

## Article

# Water Spirits of the Yangzi River and Imperial Power in Traditional China

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**Abstract:** Most research on the water spirits of the Yangzi has focused on popular worship and paid little attention to the Confucian discourse and its major role in establishing imperial legitimacy. Yet it is a crucial aspect to understand traditional politics in China. The water spirits of the Yangzi River and its tributaries and lakes were venerated, offered imperial sacrifices, and incorporated into codes of state ritual in traditional China. The canonized sacrifices to the water spirits of the Yangzi River basin symbolized the religious–political legitimacy of the imperial regimes. When an imperial court offered sacrifice to the water spirits of the Yangzi River basin incorporated by previous dynasties, this action demonstrated that the current court directly connected to past regimes and inherited the authority of sacrifice passed down from the ancient and the orthodox tradition of Confucian ritual classics. Since the majority of dynasty capitals in traditional China were located in the north with fewer rivers, worshipping water spirits of the Yangzi River basin would imply recognition and blessing from southern divinities. The practice of granting noble titles and temple plaques to those water spirits would further demonstrate the imperial courts’ control over the divine power. By communicating with and managing the water spirits of the Yangzi River, the imperial courts would also symbolize their political and military administration over the south and they are united, rather than divided, regimes.

**Keywords:** the Yangzi River; water spirits; official sacrifice; codes of state ritual; imperial power



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## 1. Introduction

The Yangzi River 長江 or Jiangdu 江瀆 (Watercourse of Yangzi River) is one of the four watercourses (*sidu* 四瀆) that was included in the traditional Chinese state sacrificial ritual to mountain and water spirits. Moreover, since the Yangzi River basin has numerous tributaries and related lakes, its many major and minor water spirits had also been venerated, offered imperial sacrifices to, and incorporated into codes of state ritual (*sidian* 祀典) in traditional China. Similar to other codes of state ritual systems, the canonized sacrifices to the water spirits of the Yangzi River basin symbolized the religious–political legitimacy of the imperial regimes.

Documental records of water spirits were incomplete in the past and are insufficiently studied in the present. Academic studies on this topic can be roughly divided into three types. The first is the research on the popular worship of water spirits, mainly investigating folk cults and culture (Huang 1934; Li 1957, pp. 63–78; Wang and Li 2009, pp. 203–6; Wang and Qian 2014, pp. 5–11; Li and Li 2013, pp. 93–98). The second type is general studies on the four waterways, mainly discussing the formational process and some details of the four major water spirits (Xu 1989, pp. 340–42; Li 2015, pp. 89–116; Jia 2021). The third is to focus the study of water spirits on a specific dynasty or period (Hansen 2016; Yang 2012, pp. 287–312; Yang 2021, pp. 128–74; Tian 2011, pp. 47–70; Zhu 2007, pp. 71–124; Wang 2006, pp. 12–17; Chen 2009, pp. 193–95; X. Ma 2011, pp. 193–96; Qian 2000, pp. 237–58). Generally speaking, there seems to be a scholarly tendency on periodized, localized, and popular history of water spirits, which has neither paid much attention to examining the

overall situation of the state ritual codes 禮典 concerning water spirits of the Yangzi River nor reflected upon the symbolic significance of those ritual codes in terms of legitimating imperial power.

This article studies the water spirits of the Yangzi River basin located in south China, which is a topic that has not been systematically discussed by scholars. In particular, it focuses on those water spirits that had been incorporated into the codes of state ritual, that is, the parts of “ritual”; those water spirits active only in folk legends and cults, that is, the parts of “folklore”, are not our main concern. The article seeks to scrutinize how the water spirits of the Yangzi River basin were incorporated into codes of state ritual and how these ritual codes of official sacrifice were implemented to symbolize the religious–political legitimacy of the imperial power and the geographical unity of the dynastical regimes.

This article utilizes ample textual evidence, including official histories, veritable records, local gazettes, and Confucian classics, with the addition of newly excavated bamboo manuscripts from the Chu state, where the southern part of the Yangzi is located, during the period of Spring and Autumn and the Warring States.

## 2. The Incorporation of the Yangzi River into the Four Waterways and Codes of State Ritual

In addition to oracle bones and bronze inscriptions and bamboo and silk manuscripts (Liu 2017, pp. 509–43), the pre-Qin 先秦 literature, such as the *Shangshu* 尚書 (*Book of Documents*), the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Classic of Poetry*), the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (*Zuo’s Commentary*), the *Yili* 儀禮 (*Classic of Ritual*), the *Liji* 禮記 (*Records of Ritual*), and the *Zhouli* 周禮 (*Ritual of Zhou*), frequently mentions state sacrifices to mountains and waters. Only a selected few, however, actually make reference to the concept of the four waterways. The *Yili*, probably compiled between the fifth century BCE and the middle of the fourth century BCE by disciples of Confucius and later scholars (Shen 1999, pp. 1–54), says that “worshipping the sun outside the southern gate, worshipping the moon and the four waterways outside the northern gate, and worshipping the mountains and hills outside the western gate” 禮日于南門外，禮月與四瀆於北門外，禮山川丘陵於西門外 (Zheng and Jia 2021, pp. 844–45). Another text titled *Erya* 爾雅 (*Correct Words*), dated latest to the third century BCE (Cobin 1997, pp. 99–104), states that “the Yangzi River, the Yellow River, the Huai River and the Ji River are the four waterways with their own origins and flowing into the seas” 江、河、淮、濟為四瀆。四瀆者，發源注海者也 (Guo and Xing 2000, p. 409). The “Wangzhi” 王制 (*Royal Regulations*) chapter in the *Liji*<sup>1</sup> also records that “the son of heaven offers sacrifices to mountains and waters, and sees the five sacred peaks as dukes and the four waterways as regional rulers. The regional rulers make sacrifices to mountains and waters within their own kingdoms” 天子祭天下名山大川，五嶽視三公，四瀆視諸侯。諸侯祭名山大川之在其地者 (Zheng and Kong 2000, pp. 677–80). Although the completion date of this chapter remains dubious, it is almost certain that the concept of the four waterways had already existed within the Confucian discourse during the Warring States Period (ca. 481–221 BCE). Yet, since not a single state during the pre-Qin period had managed to govern all the four waterways (and the five sacred peaks), this geographical concept was more likely to be a version—or a vision—of an early Confucian construct<sup>2</sup>.

