

# Origin, development and evolution: the space construction and cultural motivations of Shi Gandang temple in Macau

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This study aims to explore the relationship between folk religious place-making and the development of urban public spaces and summarize its influence on community network construction and daily behavior to discover the authentic practices and role of folk faith culture in social space.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Taking Macau's Shi Gandang Temple and its belief culture as an example, on-site research, historical evidence and interviews were used to elaborate and analyze the processes of place-making, social functions, management mechanisms and folk culture to establish a new perception of folk religious place-making in contemporary urban spaces.

**Findings** – The article argues that the culture of folk beliefs profoundly influences urban spaces and the social management system of Macau and has a positive significance in building the local community and geopolitical relations. In addition, it suggests that the participation of folk religious places in local practices is important as key nodes and emotional hubs of local networks, reconciling conflicts between communities of different backgrounds and driving urban spaces toward diversity while forming a positive interaction and friendly cooperation between regional development and self-contained management mechanisms, governance models and cultural orientations.

**Originality/value** – This study takes an architectural and anthropological perspective of the impact of faith on urban spaces and local governance, using the Shi Gandang Temple in Macau as an example, to complement related studies.

**Keywords** Shi Gandang temple, Religious places, Development and evolution, Local society

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Research background

Unlike traditional religions that have apparent religious histories and cultures, folk beliefs are inclusive. Therefore, in folk ancestral temples, gods of different sects are often worshipped



together in one hall without any systematic theoretical achievement. The geographical relationships are often used as a link to combine entertainment for the gods and the people (Yongchun, 2011). Shi Gandang (The Stone of Mount Tai, 石敢当) originated from the culture of folk spirit stone worship in ancient China. However, during the Qin and Han Dynasties, it was gradually reduced to a custom of the townhouse “to ward off evil spirits,” forming the prototype of the early Shi Gandang beliefs. Its written records first appeared in the Western Han Dynasty (B.C. 202 to A.D. 8), in Shiyou’s “Ji Jiu Pian” where he said, “A fierce tiger is his master, Shi Gandang is invulnerable, and even dragons cannot injure him” (《急就篇》: “师猛虎, 石敢当, 所不侵, 龙未央”) (Guangqing, 2012).

In the fourth year of Song Qingli (A.D. 1044), the stone inscription “Shi Gandang”, which was made in the fifth year of Dali (A.D. 770) of the Tang Dynasty, was found in Putian, Fujian Province (Dajing *et al.*, 1926). The inscription mentioned that Shi Gandang could suppress hundreds of ghosts, exorcise disasters, pray for peace, and revitalize ethics. This is the earliest mention of Shi Gandang in literature. The earliest extant Shi Gandang object is the Shi Gandang stele from the Shaoxing period of the Southern Song Dynasty (A.D. 1127 to A.D. 1279), unearthed in Fuzhou, Fujian. These historical contexts indicate that the Shi Gandang beliefs were widely spread in the Tang and Song Dynasties (A.D. 618 to A.D. 1279). It had various functions, such as eliminating evil, preventing disasters and stabilizing the wind. Hence, at this point, Shi Gandang beliefs were nearly concretized.

Over time, the Shi Gandang beliefs have developed into the ubiquitous and well-known “Taishan Shi Gandang” (泰山石敢当) belief phenomenon. According to records of the later Song Dynasty (A.D. 960 to A.D. 1279) and early Yuan Dynasty (A.D. 1271 to A.D. 1368), the official status of Mount Tai declined and was no longer an exclusive item of worship for the emperors. In the Yuan Dynasty, the word “Taishan” has been widely used among the people because Mount Tai is known to exorcise evil spirits, seek immortals and eliminate ghosts, which is in line with the cultural connotation of the Shi Gandang beliefs. The “mountain” and the “stone” have a major similarity and correlation between the material carrier and the spiritual guide. Hence, they merge to form the belief of “Taishan Shi Gandang.” The Ming and Qing Dynasties (A.D. 1368 to A.D. 1912) inherited this belief, which deepened with time up till the present century. This is both an external expression of the civil society’s desire to strengthen the spiritual power of the Shi Gandang beliefs and the general trend and inevitable result of the development of the Mount Tai and Shi Gandang beliefs (Tao, 2013). In 2006, “Taishan Shi Gandang Customs” was listed in the first batch of the Chinese National Intangible Cultural Heritage List, which laid the value foundation for the Taishan Shi Gandang research.

