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Zhuiniu Water Buffalo Ritual of the Miao: Cultural Narrative Performed

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Abstract: The zhuiniu 椎牛 ritual is one of the most elaborate of the Miao people of western Hunan, China. Zhuiniu means “kill the buffalo with a spear” and traces its origins to the worship of spirits and natural elements. Sponsored by a family to repay the spirits, the ritual was a village-wide event that culminated with the sacrifice of a water buffalo and a community celebration. The zhuiniu, estimated to be several thousand years old, is rapidly vanishing from cultural memory. In July and August of 2018, six master badai-spiritual specialists of the Miao—were gathered in La Yi 彝族, a village in the Wuling Mountain by the cultural bureau of the Xiangxi Tujia-Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Hunan Province to reenact and document the ritual. Using performance ethnography as research methodology, the author employs on-site observations, interviews, field notes, audio, and video to document the reenactment and describe its significance in the words of its practitioners. This essay argues that the zhuiniu has no definitive expression but is an adaptive and interpretative cultural narrative adjusting to circumstances and practice. The ritual exists today as it had historically, in many and varied expressions and interpretations shaped by local need, geography, and subject to the vagaries to orally transmitted forms of practice. Although fragmentary in performance expression and interpretation, the zhuiniu ritual narrative serves as a mythologically-based script that organizes a series of dramatic events that invites community awareness and interaction. In so doing, this sacred ritual has sustained its importance in conveying, embodying, and encoding a spiritual, social, and cultural record of Miao cosmology, culture, and history. Performatively conveyed—using song, music, costumes, dance and movement, props, and set pieces—the zhuiniu has been efficiently and sensorially reimagined in order to reiterate and reaffirm cultural knowledge. With rural modernization, dissolution of cultural context and need, and the aging of its practitioners, the traditional role of the zhuiniu is now in question.



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1. Contexts

In late July 2018, in the village of La Yi 腊乙, deep in the Wuling Mountains of the Xiangxi Tujia-Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Hunan Province Tujia and Miao Autonomous Prefecture, Hunan, China, six Miao badai gathered to enact the zhuiniu 椎牛 ritual. The ritual, one of their most complex and sacred, culminates in the sacrifice of a water buffalo and is considered the penultimate offering to the gods. Once commonly practiced, it is today quickly fading from cultural memory. Orally transmitted for hundreds of years, the ritual and traditional narratives it encodes and reaffirms have proven to be no match against the prevailing forces of modernization, urban migrations, and the shift to a cash economy.¹

Massive commercial and aestheticized versions of the ritual have been governmentally sponsored to stimulate the local economy, create jobs, and stem migrations to crowded industrial cities. Museums and various Miao cultural heritage parks have been developed to draw domestic tourists to the region, employing hundreds of Miao dancers, musicians, and

artisans (Figure 1). Theatricalized badai shows worthy of Las Vegas are what is presented. A large-scale zhuiniu ritual, which included a sacrifice, was part of the local government's tourism and employment initiatives. These initiatives were shaped as sensationalized entertainment yet careful to downplay "superstition" or ethnic identity, two issues the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has deemed anathema to its efforts to modernize and unify the nation under party rule.



Figure 1. A theatricalized performance depicting Badai. Created and presented by actors for tourists and without any spiritual or ritual significance. Shanjiang Miao Tourist Village in Fenghuang County. 2018. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

Annual Miao festivals are a central component of the region's widely promoted tourism attractions. All festivals are organized and overseen by government offices or representatives, from elected village committees for the village-based events to prefectural or provincial cultural affairs bureaus for large-scale parades and performances. Ethnic tourism, cultural heritage preservation, and rural development intersect in the state, provincial, and prefectural-level programs for the region and play a hyper-visible role in evidencing the projected beneficence and desired successes of national, ethnic policies and agendas (Chio 2019, p. 541).

The most recent theatricalized tourist rendering of the zhuiniu ritual in impoverished Fenghuang County failed to sustain interest or profitability despite best efforts. Heavy rains, rising costs, and poor attendance the previous years forced the cancellation of the event in 2018 and 2019, with the pandemic indefinitely halting future plans.

Knowing my interest in the ritual, Ma Mei, the director of Xiangxi Tujia-Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Hunan Province Tujia-Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Hunan Province Cultural Ministry and longtime research collaborator, organized a gathering of six respected badai in her home village of La Yi. A five-day re-enactment and documentation project of the zhuiniu ritual was prompted by the rapidly transforming and threatened ritual.² The gathering of the six badai was unprecedented, serving as an ad hoc summit to discuss, pool, and exchange knowledge through the step-by-step re-enactment of the zhuiniu ritual.

Each step of the ritual was re-enacted, explained, and discussed to identify each action's details, meaning, and significance. What emerged, and what this paper documents, was a unique scholarly opportunity offering a vivid and considered examination of a ritual from the perspective of its practitioners. Extensive discussions, documentation, and interviews allowed for a thorough examination of the ritual, Miao culture, and badai practice.

Badai practice is orally transmitted, with practitioners adhering to the dictates of their training. For the most part, badai work in isolation or with similarly trained badai. To openly share their ways of working and understanding of the zhuiniu, its meaning, mythology, and importance were revelatory. As diverse understandings emerged, so too did a cosmological narrative of Miao culture that the ritual contained and conveyed. The zhuiniu is essentially an immersive sensory retelling of Miao history, values, beliefs, and society. The zhuiniu is a medium and embodied cultural text that performed and encoded the Miao way of being in and with the world. The zhuiniu has survived to this day by adapting and adjusting. How far it will continue before it passes into history remains to be seen. This paper is a record of an event occurring from 26 July to 1 August 2018.

2. Miao Spiritual Practice

Miao spiritual practices are comprised of animism, ancestor worship, and characteristics common to shamanic practice. "The belief in this unity of nature, spirits and human being makes them very dependent, emotionally and psychologically, on their land. It also points to an internal mechanism of a defensive landscape and a symbolic boundary that resists the outsiders' interference" (Wang 2011, p. 122).

Animal sacrifices and other forms of propitiation are central to these practices. Ritual experts known as badai are the Miao tradition keepers. Badai are formally trained in ritual performance, chants, animal sacrifice, and the making of sacred objects. The badai engage in various practices, among them healing, exorcism, thanksgiving, and life-cycle rituals. Their spiritual role is complemented by the xianniang, who use trance and serve as spirit mediums. The third type of Miao spiritual practitioner works surreptitiously and sorcerer-like, using so-called *gu* sorcery in which they control others through harm inflicted by poisons gleaned from insects (Schein 2000, pp. 53–54).

Each village has a Badai, often more than one, serving their community's spiritual and ritual needs. The position adheres to traditional practice but is shaped to the abilities and personality of the individual badai. In addition to their spiritual role, many badai are also herbalists, fortunetellers, and healers. Being a badai is a calling transferred from father to son. On rare occasions, those not of a lineage line may become badai if they show a spiritual inclination and are taken on as a student by a master badai. The training is extensive and can take many years without guaranteeing an apprentice becoming accepted as a master.

The term badai encapsulates their role: "ba" means father and master, "dai" means the offspring, meaning they are the ones the pass the culture on with a sacred charge.

To keep alive and develop 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. Badai culture is the encyclopedia of the Miao people (S. Shi 2016).

Badai are male. However, there are rare instances of women, the daughters of a master badai, becoming badai. Female badai are also *xianniang* (spirit mediums) 仙娘 and are also referred to as *zimei* 紫梅; they are aligned, but separate, in the spiritual practice of the badai. Most commonly, xianniang are female; unlike the badai, their primary cultural function is to enter a state of trance and access a parallel spiritual reality, often channeling family ancestors to enable a dialogue with their living descendants. Male mediums are generally known as *xianshi* 仙師. (Katz 2022, p. 15) and serve a similar role and relationship with badai.³ In their role, they confer with ancestors to identify the source of sickness in the

family or the spirits⁴ that haunt, guide, or protect the family. The xianniang is consulted by the badai for the setting of ritual dates. “The xianniang is the female energy and the badai the male, serving as a yin-yang for the balance and well-being of the community. The Badai is the male energy” (S. Shi 2016).

But unlike the zimei, who can include women, the badui spirit officials must be male. Their title and authority are inherited through male filial lineage (father to son, or father-in-law to son-in-law). As spirit officials, they have a superior status compared to zimei practitioners. During rituals, the badui actually controls his familiar spirits and is not possessed by them. Moreover, the badui beat drums and wear red gowns during the performance. Therefore, I conclude that the badui spirit officials are shamans, in contrast to the zimei mediums. Spirits may reveal their will and speak to worshippers through the zimei, who have been selected for communicating with spirits for humans. During rituals, the zimei are possessed by spirits, and they function as mediators between yangjian, the living world and yinjian, the spiritual world (H. Wu 2010, p. 34).

