Gratitude to Origins: Cultural Logic and Spatial Expression of the Silkworm Deity Worship in the Sangyuanwei Polder

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ABSTRACT
Why did silkworm farmers in the Sangyuanwei Polder keep worshipping their deities long after the looms had fallen silent? The answer lies in the mulberry-fish ponds that once covered this part of the Pearl River Delta. From the Ming and Qing dynasties onward, sericulture shaped almost every aspect of local life, and with it came a pantheon of silkworm gods. We may ask two questions. First, what cultural logic sustained this worship's system? Second, how was that logic expressed in space? This study discovered that pantheon through the lens of "Gratitude to Origins" (Baoben Fanshi). Our findings point to a ritual genealogy that stretches back to the Zhou Dynasty. The Xiancan ceremony, the offering to the First Silkworm, was already an established state ritual by then. Its purpose was not to ask for favors. It was to repay a debt. Silkworm farmers in the Sangyuanwei area worshipped Leizu, means the First Silkworm Deity, Matou Niang, means the Horse-Headed Lady, and the Cangu Niangniang, means silkworm Aunts for the same reason. They gave thanks for the knowledge that made their livelihood possible. This worship did not emerge in a vacuum. Between the mid-Ming and late Qing, rice paddies across the Sangyuanwei area were converted into mulberry fields and fish ponds. Sericulture became the economic lifeline of the region. Once that happened, rituals to the silkworm deities were no longer optional. They were woven into the production cycle itself, before rearing, during rearing, after rearing. These practices did more than honor the gods. They calmed anxieties, regulated behavior, and held the community together. In terms of spatial expression, the site selection, architectural forms, and ritual practices of silkworm deity temples not only constitute a material manifestation of the spirit of "Gratitude to Origins," but also form a cultural space that sustains community identity and cooperative order.

Keywords: *Sangyuanwei Polder, Silkworm deity worship, Gratitude to Origins, Cultural logic, Spatial expression.*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research Background

The Sangyuanwei Polder sits in the Nanhai and Shunde districts of Foshan, Guangdong. It is the largest ancient polder irrigation project in China. Construction began in the Song Dynasty. Through the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, the polder was repeatedly reinforced and repaired. A comprehensive water conservancy system gradually took shape. In December 2020, Sangyuanwei was inscribed on the list of World Heritage Irrigation Structures. It became the first irrigation heritage site in Guangdong Province. The polder has long been known as the birthplace of the "mulberry-fish pond" system. It'sa traditional ecological model that links sericulture, aquaculture, and agriculture into a sustainable cycle. Within this ecosystem, the worship of silkworm deities emerged. It embodied two things at once: gratitude to those who first taught sericulture, and hopes for a good harvest. The core of this worship can be summed up in an old Confucian idea: "Gratitude to Origins". The phrase means repaying one's roots and tracing back to the beginning. Yet scholarly attention to silkworm deity worship in this area remains thin. How did the worship system emerge? We still do not know, for instance, when exactly this worship

took shape or how it shifted across the centuries. Nor do we understand what held it together as a coherent system. And the question of how that system found expression in space—in temple sites, ritual routes, and the layout of sacred places—remains largely unaddressed.

1.2 Literature Review

The name"Sangyuanwei"comes from the mulberry trees that once covered this area. For centuries, local people planted mulberry on the dikes and raised fish in the ponds below. This is the "mulberry-fish pond" system. It'sa classic model of ecological recycling in Chinese agricultural history. Sericulture stood at its center. Over time, silkworm deity worship became woven into this system. It is a tradition that has drawn scholarly interest. Wang Haina, for instance, has studied the legends and sacrificial customs tied to Leizu and Matou Niang in Foshan.[1] Guan Xiying takes a different path. She works through sericulture manuals, local gazettes, literati's notes, and zhuzhici (bamboo branch lyrics) from Ming and Qing Guangdong. From these sources she reconstructs a detailed picture of regional sericulture customs: worships, rituals, Five Phases cosmology, and proverbial sayings.[2] These studies offer useful reference points. But gaps remain. Silkworm deity worship in the Sangyuanwei Polder has not yet received systematic scholarly attention. The relationship between the sericulture economy and the cultural system calls for further exploration. And "Gratitude to Origins" has rarely been used as an analytical framework for interpreting local belief systems. This study addresses these gaps. It examines the cultural logic and spatial expression of silkworm deity worship in the Sangyuanwei Polder through the lens of "Gratitude to Origins." Two temple sites serve as case studies: the Cangu (Silkworm Aunt) Temples in Longjiang, Shunde district, and Xiqiao, Nanhai district. Both are historically significant and representative. Through these cases, the study traces how silkworm deity worship and local social change have interacted over time.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

