

Article

Modernization and Inheritance of Folk Beliefs in the Digital Age: A Case Study in the Southeastern Coastal Areas of China

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Abstract: With the processes of urbanization and population migration in China, local traditional folk beliefs are facing a crisis of inheritance, including the loss of believers and the decline of religious buildings. However, in the southeastern coastal areas of China, with the development of society and the advancement of science and technology, folk beliefs have shown a trend of modernization, gained widespread attention from young people, and shown a good trend of inheritance. This study focuses on the modernization of folk beliefs in the southeastern coastal areas of China, exploring how folk beliefs are adapted to contemporary life and the key role of information technology in the protection of religious buildings. The study found that the modernization of folk beliefs in China's southeastern coastal areas is mainly reflected in the portrayal of gods in cartoonish images, the popularity of music, and the modernization of communication methods. By analyzing the modernization process of folk beliefs in the southeastern coastal areas of China, this study reveals the adaptation and development of folk beliefs in modern society. Based on the reality of contemporary Chinese society, this study also explores the future modernization trend of folk beliefs and discusses the possibilities and potential risks of the application of digital technology in folk belief inheritance.

Keywords: folk belief; cultural heritage; Pageant on Immortals; Pagoda Bone; metaverse



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1. Introduction

Chinese folk beliefs refer to the various ideas, customs, and corresponding ritual systems for the worship of gods, spirits, ancestors, saints, and celestial phenomena that spontaneously develop among the people in rural society. Some scholars also call this “folklore religion” or “diffused religion”, which has a wide presence in Chinese society (Zhang 2014).

Since around 2020, folk belief in the coastal areas of southeastern China has begun to show a booming trend, garnering huge attention on Chinese social media platforms (Deng et al. 2024, pp. 3–6). Chinese folk belief is undergoing significant transformation at the intersection of tradition and innovation, exhibiting a modernizing trend that continuously aligns with contemporary life and social contexts (Ma 2010, pp. 57–66).

This study aims to analyze the process of modernization of folk belief in the coastal areas of southeastern China, with particular attention to the adaptability of local folk beliefs amidst intensified urbanization and population mobility. It seeks to explain the driving forces behind their popularity on social media platforms. Additionally, by examining the modernization evolution of the Pageant on Immortals (游神) in the coastal areas of southeastern China, this study highlights the growing importance of information technology in the contemporary inheritance of folk belief. It explores the symbiotic relationship between traditional practices of folk belief and new trends of information technology.

1.1. The Inheritance Crisis of Chinese Folk Beliefs

In the past two decades, China's urbanization process has rapidly advanced, yet the urban economy has exhibited an imbalanced trend, with people migrating to the southeast

coastal areas in pursuit of better social environments and job opportunities (Liang et al. 2022, pp. 93–103; Chen et al. 2008, p. 31), whereas the northeast, central, and western regions have seen severe population outflow (Wen et al. 2023, pp. 13–21) (Figure 1). China's traditional folk beliefs are numerous, with each province having its own worshiped deities and unique folk beliefs and customs (Chinese Religion 2018, pp. 6–9).

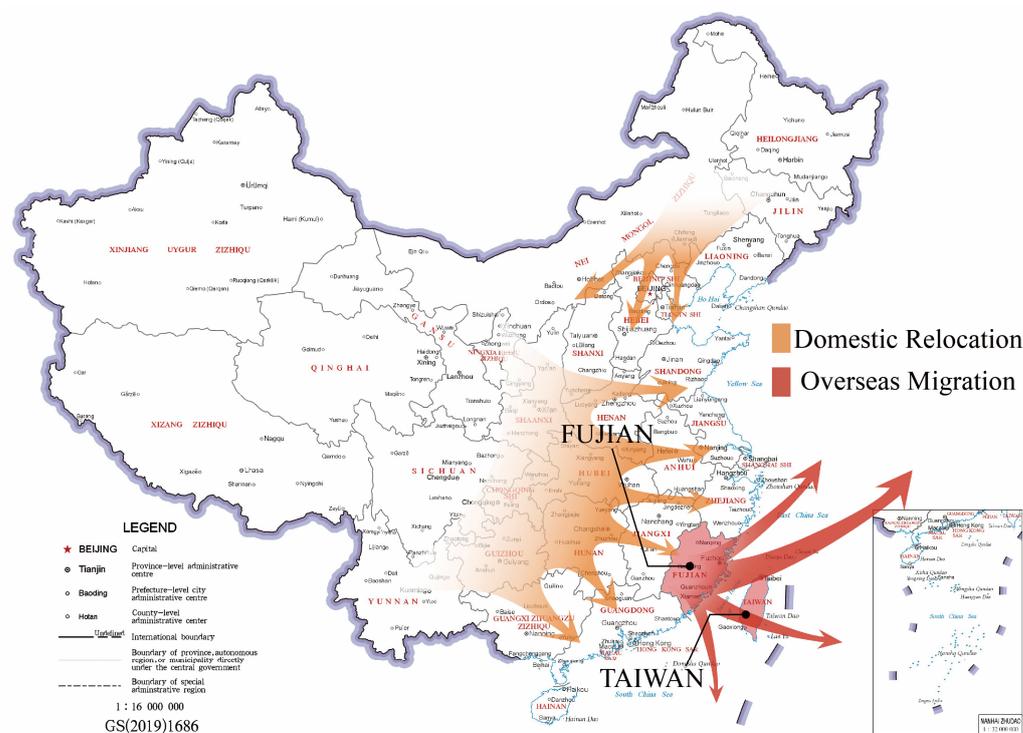


Figure 1. Population migration trends of China.

In areas experiencing population outflow, folk beliefs face decline in both material and non-material aspects. On the non-material front, the loss of believers inevitably leads to the dwindling or even permanent cessation of folk sacrificial activities, resulting in the disappearance of many intangible cultural heritages. On the material side, the most tangible manifestation is the dilapidation or hollowing out of related buildings. Due to the significant outflow of taxpayers, local governments lack the financial capacity to support the maintenance and repair of religious buildings, especially historic ones that require substantial funding for restoration. Even though local governments receive annual special subsidies from the central government for cultural heritage protection, the limited funds only suffice for minimal maintenance to ensure the safety of the building structures (Geng 2013, pp. 59–62). While some significant religious historic buildings may undergo decent restoration, the loss of believers renders these religious spaces devoid of users, turning historic buildings into exquisite but empty shells (Liu and Liu 2010, pp. 35–42). For example, the only temple dedicated to the God of Fire in Fuzhou was demolished to make room for medical facilities. Though with certain historical value, it was not deemed worthy of protection, with some of the most valuable cultural relics in the temple, such as the stone pillars engraved with couplets, found discarded in a temporary parking lot (Figure 2).

