

# An Investigation and Research on the Festival of Beggars in Dali

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**Abstract:** The Huazi Fair, namely the Festival of Beggars in Dali is a unique folk festival in the Dali area. It is held next to Dongyue Temple, Beimen Street, Dali County on March 28 of the lunar calendar every year. Its emergence is closely related to the Birthday Fair of the Dongyue Emperor. On the festival, different beggars meet their different needs by begging, and alms also reach their own goals by giving money and food. The folk culture of the Festival of Beggars includes the local people's simple understanding of the life and death of people, which is a form of expression of the human caring spirit and still has a wide influence today.

**Keywords:** The Birthday Fair of Dongyue Emperor; Huazi Fair; The Festival of Beggars; Investigation

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## 1. Introduction

The Festival of Beggars in Dali is also called the "Charity Fair" locally, and in the Bai language, it is called *Dezehui*, which means Fasting Fair<sup>[1]</sup>. It is held next to Dongyue Temple on Beimen Street, Dali Town, Dali City every year on the 28th day of the third month of the lunar calendar. Due to its unique name, the festival has attracted more and more people's attention. Every year, there are many self-media reports, but most of the reports are biased. Through on-site observation and recording of the Festival of Beggars, the author went deep into Beimen Street and surrounding villages to conduct visits and surveys and consulted relevant documents to analyze the intrinsic connection between Huazi Fair, and the Birthday Fair of Dongyue Emperor, trace the reasons for its occurrence, and sort out its development and changes, and conduct basic investigation and research for the unique the Festival of Beggars in Dali area.

## **2. Overview of field sites**

### **2.1. Dali Town Ximen Village Committee**

The Dali Huazi Fair is held in the Ximen Village Committee of Dali Town, Dali City, Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture. The Ximen Villagers Committee has jurisdiction over 10 natural villages including Ganjia Village, Hongjia Village, Beimen Street, Fengxiang Village, Shuidui Village, Congyuan Village, Zhonghe Village, Shimen Village, Dashuigou Village and Dazhifang Village, with a total of 12 villager group <sup>[12]</sup>. Among the 10 natural villages, Ganjia Village has the Bai ethnic group as the main inhabited ethnic group, while other villages are inhabited by Bai, Han, and other ethnic groups. On the first day of the sixth month of the lunar calendar every year, villagers in the jurisdiction go to the Cangshan Shrine to congratulate their owner, who is Du Guangting; on the third day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar, they attend the God of Wealth Festival, and on the ninth day of the first month of the lunar calendar, they attend the Songhua Festival. The four villages of Beimen Street, Ganjia Village, Hongjia Village, and Fengxiang Village worship the same master. The master temple is the Baijie Temple located in Beimen Village. The master is the holy consort, Bai Jie. The master's festival is the 24th month of the sixth month of the lunar calendar every year.

### **2.2. History of Dongyue Temple**

The history of Dongyue Temple on Beimen Street can be traced back to the early Ming Dynasty. After the establishment of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, the first founder of the Ming Dynasty, announced the abolition of the title of the Taishan God to enhance the sanctity of the Emperor. The court would organize official sacrificial rituals. At the same time, out of the need to educate the people, local society was allowed to build Dongyue Temple, and the worshipping activities carried out by the people were standardized and managed. The court regarded the Dongyue Emperor as a "sacrificial god", and local governments, prefectures, and counties began to build many Dongyue temples as a place for official sacrifices by local governments and for educating the people. Kangxi's "Dali Prefecture Annals Temple Sacrifice" records: "Dongyue Temple was originally in the city. During the Jiajing period, a disaster occurred at the temple. Li Yuanyang relocated it to a mile northwest of the city. Therefore, it was originally called the old site of Dai Temple. Now it is moved again, and the spirit of the gods is in danger" <sup>[3]</sup>. In the second month of the fifteenth year of Hongwu of the Ming Dynasty (1382), Lan Yu and Mu Ying led their troops to attack Dali. Duan Shi, the last general manager of Dali, was captured, and the Dali area was pacified. The Ming court immediately established Dali Prefecture and Dali Wei, as well as subordinate governments and guard offices at all levels. Dongyue Temple was also established at this time to allow sacrificial rituals at the Dali Prefecture and allow Han immigrants from the Central Plains who originally had the Dongyue belief to worship <sup>[4]</sup>.

