

The Ascendancy of the “Gong” and the Marginalization of the “Mu”: Analyzing the Social Construct of Gender in Land Deity Worship

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Abstract

This study approaches gender symbols in the worship of the Land Deity to critically examine how traditional Chinese folk beliefs participate in and shape the social gender order. Focusing on the phenomenon of “The popularity of the ‘Gong’ (male) deity is much higher than that of ‘Mu’ (female) counterpart”, it analyzes its formative mechanisms through both historical and structural perspectives. The research finds that the gendered construction of the Land Deity belief is accompanied by a transformation in its social functions: The fertility and nurturing role of the early “Dimu” (the Earth Mother) was gradually replaced by the territorial management and order-sustaining functions of the “Shegong/Tudigong” (She God/Land Deity). In this process, the “Gong” symbol became institutionalized through deep coupling with three key functions - grassroots governance, patrilineal succession, and community integration. The “Mu” symbol, by contrast, underwent a process of functional contraction, derogation in folk narratives, and symbolic weakening, resulting in significantly lower visibility and recognition in public worship compared to the “Gong” symbol. This study reveals that the gendering of religious symbols is not the result of natural evolution, but rather emerges from the interplay between power structures and cultural meanings. It offers new insights for understanding the gender politics of Chinese folk religion, and provides a fresh perspective for reflecting on how traditional societies legitimize power through symbolic systems.

Keywords

Land Deity, Tudigong, Houtu, Gender symbols, Social functions

Introduction

The Land Deity holds a prominent position in Chinese folk belief, distinguished by its unparalleled prevalence and deep-rooted connections to local communities. Academic inquiries have extensively explored this figure through diverse lenses such as historical development, regional variations, ritualistic expressions, and its role in social cohesion. While these contributions have substantially advanced our understanding, a conspicuous pattern remains inadequately addressed. In popular perception, the Land Deity is predominantly represented by its male image - “Tudigong”, while the female image - “Tudipo”- enjoys significantly lower visibility, and the socio-functional rationale that this gendered representation entails remains to be examined [1].

Substantial contributions have been made, yet avenues for further development remain. First, from a

historical perspective, the Land Deity’s evolution from a nature god to an anthropomorphic deity has been clearly delineated. Land worship originated from “Dimu” veneration and animistic beliefs in primitive societies. The complex divergence of earth deities from the “Dimu” to the “Sheshen”, “Houtu”, and finally the “Tudigong” shows multiple transformations: from a nature god to an anthropomorphic deity, and from a mainstream to a marginalized god. With a focus on the Pre-Qin and the Tang-Song periods respectively, the state-sanctioned nature of “Sheshen” and its process of anthropomorphization and secularization have been discussed.

While these historical perspectives provide essential depth, they fail to adequately address a critical question. Why did the Land Deity, which originated from a female divine concept, solidify into a singular

male elder figure in the praxis of early modern and modern folk belief [2]?

Second, the active role of Land Deity belief in constructing social order is profoundly evident. The Land Deity serves as a crucial link binding bloodline and geographical relationships in grassroots society. Its belief practices possess diverse functions, including community integration, ethnic coordination, and even participation in commercial operations. A meticulous examination of the Jiangnan region further reveals the coexistence and functional division between two sets of territorial deity systems - the She God and the Land Deity - significantly deepening the understanding of the internal complexity of Land Deity worship. This compellingly demonstrates that the Land Deity carries substantial public social functions. However, most treat the male identity of the “Tudigong” as a self-evident premise, failing to treat it as a core analytical variable to investigate the elective affinity between gender symbols and social functions.

Based on the above scholarly review, this study’s core question comes into sharp relief. How did the male gender symbol of the Land Deity become coupled with the specific functions it undertook in traditional Chinese grassroots society? How was the female dimension systematically marginalized in this process? In other words, this paper argues that the gendered positioning of the Land Deity was not accidental but rather a profound socio-cultural choice, an inevitable outcome of the continuous strengthening of its public and managerial functions [3].

To this end, this research titled *The Ascendancy of the “Gong” and the Marginalization of the “Mu”*: *Analyzing the Social Construct of Gender in Land Deity Worship*, aims to incorporate the social functional analytical perspective on the foundation of existing historical research. The paper will first trace the historical shift in the Land Deity’s function from “nurturing life” to “managing order”. It will then systematically analyze the three layers of social functions carried by the “Male” symbol. These functions are: acting as the terminal executor of the imperial bureaucracy, serving as an authority symbol for the patrilineal society, and functioning as a nexus for community public affairs. Finally, drawing on folk narratives and cross-cultural cases, this study explores

how the weakening of female visibility, as a cultural mechanism, effectively serves the reproduction of a specific social order.

