

Article

Cao'an in the Ancestral World: Contemporary Manichaeism-Related Belief and Familial Ethics in Southeastern China

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Abstract: The Cao'an (草庵), situated in the Fujian Province of China, stands as a rare Manichean relic that has long attracted scholarly interest. In the Suni (苏内) village where the Cao'an is located, there are numerous texts, narratives, and religious practices related to Manichaeism which are often cited as evidence of local Manichaean activities since the Song and Yuan Dynasties. However, drawing from anthropological fieldwork, this paper points out that the local villagers have a more complex and seemingly contradictory attitude towards Manichaeism. On the one hand, they are enthusiastic about worshipping "Moni guangfo" (Mani the Buddha of Light, 摩尼光佛) and collecting narratives of their Manichaean ancestors. On the other hand, they resist the local government's attempts to strengthen the "Manichaean" characteristics of Cao'an and related village temples. Their familial ethics provides a critical and coherent perspective. The villagers have gradually accumulated a wealth of Manichaean-related texts and narratives to demonstrate the moral virtues of their ancestors. Their beliefs and rituals concerning Mani the Buddha of Light are also grounded in traditional familial ethics. This helps us grasp the reality of Manichaeism-related culture in contemporary China.

Keywords: Manichaeism; Mani the Buddha of Light (Moni guangfo); Cao'an; familial ethics



Citation: Wang, Yanbin. 2024. Cao'an in the Ancestral World: Contemporary Manichaeism-Related Belief and Familial Ethics in Southeastern China. *Religions* 15: 185. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020185>

Academic Editors: Huaiyu Chen and Minhao Zhai

Received: 30 December 2023

Revised: 18 January 2024

Accepted: 24 January 2024

Published: 1 February 2024



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Manichaeism, founded by Mani (AD 216–277), is centered on a dualistic philosophy of light and darkness, integrating elements from Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Gnosticism, and Buddhism. It spread widely across the Old World.¹ In the 18th–19th centuries, due to the scarcity of sources, research on Manichaeism primarily focused on how it was recorded in Christian and Islamic texts. The early 20th-century discovery of numerous Manichaean documents in Turfan and Dunhuang, China, therefore, significantly transformed this field.² It stimulated researchers to revisit ancient Chinese records about Manichaeism, as well as to outline its historical spread and evolution in China (Chavannes and Pelliot 1911, 1913; Chen 1923; and cf. Wang 1992, pp. 1–58; Kōsa 2021). Particularly in Southeast China, Manichaean remains have garnered special attention. In the 1950s, the Cao'an (lit. a thatched hut, 草庵) in Jinjiang (晋江), Fujian (福建), one of the world's few remaining Manichaean sites, was discovered (Zhuang 1956; Wu 1957, pp. 44–45). Archaeological findings, like "Mingjiao black-glazed bowls", have corroborated the activities of the localized "Mingjiao" (the religion of Light, 明教), a Sinicized form of Manichaeism that existed in Fujian, since the Song Dynasty (Huang 1985). Simultaneously, scholars have collected numerous folk customs with Manichaean elements in southern Fujian near Cao'an (Nian 2008; Wang and Lin 2015). Several other Manichaeism-related remains have also been discovered in Fujian, such as religious buildings and the Manichaean manuscripts discovered at Xiapu (霞浦) (Kauz 2000, 2019; Ma 2014, 2015; Yang 2020). These studies subtly sketch the historical process of Manichaeism's spread and evolution in China, reflecting a cross-regional intermingling of civilizations.

However, a notable problem arises concerning the so-called Manichaean remains.³ Though field studies in places like Cao'an have found an abundance of Manichaean traces, texts, narratives, religious practices, and folk activities still present locally, in stark contrast,

local villagers are actually quite unfamiliar with and indifferent to Manichaeism. I first visited Cao'an and the Sunei (苏内) village where Cao'an is located in October 2016, followed by nearly a year of fieldwork there from 2020 to 2021; my observations over this extended period made me acutely aware of the complex status of the villagers' beliefs related to Manichaeism. On the one hand, the villagers engage in religious practices and worship of "Moni guangfo" (Mani the Buddha of Light, 摩尼光佛) at Cao'an and the "Moni gong" (Mani the Lord, 摩尼公) in the village. These beliefs are deeply intertwined with local Buddhism and folk religion, and the villagers enthusiastically collect, organize, and promote local stories related to Manichaeism. In fact, many of these ancestral Manichaean tales have been progressively created and accumulated by the villagers based on the realities of Chinese society over the last few decades. On the other hand, the villagers had no clear understanding of Manichaeism and even felt perplexed and resistant towards it in its "pure form". Their strong opposition emerged when the local government attempted to enhance the "Manichaean" characteristics of Cao'an and related village temples. It can be said that the villagers' attitude towards "Manichaeism", therefore, is both passionate and indifferent.

How can we understand this paradoxical phenomenon? Mere historical document research and simple interviews may not suffice to answer this question. Wearing suggests that, in order to study the Manichaean remains in the village, extensive anthropological fieldwork by researchers who are familiar with Fujian dialects and possess some knowledge of Manichaeism is required (Wearing 2006). Therefore, this paper attempts to examine this issue from an anthropological perspective. Malinowski's functionalism offers a lens. He argues that, while cultural customs, as the "survivals", may resemble ancient practices in form, what is more crucial is their function in the contemporary cultural context (Malinowski 1960). Hence, it is essential to explore the mindset and context of the villagers' Manichaeism-related practices and narratives, from their local knowledge to their sayings and actions, thereby clarifying the specific roles these activities and narratives play in the villagers' belief system and lifeworld. Only then can we understand the villagers' contradictory attitudes towards Manichaeism. Based on the material and observations gathered during my fieldwork in Sunei village, this paper first analyzes the creation of various Manichaeism-related texts and narratives in the village and then identifies their underlying dynamics and mechanisms. It is then argued that the practice of Manichaeism-related beliefs in the contemporary Sunei village stems from the villagers' development of ancestral narratives associated with Manichaeism, rooted in their familial ethical system. This "familial ethics" is not only key to understanding the complex attitudes of villagers towards Manichaeism but may also be an important factor for the revival of contemporary religions in China.

1. Manichaeism-Related Beliefs in Sunei Village: History and Reality

Sunei village is located in southern Fujian, under the jurisdiction of Jinjiang City, Quanzhou (泉州), Fujian Province. Locals commonly identify themselves as "people of southern Fujian", referring not only to a geographical area but also a significant cultural concept, forming a crucial part of local identity. Moreover, there is a strong distinction within the village between "locals" and "outsiders". This distinction is especially evident in marriage customs, where "outsiders" are often considered undesirable spouses. Village officials are also exclusively locals. Originally a closed countryside, Sunei village began opening up after the construction of major roads to the city area in 2009. Located in a hilly region, about 150 m above sea level, the village backs onto Huabiao Hill (华表山) and faces Wu River (梧江). Sunei is a single-surname village with a population of over three thousand, most of whom bear the surname Zeng (曾). There is a large ancestral hall for the Zeng clan. The Zeng clan is composed of three branches, each with its own ancestral halls and genealogy books. The spatial arrangement of family homes is centered around the ancestral hall, ordered according to branch lineage. The proximity of houses generally reflects the closeness of familial relations.

As a typical southern Fujian village, Sunei village boasts numerous temples and a rich array of folk religious activities. Since the 1920s, Quanzhou experienced several large-scale “anti-superstition” campaigns, resulting in widespread destruction of temples and shrines (Wang 2018, p. 455). However, since the 1980s, folk beliefs have rapidly revived, fueled both by local customs and a broader resurgence of rural religion (Lu 2010; Yang 2012). At the entrance of the village stands the Jingzhu Gong (*lit.* Lord of this Region’s Palace, 境主宮), a local deity temple, also known as Shuiwei Gong (水尾宮) due to its location at the exit of Lutian Creek (炉田溪) in the village. Jingzhu Gong holds a significant position in southern Fujian folk beliefs, with the deity ensuring peace and safety in the area. Additionally, the village houses other temples, like Yanjun Gong Temple (閩君公廟), Sanwang Fu (三王府廟), Siwang Fu (四王府廟), Liuwang Fu (六王府廟), and the Earth God Temple (土地公廟), venerating various local deities, alongside popular southern Fujian gods, like Guanyin (觀音) and Guangong (關公). The Zeng clan’s communal ancestral hall, along with eight ancestral houses of different branches, also serves as an important space for worship, housing ancestral tablets and various Buddhist and Taoist deities. A minority of villagers who follow Christianity abstain from these rituals and worship activities. Halfway up Huabiao Hill, behind the village, is the Cao’an, dedicated to “Mani the Buddha of Light”. A little further up the mountain is the larger Buddhist temple, Huayan Temple (華嚴寺). These sites collectively form the hubs of the villagers’ daily religious activities. On the 2nd and 16th of each lunar month, every household worships all the deities; this also occurs during traditional festivals, like the Double Seventh Festival (七夕節), Mid-Autumn Festival (中秋節), and the Pudu Festival in the ninth lunar month (九月普渡). Additionally, ceremonies are held on each deity’s birthday, such as the 26th day of the first lunar month for Siwangfu and the 13th day of the sixth lunar month for Mani the Buddha of Light. Each family also conducts rituals in the ancestral hall on their ancestors’ death anniversaries. Temple and deity worship activities are a significant part of each family’s daily life. Many elderly women visit the Huayan Temple above Cao’an to recite scriptures, especially from the fourth to the seventh month of the lunar calendar, engaging in three months of morning sessions. They also actively participate in Buddha’s birthday celebrations and other assemblies at nearby temples, often going in groups to “chi zhao” (share a meal, 吃桌). Families consult temples for divination or seek blessings for events like weddings, funerals, housebuilding, business ventures, exams, travel, illness, or misfortune. Almost every household has statues of deities obtained from temples, like Guanyin or the Earth God, along with photographs of deceased relatives.

