The Folk Beliefs of Yangliuqing Paintings During the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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1. Introduction
Yangliuqing Paintings represent a popular traditional art style in the northern regions of China which encompass a diverse range of beliefs, fully showcasing the complexity and richness of Chinese folk beliefs. However, due to the unique geographical location of Tianjin and the stimulation from shipping and North-South commodity circulation, a belief system rooted in maritime culture emerged. This gave rise to a distinctive cultural phenomenon in Tianjin, which has been referred to as "Port Culture" in some studies. This implies that Tianjin, as a trading port, attracted diverse cultural factors from different regions, which flourished and developed new cultural forms in this once unfamiliar soil. Research indicates that during the Dao Guang period of the Qing Dynasty, there were a total of 354 temples with different beliefs in Tianjin, with hundreds of them concentrated in the vicinity of the San Cha River mouth alone (Jian W, 2009).

2. Taoism
Taoism, a native religion of China, originated as a philosophical theory within the Hundred Schools of Thought during the Warring States period. It wasn't until the end of the Eastern Han Dynasty that Zhang Daoling, a key figure, amalgamated traditional spirit worship, immortal beliefs, Yin-Yang cosmology, divination, and Taoist thought to establish the religious form of Taoism (Campbell, T, 2014).

During the Ming and Qing dynasties, there was a coexistence of two situations: the highly developed feudal authoritarian system and the gradual decline of the control capacity of the feudal political and ritual system over society...
as a whole. The rulers of the Ming and Qing dynasties employed a combination of strengthened management and occasional adherence to public opinion in their approach to religious governance. This served the purpose of both controlling the development of religion and preventing people from using religion to incite rebellion. The intention was to guide people's beliefs in a way that aligned with the rulers' religious needs and practical political requirements. Under this influence, the attitude of the Ming and Qing rulers toward religion was largely utilitarian. For instance, Ming Taizu Zhu Yuanzhang believed in the usefulness of Buddhism and Taoism, but only as beliefs of the people, aiding in their moral cultivation. The Manchu rulers of the Qing Dynasty, despite their devotion to Lamaism, adopted a more practical and utilitarian approach to support certain influential deities among the populace. This utilitarian stance toward Taoism directly resulted in many popular deities receiving favor and attention due to the political needs of rulers, thus entering the Taoist pantheon and becoming objects of nationwide worship and reverence.

The urban economy held an increasingly important position in the social and economic life of the entire country, which was further developed compared to the Tang and Song dynasties. Moreover, the new lifestyles and concepts represented by urban citizens had an increasing impact on the entire society (Fang, L, 2018). The emergence of a large number of cities and the sharp increase in the number of citizens has led to great prosperity in the urban economy. Tianjin, as the gateway and important freight terminal of Beijing, is naturally one of the prosperous cities. Tianjin is a place dotted with temples everywhere, with dense human eyes and frequent transactions. Such a prosperous commercial scene is rare in other parts of China (Liman Z, 2013). The development of the urban economy and the large-scale rise of commerce had a huge impact on the lifestyle and psychological state of the people at that time. The relatively stable living structure brought about by traditional agriculture as the basic way of life has been broken, and commerce and handicrafts have brought richer income. The variability of the market and its consequences far exceed the impact of climate variability on agriculture, with winners becoming wealthy overnight and losers losing their homes every day. In the face of this new way of life, the longing and pursuit of money and luxury have become a common mentality among urban citizens, and even the entire population. In such a society, pursuing money has become the biggest goal of the whole society. Under the influence of this trend, the worship of the God of Wealth during the Ming and Qing dynasties, which aimed to bless wealth, can be understood.

Before the Ming Dynasty, there was no true God of Wealth in the official and folk belief systems of China. However, in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, there were numerous works on the theme of the God of Wealth or the theme of praying for wealth in the Yangliu Youth Painting. From this, it can be seen that under the new economic and social conditions of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the psychology of the people had undergone tremendous changes. Pursuing fame and fortune became a social trend, and people were eager to seek wealth, so they resorted to immortals (Jiahua C, 2023). In a relatively short period of time, due to the needs of the people, a group of wealth gods with different sources and influences, but with the same functions, emerged to help people achieve the goal of becoming rich (Qing-Ling L, 2020).

