

A Study on the Origins of Dragon God Worship in the Taozhou Region

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Abstract: The belief in dragon deities is a widespread phenomenon in traditional agricultural societies in China, and the worship of the eighteen dragon deities in the Taozhou area represents a unique and rare manifestation of folk belief, where many of these dragon deities are the founding heroes or royal relatives from the early Ming Dynasty. The origins of this phenomenon primarily stem from traditional dragon king worship in China, as well as the specific historical context and cultural amalgamation in the Taozhou region. This includes the official guidance and control of folk beliefs, the emergence of a sense of homeland that transcends time and space under unique regional conditions, and the integration of values among different ethnic groups, ultimately forming a special belief in dragon deities that is distinct from other regions. This belief not only reflects the local people's yearning and pursuit of a better life but also carries rich historical and cultural connotations.

1. Introduction

Taozhou, also known as Lintan, is situated on the northeastern edge of the Qinghai-Xizang region Plateau in the Chinese mainland, southern Gansu Province, and the eastern part of the Gannan Autonomous Prefecture. Historically, this region has been characterized by multiple ethnic nomadic migrations, resulting in complex and varied ethnic relations and religious beliefs. During the Ming Dynasty, Taozhou was established as a military outpost that implemented a system of garrison administration. The local population was placed under central administration, and interactions between garrison immigrants and local residents led to a fusion of customs, traditions, and folk beliefs, giving rise to unique dragon deity worship.

2. Historical review

Existing academic research primarily focuses on the specific content and cultural implications of the eighteen dragon deities in Taozhou, predominantly from anthropological and cultural historical perspectives. Few studies have investigated the reasons behind the emergence of eighteen dragon deity worship in Taozhou from a historical development perspective or examined its internal value—particularly concerning official guidance on this belief. This paper aims to explore specific

reasons for the emergence of eighteen dragon deity worship in Taozhou by tracing its historical development during the Ming Dynasty.

3. Empirical study

3.1 The Deification of Emperors: Official Control and Guidance of Folk Beliefs

The Taozhou region is not a monolithic religious area; it is home to multiple ethnic groups, including Han, Hui, Mongolian, and others. These ethnic groups practice a variety of religious beliefs, including Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and others. However, the worship of the Eighteen Dragon Gods is distinct from these traditional religious beliefs, forming a unique system. In a centralized country like China, the complete formation of a faith cannot occur without state involvement. In the early Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang initiated an official campaign to establish deities to enhance control over the country and its residents. In the second year of the Hongwu reign (1369), he established the Heroes' Temple in Jiangning Prefecture to enshrine 21 individuals including Xu Da and Chang Yuchun and ordered nationwide worship.

The Ming Dynasty employed three methods for managing popular beliefs: first, completely demolishing licentious temples; second, incorporating them into state ceremonies; and third, permitting them to persist as popular beliefs. With the passage of time the distinction between state ceremonies and popular beliefs gradually blurred, leading to overlap in their contents.^[1] The worship of the Dragon Gods in Taozhou is a product influenced by this system.

As the de facto ruler of the empire, Zhu Yuanzhang conferred titles of "fengshan" upon various meritorious subjects in the name of the emperor, essentially deifying himself and reinforcing the legitimacy of his rule. These official efforts intentionally guided the populace's beliefs, thereby creating mythological narratives about their ruling group. Simultaneously, common people through intentional storytelling overlay, infused their fundamental desires into imaginative representations.

The Eighteen Dragon Gods The Eighteen Dragon Gods of Taozhou, including Zhongchang Yuchun, Xu Da, Li Wenzhong, Hu Dahai, Guo Ying, Kang Maocai, Zhu Liangzu, An Shikui, Zhao Desheng, Huayun, Guo Ningfei, Wu Dianzhang, Cheng Shijiang, Zhang Desheng, and Han Cheng, were renowned generals of the Ming Dynasty. Both Zhu Yuanzhang's sister and his wife, Zhu Shijia and Ma Xiuying, were celebrated generals and generals as well as royal relatives. Simultaneously the same time, individuals such as Zhongchang Yuchun, Xu Da, and Li Wenzhong were officially enshrined by the state. All eighteen Dragon Gods held imperial edicts along with temple names; through their veneration, they were believed to bring favorable weather conditions, thereby gradually embodying the role of functional gods in the Taozhou region.

