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An Exploration of the Evolution of the Loong Mother Belief System in Lingnan: Formation and Transformation

Yan He and Rongqiao Wu *

Faculty of European Languages and Cultures, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou 510420, China; 202010029@gdufs.edu.cn

* Correspondence: 202210018@gdufs.edu.cn

Abstract: The rise of a patriarchal society has led to a prevalent perception of male superiority over women, which is reflected in the gender-based disparities within the deity system of China. However, in contrast to the situation in the Central Plains, the Lingnan region assigns a significant social status to women, as evidenced by the active worship of female deities. Among them, the Loong Mother stands out as a highly revered goddess in Lingnan's mythology. This paper investigates the evolution of the Loong Mother's deification from a mortal woman, and explores the varying religious principles of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, as well as their influence on the veneration of female deities in Lingnan. Additionally, this paper analyzes the Loong Mother's portrayal within civil society. Despite undergoing continuous transformation to cater to diverse religious traditions and societal needs, the goddess's actions and functions ultimately reflect her creation and shaping by the community.

Keywords: Loong Mother; social status of women; female worship; religious influence; community shaping of goddess



Citation: He, Yan, and Rongqiao Wu. 2023. An Exploration of the Evolution of the Loong Mother Belief System in Lingnan: Formation and Transformation. *Religions* 14: 1103. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14091103>

Academic Editors: Jeffrey S. Lidke and Jeffrey Clark Ruff

Received: 16 March 2023

Revised: 24 April 2023

Accepted: 23 August 2023

Published: 25 August 2023



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1. Introduction

Chinese women were highly esteemed in the past and enjoyed a prestigious standing. There existed a matriarchal society that gave rise to numerous myths about women. However, as time passed, a patriarchal society emerged, and male domination gradually supplanted the previous social order. This led to the establishment of male superiority over women, becoming a dominant feature of gender relations in Chinese society (Song 2015, p. 80). This imbalance was reflected in the hierarchy of the deity system, with female deities being relegated to a subordinate position. In comparison to the Zhongyuan region¹ (Central Plains), women in the Lingnan region² (Southern region of China) hold a prominent position in both social and familial contexts. This can be attributed to the climatic conditions of the Lingnan region, which features a year-round warm climate and an abundance of dangerous animals and poisonous snakes. It is widely believed that women are more adaptable to the Southern climate than men,³ resulting in their increased participation in business and production activities outside of the home, while men assume the primary responsibility of childcare and household duties.⁴ This phenomenon has given rise to a social construct where women assume roles outside the home and men assume roles inside the home, which contrasts with the societal norms of the Zhongyuan region.

During the early period of Lingnan society, women who were regarded as ritual practitioners held a prominent social standing. From the 7th to the 13th century, during the Tang and Song dynasties, the Lingnan people predominantly held primitive beliefs and widely embraced the notion of ghosts and ritual practitioners. These women constituted a distinct group who diverged from conventional occupations and acted as intermediaries between the spiritual realm and human society, assuming the role of spiritual guides and directing the populace's spiritual welfare (Lin 2016, p. 11).

The belief in the Loong Mother, a revered Chinese dragon, can be traced back to the elevated social status of women and the widespread conviction in ghosts and deities within Lingnan society. This study aims to investigate the metamorphosis of the indigenous female deity, from a mortal to a goddess, and examine the possible correlation between historical changes and local cultural traditions. Our research explores the historical evolution of the Loong Mother's deification, evaluates the factors that facilitated the emergence and evolution of native goddess beliefs, and illuminates the intrinsic interplay between the development of goddess worship and the societal transformations of Lingnan.

2. The Origins of the Loong Mother: Indigenous Women and the Formation of Beliefs

The Xijiang River served as the primary passage through which the Zhongyuan dynasties initially entered Lingnan, a region where the Han and Baiyue⁵ communities coalesced and developed a distinctive belief system centered around the Loong Mother. This native deity, who represented a fusion of occult practices and nature totem⁶ worship, gained a significant following among the people of Yuecheng in Guangdong, where she was revered as the Loong Mother Deity due to her reputed role in nurturing five Loong offspring. Her widespread veneration led to the construction of numerous temples dedicated to her worship, which, in turn, cemented her position as one of the preeminent deities in the Lingnan region.

