

The Deity Pedigree and Spatial Construction of Sangyuanwei Folk Beliefs Since the Qing Dynasty

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ABSTRACT

As the world irrigation engineering heritage of the Pearl River Delta, Sangyuanwei's folk belief is an important cultural dimension to understand the social structure and historical changes of the region. Based on the historical literature and field investigation, this study uses the theoretical perspective of "cultural gene decoding" to systematically investigate the deity pedigree and spatial distribution of Sangyuanwei folk beliefs. The study found that the god pedigree of Sangyuanwei folk beliefs cover many levels, such as water deity, industry deity, buddhist and Taoist deity and ancestor worship, reflecting the value orientation and realistic needs of local society. The spatial distribution follows the nested logic of "temple - community - embankment", forming an integrated structural form of "belief - space - water conservancy organization". The interactive logic of "water - deity - human" constitutes the deepest cultural gene of Sangyuanwei folk beliefs. This study not only provides a new analytical framework for understanding folk beliefs in irrigation engineering areas, but also provides historical and cultural resources for contemporary rural revitalization.

Keywords: Sangyuanwei, Folk beliefs, Cultural gene decoding, Deity Pedigree, Spatial construction.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

China's folk beliefs have always been known for the complexity of deity and spirits. In December 2020, Foshan Sangyuanwei was successfully selected into the seventh batch of "World Irrigation Engineering Heritage" list. Because it is located in the hinterland of the Pearl River Delta, its folk beliefs are similar to the popular god beliefs in the Pearl River Delta, but it has its uniqueness. On the one hand, the folk belief of Sangyuanwei has its historical tradition of formation and development; on the other hand, it is also rooted in the soil of local farming culture. Around the operation of water conservancy, silkworm production and local development needs, it has formed a pedigree of gods characterized by the worship of water deity and silkworm deity. However, the academic circles have not paid enough attention to the folk beliefs of Sangyuanwei, and there is a lack of systematic investigation on its deity pedigree and temple space construction. How did the belief system of this irrigation project come into being? What types are

included in its deity pedigree? How is the temple space distributed? What are the deep cultural genes behind these beliefs? These questions need to be answered systematically by the academic community.

1.2 Literature Review

The academic circles in China and foreign countries have accumulated fruitful results in the study of Chinese folk beliefs. In the study of regional folk beliefs, Zheng Zhenman, Chen Chunsheng and other scholars investigated the mutual embedding of folk beliefs and social space through regional studies in Putian, Fujian and Chaoshan, Guangdong.¹ Scholars such as Ye Tao and Zhou Shaoming have conducted research on the interaction between folk beliefs and regional society.² Liu Zhiwei believed that the folk beliefs of

1. Zheng Zhenman, Chen Chunsheng, chiefly ed., Folk Beliefs and Social Space. Fuzhou: Fujian People's Publishing House, 2003.

2. Ye Tao, Zhou Shaoming, chiefly ed., Folk Beliefs and Regional Society. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010.

traditional society imply the cultural changes of local society.³ David Faure analyzed the structure of Chinese rural society from the relationship between clan and village.⁴ Maurice Freedman conducted a systematic study of clan organizations in Southeast China.⁵ In the study of the relationship between water conservancy projects and beliefs, Xinglong discussed the process and sacrificial activities of the Jinshui River Basin in Shanxi from the state to the local “fabrication”;⁶ Zhang Junfeng⁷, Xia Yan⁸ and other scholars analyzed the interaction between local society and water resources. The above scholars have paid attention to the traditional Chinese social water conservancy projects often carry a strong ritual ceremony and symbolic significance. Regarding the folk beliefs of Sangyuanwei, the current academic research results are mainly concentrated in the area of Xiqiao in Nanhai District, Foshan City, Guangdong Province. Among them, the belief of Tianhou and Kanggong is the main one. It examines how the belief of Tianhou is related to the local society⁹ and how the formation of Kanggong belief affects the development and changes of the village¹⁰ in the two different social factors of Xiji flood and Dongji economic and trade. However, less attention has been paid to the interaction between the belief of gods and local society in other areas of Sangyuanwei. In summary, the existing research has not yet carried out in-depth and systematic research on the following aspects: First, the relationship between water conservancy projects