By the 1960s, Dongyue Temple had become a state-owned marble factory. Statues have been removed, murals uprooted and covered. The Dongyue Temple, which had lasted for more than 500 years, disappeared from view. The current Dongyue Temple is more than 1 kilometer west of the original Dongyue Temple site. According to WWF, president of the Beimen Street Lianchi Fair (also known locally as Jingchi Mother, Jingchi Mother, and Son), in the 1990s, with the reform and implementation of the national religious policy, with the support of the Dali Town Government, the Beimen Street Lianchi Fair was initiated. The people of Beimen Street donated money and provided voluntary labor, and other surrounding villages donated money and materials to build it. The front hall, Dongyue Palace, was built in 1991, and the rear hall, Diztigardi Temple, was built in 1998.

### **2.3. The pattern of Dongyue Temple**

The current Dongyue Temple on Beimen Street is mainly composed of Dongyue Palace and Diztigardi Temple.

The entire building faces west and east, with both front and back entrances to the courtyard. On the left side of the door is the “Black Shifter” position. There is no statue. There is a mansion painted on the wall with the top of the door being “Black Shifter”; on the right side is the “White Shifter”, with a statue with the words “Once you see it, make money” written on the high hat on the top of the head, and the fan in his hand says “release.” The front yard is the Dongyue Palace, with the god Dongyue Emperor enshrined in the middle, the ten halls of Yama King on the left, and the Great Fengdu on the right. On the top of the statue, there are plaques inscribed with the words “Help others” in the middle, “Ten Halls and Nine Youths” on the left, and “The Book of Bounty” on the right. The plaque in the middle of the entrance of the main hall is “Dongyue Palace”, on the left is “The almighty power to Dongyue”, and on the right is “Be clear-sighted”. The couplet at the door of the hall reads.” Think carefully about words and deeds in the world, and distinguish between good and evil in the world”, and the couplet at the front column of the hall reads “The Duke of Justice is shaking the world, and he has an iron face and selfless compassion on the people.” The backyard is Ksitigarbha Temple, and the plaque in the middle of the entrance of the main hall reads “Ksitigarbha King” without couplets. The main god in the hall is Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, on the left is Taiyi Savior of Suffering, and on the right is the Dahetian God.

## **2.4. Main temple fairs in Dongyue Temple**

There are four main temple fairs held in Dongyue Temple during the year, namely: the Birthday Fair of the Emperor of Dongyue, the ancestral worship of the Middle Yuan Festival, the birth of King Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva, and the birth of the black and white god. These four temple fairs are all organized and organized by the Lianchi Fair on Beimen Street. On the day of the temple fair, the Lianchi fairs in neighboring villages will come to worship and recite scriptures to pray, and most of the neighboring villagers will also come to offer sacrifices and pray. Among the four temple fairs, the one with the largest scale, the largest number of people participating in the ceremony, and the widest influence was the Birthday Fair of the Great Emperor Dongyue. On the day before and the day of the ceremony, the temple was filled with fireworks, and the sound of chanting continued. Praying villagers crowded the front and rear courtyards and blocked road traffic outside the wall.