There is ample evidence suggesting that only the Chu state 楚國 during the pre-Qin period established its four sacred rivers: the Yangzi River, the Han River 漢水, the Ju River 沮水, and the Zhang River 漳水. According to the *Zuozhuan*, when King Zhao of Chu 楚昭王 (r. 515–489 BCE) fell ill, he was reluctant to offer sacrifices to the spirit of the Yellow River 黃河; instead, he claimed that “the Yangzi River, the Han River, the Ju River, and the Zhang River are Chu’s renowned waters” 江、漢、沮、漳，楚之望也 (Yang 1981, p. 1636). Recent discoveries at Xincai 新蔡 in Henan province also corroborate the existence of these spirits in four sacred rivers. One of the bamboo manuscripts, for instance, specifically states that “from the Yangzi River, Han River, the Ju River, the Zhang River and extended to the Huai River, [we] offered sacrifices to Chu ancestors Laotong and Zhu Rong” 及江、漢、沮、漳，延至於淮，是日就禱楚先老童、祝[融] (Chen et al. 2009, pp. 403, 433).

River worship during the Qin dynasty paid less attention to the Guandong 關東 region (literally means “east of the Hangu Pass” 函谷關) and still centered around a few main streams located in the Guanzhong 關中 basin, northwestern China. According to the *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Grand Historian*), the Qin generally offered sacrifices to two major parts of the Yangzi River: the Han River (also known as Mian River 沔水) and the headwaters in Sichuan 四川 region. Interestingly, the Han River actually preceded the Yangzi River, and both were toured by the First Emperor of Qin 秦始皇 (r. 247–210 BCE) after Qin’s wars of unification. In the early Western Han dynasty 西漢 (206 BCE–8 CE), the imperial court also greatly treasured the Han River. For instance, the Emperor Wen of Han 漢文帝 (r. 202–157 BCE) once “bestowed two jade wares” to the Yellow River and Han River, while the Yangzi River was not mentioned (Sima 1959, p. 1381; Ban 1962, p. 1212)<sup>3</sup>.

The formation of the concept of five sacred peaks 五岳 and four waterways as a political agenda can be dated to as early as the Western Han period. Emperor Wudi of Han 漢武帝 (r. 141–87 BCE) traveled by the Yangzi River several times and visited all the five sacred peaks and four waterways (Sima 1959, p. 1403; Ban 1962, p. 1247). During the reign of Emperor Xuandi 漢宣帝 (r. 74–49 BCE), the imperial court officially established a regular state ritual system for the five sacred peaks and four waterways and “offer seasonal sacrifices to major rivers and seas and pray for a good harvest”. To be specific, this ritual was carried out by offering sacrifices to the Yellow River at Linjin 臨晉, the Yangzi River at Jiangdu 江都 (present-day Yangzhou, Jiangsu), the Huai River 淮河 at Pingshi 平氏, the Ji River 濟水 at Linyi 臨邑. The emperor would send off officials to temples dedicated to these rivers three times a year on average, five times for higher-ranked Mount Tai 泰山 and the Yellow River 黃河, and four times for the Yangzi River (Ban 1962, p. 1249). Since the Ji River and the Han River remained to be worshipped three times a year, it seems evident that the Yangzi River’s religious–political status was significantly promoted (Yang 2021).

Further specifications were added to this state ritual system by later imperial courts based on early Confucian theories. Spirits of the four waterways, along with the five sacred peaks, four strongholds, and four seas, were listed as earthly deities ranked only second to heavenly gods. Precisely because the five sacred peaks and four waterways represented the imperium, dismantling their associated temples was equally symbolic of destroying the imperial court’s ancestral temple and land. When the Jurchen tribes marched south, and Emperor Huizong 宋徽宗 (r. 1101–1125) and Emperor Qinzong 宋欽宗 (r. 1126–1127) were abducted, one major operation was simply to “burn down temples of former emperors and the five sacred peaks, four waterways, and other major mountains and rivers.” Shortly after reestablishing the Southern Song 南宋, the imperial court hurriedly issued an edict to rebuild all the damaged temples in the fourth year of Jianyan 建炎 (1130) (Xu 2014, p. 989).

It should be noted that the imperial court had exclusive authority over sacrifices to mountains and waters. Ordinary people and even noble families did not enjoy such privilege and would be seriously punished for violating the rule. According to a record during the Yuan dynasty 元朝 (1271–1368), “All the sacred peaks, strongholds, and famous mountains are timely offered sacrifices by the nation. Ordinary folks are forbidden to overstep the ritual to worship them. All the five sacred peaks, four waterways, and five strongholds are timely offered regular sacrifices by the nation. All princes, princesses, and princess consorts are forbidden to send persons to burn incense and offer sacrifices” 諸岳鎮名山，國家之所秩祀，小民輒僭禮犯義，以祈禱褻瀆者，禁之。諸五岳、四瀆、五鎮，國家秩祀有常，諸王、公主、駙馬輒遣人降香致祭者，禁之 (Song 1977, p. 2636). On the one hand, those mountain and water spirits that were included in the state ritual codes must be offered sacrifices timely and properly, and “if one neglects to worship mountain and water spirits, one’s land would be confiscated by the emperor” 山川神祇，有不舉者不敬，不敬者君削以地 (Zheng and Kong 2000, p. 638). On the other hand, offering sacrifices to mountain and water spirits without the emperor’s permission was a serious violation of imperial power and would be sternly punished. For example, according to the *Suishu* 隋書 (*Sui History*), ordinary people who dared to damage statues of the mountain and water spirits would be sentenced to death (Wei and Linghu 1973, p. 715). In 1297, Emperor

Chengzong of Yuan 元成宗 (r. 1294–1307) sternly punished the princes who privately made sacrifices to the five sacred peaks and four waterways (Song 1977, p. 411).

