

ECOLOGICAL WISDOM CONTAINED IN THE BELIEF IN WATER GOD ALONG THE ANCIENT SILK ROAD

MENG, F. L. – WANG, Y.*

*School of Literature and Art, Shihezi University, No. 225, No. 31 Beishi Road, Shihe-Zi 832003,
Xinjiang, China*

**Corresponding author*

e-mail: 1076435664@qq.com; phone: +86-137-5310-3709

(Received 31st Aug 2021; accepted 6th Dec 2021)

Abstract. With the increasing scarcity of potable freshwater resources worldwide, the protection and utilization of water resources in the current ecological civilization society should be more scientific and accurate. This paper takes the belief in the water god as the research object, focusing on the ecological ethics, ecological aesthetics, and moral concern of “harmony between human and water” along the ancient Silk Road with frequent cultural exchanges and trade under the triple vision of belief, culture and aesthetics. From the aspects of artistic dissemination, regional resources (humanities and nature), and technological exchanges, this paper excavates the water wisdom of ancient society in daily production and life. It adopts the methods of historical carding, category study, and case analysis. This paper attempts to reveal the development value and application of cross-regional ecological aesthetics and ecological wisdom in the cultural exchange between the East and the West under the artistic form and spatial distribution of water god worship along the ancient Silk Road. This paper discusses the construction method of sustainable development of water culture under the concept of “harmony between human and water.”

Keywords: *mutual learning among civilizations, spiritual belief, artistic image, mutual proof of picture and text, ecological aesthetics*

Introduction

Due to the global ecological crisis, water resources are scarce, and water disasters occur frequently. As a result, modern people try to find the wisdom to solve problems from the ancient people’s view of nature and life, and the result is that the thought of “unity of man and nature” in the East rises all boats. From the western perspective, the charm of the natural view of “the unity of man and nature” lies in the harmonious symbiosis between man and nature. In oriental culture, man and nature are not the relationships of opposition and mutual conquest. Man is a part of natural life, and nature is the object of awe. With the deepening of people’s understanding of it, water has changed from the “deified” resources worshipped and feared by the ancients to the modern “materialized” development of economic resources and then to the protection and rational utilization under the current ecological background. Because the belief in Water God has a robust regional color, different geographical environments, humanistic atmosphere, and social politics will give birth to different belief contents and expressions. The unique geographical environment and folk cultural atmosphere of the areas along the Silk Road make it very different from other regional artistic circles. As different from the water god belief culture in the Humid zone, the water god belief culture in the arid area along the Silk Road is not only the product of regional cultural characteristics but also has a particular influence on the exchange of ideas, culture, and folk customs along the Silk Road.

This study attempts to take the ancient Silk Road as cultural space and geographical space, to study the relationship between folk belief and artistic expression, to explore

the regional water culture type research centered on the creative image of the water god, and to reveal the ecological wisdom in production, life, and spiritual belief through the mutual evidence between written and non-written materials and the value expression of water god belief culture. Studying the belief in water gods from regional culture along the ancient Silk Road is of great value for us to understand the folk culture, belief culture, and artistic aesthetics in the old Silk Road.

Journals reviewed

The research on the belief of water god along the Silk Road is “minimal at home and abroad.” The study and exposition of the art image of the water god are even less, and there is a lack of research on the integrity, origin, and generality of water god worship. Reading the literature shows that the worship of water gods is primarily concentrated in water-rich areas and coastal areas of rivers and seas. At the same time, there is little research on the worship of water gods in arid regions. In terms of discipline, there are many types of research on water god worship in national water culture, flood myth, water conservancy project, etc. Still, the content of analyzing water god worship by artistic image is more diminutive. As a branch of nature worship, water god worship embodies human ecological consciousness from primitive society to the present. The research on the belief culture of Water God mainly includes the following aspects:

Water god worship is a branch of nature worship in folk culture, and the protection of water resources has been a hot issue in academic circles. Generally speaking, the concept of “water culture” has been integrated into social production and daily life discourse. The eco-theological movement in the West has developed considerably since the 1960s. Many theologians pay attention to the ecological crisis from different angles. The famous German theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, emphasizes the secular nature of belief in his theology. His research is closely related to contemporary social problems. However, most Western countries pay attention to the study of the ecological concept of nature, and the systematic analysis on the water god is less. The water belief in the areas along the Silk Road is even more lacking. In China, water god worship has a long history as a branch of folk belief under genuine conviction, and Chinese academic circles have studied it for a long time. The earliest research on water god is Mr. Huang Zhigang. His book *Chinese Water God* (Huang, 1998) makes a comparative analysis of many myths, summarizes, combs, and discusses the situation of water gods in various parts of China based on ancient books and legends. In his book *Water worship in China* (Xiang, 1996), Xiang Baisong studied the basis of belief in water gods, the original connotation and development of water mythology, water worship, constituent factors, water worship objects, water worship rituals, and the influence of water worship on Chinese culture and history. Wu Bingen makes a comprehensive study of Chinese folk beliefs in his book *Chinese Folk beliefs* (Wu, 1996), in which he briefly expounds on the worship of water and water gods and introduces the primary worship of water gods of each nation. In the article *Research on Water God worship in pre-Qin, Qin, and Han dynasties* (Cai, 2013), Cai Honghua mainly expounds on the influence of water god worship on the historical and cultural society at that time from the scope of water god worship, the change of function, the personification of water god and so on. In his article on *Water God worship in the Tang Dynasty* (Wang, 2006), Wang Yong Ping systematically enumerated the objects and types of water god worship in the Tang Dynasty and then described the development of water god-belief from two aspects: temples and rivers and lakes.