2.1. Identifying the Loong Mother: Understanding the Deity and Its Significance

The Loong Mother is documented for the first time in historical records by Ouyang Xun (欧阳询), a notable scholar of the Tang dynasty (from 618 to 907 AD). In Volume Nine of his compendium *Yi Wen Lei Ju*,⁷ Ouyang cites an earlier source, *Guangzhou Ji* (written by Gu Wei during the Jin dynasty (from 266 to 420 AD)): "Near Pu Xi Kou⁸ there is a mother raising Loong, which cracked its tail. When people see it, the territory of the land is very rich and profit is involved."⁹ The origin of the myth surrounding the Loong Mother is rooted at the confluence of the Xijiang River. This intersection is characterized by varying topographies on either side, which have contributed to the swift water flow and consequent prevalence of aquatic accidents throughout its history. The Loong, a species of aquatic creature in the Xijiang River basin, is recognized for its lack of a tail and, according to legend, emerges from the water during periods of flooding. The occurrence of flooding enhances the navigability of the Xijiang River and ensures a relatively safe passage for boats, thereby promoting increased trade and commerce, as well as signifying the region's prosperity. Therefore, the appearance of the Loong, despite its absence of a tail, is often associated with good fortune and affluence. In the latest period in the Jin Dynasty, the legend of the Loong Mother possessed a somewhat religious character and was considered to have a sacred identity. In his work entitled *Nan Yue Zhi*,¹⁰ Shen Huaiyuan of the Liu Song dynasty (420–479 AD) augmented the life story of the Loong Mother by furnishing details concerning her identity. The tale recounts that the Loong Mother was a foundling in Guangxi during the Qin dynasties and was subsequently taken in by a fisherman, Wen, from Yuecheng Town, Guangdong Province. One day, the Loong Mother discovered a large egg, which she placed in a container, from which five Loong hatched and soared. After the death of the Mother, the five Loong called on the wind and rain, and then buried her in the north bank of the Xijiang River. Later, people set up a temple to pay respects to her.

It is necessary to clarify that the relationship between the Loong Mother and the Loong is not strictly one of a biological mother to a child, but rather an ethical kinship proposed within their cultural context. The Loong's act of constructing a tomb for the Mother is indicative of their profound veneration for her. Following the Loong Mother's passing, a new burial site was erected for her through the utilization of the Loong's enigmatic power, thus transforming both the Mother and the Loong into sacred beings. Given the flooding in the Xijiang River basin and the requisite for a protective deity, the Loong Mother, re-

siding in water and commanding authority over the Loong, was subsequently deified as a water god.

2.2. The Deification of the Loong Mother: An Exploration of Its Causes

Despite her humble origins as an ordinary woman in secular life, the Loong Mother achieved the status of a deity in ancient China, prompting inquiry into the reasons behind her deification. The established practice of constructing temples to honor benefactors and those who have contributed to the betterment of society underpins the veneration of the Loong Mother. Evidently, her exemplary character during her lifetime merited the elevation of her status to that of a god following her demise. According to legend, the Loong Mother's virtuous act of raising the Loong served as the basis for her deification. Nonetheless, an examination of the underlying rationale for the local community's belief in the benefits of raising the Loong remains a pertinent issue.

Based on current studies (Nong 2000; Wang and Chen 2009), the Loong referenced in the Loong Mother legend is believed to represent a species of snake rather than a biological reality. The social context underlying the Loong Mother's role in nurturing the Loong can be attributed to the historical association between women and snakes in traditional folklore. In traditional folklore, it is commonly held that the fragrance emanating from women can readily entice snakes, which is why snake catchers often employ female attire as a bait to ensnare them. This association between snakes and women is further exemplified in the legend of the Loong Mother, who was purportedly able to raise the Loong due to her close affinity with the serpentine creature. In addition, the myths and legends of various cultures have depicted individuals capable of taming or adorning snakes.¹¹ According to Baisong Xiang (2015, pp. 146–50), characters in mythological legends who handle or decorate with snakes symbolize the political authority and legitimacy bestowed by the gods and heaven; the spiritual power connecting humans and the divine; as well as effective control over natural forces and communities. In the legend, the Loong caught fish for the Mother, but the villagers did not know about this, believing that the fish simply appeared in front of her; they thought this was abnormal at first, but then grew to accept it as normal. Gradually, she became well known as the Loong Mother in the countryside, and the people respected and served her.