Taoism itself has a vast system of deities. Taoism is a polytheism, and the highest deity of Taoism is the Three Pure Respected Gods derived from Taoism, namely the Yuan Shi Tian Zun, Ling Bao Tian Zun, and Dao De Tian Zun. Taoist ancestors believed that the Jade Emperor ruled over all gods in the Heavenly Court and that the underworld and the ocean each had their own masters, but both were subordinate to the Heavenly Court. The main gods in the three regions of heaven, earth, and sea were the Three Officials Emperor. Taoism has also developed a series of immortal officials from the Yanluo underworld and the Dragon King Water Palace, along with a series of local immortals such as mountain gods, city gods, land gods, and kitchen gods. At the same time, it also incorporates ancient Chinese mythology such as the Western Queen Mother and the Nine Heavenly Xuannv, and the lineage of immortals they believe in is extremely complex (Shoufu C, 2016). In addition, the development of the urban economy and the prosperity of urban life during the Ming and Qing dynasties greatly promoted the rise of various specialized handicraft industries and professions in the city, as well as the refinement of industry division. According to records, in the Jinhua Prefecture during the Ming Dynasty, various craftsmen were subdivided into 29 types, such as carpenters, sawers, bricklayers, blacksmiths, tailors, painters, stonemasons, boatmen, silversmiths, drummers, and cloggers, covering various aspects of people's daily life at that time (Qin H, 2014).

3. Buddhism

Indian Buddhism was introduced to China during the Eastern Han Dynasty (around 64 AD). When Buddhism was first introduced to China, due to its completely different cultural background, it was considered to be similar to the popular divine alchemy at that time and only popular among a few nobles and nobles. The King of Chu recited the
whispers of Huang Lao in English and worshipped the Ren Temple in the picture (Die W, 2016). Until the end of the Han Dynasty and the Three Kingdoms period, Buddhism gradually spread from the upper class to the people, from a few to the majority, and the Honghua region also spread southward from Luoyang and Chang’an. After long-term integration with local Chinese culture, it was not until the Jin Dynasty that the orthodox style of Chinese Buddhism was finally formed. The Sui and Tang dynasties were the most powerful political, economic, and cultural dynasties in Chinese history, as well as the peak period of classic text translation and sectarian competition in Chinese Buddhist history. Their influence deeply penetrated various social classes in China (Little, S, 2000). Afterwards, Chinese Buddhism experienced two anti-Buddhist movements in the late Tang and Five Dynasties, as well as wars during dynastic changes. Due to the loss of scriptures, the destruction of temples, and the persecution of monks, it almost reached the point of decline and decline. Until the Song Dynasty, there was a slight recovery, but Buddhism from the Song and Yuan dynasties to the 800 years of the Qing Dynasty, due to the overall decline in national fortune. However, Buddhism continued, it was no longer as prosperous as in the Sui and Tang dynasties. Since then, Buddhism has changed its traditional form and gradually leans towards a line of reconciliation between life practice and sects. From the association and chanting of Buddha in the Amitabha faith, to the economic life of temples in Zen farming and forestry, to the harmony with Confucianism and Taoism, Buddhism has completely integrated into Chinese culture.

In terms of ideological receptivity, China has the influence of indigenous Taoist thought. Taoism and Buddhism have similarities in certain aspects, and interpreting Buddhism through Taoism has become a major characteristic of Chinese Buddhism, especially among scholars and officials. The attitude of rulers towards Buddhism depends on its appeal and influence in society. As a social force, Buddhism cannot be ignored by rulers in their governance strategies. However, if its influence is not significant, its political leverage is clearly not very significant. As for the folk, there is a strong trend of polytheistic worship. No matter which way the gods are, as long as they can avoid evil, avoid disasters, and bring blessings, they are all included in the worship and prayer, and the same is true for Buddhism. Although Buddhism since the Ming and Qing dynasties is considered the decline period of Chinese Buddhism, some of the doctrines accepted by the Chinese people have been deeply rooted in people's hearts. Buddhism is no longer a foreign religion, but an inherent religion in China. Especially through the belief in Bodhisattva, Buddhism deeply permeates the people, and it also satisfies the earthly interest of the people to respond to their needs.