and folk belief systems in the Pearl River Delta needs to be discussed in depth; second, the theoretical perspective of “cultural gene decoding” is less applied in the study of regional folk beliefs. The purpose of this study is to combine the historical records, from the exploration of the historical tradition of Sangyuanwei folk beliefs, to outline the historical overview of its folk beliefs; with the help of field investigation, the main deity pedigree and temple space construction of the existing Sangyuanwei are investigated to see its evolution and cultural changes.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

2.1 Research Objectives

The first is to systematically investigate the historical tradition of Sangyuanwei folk beliefs, outline the overall appearance of its beliefs, and clarify the historical evolution and cultural changes of the generation of beliefs. The second is to construct the god pedigree of Sangyuanwei folk belief and analyze the hierarchical structure of different deities. The third is to clarify the spatial logic and cultural genes of the belief system, and reveal the interactive mechanism of “water - human - deity”.

2.2 Research Methods

This study is mainly based on the literature research method, and systematically collates the relevant records of historical documents such as “Records of Sangyuanwei”, “Revised Edition of the Records of Sangyuanwei” and “Continued Revised Edition of the Records of Sangyuanwei”.

With the field investigation method, the existing temples in Sangyuanwei area were investigated on the spot, and their location, scale, preservation status and other information were recorded, so as to form a comparative analysis with historical documents to investigate the inheritance and change process of beliefs.

In addition, the theory of “cultural gene decoding” is used to reveal the formation mechanism of cultural forms and decode the cultural logic of the belief system from the surface to the deep.

3. Liu Zhiwei, The Legitimacy and Localization of Gods — An Explanation of the Worship of North Gods in the Pearl River Delta, Department of History of Sun Yat-sen University ed., Journal of History, Sun Yat-sen University. Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House, 1994, p.123.

4. David Faure, The Structure of Chinese Rural Society: Lineage and Village in the Eastern New Territories, Hong Kong. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 45-148.

5. (U.K.) Maurice Freedman, Lineage Organization in Southeastern China. Liu Xiaochun, trans., Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2000.

6. Xing Long, The Case Study on the System of Irrigation and Sacrificial Rites in the 36 Villages of Jinshui Drainage Area, Historical Review, 2005(4): 1.

7. Zhang Junfeng, Legend, Ritual and Order: Interpretation of the “Water Mother” Belief in Shanxi Quanyu Society, Journal of Ancient China Studies, 2008(5): 386.

8. Xia Yan, Praying for Rain or Sunny Day and Water Resources Control by Local Government in the Tang Dynasty:Focusing on the Stone Inscription at Temple of Spring God. Collected Papers of History Studies. 2021(6): 21.

9. Li Xiaolong, The Worship of Tianhou and Local Society in Xiqiao, Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2012.

10. Shi Xiufeng, The Worship of Kanggong and Local Society in Xiqiao, Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2016.

3. RESEARCH PROCESS AND RESULTS

3.1 *The Historical Tradition of Sangyuanwei Folk Beliefs*

The historical tradition of Chinese folk beliefs is inseparable from “rites” and “customs”. The traditional “rites” are mostly “auspicious rites”, that is, sacrificial rites. The “customs” are mostly customs that accompany the sacrificial rites. The rites and customs “stipulate the organizational structure of Chinese society, which has remained largely unchanged”.¹¹ Therefore, folk beliefs are always associated with their regional customs and local social organizations. During the construction of the mulberry garden enclosure, it is necessary to complete the ritual procedures such as building rituals and sacrifices. After the restoration, the temple will also be built to worship the deities. The rise of its folk beliefs is accompanied by the development of Sangyuanwei, and the historical tradition of sacrificial rites is gradually formed in the enclosure.