All the badai I interviewed adamantly denied entering a state of trance, an ability that is central and classically defines the shaman’s function worldwide. The relationship of the badai to their community is comparable to that of a classically defined shaman in every function except the use of trance to communicate and mediate the material and spiritual worlds. The badai is unique and best described as a spirit mediator or officiator of forms. Rather than entering a state of trance to access the spirit realm, the badai and all their actions, settings, and props serve to unlock what can be described as a code. The badai is the master of forms, and it is when enacting a sequence of performative codes that they open, access, and communicate with the spirit realm. Their rituals are best understood as dramatic narratives, theatrically expressed, that reference, reiterate, and reaffirm the Miao worldview which is held and revealed by way of ritual forms and actions. In this way, ritual serves as a reiteration and reaffirmation of material and spirit world interaction and order.

In January 2016, I interviewed Shi Shougui, a badai master and descendent of thirty-two generations of badai and master in three different schools of badai practice. A man in his 60s, he is, unlike most badai, literate and educated. In addition to being a recognized and sought-after practitioner, the indefatigable Shi has devoted his life to archiving badai culture and Miao history. He is the author of several books, and we met in his self-financed museum and library in the village of Dadongchong Village, Dongmaku Township, where he explained how the badai evolved with the needs of the Miao people. The badai can trace its origins and influences from ancient Tibetan and Chinese shamanism, which serves as the “Root, spirit, energy and inheritance of the Miao people” (S. Shi 2016).

The badai draw upon many traditions and apply a wide variety of time-tested and culturally codified tools—actions, gestures, movements, dance, music, settings, ritual and narrative sequences, divination, song, chant, objects, and animal sacrifice—to open pathways to the spirit world. Their elaborate system of hand gestures, for instance, is used to “open” passageways to a parallel world and to call up and communicate with the gods and spirits (S. Shi 2016).

The Miao zhuiniu has a close correspondence with the ritual practices of other cultures from Southeast China.

[. . .] in both the structure of the ritual sequence and in terms of how the buffalo is handled, are particularly significant. [. . .] The rite is preceded by various preparations and begins with the invocation and invitation of the deities and ancestral spirits. Then follows the sacrifice of the buffalo, and the division of the buffalo body into a number of portions, often corresponding to the number of either tutelary deities of the locality or of ancestral spirits. Finally, there is a feast in which the entire community, however constituted, takes part (Holm 2003, p. 214).

The badai I have interviewed over the years uniformly agree that the mastery of ritual forms enables them to communicate with the spirits. They see their role as functional and pragmatic, addressing spiritual needs through the material world.

From the very beginning of the world, we need the badai as a medium between the spirits, gods and human beings to communicate and help us when gods have problems with people or do something harmful to the people. You need the badai to heal the problems. If human beings do something wrong with the environment, the natural world, they need the badai to ask the gods to help. They hold the tradition and are responsible for learning everything from their teachers. They have the responsibility to do everything, to memorize everything. Only after they have memorized all the rituals, the songs of their master and teacher, are they permitted to practice rituals independently (Tian 2018b).

My fieldwork with various indigenous groups—the Yup'ik and Athabaskan of Alaska, the !Xuu and Khwe Bushmen of the Kalahari and the Sakha of Siberia, among others—suggests that the deep structure of badai culture is Cosmo-centric. For the Miao, the world is animistic, conscious, and dynamic, with

All things having souls [. . .] natural phenomena and ancestors were given supernatural power [. . .] natural phenomenon include ancestors, forefathers, five-grain ghosts, mountain, river, stone, tree, wind and thunder ghosts (Li Wu 2017, pp. 80–81).

The initiate becomes a practicing badai after extensive training and passing through a series of skill and ability tests. Once the initiate is deemed ready, master badai conduct an examination; if satisfied, the initiate is presented to the village and recognized as a legitimate practitioner. The process of training and certifying a new badai can vary widely, and in addition to recognition by the presiding badai master, the village must accept the initiate. The announcement of a new badai is considered a blessing for the village. Badai Wu Xiankun from the village Niuyan explains:

My close master was my grandfather, who taught me skills, singing different songs, reciting in different languages and sacred poems and fighting. Not physical fighting, fighting ghosts and evil. This is what you learn from your close master. There must be four different masters to receive and teach you. These four masters taught me special skills, hand gestures, ritual props and sacred objects, making ritual decorations, Nuo masks, and different ceremonies. These masters were not from my school. During the training, I had to prove I was a good person, and people asked for help, that I could help them, be equal and generous, and do no evil. When my close master said I was qualified and ready, I had to be approved by all the villagers and went to each house asking for approval. There were examinations and demonstrations on a special day, and I showed myself in public at the market. This special day is called Qianjie, the day I prove to all the villagers to be authentically a real master. That is a special ceremony for a would-be Badai to become a real badai, and there must be five masters to approve and decide (Z. Wu 2015).

3. Six Badai

Each of the six badai gathered in La Yi village had varying knowledge of the zhuiniu ritual, the narrative sequence of events, and the spiritual process of altar settings, objects, meaning, and mythology. The zhuiniu was traditionally practiced by badaixiong (Miao tradition), but through the years, many badaizha (Chinese tradition) elements were interpo-lated into the ritual.⁵ This is partly due to the dwindling and aging number of badaixiong and the appropriation and exchange between practices that were once distinct.

The La Yi reenactment project also served as a skill and knowledge exchange with badai learning from one another and with younger badai benefiting from elders. Only two of the six badai were badaixiong; they were 72 and 85 years old. Given the vagaries of

orally transmitted ritual traditions, each knew parts of the ritual with variations. There was never a definitive ritual but rather a composite derived through collaborative agreement (Ma 2018a). The objective of the unprecedented gathering was to produce a written record of the zhuiniu ritual and a documentary film. This essay is offered in tribute to the life and efforts of the participating badai and Miao people.

The zhuiniu ritual varies from region to region and is in a constant state of transformation.⁶ This is so for a few reasons: (1) it is orally transmitted and subject to the vagaries of memory and transference; (2) being sacred knowledge, it must be kept secret; (3) government suppression and persecution of Miao “superstitious” practices during the Cultural Revolution disrupted generational transmission and disrupted practice; (4) modernization and economic migrations have upended traditional village life, profoundly altering Miao society and cultural transmission; (5) many badai are willfully illiterate, preferring to remain closer to the immediacy of the world unfiltered by written words; (6) it has been increasingly difficult for the ritual to obtain community effort and interest; (7) the ritual is cost- and time-intensive; and (8) when combined with the distractions and economic pressures of modernization, it is challenging to organize. The world has evolved beyond the need and ability to enact the ritual (Ma 2018b; X. Wu 1990, p. 104)

The badai and zhuiniu ritual traditions are dying. “Few people practice these rituals because people believe more and more in modern medicine and technology. If they have problems, they go to the hospital, and some people may not know their traditional healing practices” (Tian 2018c).

The last time badai Tian, at eighty-five years old, the eldest of the gathering, conducted the ritual was in 2012. As a badai, he has only conducted two and assisted in three zhuiniu rituals. For intricate rituals such as the zhuiniu, it is not uncommon to have several badai facilitating, a master and two to four assistants. The Huan Nuoyuan thanksgiving rituals I documented (in 2015 and 2016) (Ricci 2019, p. 85) had three and seven badai, respectively. Some badai never reach master status and remain assistants; others are in training and participate under the tutelage of a master badai.

Badai are broadly categorized as either badaizha 巴代扎 or badaixiong 巴代雄. Badaizha, the most practiced tradition, is the “mixed” or “Chinese style” because it is performed in Mandarin and borrows heavily from the Han, Buddhist, and Daoist ritual traditions. All sacred badaizha books and writings, including letters written to the spirits, are in Mandarin (Z. Wu 2015). Red robes distinguish badaizha and their crown-like headpieces, made of leather and called the *san qing fa guan* 三清法冠 (Figure 2), that depict Daoist and Buddhist deities; the performances use “both local dialect and standard Han Chinese” (Katz 2017, p. 158). “In Miao culture, almost all gods and ghosts do not have facial design or detail, so they have been borrowed from Buddhism and Taoism” (Yang 2018a).

In the earliest times the Chinese and the Miao were one family. The Miao was the older, the more powerful, and the more respected brother, and the Chinese was the younger [. . .] But in the centuries that followed the decedents of the two brothers grew apart and forgot their common ancestry, and so the Chinese have forgotten it all together. Moreover, the Chinese descendants have grown more and more powerful and numerous, so that the Miao are now the younger and weaker brothers, the Chinese are the older and stronger brothers. (Graham 1955, p. 27).

