

ARTICLE

COMMUNITY OF FAITH: THE CULT OF WATER GODS AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION IN THE DONGTING LAKE AREA DURING THE MING-QING PERIODS

1. *Introduction*

The cult of water gods is a systematic belief system rooted in human recognition and awe of water's natural power. It takes water gods as the object of worship and integrates ideological concepts, rituals, material carriers, and institutional norms. The cult of water gods does not belong to organized or systematic religion. Though it is intertwined with China's established religions, it remains distinct in nature while complementing their social and religious functions. It constitutes a prevalent cultural phenomenon in Chinese society, encompassing complete ideological frameworks, behavioral norms, and ritual systems derived from the productive and daily life practices of ordinary people. Meanwhile, its social functions have grown increasingly diverse alongside the development of production and lifestyles among different social groups. The study of the cult of water gods is of great significance for exploring and interpreting the cultural patterns, productive structures, power relations, and order systems of traditional Chinese society.

At present, scholars across different academic disciplines mainly adopt five analytical frameworks to explore issues concerning the cult of water gods. Firstly, the method of "literature analysis" is employed to explore the origins, historical evolution of the cult of water gods, and genealogical system of water gods¹. Secondly, from the perspective of functionalism, scholars analyze the ritual symbolism and social functions of the cult of water gods². Thirdly, scholars adopt the perspective of "interaction between the state and society"

¹ XIANG, BAISONG. *Water Worship in China*. Shanghai: Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 1999.
HUANG, ZHIGANG. *The Water God within China*. Changchun: Jilin People's Press, 2022.

² PI, QINGSHENG. *The Water God and the State in the Song Dynasty*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2019. JIA, JINHUA. Traditional Chinese State Ritual System of Sacrifice to Mountain and Water Spirits. Reprint of articles from the Special Issue of *Religions*, 2022.

to examine the relationship between the state's orthodox ritual system and folk secular worship³. Fourthly, based on the perspective of "cultural ecology", scholars explore the relationship between the cult of water gods, the watershed water environment, and water society⁴. Fifth, under the framework of "religious integration", scholars discuss the relationship between the cult of water gods and the dissemination of religious culture⁵. Meanwhile, scholars have conducted in-depth studies on the cult of water gods in the Yellow River basin⁶, the Yangtze River basin⁷, the Pearl River basin⁸, and the regions along the Grand

³ WU, YUHANG, and LI FULUN. Change and Cohesion: Water Beliefs, Legends, and Their Social Functions in the Erhai Lake Basin of Dali. *Journal of Honghe University*, 2021, (2):58–63. ZHANG, SHUAIQI and XU, YINUO. Collusion order: water god beliefs and regional society on the Jiangnan Plain during the Ming-Qing era. *Studies in Chinese Religions*, 2023, (3):290–309.

⁴ ZHANG, JINGPING and WANG, ZHONGJING. State and cult in six hundred years of irrigation activities in an arid area of China: a case study of the Dragon King Temples in the Hexi Corridor. *Journal of Modern Chinese History*, 2016, (3):77–87. 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):21–33. SHI, GUOWEI and YING, LEI. From Competition to Sharing: The Belief in Dragon King and Water Conservancy Order in the Spring-Based Society. *Journal of North University of China*, 2025, (2):70–9.

⁵ LIU, YANG. Daoist Rain Rituals and Dragon God Belief in Medieval China. *Journal of Chinese Religions*, 2018, (2):141–63. YANG, DEAI and YANG YUEXIONG. *The Evolution of the Dragon King: An Anthropological Perspective on the Water God Belief System of the Bai Ethnic Group*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2020. SHI, LEI. Religious Syncretism in Water God Worship: A Case Study of the Yangtze Delta. *Religions*, 2022, (11):1040.

⁶ WANG, JUANJUAN. The Yellow River God worship in ancient China. Jinan: Master's Thesis of Shandong Normal University, 2023. Duan Youwen and Jia Anmin. The Formation and Evolution Logic of a Folk Religion Genealogy: The Focus of the Investigation is on the Cult of River Gods and Rain Gods in Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Henan provinces in the Yellow River Basin. *Journal of East China Normal University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, 2022, (4):137–44. WU, JINXUAN. Research on the Legend and cult of water gods in the Yellow River Basin of Shanxi, Shaanxi, and Henan Provinces. Taiyuan: Master's Thesis of Shanxi University, 2023.

⁷ ZHANG, SHUO. *Gods and Beliefs in the Yangtze River Basin*. Wuhan: Changjiang Press, 2015. HUANG, QUANSHENG and WANG, YAWEN. A survey of water god worship along Yangtze River. *Journal of Nanchang Institute of Technology*, 2020, (5):46–50. YANG, HUA. Water Spirits of the Yangtze River and Imperial Power in Traditional China. *Religions*, 2022, (5):387.

⁸ LIU, YUQING and WANG, YUANLIN. Spatiotemporal Reconstruction of Water Deities Beliefs in the Pearl River Delta Applying Historical GIS. *Religions*, 2022, (11):1040. XU, GUILING. The Sea God of Lingnan. Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House, 2023.

Canal⁹. The aforementioned studies basically cover the main analytical frameworks and core research topics concerning the cult of water gods across various regions, laying a solid foundation for this paper's further exploration of the cult of water gods in the Dongting Lake area.

The Dongting Lake¹⁰ area is located in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, where the cult of water gods has long prospered. For one thing, the region was once part of the ancient State of Chu, where the custom of worshipping ghosts and gods had prevailed since the pre-Qin period. For another, the region is crisscrossed by numerous rivers and lakes, supporting well-developed fisheries and shipping. Fishermen and merchants turned to the cult of water gods to safeguard their livelihoods and ensure travel safety. During the Ming-Qing periods, large-scale lake reclamation profoundly altered the hydrological environment of the Dongting Lake area. The original river-lake hydrological pattern—"lakes higher than rivers, with lake water draining into rivers"—underwent dramatic changes¹¹, triggering more frequent and severe regional flood disasters. Consequently, various social groups resorted to worshipping water gods and invoking their divine power to ward off floods and protect local communities, which further boosted the prevalence of the cult of water god in the Dongting Lake area.

From the pre-Qin period to the Ming-Qing dynasties, the number of water gods in the Dongting Lake area kept growing steadily. These different types of water gods consist not only of indigenous ones shaped by local communities, but also of those introduced by merchants and ordinary people from other regions, as well as officially standardized water gods sanctioned by imperial rulers for local communal worship¹². Meanwhile, as the purposes of the cult of water

⁹ BRIAN R. DOTT. The God of the Grand Canal: Jinsui Si Da Wang and the Culture of Water Control in Late Imperial China. *Late Imperial China*, 2021, (1):1–38. HU, MENGFEI. *Chinese Canal Water God*. Jinan: Shandong University Press. 2018.

¹⁰ Dongting Lake is the second largest freshwater lake in China, located on the southern bank of the Jingjiang River in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River and in the northern part of Hunan Province. It includes four parts: East Dongting Lake, South Dongting Lake, West Dongting Lake, and Datong Lake. On the north side of Dongting Lake are four flood discharge outlets, namely Songzi, Ouchi, Taiping and Tiaoqin; on the south side, there are five water injections of Xiang, Zi, Yuan, Li and Miluo, so it is a typical regulating lake.

¹¹ BIAN, HONGXIANG. On the Development of the Dongting Lake during the Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties. *Journal of Natural Science of Hunan Normal University*, 1985, (1):63–9.

¹² DAVID G. JOHNSON., ANDREW J. NATHAN and EVELYN S. RAWSKI. *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*. Oakland: University of California Press. 1985, pp. 93–114.

gods diversified among local social groups, the functions of such cults gradually evolved. Their role extended beyond warding off natural disasters such as floods and droughts and blessing farm production, to consolidating social forces and maintaining local social order.

Current scholarship on the cult of water gods in the Dongting Lake area mainly falls into three categories and has yielded fruitful findings. Firstly, scholars have explored the evolutionary forms of local the cult of water gods and interpreted the cultural connotations behind its formation and spatial distribution¹³. Secondly, they have investigated the practical application and social functions of folk music in the ritual ceremonies for the cult of water gods in the Dongting Lake area¹⁴. Thirdly, existing studies have discussed the interactions between the cult of water gods, local social groups, and ecological environmental changes in the region¹⁵. Nevertheless, most of these studies are confined to scattered disciplinary perspectives and lack a targeted analytical framework tailored to water god beliefs in the Dongting Lake area. Furthermore, few studies have integrated the cult of water gods with the region's unique social structure (Embankment Yuan Society) and cultural tradition (Witch Nuo Culture). More importantly, there remains a notable research gap regarding the transformation of power structures and the construction of social order embedded in the cult of water gods.

Therefore, building on existing scholarship, this paper examines the practices of the cult of water gods in the Dongting Lake area during the Ming-Qing periods from the perspective of the social structural functions of "power interaction" and "regional integration". Firstly, combining documentary analysis with fieldwork data, this paper explores the evolution of water god genealogies in the Dongting Lake area and the structural changes of the social forces

¹³ LI, LIN. The Study on Water Deity Belief of Dongting Lake (Dongtinghu shuishen xinyang yanjiu). Changsha: Hunan People's Publishing House, 2012. WANG, YUANLIN. Research and Identification of the Xiao Lie Concubine and the Two Concubines of the Water God of Hunan. *Studies in World Religions*, 2023, (6):66–73.

¹⁴ ZENG, NINA. *Study on Folk Music of Water God Beliefs in Dongting Lake Area*. Beijing: China Theatre Press, 2020.

¹⁵ XIAO, MIN. Cultural Portrait of Harmony between Man and Nature: A Study of the Water God Beliefs in Dongting Lake Area. *Journal of Hubei Provincial Institute of Socialism*, 2025, (4):93–6. KANG, QIONG. The Harmonious Culture between Humans and Nature: Reflections on the Cult of Water God of Dongting Lake. *Journal of Hunan Institute of Socialism*, 2015, (3):76–9.

they represent. Secondly, through an analysis of the practices of the cult of water gods among different social groups, the paper constructs an analytical framework of “Community of Faith (elaborated in Part 2)”. It argues that these groups realized the integration of social forces and the construction of regional order by leveraging the cult of water gods to pursue their respective interests. Furthermore, this paper seeks to provide localized empirical references for the study of the cult of water gods in other regions of China.

2. *Community of Faith: An Explanatory Framework for the Process of Shaping Regional Social Order*

The concept of “community” was first proposed in 1887 by the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies. He contended that community is rooted in instinctive bonds (consanguinity), habitual mutual attachment (intimate affection), and shared collective memories (family ethics). He categorized the community into three fundamental types: blood community (clan), neighborhood (geographical community), and friendship (spiritual community)¹⁶. To a certain extent, Ferdinand Tönnies’ definition of “community” refers more to a living communal group marked by strong exclusivity and intimate emotional bonds. By contrast, British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman regarded “community” as an umbrella term for all social groups and organizations bound by shared characteristics, either subjective or objective. It encompasses both tangible and intangible communities¹⁷.

