

Immigrant Culture, Commercial Activities, and Folk Beliefs: A Case Study of the Tianhou Palace and Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple in Quzhou

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Abstract: The folk beliefs, commercial activities, and immigrant culture embodied in the Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple and Tianhou Palace in Quzhou exhibit mutually interwoven and mutually reinforcing relationships. Folk beliefs not only served as spiritual sustenance for merchants and boatmen but also functioned as a driving force for local economic development. Immigrant culture, through the dissemination of beliefs, facilitated the development of local trade and society. This paper takes the Tianhou Palace and Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple in Quzhou as case studies, elaborating on the manifestations, relationships, and transformations of these three elements through field surveys and documentary research.

Keywords: Folk Beliefs; Immigrant Culture; Commercial Activities; Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple.

1. Introduction

As a strategic crossroads connecting four provinces, Quzhou historically absorbed immigrants from Jiangxi, Fujian, Anhui, and other regions, who brought their respective cultures and promoted the diverse integration of Quzhou's culture.[1] According to the book *Quzhou Surnames*, there are more than 1,000 traceable surnames within Quzhou, and the development, changes, and rise and fall of these surname clans reflect the profound foundation of Quzhou's immigrant culture. Particularly noteworthy is the migration of the Kong (Confucian) family to Quzhou during the Southern Song dynasty, which formed the Southern Lineage of the Kong family and exerted profound influence on Quzhou's culture. The Southern Lineage of the Kong family not only perpetuated Confucian culture but also promoted the development of education in Quzhou, enabling Confucian culture to take root among the common people, as the descendants of Confucius multiplied and thrived there, exerting a far-reaching impact on local culture and society.[2]

In terms of commerce, Quzhou, due to its advantageous geographical location, has been an important commercial and trade hub since ancient times. Goods such as tea, silk, and porcelain were transported from Quzhou to various regions, while rare treasures from elsewhere entered Zhejiang and surrounding areas through Quzhou. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Huizhou merchants entered Quzhou, leading to commercial prosperity in the Shuiting Gate area[3]. The Longyou merchant group reached its zenith in the mid-Ming dynasty, renowned for operating in the jewelry, book-selling, and paper industries, and competing successfully with Huizhou merchants, Shanxi merchants, and others in the commercial arena[4].

Regarding folk beliefs, Quzhou's folk belief system is rich and diverse, encompassing deities widely circulated throughout the nation, such as the City God and Guan Gong, as well as more locally rooted deities like the Tide God and Emperor Hu Gong[5]. For instance, the Xi'an County Gazetteer compiled during the Kangxi reign records the belief in Zhou Xiong, while the Mazu belief also had a certain

influence in Quzhou; the Tianhou Palace served as a venue for ancient boatmen, sailors, travelers, and merchants to offer sacrifices and gather. Additionally, Yu Jie culture constitutes an important component of Quzhou's folk beliefs; Yu Jie, as a notable figure from Kaihua County, his stories were widely circulated locally. These beliefs not only played important roles in production and daily life but also continuously evolved with social development[6]. Research on Quzhou's folk beliefs primarily focuses on deities and rituals, reflecting the economic, social, and cultural development of the region[5].

2. Historical Examination of the Tianhou Palace and Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple in Quzhou

(1) Tianhou Palace

The Tianhou Palace in Quzhou is located at No. 18 on Tianhuang Lane, also known as the Fujian Guild Hall. According to the Qu County Gazetteer, "The Tianhou Palace (Tianfei Palace) in Quzhou was located at the corner of Chaojing Gate in Zhengyi Ward, west of the county seat." "During the Jiaqing reign of the Qing dynasty, Fujian merchants collectively constructed a new Tianhou Palace on Tianhuang Lane, which served as the Fujian Guild Hall." [7] The Tianhou Palace was reconstructed by Fujian merchants during the Jiaqing reign of the Qing dynasty (1803 CE) to enshrine Mazu Lin Moniang. The Xiabutou Tianhou Palace faces north with its main hall oriented south; the palace covers an area of 633.02 square meters with a total distribution area of 963 square meters. [8] The main building has a rectangular plan with a hard gable roof and white ash brick walls. The main gate's exterior wall is a memorial archway-style brick and stone structure, with three large characters "Tianhou Palace" carved in regular script in brick relief on the second floor of the central bay. The ancient Tianhou Palace occupied a geographically advantageous position at the confluence of the Wuxi River and Qujiang River. Consequently, merchants gathered here; because Fujian people believed in Mazu, they built a Mazu temple here for