The practice and regalia worn by badaizha bear many similarities with those of other Chinese ethnic groups such as the Tujia, Dong, Yao, and Jingpo. All of these are similarly borrowed from the Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist traditions.⁷ They were

[. . .] quite routine on the eighteenth-century frontier, where many locals had taken to the Manchu-style queue or Han Chinese-style clothing as a mark of status [. . .] much later these Miao were to adopt religious practices that they

called guest rituals and practice them alongside their ‘Miao’ ritual (Sutton 2003, p. 125).



Figure 2. Badai Shi Shougui, wearing a san qing fa guan with twelve Daoist and Buddhist gods depicted, marking his status as a master badai. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

In addition to their spiritual practice, it is essential to recognize the badaizha as a multi-disciplinary artist. Their training and work required the making of props and settings, singing and chanting, storytelling, drama, dancing, performance, musicianship, and drawing (writing notes, calligraphy, and images to the spirits).

The other Miao badai tradition is badaixiong, distinguished by white, blue, or black robes and a traditional cloth head wrap. Badaixiong is referred to as the “Miao tradition.” Unlike the Zha School, badaixiong use the Miao language only to tell the stories of the Miao ancestors. Although Miao, most badaizha either do not know the Miao language or have an imperfect knowledge of it.

Those ancient stories cannot be told because they do not know the Miao language. Each story holds a ritual. The difference between badaizha and badaixiong is language. Badaixiong uses the Miao language, and badaizha uses the Chinese language. Badaixiong is for language. Badaizha for military things, the generals and soldiers. Badaixiong are officials and storytellers (Tian 2018b).

The badaizha and badaixiong traditions both recognize thirty-six houses of gods. The badaixiong conduct rituals for sixteen houses of god, the Zha for twenty houses of god. Each house represents a god, which constitutes a unit that is in turn divided into thirty-six different categories of different gods. There are many thousands of categories of gods (Tian 2018c). “Gods” for the badaizha and badaixiong are legendary, mythological, or spiritual figures associated with an archetypal role, task, or need. “Spirits” are more vaguely defined as ancestral (familial, community, or cultural) or as beings that are a form created by a feeling or emotion and are generally negative or evil. If, for instance, a neighbor harbors ill will, it is manifested as a harmful spirit that may inhabit a family’s house and instigate harm or mischief. Like other animist traditions, a thought, feeling, or word has agency, can become a presence, and can accumulate power to affect the physical, mental, or emotional

health and well-being of a person or family. “Ghost” refers to lost spirits, often of an unknown origin.

Within the broadly defined badaizha and badaixiong traditions are several practice variations defined by lineage lines or regions. The overwhelming majority of badai are Zha; however, those initiated and recognized as practitioners are of both the Zha and Xiong schools. With fewer men interested in becoming badai, both schools are challenged and are aging into obsolescence. Many generational inheritors have opted not to continue their hereditary lines. Badaixiong are critically endangered because of the reliance on the Miao language, which has declined among those 40 years old and younger.

Of the six badai attending the zhuiniu ritual, four were exclusively badaizha: Hong Shuyang, Yang Guangquan, Wu Zhengnian, and Yan Zaiwen. One badai practiced both Zha and Xiong: Shi Changwu. One badai exclusively practiced Xiong: Tian Zhanliang.

Badai Shi Changwu was the only badai trained in both traditions; he was most familiar with the zhuiniu ritual and grew into the role of ritual organizer. The respected seventy-two-year-old was trained in both traditions by his father and grandfather beginning at the age of five and became recognized as a badai in his teens. He is articulate and personable and from a long line of badai extending back many generations. “During the Cultural Revolution, I continued to practice in secret because there was much sickness” (C. Shi 2018b).

4. The Miao and Han

The Miao are dispersed over a large geographical area in south-central China, with significant numbers in the Hunan and Guizhou provinces. The Miao are not homogenous, which gives rise to variations in ritual and cultural practice. The Miao badai culture is best understood as the foundation of cultural themes, myths, customs, and social practices that share similarities and variations. Variance is due to the centrality of the Miao village in determining the social, cultural, and economic organization and expression and, in turn, spiritual and ritual practice. Many Miao villages remain isolated and autonomous entities shaped by the geography and historical founding of the village. The Miao are pragmatic functionalists who identify and share a culture wellspring. Each village is specific and unique to its history, location, and geography.

The traditional bedrock of Miao society is the *cunzhai* 村寨 (village). The village is the most critical form of Xiangxi Miao social organization, for it is not only a natural grouping but also an economic community. Some villages have dozens of households; others have hundreds. The affiliations within a village are not organized by blood lineage but rather by clan surnames. People living in a village are treated as brothers and sisters (H. Wu 2010, p. 8).

The Miao migrated southward from central China beginning 2000 years ago and increased in waves to the Xiangxi region six hundred years ago (Diamond 2021 <https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/asia/chinese-political-geography/miao>, accessed on 3 June 2021). The Miao, pushed by advancing Han seeking land and opportunities, could not settle until reaching the rugged Wuling Mountains. The region was undesirable, challenging, and isolated, which provided a respite from the advancing Han. They brought their subsistence, agriculturalist, and herding lifestyle, which required a community effort to survive.

Villages are best understood as micro-units of Miao culture, many of which remain organized by a clan or group of families. Each village worships different animals and shapes their “belief and customs to maintain best ecological balance and biodiversity” (L. Wu 2017, p. 82).

Unmolested isolation lasted for three hundred years, and during this time, the village as a social, cultural, and economic unit evolved. The badai became a significant spiritual, cultural, and civic leader for their community.

The Miao people were on the run and defeated. To protect themselves, the badai became a significant conduit of cultural transmission. The Miao people were illiterate, and the badai had to carry out the physical manifesting, making visible and felt the Miao culture. We had to hide our culture from the Han. The Miao developed two faces, a surface face and something behind and beneath. The badai is the one who reveals the two features, the seen and behind" (S. Shi 2016).

Today, isolated villages remain characteristic of the Miao. Cities like Jishou and Fenghuang, which were founded to serve as military, trading, and political centers, have, to this day, Han-majority populations. The Miao essentially remain village-based as extended families or as a grouping of families generationally cooperating to eke out their existence. They can best be understood as subsistence social units organized to sustain a limited capacity of people who survive as farmers, herders, and gatherers who occasionally hunt and trap.

Historically, each village identified an auspicious tree, which they saw as a sign and called "founder." "The villagers regard it as the 'divine tree' of understanding, which can protect the happiness and well-being of the people in the village and is a spiritual sustenance" (Chen and Bao 2021, p. 102). Such large and older trees (generally maple) are still found on the road just outside a village. "Great trees are the symbol of life, death, marriage, ancestors, and descendants. They symbolize almost all aspects of life and reproductive continuity" (Wang 2011, p. 129). They are considered the "guiding spirit" of the village and revered as an ancestor surrounded by stone altars and worshiped (S. Shi 2016). During my field research (2001–2018), I have encountered a wide range of village identities. Each is recognized and organized by what they grow, the geography, economy, and climate, which directly influences dialects and cultural practices.⁸ "Human activities and material environment together constitute the overall landscape of Miao villages in Qiongdongnan and become the symbol of Miao identity" (Chen and Bao 2021, p. 103).⁹

The cultural complexity of the Miao was shaped in no small part by their historical interactions with the Han, who initially expanded into present-day Miao areas seeking land in the 17th century. Early encounters went quickly from interactions to suppression, war, and colonization.

Governmental mandates imposed on the Miao and other ethnic groups have made for an uneasy relationship with the Han-dominated central government. There were Miao rebellions in 1795–1806 and 1854–1874, with uprisings occurring in 1936 and 1942 (Katz 2017, p. 133) and resistance to governmental policies occurring into the 1950s. All rebellions were about land and control. The Miao were quelled and forced to accept the Qing imperial rule and its inheritors, the Republic of China and then the People's Republic of China.

Republican leader Sun Yat-sen prescribed: 'We must facilitate the dying out of all names of individual people inhabiting China, i.e., Manchus, Tibetan, etc. . . . uniting them in a single cultural and political whole.' Place names in non-Han areas were renamed in Chinese, and people were encouraged to adopt Han surnames. Miao women had their topknots cut off and their pleated skirts shredded by Republican troops; women in Guizhou recalled having their red headdresses removed and fastened to dogs' heads. Meanwhile, the opening of roads to minority areas brought cholera and more aggressive tax collection. Han immigration and appropriation of minority lands were supported by the government (Schein 1989, p. 72)

The PRC established autonomous areas for several minority ethnic groups in 1951, purporting "home rule." During the Cultural Revolution, the Miao were persecuted for expressing their "superstitious" and "harmful" customs, which sent many badai underground and had a chilling effect on cultural expression.

