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From "Pregnant Pig Clay Figurine" to "Pig God Worship": A Study on the Continuation of Folk Genes in Animal Carvings of Shuangdun Culture from the Perspective of Art Anthropology

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Abstract

The Shuangdun site, a key early Neolithic settlement in the middle reaches of the Huaihe River, has yielded three mutually corroborating categories of pig-themed cultural remains: pig bones, pig-shaped incised signs, and pig-shaped clay figurines. These remains not only represent the plastic arts of Huaihe civilization but also embody the primitive spiritual beliefs and survival wisdom of its ancient inhabitants. This paper examines the continuity between these three categories of pig-themed remains and the later Huaihe Pig God Worship. From the perspective of art anthropology, this study decodes the symbolic connotations embedded in the pig-shaped imagery, reconstructs the transformation process of these genes through archaeological artifacts and historical texts, and verifies their living continuity through modern and contemporary Huaihe River folk customs. To address the challenge of sparse evidence during the long "gap period" from prehistoric times to the pre-Qin era, this study adopts a "clue-based" argumentation strategy, demonstrating genetic continuity by identifying structural similarities in the dual core of "fertility prayer" and "clan protection" across different cultural forms throughout history. The academic value lies in enriching the theoretical paradigm of interdisciplinary research between prehistoric art and folklore. Its practical value is reflected in guiding the living heritage of Shuangdun culture and providing a reference for tracing the origins of intangible cultural heritage items in the Huaihe River region.

Keywords

Shuangdun site; Pregnant Pig Clay Figurine; art anthropology; Pig God Worship; folk genes; Huaihe civilization

1. Introduction

The Shuangdun site is located in Xiaobengbu Town, Huaishang District, Bengbu City, Anhui Province, approximately 5 km north of the Huaihe River. It is a Neolithic site dating back approximately 7,300-7,100 years. The site covers an extant area of about 12,000 m². Three excavations were conducted between 1986 and 1992, covering a total area of 375 m², yielding tens of thousands of pottery shards, animal bones, and stone, shell, and bone-antler artifacts (Kan & Zhou, 2007).

Among the over 600 pottery incised signs unearthed from the site, at least 17 feature the pig as a motif, either as single or combined symbols. Meanwhile, successive excavations have yielded a large quantity of pig bones. In the

2014-2015 excavation season alone, the Number of Identified Specimens (NISP) for pig bones reached 4,708, with a Minimum Number of Individuals (MNI) of 262 (Dai & Zhang, 2020). The pig occupied a significant position in both the material and spiritual lives of the Shuangdun inhabitants, representing the earliest systematic pig-themed cultural remains yet discovered in the Huaihe River region.

Research on Shuangdun pig-themed remains remains fragmented. Zooarchaeologists focus on quantitative analysis and ritual use of pig bones, while archaeologists classify and describe the pig-shaped incised signs. However, the artistic features and belief connotations of the pig-shaped clay figurines have received little in-depth discussion, and no study has integrated these three categories of remains into a unified cultural phenomenon linked to later Huaihe folk beliefs. Concurrently, folklore studies on "Pig God Worship" exhibit diachronic fragmentation: existing works either focus on pre-Qin totem records or emphasize modern folk customs, leaving a critical gap connecting prehistoric pig culture to later belief systems.

This study addresses three core questions: First, what primitive belief genes are encoded in the formal features of the Shuangdun pig-themed remains? Second, through what transmission mechanisms did these primitive belief genes evolve into later Huaihe Pig God Worship over millennia? Third, how did the functions of these pig-belief genes adapt to societal needs across different historical periods while maintaining core stability? Employing an art anthropological approach, this study constructs a three-stage analytical pathway: decoding primitive genes, tracing their evolution into medieval beliefs, and examining their manifestation in modern folklore, ultimately revealing the logic of cross-temporal folk genetic transmission.

