

Mazu Culture at Fujian, Coastal City of China: Symbolic Interaction and Meaning Change in the Context of World Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

This study is qualitative and has four primary research objectives: 1) Exploring Symbolic Representation – the evolution and reasons behind the development of Mazu culture in the coastal cities of Fujian. 2) Studying Symbolic Interaction – the historical deconstruction and modern construction of the significance of Mazu culture. 3) Symbolic Transition – interpreting and tracking the progression of symbols in Mazu culture over time. 4) Symbolic Reinvention – identifying new opportunities for Mazu culture in the context of World Cultural Heritage. The research reveals that belief in Mazu is not just religious, but also encompasses a rich array of cultural elements such as temple fairs, processions, music, and dance, forming a multidimensional system of Mazu culture. From the Song Dynasty to the present, the evolution of Mazu beliefs in Fujian's coastal cities has been accompanied by symbolic interactions and shifts in meaning. The development of Mazu beliefs in the Fujian region mirrors complex historical and societal transformations, highlighting intertwined societal changes and personal identity recognitions. In the modern era, the revitalization of Mazu culture showcases a renewed facade in various aspects. It not only serves as a medium for religious beliefs, comforting the souls of the believers and promoting social harmony, but also acts as a potent asset for boosting cultural soft power and enhancing international exchanges. Furthermore, it has become a catalyst for industrial investments, cultural and leisure tourism, and the development of the marine economy.

Keywords: *Mazu culture, Symbolic Interaction, Shift in Meaning, World Cultural Heritage.*

1. Introduction

Mazu culture is a folk culture rooted in the Meizhou Island of the Fujian coastal region in China, based on the belief in Mazu. Mazu, originally known as Lin Mo, was an ordinary woman during the Northern Song Dynasty, known for her charitable deeds at sea. Following her death, she was revered as a deity by the common folks, and her deeds became widely acclaimed and worshipped. With the thriving maritime trade in the coastal region, Mazu culture swiftly spread throughout China, becoming a shared spiritual belief among global Chinese communities. Preliminary statistics indicate that Mazu culture has

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established its roots in over 40 countries and regions across five continents, boasting more than 10,000 temples and over 300 million followers (Song Jianxiao, 2021).

As a belief system deeply entrenched in history, Mazu culture has undergone multifaceted shifts in meaning across various temporal and spatial contexts. Under the purview of the national cultural strategy, Mazu folk beliefs transition in meaning, elevating Mazu culture beyond mere religious faith to an integral part of the national cultural strategy. Mazu folk temple fairs, as concentrated expressions of Mazu beliefs, serve as a bridge connecting national consciousness with grassroots society. In 2009, Mazu was inscribed on UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage, symbolizing one of China's inaugural entries into World Cultural Heritage and an emblem of Chinese cultural identity. The preservation of Mazu culture is transitioning from a static protection to a more dynamic, lively inheritance. In the context of "World Heritage," there's a need to further enrich and plan pilgrimage tourism projects centered around Mazu culture, to expand its influence and boost Fujian's cultural soft power.

Throughout different historical phases, symbolic interaction and shifts in meaning have played pivotal roles in the evolution of Mazu culture. Therefore, in the academic realm, Mazu culture raises two paramount issues: symbolic interaction and changes in meaning. Building upon the presentation of Mazu symbols, a deeper understanding of the relationship between individuals and society, as well as societal historical shifts in the birthplace of Mazu culture, can be achieved. Employing the concepts of "symbolic interaction" and "shift in meaning" to study Mazu culture fills a research void in this field, offering fresh interpretative concepts for its substantive content.

This study is qualitative in nature and focuses on the symbolic representation, interaction, transition, and reinvention of Mazu culture in the coastal cities of Fujian, China. The aim of the study is to explore the evolution and reasons behind the development of Mazu culture, as well as the historical deconstruction and modern construction of its significance. It also seeks to interpret and progress the symbols in Mazu culture over time and identify new opportunities for Mazu culture in the context of World Cultural Heritage. It is important to note that the focus was on Putian City in Fujian Province, China, as it is the birthplace of Mazu culture and has a rich and diverse history. Additionally, a qualitative research approach was employed, which often requires a more focused and specific scope to gather in-depth and insightful information. However, expanding the research to other cities could provide valuable insights and perspectives on the evolution of Mazu culture in the region and could potentially be a topic for future research.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Scope of the Study

This section outlines the research's geographical, thematic, and demographic focus.

