

Ethnography in China Today: A Critical Assessment of Methods and Results.

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**RITUAL LITERALIZED:  
A CRITICAL REVIEW OF RITUAL STUDIES ON THE  
NATIONAL MINORITIES IN GUANGXI,  
GUIZHOU, HUNAN AND SICHUAN**

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This review article covers the methods and results of six volumes that report on ritual studies among four national minorities in four provinces of China. The four nationalities are the Tujia, Xilao, Maonan, and Miao and the four provinces are Hunan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and Sichuan. All six volumes are published in the series "Studies in Chinese Ritual, Theatre and Folklore" (see Table One).<sup>1</sup>

**I. Table One: Volumes Reviewed**

1. Duan Ming 段明, *The Masked Yangxi in Xinglong Village, Youyang*

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<sup>1</sup> This review is an abbreviated version of the Chinese version distributed and discussed at the "Conference on Ethnography in China Today: A Critical Assessment of Methods and Results," May 14-16, 1998. I gratefully acknowledge the comments on the original Chinese version given at that conference. The lengthier Chinese version is being revised for separate publication. I am also thankful to my husband James Wilkerson, who made helpful comments about language and argument.

- Tujia and Miao Nationalities Autonomous County in Sichuan* 四川省酉陽土家族苗族自治縣雙河區小崗鄉興隆村面具陽戲. No. 4, 1993. 310 pages. Abbreviated below as *Tujia Masked Yangxi*.
2. Meng Guorong 蒙國榮, *The "Recompensing the Gods for Fulfilled Wishes" among the Maonan Nationality in Huanjiang County in Guangxi* 廣西省環江縣毛南族的「還願儀式」. No. 11, 1994. 365 pages. Abbreviated below as *Maonan Recompensing the Gods*.
  3. Wang Ch'iu-kuei 王秋桂 and Tuo Xiuming 庾修明, *A Field Report on the Nuo Exorcism for Calendrical Conflicts for Seniors among the Tujia Nationality of Huangtu Village, Dejiang County, Wenping Township, Dejiang County, Guizhou* 貴州省德江縣穩坪鄉黃土村土家族衝壽攤調查報告. No. 12, 1994. 528 pages. Abbreviated below as *Tujia Nuo Exorcism*.
  4. Tuo Xiuming, Yang Qixiao 楊啓孝 and Wang Ch'iu-kuei, comp., *A Field Report on the Nuo Exorcistic Altar for Initiation into the Office of the Ritual Master among the Yilao Nationality in Cengong County, Pingzhuang Township, Guizhou* 貴州省岑鞏縣平庄鄉佬族攤壇過職儀式調查報告. No. 13, 1994. 426 pages. Abbreviated below as *Yilao Nuo Altar Initiation*.
  5. Zhang Ziwei 張子偉, *The "Maogusi" of the Tujia Nationality of Shuangfeng Villiage, Heping Township, Yongshun County, Hunan* 湖南省永順縣和平鄉雙鳳村土家族的毛古斯儀式. No. 47, 1996. 397 pages. Abbreviated below as *Tujia Maogusi*.
  6. Yang Lan 楊蘭 and Liu Feng 劉峰, *A Field Report on Celebrating the Altar for Honoring Ancestors among the Miao in Xinguang Village in Guizhou* 貴州省晴隆縣中營鎮新光村硝洞苗族慶壇調查報告. No. 50, 1996. 311 pages. Abbreviated below as *Miao Celebrating Altar*.

These six books are a refreshing change from past publications on ritual studies among China's national minorities. All the volumes share the principle of "collect holistically, record honestly, and organize carefully" and the goal of "striving against over-generalizing and unsupported empty statements in publications" (Wang and Tuo 1994: 2). Each volume provides valuable first-hand field material and fills what has so far been a yawning void for high-quality descriptions of local ritual traditions and ritual performances among South China's culturally diverse

national minority peoples.

All six volumes follow closely a general design set by and funded through Wang Ch'iu-kuei's project "Chinese Regional Theatre in Its Social and Ritual Context." Each volume reports on a single rite witnessed on site by the researcher or researchers as well as such aspects of that rite's social context as ethnicity, local society, and ritual genres. Close attention is also paid to the performing troupe's organization, inheritance, and the personal background of the individual members. In particular, a special effort is given to the collection and reproduction in appendices of liturgical texts and, for some, transcriptions of the actual performances.

In so doing the authors or compilers of the various volumes followed the directions given in *Manual for Writing Field Reports* provided by the Project. That manual directs that each report should contain: (1) an overview of the basic data of the village and its folklore; (2) basic data on the rites in general; (3) a detailed description of the process of the ritual performance, including the people, occasion, time and place; (4) the type of performing troupe (e.g. theatre troupe versus *nuo* troupe, for instance); (5) the performance and its theatrical genre; (6) a conclusion.<sup>2</sup> The considerable consistency among the various volumes results from close adherence to this outline. Over half of each monograph is given over to appendices, which is evidence of generous funding and a sophisticated understanding of the value of accuracy and primary source material. The appendices include, besides manuscripts and ritual texts, photos taken during the ritual performance, and especially photos of the different stages of each rite, the paraphernalia of the ritual specialists, and their altars.