Therefore, in the context where large-scale population mobility is already a reality in China, assessing how to protect and inherit folk beliefs from various regions has become the main concern of this study. On the one hand, we need to draw lessons from the excellent paradigms of folk belief inheritance in China. On the other hand, we need to utilize information technology to enable migrating populations to reunite in cyberspace, exploring suitable ways for the inheritance of folk beliefs in accordance with national conditions.



The thousand-year-old Fire Temple was demolished.

The stone pillars of the Fire Temple that were discarded at random.

Figure 2. The Fire Temple was demolished due to land shortage.

1.2. The Custom of Pageant on Immortals in Fujian and Taiwan

According to historical records, the Pageant on Immortals activities in Fujian and Taiwan can be traced back to the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 AD) (L. Wei 2005). Taking Shangsi Festival (上巳节) as an example, this festival was established to commemorate the birth of the First Human Ancestor (人文始祖), the Yellow Emperor (黄帝), and during this festival, people engage in sacrificial activities to commemorate and pray for favorable weather and peace for the coming year (X. Xu 2017, p. 1). The local chronicles of the Ming Dynasty recorded many scenes of the Pageant on Immortals during Shangsi Festival. In the early days, people in the procession dressed as attendants of the main deity, carrying the statue of the main deity from the temple in a portable shrine. The procession that led the way for the main deity was dressed in splendid, even luxurious attire. In the procession, there would be people playing musical instruments such as drums and gongs and groups performing acrobatics, creating a lively and joyful scene. The procession traversed through the streets and alleys, grabbing the attention of countless people (J. Xu 1967).

During the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912 AD), the number of clan ancestral halls (宗祠) in both urban and rural areas increased. People became more obsessed with the Pageant on Immortals activities as almost all villages held this ceremony. When the deity's birthday approached, villagers would raise funds to hire professionals for an opera performance. Costly as it was, people could be very generous when it came to the Pageant on Immortals activities (Ding and Zhao 1995).

Over the past five years, regions such as Fujian and Taiwan have emerged as excellent models for the protection and inheritance of folk beliefs, attracting great attention of young netizens and conducive to the development of local tourism (Deng et al. 2024, pp. 3–6). There are numerous deities worshipped in Fujian and Taiwan. According to official statistics, there are over 1000 deities in folk beliefs in Fujian alone, with sacrificial activities carried out on a highly frequent basis (G. Lin 1998, p. 6).

Among these, the Pageant on Immortals is the most significant component of sacrificial activities in Fujian and Taiwan, and also the most popular one on the Internet. The Pageant on Immortals refers to the practice where people, during festive occasions, invite the deity's statue into a portable shrine (神轿) within the temple and then carry it out onto the streets for a procession, receiving the incense (香火) and worship of the public (J. Doolittle 2018). The symbolism behind this activity is to invite the deity to descend to the mortal realm, tour the territory, and give blessings of peace and safety to local people.

The procession of the Pageant on Immortals usually stretches for about 4 km. In addition to the procession featuring the main deity as the finale, there are other formations, including the gong and drum team, a lion dance (舞龙), a dragon dance (舞狮), Pagoda Bone (塔骨), acrobatics, and a band performance (Figure 3). The central one is the Pagoda Bone formation. "Pagoda Bone" refers to a large hollow bamboo bone statue, constructed by bamboo strips to form the skeleton of the deity, with the deity's head mounted on the

top. The skeleton is draped in divine attire, typically standing 2–3 m tall, resembling a giant puppet (Figure 4).



Figure 3. The scene of the Pageant on Immortals (Fujian).

Unlike conventional sculpture forms of deities, the Pagoda Bone requires a specialized Bearer of the Pagoda Bone (挺神将) to “perform” the activity. As the Pagoda Bone is hollowed, the Bearer of the Pagoda Bone can wear and manipulate it through body movements, simulating human footsteps as the deity descends to visit the mortal realm. The characters of Pagoda Bone vary, depicting both immortals and animals, elders, and children. They serve as attendants to the main deity, leading the way, escorting the main deity, and receiving worship from believers.



Figure 4. Pagoda Bone (Fujian).

1.3. The Modernization of the Pageant on Immortals Tradition

Influenced by modern popular culture, Chinese folk beliefs have shown a trend towards modernization, first manifested in the transformation of the Pagoda Bone in Taiwan. This modernization is primarily evident in three aspects: external appearance, music, and dissemination methods. In terms of appearance, the Pagoda Bone has been adapted to a cartoonish image. People use modern trendy elements to decorate the Pagoda Bone, such as adding sunglasses, Mickey Mouse gloves, and even baby pacifiers (Figure 5). However, the modernization extends beyond the external appearance of the Pagoda Bone. During performances, traditional Chinese drum music is replaced by modern electronic dance music, incorporating contemporary popular elements.

This modern Pageant on Immortals method was first used in Taiwan on the image of a god named the Third Crown Prince (三太子) and is known as “Electric-Techno Neon Gods” (电音三太子). The modern-looking Pagoda Bone dances to trendy electronic dance music. This seemingly unorthodox behavior is, however, widely applauded by the public. As a performance form that combines traditional and trendy elements, Electric-Techno Neon Gods go beyond the traditional ritual of Pageant on Immortals and have won widespread appreciation from the local people in Taiwan, having become a model for folk beliefs adapting to modern society. With the maturity of media technology, the massive exposure through live broadcasts and short videos has helped this form of performance gain widespread attention on the Internet; thus, Electric-Techno Neon Gods have gradually become known to more people and even appeared on the international stage.



Figure 5. Electric-Techno Neon Gods (Taiwan).

As a representative of the modernization of folk beliefs, Electric-Techno Neon Gods have had a positive impact on the inheritance of folk beliefs in Fujian and Taiwan. Their popularity has drawn increasing attention from young people to traditional folk beliefs, laying a solid foundation for the inheritance of China's intangible cultural heritage (Feng 2017). Therefore, studying the logic behind this modernization is conducive to the protection and inheritance of local folk beliefs and intangible cultural heritage in areas experiencing population outflow in China (Z. Wei 2021, pp. 63–72).