Ethnology, folklore, history, human geography, literature and art, and other different disciplines are involved in the study of water god belief. In Shen Songbai's study of *Wu Yue Folk Water God belief* (Shen, 2009), the author takes the Wu Yue area as the research scope and uses the knowledge of folklore, sociology, and anthropology to theoretically analyze and summarize the water god-belief from the perspectives of life and folklore. Still, there is little discussion on the performance carrier and characteristics of water god belief. In Hu Mengfei's study of *Water God belief along the Beijing-Hangzhou Canal in Ming and Qing dynasties* (Hu, 2015), the author macroscopically grasps the composition and distribution of water god belief in Beijing-Hangzhou Canal from the perspective of history, analyzes the reasons and conditions for the rise and spread of water god belief in Beijing-Hangzhou Canal from both natural and social aspects, and expounds the influence of water god belief on the national water control activities in Ming and Qing dynasties and the social life of local people along the coast. In the above article, the biased regional research on the transmission and change of the image is not comprehensive in the systematic and holistic examination of the research content. In Tang Fei's study on *Custom characteristics of Water Temple frescoes in Guangsheng Temple, Shanxi Province* (Tang, 2016), the author explores the artistic and historical value of Guangsheng Temple frescoes and the influence of the custom characteristics of murals on the latest creation and makes contributions to the case study of water gods belief with the research method of fine arts. Still, the analysis of artistic images mainly focuses on the case analysis of murals. There is not much discussion on the influence of the regional scope on his artistic image.

According to the author's data of water god belief, most of the existing discussions are about the description and nature analysis of water god Noumenon and its historical origin, evolution process, cultural connotation, cultural history significance, and rain praying ceremony process. The research on water worship mainly focuses on the connotation, object, regional sacrificial activities, the cultural and historical influence of water worship. At the same time, there are few studies on the artistic image and aesthetic analysis, regional art image characteristics, and evolution of water worship. Further research is needed.

Based on the research results, the author puts forward the necessity of this research. Water culture is a research field with many contents, so multi-disciplinary research methods and theoretical knowledge will be used in the research and discussion. Due to the lack of academic research on the reclaimed water culture in the area along the Silk Road, especially on the artistic image of the water culture. Therefore, this paper takes the relevant theoretical knowledge of art as a starting point and studies water culture from artistic aesthetics and ecology. Therefore, this paper uses the original data about Xinjiang water culture, based on text materials, to study the remaining visual image data to carry out the image analysis and research of "using pictures to prove the history."

Research methods and data

Different geographical environments and cultural atmospheres will give birth to other belief contents. In the historical development process of cultural and economic exchanges, artistic images, as "historical evidence," together with written materials, will become materials for analyzing and corroborating history and culture. In the way of interpretation, this paper will make a comprehensive analysis from three visual fields: space, text, and image.

First of all, from the perspective of space, the origin of civilization is closely related to climatic conditions and has an essential impact on the development of types of society. Geographical environment and climatic conditions determine the basic style and features of national culture, and the birthplaces of major civilizations are directly related to water. As the central area of the ancient Silk Road, Xinjiang has a sensitive ecological environment and weak self-recovery ability (*Fig. 1*). Many civilizations have disappeared under the influence of natural habitats and manufactured. Some scholars believe that rapid climate change (especially severe cold and dry events) is crucial for the decline of an ancient civilization on the regional scale (Buckley et al., 2010). Some scholars believe that the unreasonable development of the environment is an essential factor leading to the decline of ancient civilization in arid and semi-arid regions of the earth. In the 1990s, some Chinese scholars have noticed the relationship between climate change and the rise and fall of the Silk Road since 2000 (Du, 1996), but there is a little detailed discussion on the relationship between the formation of the Silk Road and climate change. In 1907, when Joseph Widney, an American scholar, proposed to explore the origin of Indo-Europeans from the perspective of “border people,” he mentioned the persistent drought in Central Asia and the resulting reduction of grassland area (Mallory, 1973). In 2007, Craig G. R. Benjamin, an American scholar, analyzed written, monetary and archaeological evidence and explored the relationship between culture and politics in ancient Central Asia when explaining the relationship between the origin of Le Zhi and several Chinese dynasties, among which climate change was one of the reasons for their migration.

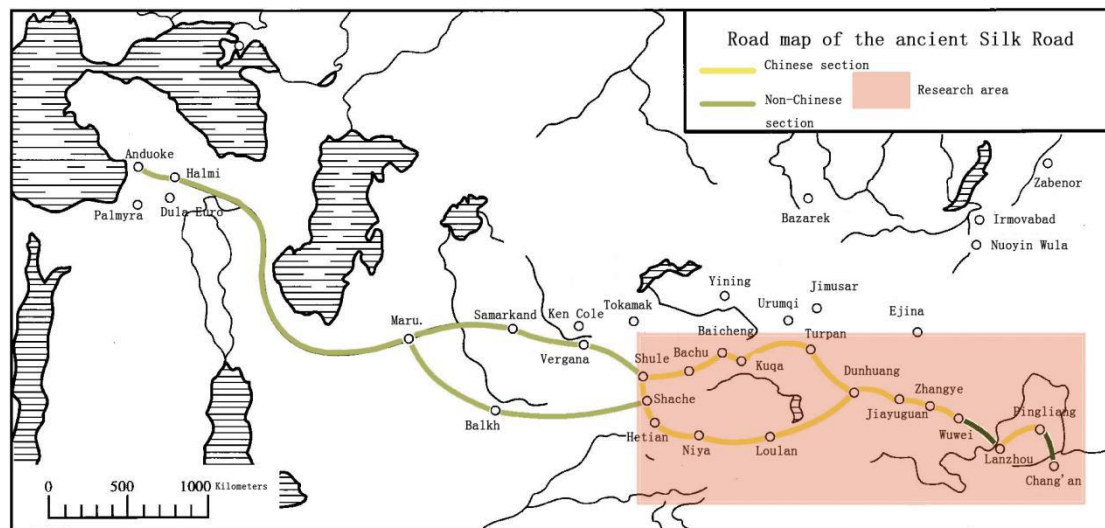


Figure 1. A schematic map of the route of the ancient Silk Road. Figure source network, Redraw <http://www.onegreen.net/jingdianditu/HTML/60920.html>

Secondly, it is explained from the text that this paper mainly combs the relevant literature in the essential context of Chinese traditional cultural ecology based on local chronicles, archives, documents, and other historical materials. This paper studies the regional water culture along the Silk Road from theory, belief, aesthetics, and reality through the research materials of agricultural civilization, natural geographical environment, survival purpose, folklore, and cultural blending. This paper summarizes the cultural implication, spiritual core, folk customs, and unique value orientation in the

water worship culture. As a natural element closely related to human life activities, water must be restored to a more specific, vivid, and perceptual cultural situation to dig out the objective and actual water archetypal image from the root. Yeruyad believes that the invisible “water of life” can be biochemical and tangible, and water symbolizes all primitive matter in form. As the initial form of culture, water in mythology is the sublimation of man’s authentic experience of water. Going back to the source of the thought of water worship, by excavating the inherent genes of water in the region’s mythology along the ancient Silk Road, the ideological similarities and differences of water worship in a large area are compared (*Table 1*).