I find this otherwise admirable effort to insure the authority and accuracy of the volumes through the imposition of a standard outline to be self-defeating in literalizing the ritual performances. First, the descriptions of the performances of a rite as unique events are literalized in the sense that the descriptions do not include discussion of the discontinuity of that performance with other performances of the rite. Second, the descriptions of the performances of a rite have an emotional and aes-

2 The author thanks Professor Wang Ch'iu-kuei for providing me with a copy of the Project's *Manual for Writing Field Reports*.

thetic superficiality that robs the ritual performances of their vitality. Also, announced intentions notwithstanding, descriptions of the ritual performances and local social context do not include sufficiently precise detail to show how specific ritual performances are integrated into the lives of the individual people, communities, and regions who make up the social contexts of the ritual performances. This gap between performance and context means that the descriptions fall short of the announced goal to describe one rite well, and so miss the possibility of learning what ritual theatre is really all about. At best the careful reader can, after considerable effort, fill in this gap by piecing together different parts of the book.

The review below will spell out the above points book-by-book. I will start with the five volumes on rites for “recompensing the gods for fulfilled wishes” (*huanyuan* 還願) and end with last volume on “dressing up as ancestors” (*Tujia Maogusi*).

## II. Tujia Nuo Exorcism

The volume *Tujia Nuo Exorcism* records a *chongshou nuo* 衝壽攤 (*Nuo* exorcism for calendrical conflicts for seniors), which took place between six-thirty in the afternoon on February 18 and four o'clock in the afternoon on February 20, 1992. A Tujia national minority resident, Zhang Jintai, held a *chongshou nuo* exorcism for the birthday of his father, Zhang Yusheng, in Huangtu Village, Wenping Township, Dejiang County, Guizhou Province. The *chongshou nuo* exorcism only takes place for those over sixty. It differs from other birthday celebrations in including “religious ritual.” The *chongshou nuo* exorcism can take only one day or last as long as three or four days depending upon the financial means of its host (p. 57). The performance described is an instance of the longer version.

After a brief introduction, the body of the book is divided into eight chapters followed by three pages of footnotes. The eight chapters cover:

1. The social cultural background and the ecological environment.
2. The host Zhang Jinta's family.
3. The ritual master of the *nuo* exorcistic altar Zhang Jinliao.
4. Preparations for the *chongshou nuo* (pp. 16-57), including descrip-

tions and figures of the altar and pictures of the altar being set up, the gods and goddess in the sacred scrolls, and so forth.

5. The ritual sequence (pp. 57-129) divided into:
  - (1) Ritual activities (*fa-shi* 法事) (pp. 57-87).
  - (2) *Nuo* altar plays (*nuo-tang xi* 攤堂戲) (pp. 87-111).
  - (3) *Nuo* birthday congratulatory blessings (*zhu shou* 祝壽) (pp. 111-125).
  - (4) Tearing down the altar (*shou tan* 收壇) (pp. 125-6).
6. The costumes and the paraphernalia used by the *Nuo* exorcistic altar.
7. *Nuo* music and dance in the performance.
8. The masks used in the *nuo* exorcistic plays.

After the body of the book, appendices include 26 liturgical texts and scripts (pp. 162-464), one genealogy (p. 465), several music recordings (pp. 466-476), and 100 pictures (pp. 477-528). The author concludes that this *chongshou nuo* exorcism follows the “procedure and structure” of “opening the altar inviting the gods,” “opening the grottoes entertaining the gods (people)” and “closing the altar and sending off the gods” (pp. 126-128).

Anyone familiar with Chinese-language publications on local culture and religious practices will appreciate the effort given by the series to fieldwork methodology, particularly in this volume with its appendices, which take up over seventy percent of the volume. The title clearly indicates that the book is about one ritual performance in a specific place. The appendices self-evidently stress the collection by the researcher of the actual liturgical texts used in the rituals reported upon. The volume's table of contents also speaks to the intention to place the ritual performance squarely within its sociocultural and performative context.

The source of the masks should be noted. Dejiang County is fortunate in the number and antiquity of the masks used in *nuo* exorcistic plays, with some dating back to the Qing dynasty. These masks are classified as valuable “cultural objects” (*wenwu* 文物) under the care and preservation of Dejiang County's Nationalities Committee (*minwei* 民委).<sup>3</sup> The Nationalities Committee has collected most of the more

<sup>3</sup> The author also provides a table listing the collected *nuo* “cultural objects” kept in the Dejiang County Nationalities Committee Office (p. 155).

valuable masks and related ritual paraphernalia. When local ritual masters perform *nuo* exorcistic rites they must borrow back the masks. The Nationalities Committee was also involved in the ritual performance recorded in this volume, including the borrowing back of several masks. The masks used in the ritual performance are listed in a table (pp. 156-7) by name and size. Photos of masks that are “cultural objects” are provided in the appendices (Photos 93 to 100, pp. 524-27).