This study emphasizes the functional coupling between gender symbols and social structures, yet it does not advocate a simplistic social determinism or teleological interpretation. Rather, it seeks to reveal a dynamic process. Over the long-term historical evolution, the logic of state governance, patriarchal cultural structures, and folk religious practices have continuously interacted, negotiated, and adapted. This process ultimately selected and solidified specific gender symbols of the Land Deity. This process was filled with unplanned power games and historical contingencies, rather than a pre-designed blueprint for social control.

This study aims to provide a novel gendered perspective for understanding Land Deity belief. Using this case, it reveals how folk religious symbols actively participate in and sustain the social structure and power order of traditional China. This analysis thereby engages in deeper dialogue with existing research and promotes further reflection in related fields.

The functional shift: From the nurturance of Dimu to the governance of Shegong

The belief in the Land Deity is not static. Its divine character and functions have undergone a profound evolutionary process. The core of this process is a historical shift from “Dimu” - a symbol of origin and life possessing a maternal divine character - to “Shegong” or “Tudigong” - symbols of the grassroots and order possessing a male divine character. This shift is not merely a change in divine appellation but represents a fundamental transformation of its core social function from “nurturance” to “governance”. It reflects the reshaping of the sacred world by state power and the evolution of governance models in grassroots society [4].

The era of the goddess: The land as origin and its nurturing function

At the very origin of the belief, the divinity of the land displayed distinct maternal characteristics. During this period, the core functions of the land deity were the

nurturing of all things and the bearing of life. Its divine nature was pervasive and fundamental, closely linked to human reproductive worship.

First, the object of worship was the earth as the natural entity itself. The concept of the Land Deity originated from animism - the belief that the land was endowed with a spirit. Thus, the object of veneration at this stage remained the earth as a natural entity itself. This worship of the land's natural attributes and its capacity to nurture and produce all things formed the conceptual foundation for all later personified land deities.

Second, the dominant divine character was the lofty "Dimu" or "Houtu". Clearly, "Houtu" was originally the supreme deity governing the land, paired with the "Huangtian", referred to as the "Huangtian Houtu". Early on, "Houtu" was regarded as the central deity corresponding to the Huangdi (Yellow Emperor), holding an exalted status. The *Wulilun* states, "Its deity is called Shu. Also called the Huangdi Shu, also named Houtu." The *Sanjiao Yuanliu Soushen Daquan* even more explicitly proposes the concept of "Tiangong Dimu". The land deity of this era was the "earth itself". Its functions were cosmological - nurturing and sustaining - rather than communal management.

Finally, its core functions were intimately connected with life rituals. As a remnant of the Dimu belief, the land deity - "Houtu" - for a long time retained the function of granting and protecting new life. Within birth rituals, people would ask "Houtu Niangniang" for a child, and when the child reached one month of age, they would go to the "Houtu Niangniang" Temple to fulfill a vow and report the household registration to her. This fully illustrates the primal function of the land as the "ancestor of the earth" and the source of life. Consequently, in its initial stage, the divine character of the land deity was maternal, and its functions were vitalistic and fundamental [4].

The historical turning point: State construction and the bureaucratization of deities

Following the Qin and Han dynasties, with the consolidation and development of the centralized imperial state, the government began to systematically regulate the sacrificial system. The belief in the land

deity was consequently incorporated into a hierarchical, bureaucratized "pantheon", marking a critical turning point in its gender and fundamental functions [5].

First, the state co-opted and disciplined the land deity through its official sacrifices. In the fourth year of the Yuanding, "A Houtu Ci was established at Fenyin (an ancient county in present-day Wanrong County, Shanxi Province). The Emperor personally worshipped there, following the rites for the Supreme Deity." This event signified the sacrifice to "Houtu" becoming a major affair of state. Records such as "sacrificing to Heaven in the southern suburb, then sacrificing to Earth in the northern suburb" from the *Liji* indicate that the worship of the earth had been integrated into a formalized state ritual system led by the emperor. Similarly, the *Zhouguan* records state, "On the summer solstice, sacrifice to the 'Diqi' (the Deity of the Earth)", further confirming this integration. This institutionalized worship stripped the land deity belief of its original grassroots spontaneity and local diversity, imbuing it with strong political connotations [5].