Table 1. *Comparison of world flood myths*

Area	Reason	Disaster attribute	Solution	Protagonist image	Life extension
Ancient China	Gonggong (Water God) cannot hit Zhoushan	Tribal war	The female harness is used to control the water	• Co-worker: human face and snake body • Nu WA: human face and snake body	Nu WA pinches people with loess and water
	Flooding of the Yellow River	Natural disaster	King yu combating the flood	• No spirit • Man triumphs over nature	
Ancient Babylon	Human sin	Divine punishment	The water god told me in advance that the ship was built	Enki: there are two streams of water on the shoulders in statues and murals	Return home after escaping
Ancient Greece	Human sin	Divine punishment	Prometheus told me that shipbuilding	God and man	
Ancient India	Flood	Natural disaster	Animals return the favor and build ships	Fish and man	

Third, from the image to explain, through artistic anthropology, folklore, iconology, and other research methods, the ancients how to express water worship through art, embody the thought of heavy water (water worship concept, water control spirit), give full play to the function of art and other aspects. It is devoted to revealing the artistic characteristics of the origin and transplantation of water worship across regions along the Silk Road. It analyzes the creative attributes of folk culture and art images constructed by the concept of water worship in visual images and text display and the expression of the ecological value of water gods worship to today. In the post-industrial era, the traditional oasis water conservancy system and living environment in ancient Iran, Xinjiang, and other regions have changed significantly. They are going through the inheritance process, which is called water cultural heritage in the modern context. At present, the well-preserved aquatic cultural heritage, as a typical underwater cultural heritage, has been concerned by the academic circles and has become the object of protection and development (*Table 2*).

Results

The meeting of belief and aesthetics—faith in water god and folk art

Human development and the natural environment are the unity of mutual influence and interaction in the construction of human history. Without exception, the splendid ancient civilization was born and developed from the river basin. The earlier the period of social development, the greater the dependence of human beings on the environment;

the lower the level of productivity, the more significant the impact of environmental factors on human beings. The Silk Road was the most crucial land passage for East-West communication in Eurasia from the 2nd century BC to the 16th century AD. It was also regarded as the center of world civilization in that period (Frankopan, 2015). As the core area of the ancient Silk Road, Xinjiang of China is the intersection area of Eurasian civilization evolution and the cultural exchange focus of the convergence and integration of Eastern and Western cultural elements.

Table 2. *Water related important agricultural cultural heritage in the context of World Heritage*

Serial number	Name	Type	Approval time	Region	Value characteristics
1	Nimgar Waterway Bridge	Water diversion and transportation hybrid water conservancy and transportation facilities	1985	France	Pont du Gard is an excellent example of highly developed water conservancy construction technology in ancient Rome
2	Segovia ancient city and its waterway	Historical buildings and infrastructure	1985	Madrid, Spain	The ancient city and the ancient Roman water bridge are the models of the times
3	Assa oasis: an evolving cultural landscape	Oasis cultural landscape	2018	Saudi Arabia	Oasis cultural landscape is a model for human beings to get along with the environment
4	Jujube planting system in Elche	Oasis cultural landscape	2000	Spain	Good at using water, poor land created a miracle of oasis agricultural production
5	Afraja irrigation system	Oasis cultural landscape	2006	Oman	Irrigation systems in extremely dry areas are the best way to solve the problem of livelihood
6	Shushtar's ancient water conservancy system	water conservancy facilities	2009	Iran	Excellent solution to urban water supply, mill, irrigation, inland transportation, defense system diversity of uses
7	Aien cultural site	Oasis cultural landscape	2011	The United Arab Emirates	Typical oasis human settlements in evolution
8	Persian Karez	Oasis cultural landscape	2016	Iran	In the arid area, the natural water resources are skillfully utilized, controlled and mastered the wisdom of water cycle

Xinjiang, eastern Iran, and five Central Asian countries belong to the arid region of central Asia, which is the largest non-zonal dry area in the world and essential oasis agriculture and landscape distribution area in the world. The water resources change significantly, and the oasis ecosystem is fragile. Many famous ancient civilizations (such as the Loulan Ancient Kingdom and the Qiuci Ancient Kingdom) developed and flourished in the arid areas of central Asia but were finally lost in the long history. Climate change may be one of the essential factors leading to the decline and decline of ancient civilizations in this region.” Historical Records” was written by Sima Qian in 104 BC and was written in 91 BC. Xuan Zang returned to Chang’an in 645 AD. During these 700 years, “Loulan unearthed jade, plants are rich in Reed, Tamarix, Populus euphratica and white grass,” as recorded in the Historical Records. Residents living by the water source to live animal husbandry life “turned into Loulan,” which Xuanzang returned from the scriptures to see that “the city building is still there, but there is no human figure.” This tragic change is believed by some scholars to be caused by the rapid deterioration of the environment and severe drought due to the quicksand

blockage of the lower reaches of the Tarim River flowing into Lop Nur after the 3rd century AD, and some scholars believe that it is the influence of human activities.

Xinjiang's particular geographical pattern and climatic environment make the natural distinction of a regional culture different from that of Rain Water. Because of the bad natural environment, drought, and little rain, based on the need for a living environment and psychological thirst for water, under the influence of primitive religion, shamanism, Zoroastrianism, Taoism, and other ideas of "animism," the primitive nomadic people's belief in water gods gradually formed. Animism is the early result of the primitive ancestors' cognition of natural and social phenomena under the deterrence of nature. Edward Taylor, a British philosopher, is an authoritative interpreter of animism. He believes that animism is the basis of religious philosophy. Under the exchange and collision of various national cultures, the belief in water gods in the areas along the Silk Road is influenced by folk beliefs, traditional cultural thoughts, regional environment, and other comprehensive factors, which is characterized by practicality and utilitarianism. "useful" folk belief culture, which is closely related to production and life, is reflected in myths and legends, arts and crafts, grotto murals and so on. Folk art is rooted in the ecology of folk culture and studies the relationship between folk art and the spiritual belief of "humans." It is the cognition, experience, and psychology formed by people in understanding, development, and survival, and the folk cultural ecology based on these cognition, experience, and psychology. The needs of survival belief and life emotion determine the ways and methods of folk art, so the function of folk art not only expresses the people's feelings but also becomes a symbol of the spiritualization of belief worship and is an essential carrier for the study of cultural characteristics.