In natural relationships, women have the ability to attract or capture snakes; in ethical relationships, the Mother nurtures the Loong. Within the culture of nature and spirit worship, snakes symbolize enigmatic powers, and the ritual practitioner's proficiency in controlling them demonstrates their mastery over these forces. The Wen woman significantly influenced local society through her snake-raising abilities, which endowed her with a divine character and transformed her from an ordinary human to a goddess.

2.3. Solidifying the Loong Mother Belief: Factors Contributing to Its Establishment

Unlike institutional religions, folk religions lack specialized clergy, doctrines, and scriptures, and they often rely on ritual practitioners working with other local people (such as local officials and gentry) to construct beliefs by fabricating relevant spiritual and legendary stories. In the Tang Dynasty, Yuecheng had already established a shrine to worship the Loong Mother. In the middle of the Taihe period (from 827 to 835 AD), the local governor rebuilt the temple of the Loong Mother, and, subsequently, local officials began to play an active role in the construction of the belief in the Loong Mother. Meng Guan, who was relegated to Lingnan as a staff officer, recorded the events related to the Temple of the Loong Mother. As per his account, a number of workers affiliated with the shrine exploited the indigenous community's belief in divine and supernatural beings to fabricate purportedly mystical phenomena associated with the Loong Mother. Additionally, ritual practitioners surreptitiously introduced a collection of snakes into the shrine with the intention of releasing them during the ritual observances, thereby deceiving the populace into perceiving the manifestation of the Loong Son and the spiritual presence of the Loong

Mother. Local government officials promoted the belief in the Loong Mother in order to collect money.

After the Tang Dynasty, the legend of the Loong Mother continued to develop. In folklore, the Loong Mother had two sisters before she raised the Loong, and she had a close relationship with her female neighbors Xu, Deng, Huang, and Wei. During their lifetimes, the Mother and sisters mutually aided and cherished one another. Consequently, when the Mother passed away, the villagers were deeply touched by their bond and erected a shrine in their honor. Over time, this act gave rise to a belief system centered around the “Loong Mother—Five Loong Sons—Six Ladies”. In the ninth year of the Hongwu period of the Ming Dynasty, which is 1376, the emperor Zhu Yuanzhang issued an edict conferring the title of Loong Mother and her accompanying gods, the Five Loong Sons and the Six Ladies. In this edict, he declared, “All the Five Loong Sons shall be made marquises and all the six sisters shall be made ladies”. Due to their (proposed) kinship with the Loong Mother, the Five Loong Sons and the Six Ladies became companion deities in the Loong Mother belief genealogy.

At present, it is possible to provide a preliminary exposition on the genesis of the belief in the Loong Mother. Historical accounts suggest that the Loong Mother originated as a female ritual practitioner who specialized in the manipulation of snakes within the Xijiang River valley. After her passing, local ritual practitioners capitalized on the community’s yearning for divine protection by fabricating a tale about a woman from the Wen family who possessed the ability to rear dragons. This fabrication eventually led to the creation of a deity statue in her image. The documentation of the Loong Mother’s accomplishments by the literati, as well as her endorsement by local bureaucrats who petitioned the imperial court for recognition, played a crucial role in establishing her as a prominent female deity in Lingnan society.

3. The Evolution of Loong Mother Beliefs: Assimilation of Buddhism and Taoism

After the Song Dynasty (960 AD onwards), with the southern spread of Buddhism and Taoism, the belief in the Loong Mother fused the religious cultures of Buddhism and Taoism, and the goddess was clearly characterized in both Buddhist and Taoist customs.