Thus, the religious landscape of Sunei village is a diverse amalgam. Regarding the Manichaeism-related beliefs on which this paper focuses, Manichaeism appears to have left significant traces in both the historical and present-day Sunei village. Three main examples will show this. Firstly, a series of Song Dynasty black-glazed bowls inscribed with “Mingjiao Hui” (明教會) were unearthed near Cao’an in 1979, 1982, and 1983 (Huang 1985). “Mingjiao” is a term used for the sinicized Manichaean communities active along the southeastern coast of China from the Song to Ming Dynasties. For example, Xu Xuan (徐鉉, AD 916–991), in his *Jishen Lu* (《稽神錄》), mentions, “There was someone skilled in sorcery, known as Mingjiao” (後有善作魔法者, 名曰明教, Xu 1996, p. 46); also, the *Fozu Tongji* (《佛祖統紀》), written during the Song Dynasty, cites the *Yijian Zhi* (《夷堅志》), stating, “Those who eat vegetables and serve demons, especially active in the Sanshan (i.e., Fuzhou福州), are known as the Mingjiao” (吃菜事魔, 三山尤熾, 稱為明教會, *Fozu Tongji*, vol. 48). Secondly, a “Mani the Buddha of Light” statue, built in the Yuan Dynasty, is located in Cao’an. Cao’an, as mentioned above, literally means a thatched hut, but today, it actually is a small temple made of granite. It is built in the typical style of a southern Fujian temple and is around 6.7 m long and 3.4 m wide (Figure 1). The statue of Mani the Buddha of Light is placed in the middle of the north wall, opposite the entrance. According to He Qiaoyuan’s (何喬遠, AD 1558–1632) *Minshu* (《閩書》), “Huabiao Hill...has a Cao’an, a relic from the Yuan era, worshipping Mani Buddha” (He 1994, p. 172). This record corresponds with inscriptions next to the Cao’an statue, dating it to the fifth year of the Zhiyuan

era (AD 1339) of the Yuan Dynasty.⁴ The statue is about 154 cm tall, carved in beige granite, and represents a god wearing a Chinese-style robe, sitting on a lotus base, and putting his hands in the dhyanamudra, with eighteen waving light-beams behind and around (Figure 2). This statue, though influenced in form by Buddhist and Taoist sculptures, may suggest that “Mani the Buddha of Light” is not a native deity, as the statue subtly aligns with certain Manichaeian doctrines (Wu 1957, p. 44; Cai 1994, p. 116). Finally, there is a Ming Dynasty stone carving from AD 1445 in front of the Cao’an, containing phrases like, “Quannian: Qingjing guangming, dali zhihui, wushang zhizhen, moni guangfo”. (Please recite: purity and light, power and wisdom, supreme perfect truth, Mani the Buddha of Light. 勸念：清淨光明，大力智慧，無上至真，摩尼光佛) The first four terms are regarded as the well-known Manichaeian names of the Fourfold Aspect of the Father of Greatness, found in Manichaeian texts from Greece to China (Bryder 1991, p. 41). Lin Wushu’s (林悟殊) research further confirms that these Chinese words are undoubtedly derived from Chinese Manichaeian texts in the Tang Dynasty (Lin 2005, pp. 5–32).



Figure 1. Cao’an the Manichaeian site. Photographed by the author in 2017.

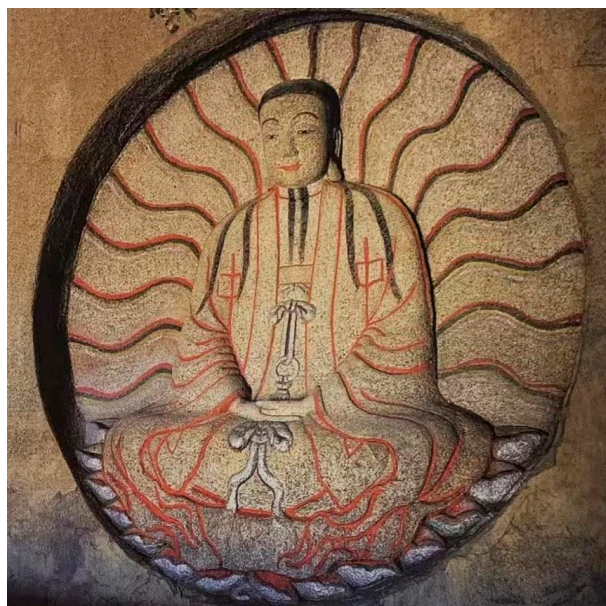


Figure 2.⁵ The Mani the Buddha of Light statue of Cao’an.

Thus, the unearthed black-glazed bowls, Cao'an statue, and stone inscriptions indicate that, from the Song to Yuan and Ming eras, Mingjiao, or sinicized Manichaean communities, were active here. They retained certain terminologies and doctrines from Manichaeism in the Tang Dynasty while also deifying Mani, whose image became deeply imbued with Buddhist and Taoist elements. However, after this period, traces of Manichaeism, or Mingjiao, quickly vanished from the literature and local history. In the 1930s, the prominent monk Hongyi (弘一法師) resided several times in Cao'an, which appeared to be a typical Buddhist temple at that time (Lin 2014, pp. 298–319). Clearly, Hongyi and the residents nearby did not regard Cao'an as a Manichaean site. In the 1920s, Chen Yuan (陳垣) and Pelliot noticed the historical record of Manichaean building the Cao'an in the *Minshu* (Chen 1923; Pelliot 1923). Unfortunately, these scholars were not sure whether it still existed since they did not visit Cao'an in person. In the 1950s, scholars such as Zhuang Weiji (莊為璣) and Wu Wenliang (吳文良) first identified Cao'an as a Manichaean shrine through their field works and then made the Cao'an one of the most attractive topics in the study of Chinese Manichaeism (Wu 1957, pp. 44–45).⁶

Today, considering fieldwork conducted by scholars and my own observations, it is clear that several cultural phenomena related to Manichaeism still exist in Sunei village besides Cao'an. Firstly, "Mani the Buddha of Light" is worshipped at Jingzhu Gong (Figure 3). This temple, believed to have been originally built during the Ming Dynasty and rebuilt in the 1930s, houses five portraits. The central one is of "Mani the Buddha of Light", modeled after the Cao'an statue. To its left are "Shiba Zhenren" (十八真人) and "Qinjiao Mingshi" (秦皎明使); and to its right are "Dutian Lingxiang" (都天靈相) and "Jingzhu Gong" (*lit.* Lord of this Region, 境主公), with the latter being the actual protector deity of the village (Figure 4). The origin of "Shiba Zhenren" is unknown. And Lin Wushu argues that terms like "Mingshi" (Envoy of Light, 明使) and "Lingxiang" (Spiritual sign, 靈相) that are found in Manichaean texts of the Tang Dynasty, like the "*Manichaean Hymnscroll Text*" (Moni jiao xiabu zan, 《摩尼教下部贊》) and "*Compendium of the Doctrines and Styles of the Teaching of Mani the Buddha of Light*" (Moni guangfo jiaofa yilüe, 《摩尼光佛教法儀略》), suggest that "Qinjiao Mingshi" and "Dutian Lingxiang" were also venerated by Mingjiao followers post-Song Dynasty (Lin 2008, pp. 166–68; Wang and Lin 2015, pp. 372–78).



Figure 3. Jingzhu Gong. Photographed by the author in 2017.



Figure 4. Portraits of the five deities worshiped at Jingzhu Gong. Photographed by the author in 2017.

Secondly, Mani the Buddha of Light statuettes are privately worshipped. Indeed, some villagers have small Moni, the Buddha of Light statuettes, in their homes (Franzmann et al. 2005; Nian 2008, pp. 83–84). Thirdly, Cao'an contains fortune-telling poems. Like many temples in and around Sunei village, Cao'an is a place for divination. A set of 81 fortune-telling poems, possibly dating back to the late Ming or early Qing Dynasty, contains Manichaeism terms, like "Mingshi" and "Gucheng" (City of bones, 骨城), used in Tang Dynasty's Manichaeism texts. These poems, arranged in order, form an acrostic, praising "Mingzun" (The Lord of Lightness, 明尊), "Mingshi", and mentioning other Manichaeism terms, like "Lingxiang" (Nian 2008, pp. 5–12; Lin 2008, pp. 173–82; Wang and Lin 2015, pp. 381–87). This indicates that, although organized Manichaeism or Mingjiao activities became elusive after the Ming Dynasty, their terminology continued to circulate locally. Fourthly, "Moni Gong" spirit-writing occurs. When facing marriage, death, illness, or disaster, villagers invite spirit mediums for spirit-writing sessions. During them, mediums, often invoking "Moni Gong" from Jingzhu Gong, use a peach-wood planchette to receive divine messages. Though "Mani the Buddha of Light" is not directly invoked, "Moni Gong" is believed to possess the medium, who then offers guidance and resolutions. Then, the medium always asks people to offer sacrifices or perform rituals to avert misfortune, often burning or displaying talismans featuring Lingxiang Gong, Mani, and the Bagua (Eight Trigrams, 八卦) to ward off evil spirits. Fifthly, villagers recite 16-character "Moni Gong incantations", composed of the saying, "Qingjing guangming, etc". from the Cao'an stone carving, for peace of mind and exorcism (Nian 2008, pp. 5–12; Wang and Lin 2015, pp. 378–81).⁷

Today's villagers of Sunei village are highly enthusiastic about collecting and organizing local narratives and elements related to Manichaeism, often attributing Manichaeism identities to their ancestors. Based on my research and collections, the narratives formed by the villagers concerning "Manichaeism" and "Mani the Buddha of Light" can be broadly categorized into three types: origin stories of the "Mani the Buddha of Light" statue; settlement stories of the Zeng Clan's ancestors; and stories of ancestors as Manichaeism followers. Not only have these stories been compiled into books, forming part of the local school curriculum in cultural studies, but they have also been prominently included in the clan's genealogy books. Additionally, these narratives are prominently featured in the construc-

tion and decoration of the ancestral halls, highlighting their importance in the village's cultural and historical identity.

As previously mentioned, the villagers of Sunei village exhibit a mixture of indifference and resistance towards Manichaeism. Although Cao'an and Jingzhu Gong are significant worship spaces, the veneration of Mani the Buddha of Light, Moni Gong, and other deities like Mingshi and Lingxiang is similar to that of other gods, and hence, they do not hold a uniquely prominent position in the village's pantheon. "Moni Gong" is not the sole entity invoked during spirit-writing sessions; Lingxiang Gong and the gods of Siwang fu are equally involved. In the past, Cao'an was not only for worship of Mani the Buddha of Light; rather, it also featured Buddhist and folk religious icons, like Guanyin and the Earth God, accompanied by banners promising "all prayers answered" (有求必应). Villagers typically engaged in Buddhist and folk religious practices, such as offering incense, throwing divination blocks, and drawing lots. In recent years, however, the local government has attempted to remodel these sites to emphasize the area's "Manichaean culture". Cao'an is one of Jinjiang's most important cultural assets and was its earliest and most renowned cultural preservation unit.⁸ Consequently, in 2003, the Jinjiang Bureau of Culture and Tourism decided to demolish the large Huayan Temple and other Buddhist structures in front of Cao'an. Gradually, the removal of accompanying deities from Cao'an, like the Earth God and Guanyin, was requested, along with non-Manichaean banners and divination items. While these actions strengthened Cao'an's Manichaean characteristics, they also fostered growing resistance towards the current state of Cao'an among Sunei villagers. Similarly, in 2016, villagers initiated a fundraising campaign to renovate the dilapidated Jingzhu Gong, intending to rebuild it in the customary style of other southern Fujian temples. However, since Jingzhu Gong, which houses the "Mani the Buddha of Light", is now classified as a "cultural relic site", the villagers' plan to rebuild it was not approved by the government, which sought to preserve its old appearance, especially its Manichaean features. This has led to strong disaffection among the villagers.

The villagers of Sunei village, therefore, demonstrate a paradoxical attitude towards Manichaeism: they are both enthusiastic and indifferent. While they actively emphasize their and their ancestors' connections to Manichaeism or Mingjiao through genealogy books, literature, and narratives, they strongly resist any changes or adjustments to their traditional ways of worshipping and believing in deities like Mani the Buddha of Light in Cao'an, and the deities of Jingzhu Gong, according to alleged "Manichaean" principles. Thus, while documenting the various Manichaean elements in villagers' beliefs and daily lives is crucial, it is equally important to understand how these villagers coherently interpret them so that their significance in their lifeworld can be properly understood. This paper attempts to explain this paradoxical phenomenon by first analyzing the logic behind the creation of Manichaeism-related narratives among Sunei villagers.