### 1.2 Literature review

Shi Gandang is believed and followed in China. Therefore, the research on Shi Gandang in China started relatively early. At present, methods such as archaeology and historical document collection are primarily used to research the rise of and changes in the Shi Gandang culture and its spread to various places (Linlin, 2018). Tiesheng *et al.* discussed the social environment and the basis of the formation of the Shi Gandang beliefs from a historical perspective, indicating that Shi Gandang was a very vital belief system (2005). Tao popularized the origin of the Shi Gandang beliefs through several field investigations (2007) and demonstrated and studied Shi Gandang as a cultural belief system. He comprehensively introduced Shi Gandang’s dissemination, rituals, feng shui (风水) and distribution, forming the foundation for subsequent research. Later studies began focusing on the folk connotation of the Shi Gandang beliefs (Haoying, 2007) and the evolution of the worship concepts (Xumin, 2010). As research progressed, it was found that the belief in Shi Gandang and the worship of traditional Chinese door gods were closely related because of their concept of guardianship (Jingyu *et al.*, 2022). This interdisciplinary discussion expanded the scope of Shi Gandang research. Regarding

the overseas dissemination of Shi Gandang, scholars generally agree that Japanese Shi Gandang is widely distributed and concentrated in Okinawa, Miyazaki and other places. The essence and function of the Japanese stone belief is a derivative of the ancient Chinese Shi Gandang beliefs (Weijia, 2015). In general, the current research on Shi Gandang beliefs focuses on folklore, history and sociology. Most of the research samples are historical documents and Shi Gandang physical object with very little attention paid to the importance of religious place-making in local spaces.

Place-making is a concern for urban settlements, which is extremely important to the urban fabric and social reproduction activities, reflecting the changes in urban mentality and habits over time (Manning *et al.*, 2014). Religious places are a mode of creating religious spatialization, a medium of communication between the deity and reality and can strongly resonate with the users as an external representation of the sanctification of the physical environment, a redefinition of urban public spaces and the redivision of the spatial order (Burchardt, 2022). While religious places influence the health, emotions, spirituality and psychology of the residents, especially the immigrants, through daily rituals and recreational activities (Agyekum and Newbold, 2016), they build a bridge of social relations and practices between different groups of people, creating a positive sense of place (Gilbert *et al.*, 2019). This spatial interaction between the deity and the people has gained widespread acceptance in local societies, reaching a consensus in the study of religious sites in China and the West. As religious sites gradually become a part of urban public spaces and a secular life, they become effective spatial ways of understanding the coexistence of the secular and the religious in the city (O'Mahony, 2019). In Melbourne, Islam influences the emotions and practices of its believers through rituals and cultural expressions that embody concretized behaviors and visible activities within its religious sites (Mansouri *et al.*, 2016), while the Roman Catholic Church uses its towering religious architectural sites to influence urban public spaces and the lived experiences in terms of rituals and spirituality (Nicghabhann, 2019). The Sri Lankan immigrants in Korea facilitated a network between the Buddhist temples in places of immigration and the existing temples in the society through the creation of Buddhist sites, which, in turn, empowered the religious sites and deepened the ties between transnational religious communities (Habarakada and Shin, 2019). The African community in Guangzhou, on the other hand, built a sense of home and identity through religious place-making (Castillo, 2014). These studies reveal that religious sites have become increasingly flexible, multidimensional and complex in urban spatial creation, mainly through place-making, marking and interaction to remain anchored to the original attachments and counteract indigenous rejection in host places, which are the main drivers of religious site creation and functional innovation. The last part is evident in the economic, institutional and spatial impact of other religious places in the Hindu super-holy land of Vrindavan (Shinde, 2012).

Religious place-making is seen as a dynamic appropriation of the urban landscape through the construction of places of worship (Garbin, 2013). This focuses on the appropriate boundaries between public and private spaces. In addition, participation in local activities offers more possibilities for the stability of local communities, especially immigrant communities, by reconciling the differences between the place of migration and the place of origin (Vásquez and Knott, 2014) and creating a cultural flow in a transregional context. A religious site constitutes the social and cultural life of the settlement, demonstrating a stronger vitality and local adaptability and becoming a part of the cultural heritage of local memory, which is the basis for the continuous development and survival of religion (Berg, 2019). Although several experts and scholars have examined the importance of race, ethnicity, community, and religion in collective action, it is critical to examine the connections between these correlates in the context of space (Martinez, 2017). Unfortunately, there is limited research on the subject. In the current process of increasingly diverse urbanization and development, spaces for religious activities are constantly compromised, shrunken and even closed, creating a greater loss of socio-cultural and heritage resources. Therefore, this study explores the impact of religious beliefs on local society from the perspective of architecture and anthropology, using the Shi Gandang Temple as an example,

complements the lack of research related to Shi Gandang as a religious belief and reflects on the survival and development of traditional religious sites.

