

# The Historical and Cultural Heritage of Foshan Sangyuanwei

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**Abstract:** In December 2020, Foshan Sangyuanwei was successfully included in the seventh batch of the World Heritage Irrigation Structures List published by the International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage. Sangyuanwei is a polder embankment system, the largest dike water conservancy project in ancient China, and also the project with the most historical and cultural heritage in the world irrigation engineering heritage, which can be divided into two central historical and cultural heritage: material and intangible cultural heritage. The material cultural heritage includes water conservancy engineering heritage, architectural cultural heritage, the cultural heritage of carved stone tablets and historical documents. The intangible cultural heritage includes folk beliefs, folk activities, folk culture and intangible cultural.

**Keywords:** Foshan Sangyuanwei, Material cultural heritage, Intangible cultural heritage

Sangyuanwei is located in Nanhai and Shunde District, Foshan City, Guangdong Province, China. It was first built during the reign of Emperor Huizong in the Northern Song Dynasty, and was named for the planting of large tracts of mulberry trees. The dike has a total length of 64.84 kilometres and an area of 265.4 square kilometres. Historically, the irrigated farmland area reached more than 13,333 hectares. In the Qing Dynasty, it was called "the first fertile soil in the near province" and "the area with the largest grain life in eastern Guangdong". In December 2020, Foshan Sangyuanwei was successfully included in the seventh batch of the World Heritage Irrigation Structures List published by the International Commission on Irrigation and Drainage. Sangyuanwei is a polder embankment system, the largest dike water conservancy project in ancient China, and also the project with the most historical and cultural heritage in the world irrigation engineering heritage, which can be divided into two central historical and cultural heritage: material and intangible cultural heritage.

## 1. Basis for classification

Sangyuanwei has a long history with an abundance of historical and cultural heritage. When classifying the heritage, we should first define the difference between material and intangible cultural heritage, clarify the relationship between folk customs and intangible cultural heritage, and strive to make the classification clearer and more scientific.

First of all, according to the *Convention on the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage*, the definition of "Material cultural heritage" is known as "tangible cultural heritage", and "intangible cultural heritage" collectively called "cultural heritage", including monuments, inscriptions, buildings, etc.<sup>[1]</sup> And according to the UNESCO(United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)*Convention on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, the definition of "intangible cultural heritage", refers to by the community groups, sometimes for personal as part of the cultural heritage of all kinds of social practice, expression of the concept, form of expression, knowledge, skills, and related tools, physical objects, handicrafts and cultural sites.<sup>[2]</sup> According to the *Convention for the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage*, "the intangible cultural heritage, means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated there with – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage."<sup>[3]</sup> Having said above, the second and third categories are juxtaposition. Still, the former is more emphasized. The latter, however, serve to remind that the protection of intangible cultural heritage should not neglect safety of the closely related substances, though they may not be intangible by nature. Therefore, the historical remains of Sangyuanwei have both material and intangible cultural heritage.

Secondly, the relationship between folklore and intangible cultural heritage overlaps with each other. That is to say, folklore contains the intangible cultural heritage, and some intangible cultural heritage belongs to folklore. In China, many folk customs have been passed down for a long time, but they are not included in the list of intangible cultural heritage recognised by the government. Compared with the broad concept of folk customs, "intangible cultural heritage" is a cultural administrative concept, whose scope is limited. Thus only government-approved projects are "intangible cultural heritage", but folk customs are everywhere. In the concept of "intangible cultural heritage", "folk custom" (recognised by the government) is one of its categories. Therefore, folk customs and intangible cultural heritage have the place of coincidence.

According to the above classification principles, we can divide the heritage of Sangyuanwei into the material and intangible cultural heritage. The material cultural heritage covers water conservancy engineering, architecture, carved stone tablets, historical documents and other material cultural heritage; Intangible cultural heritage includes related folk customs, folk beliefs, traditional skills, cultural ecology and other intangible cultural heritage.

## 2. Material cultural heritage of Sangyuanwei

The material cultural heritage of Sangyuanwei refers to the material cultural heritage directly or indirectly related to it, covering water conservancy engineering, architecture, carved stone tablets, historical documents, etc.

### 2.1 Water conservancy engineering heritage

The water conservancy engineering heritage of Sangyuanwei mainly refers to the material heritage belonging to the water engineering system, including three major systems: embankments, river systems and ancient sinus sluice control projects.