It is recorded in the “General Records of Sangyuanwei” that in the 59th year of Qianlong (1794), Sangyuanwei encountered a major flood, and there were as many as 22 crevasses. The construction lasted for about one year. The construction began in the winter of Qianlong Jiayin year (1794) and was completed in the winter of Yimao year (1795). The general project needs to hold a five-day ceremony such as building a ceremony and opening an altar, and on the last day of the ceremony, please come to the memorial official Jiujiang deputy governor Jikuai Jia to preside over the foundation laying ceremony, sacrifice to the water god, “sacrifice four iron cattle after the ceremony, and then work vigorously”.¹²

Around the river temple and the completion of the temple, there are many historical records related to the belief of the gods in the “General Records of Sangyuanwei”, such as sacrifice, town memorial, Jianjiao, open altar, worship of gods, cast town water iron rhinoceros, rural sages and so on. In the process of the creation of the river temple, the worship of water god has always been closely linked with the development of Sangyuanwei. The

river temple is also the source of the prosperity of Sangyuanwei folk belief, especially the water god belief, in the future. So in addition to the river temple, what are the Sangyuanwei other deity beliefs and temples distribution? It is necessary to make a general outline of the pedigree of the main gods and the distribution of temples in Sangyuanwei from a macro perspective, so as to see its evolution and cultural changes.

3.2 *The Main Deity Pedigree in Sangyuanwei*

Sangyuanwei is located in the hinterland of Lingnan, and the wind of primitive witchcraft has been flourishing since the Han Dynasty. Cantonese custom “every encounter deity birthday, the whole country is crazy”.¹³ “Yue people worship ghosts, and Foshan is even more”.¹⁴ Luo Tianchi, a man from Shunde County, pointed out, “And the ghosts are full of alleys, the family is a witch history, and the forty forts are mostly worshiped”.¹⁵ This situation continued until the late Qing Dynasty and the beginning of the Republic of China. From the overview of the categories of “ancestral temples” and “altar temples” recorded in the county annals of two counties in Nanshun, we can roughly outline the distribution of the main god pedigrees of Sangyuanwei in the Qing Dynasty.

3.2.1 *The Natural Agricultural Deities*

These deities mainly reflect the traditional farming culture, such as the deities of country, water, wind and so on. Among them, the water deities are prominent. This is related to the unique geographical location of Sangyuanwei, which is a water conservancy project and the intersection of the Pearl River system. The water network is developed and the rain is abundant. In summer, it is often attacked by floods from the west and north rivers, thus forming a particularly prosperous water god belief in the surrounding area. “In the water deity system of Guangfu area in the Ming and Qing Dynasties, Nanhai Deity, Thunder Deity, Hurricane Deity, Beidi, Fubo Deity, Dragon King and so on

11. Liang Shuming, *The Essentials of Chinese Culture*, Shanghai: Shanghai People Publishing House, 2018, p139-140.

12. (Qing Dynasty) Ming Zhigang, Lu Weiqiu, *General Records of Sangyuanwei*. Guilin: Guangxi Normal University Press, 2014, Volume 1, p137.

13. (Qing Dynasty) Wu Zhenfang wrote. “Miscellaneous Notes of Lingnan”, edited by Wang Yunwu, “First Series of Integrated Books”. Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1936, p.3.

14. (Qing Dynasty) Chen Yanzong, “Foshan Zhongyi Village Records”, the seventh year of Qianlong (1752), Volume 6, Fork Custom Records, Foshan Museum collection.

15. (Qing Dynasty) Luo Tianchi, “Wushan Zhilin”, in “Five Collections of Guangdong Notes from the Qing Dynasty”, Guangzhou: Guangdong People’s Publishing House, 2006, p.36.

were all water deities, and the incense was flourishing and there were many believers. Compared with these male water deities, the female water deity belief is not inferior, among which the sea deity Tianhou and the water deity dragon mother are particularly typical.”¹⁶ These types of water deity beliefs account for the highest proportion of temples recorded in the county records of two counties in Nanshun. The widely popular water god beliefs in the surrounding areas mainly include four kinds of beliefs: Beidi, South China Sea Deity, Tianhou and Dragon Mother, which are also the four popular water deity beliefs in Guangdong. Among them, the Beidi and the Tianhou are the most significant. There are four water deities in the existing temples of water deities in Sangyuanwei, but most of them are still the Northern Emperor and the Tianhou

