

Sacrifice to the Mountain

A Ritual Performance of the Qiang Minority People in China

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Historians of Chinese theatre usually regard the Song Dynasty (960–1279) as a period noted for the emergence of a fully developed theatre, and the following Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) as the golden age of classical Chinese drama. Yet long before theatrical performances became a form of popular entertainment, there were religious rituals aimed at pleasing the gods and bringing good fortune to humans. Some of these early theatrical forms still exist in the remote regions of the country, essentially unchanged by modern civilization. During the summer of 2002, I attended a weeklong conference on Chinese ritual drama held in Maoxian, Sichuan province, where I saw a ritual performance by the Qiang minority people, whose history is as old as the Chinese civilization itself.

A Brief History of the Qiang People

The Qiangs claim to be the descendants of the legendary Great Yu, the hero in the Chinese flood myth and the founder of China's first dynasty—the Xia dynasty (c. 22nd–17th centuries BCE). Although the existence of the Xia dynasty is a matter for debate, relics associated with Yu still abound in what is believed to be his birthplace in modern Beichuan County in Sichuan. The Qiang people first appear in recorded history in the Shang dynasty (c. 17th–11th centuries BCE) oracle bone inscriptions, which contain numerous references to their persecution by the Shang rulers. In the first Chinese dictionary, *Shuowen jiezi*, compiled by Xu Shen in 121 CE, the word “Qiang” was defined as “shepherders of Xirong” and it was written with the character “sheep” as its component: 羊 (sheep), 羌 (Qiang). Chinese characters such as beauty (美), goodness (善), and auspiciousness (祥) all share this “sheep” radical, indicating the importance of this animal in ancient Chinese culture.

From the very beginning of their history, the Qiangs appeared to be great warriors, their bravery in battle greatly impressed King Wu of the Zhou dynasty who led a coalition force of eight tribes to overthrow the oppressive



1. Itinerary of the Conference on Old Qiang Culture, 23–30 July 2002. (From Gu Qiang wenhua shouce [Editorial Committee 2002])

Shang rule. Another important war in the Qiang history was the war between the Qiangs and the aboriginal Geji tribe of Sichuan. After several years of fighting, the Qiangs emerged victorious and their victory enabled them to settle in the upper reaches of Min River in western Sichuan, where they still live.

The Qiangs' relationship with the Han majority alternated between peaceful coexistence and open hostility. During the fourth and fifth centuries, the Qiang and four other nomadic tribes overran the northern part of China and established a number of short-lived kingdoms, known in Chinese history as the Northern Dynasties. Successive Chinese governments, from the Southern Song to the early Qing, tried to control the rebellious Qiangs and other southwestern aboriginal tribes through local chieftains (*tusi*). The Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty, who were minority people themselves, adopted the policy of *gaitu guiliu* to replace the hereditary chieftains with appointees from the central government. This policy continued into the Republican period (1912–1949) with the goal of assimilating the minority peoples into the mainstream of Han culture.¹

When the Chinese Communists passed through western and northern Sichuan during their Long March in 1935, they proposed a new policy of self-rule for the minority peoples in order to win their support against the Nationalists. Now the Qiangs, with a total population of 198,252 based on the 1990 census, have their own autonomous Beichuan County and also share several other counties with the Tibetans in the Aba Autonomous Prefecture. The economic reforms of the past 20 years have brought business opportunities to the Qiang people. A notable

example is the success story of Yan Yiqing, a poor farm boy with a grade-school education who rose to be the CEO of a multimillion-yuan enterprise.

While modern cities have sprung up in the Qiang autonomous counties, many villagers still live in their centuries-old blockhouses, a legacy of their ancestors' wars. These stone houses were built closely together and connected by tunnels so that each cluster of houses formed a defensive unit in time of war. Now the tunnels have been converted to a network of ditches supplying the residents with clear, running water year-round. The house we visited in Taoping, a typical Qiang village built on a mountainside, has four stories with people living on the top three floors and domestic animals in the basement. A simple ladder connects the different floors and a hidden hatch on the main floor provides quick escape in an emergency. Every house has a rooftop balcony where strings of corn and chili peppers hang from the eaves and the ubiquitous white stones are displayed (plate 2).