The belief in the Eighteen Dragon Gods in the Taozhou region, as evidenced by the Ming Dynasty's management of popular faith, represents a fusion of official state worship and popular beliefs; state influence gradually secured official recognition in the form of temple names, honorary titles, and inclusion in ritual ceremonies. These gods hold a status comparable to other deities within state-sponsored ritual ceremonies.

It is clear that the majority of these Dragon Gods were initially enshrined by the state and later popularized through local influences, thereby resulting in additional mystical attributes and regional distinctions.

3.2 Agriculture and Animal Husbandry Interaction: Unique Geographical Environments

The city of Taozhou is situated in a high-altitude area that ranges from 2,209 to 4,500 meters above sea level, characterized by a cold and humid climate. The annual average temperature is 3.2 °C, with an annual average precipitation of 518 mm and a relative frost-free period of 65 days.

According to the "Taizhou Hall Chronicles," it is stated that "the land in Taozhou is cold and high, unable to cultivate rice and grains; hence, textile materials such as silk and hemp must be sourced from other regions. "Each year, during the grain harvest, unfavorable weather conditions such as rain or hail can damage crops, leading to a situation where the local populace feels as though they are on the brink of disaster.

Nevertheless, provided that the residents work diligently and do not neglect their primary occupations while capitalizing on favorable weather conditions and local resources, their efforts can sustain their livelihoods without complete reliance on neighboring areas. From these two sources, it can be inferred that agricultural development within the Taozhou region is significantly shaped by its geographic environment. Agricultural production relies heavily on water resources and favorable weather conditions; it requires collective efforts for rapid cultivation and harvesting within a limited farming period. In this region, the relationship between the "18 people" and the traditional dragon god responsible for controlling rainfall is both officially revered and shaped by local climatic conditions. During the brief agricultural season, establishing a community centered on shared interests is crucial for ensuring agricultural yields. The impact of regional climate on pastoralism has established it as the predominant means of production and way of life in the Taozhou area. The development of agriculture predominantly emerged following settlement initiatives and military garrison policies during the Ming dynasty.

The geographical and climatic conditions in this region exhibit significant differences compared to those of southern Shaanxi, Hezhou, and Lanzhou, leading to a reliance on favorable weather for agricultural success. Under the influence of various border defense policies during the Ming Dynasty, tribal peoples in the Taozhou region migrated and adopted numerous Han customs in their daily lives—"their customs in agriculture, livestock, crafts, labor, and architecture, including high buildings and the warm kang (a traditional heated bed), are all similar to those of the Han". The unique regional environment fostered a production approach that integrated agriculture and pastoralism, resulting in a profound belief in dragon deities. The establishment of dragon deity worship was highly beneficial for integrated agricultural production since agriculture relies on rainfall for irrigation while pastoralism depends on lush pastures. In this context, local residents harnessed the belief in dragon deities to establish the Qingmiao Association. The Qingmiao Association is a grassroots organization within the rural society of Taozhou, primarily focused on mutual assistance. Its activities include responsibilities for rituals, harvesting, irrigation, and resolving disputes. Importantly, it does not function as a political organization; its main duties are to organize and facilitate collaboration among community members.

Participating in the welcoming ceremony for the gods in the new city, organizing temple fairs, carrying out rituals such as the Buddha's procession along the "road," mountain repairs, and autumn offerings, as well as organizing agricultural activities like watching the crops and relocating farms, are all integral aspects of social life. Many of these functions are akin to the "Lighting Society" found in the Dunhuang region. Within this context, the president and the "Ma Jiao" (literally "Horse Horn") are the central figures in the organization and rituals of the Qmmiang Society, and such figures are elected representatives, with the Dragon God serving as their symbolic leader.

