “weak comparison” approach, a concept introduced by Bruce Lincoln. Weak comparisons refer to “inquires that are modest in scope, but intensive in scrutiny, treating a small number of examples in depth and detail, setting each in its full and proper context” (Lincoln 2018). In this paper, Japanese sea gods are compared to Mazu, with weak comparisons under homological/relational comparisons. The comparands in these studies are (historically, culturally, linguistically) related to each other, and they are situated in one context (Freiberger 2019a). This paper follows a weak comparison approach, selecting only two points of comparison between the Japanese sea gods and Mazu, namely birth and function, and meticulously combing historical records and literature to draw more reliable conclusions from them. William E. Paden (2010) pointed out that comparison can either focus on commonality or differences relative to a point of commonality, or both. Because they both belong to the East Asian cultural sphere and are historically and culturally closely related, this paper focuses on the differences between them. We take this as a tangential point to discuss the reasons for the acceptance of Mazu culture by the Japanese sea gods. In addition, most of the writers on comparative religion adopt this way to conduct a thorough study of the basic text or texts, but few authors engage in extensive dialogue with the followers of a particular religion and conduct in-depth and extensive personal research into the various religious practices they carry out (Tiwari 2015). Therefore, the results of Ogata’s (2021) fieldwork are also used to add credibility to the findings.

## 2. The Origins of the Belief in the Japanese God of the Sea

The Japanese god of the sea and the Chinese goddess Mazu are both sea gods of the East Asian seas, but they were born in different historical contexts and, therefore, have different qualities.

### 2.1. The Birth of the Japanese God of the Sea

The earliest Japanese god of the sea was Watatsumi 綿津見 (God of the sea), pronounced *watatsumi* ワタツミ, *wata* ワタ, which is the ancient Japanese word for sea and is described in the *Manyōshū* 万葉集 (Akihiro et al. 2016) (the oldest extant collection of Japanese waka), *watanosoko shizukushiratama* わたの底しづく白玉 (a pearl that sank to the bottom of the sea). The word *tsu* ツ is an auxiliary word. *Mi* ミ includes two meanings, either as a common name for a deity or an ancient personal name, which may have predated *Kami* カミ and could, therefore, be interpreted as a being with mystical powers or a major guardian, or means ‘presiding officer who watches over’<sup>1</sup>. Both suggest that Watatsumi means the god who guards the sea, the god of the sea. The earliest specific descriptions of Watatsumi can be traced back to the *Kojiki* 古事記 (Kenji 1963) (Records of Ancient Events). Then, the god of the sea was born, named Owatatumikami 大綿津見神, and then

Minatonokami 水戸神 was born, named Hayaakitsuhikonokami 速秋津日子神, and then Hayaakitsuhimenokami 速秋津比賣神 was born. (*Kojiki*, vol. 2)

In this case, Owatatsumikami is the eighth god, the god of the sea, born to Izanagi 伊邪那岐 and Izanami 伊邪那美. It is said that Owatatsumikami lived in a palace at the bottom of the sea and ruled over the treasures of the sea and used water for farming. After Izanami died giving birth to the god of fire, Izanagi followed his wife to the land of the Yellow Springs but was unable to bring her back, and Izanagi gave birth to Santyushin 三柱神 while cleansing her body of filth.

When she washed at the bottom of the water, the gods she gave birth to were called Sokotsuwatatsuminokami and Sokotsutsunoo. When she washed in the middle of the water, the gods she gave birth to were Nakatsuwatatsuminokami and Nakatsutsunoo. When she washed on the surface of the water, the gods she gave birth to were Uwatsuwatasutsu and Uwatsutsunoo. 次於水底滌時、所成神名、底津綿上津見神、次底筒之男命。於中滌時、所成神名、中津綿上津見神、次中筒之男命。於水上滌時、所成神名、上津綿上津見神訓上云宇間、次上筒之男命. (*Nihonsyoki* 日本書紀 (Taro et al. 1995))

The three gods, Sokotsuwatatsuminokami 底津綿津見神, Nakatsuwatatsuminokami 中津綿津見神, and Uwatsuwatasutsu 上津綿津見神, are combined into the god of Watatsumi Kami. It is noteworthy that at the same time as the birth of Watatsumi Kami, the other three gods were also born, namely Sokotsutsunoo 底筒男命, Nakatsutsunoo 中筒男命, and Uwatsutsunoo 表筒男命, forming the Sumiyoshi God. These three gods are collectively known as the Sumiyoshi Sanjin and are the main gods worshipped at the Sumiyoshi Shrine in Japan. *Nihonsyoki* also contains many details about the residence, form, and activities of the Sumiyoshisanjin.