4. Mazu Faith

Mazu worship was originally a worship and dependence on the sea god in the coastal areas of Fujian. Due to the origin of water transportation in the Yuan Dynasty, the boatmen and sailors used were mostly from the southern regions of Fujian and Zhejiang. Due to the high probability of danger and accidents during the boatmen's journey, people were unable to predict their future fate, so they sought the protection of the gods. In order to pray for the safe return of their families, many ancestral temples have been built, which constitute the most typical cultural symbol of the Fujian people. With the development of water transportation, the worship of Mazu, which was widely spread along the southern coast, was brought to the north, including Tianjin. A large number of Tianfei palaces were built in various coastal areas to pray for peace and smoothness during the water transportation process. At that time, the rulers of the Yuan Dynasty, in order to win people's hearts and actively cater to the worship of boatmen, in the fifteenth year of the Yuan Dynasty (1278), conferred the title of Mazu as the "Empress Dowager of Protecting the Country, Wishing Spiritual Benevolence, Cooperating with Righteousness, and Celebrating the Heavenly Consort". After the introduction of the Mazu faith to Tianjin, it underwent dissemination and development during the Yuan and Ming dynasties and reached a prosperous stage during the Qianlong period of the Qing Dynasty. Its outstanding performance was the large-scale holding of "imperial gatherings" and the appearance of Mazu and its avatars in a large number of Yangliu youth paintings. At this time, the Mazu faith in Tianjin not only focused on maritime affairs but also focused on developing folk culture, forming Tianjin's unique Mazu local faith.

5. Confucianism

Confucianism was founded by the late Spring and Autumn period thinker Confucius after nearly 1700 years of Chinese civilization going through Xia, Shang, and Zhou. The Confucian doctrine founded by Confucius has formed a complete ideological system based on summarizing, summarizing, and inheriting the traditional culture of the Xia, Shang, and Zhou dynasties. Throughout China for over two thousand years, the reason why Confucianism has been able to lead the way is partly due to its philosophical concept of heaven and man, ethical principles of the Three
Cardinals and Five Constants, and political unity, which fundamentally meet the needs of feudal autocratic rule. On the other hand, it is because Confucianism has a strong sense of social responsibility and can constantly change its appearance with the changing needs of the times.

The core idea of Confucianism is to put people first, cultivate one's character, govern the country, and balance the world. Advocate values such as kindness, etiquette, loyalty, and filial piety, emphasizing interpersonal relationships and moral responsibility. At the same time, Confucius broke the monopoly of the old ruling class on education for the first time, changing the focus of education from government to private lectures, spreading traditional cultural education to the entire nation, emphasizing the importance of education, advocating cultivation and learning, and enhancing personal character and ability through self-shaping and learning from classics.

6. Three religions in one

The concept of the unity of the three religions was proposed in the Ming Dynasty, and it is worth noting that there was indeed unity in the form of the three religions in society at that time. In the Ming Dynasty, the deities jointly worshipped by the three religions became increasingly popular, with the most prosperous being the belief in the Guan Emperor. It was written in the mid-Ming Dynasty's "The True Classic of Loyalty, Filial Piety, Loyalty, and Righteousness of the Three Realms Subduing Demons and the Guan Holy Emperor", which stated that Guan Yu was in charge of the three realms, "wielding the power of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, and managing the talent of heaven and earth".

Looking at the changes in the concept of integrating the three religions into one, we can see some development trends in Chinese society. Firstly, since the Tang Dynasty, both the external political unity and the internal degree of authoritarianism and centralization have been higher than in previous dynasties, and each generation has been greater than the other, especially during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The continuous strengthening of this authoritarian and centralized unified social and political system requires a more consistent social ideology that includes religious forms. As a result, the call for the integration of the three religions has become stronger. Secondly, during the long-term coexistence of the three religions, their internal identity has deepened through communication. The entire trend of the development of religious ethics in China since the Tang and Song dynasties ultimately converged into the integration of the three religions in the Ming Dynasty, which can be said to be inevitable.

Finally, the Chinese people have always been compatible and accepting of religion, and the content of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism has long been commonplace. The integration of the three religions is only to reconcile these familiar things and create new ones. Buddhism emphasizes liberation and transcendence, Taoism emphasizes conforming to nature and cultivating one's character, and Confucianism advocates the maintenance of human relationships and social order. Together, they form a beautiful landscape that has had a profound impact on shaping the beliefs, values, and moral norms of the Chinese people.

7. Conclusion

The folk beliefs reflected in the Yang Liu youth paintings during the Ming and Qing dynasties are similar to those in other parts of the country, such as the belief in Confucianism, Taoism, and even the later belief in the unity of the three religions. But at the same time, it also has significant regional characteristics, mainly manifested in the prevalence of Mazu faith and the numerous regional gods. The emergence of these characteristics is undoubtedly closely related to factors such as the local natural geographical environment, people's production and lifestyle, cultural traditions, and customs. Folk beliefs are different from organized and standardized official beliefs, and their dissemination is not limited to conscious and compulsory promotion by the authorities.

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