

Article

Nature, Place, and Ritual: Landscape Aesthetics of Jingfu Mountain “Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands” in South China

Yingjin Xu¹, Canxu Zeng¹, Xiaoxiang Tang^{1,*}, Ying Bai² and Xin Wang¹

¹ State Key Laboratory of Subtropical Building and Urban Science, School of Architecture, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou 510641, China; aridoer@mail.scut.edu.cn (Y.X.); canxuzeng@gmail.com (C.Z.); 202010101056@mail.scut.edu.cn (X.W.)

² School of Architecture and Civil Engineering, Huizhou University, Huizhou 516006, China; 201810100948@mail.scut.edu.cn

* Correspondence: sxxxtang@scut.edu.cn

Abstract: The “Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands” (*dongtian and fudi*, 洞天福地) is a unique concept of sacred space in China and even in East Asia, combining beautiful natural scenery, rich historical heritage, and diverse cultural heritage. This paper tries to explain Mount Jingfu’s (*jingfu shan*, 静福山) aesthetic representations. The results show that the landscape’s physical environment projects the spatio-temporal system and the concept of the universe in Daoist aesthetic ideals. With the spatial evolution of divine immortals’ abodes from imagination to reality, people’s yearning for divine cave palaces is transformed into their connection with and their expression of the palaces in exploring space interests and aesthetic trends that are then integrated into the secular life of thousands of households through living religious rituals. Preserved by local religious believers, the ritual activities incorporated geographic, familial, and divine interactions, and characterised essential social aesthetics. By exploring a typical case of Lingnan Region (*lingnan*, 岭南, an old term for South China), this paper aims to elucidate the significance of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands as living heritage in contemporary society across multiple dimensions, and to provide a theoretical basis for the protection of its system.

Keywords: Dao; nature; space; ritual; Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands; Mount Jingfu; cultural landscape



Citation: Xu, Yingjin, Canxu Zeng, Xiaoxiang Tang, Ying Bai, and Xin Wang. 2024. Nature, Place, and Ritual: Landscape Aesthetics of Jingfu Mountain “Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands” in South China. *Religions* 15: 643. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060643>

Academic Editors: Shan Gao and Benjamin Coles

Received: 6 March 2024

Revised: 15 May 2024

Accepted: 16 May 2024

Published: 24 May 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Taoism is a traditional Chinese religion, advocating “the Way follows nature”, pursuing the attainment of immortality and the creation of celestial paradises in the human world. This idea is achieved by combining idolised nature and landscape worship with the realities of life, thereby constructing a uniquely earthly paradise, known as the Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands. As functional spaces in reality, these heavenly paradises have served as the practice sites for generations of Taoist practitioners. Their construction must have a closer connection to the real world, and accessibility should be a crucial consideration in the creation of these spaces. For example, legendary immortal islands like Kunlun and Penglai, known from mythology, have limited their popularity and development due to their inaccessibility. Therefore, upon absorbing the ancient tales of heavenly paradises, Taoism derived a more expansive system of mythical lands supported by mountains, thereby connecting the legend of the human and mythical world. The Cave Heavens and Blessed Lands thus become one of the most aesthetically characteristic spatial forms within it.

The spatial imagery system of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands (*dongtian and fudi*, 洞天福地) originated from ancient Chinese folklore about the abode of the gods. It has since gained widespread recognition by both the populace and the government and become a classic theme for artistic creation, representing the multi-level aesthetic interaction between humans, nature, culture and society that remains a characteristic feature of traditional Chinese culture.

A widespread cultural emblem, the landscape has been examined in numerous studies. In general, the theoretical research frameworks have been developed on landscape archetypes (Xie 2021), landscape layouts (Miao et al. 2017), and landscape systems (Chen and Tan 2021), which outline the elemental paradigm, structural paradigm, and system paradigm of the landscape of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands from material space (Chai 2022). However, the intangible beliefs and ritual practices embodied in it are mostly studied within a national-local macro context (Brace et al. 2006). This overlooks the appreciation and reconstitution of the landscape as a living religious landscape heritage on regional ecological environment, humanistic and artistic aesthetics, and social and contemporary contexts during its continuous development (Cooper 1990).

This study shows that the cultural landscape of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands has a strong cultural association with natural elements, including “direct or tangible links with remarkable and significant events, living traditions, beliefs, and works of art or literature”. This living landscape heritage, passed down from generation to generation, retains its original religious function. Maintained by local religious believers, the landscape has witnessed the continuous adaptation and evolution of integrating the tangible media and intangible human cultural forces in response to the changes in the social environment. It is the best starting point for understanding the spiritual connection between human and nature (Du and Han 2019). The cultural landscape theory aims to explain the aesthetics and connotations of landscapes, which provides a holistic vision for the protection of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands. Under this theory, not only the naturalness, but also the intangible cultural contents such as traditional cognition, spiritual practices and living customs of human society can be focused (Verschuuren 2007). As Samuels states, “landscape is a representation of its creator”. Understanding the aesthetic representations of a landscape requires an understanding of the role of the ideas and behaviours of landscape designers throughout its formation (Samuels 1979). In the study of cultural landscapes, aesthetics are not self-evident but need to be interpreted through systematic representation before being engaged in the process of socio-cultural production (Stuart 1997).

Mount Jingfu was constructed in accordance with the cosmic concept of ‘Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands’, each of its environment and architecture bearing their own unique aesthetic and symbolic significance. The relationship between Mount Jingfu and its surrounding landscape, natural elements, culture, and even settlements was not created accidentally, but lies upon the sacred concepts held by local people. From an architectural research perspective, space is a type of objectively existing physical environment, whereas place refers to spiritual spaces rife with aesthetic meaning, representing the interaction and fusion of psychological and physical fields (Cresswell 2014). Space tends more towards construction, but a place leans more towards aesthetics and activity (Norberg-Schulz 1980). The study of spatial aesthetics encompasses both the objective nature of the aesthetic object and the sensory experience of the aesthetic subject. By elucidating the aesthetic representations of the Mount Jingfu landscape, one can infer the local believers’ understanding of the universe, that is, what the local people’s spiritual world is like, how they live within it, and how this spiritual world interacts with and relates to the development of China’s *dongtian and fudi* culture. Replacing the geographical determinism with the theory of multi-dimensional spatial interactions, from the perspective of natural landscapes and cultural groups’ interactions, provides extensive explanation for the aesthetic representations of *dongtian and fudi*, melting the traditional academic segregation of material nature and immaterial spirit, culture and nature (Livingstone et al. 1998).

This paper attempts to follow inductive research as exploration logic and analyse the aesthetic representations of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands from a more macroscopic natural landscape pattern, constantly changing historical and cultural backgrounds, social and era spirits. Furthermore, it will extract the deep structural model of the landscape’s aesthetic development, reveal its aesthetic themes of common significance and aesthetic differences, and establish the key point of the link between philosophical aesthetics and religious landscape. This will provide a more comprehensive and enlightened vision for

global theoretical research on religious art and aesthetics and will contribute to clarifying the uniqueness of China's localised religious aesthetics in international comparisons. Focusing on aesthetic representations of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands helps us to identify Chinese perceptions of their surroundings, time and space imagery and the origins of such perceptions.

2. Materials and Methods

The first-hand historical materials can be categorised into three types based on different aesthetic subjects: (1) the local chronicles and stele inscriptions compiled by the officials of Guangdong Province and Lianzhou City; (2) the poems, travelogues and paintings authored by tourists like literati; and (3) the live texts including oral histories and on-site research by users. The first category initially shows the natural geographical environment, historical development overview and spatial evolution process of Mount Jingfu. The second category shows the overall scene of Mount Jingfu's participation in constructing a local landscape set and iconic scenery system in Lianzhou City. The third category demonstrates the representations of familial, geographic and divine ties between Mount Jingfu and Bao'an Town, which jointly organise the worshipping rituals of Great Spirit.

Building on the findings of cultural landscape theories and landscape architecture aesthetics theories rooted in value theory philosophy, this research constructs an analytical framework for landscape representation, which covers nature, society, and humanity and elaborates on three significant aspects: the natural environment, spatial and landscape changes, and ritual activities. Based on the aesthetics of natural geography, the cosmology of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands is elaborated. The evolution of architectural space and the construction of the eight-scene system connecting the inside and outside of the landscape is analysed. The familial, geographic, and divine relationships that are represented by ritual activities are discussed from the perspective of daily life while avoiding the grand national-local narrative.

3. Overview of the Development of Mount Jingfu

In the Northern Song Dynasty, *Zhang Junfang* (張君房), a scholar-official, compiled an anthology of the Daoist Canon entitled *The Yunji qiqian* (雲笈七籤), which records Mount Jingfu as follows: "Mount Jingfu (*jingfu shan*, 靜福山) ranked 49th among the Seventy-two Daoist Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands, is located in Bao'an Town, Lianzhou City, Qingyuan City, Guangdong Province, China" (Zhang 2003) (Figure 1).

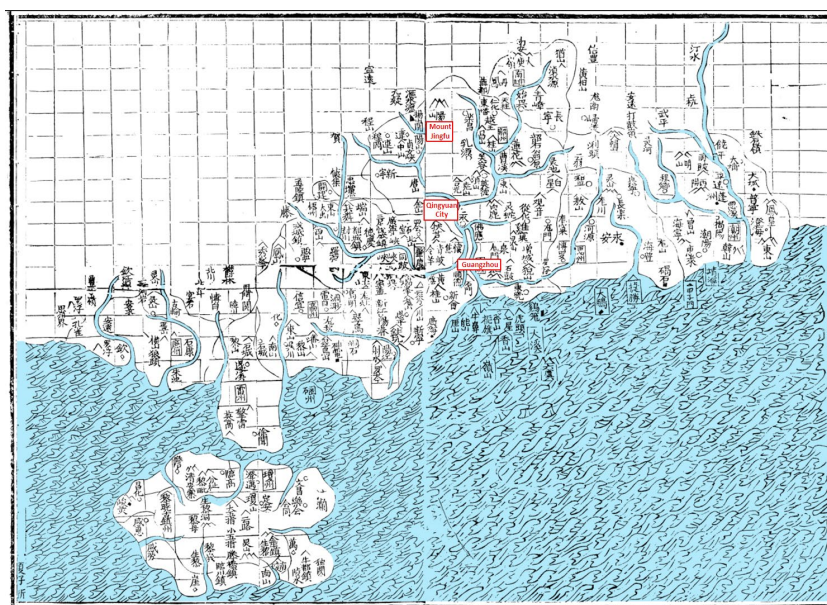


Figure 1. Geographic location of Mount Jingfu.