White Stone Worship and Sacrifice to the Mountain

The Qiangs are pantheists, worshipping a large number of gods such as gods of heaven, sun, fire, mountains, rivers, and trees, all of them represented by the



2. A Qiang blockhouse displays strings of corn and chili peppers and the ubiquitous white stones. Taoping Village, July 2002. (Photo by Yun-sheng Yu)

white stone. There are two legends about this stone. One of them, concerning the discovery of fire by the Qiang people, is recorded in one of their scriptures:

The Niemaier people (the Qiangs refer to themselves by this name) know how to make fire. They are not afraid when there is no fire. With their magic power, they can make fire anytime. By hitting and striking *ebierzi* (“white stone” in the Qiang language) very hard, fire is produced. (in Editorial Committee 2002:66; translation mine)

This magical fire was believed to be a gift from heaven and the Qiangs began to worship the white stone. Another legend links the white stone with the battle between the Qiang and Geji tribes. During this long and bitterly fought war, the Qiangs suffered heavy losses at first, then their grand ancestor, the god of heaven, sent down three white stones, which turned into three snowy mountains to block the advance of the Geji army. Using the weapons made of these stones, the Qiangs finally defeated their enemy. Saved from annihilation by the white stone, the Qiangs regarded it as their protecting deity. The ceremony of Sacrifice to the Mountain (*Jishan hui*) was dedicated to the worship of the white stone, a custom that can be traced to around 771 BCE. This annual sacrifice has become the most important religious ritual of the Qiang people.

The event I witnessed in Maoxian took place outdoors on a grassy ground with the audience on all sides. The program consisted of three parts: the sacrificial ritual, the shamanistic drama and rituals, and the Qiang folk dances. The ceremony began with a procession led by the chief shaman followed by

assistant shamans and musicians playing various instruments such as drums, gongs, *suona* (a woodwind instrument like the Western oboe but with a metal bell and hand bells; plate 3). The sacrificial sheep, decorated with multicolored strips of cloth, also marched in the procession. (A cow is usually sacrificed in this ceremony, but the animal purchased for this purpose died unexpectedly. So, a sheep was used as a substitute.) After the procession, fir branches were burned to purify the ground (plate 4). The chief shaman then walked to the altar, which was a tall stone structure with a white stone placed at its base, planted paper flags all around it, and lit incense. He and his assistants opened three wine jugs on the altar while the musicians played a tune of “Offering to the Gods” and a team of dancers performed a drum dance (plate 5). The chief shaman recited in the Qiang language a long list of gods and ancestors and asked for their help in securing good harvest and good health. The sacrifice reached a climax with the slaughtering of the sheep and the placement of its head on the altar. (I did not see the actual slaughter because of the crowd around the altar and my squeamishness at the sight of blood.)

The next part of the ceremony was called Circling the Mountain or Circling the Pagoda (*Zhuan shenta*), during which time the shamans walked around the altar while chanting the “Peace and Protection Scripture,” followed by the musicians and other participants. The chief shaman then held a plate containing figurines of various birds and animals, made of buckwheat flour dough, and sang a song to invite them to partake of the offerings but warned them not to harm the crops. This done, he then dumped all the figurines into a hole dug in the ground by the altar and sealed the opening with mud. A figurine of a dog was placed at the entrance of the cave to guard the pests from escaping in order to ensure a bumper harvest. The other participants scattered grains or small white stones around the altar. At the conclusion of the ceremony, all the participants and the audience were invited to sip from the wine jugs fitted with long, thin bamboo tubes, and the shamans hung a piece of wool string around everyone’s neck to symbolize protection by the gods. Later that day, the villagers would have a feast to which the conference delegates were not invited.

The nature and function of Sacrifice to the Mountain are similar to that of another ancient ritual, the *nuo xi* (*nuo* drama), but there is a noticeable differ-



3. *Procession of musicians. Black Tiger Village, July 2002. (Photo by Yun-sheng Yu)*



4. Burning fir branches to purify the ground. Black Tiger Village, July 2002. (Photo by Yun-sheng Yu)

5. The Sheepskin Drum Dance, Black Tiger Village, July 2002. (Photo by Yun-sheng Yu)

ence between the two forms. The nuo is characterized by its use of masks, whereas the Qiang actors wear no masks and no makeup.² Instead of masks, the Qiang shamans wear monkey hats, which are made of the fur of golden monkeys and have three peaks on the top representing the god of heaven, the god of earth, and the patron god of the shamans. The monkey hats are considered sacred objects and are only used during religious ceremonies.