2.1.1 Geographical Scope

The research focuses on Putian City in Fujian Province, China.

2.1.2 Thematic Scope

The primary focus of this paper is the symbolic interaction and evolution of meaning within the Mazu culture.

2.1.3 Demographic Scope

The population groups under investigation have been segmented into the following categories: 1) Personnel of the ancestral Mazu temple; 2) Government officials and associated researchers; 3) Tourists and other individuals.

2.2 Methodological Approach

This section describes the research methodology, including the research method, data collection methods, tools utilized in the research, and information analysis.

2.2.1 Research Method

A qualitative research approach has been employed to delve into the symbolic interaction and shifts in the significance of the Mazu culture.

2.2.2 Methods of Data Collection

The study employs two methods of data collection: (1) collection of literary material and data; (2) field data collection. The field data collection involves key informant interviews, informal interviews, as well as general and participatory observation methods.

2.2.3 Tools Utilized in the Research

The research utilizes photography and recording instruments such as cameras and smartphones, along with documentation and analytical tools such as laptop computers and pens.

2.2.4 Information Analysis

The research uses descriptive analysis of qualitative data and content analysis of interview data to analyze the information gathered during the study.

The researchers used purposive or convenience sampling to select participants with relevant knowledge or experience of Mazu culture and its symbolic representation. The demographic scope of the study is relatively narrow, focusing on individuals with specific connections or interests in Mazu culture. However, this approach may provide a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the symbolic interaction and meaning change within this cultural context.

3. Research Findings

3.1 Historical Evolution and Underlying Causes of Mazu Culture in the Coastal Areas of Fujian

Fujian, located at the southeastern confluence of China, perpetually confronts a myriad of natural calamities and diseases that defy scientific explanation. (Figure 1) In their quest for survival, the populace increasingly sought divine intercession, with Mazu belief emerging as the most salient. Initially, Mazu was merely an ordinary fisherwoman. However, with the passage of time and the unceasing reverence from the people, she metamorphosed into an indispensable cultural and spiritual emblem of the coastal Fujian.

Fujian's geographical positioning, coupled with its profound maritime culture, sowed the seeds for the rise of the Mazu culture. Its remote topography cultivated a distinctive local cultural and spiritual essence. The region's rugged mountains, deep valleys, and perpetual mists amplified the residents' trepidation of the unknown and intensified their pursuit of supernatural powers. Consequently, legends about Mazu's feats, such as saving fishermen from marine disasters and safeguarding sailors through tempests, resonate, reflecting the sea-entwined livelihoods and cultural traditions of the locals. (Wei Yingqi, 1929)

Across different epochs, Mazu donned varied societal roles. From the research of Liu and Wang (2005), it can be traced back from the Song Dynasty to the present. In the early days, she was revered as a "Dragon Maiden." As time unfurled, she captivated the attention of rulers and was consecutively honored with 36 ennoblements across various dynasties. Throughout her lifetime, given the harsh natural conditions of the Fujian coast and her prowess in medicine and shamanic rituals, the local fishermen dubbed her "Spiritual Maiden". Posthumously, to commemorate Mazu's benevolence and in hopes of

continued divine assistance, she was deified, and by the Southern Song Dynasty, she was revered as the "Dragon Maiden". In 1123, the Northern Song emperor officially recognized her as a protector deity of the sea, bestowing upon her the title of "Shunji", marking her maiden imperial ennoblement. Between 1156 and 1208, she was ennobled five times as "Madam", and from 1217, she was elevated nine times to the rank of "Consort". During the Yuan Dynasty, she received five additional titles of "Heavenly Consort". In the Ming Dynasty, despite restrictions on maritime activities, the court still conferred upon her the honorific title of "Sacred Consort" twice. By the Qing Dynasty, she was elevated 15 times, finally receiving the highest honorific title of "Heavenly Empress". As this title epitomized the pinnacle of imperial ennoblement, subsequent emperors simply augmented previous titles, resulting in an honorific 64 characters long after 14 additional titles, making her the most frequently ennobled deity with the lengthiest title in Chinese history. (Figure 2) These titles not only galvanized the dissemination of Mazu faith but also enriched and perpetuated the symbolic system associated with Mazu – including temples, rituals, attire, headgear, statuary, and ceremonial artifacts.