Second, the bureaucratic pantheon was gradually perfected, and the land deity's rank descended. As the imperial bureaucratic system matured, its model was projected onto the divine world. In other words, a top-down hierarchical divine bureaucracy - exemplified by the chain "Houtu Huang Diqi" → "Chenghuang" → "Tudigong" - crystallized, with the Land Deity being fixed at its lowest rung. Within the Daoist pantheon, the Tudi deity, although the deity with the lowest divine status, is simultaneously the deity most intimately connected with the common people.

Ultimately, the public and political nature of its functions gave rise to a male divine character. When the Land Deity's responsibility shifted from nurturing life to managing a specific territory, its divine image necessarily became isomorphic with the real-world managers of such territories. In the traditional patriarchal society, grassroots officials, such as "Lizheng" and "Baojia heads", and clan leaders, such as lineage elders and village gentry, were almost exclusively male. Consequently, the image of a male deity - the "Tudigong" - better suited its new functions

as the terminal agent of the imperial bureaucracy and a symbol of male authority within the community. The change in appellation from “Houtu” to “Tudigong”, along with legends featuring male deities like “Julong” emerging during the anthropomorphization of “Houtu”, is precisely the symbolic manifestation of this historical shift.

The solidification of functions: The managerial roles and symbolism of Shegong

Through historical selection and construction, the male image of “Shegong” or “Tudigong” and their managerial functions were ultimately solidified, becoming the norm in folk belief through a series of symbolic representations.

Its first function was the management of space, involving territorial demarcation and protection. The Land Deity became the guardian of a specific territory. Its temples were often located at village entrances or crossroads, symbolizing the demarcation of its jurisdiction. In the Songhua River Basin, the locations of Tudi Temples are mostly situated at village entrances, roadside, or by small rivers, generally on the necessary routes for people entering the village. This visually embodies their function of demarcation and guardianship.

The second responsibility encompassed the management of civil affairs, specifically through reporting and oversight. The Land Deity was regarded as a grassroots official capable of reporting situations within its jurisdiction to higher deities like the “Chenghuang”. Within the villagers’ worldview, the primary function of the Land Deity is to manage civil affairs, maintain an acute awareness of their circumstances, and faithfully relay all it observes to the Heavenly Court. This reporting function is identical to the scenario where grassroots leaders reported to superiors within the real-world Lijia and Baojia systems.

Its third function was to integrate the community, achieved through ritual and the reinforcement of social order. Collective sacrifices to the “Tudigong” became important rituals for consolidating community identity and reinforcing social order. Communal rituals like the “She Ri” sacrifice served to entertain and unite villagers, temporarily suspending internal social distinctions and thereby reinforcing village cohesion.

The Zhuang Land Deity in Guangxi plays a role in constructing a local socio-political order grounded in both kinship and territorial ties. By this point, the core function of the Land Deity had completely shifted to the construction and maintenance of social order.

The evolution of the Land Deity from “Dimu” to “Shegong” traces a clear trajectory: from nature worship to anthropomorphic deity worship, from goddess belief to god belief, from the function of nurturing life to that of social management. This transformation of the gender symbol did not originate from the will of the deity itself but was an inevitable outcome of the fundamental shift in the social functions it bore. When managing order replaced nurturing life as the core duty of the Land Deity, its image inevitably became isomorphic with male authority under the patriarchal system. This provides a solid historical dimension for understanding the folk phenomenon of “the ‘Gong’ is prevalent while the ‘Mu’ is weak”, that is, the significantly higher visibility of “Tudigong” over “Tudipo” [6].

The coupling of the “Gong” symbol and its triple social functions

Within the traditional Chinese land worship culture, the “Tudigong” is not merely a product of the secularization of folk belief but a complex symbol bearing multiple social functions. From semiotic and functionalist perspectives, this chapter systematically elucidates the three social roles coupled with the appellation “Gong” and its image. First, as an administrative agent, the “Gong” embodies the terminal execution of imperial order. Second, as a patriarchal elder, the “Gong” symbolizes the authority structure of the patrilineal society. Third, as a communal nexus, the “Gong” serves as the ritual center for public affairs. These three functions collectively construct the meaning network of the “Tudigong” within grassroots society.