The contribution of the book is curtailed by what I call the literalization of ritual performances. In recording the one specific performance, the author fails to indicate whether the *chongshou nuo* exorcism is related to the general life-cycle rites in that locality, and how it is related to other *chongshou nuo* exorcisms elsewhere in that locality. Though given a description of the longer version of the *chongshou nuo* exorcism, we are not told about less elaborate versions or, more to the point, what is the minimum required for a ritual performance to count as a *chongshou nuo* exorcism, and what is the minimal “ritual work” required in *chongshou nuo* exorcism to effect the “Recompensing the Gods for Fulfilled Wishes.” We do learn, however, that the ritual specialist was asked to perform, and complied, awkward the “ritual work” of *shangdao* 上刀 (pp. 105-6). *Shangdao*, it so happens, is “ritual work” that is normally performed as exorcistic rites for children, not seniors. The author provided no explanation of the relationship between *shangdao* and *chongshou nou* is general.

On the other hand, the fascinating accounts of the origins of the main gods of the *nuo* exorcism — the *Nuo* father (*nuo gong* 難公) and the *Nuo* mother (*nuo mu* 難母) provide an example of insufficient detail concerning the social contexts (pp. 7-9). The various legends about the *nuo* father and mother include the themes that: (1) they are the primordial siblings from whom humanity was procreated; (2) they are the principal tutors for the emperor and queen; (3) they are lovers whose marriage was frustrated by others; and, (4) they are commoners who are killed for resisting oppression by the imperial court. Information is lacking, however, on the source or sources of these legends. Who transmits these stories (ritual masters, ritual specialists, commoners, men or women), and their social distribution are just as important as the contents of the stories.

### III. Maonan “Recompensing the Gods”

The second book reviewed here on *huanyuan* 還願 (recompensing the gods for fulfilled wishes) is Meng Guorong’s *Maonan Recompensing the Gods*. Meng Guorong tells us that the most important part of *huanyuan* is a ritual play for “singing and leaping for the gods” (*changshen tiaoshen* 唱神跳神) (p. 56). The bulk of the book is given over to a description of a *huanyuan* rite which took place in February 1993 in Wei’er Hamlet (*tun* 屯) Xianan Village, Xianan Township, Huanjiang Maonan Autonomous County, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region 廣西壯族自治區環江毛南族自治縣下南鄉下南村委峩屯.

Following a brief introduction (pp. 1-8), the bulk of the book is divided into eight sections followed by appendices. Chapter One gives a general introduction (pp. 9-15), and Chapter Two gives a social, cultural and ecological overview of the Maonan nationality (pp. 16-58), including a summary of Maonan *nuo* exorcism plays (pp. 40-58). Chapter Three provides background about the family, troupe, and preparations for this particular performance of *huanyuan* (pp. 58-64). Chapter Four describes the altar and arrangements for the *huanyuan* rite (pp. 64-67); Chapter Five discussed the preliminary rites, starting on the afternoon of February 1 (pp. 67-69); and, Chapter Six the formal rites of singing and playing for the gods, beginning at eight-thirty in the morning on February 2 and lasting until dawn on February 4 (pp. 69-81). Chapter Seven gives a brief introduction to the music, dance, costumes and utensils used by the ritual specialists (pp. 81-86), while Chapter Eight introduces the masks and the legendary stories of each god being played at *huanyuan* (pp. 86-104). Chapter Nine consists of two pages of acknowledgments (pp. 104-105). Thereafter follow several pages of footnotes, references, and a name list of key informants (pp. 106-111). The rest of the volume is taken up with appendices in the form of tables, maps, figures, texts and scripts, and pictures. These appendices form almost two-thirds of the whole book (pp. 112-365).

Compared to *Tujia Nuo Exorcism*, *Maonan Recompensing the Gods* has a solid introduction (pp. 1-8) that provides a more comprehensive description of the ritual context, its performance and related rituals.

Comparing with the ritual genre of *shigong* 師公 theatre, popular among the Zhuang nationality, the author lists in his introduction six characteristics specific to *huanyuan* among mountainous Maonan villages. First, *huanyuan* is not equally popular throughout the Maonan nationality. Maonan in Ningshi City do not perform *huanyuan*, and the practice is not universal in all mountainous Maonan villages, such as that of the Meng family.<sup>4</sup> Secondly, a *huanyuan* performance counts as a *xi shi* (felicitous event), like weddings and birthday celebrations, but differs in including singing, dancing and chanting. Thirdly, *huanyuan* is performed at the host's house and on a household basis. Fourthly, ritual specialists wear masks to play gods at *huanyuan* performances. The singing is mostly in the Zhuang language, though some is also in the Maonan language. Chants and mantras are in the Han Chinese dialect of Desheng Township, Yishan County, which is incomprehensible to most Maonan.<sup>5</sup> Fifthly, *huanyuan* are performed by *shigong* ritual specialists, who either inherit the profession from their fathers or learn the skill from a ritual master. However, being a *shigong* is always a sideline to another livelihood. Sixthly, and especially different from the dialogue of the *shigong* theatre of the Zhuang, the Maonan *huanyuan* performances include references to modern history no earlier than early in the Republican era (1911-1949) (pp. 1-6).

Though the introduction takes steps in the right direction, the relationship between the performance and the people still leaves something to be desired. I feel in this case the influence of the Project *Manual*. For instance, in *Maonan Recompensing the Gods*, Meng Guorong loyally reviews Maonan life and sociocultural background, gives a map, describes the ritual masks, and describes the dance and music as instructed by the Project *Manual*. Unfortunately, the entire review is irrelevant to our understanding of the ritual. The maps (p. 112, p. 113) serve no apparent purpose in the volume. Similar frustrations occur

with the four-page description of music, dance, costumes, and ritual objects (pp. 83-86) as well as the three-line description of the masks (p. 86).

