

Physical Techniques Exhibited by Yao Shamans in *Huanyuan* Rituals

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The Yao people are an ethnic minority scattered around the southern part of China. Their culture is marked by regional diversity, having absorbed the influence of other indigenous peoples while preserving the Yao's original quality. The scope of this report is limited to the Guoshan-Yao people in Lanshan County, Hunan Province, with a specific focus on the physical techniques exhibited by Guoshan-Yao shamans in *huanyuan* rituals, which are performed when requests for help are fulfilled.

Lanshan's Guoshan-Yao people conduct religious rituals mainly to thank the *Panwang* ancestral deity or family god for a wish granted, to initiate a shaman or commemorate the deceased. These rites feature a plethora of physical techniques displayed by a shaman, including religious dances, prescribed movements of the hands and legs, talisman-making, divination and acrobatics.

Among several dozen kinds of religious dances, the dance for summoning the spirits of ancestral masters consists of basic steps and simple movements. Before the dance begins, a shaman dresses himself in a ritual garment, hat, cowl and shoes. He grips a *yatong* (resembling a *hu*: a piece of wood which government officials in ancient China carried to jot down notes when they met the emperor) in his left hand and bends his left elbow in front of his chest. He holds a copper bell in his right hand, bends his right elbow in front of his chest and brings his legs together.

Then, the main part of the dance starts. In bars 1 and 2, the shaman deeply bows his head to the altar, keeping his hands in the same position. In bars 3-4, he leans his upper body forward with his back straight. In bars 5-12, he stamps on the ground, with his knees together and feet in a T-shape. He repeats this four times, moving from side to side. In each bar, he rings the bell in his right hand, shaking it vertically. In bars 13-20, he thrusts his left leg to the left and stamps the ground, with his feet in a T-shape. He repeats this four times for each direction of the compass. In each bar he rings the bell in his right hand, shaking it vertically, tilts his head forward and looks down at the ground.

In bar 21, he kneels to the altar on his right knee and deeply bends the upper part of his body. At the same time, he rotates his left arm clockwise 360 degrees. In bar 22, he leans his entire body forward. Bars 23-34 are the same as bars 1-12. In 35-42, he repeats bars 13-20, but with his right leg thrust to the right. Bars 43-44 are identical to bars 21-22. Then, he repeats bars 1-44.

Meanwhile, the long-drum dance is a ritual dance performed to worship *Panwang*, whom the Yao people revere as their first ancestor. A long drum, which is slender in the middle and stout on both ends, is used in this dance. There are different ways to do the long-drum dance.

The *Chuantuan* dance is another ritual dance which is conducted to pay tribute to ancestors, who lived by fishing and hunting, and to pray for a bountiful harvest. The "tuan" in *Chuantuan* derives from the word *tuanyu*, or soft-shell turtle. In this dance, a shaman, followed by villagers, scurries around the altar, changing his direction from time to time. As he moves, he pretends to make a soft-shell turtle, look for it, catch it, fool

it, tie it up, take it home and chop it up, cook it, eat it and then move his bowels.

Some ritual dances are made up of several sections. For instance, a dance to call forth divine troops includes the following parts: a path is cleared; a valorous officer acting as the advance guard passes, followed by soldiers, the commander, and troops who send out information; new warriors are welcomed by the old warriors of the shrine of the family conducting the ritual; the general accepts the new warriors who are deployed to the family shrine; now together, the new and old warriors and the general line up; offerings are presented to the troops and the troops are sent back to the altar (as the shaman kicks an iron sword, which symbolizes the divine troops, into the altar). In each part, movements representing human behavior are performed. For example, a dance signifying the opening of a path comprises such performances as the cutting of grass and trees, earth digging, roadbed preparation, elimination of rocks from the path, smoothing of the ground and cleaning of the path.

The ritual dances of the Yaos bear folk and primitive facets. A shaman dances to the rhythm of gongs, drums and trumpets, holding ritual implements in his hands and swinging his hips and knees from side to side. The dance's hallmark is its slow movement, and the clear and vivacious rhythm created by these instruments.

In Yao's ritual dances, a shaman turns to the four cardinal points of the compass, or sometimes, to the "five cardinal points," which consist of the four compass points and the center. He first faces the altar and then changes direction in the order of east, south, west, north and the center. The center is sometimes placed at the central gate of the altar and at other times at the center of a quadrangle. Many ways exist to make turns, including the "normal" rotation, which is counterclockwise, "reverse," or clockwise, rotation and 90-, 180- and 360-degree rotations. In some cases, only one person spins at a time, while in other cases, two or more people change direction together.