3.1. The Taoist Concept of Feminine Softness and Its Intersection with the Loong Mother Belief

Taoism, an indigenous religion of China, espouses the notion of “the softness of femininity” and emphasizes the balance and harmony of Yin and Yang,¹² with a particular emphasis on the veneration of women. Central to the Taoist pantheon is the worship of female deities, who occupy a prominent place in the divine hierarchy. During the Ming Dynasty, Taoism underwent a process of secularization and popularization in the Lingnan region, which entailed the incorporation of folk goddesses into the Taoist pantheon. Drawing upon biographical and folkloric narratives, Taoist texts were derived that explicated the origins, attributes, functions, and exalted status of these goddesses, thereby granting them a distinctly Taoist identity, as well as contributing to the standardization and canonization of the folk deities. This transformation enabled the folk gods to acquire a more potent religious significance as they underwent a metamorphosis from human to divine, thus reinforcing their religious import. During the Guangxu period (from 1875 to 1908 AD), the text entitled “Temple of Loong Mother of Yuecheng” featured a “Royal Decree” purportedly bestowed by the Jade Emperor¹³ upon the Loong Mother; this decree conferred upon her the additional title of “Water God” in conjunction with her preexisting designation as the “Royal Decree of Protecting the Country, Loong Mother”. This act served to legitimize the Loong Mother’s deification within Taoism, as she was subsequently appointed as the patron deity of the three rivers and five basins.

Furthermore, a multitude of legends featuring goddesses and Taoism have been transmitted through folklore. Notably, these legends often depict female and male deities engaged in conflict, with female deities frequently emerging as victorious. For instance, in the narrative of “The Loong Mother and Lai Bu Yi Fighting”, Lai Bu Yi, a Taoist priest, en-

gages in a battle with the Loong Mother for control of sacred territory through the use of spells.¹⁴ Lai Bu Yi attempts to assert ownership of the land by placing copper coins on it, which the Loong Mother counteracts by piercing the eye of the coin with a silver needle, thereby breaking his spell. The copper coin and silver needle are both critical components of Taoist magic,¹⁵ and the fact that the Loong Mother is capable of using these spells suggests a close relationship between the Loong Mother and Taoism.¹⁶ The ability of female deities to overcome male deities can be attributed to the significant position occupied by women in Lingnan's societal and economic spheres, as well as due to the Taoist principle of "feminine softness".

The dissemination of genuine scriptures and legends in society contributes to the development of a Taoist depiction of the Lingnan goddess. By elucidating the identity of the Lingnan goddess through a Taoist lens and effectively integrating its doctrines, teachings, as well as ethical and moral principles into the daily lives of individuals, it is possible to evoke religious sentiments and to foster a steadfast commitment to faith among the people, thereby promoting religious propagation and moral education.

3.2. *The Buddhist Doctrine of Equality and Its Association with the Loong Mother Belief*

In Buddhism, the notion of equality among all beings, including men and women, on the ultimate level is fundamental (Yang 2005). This belief underlies the possibility for all individuals to attain the path of liberation, regardless of gender. Consequently, the presence of goddesses holds a particular significance in Buddhist thought. During the Sui and Tang dynasties (from 581 to 907 AD), the town of Shaoguan¹⁷ emerged as a prominent center of Buddhist activity in Lingnan. This was due in part to the influence of Hui Neng¹⁸, a legendary monk and the sixth patriarch of Chan Buddhism (also known as Zen Buddhism), who inherited and developed the tradition. However, despite these developments, Buddhism did not completely proliferate in Lingnan during this period. During the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, which spanned from 1600 to 1644 AD, a notable trend emerged in which a considerable number of Yimin (individuals who steadfastly adhered to the previous dynasty)¹⁹ converted to Zen Buddhism. This transformation engendered a vibrant landscape of Buddhist monasteries that proliferated throughout the Lingnan region. The *True Sutra of the Loong Mother*, located at the Loong Mother Temple in Yuecheng, appears to be a Taoist text with straightforward teachings. According to the scripture, individuals may incorporate daily reading and belief in the Loong Mother Goddess to mitigate misfortunes and rectify adverse circumstances. The sutra concludes with a noteworthy proclamation, "May this merit and virtue be spread to all. We and all sentient beings will all become Buddhas together".²⁰ This statement underscores the belief that the Buddhist path can be cultivated through a study of the sutra. The influence of Confucianism on Buddhism, dating back to the Sui and Tang dynasties, is noteworthy. As Li (2002, pp. 6–7) has pointed out, this period saw a strong emphasis on the concept of equality, with the belief that all living beings possess a Buddha nature.²¹ This philosophy was accompanied by a focus on simple and grounded spiritual practices that emphasize reality. The Loong Mother, an indigenous female deity, was considered a valuable resource for propagating the spirit of Buddhism in Lingnan. This approach helped make Buddhism more accessible to a broader audience by incorporating local beliefs and practices into the Buddhist tradition. As a result, individuals from all social and cultural backgrounds were able to engage in the cultivation of the Buddhist path.