## **3. The emergence and evolution of the Huazi Fair**

### **3.1. Dongyue Emperor Birthday Fair**

There is a relatively fixed set of sacrificial rituals on the day of the Dongyue Emperor Birthday Fair at Dongyue Temple on Beimen Street. Through the narration of WWF, the president of the Lianchi Fair on Beimen Street, and the author’s on-site observation, the sacrifices made by people in Dali at the Birthday Fair of Emperor Dongyue on Beimen Street were mainly divided into two parts: offering sacrifices to the gods and offering sacrifices to the dead. Sacrifice to the gods is held in Dongyue Temple. Dongyue Palace in the front hall worships with offerings of meat cuisine, mainly consisting of rice, fish, bacon, live chickens, and so on. Dzizang Temple in the back hall worships with offerings of vegetarian cuisine, mainly consisting of rice, vegetarian shrimp slices made of rice flour, peanuts, and so on. After the fasting ceremony, incense, paper watches, and yellow paper coins are burned in the incense burners in front of the two halls. Generally, each family member who comes to pray to the gods will be an elderly woman who is familiar with the sacrificial process and will preside over the ceremony, and other family members will follow and help. There is no fixed place to pray to the dead outside Dongyue Temple. After worshipping the gods, the people who come to pray will go to the kitchen or build a temporary stove on the roadside to process the worshiped raw cuisine into ripe cuisine to worship the dead. At the same time, they will burn white

paper money and paper clothes, shoes, hats, and so on for the dead. They will use “lotus lanterns” and “ladders” to overcome the disaster for the dead at the edge of the “Naihe Bridge” (made of bricks and stones) in front of Dongyue Temple, and throw food on the bridge. The worshippers pray that their ancestors will “have enough food and clothing” in the ghost underworld and “be reincarnated” as soon as possible. At the same time, some extra white paper money will be burned and a bowl of “pulp rice” (rice and cold water) will be sprinkled to the “lonely ghosts” who have no one sacrificed.

### **3.2. The relationship between the Dongyue Emperor’s Birthday Fair and the Huazi Fair**

The emergence of the Dali Huazi Fair is closely related to the Birthday Fair of Emperor Dongyue at Dongyue Temple on Beimen Street. Dongyue Temple is dedicated to Huang Feihu, the Emperor of Rensheng in Tianqi. He governs yin and yang, governs the fortunes and blessings of both worlds and governs the ghosts of the underworld. There are the Ten Guardian Guards of Yue Mansion, who assist him in taking charge of the underworld <sup>[5]</sup>. On the birthday of Emperor Dongyue (the 28th day of the third lunar month), he would release all ghosts in the underworld and accept the worship of their relatives in the world. At the same time, he would also allow the “beggars” who suffered in the world to receive alms from good people.

Through investigation and analysis, the Dali Huazi Festival is a regional folk activity derived from the Birthday Fair of Dongyue Temple Dongyue Conference on North Gate Street, Dali. The development of the Emperor’s Birthday Fair in Dali not only promoted the combination of sacrifices to gods and local folk temple fairs but also absorbed the culture of the local Bai people and continuously enriched the connotation of the spirit of human care in Dongyue culture. Under such circumstances, the Huazi Festival became a folk festival accompanying the Birthday Fair of the Emperor of Dongyue and was a form of secular expression in the Dongyue belief of the local people.

### **3.3. Traditional Huazi Club**

It is impossible to determine in detail when the Hanzi Festival began. It can be determined that it emerged during the development of the Birthday Conference at Dongyue Temple, North Gate Street, Dali, and its spiritual connotation and expression forms have also been continuously enriched during the development process.

“Wuhualou: A Study on the People’s Families in Dali, Yunnan” records that “Another interesting traditional festival related to the King of Hell’s Gathering (the Birthday Fair of the Emperor of Dongyue) is the ‘Beggars Gathering’ (the Huazi Gathering). At that time, there were not only real beggars from all over the country, but also hundreds of childless poor people who gathered on both sides of the road in front of Yama Temple to beg for alms. It is said that if a childless couple worships with alms obtained from begging, such prayers will be fulfilled and the woman will become pregnant. The one-and-a-half-kilometer-long road from the north gate to the temple gate was filled with beggars on both sides. Passers-by gave each person at least 1 copper plate. 100 worthless copper plates were equal to 1 nickel, so the cost was not too much...” <sup>[6]</sup>. From Fei Zizhi’s records, the situation of the Dali Huazi Fair in the late 1930s can be seen. He classified the “Dongyue Emperor Birthday Fair” as a religious festival, and the “Huazi Festival” as a folk festival, and recorded two groups who participated in the Huazi Festival. Fei Zizhi’s investigation records show that the “Huazi Gathering” and the “Dongyue Emperor Birthday Gathering” have both close relationships and clear differences.