2. Generation of Manichaeism Stories: Genealogy, Narratives, and Inscriptions

The ancestral narratives of Manichaean followers in Sunei village are often used to corroborate local Manichaean community activities from the Song and Yuan Dynasties onward. However, my research indicates that most of the Manichaeism-related narratives among Sunei villagers have gradually evolved in recent years. Their core value lies not in proving historical Manichaean activities in the area or implying continuity between contemporary Manichaeism-related customs and historical Manichaean activities at this site. Instead, these narratives reveal the underlying concerns and logic behind the villagers' Manichaeism-related beliefs and stories. The sources of these narratives are broadly four-fold: (1) Clan genealogies; (2) Interpretations of Mingjiao in the context of peasant war history research; (3) Contemporary Manichaeism research and related materials; (4) Local customs and traditions.

Based on these sources and in response to social realities, Sunei villagers have created numerous Manichaeism-related narratives, which can be categorized into three types: (1) Origin stories of the "Man, the Buddha of Light" statue; (2) Settlement stories of the

Zeng clan's ancestors; (3) Stories of ancestors as Manichaeism followers. These stories have been compiled by the villagers into two books: *Historical and Cultural Records of the Zeng Clan in Sunei Village* (《苏内村曾氏历史文化记事》, 2016) and *Preliminary Exploration of Manichaeism in Cao'an, Sunei* (《初探苏内草庵摩尼教》, 2017). The first book was authored by Zeng Kang,⁹ a 70-year-old man who could read and write, was a former primary school teacher, and was deeply involved in the cultural affairs of the village, especially Manichaeism. He compiled the village genealogy and wrote the village history after the Communist Party of China (CPC) called for "beautiful villages" in its fifth plenary session of the 16th Central Committee, 2005. The author of the second book, in his 50s, is a retired military officer currently working in a nearby textile factory. These narratives aim to demonstrate that the Zeng ancestors were Manichaeism followers, significantly contributing to the construction of Cao'an and consistently performing beneficence as Mingjiao followers, thereby highlighting their moral character. Below, each of these stories is listed, with explanations of their logic, process of creation, and historical context.

2.1. Origin Stories of the "Mani the Buddha of Light" Statue

During my fieldwork in 2017, I heard two versions of the origin story of the "Mani the Buddha of Light" statue in Cao'an, which were even recounted to me by some illiterate women in the village. The content aligns with what is recorded in *Historical and Cultural Records of the Zeng Clan in Sunei Village*, summarized as follows:

Story A: "The area around Cao'an was originally frequented by many devout men and women, as well as visitors. Suddenly, a tall man with unusual attire and a striking appearance arrived, hanging a Buddha portrait on the cliff and preaching, discussing philosophy, and talking about medicine. This portrait was distinct from Taoist and Buddhist depictions. The man's accent was not local, and initially, people thought he was a disciple of some 'followers of the immortal.' However, as he frequently returned to preach and practice medicine, often discussing current political affairs, he gained people's admiration. After this man and his portrait left, anyone who came near the cliff would envision the image of Mani the Buddha of Light. Later, people carved a statue of the image they remembered".

Story B: "In an unspecified year, on a clear night with a bright moon and stars, there was suddenly thunder and lightning above a huge rock, which then split open. The head of Mani the Buddha of Light, slowly appeared on the vertical cliff face. However, due to some unknown interference or conflicting forces, the rest of the figure did not emerge, leaving only the head and ears visible. After the stone was settled, people noticed that the head was made of stone, but its texture was different from the surrounding granite. The surrounding rock was a greyish-white medium-grained granite, while the stone of the head was a greyish-blue fine-grained granite, clearly delineated from the surrounding rock. It was believed that Mani the Buddha of Light, revealed this 'image' in a dream to the people. Later, people added carved details to the figure, thus creating a statue unlike those in Taoism or Buddhism".

These origin stories of the "Mani the Buddha of Light" statue are widely circulated in Sunei village. Both narratives likely have roots in local legend, but they have undoubtedly been embellished with new content in recent years. Story A, which describes the Mani statue originating from a painting hung by a mysterious outsider, seems to have evolved from a record in He Qiaoyuan's *Minshu* from the Ming Dynasty. The book explains: "A Hulu fashi (呼祿法師) came to Futang (福唐, in the south of Fuzhou), and taught his disciples at Sanshan (三山, i.e., Fuzhou). He came to Qianjun (泉郡, i.e., Quanzhou) in his travels died (there) and was buried at the foot of a mountain to the north of Quanzhou. In the period Zhidao (AD 995–997), a scholar of Huai'an (懷安), Li Tingyu (李廷裕), found an image of the Buddha (Mani) in a soothsayer's shop at the capital; it was sold to him for 50,000 cashpieces, and thus the auspicious image was circulated in Fujian"¹⁰ (有呼祿法師者, 來入福唐, 授侶三山, 游方泉郡, 卒葬郡北山下。至道中, 懷安士人李廷裕, 得佛像于京城卜肆, 鬻以五十千錢, 而瑞相遂傳閩中。He 1994, p. 172). Lieu (1998, pp. 131) and

Gulácsi (2009, p. 100) suggest that the “Buddha statue” acquired by Li Tingyu was a Mani sculpture, while Pelliot and Wang Yuanyuan (王媛媛) propose it was a painting (Pelliot 1923, p. 205, n.8; Wang 2009, p. 100). The villagers seem to have been influenced by the latter interpretation and appropriated Li Tingyu’s story to explain the creation of the Cao’an Mani statue; as in their Story A, the figure of the Mani statue was originally from a Buddha portrait brought by a stranger, like Li Tingyu. This story likely then emerged in recent years when the villagers were able to read those publications.

Story B, the Manifestation on the Stone Wall, can be traced back to the Qing Dynasty. The *Xishan zazhi* (《西山雜誌》), written by Cai Yongjian (蔡永兼) during the Jiaqing era of the Qing Dynasty (AD 1796–1820), records, “In the 18th year of the Shaoxing era of the Song Dynasty (AD 1148), Zhao Ziyang (趙紫陽), a member of the Song royal family, built the Longquan Academy (龍泉書院) at the foot of Shidao Mountain (石刀山). At night, the stone wall behind the academy often shone with colourful lights. Consequently, the monk Jixiang (吉祥) raised funds to carve the Buddha’s likeness and built a temple named Moni Temple (摩尼寺)” (宋紹興十八年，宋宗室趙紫陽在石刀山之麓築龍泉書院，夜中常見院後石壁石彩光華。于是僧人吉祥，募資琢佛容而建之寺，曰摩尼寺)¹¹ In 1936, the famous monk, Hongyi, also stated, “The establishment of Cao’an dates back to the Song Dynasty ... The stone Buddha was originally a rock wall, which often showed a golden face. Therefore, a stone statue was carved according to its form. My inscription reads: ‘The bright stone wall, traditionally believed to show the image of the Buddha’” (草庵肇興，蓋在宋代……殿供石佛，昔爲岩壁，常現金容。因依其形，剏造石像。余題句云：石壁光明，相傳爲文佛現影。Lin 2014, pp. 298–302, 307). According to this account, the establishment of Cao’an dates back to the Song Dynasty, not the Yuan Dynasty, as suggested by He Qiaoyuan’s *Minshu*, Two editions of *Jinjiang xianzhi* (《晉江縣志》), published in the Qianlong and Daoguang eras of the Qing Dynasty, and the inscription on the Cao’an statue. The *Xishan zazhi* manuscript is extremely rare, having been known to the wider public only since the 1980s, so it was likely not the source of Hongyi’s account. Thus, both stories likely originate from some folklore circulating near Cao’an since the Qing Dynasty. Whether Story B directly comes from this Qing-era folklore or recent academic discoveries and studies of *Xishan zazhi* is unclear. However, Sunei villagers were certainly aware of the content related to *Xishan zazhi* when collecting and organizing these stories. In *Historical and Cultural Records of the Zeng Clan in Sunei Village*, Story B is actually embedded within a more comprehensive third narrative developed from *Xishan zazhi*, the Zeng clan’s genealogy, and archaeological materials.

Story C: “The founding ancestor of Sunei, Zeng Xintian (曾信添) ... came to live in seclusion in Longquan Yan (龍泉岩) of Gaozhou Hill (高州)... He was invited by students to assist in teaching at the academy (i.e., Longquan Academy) ... It turns out that the academy’s tutor was a descendant of Zhao Ziyang (趙紫陽) from the Song Dynasty’s royal family, who had been in refuge there for many years to restore his family’s political power ... According to the legend, on the night of the 13th day of the sixth lunar month in a certain year of the Yuan Dynasty, the night sky suddenly changed, with dark clouds covering the sky and strong winds blowing. A giant rock on Wanshi Mountain emitted light, and with a loud noise, it split in half... revealing the figure of a Mani Buddha... The clan genealogy records that Zeng Xintian’s son, Zeng Qutou (曾趣投) ... in his later years in the 5th year of the Zhiyuan era of the Yuan Dynasty (AD 1339), along with his close friend, Chen Zhenze (陳真澤) from Xiedian (謝店), and Yao Xingzu (姚興祖) from Luoshan (羅山), took charge of rebuilding Cao’an into a stone structure, carving the Mani Buddha image on the rock wall where the Buddha’s form appeared in the story”.

Story C skillfully integrates elements from the *Xishan zazhi* about Zhao Ziyang of the Song royal family and the “Manifestation on the Stone Wall” at Longquan Academy. Simultaneously, it shifts the timeline to the Yuan Dynasty, with the protagonists being descendants of Zhao Ziyang and the founding ancestors of the Zeng clan, Zeng Xintian and Zeng Qutou, who were recorded in the Zeng clan genealogy. This story, then, aligns with the inscription beside the Cao’an statue, which dates the statue’s creation to the Yuan Dy-

nasty. And it also weaves in figures like Chen Zhenze and Yao Xingzu from the inscriptions at Cao'an. However, upon my investigation, the Zeng clan's genealogy does not specify the era in which these ancestors lived, and Yao Xingzu's inscription lacks precise temporal information. Thus, Story C, based on the inscription at Cao'an, imaginatively merges ancestral figures from the genealogy with Manichaean historical information from sources like *Xishan zazhi*, forming a narrative for the origin of the Mani the Buddha of Light's appearance on the stone wall. This narrative credits the construction of Cao'an to Zeng's ancestors, aligning with the villagers' efforts to establish their ancestors as Manichaean followers. Considering that *Xishan zazhi* was rediscovered no earlier than the 1980s, the creation of this story is relatively recent. Its development coincides with growing external interest in Cao'an and intensifying investigations into its history. As we will soon see, the content of the genealogy, upon which this narrative relies, indicates that the layered construction of this story matches a timeline of increasing interest and research into Cao'an.