2.1 Research Objectives

This study focuses on the Sangyuanwei Polder. It adopts "Gratitude to Origins" as its theoretical lens to examine silkworm deity worship in the region. Four objectives guide the analysis. The first is to trace the historical origins and cultural roots of this worship. How did "Gratitude to Origins" travel from classical ritual texts to local practice?

The second is to map the spatial distribution of silkworm deity temples. What logic shaped where they were built? And how did these cultural spaces relate to the mulberry-fish pond landscape?

The third is to interpret the cultural logic of the worship system. What core values, ritual practices, and community integration mechanisms did it contain?

The fourth is to decode the cultural genes of silkworm deity worship. What do these genes mean today for heritage conservation and rural revitalization?

2.2 Research Methods

This study relies mainly on literature research. It collates records from local historical documents and draws on poetry collections such as Guangdong Zhuzhici (Bamboo Branch Lyrics) as supplementary sources.

Field investigation forms the second strand. On-site surveys were conducted at surviving silkworm deity temples and related temples in the Sangyuanwei area. Their location, preservation status, and associated ritual activities were recorded. Two sites received particular attention: the Silkworm Aunt Temple on Pingsha Island in Xiqiao, Nanhai district, and the one in Longjiang, Shunde district. These sites allow for a comparative reading against historical documents.

"Cultural gene decoding" serves as the analytical tool. It is used to decode the cultural logic of the worship system. Together, these methods aim to build a research paradigm of "decoding history through culture". The goal is a multi-dimensional, multi-layered analysis of the worship system.

2.3 Research Scope

The research area is the core region of the Sangyuanwei Polder. It lies within the present-day Nanhai and Shunde districts of Foshan, Guangdong Province, China. The temporal scope runs from the Ming and Qing dynasties to the present. The mid-Ming to late Qing period receives particular emphasis, as this was when the sericulture economy peaked.

3. RESEARCH PROCESS AND RESULTS

3.1 The Historical Tradition of Silkworm Deity Worship in the Sangyuanwei Polder

3.1.1 The Ritual Origins of "Gratitude to Origins" and Silkworm Deity Sacrifices

Sericulture made Sangyuanwei rich. It was the foundation of the polder's long prosperity. The Cangu served as the occupational deity of this industry. Silkworm farmers held her in high esteem. They knew that thriving mulberry trees, healthy silkworms, and good harvests depended on their own skill and experience. But they also believed these things depended on the Silkworm Aunt's protection.

Today, villagers no longer raise silkworms or reel silk. Yet temples to the Silkworm Aunt still stand across the countryside. The worship of silkworm deities has not disappeared. The sericulture economy once brought prosperity to local people. That this worship survives today can be read as an expression of "Gratitude to Origins", a return to tradition, a remembrance of roots.

The concept of "Gratitude to Origins" comes from the Liji·Jiaotesheng (Book of Rites, "The Single Victim at the Border Sacrifices"). The text states: "All things have their beginning in Heaven; man has his beginning in his ancestors. This is the reason why they are associated with the Supreme Ruler. The sacrifice at the border is the great expression of repaying origins and returning to the beginning. Heaven is the origin of all things; the ancestor is the origin of the king. In sacrificing to Heaven, the ancestor is associated with it—this is how they repay their origin. 'Returning to the beginning' means returning to the initial source." [3] "Gratitude to Origins" emphasizes the principle of associating ancestors with Heaven in sacrifice, and the First Silkworm (Xiancan) is regarded as the ancestor of the silkworm.