Sacrifices to the water spirits of the Yangzi River were not limited to the four waterways; rather, the sacrifices were quite hierarchical with the spirit of the Yangzi River on top, spirits of tributaries and related lakes of the Yangzi River that had been incorporated into codes of state ritual in the middle, and spirits that had not been part of any state ritual system but worshipped by common people at the bottom. The imperial court, of course, valued only the first two. The so-called “codes of state ritual” were at large a catalog of ritual ceremonies. The *Liji* specifically states that this catalog only contains two kinds of deities: natural spirits and personal spirits. The former includes “the sun, moon, and stars which people look upon” and “wooded mountains, valleys, and hills where people profit from”. The latter includes five categories: “[sacrifice offered] to those who had implemented laws to the people, to those who had devoted their lives to duties, to those who had contributed to the state with industry, to those who had successfully resolved calamities, and to those who had repelled demons” (Zheng and Kong 2000, pp. 2235–39). Many personal spirits included in the ritual codes were related to water, such as Gun and Yu 禹, who regulated rivers and watercourses, Xuan Ming 玄冥, who was a water official, and many others who resolved water-related disasters.

These codes of state ritual were not merely ceremonious; they often involved decision-making on establishing temples, costs of rituals, selection of priests, and regulating etiquette. This also explains why “excessive sacrifices” (*yinsi* 淫祀) and “profane rituals” (*duli* 黷禮) were always under attack by the imperial court. Similarly, granting noble tiles and plaques to temples of water spirits was essentially to incorporate these spirits into codes of state ritual and become “orthodox rituals” (*zhengsi* 正祀) approved by the imperial court; in short, it was an act of canonization<sup>4</sup>. Canonized spirits were naturally under protection and uncanonized ones were “not to be worshipped,” as seen in the edicts issued in the first year of Yanping 延平 (106 CE) during the Eastern Han 東漢 and the first year of Qinglong 青龍 (233 CE), during the Cao Wei 曹魏 period (Li 1972, p. 987; Fan 1965, p. 196; Fang 1974, p. 600).

### 3. The Water Spirits of the Yangzi River and the Succession of Imperial Powers

Official histories provide us with a general picture of the historical development, locations, and ceremonial details of sacrifices made to the water spirits of the Yangzi River (Du 1984; D. Ma 2011; Qin 2020; Xu 2014). According to our statistics based on these histories, from the Qin to Qing, there are more than three hundred records of imperial sacrifices to the Yangzi River. In general development, the first trend is that the frequency of sacrifices dedicated to the Yangzi River and the number of historical records increase over time. The second trend shows that those sacrifices tend to be very periodic during times of political stability and irregularly war-orientated during times of turmoil and division. The earliest was attributed to the First Emperor of Qin, and the latest date to the first year of the Xuantong 宣統 (1908) (Zhao et al. 1977, p. 969). In a similar manner to worshipping Confucius temples, imperial mausoleums, and the five sacred peaks and four waterways, the last emperor of China still kept the practice of sending off officials to offer sacrifices to the spirit of the Yangzi River in order to announce the legitimacy of his throne. In other words, the tradition of offering sacrifices to the Yangzi River has lasted as long as the history of imperial China.

One rudimentary concept of such tradition proposed in the *Liji* is that “one ought not to reestablish any sacrifice which has been officially repealed or to repeal any which has been so established” 凡祭，有其廢之，莫敢舉也；有其舉之，莫敢廢也 (Zheng and Kong 2000, p. 273). Once a code of state ritual was established, the later imperial courts would not dare to challenge it; otherwise, it would be deemed as an act of sacrilege. Therefore, one of the major cultural tasks of all imperial regimes was to establish laws and regulations; chief among them was to offer sacrifices to previous spirits.



For example, after the establishment of the Han regime by Emperor Gaozu 漢高祖 (r. 202–195 BCE), he immediately started to prepare continuing state rituals of the previous regime and issued an edict stating that “as for sacrifices to the Lord on High or for the worship of the mountains, rivers, or other spirits, let the ceremonies be performed in due season as they were in the past” 上帝之祭及山川諸神當祠者，各以其時禮祠之如故 (Sima 1959, p. 1378), and then “summoned all of the former ritual officials of the Qin dynasty and restored the posts of master of invocations and grand supervisor, ordering these officials to carry out the rites and ceremonies as they had in the past” 悉召故秦祀官，復置太祝、太宰，如其故儀禮 (Fang 1974, p. 164). Such act of restoring the “past” had been continuously practiced across all imperial dynasties, and whenever there was a change of dynasty, enthronement, confer of princes, and victory of war, commissioners were sent to offer sacrifices to the four waterways.