### 1.3 Problem statement and objectives

Today, Taishan Shi Gandang often stands at the entrance of streets, alleys, four corners of villages, corner backyards, bridges and fields, or is embedded in the walls of houses (Mingyi, 2018). Steles, characters, gossip patterns, symbols, plain decorations and other artistic forms reflect its functional pursuit (Plate 1). The Shi Gandang beliefs in Macau originate from mainland China and merge into the mainstream form of Taishan Shi Gandang, which widely exists on the streets and alleys (Plate 2). This was invaluable for the early Macau society;



Source(s): Authors work

Plate 1.  
Different styles of Chinese Shi Gandang



Source(s): Authors work

Plate 2.  
Macau Patane Taishan Shi Gandang

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dominated by Western culture. In addition, it demonstrates the role that Shi Gandang played in uniting the Chinese in Macau and safeguarding the interests of the Chinese community.

However, except for the few fixed places for offering sacrifices to Shi Gandang, most of them are mainly incense shrines. In Macau, a temple of Shi Gandang was specially built, which is very rare in the Shi Gandang beliefs in China. As an important physical testimony to the rapid development of the belief system in Macau and a result of the unique status of the place, the Shi Gandang Temple has a milestone significance. Hence, this study further examines its relationship with urban culture, space and management divided through the following questions.

- (1) How were the Shi Gandang beliefs formed and transmitted in Macau? What are its connections with the culture of origin and what role did it play in the lives of the local people, especially the expatriate community?
- (2) How do we identify the competing relationships between the internal and external variables in the creation of the Shi Gandang religious sites and the urban spaces, given that the place-making, management entities, temple ownership and folk culture of Shi Gandang in Macau have evolved several times in the course of history?
- (3) How do we examine the narrative nature of the Shi Gandang religious sites in the construction of community human networks, behavioral life and local meaning and how to define its effective contribution to urban social management, especially the bonds of trust established in the diaspora?

Based on these questions, this study used field research to evaluate the current situation of the Shi Gandang Temple religious site, its surroundings and the composition of the community. In addition, it incorporates historical evidence to understand the background of the creation of the site by extracting the text from surviving objects, such as couples and inscriptions inside the building and interpreting historical documents. Furthermore, the research incorporates interviews with groups of believers, neighboring people and tourists to understand the spatial elements that were used to organize and manage the relationship between the local community and the people at the Shi Gandang Temple. The preliminary study found that the Shi Gandang beliefs, as an important part of Macau's folk beliefs, provide an important gateway to the cultural and economic cohesion of the expatriate community because of its attributes that are closely related to people's lives. It helps to promote the preservation and utilization of folk faith culture and its spatial spaces in the context of modern urban development.

## **2. Origin: the introduction and formation of the Shi Gandang beliefs in Macau**

### *2.1 Area and trends of its spread*

From the earliest written content and Shi Gandang physical objects, it is observed that Fujian was the earliest and most influential center for the dissemination of the Shi Gandang beliefs. This observation has been recognized by several Shi Gandang belief researchers, which has expanded the research into the main propagation paths of the Shi Gandang beliefs and their influence at home and abroad. After the Shi Gandang beliefs in Fujian were formed during the Tang and Song Dynasties, they spread to southern China and other parts of the mainland with the migrating people. After reaching Mount Tai and forming the Taishan Shi Gandang. The Shandong area, where Mount Tai is located, became central to the spread of Shi Gandang beliefs in the north. This explains why the worship of the three-character Shi Gandang and the five-character Taishan Shi Gandang is common in the southern region. However, in the northern region of China, the five characters of the Taishan Shi Gandang are the main cultural form. This is due to the influence of the different communication points; however, its

connotation orientation is the same (Tao, 2017). In addition, because of the “going to the Nanyang” immigration boom, mainly from Fujian and Guangdong, Shi Gandang beliefs spread to Taiwan, East Asia, Southeast Asia and other overseas regions. Primarily based in the Ryukyu Islands, Japan, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam, Thailand and even in the Americas in places such as Brazil, Canada and other Chinese-inhabited areas, Shi Gandang beliefs have been widely integrated into the local society (Xiaofeng, 2018).

Based on the above analysis, three trends in the history of Shi Gandang’s belief can be summarized.

- (1) With Fujian as the main point of dissemination, it moved toward the south and the east, primarily to the coastal areas, such as Guangdong, Hainan and other parts of East China.
- (2) It spread north and west, with Shandong as the main transmission point, primarily to inland and northeast China and other places.
- (3) It spread overseas through immigrants from Fujian and Guangdong. A domestic and foreign belief network circle of Shi Gandang beliefs formed in these areas.

Shi Gandang belief culture evolved into new forms in different places and found a place in various spaces, such as roof ridges, in front of land temples, walls and cemeteries. At the same time, in terms of material and craftsmanship, there are various expressions, including a combination of the Eight Diagrams, paintings, cement work, pottery and stone tablets, which have gradually become a part of the local culture.