3.1.2 The Downward Movement of Silkworm Deity Worship from Official Ritual to Folk Practice

From the Han Dynasty onward, the official worship of silkworm deities gradually became popularized among the people. During the Tang and Song dynasties, with the southward shift of the economic center and the population growth in the Pearl River Delta, sericulture technology spread to the Lingnan region, and localized silkworm deities such as the "Silkworm Aunts" (Cangu) began to emerge. By the Ming and Qing dynasties, sericulture in the Sangyuanwei area had reached its height. Silkworm deity worship was no longer a marginal practice. It had become part of everyday life. A complete worship system took shape—one that linked deities, temples, and rituals into a coherent whole.

The path from the royal sacrifice to the First Silkworm (Xiancan) to folk worship was long. Divine titles changed. Ritual procedures shifted. Yet through all these transformations, one thing held constant: the meaning of "Gratitude to Origins" (Baoben Fanshi). It was preserved among the people. And it was passed down.

3.1.3 The Context for the Formation of Silkworm Deity Worship in the Sangyuanwei Polder

The Sangyuanwei Polder lies in the hinterland of the Pearl River Delta. Embankments protect it. Inside those embankments is a "mulberry-fish pond" system—a classic model of agricultural ecology. Large-scale development began in the Ming Dynasty. Water conservancy and irrigation transformed fertile lands into intensively farmed fields. Silk reeling and weaving grew alongside the mulberry-fish ponds. Sangyuanwei became a key silk production and trading area in the Pearl River Delta.[4]

Why did silkworm deity worship take root here? Part of the answer lies in ecology. Part lies in economics. The mulberry-fish pond system required highly specialized labor. Sericulture was vulnerable to natural conditions, climate, and disease. Faced with such uncertainty, people turned to supernatural forces. Sericulture also became the primary source of household income. Protection from silkworm deities and prayers for good harvests became shared concerns. This gave the worship a broad social foundation.

3.2 The Pantheon of Silkworm Deities in the Sangyuanwei Polder

The silkworm-related deities in the Sangyuanwei area do not form one unified system. They constitute a multi-layered pantheon. Its deities come from different historical periods. And they serve different functions.

3.2.1 The First Silkworm Deity: Leizu

During the traditional agrarian civilization period, sericulture held an extremely important position within the agricultural structure of "men farming and women weaving." According to Wang Zhen's *Nongshu* (Book of Agriculture) of the Yuan Dynasty: "The Lady of Xiling, called Leizu, was the primary consort of the Yellow Emperor. *The Huainan Wang Canjing* (Prince Huainan's Book of Sericulture) states: 'The Lady of Xiling promoted sericulture and agriculture; the practice of personal sericulture began with her.'" [5] Leizu, as the primary consort of the Yellow Emperor, was venerated as the First Silkworm (Xiancan) and received sacrifices from successive dynasties' empresses, and was incorporated into the state sacrificial canon. Throughout Chinese history, dynasty after dynasty treated agriculture as the foundation of the state. Farming was more than an economic base. It served as a symbol for constructing dynastic orthodoxy and political legitimacy. The empress's sacrifice to the First Silkworm was paired with the emperor's sacrifice to Heaven. Together they expressed what the tradition called "Gratitude to Origins". The Liji·Yueling (Book of Rites, "Monthly Ordinances") records the practice in detail: "In the third month of spring, prepare the curved frames, upright stands, reed mats, and bamboo baskets. The queen and her consorts shall fast and abstain, personally face the east, and gather mulberry leaves. Women are prohibited from sightseeing, and their other duties are reduced, so as to encourage sericulture." [6] The queen personally gathered mulberry leaves, raised silkworms, and performed sacrifices to the silkworm deity. This established the "Xiancan" (First Silkworm) ritual as part of the state ceremonial system. The tradition of venerating the founder of sericulture laid the foundation for later folk practices of worshipping silkworm deities, such as Leizu and Matou Niang.

