

# Zhanjiang Yearly Worship Culture and Its Social Value

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## Abstract:

Yearly Worship is a large-scale traditional folk festival unique in Zhanjiang. Characterized by certain process, diverse programs, rich content, mysterious and unique cultural connotation, Yearly Worship plays a positive role in local people's clan identity, local unity and cultural self-confidence. In addition, it does not only protect folk art and develop rural culture, but also promotes the development of local economy and plays both social benefits and cultural value.

## Keywords:

Zhanjiang, Yearly Worship, Culture, Value

## 1. Introduction

Yearly Worship celebrated every year is popular in Zhanjiang and Maoming in the west of Guangdong Province. With strong regional characteristics, it is a unique and grand large-scale mass sacrifice traditional cultural festival held on schedule every year. The activities for Yearly Worship mainly include worship of gods, sacrifice and god wandering, accompanied by various folk cultural performances and banquets. Its main purpose is to worship gods and ancestors, sacrifice the country and pray for good weather for the crops, prosperity of all industries, peace and security.

Yearly Worship prevails in more than 100 natural villages in Wuchuan, Lianjiang, Suixi County, Leizhou, Mazhang District and Potou District under the jurisdiction of Zhanjiang. Each village has its own fixed date for Yearly Worship, but Yearly Worship is mostly celebrated from January to March of the lunar calendar. During the Yearly Worship, the streets of villages and towns are decorated with lanterns and people play the gongs and drums, making the whole village immersed in jubilant atmosphere. Meanwhile, various folk art performances such as lion dance, dragon dance and sea of fire are presented to the public. Moreover, every family makes a feast, good tea, good wine, good food and dishes to warmly greet relatives and friends. Happy laughters and cheerful voices are from families, making the whole village boisterous.

## **2. Origin and Development of Yearly Worship**

Yearly Worship has a long history and has long existed in the west of Guangdong Province and a small part of Guangxi Province. The Chronicles of Qinzhou in the Ming dynasty recorded the scenes of local people's Ghost Play to celebrate Yearly Worship; the General Records of Guangdong in the Ming Dynasty also recorded the scenes of the Ghost Play during the Lantern Festival in Leizhou Prefecture.

There are three folk sayings about the origin of Zhanjiang Yearly Worship.

### ***2.1. Zhanjiang Yearly Worship is Derived from the Lantern Festival***

It is the slack season from the Spring Festival to the Lantern Festival. Taking advantage of the festive occasion of the Spring Festival, people gradually hold temple fairs, sacrifice to the god of land and memorial days for the relocation and settlement of local ancestors to the peaceful Lantern Festival together. Therefore, Yearly Worship is mostly celebrated around the Lantern Festival, with a warm atmosphere and great attention.

### ***2.2. The Rise of Yearly Worship is Related to Madame Xian***

Madame Xian was born in Dianbai, Guangdong. As a famous leader of the Baiyue nationality in Lingnan during the northern and Southern Dynasties, she led the troops to calm down the war in Hainan, protect the family and the country, and made outstanding contributions to local peace, national unity and ethnic unity. There are plenty Madame Xian temples in western Guangdong and the statue of Madame Xian is often seen during god wandering in Zhanjiang. It is said that some historical data show that the activities for Yearly Worship were first raised by the Xian family and then evolved into today's Yearly Worship after a long time.

### ***2.3. Yearly Worship to drive away the God of Plague***

It is said that there was a God of Plague who often did evil to the people in western Guangdong, making the masses have no means to live in ancient times. Then, people spontaneously carried out activities to drive away the God of Plague, but the God of Plague was very cunning. When he was driven away in one place, he ran to another place. Therefore, the wise people in western Guangdong took turns to drive away the God of Plague in each village at different times. Hence, there is Yearly Worship at different times all over Zhanjiang.

However, what we most agree with is that in remote ancient times, the level of productivity was low and people's ability to conquer nature was weak, but they were in awe of all things in heaven and earth, so the custom of sacrifice prevailed. In the remote and closed area of western Guangdong, the custom of sacrifice was more prosperous. The Han people of the Central Plains who moved south due to wars, officials, relegation, business, etc. have come here to settle down, live and reproduce after hardships. The complex ethnic relation, Yue-Chu culture, Han-Fujian culture, marine culture and indigenous culture blend with each other, forming a group with the Leizhou Peninsula characteristics. The villages or tribes developed from the same clan held a large-scale sacrificial activity to worship heaven, earth, gods and ancestors in the slack season around the early spring or Qingming Festival every year. During this period, all people got together to have a big meal, so a custom celebrated every year was formed. In order to enrich the content of the activities, activities such as lion dance, burning social fire, god wandering, puppet show, gunshot, God of Plague

driving, paper boat burning and colored flag were gradually carried out to eliminate the disasters, and pray for good weather for the crops, bumper harvest, good health, peace and prosperity in the new year. This kind of established activity has slowly evolved into a kind of cultural body including diet, opera, folk customs and sacrificial rites, that is, the current Yearly Worship.