Wars and rebellions were major factors contributing to temple destructions. Whenever a national turmoil ended, the imperial court would immediately initiate sacrificial rituals to mountains and waters. When the Eastern Jin 東晉 (317–420) reestablished its regime in the Jiangnan region, Emperor Mingdi 晉明帝 (r. 322–325) quickly announced a series of sacrificial rituals to mountains and waters, including the five sacred peaks, four waterways, and others “on the record of codes of state ritual” in the third year of Taining 太寧 (325) (Fang 1974, p. 164). This action was simply to symbolize the fact that Eastern Jin inherited the heaven’s mandate of the Western Jin to rule. Similar practices were also seen in the Song dynasty. In the ninth year of Kaibao 開寶 (976), Emperor Taizu 宋太祖 (r. 960–976) ordered the repair of the previous temples dedicated to the five sacred peaks and four waterways (Toqto’a 1977, p. 48). Eight years later, due to a breach of the Yellow River in Hua County 滑縣, the imperial court initiated a sacrifice to the river in Baima ford 白馬津 and thus formed a ritualistic custom. Then, the secretary Li Zhi 李至 submitted a memorial to the throne:

On the days of greeting the seasonal qi in the five suburbs, sacrifices were offered to all the sacred peaks, strongholds, seas, and waterways. Since the chaos of war, those who were outside the central territories started to ignore offering sacrifices. After the country was united, although they were ordered to offer sacrifices, they did not take it as a regular practice. I hope the old ritual to be followed, and officials of relevant prefectures to act as ritualists according to their ranks on the days of greeting the seasonal qi. 按五郊迎氣之日，皆祭逐方嶽鎮海瀆。自兵亂後，有不在封域者，遂闕其祭。國家克復四方，間雖奉詔特祭，未著常祀。望遵舊禮，就迎氣日各祭於所隸之州，長吏以次為獻官 (Toqto’a 1977, p. 2485).

With such principle of “following the old ritual tradition,” the Northern Song thus resumed the ritual of offering sacrifices to the sacred peaks, strongholds, seas, and waterways in the five quarters of east, south, west, north, and center on the days of greeting seasonal qi (the corresponding days of the beginning of spring, summer, autumn, winter, and the earth god (eighteen days before the beginning of autumn), which was framed with the five-phase cosmology.

The Jiangdu Temple, the temple of the primary water spirit of the Yangzi River, was built in Chengdu, which had been recognized by all imperial courts. Although it was located to the west of the capitals of some dynasties (such as Kaifeng 開封) in the Northern Song Dynasty and Lin’an (Hangzhou 杭州) in the Southern Song Dynasty, it was still largely considered a southern deity based on the five-phase cosmology, which partially explains why most sacrifices to water spirits were carried out at the beginning of summer.

In fact, all the capitals of the past dynasties had relentlessly tried to rebuild altars of mountains and waters and insisted on offering sacrifices to the spirit of the Yangzi River at the beginning of summer when greeting the seasonal qi. This was entirely caused by the concept of “following the old ritual tradition” and “revering ancient canonized codes” (Yang 2020). The worship and ceaseless succession of sacrifices to water spirits of the Yangzi River is first and foremost a symbol of the continuity of the Chinese ritual system and political legitimacy. For example, it is recorded in the *Jinshu* 晉書 (*Jin History*) that during

the reign of Emperor Mudi 穆帝 (r. 343–361) of Eastern Jin, after having established its political power in the south of the Yangzi River for more than half a century, the ritual officials were still emphasizing the importance of "revering previous ritual codes, [we] will wait for the imperial carriage to return to the north to examine ancient regulations and greatly correct the institutions" 崇明前典，俟皇北旋，稽古憲章，大厘制度 (Fang 1974, p. 598).

#### 4. Conferring Titles to Water Spirits and the Control of Divine Power

The water spirits of the Yangzi River basin were commonly granted titles of "king" or "marquis" by the states and local governments in the past dynasties (at least 135 cases). These cases, in fact, were not "relatively random", as some scholars say (Zhu 2007, pp. 71–124; Zhu 2022), but had very specific political motives behind them and were one of the key measures for the imperial court to control the divine power.

In the first month of the sixth year of Tianbao 天寶 (747), Emperor Xuanzong of Tang 唐玄宗 (r. 712–756) conferred titles to the spirits of the four waterways:

Since the five sacred peaks were already conferred titles of king, the four waterways should be elevated to dukes. The Yellow River would be Duke of Numinous Source, the Ji River Duke of Pure Source, the Yangzi River Duke of Vast Source, and the Huai River Duke of Long Source. 五岳既已封王，四瀆當升公位，封河瀆靈源公，濟瀆清源公，江瀆廣源公，淮瀆為長源公 (Liu 1975, p. 221).

The emperor then ordered the local officials to offer sacrifices to these water spirits. This obviously exceeded the rank of "the four waterways are seen as maquis" in the *Liji*, and for the first time, the Yangzi River was elevated from the marquis class to the duke class (Qin 2020, p. 2031). Successive emperors conferred titles on water spirits of the Yangzi basin to demonstrate they received divine approval and protection, similar to the Wu 吳 regime of the Five Dynasties 五代 in the Jiangnan area, the Ma 馬 regime of the Five Dynasties in the Dongting Lake 洞庭湖 area, and Emperor Chengzu of Ming 明成祖.

The divine titles of water spirits had political, economic, military, and other practical functions. Such efforts were most commonly observed during the Song era, especially in the late Northern Song (23 times in the reign of Emperor Huizong) and the early Southern Song (25 times in the reign of Emperor Gaozong 高宗 and 14 in the reign of Emperor Xiaozong 孝宗). During the Song era (especially the Southern Song), since the fiscal revenue depended on Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Fujian, and particularly Sichuan, the titles were conferred quite frequently on the spirits of the Min River 岷江, Tuo River 沱江, and Jialing River 嘉陵江 in the upper reaches of the Yangzi River. The Jialing River was titled the "Marquis of Benevolent Deliverance" (Shanjihou 善濟侯) because it was "a waterway for military transportation" and the economic lifeline and strategic channel of the Southern Song for fighting the Jin regime in the north (Li 2013). The Yanquan Guyong 鹽泉沽湧 (literally means the fountain of salt spring) in the Daning river of the Three Gorges 三峽大寧河 upstream was granted the "King" title by Emperor Zhenzong 真宗 and Gaozong for providing resources for local people and governments. Another case in point is the Hanzhong 漢中 area; as the front line against the Jin 金 army in the Southern Song, the local water spirits were also granted many titles. The assistance of the water spirits of the Yangzi River was considered as very vital in politics, and some regimes conferred titles to water spirits in return after the establishment of their states.