Since the concept of “community” was put forward, its connotation and denotation have been continuously enriched and expanded by scholars worldwide¹⁸. As the theory of “community” spread from Western to Eastern societies, Japanese scholars introduced it into the research on Chinese rural society and constructed theoretical paradigms such as the village community, water conservancy community, and ritual community. These paradigms are of great significance for interpreting the power hierarchy, economic structure, and social order in rural China.

¹⁶ FERDINAND TÖNNIES. *Translated by Margaret Hollis, Community and Civil Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, pp. 58–67.

¹⁷ ZYGMUNT, BAUMAN. *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001, pp. 1–8.

¹⁸ LI HUIFENG and CAI XUCHANG. The Evolution, Application of Community and Civil Society. *Academic Monthly*, 2010, (6):19–25.

Meanwhile, based on his fieldwork of ritual activities among Han communities in Taiwan, China, Ken Okada put forward the concept of the “sacrifice sphere”¹⁹. It denotes a geographical area inhabited by residents who share the same principal patron god. Since the 1980s, Japanese scholars have conducted extensive discussions on the “sacrifice sphere” and formed a basic academic consensus. This sphere is understood as a social group with a fissile structure, featuring diverse scales and hierarchical levels. Nevertheless, scholars hold divergent views on the belief structure and sacrificial patterns of rural villages. Among them, Michio Suenar revised the notion of the “sacrifice sphere” and pioneered the use of the “belief sphere”²⁰. The “belief sphere” refers to a spatial domain in which different social groups enshrine both tangible and intangible gods in temples, ancestral halls, and other ritual venues, thereby fostering regional cohesion through sacrificial activities. The theoretical shift from the “sacrifice sphere” to the “belief sphere” mirrors the gradual deepening of Japanese academic research on folk belief practices in rural Chinese society. Nevertheless, both concepts remain overly vague and fail to account for the diversity, hierarchy, and utilitarian motivations of belief actors.

It is scholars in Taiwan, China, who substantially advanced the theoretical development of the “sacrifice sphere” and “belief sphere”. In the 1970s, Xu Jiaming and Shi Zhenming adopted the concept of the “sacrifice sphere” to interpret the formation mechanisms of local organizations in Han society²¹. Later, building on prior studies of the “sacrifice sphere”, Lin Meirong supplemented relevant theories with her own fieldwork in Caotun Village, Nantou County, and put forward a relatively rigorous definition of the concept²². It refers to a mandatory communal organization established by local residents out of a shared need to enshrine the same patron god. Based on her in-depth

¹⁹ KEN OKADA. The Ritual Circle of Villages in Northern Taiwan. *Ethnic Studies*, 1938, (1):1–22

²⁰ MICHIO, SUENAR. The Belief Circle of the Han Ethnic Group in Taiwan: Centered on the Information of the Hakka Tribes in the North. *National Museum of Ethnology Research Report*, 1991, (14):21–101.

²¹ SHI, ZHENMIN. Sacrificial circles and social organizations: a discussion on the development model of settlements in the Changhua Plain. *Journal of the Institute of Ethnology, “Academia Sinica”*, 1973, (36):191–208. XU, JIAMING. The uniqueness of the “sacrificial circle” in the Han Chinese society living in Taiwan. *Chinese Cultural Renaissance Monthly*, 1978, (6):59–73.

²² LIN, MEIRONG. *Belief of Mazu and Han Society*. Harbin: Heilongjiang People’s Publishing House, 2003, pp. 3–7.

investigation of Nanyao Temple in Changhua, Lin Meirong further proposed the concept of the “belief sphere”²³. According to Lin Meirong’s research, the “belief sphere” evolved on the foundation of the “sacrifice sphere”. It denotes a voluntary religious organization in which believers rally around the cult of a principal god and its affiliated incarnations within a given region. The introduction and application of the “sacrifice sphere” and “belief sphere” have greatly facilitated the description and interpretation of folk beliefs and rural organizations in Taiwanese Han society. Nevertheless, both concepts pay insufficient attention to regional social power structures, integrative mechanisms, and group interest appeals.

Scholars in mainland China have refrained from directly adopting the analytical frameworks of the “sacrifice spheres” and “belief spheres”. They argue that such frameworks neglect inquiries into the interactions between different social groups and organizations within regional societies. Against this backdrop, Zheng Zhenman introduced the concepts of “religious organizations” and “community organizations” in his research on the temple system in Putian²⁴. Meanwhile, Chen Chunsheng put forward the notion of “belief space” in his case study of the temple system in Zhanglin²⁵. Subsequent scholars have further supplemented and revised the analytical frameworks of “sacrifice spheres” and “belief spheres” by taking into account the regional features of rural societies across different parts of China.

This raises the question of whether the various activities centering on the cult of water gods in the Dongting Lake area have evolved into a typical model of the “sacrifice sphere” or “belief sphere”?

The emergence, evolution, and eventual decline of any cult of water god in the Dongting Lake area are inseparable from the combined efforts of diverse social groups, including imperial rulers, local officials, merchants, scholar-gentry, common people, and Buddhist monks²⁶. These groups monopolized the rituals of the cult of water gods, assumed responsibility for constructing and renovating water god temples, controlled the right to endow water gods

²³ LIN, MEIRONG. *Belief of Mazu and Han Society. op. cit.*, pp. 7–20.

²⁴ ZHENG, ZHENMAN. Temple Rites and Community Development Models: An Example from the Jiangkou Plain in Putian. *Historical Review*, 1995, (1):33–47.

²⁵ CHEN, CHUNSHENG. Faith Space and The Evolution of Community History: A Case Study of the Temple System in Zhanglin. *The Qing History Journal*, 1999, (2):1–13.

²⁶ ZHANG, SHUAIQI and SUN, HONGYU. Mobility to Other Locations: A Study on the Spread of the Cult of Lord Yan from Jiangxi to Hubei in the Ming–Qing Era. *Religions*, 2023, (5):593.

with diverse divine functions, and mediated disputes over the distribution of interests related to such cults. Behind such practices lies a public-oriented social organization—including lineages, merchant associations, and other specialized associations—spontaneously formed by various social groups around the cult of water gods. This organization oversees the execution, dissemination, and maintenance of relevant sacrificial activities.

Through fieldwork and analysis of the cult of the water god in the Dongting Lake area, I argue that a regional social integration system has taken shape. This system is characterized by a strong collective identity, clear hierarchical authority derived from social status disparities, and prominent utilitarian motives rooted in diverse practical demands. On this basis, I propose a new belief model different from the existing frameworks of the “sacrifice sphere” and “belief sphere”, namely the “Community of Faith”. A detailed definition will be given below.

Building on this basis, local social groups (including powerful lineages, social organizations, local officials, merchant alliances, and the gentry) collectively hold a range of powers centering on particular folk beliefs. These include the creation and veneration of gods, the construction and renovation of temples, as well as the endowment and regulation of divine functions. Together, these elements form a regional religious belief system with a well-defined power hierarchy and orderly operational structure.

The “Community of Faith” incorporates nearly all the attributes of the “sacrifice sphere” and the “belief sphere”, while also featuring unique characteristics not found in the other two frameworks. For instance, believers tend to regard gods as instrumental means of pursuing practical benefits, and a hierarchical order exists within the believer group, whose faith is distinctly utilitarian in nature. In the context of the cult of water gods, different social groups in the Dongting Lake area fulfilled their respective interests and goals within the framework of the “Community of Faith” (see Table 1).

Therefore, the “Community of Faith” concept proposed in this article has two core implications: it functions as both an analytical framework to dissect regional social power structures and clarify the order of divine beliefs, and a practical means to manage community public affairs and promote the integration of local social groups.

3. The Formation and Evolution of the Water God Genealogy

Since prehistoric times, the Dongting Lake area has nurtured abundant indigenous water gods and witnessed the large-scale influx of water gods from other regions. Different social groups in the area selectively adopted and

Table 1 The Roles, Intentions, and Activities of Different Social Subjects under the Framework of “Community of Faith” on the Dongting Lake Area during the Ming-Qing Periods.

Different social groups	Roles	Intentions	Activities
1. Emperor 2. Central government (Imperial court) and its officials	1. The secular authority of the empire 2. Administrator of all dynastic affairs 3. Defenders of the ruling order of the dynasty	1. Suppress heretical religions and eliminating the threat of folk religions to dynastic rule 2. Control the direction of social thought 3. Maintain the stability and ruling order of the dynastic	1. Formulating of dynastic religious management policies 2. Granting noble titles to the local water gods 3. Constructing and repairing the official water god temples 4. Acquiescence the construction and renovation of water god temples by local social groups
Local government and officials	1. Representative of the emperor and imperial court in the local society 2. Administrator of all local social affairs 3. A middleman between the dynastic government and local society 4. Reflector of local social opinions	1. Eliminating the threat of folk religions to local order 2. Maintain the stability of local societies	1. Promotion and implementation of dynastic religious management policy 2. Demolition of illegitimate water god temples 3. Report to the emperor and imperial court on the cult of water gods in local society 4. Support for the construction and renovation of local water god temples 5. Hold the sacrificial rituals for the water gods
Gentry, merchants, commoners, and other social groups	1. Followers of the secular power and helpers of the local officials 2. Participants in local social affairs 3. Creators of local social opinions 4. Main worshippers of the water gods	1. Ensure the freedom to worship water gods 2. Maintain a good relationship with the local government and officials 3. Enhancement of their own social status and prestige (certain local social groups) 4. Obtain political resources and economic benefits	1. Manufacture of legal water gods and transformation of illegal water gods 2. Request the title of water god from local officials and the emperor 3. Organize or participate in activities to worship the water gods 4. Construction or renovation of the water god temples 5. Struggle for control of certain water gods or water god temples

integrated these gods, which gradually developed into a structured pantheon during the Ming–Qing periods, comprising two main gods of Dongting Lake and multiple types of water gods.

3.1 *The Continuous Replacement of the Main Gods of Dongting Lake*

Every god possesses a definite sphere of activity, which also serves as the exclusive space for the exertion of its divine power²⁷. The main gods of Dongting Lake include two water gods, who occupy a dominant position among all water gods in the region and wield the most far-reaching social influence. Nevertheless, the archetypal identity of the main gods of Dongting Lake was not static; instead, it corresponded to different divine figures across historical eras. These include the Emperor's Two Daughters, Xiang Jun and Xiang Furen, the Prince of Dongting (Liu Yi)²⁸, and General Yang Si. Overall, this evolution demonstrates a clear transformation from natural gods to human gods.

