

# The Rural Order of the “Si She Wu Cun” in Shanxi during the Qing Dynasty

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## Abstract

As an area without the tradition of irrigation water conservancy, the “Si She Wu Cun” has extremely scarce water resources. In order to maximize the utilization of water resources, the local people have gradually formed a unique water use order in the long-term process of violent conflicts. In order to stabilize this water use order, the leaders of the “Si She Wu Cun” have given full play to the power of religious beliefs, gradually internalized the water use system into folk activities, and made full use of the inviolability of beliefs to strengthen the authority of the water use order, establish the absolute authority of the water use order, and obtain legitimacy in the later stage. By using the method of oral history, this paper deeply explores the unique rural order of the “Si She Wu Cun” in terms of water use order, social structure, and belief system, and reveals how this area has formed and maintained its unique social operation mode.

## Keywords

The Qing Dynasty, “Si She Wu Cun”, Rural Order, Water Use Order

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## 1. Introduction

The “Si She Wu Cun” is located at the junction of Hongtong and Huozhou in Shanxi Province. It is a rural community with a long history and rich culture. This community is also a typical arid area on the Loess Plateau, where the people mainly rely on the mountain spring water flowing from the Huoshan Mountain for survival, and the water volume is very limited. In response to the long-term water shortage in the area, the local residents have gradually formed a non-irrigation water conservancy tradition in their long-term production and life, and formed a folk water conservancy organization to maintain this water conservancy order. Previous scholars have conducted in-depth research on the “Si She Wu

Cun”, with numerous achievements. Dong Xiaoping and Christian Lamouroux first proposed the rural “bottom-up, rotational water use” water use order and the rural social autonomous mechanism centered on water resource use in the “Si She Wu Cun”. Dong Xiaoping believes that the operation mode of water-saving water conservancy in the “Si She Wu Cun” has strong scientific and sustainable characteristics, and even has a great impact on the lives of the local rural people at the end of the 20th century (Dong, 2003). Zhou Jia believes that the water conservancy system of the “Si She Wu Cun” contains profound local folk culture, and has gradually formed the reaction of water conservancy folklore on the water conservancy society, so that the water conservancy operation system is guaranteed and supported by the folk culture (Zhou, 2014). Dang Xiaohong proposes that the water use system of the “Si She Wu Cun” is based on factors such as the harsh natural environment, the closed social environment, and the prestige of the village regulations and folk agreements in the local area. Once the foundation of its existence changes, the water use system of the “Si She Wu Cun” will also gradually become invalid (Dang, 2010). Most of the academic research on the “Si She Wu Cun” focuses on the excavation and textual research of historical documents such as water conservancy books and water conservancy steles, while the research on the rural order of the “Si She Wu Cun” from the perspective of oral materials is relatively rare. This paper attempts to use the oral content of the local residents’ lifestyle, belief concepts, and environmental adaptation strategies in the rural society as the main materials to explore the rural order of the “Spring water irrigation society” of the “Si She Wu Cun”, and to understand the internal logic and historical evolution of the rural order in this area more deeply.

## **2. The Water Use Order of the “Si She Wu Cun”**

The water use order of the “Si She Wu Cun” is an important part of its rural order. The “Si She Wu Cun” refer to fifteen extremely water-scarce villages south of the Huo Mountain that mainly rely on the same mountain spring water for survival. In the long-term water use process of these villages, a water use system of “community self-governance” has been established to coordinate the limited water resources. This water use order is above the fifteen villages and has become the highest power organization for water use in the regional scope and the only power organization with legal water use rights in the countryside.

From an administrative perspective, the “Si She Wu Cun” do not belong to the same administrative scope, but is a cross-regional water use organization spanning the two administrative scopes of Huozhou and Hongtong. This water use organization includes the Chouchi Village and Xinggou Village in Hongtong County and the Nanlizhuang Village, Yiwang Village, and Kongjian in Huozhou City. For the convenience of daily management and to resolve conflicts as much as possible, the “Si She Wu Cun” adopts a family-style water conservancy management model, applying the family brother relationship to the villages, that is, what the local people call “the eldest, the second, the third, the fourth, and the

fifth". It should be noted that due to historical factors, the scope of the "Si She Wu Cun" today is different from that before. For example, during the era of agricultural collectivization, Chouchi Village was divided into Qiaodong Village and Qi-aoxi Village due to administrative division issues, and Kongjian Village joined the Yiwang Village later, forming the special situation of "Si She Wu Cun" today.