Figure 1: The plaque of Mazu as the "Heavenly Sacred Mother".



Source: Field survey of Meizhou Island, photographed in 2023.

Meizhou Island, revered as Mazu's holy land, currently houses 14 Mazu temples, each serving as the epicenter of its respective village. The symbiotic interplay amongst these temples and their collective rapport with the island community reinforces and propagates the Mazu faith both locally and globally. Especially post the ancestral temple's restoration, global Mazu temples forged connections, facilitating cultural exchanges and pilgrimages, amplifying the global resonance of the Mazu faith. Temple fairs transcend mere religious rites, emerging as the nexus of culture and commerce. Mazu's folk organizations have engendered a distinctive "Circle of Faith", offering a pivotal platform for cultural transmission and social cohesion. This not only promulgates the Mazu culture but also stimulates the perpetuation of local traditions.

In summation, Fujian's coastal uniqueness and its rich maritime culture fostered an environment conducive to the inception and flourishing of Mazu faith. Evolving from a mere fisherwoman, through dynastic honors and unwavering veneration from the masses, Mazu has cemented her position as an irreplaceable emblem of faith and culture in coastal Fujian. Concurrently, the Mazu symbolic system, formed and accumulated throughout the extensive propagation of the Mazu faith, serves both as a cultural construct of the Mazu faith and augments the recognizability of the Mazu culture.

3.2 Deconstructing the Historical Significance and Modern Construction of Mazu Culture

The metamorphosis of the Mazu symbol throughout various epochs is intrinsically linked with the ever-shifting societal backdrops and the evolving entities with whom it interacts. Initially, Mazu represented a localized faith. Those who revered her viewed her embodiment as one of virtuous deeds and righteousness. Such individuals hoped others would emulate these virtues. Thus, the interaction comprised one faction yearning for

these moral principles in their community, and another already embodying them. In a feudal society dominated by the veneration of shamans and deities, there was a fervent belief in celestial beings providing protection and guidance, mirroring a profound yearning for a more prosperous life. In this milieu where man felt dwarfed by divine entities, faith in Mazu, perhaps through divination or seeking affirmation from the divine, offered a solace that alleviated psychological strains stemming from the unknown.

As the culture of Mazu proliferated with Chinese diaspora into foreign lands, these emigrants often found themselves marginalized, living under the beneficence of their hosts. The indigenous populations had their own beliefs, and for the migrant Chinese, forging a collective identity and ensuring internal cohesion was imperative for survival. Mazu symbolized a shared origin, a beacon implying mutual aid and kinship. The dialogue then shifted to one between non-adherents of the Mazu faith and its followers. With the increasing dispersion of Chinese individuals overseas, not all of whom strictly adhered to the Mazu faith, Mazu began to evolve into a national emblem. Even those previously indifferent to Mazu now felt compelled to adopt her as a symbolic representation of their identity as overseas Chinese. Although nearly 30 million Chinese spread across the continents, with approximately 80% having adopted their host nations' citizenship, their ethnic identity remains undiminished. The tapestry of traditional Chinese culture continues to be the adhesive binding the Chinese diaspora. Modern hubs of Chinese communities, such as Singapore's 'Xing'an Association', 'Nanyang Putian Association', 'Xinhe Peace Opera Troupe', and Chinatowns in the US, have become organizational focal points for these communities (Figure 3). These locales not only serve as gathering spots but also epitomize the community's cohesion and cultural alignment, standing as a flag for Chinese unity and community cohesion (Rong Shicheng, 2003). They have evolved into spiritual homelands connecting the overseas Chinese. The faith and culture of Mazu form the spiritual nucleus of these interconnected Chinese communities, acting as the linchpin that galvanizes their collective endeavors towards global prosperity.

Figure 2: Mazu temples located around the world.



Source: Google Internet, consulted in 2023.