People have different ways of expression to symbolize the aesthetic ideal of water culture in different periods, influenced by the social mode of production, social, ideological cognition, the degree of social and cultural development, and other factors at that time. At the same time, it is also influenced by folk customs. The primitive ancestors' cognitive expression of water was mainly totem worship. Nowadays, in the archaeological discoveries along the Silk Road, the pottery unearthed is painted with water ripple, vortex pattern, fish pattern, frog pattern, grid pattern, etc. These are the initial expressions of the early primitive ancestors' prayers and worship for water. These objects have become the physical "evidence" of the early water worship with the combination of practicality and utilitarianism. After the social development, in the period of agricultural society, under the influence of social culture, religious culture, political education, and other factors, the object of water worship has developed from primitive water worship, water-related animal totem worship to water control figures, animal deification, dragons and other worship objects.

From artistic image to folk intention: "mutual proof of picture and text" in the belief of water god

The area's topography along the Chinese section of the Silk Road is complex, including high mountains, basins, Pingchuan, deserts, and the Gobi, especially in Xinjiang and Gansu. For the ancestors who lived along the Silk Road in ancient times, as a necessary factor for survival, water gave rise to natural worship related to water, such as asking for water and praying for rain. Socrates believes that "art imitates nature," and the creation of art is the exertion of imitation instinct. Croce believes that "art is intuition," the source of intuition is emotion, and art is the expression of emotion. Taylor believes that primitive art originates from primitive witchcraft, which is rooted in the animistic

worldview. I think the emergence and development of the art of water belief are that the ancient ancestors generated intuition from the cognition of water-based on imitating nature and formed the water belief culture under the idea of animism in practice.

The belief of water god in the spiritual level

In thousands of years of Chinese cultural history, water belief, as a deep-rooted folk traditional spiritual belief, is not uncommon in the images and text materials along the Silk Road. In collecting data, the author found that although the East and the West are far apart in terms of content expression and image form, there are many similarities in the belief and expression of water. First of all, take fairy tales as an example. The creation myths and heroic myths of the East and the West are mostly related to water. The artistic image of Water God is an image expression symbol based on symbolic semantics, a kind of social, cultural consensus, and folk art based on the interpretable image connotation under the general psychological structure of the people.

The outstanding feature of the art image in the water god belief culture is that it reflects the belief support, ideal needs, emotional comfort, and even psychological dependence of the people. This awe, worship, and demand for water can also be seen through well-known myths, such as the Chinese creation myth Pangu Kai Heaven and Nu WA made man. The myths and legends of various ethnic groups in the area along the Silk Road, such as the mythological motif of the Tatar Qingniuding Earth, in which there is an endless sea below the earth, there is a big fish in the sea, and a green cow is standing on the board of the fish. The horns of the green cattle support the whole earth. If the green cow is tired, change a horn to support it, and there will be an earthquake. In the Kazak creation mythology, the universe is separated from the darkness to give birth to a new world; from the boiling mixture, water, earth, sun, and stars are produced, and the rain-seeking ceremony “Tasatek” is recorded; in Uygur mythology, it was evident that “crops cannot be cultivated because the river is cut off,” killing sheep and offering sacrifices to the god of rain, such as Akhtihan, and other plots with water as elements.

Fuxi Nu WA in Chinese mythology, Naga and Naji in Indian mythology, Isis and Serapis in ancient Greek mythology all appear in the human head and snake tail in legends and images. Fu Xi Nu WA is a figure in ancient Chinese legends. It is said that Nu WA created human beings in the form of loess and water. In Hindu mythology, Naga and Najib are the guardians of Buddhism and the guardians of the river, which can make rain and bring bumper harvests and natural disasters. Enki is the water god of Sumeria, whose central city is near the Persian Gulf, symbolized by a goat and a fish. From the perspective of flood myths and legends in the world, the general formula of the story is human sin-flood punishment-human rebirth.

Through the comparison of the above stories, we can find that the difference between Chinese God and the West is that God is not in the leading position of absolute authority, but more reflects the unity of God and man, and there is an equal and friendly relationship between God and man. This is quite different from the dominant position of the gods in the West and the contractual relationship between people. Take Dayu flood control in China and Noah's ark in the West as examples to understand the different concepts of water between the two civilizations. It is also for the flood Noah relied on the revelation of God through the ark to escape the disaster that God brought to the people. At the same time, Dayu regarded it as a natural phenomenon, through his summary and thinking of previous experience, followed the laws of nature to overcome the flood. Noah enabled human beings to continue to reproduce. Still, at the same time,

it also provided a precedent for human beings to repent to God, while Dayu left the idea of “the unity of man and nature” that human beings transform nature based on following the laws of nature. In China, people generally regard the origin and development of the universe as an ongoing natural process, and man is an organic part of it. People want to adapt to nature and the unity of man and nature.

From the grid pattern and fish pattern in the pottery unearthed from Yangshao Culture in Shaanxi, China, to the vortex pattern and frog pattern in the painted pottery relics unearthed in Majiayao in Gansu Province, and the water ripple, fishing net, and vortex patterns in the painted pottery unearthed in Xinjiang, as well as the waves, water vortex patterns, grid patterns, fish patterns, ox head patterns, tortoise patterns, snake patterns and so on unearthed from the Qiogamish site in Iran. The appearance of similar ornamentation in different areas of the ancient Silk Road proves to a certain extent that the development of early human art comes from the understanding and understanding of the world and is related to its own needs. The art image comes from the imitation and abstract generalization of things. It is the imitation of objective things and the processing of subjective emotions (Mao, 2017). The Qiogamish site in present-day Khuzestan province in southwestern Iran is an agricultural, cultural site, which should be a farming group while domesticating dogs, cattle, sheep, and other animals, and fishing is also one of its economic models. The belief system of the agricultural nation is generally closely related to the themes of high yield, barren, life, and production. Thick lines, repeated grids, fishing and hunting energy, and simple drawing pursue survival and life. Ornamentation has become a symbol of the vitality of these themes, and it is normal for water belief elements to appear.