The second year of Jingu (AD202). A god resides at the bottom of the Tachibana komon river (or sea)<sup>2</sup> in Hyuga country and is as young and full of life as seaweed. Their names are Sokotsutsunoo, Nakatsutsunoo, Uwatsutsunoo (referring to the Sumiyoshi Sanjin). 則對曰：於日向國橘小門之海底所居而水葉稚之出居神、名表筒男 中筒男 底筒男神之有也。神功二年。

This record reveals two important points about the Sumiyoshi gods. The first is that the dwelling place of the three Sumiyoshi gods was at the bottom of the Tachibana Komon in the Hyuga country, which is equivalent to the present Awakigaharacho, Miyazaki City, Miyazaki Prefecture, Kyushu, Japan. The second is the form of the three Sumiyoshi deities, a young and vigorous deity resembling seaweed. Here, the image of the three gods of Sumiyoshi is entirely analogous, i.e., the gods are tangible.

The Sumiyoshi Sanjin also appear several times and play an important role in Empress Jingu's conquest of Silla. It is clear from this that the three Sumiyoshi gods accompanied the army in its conquest, as Sokotsutsunoo, Nakatsutsunoo, and Uwatsutsunoo were the army accompanying deities. When Empress Jingu wanted to invade Silla again, she asked the gods for help, and the gods responded by saying Sumiyoshi gods. The Sumiyoshi gods told Jingu that my soul should live in Otsu 大津 Nunakura 淳中倉 Nagasa 長峽 (where the Sumiyoshi Taisha shrine is located in Osaka). Then, I can look at the ships coming and going. So, Jingu followed the gods' advice and sat down in the town. Then, Jingu was able to reach the sea. When Jingu was returning from her three expeditions to Silla, she was faced with an unpredictable situation at sea, but she accepted the teachings of the Sumiyoshi Sanjin and crossed the sea smoothly.

It was from Sumiyoshi Taisha that Shotokutaishi 聖德太子 (Prince Shotoku) sent Ono Imoko 小野妹子 to the Sui Dynasty in AD 607 (Tono 2007), and when the Sui Dynasty fell and the Tang Dynasty flourished. Sumiyoshi Taisha became a key point of communication between China and Japan, as well as a gateway to the Maritime Silk Road. One of the thirty-six singers, Fujiwara Toshiyuki wrote that "Suminoeno kishiniyornami yorusaeya yumenokayoiiji hitomeyokuran 住の江の岸による波よるさへや夢のかよひ路人目よくらむ" in *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu*<sup>3</sup> 小倉百人一首 (Tomotaro 1966) (one hundred poets, one poem

each). Suminoe is a place where you can see the waves on the shore of the Suminoe River, and where you can see the people on the road. The name Sumie means Sumiyoshi Regency, which is now the Sumiyoshi district of Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture.

## 2.2. The Evolution of the Function of the Sea Gods in Japan

Sumiyoshi Shrine is a shrine dedicated to the three gods (Sokotsutsunoo, Nakatsutsunoo, and Uwatsutsunoo). It is also a place of worship in Japan for prayers for safe sailing and the shipbuilding industry. There are about 600 Sumiyoshi shrines in Japan, of which the three most famous are located in Sumiyoshiku, Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture, Hakataku, Fukuoka City, Fukuoka Prefecture, and Shimonoseki City, Yamaguchi Prefecture. The Osaka Sumiyoshi Taisha Shrine is the main shrine of Sumiyoshi Shrine in the country. According to the *Nihonsyoki*, Sumiyoshi Taisha was built in 211, the 11th year of Empress Jingu's reign, and has a history of 1800 years.

Sumiyoshi Shrine carries different functions as a must-visit shrine for seafaring trips, according to the *Dazaifu Tenmangu Shiryo* 太宰府天満宮史料<sup>4</sup> (Dazaifu tenmangu historical records).

### Record 1:

Jouwa 6 (AD 839) On the 17th of July, the Dazaifu, by decree, built the Silla boat.