### *2.2 The formation and spread of the faith in Macau’s Shi Gandang*

The formation of the Macau Shi Gandang belief is related to the migration of a multi-ethnic population, geographical relationships, urban environment and cultural background, although there is no clear historical data about how, when, where and by whom the Shi Gandang beliefs were introduced in Macau. However, in the demographic composition of Macau, immigrants from Fujian, Guangdong and other places held some of the answers, owing to the prosperity of the marine trade in the Ming Dynasty, Fujianese, who made a living by shipping and fishing, traveled overseas. As a maritime transportation hub, Macau became the primary transit point and destination for the Fujian traders. In addition, Macau was separated from Zhongshan and Zhuhai in Guangdong by a river. Historically, it was under the jurisdiction of Guangdong. Irrespective of the economic and geographical relationship, Macau, Fujian and Guangdong had an inseparable connection. In addition to being deeply influenced by local folk beliefs before migration, the Shi Gandang beliefs, which were widely popular in Fujian and Guangdong, were brought into Macau with the immigration tide. Therefore, it can be inferred that the formation of the Shi Gandang beliefs in Macau could not have been later than the Ming Dynasty.

Furthermore, the Shi Gandang beliefs coincided with the actual needs of Macau due to its functional attributes and spiritual orientation. From the island city to the Macau peninsula, Macau’s land resources had always been scarce. The tense situation of land use led to the reclamation of the sea and an extremely complex transportation network due to uneven terrain. Several bridges, slopes, curves, intersections and street corners were built across the urban travel space. Shi Gandang, who could exorcise evil spirits and avoid plagues, stabilize the wind and prevent water disasters, was widely welcomed. The prosperity and spread of the Shi Gandang beliefs and customs became inseparable from the urban geographical environment.

In addition, from the perspective of the cultural background of Macau’s development, folk beliefs were an important cultural phenomenon in Macau’s Chinese society. During the

Portuguese occupation, the Chinese in Macau borrowed the power of folk beliefs to retain the status of the Chinese culture under the dominance of Western culture and strive for the local development of native culture. Shi Gandang is widely popular in Macau because of its simple production, such as the use of a piece of stone or wood for its carving, wide range of uses and eye-catching placement.

### **3. Development: from stele worship to the divine place**

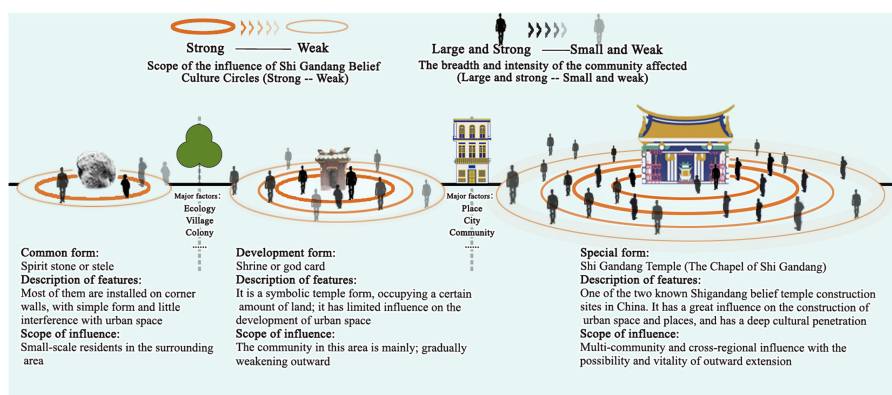
#### *3.1 Background to the construction of the Shi Gandang temple*

Before urban expansion and the construction of residential areas, San Kio District (now San Kio Fong) [1] was located in the hinterland of Macau. It was a low-lying farmland with vegetable borders and a few households of mostly poor farmers. To facilitate communication with the villagers in the coastal areas, such as Rua da Palmeira (Mazi Street) and Sa Kong [2], a simple wooden bridge was built on the Lin Kai River across the stream. However, because of turbulent tides, the dilapidated wooden bridge often collapsed, causing panic. People living here raised funds to build a new bridge, hence, the name, San Kio District. At the same time, the Shi Gandang stele stone was placed at the head of the bridge to commemorate the establishment of the new bridge and people's expectation of safety and security.