Despite placing the *huanyuan* within its local context and other useful information already mentioned, the relationship between the February 1 through 4, 1993 *huanyuan* performance and the general Maonan sociocultural and ecological background is still not worked out in any detail.

On the other hand, some of the details provided are misleading. Meng Guorong even gives the time to the minute when the rite starts. Left out, however, is the significance of time for the ritual specialists, the host, and the audience. For instance, the troupe performed the play "The Earth God Accompanies the Three Goddesses" (*Tudi pei San-niang* 土地配三娘) at eight o'clock in the morning, and "Hualin Xianguan Sends Off Yinhu" (*Hualin Xianguan song Yinhu* 花林仙宮送銀花) at nine-thirty in the morning (pp. 76-77). Is this sequence prescribed or optional? Can they be performed at other times or in other sequences? By the same token, the last act of the first day is said to be "the ritual master accompanying the host who shoulders the flower child to the room" (pp. 74-75). Could this be postponed until the second day or maybe even the act of sending the "long life chicken" to the host (pp. 75-76)? Is there something about the play that dictates the time and sequence of its performance? Or are the times and sequence optional?

Finally, though documentation of the formal performance is given in great detail, what is counted in or counted out of the performance is up to the author. For instance, Meng Guorong describes how the altar is torn down after the ritual specialists complete their chanting, but also states that in the early morning they then go on to "recall the soldiers" (*shou bing* 收兵). However, between the tearing down of the altar and "recall the soldiers" there is improvisational "singing" (*dui ge* 對歌) which the author mentions but does not record or describe. Similarly, the stage talk or dialogue that is without a textual base is excised from the record of the performances. This is a clear bias in the descriptions of the performances. Why did this happen? I suggest this is a bias that arises from the "cultural heritage" viewpoint in ritual studies. This "cultural heritage" viewpoint takes preservation as primary, rather than studying the living aspects of the performance.

4 However, the author also says later in the book, that the *huanyuan* used to be the ritual activity that was "required to be held in each house at least once each generation" (p. 46). No comment is given to clarify the apparent discrepancy.

5 The author does not provide any information about where Desheng township, Yishan County is located in relationship to Xianan township, Huanjiang county where the *huanyuan* performance takes place.

#### IV. Tujia Masked Yangxi

Duan Ming's *Tujia Masked Yangxi* is also about rituals for *huanyuan*. The book covers two performances of masked Yangxi (also called *tiaoxi* 跳戲 "Leaping Plays") which took place in Xinglong Village, Xiaogang Township, Shuanghe Region, Youyang Tujia and Miao Autonomous County, Sichuan Province. The first performance was held from twelve-thirty in the afternoon of February 7 through twelve-forty in the afternoon on February 9, 1993. The second performance was held from noon February 5 to one o'clock in the afternoon of February 6. In addition, however, Duan Ming also makes an effort in *Tujia Masked Yangxi* toward a more comprehensive understanding of the *yangxi* genre in Sichuan Province.

"Leaping plays" are held locally whenever people want to ask *Guansheng dijun* 關聖帝君 for blessing, to be rid of disaster, evil, and negative forces, request promotion and good fortune, healing, curing and protection of one's health, admission to high school, and to welcome the approach of felicitous events. Those who host the "leaping plays" do so to "recompense the gods for fulfilled wishes" (*huanyuan*) as a gesture of gratitude. If they fail to perform "recompensing the gods for fulfilled wishes," then disasters cannot be avoided and fresh disaster will visit that household (p. 20). For those who are praying for descendants and the protection of a pregnancy or for children, prayers should be directed to the Jade emperor (*Yu huang* 玉皇).

In studying the masked *yangxi* as a ritual genre, Duan Ming gives clear comparisons across Sichuan of various *yangxi* in the transmission of the offices and ritual knowledge, the size of the troupe, and the different styles of performance. He also tells the reader why the genre of the *yangxi* popular in the Youyang and Xioushan area are called "masked *yangxi*," and that not all the *yangxi* figures and stories in the Yang world are used in the Yin altars set up for funerals. The genre is called the "masked *yangxi*" because all male roles, but not the female roles, are played with masks.

After a brief introduction, the body of the book is divided into six chapters (pp. 1-89) covering:

1. The geographical environment and livelihood of Xinglong Village residents.
2. Some of the basic materials of the masked *yangxi*.
3. The structure and content of the "leaping plays," including that of a performance of "recompensing the gods for fulfilled wishes" and a performance of "rewarding the gods and worshipping the ancestors."
4. The structure and lineage of the altar troupe.
5. The attitude of the members of the altar troupe and the villagers toward leaping plays.
6. Conclusion.

Over two-thirds of this book is given over to appendices (pp. 90-310), including: the liturgical texts used at the two performances, the scripts and examples of the music scores, pictures of the masks, and scenes from the two leaping plays. Also included are scripts and texts not used in the two performances of leaping plays in Xinglong Village (pp. 198-242, pp. 244-249). These materials will be welcomed by those interested in gaining a wider comparative perspective.

