

Title:

Cults as Bridges: A Network Approach to Cultural Integration in China's Lower Yangzi, 1150-1350

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Abstract:Background:

The view that popular religion played an expressive or integrative role in Chinese society has received a lot of attention from scholars who study later imperial and modern times. Following the footsteps of Émile Durkheim, C. K. Yang (1961) sees the worship of tutelary gods and goddesses in local society as providing a “collective symbol that...transcend[ed] the divergence of economic interests, class status, and social background, so as to make it possible to coalesce a large multitude into a community.” Yang’s somewhat idyllic picture was called into question in subsequent studies by historians and anthropologists who drew attention to social tensions and power relations that were expressed and even solidified in religious beliefs and practices. James Watson (1985) shows that cultural unity was only in religious symbols and practices, not doctrines and beliefs, whereas Michael Szonyi (2007) argues that even the standardization of the gods and rites was, at least in some cases, an illusion fabricated by the local elite to provide legitimacy and cover for distinctively local gods and rituals that persisted under the guise. For him, “claims to participation in a shared culture” was just as important a mechanism of sociocultural integration as “a substantively common culture.” This study sets aside these interpretive issues but instead builds on the insights of these scholars, all of whom emphasizes that popular cults were instrumental in deciphering cultural integration in later imperial China.

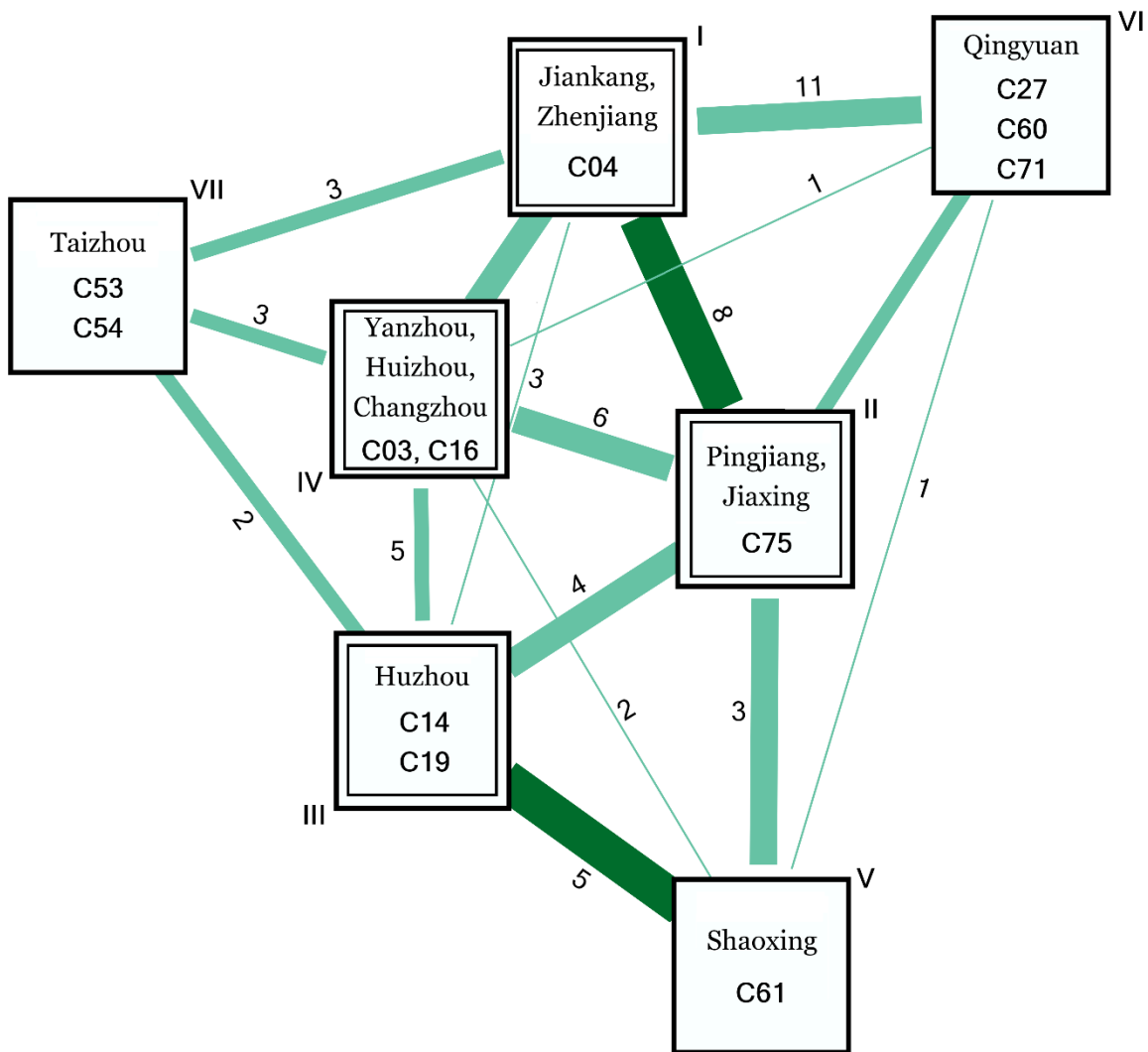
Methods and data:

Using the lists of temples and deities in the extant local gazetteers compiled between 1150 and 1350, this article takes a bird’s-eye view of the spatial distribution of popular cults in China’s Lower Yangzi region around the thirteenth century and employs the formal methods of network analysis to analyze the pattern of connections formed through these religious ties. After some data processing, I have constructed a final two-mode network dataset that has 56 place nodes and 83 cult nodes, linked by 378 ties. I have then used centrality measures, modularity analysis, core-periphery analysis, and blockmodeling to reveal its structural properties.

Findings:

This study identifies seven distinctive religious cultures in the Lower Yangzi, each comprising five to eleven nearby places and centering around a distinctive group of cults. It then teases out several complementary models of cultural integration simultaneously at work, the combination of which created a crisscrossing web of religious ties that linked together a diversity of subregional religious cultures in a highly robust manner. The first and most obvious

mechanism of cross-subregional integration was diffusion. The widespread of a few exceptionally popular cults fostered a shared religious culture that cut across geographical lines. This process of integration was strengthened by a second mechanism that relied on thirty-five less influential cults that established a presence only in two and less commonly, three or four, subregions. Despite their more restricted spheres of influence, each cult functioned as a local bridge between two or more subregional cultures. Collectively, they constituted an interlocking chain of connections that linked together all subregional cultures in the Lower Yangzi. This chainmail pattern of interlocking religious ties was nearly absent among the three subregions (Shaoxing, Qingyuan, and Taizhou) south of Hangzhou Bay, but it played a notable role in linking them to the more northerly subregions as well as among those northerly subregions, thus dividing the Lower Yangzi into a core and a periphery. Finally, this study shows a third mechanism: the capital and the prefectural administrative centers. Each a host to a great variety of popular deities associated with different subregional cultures, these “hub” cities provided a welcoming meeting ground for divergent communities of devotees. In summary, this study argues that cultural integration in the Lower Yangzi during the long thirteenth century was not entirely dependent upon the diffusion of a few extraordinarily influential cults—be it their labels, symbols, beliefs, or practices—but was realized at different geographical scales, by dozens of cults of varying radii of influence, and through several complementary mechanisms. This complex structure of integration enhanced its robustness and gave it the ability to endure potential disruptions.



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