The embankments contain 4 sections: Jizanhengji, West River embankment, East River embankment, Ganzhuxi north embankment. The total circumference is 83.86 kilometres. The full length of the dike project is 64.84 kilometres. Among them, the Xijiang Embankment and the west section of Ganzhuxi North Embankment are collectively referred to as "Xiji" or "Xidi". It is 42.95 kilometres long from the junction of Xiqiao and Baini in Hegang Village, Xiqiao Town to Xi'an Pavilion, Longjiang Town, Shunde District. Beijiang Embankment and the eastern section of Ganzhuxi North Embankment are collectively referred to as "Dongji" or "Dongdi". It is 19.89 kilometres long from the bottom of the Xiqiao Bridge in Xiqiao Town to Xi'an Pavilion in Longjiang Town, Shunde District. Jizanhengji is located in the north of Sangyuanwei, built in the Northern Song Dynasty. It is the oldest section of Sangyuanwei with a length of about 2 kilometres from east to west. It starts from Xianlai Township, Jin 'ou Community, Xiqiao Town, in the west, and ends at Dujiaowei, a large embankment of Sangyuanwei, in the east. In 1998, a major flood occurred in the Yangtze River Basin in China. To avoid the disaster in Sangyuanwei, the old Jizanhengji dike was raised nearly 1 meter. The primary function of the dike is to resist the double threat of flooding from the north and west rivers as well as swollen rivers.

The river system is composed of numerous main watercourses and attached watercourses. There are 16 main watercourses in the north and south, Shatoudachong, and Thirteen Bays. There are 42 main attached watercourses including Zhennanchong, Heqingchong and Yannanhuangjichong. In addition to main watercourses and attached watercourses, there are many other small streams in Sangyuanwei. Qu Dajun, a famous Lingnan scholar in the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, described Lingnan in his *Guangdong Xin Yu*, "It is a country of water. Most people feed on boats." [4] Since ancient times, Lingnan has had abundant rainfall, and the surrounding rivers are crisscrossed and dense like a spider web, forming a complete irrigation and drainage canal system and water transportation network.

The ancient sinus sluice at Sangyuanwei is a sluice that controls water diversion, drainage, and navigation. It is called the sinus. Therefore, sinus sluice has the functions, as water diversion, drainage, water logging prevention and maritime trade. Some sinus gates use herringbone wooden gates, which can be automatically opened when the water logging level is high for drainage, and automatically closed when the external tide or flood level is high for tide retaining and flood control, becoming a dynamic intelligent water conservancy engineering system. Some sinus sluices are engraved with "water rules" to quantitatively control the water level. Shenfu vividly describes the irrigation mechanism of the ancient agricultural dike and sinus gate in his autobiographical prose *Fu Sheng Liu*

Ji , "When it is brought to the mature part of the garden and field, each circle of names should build a high dike to prevent tide flood. There are water sinuses in the dike, which are opened and closed by sluices. In drought, sluices are opened during rising tides, and in flow, sluices are opened during ebb tides."<sup>[5]</sup> According to the preliminary statistics, there are 60 kinds of ancient sluice sinuses in Sangyuanwei. Sluice sinuses are the control engineering system of the whole water network of the Sangyuanwei, and also an original water conservancy system project of poldering dikes. It made full use of the ecological characteristics of the Pearl River Delta with low-lying land and numerous river surges, and focused on constructing dikes and sluice gates, so as to transform water disasters into water conservancy and promote the development of the silk reeling industry. In Qing Dynasty, people knew Sangyuanwei from the perspective of dike protection, and there were some related records such as "base section", "prevention flow", "robbery block" and "regulations". For example, in the "base section" part, on the "encircle each fort village sinus point management base site feet: Xiandengbao village,...sinus a hole, in the Eshichenjunchong, in the Bao base 3,950 meters and 85 inches...; Haizhoubao village... two sinus points, one in Lee village Li Yu Shi three-surname base, one in Mai village Liangwantong base, in the Bao base 4,337 meters and 10 inches ..."<sup>[6]</sup>The daily protective measures and methods of Sangyuanwei are established in the form of articles of association, which clarify the construction obligations of the management departments at all levels, and fulfil the responsibility of protecting the soil.