By including two different performances, Duan Ming's *Tujia Masked Yangxi* provides a clearer explication of the structure of the ritual performances of the leaping plays. In general, there are three segments. The first and last sections are the more solemn and religious, while the middle section is more ludic and theatrical. The first section may include the rite "Inviting the Gods" (*qingshen* 請神), "Guanye Secures the Altar" (*Guanye Zhendian* 關爺鎮殿), and "Madam Pang Secures the Stage" (*pangshi fujen zhentai* 龐氏夫人鎮台). The last section will have the rite "Sending off the Gods" (*songshen* 送神), "Guanye Sweeps the Altar" (*Guanye saodian* 關爺掃殿), and "The Altar Master Throws the Eggs" (*zhangtan laoshi toudan* 掌壇老師投蛋). What happens in the middle section seems to depend to a great extent on the talents of the troupe. Also, the rites performed during the first and third sections may vary depending upon when "leaping gods" is performed. The rites "Guanye Secures the Altar" and "Guanye Sweeps the Altar" are unnecessary when the performance takes place at the ritual master's home "because no evil would come, nor any ghosts dare to make trouble" (p. 62).

Though Duan Ming's *Tujia Masked Yangxi* gives a comparatively better picture of the structure of "leaping plays," important questions

remain about it. For instance, the performance of a "leaping play" at the ritual master's house included the rites of "Inviting the Gods" and "Madam Pang Secures the Stage" in the first section, "Winter Plum Blossom" (*dong meihua* 冬梅花) in the middle section, and "Sending Off the Gods" in the last section. However, the expected "The Ritual Master Throws the Eggs" was missing. The only explanation we have is that this particular "leaping play" was for the annual "Rewarding the Gods and Thanking the Ancestors" instead of "Recompensing the Gods for Fulfilled Wishes." Instead the troupe performed "Frolicking All Around" (*wandeng wanxi* 完燈完戲) (pp. 61-64). We are told early in the book that the "leaping plays" for rewarding the gods and worshipping the ancestors need to be done before the conclusion of the local custom of "Recompensing the Gods for Fulfilled Wishes at the Lantern Festival." (*tiao yuan deng* 跳願燈) (pp. 13-14). However, no explanation is given as to whether the rite of "Frolicking All Around" has anything to do with the local custom of *tiao yuan deng*, nor do we know whether it is a required rite as "Inviting the Gods," "Madam Pang Secures the Stage" and "Sending off the Gods" are in all leaping plays for rewarding the gods and worshipping the ancestors. The readers' understanding of this masked *yangxi* still depends very much on which performance happens to be reported upon.

I mentioned earlier the value of the data on Chinese folk religion, and especially the unedited texts which appear as appendices. In this volume, however, Duan Ming's *Tujia Masked Yangxi* gives the script to "Winter Plum Blossom," a theatrical play performed at the home of the ritual master in an appendix, but only in outline form. This is in contrast to the inclusion of additional scripts that were not part of the actual performance.

The book contains fascinating comments on the people and community of masked *yangxi* performances. Duan Ming writes in *Tujia Masked Yangxi* about the general background of the people and the community (pp. 4-14), their "belief" in the power of the "leaping plays," and their fondness for the theatrical plays (pp. 73-84), but does so in an unconvincing way. The precise terms of the cohesiveness among the masked *yangxi*, the people, and their lives are not dealt with. For instance, there are fascinating and important comments in an interview with the ritual master in charge of the altar troupe, as well as the carver

of the masks and the leader of the community, about the magical power of the masks, and dreaming as a source of knowledge for mask-carving and leaping plays (pp. 23, 28, 70). Only by pursuing points such as these at length and in detail can the descriptions of the people and the community come into convincing focus.

## V. Yilao Nuo Altar Initiation

The fourth book on recompensing the gods for fulfilled wishes is *Yilao Nuo Altar Initiation* compiled by Tuo Xiuming, Yang Qixiao and Wang Ch'iu-kuei. *Yilao Nuo Altar* describes not only rites for recompensing the gods, but also a very rare initiation into the office of the ritual master of the *Nuo* Exorcistic Altar. The initiation took place in the Yang altar troupe in Pingzhuang Township, Cengong County, Guizhou Province. Xiao Guanghua 蕭光華, a novice who for years had been a disciple of the Yang altar troupe, was initiated into the office of ritual master with the approval of the ritual master of the troupe. At the same time, Xiao took the opportunity to perform the rite "Recompensing the Gods for Fulfilled Wishes" to become a ritual master. These initiation rites are rare even for *nuo* exorcistic altar troupes.

The bulk of the book is divided into eight chapters (pp. 1-164):

1. The socio-cultural and ecological environment.
2. An overview of the Yang Guoding *nuo* exorcistic altar troupe.
3. Preparations for the initiation rites for Xiao Guanghua.
4. The *nuo* altar and its masks and setup.
5. The *nuo* exorcistic rites.
6. Initiation rites.
7. The music and dance of the *nuo* exorcistic altar.
8. The customs and etiquette of the *nuo* exorcistic altar.

The appendices, which are sixty percent of the book, include thirty-two liturgical texts, a table of Cengong County folk artists, and photos (pp. 165-426).