In the third year of the Zhongdatong era (531 A.D.), about 1500 years ago, Liao Chong, an attendant of Commandery Prince of Xiangdong (湘東王), came here for self-cultivation. He preached at Mount Jingfu for 40 years, and after his death, his believers worshipped him as the Protector Deity of the place (Guo 1996). In the Song Dynasty, Liao was ennobled as the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness (*lingxi zhenjun*, 靈禧真君) by Emperor Zhenzong, Emperor Shenzong, and Emperor Xiaozong. The orthodoxy of Taoism at Mount Jingfu was gradually strengthened and enlisted in the official sacrificial rites, leading to its heyday.

During the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism was introduced to Mount Jingfu. Du Guangting, a Daoist priest of the Five Dynasties, recorded in the Boundary Separation Experience on Mount Jingfu (*jingfushan fenjie yan*, 靜福山分界驗): “Some monks built a courtyard around the Daoist abbey, and also occupied its place to set up warehouses. Liao Shenjiao took out the official documents and theorised with them. On that night, a tiger roared and howled, biting off trees, destroying the grass, scratching out marks on the ground to leave traces. These marks clarified the monastic boundary, and the governor Jiang Fang erected a stone monument to commemorate the event”.

In the Song Dynasty, in Volume 92 of the Record of Scenic Spots Across the Country (*yudi jisheng*, 輿地紀勝), the author Wang Xiangzhi recorded: “As for Tiger Spring (*hupao quan*, 虎跑泉), it was once recorded that ‘at the end of the Tang Dynasty, a monk Xing Yuan lived here. One day a tiger ran around the place, roaring and howling. Later came out a spring. So it got the name Tiger Spring’” (Wang 2005).

At the end of the Tang Dynasty, Tianqu Academy (天衢書院), the earliest academy in Lingnan District, was founded here. Until the Song Dynasty, it had become the most famous academy in Lingnan District. In the Northern Song Dynasty, the famous Chinese chancellor Zhang Jun took his son, Zhang Shi, to live in Lianzhou City, and composed a number of poems in five-character eight-line regulated verse. He “selected the eight most outstanding locations along it (Huangchuan River), named them with praise”, and called them “the eight scenes alongside Huangchuan River” (*huangchuan bajing*, 湟川八景)¹ as a whole, making it one of the earliest eight scenes in China. Among all, Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests (*jingfu and hanlin*, 靜福寒林) is a depiction of Mount Jingfu (Figure 2). In the Ming Dynasty, people built the Wandering Cup Pond (*liubei chi*, 流杯池), where literati gathered, drinking and writing poems. They composed poems and named the landscapes in the mountain, which were collectively known as “the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu” (*fushan bajing*, 福山八景)². In later years, Daoist priests continued to enter the mountain for self-cultivation, and monks built monasteries here. As a result, Mount Jingfu had developed into an area integrating Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism with Taoism as the centre.

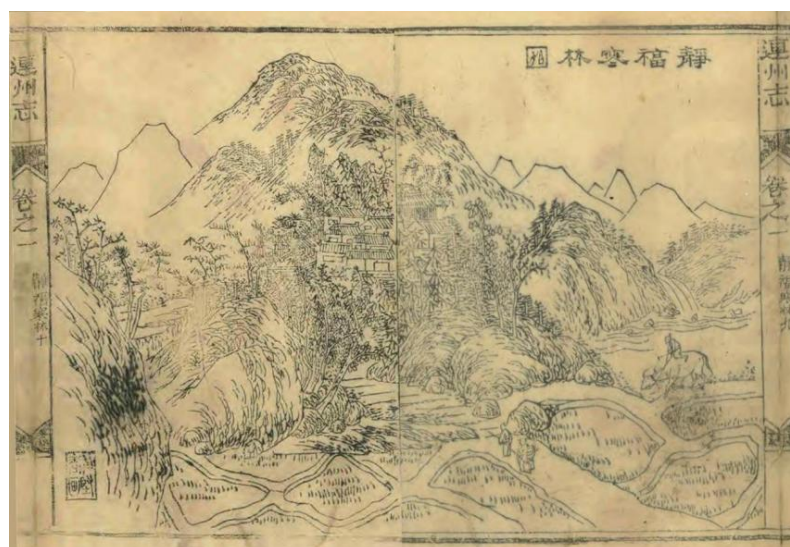


Figure 2. A print of Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests from *Lianzhou zhi*.

Mount Jingfu in Lianzhou City features the standardised prototype of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands and continues to reshape its aesthetic representations in the integration with local cultures, human activities, and the natural environment. It is manifested in the landscape remodelling caused by social aesthetic demand and collective memory change, reflecting the long-term and profound interaction and unity of naturalness, culture and sociality. The connection between the Jingfu mountain, its surrounding natural environment, cultures, and even villages is not accidental, but is based on the conceptual divine systems of the natives. By analysing the aesthetic representations, one can deduce the cosmology of the local Daoists. To be exact, it is possible to further explain what their spiritual world is and how they live in it, as well as how the local spiritual world relates to and interacts with the cultural development of other Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands in China.

4. Aesthetics of Natural Geography

The Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands are a system of sacred spaces unique to traditional Chinese culture, originating from the worship of mountains in ancient China. The mountains served as crucial vehicles in the development of the landscape. Early Daoist practitioners sought out the nearest place to the immortals, and they believed that mountains were the residence of deities and were rich in material resources for the production of golden elixir. According to a Daoist canon titled the *Book of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (Inner Chapters, 抱樸子內篇): “Anyone who practiced Taoism, prepared elixirs, and secluded themselves from chaos, invariably chose to live in mountains” (Ge 2002). The author Ge Hong associates entering the mountains with searching for immortality. The tales and legends of eminent Daoists and immortals at Mount Jingfu reinforce the sacred qualities of the spatial system of the mountain. In the Local Chronicles of Guangdong in Qing Dynasty (*Guangdong tongzhi*, 廣東通志), Hao Yulin writes, “Mount Lianyang borders on Mount Jiuyi, and its range connects to Mount Heng. River Lu comes from the west and Huangchuan River flows to the east. Mount Jingfu and Lengjia are full of spiritual energy! Thousands of mountains are in continuous succession, streams and rivers meandering among them” (Hao n.d.). In Chinese traditional cosmology of the Unity of Heaven and Man (*tianren heyi*, 天人合一), the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands bridge the two realms of earth and the celestial world, expanding the immortal mountains and sacred places in the Daoist legends to the famous mountains and rivers in the folk reality. The natural landscapes became the concrete manifestation of people’s imaginary wonderland.

Water sources were a crucial consideration for Daoist practitioners when selecting the location of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands due to their necessity for alchemy, religious practices, and daily life. In the Five Dynasties (907 A.D.–979 A.D.), Du Guangting compiled the *Records of the Numinous Efficacy of the Daoist Teaching* (*dao jiao lingyan ji*, 道教靈驗記). Its second volume, *Boundary Separation Experience on Mount Jingfu*, notes: “Mount Jingfu Abbey located in Lianzhou City was the site where the immortal Liao Chong ascended in flight. His dwelling rested beside a stream, ornamented with stalagmites and unique trees that made the place an exquisite destination” (Du n.d.). The *Record of Scenic Spots Across the Country* (*yudi jisheng*, 輿地紀勝) records the naming source Tiger Spring here. The Stream Well (*jianjin*, 澗井), Fountainhead (*yuanquan*, 源泉), Ping Pool (*pingchi*, 平池) and Blissful Well (*fuzijing*, 福字井, a well designed in the shape of the Chinese character 福) of the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu, facilitating the Daoist priests who practiced alchemy and lived here. In addition, Bao’an River running on the east side of Mount Jingfu conforms to the water environment for alchemy as described in the *Book of the Master Who Embraces Simplicity* (Inner Chapters, 抱樸子). “It is situated beside a renowned mountain, overlooking the eastward stream. Residing here for spiritual practice, one can achieve immortality within six hundred days.”

The selection of Mount Jingfu is in line with the Daoist ideal model of a mountainous environment. Located amidst the Nanling Mountains and on the banks of the Bao’an River, Mount Jingfu has long been renowned for its spiritual excellence and as a dwelling place for the immortals. The poetry on Mount Jingfu always epitomises its lofty and wintry

features. Moreover, in Lianzhou City, the northeast monsoon prevails in winter with a dry and cold climate, and the southwest monsoon prevails in summer with high temperatures and rain. With such natural climates, it is particularly essential to consider a microclimate for wind and vital energy accumulation when selecting a site to provide a comfortable environment for living and practicing. Mount Jingfu is backed by a large mountain in the north, which creates a huge natural barrier, blocking the cold air in winter and shielding the warm currents inside the mountain from dissipation. Its south-west side is the entrance to the outside world and the air entrance of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands. In front of the mountain is a vast plain, with Bao'an River on the left. The moist air currents brought by the river are blown into the mountain steadily. The natural landscape of Mount Jingfu blocks itself from the northeast cold in winter and channels the warm airflow of the southwest monsoon in summer, thus regulating the microclimate for practicing and living inside and shaping the environment into one with wind and gas accumulation (*cangfeng and juqi*, 藏風聚氣). Mount Jingfu is surrounded by mountains from three sides, with a high surrounding and a low centre. In the middle, there is a small basin with underground springs. From the perspective of the ideal landscape in ancient China, it conforms to the Hu Tian pattern (*hutian*, 壺天, a pot with the world inside, representing the land of immortals) of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands, and is an ideal geomantic treasure land.

The spatial aesthetics of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands, where mountains and water are intertwined, exemplifies the Daoist construction of sacred space in the mountains (Zheng et al. 2020). As the basic domain of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands, the mountains associate with the natural landscape spatial sequence. Additionally, the traditional cosmology concept of the unity of heaven and man has endowed the mountains with divinity. Therefore, an aesthetic transformation from a standardised landscape space to a thematic Grotto-Heaven and Blissful Land is achieved.

5. Aesthetics of Place

5.1. Aesthetics of Spatial Scenes

Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands reflect both the unique characteristics of the natural environment and the cultural spirit of mankind (Lv 2018). The palace complex of Mount Jingfu's Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands builds an overall orderly spatial layout with support from the natural environment of the landscape. The production of space theory regards space as a site of specific behaviours and an accumulation of ideologies. Examining the construction of spatial scenes from a developmental perspective helps to understand the cultural relations that a space represents. The construction of the spatial scene of Mount Jingfu began with the legends of deities and saints. Before the Ming Dynasty, the Abbey of Real Lord Liao Chong (*Liaozhenjun Guan*, 廖真君觀) was dominant in the layout. Later, with the engagement of Buddhists, literati and scholars, this area gradually developed into a sacred spatial pattern where the architecture of the three religions co-existed.