Photo1 People walk around the altar to summon gods

Photo2 Troop-dispatching dance

Photo3 Long-drum dance

Jue and *gang* are prescribed formations of the hands and legs executed by shamans. The arrangement of the fingers (*zhi*) called *zhijue* is designed to represent either a shape or the meaning, or both, of an object or concept. Several dozen *zhijue* exist, including *Laojun-jue*, *Zushi-jue* (Photo4), *Jiaohe-jue*, *Hehe-jue*, *Wulei-jue*, *Cangshen-jue*, *Long-jue*, *He-jue*, *Hu-jue*, *Ma-jue* and *Dao-jue*. Meanwhile, a shaman presses his palm (*zhang*) with his left thumb based on *zhangjue*. According to Yao belief, the hands have areas corresponding to the twelve Chinese zodiacs, the Eight Diagrams (Figure1) and the Big Dipper, and by touching one such position, a person can form a particular *zhangjue*. A *zhangjue* is demonstrated either alone or in combination with an incantation or a *gangbu* leg movement. Generally, a shaman chants an incantation, forms a *zhangjue* and executes a *gangbu* step. Some *jue* are performed differently, depending on the performer's mentor and, in any case, flexibility is inherent in folk rituals.

Gangbu includes *Qixing-gang*, *Bagua-gang*, *Jiuzhou-gang* and *Bagua-jiuzhou-gang*. The steps of *Qixing-gang*, *Bagua-gang* and *Jiuzhou-gang* respectively symbolize the Big Dipper, the Eight Diagrams and the Nine States of ancient China. As *Bagua-gang* and *Jiuzhou-gang* are often identical, they are also called *Bagua-jiuzhou-gang* (Figure2). There are many *gang* steps which form other objects.

A *zifu*, or *ziling*, is a written charm. Some *zifu* must be written on paper before a ritual; others must be written in the air during a ritual either with the hand or foot, or using a *shidao* sword, bull's horn or brush. In *Kaitianmen*, or the ritual to open the gate to heaven, a shaman ascends a two-meter-high platform called *yuntai* ("cloud platform"). Standing on the *yuntai*, he opens both his eyes, looks widely into the distance and writes the letter "井" (*jing*) with his chin. This *zifu* is believed to open the gate to the Nine Heavens. (Ancient Chinese divided the sky into nine areas consisting of the eight cardinal directions and the center and called them the Nine Heavens.)

When a shaman performs divination, he casts two *gua*, which are horn-shaped implements. Each *gua* has two sides: the front side represents the brighter element Yang and the back side is the darker element Yin. The combination of Yin and Yang which is shown by two *gua* tossed determines the divine message, which is either Yin (when both *gua* show Yin), Yang (when both *gua* are Yang), or Xun (when one *gua* is Yin while the other *gua* is Yang). In some rituals, before casting *gua*, a shaman remembers the time when his mentor imparted to him the art of fortune-telling, meditates on what the mentor told him, and prays that the mentor may help him receive an auspicious message through the divination.

Ritual acrobatics include climbing a blade-rung ladder, walking on blazing coals and holding a burning stone. An example of such mystical stunts is afforded by *Sandu*, a ceremony to initiate a shaman. *Sandu* consists of three rituals: *Pandaoshan* (to climb a mountain of swords), *Guoshuichuan* (to walk across a ship) and *Shuicichuang* (to lie on a bed of needles). These torments have transcendental significance and conjure up the image of the journey to the afterworld. In each of *Sandu*'s three sections, the initiate, led by initiators, circles around the altar several times and falls into a trance. When the ritual ends, the initiate slowly "comes back to the human world" and awakens, as an initiator speaks to him through his relatives and gives him a drink of water.

Photo5 Mounting a blade-rung ladder

Physical techniques performed by Yao shamans in *huanyuan* rituals have two purposes: to demonstrate faith and to enhance the efficacy of prayer. Ritual dances are performed to call forth, pay homage or pray to, entertain or bid farewell to gods, and to exorcise evil spirits.

Meanwhile, a shaman turns to the five cardinal points in order to gently summon or bid farewell to deities of the five directions; or to summon divine troops and horses and drive away malignant spirits.

Zhijue, *zhangjue* and *gangbu*, which are performed to call forth gods and expel evil spirits, are found in highly mystical rituals. The Yaos place a higher value on *gangbu* than on *zhijue* or *zhangjue*. In particular, they have boundless faith in *Bagua-jiuzhou-gang*, which is said to have the power to protect, save or even kill

people.

A *zifu* is believed to enable people to communicate with celestial gods, dispatch terrestrial gods, vanquish ghosts and ward off malevolent spirits. Meanwhile, in divination, the divine message is revealed based on what two tossed *gua* show.

Ritual acrobatics, such as *Shangdaoti* (to climb a blade-rung ladder), *Guohuokeng* (to walk on fire) and *Pengchishi* (to hold a burning stone), are believed to allow the performer to ascend to heaven and change into a deity, as well as to expel evil spirits. Through the three-step initiation ritual *Sandu*, which, as mentioned above, consists of *Pandaoshan*, *Guoshuichuan* and *Shuicichuang*, the initiate is freed from his physical form, acquires profound faith and attains a state of enlightenment. *Sandu* is conducted so that the initiate can communicate with the gods and serve as a bridge between the human and divine worlds.