Chapters Five and Six describe the particular ritual performance. Chapter Five divides the *nuo* exorcistic rites into three kinds: (1) ritual work (*fashi* 法事) (pp. 73-86); (2) the *nuo* exorcistic play (*nuoxi* 儺戲) (pp. 86-95); and, (3) the *nuo* exorcistic special skill (*nuoji* 儺技) per-

formed by the novice in the initiation to the office of the ritual master (pp. 96-100). During the four days and nights of the ritual, twenty-seven ritual tasks, eight exorcistic plays, seven kinds of special skill (including stepping on a burning hot plough, balancing a burning tripod stand on the head, holding a burning iron in the mouth, dipping hands into burning oil in a wok, walking through burning charcoal, and ascending the knife ladder) are performed by the novice. A timetable shows clearly the arrangement and the sequence of the ritual work, the play, and the display of special skills (pp. 70-72). Thirty-two kinds of the liturgical texts used in the ritual are attached as appendices (pp. 165-373). Chapter Six describes the never before recorded rites of “passing on the magic work and succession to the office of ritual master” (*chuanfa guozhi* 傳法過職). The series of rites (pp. 101-121) “interconnected talismans and rituals” (*fufa xiangtong* 符法相通), “inter-linked flesh and blood” (*xuerou xianglian* 血肉相連), and “inter-linked blood and vessels” (*xuemaixianglian* 血脈相連) establishes a relationship between the novice and the ritual masters of the exorcistic altar.

The book pays special attention to cross-indexing between the text and the pictures, photos, and liturgical texts in the appendices. This makes the volume much more accessible and interesting than the three books reviewed earlier. However, a problem remains concerning the relationship between the ritual performance and the people for whom the rituals are performed. For instance, the “interconnected flesh and blood” between ritual masters and novice is performed through the medium of the exchange of several *pai* cloths from their *paidai* 牌帶 (p.103). This *paidai*, which is an emblem of office of ritual master in the *nuo* exorcistic altar, is made by the novice before he is initiated by the invited “thirty-six unmarried young girls.” Red, yellow, blue, green, purple, orange and greenish blue clothes, embroidered with characters, flowers and grass patterns, are used (p.31). After the initiation, representatives of the old women in the village congratulate this *paidai* emblem of office (p. 114). In other words, this initiation ritual is unique and arresting not only in the relationship between the ritual master, the troupe, and the novice, but also in their relationship to their surrounding community.

## VI. Miao Celebration Altar

Yang Lan and Liu Feng's *Miao Celebrating Altar* is the last of the five volumes under review which cover ritual performances for “recompensing the gods for fulfilled wishes.” The book is a delight to read. The subject is the “Celebrating Altar” (*qingtan* 慶壇) among the “Laba Miao 喇叭苗” in Xiaodong hamlet, Xinguang Village, Zhongying Township, Qingling County, Guizhou Province. The main body of the book describes a “Celebrating Altar” rite performed between about eight-thirty in the evening of January 12 to almost four o'clock in the afternoon of January 13, 1994, and was divided into fifty-six rites and four *nuo* exorcistic plays. Yang Lan and Liu Feng tell us that *qingtan* for *huanyuan* (“Recompensing for Fulfilled Wishes”) for the ancestors is specific to the Laba Miao, though it is also used, as elsewhere, for *huanyuan* for the gods (p. 122). Laba Miao attribute misfortune to the disrepair of an altar or failure to build an altar for the ancestors (*dongzhu* 洞竹, literally “grotto bamboo”) (pp. 48-51, p.106). *Qingtan* is often promised when making wishes for dispelling misfortune.

Once more the main body of the book is shorter than its appendices, this time taking up slightly less than half the length of the book. The appendices include pictures and liturgical texts. Yang Lan and Liu Feng indicate that the relationship of *qingtan* to the Laba Miao is through the latter's beliefs in *sandong taoyuan* 三洞桃源 (supernatural and ancestral beliefs). Yang Lan and Liu Feng follow the Project *Manual*, though not mechanically, by dividing the book into ten chapters. The first chapter provides excellent descriptions of the sociocultural context and ecological environment as well as Laba Miao history and relations with such other ethnic groups as the Miao, Buyi, Yilao, and Yi. Today's Laba Miao are the descendants of soldiers sent about 600 years ago to conquer Yunnan during the Hongwu reign in the Ming dynasty. These soldiers stayed as a military colony in Qinglong County, Guizhou Province. The ancestors of the Laba Miao of Xiaodong Village were from the Huguang area, but linguistically and culturally were Miao who had long lived interspersed among the Han (pp. 7-8). Chapter Two gives an overview of the *qingtan* and its history. Chapter Three



describes the composition of the altar troupe, Chapter Four the altar troupe paraphernalia, including especially masks and costumes; and Chapter Five the background of the performance of *qingtan* in Xiaodong hamlet. Chapter Six provides the preparations done for the *qingtan* performance in Xiaodong hamlet. Chapter Seven gives an account of how the altar is set up; Chapter Eight describes the ritual stages in the the *qingtan* performance in Xiaodong hamlet, and Chapter Nine the music and dance used in the *qingtan* ceremony. Chapter Ten gives the conclusion.