"Folk genes" are defined as stable transgenerational cultural elements—symbolic, ritual, and cognitive—transmitted through social learning. They exhibit three attributes: continuity (structural stability over time), adaptability (functional change with core preservation), and embodiment (codification in material forms). The Shuangdun pig remains encode two such genes: "fertility prayer" and "clan protection."

2. Types and Belief Connotations of Pig-Themed Remains at the Shuangdun Site

2.1 Pig Bones: Dual Evidence of Meat Resources and Ritual Behavior

Pig bones from Shuangdun exhibit a distinct "duality" (Dai & Zhang, 2020). First, meat resource attributes: pigs were among the most important meat sources. The recovery rate of high-meat-yield limb bones was high, while that of low-meat-yield phalanges was extremely low, suggesting that most pigs were slaughtered elsewhere and high-meat portions transported to the site. Mortality concentrated in the 1-2 year age range, consistent with meat acquisition needs; slaughter season was concentrated in winter, likely to alleviate winter food shortages. Second, ritual attributes: the mandible had the highest recovery rate despite its low meat content, suggesting use in ritual activities. Sex identification revealed 112 females and 57 males (ratio approximately 2:1), a pattern distinct from market-oriented herds and closer to small-scale household management, implying selective inclusion of reproductive females in ritual activities. This dual nature indicates that pig utilization transcended the purely economic sphere and entered the domain of spiritual belief.

2.2 Pig-Shaped Incised Signs: Two-Dimensional Visual Encoding

Among the over 600 pottery incised signs from Shuangdun, at least 17 feature pigs. Based on morphological characteristics, domestic pigs and wild boars can be clearly distinguished (Kan & Zhou, 2007; Dai & Zhang, 2020). Domestic pigs have small head-to-body ratios and plump, rounded bodies (e.g., 91T0719D3:34). Wild boars have protruding snouts, developed tusks, and leaner builds (e.g., 86T0720③:10). Intermediate types also exist, with rounded bodies but prominent dorsal bristles and elongated snouts without tusks (e.g., 91T0620D3:15), possibly reflecting hybrid or transitional groups between domestic and wild pigs, consistent with the diversity inferred from bone studies (Dai & Zhang, 2020).

Figure 1. Pig-Shaped Incised Signs from the Shuangdun Site. (left: 91T0719⑮:34; middle: 86T0720③:10; right: 91T0620⑬:15) (Source: Dai & Zhang, 2020, Fig. 3)

From an aesthetic perspective, the pig-shaped incised signs skillfully combine realism and abstraction. Single pig motifs are vivid and accurately incised, with proportions approximating reality. Combined motifs, however, present narrative scenes: one shows a pig trapped in a net suspended in mid-air; inverted, it resembles a pig tied by four feet to a stilted building, rich in narrative content (Zhang, 2025). The fine classification and detailed depiction of pigs indicate accurate biological knowledge, while the emphasis on "plumpness" suggests it had become a core visual symbol carrying meanings beyond mere representation.

2.3 Pig-Shaped Clay Figurines: Three-Dimensional Carriers of Belief

The site yielded four pig-shaped clay figurines, constituting the largest collection of pig-shaped three-dimensional sculptures from the early Neolithic in the middle Huaihe River region. They can be divided into distinct functional types (Kan & Zhou, 2007). A pig-head fragment features a protruding snout with eyes and nostrils, likely from an independent sculpture possibly used as a ritual vessel. A pig-shaped figurine atop a cylindrical base elevates the pig, granting it a transcendent visual status; the cylinder may symbolize the "center" or "axis mundi." Notably, some artifacts from Shuangdun lack practical functions, and combined with the absence of residential remains and the unusually high pottery volume, this suggests the site may have served as a ritual or sacrificial venue (Kou, 2019). A pig fragment has a pointed snout with hair texture emphasizing animality. A pig-shaped appliqué on a pottery bowl rim embeds the pig image into daily life.

These four figurines show clear functional differentiation: independent sculptures for ritual spaces, the cylinder-top piece for special ceremonial status, and the appliqué for everyday contexts. Thus, pig veneration at Shuangdun was not monolithic but a multi-layered meaning system encompassing "ritual–ceremony–daily life," structurally echoing the "food–ritual" duality of the pig bones.

