



Interethnic Interaction, Exchange, and Integration: A Layered Study of the Erlang Shen Image in Guanxian

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Abstract: The legend of Erlang Shen has been widely circulated in Southwest China, with Guanxian Ancient Town (present-day Dujiangyan, Sichuan) being one of the key birthplaces of his worship. At the local Erwang Temple, Han, Tibetan, Qiang, and other ethnic believers have worshipped together for generations, a phenomenon of multi-ethnic shared belief that warrants in-depth investigation. Drawing on field observations, interviews, and historical documents, this article examines how key symbols in the Erlang Shen image—the third eye, the Howling Dog, and the Trident Blade—have been disseminated, interpreted, and reinterpreted among different ethnic groups. It further explores how the diachronic evolution of these images has contributed to ethnic integration. The study finds that the third eye simultaneously carries Han Chinese "heavenly eye" concepts, Di-Qiang "vertical eye" traditions, and Tibetan protector deity beliefs. Similarly, the Howling Dog and the Trident Blade hold plural meanings across traditions. Rather than generating conflict, these diverse interpretations have enabled ethnic groups to forge an identity of "unity in diversity" through shared worship. The Guanxian case demonstrates that the formation of the Chinese national community is not about eliminating differences but about finding common ground within them, offering a concrete reference for understanding the historical path of interethnic interaction, exchange, and integration in Southwest China.

Keywords: Erlang Shen; History of Interethnic Exchange, Interaction, and Integration; Symbolic Circulation; Ethnic Integration; Guanxian Ancient Town.

Introduction

In Southwest China, Erlang Shen is a long-revered popular deity. His identity has long been debated among scholars and local communities alike. Whether identified as Li Bing's second son, Zhao Yu, or Yang Jian, no scholarly consensus has been reached. Despite this ambiguity, Erlang Shen remains a figure jointly venerated by Han, Tibetan, Qiang, and other ethnic groups. As one of the crucial birthplaces of the Erlang Shen cult, Guanxian (present-day Dujiangyan) in Sichuan features prominent sites such as the Erwang Temple, where shared worship across ethnic lines is frequently observed. This raises two central questions: What cultural origins underlie this multi-ethnic communal worship? And how has the image and lore of Erlang Shen been continuously interpreted and enriched through interethnic interaction? These questions form the starting point of this study.

Scholarly interest in Erlang Shen is extensive and interdisciplinary, spanning multiple countries. Early domestic research focused heavily on textual research, exemplified by Rong Zhaozu's *A Study of Erlang Shen*[1]. Recent advances in art history have illuminated the visual evolution of Erlang Shen's iconography, bringing regional variations into focus. The introduction of an interethnic interaction perspective has yielded fresh insights. In the Regong area, for instance, the syncretism between Erlang Shen worship and local Bon and Tibetan Buddhist traditions has fostered a belief system characterized by multi-ethnic cultural features[2]. Japanese scholarship is similarly robust. As early as 1933, Uemura Koji published *Erlang Shen and the Mount Tai God as Seen in Yuan Drama*, exploring belief transformations through literary sources[3]. Nikaido Yoshihiro of Kansai University, specializing in East Asian temple guardian deities, has investigated the intertwined influences of Erlang Shen and Huaguang Emperor across a series of papers[4]. Korean scholars also contribute actively. Kim Hyunjung posits that Guankou Erlang Shen belongs to the Daoist pantheon[5]; Cho Youngran further traces the historical roots of Erlang Shen worship, offering core insights[6]. Western academia provides methodological diversity. Wang Yao, a PhD candidate at Stanford University, analyzes the integrative mechanism of "Erlang" as a shared epithet within local pantheons through fieldwork on folk religion in Hongtong County, Shanxi[7], offering vital reference points for understanding Erlang Shen as an open symbol.