1.4. The Trend of Integrated Protection of Intangible Heritage and Tangible Heritage

Research on the protection of folk beliefs in China mainly focuses on two aspects: tangible cultural heritage and intangible cultural heritage. The protection of tangible cultural heritage usually falls within the realm of architectural studies, which emphasize the conservation and restoration of architectural heritage (Liu and Zhu 2010, pp. 161–62). On the other hand, the study of intangible cultural heritage is primarily conducted in disciplines such as religious studies and history, focusing on ideologically driven sacrificial rituals, among other aspects (X. Zhou 2013, pp. 1–10). Currently, scholars from different fields, such as political sciences, economy, arts, archaeology, architecture, tourism, law, history, and culture, are engaged in research on cultural heritage preservation. This interdisciplinary approach to preservation is gradually emerging as a new trend. There is a growing consensus in the academic community on the need to protect both tangible and intangible cultural heritage, and significant progress has already been made in this regard. (Hein and Foster 2023).

This study proposes that, against the backdrop of large-scale population mobility in China, the use of metaverse technology can transcend the physical distances of the real world. It is possible to use digital technology to recreate the sacrificial space in the metaverse, therefore providing an immersive experience with the help of relevant equipment and allowing to complete sacrificial activities in tandem with the real world.

This study argues that metaverse technology has the potential to promote better inheritance of folk beliefs in China and serves as a crucial link for the integrated protection of tangible and intangible cultural heritage.

2. The Ritual of Sacrifice in the Pageant of Immortals and the Culture of Pagoda Bones

The term “sacrifice” has distinct meanings within different religious contexts. In this study, “sacrifice” refers to acts of expressing respect and wishes to deities through specific rituals at particular times and locations. These rituals may include worship, prayer, and offerings, with the intent of imploring the deities to fulfill desires beyond human capability. Essentially, it is an act of pleasing and appeasing the deities, an activity extending interaction between humans to one between humans and deities (Du 1999, pp. 18–21).

The traditional ritual form of the Pageant on Immortals has been passed down to the present day. Even now, in the southeastern coastal areas of China, traditional Pageant on Immortals ceremonies are still celebrated. In the past, due to the fact that the main deities worshipped in each village were different, Pageant on Immortals activities were mostly conducted on a village-by-village basis. In the process of urbanization, many villages have merged and the Pageant on Immortals has been held at increasingly larger scales with more grandiose processions, often jointly celebrated by different villages. Villagers would joyfully carry the locally worshipped main deity statue in a portable shrine, parading through the villages and conducting a series of symbolic rituals known in folkloristics as “getting rid of diseases along gateway” (沿门逐疫) (Kang 1990, pp. 25–34). Accompanied by the sounds of gongs, drums, and firecrackers, they would tour the village, while each household would place tributes (贡品) on altars, awaiting the arrival of the Pageant on Immortals procession with blessings from the deities.

2.1. Ritual of Pageant on Immortals

In the early morning of the day of the Pageant on Immortals, villagers don festive attire and form procession teams. They gather at the temple of the main deity, where the Bearer of the Pagoda Bone from each village carries the Pagoda Bone in and out of the temple in sequence, symbolizing the subordinates paying respects to the main deity. Outside the temple, drum and gong teams from each village assemble to perform, cheering their respective teams.

After the Pagoda Bone from each village has paid respects to the main deity, the gates of the temple are closed. The procession teams from various villages wait at the temple gate for the main deity to change clothes. Once the clothes are changed, the deity’s statue is put into a portable shrine and carried out of the temple, marking the official start of the Pageant on Immortals (Figure 6). The entire procession follows a predetermined route, receiving incense and kneeling worship from villagers along the way. Every household sets up altars with various tributes such as food, flowers, and joss paper (炷品) to “host” the deities as a way to express their gratitude. The number of tributes offered indicates the strength of the family. Whenever the Pageant on Immortals procession passes, households light firecrackers and fireworks to echo and add to the grand scene. This continues to the end of procession. The lighting of firecrackers and burning of incense, which symbolize family prosperity, are ways of expressing good wishes and reverence for the deities.

The Pageant on Immortals procession can be quite lengthy, with procession teams from each village leading the way for the main deity’s team. Each village’s procession may include drum and gong playing, lion dances, dragon dances, Pagoda Bone displays, acrobatics, and musical performances. The team carrying the main deity usually appears at the end of the procession, symbolizing the conclusion of the Pageant on Immortals activity (Li and Lin 2019). After the entire procession passes the last household, villagers place the main deity in the nearest village temple or the main temple dedicated to the main deity. By then, the Pageant on Immortals activity is considered concluded, usually approaching dawn of the following day.



Figure 6. Ritual of Pageant on Immortals (Fujian).

In the lengthy Pageant on Immortals ceremony, the most distinctive part is the procession of the Bearers of the Pagoda Bone, who lead the way ahead of the main deity's team. They serve as the vanguard of the Pageant on Immortals procession, clearing the way for the main deity (Tian 2022). These Pagoda Bone deities, as the attendants of the main deity, hold relatively minor divine responsibilities. As the drum and gong ensemble plays rhythmic melodies, the Bearers of the Pagoda Bone proceed in unique steps. There are various types of Bearers of Pagoda Bone, each with different responsibilities, including the vanguard team responsible for scouting the route, the descendants of the deities, the generals with distinguished military merits, the devotees escorting the Pagoda Bone, and other divine beings from mythology (C. Qian 2015). The walking steps of each team vary, reflecting the duties, personalities, and ranks of the deities. The Bearers of the Pagoda Bone manipulate the Pagoda Bone with agile or solemn movements, swinging its arms skillfully, bringing the "divine beings" into life. This performance provides viewers with both visual and auditory impact, adding to the grandeur of the entire Pageant on Immortals procession. As a solemn tradition, in today's Fuzhou region, local Pagoda Bone teams still strictly adhere to old rituals as they inherit the ancient culture of Pageant on Immortals.

2.2. The Construction of Pagoda Bone

In the Pageant on Immortals procession mentioned above, apart from the main deity, the other subordinate deities are represented by human bearers carrying hollow-bodied deity statues, known as the "Pagoda Bone". The Pagoda Bone is a type of large hollow bamboo bone statue, consisting mainly of a "head cylinder" and a "skeleton". The head cylinder is carved from camphor wood, depicting various facial makeups (脸谱) to represent different deities. The body skeleton is woven from bamboo strips. During the annual Pageant on Immortals performance, people lift the Pagoda Bone and place it on the Bearer. The Bearer of the Pagoda Bone inserts their hands through the shoulders of the Pagoda Bone, gripping the ends of its arms; then, the headpiece is placed on top and a specially made robe is put on the Bearer. These robes have a bowl-sized hole at the chest, allowing the Bearer of the Pagoda Bone to see the surroundings during the performance. Walking with the Pagoda Bone on their shoulders, the Bearer mimics the scene of the deity touring the mortal world.