Qingxu Temple (*qingxu guan*, 清虛觀) of Mount Jingfu was built in the third year of the Zhongdatong era of the Southern Liang Dynasty (531 A.D.). As the Monument to Liao Chong at Mount Jingfu of Lianzhou City (連州靜福山廖先生碑銘) reads, "Liao Chong, whose given name is Chong and who styled himself as Qingxu (清虛). Mount Jingfu was home to him. In the third year of the Datong era of the Southern Liang Dynasty (529 A.D.), he lived in this mountain. And in the second year of Guangda era of the Southern Chen Dynasty (568 A.D.), he died here at the age of ninety-seven" (Liu 2011). As recorded in the *Records of Lianzhou Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness* (*lianzhou lingxi zhenjun ji*, 連州靈禧真君記), "One day, people lost track of where Liao went, and thus worshiped his residence as a Daoist temple. They named the temple "Qingxu" (Liao's courtesy name) and reserved his altars for ritual offerings and cinnabar stove. People revered him and kept the temple to worship the immortals of the Highest Clarity Sect" (Zheng n.d.). In the Tang Dynasty, Buddhism was introduced here. Since then, Mount Jingfu became a place where Daoist and Buddhist cultures coexisted. The previous version of *Da Qing Yi Tong Zhi* (a book about historical geography of Qing Dynasty) states that "Tianqu Academy lies

at Mount Jingfu, north of the city. In the Five Dynasties, a native named Huang Sun read there" (Mu and Pan n.d.).

At the end of the Tang Dynasty, Mount Jingfu was equipped with educational facilities. The earliest academy in Lingnan District, Tianqu Academy (天衢書院), was established there. The place was continuously honoured by Emperor Zhenzong (真宗), Emperor Shenzong (神宗) and Emperor Xiaozong (孝宗) of the Song Dynasty, and in the first year of the Yuanfeng era (元豐元年) of Emperor Shenzong (1078 A.D.), Liao Chong was ennobled as the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness. As written in the local chorography, "During the Longxing era (1163–1164 A.D.) of the Song Dynasty, the Heavenly texts appeared several times, totally more than one hundred and twenty volumes. Emperor Xiaozong granted the title of 'Abbey of the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness (*lingxi zhenjun guan*, 靈禧真君觀)'. The hall is grand and spacious. On the east and west are the Emperor Calligraphy Memorial Hall (*yushu ge*, 禦書閣) and the Hongyin Building (洪音樓) (Hao n.d.). To the left and right are the Pavilion of Three Clarities (*sanqing dian*, 三清殿) and Pavilion of the Jade King (*yuhuang dian*, 玉皇殿). From the centre to the north, there is the Pavilion of the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness (*lingxi dian*, 靈禧殿). On its west side lies Jinjian Pavilion (金簡亭). The buildings had decayed over the years. In the first year of the Duanping era (端平元年) of Emperor Lizong of the Song Dynasty (1234 A.D.), the government and citizens collectively raised funds to reconstruct the temples, restoring them to their former glory. In the summer of the next year (1235 A.D.), the place suffered a drought. The local governor Liu Yuan prayed at the Abbey of the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness and was answered with timely rain, so he donated money for its renovation" (Wu n.d.). The officials of Lianzhou City reported the event to the emperor, who praised the Real Lord Liao Chong, and included him in the official sacrificial rites, which led to a flourishing of palaces and abbeys at Mount Jingfu. Throughout the Ming and Qing Dynasties, these architectural spaces underwent multiple reconstructions and expansions. During the early Qing Dynasty, the architectural layout of Mount Jingfu was basically set. There were twelve palaces to honour the deities at Mount Jingfu Abbey, accompanied by numerous pavilions and palaces throughout the abbey. Of the twelve palaces depicted in Figure 3, eight were Daoist structures while the remaining four were Buddhist structures. As shown in Table 1, the years between 1948 and 1955 witnessed the destruction of almost all of the temples and abbeys, making way for public facilities more necessary for the Bao'an area at that time (Table 1).

Table 1. Development and evolution of Mount Jingfu.

Major Years	Sources	Scale and Organisational Changes
3rd year of Datong era of the Southern Liang Dynasty (529 A.D.)	Monument to Liao Chong at Mount Jingfu of Lianzhou City	Liao Chong lived here.
2nd year of Guangda era of the Southern Chen Dynasty (568 A.D.)	Records of Lianzhou Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness	People worshiped Liao's residence as a Daoist temple. They named the temple "Qingxv" (Liao's courtesy name).
Xiantian and Tianbao eras of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty (712–742)	Chart of the Palaces and Bureaus of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands	Mount Baofu (the old name of Mount Jingfu) was ranked 49th among the Seventy-two Daoist Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands.
Five Dynasties (581–907)	Boundary Separation Experience on Mount Jingfu	Some monks occupied Mount Jingfu.
Five Dynasties (581–907)	Da Qing Yi Tong Zhi (the previous version)	Tianqu Academy where a native named Huang Sun read was built.
Qianxing era of the Song Dynasty (1022)	Da Qing Yi Tong Zhi	Emperor Zhenzong ennobled Liao Chong as the Real Lord of Numinous Support.

Table 1. Cont.

Major Years	Sources	Scale and Organisational Changes
1st year of Yuanfeng era of the Song Dynasty (1078)	Records of Lianzhou Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness	Emperor Shenzong ennobled Liao Chong as the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness.
1st year of Longxing era of the Song Dynasty (1163)	Local Chronicles of Guangdong in Qing Dynasty	Emperor Xiaozong granted the title of Abbey of the Real Lord of Overflowing Happiness.
3rd year of Baoqing era in the Song Dynasty (1227)	Record of Scenic Spots Across the Country	Mount Jingfu, also known as Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests, is one of the eight scenes alongside Huangchuan River.
2nd year of Duanping era in the Song Dynasty (1235)		The government and citizens raised funds to reconstruct the temples.
7th year of Tianshun era in the Ming Dynasty (1463)		The governor Zhu Yun reconstructed the place.
39th year of Wanli era in the Ming Dynasty (1601)	Guangzhou Chronicles	
7th year of Tianqi era in the Ming Dynasty (1626)		The place was reconstructed.
47th year of Emperor Kangxi in the Qing Dynasty (1708)		The governor Wang Jimin and others advocated for the restoration.
Early years of the Qing Dynasty		The stable spatial layout of 12 palaces.
7th year of Emperor Qianlong in the Qing Dynasty (1742)	Lianzhou Chronicles (in the Tongzhi era)	The scholar Zhang Weiqin discovered and nominated the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu.
11th year of Emperor Guangxu in the Qing Dynasty (1806)		Liao Mulu, Liao Chong's descendants, and others advocated for the restoration.
22nd year of Emperor Guangxu in the Qing Dynasty (1896)		Liao Chong's descendants advocated for the restoration.
28th year of the Republic of China (1939)		Liao Yuankai, Liao Chong's descendants, and others advocated for the restoration.
37th year of the Republic of China (1948)		The Guangdong provincial government established a correctional institution at Mount Jingfu.
1950	Lianzhou County Chronicles	Buddhist Monk Hall was destroyed and a new platform for Bao'an Village was constructed using demolished brick and wood materials.
1951		The first district government demolished the palaces on Mount Jingfu and used the brick and wood materials to strengthen Bao'an Gospel of Grace Church as its office building.
1955		Bao'an Grain Management Agency demolished the palaces on Mount Jingfu and used brick and wood materials to build a grain storehouse on the west side of the Jielongmen Gate of Wenming Fang.
		Bao'an Supply and Marketing Agency demolished the palaces on Mount Jingfu and used brick and wood materials to strengthen the Ouyang's Great Water Shrine and to construct its office building.



Figure 3. Spatial pattern of Mount Jingfu in the Qing Dynasty.

The Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands of Mount Jingfu represent the culture of diverse beliefs, balancing the fusion and development of natural environmental elements with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, connecting major historical figures and events, and constructing unique spatial scenes, which have influenced the evolution of traditional culture and artistic aesthetics of Mount Jingfu.

5.2. Aesthetics of the Eight Scenes (Bajing, 八景)

As Bajing (八景, eight scenes) culture of the Southern Song Dynasty developed in Lianzhou City, the internal and external eight-scene systems were built centred on Mount Jingfu, namely, the eight scenes alongside Huangchuan River (*huangchuan bajing*, 湟川八景) and the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu (*fushan bajing*, 福山八景). Through naming, commenting, groups of poetry and paintings, the holistic scene of the local iconic landscape system was constructed.

The landscape clusters at Mount Jingfu in Lianzhou City have developed for thousands of years. Their development is not only driven by natural and geographical conditions, but also by the inheritance of traditional culture and the inevitable progress of artistic aesthetics. Bajing culture is a significant aspect of the cultural heritage in the Huangchuan region. The eight scenes alongside Huangchuan River (湟川八景) appreciated and recorded by Zhang Shi (張棫) represent one of the earliest well-known eight scenes in China. The landscape set was firstly described in the *Volume 92 Lianzhou City of the Record of Scenic Spots Across the*

Country (輿地紀勝), of which Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests (靜福寒林) is a depiction of Mount Jingfu. As a kind of cultural symbol of landscape set, the eight scenes gradually impacted the development of local culture by cultural radiation and diffusion. After Zhang Jun and his son Zhang Shi left Lianzhou City, their supporters arrived successively, composing poems and chants, which resulted in the creation of eight subsequent scenes in specific places. Among them, the most representative eight subsequent scenes were derived from the Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests (靜福寒林), one of the eight scenes alongside Huangchuan River. The eight scenes at Mount Jingfu were the landscape set discovered and nominated by the scholar Zhang Weiqin in the third year of the Daoguang era in the Qing Dynasty (1823 A.D.). His marvellous discovery, along with the poetry on these scenic spots made Bajing Culture, resonated with the folk of Lianzhou City, promoting the creation of six rural eight scenes and two mountainous eight scenes (Figure 4).

