Investigation of Wulin and Seven Villages' Ritual System in Southern China

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Abstract. In Guangming Village, Jieyang Airport Economic Zone, Guangdong Province, there is a settlement cluster known as the "Wulin and Seven Villages". In the 1990s, with the revival of folk religious activities, these villages jointly funded the construction of a Tianhou Palace (Mazu Temple) in 1996 and gradually developed a system of rotating Tours and holding ceremonies every seven years. This study takes the Wulin and Seven Villages as an example to explore how the local ancestral hall culture is combined with the belief of Mazu and promotes the formation of a collaborative governance model in multiple villages. Taking a case study approach, this paper further analyses how facilities such as ancestral halls and temples have developed into sustainable folk governance systems and why they have become an important support in rural social governance. The paper argues that its effective operation relies on traditional social relations, the rotation system, and the local inclusive polytheistic belief tradition.

Keywords: Clan ancestral hall, Mazu belief, Chaoshan folk customs, King of the Three Mountains.

1. Introduction

Since the reform and opening up, there has been a general trend of religious revival and the reconstruction of public Spaces in China's grassroots society. According to relevant research statistics, since the 1980s, the number of rebuilt or newly built village temples across the country has been considerable. In the Chaoshan region, where clan traditions are profound, ancestral halls and temples often jointly form important carriers of rural public life [1].

The "Wulin and Seven Villages" in Guangming Village is an organization that cantered around the Lin clan. In the mid-1990s, it was jointly initiated by the elders of the clan and overseas local elites to build a Mazu temple. In 1996, the "Wulin and Seven Villages Tianhou Palace", as shown in Figure 1, was completed. Since then, each village has jointly held a parade every Spring Festival and established a rotation system of "one parade every seven years", forming a standardized mechanism for cross-village collaboration and festival sharing.

This study closely examines this organization. Specifically, the Lin family ancestral hall provides a blood connection and organizational foundation; Secondly, the joint construction of temples and the resulting temple affairs council have provided a regular platform for discussion for each village. Secondly, the "once every seven years" system rotates the responsibility and honour of holding events among villages in sequence, ensuring their long-term stable operation. In terms of the belief system, Mazu, as a regional sea goddess, together with the local community deity "King of the Three Mountains" (commonly known as "Lord"), forms a two-tier structure [2].



Fig 1. The temple where Mazu situated

2. Joint Temple Construction: The Ancestral Hall Network Becomes a Cross-Village Platform

2.1. Blood Relationship and Organizational Foundation

The Wulin and Seven Villages are mainly inhabited by the Lin surname, and each village belongs to the same clan. For a long time, ancestral halls have not only been places for ancestral worship but also served the functions of deliberation and dispute mediation, which has provided a solid interpersonal network and trust foundation for cross-village cooperation [3].

2.2. The "Integration of Temple and Shrine" Feature of the Tianhou Palace

The Tianhou Palace, completed in 1996, combines the attributes of a temple and an ancestral hall in both space and function: the front hall enshrines Mazu, while the side halls or the back courtyard serve as venues for the clan members to hold meetings and conduct activities. This layout symbolizes the combination of clan power and theocracy, making the Mazu Temple a common spiritual centre and public affairs platform for the seven villages.

2.3. Council and Rotating "Furnace Master" System

The temple council is composed of representatives from the seven villages. Every year, the large-scale celebrations and parades are organized and funded by the "furnace masters" elected in rotation by each village. This rotation system not only continues the traditional practice of taking turns to be responsible for sacrificial ceremonies in clan management, but also achieves an orderly cycle and balance of "responsibility - reputation - resources" at the cross-village level.

2.4. Cross-Regional Resource Integration

The construction of the temple and subsequent activities actively attract the support of overseas Chinese and local celebrities, including funding for renovations, sponsoring opera performances and parades, etc. This not only strengthened the connection between the relatives outside and their hometown villages, but also further expanded the clan network, forming a mutual assistance system that transcends geographical boundaries [4].

3. "A Tour Every Seven Years": Sustainable Folk Systems and Customs

3.1. System Design

Every Spring Festival, a selected date is chosen for the Mazu statue to tour seven villages in sequence. It stays overnight in the host village after the tour on that day. The entire parade takes seven years as a cycle. The hosting rights and corresponding honours rotate among the villages in sequence, which not only reflects fairness but also avoids internal conflicts that may arise from resource competition.