About the origin of these special hats, there are two legends. According to one account, the Qiangs used to have a written language, and their patriarch recorded the scriptures he obtained from the gods and other important writings on human affairs on the bark of birch trees. One day when he took out the pieces of bark to be aired, a mountain sheep came and ate them all. With the help of a golden monkey the patriarch captured the guilty sheep and made its skin into a drum. When he beat on the drum he was able to recall the words written on the birch bark. To prevent future mishaps to these precious documents, he memorized them by heart (Editorial Committee 2002:102). Thus began the tradition of oral transmission of the scriptures—and the Qiang people also lost their written language.

Another legend depicts the golden monkey as a Prometheus-like figure who stole fire from heaven. The first two attempts failed because the god of wind and the god of rain extinguished the fire, but the monkey succeeded the third time by concealing the fire in a white stone. It is worth noting that in this legend the golden monkey is closely related to the white stone. In the Qiang language, the first syllables in the names of the monkey's mother and father mean respectively "stone" and "fire." "This implies that fire is produced by stone and hidden inside the stone, and that the half-human, half-simian golden monkey was an offspring of the union between stone and fire" (Qu 2002:1). The white stone and the golden monkey, as the source of fire and the messenger who brought it to the human world, became the totems of the Qiang people. To commemorate the recovery of the lost scriptures, wearing the monkey hat and playing the sheepskin drum also became an indispensable part of Sacrifice to the Mountain. However, the monkey legend is not particular to the Qiang people. The Yi minority people of northwestern Guizhou province have a nuo drama known as *bianren xi* (changing-into-people drama) based on a legend that people derived from monkeys. Actors wear monkey masks for this performance (Mackerras 1992:10). There is also the famous monkey, Sun Wukong, who was born from a stone in the Han Chinese novel *Xiyu ji* (Journey to the West, 1982) by Wu Chengen (ca. 1506–1582). The novel was first published in 1592, but the monkey lore included in it was of much earlier time.

Shibi Drama and Rituals

The second part of Sacrifice to the Mountain featured *shibi* dramatic performance and rituals. In the Qiang language, the word "shibi" means "shaman." Shamanism has a long history in China and has survived to this day in some of the minority people's regions. In pre-modern times, shamans were tribal leaders in the Qiang society. Nowadays they no longer have their political power but are still regarded as spiritual leaders because of their learning and religious duties. Shamans' duties are mainly twofold: to officiate at religious ceremonies, including weddings and funerals; and to pass down the Qiang oral history. Since the Qiangs have no written language, their legends, histories, and rituals form a large corpus of oral scripture, which the shamans must memorize and transmit to the general population and posterity. There used to be more than 300 such scriptures, but only 70 to 100 are performed now. The pieces in this repertory fall into three categories: the Upper Platform Scripture

(*shangtan xi*) deals with the worship of gods, ancestors, and national heroes; the Middle Platform Scripture (*zhongtan xi*) addresses human concerns such as good harvest, peace, and prosperity; the Lower Platform Scripture (*xiatan xi*) is used to exorcise ghosts and evil spirits.

Some of the legends and historical tales have evolved into drama, of which the best-known piece is *Qiang-Ge dachan* (The Battle between the Qiang and Geji) based on the oral epic of the same name. A short episode of this drama was performed for our conference. Two shamans, representing the Qiang and Geji peoples respectively, sang and acted out the story. The following is a part of the narrative that describes this famous battle:

The Qiangs and Gejis again laid out a battle formation and this time they chose their battlefield on a snowy mountain. Mubi [god of heaven] and his son told both sides that they would give them the weapons to be used. First they gave Gejis snowballs, and then gave Qiangs white stones. Gejis attacked first, hitting Qiangs with snowballs. As the snowballs exploded on the Qiang people, the Gejis roared with laughter. Then the Qiangs attacked, throwing white stones at their enemy without mercy. The Gejis died by the thousands, one by one felled by the stones. (in Editorial Committee 2002:144; translation mine)

In this and other performances, one shaman actor could play several characters, as men or women, gods or evil spirits, relying on his tone of voice and movement to indicate which character he was portraying. In addition to singing and acting, an orchestra consisting of drums, gongs, the Qiang flutes, suona, and other folk instruments also played an important part in the performance. The big drum was the most important, and the drummer served as the conductor.