Regarded as an integral component of the folk culture of coastal Fujian, the propagation of Mazu culture abroad has primarily paralleled the outward migration of coastal inhabitants since the 15th and 16th centuries, and the concomitant spread of the local culture. Temples dedicated to Mazu often emerge as communal places of worship for overseas Chinese in Chinatowns worldwide. In foreign lands, the impact of Mazu culture transcends its domestic confines as a deity of seafaring, travel, and the common people, evolving into a cultural and spiritual emblem for overseas Chinese to rally around and identify with. The temples and the culture of Mazu devotion also serve as pivotal symbols through which foreigners acquaint themselves with Chinese heritage."

3.3 Time-based Interpretation and Transformation of Mazu Cultural Symbols

Mazu, as a cultural entity, has been assigned varying meanings across different historical periods. The evolution in the significance of the Mazu symbol arises due to shifts in the primary entities needing or utilizing this culture. In various dynasties, as the societal background or the demand for Mazu changed, new meanings were ascribed to her. This shift in significance was not initiated by Mazu herself but by people and society altering their needs and interpretations of Mazu.

Portraying Mazu as a dignified and benevolent female hero involves infusing her divine essence with human-like qualities. Such a personification helps define the intrinsic nature of Mazu's divinity. Devotees then worship her, praying to Mazu for abundant harvests, seeking cures for ailments, or beseeching her protection from unforeseen calamities. By articulating these desires through ritual ceremonies, they reinforce guarantees for life and enhance communal well-being. Ultimately, this caters to their psychological needs. The Mazu faith embodies the human comprehension of tolerance, peace, and benevolent divinity, explaining her vast following, an appeal male deities often can't match. While humans create culture, culture also shapes humans. The Mazu faith promotes a spirit of "truth, kindness, and beauty." As a popular belief, the essence of Mazu has deeply ingrained itself in the psyche of her followers. In their reverence for Mazu, there's a dual sentiment of admiration and fear: they respect her benevolence, yet fear wrongdoing, anticipating retribution. This instills an intangible psychological pressure, urging Mazu followers to align their actions with community standards. Society is intricate; its members inevitably face contradictions, anxieties, or unforeseen setbacks. Common negative reactions include aggression, apathy, escapism, and regression (as described by Ding YuLing). Many Mazu believers' resort to the fantasy of seeking solace in Mazu, hoping her protection will offer psychological comfort, compensation, and equilibrium. This bolsters their confidence and courage, inspiring a positive, healthier, and brighter outlook on life. Their psychological inclinations are often expressed through Mazu festivals and ceremonies, serving dual purposes: appeasing the deity and entertaining the people, harmonizing both individual and societal spheres.

Amid this multi-dimensional evolution, Mazu culture transformed from a religious belief system into a multifaceted cultural symbol, integrating national culture, folk traditions, and local cohesion. This transformation not only honors history but also blends the legacy and innovation of culture. Interactions between the state and society, influences of international relations, and the continuation of local festivities collectively reshape the vibrant contemporary significance of Mazu culture.

3.4 The New Opportunities for Mazu Culture in the World Heritage Process

In the advent of a new era, against the backdrop of China's promotion of its national cultural strategy and the strengthening of cross-strait relations with Taiwan, the Mazu belief is increasingly viewed as a bridge of peace. The Mazu culture is not merely a simple faith; it embodies a profound cultural and historical identity. This identity is realized through participation in collective sacrificial ceremonies, which, having evolved and accumulated over millennia, became a pivotal element in the successful nomination of Mazu as a World Cultural Heritage. In contemporary times, the ceremonial rituals of the Meizhou Mazu Temple have undergone multiple innovations and reforms, rejuvenating both in content and form. This includes alterations in participant composition, musical and dance performances, costume and tool styles, altar arrangements, ceremonial offerings, and liturgical innovations, culminating in a fresh ceremonial paradigm. (Figure 5)



Figure 3: A scene from the Mazu festival. Originating in the Song Dynasty and enriched through the Yuan, Ming, and Qing Dynasties, the Mazu festival now stands as one of the national intangible cultural heritages.

Source: Field study in Meizhou Island, photographed in 2022.