### **3. Content and Process of Yearly Worship**

The whole process of the Yearly Worship includes the beginning of the Yearly Worship, the process of the Yearly Worship and the end of the Yearly Worship interspersed with various traditional cultural programs and Yearly Worship banquets.

#### ***3.1. The Beginning of the Yearly Worship is to Invite the Gods***

The beginning of the Yearly Worship means that at the beginning of the Yearly Worship, the most prestigious elders or Taoists of the clan invite the gods of the ancestral temple to a temporary resettlement place in an open square or spacious open space outside the temple, and then the temple attendant in charge of incense and religious service spells and offers incense for the villagers to worship.

#### ***3.2. The Process of the Yearly Worship Includes the Ancestry Table Setting and Wandering Gods, Which are the “Main Events” of the Yearly Worship***

The ancestry table setting, also known as the sacrificial ceremony, is an important ceremony for worshipping God. Each household will prepare a cooked capon, a strip of pork and a fish (commonly known as the “three animals”), as well as sacrifices such as three cups of tea, five cups of wine, various fruits, ingots and candles. After being properly placed on a tray, they will be placed in front of the god square for all gods or Bodhisattvas to enjoy. During the sacrificial ceremony, the Taoist priest will chant congratulatory messages and all the men, women and children in the village will worship, kneel thrice and bow nine times to pray for the blessing of the gods for good weather for the crops, peace and good luck in the year. When it is the lucky hour of the god wandering, the firecrackers will be set and the gongs, drums and suonas will be played together. In the meantime, the young boys will raise the statues in their sedans and begin to wander around the village. The gods might be different in different villages or regions, often including Guan Gong, King Kang, Zhao Shuai, Queen Mother, Seven Fairies and Madam Xian. When wandering the gods, Taoists usually lead the way. Behind each God’s sedan are all kinds of gongs, drums and suona players, firecracker setters and flag bearers, as well as many young and middle-aged male and female villagers in uniform. Some teams are even followed by mighty long car teams and motorcycle teams. The flags float, the trumpets, suonas, clangs, gongs and drums are played together and firecrackers are set constantly, creating a boisterous atmosphere. The team wanders the streets and lanes from the head of the village to the end of the village according to the predetermined route. After wandering the whole village outside the village, the team will turn back to the temple. Every time a God comes to a household, the household will set off firecrackers to promote the festivity. Some god wandering teams also have lion dance teams. When passing through the door of each household, if there are sacrifices such as fruits, biscuits, incense candles, the lion dance teams will also dance in front of the house to show their joy, while the head of household will give the lion dancers a red envelope to express their condolences and gratitude.

The Yearly Worship generally lasts for one to three days. During the Yearly Worship, in addition to sacrifice and god wandering, there are also activities such as lion dance, dragon dance, eagle dance, face piercing, ghost play, piaose parade, sea of fire, rolling on thorns, puppet show, huapeng dance, eight tones, dragon boat, lighting and opera. The longer the Yearly Worship held, the richer the programs and the more popular they are.

### ***3.3. “End of the Yearly Worship, It Means that After the Major Activities of the Yearly Worship***

The villagers go to the theater to watch the plays or go to the night market; some villages also hold paper boat burning activities, that is, villagers make a big paper boat to tour families to collect five ghosts and six evils, and then burn the paper boat at night or in the morning at the nearest river, meaning ghost and evil burning to wish the villagers good weather for the crops and safe trip in a year, and finally send all gods or Bodhisattvas back to the temple, showing the end of the Yearly Worship.