3.2.2 Matou Niang (The Horse-Headed Lady)

The legend of Matou Niang originates from the *Soushen Ji* (In Search of the Supernatural), which tells the story of a girl and her horse. The horse's skin rolls the girl away, and "the girl and the horse skin together transformed into a silkworm, spinning silk on a tree."[7] Hence she is called the "Silkworm Deity." Matou Niang emerged as a folk deity during the Tang and Song dynasties and was widely worshipped in sericulture-producing regions. During the Qing Dynasty, the silkworm industry in Longshan Township, Shunde district, was highly developed, and the local literati created numerous zhuzhici (bamboo branch lyrics) that reflected the worship of silkworm deities. For instance, the poem composed by 'Zhegu Mountain Woodcutter" reads: "In droves they pay homage to the Three Ladies at the temple; the sworn sisterhood of golden orchids is formed and dissolved."[8] This reflects the custom of worshipping silkworm deities among the "Zishu Nü" (self-combed women). A special female group in Shunde district with "paying homage to the Three Ladies at the temple". Referring to visiting the Silkworm Aunt Temple during festival days to worship the silkworm deity. Over time, the local people's persistent mulberry cultivation and silkworm rearing gradually established a tradition of silkworm deity sacrifices. The Qing Dynasty poet Mei Xuan, in his Longshan Zhuzhici, wrote: "Bamboo frames and reed mats form the central structure; the pine-wood house with bright lamps is the warm chamber. This year's silk prices are good; they make frequent offerings of date cakes to the Horse-Headed Lady." [8] This reflects the ancient custom of worshipping the "Matou Niang" silkworm deity, a tradition that has continued to the present day.

3.3 Temple Spaces of Silkworm Deity Worship in the Sangyuanwei Polder

3.3.1 Silkworm Deity Temples in Xiqiao, Nanhai District

Although temples dedicated to silkworm deities were rarely recorded in the county gazettes of Nanhai and Shunde districts during the Qing Dynasty, relevant records can be found in the modern Xiqiao Mountain Tourism Resort Annals: "The Silkworm Aunt Temple, dedicated to Leizu, was established on Pingsha Island."[9] Currently, only one Silkworm Aunt Temple survives in Nanhai district, located in Shangshe Village on Pingsha Island, Xiqiao, where the First Silkworm Deity Leizu is worshipped.

Over the past two years, this study has carried out multiple rounds of fieldwork in the core areas of the Sangyuanwei Polder. These include Xiqiao in Nanhai district and Longjiang in Shunde district. To date, 12 temples have been identified across the two areas. Some are dedicated solely to the Silkworm Aunts. Others house them alongside different deities in shared worship spaces. Of these 12 temples, 11 are in Shunde district. Only 1 is in

Nanhai district. This distribution across the Pearl River Delta reflects two things: the localization of silkworm deity worship and its popularization.

3.3.2 Silkworm Deity Temples in Longjiang, Shunde District

Pingsha Island is not the only site. Shunde district has many surviving Silkworm Aunt temples. They reflect the traditional sericulture culture of the Sangyuanwei Polder. Longjiang stands out in particular. Silkworm Aunt temples or shrines, either independent or sharing space with other deities, appear in seven locations: Nanfang Village in Suxi Community, Chongkou Village in Dongchong Community, Wuchong Village in Dongtou Community, Huilongshe in Shatian of Shibu, Xishe Village in Xixi Community, Lihai Guanyin Hall in Nankeng Village, and Tandong Village in Dongchong Community. Four more sites are found elsewhere in Shunde: Shangdi Village and Maning Village in Xingtan Town, Huanglian Village in Leliu Town, and Shabian Village in Lecong Town. Huanglian Village has a temple called the “Xiancan Temple”. It is dedicated to Leizu. Shabian Village has one too. It goes by the name “Silkworm Mother Temple”. The Sangyuanwei Annals mention “Cangu Temple” again and again as a marker for dangerous embankment sections. Daluokou in Jiujiang Fort is one example. One entry records it this way: “At Jiujiang Fort, locally known as Daluokou, there is an earthen embankment section measuring eighteen zhang in length, and another section locally known as Silkworm Aunt Temple measuring sixteen zhang in length.”[10] This is no accident. It offers direct material proof. Silkworm deity worship was deeply embedded in the embankment landscape of the Sangyuanwei Polder. Cultural space and water conservancy space overlapped closely here. What does this tell us? For one thing, naming an embankment section after the temple made it a spatial reference point. The temple was more than a place of worship. It was a physical presence in the embankment landscape. For another, the temple stood right beside the embankment. Villagers could visit and worship with ease. The temple also became part of the embankment landscape itself. When a temple enters the official records of a water conservancy annals—and becomes an embankment section name—something has shifted. The Silkworm Aunt Temple had moved from a community-level cultural space to a landmark node within the entire Sangyuanwei water conservancy system.