Population growth deepened Macau's multi-ethnic aggregation. People living near San Kio District often had disputes over issues, such as arable land and water sources and were repeatedly bullied by outsiders. To resolve internal conflicts and strengthen unity, the people proposed the establishment of a public office in the San Kio District to gather and discuss matters (an equivalent of a neighborhood meeting presiding over local affairs). However, getting people with different interests together to discuss their differences was the main challenge. The belief in gods played an important role in this matter. This joint significance of religious sites and spirits gave the concept of spatial spirituality. The idea was that they inspire people to do good for the community (a catalyst) by making them spiritual, providing reassuring healing and helping them connect with their inner selves (self-reflection) and other people in different ways (Kim, 2016). In the research about Mazu's folk beliefs [3], Yande indicated that the gods became the center of Macau's urban activities. He further elaborated that when a belief is universally recognized, a spirit of credit is formed by coordinating interests, protecting stakeholders and maintaining credit (Yande, 1998). In San Kio District, the Shi Gandang beliefs became a common belief because of problems such as early flooding, road feng shui (风水) collisions and bridge collapses. The people hoped to take advantage of Shi Gandang's magical power to invite the gods into the temple to raise funds and build a public office (using the Shi Gandang Temple as a public office). This demonstrated that the form of enshrining Shi Gandang in Macau has transformed from a monument into a temple. Two factors were mainly considered. On the one hand, it was for pacifying disputes and uniting internal opinions about the construction of the public office. In addition, through the deterrence of Shi Gandang as a God, folk beliefs and social activities blended and evolved into a spirit of credit recognized by the people. Through these belief circles, it has influenced the psychological trends, attitudes and daily behaviors, thereby, deepening the trust between the local people (Figure 1). This was a positive interaction for the mutual achievement of the development of Shi Gandang beliefs and local social management.

#### *3.2 The characteristics of the divine place in the Shi Gandang temple*

The establishment of the Shi Gandang Temple is an important aspect of the development of the Shi Gandang beliefs in Macau. Judging from the current remains, two main temples in China worshiped Shi Gandang (the other is the General Temple of Shi Gandang in Jinan, Shandong). This can be regarded as a unique and rare way of existence (Figure 2). According



Source(s): Authors work

**Figure 1.**  
The evolution of Shi Gandang forms and its impact on the spatial scope and vitality of the city

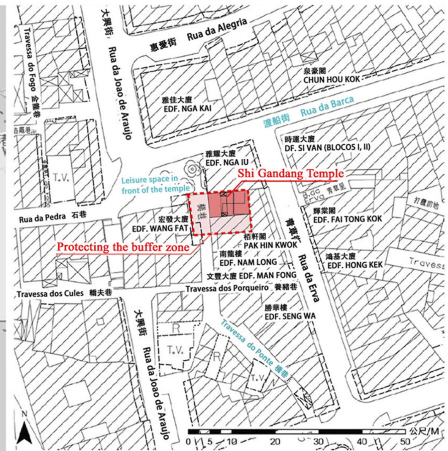
to the “Inscription on the Creation of the Shi Gandang Office,” in the 20th year of Guangxu’s [4] reign in the Qing Dynasty, the “Hoengsaan Macau San Kio Street Congregation” (香山澳門新桥街众) was the builder of the Shi Gandang Temple. Hence, the people of the Macau New District, Xiangshan County, which belongs to Guangzhou Prefecture, initiated the construction of the temple, providing further proof of the origin of the Shi Gandang belief in Macau and Guangdong. The construction timeline ranges from the 11th year of Qing Guangxu (AD, 1885) to the 20th year of Qing Guangxu (AD, 1894). Although the temple is small, the construction period reveals the limited economic capacity of the companies and individuals who advocated and donated at the time and the overall poverty-stricken living conditions in San Kio District, resulting in a lack of funds for the construction process. According to legend, the father of a wealthy Macau businessman, Lou Kau, after the temple was completed, sent people to build a statue from the Shi Gandang General Temple in Jinan, Shandong, and consecrated it at the Shi Gandang Temple in Macau. Hence, Shi Gandang became the statue of Jiang Taigong [5], the main God of the temple (it is said that Shi Gandang is the title of Jiang Taigong) (Yonghui and Jinguo, 2015). However, this legend is not supported by historical facts and may be based on the popular imagination. Nevertheless, in the 20th year of Guangxu’s reign at the Shi Gandang Temple, the Changlian “God Yang Taishan and Mingdang Kongdao” (神仰泰山名当孔道) described the connection between the Shi Gandang Temple and Mount Tai and Kongdao, pointing out the historical fact that the gods originated from the orthodox Taishan Shi Gandang.