Tao Prefecture is situated in a high-elevation plateau region with long winters and short summers. The narrow mountain areas are prone to frequent hailstorms during the heavy rainfall of summer. Many immigrants in Tao Prefecture are engaged in agriculture and depend heavily on favorable weather conditions for harvests, as climatic disasters are recurrent in this area. The "History of the Ming Dynasty" records, "In April of the first year of Hongzhi, on the day of Xinmao, hail and rain struck Tao Zhou, causing water to rise to three zhang. " Furthermore, it mentions: "The Tao Zhou Wei experienced hail and ice. Water rose to three or four zhang, inundating the city and drifting houses; many crops, livestock, and people drowned. "In July, on the day of Yiyou, again hail and

rain struck Tao Zhou, destroying crops. Many people and livestock drowned due to violent floods. ^[2] According to historical records such as county annals, there were recorded instances of hail (9 times), floods (5 times), droughts (13 times), locust infestations (2 times), and earthquakes (19 times) between the Ming and Qing Dynasties, ^[3] highlighting the frequency of natural disasters that posed significant challenges to agricultural production.

Located in a remote area, official relief efforts were similarly limited, and faced with unpredictable happenings, locals tended to place their hopes in deities. The presence of the Dragon God supplements the deficiencies in government support. The combination of this deity with eighteen officially recognized gods fulfills the public's desire for favorable weather and agricultural prosperity.

The inscription on the "Memorial Stele of the Seven Surnames of the Urban and Rural Communities in Tao County" states: "Our Tao is situated on the extreme border, with high mountains and cool terrain, the soil is poor and the populace is impoverished. The land and pastures are exceedingly narrow. The daily sustenance is reliant on farming and herding to sustain life. Despite each land having its own allocation, there are yet no divisions for pastures. Only behind the northern city at the Party Family Gully, there is a dedicated pasture called Cao Mountain, located at the bottom of the Great Gully, near the Qinglong Pool. Since ancient times, this has been passed down as a grazing ground for the military and civilians from the urban and rural communities of the seven surnames. In recent years, however, it has been subject to plots and the encroachment of land. Thankfully, Zhang Wei has inspected and verified this as a sacred site for the Dragon God's rinsing pool and grove, serving local livestock. "The inscription concludes with the date of confirmation in the 20th year of the Qianlong era, on the 18th day of the month of Yihai.

Although the Dragon God Society is not an official organization, it holds substantial credibility among the population. The Qmmiang Society is established in both major and minor temples dedicated to the Dragon God. The existence of this society serves to uphold the sanctity of faith, while also reflecting the public's functional needs regarding their belief in the Dragon God. The shift from herding to agriculture, along with changing lifestyles, signifies a profound influence by a new faith. Functional deities have always been venerated across dynasties, merely manifesting differently in the public's representation of idol figures.

The belief in the Dragon God encapsulates the local people's deep longing for a better life, establishing collective organizations aimed at resisting disasters and enhancing resilience against external adversities. This creates a non-clan-based community of interest within agricultural society, facilitating agricultural development and collectively addressing life's hardships and production disputes.

3.3 Guarding the Border and Cultivating New Land: The Transfer and Extension of Emotional Attachment to One's Hometown

The residents of Taozhou are predominantly descendants of immigrants who have migrated far from their ancestral lands. In the second year of the Hongwu reign (1369), Zhu Yuanzhang commanded Xu Da to advance into the northwest, instructing him to "first attack Lintao and then proceed westward. "During the early Ming dynasty, soldiers accompanied prominent generals, such as Chang Yuchun, to Taozhou in order to quell the revolts orchestrated by the eighteen clans in the region. Positioned at a strategic military site, Taozhou proved pivotal for border defense, as it "checks the barbarian tribes from the west and shields against the Hu and Long from the east," making it critical since the Han and Tang dynasties. "Now that the Qiang and other tribes have been repelled, if we abandon this position and do not establish a garrison, in a few years, the barbarian tribes will return to pose a threat. It is unwise to weigh minor expenses against substantial dangers.