Based on their sizes, the Pagoda Bone deities can be categorized into three types: tall, medium, and short Pagoda Bones. The internal structure of all three types is roughly the same, consisting of bamboo strips stretched and bent to form a “工”-shaped frame. The upper part is widened to form a shoulder pad shape, providing support for the robe worn by the Bearer of the Pagoda Bone, and the draping robe is large enough to cover the legs of the Bearer of the Pagoda Bone. The bottom of the structure is oval-shaped, roughly at the waist level of the Bearer. The Bearer of the Pagoda Bone uses the waist as a pivot point to control the movement of the Pagoda Bone. The differences among the three types of Pagoda Bone lie in their height. The Short Pagoda Bone is closer to the height of an average human, allowing the Bearer of the Pagoda Bone to see the surroundings through the head, whereas the Bearers of the Medium Pagoda Bone and Tall Pagoda Bone can only see the surroundings from the chest and abdomen. Since the Short Pagoda Bone is smaller, the Bearer of the Pagoda Bone can mimic the movements of the deity by holding a wooden stick shaped like an arm, more agile and flexible. In the case of a Tall Pagoda Bone, due to the longer span between the upper and lower parts of its frame, the Bearer of Pagoda Bone needs to use both hands to grasp the crossbar connecting the frame and move the “arm” through inertia to mimic the deity’s posture. The movement is thus limited, mainly simulating the action of swinging arms while walking. Tall Pagoda Bones and Short Pagoda Bones are more commonly seen, while Medium Pagoda Bones are relatively rare (Lin and Zheng 2023, pp. 5–13) (Figure 7).



Figure 7. The internal structure of Pagoda Bones (Fujian).

2.3. The Image and Connotation of Pagoda Bone

The Pagoda Bone deity figures vary in appearances, mainly including various immortals, mythological figures, and divine generals. The Pageant on Immortals procession can generally be divided into the vanguard team (开道神), the general’s team, the main deity,

and the devotee team. Both the vanguard team and the general’s team are composed of Pagoda Bone deity figures.

In the procession of the Pageant on Immortals in Fuzhou, the Male Imperial Entourage (保长公) serves as the leader of the vanguard team (Wang and Wu 2018, pp. 94–100). He typically appears in the image of a man wearing a Fu Manchu mustache and holding willow branches and a wine pot (or a dry tobacco pipe). He plays a role similar to a village official or squire, guiding the procession of the Pageant of Immortals while also maintaining its order (Figure 8). Villagers offer wine to the Male Imperial Entourage to show respect. If anyone blocks the path of the Pageant on Immortals, the Male Imperial Entourage will pretend to “lash” them to ward off evil spirits. Following him is the procession of the Pageant on Immortals organized by various villages, spanning several miles.



Figure 8. Male Imperial Entourage and Female Imperial Entourage (Fujian).

Black Impermanence (黑无常) and White Impermanence (白无常) refer to the two messengers of the underworld, one black and one white, whose duties are to capture evil spirits and bring the souls of the deceased. They are the Chinese Grim Reaper equivalent (B. Wang 2015, p. 121) and also serve as members of vanguard team. The taller one is White Impermanence, and the shorter one is Black Impermanence. They usually appear together as a pair, symbolizing the punishment of evil and the promotion of virtue, thus bringing peace to the people (J. Doolittle 2018) (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Black Impermanence and White Impermanence (Fujian).

In the Pageant on Immortals in Fuzhou, important roles have their own dedicated Scouts (马夫). A Scout is a special character and a member of vanguard team, usually dressed as a harlequin (丑角), guiding and clearing the way for the main deity and the larger subordinate deities (Qi 2009). The Scouts are often dressed in comical and color-

ful attire, carrying whips or other props. Like the Male Imperial Entourage, they “whip” passersby to ward off evil, and people willingly accept being “whipped” by the Scouts as it dispels misfortune. The Scouts run back and forth in the Pageant on Immortals procession, hopping as if riding a horse, inspecting the situation, and then returning to inform the generals behind (Z. Yang 2012, pp. 1–155) (Figure 10). Through exaggerated actions and expressions, the Scouts attract the audience’s attention, adding flair to the Pageant on Immortals procession.



Figure 10. Scout and General (Fujian).

The General Pagoda Bone team is much more solemn. Like the main deity, they are also accompanied by attendants clearing the way for them. The General Pagoda Bone may take after a real general in history with outstanding achievements or it can be a fictional heroic figure. They embody the spirit of heroism and are regarded as protectors of the region (Gao 2023, pp. 107–9) (Figure 10).

The majority of the Pagoda Bone figures in the Pageant on Immortals procession are depicted as classical childlike figures. These Pagoda Bone figures, as the attendants of the main deity, often appear in the image of children, with thick eyebrows, large eyes, neat bangs on the forehead, short braids adorned on both sides, silk ribbons tied at the ends of the braids, dimples on their faces, wide smiles, and an innocent and adorable appearance. The prototype of the Electric-Techno Neon Gods is one such childlike Pagoda Bone figure, endearing to many with a lovable and approachable look (Deng 2013, p. 2) (Figure 11).



Pagoda Bone in the form of a child (Fujian) ➡ Electric-Techno Neon Gods (Taiwan)

Figure 11. Child Pagoda Bone.

In Fujian and Taiwan, there are numerous deities worshipped by local people. Craftsmen have created “Pagoda Bone” figures of different ages and facial expressions based on descriptions in myths and stories. These figures display different features and emotions, such as joy, anger, sadness, and happiness. Such differences not only enhance the visual appeal of the Pageant on Immortals procession but also reflect the diversity in local beliefs.

3. Discussion on the Modernization of the Pageant on Immortals

3.1. The Divine System Represented by the Third Crown Prince

The “Gods” in “Electric-Techno Neon Gods” refers to one of the important deities in the Fujian and Taiwan regions, known as the “Third Crown Prince”, or Nezha (哪吒), the third child of the ancient Chinese mythical god of war, Heavenly King Li, Li Jing (托塔李天王李靖). “The Third Crown Prince” is a protective deity in Chinese Taoism (道教) (Liu 2018, pp. 65–90), and the concept of the Third Crown Prince originates from the Sanskrit Nalakubara in Indian Buddhist scriptures, whose father is The Heavenly King Vaisravana (毗沙门天王) (Chen 2014, pp. 291–327). When Tantric Buddhism was introduced into China in the Tang Dynasty (618–907 AD), the worship of The Heavenly King Vaisravana gained widespread advocacy. Nezha, as his attendant, was also introduced to China. Due to his identity as an attendant and his heroic image, the Third Crown Prince also became a deity protecting the country and land (Wu 2017, pp. 1–23). This belief has been passed on since the Tang Dynasty, especially in Fujian. By the Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD), Yoga Esoteric Buddhism (瑜伽教) took shape in Fujian, incorporating some tantric practices, including the belief in the Third Crown Prince, who became a deity in Yoga Esoteric Buddhism, revered as the commander of celestial soldiers. This tradition gave rise to a unique belief system centered on the Third Crown Prince in the local area (Xie 2020, pp. 71–97) (Figure 12).