Previous studies have often prioritized identity verification or single-ethnic perspectives, seldom probing how multiple ethnic groups co-construct beliefs within specific shared spaces. To address this gap, this study employs a documentary-visual-interview triangulation method—integrating archival research, visual analysis, and semi-structured interviews—to interconnect sacred space, visual symbols, and ethnic practices. It traces the dissemination and evolution of Erlang Shen symbols to elucidate their role in promoting what I define as the "threefold process of interethnic interaction, exchange, and integration". This framework distinguishes three analytically distinct but empirically intertwined dimensions: (1) interaction at the level of spatial co-presence, (2) communication through symbolic exchange, and (3) integration as



identity sublimation. Rather than treating these as sequential stages, the study views them as coexisting and mutually reinforcing layers that together shape the dynamics of shared belief.

Focusing on Guanxian Ancient Town as a case study, this research contributes to the broader understanding of how shared religious spaces can facilitate interethnic coexistence and identity formation in multi-ethnic frontier regions.

1 Remains of the Erlang Shen Image in the Guanxian Ancient Town Context

1.1 Spatial Narratives of the Erwang Temple

Extant physical relics related to Erlang Shen in Guanxian Ancient Town are concentrated in the Erwang Temple, located at the foot of Yulei Mountain in Dujiangyan. First established during the Eastern Han Dynasty (25–220 CE), the site evolved from the Wangdi Shrine and Chongde Temple. During the Northern Song Dynasty expansion, a statue of Li Erlang (Li Bing's second son) was added. As the Erlang Shen cult flourished in the Song, a unique spatial arrangement emerged within the temple: "the son before the father." Li Bing is enshrined in the rear hall, while Erlang occupies the front hall.

According to Volume 9 of the *Revised Gazetteer of Guanxian (Zengxiu Guanxian Zhi)*, during the Yuan Dynasty, locals "called Luo the Great Erlang, and Guankou the Second Erlang"[8], indicating the widespread adoption of the Guankou Erlang title. In the Tongzhi reign of the Qing Dynasty, the authorities attempted to reposition the statues to emphasize Li Bing's orthodox status. This seemingly "coercive" rearrangement reflected the pragmatic nature of popular religion: Li Bing was associated with state orthodoxy, whereas Erlang Shen resonated more closely with the daily lives of the people. The "son before father" layout ultimately reinforced this perception. Worshippers entering the temple first pay homage to the accessible Erlang before turning to the orthodox Li Bing, revealing a popular hierarchy of affinity towards these protective deities.

1.2 Iconographic Features, Ritual Practices, and Fieldwork Methodology

To ground the analysis in empirical evidence, I conducted fieldwork at the Erwang Temple in Dujiangyan on January 8, 2026. The one-day visit involved participant observation during regular worship hours (8:00 AM – 5:00 PM) and semi-structured interviews with eight individuals purposefully selected to represent the main ethnic groups involved in Erlang Shen worship: two Han Chinese devotees (one local resident, one tourist), two Tibetan pilgrims, one Qiang visitor, one temple staff member (cultural office), and two local residents of unspecified ethnic background. Participants were purposively selected based on their visible presence at the temple during the observation period and their willingness to engage in informal conversation; ethnic self-identification was recorded as reported by each individual. This sampling strategy was designed to capture the range of interpretive traditions present in the shared ritual space, rather than to achieve statistical representativeness.

Interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese; for elderly participants, a research assistant fluent in the local Sichuan dialect provided interpretation when needed. Among the two Tibetan participants, one was fluent in Mandarin and was interviewed directly in Mandarin; the other preferred to use basic Mandarin supplemented by brief explanations from a local Tibetan resident who acted as an informal interpreter. This linguistic arrangement may have limited the depth of discussion with the latter participant, but the core questions regarding ritual practice and deity interpretation were successfully communicated. All interviewees were informed of the research purpose and gave oral consent; given the public, non-sensitive nature of the topic, formal written consent was not required. Interview responses were recorded as handwritten field notes rather than audio recordings, as the temple's ambient noise and ritual activities made audio capture impractical. Notes were transcribed within 24 hours and coded thematically (e.g., "third eye interpretation," "dog symbolism," "shared space perception"). Where responses conflicted—for instance, regarding whether Erlang Shen originated as a Han or Di-Qiang deity—I cross-referenced claims against documentary and visual evidence, and treated conflicting accounts as data points reflecting interpretive diversity rather than as errors. Documentary sources (gazetteers, literary works), visual materials (statues, murals, photographs I took), and interview responses were triangulated to corroborate findings, with priority given to documentary evidence for historical claims and to interviews for contemporary interpretive practices.