3.1.1 The Two Daughters of the Emperor

In primitive societies, humans could not comprehend the mysterious forces of nature. They thus began to revere and worship nature, and even sought to communicate with it²⁹. This process was imbued with the religious mentality of “deifying nature” and “personifying nature”. The embryonic form of the water gods in the Dongting Lake area first appeared in the pre-Qin period. The Book of Mountains and Seas (Shanhai Jing) records that the Emperor's two daughters dwelt in Dongting Mountain. They often wandered among major rivers—the middle Yangtze, the Xiang, Zi, Yuan, Li, and Miluo Rivers—and Dongting Lake, bringing gales and rainstorms wherever they appeared³⁰. As early water gods, they govern the winds and rains of rivers and lakes and rank among the earliest main gods of the Dongting Lake area.

However, the “two daughters of the Emperor” have often been confused by later generations with Yao's two daughters, namely Shun's consorts E Huang and Nü Ying. Through a comparative analysis of diverse historical texts, this

²⁷ YU, LIYUAN. On the Ecological Positional Relationships of Deities and the Balance of Folk Belief Ecosystems. *Folklore Studies*, 2008, (3):179–99.

²⁸ In different historical periods, the God of Dongting Lake has also had different names, such as Dongting Jun, God of Dongting and Prince of Dongting.

²⁹ ZHANG, QIANG. Nature Worship: Linguistic Context in Dialogue between Man and Nature. *Jianghai Academic Journal*, 2003, (3):50–6.

³⁰ Anonymous. 2009. Translated and annotated by FANG, Tao. *The Book of Mountains and Seas*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2009, p. 170.

claim proves untenable. According to “The Historical Records (Shiji)”, Shun succeeded Yao as leader of the tribal alliance at the age of 61. At the age of 100, he toured the southern frontier of the alliance and passed away in Cangwu, where he was buried at Jiuyi Mountain in Lingling³¹. Meanwhile, Bamboo Annals (Zhushu Ji’nian) records that when Shun was 91, E Huang was buried at a place named “Wei”³². In addition, the Annotations of the Book of Mountains and Seas (Shanhai Jing Guangzhu) notes that after Shun’s death, Nü Ying accompanied his son Jun and migrated to the fief of Shang Prefecture, where she was eventually buried³³. Based on the above historical sources, it is evident that the “two daughters of the Emperor” cannot be identified with Shun’s two consorts, E Huang and Nü Ying.

The “two daughters of the Emperor” are not personality gods derived from the deification of historical figures, but indigenous nature gods transformed from non-human to human. As the early main gods of Dongting, their evolution was closely linked to both the emergence of abstract thinking among local social groups and the region’s natural setting of dense water systems, as well as the prevalent social customs of the cult of witchcraft, ghosts and dods.

3.1.2 Xiang Jun and Xiang Furen

From the Qin and Han dynasties onward, Xiang Jun and Xiang Furen—water gods worshipped in the Dongting Lake area—gradually superseded the Two Daughters of the Emperor as the new main gods of Dongting under the promotion of different social groups. This transformation was greatly influenced by Qu Yuan (Approximately 340 BCE–278 BCE) and his compilation of “Chu Ci”³⁴. According to “The Collection of Songs of Chu (Chuci Jijie)”, Xiang Jun governs the Xiang River, while Xiang Furen is regarded as his consort³⁵. Local social groups venerate Xiang Jun and Xiang Furen as a divine couple presiding

³¹ SIMA, QIAN. *The Historical Records*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1959, p. 44.

³² Anonymous. Translated and annotated by ZHANG, YUCHUN. *Bamboo Annals*. Haerbin: Hei-longjiang People’s Publishing House, 2002, p. 106.

³³ WU, RENCHEN. *Annotations of the Book of Mountains and Seas*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2020, p. 308.

³⁴ “CHU CI” is a poetic genre formed by Qu Yuan’s transformation and processing of folk songs and music dedicated to the gods in the Chu region during the primitive society period. More importantly, it opened up a path of Romantic literary creation that was of unusual significance to the entire Chinese cultural system.

³⁵ WANG, NUAN. *The Collection of Songs of Chu*. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2017, p. 103.

over the Xiangjiang River basin. This image is essentially a cultural construction that projects the marital conventions of traditional Chinese agrarian society onto the relationship between gods.

However, according to “Supplementary Notes of Songs of Chu (Chuci Buzhu)”, the waters under Xiang Jun’s jurisdiction were centered on Dongting Lake, extending northward along the Yangtze River and southward to the Yuan and Xiang River basins³⁶. Accordingly, the sphere of influence of Xiang Jun and Xiang Furen is not confined merely to the Xiangjiang River basin; instead, they should be regarded as the main gods worshipped by local communities across the greater Dongting Lake area. Meanwhile, scholarly interpretations of their mythical prototypes have long diverged. Some identify both E Huang and Nü Ying with Xiang Jun³⁷; others regard E Huang as Xiang Jun and Nü Ying as Xiang Furen³⁸; a third view equates Shun with Xiang Jun³⁹ and both E Huang and Nü Ying with Xiang Furen⁴⁰. Nevertheless, a comparative analysis of various textual records demonstrates that such interpretations lack credible evidence. Instead, Xiang Jun and Xiang Furen ought to be classified as indigenous nature gods native to the Dongting Lake area⁴¹.

Variations in the literary and historical depictions of Xiang Jun and Xiang Furen have constructed multiple character archetypes, while also extending their social influence in the Dongting Lake area. Moreover, the transition of the main gods of Dongting—from the “Two Daughters of the Emperor” to Xiang Jun and Xiang Furen—involves a change among indigenous nature gods, which does not depart from the practice of deifying and personifying natural entities.

3.1.3 Prince of Dongting and General Yang Si

Since the Tang and Song dynasties, there have been various types of water gods in the Dongting Lake area. Among them, Liu Yi and General Yang Si

³⁶ HONG, XINGZU. *Supplementary Notes of Songs of Chu*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2015, p. 47.

³⁷ SIMA, QIAN. *The Historical Records*. *op. cit.*, p. 248.

³⁸ HAN, YU. Annotated by Ma Qichang, arranged by Ma Maoyuan. *Annotations on Han Changli’s Literature*. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2014, p. 553–4.

³⁹ SIMA, QIAN. *The Historical Records*. *op. cit.*, p. 249.

⁴⁰ HONG, XINGZU. *Supplementary Notes of Songs of Chu*. *op. cit.*, p. 97–8.

⁴¹ ZHANG, YUN. The literary Writing of Dongting Flood about Xiangjun and Xiang madame. *Regional Culture Study*, 2021, (3):81–97.

emerged as the region's most influential main gods⁴². To this day, a local saying still prevails in the Dongting Lake area: "A great disaster portends the arrival of the Prince of Dongting; a minor calamity signals the coming of General Yang Si."

The prototype of the Prince of Dongting is Liu Yi, protagonist of the Tang dynasty tale Legend of the Dongting Spirit Marriage (Dongting Lingyin Zhuan) by Li Chaowei (Approximately 766–820). The narrative recounts how Liu Yi helped rescue the Dongting Dragon Maiden by delivering a letter to her father, Lord of Dongting, subsequently fell in love with the maiden, married her, and eventually inherited the throne of the Lord of Dongting⁴³. With the constant enrichment and widespread dissemination of the story, Liu Yi was gradually venerated by local communities as a God of Dongting Lake by the late Tang Dynasty, completing his transformation from a mortal figure to a god. Nevertheless, imperial authorities across successive dynasties never officially recognized the folk deification of Liu Yi as the new patron god of Dongting Lake. Instead, imperial honors and titles were consistently conferred upon the generic God of Dongting Lake, with no reference to Liu Yi himself⁴⁴. During the Ming-Qing periods, amid tacit official acquiescence, Liu Yi's social prestige rose steadily above that of other water gods in the Dongting Lake area, establishing him as one of the main tutelary gods of Dongting.

The archetypal figure of General Yang Si bears distinctive local characteristics⁴⁵. By comprehensively examining diverse historical documents and folk

⁴² LI, LIN. Historical Changes of Water God Beliefs in Dongting Lake. *Folklore Studies*, 2010, (4):154–64.

⁴³ HU, XIUFENG. Research on Changes and Progress of Liu Yi's Story. Shenyang: Master's Thesis of Liaoning University, 2012.

⁴⁴ The time and title of awarding the God of Dongting Lake by rulers of different dynasties. In 905, the God of Dongting Lake was appointed as the Marquis of Lishi. Wang, Pu. *Hui Yao in Tang Dynasty*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1988, p. 835. In 937, the God of Dongting Lake was granted the title of Lingji Gong. XUE, JUZHENG. *Old History of the Five Dynasties*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2000, p. 698. In 1328, the God of Dongting Lake was awarded the title of "Zhongshun Huili Lingji Zhaoyou King" by the rulers of the Yuan Dynasty. SONG, LIAN. *History of the Yuan Dynasty*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2000, p. 464.

⁴⁵ The character prototypes of General Yang Si include Yang Si from Changsha, Yang Congyi (1089–1167) from Fengxiang (Zhang 2008), Yang Silang from Bingzhou, Yang Zaixing (1104–1140) from Linying, and Yang Yao (1108–1135) from Longyang. HUANG, ZIGANG. *Chinese Water Gods*. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature & Art Publishing House, 1988, p. 1–6. ZHANG, XIAOHONG. Nativization of Regional Worship and Transformation of local Worship: A Consideration on Investigation of the Worship of General Yang Si in Southern Shaanxi in the Qing Dynasty. *Journal of Shaanxi Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2008, (6):96–103.

tales, this study concludes that General Yang Si is most likely based on Yang Yao, a leader of a peasant uprising in the early Southern Song Dynasty. Born into a poor family in Longyang County, Yang Yao and his father both worked as hired laborers on merchant vessels in the Dongting Lake area. Following the failure of his uprising, Yang Yao attempted suicide by drowning himself in Dongting Lake, only to be captured and executed by Niu Gao (1087–1147)⁴⁶. Yang Yao's place of residence, occupational background, sphere of uprising activities, and suicidal act are all closely associated with water, which provides a plausible rationale for his later deification as the water god General Yang Si. This apotheosis was closely intertwined with the efforts of local social groups who, shaped by the regional geographical environment, created and venerated water gods to pursue socioeconomic interests. The Dongting Lake area features an intricate network of rivers and convenient water transportation routes; yet sudden storms on the lake constantly endangered maritime navigation. Meanwhile, the widespread practice of constructing dikes to reclaim farmland frequently triggered floods and droughts, severely disrupting agricultural production. Consequently, local communities including merchants and ordinary civilians gradually deified the historical figure Yang Yao as General Yang Si, worshipping him to pray for blessings on economic activities and safeguard livelihood and travel safety.

3.2 *The Multiple Types Structure of Water Gods in Dongting Lake Area*

From the pre-Qin period to the Ming-Qing periods, affected by ongoing changes in the geographical environment, social customs, economic structure, political authority and other factors, the quantity and typology of water gods in the Dongting Lake area underwent constant expansion and decline, demonstrating a historical feature of relative fluidity and openness. Given that water gods in the Dongting Lake area differ considerably in nature and functions, they can be classified into two main categories and several subcategories (see Table 2).