worship.

The architectural layout of the Tianhou Palace reflects the characteristics of late Qing dynasty guild hall architecture, with the main structures including a gate tower, opera stage, and main hall. The hall enshrines the Tianhou (Empress of Heaven) facing the opera stage, serving as important physical evidence of the transformation of traditional wooden structure architecture.

(2) Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple

The Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple, also known as the Filial Son Temple, Zhou Yiyang Hou Temple, or Zhou Filial Son Shrine, is located at No. 18 Xiaying Street, Kecheng District, Quzhou City, Zhejiang Province. This temple was initially constructed during the Jiading reign of the Southern Song dynasty (1208–1224 CE) to commemorate Zhou Xiong, the filial son. Zhou Xiong was renowned for his filial piety; according to legend, after his mother's death, he was overwhelmed with grief and ultimately died from excessive sorrow. His body did not sink, and the people of Quzhou therefore deified him and built a temple for worship.

According to Baidu Baike, the existing Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple building was rebuilt during the Ming dynasty and renovated during the Qing dynasty. It faces west with its main orientation eastward, with an irregular square plan divided into southern, central, and northern axis lines. The architectural structure is complex and sophisticated, grand and imposing, with exquisite and elegant decorations, including an entrance hall, main hall, and rear hall[8]. Particularly notable is the use of large horizontal beams and column reduction and relocation techniques in the front eaves of the main hall, reflecting early architectural characteristics and serving as important physical evidence for studying the transformation of traditional wooden architecture in the Quzhou region from the Yuan dynasty to the Ming-Qing period.

Both the Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple and the Tianhou Palace are important components of Quzhou's historical culture, respectively representing the local deep reverence for filial piety culture and Mazu belief. The Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple is renowned for its cultural connotation of filial piety and distinctive architectural style, while the Tianhou Palace is famous for its Mazu belief and guild hall architectural features.

3. Formation of Immigrant Culture and Folk Beliefs

(1) Impact of Immigrants on Quzhou Society

First, the immigrant background has exerted a significant impact on Quzhou's social structure. Quzhou has been a convergence point of multiple ethnic groups and cultures since ancient times; as a strategic crossroads connecting four provinces, it historically absorbed a large influx of immigrants from Jiangxi, Fujian, Anhui, and other regions. These immigrants not only brought new dialects and cultures but also expanded Quzhou's economic activities by cultivating cash crops and engaging in handicrafts. This multicultural integration has rendered Quzhou's social structure more complex and inclusive. Therefore, Quzhou's religious and folk beliefs possess strong regional characteristics, reflecting the cultural integration of different immigrant groups.

Simultaneously, immigrants made significant contributions to the construction of temples. In Quzhou, many temples were

established by immigrants from different regions to maintain their religious beliefs and cultural traditions. The Tianhou Palace was established by people from Fujian to enshrine Mazu (the Holy Mother Empress of Heaven)[6]. These temples not only served as venues for folk belief activities but also functioned as important public spaces for immigrant communities, providing vehicles for collective memory and cultural identity.