Today, in Taiwan and Fujian, the Third Crown Prince is often depicted as a child or teenager. Local people believe that the child-like Third Crown Prince can be a guardian deity for children, capable of warding off evil and disasters. Consequently, the Third Crown Prince is loved and revered by many people. Local residents often offer toys and snacks loved by children to the Third Crown Prince. Moreover, his childlike look has won the Third Crown Prince’s Pagoda Bone numerous fans, and his lively and mischievous characteristics have become important attributes in the development of Electric-Techno Neon Gods (Figure 13).



Figure 12. The Third Crown Prince Nezha enshrined in the temple.



Figure 13. The Pagoda Bone in the image of Nezha (Fujian).

3.2. The Modernization of Divine Figures' Images

The image of deities portrayed through Pagoda Bones is typically sacred and solemn. However, the Third Crown Prince stands out as a lively and adorable figure. As mentioned earlier, Electric-Techno Neon Gods evolved from a childlike Pagoda Bone (Fang and Li 2013, pp. 55–72). The image of the childlike Pagoda Bone already embodies lively, endearing, and approachable characteristics. This youthful deity image is often seen as a symbol of youth and vitality. Therefore, among all deities, only the Third Crown Prince has developed a modernized form. This distinctive feature, different from other gods, is the key reason why people are enthusiastic about this new folk custom.

(1) Cartoonish Images of Gods

Around 2006, during a temple festival in Taiwan, a team portraying the Third Crown Prince through Pagoda Bone performances in the Pageant on Immortals heard electronic dance music playing in nearby shops (Maoxian Lin 2018). They began dancing to the music, and to their surprise, this unconventional behavior was warmly applauded by the audience. This marked the earliest modernization of the traditional childlike Pagoda Bone in Taiwan. In terms of appearance, the traditional small headgear of the Pagoda Bone was replaced by larger doll heads with cute dimples, sunglasses, pacifiers, and white gloves to create the unique modern image of Electric-Techno Neon Gods. The costumes also differ from traditional Pagoda Bone attire. Besides using more colors in addition to the traditional orange color, designers have also added animal faces and scales. The divine robes not only featured casual capes but also luxurious ones decorated with jewels and even lace edges and rabbit fur. Moreover, Electric-Techno Neon Gods performances often involve skateboarding, roller skating, or motorcycle riding. Furthermore, the statues of the Third Crown Prince in temples have been given makeovers to achieve more modern looks (Figure 14). For instance, in the Ciling Temple in Chiayi (嘉义慈灵宫), the statue not only wears a helmet and sunglasses but also combat boots, with assault rifles and rocket launchers. Modern elements such as a GPS and computers were added to the statue's base. Many temples saw an increase in the number of pilgrims after the modernization of the Third Crown Prince statues (Yi 2011, pp. 64–66).



The early form of the Pagoda Bone of the Third Crown Prince (Fujian, 1900s)



The modern image of the Pagoda Bone of the Third Crown Prince (Taiwan, 2020s)

Figure 14. The evolution from traditional Pagoda Bone to modern Electric-Techno Neon Gods.

In contrast to the trend in Taiwan, some Pagoda Bone artisans in Fujian who adhere to traditional concepts believe that Pagoda Bones should adhere to traditional imagery and strictly follow the rituals of folk beliefs (G. Qian 2016). It can be seen from old photographs that Pagoda Bone decorations used to be very simple. With economic development, people in Fujian have significantly increased their spending on Pagoda Bone decorations. However, in terms of belief, it is far less rigorous than before. Additionally, influenced by the trend of cartoonish Pagoda Bones in Taiwan, many young people in Fujian prefer their style and view the Pageant of Immortals as purely entertainment. They believe that they can innovate the image of Pagoda Bones freely without being constrained by traditional folk beliefs. However, many traditional-minded Fujianese argue that some Pagoda Bones in Taiwan have deviated from traditional roots and have simply become large cartoon dolls (G. Qian 2016). They insist that Fujian's Pagoda Bones should not prioritize entertaining the audience but focus on the deities; therefore, the inheritance or any creative changes of rituals must be centered on divine figures (B. Yang 2024). Consequently, the modernization of Pagoda Bones in Fujian, unlike those in Taiwan, opts for the idolization of divine figures.

(2) Idolization of Images of Gods

Inspired by the Electric-Techno Neon Gods phenomenon in Taiwan, Pagoda Bone performances in Fujian have also begun to modernize.

In 2022, a new divine image emerged in Fujian, known as the “Prince of Deity” (世子) (S. Zhou 2024). Its Pagoda Bone head has been modified, with facial makeup different from the traditional serious or fierce appearances. Instead, it adopts a handsome and idolized look modeled after Taiwan's two-dimensional characters (PILI puppetry (霹雳布袋戏)). Traditional Pagoda Bone performers have also adorned their headgear with LED light strips, emitting colorful lights during nocturnal processions (Figure 15). These new Pagoda Bone images have gained popularity among a large number of young people in China. Many of them have even traveled to Fujian simply to catch a glimpse of the “Prince of Deity”. In the eyes of young people from China's mainland, the “Prince of Deity” is no less appealing than Taiwan's Electric-Techno Neon Gods.



LED strip decorates the crown of Pagoda Bone



The Prince Pagoda Bone

Figure 15. Fujian's modernization of Pagoda Bone image.

Compared to the solemn and sometimes even frightening traditional Pagoda Bones of the past, contemporary Chinese people are more likely to embrace cartoonish and idolized Pagoda Bone representations. The cartoonish and idolized images have contributed to the popularity of Pagoda Bone culture, as many netizens have begun to follow the Pageant on Immortals. In the era of We-Media, folk beliefs in Fujian and Taiwan have thus found new channels for their promotion and inheritance.