As shown in Table 2, during the Ming-Qing periods, water gods in the Dongting Lake area were primarily categorized as human gods, natural gods, and animal gods, supplemented by water official gods, Shuifu gods, suppression water gods, and part-time water gods. Their overall development exhibits the following characteristics.

⁴⁶ Tuo, Tuo. *History of the Song Dynasty*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2000, p. 9033.

Table 2 The Multiple Types Structure of Water Gods in the Dongting Lake Area during the Ming-Qing Periods*

	Nature Gods	Human Gods		Animal Gods	Water Officer (Taoist)	Shuifu-Gods	Suppression Water Gods
		Local Gods	Outside Gods				
Dedicated Water Gods	God of Jiang (God of Jiangdu, God of Jiangzhu, Different regions along the Yangtze River have different names for God of Jiang.), God of Xiang Jiang, God of Dongting Lake (Dongting Jun, God of Dongting, The God of Dongting Lake were called by different names at different times.)	Legendary Figures Gods: Xiang Jun, Xiang Furen, Two Concubines (E Huang and Nü Ying), Two Daughters of the Emperor, Prince Dongting (Liu Yi), Nan Mu	Historical Figures Gods: Yan Gong (Yan Wuzai), Xiao Gong (includes Xiao Boxuan, Xiao Xiangshu and Xiao Tianren), Liu Gong (Liu Qi), Xu Zhunjun (Xu Xun), Zong Gong (Zong Ze), Tian Fei (Ma Zu)	Dragon God, Dragon King (Dragon King of Meishan, Dragon King of Shunji, Different regions have different names for the Dragon King.)			Their identities may overlap with each other.
		Historical Figures Gods: Qu Yuan (Sanli Dafu), General Yang Si	Leg-endary Figure God: Da Yu (Yu King)				
Part-time Water Gods	Yuhuang Dadi (Jade Emperor), Zhenwu Dadi (The Great Perfect Warrior Emperor), Guan Yu, Ma Yuan (also known as General Fubo), God of Chenghuang						

*The content in Table 2 is compiled from local chronicles and fieldwork. The difference between "Dedicated Water Gods" and "Part-time Water Gods" lies in whether their core functions are related to water, while the distinction between "local Water Gods" and "Outside Water Gods" depends on whether their place of origin is in the Dongting Lake area.

Firstly, human gods constitute the predominant type of water gods in the Dongting Lake area, encompassing both locally originated and externally introduced water gods. Among them, gods evolved from historical figures occupy a dominant position. The historical prototypes of such god figures were real personages. Their apotheosis as water gods generally stemmed from their meritorious deeds in life or supernatural legends emerging after their death⁴⁷. This process and its outcome were sanctioned by both local communities and imperial authorities of successive dynasties. More notably, the main gods of Dongting across different historical periods all belong to the category of indigenous human water gods.

Secondly, the natural gods in the Dongting Lake area originated from the cult of water in primitive society⁴⁸. They refer to gods associated with the Yangtze River, Dongting Lake, and Xiang River, which bore different names and had distinct character prototypes in different historical periods. Initially, the animal gods in the Dongting Lake area mainly included the Dragon God and the Dragon King. However, with the introduction of the Dragon King concept from Indian Buddhism, the advocacy of local social groups, and the conferment of titles by the rulers of the Song Dynasty, these two figures gradually merged into one, unified under the title of the Dragon King⁴⁹.

Thirdly, the water officer is a god within the early worship system of Taoism, China's indigenous religion, and its character archetype is generally regarded by social groups as Da Yu. However, the identities of the shuifu gods and suppression water gods in the Dongting Lake area are not entirely clear; they may be any of several other types of water gods, depending on the belief habits and practical choices of different social groups.

Finally, the primary functions of part-time water gods in the Dongting Lake area are inherently unrelated to water. Instead, driven by the practical demands of local communities, these gods have acquired water-god attributes

⁴⁷ HAMASHIMA, ATSUTOSHI. Translated by ZHU, HAIBIN. *Rural Society and Folk Beliefs in Jiangnan during the Ming and Qing Dynasties*. Xiamen: Xiamen University Press, 2008, p. 96.

⁴⁸ ZHU, TIANSHUN. *Primitive Religions*. Shanghai: Shanghai People's Publishing House, 1978, p. 36.

⁴⁹ QIAO, YINGFEI. 2022. The Emergence and Development of the Dragon King Cult in China. *Folklore Studies*, 2022, (1):83–93.

in the course of religious dissemination, gradually evolving into a category of folk divinities that retain their original core functions while also embodying the powers of other patron gods⁵⁰.

4 *The Construction and Distribution of the Water God Temples*

Water temples serve as the material manifestation of the cult of water gods, their quantity reflects the prosperity or decline of such cults in a certain region. Since the pre-Qin period, different social groups in the Dongting Lake area continuously constructed and renovated numerous water god temples. By the Ming-Qing periods, alongside the flourishing of the cult of water god activities in the Dongting Lake area, the number of water god temples reached its historical peak.

The earliest water god temple in the Dongting Lake area is the Huangling Temple, constructed prior to the Han Dynasty (202 BC–8 AD). Annually, on the fourteenth day of the sixth lunar month, local officials would lead the gentry, merchants, and commoners in worshipping the temple's principal gods, Ehuang and Nüying⁵¹. To this day, the Quzi Temple in Miluo City still holds annual rituals in honor of the water god (Qu Yuan) and undergoes regular renovations. However, among water god temples across the Dongting Lake area, Dongting Temples are the most numerous and widely spread. In total, forty-eight such temples are distributed along the lake's periphery and on its islands, with the main temple located in Lujiao Town⁵². In the past, there were far more Dongting Temples than exist today, as these temples have long undergone repeated destruction and reconstruction. The same applies to many other water god temples in the region. In addition, the construction and repair processes of most water god temples in the Dongting Lake area have gone through several historical periods, and the participants involved neither belonged to the same social group nor came from the same region. For instance, the main and rear halls of Dongting Temple in Baling County underwent renovations

⁵⁰ WANG, SHOUEN. 2009. On the Gods System of Folk Beliefs. *Studies in World Religions*, 2009, (4):72–80.

⁵¹ ZHANG, DENG (fl. 1551–1553). *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 103, Annals of Xiangyin County*. Taipei: Cheng Wen Publishing Co., Ltd., 2014, p. 138.

⁵² TAO, SHU (1778–1839). *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 1227, Annals of Dongting Lake*. Taipei: Cheng Wen Publishing Co., Ltd., 2014, p. 300.

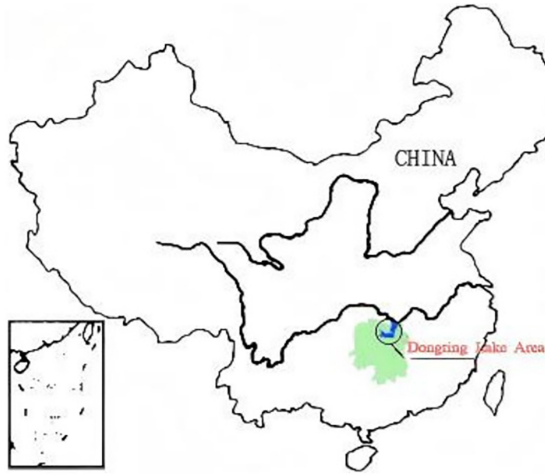


Figure 1 The Location of Dongting Lake Area in China

in 1793 and 1798, undertaken respectively by local administrator Zheng Yuantao (fl. 1793) and Hubei native Zhao Xiying (fl. 1798)⁵³.

Based on data from local chronicles and fieldwork, water god temples in the Dongting Lake area are widely scattered across eight counties under four prefectures in Hunan Province⁵⁴. Significant disparities can be observed in the quantity and layout of water god temples among these counties. To better visualize such spatial variations, this paper compiles a spatial distribution map of water god temples in the Dongting Lake area during Ming-Qing dynasties on the basis of the above-mentioned “local knowledge”⁵⁵ (see Fig. 1).

⁵³ CHEN, YUYUAN (fl. 1803–1804). *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 1212, Annals of Baling County*. Taipei: Cheng Wen Publishing Co., Ltd., 2014, p. 508.

⁵⁴ According to the records of Dongting Lake Chronicle, the Dongting Lake area includes eight counties, including Baling County, Hua’rong County in Yuezhou Prefecture, Anxiang County in Lizhou Prefecture, Wuling County, Longyang County, Yuanjiang County in Changde Prefecture, Yiyang County, Xiangyin County in Changsha Prefecture. Anfu County in Li Zhou is also part of the Dongting Lake area. Tao, Shu (1778–1839). *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 1227, Annals of Dongting Lake. op. cit.*, Ltd., 2014, p. 39.

⁵⁵ Local knowledge is a new type of knowledge concept, which includes a series of contents such as specific regional significance, specific context formed by knowledge production, cultural and group values formed by specific historical conditions, and positions and perspectives determined by specific interest relationships. Clifford, Geertz. *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*. New York: Basic Books, 1983, p. 7.

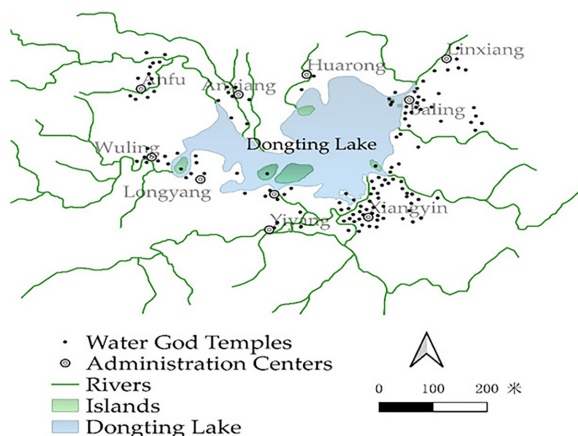


Figure 2 Spatial Distribution of Water God Temples in the Dongting Lake Area during the Ming-Qing Periods⁵⁶

As shown in Fig. 2, during the Ming-Qing periods, water god temples in the Dongting Lake area exhibited obvious spatial differentiation, presenting an overall pattern of being denser in the south and east, and sparser in the north and west. This pattern is closely associated with local geographical environment changes, economic development models, and the inheritance of regional social customs.

Firstly, East and South Dongting Lakes are broad and deep. They link up with the Yangtze River to the north and are injected by major water systems including the Xinqiang, Miluo, Xiang, Yuan and Zi Rivers to the east and south, which facilitated waterway transport and population mobility across regions⁵⁷. By the Ming-Qing periods, the waterway transportation of the Dongting Lake basin had reached its zenith. The region evolved into a pivotal hub of the national inland water transport network and served as the material circulation lifeline of the Two Lakes region⁵⁸. Commodities such as grain, timber, tea,

⁵⁶ Adapted from the “Atlas of Chinese History-Qing Dynasty-Hunan”. TAN, QIXIANG. *The Historical Atlas of China*. Beijing: Sinomap Press, 1996, pp. 37–8. And the content in the Fig. 1 is compiled from local chronicles and fieldwork.