Bulls and horns have been unearthed in the Xiaohe graveyard in Xinjiang. Chinese scholar Xu Feng connects the Xiaohe cemetery with the site of atalhyük in death and Rebirth: a glimpse of the burial customs of the Creek Cemetery in Xinjiang (Xu, 2011). He believes that the form of cattle remains (cattle heads and horns) seen at the Chattar site is similar to that seen in the Xiaohe graveyard, giving people a very marginal, ferocious, and primitive feeling (*Fig. 2*). A room was excavated in the Katai mound in south-central Turkey (ancient Anatolia), apparently used to hold religious rituals related to birth. They painted the room red, which some scholars think is the color of blood, and red is the color of life. The figures painted on the wall show the woman in childbirth, and the circular and wavy lines painted next to them may symbolize the uterus, umbilical cord, and amniotic fluid.

The image of the uterus similar to the ox’s head represents life, and the water ripple is the element of amniotic fluid, that is, the carrier of life. We can infer that the spiritual world of the ancestors at that time believed that water, Horn, and goddess were the beginning of life. Human life originated in the waters of the womb.

Therefore, according to analogy, the goddess is the source of all life, including human beings, animals, and plants, so a large number of female images have been unearthed in many archaeological sites, highlighting reproductive features. This represents that water worship is an element of nature worship and an element of reproductive worship. Mellaart, a former excavator at the site of Chattar Hugh, once briefly pointed out that the bull is the symbol of the male god. At the same time, the leopard has the attribute of a goddess. Ms. Gimbutas believes that the bull symbolizes the seasonal function of the water of life, the inherent vitality of the bull can be proved by the artistic expression of flowers and plants on the bull, through the sacrifice of the bull, the concept of regeneration can be dramatically understood as the birth of new life

(Gimbutas, 1991). From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the bull represents regeneration and is the symbol of the water of life. In the sacrificial activities in ancient China, cattle are also often used animals, so in the archaeological discoveries in China, cattle remains are common and appear in various forms. As an object that has been stored for a long time and is easy for secondary processing, Horn has become a symbolic representation in sacrificial activities.

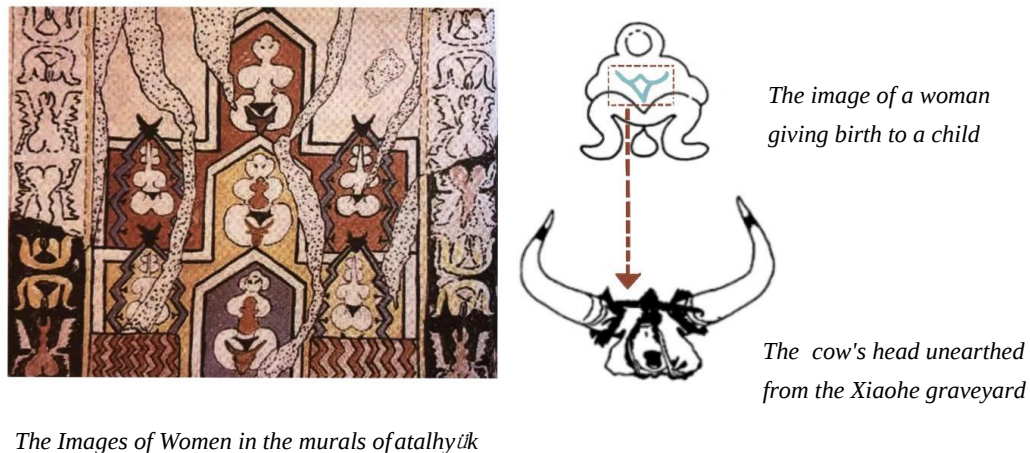


Figure 2. The image relationship between cattle and water. Photo source: epainting of the relics of Xu, 2011

To sum up, the belief in water gods at the spiritual level is all over the ancient Silk Road, and the material needs are transformed into spiritual needs related to fish, frogs, and snakes directly associated with water. And later developed into a symbolic form of worship of cattle. The influence of water on spiritual belief in the East is imperceptible. As a necessary element of life, it is often associated with the origin of the world. Religious belief in water can be found that water plays a role in preventing misfortune and purification. In ancient times, water always played an essential role in the process from birth to death, and bathing before ancient sacrifices and religious ceremonies embodied the purification role of water.

The belief of water god in the material level

The folk art in the Silk Road has the cultural characteristics of multi-ethnic and multi-regional communication and integration. The folk art resources attached to the trade exchanges and derivatives along the Silk Road are integrated with “text, images, and rituals.” The artistic expression always revolves around the aesthetic phenomenon of production, life, and trade in the Silk Road, the aesthetic activities created, and the resulting aesthetic emotion, aesthetic consciousness, aesthetic concept, and aesthetic thought. The artistic image of water worship exists in all aspects of society, from clothing, food, housing, transportation, related festival customs, belief taboos, etc. Although the opening of the Silk Road started with Zhang Qian’s mission from Chang’an to the Western regions, the folk culture of water belief emerged as early as the primitive Yangshao culture. At that time, people had a preliminary understanding of water. After their expectations and demand, they drew abstract and straightforward patterns with symbolic connotations in daily necessities, sacrifices, and funerary objects

according to the limitations of technology and technology at that time. From the grid patterns and fish patterns in pottery unearthed in Yangshao culture in Shaanxi to the vortex patterns and frog patterns in painted pottery relics unearthed in Majiayao, Gansu Province, these patterns appear. It is the ancient human's initial worship of water, extending to the worship of the dragon king and the river god. The worship of water belief in the artifacts unearthed in Yangshao culture, whether witchcraft or worship, embodies the primitive ancestors' preliminary understanding of nature and displays and develops its practical function and aesthetic consciousness to a certain extent (Wang, 2017). Similarly, among the painted pottery relics unearthed in Xinjiang, water ripples, net fishing patterns, vortex patterns, and further understanding and worship of water in Xinjiang. Although the artistic image of Water God has different ways of expression according to varying objects of belief, through the collection and arrangement of the creative manifestation of Water God along the Silk Road, the artistic image of Water God takes water Noumenon, animal image, character image and consciousness image as the main body of creative expression. At the same time, clouds, rain, thunder, electricity, and other images related to precipitation also exist in the depiction image.