While the Mazu festival originates from religious rites, it has evolved into a broader folk event that transcends religious confines, resonating with profound contemporary significance. Annually, the festival hosted by the Meizhou ancestral temple attracts devout followers and observers from both within China and overseas. This pilgrimage to Meizhou further solidifies the temple's central status. Devotees participating in the island festival immerse themselves in a dialogue of cultural exchange, forging an indomitable bond of Chinese cultural identity. Concurrently, the festival, through a unique cultural transmutation, revitalizes shared experiences and memories, eliciting profound emotions and awareness, crafting a sense of communal ceremony, fortifying present and future connections.

These rituals and events inherently form part of the intangible cultural heritage, effectively rebranding folk culture and diminishing its superstitious labels. This shift is profoundly significant. On one hand, it shatters the longstanding influence on Chinese tradition from both foreign and top-down perspectives. On the other, it aligns the cultural relationships among individuals, communities, localities, nations, and even global mainstreams in an unprecedented consensual manner. This transformation impacts not only the cultural domain but also fosters a wider societal and international cultural recognition and bond. (Gao Bingzhong, 2021)

Following its World Heritage designation, the Mazu culture garnered amplified attention from the international community and the Chinese government for its preservation and transmission. Mazu's folk practices were elevated to government-sponsored cultural tourism events, allowing government officials to partake in the worship. Led primarily by Putian University, institutions researching Mazu culture were established, undertaking systematic, specialized academic studies, bridging the cultural belief from folklore to academia. A plethora of Mazu-related cultural products emerged, notably a song titled "Mazu" performed by China's First Lady and renowned soprano, Peng Liyuan. Furthermore, the Mazu culture, as a World Heritage, magnetizes a plethora of domestic and international tourists and participants to Meizhou Island, significantly bolstering local cultural tourism, aiding socioeconomic growth, (Jing Feng, 2018) and furnishing a broader platform for the perpetuation and proliferation of the Mazu faith. The thriving Mazu parade in Putian is a vibrant testament to this. (Figure 6)



Figure 4: Mazu's processional rituals are a significant rite within Mazu belief, typically held during specific periods.

Source: Google Internet, accessed in 2023.

The study emphasizes the importance of understanding the symbolic interaction and evolution of meaning within Mazu culture. It also highlights the multidimensional aspects of Mazu culture, extending beyond its religious significance to its potential to drive industrial investments, cultural and leisure tourism, and the development of the marine economy. The findings of this study have significant policy and practical implications for the preservation and promotion of Mazu culture. Firstly, the study emphasizes the need for a dynamic, lively approach to preserving Mazu culture, moving beyond static protection to a more comprehensive and interactive form of inheritance. Secondly, the study underscores the importance of recognizing the cultural and economic value of Mazu culture and its potential to enhance cultural soft power and international exchanges. Therefore, the policy and practice implications of this study are to encourage the development of pilgrimage tourism projects centered around Mazu culture and to promote the integration of Mazu culture into the national cultural strategy. It is also essential to support the development of cultural and creative industries related to Mazu culture and to preserve and promote the intangible cultural heritage of Mazu culture through education and public awareness campaigns. Such initiatives would contribute to the continued preservation and promotion of Mazu culture and its significance as a world cultural heritage.

In this study, there are some limitations, including the small sample size and the specific geographical and demographic scope of the research, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other contexts. Additionally, as a qualitative study, the findings are subjective and may be influenced by the researcher's own biases and perspectives. To overcome these limitations, future studies aimed to include a larger and more diverse sample size, representing a broader range of contexts and perspectives. This would help to increase the generalizability of the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding of Mazu culture. Additionally, future studies will employ a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a more objective and well-rounded analysis of the topic.

5. Conclusion

The qualitative study titled "Mazu Culture in the Coastal Cities of Fujian, China: Symbolic Interactions and Meaning Transitions under the Backdrop of World Cultural Heritage" focuses primarily on analyzing the Mazu culture of coastal cities in Fujian, China. This investigation delves deeply into the Mazu culture in Fujian's coastal cities, recognizing that the geographical location and the abundant maritime cultural backdrop of these cities have provided favorable conditions for the proliferation and prosperity of

Mazu beliefs. The reverence for Mazu has taken root in these cities, solidifying its position as an essential spiritual and cultural emblem among the locals.