2.2. Settlement Story of the Zeng Clan Ancestors

Story C intertwines the origin of the "Mani the Buddha of Light" statue with the story of the Zeng clan's ancestors settling in Sunei village, thereby emphasizing the notion that these ancestors were Manichaean followers. According to the clan genealogy, the Zeng ancestors were originally from another region, and the founding ancestor, Zeng Xintian, married into the local Chen (陈) family, enabling the Zeng clan to thrive in Sunei village. In *Historical and Cultural Records of the Zeng Clan in Sunei Village*, the villagers narrate the story of their ancestor's settlement as follows:

Story D: "Zeng Xintian (AD 1219–1301) was a scholar and hermit during the Song and Yuan Dynasties. He visited the area around Cao'an, drawn by its reputation and the activities of his ancestors. During his visit, he observed Manichaean activities in the area: the academy was filled with the sound of reading and the martial arts field with drill commands. Everyone was civil, polite, and close-knit, treating each other like brothers, sisters, and respected elders. Intellectuals and high-ranking officials frequented the place, creating a culturally vibrant and aesthetically pleasing environment. Zeng Xintian decided to settle in the area, cleaning up the Longquan Yan to reside there temporarily, building a thatched hut, and sustaining himself by farming and grinding tofu".

According to this narrative, Zeng Xintian, the founding ancestor of the Zeng clan in Sunei village, was drawn to the area due to his admiration for Mingjiao and its activities there. He settled by building a thatched hut, eventually marrying into the local Chen family and becoming the progenitor of the Zeng clan in Sunei. The primary sources for this story are two versions of the Zeng clan genealogy found in the village.

One version of the genealogy was written in the late 20th century. It does not have a specific year of compilation, but it includes a copy of a stele inscription from 1998 regarding the reconstruction of the ancestral hall, suggesting it was compiled no earlier than that year. This genealogy describes Zeng Xintian, the founding ancestor, "[I] Wenju Gong (文舉公), with the name Xintian, style name Dongpo (東坡), married into the Chen family of Sunei village, Wudu (五都). He enjoyed the warm and fertile land and admired the famous Gaozhou Hill and Cao'an's beautiful scenery, deciding to settle there happily, and never to go back to his hometown". (文舉公，字信添，號東坡，贅居五都蘇內鄉陳家。樂其地土溫厚，又愛高州名山、草庵勝境，不忍回籍，遂樂居焉。) The other, older version of the genealogy was not compiled in a single effort and can be divided into two parts. The first part begins with a record of the ninth-generation descendant, Zeng Yiguan (曾一貫, AD 1553–1614), who lived in the late Ming Dynasty and ends with an agreement dated to the 16th year of the Shunzhi era of the Qing Dynasty (AD 1659). Therefore, this part was likely compiled around 1659 or shortly after, based on a half-century-old genealogy by Zeng Yiguan and subsequent additions. The second part covers the twelfth generation and beyond. Based on the handwriting, this part was recorded between the third and the sixth lunar month of 1735, as evidenced by the unfilled death dates of clan members still alive at the third lunar month of 1735 and the later filling of these gaps during the

Qianlong era, starting from the sixth month of 1735. This timing is also confirmed by the fact that this manuscript uses characters that are the names of emperors after Qianlong, such as Hong (弘), Li (曆), Ning (寧), and Chun (淳). In this older genealogy, the founding ancestor, Wenju Gong, is recorded as “[II] having come from Baishi (白石) and liv[ing] in seclusion at Longquan Yan in Gaozhou Hill. He built a thatched hut with a friend(s) and eventually married into the Chen family of Sunei village under Wanshi Peak (萬石峰)” (由白石來，隱高州之龍泉岩，與友結草為庵居焉，遂贅于萬石峰下之蘇內里，配妣陳氏。)

The evolution from [II] to [I], and then to Story D, reveals a growing emphasis on the “Cao’an” element and a continuous construction of the relationship between the ancestors and Manichaeism. In the earliest narrative [II], the genealogy does not mention Cao’an but, rather, describes the ancestor as building a thatched hut. This hut is located not at the current Cao’an site but at Longquan Yan in Gaozhou Hill. Further, “Gaozhou Hill’s Longquan Yan” and “Sunei village, Wanshi Peak, Huabiao Hill” are presented as distinct locations, not the same place. This is also confirmed by the *Jinjiang xianzhi* from the 30th year of the Qianlong era (AD 1765), which states that Cao’an is in Huabiao Hill and was built in the Yuan Dynasty for the worship of Mani Buddha; nearby is Wanshi Peak, while the Gaozhou Hill is located between Lingyuan (靈源) and Huabiao Hills (Fang 1968).

However, in the narrative [I], compiled around 1998, “the famous Gaozhou Hill” and “Cao’an’s beautiful scenery” are linked, weakening the distinction between locations and strengthening the connection between Zeng Xintian and Cao’an. The language of narrative [I] is archaic, likely written earlier, and the term “Wudu” reflects the administrative system of the Qing Dynasty. However, the term “Cao’an’s beautiful scenery” seems to be a later addition. The *Jinjiang xianzhi* from the Daoguang era of the Qing Dynasty quotes a poem by the Ming poet Huang Fengxiang (黃鳳翔, AD 1539–1614), indicating that by the late Ming Dynasty, Cao’an was already in ruins (Zhou 1990). Furthermore, according to the “Reconstruction of Cao’an Stele” written by Hongyi, before the monks Ruiyi (瑞意) and Guangkong (廣空) renovated Cao’an by building three rooms in the 12th year of the Republic of China (AD 1923), the temple had long been abandoned (Lin 2014, pp. 299–300). Cao’an at that time was far from a “beautiful scenery”. Therefore, the term “Cao’an” in the narrative [I] likely entered the genealogy and subsequent copies in the 1990s, as Cao’an gained national recognition as a cultural preservation site in which attention from domestic and international researchers in Manichaeism and other fields increased. The incorporation of this modification into the narrative [II] of the genealogy book serves to construct a link between the Zeng ancestors and Cao’an.

It is noteworthy that narrative [I] only emphasizes the ancestor’s fondness for Cao’an, suggesting that it existed before the founding ancestor, Zeng Xintian, settled in the area. In subsequent narratives, the relationship between the ancestor and Cao’an is increasingly emphasized. This eventually leads to the phrase “building a thatched hut” of narrative [II], being interpreted as referring to the construction of Cao’an (which literally means “a thatched hut”). In 2005, Sunei village renovated its ancestral hall, and a poem titled “*Jiecao weian song*” (Eulogy for Building the Thatched Hut, 結草為庵頌) was prominently engraved on the left wall. This implies that the “hut” he built was Cao’an itself. And the poem connects Zeng Xintian’s action of “building a thatched hut” with the Silk Road; an association likely due to the visit of a scientific mission of the UNESCO Silk Roads programme to Cao’an in 1991, marking Cao’an as an important symbol of the Silk Road. In 2000, the Jinjiang Bureau of Culture and Tourism inscribed the signatures of the UNESCO scientific mission members on a stone and placed it in front of Cao’an, turning this event into an important public memory for the villagers and deeply associating Cao’an with the Silk Road in their minds.

Around the same time, Nian Liangtu (粘良图), a local scholar and former staff member of the Jinjiang Museum, further interpreted narratives [I] and [II] from the clan genealogy books as representing the history of organized Mingjiao (Manichaean) activities in the region during the Song and Yuan Dynasties. This interpretation strongly linked the concept of organized Mingjiao followers with the idea that Zeng Xintian was responsible for build-

ing Cao'an. Prior to this interpretation, the villagers' narratives focused primarily on the founding ancestor's role in the establishment of Cao'an, without much emphasis on the Mingjiao followers and their activities. In his 2008 publication, *"Jinjiang Cao'an yanjiu"* (A Study of Cao'an Jinjiang, 《晋江草庵研究》), Nian Liangtu speculated, based on the genealogies, that Zeng Xintian lived during the late Song and early Yuan periods, and that the phrase "building a thatched hut with friend(s)" indicates he was not alone in establishing Cao'an, but was accompanied by a group. Nian, thus, deduced, "Based on the history of Cao'an, this group could only be the Mingjiao. 'Building a thatched hut' suggests that before the construction of the Cao'an stone chamber, Mingjiao followers lived in simple huts covered with straw" (Nian 2008, pp. 43–44). This interpretation has been accepted by many scholars.

Ultimately, Nian Liangtu's interpretation forms the historical basis of Story D. This narrative emphasizes that the activities of the Mingjiao organization were a significant reason for Zeng Xintian's settlement in the area. It intertwines the history of Mingjiao with the ancestors' history and further shapes the origin story of the "Mani the Buddha of Light" statue in Story C, extending the construction of Cao'an to both Zeng Xintian and his son. The concept of an organized group of Mingjiao followers is particularly evident in Story C, where Zeng Xintian discovers local Mingjiao members engaged in activities characterized by "lively reading" and "drill commands". As the analysis shows, this concept of an organized group of Mingjiao followers does not originate from the Sunei village genealogy books. Instead, it developed gradually through interactions between the villagers and the external world, and its formation is relatively recent.

Furthermore, the concept of a Mingjiao (Manichaeism) organization has had a profound impact on the narratives of Sunei village's ancestors, extending beyond mere historical reinterpretation. It has been employed to explain various cultural and folk customs in the village. As we will soon discuss, the origin of this Mingjiao concept is not solely attributable to scholars like Nian Liangtu. Instead, it stems from a deep-seated tradition of Manichaeism studies, which has significantly influenced the way the villagers understand and narrate their history and cultural practices, especially in the stories of the villagers' ancestors performing acts of goodness and combating evil.

2.3. Stories of Ancestors as Manichaeism Followers

In the booklets, *Historical and Cultural Records of the Zeng Clan in Sunei Village* and *Preliminary Exploration of Manichaeism in Cao'an, Sunei*, compiled by the villagers, numerous stories discuss the Zeng clan ancestors of Sunei village as followers of Manichaeism. These stories include the following:

Story E: "Zeng Xintian's eldest son, Zeng Qutou, and his second son, Zeng Xiamu (曾遐慕), were influenced by Manichaeism. Many descendants of Zeng Qutou were Manichaeans or adherents, while some of Zeng Xiamu's descendants, due to business, lived in Guangdong. Following a crackdown on Manichaeans known as the 'Mani Case' (摩尼案), they all relocated to Guangdong (广东), affecting other local families, as well. Today, the descendants of the first and second branches of the Zeng clan are less than three hundred people. This is because their ancestors suffered significant losses following their participation in the Mingjiao and struggle against the ruling classes and dark forces. Most of Zeng Xintian's descendants joined the Mingjiao, but during the Qing Dynasty, when the genealogy was revised, references to Manichaeism activities were limited to avoid implicating future generations in 'literary inquisition' (文字狱)".

Story F: "During the Ming Dynasty's numerous battles against Japanese pirates, Sunei villagers' ancestors displayed a spirit of sacrifice for national interests. For example, eighteen young women from Sunei village were captured and killed while distracting pirates, all in an effort to protect their troops. A small temple commemorating these 'Eighteen Maidens' still exists".

Story G: "At the end of the Ming Dynasty and the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, most Manichaeans along the southeastern coast followed Koxinga (Zheng Chenggong, 郑成功)

in AD 1661 to expel Dutch colonizers and recover Taiwan. They suffered multiple rounds of purges and looting by the Qing government and faced strict prohibition”.