Today, the Shi Gandang Temple, located at No. 7 Travessa da Ponte (Bridge Lane) in Macau, can be seen as a concrete manifestation of the development of Shi Gandang beliefs, evolving from natural and primitive stele worship to deity and figuration. Since the original front and side halls have become high-rise residences, the scale of the existing temples is smaller than the original construction. It retains the two main parts of the front door and the main hall, which are connected by a corridor and a small patio in the middle for ventilation and lighting the hall. With the lingering tower incense, it creates a solemn and divine sense of space (Plate 3). The overall temple building is symmetrical around the central axis and the main structure is mainly made of bricks and wood. The walls are constructed of water-milled blue bricks in a transversal manner. The hall floor is paved with vermilion-fired Guangdong large-order bricks and blue-striped granite. The fascia panels and the underside of the eaves are the focus of the painting with auspicious flowers and animals as the primary themes, echoing the spirit of the Shi Gandang beliefs. The overall architectural approach reflects Lingnan architecture.





Shi Gandang Temple is located in the hinterland of the city in Macau



Situated at a road intersection, the Shi Gandang Temple is closely related to the urban space



Shi Gandang Temple



Interior shrine space



Tall building outside the patio in the temple



Taishan Shi Gandang Stele in front of the gate

Figure 2.  
Status of Macau Shi Gandang Temple

Source(s): Authors work

The statue of Shi Gandang in the center of the main hall is the image of Jiang Taigong, which is based on the beliefs and customs of Shi Gandang Jiang Taigong theory of conferring goods (in addition to Shi Gandang, there are legends, such as Doctor Shi and General Shi). Guanyin Bodhisattva and Taisui God are enshrined on the left and right sides, respectively. In addition, there are the gods of Taoism and Buddhism, such as the Golden Monkey King of Xishan, Ziwei Zhengshen, Marshal Fuhu, Caibo Xingjun and Guan Di (Plates 4 and 5). Hence, Shi Gandang is not exclusive as a folk belief and multiple gods are welcome for an inclusive



Source(s): Authors work

**Plate 3.**  
The patio and tower  
incense in the Shi  
Gandang Temple

worship. The couplets, plaques and inscriptions in the temple provide an important reference for this study to understand the history of temple construction and the psychology of the believers. At the same time, it is a physical representation of the good wishes of the believers for safety and health. For example, the couplet at the gate, "Do things fairly and impartially to be sustainable, and look at others and yourself objectively and impartially to create peace and health together" (公是公非创立规模垂久远, 正人正己协同心力兆安康). They reflect the importance of fairness and justice among the believers of the Shi Gandang beliefs. After reclamation in 1915 and urban expansion in 1940, the original stream and farmhouse in front of the temple disappeared. However, the venue used to be lively as the ceremony venue for Shi Gandang's birthday. Until the 1970 and 1980s, with the sharp increase in the population and the number of vehicles in Macau, the old residential buildings in the surrounding area were



Source(s): Authors work



**Plate 4.**  
The statue of Jiang  
Taigong in the shrine  
of the main hall in the  
Shi Gandang Temple



**Source(s):** Authors work

demolished and rebuilt, and ceremonies such as the parade of the gods were suspended. Today, there are simple sacrificial activities, such as temple operas.

From the above analysis, it is evident that the construction of the Shi Gandang Temple was not an overnight process. It had three main stages.

- (1) The first stage was the original spiritual stone worship. At this time, Shi Gandang was placed on the hade of the bridge and at road intersections as a spiritual object to exorcise evil spirits. Its spiritual orientation was relatively pure.
- (2) The second stage was the transition period of functions that resemble temples but were public offices. Compromises were made mainly because of the practical need of solving the social problems of the time.
- (3) The third stage was an exclusive worship place for Shi Gandang beliefs. This was an affirmation of Shi Gandang's positive contribution to the local area. At the same time, it was the inevitable result of the return to the original function of the temple after urban development and the evolution of historical beliefs.

#### **4. Evolution: Shi Gandang temple as an important medium for social development in Macau**

##### *4.1 The social function – from the townhouse to ward off evil spirits to pluralistic education*

After Shi Gandang beliefs were introduced into Macau, it showed an evolutionary way of “doing as the locals do.” Since the construction of the Shi Gandang Temple, its spirituality has gradually shifted from the basic function of being the townhouse to ward off evil spirits to undertaking various rituals. It further ritualized a series of activities, such as praying for good fortune and auspiciousness, driving and eliminating disasters, to enhance its functions of dissemination, publicity and education. At the same time, with the protection of temple buildings, and by clinging to other gods to improve their divine power, Shi Gandang beliefs preached divinities, such as the God of Wealth and Protection God, and derived the function of setting up free schools and promoting people's livelihood of free clinics. These roles never appeared in the belief of Shi Gandang in China. It is evident from the overall evolution and role of Macau Shi Gandang that people intentionally internalized the Shi Gandang beliefs into their daily code of conduct and the moral code of the society to better serve the locality and unite the neighbors. This was a direct manifestation of secular education with the help of the gods (Guo *et al.*, 2022). This adaptive relationship between folk beliefs and the traditional social neighborhood network, as a spiritual attraction, promoted fairness and justice in the

community, penetrated the daily life of the community and indirectly participated in the construction of social meaning at the level of consciousness. It led people from different regions, occupations and classes toward a common identity (Broy, 2022) born out of the interaction between Shi Gandang beliefs and the social relations in Macau.