Madang 馬當 (present-day Pengze 彭澤 of Jiangxi Province), Caishi 采石 (present-day Maanshan 馬鞍山 of Anhui Province), and Zhenjiang 鎮江 (or Jinshan 金山), located in the middle and lower reaches of the Yangzi, were referred to as three guardians of waters 水府三官 due to their strategic location and rich in picturesque peaks and rocks. Naturally, there were many temples built in these three places, which attracted many pilgrims (Wang and Qian 2014, pp. 5–11). However, as fortresses separated the south and the north, their military significance was much more crucial. During the Five Dynasties period, Yang Fu 楊溥 (900–938), the emperor of the Southern Wu (the capital was founded in Jiangdu 江都, now Yangzhou 揚州), greatly valued these three guardians of waters.

In the first month of the second year of Qianzhen (928), he granted a title to Madang as “Shangshuifu ningjiang wang” 上水府寧江王 (The Upper Water King of Pacifying the Yangzi River), Caishi as “Zhongshuifu dingjiang wang” 中水府定江王 (The Middle Water King of Fortifying the Yangzi River), and Jinshan as “Xiashuifu zhenjiang wang” 下水府鎮江王 (The Lower Water King of Guarding the Yangzi River) (Ouyang 1974, p. 758). For the first time, the three water spirits of Madang, Caishi, and Jinshan, along with other water spirits in Chengdu, were promoted as “Kings 王”. During Emperor Zhenzong’s 真宗 reign in the Northern Song, imperial patronage remained to be a continuous effort and the three water spirits received longer titles on the seventeenth day of the ninth month in the second year of Dazhongxiangfu (1009 AD): [the imperial court] granted the title of “Shangshuifu fushan anjiang wang” 上水府福善安江王 (The Upper Water King of Blessing, Benevolence, and Pacifying the Yangzi River) to Madang in Jiangzhou, “Zhongshuifu shunsheng pingjiang wang” 中水府順聖平江王 (The Middle Water King of Submission, Sacredness, and Fortifying the Yangzi River) to Caishi in Taiping, and “Xiashuifu zhaoxin taikang wang” 下水府昭信泰江王 (Lower Water King of Guarding the Yangzi River) to Jinshan in Runzhou (Toqto’a 1977, p. 2486). Because Emperor Zhenzhong had just held an imperial ritual by offering sacrifices to Mount Tai, granting titles to the three water spirits was just another religious act to prove the legitimacy of the throne and his capacity for dealing with domestic and foreign affairs (Tang 1995, pp. 9–13; Tang 2003, pp. 146–64). During the Southern Song, the Yangzi River in the south reach became particularly important to defend against the Jurchen troops. In the thirty-first year of Shaoxing (1161), Many counties in the lower reaches of the Yangzi River, such as Zhenjiang, Jiankang, and Taiping counties, were already frontlines. The Jurchen troops intended to cross the river from Dantu 丹徒 (present-day Zhenjiang in Jiangsu province) but eventually failed due to a fierce gale on the water. The scholar-officials of the Southern Song believed that they were protected by the water spirits’ “yinyou” 陰佑, which literally means “secrete protection”, so they immediately proposed to promote the ranks of Jinshan and Caishi and offer sacrifices. Some even suggested the title of “Di” 帝 (emperor). They finally reached a consensus by establishing a new temple in Jiankang (present-day Nanjing) with an imperial plaque titled “Deyou” 德佑 (Virtuous Protection), lengthening the titles of water spirits even further as “Zhaoling fuying weilie guang yuan wang” 昭靈孚應威烈廣源王 (Numinous, Prestigious and Formidable King of Numerous Streams), and granting the title of “Di” after recapturing the North. This is just one of many examples to show how the Southern Song expressed gratitude to the water spirits of the Yangzi River due to the military significance of the three waters (Li 2013, p. 3810). The Southern Song was grateful to the Yangzi River for its natural role of geographical location in resisting the southward march of Jin troops, while Zhu Yuanzhang 朱元璋, Emperor Taizu of Ming, was grateful to the rivers, lakes, ports, and streams of the middle and lower reaches of the Yangzi River for their help in subduing other rebel armies at the end of the Yuan Dynasty. The reason why the cult of the water spirit Xiao Gong 蕭公 in the Gan River 贛江 basin was able to grow was precisely because the Xiao clan used their incense money from Xiao Gong Temple to support the war against the Miao 苗 rebellion. In short, there seems to be a dynamic discourse centered around the concept of rewarding the water spirits of major rivers with noble titles for their military, economic, and spiritual assistance.