The “Gong” as administrative official: The terminal execution of imperial order

Within the divine hierarchy, the “Tudigong” plays the role of a grassroots administrative official. Its functions correspond profoundly with systems such as the Baojia system and the reporting mechanisms of the

imperial bureaucracy. From territorial guardianship to information reporting, the “Tudigong”’s duties reflect the methods of state power penetration at the local level.

As the guardian deity of villages and communities, the “Tudigong” undertakes the core functions of demarcation and guardianship. This role is rooted in the administrative nature of the ancient She. The *Liji · Jifa* clearly records that “officials below the rank of senior minister form groups to establish a She”, indicating that the She was the most basic administrative unit. The Han dynasty system of twenty-five households forming one She, as documented in the *Hanshu · Wuxingzhi*, further strengthened the association between the “Tudigong” and territorial management. In practice, the “Tudigong” not only guarded physical spaces like village boundaries, farmland, and water sources but also functionally complemented the Dibao and Lizheng figures within the Baojia system, jointly maintaining local spatial order.

Simultaneously, the “Tudigong” also shoulders the important responsibilities of reporting and surveillance. The Song dynasty text *Yijian Zhi* details an instance where the “Chenghuang Deity” summoned various “Tudi Deities” to report on epidemics within their jurisdictions. The “Tudi Deities” were required to promptly submit reports on the conditions of the people in their districts without delay. This hierarchical reporting mechanism is highly isomorphic with the information flow from the Lijia to the prefectural and county levels within the imperial administrative system. By establishing a divine surveillance network of “Tiandi - Chenghuang - Tudi”, the “Tudigong” becomes a crucial node connecting the supernatural order with the secular order, ensuring the comprehensive coverage of state power on a symbolic level.

These administrative functions are represented through specific visual symbols. The classic image of the “Tudigong” as a white-haired old man holding a hu tablet (a ceremonial tablet held by officials) embodies both the authoritative experience of an elder and displays his public management identity [7]. The Tang dynasty line, “Together at the field head, making

merry to the She God” (from *You Cheng Nan Shiliu Shou · Sai Shen, Sixteen Poems on South of the City · The Sacrificial Ceremony to the Gods*). This verse vividly corroborates the symbolic characteristic of the “Tudigong” as a field-level functionary.

The “Gong” as patriarchal elder: Authority symbol in a patrilineal society

Within the social structure of lineage-based villages, the “Tudigong” is assigned the role of “common ancestor” or “guardian patriarch”. Its symbol reinforces the legitimacy of the patrilineal bloodline order and property inheritance, becoming a vital representation sustaining the patriarchal clan system.

The “Tudigong” deeply participates in constructing the lineage order through sacrificial activities. After the Ming dynasty, Tudi Temples were often established adjacent to ancestral halls, with rituals presided over by lineage elders emphasizing ethical norms like “filial piety, fraternal duty, loyalty, and trustworthiness”. For instance, through periodic incense offerings, community members reinforced the hierarchical order of seniority and status within the lineage. This arrangement thereby positioned the “Tudigong” as the symbolic patriarch of the lineage community, exerting a dual function of cohesion and discipline within the kinship group.

Regarding the transmission of property and the ancestral line, the male deity attribute of the “Tudigong” ensured the sacredness of the patrilineal inheritance system. Land worship was closely linked to concepts of land rights. The *Zhouli · Diguan* states that the “Tujun (Official of Land) manages the governance pertaining to land”, while folk tradition revered the “Tudigong” as the “Guardian Deity of Farmland and Property”. In crucial rituals such as the division of family property and inheritance, worshipping the “Tudigong” became a necessary step for confirming male inheritance rights. Furthermore, the association of the “Tudigong” with the child-giving function of “Houtu” further solidified the symbolic system ensuring the continuation of the patrilineal line, granting divine blessing to bloodline succession.

The appellation “Gong” itself carries profound dual meanings. Etymologically, the *Shuowen Jiezi*

interprets “Gong” as “to divide equally”, extending to connotations of impartiality and public nature. Within kinship terminology, “Gong” specifically refers to senior male relatives on the paternal side. This semantic duality makes the “Tudigong” a perfect amalgamation of bloodline ethics and public authority, embodying the traditional society’s cultural logic of state-family isomorphism [8].

