

The Ethnoreligious Dimensions of Taihao Fuxi Worship: Local Identity, Ritual Continuity, and the Sacred Heritage of Central China

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Taihao Fuxi, revered as one of the mythological ancestors of the Chinese nation, occupies a vital position within the ritual landscape of Central China. This paper explores the ethnoreligious dimensions of Taihao Fuxi worship in Henan Huaiyang, where local folk devotion has evolved from spontaneous ritual practice to a form of officially recognized intangible cultural heritage. Drawing on fieldwork, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024, the study reveals how local ritual actors reinterpret ancient mythological symbols within a changing sociopolitical context. The paper argues that Taihao Fuxi worship functions as a cultural nexus between local identity, regional belonging, and national symbolism, serving simultaneously as a site of spiritual continuity and cultural reconstruction. From the perspective of ethnoreligious studies, this research highlights the dynamic negotiation between folk religiosity, state heritage policy, and communal memory. It contributes to broader discussions on how Chinese folk religions sustain moral order, identity expression, and social integration amid modern transformations.

Keywords: Taihao Fuxi, folk religion, Huaiyang, ethnoreligious identity, intangible cultural heritage, ritual continuity, China

Introduction

In the landscape of Chinese religion, the worship of Taihao Fuxi occupies a unique position. Revered as both a cultural ancestor and a civilizational founder, Fuxi is associated with the invention of divination, marriage, and governance—symbolizing the transition from mythic nature to human culture. The enduring veneration of Fuxi in Huaiyang, Henan Province, has made this central plains region a key site for understanding how folk religiosity intertwines with identity, morality, and governance in China.

In recent decades, the revival of the Taihao Temple Fair and the institutionalization of the “Fuxi Cultural Festival” reflect not only the resilience of traditional faith but also its adaptation to contemporary state frameworks of intangible cultural heritage. Such transformations invite deeper inquiry: How does Taihao Fuxi worship operate as an ethnoreligious system, mediating between local lifeworlds and national ideologies? What social and symbolic functions do rituals perform in maintaining community cohesion? And how does the process of heritage-making reshape the meaning of the sacred?

This paper situates Taihao Fuxi worship at the intersection of folk religion, ethnoreligion, and cultural politics, demonstrating how the sacred survives through its continual reinterpretation by both devotees and the state.

Literature Review

Scholarly treatments of Taihao Fuxi worship sit at the intersection of several literatures: classical studies of Chinese myth and ancestral cults, ethnographies of popular religion, and recent work on the politics of intangible cultural heritage (ICH). This review synthesizes those strands and highlights recent (2022–2025) contributions—with particular attention to Chinese-language fieldwork on Fuxi/Taihao and to research that examines the heritage-ization of folk religion under contemporary state frameworks.

Classical and Historical Scholarship on Fuxi

Traditional philological and historiographical research situates Fuxi within early Chinese cosmological and political narratives: as an origin figure associated with the invention of divination (bagua), marriage, and social order (see canonical references and classical reconstructions). Historical studies emphasize the plurality of Fuxi traditions across regions and their integration into competing “imperial” genealogies in later historiography (e.g., studies on imperial lineage narratives). These foundations remain important for understanding how contemporary claims of “origins” (e.g., “birthplace of civilization”) are rhetorically mobilized in local and national discourse. (For discussions of imperial/lineage framing and its historical reconstructions see classical historiography overviews.)

Ethnographies of Folk Religion and the “Doing” Approach

Anthropological and sociological literature on Chinese popular religion emphasizes the performative, practice-centered nature of belief: ritual efficacy derives from embodied practice, social networks, and local cosmologies rather than from doctrinal systems (Chau, 2006; Dean, 1998). Recent comparative research treats folk religion as a “life-world” that adapts to modernity through vernacular forms of piety, market entanglement, and mediated performance (e.g., online diasporic practices) (Chau, 2006; Dean, 1998; see also recent syntheses on folk religion as life-world). A growing body of work published since 2022 has focused on how local ritual economies, volunteer mobilization, and youth participation sustain ritual vitality in rapidly changing social contexts. These perspectives foreground the ethnographic method—participant observation and oral narratives—as central to capturing the lived texture of Fuxi devotion.