The imperial court’s conferral of titles on water spirits popular among common people was an expression of accommodating public opinions and appeased local societies. In the eyes of ordinary Chinese, water spirits could always suppress disturbance, defeat the evil, bless water travel, and bring good rains to agriculture. Keith Stevens studies a variety of water deities largely worshipped by popular cultures and local people in the Yangzi basin, including Dragon Kings 龍王, the Frog Spirit 水怪蛤蟆精, the Crab Spirit 水怪螃蟹精, the spirit of the lake 湖精, the Prince of the Golden Dragon 金龍大王, the Great Yu 大禹, Qu Yuan 屈原, Lu Ban 魯班 (patron deity of boat builders), Three Guardians of the Waters 水府三官, Yang Laoda 楊老大 (the spirit of the Yangzi), Xiang Yu 項羽 and many other deities (Stevens 2007). However, most of these were usually regarded as minor folk

religion water deities whose cults have spread across southern China; in other words, they were not incorporated into codes of state ritual and thus were not officially recognized by the imperial court. For example, Yang Si 楊泗, or Yang Laoda 楊老大, had no shrines dedicated to him. Similarly, there has been no textual evidence showing that Yang Si had been granted imperial titles, nor had his temples received any imperial plaque. In short, he was just a folk deity and only became popular during the Ming and Qing periods. Yet, it is undeniable that the imperial would have enlisted them into codes of state ritual when peasants, boatmen, fishermen, and whoever depends on harvests and the safety of waters regarded them as a protective deity of water transport, a patron of harvest, or a god of prosperity. Another example is the Dragon King cult. In contrast, there were many temples dedicated to Dragon Kings across China, and only a selected few received imperial plaques. One Dragon King temple located along the Gan River 贛江 and Poyang Lake 鄱陽湖 in the Jiangxi province, for instance, was commonly referred to as a place to worship the “Little Dragon” (Xiaolong 小龍). It was first granted the title as “Shunji hou” 順濟侯 (Marquis of Success and Facilitation). Later in the tenth month of the third year of Chongning during Emperor Huizong’s reign (1104), it received the title as “Yingling shunji hou” 英靈順濟侯 (Brilliant and Numinous Marquis of Success and Facilitation). In the next year (1105), it was promoted to be “Lingshun zhaoying anji wang” 靈順昭應安濟王 (Numinous and Successful King of Peace and Facilitation). The “Little Dragon” eventually became a very popular deity in the Poyang basin during the Song and Yuan dynasties. There was even a sub-temple of this Dragon Temple titled “Lingshun zhaoying anji huizewang miao” 靈順昭應安濟惠澤王廟 (Temple of Numinous and Successful King of Peace, Facilitation, and Kindness). It was located in Yiyang County 弋陽縣 along one of the tributaries of the southeast part of the Poyang Lake (Xin River 信江 or Shangrao River 上饒江). In the fourth year of Jianyan during the Southern Song (1130), this Xin River Dragon Temple inherited the title of “King” under imperial edict (Xu 2014, p. 1087).

The emperor’s compliance, in turn, actually enhanced the authority and credibility of the son of heaven. For example, in the second year of Huangyou 皇祐二年 (1050) during the Northern Song (Xu 2014, p. 988), local officials nationwide were asked to report to the imperial court all the spirits that were capable of blessing and had not been listed in codes of state ritual, in order to accommodate them into the codes. During the reign of Emperor Xuanzong of Ming 明宣宗, in the seventh year of Xuande 宣德七年 (1432), Chen Xuan 陳瑄 claimed that in the northwest of Gaoyou prefecture 高郵郡, there was a lake spirit and worshipping it would “travel by boat without worrying about drowning and invoke good rain whenever there is a drought” 舟行溺之患，旱熯有甘澍之。He asked the emperor to perform sacrificial rituals to the lake spirit in both spring and autumn. Emperor Xuanzong ordered Hu Ying 胡, the head of the Ministry of Rites, to check this matter: “Those spirits who benefit people should be accommodated into the sacrificial codes. If the spirit indeed presents auspicious sign as Chen Xuan reported, demanding relevant office to make timely sacrifice” 神有功德及民，應在祀典，果如瑄所言有應，其令有司以時致祭 (Taiwan Academia Sinica 1962, pp. 2120–21). That is to say, when local worship prevailed to a certain extent, the authorities would actively respond and incorporate it into codes of state ritual.

Running parallel in most cases, the bestowal of nobility and the official sacrificial system constituted the official cult of mountain and water spirits, which survived until the first years of the Ming Dynasty (Zhu 2022). Generally speaking, in traditional China, the title of the spirit of the Yangzi River became increasingly higher from “marquis” to “duke”, and then to “king”. Once there was even a proposal of using the title of “emperor”. The reason for this was to show the imperial court’s control over the divine power: on the one hand, the emperor wanted to express awe to water spirits; on the other hand, he placed water spirits among his ministers. For example, the water spirits were personified as historical figures, such as Wu Zixu 伍子胥, Qu Yuan 屈原, Xu Xun 許遜, Zhang Xun 張巡, or General Yuan 元將軍, articulating that they were inferior to the son of heaven. As Wang Gu 王古 said, during the reign of Emperor Shenzong of Song 宋神宗, the goal



was simply to “sanction and dominate spirits and establish a ritual hierarchy” 錫命馭神，恩禮有序 (Toqto'a 1977, p. 2561). Feng Ji 豐稷, also an official in Shenzong reign, wrote that if the state included a water spirit in ritual codes, it should clearly be recorded in the calendar, and officials should be sent to the temple to make sacrifices so as to show the court's “way of control the spirit” (Xu 2014, p. 994). As Koichi Matsumoto and Takashi Sue have pointed out, by granting titles to these temples, the imperial court could achieve centralized governance, which was a way to reorganize the national sacrificial system (Jiang 1997).