Story H: “At the end of the Ming and the beginning of the Qing Dynasties, though hating the destruction of the Longquan Academy by Zhang Juzheng (张居正) in AD 1579, villagers and followers joined Koxinga’s army to resist the Qing and restore the Ming, continuing the struggle until they crossed the sea to reclaim Taiwan”.

Story I: “In the early days after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, a tradition remained in the village: every year on the 15th day of the eighth lunar month, children would build and burn ‘miniature towers.’ This custom originated from a story of the late Song and early Yuan periods when every three households in southern Fujian were forced to support a Yuan soldier, share a kitchen knife, and allow him to spend the wedding night with newlywed brides. Unable to bear such humiliation, Manichaeism followers initiated a ‘rebellion against the Yuan,’ with ‘burning the miniature towers’ as a signal for action”.

The villagers of Sunei, obviously, show a keen interest in interpreting various local cultural phenomena through the lens of their ancestors being Manichaeism followers. These interpretations are certainly unreliable. For example, Story E claims that the ancestors of Zengs, Zeng Xintian, and Zeng Qutou, were Manichaeism. This story clearly echoes stories C and D discussed above. Thus, contrary to Story E, there is no explicit evidence showing that Zeng Xintian and his sons, as the ancestors of the Zeng clan, were Manichaeism. The connection between Mingjiao and the Zeng ancestor may be a recent creation. In Story I, the “burning of miniature towers” during the Mid-Autumn Festival is a tradition found throughout Jinjiang and Quanzhou, not unique to Sunei village, and unrelated to Manichaeism. The ritual traditionally signifies driving away mythical creatures that are believed to eclipse the moon rather than being a specific act of resistance against the Yuan Dynasty as portrayed in the narrative. Yet, the villagers incorporate such practices into the narrative of Manichaeism, portraying themselves as part of a Mingjiao group. They aim to highlight their ancestors’ moral qualities through the medium of “Manichaeism”. In their view, Manichaeism advocates for light against darkness and represents moral virtues like honesty and opposition to corruption, aligning with their understanding of Manichaeism’s ethical characteristics. Hence, the “darkness” in their stories may be highly comprehensive, including all sorts of evil and criminal things: it is the feudal ruling class in Story E, the Japanese invaders in Story F, the Dutch colonizers in Story G, and the military forces of the Yuan and Qing Dynasties in Story H and I. It can even refer to corruption, a major target the CPC has tried to address and a popular public topic in China since 2012. After the renovation of Jingzhu Gong in 2018, a commemorative stele was erected at its entrance, which states the following:

Story J: “It is said that Mani Buddha’s teachings came from Persia (now Iran) to China during the Tang Dynasty, reaching Wanshi Mountain north of the village. Initially, a simple hut was built, hence the name Cao’an. Manichaeism, also known as Mingjiao, advocates for light against darkness, rectitude against corruption, and the establishment of a righteous society. In the Cao’an area, a Mingjiao armed group primarily composed of farmers was organized. Due to its opposition to the feudal ruling class and corrupt officials, it faced hatred and persecution from successive feudal regimes, being labelled a heretical religion and repeatedly subjected to military suppression. In the turmoil, Mingjiao suffered heavy losses, which also affected surrounding villages and led to the destruction of many small temples. The ancestors of Sunei village built Jingzhu Gong in their honour, gathering deities like Dutian Lingxiang, Jingzhu Gong, Qinjiao Mingshi, and Shiba Zhenren, with Mani Buddha as the main deity. The temple was built at the confluence of two creeks”.

This narrative of Sunei village’s ancestors as Manichaeism followers clearly reflects an ideological lineage that can be traced back to the tradition of peasant war history research in China from the 1950s onward. In the early history of Manichaeism research in China, Mou Runsun (牟潤孫) noted that after the Huichang Persecution of Buddhism (會昌法難) in the Tang Dynasty, Manichaeism in China faced internal and external difficulties. Internally, it could not compete with other religions, and externally, it was banned by the

government. To survive, it had to affiliate with Buddhism and Taoism, and it gradually became a secret religion (Mou 1938). In 1941, Wu Han's (吴晗) influential work "*Mingjiao yu daming diguo*" (Mingjiao and the Great Ming Empire, 《明教與大明帝國》) followed this line of thought and innovatively introduced a class perspective. He argued that, although Mingjiao had various names after the Song Dynasty, it was popular among peasants and became a force in peasant revolutions against feudal oppression, such as the rebellions led by Wu Yi (毋乙) and Fang La (方腊). Wu Han also suggested that the term "Ming" (明) in Mingjiao had a revolutionary connotation, embodying the idea of "light and darkness in opposition, with light ultimately prevailing". He posited that the name of the Ming Dynasty itself derived from Mingjiao (Wu 1956, pp. 236–37).

Wu Han's perspective, though now considered outdated, laid the foundation for understanding Manichaeism within the context of peasant war research for a significant period. Movements with religious undertones, like the uprisings led by Fang La and Wu Yi, were identified as peasant movements under the banner of Mingjiao, fighting against oppression and feudalism. Their political and religious activities were further connected to Manichaeism's pre-Song Dynasty theme of "struggle between good and evil". Within the framework of peasant war history, these movements' opposition to the regime was equated with Manichaean opposition to darkness, providing ideological justification for their "struggle".

This paradigm suggests that groups like Fang La's were able to form tight-knit organizations due to Manichaeism's dualistic doctrine. He Pengyu (何鹏毓) argued that Manichaeism used sunlight as a symbol of light, prophesying its imminent arrival and the passing of darkness, thus inspiring followers to fight against the unjust feudal society (He 1951, p. 9). The "*Zhongguo nongmin qiyi xiaozhuan: Fang La*" (Biographies of Chinese Peasant Uprising Leaders: Fang La, 《中国农民起义领袖小传·方腊》, 1976) further defined these religious dualistic ideas as revolutionary thought, aligning them with the ideological core of peasant uprisings and labelling Fang La as a Manichaean. It asserted that Manichaeism had a mass base, revolutionary ideas, and opposed the feudal landlord class (History Department Kaifeng Normal College 开封师范学院历史系 1976). Similarly, the Wu Yi uprising was used to demonstrate the close relationship between Manichaeism and peasant rebellions. Some scholars have argued that Manichaeism was a tool for organizing lower-class peasants and inciting rebellion (Chen 1980, p. 29; Li 1988, p. 256; Mou and Zhang 2000, p. 585). Wang Zhongluo (王仲鲁) noted that Manichaeans lived simply, advocated for the struggle against darkness and quested for light, were organized and combative, and their dualistic doctrine made it easy to merge with peasant movements (Wang 1988, pp. 1084–85).

This research approach aligns with China's long-standing official ideology, emphasizing class analysis and focusing on the relationship between Manichaeism or Mingjiao doctrines, religious groups, and peasant wars. In this interpretation, Manichaeism's doctrine of the opposition between darkness and light metaphorically represents the conflict between feudal authorities and peasant uprisings, highlighting the positive significance of peasant wars and the virtuous deeds of these peasants. This perspective has further influenced the discourse of local historians and scholars.

These local scholars operate at the intersection of mainstream academia and the general populace. Compared to academics, they are rooted in the local community, have access to more local materials, and are not bound by strict academic standards. Compared to the general public, they possess more scholarly knowledge and social resources. As cultural elites in their localities, they not only assimilate mainstream academic narratives and information but also integrate these narratives with local cultural traditions. Moreover, due to their close ties with the community, they act as a bridge between mainstream narratives and the public. Nian Liangtu, who we have cited a former staff member of the Jinjiang Museum, exemplifies such scholars. He endeavours to identify Mingjiao group activities from genealogies and other materials, interpreting various records through the lens of the peasant war history paradigm, which sees followers in conflict with the feudal

regime (e.g., [Nian 2008](#), pp. 47–52). Similarly, Yang Chunlei (杨春雷), an official responsible for religious affairs in Jinjiang, has written books interpreting the historical destruction of Cao'an as a consequence of Mingjiao followers participating in peasant uprisings and facing suppression by government forces ([Yang 2015](#), p. 9).

The villagers' stories from E to I are indeed products of this intellectual context. The scene of martial training witnessed by the ancestor, Zeng Xintian in Story D, also hints at the ancestors' Manichaean resistance activities. These stories, following the tradition of peasant war history research, craft a narrative of the Zeng ancestors as Manichaeans initiating rebellion, thereby aligning their forebears with the righteous side in the grand historical narrative sanctioned by official historiography. The class analysis of "Mingjiao followers" within peasant war history research, which is typically seen in a positive light, translates into the villagers' affirmation and portrayal of their ancestors' moral virtues.

From the above analysis, it is clear that the Manichaean narratives of Sunei village are not remnants of ancient local legends, nor do they serve as evidence of ancient Manichaean group activities in the area. Their emergence, particularly since the 1990s, coincides with increasing external interest in Cao'an. The villagers' activities in compiling genealogies, rewriting family histories, constructing ancestral halls, and collecting folk stories have continuously reinforced the association between their ancestors and Manichaeism. These narratives have been shaped following the research paradigm influenced by Wu Han's interpretation of peasant wars, gradually layering over time. The question then arises: what motivates and drives the villagers to craft and generate these narratives so passionately? To answer this, we need to move from the "text" of the villagers' Manichaeism-related narratives to their "context", understanding the fundamental logic behind their creation from an anthropological perspective. As we will see, this underlying and unifying reason relates to family ethics, shaping how the villagers perceive and construct their historical identity in relation to Manichaeism.

3. Manichaeism-Related Narratives and Family Ethics

The enthusiastic engagement of Sunei villagers in compiling and developing Manichaeism-related narratives and moralizing their ancestors may be simply seen as a way for them to acquire moral resources and benefits, especially as Cao'an gains increasing external attention. This perspective might suggest that these stories are merely a facade presented to outsiders and do not reflect the villagers' genuine beliefs, hence their occasional ambivalence or indifference towards Manichaeism. However, this interpretation is hardly tenable, facing two fundamental challenges. First, it disconnects the villagers' Manichaeism-related narratives from their everyday worship of Mani the Buddha of Light, and Moni Gong, treating the former as artificially constructed tales and the latter as inherent cultural elements of the village. Second, this explanation examines the historical and relational aspects of Manichaean elements in the village in an abstract way, detaching them from the villagers' overall belief system and lifeworld. Both tendencies are inconsistent with reality, as Bronislaw Malinowski argued that a culture should be viewed as a whole, where all elements are intricately interconnected ([Malinowski 1960](#)). If we approach from the perspective of the villagers' comprehensive belief system and lifeworld, we find that their religious actions and narratives share a unified fundamental logic, namely, family ethics.

3.1. Ancestors as Manichaean Followers, Memory, and Family Ethics

While the villagers' narratives related to Manichaeism do, indeed, serve to acquire moral resources, their primary purpose is not external propaganda but rather fulfilling significant functions within the villagers' lifeworld. The context and setting in which these narratives occur are essential. As observed earlier, the villagers have incorporated Cao'an into their genealogy books and have engraved stories about their Manichaean ancestors on the walls of the Zeng clan ancestral hall. Genealogies and ancestral halls are not venues for external promotion; they are spaces for recording and shaping a shared history and

consciousness among the villagers. Whether during festivals or in everyday life, when villagers enter the ancestral hall or peruse the genealogy, the content solidified in texts and images repeatedly activates and reinforces their shared memories and understandings.