The belief in the god of water has a prominent position in the Chinese folk belief system. People transform their awe and fear of water into the consciousness of religious belief, "endow water with supernatural fantasy power," thus providing a conscious basis for the personification and deification of water. Before Zhang Qian's mission to the Western regions, there had been exchanges between the Central Plains and the Western regions. After Zhang Qian's mission to the Western provinces, sales in economic, cultural, ideological, and other fields became more frequent and profound. The area along the Silk Road has always been where nomadic civilization and agricultural civilization collide and merge. Xinjiang and Gansu belong to oasis agrarian areas. Although mobile agriculture is not highly developed, exchanges with the Central Plains, especially after the Han Dynasty attacked Xiongnu, Jiuquan County, and Dunhuang County. After the Han people moved to Gansu and other areas, they brought advanced farming techniques and production tools. Oasis agriculture has significantly been developed. The worship of water comes from the critical significance of water to life, from the nomadic people living after water plants to the development of agricultural areas that irrigate water sources, the shortage of water resources will inevitably lead to the contradiction of water used to maintain stability, the government supports the water god belief and puts the water belief into the national sacrifice, and appropriately regulates the folk water conservancy activities. As a result, the water belief in Xinjiang and Gansu has become a water belief culture in arid areas, which is different from the water-rich regions.

The feudal official sacrificial policy promoted the development of the belief in water gods. Based on the needs of social reality, the continuous implementation of the sacrifice system has objectively promoted the development of the belief in the water god. In Cave 25 of the Yulin Grottoes in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes, a yellow and black dragon will be at the top of the murals, with red clouds and auspicious clouds on its feet. (*Fig. 3*) in the period of Emperor Xuanzong of the Tang Dynasty, the Zhao Temple Longchi set up altar officials to offer sacrifices to the Dragon King. As a result, the function of Dragon King Siyu was established and was believed in among the people. The Asura in the sea on the west wall of Mogao Grottoes 249 stands in the sea, and the traditional Chinese images of Fengshen and Thor are painted on both sides, a combination of Chinese and Western water gods (*Fig. 4*). Xinjiang is an arid agricultural area, and the prerequisite for

agricultural planting is the availability and quantity of irrigation water sources. The shortage of water resources will inevitably lead to contradictions in water use, and civil water conservancy disputes continue to emerge. To maintain stability, the Qing government supported the construction of Longwang Temple and appropriately regulated non-governmental water conservancy activities. Longwang Temple is no longer only a sacred place for officials and people to sacrifice but also plays a religious role in the irrigation activities to maintain regional water conservancy order. According to Xinjiang Tu Zhi, more than 30 Longwang temples were built during the reign of the Qing Dynasty and formed regional and cultural characteristics different from those in the mainland. The first difference is that the Longwang Temple in Xinjiang is mainly built on riverbanks, springs, and water dividers. Not all the Longwang temples in the mainland are built by the water. The second difference is that Longwang Temple has evolved from the function of “seeking rain” in the Central Plains to the position of “seeking water” and “dividing water” in Xinjiang.



Figure 3. The Middle Tang Dynasty in Cave 25 of Yulin Grottoes. Photo from the official Weibo of Dunhuang Grottoes



Figure 4. Mogao Grottoes Cave 249 Sea Asura. Photo from the official Weibo of Dunhuang Grottoes

From the perspective of the areas along the ancient Silk Road, the belief in water gods has common or similar characteristics. From the above, it can be concluded that the belief in the water god along the ancient Silk Road can be divided into the worship

of the original water body, the regeneration of the water worship function of the ox horn, and the establishment of the image of the dragon god (Fig. 5). Most of the ancient civilizations originated in the river basin. Still, civilization has never been a single generation, and various civilizations continue to learn from and learn from each other in the process of communication. The ancient Silk Road promoted the development and spread of civilization, and the interaction and communication between regions is a necessary process of the evolution of society. The class has similar needs in the relative time range, and human beings have the same psychological function in a similar social state. Therefore, the same or similar belief culture can be produced under the same or similar geographical conditions, and water is a necessary element of life on earth. Understandably, similar water god beliefs, totem worship, and technical systems appear along the Silk Road, which is also the reality of close communication between global and regional perspectives. There is a wide range of areas along the ancient Silk Road, the differences in different regions, landforms, climate and other natural factors, the differences in the needs of the people, as well as the differences in subjective factors such as concepts, methods, skills and other personal factors adopted in the transformation of nature. There are different restrictions on the image shape and style of the water god, making the created social and cultural tradition have apparent regional characteristics. Thus resulting in the difference and diversity in the modeling characteristics of folk art.