There were many hardships during the communist takeover and the Cultural Revolution; the Miao people ate grass, roots, and tree bark. Those who believed in ghosts and spirits were persecuted. My family's ritual materials were destroyed.

Others secretly hid anything suggesting they were badai. My grandfather and father were persecuted in the 1940s and 1970s and called professionals of superstition and shamed by the community. I trained at the risk of political and personal life. It was a difficult time, and I would learn at night because to become a badai requires person-to-person teaching. It is an apprenticeship, learning by doing. Now the climate has changed and is more accepting. But certain kinds of persecution continue. Four books of mine were published—but I was the second author, the government assigned another writer as a censor. My other materials were not allowed to be published (S. Shi 2016).

The single most destructive force affecting Miao culture and its spiritual practice was the Cultural Revolution, an event from which it may never recover. Rural development and anti-poverty programs have gone far to quell ethnic tensions, but resentments and distrust remain. Ultimately, time and the progression of modern technology, social media, tourism, and a burgeoning cash economy transformed Miao culture, bringing it closer to the Chinese government's values and objectives.

The influx of Han settlers into the Miao region in the 18th and 19th centuries initiated an informal cultural exchange, resulting in an adjustment of Miao spiritual practice. In particular, the badai culture interpolated Han spiritual practices, mythology, cosmology, and deities. Most prominent was the introduction of Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, as well as the *Yijing* or *Book of Changes*,¹⁰ which was adapted and interpolated into badai practice in the Fenghuang area. The Miao adapted regalia, ritual objects, deities, and organization, which were highly developed and characteristic of the Han.

Miao cosmology is very similar to Chinese cosmology. Chinese folk religion divides the cosmos into three interconnected realms: heaven, the world of the living, and the underworld. Here, heaven is equal to the upper realm; the world of the living is equal to earth, and the underground is equal to the spirit world. Indeed, in most of the eastern and southeast Asian areas, this three-part view of the universe is common (H. Wu 2010, p. 35).

In creating a syncretic spiritual belief, the Miao did what so many other world cultures have done. They responded to a changing social and political condition through spiritual adaptation. Their syncretic spirituality evolved in a manner that persists to this day and can be viewed as a theatrically performed expression of their historical journey and evolution. Syncretic adaptation was key to the Miao ability to process humiliation and subjugation by providing a means to assert agency. It was a means to take ownership, transform, empower, and mitigate the trauma of defeat. This assertion will vividly reveal itself in reference to calling on martial implements, such as swords and flags, and protectors in the form of generals and soldiers to do battle on their behalf—all of whom are of Han origin.

“Interestingly, some Han settlers adopted Miao cultural lifestyles during the 18th and 19th centuries. In the changing frontier of western Hunan, the main flow of influence can go either direction” (Sutton 2003, p. 109). The Han settlers were taken by the Miao lifestyle and welcomed into the Miao community. Today, several hundred years after Han settlers arrived, certain villages are known as “Han Miao” in recognition of their historical origins, acculturation, and subsequent Miao “otherness” (Cheung 2012, p. 152).

The six badai gathered to re-create the zhuiniu ritual exemplified the rich, varied, and syncretic Miao culture, making it difficult to assess and document the ritual. “They are not culturally homogenous, and the differences between local Miao cultures are often as great as between Miao and non-Miao neighbors” (Diamond 1996, p. 473).

5. Zhuiniu Overview

Unlike the one-day government-sponsored tourist rendering of the zhuiniu ritual, the traditional ritual was an elaborate, multi-faceted village-wide event requiring months of preparation and organization, which financially obligated the sponsoring family. Although

a family-initiated event, given the extended family socialization of traditional villages, the participation of the entire community was an understood given.

When I arrived at La Yi village, the six badai were gathered, discussing the sequence of events to begin the ritual the following day. They had just finished a three-day fast with a meal of vegetables and rice. “To begin, we must have no blood in our body and be pure for the gods. We must not even swat a mosquito, which can draw blood. You must instead shake it off” (Yang 2018a).

They were seated around a central open pit with a low fire burning. Ma Mei’s brother’s rough-hewn, barn-like home was a high, open structure of wood darkened by the smoke from the fire pit, used for warmth and gathering. A wood-fed “stove” was in the adjacent kitchen area. The stone and concrete floor was wide and open to accommodate the drying, sorting, and storage of harvested items. Large rice and grain sacks were piled next to farm tools in the corners. The ceiling was hung with hundreds of ears of corn drying. Nearby was a ladder to a sleeping loft. The sounds of pigs, chickens, and goats could be heard from the interconnected barn area. The house was typical of rural houses throughout the region. The zhuiniu would occur in the adjacent house belonging to the parents, which was similarly arranged and larger.

With me were Wheeler Sparks, my assistant and videographer; Megan Evans, my former student and now a professor at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand; Yang Bingfeng, a former Ph.D. student of mine and translator; and Peng Jinqian, a dear friend, filmmaker, and translator, and activist for Miao cultural preservation. As the six badai spoke, a silent flat-screen television flashed a sporting event in the background. Ma Mei, the event organizer, a government official and Miao scholar and cultural activist, welcomed us.

Such a gathering was unprecedented. Badai generally work alone or with those from their school.¹¹ All six badai were known and respected masters. Except for badai Tian, who was from the hosting La Yi village, the others were from nearby villages. Ma Mei had chosen well.¹²

The excitement of the six badai was palpable.

They enjoy meeting and talking with the other badai and being hosted. There is food, and people take care of them, and they are paid. If they, do it quickly, it will end quickly, and they will be back home. For them, this is a great pleasure” (Peng 2018a).

None had met before but knew of the others by name and reputation. Each day, during and after dinner, the badai spent hours going over the details for the following day. Although the reconstruction of the zhuiniu was why they were gathered, their discussions were often opportunities to reflect, exchange, compare, and reaffirm their tradition and lives as badai. Used to conducting all-night rituals, they talked well into the night about a range of issues revealing their roles as spiritual and cultural guides.

These days are an extraordinary situation. We come from different schools, but there is cooperation. Usually, only badai from the same school work together. The badai knows those in his line, the same system, only those masters. We are not familiar with their practice and learning different ways (C. Shi 2018b).

6. Preparation

Traditionally the zhuiniu ritual begins with the family’s announcement of intent at the beginning of the Chinese lunar New Year, usually in January or February. Before that, the family consulted a xianniang (spirit medium) who enters into a state of trance to speak to the family ancestors and determine whether it is an auspicious time for the ritual. “Ancestors are particularly revered and are worshipped as though they possessed god-like qualities. Some Miao believe there are spirits everywhere” (Wang 2011, p. 119).

Once approved, a fortuneteller—a badai with fortunetelling ability or a specialist—is then consulted. According to the Chinese calendar, fortunetelling is based on the birthday

of the head of the sponsoring family (Hong 2018a). Using the *Yijing*, the five essential elements of the universe are consulted: fire, water, metal, wood, and earth. The days for the ritual are set, as is the day to purchase the water buffalo and the day it should be sacrificed. Then the preparations begin (Yang 2018c).

The *zhuiniu* is considered the highest way to give thanks to the gods. The reasons for having a family to sponsor the ritual include: (1) someone in the family is seriously wounded or ill, (2) the family have experienced a disaster or some great bad luck (e.g., house burnt down), (3) having a problem with children birthing or no children, (4) giving thanks for a great fortune bestowed on the family, and (5) the need to gather money for the family (Hong 2018b). According to badaï Tian and Shi, the last reason was most prominent. Other, smaller and less expensive rituals, such as the Huan Nuoyuan, addressed similar issues.

To sponsor a *zhuiniu* ritual is expensive, often requiring the sponsoring family to make long-term financial arrangements, often borrowing money. Badaï Shi estimated the total cost to be CNY 19,500.00 to 22,500.00 (approximately USD 3000.00–3500.00), which for those living in poverty-blighted rural areas can equal their income for six months (Ma 2018b).

Most rural Miao presently live at or below poverty levels, eking out a subsistence living. Since my first visit to the region in 2001, the PRC has focused a great deal of attention and funding on improving roads, education, and employment opportunities. Like others living with generational poverty, it is a continuing process with the Miao, looking for opportunities to better their lot. Money and wealth become preoccupations with gambling, investing, and lotteries, fueled by hope, these being the few opportunities. For the Miao seeking to better their economic standing, the *zhuiniu*—like divination, astrology, belief, religion, and luck—was an expression of hope and aspiration.