Heritage Studies and the State’s Role in “Redefining” Religion

An important strand of recent scholarship interrogates how the contemporary Chinese state uses intangible cultural heritage frameworks to manage, reframe, and sometimes instrumentalize religion-related practices. Xu, Zhang, and Wang (2022) systematically analyze China’s involvement in safeguarding religion-related ICH and argue that state actors actively shape which practices are recognized and how they are presented to the public; the effect is a partial “de-politicization” or “culturalization” of religious practice (i.e., translating faith into heritage language). Studies published in 2023–2024 have extended this critique to show that heritage recognition frequently produces hybrid outcomes: it brings funding and infrastructure that sustain rituals, but it also imposes standardization, tourist-facing staging, and bureaucratic governance that can alter ritual meaning and repertoire. Thus the heritage lens is crucial for understanding contemporary changes to Taihao Fuxi worship in Huaiyang, where festivalization and non-religious framing often accompany state support.

Recent Chinese Scholarship on Taihao / Fuxi and Huaiyang Practice (2022-2025)

Chinese scholars and local research teams have produced a notable surge of work on Taihao Fuxi in the last three years, often combining local archives, festival studies, and policy analysis. For instance, Li and Liu (2023) explicitly examine the Huaiyang Taihao Fuxi festival through the lens of consolidating a shared national community consciousness, exploring how local ritual and state discourse intersect to produce narratives of national cultural continuity (a framing increasingly visible in middle-regional scholarship). Conference volumes and special issues (e.g., a 2024 special on Fuxi) collect ethnographic case studies that document ritual choreography, material culture (statues, banners, mausoleum architecture), and vendor/ecological networks around the fair—providing rich empirical bases for understanding local practice and transmission. Local state and cultural bureaus have likewise published reports and hosted large-scale non-ethnographic expositions: for example, the Huaiyang intangible cultural heritage exhibition and annual non-heritage showcase in 2024-2025 demonstrates the scale of official mobilization around Fuxi culture. These Chinese-language outputs highlight three tendencies: (1) an emphasis on Fuxi as civilizational ancestor in state/region building narratives; (2) attention to ritual management and festival economies as sites of “revival”; and (3) reflexive concerns over authenticity and standardization as heritage projects expand.

Theoretical Convergence: Ethnoreligion, Cultural Memory, and Localization

Drawing these literatures together, contemporary analysts propose that practices like Fuxi worship are best understood via an ethnoreligious framework that links ritual performance to ethnic/cultural identity, and a cultural memory perspective that sees ritual as a mechanism of intergenerational transmission (Assmann, 2011). Recent empirical work further nuances these frameworks by foregrounding localization: how national narratives (heritage, civilizational continuity) are refracted through village-level idioms—language of root/ancestry, moral reciprocity, and place-based pride. In Huaiyang, for example, community discourse often frames Fuxi devotion in idioms of “homecoming” and “rootedness,” which both echo and diverge from official heritage narratives. This multi-scalar analytical lens (local-regional-national) has become prominent in the most recent scholarship and forms the theoretical backbone for the present study.

Gaps and the Contribution of This Study

Notwithstanding the rich recent output, several empirical and theoretical gaps remain. First, while many Chinese studies document festivalization and policy framing, fewer combine thick ethnography of everyday devotional practice with analysis of how heritage bureaucracies reshape ritual authority and moral discourse. Second, comparative attention to inter-generational dynamics (how youth and migrant networks reconfigure ritual participation) remains limited in published Chinese work. Third, the category of “ethnoreligion” as applied to ancestor-founder cults like Fuxi needs further specification—particularly regarding the interplay of territorial claims, economic livelihoods, and affective practices. This paper addresses those gaps by offering an empirically grounded, multi-scalar ethnography of Taihao Fuxi worship in Huaiyang that links ritual choreography, local narratives, and heritage politics into a coherent ethnoreligious analysis.