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These military households and soldiers were stationed at Taozhou due to their military significance and considerations to alleviate the population and land pressure in the interior while stabilizing the frontier. The majority of its residents are military settlers from the early Ming dynasty, including the Hui and Han ethnic groups, and they possess diverse religious beliefs. "I have asked each household for their genealogies and identified two prominent clans: one is the Jin family, which is descended from the military commander Jin Chaoxing and his brothers; the other is the Li family, descended from the military assistant Li Da. The genealogies of other families include the Song family, originally from Tuntou Village in Xuzhou, descendants of Commander Song Zhong; the Yang family, originally from Zhusi Lane in Nanjing, descendants of the town pacifier Yang Yuchun; the Liu family, originally from Liu'an Prefecture, descendants of Liu Gui, a hundred households' leader; and the Fan family, originally from Hefei, descendants of Fan Yingzong, a thousand households' leader. " [5]

The military households largely originated from the Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces, which are located far from their homeland; many of them established themselves and reproduced in this new environment. The rulers of the Ming dynasty not only permitted soldiers to bring their wives and children to the garrison but also allowed their parents and siblings to reside with them, effectively severing the chances for military families to return to their roots. Soldiers longed for their homeland but found themselves unable to return, leaving their sentiments regarding their origins relegated to the realm of the supernatural. From the rain-rich, warm, and humid lands of the Jianghuai area to the desolate Northwest plateau, the cultural and dietary customs of the local ethnic minorities were notably distinct. The cultural disparities were evident, as illustrated by the narrative from " The Legend of Madame Ma," which describes the picturesque Jianghuai landscape: " Little bridges and flowing water, amidst thatched cottages; fertile fields in the south and the north of the village... a clear spring in the forest, crystalline water reflecting the blue sky," in contrast to the expressed nostalgia in the lyrics, " Arriving in the new year in the first month, my hometown is in Jiangnan; ever since I came to Taozhou, it's a different land, not of this world. "[6]

This enduring longing for their homeland is indelible; at such moments, the role of the divine becomes prominent. In this context, each military household resembles a foreign guest, lacking a sense of belonging; only by establishing a shared value system and beliefs can they sustain a connection to their homeland. This communal spirit enables them to unite as expatriates in agriculture and find spiritual comfort.

Residents of Taozhou, capitalizing on the state's "City God reforms" and "Divine teachings," venerated the generals their ancestors had followed as deities, thereby transferring their attachment to their homeland onto their reverence for their forebears. This practice has become a spiritual pillar for the military households stationed there. The eighteen dragon gods, designated to protect different garrisons, served to establish local "roads. "The locations of the temples are widely dispersed; notable figures such as Chang Yuchun and Xu Da are honored with temples in various locations. This demonstrates that these dragon gods encompass all garrisons of the Taozhou Wei, thereby forming a unique folk belief that coexists alongside Buddhism, Daoism, and Islam.

In the Taozhou region, the residents of the military posts have applied the state's strategies of "reforming the City God" and "establishing the teachings of divine roads" to deify the generals their ancestors once followed. This practice has allowed them to transfer their deep-rooted attachment to their homeland onto the spiritual altars of their ancestors, which have emerged as the spiritual backbone for the military households stationed in the area.

The eighteen dragon gods serve as individual protectors of various military forts, collectively referred to as "Malus. The sites of the shrines dedicated to these deities are dispersed rather than clustered.

Notable figures such as Chang Yuchun in Yugang Township, Xu Da behind the urban center of Xincheng, Li Wenzhong at Dashing Mountain in Xincheng, Hu Dahai at Qingshi Mountain in Xinbao Township, Guo Ying at Yangjiagou in Biandu Township, Kang Maocai at Yanjia Fortress in Xincheng, Ma Xiuying at Fengqi Village in Changchuan Township, Zhu Liangzu at Shangzhai Village in Liushun Township, An Shikui in Chengguan Town of Lintan County, Zhao Desheng at Shiqiya in Chenqi Township, the Zhu family at Baitu Village in Yangyong Township, Hua Yun at Shuimochuan in Liushun Township, Guo Ningfei in Chenqi Township, Wu Dianzhang at Qinguo Village in Zongzhai Township, Cheng Shijiang at Gankou Village in Yangsha Township, Zhang Desheng at Liyuan Village in Chenqi Township, Han Cheng at Hanqi Village in Chenqi Township, and Liu Gui at Liuqi Village in Biandu Township.

An examination of the villages and towns where these shrines are located reveals that the eighteen dragon gods encompass all military forts within the Taozhou garrison. This has resulted in the emergence of a unique form of folk belief in the region, coexisting and thriving alongside Buddhist, Taoist, and Islamic faiths. "The Longwang Temple houses eighteen Dragon Gods, with numerous temples constructed that are nearly present in every town and village. During times of drought, prayers are offered at the sacred pool, and responses are said to be heard like echoes. "This reflects the emergence of new emotional bonds that transcend both familial and village connections.