In daily water use, it is mainly managed and supervised by the "Si She Wu Cun", and the functions and powers of the "Si She Wu Cun" are different. Among them, the "Si She" take turns to hold the absolute ownership and management right of the water source in the order of the eldest, the second, the third, and the fourth for one year as a cycle, that is, "sitting in the society", while Kongjian Village, as one of the Wu Cun, only has the management right of the water source but no ownership right. The villages attached to the "Si She Wu Cun" only have the right to use the water source. The emergence of this difference in rights should be related to the strength of the local village forces, which is manifested in the overall strength of the village, specifically in the population size and cultivated land area of the village.

**Table 1.** Statistical table of the "Si She Wu Cun" today.

	Village	Population size	The amount of land
Si She	Qiuchi Village	2636	5800
	Lizhuang Village	900	3000
	Yiwang Village	1040	2800
	Xinggou Village	1268	2200
Wu Cun	Kongjian Village	700	1000

Through the statistical analysis of the population size of the "Si She Wu Cun" in **Table 1**, it can be seen that the population size and cultivated land area of the "Si She" are far larger than that of Kongjian Village, the "Wu Cun", and the village with a large population and cultivated land area naturally holds the absolute right to speak in the region. The community leader Dong Buyun said: "Historically, our village is the leading village. Our village is large, has a large population, and what we say counts. We also have manpower and material resources, and may also dare to fight." (Dong, 2003) It can be seen that the right to speak of the "Si She Wu Cun" largely comes from its absolute strength in the region. This right to speak has gradually become a social consensus in the local area, and this consensus still has a profound impact today. In the interview with the villager Hao Jihong, it was mentioned: "In the 1980s, I asked for money from the Linfen region. They advocated calling it the 'Honghuo United Canal'. However, due to the history of two thousand years, it has been passed down and has always been called the 'Si She Wu Cun', and the 'Honghuo United Canal' has not spread and no one calls it." (Wang, 2017)

It can be seen that as a long-term implemented water management unit, the "Si She Wu Cun" has become the main manager of the rural social water use order,

and this status is still accepted by the vast number of villagers and has become a kind of folk social security. Even in the face of administrative interference, this management system has not been shaken.

The long-term and continuous use of the water use system of the “Si She Wu Cun” indicates that the system itself is very reasonable. In terms of content, the water use system of the “Si She Wu Cun” has made detailed regulations on the water use time and water use population in accordance with the principle of fair water use. First, the regulations on the water day. According to the historical water book, the “Si She Wu Cun” have clearly defined the water days of each village and society: “A set of water regulations, 28 days a week, 14 days in Zhaoyi, 14 days in Huozhou, 6 days in Zhaoyi Xinggou Village, 8 days in Chouchi Village, 7 days in Huozhou Lizhuang Village, 4 days in Yiwang Village, 3 days in Kongjian Village, and repeat in cycles without confusion. Violators will be punished according to the regulations.” (Dong & Christian, 2003) That is, there are 28 water days per month, and the remaining two days are for the replenishment of the main canal. And based on 28 days, the water days are divided into two according to different administrative affiliations. Among them, the Chouchi Village (the eldest) and Xinggou Village (the third) in Zhaocheng County respectively account for 8 days and 6 days, while the Lizhuang Village (the second), Yiwang Village (the fourth), and Kongjian Village (the fifth) in Huozhou respectively account for 7 days, 4 days, and 3 days. This division also basically corresponds to the population size of the villages, maximizing the rational utilization of the limited water resources.