3.3. Adoption of Popular Music in the Pageant on Immortals

In the traditional ritual of the Pageant on Immortals, percussion music played on gongs and drums was mainly used. The Bearers of the Pagoda Bones moved and positioned themselves according to the beat of the drums, which was specific to each village participating in the Pageant on Immortals. Different drum sheet music conveys different wishes, either for good fortune in life and good harvest in the coming year or harmony in family, happiness, and prosperity. All types embody villagers' sincere hope for better outcomes in the coming year, often presenting in a solemn and dignified way (Y. Wang 1999) (Figure 16).



Traditional Drum Music of God Pageant Ceremony (Fujian)



Electric-Techno Neon Gods with Avant-garde Music (Taiwan)

Figure 16. Popularization of Pageant on Immortals music.

In contrast, Electric-Techno Neon Gods often incorporate trendy electronic music instead of traditional percussion music. In this context, the movements are no longer constrained by drum beats or established rhythms but become highly free and even improvisational. When Electric-Techno Neon Gods performances first emerged in Taiwan, they typically featured a single dance set to a Korean electronic dance track called “bobby,” which became popular in Taiwan due to its pronunciation, which sounds similar to “保庇” (bǎo bì), meaning “protection” in Mandarin. Subsequently, Electric-Techno Neon Gods performance teams across Taiwan created numerous new tracks and dance routines. These ranged from popular pop songs by renowned artists such as Wu Bai, including “Miss Su-Lan wants to Get Married 《素兰小姐要出嫁》” and “You Are My Flower 《你是我的花朵》”, to globally trending Korean pop music such as “Gangnam Style 《江南 style》”. Additionally, many teams created their own DJ tracks, diversifying and enriching the performances of Electric-Techno Neon Gods. This culminated in the release of the album “Electric Sometimes 《电音三太子Electric Sometimes》”, which became one of the most popular electronic dance music albums in Taiwan, particularly among the younger generation (Figure 16).

3.4. The Modernization of Communication Methods of Pageant on Immortals

Before the advent of We-Media, people could only learn about the Pageant on Immortals in the Fujian and Taiwan regions from textual and audio materials. At that time, the Pageant on Immortals was only known to the surrounding areas, and other regions in China had little understanding of the folk beliefs in these areas. However, Electric-Techno Neon Gods’ interaction with the participants of the Pageant on Immortals turned the traditional performance into a carnival-like spectacle, gaining the interest of the audience and a sweeping wave of enthusiasm. In 2006, the Electric-Techno Neon Gods were officially invited to larger stages, such as the Taiwan Temple Carnival. From then on, they gained unstoppable popularity, even meeting with the then-President of China (Figure 17) and participating in the opening ceremony of the World Games hosted in Taiwan. The Electric-Techno Neon Gods gradually became a representative of folk belief culture in Taiwan and began to reach out to the world, performing overseas in India, Egypt, the United States, and Africa. In 2009, the Electric-Techno Neon Gods performed the ceremonial first pitch at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, and in 2010, they were spotted performing energetically at the Shanghai World Expo, in Melbourne in Australia, and at the Lincoln Center in New York (Figure 18).



Figure 17. The Electric-Techno Neon Gods received with the former President of China.



Electric-Techno Neon Gods has been invited to participate in events around the world.

Figure 18. The global outreach of Electric-Techno Neon Gods.

As the Electric-Techno Neon Gods have drawn widespread attention, the traditional folk beliefs behind them have also gradually become better known. People have begun to shift their focus towards the traditional Pageant on Immortals. With the development of contemporary media technology, individuals can now watch the entire process of the Pageant on Immortals through online live streaming, with multiple camera angles available (Figure 19). This is particularly beneficial for overseas Chinese nationals and students who are unable to return to their homeland, as it alleviates their homesickness and the regret of not being part of these events (Lin and Li 2023, pp. 93–95).



Figure 19. Pageant on Immortals' multi-camera drones used for live broadcast (Fujian, 2024).

The advent of We-Media and emergence of short video platforms such as Chinese TikTok have given more exposure to folk beliefs in Fujian and Taiwan through new communication methods. In the past five years, there has been an explosive growth in online searches about the Pageant on Immortals in the Fujian and Taiwan regions on social media. This indicates that an increasing number of people are becoming aware of the folk beliefs in Fujian and Taiwan and are showing interest in this unique culture (Figure 20). As a result, more and more enthusiasts of folk culture have joined the ranks of those working

to protect folk beliefs. Consequently, folk beliefs in Fujian and Taiwan have experienced better inheritance and development.

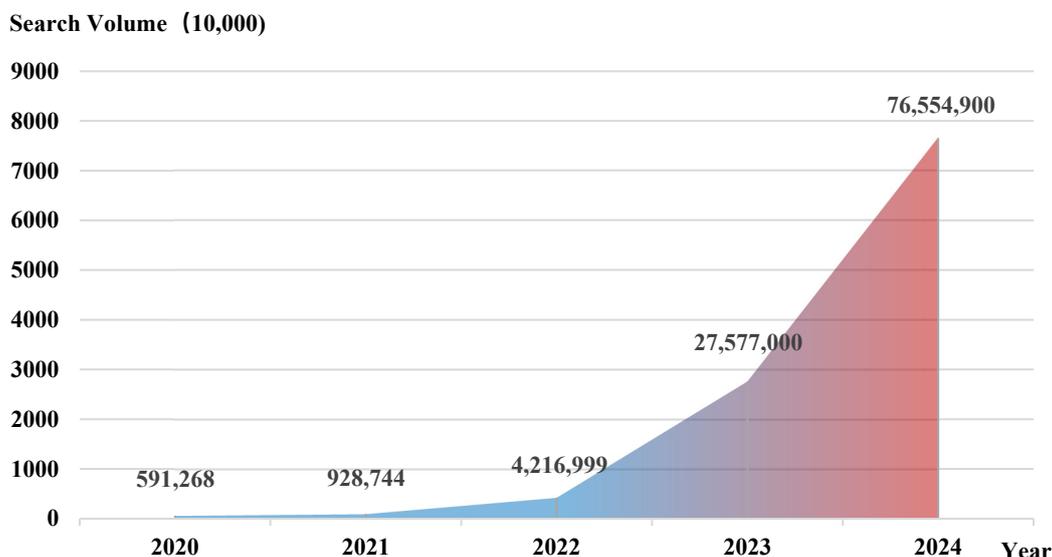


Figure 20. Viewing of Pageant on Immortals on Chinese TikTok in the past five years. Data from Beijing Giant Engine Network Technology Co. Ltd.