#### *4.2 The management mechanism — from the director system to family inheritance*

Judging from the current situation of the Shi Gandang in various places, most of them are placed behind street corners, and there is no deity to worship. In Macau, because the Shi Gandang Temple is a fixed sacrifice place managed by special personnel, there are many worshippers. From the couplets, plaques and other textual information in the main hall of the Shi Gandang Temple, it appears that a director management system has been in place since its establishment. Written in the 20th year of Guangxu (AD, 1894), the plaque of “Yi Bo Yuntian” (义薄云天) was signed with the inscription, “Promoting Construction: ‘Chen Liansheng Deyuan Factory, Li Jinyou Welfare Factory, Liang Houhua, Rong Maotai, and Taitong’” (倡建值事: “陈连生 德源厂 黎金有 福利厂 梁厚华 荣茂泰 同敬送”). Special personnel, consisting of both individuals and physical factories, organized fundraising, which explained the vastness of Shi Gandang’s belief circle. The inscription on the plaque of “Zeji Dongren” (泽及同人), “Muen Janjiao is on duty . . .” (沐恩建醮值事) explains that there were special personnel in charge of ceremonial activities in the hall. The plaque of “Sound Ling Hezhuo” (声灵赫濯) in the 20th year of the Republic of China (AD, 1931) was signed, “Creating duty: Yuanli Store, Chentang, He Changdian, Liantai, Maoli, Guangtai, and Cai Yongsheng” (创建值事: 源利店 陈堂 和昌店 联泰店 茂利店 广泰和 蔡永胜), which confirmed that there were management personnel specially responsible for the construction of the Shi Gandang Temple during the repair process. The vocabulary points to the fact that the Shi Gandang Temple had a complete management system in the early days, which is an interesting and meaningful discovery. The on-site research indicated that the current Shi Gandang Temple is mainly managed by the Liang family, passed down to the second generation, Leong Kamfong, supporting a family style management system. This evolution of the management mechanism from the early director system to the family lineage system explains, to a certain extent, that in the context of modern urban development, the Shi Gandang beliefs face the possibility of a shrinking belief circle.

#### *4.3 Folk culture — from simple sacrifices to divine birthday celebrations*

The early stele worship of Shi Gandang beliefs simplified the procedure and content of sacrifice, it placed small incense burners to facilitate the activity. In sharp contrast, the Macau Shi Gandang Temple released the greatest advantage of the ceremony space due to its place-building characteristics. Driven by the common Shi Gandang beliefs, Shi Gandang’s birthday was annually celebrated on the seventh day of the first lunar month and a grand temple fair was held on San Kio Street. A theater was built at the junction of Rua de João de Araújo (Daxing Street) and Rua da Barca (Ferry Street). Believers carried the statue of Shi Gandang to parade around San Kio Street, accompanied by floating colorful flags, to protect the people’s travel and livelihoods. In addition, there were traditional magical performances, fireworks and other entertainment activities in front of the temple. In the Shi Gandang Temple Hall, people scrambled to offer incense for worship, offering sacrifices ranging from a few pieces of clothing paper and incense sticks to fruit and meat. The rituals of the gods were performed in various forms and the entire community was part of the celebration. These ritualistic interactions between the inner and outer spaces of the Shi Gandang Temple gave the Shi Gandang beliefs social significance and created a household atmosphere conducive to the cultural circle and relationship network of the community. This was an effective way to strengthen the sense of place identity (Wang, 2019). However, the changes in the surrounding

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urban environment and the shrinking space in front of the temple weakened the ritualistic form of Shi Gandang and the perception of the space. This is a key issue that deserves further reflection.

## 5. Conclusions

This study provides a framework for future research on the Shi Gandang beliefs in Macau. By tracing the creation of the Shi Gandang lineage, it explores the impact of the Shi Gandang beliefs on people, objects, spirituality and culture from multiple perspectives, including the transmission of beliefs, the interaction of the advocacy process, participation in local practices and the derivation of the development of use. The findings of this study answer the questions posed in [Section 1.3](#).