*Shoku Nihon Koki* 続日本後記, On the 20th of August (AD 839): According to a Tyoujyou 牒狀 (circulating letter) sent by Omiwa Muneo 大神宗雄 of the Kentō Rokuji 遣唐録事 (Officials sent to the Tang Dynasty to record documents). Knowing that the three ships that entered Tang Dynasty did not like the incompleteness and hired and boarded nine Silla ships in Chuzhou 楚州 and returned from the southern coast of Silla, Omiwa Muneo boarded the sixth of these ships, and the other eight ships were hidden from sight, but both before and after as they had disappeared and had not yet arrived and were unprepared for this worrisome incident, the order was given that the defenders in each direction should be heavily guarded, the Sakimori 防人 (Defence Sergeant) should be kept up, food and water should be stocked, the following ships should arrive peacefully, and Muneo and others should be laid to rest in the kyakkan and wait for the ships to follow. On that day, he ordered the fifteen great temples to read the sutras and pray for the arrival of the ships, and to send *Shenzhishaofucong wuwei xia dazhongchenchaochen* Jishou 神祇少副從五位下大中臣朝臣磯守, *Shaoyouzhengqiweishang dazhongchenchaochen Baishou* 少祐正七位上大中臣朝臣穉守 to the country of Setsujin and present coins and silk to Sumiyoshi Kami 住吉神, then also to the Kehi Kami 氣比神 in the country of Etizenn 越前國 and to pray for the arrival of the ships. (Takeuchi 1964b, p. 382) 承和六年 (AD 839) 七月十七日丙申、大宰府命により、新羅船を造る。仁明天皇 承和六年八月己巳 (二十日)、勅大宰大貳從四位上南淵朝臣永河等、得今月十四日飛驒所奏遣唐録事大神宗雄送大宰府牒狀、知入唐三箇船、嫌本舶之不完、倩駕楚州新羅船九隻、傍新羅南以歸朝、其第六舶宗雄所駕也、餘八箇船、或隱或見、前後相失、未有到著、艱虞之變、不可不備、宜每方面戒防人、不絶炬火、贏貯糧水、令後著船、共得安穩、其宗雄等安置客館、得待後船、是日、令十五大寺讀經祈願、以船到著、為修法之終、遣神祇少副從五位下大中臣朝臣磯守、少祐正七位上大中臣朝臣穉守、奉幣帛于攝津國住告神、越前國氣比神、并祈船舶歸著。 (Dazaifu Tenmangu Shiryo)

On the 14th of August in the 6th year, Ninmyo Tenno 仁明天皇 (Emperor Ninmyo) received an ultimatum from the Dazaifu, sent by the dispatcher of the Tang dynasty, Omiwa Muneo, stating that the three ships to the Tang dynasty were not complete, so he borrowed nine Silla ships from Chuzhou and the sixth ship he was on arrived first, but the others were nowhere to be seen. Knowing that the situation was very dangerous, the emperor deployed a series of measures on 20 August and ordered the fifteen great temples to read sutras and pray for the safe return of the ships by making offerings of silk to the god of the Regency. On the 25th of August, the imperial envoy Fujita Tsunetsugu 藤原常嗣 arrived in



Matsuura-gun, the country of Hizen with seven ships, making a total of eight ships with those taken by Omiwa Muneo. This shows that the prayers to the Sumiyoshi deity worked and, therefore, it can be shown that Sumiyoshi Shrine has the function of praying for safety at sea and protecting the safety of the sea.

#### Record 2:

In June, Enkei 2 (AD 1209), Fujita Kunikado, Grand Shrine Chief of Takeo Shrine in the country of Hizen, appealed against the ruling of Chinzeibugyonin Tokitsura, and asked to be rewarded for praying for the surrender of a foreign country. (Takeuchi 1964c, p. 314) 延慶二年（AD 一二〇九）六月、肥前國武雄社大宮司藤原國門、鎮西奉行人時連・倫綱の裁定を不服とし、速かに異國警固祈禱の報賽に預からんことを請う。(Dazaifu Tenmangu Shiryo)

During the war, the Shogunate ordered temples and shrines across the country to pray and predict victory, and as a result, the shrines were rewarded with military honors (Zhao 2018). Takeo Shrine in the country of Hizen, claiming credit for its accurate predictions during the Bunei war and Koan war 文永弘安の役 (Japan was attacked two times by the Mongols), appealed to the Shogunate because it was not convinced by the predictions of other shrines and believed that its own temple was more accurate than others in predicting the war.