4. The Modernization Trends of Chinese Folk Beliefs in the Future

The previous discussion addressed the modernization of folk beliefs in the Fujian and Taiwan regions. The gradual innovation in the deities' imagery and music and the methods of communication of these folk beliefs has garnered widespread attention from society. As China steps into an aging society, folk beliefs are likely to decline or vanish if they solely rely on elders to preserve it and fail to attract the younger generation (J. Yang 2023, pp. 14–26). At the same time, China is undergoing profound economic and social transformation. Young people, as the primary participants in social activities, are facing immense pressures and confusion. Struggling with high housing prices, employment competition, and an accelerated pace of life, many young people experience unprecedented anxiety and stress, leaving them with little attention and energy for the preservation of folk beliefs (Mei Lin 2019, pp. 78–80). Against this backdrop, if folk beliefs can serve as spiritual solace and emotional sustenance that stimulate the interest of young people and encourage their participation in preservation efforts, it would inject new vitality into the inheritance of folk beliefs against the challenges they are facing now.

Folk beliefs need to adapt to these social transformations and respond to the younger generation's need for mental comfort to attract them and thus attain lasting vitality. Therefore, the modernization of Chinese folk beliefs will not cease. Based on the successful cases of modernization of folk beliefs in the southeastern coastal regions of China, and considering the current state of development and technological advancement of contemporary Chinese society, this study can form some preliminary judgments to provide references for the preservation of folk beliefs in other regions of China.

4.1. Cultural Heritage and Digital Technology

In China, the rapid development of the Internet and digital technologies has profoundly changed many aspects of society. This is particularly true for the younger generation, whose lifestyles, values, and social interactions are deeply influenced by the Internet. This deeply integrated way of life necessitates the use of digital technologies to assist cultural preservation efforts in adapting to the changes of the times for effective results.

Urbanization in China has led to large-scale population migration, which has had significant impacts on local belief structures. The opportunities brought by urban moderniza-

tion have attracted more people to work or study in cities. Such geographical barriers have made it difficult for most migrant workers to return home for their local major festivals (Li and Yang 2019, pp. 200–7). As the development of folk beliefs relies on spontaneity to some degree (Chen and Yi 2009, pp. 115–16), sacrificial activities are more difficult to organize due to population migration. With a lack of manpower, large sacrificial activities have to reduce their scale or even stop altogether. In addition, the unfamiliarity and lack of participation of newcomers render the maintenance of traditional beliefs challenging within a social context marked by large-scale population migration.

The Internet has provided new ways for young people far from home to stay connected. Through online communities, social media, and video platforms, young people can observe activities related to their hometown's folk beliefs anytime anywhere. However, most current technological means only allow people to watch as spectators, without direct participation. Since the inheritance of folk beliefs requires extensive practice, it is difficult to achieve this goal solely through observation. Therefore, new digital technologies are needed to address this shortcoming.

China's digital economy is developing rapidly, leading the world in areas such as e-commerce, mobile payments, and digital entertainment. These technologies also provide an important platform for the modernization of folk beliefs (Zhang and Shi 2019, pp. 10–22). Given the aforementioned characteristics and the current situation of Chinese society, the inheritance of folk beliefs must fully utilize the Internet and digital technologies. This is not only an inevitable trend echoing the changes of the times but also an effective way to satisfy the spiritual needs of young people. Inspired by the successful cases of modernization of folk beliefs in Fujian and Taiwan, folk beliefs in other regions of China can seek integration with digital technologies for modernization and sustainable development of their cultural heritage.

4.2. Reconstruction of Sacrificial Spaces in the Virtual World

When discussing the ritual spaces of Chinese folk beliefs, we should not only focus on religious buildings such as temples and ancestral halls but also consider the related street spaces. These traditional street spaces, in addition to their function for daily traffic, also have social and cultural functions as they often serve as important venues for religious activities during significant festivals and celebrations.

Traditional street spaces, designed for the passage of humans, are often characterized by vibrant activity. These streets are usually narrow and winding, with small shops, vendors, and houses on both sides, where residents can communicate freely, run daily errands, and carry out religious activities (Zhang et al. 2017). However, with the advancement of urbanization, these human-scaled streets have been replaced by wide motorways, and high-rise buildings have sprung up on both sides, irreversibly damaging the original street spaces. The noise and pollution from motorways, along with the reduction in pedestrian spaces, make it difficult to continue traditional ritual activities in such environments. Additionally, in the process of urbanization, the government has often focused only on the protection of significant religious buildings such as temples and ancestral halls while neglecting the surrounding street spaces (Yuan 2024, p. 185). This one-sided protection method has destroyed the integrity of sacrificial spaces. Although some temples and ancestral halls have been preserved, the lack of support for traditional streets has caused these religious buildings to lose their original cultural atmosphere and functions. Surrounded by modern high-rise buildings and motorway lanes, their cultural and religious atmosphere is greatly reduced, making it difficult for believers to carry out traditional sacrificial activities and social interactions around the temples (Figure 21).



Temples and ancestral halls surrounded by modern high-rise buildings and motorways

Figure 21. Urban construction occupies more space than traditional street space.

The issues with these physical spaces have become an irreversible reality. The spatial changes brought about by rapid urbanization are irreversible, and traditional street spaces have been permanently changed, unlikely to be reconstructed in the real world. However, the development of digital technologies, especially digital twin technology, offers us the possibility of recreating these traditional human-scaled street spaces in the virtual world (Wang et al. 2024).

Digital twin technology involves constructing an identical model of a physical object in the digital world, enabling dynamic simulation, monitoring, analysis, and control of the object through digital means. Using this technology, along with historical data, it is possible to reconstruct those vanished traditional streets in the virtual world, allowing believers to experience ritual activities in a virtual environment (Tao et al. 2018). For instance, through virtual reality devices, people can immerse themselves in “walking” through traditional streets, participating in temple fairs and rituals, and experiencing the ambiance of traditional culture. In 2023, China began experimenting with hosting virtual temple fairs on online platforms, allowing global users to participate through live streaming and interaction (Figure 22). The new digital spaces created by digital twin technology provide a new medium for the communication of folk beliefs despite physical limitations and attract many young people.



Street space of the Chinese metaverse temple fair

Experience the intangible cultural heritage activities of China's metaverse temple fair

Figure 22. Metaverse online temple fair held in China.

4.3. Contemporary Young People's Desire for Anti-Authoritarianism and Equality

In contemporary Chinese society, young people's attitudes toward authority are undergoing significant changes. This change shows not only their aversion to the strict hi-

erarchy in East Asian Confucian culture (R. Li 2015, pp. 50–56) but also their stronger advocacy for individuality and equal rights (Cai et al. 2020, p. 1599). Against the backdrop of increasing social pressure, young people are increasingly eager for a space of equality without a strict hierarchy where they can freely express their true feelings. This desire for anti-authoritarianism and equal power has also profoundly influenced the inheritance and development of folk beliefs.