There seems to be an assumption that conflicts prevail between the worship of spirits and the worship of imperial power in many civilizations dominated by religion. In other words, does the divine power undermine the authority of the emperor? This contradiction was solved in the Tang Dynasty when the water spirits were granted titles. According to the *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 (*Old Tang History*), if the five sacred peaks were regarded as dukes and the four waterways as vassals, how could the emperor kneel down to someone inferior? The ministers then suggested that the sacrificial prayers to the mountain and water spirits should be signed but not bowed (“The five sacred peaks and below should be signed, but not bowed” 五岳已下，署而不拜), and the emperor naturally accepted this suggestion (Liu 1975, pp. 914–15). Later, in the first year of Kaiyuan 開元 (713), the ritual officials came up with a more thorough and ingenious method. The emperor no longer signed his name on the sacrificial prayers to the five sacred peaks and four waterways but gave a statement indicating that “the emperor cautiously sends someone to reverently offer sacrifice to certain spirit of the sacred peaks and waterways” 皇帝謹遣某乙，敬祭于某嶽瀆之神. Sending people on behalf to offer sacrifices would certainly save the dignity of the emperor (Du 1984, pp. 1282–83). In the early and middle periods of the Tang Dynasty, the imperial power expanded, and the court was keen on granting titles to mountains and waters. In the fourth year of Chuigong 垂拱 (688), Empress Wu 武后 once named Songshan 嵩山 the “King of Heaven” (Tianzhongwang 天中王) (Niu 2021, pp. 140–41). It is then not surprising that in the first year of Zhengsheng 證聖 (695), ritual officials submitted a petition to change the way the empress signed her name for offering sacrifices to mountain and water spirits. By the time of Emperor Xuanzong, “since the five sacred peaks had been entitled kings, the four waterways should be promoted to dukes” 五嶽既已封王，四瀆當升公. Similar to Empress Wu, Xuanzong granted titles to the Yangzi River in the sixth year of Tianbao (747) without compromising his imperial authority.

### 5. Sacrifices to Water Spirits and the Unification of Nation

According to the saying of Confucian classics, “The son of Heaven needs to make sure his sacrificial ritual can reach all parts of his empire” 天子有方望之事，無所不通 (Zheng and Jia 2021, p. 446). However, not all dynasties in Chinese history were able to bring all major mountains and waters into their territory. What happens if an imperial court cannot achieve this? The solution was to adopt—and perhaps invent—flexible sacrificial methods for sacred mountains and waters. For example, in the third year of Taichang 泰常 of the Northern Wei (418), Emperor Mingyuan 明元帝 built a Temple of Five Sacred Peaks and Four Waterways (Wuyue Sidu miao 五岳四瀆廟) on the north bank of the Sanggan River 桑乾河 (Wei 1974, p. 2737). At that time, China was divided, and the Yangzi basin in the south was the territory of Eastern Jin, not under the jurisdiction of the Northern Wei. The Northern Wei court established this all-inclusive temple adopting the method of “worship in distance” (*wang zhi* 望秩); that is, worshiping sacred mountains and waters in distance. The Tuoba 拓跋 regime's approach was sending officials to sacrifice within the jurisdiction of the state in the tenth month of each year and making worship remotely for the water spirits of the Yangzi River basin in the south.

If the temple in the Sanggan River had some ritual characteristics of capital sacrifice, then the “remote worship” of the Yangzi River by the Jin and Yuan regimes before the unification of the south was more clearly “temporary” approach. The *Jinshi* 金史 (Jin History) records that in the fourth year of Dading 大定 (1164), Emperor Shizong 金世宗

issued a decree to offer sacrifices to sacred peaks, strongholds, seas, and waterways on the days of greeting the seasonal *qi* in the five suburbs. Since the Yangzi River was not within the territory of the Jin Dynasty, the South Sea and South Waterway (i.e., Yangzi River) were offered sacrifice in Laizhou 萊州 (present-day Laizhou, Shandong) on the day of the beginning of summer (Toqto'a 1975, p. 810; Song 1977, p. 1902). It is possible that a Jiangdu Temple was built in Laizhou, which was more than 2000 km from the actual Jiangdu Temple in Chengdu. This was obviously a "remote sacrifice". In the early Yuan Dynasty, there was also a modified sacrificial method. In the summer of the third year of Zhiyuan 至元 (1266), Kublai Khan 忽必烈 "set the rule of worshipping mountain and water spirits" 定歲祀嶽鎮海瀆之制 and stimulated "to offer sacrifices to the South Sea and Great River (i.e., Yangzi River) remotely in Laizhou boundary on the day of the beginning of summer" 立夏日遙祭南海、大江於萊州界. Of course, this was only a temporary method, and with the unification of the Yuan Dynasty, "remote sacrifice were terminated as the south was already seized" 既有江南，乃罷遙祭 (Song 1977, p. 1902).

In the fifth year of Xiande 顯德 (958) in the Late Zhou Dynasty 後周, the sacrificial ritual to the Yangzi River was held in Yangzhou 揚州. At the beginning of the Northern Song, this ritual was followed, but it was temporary. Once the Sichuan basin was included in the territory, in the sixth year of Qiande 乾德 (968), the sacrificial ritual to the Yangzi River was resumed in Chengdu (D. Ma 2011, p. 2556). After Emperor Taizu of Song took over Hunan, he immediately sent Li Fang 李昉 to offer sacrifices to Mount Heng 衡山, the Southern Sacred Peak. After the pacification of Guangnan 廣南, Li Jifang 李繼芳 was immediately sent to offer sacrifice to the South Sea and remove the titles of mountain and water spirits bestowed by the previous regime. The emperor issued an edict:

Order Li Fang, Lu Duoxun, Wang You, and Hu Meng to write stele inscriptions for temples of sacred peaks and waterways and emperors of previous dynasties, and send the editorial assistant of Hanlin Academy Sun Chongwang and others to the temples to engrave them on stones respectively. 命李昉、盧多遜、王祐、扈蒙等分撰嶽、瀆祠及歷代帝王碑，遣翰林待詔孫崇望等分詣廟，書于石。 (Toqto'a 1977, p. 2485).