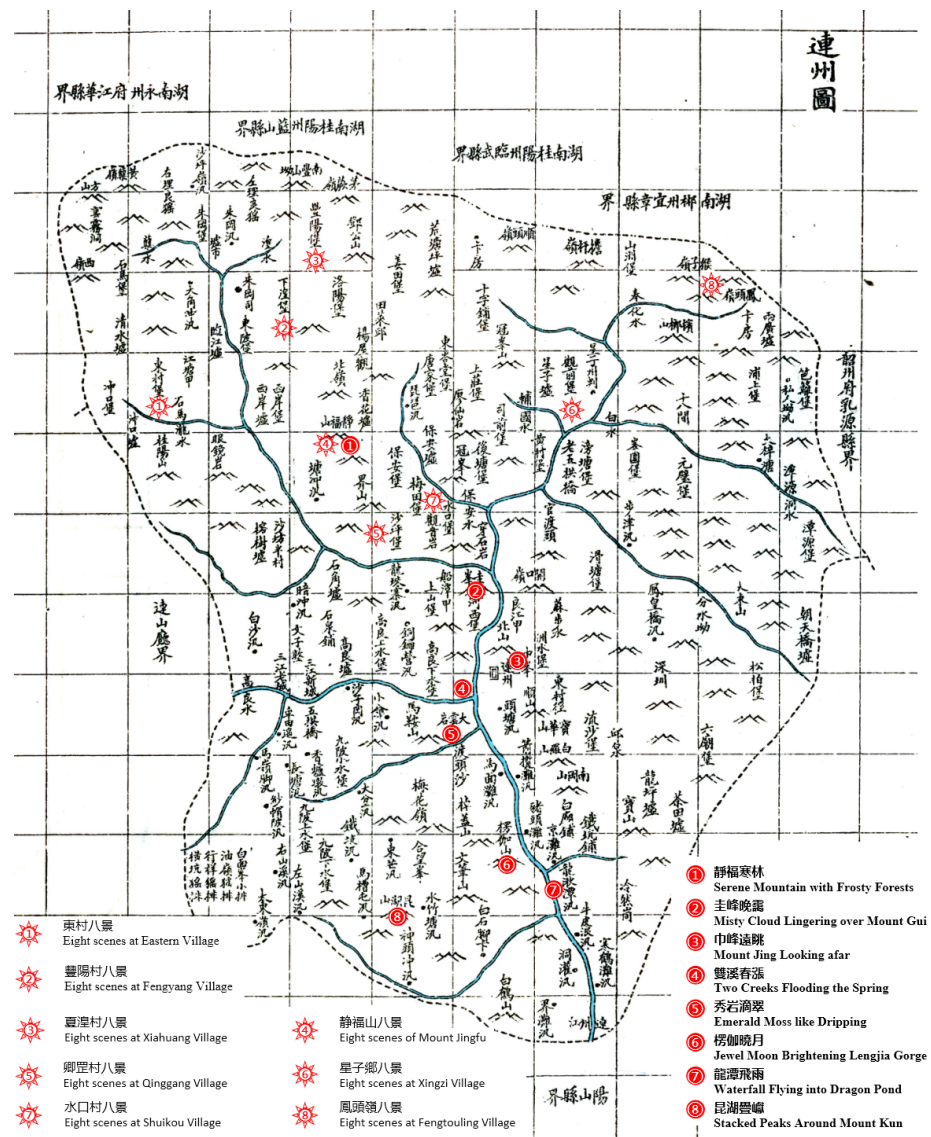


Figure 4. Eight Scenes along the Huangchuan River and its eight child scenes.

By designing viewing platforms from various viewpoints, the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu create a spatial organisation of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands, which highlights the scenery outside and conveys the sacredness inside. This further enhances the contribution of Mount Jingfu to the overall landscape composition at a larger scale. The scene of Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests was one of the eight ancient scenes alongside Huangchuan

River, from which the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu were derived. This scene together with the other seven scenes builds the typical landscape space of Lianzhou City (Figure 5). The eight original scenes and the eight subsequent scenes interconnect each other internally and externally, enlarging the scope and heightening the realm of the small-scale landscape of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands (Yang et al. 2022).

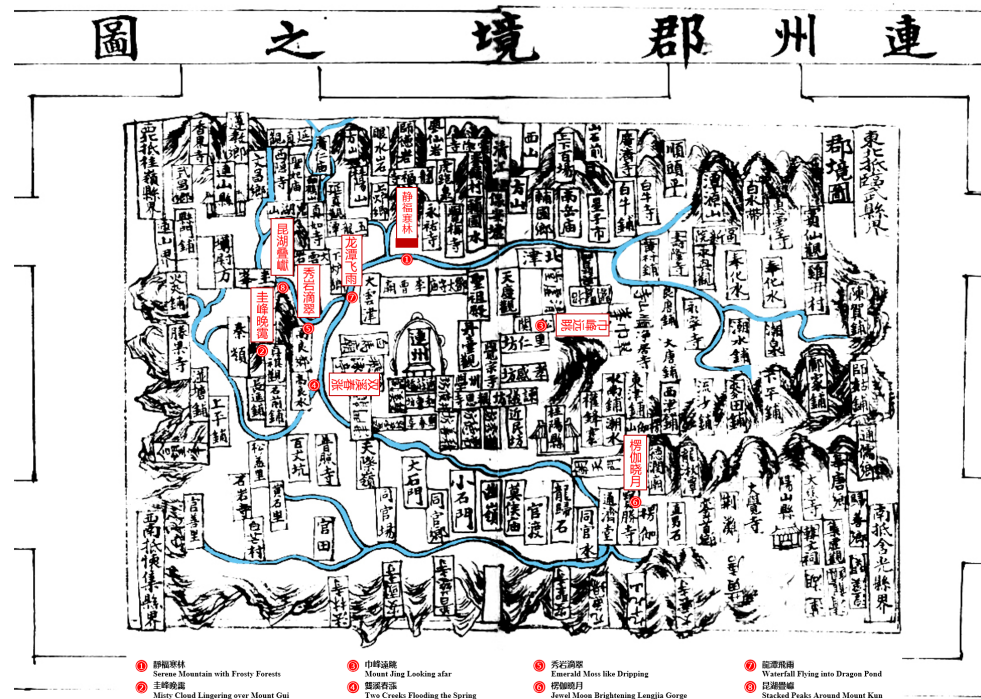


Figure 5. Distribution map of eight scenes along the Huangchuan River.

The poetry on the eight subsequent scenes depicts the internal landscape of Mount Jingfu, which accurately reproduces the scenery of Mount Jingfu encompassed by water during the Ming and Qing Dynasties. The eight scenes are integrated in an orderly manner and thematically linked into a series of echoing scenes through the presentation of traditional poems and commentaries (Du and Wang 2014). During the Ming and Qing dynasties, many literati journeyed to Mount Jingfu and Lianzhou City, creating an extensive collection of poems. The poems on Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests and the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu appreciate the spatial layout and scenic qualities while extracting the significance of the landscapes. This represents the comprehensive features of the landscape complex centred on Mount Jingfu. Through analysis of the extant poems related to the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu, it becomes apparent that their focus primarily lies on natural and humanistic landscape elements. The depiction of natural elements such as animals, plants, weather, waterscape, mountains and rocks conveys the connection and harmony between the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands of Mount Jingfu and nature (Table 2). In particular, the portrayal of plants and landscapes highlights the diversity of the natural environment of Mount Jingfu. On the one hand, the botanical elements present in the poems not only document the environment, but also represent the ecological foundation upon which the landscape is built. On the other hand, the combination of hills and water signifies the aesthetic pleasure of ancient people as a result of their intricate observation of the springs, pools, and waterways of Mount Jingfu. The humanistic landscape elements are dominated by architecture. Daoist rites, figures and connections with the celestial realm are combined with architectural features to create a sacred atmosphere of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands. As a significant cultural symbol and spatial and temporal reference, the buildings interact with the scenery of the day and the four seasons, reflecting rich landscape structural connections between them and the aesthetic needs of the aesthetic subjects.

Table 2. Landscape aesthetic elements in poems on eight scenes at Mount Jingfu.

Landscape Elements	Architectural	Mountain	Botanical	Animal	Religious	Astronomical	Cultural	Legendary
Rolling Waves in Blissful Well	pavilion	Stone\clear stream	--	--	Xiyi	--	float wine cups\character "Fu"\Shangsi festival	grindstone
Ping Pool Mirroring the Moon	--	ping pool\ fragrant pond\ clear waves\blue waves	pondweed	--	--	Moon\bright moon\ moon\cold moon	--	--
Creeks Circulating Wells	funnelled device\ square well	unusual stone\ mountain spring	dappled moss	--	secluded place	cold wind	--	--
Tigers Crouching at Spring Source	--	Spring\stream\ cliffs\valley	osmanthus flowers	tiger	crimson tripod\ lord of the mountain	--	tamed and subdued the tiger	the rise of chickens and dogs
Golden Palms of Immortals	--	--	purple peonies\ wild grass	--	Immortals\ sacred altar	Clouds\dawn\ dew\rain\ gleaming light	--	golden palms\ Penglai
Broad Sky and Great Mountains	Tianqu academy	green mountains\ fragrant stream	locust trees\ cassia trees	Swallows\ cicadas	high immortals	purple wind	--	--
Mountains Around Cultural Buildings	--	Mountains\twin peaks\ stones\river	green moss	--	Taoist bell\ blessed land	Clouds\blue sky\ morning rays	chant poet	--
Fairy Trees with Luminous Light	--	--	fairy trees\ fair\cassia blooms\ fragrant blossoms\ camphor tree	night magpie\ fireflies	--	luminous light\ brightly moon\ sparse stars\ wind	--	blessed land

In summary, the poems on the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu emphasise the depiction of natural landscapes, combined with the imagination of immortals and references to historical stories, which underline the sacred ambience of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands (Figure 6). The eight internal scenes initially set the tone for their original scene of Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests, which is characterised by serenity and coldness. The poems on the eight original scenes traditionally portray natural, humanistic, and imaginative landscapes. These descriptions emphasise the scenery’s lofty and frigid nature, which, when combined with the imagination and analogy of the celestial realm, creates the sacred atmosphere of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands. The commentaries on the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu transcend depicting the interior of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands from a distinct perspective. Rather, they create an aesthetic correlation between the picturesque surroundings and the sacred connotation inside for the landscape set.

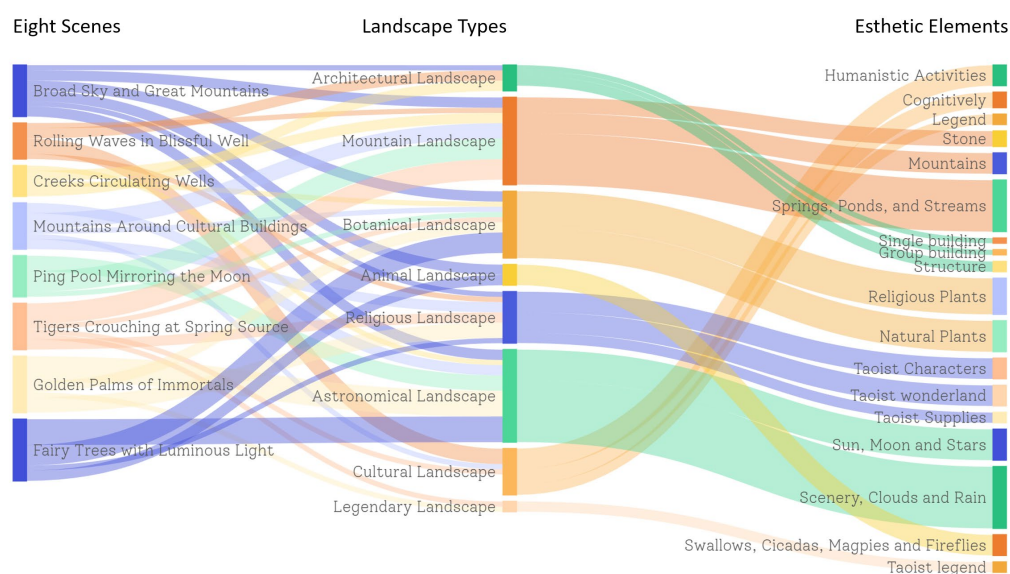


Figure 6. Landscape representation in poems on eight scenes at Mount Jingfu.