As can be seen from the *The Document of Takeo Shrine* submitted by Takeo Shrine's Grand Priest, Fujita Kunikado, the Dazaifu selected six shrines to reward the shrines for their prayers and predictions: Takeo, Sumiyoshi, Takara, Aso, Kagami, and Kawakami. 宰府精撰注進六ヶ所武雄住吉高良阿蘇鏡河上内、最前注進当社武雄神社文書 (Dazaifu Tenmangu Shiryo)

#### Record 3:

On the 19th of the year, the Jinzei Tandai Ashikaga Tadafuyu awarded Chikuzen Sumiyoshi Shrine Lord Masatada the Jidou 地頭 (a position of authority and control over a manor and a public domain set up during the Kamakura Shogunate period) of Buzen and Tikugo (Takeuchi 1964d, p. 386). 十九日乙丑、鎮西探題足利直冬、筑前住吉神主政忠の勳功を賞して、豊前・筑後の地頭を與う。(Dazaifu Tenmangu Shiryo)

The Sumiyoshi Shrine document contains a more detailed account of the granting of Jidou. Jinzei Tandai Ashikaga Tadafuyu awarded Chikuzen Sumiyoshi Shrine Lord Masatada the Jidou, one in the Buzen country tagawa gun 田河郡 honniyugochō 本貳拾伍町 motomatushirogoroato 本松四郎五郎跡 and the other in the Chikugo country fujitajiro 藤田次郎 saemonnojyo 左衛門尉 fujitayarokujyoshiato 藤田彌六女子跡 yonjyūcho 肆拾町. The two records here suggest that Sumiyoshi Shrine also played a role in predicting the course of the war and was expected to receive military honors.

#### Record 4:

On the third day of the twelfth month of that year, Eisai was 27 years old and left his parents and went to Tinzei. He went to Usa-no-miya 宇佐宮 for seven days, met Gen-san, and visited Aso Mountain, where the Eight Great Dragon Kings live. On the 27th of January, he practiced praying for a trouble-free crossing of the sea and for victory, and he arrived in Hakata on the 8th of February. Before his departure, he went to the Anrakuji Temple (now Tenmangu Shrine in Dazaifu), Tenjin Kamado Homan, Hakozaki Shrine, Kashii Shrine, and Sumiyoshi Shrine. He visited all the spiritual shrines and obtained the sense of crossing the sea one by one. He left Hakata on the 3rd of April, went out on the boat yesterday on the 18th, and arrived in Mingzhou on the 24th of the same month. (Takeuchi 1964a, p. 42) 行年廿七歳也、其年冬十二月三日、辭父母赴鎮西、詣宇佐宮七日、遇元三詣肥後阿素岳、此處是八大龍王所居也、二七日修煉祈渡海無難、一一得勝利、二月八日達博多唐房、未庸船解纜之前、安樂寺・天神・竈門法滿・筥崎・香椎・住吉、

如是靈社無不經歷、一一得渡海之感應、即四月三日解纜、同十八日放洋、廿四日就明州之津。榮西入唐緣起 仁安三年 (AD1168) (*Dazaifu Tenmangu Shiryo*)

Eisai arrived in Hakata on the 8th of February in the 3rd year of Nian and visited Anrakuji Temple (now Tenmangu Shrine in Dazaifu), Sumiyoshi Shrine, and some other places to obtain the sense of crossing the sea. He left Hakata on the 3rd of April and arrived in Mingzhou (the present city of Ningbo, China) on the 24th of the same month. It can be seen that Eisai obtained his sense of crossing the sea at Sumiyoshi Shrine before entering Tang, thus giving Sumiyoshi Shrine a certain religious dimension, and this also shows that Sumiyoshi Shrine does have the function of protecting the safety of navigation.

One of the sacred rituals that emerged from the evolution of Sumiyoshi Taisha was the annual Otaue matsuri 御田植祭り (rice planting festival), the purpose of which was to pray for a good harvest. According to historical records, it was first established by Empress Jingu, who prescribed a new field and called for planting girls from Nagato (now Yamaguchi Prefecture). In the Kamakura period, the festival was already quite large in scale, and artistic expressions such as sarugaku and dengaku could be seen. After the Meiji Restoration, the Shinto rituals were in danger of being discontinued. In 1979, it was designated as a Japanese national important intangible folk cultural asset and has since been preserved.