Another important role of the shamans was to act as faith healers. Since it was believed that illnesses were caused by evil spirits, shamans were called upon to exorcise these demons with various rituals such as dancing in a red, hot cauldron, spewing fire, playing with hot iron chains, and climbing a mountain of knives. During the 1950s and '60s these rituals were considered superstitious and rarely performed. In recent years with the development of tourism in the minority people's regions and the renewed interest in the old theatrical forms, some of these rites have been revived. Three pieces were listed in our program, but only one was performed, and it was not as scary as some of the descriptions that I had read. An iron chain was first heated until it got red hot, then it was allowed to cool down sufficiently before a shaman picked it up. He wound the chain around his bare chest and back, and finally around his forehead. The chain was hot enough to leave red marks on his body (plate 6). The shaman's ability to endure pain is taken as a sign that he is possessed by the spirits—and that his power is above the ordinary mortals.

Qiang Folk Dances

Qiang folk dances fall into two general categories: ritual dance, and courtship and recreational dance. Both types were included in our program, with three teams of dancers performing (plate 7). The first piece was called *Heihu Jiangjun wu* (Black Tiger General Dance), which celebrates the heroic deeds of this beloved general who sacrificed his life to save his people. The historical setting of this dance was similar to that of *The Battle between Qiang and Geji*: both events were set against the backdrop of the Qiang people's migration from their original home in northwestern China to the southwest in order to

6. A shaman winds hot iron chains around his body and head. The shaman's ability to endure pain is taken as a sign that he is possessed by the spirits. Black Tiger Village, July 2002. (Photo by Yunsheng Yu)



escape from the hostile northern tribes. Even after they had reached their destination in western Sichuan, their enemies were still in hot pursuit, and the fate of the Qiang nation hung in the balance. At this crucial moment, a brave young warrior named Black Tiger led the people of his village to defeat the invaders but was killed in the fighting. The grateful villagers renamed their village Black Tiger Village and the women of the village adopted the custom of wearing white headdresses—"the ten-thousand-year mourning" as they called them. The young male dancers from this village performed the dance we saw. Through different formations and movements they reenacted the battle scenes while a women's chorus provided accompaniment (plate 8).

After this stirring military dance, the mood of the audience changed from reverence for a national hero to excited anticipation for the next number—a courtship dance called *Dui yijiao wu* (Matching the Jacket Corners). In this dance, an equal number of male and female dancers formed two circles, with the men's circle on the outside facing the women's circle on the inside. They sang and danced around the circle while swinging the corners of their jackets and matching them with their partners' (plate 9). It is in this last movement that a secret message can be sent. If the partners are interested in each other, they will show it by touching the other's jacket corners repeatedly; if they are not interested, they just dance around each other without matching the jacket corners. Sometimes, if one partner lifts his jacket corners very high but the other side does not respond, the audience would burst out in good-natured laughter and teasing. The young people who use this occasion to find a boyfriend or girlfriend or to convey their love to their sweethearts eagerly await this dance. The last dance was called "*salang*," which in the Qiang language means "Circle Dance." As all the participants joined in the singing and dancing, the ceremony of Sacrifice to the Mountain drew to a close.

Conclusions

This ritual performance was originally arranged for our conference, but the entire village turned out to watch and some people even watched from rooftops and treetops. As the performance progressed, more and more people

crowded around the “center stage,” making it difficult for those of us in the back to see and even more difficult to take pictures. My husband did manage to get a few shots but he lost his lens cover in the surging crowds. At first I was quite annoyed by their pushing and shoving, but as I reflected on the enthusiastic reception of the villagers, I realized how important this performance was to them. At a time when professional companies are experiencing a “crisis” due to lack of audience, there is no such problem here. It was reported that ritual performances were equally popular with other minority groups and their rustic shows could compete successfully with film and television (Yu 1989:14).

What accounts for the enduring appeal of ritual drama? To answer this question, let’s briefly review the performance I describe above. The three-hour program included religious ceremonies, reenactments of history and legend, and folk songs and dances. What we saw was a shortened version of the real event, which usually lasts all day and may continue through the night. It is a celebration in which every member of the village can participate. It would be hard to imagine any movie or television program that could offer so much. Several scholars have pointed out that China’s “primitive theatre,” of which nuo drama is the most prominent example, functions as both ritual and entertainment (Yu 1989; Qu 1989; Huangpu 1989). This is also true with *Sacrifice to the Mountain*. The combination of the sacred and the secular, and audience participation makes this ancient ritual an integral part of the Qiang people’s religious and social lives.