Iconographic features are key to deciphering the composition of the deity's image. Yan Yan's analysis of Song–Jin period Erlang Shen imagery identifies its standard form: a three-peaked crown, refined facial features, martial or robe attire, accompanied by a white dog. Fig.1, a Song bronze statue held by the Changzhi Museum, depicts the deity with a three-peaked crown, right leg bent and raised, with a collared, turning-back slender hound lying before him; the third-eye feature is indistinct here. Fig.2, a Jin-dynasty polychrome seated statue unearthed in Yanjin County, similarly includes the white dog, corroborating this visual paradigm[9]. This confirms the slender hound had become an established independent symbol of Erlang Shen by the Song Dynasty. Core symbols like the Howling Dog and the Third Eye facilitated easy recognition and memorization due to their high distinctiveness and transmissibility. Furthermore, variations across periods exist: Song–Jin statues conveyed divinity primarily through headdresses and facial features, with the third eye less prominent; Ming–Qing statues saw the third eye become increasingly explicit. This temporal shift suggests a possible correlation between the historical prominence of these core symbols and the needs of cross-ethnic cultural interaction, though the exact causal relationship requires further investigation.



(Left)Fig.1 Bronze statue of Erlang Shen, Song Dynasty, collected by Changzhi Museum, Shanxi. Source: Yan [9, p. 352].

(Right (Fig.2 Red and green painted seated statue of Erlang Shen, Jin Dynasty, unearthed in Yanjin County, Henan. Source: Yan [9, p. 353].

The sacrificial rites for Erlang Shen in Guanxian boast a long history. The *Dreams of Splendor of the Eastern Capital (Dongjing Menghua Lu)*, Vol. 8, records the bustling scene on the 24th day of the 6th lunar month marking the "Divine Protector Observance God's Birthday"—this deity being "Guankou Erlang"[10]. These rituals persist today, with the Qingming Water Release Festival and the Sixth Lunar Month Temple Fair being the grandest events. Originating from ancient celebrations of the annual maintenance of the Dujiangyan irrigation system, the Water Release Festival comprises official and popular rites. Sacrifices are first offered to Li Bing at the Fulong Temple, followed by offerings to Erlang at the Erwang Temple, culminating in the cutting of the wooden dam (maocha) to release water. This ritual integrates state ceremonies with folk beliefs, creating a temporal-spatial arena for multi-ethnic gathering. Additionally, temple fairs are held on the 24th day of the 6th lunar month (Erlang Shen's birthday) and the 26th day (Li Bing's birthday). According to Volume 2 of the *Gazetteer of Guanxian Native Place (Guanxian Xiangtu Zhi)*, after transplanting rice seedlings, Shu people would "offer incense and candles to worship King Li, in an endless stream"[11], reflecting the enduring folk tradition of Li Bing veneration. Today, these fairs still draw large crowds, including local residents, believers from various ethnic groups, and tourists from afar.

Within the same ritual space, worshippers from different ethnic groups simultaneously venerate "Erlang Shen" as conceived in their respective traditions. Rather than causing conflict, these differences foster mutual accommodation within the shared sacred space. This "seeking common ground while preserving differences" represents a microcosm of ethnic integration, propelling continuous interaction, exchange, and fusion among ethnic groups in the locality, thereby solidifying the foundations of the Chinese national community.