The festival begins with the awarding of rice seedlings by the Ueme 植女 (planting maiden) to the Kaeueme 替植女 (substitute planting maiden), followed by the Yaotomemai 八乙女舞 (Shrine maiden's ceremonial dance) performed by eight witches in the center of the stage and the Planting Dance performed by local children. The final performance is the Sumiyoshi Odori 住吉踊り (Sumiyoshi dance). The Sumiyoshi Odori is a dance performed at the time of the Otaue matsuri. The dance is said to have been performed by the inhabitants of Sakai City as a gesture of blessing and welcome to the empress of Jingu when she successfully landed on the beach from Sakai City. After the Tyusei<sup>5</sup> 中世, the Sumiyoshi dance spread as monks and Daidougeinin 大道芸人 (street performers) traveled around the world praying for peace and good harvests. The dancers are dressed in distinctive clothes and the leader sings while tapping the handle of the umbrella in the middle, while the dancers dance to the beat while beating their fans and drawing their legs in the shape of a heart.

### 3. Traceability of Mazu Culture

#### 3.1. The Birth of Mazu Culture

Mazu was a goddess of navigation known to the general public in the East Asian and Southeast Asian worlds, formerly known as Lin Mo Niang. Mazu was born during the Jianlong period of the Song Dynasty, and in the Southern Song Dynasty, in Liao Pengfei's *Shengdun Zumiao Chongjian Shunjimiaoji* 圣墩祖庙重建顺济庙记 (Liao 2007) "Lin, a native of Meizhou Island, was initially known for her witchcraft, and was able to foretell people's misfortunes. When she died, the people set up a temple on this island". At the age of 16, she was gifted with magical powers and performed many miracles; thus, she was also known as the Tongxianlingnv 通贤灵女 (the spiritual woman of access and virtue), unaccounted for at the age of 28 when she went to sea to rescue other people. Her kind and brave qualities have been widely celebrated by future generations, and folklore related to Lin has been widely circulated. In the Northern Song Dynasty, she was named Fei 妃 (Concubine), in the Yuan Dynasty she was named Tianfei 天妃, and in the Qing Dynasty she was named Tianhou 天后. As a folk woman, Mazu became a figure recognized and accepted by the imperial court in later times.

#### 3.2. The Evolution of Mazu's Function

According to Chen (2009), the social function of Mazu has progressed through three stages, from "the people's daughter" to "the sea god" to "the all-powerful god". The term all-powerful god refers to the transition from the sea god to an all-powerful god, such as the god of grain, the god of commerce, the god of midwifery, and the god of conservation,

who could seek blessings and eliminate disasters. On the other hand, [Liu \(2009\)](#) distills the war-aiding functions of Mazu from the inscriptions of Mazu temples in Taiwan during the Qing dynasty, specifically suggesting that they helped the Qing court to unify and stabilize the general situation in Taiwan, helped local officials to resist invasion and quell local civil unrest, and helped the Qing army to cross the sea and resist invasion by foreign enemies. According to [Chen \(2003\)](#), Mazu was a relatively active ‘living culture’, and Mazu’s beliefs became increasingly prominent as a cultural symbol, spiritual bond, or cultural accumulation. As can be seen from the previous studies, Mazu began as an image of a sea god, but developed into a multi-functional deity in later years and rose to become a cohesive core culture.

The two chapters above have traced the birth and functional evolution of the Japanese belief in the sea gods, represented by the Sumiyoshi Sanjin, and the belief in Mazu, respectively, and I have argued that there are both similarities and differences between them and that the differences outweigh the similarities. The similarities lie in the fact that both were originally intended as gods of the sea, guarding the safety of navigation. The differences can be broadly divided into the following three points. Firstly, the background of birth is different, as the Japanese god of the sea was born out of myth and legend, with no physical support, whereas the belief in Mazu was transformed from a physical figure. Secondly, there is a difference in identity. According to the *Kojiki*, the Sumiyoshi Sanjin is the general term for the Sokotsutsunoo, Nakatsutsunoo, and Uwatsutsunoo; so, the Sumiyoshi Sanjin is male. Mazu is known as the God of the Saints and in later times as the God of Heaven. In later times, she was known as Tongxianlingnv and also was praised as Tianfei and Tianhou, so there is no doubt that the gender of Mazu was female. In later times, the Japanese sea god gradually assumed the function of praying for a good harvest, but the god had not yet moved away from the category of a sea god, whereas the function of Mazu changed in many ways, from being a single sea god to an all-purpose god, rising to the level of a cultural bond. This is incomparable to the Japanese belief in the sea god. Given the many differences between the Japanese belief in the sea god and Mazu, why did the Japanese belief in the sea god accept Mazu? Why has Mazu developed to the height of Japanese sea god worship?