3.4 The Cultural Logic and Spatial Expression of Silkworm Deity Worship

3.4.1 The Core Value and Orientation of the “Gratitude to Origins” Spirit

Two terms need definition here. By “cultural logic”, I mean the internal rationale of silkworm deity worship what held it together and gave it coherence. Four dimensions are involved: where the worship came from, how it was practiced, what values it carried, and what social functions it served. By “spatial expression”, I mean how that logic took shape in space. Temple site selection is one example. Ritual pathways are another. The arrangement of deities within a temple is a third.

At the core of silkworm deity worship in the Sangyuanwei Polder lies the spirit of “Gratitude to Origins”. This spirit works on several levels.

The first concerns gratitude for the founding contributions of sericulture’s originator. Worshipping Leizu means recognizing what she contributed. It embodies a traditional agricultural value: not forgetting one's roots.

The second level involves gratitude expressed through sacrificial offerings. Villagers thanked the deities through ritual practice. This created a moral orientation “repaying kindness” between humans and gods.

The third level serves community cohesion. Collective rituals turned individual gratitude into collective memory. Community identity was strengthened in the process.

3.4.2 The Seasonal Cycle and Ritual Practices of Silkworm Deity Worship

Rituals to the silkworm deities were embedded in the production cycle itself. At the season's start came the “Inviting the Silkworm Flowers” ceremony. It asked the deity to protect the cocoons. At the end came the “Thanking the Silkworm Deity” ceremony, an expression of gratitude.

Villagers traditionally paid homage to the Silkworm Aunts on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month. On their birthdays, they prepared date cakes, flowers, and fruits. In Longjiang, Shunde district, the first day of the first lunar month belonged to the First Silkworm Aunt. The fifteenth day of the second month was the Second Silkworm Aunt's birthday. The eighteenth day of the third month belonged to the Third Silkworm Aunt.

During these celebrations, deity statues were paraded through the streets. Each household burned incense and made offerings. Operas were performed to thank the deities.

For every sericulture cycle, farmers paid their respects to the silkworm deity. They offered “fried soft eggs” small, deep-fried glutinous rice balls filled with mashed sweet potato, along with date cakes. During the ritual, they parted the mulberry leaves and prayed before the silkworms. They wished for a smooth and prosperous season. Temple fairs and operas served two purposes: to entertain the deities and to bring the community together. Through these rituals, the spirit of “Gratitude to Origins” was collectively embodied.

3.4.3 The Spatial Expression of Silkworm Deity Temples and Community Organization

The spatial expression of silkworm deity worship reflects a relationship—between cultural spaces and the mulberry-fish pond landscape. Where were the temples built? How close were they to production areas? Did they serve as community centers? And how did they relate to the embankment ecology? Each question points to the same answer: cultural spaces were integrated with agricultural production and community organization. The internal configuration of temple spaces reinforces this. Consider what they contained: the deities enshrined, the offerings and rituals performed, the community's management of temple affairs. Each element manifests the spatial expression of “Gratitude to Origins”.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 The Logical Relationship between the Deity Pantheon and Spatial Construction

The Two dimensions sit at the heart of this worship system. One is the pantheon of silkworm deities. The other is how their temples were built and arranged in space. The pantheon establishes the pecking order. It decides which gods occupy the top tier. It also decides which ones serve more localized roles. Leizu is a case in point. She received official recognition. As such, she embodies the classical strand of “Gratitude to Origins”. Her temples tend to be larger. Their fairs pull in worshippers from a wider catchment. Matou Niang and the Silkworm Aunts cut a different figure. They are folk deities. Their temples bind them more tightly to local communities.