It should be noted that the distribution of water days not only means that the villages has the right to use water resources, but also its affiliated villages have the right to use water resources on their corresponding water days. As an important part of the regional life, the affiliated villages also need to have their demand for water resources met. In order to solve the water problem of villages with a small population size, the form of affiliated villages has gradually emerged. Under this form, each village and society from the eldest to the fifth has one to three affiliated villages (as shown in **Table 2**). These affiliated villages can also use water normally on the water days of the “Si She Wu Cun” and also need to bear corresponding responsibilities when constructing public water conservancy facilities.

**Table 2.** “Si She Wu Cun” and their affiliated villages.

Village	Affiliated village
Chouchi Village	Caowa Village
Lizhuang Village	Pipa Village; Baimu Village
Xinggou Village	Taohuaqu Village; Nanquan Village; Nanzhuang Village
Yiwang Village	Yaoyuan Village
Kongjian Village	Liujiazhuang Village

### 3. The Hidden Violent Factors in the Water Use System

Due to the scarcity of water resources, the distribution of water resources in the

“Si She Wu Cun” area is bound to encounter many difficulties, among which the most significant is the interference of violent behavior. Especially in the case where the “bottom-up” water day allocation model formed in the “Si She Wu Cun” completely deprives the upstream village and society of the water resource ownership rights, the violent conflicts between villages are bound to be more prominent. In fact, violent conflicts have long existed in the “Si She Wu Cun”. The earliest existing Jin Dynasty stele in this area mentions the fights and lawsuits between the downstream Lizhuang Village and the upstream villages, and gradually obtained the water rights in the struggle. The Chouchi Village, also located downstream, “through repeated violent duels, has the greatest say in the Si She Wu Cun” (Xing, 2018) and has won the absolute advantage in water use qualifications. The modern ranking of the “Si She Wu Cun” as the water resource managers “is the result of fighting. All five main villages have fought, and the winner is the elder brother and the loser is the younger brother, thus forming five brothers.” “After experiencing many vicious contests and passing the test of life and death, they formed a sworn alliance of life and death. The stele is the rule for them to get along with water, their life and death stele, and their unity stele for generations of alliances.” (Dong & Christian, 2003)

This kind of violent struggle for water resources has lasted for a very long time, and even the casualties are relatively serious, leaving a deep impression on the rural history. There are historical legends about the water distribution of the “Si She Wu Cun” in different villages. “The eldest one has great power, and has beaten too many people to death. Another thing about the water is that it is the same as the legend spread in Guangsheng Temple. That is, the water in Guangsheng Temple is divided into three and seven channels. You can get more if you fish out more small coins in the boiling oil. In the past, it was like this.” (Dong & Christian, 2003) Water needs to be fought for with all one’s strength, and this kind of fight may even require the sacrifice of life. This actually reflects that the struggle for water resources in ancient times was continuous, and the long-term struggle for water resources gradually made the people form the consciousness of fighting for water with their lives and gradually formed the legend of fishing for money in the boiling oil.

In addition, in the water use system of the “Si She Wu Cun”, there is also a special situation, that is, the donation of water days. In the legend of the donation of water days, it is often accompanied by the emergence of marriage relations, but in fact, it should also be a compromise that emerged after violent struggles to protect each other’s reputation. The most representative one is the donation of water days between Kongjian Village and its affiliated village Liujiacun Village. It is said that Kongjian Village once donated one day of water days to Liujiacun Village due to marriage relations, but it was not given voluntarily because of the marriage relationship, but should have gradually emerged as a compromise in the long-term struggle.

“Because there was no water to drink, a lawsuit was filed. It is said that three

county magistrates in Huoyi County were changed. At that time, it was one person in charge for one year. Finally, this lawsuit was won, and there were witnesses. When Kongjian Village was there, the lawsuit was filed earlier than the stele above. Anyway, the father fought and it didn't work, so the son fought. That's how the water days were fought." (Dong & Christian, 2003) During the Qianlong period of Qing Dynasty, there was still a conflict over the water resource ownership between Kongjian Village and Liujiacun Village, which was still very serious and exceeded the ability of the community leaders to preside over. There was already the intervention of the government forces. After the water distribution day was carried out under the auspices of the government, the legend of Kongjian Village's daughter getting married gradually spread in the village and society centered on Kongjian Village. In the local marriage relationship, most people pay attention to "keeping the good things within the family" and practice in-village marriage. Taking Yiwang Village as an example, through the statistics of the married population in the village, more than 85% of the women who got married in the first half of the 20th century were in-village marriages. In Nanlizhuang Village, it is as high as 93%, and gradually spread in the local area: "There are many benefits to in-village marriage, including deep affection and friendship. Everything should be self-conscious, and don't talk about trifles." (Dong & Christian, 2003)