The “Gong” as communal nexus: The ritual center of public affairs

The worship of the “Tudigong”, as the most crucial public ritual in grassroots society, served the functions of community integration and moral edification. It was a core arena for the generation of public spirit, shaping community identity through collective participation and moral narratives.

The worship of the “Tudigong” achieved community integration through periodic collective rituals. During the She Ri activities, the celebrations of “Spring Prayers and Autumn Sacrifices” transcended family boundaries, forming a geographical community that surpassed blood ties. During the Ming dynasty, the description in the *Jiajing Wukang Xianzhi* vividly illustrates the integrative function of these sacrificial activities. It states: “In each village, typically ten to twenty people form a Shehui (sacrificial association), slaughter animals, buy wine, burn incense, and play music.” Since the Song dynasty, Tudi Temples organized by villages further became public spaces for community deliberation and dispute resolution, with their geographical location and layout reinforcing the territorial nature of the “Gong”.

On the level of moral edification, the “Tudigong” enforced social discipline through narratives of divine manifestations. In folk tales, the “Tudigong” often appears as a judge who rewards good and punishes evil. The *Yijian Zhi* contains a case where the Tudi Deity Yang Wenchang in Jiashan was enfeoffed due to his honesty and filial piety, while those who neglected their duties were punished. Such stories, spread orally, became effective tools for moral education at the grassroots level. These tales, working in tandem with village covenants and lineage rules, collectively constructed a normative system for community self-governance.

Collective public worship established the central position of the “Tudigong” in public life. From the Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi’s depiction in his poem *Libuji*, the line reads: “at the suburban sacrifices to Heaven and Houtu, using this music to move the deities”. Later, during the Qing dynasty, temple fairs at the Wanrong Houtu Ci integrated sacrifice, commerce, and entertainment. Throughout these periods, the worship of the “Tudigong” consistently remained the core form for expressing community public spirit. These activities not only strengthened community identity but also continually reproduced the symbolic meaning of “Gong” through ritual performances [9].

Therefore, the “Gong” symbol, through its organic coupling with administrative, kinship, and communal functions, became a key cipher for interpreting the structure of traditional Chinese grassroots society. The “Tudigong” was simultaneously the terminal executor of imperial order, a symbol of patriarchal authority, and the ritual hub of public life. This multifunctional coupling reflects not only the political wisdom of “using religion to support governance” but also the creative adaptation of folk society in the interaction between institution and belief. We systematically deconstruct the “Gong” symbol. Through this deconstruction, we can understand the governance logic and cultural identity mechanisms of traditional Chinese society from a new dimension. This understanding provides a valuable historical reference for contemporary studies on grassroots governance.

The marginalization of female visibility: Functional distinction and the shaping of folk narratives

Having systematically analyzed how the “Gong” symbol was shaped and reinforced through its interaction with the triad of social functions - constituting the “constructive” dimension of the masculinization of Land Deity belief. We must now turn to its counterpart. The consolidation of this gendered structure relied not only on the active crafting of the male divine character but, equally crucially, on the functional exclusion and cultural disciplining of the female divine character.

This chapter precisely unfolds this “deconstructive” dimension, aiming to elucidate that the weakening of

the “Mu” symbol’s visibility is not a result of natural evolution, but rather a core strategy for establishing the authority of the “Gong”. These two processes are like two sides of the same coin, jointly accomplishing the reproduction of the traditional grassroots social power order in the symbolic realm.

Within the traditional Chinese land belief system, the marginalization of the female divine character was not accidental but rather the result of a collusion between functional exclusion and cultural narrative. This process is manifested on three levels. They include the systemic exclusion of “maternal” functions from the public sphere, the stigmatization of the female divine character in folk legends, and the hollowing out of functions due to the elevation and abstraction of the divine character. The evolution of “Houtu Niangniang” from a specific terrestrial deity to an abstract conceptual god serves as a typical example of this mechanism.

Functional exclusion: The delineation of the “maternal” from the public sphere

Traditional societal division of gendered spaces adhered to the binary opposition of “public/external” versus “private/internal”. Affairs pertaining to Land Deity belief - such as territorial management, tax collection, and community policing - were categorized as “public matters”, falling within the male-dominated public sphere. Conversely, women were confined to the “private domain”, primarily responsible for “domestic duties” like household affairs, childbirth, and child-rearing. This demarcation makes it difficult for female deities to enter the mainstream of public worship, resulting in their low visibility in folk belief. Historically, the Land Deity initially emerged as the She God, whose core functions were closely tied to state sacrifices and agricultural abundance. The *Liji · Jifa* records: “The King establishes a She for the multitude of surnames, called the Great She; the King establishes a She for himself, called the Royal She; the feudal lords establish a She for the common people, called the State She; the feudal lords establish a She for themselves, called the Hou She.” As a crucial component of state sacrifice, the She sacrifice held explicit political symbolic significance, aiming to “seek blessings and report achievements for the realm”

(*Baihutong · Sheji*).