- (1) How were the Shi Gandang beliefs formed and transmitted in Macau? What are its connections with the culture of origin and what role did it play in the lives of the local people, especially the expatriates? – Due to the Chinese immigrants from Fujian and Guangdong, trade and commerce, and geopolitical relations became the driving force. In addition, urban geography and spiritual sustenance were the main factors, which together constructed the historical lineage of the formation and transmission of the Shi Gandang beliefs in Macau. They relied on the power of the Shi Gandang beliefs to identify themselves and be anchored in the local community ([DeMaria Harney, 2006](#)). Through multiple interactions of ritual, space and culture, the diaspora created an urban memory in their place of immigration ([Sparre and Galal, 2018](#)), connecting the past with the present, which provided the impetus for strengthening local rituals and community solidarity ([Gao et al., 2019](#)). Hence, the Shi Gandang lineage acts as a spiritual container, accepting the local people's love and respect for their culture and origin and as a manifestation of the cultural continuity of Shi Gandang beliefs.
- (2) How do we identify the competing relationships between the internal and external variables in the creation of the Shi Gandang religious sites and the urban spaces, given that the place-making, management entities, temple ownership and folk culture of Shi Gandang in Macau have evolved several times in the course of history? – Religious sites can be seen as open public spaces with both inner spirituality and outer form ([Knott, 2017](#)), which the Maya regarded as the culturally iconic symbol of the various artistic expressions of the city ([Frühsoerge, 2015](#)). This study further pointed out that, similar to most folk beliefs, the historical dynamics of Macau's Shi Gandang beliefs are a process of continuous interaction with regional development. Although this process may produce unsatisfactory compromises, such as the occupation of the external environmental space by urban development and the transformation of the internal space because of social and secular needs; however, the tolerance of religious beliefs can maintain a positive effect in an unfavorable environment. This notion is supported by the Shi Gandang Temple's integration into the daily life and behavior of modern people through different rituals for spiritual guidance, while the space in front of the temple is constantly being reduced because of urban developments. Therefore, this interactive process is a cooperative, rather than a confrontational, relationship.
- (3) How do we examine the narrative nature of the Shi Gandang religious sites in the construction of community human networks, behavioral life and local meaning, and how to define its effective contribution to urban social management, especially the bonds of trust established in the diaspora? – The article demonstrates that the Shi Gandang Temple acted as a key node of the human connection hub in local networks

and provided an important venue for complex interactions between religious power and local communities. As a space for ritual performances and secular life entertainment, it connected the demands of different groups and places to meet their positive expectations of life. The research on the Macau Shi Gandang Temple and its beliefs can prove that when a folk belief becomes a local belief and value orientation, its right to participate in local activities is enlarged. As an “agent,” it can effectively influence the behavior of the community by believing in magical and strong powers, breaking the psychological boundaries of the believers and gathering to solve practical problems objectively. It can become a self-organized local management model without official top-down intervention, which would save social resources and promote community harmony.

This study extends the discussion about the local development of the Shi Gandang beliefs beyond the Macau Shi Gandang Temple and provides insights into the continuous interaction and integration of Shi Gandang beliefs into community life. However, several questions remain answered in this study. Follow-up studies would be required to understand if the range of Shi Gandang believers is determined through the ritual flow of the tour, when and why did the director system management model begin to evolve into a family style management method, its impact on the Shi Gandang beliefs and the possibility of cross-regional connections in the Macau Shi Gandang beliefs circle, with the help of the Shi Gandang platform.

#### Notes

1. San Kio is a small open garden next to the Cinema Alegro and near Lin Kai Temple on Estrada do Repouso. Many farmers lived here in the past. Now, the area has been reduced and has become a living area with modern buildings.
2. Before the expansion of the urban area by the Macao–Portugal government, the north of San Kio Village belonged to the Sa Kong District and had the Sa Kong Village.
3. Mazu or Matsu is a Chinese sea Goddess, known by several other names and titles. She is the deified form of the legendary figure, Lin Mo or Lin Moniang, a Fujianese shamaness whose life span is traditionally dated from 960 to 987. Revered after her death as a tutelary deity of seafarers, including fishermen and sailors, her worship spread throughout China's coastal regions and overseas Chinese communities, throughout Southeast Asia to the United States, where some Mazuist temples are affiliated with famous Taiwanese temples.
4. Guangxu Emperor (August 14, 1871–November 14, 1908), personal name Zaitian, was the tenth Emperor of the Qing dynasty and the ninth Qing emperor to rule over China proper.
5. Jiang Ziya (fl. 12th century BC–fl. 11th century BC) was a Chinese noble who helped kings Wen and Wu of Zhou overthrow the Shang in ancient China. He is often known as the “Grand Duke Jiang” (姜太公; Jiang Taigong), the “Grand Duke's Hope” (Taigong Wang; 太公望), and the “Hoped-for Lü” (Lü Wang; 吕望). In the Tang Dynasty, he was accorded a personal state temple as the martial patron and attained the officially sanctioned status approaching that of Confucius. In Chinese and Taoist belief, Jiang Ziya is sometimes considered to have been a Taoist adept.

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