In “Watching the Spiritual Home: Festival Culture of the Bai Nationality in China”, Zhao Yinsong recorded the situation of Dongyue Temple on Beimen Street in the early 21st century (field survey photos) and Huazi Hui <sup>[1]</sup>. In the article, Zhao Yinsong classified the “Hanzi Festival” as “the main traditional festival of the Bai nationality”

and made a brief investigation and analysis of the origin of the “Hanzi Festival”, the time and place of its holding, the three groups of people participating in the event, and the reasons why the participants gave “Hanzi” alms.

### **3.4. The current Huazi Fair**

The current Huazi Fair has not changed much in form from what Fei Zizhi and Zhao Yinsong recorded, but the number of beggars has changed. Nowadays, the beggars on the day of the Huazi Fair are mainly groups with imperfect limbs who lost the ability to labor. Their main purpose is to obtain money and other materials that people give out. According to President Wang (WWF) and Master Zhang (ZDC), the number of women begging along the road under the traditional “praying for childbirth” and “praying for the safety of babies” has decreased year by year. Now, “women praying for childbirth” are mainly used for preparing fasting, memorials, and so on, directly going to the temple to pray. “Women who pray for the safety of children” use a flexible way to beg for money. They perform exchanges to give money to each beggar on the roadside and take some items from the beggar’s bowl. Some item exchanges include rice, beans, “long-life locks” for their children, and “hundreds of rice” for cooking.

## **4. The begging crowd at the Huazi Fair**

### **4.1. Beggars**

Beggars, people who lose their ability to labor due to physical defects or old age and make a living by begging, are also called “almsmen” locally. A few days before the Huazi Fair, they would gather on both sides of the road outside Dongyue Temple, find a suitable place, and start begging. There were usually two or three pots, bowls, or bags placed in front of them to receive money and food from the crowd who rushed to the Fair. Everyone who came to the Birthday Fair of Emperor Dongyue would give rice, broad beans, money, and even candy to the beggars on both sides of the road; merchants who set up stalls to do business at the temple fair would also give them money or food, to seek prosperity in business and the safety of people and wealth. Beggars are now the main group begging at the fairs.

### **4.2. Women praying for childbearing**

President Wang (WWF) and other members of the Lianchi Fair told that the Dongyue Emperor was in charge of the life and death of people in the world and the reincarnation of ghosts in the underworld. If a woman has been married for many years and has not yet become pregnant and has not given birth to a child, it means that the Dongyue Emperor has not blessed (given a child). Then on the day of the “Huazi Gathering”, this woman would sit on the roadside with the beggar and accept alms from the people who rushed to the gathering. Then, she would use the money and food from begging to make a table to offer fasting and sacrifice to Emperor Dongyue. When Emperor Dongyue felt the sincerity of a woman, he would grant blessings and choose one of his reincarnated children to give to her <sup>[7]</sup>. In the past, when medical science was underdeveloped, people’s understanding was limited. Every year, many such women begged. Now that medical science is developed, there are almost no such beggars.

### **4.3. Women praying for the safety of their children**

Through interviews with President Wang (WWF) and the woman who came to pray for the safety of her grandson (ZCQ), it was learned that local people believe that the children at home are frail and sick. They use the “hundreds of grains” solicited at the flower gathering to cook them into “hundreds of rice” to feed the children and use the money solicited at the flower gathering to buy new clothes, new shoes, new hats, and so on for the children. In this

way, the children will receive the blessing of the gods and the blessings of everyone, and the children will become healthy and strong. Therefore, on the day of the Huazi Fair, if there are families with frail children in the family, the elders will join the ranks of “Huazi” and accept alms from the people who rush to the Fair. After the meeting, they will use the “hundreds of grains” they have been asked to cook “hundreds of rice” for the children; Use the “hundreds of money” from begging to buy a long-life lock or a long-life collar in a silverware store and wear it around the child’s neck until the child reaches adulthood<sup>[8]</sup>. Such beggars still exist in today’s Huazi Fair.