Within this context, the Land Deity was regarded as the guardian of territory and a symbol of political power, its functions encompassing “bearing and nurturing all things”, and was intimately linked to public affairs like taxation and warfare. In a patriarchal society, such functions were naturally ascribed male traits, as the “public sphere” was considered the exclusive domain of men [10].

Although female deities persisted within land belief systems, their functions were strictly confined to fertility and the familial sphere. For instance, in central-southern Shanxi, “Houtu Niangniang” is revered as the “Child-Giving Goddess”, giving rise to folk customs such as “Picking Flowers to Seek a Son” and “Stealing the Small Shoe”. Within birth rituals, land belief manifests as “asking Houtu Niangniang for a child”, while in marriage rituals, it appears as “kowtowing to Heaven and Earth to seek approval from the ‘Dimu’”. These functions all revolve around the “maternal”, having no connection to public management.

Whenever female deities attempted to encroach upon the “public sphere”, they encountered resistance from cultural perceptions. Although Houtu was the supreme deity governing the land, it was gradually replaced by the “Tudigong” during its evolution, its functions receding from the grand narrative of “Huangtian Houtu” to regional, private practices of child-seeking and prayer.

The logic of this functional exclusion lies in the gendered division of labor in traditional society. Decision-making and management in public affairs were seen as embodiments of “masculinity”, while women, due to traits “reserve” and “fertility”, were deemed unsuitable for such roles. The case of “Houtu Niangniang” demonstrates that even when female divine figures were incorporated into the belief system, their sphere of influence remained disciplined, unable to transcend the boundaries of the “maternal”.

Narrative stigmatization: The disciplining of “exceptions” in folk legends

In the sporadically existing legends of the “Tudipo”, the female divine character is not revered but is instead portrayed as a negative archetype through

stigmatizing narratives, thereby reducing their recognition and circulation in public worship. These tales, by depicting the “Tudipo” as “short-sighted”, “stingy”, and “narrow-minded”, reinforce the gendered notion that “public affairs should be decided by men”.

For example, in the widely circulated story *The “Tudipo” Opposes Universal Prosperity*, the “Tudigong” intends to grant the people a bountiful harvest. But the “Tudipo” obstructs this, arguing that if everyone is wealthy, no one will serve others, ultimately leading to the division between rich and poor in the human world. Such narratives do not affirm the female divine character; instead, they construct her as a saboteur of public welfare through moral denigration. The stark contrast between the “Tudipo”’s “stinginess” and the “Tudigong”’s “benevolence” implies that female participation in public decision-making leads to disastrous outcomes. This narrative strategy essentially disciplines female transgression by vilifying the “exception”, thus maintaining the male monopoly within the divine hierarchy.

The cultural function of stigmatizing narratives lies in dismantling the legitimacy of female participation in public affairs. The utilitarian nature of folk belief makes divine images highly dependent on their “practical utility”. The negative portrayal of the “Tudipo” in legends prevents her from gaining the trust of the faithful in community governance, thus making it difficult for her to become a mainstream object of folk worship, with her visibility far lower than that of “Tudigong”. Although “Houtu Niangniang” is revered as the “holy mother”, her functions remain confined to protection in childbirth, creating a functional division of labor with the “Tudigong”’s role of “protecting the territory and bringing peace to the people”. This narrative differentiation ensures the authority of the male divine character in the public sphere.

From a socio-psychological perspective, stigmatizing narratives reflect the anxiety towards female power in traditional society. Ritual theory posits that while the anti-structure state in sacrificial rituals temporarily dissolves social distinctions, it ultimately reverts to the

mundane order. The legends of the “Tudipo” precisely maintain the structural stability of gendered power by reinforcing the norm that women should not involve themselves in public matters [11].