This kind of marriage relationship essentially still aims to protect the water use rights within the village. In this case, it is obviously impossible to realize the transfer of water rights through marriage. However, there is a legend of giving water rights as a dowry in the local village and society: "In the past, all the seven-gun water belonged to us. A girl in our village was married to Kong Village. In the past, it was all arranged by parents. She didn't want to go, saying there was no water to drink. So, at that time, our village gave her three-gun water, saying that if you marry, we will give you three-gun water. This girl is a daughter of our village who took the water away." (Dong & Christian, 2003).

It can be seen from the materials that the water allocation day in Kongjian Village has undergone quite a lot of changes. The division of one water allocation day from Kongjian Village to Liujiazhuang Village should indeed have existed. However, by constructing the act of water allocation day division based on the establishment of a marital relationship, it has minimized the conflict points between the two sides as much as possible, which should be a kind of beautification of the conflict. As for this beautification, the purposes of both sides are different. The purpose of Kongjian Village's beautification should be to cover up its failure in litigation and seek a decent reputation, while the purpose of Liujiazhuang Village's acceptance of this beautification should be out of consideration for Kongjian Village located upstream and the hope that Kongjian Village can help with the construction of the water channels in Liujiazhuang Village.

However, this arrangement of the water allocation day did not satisfy the villagers. There were still relatively large conflicts between the two sides, and their relationship remained in a tense state. For example, there were still resentful

emotions towards Kongjian Village in Liujiazhuang Village.

“In the old society, it was the people from Liujiazhuang Village who served as water releasers. They would first fill the canals of Kongjian Village with water and then release water for their own village. In our village, when there was no water, the daughters who got married here would go back to their parents’ home, saying that there wasn’t even water for washing faces. The women from Kong Village who married into Liujiazhuang Village were sent a basin of water for washing faces by their parents in Kong Village. And our village even had to rely on that water for washing faces. We were actually using the water sent by our wives’ fathers.” (Dong & Christian, 2003)

It can be seen that violent conflicts still existed in the long-term practice of water use and could not be completely eliminated. The systems formed through violence inherently have the defect of lacking legitimacy. They are often fragile and short-lived and are extremely vulnerable to resistance, destruction and even overthrow by other forms of violence (Liu, 2024). When analyzing the power structure in rural society, Fei Xiaotong also pointed out that “The stage of using force has passed, and the dominated side has admitted defeat... But they have not willingly accepted the conditions stipulated by the victors. They are not truly convinced.” (Fei, 2005) Behind the seemingly stable water use order in the “Si She Wu Cun”, violent conflicts should have constantly existed. It failed to completely achieve absolute stability in the regional society. Even in many cases, it required the intervention of the official forces to quell the local violent conflicts.

#### 4. The Water Conservancy Beliefs in the “Si She Wu Cun”

The belief system also occupies an important position in the rural order of the “Si She Wu Cun”. The belief in the Dragon King, sacrificial activities and so on are not only part of the villagers’ spiritual life but also manifestations of social order and norms. The belief in the Dragon King aims to place the water use behavior under the supervision of the gods in order to stabilize the rural water use order. In essence, it is a process of sanctifying the rural social system. Once this system has achieved integration with local folk customs, the authority of the leaders of the “Si She Wu Cun” has been confirmed by the sacred performance rituals. These performance rituals possess extremely strong cultural penetration and solidification abilities, condensing the water use system into a profound social memory, deeply imprinting it in people’s inner world and forming a long-term stable rural water use order under the absolute dominance of the local leaders. During this process of sanctification, the belief in the Dragon King, as the supervisor of the water conservancy order, was gradually created and, with the promotion of various forces, its sacred and unshakable absolute status was determined. On the basis of establishing this absolute status, the sacrifices to the Dragon King have gradually become an important part of rural social life.