Therefore, the stories of Manichaeian ancestors written in genealogies and displayed in the ancestral hall align with Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory and Jan Assmann's idea of cultural memory. Halbwachs argued that a society's shared collective memory allows the past to live on in people's daily lives, ritually reenacting their version of history, thus contributing to social integration in everyday life (Halbwachs 1992). Assmann further noted that, through such memory, the past is rewritten into foundational history, transforming it into a common myth that provides a basis for a society's self-perception, internalizing historical narratives (Assmann 1992, p. 78). In Chinese society, through revising genealogies and ancestor worship rituals, villagers come to understand the past of their familial group, evoking collective memories of the deceased and recalling their identity and obligations within the clan (Jing 1996). Since the Song Dynasty, Chinese genealogies have served to "respect ancestors and gather clan members" through moral teachings of "honouring one's elders" (Wang 2011, pp. 116–17). In this sense, as Yang Ching-kun noted, ancestor worship, carried through genealogies and ancestral halls, is the substantive religion of the Chinese people (Yang 1961, p. 53).

Thus, the main purpose of the villagers in crafting narratives about Manichaeian ancestors is not for external promotion but to forge a common memory among the Zeng clan of Sunei village by tracing the moral deeds of their Manichaeian ancestors. This process strengthens the unified self-identity of the clan members, achieving the goal of "respecting the clan and gathering the members", thereby sustaining the communal unity of that clan. The villagers seriously hope that future generations will remember and honour the history of their ancestors as Manichaeian followers.

In the booklets *Historical and Cultural Records of the Zeng Clan in Sunei Village* and *Preliminary Exploration of Manichaeism in Cao'an, Sunei*, created by the villagers, the authors state that their purpose is "to acquaint the Sunei Zeng clan villagers and their descendants further with their historical and cultural heritage". They emphasize the importance of remembering history and ancestors, stating, "Without history, there is no present; without ancestors, there are no descendants. We should not forget our history and ancestors, and must promote our ancestral virtues to enlighten future generations". They express regret that "not knowing about Manichaeism is a great loss for the residents of Sunei village and a significant oversight in traditional education". Thus, they hope that, by compiling the moral deeds of their Manichaeian ancestors, villagers will recognize the virtues of their forebears and educate future generations accordingly.

Moreover, since 2014, Sunei village's Elementary School has explicitly incorporated "Cao'an Culture" into its curriculum. During my tenure as a primary school teacher there from May to July 2020, I saw that they had compiled the textbook, *Our Cao'an: Practical Teaching Materials* and offered weekly comprehensive courses for third to fifth graders. The school also trained students to act as "Little Guides of Cao'an", introducing Cao'an to visitors. I taught the Cao'an course and helped write the remaining two books in the Cao'an series. Cao'an is no longer just a subject of academic research or local legend; it has become "classroom knowledge" taught to successive generations of students in the village, with narratives about Cao'an standardized in this context. The teachers explicitly state, "We aim to influence students' families and the entire community and society through the students, making them all understand Cao'an culture".

In this context, the villagers' portrayal of their ancestors as Manichaeian followers is a natural and integral part of their narrative. From a religious studies perspective, it might be impossible to find concrete traces of Manichaeism in the villagers' genealogies and current practices. Consequently, it is easy to assume that the villagers retrospectively attribute Manichaeian identity to their ancestors for specific purposes without truly believing in it themselves. Some scholars even suggest the possibility that the worship of Mani the Buddha of Light, in the village might be a kind of Cargo Cult, a practice that emerged after

the UNESCO mission surveyed Cao'an (Franzmann et al. 2005, p. ix). However, this viewpoint does not align with the villagers' own perceptions. For them, the identification of their ancestors—and by extension, themselves—as Manichaeism followers is not a mere contrivance but a representation of their genuine belief system. They consider themselves adherents of Mani the Buddha of Light, believing that this has been their faith tradition across generations.

In the summer of 2018, villagers already knew of my search on Manichaeism, and someone proactively informed me that the large temple on the mountainside (i.e., Huayan Temple) also enshrined a statue of Mani the Buddha of Light. Although surprised that I had not heard of this before, I promptly made my way to the temple. This temple, with its red brick walls and glazed tile roof, was much more grandiose than Cao'an. Despite having only one main building, it housed three golden Bodhisattva statues, with offerings of fragrant flowers, fruits, and candles laid out on the altar. Finding the temple deserted at noon, I waited a long time before a master, having finished his noon nap, appeared. I inquired about the presence of Mani the Buddha of Light in the temple. He pointed to the three golden Bodhisattvas statues, identifying the central figure as Mani; he shared several key points: Firstly, the Mani Buddha in Cao'an was fake, merely stone, while the Buddha here was the real, golden one. Secondly, he explained that Mani Buddha was an Islamic prince who attained enlightenment under a tree, not emerging from a stone wall as the villagers claimed. On another occasion, villagers told me that the Nantian Zen Temple (南天禪寺) in the city also housed a Mani Buddha. Hurriedly visiting the temple, I only found statues of Avalokiteśvara and other Bodhisattvas. Nantian Temple is famous for its three large Buddhist rock carvings, each 6 m tall and 3 m wide, representing Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, known as the "Three Saints of the West" (西方三聖). Perplexed, I asked the temple's head where Mani Buddha was, but she was baffled, having never heard of such a figure in her many years at the temple. Returning to ask the Sunei villagers, they were equally surprised, insisting, "How can it not be there? It is in the temple, the three great statues". Puzzled by the three Mani Buddhas, my initial belief that "Manichaeism" referred to the authentic religious tradition had changed. I asked, "Are you referring to the one carved on the wall?" Everyone nodded in agreement, "Yes, the stone carving is particularly beautiful, quite large, and supposedly from the Song Dynasty. It is better than the one in Cao'an, more imposing. Is not that the stone Buddha you are looking for? It is very popular". Additionally, the helpful villagers of Sunei directed me to various "Mani Buddha temples", including stone Buddha statues, supposedly imported statues, and even carvings on cypress trees at Cao'an's entrance, all categorized under "Manichaeism" in their view.

The villagers' understanding of Mani the Buddha of Light, cannot be simplistically labelled as "ignorance". The precise differentiation between "Mani Buddha" and "Buddhism" relies on academic knowledge of history and religious studies, which are absent in the everyday life of Sunei villagers. Instead, they base their understanding on personal experiences, possessing their own local knowledge (to use Clifford Geertz's term) and classification methods. In their view, there is no distinction between "Mani Buddha" and other representations of "Buddha". As previously discussed, the veneration of Mani Buddha in Sunei village is no different from the localized form of folk Buddhism practiced there. Thus, the images of Mani Buddha that they worship in Cao'an and the local temple, following local customs and rituals, are simply "Buddha" images to them. Therefore, to them, all Buddha images, especially stone carvings, are considered representations of Mani Buddha.

This makes it understandable that the terms "Manichaeism" and "Manichaean followers", though somewhat unfamiliar to the villagers, are naturally interpreted by them as denoting the worship of Mani Buddha and even general "Buddha" images as per their long-standing traditions and customs. Consequently, it is logical for them to consider their ancestors, and even themselves, as "Manichaean followers". Some villagers even half-jokingly said to me, "We (the villagers) are all Manichaean followers". The idea that both they and their ancestors are "Manichaean followers" might seem novel and a bit strange

to them, but it still makes sense within their context. In contrast, as mentioned earlier, when the local government attempted to remodel Cao'an and the local temple based on the academic understanding of religious studies, to accentuate their "Manichaeism" characteristics, it contradicted the villagers' traditional way of worshipping Mani Buddha. This led to strong resistance from the villagers. Evidently, these practices of worship are not Cargo Cults that have recently emerged among the villagers but are part of their traditional belief system.

Building on this foundation, when villagers narrate stories of their ancestors as Manichaeism followers in genealogies and booklets, they are not merely retrofitting the history and doctrines of Manichaeism and Mingjiao and applying such to their Zeng clan ancestors. On the contrary, from their perspective, they are seeking external research materials to supplement and elucidate the virtues and beliefs of their ancestors (extending to the present). Therefore, these narratives about Manichaeism ancestors are not fabrications disbelieved by the villagers, themselves; rather they are natural extensions of their culture and logic.

In the epilogue of *Historical and Cultural Records of the Zeng Clan in Sunei Village*, the author initially points out that the Manichaeism ancestors of the Sunei Zeng clan participated in activities resisting dark rulers. However, due to oppression from these rulers, the clan's genealogies mention little of this, and Manichaeism was stigmatized by the authorities. As can be inferred from the previous analysis, this view is clearly influenced by the paradigm of peasant war research. The author then argues that such stigmatization has left few remaining materials on Manichaeism, leading some experts and scholars to mistakenly believe that Manichaeism only exists in isolated remnants today. However, in his view, Manichaeism has always been present in places like Sunei, revered equally alongside Buddhism and Taoism. Furthermore, since Cao'an became a national cultural preservation site, in-depth studies by cultural heritage departments have led to a renewed and deeper understanding of Manichaeism. "Especially significant", the author says, "is the recent work (*sic.*) by Hong Kong novelist Jin Yong (Louis Cha, 金庸). His novel '*Yitian tulong ji*' (The Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber 《倚天屠龙记》) written from an impartial standpoint, depicting the activities of the 'Mingjiao,' helps restore the truth about the cult". This sincere statement corroborates our earlier analysis.

Firstly, from an academic perspective, Manichaeism in southern Fujian is considered extinct, its remnants intermingled with local Buddhist, Taoist, and folk beliefs. However, the villagers' perspective is the exact opposite; they believe that this blending actually demonstrates that Manichaeism always exists in this area and has received equal treatment with Buddhism and Taoism in the locality. As previously mentioned, in the local knowledge and classification methods of Sunei village, venerating Mani Buddha in Cao'an and the local temple in the traditional way (similar to Buddhism and Taoism) is identified as "Manichaeism", and therefore, their ancestors are considered "Manichaeism followers". Secondly, in their eyes, both academic research on Manichaeism and Jin Yong's novel serve to elucidate the historical details of their Manichaeism ancestors. Through these external studies and materials, the villagers validate the moral character of their ancestors, thus fulfilling their familial and ethical goal of educating their descendants and sustaining the continuity of their clan community.

3.2. Mani Buddha Worship and Familial Ethics

Familial ethics not only influenced the villagers' narratives about Manichaeism but also shaped their traditional ways of worshipping Mani Buddha. For instance, following the practices passed down through generations, they establish familial bonds with Mani Buddha during rituals, treating these connections as covenants. They build temples for Mani Buddha in a manner akin to maintaining their own homes and even venerate him as a household deity.