Many physical techniques have their roots in mythical beliefs. Take *Yubu* (“Steps of King Yu”), which a shaman performs to summon the spirits of ancestral masters. How to execute *Yubu* steps is explained in Vol. 61 of *Yunji Qiqian*, a Taoist encyclopedia compiled in the 11th century: “First, raise the left leg and move it a half step forward. Place the right leg in front of the left leg. Move the left leg toward the right leg to get back to the starting stance (in which two legs are put together). Then, put the feet in a T-shape.” The origin of *Yubu* is described in Vol. 4 of the Taoist scripture *Dongshen Badi Yuanbianjing Yubu Zhiling*: “*Yubu* is a step which summons deities. It was invented by King Yu, the legendary founder of the Xia Dynasty. *Yubu* forms the basis of every mystical technique and encapsulates profound truth. Once upon a time, when Yu tried to control floods, he couldn’t predict the river level fluctuation. Thus, he used an instrument which served to forecast precipitation and wind direction and speed. ...When he reached the beach of the southern sea, he saw a bird moving a rock by laying a curse on it. Whenever the bird calls down a curse, it always executed particular steps. Yu imitated the steps, which turned out to have magical power. Since Yu found this step, it was named *Yubu*.”

The Yao long-drum dance derives from the ancient custom of worshipping the “solar tree,” which has a role similar to a gnomon. The slender middle part of the drum symbolizes the solar tree, while the two stout ends represent the sunrise and sunset. The long drum is used in a dance dedicated to *Panhu*, or *Panwang*, the first ancestor of the Yao people (See: Zhang Jin Song (1991) The Solar Tree Myth and the Yao Long Drum. *Journal of the Central University for Nationalities* No. 3, 75-80. (in Chinese)).

According to folklore, ethnological and archaeological evidence, paternal culture in the prehistoric era gave birth to phallicism. *Zushi-jue* (祖师诀), for example, symbolizes the male sexual organ. Ancient inscriptions on bones and tortoise shells show that the letter “祖” was originally written as “且,” which resembles the middle finger and its joints in *Zushi-jue*.

When a shaman forms *Laojun-jue*, he puts up his thumb, index finger and little finger, while bending his middle and ring fingers, as if to hold a bowl with the three raised fingers. This shape has its origin in ancient belief. Early people used a stone with three legs to support a pot while cooking and worshipped the stone as the god of fire, or the kitchen god. A tripod shape represented not only the fire god, which people believed had three legs, but also the solar god: the sun was regarded as of the same nature as fire, since both emit light and heat. Shamans and ancient kings wore three-pointed crowns, which implied divinity, in order to deify

themselves. The tripod shape formed by the fingers came to be called *Laojun-jue* and was defined as the most sacred of all *jue* in Taoism, which evolved from Chinese shamanistic culture.

The genesis of some physical techniques dates back to prehistoric and early historic times. In a dance to summon the spirits of ancestral masters, for instance, a shaman, executing steps, turns to the four compass points in order to call forth deities of the four directions, that is, the entire universe. The concept of *Si Fang Si Shi* (“four directions and four seasons”) mirrors ancient peoples’ view of the cosmos: they conceptualized time and space based on a square-shaped model (See: Zhang Jin Song (1996) *The Square Culture of Ancient China and the Origin of Bagua*. *Wenhua Yanjiu* No. 6, 81-88. (Published by Renmin University of China.) (in Chinese)).

Meanwhile, a shaman turns to the five cardinal points so as to imitate the cosmic movement, which is referred to as *Wu Fang Wu Xing* (“five directions and five elements”). As ancient people developed the idea of the “center” (that is, the center of the universe), the concept of the five directions emerged. According to the *Wu Xing* theory, the five directions interact with each other. The idea of *Wu Fang Wu Xing* was born in prehistoric times and, in the Eastern Zhou Dynasty (770BC-221BC), developed into a philosophy in which five elements in nature (that is, wood, fire, earth, metal and water) were regarded as the basic components of the universe (See: Zhang Jin Song (2001) *Symbols in Prehistoric China and Primitive Culture*. Beijing Yanshan Publishing House. pp. 46-61. (in Chinese)).

The letter “井,” which is one of the letters written in talisman making, is composed of four intersecting lines. This letter, which has nine sections bordered by the four lines, represents the Nine Heavens, and moreover, symbolizes *Tiandi* (“Emperor of Heaven”). As mentioned above, ancient Chinese divided the sky into nine areas and called them the Nine Heavens. They believed that the center was connected to the eight directions of heaven and earth. When a shaman writes the letter “井,” he draws a circle around it, since heaven is thought to be globe-shaped (See: Zhang Jin Song (2001) *Symbols in Prehistoric China and Primitive Culture*. Beijing Yanshan Publishing House. pp. 108-118. (in Chinese)).

As described above, a *yatong*, which a shaman holds when he summons deities, has the shape of a *hu*, a piece of wood which government officials in ancient China carried when they met the emperor. A *yatong* symbolizes divinity and, out of respect for the sacred, is held in the left hand, which is deemed superior to the right hand: in the Yin-Yang theory, the left corresponds to Yang, the brighter element, and the right is Yin, the darker element. Meanwhile, the tinkling sound of a copper bell, which a shaman holds in his right hand, is considered a means to communicate with gods. The use of a bell originates in the Bronze Age, when copper implements were used in religious rituals.