3.3. *The Function and Position of the Loong Mother in the Religious Framework*

Through incorporating the legend of the Loong Mother, a prominent figure in folk beliefs, into their respective religious pantheons, Buddhism and Taoism attributed a sacred status to her in accordance with their respective traditions. The veneration of the deities was primarily motivated by their perceived functions and roles.

The Loong Mother Goddess assumes a variety of functions and roles, including the provision of favorable weather conditions for smooth winds, rains, and waterways. Of

note, the temple of the Loong Mother resides at the confluence of the Xijiang River, the Yuecheng River, and the Jiang Shui River, where water flows intersect in a hazardous environment that is riddled with swift currents and eddies, which pose a significant risk to watercraft navigation. Additionally, floods are common in this area, especially during the summer, which is when large amounts of rainwater are concentrated near the sea. This can lead to floods and other disasters.²² As a result, people pray to the Loong Mother for good weather and a bountiful harvest, hoping that she will bless and protect them from the forces of nature. What could be the reason behind the Loong Mother's ability to bestow blessings upon the wind, rain, and the safety of those at sea? It could possibly be due to the traditional Chinese belief system of Yin and Yang, where women and water are categorized as Yin. As the southern region is considered to be Yang with a prevalence of fire, the female deity of the Loong Mother resonates with the fire element to supplement the Yin category.

The Loong Mother Goddess has a second role in bestowing blessings related to marriage and childbirth. As the deity of fertility protection, she has Loong sons and serves to support conception, aid in childbirth, and protect young children. According to Du (1992), a part of the Loong Mother Festival's customary activities includes "touching the Loong bed", which involves touching the pillow, quilt, and tent located on the bed of the Loong Mother that is situated in the dressing area of the Yuecheng Loong Mother Temple. It is a common belief that the act of touching the Loong bed results in the acquisition of blessings, and sitting on it is thought to facilitate a quick conception. Historically, and continuing into the present day, the deity responsible for safeguarding the well-being of mothers and infants is held in high esteem. This deity is not only viewed as exceptional and admirable by devout individuals but also credited with divine power and venerated with unwavering devotion.

The third function attributed to the Loong Mother Goddess is the treatment of diseases and epidemics, and this is well documented in historical records.²³ At the Yuecheng Loong Mother Temple, prayers for relief from floods, droughts, and epidemics have been known to be answered promptly. In the past, on the seventh day of May during the Loong Mother Festival, a considerable number of people used to sleep outdoors on the temple's grounds. This custom was based on the belief that one could absorb the essence of the natural world, promoting the dispelling of diseases and disasters.

In Lingnan culture, water has traditionally been regarded as a source of wealth. This belief is reflected in the worship of the Loong Mother, who is revered as the deity of water, and her five Loong sons, who are believed to control the sea and rivers, as well as facilitate business and trade. As a result, the Loong Mother is also revered as the goddess of wealth. A popular folk custom involves the opening of a vault by the Loong Mother. Every year, during the first month, the Loong Mother Temple carefully prepares the "treasury" and the "Loong Mother's Golden Key", placing them in the main hall of the temple to signal the opening of the vault for believers to pray for blessings and pay their respects. The event draws numerous attendees from various regions, with some gatherings drawing tens of thousands of participants. The "Loong Mother opens the vault" ceremony remains, to this day, a deeply cherished tradition at the Loong Mother Temple in Yuecheng.²⁴

4. Integration of Loong Mother Beliefs with Confucianism: How the Deity Was Accommodated

In the Chinese cultural landscape, the dominant influence of Confucian ethics, referred to as the "grand tradition", is widely recognized. However, in certain local societies situated along the southeast coast, such as Guangdong, Guangxi, and Fujian, there is a deep-rooted belief in goddesses, known as the "small tradition", which is a topic of considerable academic interest. Undertaking research on the goddess as a prominent figure in Chinese folk beliefs holds significant implications for comprehending the role of gender in Chinese cultural traditions.