In the autumn of 2021, a temple was quietly built in the forest on the mountain. During my investigation in the village, the villagers casually mentioned in conversation after

meals, “the Mani Buddha enshrined in the temple”. It was already dark, but I was eager to visit the mountain, thinking this could be important new evidence of a “Manichaean revival”. However, the villagers stopped me, puzzled by my urgency. To them, the addition of another temple was nothing extraordinary. In their view, significant village events like family celebrations, promotions, wealth, and childbirth were more important and would be instantly known throughout the village.

The next morning, I set out for the mountain temple. Following a muddy path through the forest, I soon saw a rectangular building with a green-painted iron roof and with a large brass tripod incense burner in front. The entrance was adorned with red couplets: “Good deeds bring harmony from heaven and earth, eight solar terms of wellbeing; upright and incorruptible heart ensures peace throughout the four seasons” (善事天和地鉴 八节康宁, 为人心正廉洁四时平安). There was also a horizontal inscription: “Prosperity for all people” (隆昌庶黎). Inside, a long altar held a wide golden shrine with curtains draped down, housing three gilded statues. The central Sakyamuni Buddha had protuberances on the head, was wearing an Indian-style monastic robe, its hands in dhyanamudra, and was seated on a lotus base. Flanking it were seated Guanyin and standing Guan’gong with a sword. On either side of the golden shrine were two more tables, each with a small shrine—the Earth God on the left and Shuntian Zhugong (顺天主公) on the right. I did not find the Mani Buddha of Cao’an; it was clearly a folk temple where Buddhism and Taoism coexisted (Figure 5). I asked a villager accompanying me, “Where is the Mani Buddha?” The reply was, “Is not that him, in the middle?” I questioned further, “Is not that the Sakyamuni Buddha?” To which the response was, “Yes, it is!”



Figure 5. Shrines and altars of the “Mani Buddha Temple”. Photographed by the author in 2021.

I eventually sought out the person responsible for building the temple. He led me back inside, directing me to turn around and look towards the door. Above the interior side of the main entrance hung a sign with four large characters signifying “Mani the Buddha of Light” (Figure 6). The temple builder, a man over sixty, is also a resident of Sunei village. In earlier years, before Cao’an underwent cultural restoration and became more “Manichean”, he was in charge of interpreting divination poems in the temple. Later, he set up a water plant at the village entrance, but it closed following a demolition. Subsequently, he moved to live on the mountain. His iron-sheet house comprised two rooms:

one for living and the other serving as the “Mani Buddha Temple”. When I asked why he built the temple, he responded, “Now, in Cao’an, they do not allow burning incense, drawing lots, or throwing divination blocks; nothing is allowed except looking. People have nowhere to seek Mani Buddha”. They even plan to recreate a statue of the Mani Buddha from Cao’an there. They found a strange rock about ten meters outside the temple, set up an altar in the traditional manner to worship the God of Earth, and placed a sign marked “Moni”. They plan to start carving by around 2024, intending to replicate even the sixteen characters of the inscription found outside Cao’an (Figure 7). As previously mentioned, from the perspective of local knowledge and classification within the village, this small temple, dedicated to the Buddha and built according to southern Fujian traditional beliefs, is the true “Mani Buddha Temple”. In contrast, today’s Cao’an, transformed into a “Manichaeism” site, does not align with their understanding of a temple for worshipping Mani Buddha.



Figure 6. Entrance of the “Mani Buddha Temple”. Photographed by the author in 2021.

In a corner of the iron-sheet wall of the “Mani the Buddha of Light Temple”, a small red paper was affixed. In December, a villager from Sunei, Zeng E, heard that there was now a temple for Mani Buddha of Light on the mountain, and she brought her sickly son to be adopted by Mani Buddha as a foster child. This practice is customary in the southern Fujian region, where deities are revered as parents to ensure the safe and healthy growth of young children. The red paper contained a detailed “Adoption Contract”.



Figure 7. The rock where villagers planned to recreate a statue of Mani the Buddha of Light. Photographed by the author in 2021.

Adoption Contract

Adopted Parties: Chen Qi, married to Zeng E from An Village, Hongzhai, Jinjiang, Quanzhou. On the 24th day of the 10th lunar month in 2018, a son named Chen Wen was born. The couple has decided to give their beloved son to Mani Buddha of Light as a foster child.

We pray for the support of his foundation, disaster-free years, celebrations in all seasons, well-being during the eight solar terms, and growing up healthy and strong. Upon reaching adulthood, he shall offer fruits, flowers, and money as tokens of gratitude to the deity. Fearing that words alone are not substantial; this written contract is hereby made as proof.

Adopted Parties: Chen Qi; Zeng E

Respectfully established on the 3rd day of the 12th lunar month in 2021.

This means that, according to local beliefs, a fictive kinship relationship can be established between devotees and Mani, Buddha of Light or other deities. Villagers attempt to regulate the relationship between humans and gods through family ethics, thus ensuring the deity's protection over their followers, akin to how household gods protect family members. However, if they were to follow the local government's intent to make their culture appear more "Manichaeian", they would have to abandon their traditional ways of worshipping Mani, Buddha of Light. Consequently, they would not be able to form a kinship relationship with him, losing his protection. This constitutes a major reason for their resistance to the "Manichaeization" of Cao'an.

Indeed, family ethics are not just manifested in the establishment of fictive kinship contracts with Mani the Buddha of Light and other deities, but also in everyday life. This is evident in the villagers' temple-building activities, where they attempt to construct temples for Mani the Buddha of Light as they would build their own homes. As discussed earlier, the villagers' plan to renovate the local temple encountered significant obstacles due to heritage conservation issues. After the failure of the renovation, the question of "how to rebuild the temple" became a persistent topic in the villagers' daily conversations. Temple construction was seen by the people of Sunei village as closely linked to their daily

lives. Building materials, such as clay, sand, bricks, and tiles, piled up at the dilapidated temple entrance, and the elderly often wandered around sighing and muttering, “How can the gods bless us if they live in such a dilapidated place? We need to figure out what to do”. Our understanding should not be limited to interpreting this as merely a transactional or reciprocal relationship between offerings to the deities and their blessings. On a deeper level, the villagers’ mindset and actions in building temples for Mani the Buddha of Light are strikingly similar to those involved in constructing ancestral halls for their ancestors or homes for their family members. They perceive temples as the homes of deities and feel a responsibility to construct them for deities like Mani the Buddha of Light, just as they feel obligated to build homes for their ancestors and family members.

The people of Sunei village often use the phrase “marrying a wife, having a son, building a house” to describe the ideal life scenario. Building a house, as an important life goal, is not merely for the purpose of comfortable living; rather, it signifies good family life and social relationships. An elder in the village explained, “Life in the village is comfortable, but when a son gets married, he needs a place of his own, and when a daughter is married off, she cannot leave empty-handed. Besides, my grandfather and father both rebuilt their houses; I cannot be so unambitious as to not do the same”. Thus, building a house symbolizes an individual’s successful and fulfilled familial and social relationships, constituting a familial duty for everyone. Therefore, what these villagers truly value is not the material aspect of the house itself but the home that is intimately connected with the house. A house is not just a physical structure but a dynamic entity that encompasses complex relationships between architecture, people, and concepts (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995, p. 1). Levi-Strauss conceptualized this as a “house society”, revealing how, within the spatial context of a house, political and social accomplishments are realized (Lévi-Strauss 1963, pp. 132–63; 1982; 1987). The same logic applies to the rebuilding of ancestral halls, as these halls are also the homes of ancestors. According to the family records, when the economic conditions in the village improved in the late 1990s, the reconstruction of the ancestral hall was promptly put on the agenda. Even during the planning stage, several enthusiastic young people began the reconstruction spontaneously.

Their attitude towards temples is similar. As Montesquieu insightfully pointed out, people live in houses, so they want to build houses for their gods; the house of a god is a temple (Montesquieu 2012, p. 164). The idols are enshrined in village temples, and to the people of Sunei village, these temples are not just a place for divine judgment (Feuchtwang 1991) but are the homes of the gods. If a temple falls into disrepair or collapses, the gods would be rendered homeless. Villagers feel it is their duty to ensure that the gods have a home and to maintain the temple to at least a standard commensurate with the village. An elderly woman living opposite the Wangye Temple (王爷庙) commented, “Even the poorest have a home to live in; how can the gods not have a place to stay?” She expressed deep sympathy for the deities dwelling in dilapidated temples. In fact, when discussing the inability to repair temples, villagers often use the term “unreasonable” to express their disapproval. The concept of “reasonableness” has transcended purely utilitarian bounds and carries a moral indignation. The villagers’ aim is not simply to save face or to repair the Jingzhu Gong for the sake of showing off. In reality, the temple is located far from main roads and is not even marked on maps. Surrounded by villagers’ tall residential buildings, it is hardly visible from the outside, and even finding the path to it is challenging—of course, this is not to deny the element of saving “face” involved, but this kind of “face” is not merely for comparison and showing off, but represents their understanding and recognition of what they should do for relatives, ancestors, and deities. If a wealthy family does not participate wholeheartedly in a temple renovation, making contributions commensurate with their circumstances, they would be considered “bu xianghua” (unreasonable, 不像话). During the Jingzhu Gong renovation, a well-off villager, Mrs. Li, donated ten thousand yuan. While people admired her generosity and even envied her ability to contribute such a sum at once, they all agreed that she “should” donate the most, given that she “has the village’s best Fengshui”. Some even said, “It is the gods’ blessings

that enabled her to earn so much money”. Though Zeng Zhang, a prominent figure in the village, never participated in worshipping or visiting temples—tasks managed by the women in his family—he still donated five thousand yuan for the Jingzhu Gong restoration and is prominently listed on the donation plaque.

Thus, the logic of the villagers in building their homes, ancestral halls, and the Jingzhu Gong is consistent. The understanding of temple building as an “exchange of benefits” in a “mutual reciprocity” between humans and gods fails to explain the rich emotions of the villagers regarding temple construction, as well as those temple-building practices that go beyond mere “transactional” acts. The use of the term “xianghua” (reasonable, 像话) by Sunxi villagers to describe the construction of homes and temples indicates their strong sense of responsibility towards this task, and thus their construction of the Jingzhu Gong for Mani the Buddha of Light, also viewed as a “home”, stems from a similar obligation. This not only means that villagers built the Jingzhu Gong for Mani the Buddha of Light, based on family ethics, but it also seems to reflect a kind of familial ethical bond between them and the deity, more prominently demonstrated by the fact that some villagers worship him as a household deity.

Nian Liangtu reports that a small statue of “Mani the Buddha of Light” is enshrined in the house shrine of the former spirit medium, Zeng De (曾德), in the village (Nian 2008, pp. 83–84; Franzmann et al. 2005). This Mani the Buddha of Light statue, standing no more than 20 centimetres tall, sits on a lotus base. The figure is adorned in red, with strands of long hair draped over the shoulders. It is dressed in a golden Chinese-style Taoist robe with a waist belt, and the hands are in the dhyanamudra (Figure 8). Lieu doubts that this statue, as having a crimson visage, may be influenced by the worship of Guangong who is the most famous red-faced deity in China that rose in the middle 17th century (Lieu 2013, p. 97).