⁵⁷ LIU, XIUSHENG. A Study on the Commercial Transportation of Inland Rivers in the Qing Dynasty. *The Qing History Journal*, 1992, (4):12–21.

⁵⁸ ZHANG, ZEXIAN and GUO, SONGYI. *History of Chinese Shipping*. Beijing: Wenjin Publishing House, 1997.

medicinal herbs and tung oil from southern Hunan and southwestern China were shipped to northern China and the lower Yangtze reaches via these water routes⁵⁹. At that time, goods were mainly carried by wooden sailboats and bamboo rafts, which had limited capacity to withstand wind and waves in lakes and rivers and thus faced considerable navigation risks. To guarantee unimpeded water transport and personal safety, merchants, sailors and ordinary travelers along the Dongting Lake waterways commonly worshipped water gods and contributed to the construction and renovation of water god temples along the lake shore.

Secondly, the Dongting Lake area is interwoven with rivers, lakes, ponds, reservoirs and canals. It features extensive and diverse water systems abundant in aquatic life and fishery resources. In particular, in the historical territories of Baling, Xiangyin, Yuanjiang and Wuling, a large number of local residents relied on Dongting Lake's fishery resources for a living, forming nearly half of the regional population⁶⁰. Since the late Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368 AD), the imperial government set up successively Hepo Offices in these regions to impose fishery taxes on fishermen. By the early Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), over twenty such offices had been established around Dongting Lake, and fishery taxes alone accounted for half of the imperial government's miscellaneous tax revenue⁶¹. To meet their fishery tax obligations and sustain their livelihoods, local fishermen had to catch large quantities of fish for sale to earn income and procure daily necessities. Consequently, before each fishing voyage on Dongting Lake, fishermen would perform rituals to worship water gods, praying for bumper catches and safe returns. When their prayers were answered, they would donate funds to construct and renovate temples dedicated to water gods.

Thirdly, in the early Ming Dynasty, thanks to the nationwide implementation of the state's land reclamation policy and the large-scale migration of people from Jiangxi to the Huguang region, land reclamation boomed in the eastern and southern parts of the Dongting Lake area. Local officials, scholar-gentry, clans, immigrants, military and other groups all took part in the reclamation

⁵⁹ LUO, CHUANDONG. *History of Yangtze River Navigation (Ancient Part)*. Wuhan: Changjing Press, 2019.

⁶⁰ LI, YUANFANG (1489–1553). *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 1023, Annals of Yuezhou Prefecture*. Taipei: Cheng Wen Publishing Co., Ltd., 2014.

⁶¹ YIN, LINGLING. The Fishery Economy of Dongting Lake Area in Ming Dynasty. *Agricultural History of China*, 2020, (1):48–56.

and cultivation of Yuan Fields⁶², either farming the land themselves or hiring laborers to till it⁶³. By the mid-to-late Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), the number of Yuan Fields in the Dongting Lake area had grown from more than 140 in the Ming Dynasty to over 1340⁶⁴. During this period, the unrestrained expansion of Yuan Fields led to a drastic reduction in the flood storage capacity of rivers and lakes. This triggered frequent floods and droughts, with floods making up 90% of all natural disasters, and embankment collapses became a recurring annual phenomenon⁶⁵. Apart from constructing and reinforcing dykes, local officials, gentry and peasants also sought to mitigate flood damage to Yuan Fields by erecting water god temples and performing sacrificial rituals to worship water gods. After all, agricultural production constituted not only the economic foundation for both feudal regimes and peasant livelihoods, but also a key criterion for the imperial court to evaluate local officials' governance performance.

Finally, from the pre-Qin period to the present, the area where Dongting Lake converges with the Yuan and Xiang Rivers has long been known for the local custom of worshipping ghosts and gods, and temples construction. When local residents fall ill, they often refrain from taking medicine and instead turn to shamans or pray at temples for spiritual healing⁶⁶. Whenever floods, droughts or epidemics occur, the social groups invite shamans to perform song and dance rituals in temples to entertain gods⁶⁷. In particular, in Baling and Xiangyin Counties, different social groups usually share the expenses of the cult of god at proportional rates⁶⁸. Influenced by such folk customs and religious

⁶² YUAN Field is a high-yield water conservancy field in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River plain, surrounded by embankments, with different sizes of land in the middle, and equipped with drainage and irrigation engineering facilities, which appeared in the Southern Song period at the latest, but its comprehensive development stage occurred in the Ming-Qing periods.

⁶³ ZHANG, JIANMIN. *Research on Agricultural Water Conservancy in the Yangtze River Basin during the Ming-Qing Dynasties*. Wuhan: Wuhan University Press, 1993.

⁶⁴ TAO, SHU (1778–1839). *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 1227, Annals of Dongting Lake*. *op. cit.*, pp. 205–28.

⁶⁵ ZHANG, GUOXIONG. *Immigrants in Hubei and Hunan Regions during the Ming-Qing Periods*. Xi'an: Shaanxi People's Education Press, 1995.

⁶⁶ FAN, ZHIMING (?–1119). *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 301, Record of Yueyang Customs*. Taipei: Cheng Wen Publishing Co., Ltd., 1976.

⁶⁷ WANG, YI. Proofread by Huang, Linggeng. *Annotated version of Chuci*. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2017, p. 42.

⁶⁸ HUANG, NINGDAO (fl. 1742–1750). *Chinese local Chronicles Series, Records of Prefectures and Counties in Hunan Province, No. 6, Annals of Yuezhou Prefecture*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Classics Publishing House, 2002, p. 191

traditions, a large number of water god temples were erected along the lower Xiang River where it meets Dongting Lake.

In the final analysis, the construction and spatial distribution of water god temples in the Dongting Lake area result not only from the interplay of faith activities among different social groups (officials, gentlemen, merchants, monks and commoners), but also serve as an external embodiment of the local social mentality of “worshipping any gods who is efficacious⁶⁹”. To a certain extent, these water god temples can be seen as offerings presented by local social groups to water gods. In return, the water gods grant practical benefits to these groups in economic security and political prestige, thereby forming a “gift exchange” mechanism between human communities and water gods⁷⁰.

Furthermore, shaped by environmental and socioeconomic conditions, this spatial pattern in turn laid the material and social groundwork for the operation of the “Community of Faith”, as analyzed in depth in the following case studies.

5. *The Practice of Cult of Water Gods and Regional Social Integration*

The cult of water gods constituted a cultural resource of local society and served as a non-institutional mechanism for integrating diverse social groups and constructing regional power order⁷¹. Meanwhile, alongside geographical and socioeconomic changes, different social groups increasingly endowed water gods with new social functions.

Accordingly, throughout the Ming-Qing periods, imperial courts and local administrations, together with local social groups including gentry, merchants and commoners, forged a distinct “Community of Faith” in the Dongting Lake area. This community coalesced around a set of practical activities centered on the cult of water god, such as god veneration and the construction and renovation of water god temples. Given the disparities in power, wealth and social prestige among these groups, each acquired distinct rights and obligations within the cult of water god. This ultimately fostered a hierarchical order inside the “Community of Faith”, stratified primarily by social status. From the

⁶⁹ VALERIE, HANSEN. *Changing Gods in Medieval China: 1127–1276*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 38.

⁷⁰ MAUSS, MARCEL. Translated by JI, ZHE. Proofread by CHEN, RUIHUA. *Gifts: Forms and Reasons for Exchange in Ancient Societies*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 2016, p. 5.

⁷¹ ZHANG, SHUAIQI. Collusion order: water god beliefs and regional society on the Jianghan Plain during the Ming-Qing era. *op. cit.*, 2023, (3):290–309.

perspective of social function, the following analysis examines how the cult of water gods interacted with dynastic politics, shaped regional order, facilitated cross-regional alliances, and mediated social disputes within the operational logic of this mechanism.

5.1 *Dynastic Political Integration: The Cult of Water God and Suppression of Dynasty Rebellion*

According to The Zuo Commentary (Zuozhuan), the two most important affairs of a state are sacrifice and warfare⁷². Likewise, in China's feudal dynasties, both rulers and rebel forces frequently invoked various gods in military conflicts.

They did so to unify the power of local social groups through shared religious worship and to legitimize the regimes they established through deliberate god selection. Within the operational framework of "Community of Faith", imperial authorities, officials and military personnel therefore collaborated with local gentry, merchants and commoners to jointly suppress local uprisings and restore the established political order.

The Junshan Dongting Temple (located in Baling County, Yuezhou Prefecture) is an ancient temple whose construction date is unknown. It was damaged by war at the end of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) and was not rebuilt until 1392⁷³. The God of Dongting Lake has always been regarded by social groups in the Yuezhou area as the region's protective god and has never been included in the lists of national sacrifices by dynastic rulers. Local officials, gentry, merchants, and commoners (fishermen and peasants) would personally go to the Dongting Temple to burn incense on the first and fifteenth days of each lunar month, and they would hold a grand ceremony to worship the God of Dongting Lake every spring and autumn⁷⁴. Meanwhile, merchants, commoners, and literati from other regions would visit the Dongting Temple to worship the God of Dongting Lake when passing by the lake. Those who failed to do so were believed to incur divine punishment, such as boat capsizing and loss of life⁷⁵. Social groups also participated in the construction and renovation

⁷² YANG, BOJUN. *The Annotations of the Spring and Autumn Annals and the Zuo Commentary*. Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1981, p. 861.

⁷³ HUANG, NINGDAO (fl. 1742–1750). 2002. *Chinese local Chronicles Series, Records of Prefectures and Counties in Hunan Province, No. 6, Annals of Yuezhou Prefecture*. op. cit., p. 86.

⁷⁴ YAN, MINGQI. *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 1212, Annals of Baling County*. Taipei: Cheng Wen Publishing Co., Ltd., 2014. p. 477.

⁷⁵ YAN, MINGQI. *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China*, op. cit., p. 1987.

of Dongting Temple in various forms: local officials donated portions of their official salaries, gentries and merchants contributed funds, real estate or land, while artisans and commoners provided manual labor. Accordingly, all social groups in the Dongting Lake area formed a “Community of Faith” centering on the cult of the God of Dongting Lake.