The action of sending an official to the Jiangdu Temple to establish an engraved stele was a symbol of control over the Yangzi River basin. In the early Ming Dynasty, when the Sichuan basin was not included in the territory yet, Xiazhou 峽州 (present-day Yichang, Hubei province) was used as a temporary sacrifice site for the Yangzi River in a similar manner. In short, the exercise of the right of sacrifice was synchronized with the military advance and the expansion of territory.

Historically, some small regimes often ignored the rules of ritual and arbitrarily added titles to mountain and river spirits. The Qing scholar Qin Huitian criticized this matter severely: "A country that is content with its partial territory and unable to make efforts for prosperity, merely granting titles to spirits to expect blessing, this is the so-called listening to the mandate of the gods. How could such a country be lasting?" 國家偏安，不克振作，徒以加封神號為望佑之舉，所謂聽命於神也，其可久乎 (Qin 2020, pp. 2058–59). Although Qin's comment is reasonable, what Qin could not fathom was that the worship and bestowment by those imperial courts implied other profound meanings. On the one hand, as far as the practical function was concerned, the purpose was to pray to the spirits of distant places for their own use rather than the enemy. On the other hand, the legitimacy of the historical political system and geographical space of the dynasty was demonstrated through establishing the relationship with distant deities through remote offering and conferring and through sacrificing to the water spirits of the Yangzi River. In a sense, the latter is more important. The *Liji* states: "The ruler who owns the world offers sacrifices to hundreds of spirits, while the regional rulers offer sacrifices to the spirits within their lands and never to those outside their lands" 有天下者祭百神，諸侯在其地則祭之，亡其地則不祭. Kong Yingda's 孔穎達 commentary further explained, "If there are no such mountains and waters in its territory, the spirits cannot be sacrificed to" 其境內地無此山川之等，則不得祭也 (Zheng and Kong 2000, pp. 2217–19). The *Gongyang zhuan* 公羊傳 (*Gongyang's Commentary to the Spring and Autumn Annals*) has a similar saying. The son of heaven could

offer sacrifices to the great mountains and waters in all the quarters, while regional rulers could offer sacrifices only to the mountains and waters within their territories (Zheng and Kong 2000, p. 446). In reality, however, small or new courts' worship of distant water spirits meant that in the future, they would be a unified, rather than divided, regime.

## 6. Conclusions

From the above discussions of the sacrifices to the water spirits of the Yangzi River basin in traditional China, we can draw several conclusions.

First, Chinese imperial courts offered sacrifices to the water spirits of the Yangzi River, which not only referred to the primary spirit enshrined in the Jiangdu Temple in Chengdu but also included various water spirits in the tributaries and lakes along this great river. In the rich historical documents in China, there are more than 300 records of sacrificial rituals about the water spirits of the Yangzi River. From these records, we can see that the inclusion in the "codes of state ritual" is the main basis for offering official sacrifice to those water spirits in the past dynasties.

Second, the worship of the water spirits of the Yangzi River was an expression of the legitimacy of imperial power. The worship of the main Jiangdu Temple and other temples of the Yangzi River basin established in the previous dynasties shows that the current court was directly connected to the previous regimes, which was the inheritance of the authority of worshipping water spirits, representing the orthodox tradition of the Confucian ritual classics.

Third, since the majority of capitals in imperial China were located in the north with fewer rivers, worshipping the water spirits of the Yangzi River would imply a blessing from the south. In particular, when holding the grand ceremony of establishing a new regime, the sacrifice to the Yangzi River was a must.

Fourth, granting noble titles and temple plaques to southern water spirits of the Yangzi River basin would further demonstrate the competency of the imperial court in controlling the divine power. In the ceremony of offering sacrifices to the water spirits, who had been given titles such as "marquis", "duke", and "king", the emperor first only signed his name and did not come on-site to worship, and later only stated, "the emperor sent somebody to worship certain mountain and water spirits reverently." Through these designs, the officials saved the emperor from the embarrassment of bowing to the water spirits, who were presumably ranked lower than him.

Fifth, according to the classical Confucian ritual design, the son of heaven could offer sacrifices to all mountains and rivers in the world, while regional rulers could only offer sacrifices to the mountains and rivers within their fiefs. However, all later small or new imperial courts offered distance sacrifices to the spirits of the Yangzi River outside of their territories in order to demonstrate that they could communicate with and manage those spirits, therefore further showing they had political and military control of southern China as geographically unified, rather than divided, regimes.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to the evidence provided by Wang E 王鐸 (Wang 2007), the completion of this chapter dates to the middle of the Warring States period, though speculations on this matter also date to the time of Confucius, late Warring States period, Qin-Han transition period, and the reign of Emperor Wendi of Han 漢文帝 (180–157 BCE).

<sup>2</sup> Gu (1963) claimed that the concept of "four sacred peaks" already existed during the pre-Qin period and the term "five sacred peaks" was invented by Han Confucian scholars. Tian (2011) believed that this concept appeared during the middle and late Warring States period. Niu (2021), however, dated it to the Western Han, and only during the Eastern Han such concept became consolidated.

- <sup>3</sup> For the formation of the ritual system of the five sacred peaks and four waterways, see [Jia \(2021\)](#), which provides a quite comprehensive list of literature on this state ritual system.
- <sup>4</sup> Several scholars have made significant contribution to this field of research, including Koichi Matsumono 松本浩一, Noriyuku Kanai 金井德幸, Takahashi Sue 須江隆, Kojima Tsuyoshi 小島毅, Hamashima Atsutoshi 濱島墩俊, Jiang Zhushan 蔣竹山, and Valerie Hansen. See [Jiang \(1997\)](#), and [Hansen \(2016\)](#).

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