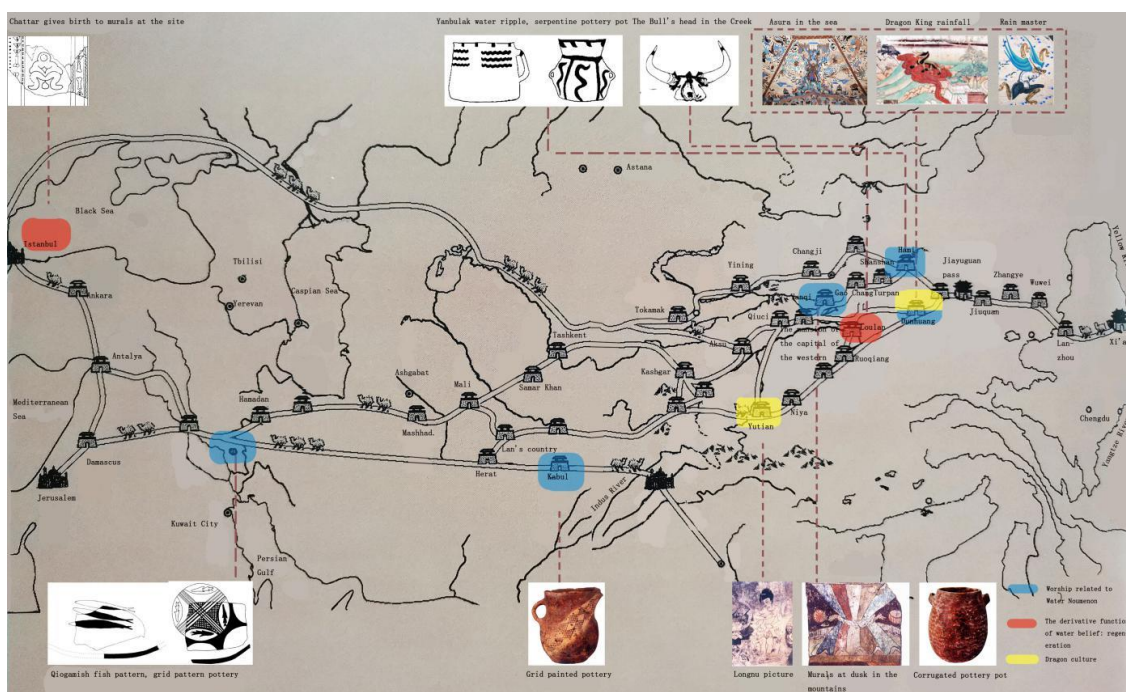


Figure 5. Schematic diagram of belief in water gods along the ancient Silk Road. Photo source: repainting of the relics of the Northwest of the Silk Road

The unity of knowledge and practice in response to the times: the contemporary value of ecological wisdom in the belief of water god

In the historical process of development, the ancient ancestors along the Silk Road took the opening of the Silk Road as an opportunity, the interweaving of nomadic

farming civilization as a link, and the needs of the development of oasis agriculture and animal husbandry in arid areas. It created a regional water culture, which represented the development level of productive forces at that time and adapted to the external living environment. Including climate, temperature difference, topography, natural disasters, and so on. This kind of pioneering, enterprising, and adaptability in the face of nature and poor living conditions is the content we need to inherit and learn when our current social living conditions are superior.

Construction of social order

In the past, the belief in Water God played a role in calming the people's hearts, organizing and mobilizing to a certain extent, and had the responsibility of promoting ethics and educating the people. The water god sacrifice space conveys the official sacrifice idea through worshipping the water god to achieve the goal of harmony in the countryside and thick customs. Generally speaking, the belief in Water God pursues the realm of "harmony." In Confucianism, it puts more emphasis on the harmony between man and society and the unity of emotion and reason; in Taoism, it puts more emphasis on the connection between man and nature and the unity of heart and thing; in Zen Buddhism, it puts more emphasis on the harmony between man and people and the pursuit of spiritual purity. The belief in Water God pursues the harmony between man and nature and runs through the connection between man and people, man and society (Wu and Li, 2021). Such harmony is connected from individual to society, from humanities to art, heaven, and earth to the whole universe. In other words, heaven, man, and literature are the same, all run through and. The harmonious beauty of the unity of man and nature is the highest pursuit of Chinese traditional art. Chinese aesthetics requires the unity of beauty and goodness. Although Confucianism and Taoism have different views on the so-called highest realm of excellence, in the end, they all regard "the unity of man and nature" as the highest realm, and the so-called "unity of man and nature" is also a kind of aesthetic realm, a realm of the unity of truth, goodness, and beauty.

Inheritance of ecological wisdom

At present, the rise of ecological civilization construction is a worldwide revolution involving the transformation of the mode of production, way of life, and even values (Berleant, 2010). Promoting the promotion of public environmental awareness is an inevitable requirement in the development and construction. Judging from the content reflected in the culture of belief in God in Sheung Shui, the folk culture that has been worshipping and protecting water for thousands of years has continued to develop. The pace of the times has not stopped. In today's economic development, social development, and scientific and technological development, the protection consciousness has become relatively thin. The ancient people already have the concept of ecological environment consciousness is still the cultural treasure that we need to take its essence today. In the formulation of relevant environmental laws and regulations, we should attach importance to water resources from the perspective of moral and emotional constraints to educate the concept of getting along with nature in harmony with nature. In the year when festivals, folk customs, and other traditional folk culture to play the role of art imperceptibly, teaching in fun. In today's economic globalization, ecological globalization is also an important issue we are facing. We

should use the ecological wisdom exchange, blending, and communication of the water gods in the ancient Silk Road to deal with the practice of human community with a shared future in culture, ecology, and social construction in different periods. We should pay more attention to the ecological quality education of the people, strive to build a cultural atmosphere of environmental protection awareness, enhance the information access channels of public awareness of environmental protection, and improve and develop the construction of an ecological education system.

Aesthetic value of art

Morality, art, and science are the three pillars of human culture, and the belief in Water God is included in these three pillars. The aesthetic value embodied in the traditional ecological wisdom in the ancient Silk Road can be used for reference to the construction of contemporary environmental aesthetics. Many categories of Chinese traditional aesthetics and art appear in the form of unity of opposites, such as “rigidity and softness,” “emptiness and reality,” “movement,” “form and spirit,” “cultural quality,” “reason,” “scene,” “image,” “artistic conception” and so on. Among them, the spiritual side is more dominant in the unity of contradictions, such as “spirit” in “form and spirit,” “emotion” in “situation,” and so on. “meaning” in “image” and so on. In the artistic images of belief in water gods, the relationship between “form and spirit” and “image,” which is dominated by the expression of spirituality, provides a reference and guidance for the development and aesthetics of our art today (Zhang, 2021). This dialectical thinking shines with the rational wisdom of the Chinese nation, which has a significant influence on Chinese traditional art and aesthetic thought and forms the analytic harmony view full of national characteristics in classic Chinese art and aesthetic opinion.