Contemporary young people have begun to generally reflect on the hierarchy in East Asian Confucian culture, and this change is particularly significant in the field of folk beliefs. Officially recognized clergy in religions often have a high social status, and believers need to follow certain rules and etiquette. However, young people nowadays want to have more autonomy and a sense of participation in religious activities, which is why folk beliefs are more popular among young people. As mentioned above, young people are no longer just passive participants in traditional rituals, but become active organizers and creative planners and even introduce modern pop culture elements to make activities more diverse and closer to their lives.

Compared with the previous generation, contemporary young people attach more importance to individuality and equal rights, which is also reflected in their attitude towards folk beliefs. Many young people hope to express their own personality in religious activities instead of being bound by traditional norms. This pursuit of personalized expression has made folk beliefs richer and more diverse in form and has also attracted more young people to participate.

In addition, the increase in social pressure has made young people more eager for a decentralized and equal space for their faith. The highly competitive modern society has made many young people anxious and helpless, and many activities and rituals in traditional folk beliefs can provide a channel for emotional comfort. Since 2023, the number of ticket orders for temple-related scenic spots has increased by 310% annually, and nearly 50% of those orders were accounted for by those born in the 1990s and 2000s (F. Li 2023). This shows that young people need channels for mental comfort, and folk beliefs play an important role in this process (Wei and Jin 2023, p. 4634).

However, facing some formalistic and authoritative elements in traditional folk beliefs, young people may feel alienated. The development of digital technology has made it possible to create a folk belief space with equal rights. Through the Internet and digital platforms, we can explore decentralized belief spaces and create a freer and more open community for believers. This new form not only breaks the limitations of region and time but also eliminates the constraints of the hierarchy in traditional beliefs, allowing everyone to participate and express themselves equally.

4.4. Metaverse: A Possible Way to Protect Folk Beliefs

In this section's discussion, we can see that the rapid transformation of contemporary Chinese society; young people's reflection on authority, pursuit of individuality, and equal rights; and the need for stress relief and spiritual solace all point to a technology that can address these challenges—the metaverse. The metaverse, as a digital space that merges virtual and real worlds, can effectively address the issues discussed in this section, providing new possibilities for the protection and inheritance of folk beliefs.

In the metaverse, we can utilize digital twin technology to reconstruct ritual spaces. Its interactivity allows people to overcome the geographical limitations of the real world and to immerse themselves in ritual ceremonies within the virtual world. It also breaks the constraints of time by synchronizing with real-world rituals, enabling necessary practice in folk beliefs. Additionally, the metaverse possesses the attribute of decentralization, meaning it is not owned or operated by a single entity, nor is it governed by intermediary institutions. This reduces centralized power, making authority more evenly distributed and giving people more of a voice and decision-making power (Lu 2022, pp. 65–79). In this decentralized virtual space, young people can freely express and innovate, finding their own beliefs and cultural identities. Through the metaverse, folk beliefs can be effec-

tively protected in modern society with fewer hierarchical constraints of traditional folk beliefs; in this sense, the metaverse provides young people with a new platform for free expression and equal participation. The combination of folk beliefs and the metaverse is not only a means of preserving traditional culture but also an active step in exploring the application of modern technology.

However, there are still some potential problems and challenges in the practical application of metaverse technology, which need to be examined from a critical perspective.

(1) Virtualization and Alienation

Although virtual sacrificial activities in the metaverse can reproduce some external forms of traditional culture, they may lead to cultural alienation. After all, the experience in the virtual world is different from personal participation in reality. The atmosphere and emotional connection created by digital technology may not completely replace the real cultural scene, which may weaken people's true feelings and deep understanding of traditional culture, making the culture superficial and entertainment-oriented.

(2) Technology Barrier and Digital Gap

The application of the metaverse relies on advanced digital technologies and devices, which places high demands on the popularization of technology and users' digital literacy. In China, despite the popularity of the Internet, a digital gap still exists, particularly in rural and underdeveloped areas (Cheng and Zhang 2019, pp. 19–41). Groups that cannot access or proficiently use these technologies may be excluded from this new model of cultural protection, leading to gaps and imbalances in cultural heritage.

(3) Commercialized Cultural Protection Efforts

Virtual spaces in the metaverse are often closely linked with commercial models so as to generate profit through virtual ritual activities and religious, cultural, and creative products (Shi et al. 2022, pp. 98–116). This commercialization tendency may distort the original intent of cultural preservation, with more emphasis on commercial interests rather than genuine cultural protection. Excessive commercialization may also lead to the entertainment-oriented consumption of traditional culture, undermining its sanctity and solemnity.

(4) Deconstruction of Authority and Belief

While the attribute of decentralization of the metaverse aligns with young people's pursuit of equal rights and individuality, it may also lead to the excessive deconstruction of folk belief systems. In traditional folk beliefs, authoritative structures and ritual norms serve important cultural and social functions. A completely decentralized belief space could result in the loss of formality and order, leading to the fragmentation and erosion of beliefs. Moreover, decentralization in virtual spaces may lack effective management and guidance, which may lead to chaos and the emergence of harmful content.

In summary, although metaverse technology provides new opportunities for the protection and inheritance of folk beliefs, there are still many potential issues and challenges in its application. We need to remain clear-headed and vigilant in the development and application of this technology to ensure that the original intent of cultural protection is not distorted, and that the true value of traditional culture is preserved and promoted. By doing so, we can explore an effective path that balances technological application with cultural preservation.

5. Conclusions

Many folk beliefs in China have a time-honored history and profound social foundation. Past research on the Pageant on Immortals has been scattered and unsystematic. Most research has focused on its history, often neglecting its contemporary modernization trend. This study analyzed the modernization of traditional folk beliefs in the southeastern coastal areas of China and explained the reasons behind its development and inheritance.

In addition, this study pointed out that in the practice of Chinese folk beliefs, there is a close connection between tangible and intangible cultural heritages. Temples and ancestral halls represent architectural heritages. Without them, sacrificial rituals will be impossible to perform. Equally, without sacrificial activities, these buildings will become meaningless shells. Therefore, architectural heritage and intangible cultural heritage are interdependent. This study revealed the adaptation and development of folk beliefs in modern society. Based on the reality of contemporary Chinese society, this study explored the future modernization trend of folk beliefs and discussed the possibilities and potential risks of the application of digital technology in folk belief inheritance.

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