6. Aesthetics of Ritual Activities

With changes in ideology during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, the rituals on Mount Jingfu centred on the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands were influenced by folklore and moved into the living spaces associated with daily life. The Daoist ritual activities combined with the folk god pageant ceremony (*youshen and saihui*, 遊神賽會) in Lingnan District have given rise to the Bao’an Great God Parade held during the Double Ninth Festival (保安重陽大神會)³. This event enhances the social aesthetic representations of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands with a figurative narrative focusing on blood, geography, and divinity.

6.1. Bloodline Identity Represented by Religious Rites

The essential representation of religious belief systems serves to maintain community stability and manifest communal values (Durkheim 1925). The Bao’an Great God Parade (保安大神) has developed from unique beliefs due to a long-standing settlement within a single-surname clan. The rituals organised under these beliefs highlight the inherent blood ties within the clan, which further reflects the importance of sharing the same family name and clan for the stable inheritance of the parade. The Bao’an Great God Parade is primarily organised and participated in by people residing in the six major villages of this town whose shared blood ties create a clan-based identity.

The Bao’an Great God Parade held during the Double Ninth Festival is the largest god pageant ceremony in northwestern Guangdong. It comprises two major activities: *youshen* (遊神) and *saihui* (賽會), which mean parading the deities and a competition of miscellaneous

arts, respectively. The event was initially arranged to honor Liao Chong, a Daoist priest who introduced self-cultivation practices at Mount Jingfu. As per the Lianzhou Chronicles from the ninth year of the Tongzhi era of the Qing Dynasty (1871 A.D.), Liao ascended in flight in the second year of the Guangda era of the Southern Chen Dynasty (568 A.D.) at Mount Jingfu. Since then, every year during the Double Ninth Festival, the Liao's ethnic group would parade the statue of their ancestor Liao Chong in the mountain. After the Song Dynasty, more and more outsiders who settled at Bao'an Town participated in the parade, leading to a gradual increase in the number of great gods (*dashen*, 大神). This then led to the enrichment and diversification of the forms and contents. With the growing participation, a festival was formed that has been preserved and passed down from generation to generation. People invite the idols out of their temples onto a carrier, and travel around the region. Along the way, gongs are sounded, drums are beat, and various entertainment programs are performed to honor the gods, entertain people, and ward off disasters while bringing blessings.

The god pageant ceremony is an event organised by civil society itself. The Bao'an Great God Parade involves the Great God (*dashen*, 大神)⁴ as the dominant deity and the High Gods (*gaoshen*, 高神, local ancient sages)⁵ as secondary gods. There are six villages in Bao'an Town, including Wenming Fang (文明坊), Yuxiu Fang (毓秀坊), Dongxing Fang (東興坊), Wanquan Fang (萬全坊), Xiangui Fang (仙桂坊) and Taiping Fang (太平坊). The community has agreed that the first four villages carry the Great God on a rotational basis and the other two primarily travel the High Gods and occasionally carry the Great God. Before the establishment of the Republic of China, Wanquan Fang had strong financial resources and hosted the ceremony actively once every two years, while the other three villages rotated once every few years, and after the resumption of the activity in 1985, the Great God Parade was held by the four major villages once a year (refer to Table 3 for details). The familial connections embedded within the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands of Mount Jingfu correspond to the divine systems of high gods in the organisation of activities. Every village in Bao'an Town possesses its individual high god, and nearly all of the high gods are local ancient sages. As per Feuchtwang, local gods represent the essence of folk morality (Feuchtwang 2021). For the purpose of sacred formation, the Bao'an villages associated their earthly aspirations with the belief in high deities through the legends of divine manifestations. By performing regular rituals, they established a stable and blessed relationship between the village and the exclusive high god, forging an important bond to unify the bloodline identity.

Table 3. Village rotation year for Great God and High Gods Parade Ceremony.

a Village Rotation Year during the Republic of China			b Village Rotation Year after 1985		
Year	Rotation Village	High God	Year	Rotation Village	High God
1940	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu	1985	Yuxiu Fang	General Bai
1941	Dongxing Fang	Lord Wang	1986	Dongxing Fang	Lord Wang
1942	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu	1987	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu
1943	Wenming Fang	Grand Guardian Cai	1988	Wenming Fang	Grand Guardian Cai
1944	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu	1989	Yuxiu Fang	General Bai
1945	Yuxiu Fang	General Bai	1990	Dongxing Fang	Lord Wang
1946	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu	1991	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu
1947	Dongxing Fang	Lord Wang	1992	Wenming Fang	Grand Guardian Cai
1948	Wanquan Fang	Meng Binyu	1993	Yuxiu Fang	General Bai
1949	Wenming Fang	Grand Guardian Cai			

Bao'an Town comprises several villages of different clans around Mount Jingfu, united by a core belief in the Great God, as well as the bloodlines of individual clan villages with different beliefs in high gods. The cultural landscape of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands has evolved from a small-scale clan space to a larger geographical space, sustained and represented by communal rituals.

6.2. Geo-Spatial Identity Represented by High Gods Parade

The geospatial identity of the Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands of Mount Jingfu is upheld through high god offerings conducted by all villages. Local traditional deities and sages' beliefs are integrated into the landscape in an enlightened way, transforming the clan settlement's family-based relations into territorial deity worship. The set route of the high gods' procession serves as an annual symbolical validation of the spatial boundaries of divine blessing, while the rituals establish the local community's identity spanning from the bloodline clan to the geographical settlement.

In the legends of high gods that have been transmitted through generations in Bao'an Town, the factual mountain scenery, historical events, and the revered immortals and sages authenticate each other, linking the landscape, the beliefs, and the settlements in this area. With the god pageant ceremony co-organised by all villages, the high gods originated from their ancient sages' stories were included in the parade to symbolise each village's participation and establish interactive relationships between villages and high gods. This creates a stable fusion of ritual and regional space, forming the entire imaginary world and marking the ritual space as locally recognised.

Every year, the Bao'an Great God Parade is held from the seventh to the tenth day of the ninth month on the Chinese Lunar Calendar. On the second day of the event, at around 3:00 p.m., the procession is led by the village councillors to carry the statues of high gods in a specific order. At the beginning of each village team, two individuals ignite firecrackers, followed by others who carry colourful gates, flags, village sign, incense holder, eight percussion instruments (*bayin*, 八音) and the High God. Additional teams include performers of dragon dance, storytelling (*gushi*, 故事隊)⁶, lion dance, and ten varieties of gongs and drums (*shiyang jin luogu*, 十樣錦鑼鼓)⁷, as well as stilt walkers (Figure 7). The High God Parade teams tour the villages following a fixed route in close succession. As the procession passes, each household greets the high gods at the gate and greets the ceremony of "swinging the gods" (*yaoshen*, 搖神)⁸, offering gifts in reverence. The shared street space between adjacent neighbourhoods serves as a buffer zone between public ceremonies and private domains, and the ritualistic practices conducted in this area contribute to enhancing neighbourhood cohesion (Wang et al. 2022) (Figure 8). According to the villagers' beliefs, the parade represents the deities' assessment of their daily lives and serves as a means for the deities to visit the earth and bestow blessings on the townships. In addition, the parade route represents the spatial extent of these blessings.

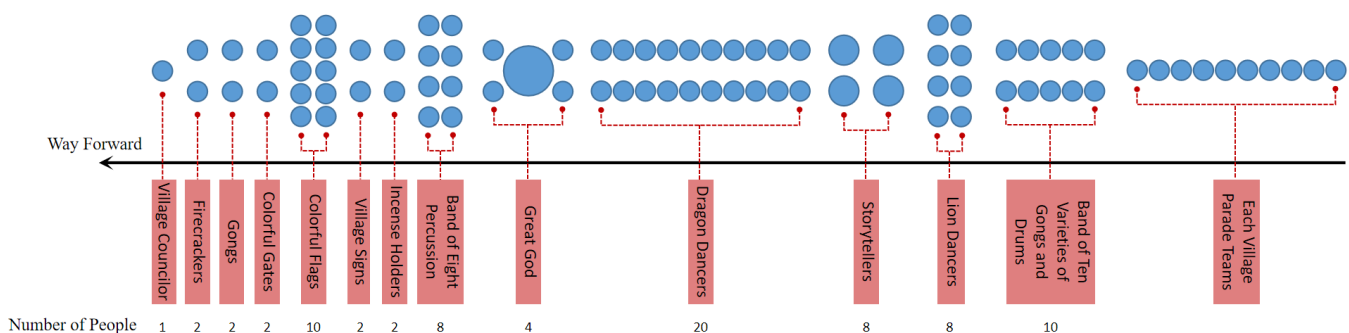


Figure 7. High Gods Parade procession and people involved.

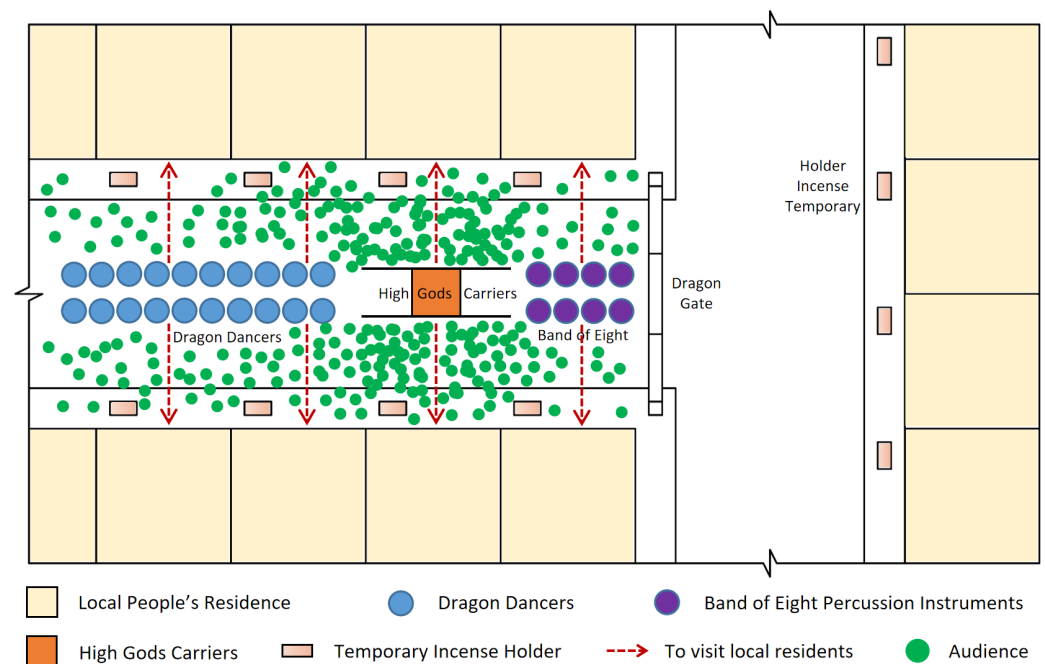


Figure 8. Spatial organisation illustration of alleys in High Gods Swinging Ceremony.