#### 4. The Acceptance of Mazu by the Japanese Sea Gods

##### 4.1. The Process of Mazu’s Acceptance by the Japanese Sea Gods

The belief in Mazu originated in Putian, Fujian Province, and as exchanges between countries in the East Asian seas continued, the belief in Mazu spread out of the country to the Ryukyus and Japan, and so on. [Jing Lin \(2021\)](#) concluded that Mazu was transmitted to the Ryukyu, Nagasaki, East Japan, and modern Japan, and that this is the current consensus among scholars on the path of transmission of Mazu in Japan. The earliest record of Mazu in Japanese literature is in the *Ryukyujindoki* 琉球神道記 (Account of Ryukyu Shintoism), written by the Japanese monk Ryoujyo [Taityu \(1943\)](#) 袋中良定, and the Ryukyu Islands were the first place in Japan to come into contact with the Mazu faith. The belief in Mazu was brought to the Ryukyus by the Min people, who built the Shangtianfeigong 上天妃宮, and later passed on to the Ryukyu royal family, who built the Xiatianfeigong 下天妃宮. [Lin and Lian \(2019\)](#) argued that during the Ming and Qing dynasties, Mazu culture spread to the heavy Okinawa region as a result of tribute trade and envoy exchanges, while [Xu and Gai \(2022\)](#) pointed out that the Ryukyu Kingdom’s external development was highly dependent on maritime activities, and that the Chinese tribute system and belief in the sea gods provided economic benefits and security guarantees. The belief in Mazu began to move north after the Ryukyu Islands were settled and then spread to southern Kyushu. Mazu was spread in Nagasaki by the Tangchuanmaoyi 唐船貿易 (Tang boat trade), with the Tang people, represented by merchants and Buddhist monks, as the core of the trade ([J. Lin 2021](#)). The migration of a large number of Tang people during this period provided the natural conditions for the localization of Mazu. Figure 1 shows the distribution of ancient Mazu statues in Japan, the most striking feature of which is the dense

distribution of Mazu statues in the Kyushu region, with Nagasaki and Kagoshima, two of the southern Kyushu sites, being the most densely distributed. The fact that there are three Mazu statues in the old Tang residence in Kannaichi, Nagasaki, reinforces the idea that the dense distribution of Mazu statues in Nagasaki was inextricably linked to the Tang people living in Nagasaki and to the trade in Nagasaki. The southern Kyushu region has traditionally been a key target location for Ryukyu trade, so it was mostly influenced by the South China–Ryukyu region–Southern Kyushu route.



**Figure 1.** List of ancient Mazu statues in Japan (as of June 2006). Cited in (Takahashi 2009).

The belief in Mazu continued northwards along Honshu Island, before settling in the Eastern Japan region. So, what was the reason for the eastern transmission of the Mazu statue? As can be seen in Figure 1, the statues of Mazu are spread all over Honshu Island, reaching not only the northeastern regions of Miyagi and Ibaraki prefectures, but also Aomori Prefecture, the northernmost point of Honshu Island. According to Akiyoshi Fujita (2021), the eastern transmission of Mazu is linked to the Chinese Zen monk Donggao Xingyue 東皋心越. He was a native of Pujiang, Zhejiang province, the character Xin Yue and the name Donggao, and was invited by Zen master Tyoutsu to live at Kofukuji Temple in Nagasaki at the beginning of the Edo period, but was confined to Nagasaki because of suspicion of being a spy for the Qing court. He was later released by the Mito clan (present-day northern Ibaraki Prefecture) on the strength of a short message from Tokugawa Mitsukuni and moved to the Mito clan's Tentoku Temple. The statue of Mazu,



brought from China, was brought back to eastern Japan by Donggao Xingyue. According to Ng Wai-ming (2022), after Mazu was introduced to the East Japan region, the phenomenon of mixing with the local Shinto patron deity, Ototachibanahime<sup>6</sup> 弟橘媛, arose and eventually the two deities were combined. In conclusion, the distribution of the statues of Mazu can be seen to have spread throughout Japan, with the Kyushu region at the center of the spread of Mazu belief. During the course of its history, Mazu's influence in Japan was expanded through the tribute system, maritime trade, the migration of the Tang people, and the joint worship of local sea gods, gradually entering Japan's indigenous belief system and realizing the localization of Mazu's faith. However, Sumiyoshisanjin and Mazu were not originally the same, one being a firstcomer, the other a later one; one a native god, the other a foreign one, but both eventually entered the Japanese Shinto system and became gods in Shinto. How was Mazu accepted by the Japanese faithful and eventually reached heights comparable to those of the Sumiyoshisanjin? We need to explore the reasons.