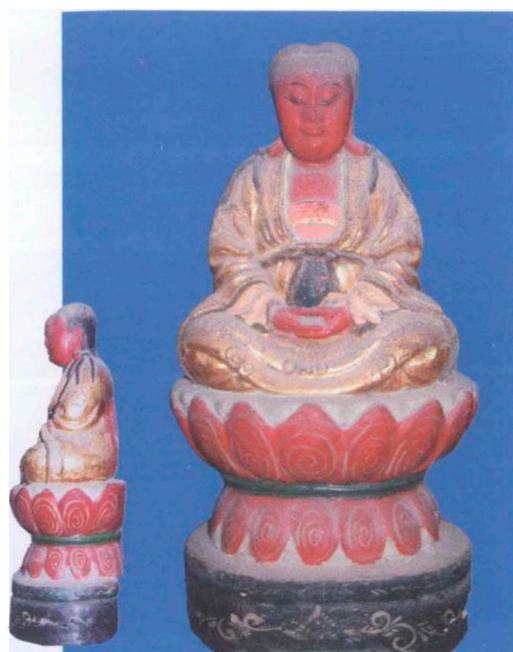


Figure 8. ¹² The wood-carved statue of Mani the Buddha of Light preserved in a house shrine of Zeng De’s home.

Indeed, the villagers seem to care little whether this statue of Mani the Buddha of Light looks like the one in Cao’an. In my field research, I discovered another case where a former spirit medium, Zeng Xi, also enshrined a statue of “Mani the Buddha of Light” in his home. This small statue is not identical to the ones in the Cao’an or as depicted in Figure 3. It is entirely painted in gold, wearing a Taoist robe covered with a golden ceremonial cloak, and the hands are positioned in the dhyanamudra (Figure 9).



Figure 9. The statue of Mani the Buddha of Light enshrined in Zeng Xi’s home. Photographed by the author in 2021.

Although its form differs from the Mani the Buddha of Light in the Cao’an, this statue is inscribed with “Cao’an Moni Gong” (草庵摩尼公) indicating that it is a spiritual emanation of the Cao’an statue. It is enshrined on the fourth floor of this family’s home, alongside statues of the God of Earth and other deities. The fourth floor is a semi-enclosed terrace, partially covered by a roof on one side and completely open on the other. The Mani the Buddha of Light statue is placed in front of the wall on the covered side, facing the open terrace. It is evident that this arrangement resembles the Cao’an and most Chinese temples, where religious statues are typically located inside a hall, facing an open space or square. Consequently, this family’s layout turns their fourth floor into a miniature temple within the home. Although not many families in the village enshrine Mani the Buddha of Light in their homes, those who do usually follow this pattern do so for other deities, like Guanyin, too. Thus, each household essentially contains a small temple. As a result, these deities become household gods, with this particular Mani the Buddha of Light serving as the household deity for this family. Every morning, the hostess of the house offers incense to the deity, and on the first and fifteenth days of the lunar month, she presents offerings, praying for the protection and well-being of her family. This ritual is similar to how other families in Sunei village worship their respective deities. In this way, Mani the Buddha of Light (and other deities) becomes integrated into the domestic space, becoming part of the family. They are believed to reside within the home and protect its inhabitants.

Thus, in the belief system of Sunei village, family ethics form the traditional method and intrinsic logic behind the villagers’ worship of Mani the Buddha of Light, and other deities. The villagers feel obliged and responsible for constructing temples for them, akin to building homes, even placing them within their own homes as household gods. When seeking divine assistance, they can explicitly establish a kinship relationship through contractual techniques, thereby securing divine protection. Therefore, the villagers’ worship of Mani the Buddha of Light is deeply rooted in the family ethics of Chinese clan society, far from being any form of Cargo Cult. It represents their traditional way of venerating the deity, a practice they strive to maintain within their narrative of Mani the Buddha of Light worship.

4. Conclusions

Now we can return to our initial question: Why do villagers display a paradoxical attitude towards Manichaeism, showing both indifference and enthusiasm? That is, why do they devoutly worship Mani the Buddha of Light and actively compile narratives related to Manichaeism while strongly opposing local government efforts to accentuate the Manichaean characteristics of the Cao'an and some village temples? Our analysis reveals that the core issue lies in many researchers' tendency to view villagers' religious practices and narratives from a disciplined religious studies perspective. This involves the presupposition that Manichaeism is distinct from Buddhism, Daoism, and folk beliefs. Researchers often perceive villagers' family legends and narratives as disorganized historical materials, attempting to extract purely Manichaean historical information from them.

However, the realities observed in Sunei village present an alternative approach to understanding Manichaeism in China; that is, understanding Manichaeism from the perspective of Sunei villagers, comprehending its significance within their local knowledge, and interpreting its meaning in their lifeworld and belief system. This approach reveals the motives and logic behind the development of various beliefs and narratives around Manichaeism. Consequently, it becomes evident that family ethics fundamentally drive the villagers' practices and the development of their faith in Mani the Buddha of Light related to Manichaeism.

Over the past two decades, narratives concerning "Manichaeism" and ancestral affiliations therewith in the Sunei village, such as genealogies, inscriptions, and legends, have gradually accumulated. Through meticulous examination and comparison of these narratives, it becomes apparent that since the 1990s, as the Cao'an garnered increasing external attention, villagers have gained progressively more knowledge and information about Manichaeism, thereby reinforcing the narrative of their ancestors as Manichaeans. In the process of revising their genealogies, they emphasized the ancestral connection with Cao'an. Subsequently, inspired by the mission of the UNESCO Silk Roads programme, they highlighted the relationship between their ancestors' establishment of Cao'an and the Silk Road. Later, after gaining insights from Manichaean studies and discourse on the tradition of peasant wars, they narrated numerous stories of their ancestors as Manichaeans engaged in struggles against dark forces. Therefore, these texts hold significance not as historical records but for revealing the underlying logic and mechanisms behind the generation of Manichaean narratives among the villagers.

Within the framework of local knowledge held by the villagers, there is no differentiation between Mani Buddha and "Buddha". For them, the worship of "Mani Buddha" at Cao'an and Jingzhu Gong in accordance with local traditions is, in a certain sense, equivalent to being "Manichaean". Building upon this foundational understanding, they have recently absorbed a significant amount of external research on Manichaeism with the intent to showcase their ancestors' morality and virtues as "Manichaeans". Their aim is to educate their descendants and gather the clan members.

This family ethics is also reflected in the villagers' acts of faith towards the Mani Buddha at Cao'an and Jingzhu Gong. Family ethics form the connection between the villagers and the deity, as well as the traditional methods and logic of worshipping him. The villagers construct temples for the Mani Buddha just as they build their own homes for the family. They place these deity images in their households, where these gods become household deities. Simultaneously, they seek the blessings of the Mani Buddha by entering into contracts with the god and creating fictional kinship relationships with him.

Consequently, family ethics not only drive the accumulation of narratives related to Manichaeism among the villagers but also constitute the backdrop and mode of their faith in the Mani Buddha. It reflects the villagers' consistent mindset and logic concerning their faith in the "Mani Buddha", their narrative activities, and their rejection of the officially promoted "Manichaeism". Family ethics, then, is the cornerstone of the development of religious activities among the villagers in contemporary times.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ For an overview of Manichaeism canonical literature, history, doctrines, and important studies, see: [Lieu \(1985, 1998, pp. 1–58\)](#), [Lin \(1987, pp. 1–11\)](#), [Gardner and Lieu \(2004, pp. 1–45\)](#), [Tardieu \(2008\)](#), [Baker-Brian \(2011\)](#), and [Yao et al. \(2011, pp. 161–305\)](#). For a retrospective review of the history of Chinese Manichaeism studies, see: [Wang \(1992, pp. 2–58\)](#).
- ² On the activities and findings of the expeditions which discovered these documents in the early 20th century, see: [Lieu \(1998, pp. 2–12\)](#). For a brief summary of the studies based on them, see: [Gardner and Lieu \(2004, pp. 25–35\)](#), and [Wang \(2012, pp. 1–14\)](#).
- ³ Lin Wushu distinguishes between “Mingjiao sites” (fixed religious structures left by Mingjiao adherents, like Cao’an), “Mingjiao artifacts” (religious and daily items of Mingjiao followers), and “Mingjiao traces” (physical and non-physical items with Mingjiao elements). See, [Lin \(2014, pp. 337–41\)](#).
- ⁴ The inscriptions read: “Yao Xingzu of Luoshan Jing, Xinghua Lu, devoutly constructed a stone chamber. Prayers for his father Yao Rujian Sanshisan Yan, his mother Guo Wujiu Tairu, stepmother Huang Shisanniang, and brother Yao Yuejian Sixue, and hopes that they could live in Buddha’s realm generation after generation. (興化路羅山境姚興祖, 奉捨石室一完。祈薦先君正卿姚汝堅三十三宴, 妣郭氏五九太孺, 繼母黃十三娘, 先兄姚月潤四學世生界者). Chen Zhenze Lisi, a Xiedian Shi believer, joyfully donated the sacred statue of the Master, praying for the rebirth of his parents in Buddha’s realm”. (謝店市信士陳真澤立寺, 喜捨本師聖像, 祈薦考妣早生佛地者. [Wu 2005, p. 443](#))
- ⁵ [Lieu \(2012b, p. 72\)](#). The same paper also collects a series of other photos of Cao’an and Manichaeism-related remains of Sunei village.
- ⁶ For the story of Wu Wenliang’s discovery of Cao’an, see: [Lieu \(2012a, pp. 15–17\)](#). Goodrich first reported this discovery to the West in 1947 ([Goodrich 1957, p. 64](#)). Bryder’s personal visit to Cao’an in 1986 and his corresponding papers became the first major study of Cao’an in the English-speaking world ([Bryder 1988](#)).
- ⁷ However, during my fieldwork, I found no evidence of local people knowing or using this incantation.
- ⁸ In the 1980s, when Jinjiang was still a remote area, it was linked with the “international” community. The local government consciously utilized Cao’an as a cultural capital, taking advantage of the “traditional culture” and “Silk Road” trends to promote Manichaeism and Cao’an. Cao’an has been positioned as Jinjiang’s “shining business card”, attracting substantial economic resources. In 1987, the first International Manichaeism Symposium used the Cao’an Mani statue as its symbol. In 1991, a scientific mission of the UNESCO silk roads programme visited Cao’an. In 1996, Cao’an was upgraded to a national cultural preservation site. In 2008, its management was transferred from Sunei village to Jinjiang City. In 2010, the Jinjiang City government developed the “Cao’an Park Project”, aiming to turn Cao’an into a 3A tourist attraction and a patriotic education base. For this purpose, Sunei village underwent a major demolition to create the “Cao’an Cultural and Tourism District”.
- ⁹ The names of the villagers today (i.e., Zeng Kang, Chen Qi, Zeng E, Chen Wen, Mrs. Li, Zeng Zhang, and Zeng Xi) are aliases.
- ¹⁰ Translated by [Lieu \(2015, p. 137\)](#), adapted.
- ¹¹ Wang Yuanyuan doubts the credibility of this record, arguing that the inscription on the Cao’an statue confirms its construction during the Yuan Dynasty ([Wang 2009, p. 108](#)).
- ¹² ([Nian 2008, Figure 24](#)).

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