## **5. Analysis of the Huazi Fair**

### **5.1. Reflecting the integration of multiple beliefs**

After the Ming army pacified Dali, Dongyue Temple began to be used as an official place of worship throughout Dali prefectures, prefectures, and counties. The Dongyue belief gradually entered the lives of the local Bai people. In the process of popularizing the Dongyue belief, it absorbed the original local culture and completed “localization” to adapt to the belief needs of the people in the region<sup>[9]</sup>. Bai culture also absorbs its own needs from the Dongyue belief to increase the spiritual connotation of its original culture. This two-way interaction has contributed to the diversification of religious beliefs and national cultures in Dali. The Dali “Hanzi Hui” is a typical example. It is closely related to the Dongyue Emperor Birthday Fair, but it is obviously different from the traditional Dongyue Emperor Birthday Fair in the Central Plains. It is a folk festival created by the people of Dali based on the needs of “spiritual beliefs”. It reflects the fusion of diverse beliefs of the Bai people in Dali.

### **5.2. Reflecting the traditional culture of valuing life and valuing death**

The Dongyue Emperor’s Birthday Fair and the Huazi Festival are inseparable from the themes of “life” and “death”, and life and death is the issues of greatest concern to people. Therefore, the Dongyue Emperor’s Birthday Fair and the Huazi Festival have become the liveliest temple fairs and folk activities in Dali. Women without children begged “Emperor Dongyue to grant them children” by begging; when the child was born, the whole family would go to the temple to thank “Emperor Dongyue” at the Birthday Fair of Emperor Dongyue, and at the same time give alms to the beggars begging at the scene to express joy and gratitude. When a relative passed away, the family had to pray to Emperor Dongyue to let the dead soul live in peace and reincarnate as soon as possible, and by giving alms to beggars, they would accumulate blessings for the dead soul and accumulate virtue for themselves. Through different forms of “begging” and “charity”, local people have a simple understanding of “life” and “death”, and are also a reflection of the local people’s traditional culture of “valuing life and valuing death.”

### **5.3. Meet the spiritual needs of different believers**

There are profound historical and social reasons why the Dongyue Emperor’s Birthday Fair and Huazi Fair have been so prosperous. From a historical perspective, since the Ming Dynasty, many Han immigrants from the Central Plains lived together with the local Bai people, forming many regional traditional customs, which have been passed down from generation to generation, are deeply rooted, and their legacy still exists. From the perspective of social reasons, it has a close relationship with the Lianchi Fair, a local folk spontaneous belief organization of Bai women in Dali. Local people understand religion, largely through the explanations or persuasion of members of the Lianchi Society in the village<sup>[10]</sup>. They use simple and kind ideas in life to understand “life” and “death”, and practice their beliefs through “begging” and “charity.” The Dongyue Emperor was in charge of the Yin and Yang realms and controlled the life and death of people, which could meet the basic psychological needs of local people. As a result, he became one



of the gods with the largest number of believers and the most popular incense in Dali. Therefore, the Huazi Society also followed the Dongyue Emperor's Birthday Fair in Dongyue Temple on Beimen Street.

## 6. Conclusion

Dali Hanzi Fair is a folk festival derived from the fusion of the Birthday Fair of the Dongyue Emperor in Dongyue Temple on Beimen Street in Dali and various local beliefs. Beggars and worshippers both get what they need at the Huazi Fair, either material gifts or spiritual sustenance. It is the traditional concept of life and death in Dali and a manifestation of pity for the weak. With the development of the times, the form of the Huazi Fair and the people participating in it are constantly changing. However, people can still use the Huazi Fair to explore the diverse and integrated Bai culture and explore the unique spiritual beliefs of the Bai people.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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