#### 4.2. The Reasons for the Acceptance of Mazu by Japanese Sea Gods

Chinese scholars have focused on the external spread of Mazu and the reasons for it, but there is a lack of research on the reasons for the acceptance of the Japanese side from an 'other's perspective' and, therefore, little prior research on the subject. In this regard, Japanese scholar Hiromi Ogata (2021) conducted a field survey of fishermen in Kagawa and Aomori prefectures to investigate the reasons for the acceptance of Mazu, and found that there was confusion between Mazu and the local sea gods among fishermen, who even absorbed the two without understanding their relationship. Akiyoshi Fujita (2021) pointed out that Mazu was accepted because she was a female figure and had been passed down in Japan for a long time. Chen (2011) argued that there is an overlap between the images of Mazu and the Bodhisattva, and that people in Japan regard Mazu as the draping of the Bodhisattva, and has also suggested that one of the fundamental reasons why Mazu is worshipped as the patron saint of navigation is because of her feminine divinity. Xu and Gai (2022) also argued that the belief in a sister deity, who is also a goddess of patronage, has made the belief in Mazu more acceptable to a certain extent.

However, the author believes that the reasons for the acceptance of Mazu's image from a gender perspective alone need to be further explored. As mentioned in Section 2, the native Japanese sea god, Sumiyoshi Sanjin, is male. In addition, according to a survey by Ogata (2021), the content of the gods of the sea is not uniform from mainland Japan to Okinawa, and Kodo Island fishermen's masters in Kagawa Prefecture are in the form of a male and female pair of Ningyo 人形 (puppets made of paper, wood, clay, etc.). Therefore, it is difficult to conclude that gender became the reason for Mazu being tolerated.

Based on the aforementioned tracing of the origins of the beliefs of the sea gods and Mazu, I would like to suggest the following two reasons for the acceptance of Mazu.

Firstly, the tangibility of Mazu's beliefs. The beliefs of the sea gods in Japan, such as Sumiyoshi, were born out of myths, such as *Kojiki*, and there were no real characters or historical prototypes. The origin of Mazu was a real historical event, and the prototype of the Mazu statue was Lin Mo, a seaside girl who lived in the Southern Song Dynasty. Mazu can be described as a tangible deity, a deity with a vehicle based on a real person. The fact that Mazu is based on a beautiful, kind-hearted woman makes her more relatable than the gods of nature worship, animal worship, and spirit worship (Xie 2002). In addition, Funadama 船玉 (the god of safe navigation) originally had no principal object of worship (Ng Wai-ming 2022). In more recent times, Japan has attempted to visualize the belief in Funadama in human form and has used this human form, together with hair and ancient money, in shipbuilding rituals where they are buried at the base of sail poles (Fujita 2021). The move from no principal object of worship to seeking a physical form for worship illustrates the search for tangible worship by shipping and fishermen alike. It is precisely the origin of Mazu of the true story, and the distribution of statues throughout Japan, that

meets the needs of shipping and fishermen. This is a strong indication that the Japanese belief in the sea gods has taken on a tangible form.

Secondly, the superb spirituality of the Mazu beliefs. Superb spirituality means effective protection, both in terms of safety at sea and swiftness in rescuing shipwrecks, and in terms of the smooth running of the fishing industry. The belief in Japanese sea gods is first found in the Watatsumi in the *Kojiki*, but Mazu was born in the second half of the 10th century and was a good deal later than the Japanese sea gods. However, even with the blessing of the Japanese sea gods, the sea was still a treacherous and unforgiving place, and it took six trips for Jianzhen to cross Japan. Abe Nakamaro, who wanted to return to Japan, was shipwrecked in Vietnam and had no choice but to return to Tang. Sugawara Michizane, who was the last Kentoshi 遣唐使 (an ambassador dispatched to Tang) to be sent to Tang, was afraid of the dangers of the sea and proposed the abolition of the Kentoshi, which led to the end of the dispatch across East Asian seas. However, according to historical records, Mazu was highly spiritual. In the Chenghua 成化 period (AD 1465–1487) in the Ming Dynasty of Geishizhong 给事中 (the name of the official position), Chenxun was ordered to Japan. When he crossed the great ocean wind and rain would overturn the boat, and there were two lights from the sky so he could park on the island. Someone told him that they were sent by Tianfei (Zhao 2019).