(2) Integration of Immigrant Culture and Local Beliefs

The formation and development of the Tianhou Palace and Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple in Quzhou embody the integration of immigrant culture and local beliefs. The Tianhou Palace in Quzhou serves as an important vehicle for the dissemination of Mazu culture, funded by Fujian merchants, and is therefore also called the Fujian Guild Hall. The Mazu belief originated in Fujian and was established by Fujian merchants for worship and seeking blessings for safe commercial journeys.[9] The Tianhou Palace not only served as a venue for commercial exchange but also constitutes important physical historical material for studying the formation of the western Zhejiang commercial center and the folk customs of this historic city. Additionally, murals depicting Mazu's deeds displayed inside the Tianhou Palace promoted the local dissemination and integration of the Mazu belief.

The Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple and Tianhou Palace both belong to the Shuiting Gate district, where Fujian merchants had long been active; Zhou Xuanlingwang was simultaneously a local belief. Simultaneously, Zhou Xuanlingwang was also revered as the "Water God" and "River God"; records from the Kangxi reign period explicitly mention that Zhou Xiong's deity possessed the spiritual power to protect navigation on the Qiantang River. Beliefs are shaped by their adherents; if one's own influence is sufficient, one can incorporate desired elements into the belief, requiring only widespread recognition. Against this backdrop, Fujian merchants, perhaps due to their long-term presence locally, and because both Mazu and Zhou Xuanlingwang belong to water deity beliefs with certain homologous characteristics, may have been motivated to join this belief for adaptation.

Immigrant culture profoundly influenced Quzhou's society through its background, economic activities, and social participation. The integration of immigrants and local beliefs has also transformed temples into spaces of multicultural coexistence, further enriching Quzhou's cultural landscape.

4. Interaction between Commercial Activities and Folk Beliefs

(1) Combination of Folk Beliefs and Commercial Activities

The description "crossroads of four provinces, hub of five roads" highlights Quzhou's strategic position in history[10]. Located on the upper reaches of the Qiantang River, Quzhou historically had developed water transportation and gathered numerous merchants, making it an important commercial center. "Quzhou is the convergence point of waterways and land routes, accessible in all directions; Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and Guangdong converge here... The prefecture serves as a thoroughfare for travelers; in peacetime, merchants pass freely; in wartime, strategic positions are held for defense." [11]

As established in the preceding discussion, the establishment of the Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple and Tianhou Palace was closely linked to commercial

activities. Zhou Xuanlingwang, namely Zhou Xiong, was regarded as the guardian deity of Qiantang River navigation, and his belief was widely disseminated throughout the Qiantang River basin during the Qing dynasty, particularly among merchants and boatmen. These merchants and boatmen played important roles in the construction and maintenance of Zhou Xiong's temple, pooling funds to build the temple and becoming the primary source of donations. The Tianhou Palace was a guild hall established by Fujian merchants to enshrine the sea goddess Mazu, protecting maritime navigation safety. Fujian merchants offered sacrifices to Mazu to pray for successful commercial journeys and exchanged economic information there, reflecting the close relationship between the Mazu belief and the development of maritime trade.

(2) The Role and Influence of Merchant Groups in Temples

The Tianhou Palace, as an important vehicle for the dissemination of Mazu culture in the Quzhou region, was funded for construction by Fujian merchants during the Jiaqing reign of the Qing dynasty, and is therefore also called the Fujian Guild Hall. This indicates that merchant groups not only played important roles in the construction but also played key roles in the economic support of temples.

The roles that merchant groups played in temples and their influence were also very important and profound. The Tianhou Palace was a gathering place for merchants and boatmen passing through Quzhou in ancient times; merchants and boatmen offered sacrifices and gathered here, reflecting their worship of Mazu and spiritual needs [12]. The existence of the Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple and Tianhou Palace not only reflected the deep roots of folk beliefs but also promoted local economic development. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Huizhou merchants were distributed across the nation and played an enormous role in promoting commodity circulation and the formation of the domestic market.

They "traveled to trade in all directions," with the Jianghuai, Susong, Hangjiahu regions, and areas along the Yangtze River and Grand Canal being their key areas of activity. Yet they also reached "remote islands and barren deserts, their footprint covering nearly half of the land."

The Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple, as a local protective deity, gained widespread support in Quzhou Prefecture, Yanzhou Prefecture, and other areas, becoming an important object of belief for merchants and boatmen, with Huizhou merchants as the most representative group. This type of belief not only helped stabilize social order but also promoted local economic development. Similarly, the Tianhou Palace, as a center for the dissemination of the Mazu belief, witnessed the prosperity of maritime trade and promoted local economic development.

5. Practice and Transformation of Folk Beliefs

The practice and transformation of beliefs at the Tianhou Palace and Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple in Quzhou reflect the historical evolution of Chinese folk beliefs and their interaction with social development.

The Mazu belief and Zhou Xuanlingwang belief exhibit significant differences in origin and dissemination. The Mazu belief originated in the coastal regions of Fujian and gradually spread to Zhejiang and other coastal areas, forming belief centers of considerable scale in the mountainous regions of southwestern Zhejiang, such as the Tianhou Palace. These

venues were mostly funded for construction by Fujian merchants or local officials, possessing relatively high architectural standards and scale.

After the Song dynasty, the Yuan dynasty also used sea routes to transport goods from Jiangnan to the capital (Dadu), so the sea remained vital to the empire's fortune. Based on the "Major Imperial Titles Bestowed Throughout History" inside the Tianhou Palace during the field survey, it can be determined that beginning with the Xuanhe fifth year (1123 CE) of Emperor Huizong of the Song dynasty, Mazu was conferred the title of "Goddess of the Southern Sea" and granted the temple name "Shunji." By the fifteenth year of the Yuan dynasty (1278 CE), Mazu was granted the title "Protector of the Nation, Illustrious and Manifest Celestial Consort," rivaling heaven and becoming the deity who guarded the empire. During the Qing dynasty's incorporation of Taiwan into the empire, Mazu was credited with protecting Qing naval ships; in the twenty-third year of the Kangxi reign (1684), she was elevated from "Celestial Consort" to "Empress of Heaven." Successive dynasties bestowed upon Mazu dozens of cumulative honors, with her title growing from 2 characters to 64 characters, and her rank progressing from "Lady" and "Celestial Consort" to "Empress of Heaven" and "Holy Mother in Heaven," reaching an unparalleled status. The successive imperial grants ultimately established Mazu's supreme position as the sole sea goddess. [13]

In contrast, the Zhou Xuanlingwang belief originated in Quzhou, Zhejiang, and other areas; initially a local deity cult, it gradually evolved into a water deity belief beyond the filial son legend. The Zhou Xuanlingwang belief further developed in the mid-Ming dynasty, particularly in the commercially prosperous Jiangnan region, where merchants and townspeople became the main participants in sacrificial activities.

In recent years, according to research by Japanese scholar Hamashima Atsutoshi, local deities such as Jin Zongguan widely popular in the Yangtze River Delta region all underwent a process of transformation from ordinary human spirits to deities; in this process, supernatural legends fabricated by their descendants played an extremely important role [14]. These legends generally possess three elements: first, righteous deeds during their lifetime; second, manifestations of spiritual powers after death; third, imperial investiture. The purpose was to preserve and even promote the associated deity beliefs.

Using these three elements, we can analyze the belief in Zhou Xiong at the Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple. First is the so-called righteous deeds during his lifetime, namely the deeds of Zhou the Filial Son—he was not only renowned for his filial piety toward his mother but was also respected and beloved by the people for his good deeds such as helping others, healing the sick, and eliminating harm to bring peace to the people [15].