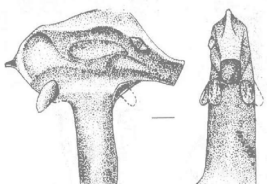

Figure 2. Pig-Shaped Pottery. (After Kan Xuhang, Shuangdun site, Bengbu)

Figure 3. Pig-Shaped Carved Symbol. (After Zhang Dong, Shuangdun Site in Bengbu: The Early Light of Civilization in the Huai River Basin)

2.4 Integrated Analysis: The Primitive Form of Folk Genes

Integrated observation reveals a unified belief structure: the pig embodied both "fertility prayer" and "clan protection" in the Shuangdun spiritual world. The fertility gene is materially expressed through: (a) the ~2:1 female-to-male ratio linking pigs to reproduction; (b) the plump depiction of domestic pigs as a visual metaphor for fertility; and (c) the penetration of pig imagery across multiple vessel types and spatial contexts. The clan protection gene is expressed more indirectly: the systematic treatment of the pig as a unified concept, and the elevated positioning of the cylinder-top figurine suggesting a "guardian of the center" function. The Huaihe incised signs as a whole show a clear evolutionary trajectory from simple marks to complex signification and from single to combined usage, of which the Shuangdun pig signs are a typical example (Zhang, 2026).

In sum, although the Shuangdun period lacked personified or deified pig gods and remained at a primitive stage of "pig as fertility symbol and clan marker," the original forms of the fertility and protection genes had already taken shape, providing the deep structure for the long-term transmission of Huaihe Pig God Worship.

3. The Hereditary Lineage of Shuangdun "Pig Belief Genes" in Later Ages

3.1 Filling the Archaeological "Gap Period"

Between the Shuangdun site (c. 5300-5100 BCE) and the first documentary appearance of the Shiwei tribe, there exists a gap of approximately three millennia. However, archaeological evidence from the middle Huaihe region suggests uninterrupted pig-veneration traditions. At the Yuchisi site in Mengcheng, Anhui (Dawenkou culture 晚期 to Longshan culture, c. 4600-4000 BCE), nearly 1,000 pig bones were recovered, accounting for about 40% of identifiable animal bones. More significantly, animal pits containing complete pig skeletons were found in spatial correspondence with house foundations—e.g., pit S3 corresponds to House Foundation No. 4, S7 to No. 10, S6 to No. 11, S2 to No. 2, and S5 to No. 3—suggesting foundation-laying rituals or other religious offerings (Chen, 2000). The oracle bone script character for "shaman" (巫), depicting a person holding two pigs, further supports the connection between such burials and primitive religious concepts. This three-thousand-year cultural sequence indicates that the pig consistently occupied a central position in the belief systems of the middle Huaihe region.

3.2 Pre-Qin "Shiwei": The Historical Presentation of Genetic Totemization

The "Shiwei" (also "Xiwei") recorded in pre-Qin texts represents the first explicit historical manifestation of the Shuangdun pig-belief genes. The Zuo Zhuan (Duke Zhao, 29th year) records the "Shiwei" as an ancient tribe. The Zhuangzi lists "Xiwei" among sages who "attained the Way," imbuing the pig totem with divine and protective functions (Wang, 2016). The Shiwei's territory extended from modern Hua County, Henan, to the southeast, overlapping the Shuangdun cultural sphere (Wang, 2016).

3.3 Qin-Han "Sacrificial Use of Pigs": The Unfolding of Genetic Ritualization

During the Qin-Han period, the pig-belief genes entered a "ritualization" phase. Pigs were included with cattle and sheep in the highest sacrifice (Tailao) and were mandatory in the secondary sacrifice (Shaolao). The Han Dynasty tomb at Shuangdun contained complete pig bones in sacrificial pits alongside bronze vessels, with burning marks confirming their use as offerings. The tradition of using pigs in rituals thus remained unbroken for three thousand years.