Temple distribution echoes this pecking order. The Xiancan Temple reaches across multiple villages at times the whole polder. Cangu Temples cater to one village or a handful of neighbours. This spatial arrangement tracks the pantheon＇s own ranking. Such a convergence of pantheon and space together gives the cultural logic of “Gratitude to Origins”. Temples do more than embody that spirit in stone and timber. They serve as spatial anchors that hold a community together.

4.2 Theoretical Contributions of the Cultural Gene Decoding Framework

“Gratitude to Origins” may be understood as the core cultural gene of silkworm deity worship in the Sangyuanwei Polder. Three features mark this gene. First, it endures and passes down. The concept runs unbroken from the Book of Rites to local ritual practice. Second, it bends without breaking. The move from official canon to folk worship signals a process of localization. Third, it draws people in. Its aim centres on gratitude and communal cohesion.

Decoding this gene sharpens our grasp of the worship system. In the Sangyuanwei area, the gene’s formation and transmission trace a downward path from classical texts to local society.

4.3 Contemporary Significance: Heritage Conservation and Rural Revitalization

Silkworm deity worship in the Sangyuanwei Polder constitutes an intangible cultural layer of the World Heritage Irrigation Structure. That fact gives it present-day weight.

Look first at cultural revitalization. Folk activities and festival traditions bound up with silkworm deity worship can be recast as cultural assets for rural renewal. The “Silkworm Flower Temple Fair” stands as one such case. Rituals of this kind can attract cultural tourism. They can also breathe new life into rural development.

Rural governance is another angle. The worship system carries mechanisms of community integration. Those mechanisms hold historical lessons for grassroots governance in today's countryside.

5. CONCLUSION

This study reaches the following conclusions.

First, silkworm deity worship in the Sangyuanwei Polder follows a clear historical trajectory. It moves from the classical concept of "Gratitude to Origins" to local ritual practice. The "Xiancan" ritual recorded in the Book of Rites established the ritual origins of this veneration. From the Tang and Song dynasties onward, the southward shift of the economic center brought cultural dissemination. The official ritual canon gradually became folk practice. The spirit of "Gratitude to Origins" became the core cultural value of silkworm deity worship in the Sangyuanwei Polder. It connected the classical tradition with local society.

Second, the spatial distribution of silkworm deity temples follows three factors. The first is the hierarchy of deities. The second is the sphere of influence of the cultural community. The third is the relationship with the mulberry-fish pond landscape. Together they form a spatial configuration of "temples within villages, temples guarding the polder embankments." This spatial structure is not merely a geographical phenomenon. It is also a spatial expression of the worship system and social organizational structure.

Third, the cultural logic of silkworm deity worship in the Sangyuanwei Polder can be summarized as an interactive mechanism of "gratitude-community-order." The spirit of "Gratitude to Origins"(Baoben Fansi) constitutes the core worship and value orientation; ritual practices realize the expression of gratitude and community cohesion; and temple spaces provide the material foundation and organizational structure for the worship system. The interaction of these three dimensions forms the unique cultural logic of silkworm deity worship, the "cultural gene" of the worship system.

Fourth, silkworm deity worship holds significant contemporary value for the conservation of the Sangyuanwei World Heritage Irrigation Structure and for rural revitalization. The cultural system represents an important intangible cultural dimension of the irrigation heritage; the community integration mechanisms embedded within it can provide historical references for contemporary grassroots governance; and the transformation and utilization of worship-related folk activities can inject new vitality into rural cultural revitalization and cultural tourism.

This study still has certain limitations. In terms of materials, although historical gazettes and annals provide rich textual sources, the limited number of stele inscriptions and other historical remains discovered in the field makes it difficult to fully reconstruct the historical picture of temple construction and ritual activities. On methods, field investigation was carried out. Time and funding, however, imposed limits. Not every temple site in the Sangyuanwei area could be surveyed. Some remain unrecorded.

Several avenues remain open for future research. One would extend the fieldwork—especially to track down surviving stele inscriptions and gather oral testimonies. Another would draw on digital humanities tools. GIS, for example, could enable a more systematic spatial analysis of the temples. A third avenue would examine how silkworm deity worship is being transmitted and reconstructed today, particularly within the wider push for rural revitalization.

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