In the ancient times, Jishui sinus has important historical and cultural value. It is located in Xiqiao town, Nanhai District, Xiqiao village Jishuichong, built in the Ming Dynasty. In 1894, Chen Qiyuan, a famous modern national entrepreneur, donated money for reconstruction in order to benefit the hometown. On the head of sinus ,wrote "Ji Shui Dou" three words, on the right, wrote "Guangxu Jiawu year"(1894), on the left, wrote "Jian village Xiandengbao reconstruction". At present, the main body is basically intact and the structure is relatively stable. It is now a cultural relic protection unit in Foshan City. Another ancient sinus sluice, Minle sinus, also has important historical and cultural value. It is located in Guanshanchong, Qiaole Community, Xiqiao Town, Nanhai District. It was built in the late Ming Dynasty and rebuilt in the fourth year of Guangxu (1878) in the Qing Dynasty. A single-hole sinus gate is built for granite stone coupons. The east side is connected with the gate and Guanshanchong; the west side is connected with the inner gate. A feldspar plaque is embedded on the arch on the east side, the four characters "Ren Shou Nian Feng" are embedded on the arch on the west side, the three characters "Min Le Dou" are carved in vertical recessed stone. In the Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China, the silk reeling industry in Minle, Xiqiao town was very developed, and it was the largest silk fabric distribution centre in Guangdong. The silk-laden ferries depart from Minle Sinus and are shipped to Guangzhou or Jiangmen via the Guanshanchong and Beijiang waterways, and to Southeast Asia, India, the Middle East and Europe. Therefore, Minle Sinus is one of the starting points of the Maritime Silk Road in southern China. The folk say, "A boat of silk goes out, a boat of silver returns." It is a true portrayal of the prosperity of Minle sinus in the past. The wharf next to Minle Sinus is also known as the "Silver Ship Wharf". At present, the main body of Minle Sinus is well preserved, the structure is stable, and it is still navigable.

Sangyuanwei is an intelligent product of the ancients to deal with natural disasters and turn floods into water conservancy. It still plays an important water conservancy function in water system connectivity, flood drainage and irrigation, navigation, and water conservation.

## 2.2 The cultural heritage of architecture

The Irrigation and Drainage Project System has retained a large number of water conservancy cultural heritage in the historical development of more than 900 years. In addition to the water conservancy engineering heritage, there are also water conservancy management and water god worship buildings closely related to the project, such as The Sangyuanwei General Administration, the highest management agency of Sangyuanwei, is located in the "River God Temple", but unfortunately, the temple no longer exists today, and only the ruins remain. According to Tongzhi's *Nanhai County Chronicle*, in the 60th year of Qianlong's reign (1795), the gentry in Sangyuanwei built a river god temple in the Shangxu of Lee Village (now Mai Village, Xiqiao Town) in Haizhoubao, to pray for the elimination of floods and to bless the surrounding people. It is a safe sacrifice centre, and it also has the functions of water conservancy management and organization in the whole area. *General Chronicle of Sangyuanwei* records: "When the god temple is completed, it will be able to protect the field from flooding forever. I am deeply pleased."<sup>[7]</sup>The people hope to achieve the wish of harmonious coexistence between man and nature by building god temples and offering sacrifices to the gods. Another example is, "Sangyuanwei is also surrounded by a large embankment. The land is combined

with two towns in the south. It is more than 50 kilometres long and has more than 2,000 hectares of grain fields. If there is a decisive decision, the entire perimeter will suffer...,collected discussions in the River God Temple."<sup>[8]</sup>Here it is recorded that the Sangyuanwei needs to be overhauled. Whenever there are important matters such as the construction of embankments and other important matters within the enclosure, the heads of management agencies at all levels will definitely gather together in the River God Temple. The Wenlan Academy near the River God Temple is also a place where representatives of the gentry from all over the Sangyuanwei discussed their affairs.