3.2. Consultation Mechanism

Specific matters such as minor adjustments to the parade route, arrangements for the stopover points of the deities, cost-sharing, as well as the organization of security and performance teams, were all jointly discussed and decided under the framework of the "Village Representative - Council". Long-term practical accumulation has formed an informal rule system that is recognized by all parties and stably implemented.

3.3. Social Effects

First, it impacts resource integration. Effectively integrate the scattered religious enthusiasm, human and material resources, and donations of money and materials from each village into orderly public activities. Second, in terms of behavioural norms, through the rotation system and collective

deliberation, the organizational process and division of labour for large-scale events can be passed down through socialization and from generation to generation. Last, when it comes to collective recognition, the jointly held festival activities have created a shared collective memory and symbolic resources. This memory strengthens the regional identity of the "Seven Villages as One".

4. The Dual Belief of "Sea God-Society God": Cross-Village Connection and the Synergy of Daily Norms

4.1. Mazu: As a Faith Bond Connecting Villages

The Chaoshan region has always had a tradition of doing business, and as a result, the belief in Mazu has been deeply rooted in the local people's hearts and is regarded as an important symbol of protecting merchants and uniting the feelings of the hometown [5]. In the "Wulin and Seven Villages", Mazu is even said to be the "great-aunt of the same clan". Through this bloodline narrative, the identity among the villages has been strengthened, and a cultural community that transcends a single village has been established [6].

4.2. The King of the Three Mountains: As a Local Deity

The belief in the Three Mountain Kings originated from the River Lady of Jie Xi [2]. After being revered by generations, it has become a local social deity. In the Wulin and Seven Villages, apart from the "Wangye Palace" shared by each village, many families also worship the "Laoye" altar, forming the custom of burning incense on the first, fifteenth day of the lunar month and during festivals, and establishing a relatively extensive daily sacrificial and protective system [7].

4.3. The Governance Role of Customs and Etiquette

The way of paying homage to "Lord" is simple and low-cost, easy to be widely accepted, and has a strong guiding role in behaviour. In the local multi-deity coexistence belief environment, "going out to worship Mazu and paying homage to the Lord at home" has become a natural division of labour. This belief not only avoids belief conflicts but also enhances the vitality of the entire system. Ancestral tablets, ancestral altars, and Mazu incense coexist in the ritual space, symbolizing order within the ceremony.

As shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3, the common images of the "thousand-mile eyes", "wind-hearing ears", and various divine generals in the parade, although their names vary from place to place, all convey the social expectations of "insight - listening - protection - order". These visualized and ritualized symbols integrate public safety and behavioural norms into the festival process, reinforcing the concept of collective order in a concrete way.



Fig 2. Thousand-Mile Eye (Red-faced guardian of Mazu)



Fig 3. Wind-Following Ear (Green-faced guardian of Mazu)

5. From Customs to Systems: Ancestral Halls and Temples as Effective Means of Folk Governance

The trust network formed based on blood ties and geographical ties has been gradually fixed into an operational and repeatable collaborative mechanism through measures such as rotating shifts, joint discussions, and shared responsibilities. The rotation system periodically distributes symbolic honours and material resources among villages, effectively alleviating the coordination difficulties in collective actions. The common origin of "Zu Gu Mazu" and the local ethics of "Lord Protecting the territory" provide a persuasive framework for mobilization and reduce the costs of organization and coordination [8].

Through the cycle of ritual performances, collective memory and exemplary demonstrations, relevant rules are passed down from generation to generation. The joint efforts in charity, environmental improvement and order maintenance have further enhanced the trust between villages. This governance model particularly relies on social foundations such as single-surname clusters, comparable inter-village strength, and a long history of interaction. In regions where the composition of clans is complex or there are historical conflicts, it is more difficult to promote.

6. The Ritual Structure as a Microcosm of Chaoshan Folk Customs

The ritual structure of the Wulin and Seven Villages vividly reflects the basic form of folk beliefs in the Chaoshan region. From the cross-village joint construction of Mazu temples and the holding of the "seven-year Tour" event to every household's worship of the "Lord", this series of practices have collectively formed a complementary folk belief system [9]. This system features a typical two-layer structure: the first layer is a regional faith community centred on the Mazu Temple and spanning villages; Another layer is a local protection network based on families and clans, dedicated to worshipping "masters" [10]. This structure is very common in the Chaoshan region, reflecting the division of labour and collaboration of folk beliefs in different social Spaces.