Every year during the Duanwu Festival, residents throughout Taozhou participate in the "Dragon God Race" ceremony, in which "on the fifth day of the fifth month, the eighteen dragon gods ascend Mount Duo for storm supplication and return to compete outside the West Gate." On this day, people from the east, south, west, and north gather in Taozhou are to participate in this grand sacrificial ceremony.

Wang Mingke's concept of "heroic ancestors" is also reflected here, as the residents of Taozhou are primarily the wives and children of the Ming soldiers who settled there, thus perpetuating generations in the region. Their ancestors, who served honorably, have left stories that continue to be passed down, while values emanate from the ancestral spirit tablets. Originally considered non-human, the dragon gods acquired personification in Taozhou, where they became linked with renowned generals and royal family members, thereby attributing worth to human values. In many legendary tales, these gods behave in a manner similar to humans, augmented by some divine abilities. These deities sustain the spirit of the immigrants from the Taozhou Wei while serving as role models that guide them in their military lives away from home and fostering cultural connections that transcend lineage among the garrisons.

3.4 Common Values: Unity among Different Ethnic Groups

In a multi-ethnic nation, the formation of folk social culture is not solely confined to one family or one clan. Folk beliefs are intricately connected to the production and daily lives of the people. Beliefs often come with a series of orders and frameworks. Establishing such beliefs requires a collaborative effort from various parties to complete the structure of belief systems, which includes a series of regular agricultural activities, folk rituals, and cultural customs. These activities are not limited to the totemic worship of any one ethnic group, nor to specific religious beliefs.

Indeed, in many regions, folk beliefs resemble the collective values shared among different ethnic groups and clans, demonstrating strong inclusivity and openness, while absorbing elements of other cultures and involving participation from various ethnic groups. Historically, the Taozhou region has been characterized by diverse beliefs and a multitude of ethnic communities. Each ethnic group that has settled in this area has contributed its own belief systems, such as Buddhism, Bon religion, and the Qiang tradition of sheep-headed ceremonies. As noted by Gu Jiegang, "This area is a region of different ethnicities, where many have foreign backgrounds. Even as their territorial

domain diminished, the term 'fan' has persisted. Since the Yuan and Ming dynasties, due to the influence of Lamaism, the local people have developed their own way of life, which differs greatly from that of the Han ethnic group".

However, at their core, these so-called 'fan' people were originally Qiang individuals. Those among the Qiang who accepted Lamaism were considered 'fan,' while those who retained their original shamanistic beliefs remained identified as Qiang. Residents in certain areas, such as the Maoxian district of Sichuan, serve as illustrative examples. This demonstrates the coexistence of diverse beliefs in the region.

The establishment of military garrisons in the Taozhou area was initially aimed at preventing rebellions among the "fan" people. However, when the garrison system was reformed during the Qing dynasty, its dominance in the region sharply declined, and the residents of the garrison became indistinguishable from ordinary civilian households. Connections between garrison villagers and local people became increasingly close. "To the west of Min, it is particularly cold; old records describe the people as strong-willed, with women adept at archery and horsemanship, clad in rough clothes and subsisting on milk, living by hunting."¹⁷ After centuries of cultural influence, Gu Jiegang noted in his investigative diary that "the women in this region with bound feet are among the smallest, less than three inches—they cannot stand without a cane, and very few can be seen in the market streets... this is because they have maintained the garments from the time of migration during the Ming." Until the period of the Republic of China, the differences in clothing styles between the local and Han ethnic groups were still evident; However, beliefs began to merge, forming a pattern of cultural coexistence.

During the Ming dynasty's frontier and reclamation policies, immigrants from inland China introduced their ancestral worship and clan consciousness, which, combined with local customs, culminated in the belief in the "Eighteen Dragon Gods." Among these Dragon Gods, elements from the Han, Hui, and local indigenous peoples were included.