The *zhuiniu* offered an opportunity to interact with the “god of the treasury” and was viewed as a proactive way to manage the family’s money and wealth. For the Miao, the gods, ancestors, and spirits are responsible for the wealth and well-being of the family. Reciprocity and interaction with the spirit world was the conceptual context anchoring the cosmological narrative the *zhuiniu* articulated. “The family sponsoring the water buffalo killing must be very rich or want to become rich to maintain their wealth by this ritual. People will ask you, ‘How did you become rich?’ And you respond, ‘Because of the gods’” (Yang 2018b).

The La Yi village demonstration of the ritual condensed into five days what traditionally would have taken eight or nine months of preparation and culminating during harvest season (generally on or around a full moon) in September or October of the same year. “In the fall, the meat will be good for a long time. The fall is also when the weather is cooler. Summers in Hunan are notoriously hot and humid. Even today, there is little refrigeration in Miao villages, and meat will become rotten” (Peng 2018c).

7. House Cleaning

With the announcement of intent, an ox is sacrificed according to the badaizha tradition. The badaixiong tradition sacrifices a sheep and a cock (Yang). The ox sacrifice must happen before the house cleaning and is a “payment” to the gods to protect the sponsoring family. “Once you begin the ritual process, the spirits, both good and bad, are awakened (C. Shi 2018a; Yang 2018b).

Water buffalos were traditionally (as is the case today) expensive, requiring the hiring of guards to travel a long distance and carrying money for the purchase. The sacrifice of the ox is also necessary to feed those who will, in traditional times, travel to purchase a water buffalo. Once purchased, the water buffalo was brought back to be fed and groomed until the fall sacrifice. As part of the house cleaning ritual, which occurs in the family’s home, the god of the treasury is called upon to protect the family, the guards (which include family members), and those who travel with money to purchase the water buffalo.

It is important to remind the reader that the circumstances and requirements for the zhuiniu ritual were shaped in an earlier era. It was a time when travel beyond one's village was fraught with danger, when highwaymen, robbery, and death were real threats, and when evil and hungry spirits played on the imagination of the isolated and poorly educated. The zhuiniu was encoded as a ritual during this era.

The ox sacrifice and house cleaning serves several functions: (1) it announces to the community and the spirits the onset of the zhuiniu and the family's intent; (2) it is a house cleaning, cleansing the home of evil spirits and preparing for the events to come; (3) it calls upon the god of the treasury to protect the family financially and to assure their ability to fulfill the complete ritual financially and to protect the money sent to purchase the water buffalo; and (4) it calls upon the gods with spirit armies to protect those who will be traveling (Hong 2018b).

The zhuiniu begins, as do all house-located rituals, with the "house cleaning," a ritual used for various purposes (Peng 2018a).

Agreeing on the house cleaning details, Badai Yang was charged with enactment.

For each segment, a leading master decides what is to be done. It is the one who has the most knowledge of that part. They ask for our experiences, and they determine everything, all the details, including props and movements. They are the master and determine the process and the ritual (C. Shi 2018b).

Badai Yang was the master of the house cleaning ritual, which was required to clear out the evil spirits. Evil spirits are especially fond of doors, corners, windows, and beds to influence those sleeping. Essential to the house cleaning was the liu jin 縹巾 (Figure 3), a ritual device adopted from the Han and "used to sweep ghost and any disaster or weirdness away" (S. Shi 2016). It is a stick (made from the commonly found Chinese fir tree) hung with strips (24, 33, or 36 strips) of richly varied cloth, often embroidered, to represent the various branches of Miao clans. Each strip of cloth is made and contributed by the village households and given to the village Badai to symbolically affirm that he is empowered and protector of the families and village. The badai repays each family with wine or sugar when given the cloth strip. "It is also called the cloth of the dragon or phoenix. It represents the coming of the Han from the north, where dragons from the time of the ancestors. Using it honors the influence of the Han, but when the people see it, they know it is Miao" (S. Shi 2016).

If a badai sees an evil form or group of bad spirits walking around the house, a rooster will be sacrificed by a procedure that entails going behind the house cleaning altar with his back to the people. Then he bites the rooster on the neck, killing the rooster, flinging its body over the altar and the heads of the family. This "crossing over the people" is to protect them from evil and bad spirits because the blood of the rooster has magical power" (Yang 2018c). Yang told me he could see the spirits, but not always. When conducting a house cleansing ritual the previous year, an evil spirit reached to take an altar sacrifice. Using his *shidao* 司刀—a ritual knife used historically as a battle weapon—he fought to take the sacrifice back. Shi recounted that he returned home after a ritual to find a ghost sitting at his feet. The ghost was lonely and had followed him, remaining at his house for several days. During that time, the family living next to him died in a car accident (C. Shi 2018c). Badai Tian related, "When I see them, they are just a shape you cannot see. Clearly, they do not look like a person. I do not tell other people, because they might take it as a curse" (Tian 2018c).

A xianniang, when in a state of trance, is often asked by the badai to identify and locate the evil spirits affecting the family. The xianniang, channeling the family ancestors, names all the evil things present in the house, where they are hiding, and words to attract and kill the demons.

Because we will do the ritual, it is necessary for this cleaning to be done. It is a necessary part of the ritual. The cleaning of the house is required for all the major rituals. It is to prepare the house for all that follows, and the host family

must clean all the persons, animals, take baths, and change the mattress's clothes. Everything must be clean (Yang 2018a).



Figure 3. A liu jin used by badai to sweep away evil spirits. Each cloth was embroidered by families from the village and given to the badai to protect the village. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

Badai Yang Guangquan, 56 years old and from Tang Jia village in the adjacent county, was, like the others, a farmer. He descended from four generations of badai and was taught by his father (a badaixiong and badaizha)¹³. Beginning at 12 to be a badai and healer, not all Badai can heal.

During the day, I studied at school and at night, I learned to be a Badai and began to practice at the age of twenty-five. I have traveled to many places in this province and the next province. I am not a fortuneteller, but I can help villagers choose the dates and the place for marriages and help with funerals. The busiest time of the year is the fourth month of the lunar system. This time of the year, the summer, there is not much to do. If you come other times, you will not find me (Yang 2018a).

Badai Yang had conducted the house cleaning ritual many times that year for several families. The ritual is not specific to the zhuiniu and is often conducted independently with variations by both badaixiong and badaizha. “There is no limitation. The ritual can be done anytime of the year and for many reasons if the family needs it” (Yang 2018a). Generally, pigs or other meat (chicken, goat) are sacrificed to satisfy the spirits. However, the sacrifice of the ox is specific to the zhuiniu “because it is special and more expensive than pigs, sheep or roosters, but the ritual is the same. Usually, house cleanings are one hour, for the zhuiniu, it is much longer, depending on the gods and spirits, they must be made happy” (Yang 2018a).

Yang had never participated in a zhuiniu ritual before. Using his knowledge of housecleaning under the guidance of the badai Shi and Tian, he shaped his experience to the requirements of the zhuiniu. The physical demands of the house cleaning required a younger man to perform it. When asked why the ox sacrifice for the zhuiniu house cleaning, he replied, “It is more treasured that is why the spirits want it. The meat is practical and necessary for their travel to get the water buffalo” (C. Shi 2018b).

The house cleaning ritual made the house into a sacred space to perform the ritual, and strict adherence to detail had to be followed. Form and sequence adherence was

essential for efficacy, with patterns, words, and actions considered sacred and necessary for communication with the spirit world.¹⁴ The house cleaning that prepares for the zhuiniu moves beyond cleaning and into the calling of the spirits of the five heavens to prepare for the most elaborate and spiritually intensive Miao ritual.

8. Altars and Armies

During the two days before my arrival, the six badai gathered what they needed for the ritual from the nearby fields and forest. The forest surrounding the village is sacred, hosting several spirits, including the “seven fairy daughters”¹⁵ and some animal spirits, known as “gold” spirits because of their glistening appearance. In this way, the forest becomes a living and ongoing host of the Miao cosmological narrative. The world is charged with meaning, with the zhuiniu reiterating and reaffirming their worldview.

The ritual items sought in the forest were wild-grown peach tree branches, essential for house cleaning. The peach tree is said to have originated in China and produces a beautiful blossom. Sweet fruit is symbolic of driving out evil spirits.

Two badai were charged with going to the mountains and cutting peach tree branches, which were boiled. This created reddish water used by all six Badai to wash their face and hands, who then rinsed their mouths to protect them from evil spirits and ghosts (Hong 2018c). As the badai are gathering, the family prepares “fast” cakes, rice cakes made with tofu offered in respect to the gods. This is the only food eaten by the family before the ritual.

From here forward, the zhuiniu ritual comes into focus with each subsequent step in the sequence of events leading to the sacrifice of the water buffalo.