Second are the manifestations of supernatural powers after death. According to Zhu Haibin's analysis of the Zhou Xuanlingwang belief in Jiangnan, after the late Ming dynasty, legends of Zhou Xiong's spiritual manifestations related to Qiantang River navigation began to emerge. The Collected Unofficial Histories (Bishi Huibian), compiled by Wang Qi during the Ming dynasty, Volume 132, contains the following record: "Zhou Xuanlingwang of Quzhou was originally an ordinary townsman; after death, his body floated at Shuiting Beach, drifting away and returning. [9] The literati found this strange and prayed, saying: 'If truly a deity, three days of

fragrance followed by three days of stench, then we shall serve you." "Soon the entire city smelled the extraordinary fragrance emanating from the corpse for three days, and also the stench. They then made a clay statue of the corpse; when his mother heard and went to worship, the statue turned its head, and to this day the head remains askew, with hundreds of supernatural occurrences. Once, a longtime boatman carried Hangzhou merchants to Fujian; other boats set off, but his boat remained motionless. The merchants grew impatient. He said: 'Do you wish to arrive immediately? Close your eyes and do not move.' That evening when they opened their eyes, they had already reached Qinghu, seven hundred li from Hangzhou." This indicates that the supernatural deeds of Zhou Xiong had already transformed toward Qiantang River navigation.

Third is imperial investiture. By no later than the Kangxi reign, legends were already circulating among the people that Zhou Xiong's deity could diminish the waves and tides of the Qiantang River. In other words, at this time, Zhou Xiong's deity had already become the guardian of Qiantang River navigation. "Quzhou lies in the upper reaches of Zhejiang Province, with waterways to Hangzhou extending over six hundred li; the waves were swift and the currents surged. During dangerous storms, he transforms peril into safety, repeatedly displaying spiritual manifestations."

"In the third year of the Yongzheng reign of our dynasty, due to imperial decree, [he was] conferred the title 'Transport Virtue Sea Tide King,' with orders to be worshiped in the Sea Tide God Temple." Thereafter, the belief in Zhou Xiong's deity gained even broader support from folk society. During the Qing dynasty, the dissemination and popularization of this belief throughout the Qiantang River basin were closely related to the movement and distribution of merchants and boatmen engaged in commerce and trade. For example, during the Qianlong and Jiaqing reigns, a case occurred in Zhangshutan, Xi'an County, Quzhou Prefecture, where boatmen pooled funds to build a Zhou Xiong Temple [12]. During the Guangxu reign, in the construction activities of the Zhou Xiong Temple located in Quzhou Prefecture city, merchants and boatmen also became important donors [13].

Since the mid-Ming dynasty, commercial economy achieved tremendous development, and the traffic position of the Qiantang River as an important route connecting major cities nationwide became increasingly prominent. At the same time, the population depending on commerce and shipping for their livelihood also increased day by day, and they urgently needed deities who could bless their safety in water navigation and life. Before Zhou Xiong became the river god of the Qiantang River, the middle and upper reaches of the Qiantang River had not nurtured any locally indigenous water deity. Since the late Southern Song dynasty, the belief in Zhou Xiong flourished in multiple places including Quzhou Prefecture, Yanzhou Prefecture, and Huizhou Prefecture. If Zhou Xiong's deity were to become the guardian of Qiantang River navigation, both local people and passing merchant boat crews would easily accept this from a cultural-psychological perspective; thus, Zhou Xiong became the guardian deity of Qiantang River navigation.

6. Conclusion

The Zhou Xuanlingwang Temple and Tianhou Palace in Quzhou are not only important vehicles for local folk beliefs but also profoundly reflect the shaping influence of

commercial activities and immigrant culture on the local belief system. Zhou Xuanlingwang, as a river god worshipped by boatmen and merchants, embodies the promotion of folk beliefs by commercial activities. The establishment of the Tianhou Palace architectural form in Quzhou serves as evidence that Fujian merchants brought their sea-protecting deity Mazu's belief to Quzhou, demonstrating the integration and continuation of immigrant culture within local beliefs. These two temples not only enriched Quzhou's folk belief landscape but also became symbols of commercial prosperity and multicultural integration, together constructing a diverse, inclusive, and vibrant local cultural ecosystem. These historical relics are not only important components of Quzhou's cultural heritage but also significant physical historical materials for studying the formation of the western Zhejiang commercial center and the folk customs of this historic city.

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