In addition, during the Tokugawa period in Japan, temple reforms were introduced to oppose the worship of foreign gods and the removal of the statue of Mazu, resulting in strong resentment among local fishermen and petitions from shipping and representatives of the fishermen who had been experiencing maritime disasters or failed catches and wanted the statue of Mazu returned (Ng Wai-ming 2022). These historical records also confirm the spirituality of Mazu, namely the ability to offer effective protection. As Ogata (2021) found in his actual investigations in Kagawa and Aomori prefectures, fishermen need to acquire supernatural powers with greater guardianship in case of misfortune in their sea voyages, as well as the pursuit of a more spiritual guardian of the sea. The fishermen, who lived and breathed the sea, sought the more spiritual beliefs of the sea gods. This explains why the fishermen of Kagawa and Aomori prefectures did not distinguish between Mazu and the local sea gods and absorbed them. The fishermen absorbed the belief in Mazu for the sake of safety at sea and the pursuit of a more spiritual god of the sea.

## 5. Conclusions

Mazu belief, a symbol of Chinese culture, has been spread overseas since the Southern Song Dynasty and has left a strong mark on history. Today, the history of Mazu culture seems to have taken on an additional dimension, as it began in folklore and grew in the official world, and its function changed from that of a sea god to that of an all-powerful god. The belief in the god of the sea in Japan is first mentioned in *Kojiki* as Watatsumi, and later developed together with the Chinese culture of Mazu. Sumiyoshi Shrine is dedicated to the three gods of the sea, originally built as a guardian of the sea to pray for its safety, but later its role changed to include praying for ‘peace under the sky and good harvests’ as one of its important deities. The beliefs of Mazu were adopted by the Japanese sea gods through the drift of the East Asian seas, which I believe was not only based on the fact that Mazu was a tangible deity, but also on the superb spirituality of the Mazu beliefs and a choice made by the Japanese fishermen to pursue a more spiritual sea god. “He who knows the enemy and himself, will never in a hundred battles be at risk” (Sunwu 2012). It is important to understand the path of culture spreading abroad, and even more important to understand the reasons why the target country accepts the culture, and only then can you better spread it.

**Author Contributions:** Writing—original draft preparation, Z.L.; writing—review and editing, K.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Kokugakuin, Shinmei Database. [kojiki.kokugakuin.ac.jp/shinmei/watatsuminokami](http://kojiki.kokugakuin.ac.jp/shinmei/watatsuminokami).
- <sup>2</sup> The original text is only expressed as underwater, which is not clear.
- <sup>3</sup> Ogura Hyakunin Issyu is said to have been selected by Fujiwara Teika at his villa on Mount Ogura in Kyoto. It is a collection of one waka poem each by one hundred people, from emperor Tenchi to Juntokuin. (Digital Daijisen, Japanese dictionary published by Shogakukan デジタル大辞泉).
- <sup>4</sup> Dazaifu Tenmangu Shiryo (1964) is a collection of historical materials held by Dazaifu Tenmangu. The Dazaifu Tenmangu Shiryo is divided into the 上世 Jyosei, 中世 Tyusei and 近世 Kinsei, totaling 17 volumes. In addition to the original historical materials held by Dazaifu Tenmangu Shrine itself, the 17 volumes include almost every period of Japanese history and temple collections, such as the *Nihonki* 日本紀, *Nihonkoki* 日本後紀, and *Nihonkiryaku* 日本紀略. It also contains Chinese historical materials on China-Japan relations from Chinese texts such as *Songshi* 宋史, *Jinshi* 金史, *Yuanshi* 元史, *Mingshi* 明史 (Zhao 2022).
- <sup>5</sup> The pre-modern period in Japanese history, following the Ancient Period. Tyusei refers to the Kamakura and Muromachi periods. The Azuchi-Momoyama and Edo periods of the Early Modern period are sometimes referred to as the Late Feudal Society, while the Kamakura and Muromachi periods are called the Early Feudal Society. (*Dictionary of the Japanese Language* 日本国語大辞典).
- <sup>6</sup> Empress of Yamatotakeru no Mikoto. When he attempted to cross the Hashirimizu Sea during his expedition to the east, he was cursed by the sea gods and his boat was unable to proceed. The Empress took his place and threw herself into the sea, and the boat was able to proceed (*Encyclopedia Nipponica* 日本大百科全書 ニッポニカ).

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