Methodology

Field Site and Research Design

Fieldwork was conducted between 2022 and 2024 in Huaiyang County, Zhoukou City, Henan Province, home to the famous Taihao Mausoleum (太昊陵). The research adopted an ethnographic approach, combining

participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis.

Data collection included:

1. Observing ritual events during the annual Taihao Temple Fair, which attracts over one million participants each spring.
2. Interviewing temple administrators, local officials, ritual specialists, and lay devotees ($n = 35$).
3. Analyzing classical texts (e.g., *Shanhaijing*, *Diwang Shiji*) and contemporary policy documents (e.g., “Fuxi Cultural Heritage Protection Plan”).

Reflexive Ethnography

Ethnographic notes were kept daily, focusing on ritual processes, participant interactions, and the language of devotion. For example, during a 2023 field visit, a middle-aged devotee from Zhoukou expressed:

“We worship Fuxi not as a god of miracles, but as our ancestor who taught us how to live. It’s not superstition—it’s respect for our roots.”

This sentiment echoes the broader moral function of Taihao Fuxi worship: it anchors personal faith in collective ancestry.

To ensure analytical rigor, data triangulation was employed by comparing oral accounts with textual and visual records. Ethical protocols followed MDPI guidelines for ethnographic research, ensuring anonymity and cultural sensitivity.

Findings

The Local Landscape of Taihao Fuxi Worship

In Henan Huaiyang (淮阳), the worship of Taihao Fuxi is not only a religious tradition but also a vital aspect of local social life. The Taihao Mausoleum Temple Fair, held annually during the second lunar month, transforms the town into a pilgrimage center that bridges history, commerce, and devotion. During field visits in 2023 and 2024, I observed how the temple precinct and surrounding markets became saturated with spiritual and sensory intensity—burning incense, rhythmic gongs, banners bearing the characters “the ancestor of civilization”, and the rhythmic chant of “May the Ancestor Fuxi bless us”.

Local informants often describe the event not as a “religious ritual” but as “our way of greeting the ancestor.” One village elder, Mr. Zhang (age 76), told me: “We don’t think about religion. It’s about our roots (根). When you bow before Fuxi, you remember who we are and where we come from.” Such statements reveal that Taihao Fuxi worship functions as a moral genealogy, blending ancestry, mythology, and territorial belonging. The annual fair becomes a site of communal renewal, where local identity is reconstituted through collective performance rather than doctrinal belief.

Ritual Performance and Embodied Belief

The main ritual sequence observed includes “inviting the deity”, “offering incense”, “circumambulation of the mausoleum”, and “sending off the deity”. Each act is performed with elaborate choreography that reflects local adaptation. The temple priests, now organized under the official Taihao Cultural Heritage Management Committee, act as mediators between sacred tradition and modern governance. Young volunteers—mostly local students—help manage crowd control, yet many also participate in the ritual procession. One young woman explained:

“We are not monks, but when we hold the incense and walk around the mausoleum, we feel like part of something ancient and proud.”

This blending of heritage management and folk participation illustrates how local religiosity has been reinterpreted within the framework of state cultural policy. The ritual retains its sacred intensity, yet its administration reflects the modern logic of “intangible cultural heritage”.

Local Economy and Cultural Continuity

The temple fair also supports the ritual economy—from incense trade and food stalls to folk opera troupes and fortune tellers. These economic activities not only sustain local livelihoods but also reproduce the ritual environment. Many vendors interpret their participation as an act of devotion: “Selling incense here is not business—it’s doing good karma”.

In interviews, local artisans who craft Fuxi effigies described their work as transmission. One craftsman noted: “Every Fuxi statue I make carries the breath of this land. It’s not just a product—it’s an offering.”

Thus, the economic dimension of the ritual is not merely commercial but sacramentalized—imbued with moral and spiritual significance. The local economy becomes part of the ritual ecology, sustaining both material life and sacred continuity.