Beginning as a local deity during the Song dynasty, Mazu transitioned to a protector of mariners during the Yuan dynasty, serving as a pivotal spiritual pillar. Its societal prominence escalated in the Ming dynasty, evolving into a guardian deity for the nation and its citizens. By the Qing dynasty, the worship of Mazu flourished extensively, with both governmental entities and the general populace venerating the deity. Evidently, the Mazu culture in Fujian's coastal cities boasts profound historical foundations and rich cultural connotations. Presently, Mazu, as the maritime goddess, not only commands widespread devotion locally but also epitomizes a segment of China's oceanic culture. The veneration of Mazu transcends China, captivating global attention, solidifying its position as an integral component of China's cultural heritage.

Under the lens of national cultural strategies, the significance of Mazu's folk beliefs has undergone evolution. Mazu culture extends beyond religious worship, seamlessly intertwining with the national cultural strategy. Its profound influence on the social and cultural fabric of Fujian's coastal cities is undeniable. Amidst this multifaceted transition, Mazu culture has metamorphosed from a mere religious belief system into a multifaceted cultural emblem amalgamating national culture, folk traditions, and regional cohesion. This transition embodies not only reverence for history but also the synthesis of cultural legacy and innovation. Interactions between the state and society, international relations, and the perpetuation of traditional festivities collectively reshape the rich contemporary essence of Mazu culture.

6. Discussion

The study, entitled "Mazu Culture in the Coastal Cities of Fujian, China: Symbolic Interactions and Meaning Transitions under the Backdrop of World Cultural Heritage," has fostered an understanding of the phenomenon surrounding the Mazu culture in Fujian's coastal cities. Key concepts encompass Mazu culture, symbolic interactions, meaning transitions, and world cultural heritage.

From a research perspective, the Mazu culture transcends mere "belief." Observing it through alternative socio-cultural prisms and analyzing its evolution across historical epochs reveals that the Mazu culture has ascended from a regional deity to a national spiritual representative. As an objectively existing "belief," the significance of Mazu culture is continually being sculpted. The transformation from Mazu customs to cultural significance necessitates the infusion of nationalistic cultural nuances, allowing it to truly manifest as a symbol with robust cultural cohesion in a global context. Secondly, the ritualistic propagation of Mazu beliefs and cultural identification essentially epitomizes the intricate interplay between humans and divinity, simultaneously reflecting faith, spiritual experiences, and cultural recognition. Third, the tourism gaze of Mazu culture highlights its transformation from pure ritualism and piety to becoming a part of the tourism industry. This not only promotes the local tourism industry, but also makes the Mazu culture further spread through the tourist gaze. Lastly, Mazu culture's designation as intangible world cultural heritage not only garners international validation but also subjects it to certain constraints. Despite potential distortions due to excessive commercialization, active initiatives post its global recognition have further elevated its traditional core beliefs and practices, expanding its sphere of influence.

Furthermore, this study suggests to the academic community the importance of promoting the Mazu culture. It advocates the establishment of expert committees, rallying specialists to offer intellectual support, formulating developmental strategies for Mazu culture, and specific plans for promoting cultural tourism. Continuing encouragement for cross-strait Mazu cultural exchanges and academic forums, breaking temporal and spatial barriers,

and systemically integrating Mazu cultural resources are crucial. Clarifying the nexus between the Mazu culture from the Song dynasty onwards and other cultural forms like maritime, ceremonial, and vocal music cultures can further propel the Mazu culture towards multifaceted development, embellishing the city's cultural tapestry.

List of Interviewees for Field Research

Chen Zufen - Vice President of Fujian Intangible Cultural Heritage Society

Chen Bujia - Meizhou Island Management Committee Housing Construction Bureau Deputy Director

Lin Feng - Meizhou Island Management Committee Director

Lin Zidi - Chairman of the Ancestral Temple of Tian Tian Xianliang Port

Tang Bingchun - Putian Municipal Party Committee Propaganda Department, Former Executive Vice Minister

Ke Li - Associate Professor, School of Marxism, Putian University

Tang Chi - Meizhou Island Ancestral Temple Staff

Li Qinglong - Meizhou Island Travel Service Company Tour Guide Department Head

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