3.2.2 *The Deities of Social Protection*

Such deities mainly reflect the relationship between man and society, such as industry deity, fertility deity, medical deity and other folk beliefs. Each type of deity system contains several deities. The industry deities mainly include the silkworm deity Sangu, which is closely related to the development of ecological agriculture in mulberry base fish pond, and the ceramic master Taomu belief, which is closely related to Foshan ceramic industry. Some deities have multiple functions, such as the silkworm god is both the industry god and the agricultural deity, the social deity is both the social protection deity and the agricultural deity, etc. According to the records and legends of ancient Chinese history books, there are many gods widely spread in the folk, such as the Yellow Emperor's Yuanfei Leizu, Matou Empress, Silkworm Empress, Silkworm Flower Empress, Silk Fairy, Wan Yu Woman, Yushi Princess and so on.

3.2.3 *Secular Deities of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism*

Such deities mainly reflect the secularization of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism beliefs, such as Wenchang, Guandi, Guanyin, Huaguang beliefs, etc., covering Buddhism and Taoism. Buddhism mainly includes Guanyin Bodhisattva, Tathagata, Maitreya Buddha, Eighteen Arhats, Four Diamonds and so on. Among them, the most worshipped is the

Guanyin. There are four main categories of Taoist gods. The first category is natural gods, such as wind, rain, thunder, etc.; the second category is the cultural god or hero god, such as Wenchang, Guandi, Ge Hong, etc.; the third category is the patron saint, such as door god, stove god, land god, etc.; the fourth category is functional gods, such as Hua Tuo, God of Wealth, Great Emperor of Huaguang, etc. Among the above deities, some run through the three realms of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, such as Guan Yu, which is a symbol of “loyalty, righteousness, benevolence and courage”. It carries the moral spirit of the Chinese nation and is enshrined as Guan Di by the world.

3.3 *The Main Temple Space of Sangyuanwei*

3.3.1 *Temples Recorded in Historical Documents*

Each of the three water conservancy records in Sangyuanwei has set up the category of “ancestral temple”, following the ritual system of sacrificing mountains, rivers and seas contained in ancient Chinese history books. This category is contained in volume 9 of “General Records of Sangyuanwei”, volume 14 of “Revised Edition of the Records of Sangyuanwei”, and volume 14 of “Continued Records of Sangyuanwei”. The “ancestral temple” style of the three water conservancy records is composed of two parts: the general description of the temple records and the description of the temples.

“Revised Edition of the Records of Sangyuanwei” Volume 2 “Illustrated” One, compiled the temple distribution of each fortress of Sangyuanwei. Through the analysis and combing of the maps contained in each fortress foundation, there are 67 temples in the complete map of Sangyuanwei fortress foundation, and 58 temples in other fortress foundations. Everyone in the most dangerous base of Sangyuanwei will set up a temple to deter floods with gods. Among the sub-base maps of each fort, Jiujiang Fort has the largest number of temples of 34. From the classification of temples, it covers three types of temples in Sangyuanwei folk belief pedigree: the first is agricultural natural deities and their temples, such as Beidi Temple, Hongsheng Temple, Tianhou Temple, etc.; the second is the social protection deities and their temples, such as Guandi Temple, Huaguang Temple, Yidi Temple, etc.; the third is the secularization of Confucianism, Buddhism and

16. He Zhangrong, Cai Pengchong, A Brief Exploration of the Cult of Goddesses in Cantonese Folk Beliefs. Studies in World Religions, 2016(4), p81-82.

Taoism and their temples, such as Wendi Temple, Guanyin Temple, Zhenjun Temple and so on. Local officials directly intervened in folk belief activities through temples and sacrifices, which strengthened the control and management of local society during the disaster period.