In addition, there is a folk legend about Zhang Yuchun marrying a local girl, thus becoming a local son-in-law. Guided by this narrative, ethnic groups in Lintan, Yaligang, Bajiao Township, Zhuoni and other places also worship Zhang Yuchun, one of the eighteen dragon gods, and regard him as a family member. The annual Dragon God procession frequently crosses the borders between different ethnic communities and is referred to as "Zoumalu," bringing together all ethnic groups in the Taozhou region.

In 1917, the Yang chieftain married a Han woman with the surname Liu from Yanjia Fort as a concubine and participated in the local Dragon God worship activities, funding the repair of the temple of the Dragon God. The Yang chieftain also designated Naluye Hu Dahai as his household deity, thereby encouraging many people on the south bank of the Tao River to adopt a belief in Naluye.¹⁸ One of the essential aspects of the Dragon God belief is to pray for favorable weather and to avoid the impact of hail disasters, which is crucial for every ethnic group to embrace. Throughout history, frequent interactions among various ethnic groups in the Taozhou area have created mutual influences among different ethnic cultures, effectively blurring the boundaries between them. Through prolonged integration, the barriers between ethnic groups have broken down, leading to close connections in agriculture, trade, friendship, and marriage.

Different ethnic groups also participate in agricultural activities and various folk customs with subtle religious connotations, such as "moving fields," "markets," "Dragon God fairs," and "Zoumalu." Although the geographical environment of the Taozhou area facilitated tea-horse trade, significant cultural transformations were primarily brought about by Han immigrants during the Ming Dynasty. In a region where cultures intersect, the local culture exhibits both inclusivity and distinctiveness.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Study summary

In summary, the formation of folk beliefs and social culture in the Taozhou region is a complex and dynamic process that illustrates the exchanges, clashes, and integrations among different ethnic groups throughout history, showcasing the diversity and inclusivity of local culture. The Ming dynasty marked a crucial period in the formation of folk social culture within the Taozhou region. Influenced by the frontier management strategies of the Ming dynasty, different ethnic groups came to adopt the Dragon God belief, which was based on cultural integration and a shared social value system. The formation and development of the Dragon God belief in the Taozhou region have had a positive impact on inter-ethnic interactions. Within their shared living and economic trading, this belief has promoted communication among Han, Hui, and other ethnic groups, thereby deepening their emotional connections.

4.2 Conclusion and contributions

The emergence of the Dragon God belief embodies the common aspirations of the people of Taozhou, regardless of ethnic background, for a better life. The belief system surrounding the Eighteen Dragon Gods encompasses the exchange and integration of values among various groups, serving as a medium for inter-village and inter-ethnic communication and religious activities. The process of forming folk social culture in the Taozhou region exemplifies the convergence and development of various cultures and beliefs in a multi-ethnic country.

In this area, the influx and coexistence of diverse ethnic groups have led to the establishment of a pluralistic and intricate belief system. Faith is tightly intertwined with local production and daily life, constituting a specific social order and group identity. The arrival of each ethnic group has introduced its traditions and beliefs—such as Buddhism, Bon religion, and Qiang customs—thereby creating a cross-ethnic common value system. In the Taozhou region, interactions and exchanges among different ethnic groups have generated a rich tapestry of folk belief culture.

For example, the reclamation policies of the Ming dynasty enabled inner immigrants to bring their ancestral worship and clan awareness; this, when combined with local customs, led to the formation of a folk belief system centered on the Dragon God. This belief has integrated elements from Han, Hui, and local indigenous communities, showcasing the ethnically diverse character of the region. The creation and evolution of the Dragon God belief represent a reaction to the natural environment (such as prayers for favorable weather) and also reflect the economic and cultural exchanges among different ethnic groups. The region's significant ethnic interaction has fostered a community in which the boundaries among ethnic groups have become increasingly blurred.

By participating in communal agricultural activities and cultural events, such as "Zoumalu" and "Dragon God fairs," various ethnic groups in the Taozhou region demonstrate strong emotional identification and tight social connections within their daily lives. The boundary management policies of the Ming dynasty facilitated the recognition of Dragon God belief among different ethnic groups while also strengthening communication and interactions among them.

The cultural amalgamation during this period not only enriched the cultural landscape of the region but also laid a foundation for harmonious coexistence among various ethnic groups, reflecting a shared aspiration for a better life.

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