During the Tang and Song dynasties, the Loong Mother legend was perceived as a straightforward account of an event in which the Loong Mother raises the Loong Sons, who later construct a tomb for her. However, the legend gained significant attention from the state and local scholars due to its elevation in the culture of Confucian ethics of filial piety, which emphasizes the ultimate significance of life and death (Jiang 2008). “Filial piety” is a crucial component of Confucian ethics, and it comprises two key elements: “to nurture while alive and accommodate after death”. This doctrine endeavors to reflect the Confucian cultural ideal of prudence during life’s final stages. The story of the Loong Sons provides an illustration of this concept. The Loong Sons demonstrate their respect for their Mother while she was alive, fulfilling the “nurture while alive” aspect of filial piety, and after her death, they constructed a tomb and relocated their Mother’s remains, thereby fulfilling the “accommodate after death” aspect. During the Qing Dynasty, the legend was further embellished with the addition of a plotline involving wild animals guarding the Loong Mother’s tomb.²⁵ In this adaptation, the Loong Sons are portrayed as Confucian scholars, arriving from the east on a reed, to perform the burial ceremony for their relative without any ceremonial items. They subsequently take advantage of a storm and thunder to relocate the tomb, emphasizing the enduring importance of filial piety in Confucian culture. Moreover, the tomb of the Loong Mother is safeguarded by a retinue of five serpents (known as the Loong sons), white deer, and yellow apes. The narrative of the Loong Mother is emblematic of the interplay between the conduct of the Loong Sons and the Confucian virtue of filial piety. Notably, the legend accentuates the moral significance of filial piety over any of the supernatural elements; this is evident in the sudden conclusion of the Loong Mother’s tale following the Loong Sons’ reburial of her remains, as there is no further mention of her fate after death. During the Qing Dynasty, officials and local elites who visited the Loong Mother Temple were unequivocal in their veneration of the Loong Sons. Due to their adherence to the Confucian tenet of “filial piety”, the behavior of the Loong sons was commended in the official narrative, despite the fact that the Loong Mother Goddess was the intended focus of public veneration.

In the Confucian scholarly framework, filial piety holds greater practical and secular importance, with the legend of the Loong Mother serving to advance filial culture. This legend has undergone reinterpretation by Confucian scholars, resulting in its transformation from spiritual folklore to an allegorical narrative that facilitates the promotion of moral education. By reshaping the story of the ritual practitioner’s control of the snake in accordance with the ethical values of Confucianism, it has been effectively adapted into a tool for conveying teachings with significant Confucian cultural implications.

5. Conclusions

This paper aimed to investigate the transformation of the Loong Mother from a woman into a goddess. In doing so, we specifically examined the influence of various religious concepts and practices of Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism on the belief in the Loong Mother as a female deity, as well as analyzed her depiction in civil society. Through this thorough exploration, we uncovered the gradual evolution of the female deity, which did not occur abruptly but rather was consistently influenced by local cultural traditions; the interplay between Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism; and the evolving needs of the people. This ultimately resulted in the augmentation of her “female” identity and the extension of her sacred realm.

In pre-Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist Lingnan society, the idea of “male superiority over female”, as prevalent in the Zhongyuan region, was not traditionally practiced, resulting in a long-standing matriarchal society in the southern region. Originally, the Loong Mother was a snake-handling sorceress in the Xijiang River valley who wielded regional power during her lifetime, creating a genealogical structure of deities with her as the primary goddess, even after her death. As the Song Dynasty brought about a shift in dynastic power and the development of cross-regional market circulation, there was an influx of people from various regions who passed through Lingnan, leading to widespread cul-

tural exchange and the introduction of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism in southern China. The Lingnan goddesses subsequently underwent significant changes, gradually acquiring divine personalities. The Taoist concepts of “the softness of the femininity” and the Buddhist idea that “everyone can become a Buddha” aligned with the belief in the Loong Mother, leading to her transcendental character as Taoists and Buddhists incorporated relevant religious classics to disseminate religious teachings. In contrast, Confucianism utilized the legend of the Loong Mother to propagate the ethics of “mother’s kindness and son’s filial piety”, as well as to provide justification for the belief in the goddess.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization was carried out by Y.H. and R.W. The original draft was prepared by Y.H., while review and editing were handled by Y.H. and R.W. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