In the twenty-first year of the Republic of China (1932), the 14th volume of "Continued Records of Sangyuanwei" also set up the category of "ancestral temple", emphasizing the educational function of folk belief "Deity Taoism education". Confucianism, represented by Confucius, often realizes the education of the people through etiquette norms to maintain the political authority of the country and the ethical order of the society.

The more comprehensive records of the Sangyuanwei Temple are the county records of the two counties in Nanshun. The statistical results show that there are three "altars" in Nanhai County in the Qing Dynasty, namely, the Sheji altar of the Great Sacrifice, the Xiannong altar of the Middle Sacrifice and the Li altar of the Group Sacrifice. There are 237 temples in total, including 21 Nanhai Temple and Hongsheng Temple for Hongsheng King, 32 Beidi Temple and Shengtang Temple for Beidi, 34 Tianhou Palace and Tianfei Temple for Tianhou, and 87 temples for three types of water deities. In terms of quantity, the temples of water deities account for the largest proportion of all types of temples in the county. There are 46 ancestral halls. In addition to Sangyuanwei's eighteen castles of the Ming Dynasty, the people jointly built a sacrifice to Chen Bomin's "grain food temple". The remaining 45 ancestral halls are dedicated to the sages of the past dynasties, the three grades of civilians, the two grades of military officials, and the women of filial piety.

There were four "altars" in Shunde County in the Qing Dynasty, namely, the Sheji altar, the Xiannong altar, the Chenghuang altar and the Li altar. There are 29 temples, including 6 Tianhou Palace, Tianhou Temple and Shuikou Temple, 3 Beidi Temple and Zhenwu Temple, and 9 two types of water temples.¹⁷ In terms of quantity, the temples of water deities also account for the largest proportion of all types of temples in the county. There are 66 temples, and the sacrificial objects are the sages and loyal warriors of the past dynasties. The number of temples is far more than that of temples, indicating that Shunde County paid more

attention to the worship of ancestors and sages in the Qing Dynasty.

3.3.2 *Temples Found in Field Investigation*

The temples investigated in the field of this study are mainly two types of temples closely related to Sangyuanwei, such as water deity and silkworm deity.

All kinds of water deity temples are densely distributed near the embankment of mulberry garden, including the four water gods of Beidi, Tianhou, Hongsheng and Dragon Mother. Among them, the number of Beidi Temple is the largest, followed by Tianhou Temple. This is related to the frequent floods in the history of Sangyuanwei and the tradition of "building a temple". These temples are important carriers for sacrificial ceremonies and their celebrations in traditional villages. According to statistics, there are 65 existing water god temples in Sangyuanwei, including one Foshan municipal cultural relics protection unit and one Nanhai district-level immovable cultural relics.¹⁸ Among them, there are 33 Beidi temples, 14 Tianhou temples, 9 Dragon Mother temples, 8 Hongsheng temples, and 1 water control figure Chen Bomin temple.

Silkworm temples were rarely recorded in the county annals of Nanshun County in the Qing Dynasty, but they can be seen in the modern Xiqiao tourist resort annals: "Silkworm temple, worship Leizu, built on Pingsha Island."¹⁹ In addition to Xiqiao Pingsha Island, there are many silkworm temples in Shunde Longjiang and other places that reflect the traditional silkworm culture of Sangyuanwei. In the three water conservancy records of Sangyuanwei, there have also been many times that the Daluokou section of Jiujiang Fort was named after "Cangu Temple", which proves that it has an internal relationship with water conservancy organizations. At present, there are 12 temples in the two places, including 11 in Shunde and 1 in the South China Sea. The belief of silkworm god in Shunde is more prosperous than

18. At present, the Dragon Mother Temple of Panlong Cave in Xiqiao Mountain in Nanhai area is a cultural relics protection unit in Foshan City; the ancient temple of Shengtang in Xiqiao Jian Village of Nanhai is an immovable cultural relic in Nanhai area.

19. Compiled by the Local Chronicles Compilation Committee of Xiaoqiao Town, Nanhai District, Foshan City, Guangdong Province, "Chronicles of the Xiaoqiao Mountain Tourism and Resort Area, Nanhai City", Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House, 2009, p.705.