On the morning of the house cleaning, all six badai assisted in setting up two altars (also referred to as temples) at the main entrance and room of the house. The larger altar, also known as the “left altar,” was set against the far wall at the house’s interior for the god of the land (Hong 2018a) (Figure 4). The Miao believe that each piece of land has a god, and the land altar is in honor of the overseeing “land god”. Often conflated with the god of the treasury is *Caishen* 財神, a god personification borrowed from the Chinese.¹⁶ The god of the treasury, depicted as corpulent and generous, is evoked to help the host family afford a water buffalo, protect the family from the evil spirits, and help those traveling to buy the water buffalo. Badai Yang, speaking on behalf of the god of the treasury, thanked the host family and, in turn, announced the household’s support of the god of the treasury.

The left altar was elaborately arranged, hung on three sides with two rows of hanging paper cut to look like fencing and serving as a defense against evil spirits by protecting the altar and creating a sacred space. “You need to go to create this altar in the house, to make a temple to protect the family and to communicate with the god of the treasury” (C. Shi 2018b). On the table were arranged (1) rice cake offerings, (2) a rice bowl with incense, (3) a shidao (a brass knife-like implement with a round handle and dangling metal), (4) a gao (two pieces of bamboo used for divination), and (5) three bowls of peach water, one for each kingdom of heaven.¹⁷ The inviting in of the water spirits to make holy water was necessary to establish the presence of the gods. It was essential that protocol be followed and that the guardian spirits be positioned correctly on the altar and given respect and comfort. The last item on the altar was (6) a rolled scroll, the shenxiangjuan 神像卷 depicting the spirit army (Yang 2018b).

The second, smaller altar was at the house’s main entrance (Figure 5). This altar was known as the “right” altar to call the “armies” to protect the journey and the ritual. The god that oversaw the armies and this altar was *qiaoshi*, or *qiaoshen* 神, bridge god or bridge master, who facilitates the crossing of distance (Peng 2018a).¹⁸ This altar is sparse, arranged prominently with beeswax incense—burning wax wrapped in paper—and it was constantly burnt throughout the house cleaning. Located at the doorway, the altar advances the belief that gods should come and go as they please and travel (like bees) to and from heaven more easily with the beeswax smoke (Peng 2018c).



Figure 4. Badai Yang inviting in the spirits and armies. He dances the hexagon in front of the left altar. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).



Figure 5. Badai Shi Changwu at the right altar in front of the main door to the family's home. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

Traditionally, this ritual began at midnight. For the La Yi re-enactment, it was conducted mid-day.¹⁹

9. Inviting the Gods and Spirits

Next came the introduction of the badai participating in the ritual to the spirits and gods. The introductions were done using a complex system of hand gestures (C. Shi 2018a), which linked ordinary and spirit realities. Hand gestures, numbering in the dozens, serve various functions, most notably communicating with the spirits, mythical animals and soldiers, magical powers, and master badai to assist (J. Shi 2001); the hand gestures were used throughout the ritual. Then, Yang and the other badai changed into their regalia.

Gestures are ways to communicate with the spirits and ancestors. There are many gestures from the ancestors, and they are used for different reasons. Some are used to communicate and move with the spirits. Some gestures are used to hide your body from those evil spirits so they cannot get into you. Sometimes the masters make mistakes with the hand gestures, and the ancestors come and help (Yang 2018a).

The introduction of the Badai and invitation to the spirits was repeated twice to avoid any confusion in communication. Special consideration was given to inviting the god of the “doors and gates” because entrances and thresholds are where evil spirits often linger and hide. The function of the ritual is first to clean out the devils and evil spirits: “some must be driven away, others are locked up,” and then I ask for guidance and protection of the good spirits (Yang 2018a).

Peach water was offered to each of the spirits. To verify their acceptance Yang threw his gao, a palm-sized ritual object typically made of bamboo or wood split in two and thrown as a form of divination. The gao is thrown on the floor midway between the two altars. If the gao lands with both sides down, the spirits have accepted the water and will participate. If both sides land up, it is an absolute refusal. If one up and one down, it is a negotiable refusal. The gao is thrown repeatedly, each time with a vocal request, plead, or persuasion until the offering is accepted. Once accepted, the peach water is offered and poured onto the earth.

Throwing for an agreeable response to multiple questions and wishes required multiple throws of the gao and is considered dialogue and negotiation with the spirits. With discussions taking place and propitiations offered as necessary in the form of chant or an additional offering of “fortune money” or “spirit money,” gold-colored paper (typically 8 × 8 inches square) is burnt and sent to the gods.²⁰ Smoke is considered a pathway to heaven. The money sent to the gods, specifically the god of the treasury, is never a burden but seen as communication, opportunity, and blessing. “Human beings send money to gods so the gods can send back real money—so you give money to gods, and they will give to you. Yin money is sent to the gods, and yang money is sent to the family (Ma 2018b). Spirit money burning occurs throughout the ritual and is an integral part of all Miao rituals. The white paper is symbolically “silver,” and the yellow paper is gold (Peng 2018b).

Negative gao responses provoke the badai to ask if the gods have changed their minds or require more spirit money, rice cakes, further cleaning of evil spirits, or animal sacrifices (Yang 2018a). The gao throwing continues going through a step-by-step checklist of wishes asked of the gods to assure a successful zhuiniu ritual. Daoist rituals inspired the checklist of wishes, and depending on the school of badai practice, were either written (text) or spiritual (visually conveyed via scroll). Yang’s school used the visual scroll form.

The asking of the gods concluded with a rooster sacrifice; its spirit is believed to protect those who travel.

For the sacrifice, the rooster’s mouth is stuffed with rice cakes, and its beak tied with thread to protect the travelers from any bad words. “When they are on their trip to look for a water buffalo, people may say bad things about the journey. Not the local people, but people along the journey. Tying the mouth will protect them from bad words” (C. Shi 2018b).

The ritual proceeds to a more intimate interaction as badai Yang moves with the gods and dances to “open up heaven.”

The horn is blown again for *Yuhuang* the Jade Emperor, the highest of the gods.²¹ There are two distinct types of horn blowing. “For the Jade Emperor,” sounds like, *Who EE Who EE Who EE* and is blown to fulfill the family’s will and respect to the Jade Emperor. The second type is used more generally as an announcement and in various contexts is identified as *Laojun* in honor of the Daoist god Laozi and sounds like *Ho Ye Ho Ye Ho Ye*. The blowing of a water buffalo horn serves as an announcement to the heavens that the section is complete.

Yang sang and chanted exclusively in Chinese. The dance steps were in nine parts or “states” called the “nine ancient steps.” Based on hexagram readings of the *Yijing* (Figure 6). With this action, Yang “danced” to evoke the “Kingdoms of Heaven” (Yang 2018b). The function of the dance is twofold: (1) to connect the human world with heaven by way of ritual and (2) to symbolically travel to each kingdom of heaven. The dance steps opened each of the five heavens (one in each of the four directions and one for the center axis), following a dance step pattern unique to each direction and center axis. “Dancing the hexagram” required nine repetitions of step patterns, with each consisting of two steps followed by four steps performed nine times. The dance can be viewed as a danced drama that culminates with a nine-step repetition of an eight-step pattern for the center. The dance step pattern of nine (2×4) for each direction and then eight for the center each equaled nine when accounting for each direction and center as one. The dance opens each heaven (Hong 2018c) and retraces the cosmological structure of the Miao worldview.

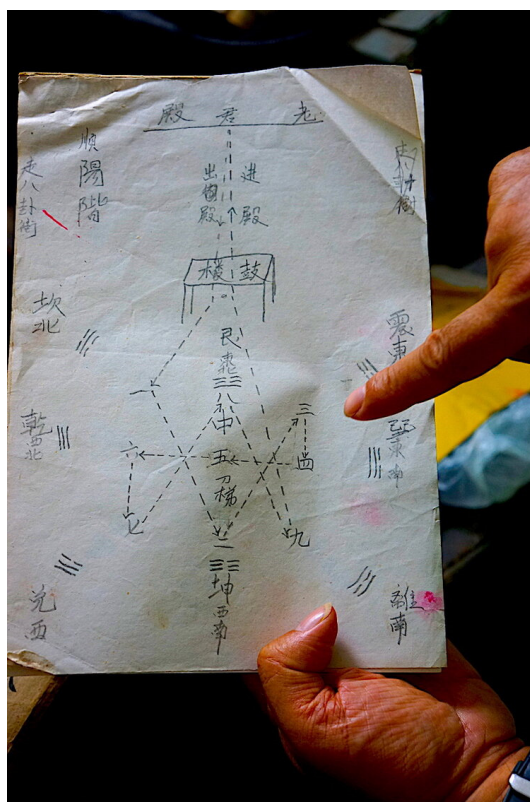


Figure 6. A diagram of the *Yijing*-inspired dance steps that evoke the “Kingdom of Heaven.” (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

The Miao believe that the *Yijing* originated with the Miao and not with Confucius or Daoism, who came after the Miao were historically established in central China. The Miao maintain that others formalized the *Yijing* into a written culture and a belief system. When pressed for details, Yang said he did not understand nor was it important to know the reason for the dancing, only that he must strictly adhere to the form to preserve its sacred meaning and open each heaven (Yang 2018c).