- 1 The term “Zhongyuan” denotes the geographical region dubbed the “wilderness in the middle of the world”, and it is recognized as the cradle of Chinese civilization. In addition to its historical significance, “Zhongyuan” also encompasses the entirety of China, distinguishing it from the northern territories that were historically inhabited by foreigners.
- 2 The term “Lingnan” denotes the geographical region situated south of the Five Ridges in China, which is demarcated from the mainland by this mountain range. Historically, the Lingnan region encompassed Guangdong Province, Guangxi Province, as well as certain areas of eastern Yunnan Province and southwestern Fujian Province.
- 3 For more information, please refer to the annotated edition of *Lingwai Daida* (岭外代答), edited by Zhou and Yang (1999, p. 429). *Lingwai Daida* is a geographic and cultural encyclopedia of China, which was written during the Song Dynasty by Zhou Qufei. It was completed in 1178 and is divided into 31 chapters, covering topics such as the geography, history, culture, customs, and mythology of various regions in China.
- 4 This information was extracted from the inscription on the *Dan'er Temple Stele* (儋耳庙碑), which offers valuable insights into the social and cultural background of Guangdong Province during the Southern Song Dynasty, particularly regarding the local government, temple restoration, and historical accounts of the customs and beliefs of the people of that era. The stele is currently exhibited at the Guangdong Provincial Museum.
- 5 The Lingnan area has had a long-standing history of inhabitation by the Baiyue people. Following the consolidation of China by the Qin Dynasty, a significant migration of Han Chinese to the south occurred, resulting in their coexistence with the native population and giving rise to a complex Han–Yue intermingling dynamic.
- 6 Regarding the term “totem”, scholars have raised doubts about the presence of totemic culture in China. Frazer’s book, *Totemism and Exogamy* (Frazer 1910), discusses the totemic cultures of various nations around the world, but makes no reference to such a culture in China. However, He (1990, p. 34) highlighted the discovery of numerous realistic animal patterns on painted pottery from the Neolithic Age. According to the majority of archaeologists and historians, these animal patterns, along with their symbolic representations on Neolithic pottery, may have served as totemic symbols for ancient clans and tribes (He 1990, p. 35).
- 7 The Collection 艺文类聚 comprises 100 volumes that are thematically organized into distinct categories such as Heaven, Time, Earth, Mountains, Water, Fortunes, Emperors, Reservoirs, Rites, Music, Miscellaneous Writings, Dwellings, and Spirits. This book is a valuable repository of a multitude of canonical texts and literary works, including poems, songs, fugues, and other precious literary compositions that date back to the Tang Dynasty and earlier periods.
- 8 Pu Xi, which originates in Sihui, joins the Xijiang River at the Pu Xi Kou.
- 9 This was translated by myself. For the original article, please check: <https://cctx.org/dictionary.pl?if=gb&id=541499&remap=gb>, accessed on 10 January 2023.
- 10 The book *Nan Yue Zhi* (南越记), which dates back to the Liu Song Dynasty (420–479 AD), has been lost for an extended period. However, it is referenced in *Tai Ping Huan Yu Ji* (太平寰宇记), a text from the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127 AD). According to historical records, Shen Huaiyuan (沈怀远), who was sent to Guangzhou during the Song Dynasty by Emperor Xiaowu due to his concubine’s involvement in an occult practices scandal, wrote *Nan Yue Zhi* during his exile.