In 1673, Wu Sangui (1608–1678) staged a military rebellion in Yunnan, advocating the political platform of opposing the Qing Dynasty and restoring the Ming Dynasty⁷⁶. The next year, Wu Yingqi (fl. 1673–1679), a subordinate of Wu Sangui, led troops to seize Yuezhou. The Qing army sought to retake Yuezhou by fighting the Battle of Qilishan, yet suffered a defeat owing to lost warships (a consequence of storms on Dongting Lake) and inadequate logistical supplies. This resulted in a long military standoff between the two sides along the Yangtze River and Dongting Lake. In 1678, Qing generals Cai Yurong (1633–1699) and E Na (fl. 1673–1681) planned a new campaign to recapture Yuezhou. To avoid repeating earlier setbacks, they made thorough preparations in two respects. On the one hand, they visited Dongting Temple on Junshan Island to worship the God of Dongting Lake, praying for divine protection from violent lake storms⁷⁷. On the other hand, they concluded a local alliance with the gentry, merchants and commoners of the Yuezhou region at the temple, swearing joint resistance against Wu Sangui’s rebellion under the witness of the God of Dongting Lake. This consisted of local gentry provided strategic advice to Qing military commanders⁷⁸; merchants took charge of fundraising and transporting military provisions and pay⁷⁹; and ordinary residents gathered military intelligence inside Yuezhou City and organized small detachments to harass enemy forces⁸⁰.

In 1679, the Qing army successfully retook Yuezhou City. Rebel forces in surrounding areas surrendered to the Qing court, while Wu Yingqi fled secretly

⁷⁶ MA, QI and ZHANG, TINGYU. *Historical Records of Qing Shengzu*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1985, p. 585.

⁷⁷ Anonymous. Proofread by WANG, ZHONGHAN. *Biographies of Qing Dynasty History*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1987, p. 437.

⁷⁸ YAN, MINGQI. *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 1212, Annals of Baling County. op. cit.*, p. 610.

⁷⁹ WANG, XINFU. *Compilation of Eight Years of Historical Facts*. Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2019, p. 4082.

⁸⁰ TENG, SHAOZHEN. *The History of the Three Princes*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2008, p. 1436.

by boat with a small troop detachment⁸¹. During this period, the waters of Dongting Lake remained tranquil, allowing the Qing warships to sail across unharmed. Consequently, Qing generals, soldiers, and local communities attributed the safe passage to the divine protection of the God of Dongting Lake⁸². Accordingly, Cai Yurong petitioned the imperial court to confer honors upon the God of Dongting Lake in acknowledgment of its meritorious divine deeds. The emperor approved his request and dispatched Bao Fuye (fl. 1679), a official from the Ministry of Rites, to conduct an official worship ceremony at Dongting Lake. The emperor formally bestowed an official title on the god, integrated the God of Dongting Lake into the state's orthodox pantheon, and decreed that annual expenses for temple worship and maintenance would be officially funded by the government⁸³.

The Qing army's suppression of the rebellion did not depend on the supernatural power of the God of Dongting Lake, but rather stemmed from the cooperation of multiple social groups within the framework of a "Community of Faith". Nevertheless, both Qing authorities and local communities tended to attribute the quelling of the rebellion to the divine assistance of the God of Dongting Lake. Qing rulers and local groups around Dongting Lake thus formed a "two-way reciprocal" power transaction centering on the conferment of official titles upon the god (see Table 3). By contrast, although the local god General Yang Si was never officially enshrined by the imperial state—because his original prototype derived from the rebel Yang Yao, a figure incompatible with dynastic orthodox ideology—he was widely revered among local residents. This phenomenon reflects an inherent tension between state ideological control and local cultural autonomy. Later, local communities redefined General Yang Si's original identity as a folk water god capable of slaying dragons and taming floods. The imperial government tacitly endorsed this reinterpretation and allowed popular cult of the god to continue. Furthermore, the God of Dongting Lake never evolved into a fully standardized god within the national official pantheon; its cult remained confined to the Dongting Lake area and failed to spread to other areas.

⁸¹ TAO, SHU (1778–1839). *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 1227, Annals of Dongting Lake*. *op. cit.*, p. 418.

⁸² ZHAO, SHIHENG. *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 103, Annals of Baling County*. Taipei: Cheng Wen Publishing Co., Ltd., 2014, p. 257.

⁸³ MA, QI and ZHANG, TINGYU. *Historical Records of Qing Shengzu*. *op. cit.*, p. 1033.

Table 3 The Harvest of Qing Dynasty Rulers and Social Groups in the Process of Rewarding God of Dongting Lake

Social Subjects	Gains
Rulers of the Qing Dynasty	1. Political Legitimacy (1) Prove the justice of quelling the rebellion (2) Prove oneself as the inheritor of the culture of the Central Plains dynasty 2. Cultural Orthodoxy (1) Control the interpretation power of god included in the national sacrificial list (2) Using god to rebuild local cultural systems 3. Local Control (1) Prevent rebels from using god to resist the court (2) Utilizing god to integrate the power of regional social groups
Social Groups in the Dongting Lake Area	1. Legitimizing Local Belief (1) God and its temples have obtained legal status (2) The social reputation and political status of god have significantly improved 2. Institutionalizing Resources (1) The gentry used god to consolidate their dominant power in handling community public affairs (2) Ensure normal fishing and water transportation activities in the area. 3. Stabilizing Social Order (1) Using god to mediate conflicts between different social groups (2) Strengthen the regional cultural identity and sense of belonging of local people

Note: The gods mentioned in Table 3 refer to God of Dongting Lake.

In this case, Qing army commander Cai Yurong, together with local gentry, merchants and commoners from Yuezhou, assembled at Junshan Dongting Temple. By jointly performing sacrificial rituals to the God of Dongting Lake and swearing an oath to resist Wu Sangui's rebel troops, they established a broad political alliance grounded in a "Community of Faith". It was not until the end of the war, when the Qing court conferred an official title upon the God of Dongting Lake, that this mechanism of social integration led by Cai Yurong and other Qing military commanders began to disintegrate. As social order was restored in Yuezhou, local officials took charge of official worship ceremonies dedicated to the God of Dongting Lake. Merchants and gentry assumed responsibility for collecting incense donations and drafting temple regulations.

Fishermen, boatmen and rural villagers organized incense associations to administer temple affairs, while Buddhist monks and Taoist priests oversaw temple management⁸⁴. Diverse social groups coalesced around the God of

⁸⁴ GUO, SONGTAO. *Chinese Local Chronicles Series, Records of Prefectures and Counties in Hubei Province, No. 10, Annals of Xiangyin County*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Classics Publishing House, 2002, p. 360–1.

Dongting Lake and Dongting Temple, forming a structured “Community of Faith” with a clear division of roles and responsibilities.

5.2 *Shaping Local Control: The Cult of Water God and the Formation Consolidation of Regional Dominance Authority*

The formation and consolidation of authority for any regional social actor relies on a certain medium. During the Ming-Qing periods, the social organizations and lineages in the Dongting Lake area established and consolidated their authority by taking the God of Dongting Lake as the medium. In this process, the collective identity of local social groups, with the God of Dongting Lake as a unifying symbol, was further reinforced.

5.2.1 The Cult of Water God and Operation of Specialized Organization

Due to the practical demands of the cult of water gods, specialized religious organizations emerged in areas surrounding Dongting Lake. As their social functions expanded, these organizations became instruments used by local influential elites to maintain grassroots social order⁸⁵. More importantly, such organizations have taken effective charge of the administration and operation of communal affairs of the cult of water god in regional society, thereby forming a genuine “Community of Faith”.

The Sanlü Temple (also known as Qu Yuan Temple) stands in Shawan outside the east gate of Wuling County. On the fifth day of the fifth lunar month each year, regular activities are held here, including the ritual of summoning the soul of Qu Yuan, dragon boat races, as well as sacrificial songs, dances and operas for god worship and folk entertainment⁸⁶. Nevertheless, in the absence of specialized managerial staff and formal organizations, various folk activities centered on the cult of Qu Yuan failed to proceed in an orderly fashion. Particularly, drowning incidents and crowd stampedes frequently occurred during the annual festival. Against this backdrop, local authorities gathered gentry, merchants and common residents to deliberate on solutions. They eventually resolved to set up a social organization dedicated to supervising all affairs

⁸⁵ LIU, YUTANG and ZHANG, SHUAIQI. State Presence, Folk Belief and Local Society: On the Evolution of Jiangnan Chenghuang Temple during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. *Journal of Hubei Minzu University (Philosophy and Social Sciences)*, 2020, (1):107–15.

⁸⁶ YING, XIANLIE. *Chinese Local Chronicles Series, Records of Prefectures and Counties in Hubei Province, No. 10, Annals of Changde Prefecture*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Classics Publishing House, 2002, p. 175.

related to the cult of Qu Yuan, which was named the “Sanlǔ Association”⁸⁷. As time went by, the association also took charge of temple renovation and daily administration of Sanlǔ Temple. Relevant activity funds were collected by local gentry via the Sanlǔ Association from all sectors of local society⁸⁸. In essence, the “Sanlǔ Association” embodied the “Community of Faith” established by local social groups in Wuling County through diverse practical activities centering on the cult of Qu Yuan.

Meanwhile, the daily operation and administration of the “Sanlǔ Association” was undertaken by local gentry on an annual rotational basis. A dedicated post system of “Shou shi” was established, with specific persons assigned to take charge of particular affairs, such as sacrificial rituals⁸⁹. As the association gained growing social influence, local officials began to leverage it to rally gentry groups for the administration of local social affairs. Lu Erqiu, Magistrate of Wuling County, relied on the Sanlǔ Association and local gentry to disseminate state decrees, as well as raise funds for constructing public infrastructures including bridges, roads and schools. All these practices aimed to exert the authoritative influence of Qu Yuan, the water god, to facilitate local governance⁹⁰. In this sense, the “Sanlǔ Association” gradually evolved into an instrumental force for local officials to administer public social affairs. More significantly, functioning as a “Community of Faith”, its operational mechanism fostered the integration of identity consciousness among diverse social strata in Wuling, and offered an effective social approach to consolidate grassroots social order. Undoubtedly, all these practices were realized through joint efforts and coordinated promotion among local gentry, who constituted the core group dominating and shaping the development of regional society⁹¹.

In this case, the Sanlǔ Association, composed of local gentry, common villagers and merchants, took charge of the daily management of Sanlǔ Temple and the organization of sacrificial rituals honoring Qu Yuan. As local gentry assumed rotational leadership of the association, they gradually became the

⁸⁷ OUYANG, LIE (1807–1868). *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 1033, Annals of Wuling County*. Taipei: Cheng Wen Publishing Co., Ltd., 2014, p. 254.

⁸⁸ OUYANG, LIE (1807–1868). *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, op. cit.*, p. 254.

⁸⁹ OUYANG, LIE (1807–1868). *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, op. cit.*, p. 254.

⁹⁰ SUN, QIAOZE (fl. 1830–1832). *Chinese Local Chronicles Series, Records of Prefectures and Counties in Hubei Province, No. 75, Annals of Wuling County*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Classics Publishing House, 2002, p. 380.

⁹¹ ZHU, LIN. *The Gentry Linchuan and Local Society in the Ming-Qing Dynasties*. Nanchang: Master’s Thesis of Nanchang University, 2011.

principal managers of all temple-related affairs. In later periods, the association further assisted local authorities in handling various public social affairs. Practically, it fostered a social integration order underpinned by the “Community of Faith” mechanism, featuring joint governance by officials and gentry together with extensive participation of merchants and ordinary residents.