While visiting heaven, he encountered eighteen sacred gods and four officials—gods in charge of each specific heaven (Yang 2018c). While traveling to each heaven, Yang verbally invited the gods, ancestral spirits, and badai masters from his school that resided in each heaven. His song and chant declared why he was there and what he needed from each heaven. By so doing, he linked the material world with the cosmological, becoming the embodiment and articulator of the Miao mythic narrative.

His hand gestures, vocalizations, and actions (such as tapping the buffalo horn) varied according to his interaction with the various heavens. Tapping the horn signified the invitation of his school's ancestral teachers. Once they accepted, Yang persuaded them to eat from the altar table, talked with them, and then released them before he moved on to another heaven.

After visiting the heavens, the spirit army, which resides at the center, was called upon to support the ritual and chase away the devil and evil spirits. "It is the army sent from heaven to help the host family. There are many gods and soldiers in each heaven that gather at the center. There are 99,000 soldiers and horses" to protect those traveling long distances carrying cash to purchase the water buffalo. "This ritual is about what you should do before you go into battle (Yang 2018a). The soldiers are called to protect against three types of bad people, spirits, or gods: (1) enemies of the host family, (2) those who may be friendly but say bad things, and (3) those that could do harmful things. There are three types of evil spirits: (1) natural spirits, like a tree or rock (anything in nature can potentially be an evil spirit), (2) ghosts from unnatural death (murder, accident, or suicide), and (3) those that come from relationships (people or spirits) that fight or kill each other. Evil spirits are always close at hand, with the best protection being working together, respect, and communication. If that does not work, one must fight with the armies (C. Shi 2018b). Traditionally, it was at this point in the house cleaning when the intestines and butchered body of the ox were brought and piled between the two altars and equally offered to the two altars. The uncooked ox head was placed at the center, midway between the two altars with the oxtail facing the left altar of the land god, Tudigong 土地公, which is borrowed from the Han. Once the offering is accepted (determined by throwing the gao), the head is cooked. "It must be an ox because this is an offering for the Water Buffalo killing ritual. The head must be cooked for the gods to eat" (Yang 2018c).

No ox was sacrificed for the La Yi demonstration, and only the ox head was used, purchased at a local slaughterhouse earlier that day. The badai interpreted the ready availability of the ox head (which are seldom slaughtered) as a sign from the gods. "Without it, even the demonstration could not proceed" (C. Shi 2018b).

Every aspect of the ox sacrifice and cooking was important. Traditionally, a host family member oversaw the ox killing and preparation. "It is not a badai. It is another one who will kill the ox and then take it away to clean it and cook it and bring it back to the altar" (C. Shi 2018b). In keeping with tradition, the demonstration charred the ox head then separated the meat from the skull (Figure 7). An ax was used to split the horns from the skull. The meat was then distributed into five bowls to compliment five bowls of corn wine altar offerings. Every aspect, from the type of basin, towel, and fire used to the process of how the head must first be boiled in a pot without blood being split, was strictly observed. Throughout the process, a devotion to the thunder god, *Ji Leishen* 祭雷, and jade god *Yuhuang Dadi* 玉皇大帝, was held foremost in the minds of those doing the preparation of the ox head and its meat.



Figure 7. The flaying of the ox head by members of the host family to make the meat an offering to the gods. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

Yang then sang to the armies. The armies are “From the past, from the very beginning of ancient times and do not use modern weapons, only spears and shields” (Hong 2018c). The soldiers from five different directions/heavens are asked to gather at the center between the two altars where the “barracks” are located.

Once gathered, the shenxiang juan—the scroll placed on the altar—is unfurled. It is extended to create a pathway from the altar to the house entrance to invite the army. As Yang chanted the invitation, he walked with a dance step along the side of the scroll. By moving back and forth with the “army,” he symbolically walked with the soldiers serving as their guide to the material world. When Yang walked on the cloth, he “walked on clouds” between heaven and earth. While doing so, he gave the army the names and information needed to protect the host family. Then the armies “must take the sacrifice and be sent back because they do not belong here. When you learned to be a badai, you have a right to call those armies and lead them” (Yang 2018c). The shenxiang juan scroll is canvas, approximately twelve inches wide and twelve feet long and colorfully painted with martial figures.

Walking on the clouds is a trained specialization worthy of note in that it reveals the intricacy of badai ritual training. Badai Shi outlined the training,

For forty-nine days, you are trained for that kind of walking. Every morning at daybreak, I washed my face and went on the roof and practiced the walk. You must walk on the house roof barefoot with a cup of wine in hand, an offering to the teachers. For forty-nine days, you cannot pause. Each day, you must do it and chant sacred words to the elements five times very fluently without any pause. You are walking on the roof, and after practicing, you learn to walk on clouds. If you pause, you must begin again and do another forty-nine days. You say those words, and that finishes that day’s practice (C. Shi 2018c).

During the call of the army, Yang described how he saw gods riding horses and how he “invited them to get off their horses and drink corn wine.” The army “took away food” with some “hanging over the table after finished eating. I must invite the gods to get their horses or vehicles (chariots) and go back to heaven with their army otherwise they will stay”. Often Yang would drink from the bowl of corn wine and gesture towards the heavens, so that the gods do not drink alone. Sometimes the gods enjoy themselves too much and are reluctant to go and must be persuaded by giving them spirit money for their travel (Yang 2018c).

Once Yang’s visits to the heavens were complete, he cleaned the altar and all the ritual implements with incense and prepared it for sacred writing, a process by which he wrote on paper a list of each altar element, thereby making them sacred. He did this to ensure that “everything is done correctly, and then I check again” (Yang 2018c). Satisfied that all was in order and done correctly, the ritual of inviting the gods and armies was complete.

That evening, when the badai had their dinner of ox meat (the first meat they had in several days), they chanted to invite the god of the treasury to come to the house and share in the sacrificial meat. For breakfast the next day, they ate ox head meat from the night before. Once dinner was complete, they chanted again, asking the god to go back because he belonged in heaven.

10. Fall: Preparing the House and Family

Traditionally, the house cleaning ritual, inviting the gods and armies, and ox sacrifice all occur in February during the lunar New Year.

The following sequence of rituals occurred in October, after harvest season, and climaxed with the water buffalo sacrifice. The eldest son of the sponsoring family invited his uncle-in-law (his mother’s eldest brother) to the ritual. A flag was hung at the house’s main entrance “for the water buffalo” (Tian 2018b), identifying the family’s ritual intent.

The Miao are not strictly defined as matrilineal in classic, anthropological terms. However, throughout my fieldwork with the Miao, I have observed a high degree of gender equity. Women are empowered and enjoy social, economic, and cultural respect, status, and autonomy. This may be attributed to the equanimity, and shared burden required by hardscrabble farming life, where women are “visible contributors to the regional culture and economy” (Faure and Siu in Oakes and Schein 2006, p. 44). “Since ancient time, the Miao have kept a matrilineal tradition and sense of respect for women, which put women before men. Our culture has no derogatory words for women. The divorce rate is nearly zero” (S. Shi 2016). When asked why the importance of women in Miao culture, badai Tian replied, “All comes from our mother. We all come from our mother” (Tian 2018b). The mother’s brother is also part of the family, that origin. “Married women and their relatives are key figures in Western Hunan Miao family and communal life, especially maternal uncles, *mujiu* 母舅; mother’s brothers and brothers-in-law *qijiu* 妻子的兄弟 wife’s brothers, often guests of honor at major ritual events like the oxen sacrifice and *zhuiniu*” (Katz 2022, p. 40).

Miao men are protective of their women, which may have originated at the time garrisoned Han soldiers came to the region several hundred years ago and sexualized Miao women. The eroticization and objectification of Miao women is a perception persisting to this day. Their vigorous, primal, and sensual dancing of Miao women, along with their dialogic love songs, are, in comparison to Han culture, considered sexually alluring and permissive (Rack 2005, p. 59).

The importance of the uncle-in-law is one of many expressions recognizing the importance of women in Miao society.