The parade team starts at the Jielongmen Gate (接龍門) of Wenming Fang located on Northern Bao'an Street, proceeding towards Yaoshen Square (搖神坪) in Wanquan Fang. The route then winds upwards towards Huguang Street and continues onto Bao'an New Street, Xinxv Square (新墟坪), and Jiashenmen Gate (接神門) of Wenming Fang before descending via Yuxiu Fang and Dongxing Fang. The team then rests in Yaoshen Square of Wanquan Fang for approximately thirty minutes. Then, the procession is led by the rotating village team, followed by the team from the previous year's rotating village and other village teams. It proceeds from Yaoshen Square to Xinxv Square, then to Jielongmen Gate. Finally, the teams from different villages go back to their respective ceremonial sites.

The High God Parade route consists of several critical spatial nodes on a designated path that connects Bao'an Town and the natural landscape of Mount Jingfu through a specific time and space for scenic events. The ceremony will feature several activities in various places, with these spatial locations being both functional and symbolic, which can facilitate ceremonial events while representing significant importance (Jones 2016). The god pageant ceremony, as a local public event, serves not only as an annual commemoration but also as a means for social education in everyday life, linking the public interaction space with the nodes along the parade route. Mount Jingfu and Bao'an Town's divine squares, village gates, streets and alleys function as exhibition sites for local annual rituals, which constantly reinforce the believers' understanding of the spiritual space, residential space and natural environments. Through the creation of ritual scenes, the ceremony serves as a cultural emblem of collective consciousness that connects the daily living space of local people and represents the geospatial identity from long-term settlement.

6.3. Divine Identity Represented by Great God Parade

In traditional Chinese communities, there is always a common belief in a master deity, whose worshipping ritual functions as a key representation that motivates local residents to form a social community and advances its unity (Dean and Zheng 1992). The Bao'an Great God Parade originally honours Liao Chong, the Taoism founder at Mount Jingfu. However, based on the rituals and the needs of the public, the ritual space of Mount Jingfu has subsequently formed an alliance among territorial units in the area influenced by a shared main god through divine connection, extending the reach of the shared belief space (Zheng and Chen 2003).

The rituals of the deities are realised through the Great God Parade, in which the living space of clan settlements merges with the space of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands, achieving spatial integration. The annual parade ceremony and religious practices have endowed the local environment with a sense of sanctity and represented the boundaries of the ritual space on Mount Jingfu and the areas blessed by the deities. These customs have enhanced the residents' recognition of the belief space of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands at Mount Jingfu through the divine ties.

Every year on the Chinese Double Ninth Festival, at around 6 a.m., the rotating village organises the procession to bring the clothing and crowns of the Great God, Judges and Servants to the Real Lord Abbey at Mount Jingfu to invite the statues of the deities while carrying colourful gates, flags, incense holders and performing eight percussion instruments. When the god figures are dressed up, the cannons boom three times and the firecrackers are set off. In the front of the procession, two people play gongs, followed by those carrying colourful gates, flags and the statue of the Lord of Mount Hua (*xiyue chuanzhu*, 西嶽川主) and the honor guard. Then follows the carrier for the Great God, people holding yellow damask umbrellas and a man carrying two gongs. The Judges and Servants stand on the left and right side of the carrier, respectively, stopping every three steps to look back at the Great God. A team of old men walks slowly with incense pillars in their hands and deacon plates on their shoulders, followed by the dragon and lion dancers, along the road from Mount Jingfu to Bao'an Street (Figure 9). The processions from other villages greet the Great God at Gaoshen Square at the Jielongmen Gate. Everywhere the whole procession arrives, the neighborhoods greet them excitedly, burning incense and setting off firecrackers. At around 11 a.m., the procession arrives at Yaoshen Square of Wanquan Fang and puts down the carrier, making the Great God face north. And the Judges perform the ritual of Treading on the Eight Diagrams (*cai bagua*, 踩八卦)⁹ to pray and offer sacrifices (Figure 10).

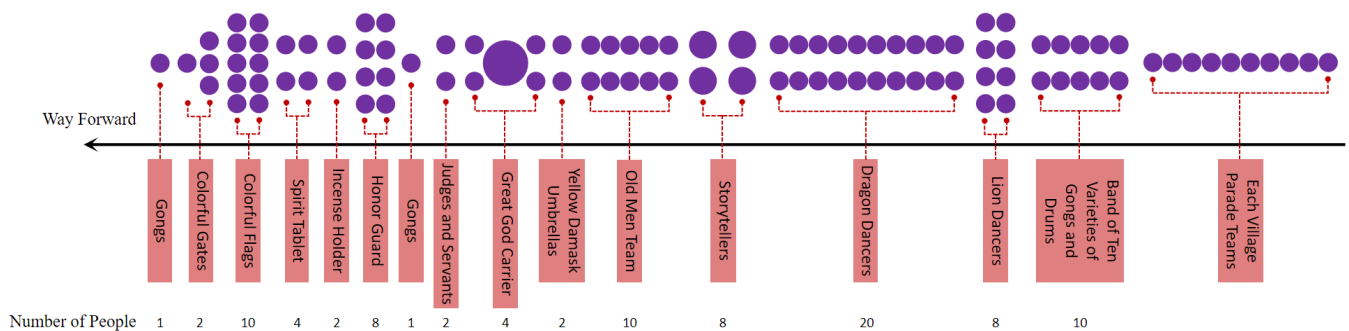


Figure 9. Great God Parade procession and people involved.

The climax of the god pageant ceremony is at 3 p.m., when the processions, following the order of activities on the afternoon of the eighth day, march down the street from the Jielongmen Gate of Wenming Fang and gather at Yaoshen Square for the second round of Treading on the Eight Diagrams. After that, the rotating village takes first place in the procession and the rotating village of the previous year takes second place, followed by other villages, marching up the street from Yaoshen Square of Wanquan Fang and resting at Gaoshen Square of Wenming Fang via Xinwei Square. Meanwhile, the High Gods are swung several times in front of each village's archway.

The rotating village team places the Great God on the crossroad at the mouth of Mount Jingfu, unveils the first mask of kindness and harmony, and shows the second mask with a green face and fangs. Then, comes the third round of the Great God going down the streets, when the non-rotating villages place the statues of landlords and gods in the middle of the streets to block the Great God, which is called collecting the blessing of the Great God (*tun dashen*, 囤大神). After this ceremony, the procession descends to Yaoshen Square in Wanquan Fang, stopping every three steps along the way and lowering

the Great God Carrier from south to north. The parade of high gods, storytelling, dragon and lion dances ends here, while the Judges conduct the third round of Treading on the Eight Diagrams. At around 7 or 8 p.m., the Double Ninth Great God Parade ends, and the rotating village carries the Great God back to its own village, while the other villages return with their own High Gods. On the morning of the tenth day, the villages send off their guests with dragon and lion dances in the streets, and this is the end of the god pageant ceremony of Bao'an Town.

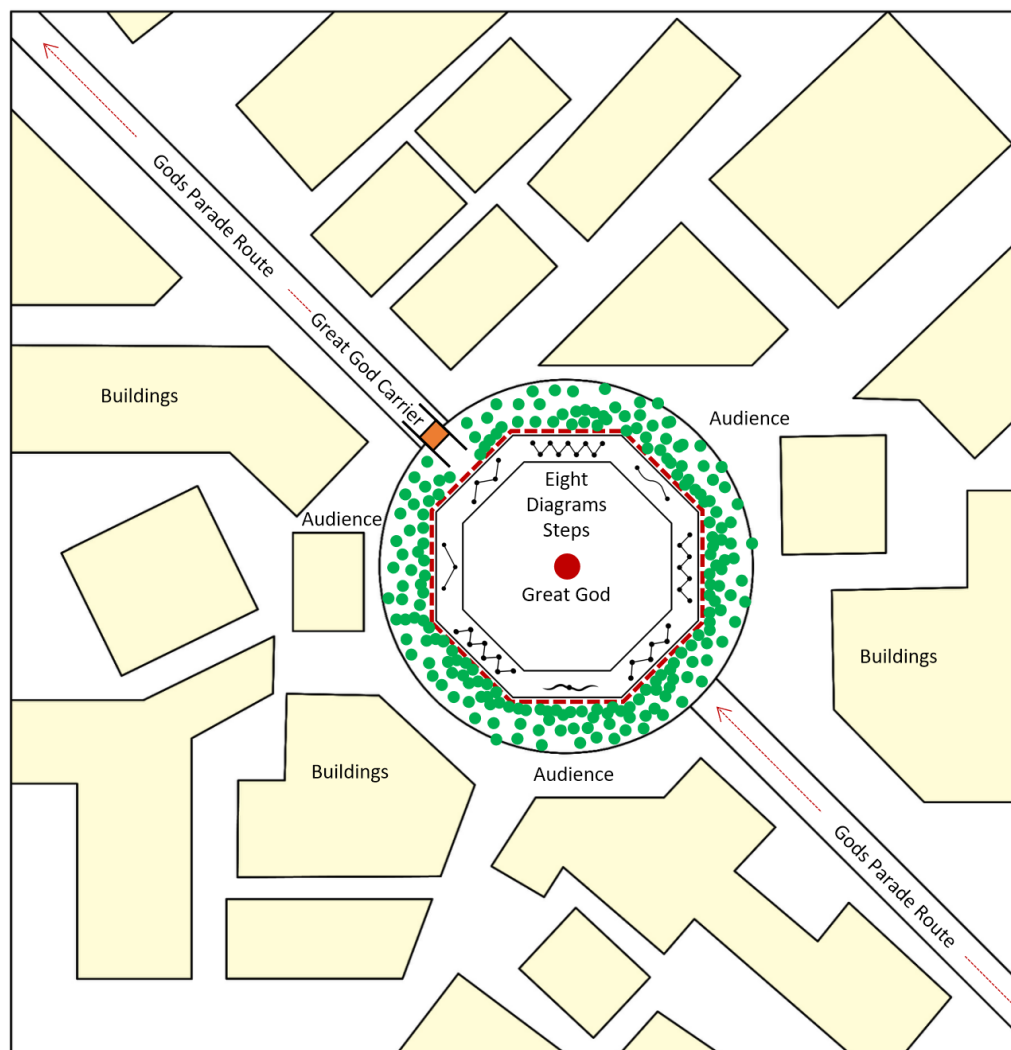


Figure 10. Spatial organisation illustration of Treading on the Eight Diagrams Ceremony.