5.2.2 The Cult of Water God and Expansion of Clan Power

Generally speaking, to establish themselves as local cultural hubs and acquire local social influence, clans in the Dongting Lake area strengthened kinship bonds by creating cultural symbols, with the cult of water gods being a pivotal one. Clan members took turns to engage in practical affairs concerning the cult of water gods, such as making donations, providing labor for rituals, and building and restoring water god temples. As a result, such local clans gradually formed solid communities of shared faith (“Community of Faith”).

Located at Baishazui Ferry, Dongting Temple in Yuanjiang County was collectively constructed by members of the Tang clan. The clan has long taken charge of its daily management and maintenance, so it can be defined as a clan temple⁹². As frequent Dongting Lake floods increasingly affected Yuanjiang’s social and economic life, the cult of water gods grew prevalent. Local residents actively joined sacrifices to the God of Dongting Lake and temple renovation projects led by the Tang clan. Hence, rituals honoring the God of Dongting Lake were open not merely to Tang clan members, but also to ordinary locals including fishermen, farmers and people from smaller clans⁹³. Over time, a multi-group “Community of Faith” centering on the God of Dongting Lake took shape in Yuanjiang. Within this structure, the Tang clan occupied a dominant position while other local groups attached themselves to it, enabling the clan to realize cultural integration and social domination in the region. To a certain degree, this serves as a typical embodiment of the “cultural nexus of power” within grassroots society⁹⁴.

In terms of this operational mechanism, the leading status of the Zhang clan in Baling County was far more prominent. Originally erected on

⁹² TANG, GUTE (fl. 1806–1810). *Chinese Local Chronicles Series, Records of Prefectures and Counties in Hubei Province*, No. 82, *Annals of Yuanjiang County*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Classics Publishing House, 2002, p. 89.

⁹³ TANG, GUTE (fl. 1806–1810). *Chinese Local Chronicles Series, Records of Prefectures and Counties in Hubei Province*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁹⁴ PRASENJIT, DUARA. *Culture, Power, and the State, Rural North China, 1900–1942*. Calif: Stanford University Press, 1991, p. 5.

Qili Mountain, Zonggong (local water god) Temple in Baling County was later destroyed by Dongting Lake floods. In the Kangxi (r. 1622–1722) period of the Qing Dynasty, Zhang Cuihuan of the local Zhang clan reconstructed the temple at the mountain foot, yet it was ruined once more by floods. Afterwards, Zhang Jing, son of Zhang Cuihuan, rebuilt Zonggong Temple on Hengjie Street in Chenglingji Town and donated ten mu of land as temple endowment fields⁹⁵. Having suffered repeated flood damage, the temple was funded and maintained by Zhang clan members for generations. This shows that the clan had long held dominant jurisdiction over the temple, which can therefore be classified as a clan temple. Accordingly, the Zhang clan constituted a solid “Community of Faith” centered on the cult of Zonggong.

In 1773, as Zonggong Temple fell into disrepair, Zhang Bin and Zhang Weisi called on clan members and local residents to raise funds for its renovation⁹⁶. This reveals that the Zhang clan had tacitly allowed outside groups to take part in all kinds of activities concerning the cult of Zonggong, so that they could more effectively cope with flood disasters and manage local affairs with the aid of divine spiritual power. In this sense, the temple gradually evolved into an informal local power hub embodied in religious space, through which the Zhang clan further broadened its local social influence⁹⁷. Furthermore, Chenglingji sits at the confluence of Dongting Lake and the Yangtze River. When vessels from elsewhere docked here, merchants, ordinary people, sailors and local officials would visit Zonggong Temple to worship the water god and pray for safe water navigation⁹⁸. This practice invisibly expanded the belief circle of Zong Gong. More importantly, it extended the operational scope of the “Community of Faith” centered on the cult of Zong Gong from the Zhang clan itself to the broader township society embracing various floating populations, thus realizing the large-scale integration of social forces via the cult of Zong Gong.

In this case, both the Tang and Zhang clans constructed their respective water god temples and gradually relaxed restrictions on local fishermen, boatmen,

⁹⁵ YAO, SHIDE. *Chinese Local Chronicles Series, Records of Prefectures and Counties in Hubei Province, No. 6, Annals of Baling County*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Classics Publishing House, 2002, p. 530.

⁹⁶ YAO, SHIDE. *Chinese Local Chronicles Series, Records of Prefectures and Counties in Hubei Province, No. 6, Annals of Baling County*. *op. cit.*, p. 530.

⁹⁷ ZHENG, ZHENMAN. Temple Rites and Community Development Models: An Example from the Jiangkou Plain in Putian. *op. cit.*, 1995, (1):33–47.

⁹⁸ YAO, SHIDE. *Chinese Local Chronicles Series, Records of Prefectures and Counties in Hubei Province, No. 6, Annals of Baling County*. *op. cit.*, p. 515.

merchants and seafarers, permitting them to come and offer sacrifices to the water god. This invisibly completed the integration of beliefs among local fishermen, boat owners, and other local communities. Later, amid frequent Dongting Lake floods and growing public demand for safe water transport, the two clans leveraged the cult of water gods to unify local forces including fishermen and boat operators, so as to jointly administer local public affairs at the water god temples. The two clans thus grew into core forces that maintained local social order. Within the operational framework of “Community of Faith”, they held dominant cultural influence and the right to make decisions on local public affairs.

5.3 *Cross-Regional Alliance: The Cult of Water God and Strengthening of Merchant Alliance*

A commercial guild hall referred to a public space collectively erected by merchants from other regions in the local area to standardize trade order and maintain hometown kinship bonds⁹⁹. Moreover, merchants from various places formed trade alliances centering on guild halls, and consolidated such alliances through collective cult of their native water gods. Accordingly, these trade alliances, which undertook various rituals concerning the cult of native water gods, can be defined as “Community of Faith”.

Most commercial guild halls in the Dongting Lake area were constructed by merchants from Jiangxi and Fujian, namely Wanshou Palace and Tianhou Palace, which enshrined their native water gods Xu Zhenjun and Tianfei respectively. The Wanshou Palace in Yuanjiang County was founded by Jiangxi merchants. In 1719, merchants from five prefectures (Nanchang, Ji'an, Linjiang, Ruizhou, and Raozhou) of Jiangxi Province jointly erected additional structures including Xiaogong Temple, Guanyin Pavilion and an opera stage within Wanshou Palace, and also built surrounding walls¹⁰⁰. Likewise, the Tianhou Palace in Yuanjiang County was established by Fujian merchants. In 1752, Fujian merchants constructed Guandi Hall and Guanyin Pavilion. In 1759, they built Tianhou Hall inside the main complex. In 1785, they added Bai Pavilion and another opera stage, and set aside sixty mu of incense lands in Zhulanyuan and Chongtianlun.

⁹⁹ WANG, RIGEN. *The Guild Halls of Ming-Qing Periods and Social Integration. Sociological Studies*, 1994, (4):101–9.

¹⁰⁰ TANG, GUTE (fl. 1806–1810). *Chinese Local Chronicles Series, Records of Prefectures and Counties in Hubei Province, No. 82, Annals of Yuanjiang County. op. cit.*, p. 90.

Wanshou Palace and Tianhou Palace shared largely identical cultural implications. They respectively enshrined Xu Zhenjun and Tianhou, the native water gods revered by Jiangxi and Fujian merchants, and both served as composite architectural spaces integrating merchant guild halls and water god shrines. These two complexes enabled merchants from Jiangxi and Fujian to reconcile commercial interests and maintain hometown kinship ties. Two native-origin merchant alliances thus took shape around them, further tightening social and economic interactions among migrant merchants settled in Yuanjiang. By holding collective worship rituals for native water gods inside the palaces, Jiangxi and Fujian merchant groups in Yuanjiang reconnected migrant fellows to their hometown religious and cultural networks, and thereby strengthened their native cultural identity. Accordingly, the two palaces evolved into exclusive hometown spiritual venues built by foreign merchants, separate from the local religious system of Yuanjiang. Meanwhile, native water gods functioned as core cultural symbols to consolidate internal merchant solidarity.

As merchant alliances bonded by the cult native water gods grew increasingly powerful, merchants from Jiangxi and Fujian employed local residents to take charge of the daily administration of Wanshou Palace and Tianhou Palace. Gradually, these originally foreign water gods won reverence among all social strata in Yuanjiang, and their social influence kept expanding. This process not only facilitated the re-socialization of these immigrant water gods in the local society¹⁰¹, but also allowed their belief spheres to expand in both population coverage and geographical scope within the operational framework of “Community of Faith”¹⁰².

In this case, merchants from Jiangxi and Fujian constructed the Wanshou Palace and Tianhou Palace respectively in Yuanjiang, Hunan Province, and formed cross-regional commercial alliances through the joint veneration of their native water gods, Xu Zhenjun and Tianfei. Later, local fishermen, common people and gentry also took part in such the activities of the cult of water god by merchants from other provinces out of their own livelihood and practical demands. This process not only facilitated the localization of externally introduced water gods, but also established a “Community of Faith” that integrates multi-regional and multi-level groups.

¹⁰¹ ZENG, LING. 2006. Historical Memory of Social Integration and Emblem of “Ancestral Home Deities” of the Singapore Chinese Society. *Journal of Literature History and Philosophy*, 2006, (1):14–21.

¹⁰² LIN, MEIRONG. Belief Sphere of Mazu in Zhanghua. *Bulletion of the Institute of Ethnology, Academia “Sini-ca”*, 1990, (68):41–104.

5.4 *Social Dispute Mediation: The Cult of Water God and Settlement of Social Disputes*

Different social groups in the Dongting Lake area have built a “Community of Faith” controlled by diverse power actors via various practical activities of the cult of water gods, which has been embedded into the local social governance system. Accordingly, such “Community of Faith” serve not only as a structural framework to integrate various social forces, but also as a cultural medium to mediate multifarious social affairs.

In 1773, a lawsuit arose over the ownership of the land at Dachengchi between Wang Sheng (born 1770–1775) and Yang Xing (born 1773–1775) of Jianli County, and Yao Fengcai (born 1772–1776) of Baling County. As none of the disputants could produce valid land title deeds, Liang Guozhi (1723–1786), Governor of Hunan Province, granted the land to Dongting Temple in Baling County. All annual monetary and grain proceeds from land rentals were allocated to cover the temple’s daily operational expenditures¹⁰³. Eventually, all involved parties accepted this ruling and ceased all subsequent disputes. In this process, local officials mediated social conflicts by virtue the cult of God of Dongting Lake among local residents. Fundamentally, this practice relied on the collective authority and communal identity centering on the God of Dongting Lake, which was fostered within the operational framework of the “Community of Faith”. This exerted a far-reaching influence on the ideological tendencies and behavioral decisions of local social groups.