The water god worship buildings in Sangyuanwei mainly include Hongsheng Temple, Beidi Temple, Tianhou (Tianfei) Temple, Longmu Temple, etc. There are also joint worship, such as the Sansheng Palace, praying for good weather and peace for the world. According to the preliminary statistics of the water conservancy department, there are 65 water god temples in Sangyuanwai, including 8 Hongsheng Temples, 33 Beidi Temples, 14 Tianhou Temples, 9 Longmu Temples and 1 Temple of Chen Bomin, a water-controlling figure. The Longmu Temple is located in the Panlong Cave of Xiqiao Mountain in the Nanhai, District. It was built in the 27th year of the Republic of China (1938). It is a brick-wood structure, a hard top, green glazed flower hooks, dripping edges, and the cornice is decorated with wood carving flowers and grass patterns. The couplet at the main entrance reads: "Dragon is sincere and powerful, and the mother is graceful and virtuous." It is now a cultural relics protection unit in Foshan City. At present, the main body is basically intact. Jian village Beidi Temple, also known as Shengtang Ancient Temple, is located in Gangtou, Jian village, and is a cultural relics protection unit in Nanhai District. There are many water towns in Lingnan, with water as the source, so the Beidi Temple is also known as the "Ancestral Temple".

### ***2.3 The cultural heritage of carved stone tablets***

The carved stone tablets at Sangyuanwei include water conservancy-related carved stone tablets and flood carved stone tablets. According to the actual investigation of the water conservancy department, there are 18 pieces of water conservancy-related carved stone tablets in Sangyuanwei: 1 piece of "Sangyuanwei full map stone tablet", which is a stone tablet in the Qing Dynasty. It was originally erected in the Nanhai River God Temple in the northwest of Haizhou Village, Xiqiao Town, Nanhai District. In the temple, there is a carved stone tablet from the ninth year of Tongzhi in the Qing Dynasty (1870). The tablet is made of ink stone, with the five words "Sang Yuan Wei Quan Tu" in seal script directly engraved on the forehead of the tablet, and 28 lines of regular script are directly engraved on the tablet. It is currently stored in the new museum of Nanhai District, Foshan City. There are also 1 piece of the Baokangwei Convention Tablet, 3 pieces of the Sangyuanwei West Base Boundary Tablet, and 2 passes of the Ban Tablet in the Sangyuanwei Office: one piece stands at the Tieniutan dangerous section of the Xiqiao embankment section in Qiaosanglianwei, the main stream of the Xijiang River, and the other stands near Wulinghou Temple in the fourth village of Heqing. In addition, there is also a piece of tablet with the word "forbidden" in Sangyuanwei, a piece of the Yudaiwei Public Ban Tablet, a piece of the convention tablet in Sangyuanwei, and a piece of water conservancy disputes tablet on the Huanggong Embankment. And there are 7 pieces of inscriptions in the Minle sinus.

### ***2.4 The cultural heritage of historical documents***

In the long-term historical development process of Sangyuanwei, a wealth of historical documents has been produced. It is a very precious historical material for the studying of the history of Sangyuanwei and its water conservancy, ecology, science and technology, institutional organization and management, etc. It is also a study of contemporary rural social governance. An important reference for the pattern and how the rural power plays an important role in resource linking and communication and coordination in rural revitalization. The documentary heritage of Sangyuanwei is mainly composed of four parts: the water conservancy engineering journal, the local chronicle, the family tree, and poems of Zhuzhici. In addition to Sangyuanwei's special journal, the other three parts also contain many literature records and poems about Sangyuanwei. Sangyuanwei water conservancy special chronicle currently has 14 volumes of "General Chronicle of Sangyuanwei" (Tongzhi), 17 volumes of "Recompiled Chronicle of Sangyuanwei"(Guangxu), and 16 volumes of "Continued Chronicle of Sangyuanwei" (Republic of China), a total of forty-seven volumes. Local records such as "Nanhai County Chronicle", "Shunde County Chronicle", "Longjiang Township Chronicle", "Longshan Township Chronicle", "Xiqiao Mountain Chronicle" and so on. Personal collections such as "Revisiting Minle sinus record" in "Qing Fen Ji"(Guangxu), genealogy such as Pan Shide Tang's genealogy

(Guangxu) and so on. The most important is the Sangyuanwei water conservancy special chronicle, which fully retains the Sangyuanwei water rights and water conservancy project management rules and regulations. It is the earliest and most complete water conservancy project chronicle in the Pearl River Delta.

In addition, the ancient bridges, wells, trees and villages scattered throughout the enclosure are also the valuable material cultural heritage of Sangyuanwei. They have jointly witnessed the development history of Sangyuanwei irrigation and drainage project and carried the rich history and culture of water conservancy projects.