In terms of the choice of sacrifice time, local residents have set the time of sacrifice on the Qingming Festival. The reason for choosing this date may be that the

Qingming period is an important juncture when rainfall increases and everything comes back to life. The common people believe that sacrificing to the Dragon King at this time can be more effective. However, it can be seen from this that the local people's belief in the Dragon King is already equivalent to their belief in ancestors, and to some extent, the scale of sacrifices to the Dragon King exceeds that of sacrifices to ancestors. It can be known that in the extremely water-deficient area of the "Si She Wu Cun", the management of water resources and sacrificial affairs hold an absolutely important position locally.

The sacrificial activities during the Qingming Festival in the local area are divided into grand sacrifices and minor sacrifices according to the differences in rituals and purposes. "One day before the Qingming Festival, a minor sacrifice is held as required. After the sacrifice, the ditches are divided. Starting from the society that holds the sacrifice on its own, the ditches are divided in an orderly manner one after another, and the order will never be disrupted. Those who violate it will be punished." (Wang, 2017) In the "Si She Wu Cun", with the urgent message symbolized by a feather as the signal, the distribution of water rights and the derived issues are discussed in the Dragon King Temple in Shawo Village. Under normal circumstances, the leaders of various village mainly check the water conservancy accounts of the "previous society" (the society responsible for managing water use in the previous year) and the situation of related projects during the minor sacrifice, discuss the plan of the "next society" (the society responsible for managing water use in the next year), and also discuss the specific matters of the grand sacrifice. In essence, it is an inspection of public expenditures by the senior managers of the "Si She Wu Cun" and supervision of the implementation of the rural water use system.

However, in fact, after the water use management system in the "Si She Wu Cun" has gradually been sanctified, the minor sacrifice in which the leaders of various societies participate has already played a decisive role in the decision-making of public affairs. Just as the villager Hao Jihong described: "For the project funds of this year, as the water conservancy facilities need to be repaired every year, the budget is all worked out on the day of the minor sacrifice and then distributed among the four societies." (Wang, 2017)

The grand sacrifice is a sacrificial activity for all the villagers within the entire river basin. The participants in this sacrificial activity include all the villagers from the "Si She Wu Cun" as well as those from the affiliated villages. Originally, the main task of this sacrificial activity was to make the matters discussed in the minor sacrifice known to the public, subject them to everyone's supervision, and also announce the amount of project apportionment for the new year. However, in actual situations, the resolutions made by the heads of various societies under the blessing of divine power are only a formality when they are publicized during the grand sacrifice. In essence, the grand sacrifice is still a reaffirmation of the rural water use order. This order is reflected not only in water use but also in the scramble for sacrificial positions in the Dragon King sacrificial activities. "Every year

during the Qingming Festival, people from the “Si She Wu Cun” in our society would go to the temple beating gongs. When going there, each group has its own way of beating drums and gongs and its own territory. You are not allowed to go to that side, and others are not allowed to come to this side. Once a person from our village just stepped across the village boundary, and his leg was broken.” (Dong & Christian, 2003)

It can be seen that under the water use order of the “Si She Wu Cun”, the common people have a very strong sense of exclusivity towards other villages and societies. This exclusivity is manifested not only in marital relations but also in aspects of religious sacrifices. The Dragon King Temple, which represents water resources, has essentially become a symbol of rural water use rights. Therefore, the allocation of sacrificial activities is actually an externalized form of the distribution of water use rights. And in order to prevent the scramble for water use rights in the name of religious beliefs, the “Si She Wu Cun” have also put forward strict regulations on the Dragon King sacrificial activities. “For example, when we hold the community activities, we carry Dragon King up and then carry it back. After that, we put it in the Dragon King Temple. When it comes to next year, when it’s the turn of the apricot community to hold the activities, it’s time to carry the Dragon King away from here. These four villages take turns to deal with this Dragon King in the sacrificial activities.” (Dong & Christian, 2003)