The texts and appendices in this volume are consistently better than the others reviewed here; this book succeeds exactly where the other five books fail. That is, this book successfully handles the relationship between people and performance. It is especially informative in the social and historical background information it provides on the relationship between the Laba Miao and *qingtan*.

The author lays out convincing evidence of the relationship between the Laba Mjiao, *taoyuan sandong* beliefs, and Ming dynasty military colonies. The authors accomplish this in part by the close comparison of place names in the liturgical texts *lutuji* 路途記 and their distribution in space. Doing so enables them to show a close correspondence between those localities where *qingtan* are prevalent and the route for imperial communication during the Ming and Qing dynasties that ran from Hunan through Guizhou and on into Yunnan. The authors furthermore found written records of five thousand households of military colonists (*wei suo* 衛所) in those localities from the Ming and Qing dynasties and learned that they were subdivided first into subunits of one thousand (*qianhu suo* 千戶所) and then one hundred (*baihu suo* 百戶所) military colonist households. The areas where these troops were stationed are the same areas where there is substantial evidence of altar troupe activities (pp. 21-22). The author also suggests that the Laba Miao in the Zhongying area are the descendants of those who were originally stationed in Nanwei in Guizhou. *Qingtan* activities became the ethnic symbol of the Laba Miao only after they started their military settlement in Guizhou, where they lived among the other Miao ethnic groups, the Yilao, the Yi and the Buyi (pp. 8-9, 21-27). *Qingtan* is from their original inheritance of *qing niangniang* (慶娘娘) activities in the western part of Hunan (pp. 28-29, 32-33) where their ancestors were

from.

Other scholars will want to look in greater detail into the authority of the correlations suggested by Yang Lan and Liu Feng's *Miao Celebrating Altar*. What I stress here is that, right or wrong, their hypothesis does address the central issue of the relationship between people and ritual performances. The evidence even supports the hypothesis in the additional sense that it helps make sense of such liturgical texts as the *lutuji*, where that text describes how the ancestors (both male and female) enter the altar area (pp. 88-92, 120, 193-207).

Unfortunately, however, the contemporary relationship of the people to the ritual performances includes much that is simply not covered because it is contemporary rather than indicative of past practices. Especially interesting would be a more thorough description of the relationship between the emotional and efficacious aspects of the ritual performances. For instance, if one reads closely the scripts of *shiliu hua* 石榴花 and *lutuji* in appendix three (pp. 193-215), one cannot but admire the rich vibrancy and, as Victor Turner would have called it, the *communitas* of the ritual performance. However, the description of this aspect is limited to only three words: enthusiastic, highly-spirited, and extraordinarily energetic (p. 133).

## VII. Tujia Maogusi

In contrast to the other five books reviewed above, Zhang Ziwei's *Tujia Maogusi* is not a field report. *Maogusi* ritual performances are prevalent among the Tujia nationality in Yongshun County and Guzhang County, Hunan Province. Zhang Ziwei's *Tujia Maogusi* is evolutionary in approach (e.g. pp. 15, 35, 92, 119-120, 120-123, 176-181, 182-183), with modern accounts of the ritual performances being used to draw conclusions about an earlier way of life. This view of ritual performance ignores the fact that the *maogusi*'s modern history has alternated, since at least the 1950s, between appropriation for use as an emblem of the Tujia nationality and as a target for eradication during periods of political turmoil.

Zhang Ziwei describes state intervention into the *maogusi* as beginning no later than the Qianlong and Jiaqing reign periods of the Qing

dynasty (1736-1820). Local histories are quoted to show that the *maogusi* was already considered obscene and lewd by that time. The state banned *maogusi* many times, especially from the Yongzheng reign period (1723-1735) on, after Chinese officials replaced local native officials. The *maogusi* was “discovered” in the late 1950s and early 1960s during a nationwide survey of folk art, and was described as a survival of archaic forms of Chinese primitive dance, music, and fertility worship (pp. 2-4, 95-96). The tables turned during the Cultural Revolution, and the ritual masters in charge of the *maogusi* performances were humiliated and even tortured. With liberalization and a more tolerant attitude toward nationality customs, the Yongshun County Cultural Office choreographed the *maogusi* into twenty-four standardized motions on the basis of written records from the 1950s and early 1960s and the performances of elderly people willing and able to perform (pp. 95-96). Ritual masters are no longer involved in the contemporary performances of the *maogusi*, where it is a part of annual ancestor worship performances (*sheba ri*) (pp. 40-41, 70-71).

The Tujia term for *maogusi* is *babuka* or *babukari*, which means “hairy ancestors” or “dressing up as hairy ancestors” (p. 37).<sup>6</sup> The author argues that *maogusi* should be understood as an exorcistic play of “dressing up as ancestors” after the annual ancestral worship rite in the early spring. In conclusion, the author defines *maogusi* as follows: “*Maogusi* is a kind of primitive theatre that combines worship, singing, and dancing together, originally in the *sheba* hall (the village level *tuwang* 土王 shrine). In *maogusi*, villagers dress up as ancestors who lived during the fishing and hunting era [of cultural evolution]” (p. 175).