2 Symbol Decoding: Multi-Ethnic Cultural Elements in the Erlang Shen Image

2.1 The Third Eye: Layered Meanings from "Vertical Eye" to "Heavenly Eye"

The third eye (disanzhi yan) is the most salient visual attribute of Erlang Shen; however, scholarly opinions diverge regarding the ethno-cultural origins of this symbol. At its most ancient layer, it may stem from the Di-Qiang "vertical eye" (zongmu) tradition. The *Chronicles of Huayang (Huayang Guozhi)* records that Cancong, the legendary founder of the Shu kingdom, had "protruding eyes" (qi mu zong)[12]. The Di-Qiang peoples historically revered this trait. The Baima Di people, during their mountain-worship ritual called "Zha Shan," would cut their foreheads and smear soot during drum dances, termed "opening the heavenly eye," believing it helped locate lost sheep[13]. The *Gazetteer of Qionglai County (Qionglai Xianzhi)*, Vol. 2, also mentions ancient temples in Shu land housing blue-faced statues with "vertical eyes" on their foreheads[14]. Given that this belief originated in Guankou—a region historically inhabited by Di-Qiang groups—it is plausible that the "substrate" of this symbol derives from Di-Qiang culture. However, this remains a hypothesis based on geographical and textual associations; direct historical continuity has yet to be established. Subsequently, both Buddhism and Daoism contributed the concept of the "Heavenly Eye" (tianyan). With the rise of Daoism, new interpretations emerged, portraying the third eye as capable of omniscient insight, which gained wide currency among Han believers. Tibetan influence further "Tibetanized" the symbol: in Tibetan Buddhism, certain protector deities and mountain gods are depicted with three eyes, signifying their ability to perceive the three realms.

These three layers of meaning do not supersede one another chronologically but coexist synchronically in the contemporary ritual context. Han worshippers call it the "Heavenly Eye"; Qiang elders recount the "vertical eye" legend; Tibetan pilgrims recognize it as the "three eyes of the protector deity." One symbol, carrying three distinct cultural memories—this exemplifies the dynamics of symbolic circulation: it accommodates diversity while maintaining unity within it.

2.2 A Multidimensional Interpretation of the Howling Dog and the Trident Blade

The Howling Dog (Xiaotian Quan) is a core companion symbol of Erlang Shen. Yan Yan's research traces its lineage: from the hunting hound depicted in murals of Tang Prince Yide's tomb (Fig. 3), to the hare-seizing white slender hound featured in various versions of the *Shoushan Scroll* (Fig. 4)[9]. This attests to the dog's deep roots in Chinese culture. Its symbolism varies across ethnic traditions: Han believers view the Howling Dog as Erlang Shen's loyal assistant,

representing guardianship. Tibetan, influenced by Zoroastrian (Xianjiao) traditions, regard dogs as sacred and pure creatures; thus, the Howling Dog acquires sanctified symbolism, facilitating the transmission of Erlang Shen worship in Tibetan areas. The Di-Qiang peoples have coexisted with canines since antiquity; in Qiang epics, dogs procure grain seeds for humanity, fostering inherent affinity towards the Howling Dog, which shaped local reception and shaping of Erlang Shen's image.

Notably, this symbolic influence is not unidirectional. As Tibetan communities incorporated Erlang Shen into their local protector-deity system, the functional scope of Erlang Shen expanded beyond flood control to encompass village protection and exorcism—attributes that Tibetan devotees projected onto him. In turn, Han devotees who observed Tibetan Weisang (incense offering) rituals gradually came to accept a broader understanding of Erlang Shen as a guardian of the wider region rather than solely a water-control hero. This mutual enrichment illustrates how symbolic exchange operates as a two-way process, with each tradition both contributing to and being shaped by the other.

Today, at Erwang Temple in Guanxian Ancient Town, the Howling Dog statue guards the entrance to Erlang Shen's hall. Passing devotees and tourists routinely touch it and leave coins on its pedestal for blessings (Fig. 5). This practice reflects the secularization of divine and auspicious beast functions within popular religion.



(Left) Fig.3 Hunting hound in the mural paintings of Prince Yide's tomb, Tang Dynasty, Qianxian, Shaanxi. Source: Yan [9, p. 357].

(Left 2) Fig.4 Mountain Search Painting (Soushan Tu): a slender hound seizing a hare. Source: Yan [9, p. 358].