Ritual performances are not only important to the various minority groups in China but have a wider significance as well. What Antonin Artaud said about Balinese theatre can also be applied to Chinese ritual drama. Both belong to what he called metaphysical theatre that “draws upon dance, song,

7. *Three teams of dancers. The dancers on the right wear the special monkey hats. Women dancers in the middle wear white head-dresses—“the ten-thousand-year mourning” in memory of Black Tiger General. Black Tiger Village, July 2002. (Photo by Yun-sheng Yu)*



pantomime” and “restores the theatre [...] to its original destiny which it presents as a combination of all these elements fused together in a perspective of hallucination and fear” (Artaud 1958:53).

The combination of singing, dancing, acting, and worshipping in the Qiang ritual performance creates a total and physical experience for its participants and audience that Artaud considered important. Its themes of gods, spirits, and epic battles suggest a cosmic view of the universe consistent with Artaud’s idea that theatre should deal with the universal and absolute rather than the personal and quotidian. With his disdain for a purely verbal theatre and the written text, Artaud believed that modern Western theatre, with its emphasis on psychological and social realities, could learn much from the Asian tradition in which the supernatural world and the human world come together.



8. Heihu Jiangjun wu (Black Tiger General Dance). Through different formations and movements the men reenact scenes from the battle led by the Black Tiger General. Performed at the Conference on Old Qiang Culture, 23–30 July 2002. (From Gu Qiang wenhua shouce [Editorial Committee 2002])



9. A courtship dance called Dui yijiao wu (Matching the Jacket Corners) performed at the Conference on Old Qiang Culture, 23–30 July 2002. (From Gu Qiang wenhua shouce [Editorial Committee 2002])

Following Artaud's idea of "total theatre," Chinese playwright Gao Xingjian also explored indigenous Chinese traditions in order to create a modern theatre. His play *Yeren* (Wild Man, premiered in 1985)³ is a good example of his experiment in combining the "primitive" with the modern. The action of the play spans 8,000 years from the primordial times to the present, and the elusive "Wild Man" from Chinese legends shares the stage with a variety of characters from contemporary society. Performance of a Han Chinese oral epic about creation, nuo exorcising dances, and minority people's wedding songs are interspersed with spoken dialog to give the play a polyphonic structure. In the "Postscript" to the published play, Gao explains:

This play is an attempt to return modern drama to the concepts of traditional Chinese theatre. In other words, it does not depend exclusively on the artistry of its dialog; the traditional theatre's techniques of singing (*chang*), speech (*nian*), acting (*zuo*), and acrobatics (*da*) are also fully utilized. [...] It can be said that this play is total theatre. (Gao 1988:133)

The modern Chinese spoken drama (*huaju*), a transplant from the West, is generally regarded as an art form based on language because of its heavy reliance on dialog, but Gao believes that drama, as a performing art, should not be so limited; hence, in *Wild Man*, he tries to combine the Chinese and Western traditions "in order to create a new form of drama" (1988:140). In writing this play, he was also motivated by his desire to trace Chinese theatre to its origin, not only the Beijing opera and other regional operas, which in his opinion "have been thoroughly transformed by feudal morality," but the much older ritual and folk performances. He journeyed 30,000 *li* (10,000 miles) through eight provinces and many minority people's areas along the Yangzi River to collect the materials for his play. His goal was "to rediscover the techniques Chinese dramatic art possessed at the time of its birth" (141). For Gao Xingjian and other Chinese playwrights who want to break loose from the confines of realism and socialist realism, the long-neglected ancient Chinese ritual drama has become a new resource for the creation of a modern theatre.

Notes

1. For a more detailed account of the *tusi* system and the *gaitu guiliu* policy, see *Beichuan Qiang zu* Editorial Committee (2002:50–168); see also Beichuan County Government Offices (2000:5–14).
2. For studies of *nuo* drama in English, see Qu (1989) and Huangpu (1989).
3. *Wild Man* is included in the anthology *Tansuo xiju ji* (A Collection of Experimental Plays) edited by Shanghai wenyi chubanshe (1986:289–354). An English translation by Bruno Boubicek was published in *Asian Theatre Journal* (Gao 1990:195–249).

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