



龙眼

DRAGON EYE


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A Dragon Eye is a square red stone each Miao village family has at the entrance of their home. The position of the stone is ritually placed by the local badai, a shaman, in consultation with a xianniang, a spirit medium. For the Miao, the dragon expresses the essence, vitality, and persistence of the Miao. Having the mythical dragon live with the family brings prosperity, good luck, health, and harvest. Beneath the dragon eye stone is a bowl and wine, which feeds and honors the dragon spirit. Each dragon eye "sees" and watches out for the family, with each stone connected to a central village well where the dragon lives, creates, and sustains the village community.





Dragon Eye is an immersive video installation. An experiment in ethnographic documentation and an impressionistic journey told in images to capture the vibrancy, intimacy, and sensuality of a time, place, and people. It is a celebration presented to honor people who have carried forward a tradition that is millennia old. The Miao are ancient yet modern, and though in transition, they remain an intimately connected expression of the rhythms and ways of the earth.



My first visit to the Miao region was in 2001. Since then, returning to the region to conduct field research five times. The research was focused on Miao performance traditions, which took me deep into the mountains to document rituals and meetings with Miao tradition bearers, the badai and xianniang.



仙娘

Xianniang (pronounced shen ya) are spirit mediums and are predominantly female. Their cultural function is to enter a trance and access a parallel spiritual reality, channeling family ancestors to enable a dialogue with their living descendants.

They confer with ancestors to identify the source of sickness in the family or the spirits that haunt, guide, or protect the family. The xianniang is the female energy, and the badai is the male, serving as a yin-yang for the balance and well-being of the community.

师父的后代

The term badai encapsulates their role: “ba” means father and master, and “dai” means the offspring, meaning they are the ones who pass the culture on with a sacred charge. Keeping alive and developing the invisible aspect of the Miao culture, ritual, and society is the duty of the badai. The Miao developed rituals for all functions: physical, political, artistic, mythological, literature and poetry, ritual, social organization, and relationships: anything and everything to heal and balance their community and carry out the ancestors’ original culture. The Badai, many of whom cannot read or write, are the encyclopedia of the Miao people.





Numbering over 10 million, the Miao are one of the largest of fifty-five officially recognized ethnic groups in the People's Republic of China. The Miao historically inhabited central China as horticulturalists, herders, and small game hunters until the invading Han from the north pushed them into southwest China over the millennia. After several wars and persecution by the martial Han, the Miao settled in the forbidding Wuling mountains of Hunan five to six hundred years ago. There, they flourished to the point of overpopulating the region with groups of Miao migrating over the last several hundred years to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, where they are known as the Hmong. The Miao people are an indigenous people with many branches sharing social and cultural traditions and a Hmongic language.

In 1948, the Chinese Communist government imposed the name “Miao” to reduce, control, and diminish the richness of the many disparate groups that share a linguistic and cultural heritage. The Miao were internally colonized and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to “revolutionize” ethnic minorities into accepting a “modern identity.” Today, the Miao’s resistance to Han and CCP cultural occupation remains an underlying tension. New challenges with far more powerful consequences now challenge their ancient ways — a cultural upheaval wrought by technology, consumerism, and globalization.



Traveling and showing others is the metamorphosis of learning. Just like a tree. If the tree grows from new branches, you learn from other branches. First, I learned from my father. I learned from his trunk. At the trunk, it is more real, more magic — at the branches, the magic is not as strong. I get up very early to recite the magical words to learn how to make and hold the magic.

The spirits called me. The spirits know my family well. For many generations, my grand and great grandfathers and beyond were healers. Only one son from each generation is chosen to carry this family forward. I was chosen. Only the most honest and dutiful is chosen.

Badai Master, Shi Jinghe



Thomas Riccio

has worked extensively with indigenous groups worldwide as a performance ethnographer and creator. Groups he has worked with include the Yup'ik and Inupiat of Alaska, the Zulu of South Africa, the Sakha of central Siberia (which declared him a Cultural Hero), and groups in Tanzania, Kenya, Zambia, Ethiopia, Korea, Russia, India, Burkina Faso, and with the !Xuu Bushmen of the Kalahari. He is a Professor of Visual and Performing Arts at UTD. He has been a visiting professor at several universities, most recently Jishou University in Hunan, where he assisted in developing a cultural center to document the ritual traditions of the Miao. He has published articles on Miao ritual and is working on a book. A documentary of the Huan Nuo Yuan ritual has been shown at film festivals internationally; he is in post-production for another documentary.

Peng Jin Quan and Wheeler Sparks contributed additional video and photographic material to Dragon Eye. Abundant thanks for their efforts, enthusiasm, and companionship during our travels and shoots. My work in Hunan would not have

been possible without cultural activist and scholar Ma Mei Jin, whose tireless energy, insights, and valuable contributions were indispensable. Within her resides the tenacious spirit, grace, and beauty of the Miao people.

Assisting in the Dragon Eye installation include Kevin Sweet as the projection and media engineer, Alex Hill in construction, Scot Gresham-Lancaster contributing to sound design, and Brian Scott, the installation whiz kid. Special thanks to Laura Kim for her advice, intuition, and encouragement. Thank you, Danielle Avram, for being the SP/N Gallery director extraordinaire and for suggesting the project. Special appreciation to Jessie Budd for her wonderful catalog design and consultation.

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苗族





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