The Bao'an Great God Parade involves a set of procedural and symbolic rituals, like activities traveling along the villages with performances in specific spaces to worship the deities. The parade is not confined to the palatial space of Mount Jingfu but has instead expanded to the entire Bao'an Town, with all villages joining together. It is an event that unites individuals, villages, settlements, and Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands based on shared beliefs, symbolising collective identity. The Great God Parade incorporates local clan connotations into religious practices, establishing a framework of activities based on familial ties. The ritual space of communities where multiple family names have long resided fosters geopolitical ties and legends of divine manifestations creates an exclusive divine identity for each village. The interplay of familial, geographical, and divine connections plays a crucial role in the ongoing transmission of the Bao'an Great God Parade and the preservation of the social vibrancy of Mount Jingfu's Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands as a cultural landscape (see Table 4).

Table 4. Social representation of Bao’an Great God Parade during the Double Ninth Festival.

Type	Content
Familial Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rotation villages: Wanquan Fang, Dongxing Fang, Yuxiu Fang, Wenming Fang; • High Gods: local sages like Cai Qiji, Meng Binyu, Liao Jiu, Liao Yong, Aunt Liao, General Bai and so on; • Great God: Liao Chong, a local sage at Bao’an Town.
Geographic Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parade space: abbeys at Mount Jingfu, Bao’an River, farmlands, alleys, ancestry halls, village gates, the palace of Great God and divine squares; • Ceremony procession: village councillor—people igniting firecrackers—people playing gongs—people carrying colourful gates—people carrying flags—people carrying incense holders—a band playing eight percussion instruments—people carrying the Great God—dragon dancers—storytellers—lion dancers—a band of ten varieties of gongs and drums—stilt walkers—teams of each village; • Route for High Gods Parade: Northern Bao’an Street—Jielongmen Gate of Wenming Fang—Yaoshen Square in Wanquan Fang—Huguang Street—Bao’an New Street—Xinxv Square—Jieshenmen Gate of Wenming Fang.
Divine Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parade space: Mount Jingfu, Jielong Square, Gaoshen Alley, squares in the front of each village gate; • Ceremony procession: people playing gongs—people carrying colourful gates—people carrying colourful flags—people carrying Spirit Tablet—people carrying incense holders—a honor guard—people playing gongs—Judges and Servants—Great God carrier—people holding yellow damask umbrellas—old men team- dragon dancers—lion dancers—a band of ten varieties of gongs and drums—each village parade team; • Route for Great God parade: Mount Jingfu—the crossroad at the mouth of Mount Jingfu—Xinwei Square—Wenming Fang—Jielong Square—Yuxiu Fang—Dongxing Fang—village gate of Wanquan Fang—Yaoshen Square.

7. Conclusions

Based on the superior mountainous resources of Lianzhou City, Mount Jingfu was constructed around the ideal environment of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands in people’s mind. Furthermore, it incorporated sacred yet systematic archetypes of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands and created an ideal spatial pattern of Mount Jingfu, which has been recognised by Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism over the ages. Through the promotion by literati and the construction of landscape sets, the landscape clusters of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands at Mount Jingfu, which connects the picturesque surroundings and the sacred connotation inside, have had a profound impact on constructing sacred space in Lianzhou City and Bao’an Town. During the Song Dynasty, Liao Chong became the official deity sanctioned by the state. In later Ming and Qing Dynasties, the Great God belief of Bao’an Town was accompanied by additional local sages. This represents that the veneration of True Lords, as dictated by the state, surpasses the limited spatial layout of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands and encompasses the communal identity of those who congregate with regard to geography, family and divinity. During ceremonial events, genetic ties amongst people sharing the same surname or clan structure serve as the organisational blueprint and unify clan identity. The long-term settlement’s geographical relationship holds the physical space of the activities while the High Gods parade sequences mountains and water bodies. The shared belief in the divine illuminates the significance of the practices, expressing thanks to deities and providing amusement to the public while unifying the local identity. These interconnected aspects motivate the ongoing development and preservation of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands at Mount Jingfu as a living legacy of cultural landscapes.

As a primary form of cultural landscapes, Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands document local history and represent the aesthetics of the landscape, playing a crucial role in a specific cultural domain and social progression. The Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands at Mount Jingfu have preserved traditional Chinese cultural elements while integrating complex socio-cultural factors within a specific natural and historical framework. It represents aesthetic beliefs and collective consciousness internalised within the familial, geospatial, and spiritual identity of a social group and has become crucial to integrate cultural groups within a definite spatial-temporal framework to explore their social aesthetics. From the view of cultural landscape, exploring the interaction between natural geography’s

environmental force and human society's cultural force in the development of Grotto-Heavens and Blissful Lands can help highlight the common genetic characteristics and regional individuality shaped in its landscape aesthetic system.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Y.X. and X.T.; methodology, C.Z.; software, X.W.; validation, Y.X., Y.B. and C.Z.; formal analysis, C.Z.; investigation, X.T.; resources, X.T.; data curation, X.W.; writing—original draft preparation, Y.X.; writing—review and editing, Y.B.; visualization, Y.X.; supervision, X.W.; project administration, X.T.; funding acquisition, X.T. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the National Natural Science Foundation of China, grant number [51978272] and the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Foundation of Ministry of Education of China, grant number [23YJA760033].

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available in all figures and tables.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Notes

- Eight Scenes Alongside Huangchuan River: The mother river of Lianzhou City is Lianjiang River, which was known as Huangshui in ancient times, and the entire water basin was called Huangchuan River. Therefore, the eight scenes of Lianzhou City are also known as the eight scenes alongside Huangchuan River. *Record of Scenic Spots Across the Country (yudi jisheng, 舆地纪胜 (Wang 2005))* and *Fang Yu Sheng Lan (方輿胜览)* are two comprehensive geographic books of great significance, compiled during the Southern Song Dynasty. These texts specifically document two sets of landscapes, known as the “Eight Views of Xiaoxiang” and the “Eight Scenes Alongside Huangchuan River”. The latter consists of Mount Jing Looking afar (巾峰远眺), Misty Cloud Lingering over Mount Gui (圭峰晚霭), Emerald Moss like Dripping Aurora (秀岩滴翠), Two Creeks Flooding the Spring (双溪春涨), Jewel Moon Brightening Lengjia Gorge (楞伽晓月), Waterfall Flying into Dragon Pond (龙潭飞雨), Stacked Peaks Around Mount Kun (昆湖叠嶂) and Serene Mountain with Frosty Forests (静福寒林).
- Eight Scenes at Mount Jingfu: Zhang Weiqin is a scholar of the Daoguang era in the Qing Dynasty. He firstly discovered and nominated the eight scenes at Mount Jingfu.

Rolling Waves in Blissful Well (福字回澜) (created by Weiqin ZHANG—Qing Dynasty)
 There's a pavilion covered like a cap, there's a stone flat as a grindstone (有亭覆如盖, 有石平如砥)
 The character “Fu” is patterned after Xiyi, who might have carved it here back then? (福字摹希夷, 當年誰勒此?)
 Wandering leisurely like a gentle wave, trickling endlessly around the clear stream (宛轉約回瀾, 涓涓繞清泚)
 Desiring to float wine cups down a winding stream, the joyful date is already set in Shangsi Festival (欲泛羽觴流, 佳期約上巳)
 Ping Pool Mirroring the Moon (平池印月) (created by Weiqin ZHANG—Qing Dynasty))
 The fragrant pond stores clear waves, bright and quiet under delicate dust (芳池蓄清波, 皦皦纖塵靜)
 The bright moon graces the sky, blue waves immerse the treasure mirror (皓月麗中天, 碧波沉寶鏡)
 The pondweed interweaves, the clear light reflects each other (荇藻自交橫, 清光互輝映)
 On a fine night embracing the cold moon, leisurely, I see my nature (良夜抱寒暉, 悠然見吾性)
 Creeks Circulating Wells (涧井交流) (created by Weiqin ZHANG—Qing Dynasty)
 The divine mechanics of the universe, shape an unusual stone into a funnelled device (造化運神機, 奇石辟為甕)
 The mountain spring gushes forth, the square well contains the clear shallows (山泉汨汨來, 方井涵清淺)
 In this secluded place, worldly dust is scarce, dappled moss paints a colourful scene (境僻俗塵稀, 爛斑暈苔蘚)
 Cherishing this isolated spot, a cold goodness arises when the wind blows past (愛此獨遲留, 風過冷然善)
 Tigers Crouching at Spring Source (泉源伏虎) (created by Weiqin ZHANG—Qing Dynasty)
 A spring opens up with the pace of a tiger, a crimson tripod gathers the osmanthus flowers (泉逐虎蹄開, 丹鼎黃芽簇)
 Flowing since ancient times, the lord of the mountain tamed and subdued here (終古流潺湲, 山君此馴伏)
 Not following the rise of chickens and dogs, always resting at the source of the spring (不隨雞犬升, 長踞泉源宿)
 There will be a moment to leap over layers of cliffs, a single laugh generates breeze in the valley (會當躡層崖, 一笑風生穀)
 Golden Palms of Immortals (仙人金掌) (created by Bo ZHANG—Qing Dynasty)
 Beyond the wilderness clouds of three autumns, twice-drenched condensed into crimson hues (三秋野雲外, 兩潤凝丹彩)
 Tangerine dawn wields the dew's shadow, as purple peonies urge orchids to bloom (橙霞揮露影, 紫芍催蘭開)
 Golden palm absorbs the fine essence, jade-like brilliance seals the sacred altar (金掌收氤氣, 鑿玉鎮聖臺)
 Once again, dark greens merge with wild grass, the gleaming light seems like fairyland Penglai (蒼蒼複菅莽, 瑤光似蓬萊)
 Broad Sky and Great Mountains (天衢毓秀) (created by Bo ZHANG—Qing Dynasty)
 In front of the jade green mountains and purple wind, beside the fragrant stream with colourful blossoms (翠微紫風前, 樵華香澗邊)