However, driven by self-interest, local residents of Xiangyin County occupied Sanlü Temple, a shrine dedicated to the water god Qu Yuan. In 1541, Liang Rubi (fl. 1541–1543), magistrate of Xiangyin County, erected a new Sanlü Temple southeast of the county government office, adopting the same sacrificial rituals and standards as Miluo Temple.

As time went by, local residents gradually took over half of the temple premises, yet local officials made no attempt to stop such encroachments and seemingly acquiesced to this unlawful conduct. It was not until 1755 that Chen Zhongli (fl. 1755–1757), the Magistrate of Xiangyin County, conducted an audit of local public properties and restored the seized premises to Sanlü Temple¹⁰⁴. These occupiers are likely members of powerful clans that control or influence local social

¹⁰³ CHEN, YUYUAN (fl. 1803–1804). *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 1212, Annals of Baling County. op. cit.*, p. 532.

¹⁰⁴ CHEN, ZHONGLI (fl. 1755–1757). *Chinese Chronicles Series, Central China, No. 1104, Annals of Xiangyin County*. Taipei: Cheng Wen Publishing Co., Ltd., 2014, p. 307.

order, otherwise, such long-term encroachment on public temple assets could not have persisted for over two centuries. This reveals that the operational mechanism of the “Community of Faith” around Dongting Lake area is an unbalanced hierarchical structure. Relying on their social standing, privileged groups could take advantage of this system to secure religious privileges and covert illegal economic gains, thereby further entrenching the local social hierarchy¹⁰⁵. The official restoration of temple premises thereafter reflected shifts and power reshuffles among different social strata within “Community of Faith” amid social transformation. Those privileged groups were consequently stripped of their access to unequal vested interests and lost the ability to sway local administrative decisions.

In this case, influential clans and local gentry frequently fell into conflicts and lawsuits over land and housing properties. To defuse tensions, local officials would assign the disputed properties to water god temples. Local officials from both regions incorporated the spiritual authority of water gods into social dispute mediation. In essence, they administered communal public affairs within the established framework of “Community of Faith” in the Dongting Lake area. This phenomenon not only mirrors power contests among local clans and gentry, but also manifests the leading role of state political forces in sustaining grassroots social order. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that “Community of Faith” were not capable of settling all local legal disputes. The majority of lawsuits remained judged by local magistrates in accordance with the official laws of the Ming-Qing dynasties.

6 Conclusions

This paper constructs an analytical framework of the “Community of Faith” to interpret the interactions among social groups, water god worship practices, and regional social order in the Dongting Lake area during the Ming-Qing periods. Drawing on the analysis of local historical records and fieldwork, this study mainly discusses three core research topics.

Firstly, the water god genealogy in the Dongting Lake area is composed of two main gods and multiple types of water gods. Evolutions in the categories, identities and quantities of these gods essentially stem from long-term interactions and value selections between local social groups and imperial state power. Secondly, water god temples in this region show an obvious spatial distribution pattern: concentrated in the east and south while sparse in the west and north.

¹⁰⁵ FAURE, DAVID. *Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China*. Calif: Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 245–56.

Such spatial layout is a concrete reflection of local socio-economic activities, including the reclamation of Yuan fields, fishery production, waterway transportation, flood hazards and folk custom inheritance. Thirdly, different social groups in the Dongting Lake area have gradually formed a mature “Community of Faith” centering on shared the cult of water gods. This communal mechanism not only helps different groups seek practical interests, but also facilitates regional social integration.

Apart from serving as an analytical framework, the “Community of Faith” should be further regarded as a form of religious consensus and a functional social operational mechanism. It refers to a broad alliance built upon shared the cult of water gods, transcending economic interests, social strata and social backgrounds. Such communal bonds are often consolidated when social groups jointly administer local public affairs and strive for shared interests, such as suppressing rebellions, constructing regional order, expanding clan influence, consolidating merchant alliances and mediating social conflicts. It can also be interpreted as a form of “institutional arbitrage”¹⁰⁶.

Naturally, its operational mechanism is not completely stable. Rooted in interest alignment among social groups, it is liable to break down amid conflicts over uneven benefit distribution, including struggles over sacrificial leadership, temple land tenure, incense revenue allocation and temple construction rights. Nevertheless, such fragmentation never persists for long. Driven by interventions from dominant social forces including official authorities, local clans and merchant groups, the community tends to regain integration. The repeated disintegration and reconstruction of “Community of Faith” mirrors the fluctuation of power among local social groups, and meanwhile acts as an inherent driving force shaping regional social order. Next, I will take an ancient stone tablet unearthed in Yueyang County as an example to further illustrate this mechanism.

Fishermen, boat owners, gentry, and clan members in Yueyang County jointly erected the Dongting Temple in Rongjiawan to enshrine the God of Dongting, and entrusted the Zhang, Rong and Xu clans to take charge of temple affairs in rotation. As the number of worshippers grew, the temple’s incense donations and earnings from temple fairs became increasingly substantial. The locally dominant Rong clan then sought to seize control of the temple and appropriate its revenues for themselves. This aroused widespread discontent among the Zhang and Xu clans as well as other local communities,

¹⁰⁶ MICHAEL, SZONYI. *The Art of Being Governed: Everyday Politics in Late Imperial China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017, p. 131–58.

triggering prolonged clashes and lawsuits between the conflicting parties. In 1803, local authorities stepped in, reinstated the original rotational management system, and ruled that all temple revenue could only be used for daily operational expenses. Subsequently, representatives from all relevant parties signed a reconciliation pact to restore the sacrificial rituals order centered on Dongting Temple.

In addition, unlike southern China, social groups in the Dongting Lake area share identical “ritual symbols”. Social groups in southern China adopt such symbols to construct a communal identity order rooted in consanguinity and geographical proximity¹⁰⁷. By contrast, local communities around Dongting Lake area utilize “ritual symbols” to build a regional integration order based on interest demands and religious identity. Evidently, the former represents a highly stable clan-oriented social structure, whereas the latter is a loose alliance forged through multi-group consultations, featuring greater flexibility and frequent splits and regroupings. This also serves as an external embodiment of the disparities between land-based and water-oriented societies.

Unfortunately, due to the scarcity of extant written records, this study cannot conduct an in-depth exploration of various issues concerning the “ritual economy” embedded in the practices of the cult of water god across the Dongting Lake area. Such issues cover temple revenue and expenditure (including land rents, incense donations and daily operational costs), labor deployment for temple construction and renovation, economic activities surrounding god festivals, the socioeconomic networks of temple managers, the distribution of economic interests, and the power relations derived therefrom. These matters facilitate a clearer interpretation of the multi-power interactive mechanism behind local the cult of water gods from an economic perspective. Nevertheless, such research hinges on the comprehensive collation and analysis of relevant historical documents as well as more intensive fieldwork, which also marks an important direction for further research in the future.

Fieldwork Information: The author carried out three rounds of fieldwork in total. The first survey was conducted in Miluo, Junshan, Huarong, Xiangyin and other areas of Yueyang City, Hunan Province, from May 13 to June 20, 2022. The second one took place in Hanshou, Anxiang, Wuling

¹⁰⁷ JOHN, LAGERWEY and DAVID, FAURE. *The Construction of Sacred Space in Chinese Villages and Market Towns*. Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press, 2014, pp. 188–230.

and other regions of Changde City, Hunan Province, from March 16 to May 8, 2023. The third field trip was made in Nanxian, Yuanjiang and other areas of Yiyang City, Hunan Province, from October 18 to November 10, 2023. In this process, the author adopted “participatory observation” to investigate ritual practices of the cult of water god and related folk customs. Meanwhile, semi-structured interviews were conducted with temple managers, local worshippers and administrative staff in charge of religious affairs to gather information concerning water god temples, including their historical origins, funding sources, renovation and daily maintenance, and other relevant conditions.

SHUAIQI ZHANG*

School of History and Cultural, Xinyang Normal
University, Xinyang, China
Yangtze River Culture Institute, Wuhan, China
Email: shuaiqi-zhang@xynu.edu.cn

Abstract

L'area del Lago Dongting si trova nel corso medio del Fiume Yangtze, contraddistinta da una complessa rete di fiumi e laghi. Nel periodo Ming e Qing, il culto delle divinità acquatiche raggiunse il suo apice in questa regione. Tale fenomeno fu determinato da molteplici fattori: lo sviluppo florido della pesca, l'espansione dei trasporti fluviali, la diffusa tradizione popolare di adorazione di spiriti e divinità, nonché le frequenti inondazioni causate dalla massiccia bonifica delle zone umide lacustri del Lago Dongting. Sulla base dell'analisi documentale e dei dati di indagine sul campo, il presente articolo analizza l'evoluzione genealogica delle divinità acquatiche, la distribuzione spaziale dei templi dedicati a tali divinità, le pratiche di credenza dei gruppi sociali e l'integrazione dell'ordine territoriale nell'area del Lago Dongting. La ricerca evidenzia che diversi gruppi sociali—funzionari pubblici, intellettuali e nobili locali, mercanti, organizzazioni claniche e popolazione comune—hanno istituito un meccanismo cooperativo di «Comunità di Fede» nel perseguimento dei rispettivi interessi attraverso il culto delle divinità acquatiche. Questo meccanismo non solo ha favorito l'unificazione delle forze sociali locali per la gestione degli affari pubblici collettivi, ma ha anche costituito uno strumento fondamentale per la costruzione di un ordine gerarchico territoriale. In una certa misura, il modello di «Comunità di Fede» offre una nuova prospettiva analitica per comprendere la logica interna dell'integrazione regionale nella società tradizionale cinese.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Epoche Ming e Qing
Area del Lago Dongting
Culto delle divinità acquatiche
Gruppi sociali diversi
Comunità di fede
Integrazione sociale
Ordine sociale regionale

The Dongting Lake area lies in the middle reaches of the Yangtze River, characterized by an intricate network of rivers and lakes. During the Ming-Qing periods, the cult of water gods in this region reached its peak. This was driven by multiple factors: a thriving fishing industry, the growth of water transportation, the popular folk tradition of worshipping ghosts and gods, and frequent flooding triggered by large-scale reclamation of lake wetlands around Dongting Lake. Based on documentary analysis and fieldwork data, this paper explores the evolution of water god genealogies, the spatial distribution of water god temples, the belief practices of social groups, and the integration of regional order in the Dongting Lake area. This study argues that diverse social groups—including officials, scholar-gentry, merchants, clan organizations, and ordinary civilians—in the Dongting Lake area established a co-operative mechanism of a “Community of Faith” while advancing their respective interests through the cult of water gods. This mechanism not only helps unify local social forces to govern communal public affairs but also serves as a core means of constructing a regional hierarchical order. To a certain extent, the framework of the “Community of Faith” provides a new analytical perspective for understanding the internal logic of regional integration in traditional Chinese society.

KEYWORDS

Ming-Qing periods
Dongting lake area
The cult of water god
Different groups
Community of faith
Social integration
Regional social order