- 11 *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers* (山海经), an ancient book from the Pre-Qin period, is a comprehensive encyclopedia of ancient social life, covering topics such as ancient geography, history, mythology, religion, and more. Throughout the book, snakes are a symbolically important animal, with many gods and spirits depicted as snake-handlers or snake-treaders. As an example, *The Classic of Mountains and Rivers: Eastern Seas* (海东东经) describes the Rain Master as a black-bodied figure located in the north, holding a snake in each hand and being adorned with a green snake on the left ear and a red snake on the right ear (“雨师妾在其北，其为人黑，两手各操一蛇；左耳有青蛇，右耳有赤蛇”).
- 12 In Chinese philosophy, Yin (阴) and Yang (阳) is a concept that symbolizes the union of two interdependent, yet contrasting, forces. These forces can be observed in various phenomena, such as the annual cycle (with winter and summer as opposites), the landscape (with north-facing shade and south-facing brightness), sexual coupling (with female and male as opposite ends of the spectrum), the formation of both men and women as characters, and sociopolitical history (with disorder and order being the two forces in play) (Feuchtwang 2016).
- 13 The Jade Emperor (玉帝) is considered the supreme ruler in the Taoist system.
- 14 For further information, please refer to (Jiang 2010, pp. 157–64).
- 15 Taoist magic, also known as “道术”, involves Taoist priests performing various spells using rituals, talismans, specific gestures, and other techniques. These practices often occur in sacred locations and employ a range of traditional Chinese magical instruments and musical accompaniment, thus helping to create a mystical atmosphere and enabling the completion of a comprehensive set of spells (Xiong 2014).
- 16 The story of the confrontation between the Loong Mother and Lai Boyi can be found in Ye (2005).
- 17 Shaoguan (韶关) City is located in the northern part of Guangdong Province.
- 18 Hui Neng (惠能) was a legendary Buddhist monk and the sixth patriarch of Chan Buddhism, also known as Zen Buddhism. He lived in China during the Tang Dynasty (from 618 to 907 AC), and is considered to be one of the most important figures in the development of Zen Buddhism.
- 19 The Yimin were individuals who maintained their allegiance to the previous dynasty despite the transition. As soon as the Qing army arrived in the south of China, they enforced a policy that required people to shave their heads and keep a small bundle of hair to fashion into a braid. Nevertheless, the Qing government regarded Buddhist and Taoist monks as foreign nationals and permitted them to retain their customary garments. Therefore, those who refused to compromise their principles had no choice but to adopt the monastic or Taoist way of life.
- 20 The original text is “愿以此功德，普及与一切。我等与众生，皆共成佛道。” You can find the original text of the Loong Mother Sutra on this website: <http://taolibrary.com/category/category50/c50045.htm>, accessed on 15 February 2023.
- 21 “Buddha-nature” is a commonly used translation for the Chinese Buddhist term “佛性” (fó xìng). This term refers to the innate potential, seed, or essence within all living beings that allows them to become a Buddha. According to Pu (2004), “佛性” implies that all beings have the capacity to realize their true nature and attain enlightenment, regardless of their current state or conditions. English-language scholarship on Chinese Buddhism often uses “buddha-nature” as a translation for “佛性” (fó xìng), as seen in the works by Hershock (2019) and Tseng (2014).
- 22 The information for this is documented in *The Wuzhou Prefecture Annals*, which is a 16-volume book that provides a comprehensive account of the history, geography, politics, economy, and culture of Wuzhou in Guangxi Province.
- 23 According to the *Ci'e Ji* (赐额记) written by Wu Kui, a Song dynasty writer, the Loong Mother’s power is recorded. It is said that at the Yuecheng Loong Mother Temple—whenever there are droughts, floods, epidemics or other disasters—people pray to her, and she responds immediately.
- 24 The origin of these folk customs of the Loong Mother opening the treasure vault is yet to be verified. However, these customs have been mentioned in many studies on the Loong Mother culture and the cultural industry (for example, Ye 2005; Jiang 2012). In recent years, there have also been media reports, such as the following local government promotional article: <http://static.nfapp.southcn.com/content/201803/07/c1006666.htm>, accessed on 15 February 2023.
- 25 This story is recorded in *Xiao Tong Miao Zhi* (孝通庙志), a temple chronicle written by Cheng Ming during the Qing Dynasty. This information is cited from the book *Yue Cheng Loong Mother Culture* (悦城龙母文化) by Ye and Jiang (2003, pp. 14–17).

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