### ***3.4. Yearly Worship Banquet is Yearly Worship Meal***

It is not only an important content but also a major feature of Zhanjiang Yearly Worship for villagers to make banquets to entertain guests. Every family carefully prepares banquet dishes early in the morning of the “Yearly Worship” because dishes of the banquet show the family’s dignity and reputation. They prepare or book all kinds of fresh ingredients early and present the best local seafood and special cuisine to the table during the banquet, making the distant relatives, next-door neighbors and friends who have never met feel the unique human interest of enthusiasm and gathering at the table full of delicacies. The richness of the banquet and the level of guests can reflect the social status, family background and interpersonal relationship of the host family. The more people come, the higher the level, and the more the car parked in front of the door, the higher the grade, and the more dignified the host family is. Therefore, each family hopes more relatives and friends to come on this day. The host family warmly welcomes all blood relatives, in-laws, cousins, friends, colleagues, classmates, friends, classmates, friends of friends, classmates of classmates and those who know or do not and will try his best to let the guests eat and have fun at any time. Some host families even prepare meals from noon to night for people to eat, drink and chat. As the Yearly Worship of neighboring villages is mostly staggered, relatives and friends will eat in different villages from day to day. During the Yearly Worship, all families will welcome relatives, friends, etc. to eat and see them off, creating a boisterous atmosphere and forming all villages’ “Yearly Worship meal” activity mainly featured by lively eating and drinking.

### ***3.5. Watch the Yearly Worship***

During the one or two days of the Yearly Worship, there will always be a variety of Yearly Worship programs. In some villages, when wandering God, the team is accompanied by performances such as lion dance, face piercing, rolling on thorns and piaose. In the village square, there are often programs such as dragon dance, eagle dance, ghost play and sea of fire. At the end of wandering god in the evening, there are activities such as puppet shows and operas. Most of these programs are unique to the Yearly Worship, especially the thrilling and exciting programs such as face piercing, rolling on thorns, sea of fire, eagle dance and ghost play, which are all the impressive Yearly Worship programs for worshiping and entertaining gods, rarely

seen at ordinary times. Therefore, when it is the Ninali Festival in each village, a lot of tourists will come to see the folk performances specially to please the gods. With the continuous development of the times, in addition to the traditional Yearly Worship programs, movies, plays, concerts, sports competitions, martial arts performances and riddles, common modern activities have increasingly become a new choice to enrich the Yearly Worship programs in recent years.

#### **4. Social Impact and Significance of the Yearly Worship**

As a unique custom in western Guangdong, Zhanjiang Yearly Worship is an important activity for people to carry out clan identity, interpersonal communication and cultural exchange. Its strong national customs and local flavor make it unique charm and play an important and positive role in the development of rural areas.

##### ***4.1. It Has the Function of Social Education and Increases Zhanjiang Cultural Self-Confidence***

In recent years, governments at all levels have attached importance to and strengthened the exploration and construction of local religion and folk culture. The governments of Zhanjiang, Guangdong have respectively organized relevant institutions to sort out and study Lingnan culture and Zhanjiang folk culture. Influenced by plenty cultures such as military culture, Taoist culture, Buddhist culture, Confucian culture and official culture as well as specific natural conditions in history, Leizhou Peninsula has formed the Yearly Worship culture aimed at exorcising evil spirits and praying for blessings. Through the unique traditional folk custom programs for the Yearly Worship, the Yearly Worship conveys the spirit that Gods promote good and punish evil, and warns future generations to be a good man, which undoubtedly has an invisible constraint on people's hearts, plays a positive role in maintaining social stability and forming positive living atmosphere, reflects the profound cultural heritage and increases the cultural self-confidence of Zhanjiang people.

##### ***4.2. Strengthen Clan Identity and Local Complex***

China is a human relationship society which pays attention to mutual exchanges. Usually, the family with many guests and high popularity proves that the family has a wide range of interpersonal and social relations, while the family with few visitors coming will be regarded as indifferent and despised by the villagers. Therefore, when it is the Yearly Worship, every family will invite relatives and friends, and even relatives of relatives, friends of friends and guests to have the Yearly Worship meal and the family will be proud of having most guests. In addition, relatives and friends will invite each other. Therefore, invitation during the Yearly Worship is not only an important social activity to consolidate and expand contacts every year, but also an emotional exchange between relatives and friends. Gradually, almost every household in the surrounding villages is acquainted with each other and even becomes friends or relatives. Therefore, the interpersonal relationship has expanded, the feelings between relatives and friends have deepened, and everyone's sense of clan relation and local identity has strengthened. In addition to actually serving as a bridge to maintain, stabilize and connect the happy life of Zhanjiang local people, the activities for the Yearly Worship such as prayer, sacrifice, worship and epidemic elimination are conducive to the harmony and unity of people's relations and enhance the centripetal force and cohesion of local people.