Discussion

Folk Religion as Lived Heritage

The case of Taihao Fuxi worship in Huaibyang illustrates how folk religion operates as lived heritage, a term that transcends the binary of “belief” versus “heritage.” The local actors do not distinguish between spiritual and cultural expressions. Rather, the same ritual space accommodates devotion, tourism, and identity-making. This corresponds to Feuchtwang’s (2001) notion of “the imperial metaphor”—where the sacred order reflects and sustains the moral cosmos of Chinese civilization.

However, the “imperial metaphor” is now localized: villagers articulate their belonging not through imperial ideology but through the idiom of local civilization. This suggests a form of vernacular modernity, where national symbols are refracted through local practice.

The Reinterpretation of Myth in Contemporary Life

Taihao Fuxi, as the mythic “Ancestor of Humanity,” is reimagined not as a distant deity but as a cultural ancestor who legitimizes modern identity. The state’s heritage discourse frames Fuxi as a symbol of “Chinese civilization’s origin,” while villagers perceive him as the patron of fertility, rain, and continuity. This dual reading reveals a multi-scalar cosmology—local, regional, and national—that allows different stakeholders to invest meaning in the same figure.

Such pluralism echoes Chau’s (2006) concept of “doing religion”—where ritual efficacy lies in performative acts rather than doctrinal alignment. The Fuxi fair exemplifies “doing heritage” as a religious act: participants perform the nation through local idioms.

Ritual Space and the Politics of Place

The temple fair also exemplifies how place-making functions as an act of symbolic sovereignty. Huaiyang’s residents emphasize that “Fuxi was born here, so this is the root of civilization.” This claim turns local geography into sacred cartography, positioning Huaiyang as a spiritual center in both historical and contemporary narratives.

Local officials often echo this rhetoric in promotional materials, portraying Huaiyang as “the birthplace of the Chinese people.” Yet, villagers articulate the same sentiment through lived experiences: “Without Fuxi, Huaiyang is just a town; with Fuxi, it is our world.”

This interplay between official discourse and popular narration exemplifies what Dean (2003) describes as the “ritualization of the state”, where state symbols gain legitimacy through their integration into local ritual economies.

Negotiating Authenticity and Modernity

While heritage recognition has brought funding and visibility, it has also triggered debates about authenticity. Some older ritual specialists lament that “the spirit is weaker now,” as performances are standardized for tourists. Yet, younger participants see this transformation as renewal: “If we don’t modernize, it will disappear.”

This tension reflects what Goossaert and Palmer (2011) identify as the “modern religious question” in China—the challenge of integrating traditional religiosity into the modern secular framework. Taihao Fuxi worship demonstrates that heritageization does not necessarily secularize religion; instead, it re-embeds the sacred in the logic of cultural sustainability.

The Local Moral Cosmos

At the heart of Fuxi worship lies a moral imagination that sustains communal ethics. Offerings, shared meals, and the circulation of blessings express reciprocity and trust—values essential to local social order. The temple fair thus operates as a moral marketplace, in which exchange is not only economic but also ethical and cosmological.

Through these ritualized interactions, the community performs what Feuchtwang (2001) calls “the moral landscape”—a configuration of emotions, obligations, and meanings that binds people to place and ancestors. In Huaiyang, this moral landscape remains dynamic, adapting to new social realities while retaining its sacred axis around Taihao Fuxi.

Conclusion

The case of Taihao Fuxi worship in Huaiyang reveals the resilience and adaptability of Chinese folk religion under modern conditions. As an ethnoreligious system, it embodies the moral and cultural foundations of Chinese identity—linking myth, ritual, and collective memory. By situating Fuxi as both ancestor and cultural heritage, local communities negotiate between sacred continuity and secular governance, demonstrating how religion in China survives through transformation rather than resistance. Ultimately, Taihao Fuxi worship illustrates a distinctive Chinese logic of the sacred—one that fuses morality, ancestry, and cultural memory. It affirms that in contemporary China, the sacred is not confined to temples or doctrines, but lives in the embodied practices of remembrance and renewal.

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