(Left 3) Fig.5 Howling Dog statue at Erwang Temple, Dujiangyan. Photograph by the author, January 8, 2026.

(Left 4) Trident Blade at Erwang Temple, Dujiangyan, Qing Dynasty bronze. Photograph by the author, January 8, 2026.

The Trident Blade (Sanjian Liangren Dao) serves as Erlang Shen's quintessential weapon. Its origins are also multifaceted. According to the Song Huiyao Jigao, weaponry paraded during welcoming-the-god festivals in Yongkang Commandery of the Northern Song featured double-edged blades with a three-pronged tip, commonly known as the "Trident Blade"[15]. Its form likely derives from weapons and ritual objects of ancient northwestern and Bashu ethnic groups. Tibetan believers discern a fusion of Bon ritual implements and Daoist divine swords in its shape: the double edges correspond to Yin-Yang duality, while the triple prongs align with the triad of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity. Within southwestern beliefs, it embodies the syncretism of Han deities and indigenous divine power. The Qiang further identify it as the embodiment of the Mountain God or Thunder God, resonating with the divine attribute of "Pure Origin Sublime Lord" (Qingyuan Miaodao). Such pluralistic interpretations result from the symbol's integration with various ethnic beliefs during dissemination. It has long transcended its role as merely Erlang Shen's emblem, becoming a vessel for multi-ethnic cultural memory. A Qing-dynasty cast bronze Trident Blade remains preserved in the contemporary Erwang Temple of Guanxian Ancient Town (Fig. 6), standing as a historical testament to the convergence of ethnic faiths.

3 Historical Stratification: The Diachronic Evolution of the Erlang Shen Image

3.1 The Rise of Guankou Deity Beliefs and the Di-Qiang Cultural Substratum

The Erlang Shen cult in Guanxian Ancient Town traces its origins back to the "Guankou Deity" (Guankou Shen) worship of the Northern and Southern Dynasties period (420–589 CE). The earliest Guankou temple was reportedly built by the Di people to enshrine a three-eyed deity. This belief was linked to the Yang clan of the Di people, who established the State of Chouchi. A branch of the Baima Di, the Yang clan migrated westward into Sichuan. The three-eyed god became fused with Yang Nandang, the last ruler of the Qing Shui Di Yang regime, forming the nascent prototype of the Guankou Erlang Shen belief in Shu[16]. The popularly termed "Guankou Erlang Shen" essentially represents the historical evolution and dissemination of Di ancestral worship, though this lineage requires further corroboration from archaeological and textual sources.

The Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) marked a pivotal period for Erlang Shen's popularization. Cui Lingqin's *Records of the Music Bureau (Jiaofang Ji)* first listed "Erlang Shen" as a tune title[17]. Zhao Yu, who served as Governor of Meishan during the Sui Dynasty (581–618 CE), was mythologized as having slain a river dragon; he is popularly referred to as

"Zhao Erlang" owing to his second-born status. According to the *Gazetteer of Changshu County (Changshu Xianzhi)*, after Zhao Yu abandoned his post to live as a hermit, later Shu inhabitants witnessed a miraculous apparition during a flood in Jiazhou: a figure riding a white horse through the mist across the torrent. They erected a temple at Guankou River, venerating him as "Guankou Erlang Shen," thereby formally establishing the title[18]. During this phase, the third eye disappeared from depictions, with the deity mostly portrayed as a dignified official.

3.2 Song to Contemporary Era: Belief Evolution and Multi-Ethnic Integration

Throughout the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE), Erlang Shen worship flourished among both populace and court. The Northern Song government incorporated the Guankou deity into the state-sanctioned sacrificial system for Li Bing and his son, conferring honorific titles like Huiling and Zhaohui Lingxian Wang to consolidate its orthodox status. Hong Mai's *Records of the Listener (Yi Jian Zhizhi)* describes the deity as having a "refined and dignified appearance... clad in robes with gold filigree," highlighting his transcendent divinity[19]. During the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368 CE), traces of Di-Qiang culture resurfaced in Erlang Shen iconography. Although Zhao Yu remained the primary identity, the image now blended Di-Qiang hunter-god traits with Han water-god connotations. This cultural resurgence exemplifies the layered, syncretic nature of popular religious development.

The Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE) saw Erlang Shen's image absorbing totems from folk Di-Qiang ethnic groups and being popularized through novels like *Journey to the West and Investiture of the Gods*, shaping the portrayal of Yang Jian (Yang Erlang) wielding the Trident Blade and accompanied by a dog. Early novels did not explicitly emphasize the third-eye feature. The Qing Dynasty (1644–1912 CE) witnessed parallel development of official and popular images, culminating in its final standardized form. Official endorsement of father-son joint enshrinement effectively ratified the existing popular layout. The Erlang Shen image ultimately achieved the confluence of three major lineages—Li Erlang, Zhao Yu, and Yang Jian—collectively known as Erlang Shen[20], with worship spreading nationwide. He Shaoji, a scholar-official and academic commissioner in Sichuan, noted seeing Erlang Shen sculpted with "three eyes" and learned it referenced the "Yang Erlang stories in fiction." Though he dismissed these tales as "absurd and unorthodox," this anecdote confirms that popular lore had firmly associated the third eye with Yang Erlang[21]. The long-absent third eye returned definitively. Folk aesthetic paradigms ultimately superseded official narratives, evolving into the Erlang Shen image recognized today.

In 1925, the Erwang Temple suffered a fire and was subsequently rebuilt, adopting a multi-deity enshrinement layout that expanded the multi-ethnic ritual space. In contemporary Guanxian Ancient Town (Fig. 7), the Erlang Shen image appears fully developed, with core symbols prominently displayed. The diachronic evolution of this imagery, along with the re-interpretation of its symbolic dissemination, reveals an ethnic integration that possesses greater resilience and durability than mere surface-level ethnic amalgamation.

These historical layers are not merely relics of the past; each sedimentary stratum is reactivated and recombined in contemporary ritual practice, functioning as a living carrier of shared cultural memory for different ethnic groups.

Within this shared space and before the same deity, the Han, Tibetan, and Qiang peoples articulate their devotion through diverse practices, forging a tacit understanding.



Fig.7 Contemporary statue of Erlang Shen at Erwang Temple, Dujiangyan. Photograph by the author, January 8, 2026.

4 Profound Implications of the Image: From Historical Stratification to Community Identity

4.1 Core Findings and Theoretical Reflections

Through diachronic tracing and synchronic examination of the Erlang Shen image in Guanxian Ancient Town, this study yields the following findings:

First, the composite image of Erlang Shen synthesizes multiple strands: the Han narrative of water control benefiting the populace, the Di-Qiang origins evident in the third eye and hunter-god iconography, the enrichment of divine functions through Tibetan integration, and the elevated status conferred by Daoism as the "Pure Origin Sublime Lord" (Qingyuan Miaodao Zhenjun). It stands as a unique entity co-created by Han, Tibetan, Qiang, and other ethnic groups.

Second, ethnic groups have forged an "identity of unity in diversity" through shared religious practice. Han believers pray

for favorable weather; Tibetan believers incorporate him into mountain god worship via Weisang (incense offerings) and Khata (ceremonial scarves); Qiang elders recount ancient "vertical eye" legends post-sacrifice. These diverse ritual expressions coexist within the shared sacred space centered on Erlang Shen, manifesting a pattern where each group maintains its distinct practices while mutually respecting and participating in a common ritual framework.

Third, the emergence of Erlang Shen as a pan-ethnic cultural symbol stems from what I term three "affinities": Geographical Affinity, as Guanxian lies at the eastern end of the Zang-Yi Corridor, naturally positioning the belief within a multi-ethnic milieu; Functional Affinity, as the flood-control and protective functions address shared survival needs across ethnic groups; and Symbolic Affinity, as the multi-layered symbolism allows different ethnicities to find reflections of their own cultural narratives.