### **3. The intangible cultural heritage of Sangyuanwei**

The intangible heritage of Sangyuanwei refers to the intangible cultural heritage derived from the water conservancy project of Sangyuanwei, including related folk customs, folk beliefs, traditional skills, and traditional practical knowledge, including concepts, cultural ecology, etc. This part briefly introduces the folk beliefs that are most closely related to Sangyuanwei, such as the worship of the water god; folk activities, such as the Northern Emperor's birthday sacrifice, and the intangible cultural heritage culture derived from Sangyuanwei, such as folk culture and traditional skills.

#### ***3.1 Folk beliefs and folk activities***

Foshan folks widely spread the saying "Shunde ancestral halls and Nanhai temples", which reflects the multitude of ancestral temples in Nanhai and Shunde district, and the prosperity of folk beliefs. Historically, Sangyuanwei has many historical records of the embankment being washed away. Therefore, the worship of the water god caused by the flood has spawned many temples dedicated to the water god, such as the Dragon King Temple or the Water God Temple, etc, which are concentrated in various dangerous construction sections, such as Sanyakou and Weituo Temple construction sections. The birthday of the Northern Emperor, born from the worship of the water god, reflects the folk events such as the second sacrifice in the Spring and Autumn Festival of farming civilization, and is reflected in the way of daily life and specific sacrificial ceremonies. It is the persistence and change of local cultural traditions at a deeper level. Among many beliefs, worshipping the water god is the cultural bond between the ancient local government and the people to maintain water conservancy projects jointly. Surrounding people seek cultural memory in the sacrifice of the water god, inherit cultural genes, and condense the life experience and life perception that have constantly been new for thousands of years into a collective spirit and group will. The prevalence and inheritance of the water god sacrificial custom is the embodiment of people's good desire to pursue harmonious coexistence between humanity and nature. In addition to worshipping of the water god, there are also Buddhist and Daxian beliefs in the surrounding area. Every year, folk activities such as Guanyin Festival and Daxian Festival. Temple Fair in Nanhai and Shunde district are deeply believed and loved by the people. Compared with Guanyin Festival and Daxian Festival, the folk custom of the Silkworm Flower Festival, which originated from worshipping of the silkworm god, is slightly deserted. However, in order to continue this tradition, there are also people of the older generation to worship at the Cangu Temple and reproduce folk activities such as the Silkworm Flower Festival in the Nanhai Xiqiao Fishing and Farming Cantonese Ecological Park. The worship of the dying silkworm god is a historical testimony to the widespread cultivation of mulberry and silkworms in the local area.

#### ***3.2 Folk Culture and Intangible Cultural Heritage***

The culture derived from Sangyuanwei has become an important foundation and a symbolic cultural symbol for the social development of Lingnan water towns. The folk culture and intangible cultural heritage in the surrounding area are colourful, such as the dragon boat culture born from the water; the Xiangyunsha silk culture prospered by the agriculture and mulberry economy the national intangible cultural heritage " Xiangyunsha silk dyeing and finishing skills". They have become the unique folk culture of Sangyuanwei. Among them, agriculture and mulberry culture are particularly prominent. Planting mulberries and raising silkworms have spawned rich products in Sangyuanwei, such as the Mulberry Dike-Fish Pond Complex, Xiangyunsha silk, mulberry silk quilts, mulberry wine, moth wine and so on. The world-famous Xiangyunsha silk with the reputation of "soft gold", originated in Foshan city, using mulberry silk as the raw material, and was also bred in the long-established Mulberry Dike-Fish Pond Complex. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, the large-scale planting of mulberries and raising of silkworms in Foshan developed the silk weaving industry set in the surrounding area,

especially Xiqiao town in South China, which has become the most famous hometown of mulberry silkworms and an important silk town at that time. The development of the silk industry has also enhanced the economic status of Sangyuanwei as "the first fertile soil in the province".

The material and intangible cultural heritage of Sangyuanwei, regardless of the number and types of projects, can show its long history and profound cultural heritage. Today, after the protection of the sages and people of the past dynasties, the water conservancy heritage of Sangyuanwei is well preserved, especially the backbone waterways with historical value, the stone structures, sinus brakes and other engineering facilities, as well as the water conservancy heritage that reflects the worship of water gods and folk beliefs. And building facilities are also well preserved. The complete and rich water conservancy journals, local chronicles, personal anthologies, clan genealogy, and poems of Zhuzhici have written the water conservancy history and folk customs of Sangyuanwei for hundreds of years and also witnessed the historical changes and long-lasting cultural context of it.

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