The regulation that the four societies take turns to offer sacrifices to one Dragon King in an orderly manner has enabled the water use rights in the “Si She Wu Cun” area to be confirmed at the divine level. And when it has gradually been internalized into the common consciousness of the region, the water use system has gradually won the approval of the public. In the process of implementing the actual water use system, there are inevitably some opposing forces. “The sacrificial system not only ensures the rationality and legitimacy of a set of water rights operation logic at the practical level, but also arranges a corresponding punishment system. The punishments for violators range from the lighter one of asking them to offer tributes to the Dragon King, to the more severe one of ‘reporting to the officials for correction’, and even to ‘beating to death in front of the temple and burying behind the temple’.” Facing the opposing forces, the local heads of the societies have made full use of the authoritative role of the Dragon King Temple to obtain the legitimacy of punishment activities in the name of the gods. Even the measure of “beating to death in front of the temple and burying behind the temple” (Zhou, 2018), which has already exceeded the authority of rural autonomous organizations, seems so reasonable under the name of the gods.

“Originally, there were four rules for penalties in the eating regulations: four stars in the sky, four taels of frog hair, five catties of buckwheat husk oil, and four taels of mosquito eggs. All of these are things that we don’t have on us.” (Dong & Christian, 2003) Extremely exaggerated punitive measures were used to intimidate the common people so as to strengthen the maintenance of the water use system and further enhance the stability of the water use system.

However, the water management power of the heads of the various societies in the “Si She Wu Cun” was still “a relatively stable state of subjective equilibrium and mutual tolerance achieved through mutual forbearance”. (Qi, 2012) And in order to ensure its objective stability, the intervention of official forces was bound to be needed. This kind of intervention was not only required for the officials to handle rural disputes that the “Si She Wu Cun” couldn’t deal with, but also to affirm and maintain the existing rural water use order. Especially in areas like the “Si She Wu Cun” which were extremely short of water and located on the edge of administrative rule, it was undoubtedly a more labor-saving and efficient choice to manage the local people with the existing local autonomous organizations. Therefore, there also emerged folk legends about official forces in the local area.

“Even the county magistrate went to pray for rain. He went to the Xingtang Temple in a sedan chair. When he reached the entrance of the valley and there was still five li (a Chinese unit of length) left, he got off the sedan chair and couldn’t sit in it anymore. He took off his shoes and didn’t say a word. Then he entered the mountain. When he was almost at the foot of the mountain, he knelt down. He wouldn’t eat or drink and would kneel for several hours. ‘I won’t leave until it rains. I’ll keep kneeling until it rains,’ he said.” (Dong & Christian, 2003)

The degree to which the “Si She Wu Cun” area was managed by the local government was quite limited. Under such circumstances where the official forces couldn’t exercise in-depth control, the autonomous management model of the “Si She Wu Cun” was supported by the official forces. Therefore, the legalization of the “Si She Wu Cun” was ensured. After the water use system of the “Si She Wu Cun”, which was safeguarded by religious beliefs, obtained legalization, on the basis of the water use order, a stable rural operation order gradually took shape in the local area.

## 5. Conclusions

The “Si She Wu Cun” is a rural autonomous water use system that gradually took shape in history for the sake of survival in the rural regional society under the extremely water-scarce environment. This system divides the usage time of water resources according to the population size and the strength of rural forces, which has ensured to a great extent that the common people in this region can survive. This system was formed through the scramble for rural water use rights by violent means. After its formation, the water conservancy order was gradually folk-customized in the form of water conservancy beliefs and solidified into the spiritual cognition of the common people. In order to comprehensively safeguard this water use order in the rural areas, the “Si She Wu Cun” also made full use of the will of the gods to issue severe warnings to the common people and finally won the recognition of the local government and achieved legalization.

Moreover, this water use order also directly influenced the order of the rural society, gradually giving rise to a cross-village and cross-society rural autonomous organization presided over by the heads of various societies in the local area,

which further enhanced its degree of integration.

However, in this regional society, due to the influence of the right to use water resources, the estrangement among villages and societies within the region is also very serious. This estrangement is manifested not only in the choice of marital relations but also in the scramble for religious activities. Therefore, the rural order of the “Si She Wu Cun” is still in a relatively stable state, but there are still relatively large conflicts within it.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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