Viewed through the lens of the threefold process of interethnic interaction, exchange, and integration proposed in this study:

1. Interaction at the Level of Spatial Co-presence: Erwang Temple, as a shared ritual space, provides the physical site for interethnic encounters. Whether during the Qingming Water Release Festival or the Sixth Month Temple Fair, the mere "co-presence" of Han, Tibetan, and Qiang believers within the same halls constitutes the foundation of interaction.

2. Communication at the Level of Symbolic Exchange: During rituals, ethnic groups maintain their interpretative traditions while simultaneously enabling cultural exchange through observation, imitation, and dialogue. Tibetan Weisang rituals proceed alongside Han incense offerings without conflict. The Qiang elder's "vertical eye" narrative interacts with the Daoist concept of the "Heavenly Eye." Such symbolic-level communication proves more enduring than material exchanges.

A concrete illustration was observed during the field visit: a Tibetan pilgrim, after placing a khata (ceremonial scarf) before the Erlang Shen statue, stepped aside and gestured to a Han devotee to approach for incense offering. The Han devotee nodded in acknowledgment before proceeding. This brief, non-verbal exchange—gesture and acknowledgment—exemplifies the everyday practice of mutual recognition that constitutes integration at the experiential level, without requiring either participant to abandon their distinct ritual traditions.

3. Integration at the Level of Identity Sublimation: Integration, in this study, is empirically identified not as the erasure of ethnic boundaries but as the everyday practice of co-worship and mutual recognition. Erlang Shen concurrently embodies identities as a flood-control hero, a mountain god, and a vertical-eyed deity. He is the product of long-term sedimentation of collective memories: the vertical-eye trait from Di-Qiang lineages, the Han water-control narrative, and Tibetan folklore surrounding the sacred dog. When ethnic groups discern commonalities amidst differences, Chinese culture undergoes profound integration at its core. Within the shared space of Erwang Temple today, the sight of diverse ethnic groups "coexisting in one hall, each voicing distinct prayers" nurtures and extends consciousness of the national ethnic community.

A methodological limitation should be acknowledged: the fieldwork for this study was confined to a single day of observation at one temple site. While this snapshot captures the co-presence and symbolic exchanges typical of regular worship, it cannot capture seasonal variations or long-term changes in ritual participation across different ethnic groups. Future longitudinal research—spanning multiple festival cycles (e.g., the Qingming Water Release Festival and the Sixth Lunar Month Temple Fair)—would strengthen the empirical basis for claims about "integration" as an ongoing process rather than a static outcome. Despite this limitation, the convergence of documentary, visual, and interview evidence within the current dataset provides sufficient ground for the analytical distinctions proposed in this study.

4.2 Practical Implications: The Contemporary Significance of Seeking Identity Amidst Difference

Against the backdrop of "Forging a Strong Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation" (Zhulao Zhonghua Minzu Gongtongti Yishi), the case of Erlang Shen worship demonstrates that cultivating this consciousness does not necessitate negating or erasing cultural differences. On the contrary, difference itself can become a resource for identity. Precisely because each ethnic group recognizes familiar cultural elements within Erlang Shen, they more readily embrace this "shared deity." It is the very existence of differences that allows individuals to find belonging within the common faith.

Erwang Temple in Guanxian Ancient Town, as a shared sacred space, provides the material basis for such cross-cultural dialogue. This "difference-accommodating" arena serves as a vivid instance for studying the history of the threefold process of interethnic interaction, exchange, and integration in Southwest China. Its model of "each group appreciating its own beauty while sharing it with others" offers valuable insights for contemporary ethnic affairs work. Here, Han, Tibetan, and Qiang believers gather under one roof. Though languages and customs may differ, they share the conviction that the Erlang Shen—donning the three-peaked hat, wielding the Trident Blade, with the Howling Dog reclining beside him—will protect every devout pilgrim. This mutual recognition and acceptance, anchored in shared belief, constitutes the most fundamental yet resilient bedrock for the formation of the Chinese national community consciousness.

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