Summary and discussion

The development of human society is rooted in the ecological environment, and it is an inevitable requirement to promote the environmental awareness of the public (Carlson and Lintott, 2008). At present, saving water has not become the conscious behavior of human beings in daily life. Understand the worship of water gods, learn ecological wisdom, and make water saving, water use, and water management become the conscious behavior of the people from the heart. The ancient people’s understanding of water and life already had a simple, universal, and strong sense of protection and measures from the contents reflected in the above materials. This is reflected in the relevant environmental laws and regulations and moral regulations. Dunhuang Mengshu has attached importance to the education of the concept of living in harmony with nature since childhood; the karez in Turpan, the development of human society, and the progress of civilization are based on a healthy ecological environment. The change of ecological environment has its regularity and regionality, and the formation and development of ecological civilization also have corresponding frequency, regionality, and nationality. In the face of today’s ecological problems, we should learn their ecological wisdom from the belief in ancient water gods. We inherit the past and the future from the water belief culture, and what we want to take from its essence and discard its dross is to integrate the new needs into the present era scene. Inherit the belief of respect for water, the protection and utilization of water, with the concept of ecological, green, and sustainable development. The ancient ancestors could not control

the amount of water and used the method of sacrifice to please the gods in charge of the water. The space places, image texts, and behavior rituals of its sacrifice together form the belief culture of water gods. Its sacrificial activities are inseparable from “etiquette and music civilization.” The order and etiquette formed in the sacrificial activities of this belief have become the moral laws that restrict the behavior. In the sacrifice to the water god, the rights, obligations, and daily norms of conduct of the members of the society are stipulated. After receiving the grace, the ancestors will be grateful, restrain their behavior, and internalize their beliefs into moral laws that people consciously abide by.

With the rapid development of the economy and society, the belief in Water God seems to have become a lost folk belief. The current eco-environmental problems have not received enough attention. Similarly, in natural science, the research on the ecological environment is mainly focused on the current situation, spatial cognition, efficiency assessment, risk assessment, and other biological factors, but behind the rapid social development is the pollution and abuse of water resources. In the “regional social relations system with water conservancy as the center,” the maintenance of water conservancy order, protection, and rational use of water resources should not be based on the destruction of natural resources. The relationship between man and water profoundly impacts the past and the present and will continue to shape the future. Nowadays, the widespread problems of water shortage, water environment pollution, and flood disasters affect the long-term and effective utilization of water resources and the realization of sustainable development of human society. We should pick up “water worship” and even “nature worship” again, not to worship unknown gods, but to have awe of nature and restrain ourselves from our behavior, to establish natural moral restraint norms at the social level of the masses. Attaching importance to and strengthening the study of ancient ecological thoughts plays a positive role in enriching and building today’s ecological civilization.

Acknowledgements. Support from the National Social Science Foundation of China: “Study on Landscape Protection of Oasis Historic and Cultural Villages and Towns” (14G126) and “Study on the Cooperative Mechanism of Water Cultural Heritage Protection and Rural Revitalization in Xinjiang Section of the Silk Road” (19XMZ046).

REFERENCES

- [1] Berleant, A (2010): *Sensibility and Sense: The Aesthetic Transformation of the Human World* (St Andrews Studies in Philosophy and Public Affairs 6). – Imprint Academic, Charlottesville.
- [2] Buckley, B. M., Anchukaitis, K. J., Penny, D., Fletcher, R., Cook, E. R., Sano, M., Nam, L. C., Wichienkeo, A., Minh, T. T., Hong, T. M. (2010): Climate as a contributing factor in the demise of Angkor, Cambodia. – *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 107(15): 6748-6752.
- [3] Cai, H. H. (2013): *A Study on the Worship of Water God in the pre-Qin, Qin and Han Dynasties*. – Guangxi Normal University, Guilin.
- [4] Carlson, A., Lintott, S. (2008): *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty*. – Columbia University Press, New York.
- [5] Du, Z. (1996): The East-West differentiation of climate change in China in the past two millennia and its impact on the rise and fall of the Silk Road. – *Geography of Arid Areas* 3.

- [6] Frankopan, P. (2015): *The Silk Roads. A New History of the World.* – Bloomsbury Publishing, London.
- [7] Gimbutas, M. (1991): *The Language of the Goddess. Unearthing the Hidden Symbols of Western Civilization.* – Harper, San Francisco.
- [8] Hu, M. F. (2015): *A Study on the Belief in Water Gods Along the Beijing-Hangzhou Canal in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.* – Nanjing University, Nanjing.
- [9] Huang, Z. (1988): *The Water God of China.* – Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, Shanghai.
- [10] Mallory, J. (1973): A short history of the Indo-European problem. – *Journal of Indo-European Studies* 1(1): 21-64.
- [11] Mao, N. (2017): *The Discovery and Integration of the Art Ideal of Going to the Folk and the Folk Tradition (1919-1945).* – China Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.
- [12] Shen, S. B. (2009): *A Study on the Belief of Water God in Wu Yue Folk.* – Wen Zhou University, WenZhou.
- [13] Tang, F. (2016): *A Study on the Custom Characteristics in the Murals of the Water Temple in Guangsheng Temple.* – North China University of Technology, Shanxi Province.
- [14] Wang, Y. P. (2006): On the worship of water god in Tang Dynasty. – *Journal of Capital Normal University (Social Science Edition)* 2006(04): 12-17.
- [15] Wang, S. (2017): The imprint of Silk Road in Xixia Art Image. – *Xixia Studies* 2017(04): 50-57.
- [16] Wu, B. (1996): *Chinese Folk Letters.* – Shanghai People's Publishing House, Shanghai.
- [17] Wu, Y. H., Li, F. L. (2021): Change and Cohesion: Water Beliefs and Legends and Their Social Functions in Dali Erhai Basin. – *Journal of Honghe University* 19(02): 58-63.
- [18] Xiang, B. (1996): *Chinese Water Worship.* – Shanghai Sanlian Publishing House, Shanghai.
- [19] Xu, F. (2011): Death and rebirth: a glimpse of the burial custom of Xiaohe graveyard in Xinjiang. – *National Art* 2011(04): 58-64.
- [20] Yuan, I., Zhang, X. L., Xue, Z. Y., Jiang, X. (2021): The influence of the change of minority water culture on water environment pollution. A case study of Miaolan Village in Southeast Guizhou Province. – *Rural Economy and Science and Technology* 32(07): 30-32.
- [21] Zhang, H. (2021): Symbol and situation: a study on the interpretation model of visual art based on art history. – *Journal of Qiqihar University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)* 2021(02): 23-27.