At the regional level, Mazu, as an alien sea goddess, has been deeply integrated into the society of Chaoshan through a long process of localization. Historically, many people from Chaoshan had the tradition of going out to sea for business, and thus Mazu was regarded as the guardian deity of merchants and travellers and a symbol of regional identity. Although the belief in Mazu originated in Fujian, many Tianhou Palaces have been built in various parts of Chaoshan, forming a close network of inter-temple connections [8]. For instance, the annual Mazu parade held in places like Dahao and Chenghai in Shantou is grand in scale, attracting tens of thousands of people to participate and effectively strengthening regional cultural identity. The Mazu parade in the Wulin and Seven Villages is a concrete manifestation of this regional folk custom in the grassroots village

alliance. Through cross-village joint celebrations, a community bond that transcends a single clan has been established.

At the local level, “Laoye” (represented by the King of the Three Mountains) serves as the local social deity and plays a complementary role to Mazu. In Chaoshan, there is a saying among the people that “only with the Earth God can there be a great Lord”, emphasizing that the peace of the local area primarily depends on the protection of the local deities. The belief in the Lord provides moral norms and daily ritual arrangements for the village community - from agricultural festivals to red and white events, all are inseparable from the worship of the Lord. Villagers abide by relevant taboos (such as not speaking foul language in front of the temple and not trampling on incense ash), demonstrating their reverence for the community deity. This behavioural norm based on folk beliefs restrains community members.

The ritual system of “Wulin and Seven Villages” can be regarded as a microcosm of the broader religious practice in Chaoshan: centred around a joint Mazu temple (built in 1996), an annual “lao-re” tour is held. In the order of a cycle every seven years, the goddess stayed overnight in each village and was accompanied by four guardians (the most famous being the “Thousand-Mile Eye” and the “Wind-Following Ear”) to patrol and protect her. As for the household level, almost every family worships the King of the Three Mountains (“Lord “) to protect the daily peace of the land and the clan [2].

This double-layered structure – the sea goddess Mazu maintaining the cross-village community and the land “Lord” safeguarding daily safety – is precisely a portrayal of the more macroscopic festival and folk customs of Chaoshan. It is worth noting that here, Mazu and the Lord are seen together, demonstrating the “dual power” in the customs and traditions of Chaoshan. The combination of the two presents a micro-picture of folk religion that is both practical and utilitarian: there is a large-scale parade every year, and on ordinary days, every household offers sacrifices without interruption.

7. Conclusion

This research reveals that, based on the blood ties of the ancestral halls and combined with folk beliefs such as Mazu and the Three Mountain Kings, a rural governance model with local characteristics has been formed. During this process, the tribe members extended their worship from the common ancestor to the reverence for the common deities. Clan networks provide an organizational foundation for collective actions, while regular ritual activities (such as the “seven-year Tour”) become important carriers for collaborative governance.

The “Wulin and Seven Village” have demonstrated how cultural traditions, and social structures can be closely integrated through faith practices by jointly building temples and taking turns to hold festivals, thereby enhancing community cohesion and self-management capabilities. This cooperative approach rooted in local culture holds positive reference value for fostering a rural governance community in the current process of rural revitalization.

Against the backdrop of modern social changes, ancestral hall culture and folk beliefs are also facing new challenges, such as the outflow of young people and how religious activities can adapt to modern laws and regulations. However, the case of the “Wulin and Seven Village” demonstrates that rural governance does not only rely on administrative measures or market mechanisms; traditional cultural resources can also serve as an important “third path”. Ancestral halls and temples are not merely remnants of the old era. They may still thrive under new social conditions. The human feelings, trust and norms they maintain are precisely the indispensable parts of rural social capital. In the process of promoting effective rural governance and community reconstruction, respecting and making good use of these local cultural resources may be more effective than simply introducing external models.

In conclusion, the experience of the “Wulin and Seven Village” serves as a microcosm, revealing the potential of ancestral hall culture in promoting cross-village cooperation. From the clan network

to the institutionalized collaboration of the “seven-year patrol”, this series of practices reflects the inherent logic of the rural society in Chaoshan and even South China: faith and culture jointly constitute the connected groups

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