### ***4.3. Protect Local Folk Art and Develop Rural Culture***

In the long historical development, the customs of each nation will change to meet the needs of social development. Zhanjiang Yearly Worship has also evolved from the initial worship and sacrifice activities to the traditional custom of entertaining people and gods over time and it has now evolved into a comprehensive cultural festival integrating regional communication and cultural and recreational activities.

Zhanjiang has a variety of programs for the Yearly Worship, some of which are listed in the national, provincial and municipal intangible cultural heritage list. The programs involve 11 categories including folk dance, traditional art, folk custom, traditional dance, opera, folk art, traditional music, traditional drama, folk opera, folk music and folk belief, where those listed in the national intangible cultural heritage include the East China Sea dragon dance embodying the dragon totem belief and enjoying the reputation of “Oriental Uniqueness”; Zhanjiang ghost play, known as the “dancing living fossil”; Wuchuan piaose, known as “Oriental Hidden Art”; Suixi lion dance famous at home and abroad. There are also provincial and municipal intangible cultural heritages, such as eagle dance, puppet show, station troop dance, check piercing, rolling on thorns and sea of fire. These folk arts with a long history and profound humanistic connotation are unique programs of Zhanjiang Yearly Worship, which are rarely seen at ordinary times. The existence of the Yearly Worship plays a decisive role in the inheritance of these programs, making these ancient traditional cultures inherit and develop.

In the past, the object of the Yearly Worship was “God” and the Lei opera and Cantonese opera, long-standing folk arts, were essential entertainment programs for God in some areas of Zhanjiang; at present, the Yearly Worship also pleases the broad masses. In addition to Lei opera and Cantonese Opera popular with the older generation of villagers, there are also activities such as martial arts performances, sports competitions, modern songs and dances, concerts and riddles. These activity programs with various forms do not only strengthen the villagers’ physique and enrich their spiritual life, but more importantly make new ideas be well publicized in rural areas, and make new culture flourish.

### ***4.4. Promote Local Economic Development***

There is the saying of “spending money made the whole year on the Ninali Festival” in Zhanjiang folk. During the Ninali Festival, economic and trade activities are active. Villagers often prepare drinks, candies and biscuits a few days in advance, and book and purchase various main ingredients such as seafood, river food, chicken, duck, goose or pork and beef in advance. What’s more exaggerated, the high-quality ingredients such as abalone, lobster, crab, cuttlefish and big grouper might be already booked up. There will also be small mobile markets for temporary sales of drinks, fruits, food, tableware, etc. along the roadside of the village. In some places, shopping streets or shopping areas for the Yearly Worship are set up for the convenience of the villagers. The Yearly Worship banquets might have prices raised, and the farmers’ market might become irritability active. Knowing the accurate Yearly Worship time of each village and paying close attention to the Yearly Worship business opportunities, the merchants will sell drinks, fruits and other commodities needed by the village in advance as soon as it is the Yearly Worship in the village. In order to prepare delicious, good-looking and high-quality banquet, folk chefs and professional chefs will become the most popular “occupations” at this time. Some

families might buy food materials and send them to the home after being processed by the restaurant, and some families even order dishes directly from five-star restaurants. Coupled with the various consumption from foreign tourists, the business during the Ninali Festival will greatly stimulate local consumption and promote the development of local economy.

## 5. Conclusions

The value of Zhanjiang Yearly Worship is mainly reflected in social benefits, economic benefits and cultural development. During the Yearly Worship, family and friends will gather together and participate together to deepen people's understanding and recognition of clan culture, produce a deep sense of belonging, enhance local cohesion, broaden interpersonal relations and create a harmonious social atmosphere; the activities for the Ninali Festival can also promote production and consumption, increase local economic benefits and stimulate the development of the tertiary industry; the Yearly Worship is also an important stage for the exhibition and inheritance of folk art in Zhanjiang, making many intangible cultural heritage be continuously carried forward.

Although there are more or less some feudal superstitions in the activities for the Yearly Worship, and the trend of banquet comparison is also easy to cause a waste of resources, the activities for the Yearly Worship have established a distinctive brand city image of Zhanjiang on the whole. If we can develop folk festival tourism with the Yearly Worship, the unique Yearly Worship will be understood by more people and will promote the development of economy and culture in Zhanjiang to a certain extent.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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