Despite the systematic stigmatization in mainstream narratives, the image of “Tudipo”/“Tudimu” has tenaciously persisted in regional folk beliefs and ritual practices, which cannot be simply regarded as a residual of tradition. Instead, it embodies the agency of the weak in grassroots society. For local believers, especially female devotees, “Tudipo/Tudimu” is not merely a negative foil to “Tudigong”, but a complementary divine figure who responds to private, emotional, and familial demands that the male official deity overlooks. Her survival constitutes an implicit, low-profile resistance to the absolute patriarchal authority of the “Gong”, breaking the monolithic power structure of land deity worship in the public sphere.

Elevation and hollowing of divine status: The case of “Houtu Niangniang”

The evolution of “Houtu Niangniang” from a specific terrestrial deity to an abstract conceptual god exemplifies a typical pathway for the functional hollowing out of the female divine character. Through this elevation in divine status, “Houtu” was raised to a height corresponding to the “Huangtian”, yet her concrete functions were stripped away, thereby making sacred space for the male “Tudigong”.

In the pre-Qin period, “Houtu”, as the She God, governed the land’s capacity to nurture and sustain life; her image combined traits of both a nature deity and an anthropomorphic deity. The *Zuozhuan* records: “the Earth Official was called Houtu”, and her functions directly related to agricultural abundance and failure. When Emperor Wu of Han established the Houtu Shrine at Fenyin and personally performed sacrifices, “Houtu” was formally incorporated into the state sacrificial system. At this stage, “Houtu” still possessed practical functions closely tied to people’s livelihoods. However, after the Northern Song dynasty, “Houtu” was incorporated into the Taoist pantheon and granted the title “Chengtian Xiaofa Houde Guangda Houtu Huang Diqi”. Her image gradually became abstract and sublime. In contrast, regional

Land Deities, embodied as the “Tudigong”, proliferated widely among the populace, undertaking specific community management functions.

The essence of this elevation in divine status is the hollowing out of function. Houtu Niangniang was endowed with the symbolic meaning of “setting a maternal example for the world”, but her actual role was confined to that of a childbirth deity. In central-southern Shanxi, although Houtu Temples are often large in scale, the petitions of devotees are predominantly for “seeking a son”. Meanwhile, the “Tudigong” is responsible for protecting the peace of the locality, involving public affairs like security and taxation. This differentiation is not accidental but reflects the operation of gendered power in the construction of divine status. The “elevation” of “Houtu” distanced her from concrete affairs, transforming her into a revered yet powerless symbol, while the “Tudigong”, through the decentralization of function, became the practical executor of community governance.

From a cultural narrative perspective, the abstraction of “Houtu” aligns with the philosophical concept of “Heaven as Yang, Earth as Yin”. The *Yijing* states: “Great is the “Qian” (Heaven) primal, from which all things originate”, “Perfect is the “Kun” (Earth) primal, by which all things are born”. As the “Dimu”, “Houtu” was ascribed the attribute of generating all things, but her managerial functions were stripped away. This narrative duality led to the female divine character being sublimated at the symbolic level while being marginalized at the practical level.

More importantly, the localization of “Houtu Niangniang” as a fertility goddess has constructed a relatively autonomous religious space for female believers in the private domestic sphere. In this space, women’s prayers for childbirth, family health and emotional sustenance are free from the direct intervention of the male-dominated public power and bureaucratic divine order.

This gendered religious practice is not a passive acceptance of functional marginalization, but an active appropriation and reconstruction of female divine symbols by women. It forms a hidden tension with the public authority of the “Gong”, adding a layered and

dialectical dimension to the gender construction of land deity worship.

The weakening visibility of the “Mu” in land belief results from the collusion of functional exclusion and cultural narrative. Through the gendered segregation of the public sphere, the discipline of stigmatizing legends, and the hollowing out via elevation of divine status, female deities ceased to perform public administrative roles and were relegated to the realm of private worship. Consequently, their public visibility steadily declined. The gendered transformation of the Land Deity reveals the operational mechanisms of gendered power within traditional Chinese belief systems and provides a typical case study for understanding the construction of gender in folk culture.

Conclusion

Research conclusions

Through a historical investigation and structural analysis of the gender symbols in Land Deity belief, this study reveals that its evolution from “Houtu” to the “Tudigong” is essentially a process of cultural construction centered around societal functional needs. This turn towards the “Gong” (male/public) was not accidental but a precise reflection of the traditional Chinese grassroots social power structure within the symbolic realm, specifically manifested across three interconnected levels.