Locust branches hold thousands of dews, Cassia trees reach up to the ninth heaven (槐枝承千露, 桂木舉九天)
 Swallows cut the clouds brightly, cicadas sing lying low on the hot hill (剪燕繞雲亮, 唱蟬伏丘炎)
 Over the long wilderness, mountain smoke rises, climbing the path to greet the high immortals (長野山煙起, 攀徑謁高仙)
 Mountains Around Cultural Buildings (文峰并峙) (created by Bo ZHANG—Qing Dynasty),
 Twin peaks rise abruptly in the south, they stand soaring and leaning in the long empty sky (雙峰聳南起, 飛倚長空立)
 Deep clouds push against the blue sky, and shallow stones wear green moss (雲深推藍影, 石淺披青衣)
 As the poet's chant reaches the edge of the forest, the Taoist bell echoes back from the west of the river (詩吟出林際, 道鐘回河西)
 Shoulder-to-shoulder, we gaze at this blessed land, waiting for the first rays of the autumn morning (並肩仰福地, 秋晨待先曦)
 Fairy Trees with Luminous Light (珠樹夜光) (created by Bo ZHANG—Qing Dynasty).
 The fair leaves sway casting silhouettes, the night magpie returns kicking up dust (嘉葉搖暗影, 夜鶻撲塵歸)
 The moon shines brightly with sparse stars accompanying, in the gentle wind, fireflies fly (月明稀星伴, 風柔眾螢飛)
 Cassia blooms hide in the smoke cage, the tall camphor tree hangs jade shells (桂舒掩煙籠, 樟挺懸玉貝)
 Summer sentiments weave into dreams, in this blessed land, we search for fragrant blossoms (夏情牽入夢, 福瀛覓芳菲)

- 3 Bao'an Great God Parade held during the Double Ninth Festival is also called the god pageant ceremony which is a custom based on local Chinese popular exorcistic religion to honor the gods and ward off disasters while bringing blessings in Bao'an Town. As per Buddhist Classics and Topography of Mount Hengshan (*nanyue zongsheng ji*, 南岳总胜集), the original prototype to be worshipped was Real Lord Liao Chong who was venerated by the local people. Over time, the ceremony evolved and was inherited, eventually transforming into a customary event for commemorating ancestors, seeking good fortune, and preventing disasters. It also serves as a means for the community to gather with their relatives and friends.
- 4 The Great God refers to Shaohao, also known as Jin Tian (金天), who is the Lord of Mount Hua (*xiyue chuanzhu*, 西岳川主). In the Bao'an Great God Parade, one of the local elders will be chosen to act as the Great God who sits on a dragon-shaped chair wearing a mask with a serene expression, a dragon robe, and a divine umbrella over the head. Each village takes turns playing the role of the Great God annually.
- 5 High Gods are locally known as Gao Gong (高公), and in ancient times, there were 72 Gao deities, such as Liao Chong, Meng Binyu, Cai Qiji, General Bai and Aunt Liao.
- 6 Storytellers (*gushi*, 故事) are played by children dressed in little dragon robes and official hats, mainly modelled after the Beijing Opera and Qi Opera plays. These performances often feature classic plays such as The Oath of Brotherhood in the Peach Garden, Legend of the White Snake and Wu Song Fighting a Tiger.
- 7 Ten varieties of gongs and drums make up a form of folk music consisting of blowing and beating, popular in the Xingzi language area of Lianzhou City. The instruments comprise the high-side gong, small gong, hard gong, high-side drum, flat drum, Mandong drum, wooden fish, medium cymbal, small cymbal, and suona. Before the establishment of the People's Republic of China, this type of folk music was exclusively performed during the god pageant ceremony.
- 8 Shaking the Gods is a ceremony in which people wearing masks stand on the deity carriers and act as the Great God and High Gods who are raised high by eight men. When they reach a house, the audience shouted "swing the gods". They respond by swinging the gods from side to side, and it seems that the actors are dancing like fairies with long sleeves.
- 9 Treading on the Eight Diagrams is a dance of Daoist origin in which the dancers perform in the Eight Diagrams steps.

References

- Brace, Catherine, Adrian R. Bailey, and David C. Harvey. 2006. Religion, place and space: A framework for investigating historical geographies of religious identities and communities. *Progress in Human Geography* 30: 28–43. [CrossRef]
- Chai, Mengyuan. 2022. Idealizing a Daoist Grotto-Heaven: The Luofu Mountains in Luofu Yesheng 羅浮野乘. *Religions* 13: 1043. [CrossRef]
- Chen, Wei 陳蔚, and Rui Tan 譚睿. 2021. A Study on the Cultural Landscape of Daoist "Heaven and Earth in Caves" and the Spatial Structure of Hutian". *Architectural Journal* 4: 108–13.
- Cooper, Roger A. 1990. Geographies and religious commitment in a small coastal parish. *Geography of Religions and Belief Systems* 12: 3–5.
- Cresswell, Tim. 2014. *Place: An Introduction*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Dean, Kenneth, and Zhenman Zheng 鄭振滿. 1992. A Preliminary Study of Taoism and Popular Cult Worship in Fujian and Taiwan (閩臺道教與民間諸神崇拜). *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnology Academia. Taipei, Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica* 73: 33–52.
- Du, Chunlan 杜春蘭, and Jing Wang 王靖. 2014. Coupling Between Literary Context and Landscape Space—A Case Study of Ancient "Eight Views" in Chongqing. *Journal of Human Settlements in West China* 29: 101–6.
- Du, Guangting 杜光庭 [Five Dynasties 五代]. n.d. The Records of Daoist Spiritual Experience. 道教靈驗記. In *Chinese Daozang 中華道藏*, Vol. 2, "The Experience of Dividing the Boundary at Jingfu Mountain 靜福山分界驗". Beijing: HuaXia Publishing House.
- Du, Shuang 杜爽, and Feng Han 韓鋒. 2019. Study on the Origins of the Abroad Sacred Mounts from the Perspective of Cultural Landscape. *Chinese Landscape Architecture* 35: 122–27.
- Durkheim, Émile. 1925. *Les Formes e'l'ementaires de la vie religieuse*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Feuchtwang, Stephan. 2021. *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor*. London and New York: Routledge.

- Ge, Hong 葛洪 [Eastern Jin dynasty 東晉]. 2002. *The Inner Chapters of the Baopuzi* 抱樸子內篇. Beijing: Hualing Publishing House 華齡出版社.
- Guo, Fei 郭棻. 1996. *Wanli Guangdong Annals* 萬曆廣東通志. Jinan: Shandong Qilu Book Publishing Co., Ltd., vol. 72.
- Hao, Yulin 郝玉麟 [Qing dynasty 清代]. n.d. Guangdong Tongzhi 廣東通志. In *Siku Quanshu* 四庫全書. Beijing: Beijing Publishing Group, vol. Temples 道觀卷, p. 180.
- Jones, Peter Blundell. 2016. *Architecture and Ritual: How Buildings Shape Society*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Liu, Kai 劉凱. 2011. The Development of Taoism at Jingfu Mountain in Lianzhou from the Sixth Dynasty to the Tang and Song Dynasties: Centered on Jiang Fang's Inscription of Mr. Liao in Jingfu Mountain of Lianzhou in the Tang Dynasty. *Lingnan Culture and History* 4: 32–37.
- Livingstone, David N., Margaret C. Keane, and Frederick W. Boal. 1998. Space for religion: A Belfast case study. *Political Geography* 17: 145–70. [CrossRef]
- Lv, Zhou 呂舟. 2018. *Dongtianfudi* 洞天福地--World Heritage Value and Preliminary Comparative Study. Beijing: Tsinghua University-National Heritage Center.
- Miao, Shiqi 苗詩麒, Hexian Jin 金荷仙, and Xin Wang 王欣. 2017. Analysis on Landscape Layout of 'Caverns of Heaven and Place of Blessing' in Jiangnan. *Chinese Landscape Architecture* 33: 56–63.
- Mu, Zhange 穆彰阿, and Xien Pan 潘錫恩 [Qing dynasty 清代]. n.d. Qing Dynasty Unification Records 大清統一志. In *Siku Quanshu* 四庫全書. Beijing: Beijing Publishing Group, vol. Lian Zhou 連州卷, p. 284.
- Norberg-Schulz, Christian. 1980. *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. Milano: Mondadori Electa Spa.
- Samuels, Marwyn S. 1979. *Biographies of Landscape. The Interpretation of Ordinary Landscapes, Geographical Essays*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stuart, Hall, ed. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage Publications.
- Verschuuren, Bas. 2007. Believing Is Seeing: Integrating Cultural and Spiritual Values in Conservation Management. Available online: <https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/45804> (accessed on 5 May 2024).
- Wang, Xiangzhi 王象之 [Song dynasty 宋代]. 2005. *The Record of Scenic Spots Across the Country (Yu Di Ji Sheng 輿地紀勝), Volume 92, Xian Shi* 仙釋. Chengdu: Sichuan University Press, p. 3199.
- Wang, Yifan, Jie Zhang, Yingjun Li, Xiaolei Ma, and Wentai Cui. 2022. An Architectural Ethnography of the Historic Neighborhood of Pujing in Quanzhou and the 'Spirit of Place'. *Architectural Journal* 3: 97–103.
- Wu, Zhong 吳中 [Ming dynasty 明代]. n.d. Temple 寺觀. In *Chenghua Guangzhou Zhi* 成化廣州志. Beijing: National Library of China Publishing House, pp. 1465–87.
- Xie, Yuhan 謝雨含. 2021. A Study on "Cave Paradise" from the Perspective of Landscape Prototype. Master's thesis, Hainan University, Haikou, China.
- Yang, Xiaodan 楊曉丹, Shusheng Wang 王樹聲, Xiaolong Li 李小龍, and Qirui Zhang 張琪瑞. 2022. Eight Scenes: A Native Model of Urban and Rural Residential Landscape Creation. *City Planning Review* 46: 125–26.
- Zhang, Junfang 張君房 [Song dynasty 宋代]. 2003. *The Seven Dances of Yunji* 雲笈七籤. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, vol. 27, p. 627.
- Zheng, Qingqing 鄭青青, Hexian Jin 金荷仙, and Chuwen Chen 陳楚文. 2020. Taoism in the Mountain, Thoughts Penetrate the Universe—A Study on the Evolution of Mountain Landscape and Cultural Image of "Cavern of Heaven and Place of Blessing" in Tiantai Mountain, Zhejiang. *Chinese Landscape Architecture* 36: 35–40.
- Zheng, Xia 鄭俠 [Song dynasty]. n.d. Xitang Collection 西塘集. In *Siku Quanshu* 四庫全書; Volume The Records of the True Lord Lingxi of Lianzhou 連州靈禧真君記. Beijing: Beijing Publishing Group, p. 395.
- Zheng, Zhenman 鄭振滿, and Chunsheng Chen 陳春生. 2003. *Folk Beliefs and Social Space*. Fuzhou: Fujian People's Publishing House.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.