3.4 Sui-Tang "Pig-Motif Bronze Mirrors" to Song-Yuan "Folk Pig Gods": Continuous Evolution

Tang Dynasty bronze mirrors feature plump pig motifs with auspicious clouds, inheriting the "rounded physique" tradition while acquiring new apotropaic and blessing functions (Li, 2010). After the Song-Yuan period, the Gazetteer of Fengyang Prefecture records that in the Bengbu area, "On New Year's Eve, (people) clean the toilets and offer a pig's head, saying 'Offering to the Latrine God, praying for abundance.'" Modern New Year paintings such as "Fat Pig Bumping the Door" and paper-cuts of "Pig with a Child" translate fertility into more popular meanings like "attracting wealth" and "having many children," yet the plump pig shape consistently transmits the core gene.

4. Transmission Mechanisms and Evolutionary Characteristics of Shuangdun "Pig Belief Genes"

The persistence of these core genes for over 7,000 years is attributed to a three-dimensional transmission mechanism involving symbol, ritual, and community, alongside a dynamic balance between core stability and functional adaptation.

Symbolic reconstruction serves as the visual anchor: from the Shuangdun incised signs and figurines, through Han pottery pigs and Tang bronze mirror motifs, to Ming-Qing "Fat Pig Bumping the Door" paintings, the core visual language consistently revolves around the "plump pig form." Ritual solidification as the behavioral vehicle shows a downward trend: from Shuangdun's mandible rituals and Yuchisi's complete-pig foundation sacrifices, through Qin-Han differentiation into official rites and folk practices, to Song-Yuan simplification into "New Year's Eve sacrifices." Community memory provides the living soil: the Shuangdun figurines and signs themselves constituted visual cultural memory, later evolving into folk tales and modern "Pig God saving the village" legends that perpetuate the core of "pig as protector."

Shuangdun society remained at a low-level food production stage with a fishing-hunting-gathering economy; the numerous settlements along the Huaihe lowlands occupied low mounds near wetlands, providing convenient access

to abundant wildlife resources (Zhang, 2024). This dependence on pigs formed the material foundation for the long-term persistence of belief genes.

The Shuangdun incised signs exhibit distinctive transitional and integrative features, showing both regional differences from and significant cross-regional transmission and cultural interaction with similar signs from the Yellow River and Yangtze River basins. The evolution of Shuangdun pig signs from single to combined forms and from realistic to abstract representations exemplifies this pattern, while the overall evolutionary trajectory from simple marks to complex signification provides a cognitive framework for understanding the transformation of pig-belief genes from concrete symbols to abstract concepts (Zhang, 2026).

The root of core stability lies in the long-term continuation of the "rice-pig symbiosis" economic model. Twelve rice husk impressions were found in Shuangdun's red-burned soil; of the nine identifiable specimens, 22.2% were japonica, 44.4% indica, and 33.3% intermediate types, indicating rice cultivation during the Shuangdun period, which provided stable fodder for pig husbandry (Kan & Zhou, 2007; Li, 2007). From the incipient rice cultivation and pig domestication of Shuangdun to the modern rice-producing heartland, the Huaihe people's dependence on "pig" and "rice" has never wavered.

5. Conclusions

This study demonstrates that the dual core genes of "fertility prayer" and "clan protection," originating in the Shuangdun period, evolved through the ritual practices of Longshan-period sites like Yuchisi, the totemization of the pre-Qin Shiwei, ritualization in Qin-Han, deification in Sui-Tang, and folklorization from Song-Yuan onward, consistently using the "pig" as the core carrier across time and space.

Practically, the findings guide Shuangdun culture's living transmission: IP products can be designed based on the "fertility and protection" gene; narrative storytelling integrating Shuangdun pig-themed remains and Pig God folklore can be incorporated into Bengbu's local cultural curriculum. The analytical framework also serves as a reference for tracing genetic origins in other intangible cultural heritage projects in the Huaihe River region.

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