First, at the level of the imperial bureaucracy, the masculinization and hierarchization of the Land Deity replicated the structural logic of the imperial administrative system. From Emperor Wu of Han establishing the Houtu Shrine at Fenyin to the Tudi Temples throughout urban and rural areas during the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Land Deity system gradually formed a hierarchical order isomorphic with the bureaucratic apparatus. The Land Deity spawned a complete genealogy ranging from the state-level “Houtu Huang Diqi” to the village-level “Tudigong”. This “formation of major and minor Land Deities” was precisely a symbolic expression of the penetration of imperial power into grassroots society. The widespread establishment of the male divine character ensured a high degree of consistency between the sacred order and the real political structure.

Second, at the level of the patrilineal kinship system, the gendered selection of the Land Deity reinforced the core position of patriarchy in social organization. The gendered division of labor in traditional society allocated the “public sphere” to men and restricted the “maternal” to the “private sphere”. This study detailed how “Houtu Niangniang” was marginalized through a triple mechanism: functional exclusion, stigmatizing narrative, and elevation of divine status. Her fertility function was preserved, but her public management authority was stripped away. Her image was sublimated, yet her practical functions were hollowed out. This process completely aligns with the “men outside, women inside” power distribution within the patrilineal family system, making the Tudi Temple a symbolic space sustaining patriarchal culture.

Third, at the level of the geographical community, the masculinization of the Land Deity adapted to the practical needs of grassroots social governance. Land belief plays multiple roles in people’s lives, including cohesion and entertainment. The male Land Deity, as a community protector, better conformed to the traditional society’s role expectations for public affairs managers. In central-southern Shanxi, although Houtu Temples have persisted, their functions are now primarily confined to child-seeking and blessings, while the “Tudigong” has taken on the duty of protecting the territory and ensuring people’s safety. This functional differentiation reflects the utilitarian arrangement of divine roles within grassroots society. Female deities such as “Tudipo” have not disappeared; rather, they have experienced a structural marginalization in terms of visibility and public status within folk belief, while still retaining their agency at the level of popular religion. The persistence of “Tudimu” and the private belief practice centered on “Houtu Niangniang” have formed a complementary and restrictive relationship with the dominant male divine system. This relationship is characterized by both mutual reinforcement and mutual constraint. It demonstrates that the gender construction of folk religion is a two-way game rather than a one-way suppression of power.

Concluding remarks: The power structure of gender symbols and their contemporary resonance

While this study focuses on the cultural constructions

of traditional society, the power mechanisms reflected in the gender symbols of the Land Deity retain significant implications for the contemporary era.

On a theoretical level, the evolution of the Land Deity’s gender symbols provides a unique perspective for understanding the power structure of traditional Chinese society. Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power helps us recognize that this gendered selection is not simply “discrimination” but a comprehensive mechanism of cultural reproduction. It transforms social structures into seemingly natural “common sense”, thereby facilitating the hidden operation of power. The masculinization of the Land Deity precisely consolidates the legitimacy of patriarchy by naturalizing the gender hierarchy.

On a practical level, the contemporary reconstruction of traditional gender symbols warrants attention. Research into folk culture, involving the collaborative participation of local governments, scholars, local elites, and the populace, shows that “Houtu” belief is being endowed with new cultural connotations. This process involves both the continuation of tradition and the potential for transformation: “Houtu Niangniang” is being reinterpreted as a symbol of “root-ancestor culture”, and the gendered implications she holds in contemporary society merit further exploration.

Future research directions include: First, comparative studies of Land Deity gender symbols across different regions, investigating the influence of geographical environment and economic models on gender construction. Second, examining the role transformation of Land Deity belief within contemporary rural revitalization, analyzing the interaction mechanisms between traditional symbols and modern governance. Third, researching the agency of female devotees in the practice of land belief, exploring how they reinterpret gender roles through religious practice.

In conclusion, the gendered shift of the Land Deity from “Houtu” to the “Tudigong” is a symbolic expression of the power structure in traditional Chinese society. Understanding this process of cultural construction not only helps us grasp the social fabric of traditional China but also provides a historical perspective for reflecting on gender relations in

contemporary society. Cultural symbols are not rigid heritage but a dynamic web of meaning constantly reinterpreted and constructed within power networks. This recognition may offer valuable insights for understanding the complex relationship between traditional culture and modernity.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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