After a five-page introduction, the main body of the book is divided into six chapters:

1. Overview of Shuangfeng Village and its beliefs.
2. Overview of the ritual performance, and especially *sheba ri* ancestral worship activities, *maogusi* performances, and their historical development. This review gives a picture of the highpoints in historical development and spatial distribution in various counties, townships, and villages. It also discussed performance, organization, plays, and

dates in the *sheba ri* activities and times of the *maogusi* performances in these places. The Shuangfeng Village *sheba ri* activities took seven days and nights, and seven and a half natural villages or hamlets took turns sponsoring each night's activities.

3. The evening ritual activities are described in comparative detail. These activities include: inviting the ancestors to the *sheba* hall; purifying the hall; dancing the hand-waving dance (*baishou wu* 擺手舞); singing the *sheba* origin songs; and, performing the *maogusi*. The plots of the *maogusi* plays differ each night (pp. 75-79), including plots of “meat chasing,” “fish catching,” “wife capturing,” “studying,” and “*zuo yangchun* (做陽春).” The former three plots Zhang Ziwei cites as evidence of the ancestors belonging to a fishing and hunting stage of social evolution. The plot of “studying” reflects the stage of the civilized life. The plot of *Zuo yangchun* describes how order is established out of chaos through the ritual specialist *tima*'s singing.
4. Accounts are given of the performance troupe, including the names and ages of *maogusi* performers, life histories of some performers, legends about the ritual master *tima*, and various ancestral figures in the *sheba* hall.
5. Descriptions are given of the performance and its theatrical forms, including dance, songs, make-up, and costumes.
6. Discussion of the hypothesis that the *maogusi* is a “living fossil” in the history of theatre.

The appendices include all “relevant” written material which Zhang Ziwei collected from the village and local histories. This material includes all the inscriptions he could find in the ancestral halls and temples; all accounts in the Yongshun County local history about the ancestral temples, worship, poetry, customs, founding ancestors of the village, and materials on the local native officials (*tusi* 土司). The appendices also include several *sheba* songs, not all of which were performed, transcripts of three *maogusi* plays romanized in the Tujia language and with Chinese translation (pp. 237-261), as well as some transcribed texts whose origin and use are not stated (pp. 262-318).

In all, the book gives a good overview of the custom of performing *maogusi* at a regional level, and some historical background about its development. The author suggests the custom of playing the “hairy

6 The author only uses Chinese characters, instead of a romanization or IPA transcript, to record this Tujia terms. I thus romanize from the Chinese characters.

ancestors” as a reflection of the hybridity of the local population, which involves not only the Tujia, but also Han and the natives before the Tujia were there. However, in addition to using a rather vulgar evolutionary theory to assume the existence of the “primitives” in the “hunting and gathering stage” without demonstrating it, the book also fails in its coherence.

A cursory look at Zhang Ziwei's *Tujia Maogusi* shows that it follows the Project *Manual*, though closer scrutiny suggests to that there is little connection between the headings and the contents under those headings. For instance, in the account given under the heading for the section on “performance troupe, ” Zhang Ziwei's treats ordinary villagers who played in *maogusi* for Shuangfeng Village only as if they were the paid ritual specialists in the Han exorcistic altar troupe (pp. 92-94, also Appendixes 4 and 5). Any villager who has ever played in *maogusi* is listed in the name list. In addition to listing names and ages, each person usually has a *maogusi* role assigned. However, there is no description of how the *maogusi* players were selected and their roles assigned. Under the heading for the section “the life history of important artists, ” there is nothing that relates directly to their lives as performers. For instance, the author gives the life history of Peng Yingfa as: “male, 58 years old, Tujia nationality, elementary-school cultural level, and two-term Shuangfeng Village head. He is the *sheba* hall master for *sheba ri* activities. He plays the role of the beast in *maogusi*” (p.107).

Zhang Ziwei sometimes is overzealous in following the “suggestions” of the Project *Manual*. These excesses should have been caught during the editorial process. The same could be said about the appearance of paragraphs that have little or nothing to do with the section's topic. For instance, in Chapter Three, where the general content is *maogusi* performance, suddenly Zhang Ziwei gives a three-line paragraph (p. 85) about the parade in *sheba ri* activities, not the *maogusi* performance. Chapter Four is about the performance troupe, but suddenly starts with descriptions of the ritual specialist *tima*, his legends and deity scrolls.

## VIII. Conclusion

Of all the volumes under review, only Yang Lan and Liu Feng's *Miao Celebrating Altar* raises a thesis or theoretical viewpoint which explains the lived relationship between people and ritual performance. Zhang Ziwei's *Tujia Maogusi* raises arguments about the relationship between the *maogusi* performance and the people, but it is more about the dead than the living. The other four books can only be read as fieldwork reports of one or two rituals. The appendices each of them provide will probably be much more useful than the main body of the volumes. All five volumes on “recompensing the gods” should be of great interest and use for comparing the different texts. They might best be approached by beginning with the appendices. This is just another way of saying, however, that the descriptions tell us less about the ritual performances than do the original texts themselves.

The effort in making the above volumes possible should be appreciated and the authors congratulated. The flaws I have noted could well be the result of an epistemological bias of viewing rituals as cultural objects or commodities that can be extracted from the lives of the people, community, or nationality. The volumes under review are, largely though not wholly, themselves a cautionary tale about the dangers of formalism, particularism, and objectification of rituals as cultural relics.