17. Shuikou Temple worship Tianhou; Zhenwu Temple worships the Beidi.

that in the South China Sea, among which Longjiang is the most prosperous. These silkworm temples have become a historical witness of the local traditional silkworm culture, reflecting the development and changes of local society.

4. DISCUSSIONS

4.1 *The Logical Relationship Between Deity Pedigree and Space Construction*

The deity pedigree and the temple space are interdependent and indispensable. The two together constitute the complete appearance of Sangyuanwei folk beliefs. Compared with the folk beliefs in other regions, the belief system in Sangyuanwei area presents distinct regional characteristics of water conservancy. First, the status of the water deities in the belief system is significantly higher than that in the ordinary agricultural area, and its hierarchical position in the deity pedigree is significantly higher. Second, belief activities are closely related to water conservancy management. Embankment construction and flood control are often accompanied by sacrificial ceremonies.

4.2 *Theoretical Contribution of Cultural Gene Decoding Framework*

The “cultural gene decoding” analysis framework adopted in this study provides the following theoretical contributions to the study of folk beliefs: First, it provides a structured analysis tool, which transforms the relatively abstract description of cultural phenomena into a specific and analytical research process through four steps: extraction, classification, map construction and spatial analysis. Secondly, it establishes the connection channel between the surface and the deep layer, which connects the specific temple material carrier with the deep cultural logic, and reveals the formation mechanism behind the cultural phenomenon.

4.3 *Contemporary Significance of Heritage Protection and Rural Revitalization*

As an intangible cultural dimension of the world's irrigation engineering heritage, the folk belief has important contemporary significance. In terms of rural governance, the integration mechanism of clan organizations and communities contained in the folk belief system can provide a historical reference for contemporary rural

grassroots governance and cultural identity. In terms of cultural revitalization, folk activities and Christmas traditions related to folk beliefs can be transformed into cultural resources for rural revitalization and emotional ties that unite people's hearts, injecting vitality into rural development.

5. CONCLUSION

This study uses the analytical framework of “cultural gene decoding” to systematically examine the deity pedigree and spatial construction of Sangyuanwei folk beliefs, and draws the following conclusions:

First, the genealogy of Sangyuanwei folk beliefs is a complete system composed of water gods, silkworm gods, Buddhist and Taoist gods and other types, in which water gods are at the core. This god pedigree structure reflects the real needs of villagers in dealing with flood threats and pursuing agricultural fertility.

Second, the spatial distribution of temples in Sangyuanwei area presents the nested logic of “temple - community - embankment”, and the layout of belief space is closely combined with embankment water conservancy and community life. This spatial structure is not only a geographical phenomenon, but also a spatial expression of belief system and social organization structure.

Third, the cultural gene decoding framework provides a new analytical path for the study of regional folk beliefs. The cultural genes of Sangyuanwei folk beliefs can be refined into praying for disaster relief and praying for prosperity. The interactive logic of “water - deity - human” constitutes the deepest cultural gene of the belief system. The water town created by the Sangyuanwei is the basis for the survival of the people. The temple is not only the sacred space for the sacrifice of the gods, but also the space for the clans with common god beliefs to gather and discuss.

There are still some limitations in this study. In terms of materials, although the historical documents are relatively rich, many temples have been destroyed or rebuilt, and there are difficulties in the reconstruction of historical space. In terms of methods, although the field survey was used, due to time constraints, it was not possible to conduct a comprehensive survey of all temple sites in the region. The follow-up research will continue to expand the scope of field investigation and explore

the introduction of digital humanities methods for more systematic and accurate analysis.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This paper is a phased research result of the Lingnan Culture Project "Sangyuanwei Traditional Culture Gene Decoding and Its Enlightenment to Modern Rural Governance" (Project Approval Number: No.GD23LN13) of Guangdong Provincial Philosophy and Social Science Planning 2023. The project team is grateful for the research funding of the above fund project.

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