Miao society today keeps this system. The mother’s family is vital, and the uncle represents the mother’s family showing respect to the mother’s family. Even now, the mother is very important. So, when we say mom, as we Miao do, we always say father and mother as ‘baba.’ We do not say mama and papa. They are the same. (Peng 2018c)

Once the invitation is sent, the house is prepared for rituals. White fortune paper, representing silver, was burnt outside the house entrance to notify the gods of the family's ritual intent. A goat and rooster, their necks tied with rope, were then led through the house and outside the house's main entrance. "We must let the spirits know. Because we do not know where the spirits are, we take the animals to be where the spirits might be inside to prove the animals are alive and will be offered to the spirits (Tian 2018a). A ritual altar, called the "tali tree," is then set up outside the house's main entrance.

11. The Tali Tree

The function of the tali tree ritual was to dispel the evil spirits and curses that haunt the family (Figure 8). Unlike the house cleaning ritual earlier in the year, this and the following ritual delve into the historical and ancestral curses. The evil spirits and all the curses they embody must be called up and purged before a water buffalo sacrifice. This tree is also considered sacred because of its function and is part of a cultivated forest of spirit trees. "It also takes a long time to establish an intimate spiritual relationship with the mountain by worshipping the spirits and for the integration of the 'implanted' spirits and the naturally living spirits of the land" (Wang 2011, p. 133).



Figure 8. Badai Yang during the first part of the tali tree ritual. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

The locally found tali tree is an evil attractor because the Miao consider it accursed. After all, it is rare, difficult to burn, and has no fruit or practical application. "If you see that kind of tree in the woods, you need to cut it because it is cursed, you must not let it grow. It is a symbol of the cursed and that is why it is used" (C. Shi 2018b).

An altar table was set with a rice bowl stuck with incense offerings (Figure 9). On either side of the bowl were two empty bowls face down, later filled with rice offerings. At the edge of the table facing away from the house was a series of paper flags of different colors, representing protecting spirits and serving as a fence for the altar against evil spirits.

A hemp rope hung with more flags and anthropomorphic figures extended from the table, representing evil spirits and protecting gods (Figure 10a). The rope was attached to a tali tree branch (approximately three meters high) and symbolized a bridge that linked present and ancient generations of the family (Figure 10b). Also on the rope, interspersed between the paper figures and flags, were looped "hooks" made of bamboo and meant to capture evil.



Figure 9. The table altar setting for the first phase of the tali tree ritual. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

In ancient times, many generations ago, there was a curse. It is said that the curse would continue for ninety-nine generations. But we do not know when that curse started, so we do not know the duration, and so we do not know if we are in that curse or not. It is to protect the family. To ensure that that curse will not hurt them, we need to do the tali ritual to protect the family. Since we do not know which generation has the curse, we use the rope as a symbol for all ninety-nine generations and use the hooks on the rope to separate the curse's effects because you do not know which generation is affected by the curse. The hooks are to block the effects of the curse from ancient times. At the end of the bridge is the altar, the paper symbolic of protecting spirits, so today is completely separated from the ancient time (Tian 2018b).

If the ritual is practiced at night, as few as five flags are required. If performed during the daytime, more flags are required to attract evil spirits, which are said to travel more at night and require fewer flags and hooks to attract them.

The tali tree altar is built outside the house to prevent spirits from entering the house. Yang took the animals into the house again during the ritual to attract evil spirits with a living sacrifice. "When the spirits are ready, they will make the sacrifices at the altar" (Yang 2018b).

While Yang was inside circling with the goat, Shi posted bamboo sticks topped with red flags around the altar to further entice and capture evil spirits. To make sure the spirits do not escape the boundary of the altar, he sets a trap. Yang then circles clockwise around the altar, ringing a bell with a low chant, "whispering to attract the evil spirits." This action is consistent with the Miao preoccupation of "possible invasions, attacks and interventions on all sides, and it points to the tension with their neighbors. This spiritual boundary is maintained through worship in daily life and important festivals. Worshipping and the relevant rituals not only cultivate Miao's intimate relationship with the land but also strengthen the spatial boundary and their ideas of resisting outsiders" (Wang 2011, p. 132).

The bell is symbolic of the uncle-in-law who witnessed the ritual and will oversee the sacrifice of the goat. The goat's throat was slit, and its blood drained at the altar. The final action of the ritual was an offering of rice followed by the cleaning of the rice bowls with peach water. The rice and the water used to clean the bowls were contaminated and

dumped in a nearby wooded area. The table was then wiped with peach water and deemed clean and safe.



(a)



(b)

Figure 10. (a,b) The tali tree altar. (b) Note the tali tree branch and the anthropomorphic figures symbolizing spirits. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

12. Jiuixi

After the tali tree, a follow-up ritual to expunge any lingering and unaccounted evil spirits attracted to the house. This ritual segment was called *jiuixi*, a Miao word meaning “reasons.” Badai Tian, wearing badaixiong regalia, chanted an invocation inside the side door nearest the family dining area (Figure 11). Tian performed the ritual to expunge unaccounted evil. Once completed, he began calling the gods and good spirits to come. However, the elderly Tian grew tired and asked Shi, a badaixiong, to assist.



Figure 11. Badai Shi Changwu playing the zhutuo and chanting to call and welcome helping spirits into the house. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

Throughout the ritual, Shi played the *zhutuo* 竹柝, a long, hollow wooden traditional instrument with three strings, as he and Tian chanted. “The instrument played is of the Miao people from ancient times to bring the people together. And it is the only instrument to call the god and spirits. When it makes sounds, they know they are speaking. We use it so the spirits will come. It pleases them and gets their attention” (C. Shi 2018b).

At the “door altar,” Tian and Shi chanted rounds of repetitive, trance-like invitations. “This ritual begins with inviting spiritual teachers and the gods to this family. It is also to tell the ancestor teachers what they need to do for this ritual. When the spiritual teachers are agreed and we are together, we know what we need to do” (Tian 2018c).

Then the ritual moves into its primary concern, asking questions and the reasons for the curses against the family. The *jiuixi* segment of chanting of questions can last for several hours; this demonstration lasted well over an hour. The chanting asks the spirits by whom and why the family has been cursed. Tian called spirits by their name and asked who made the curse. “If you do the altar, you need to do this part by asking questions. I ask each spirit

and offer a goat to take the curse away” (Tian 2018c). Tian told me there was no verbal response from the spirits. Instead, “I know when I call their name” (Tian 2018c).

The chanting could be longer if you need to call more spirits. It is an ancient poem and is rhymed just like poetry to please the gods and spirits. Each rhyme has the same number of characters, and the words are precisely what I learned from my father and grandfather. I did not add one character (Tian 2018b).

13. For the Heavens

Next, on the altar located in the house’s interior—the inside altar—were food offerings to the gods and for “the heavens”. The function of this altar and ritual was to invite and please the gods and convey the family’s wishes (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Badai Tian making food offerings for the gods at the inside altar. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

The inside altar was a low table with several bowls, one filled with rice for the female god, the other filled with millet for the male god. A third bowl was filled with peach water. Twenty-one bowls surrounded these three centrally placed bowls. Three each were filled with the harvest of the season, buckwheat, ramie, soy, maize, wheat, sorghum, and oats, each a crop the gods enjoy. Each crop filled three bowls and, when multiplied by seven, equaled twenty-one, which was numerologically auspicious for receiving the gods from heaven (Tian 2018b).

Tian chanted invitations in the Miao language, which was punctuated with the ringing of a bell. Only badaixiong use the bell. The chants ask the gods to “come peacefully and don’t worry about anything. We will serve you as you like” (Tian 2018b).

14. Three Brothers

An altar was established after a long break, replacing the tali tree altar. Yang performed this “outside altar” at the house’s main entrance under the advisement of Shi and Tian.

The altar table was surrounded by three chairs and set as a mnemonic of the “Three Brothers” narrative, also known as the Three Generals or Three Heavenly Kings. In all variations of the mythology, the three brothers were surnamed Yang *Tianwang* 天王; their full title historically was White Emperor Heavenly Kings or *Baidi Tianwang* 白帝天王 (Katz 2022, p. 61) and was the basis of a widespread cult originating during the Ming dynasty (if not earlier) and flourishing in West Hunan during the Qing or Republican periods (Sutton 2000, p. 448).

The mythology of the Three Heavenly Kings was a Miao myth developed in the face of conflict with the Han. Ironically, it was adopted by the Han and other regional ethnic groups, becoming widespread and popularized regionally. As a myth, it has undergone transformations reflecting its social, cultural, and political journey and serving and adjusting to local needs. However, the myth, in all its various tellings, is central to Miao culture and mythological origins of its families, and historical injustices endured.

The three brothers were generals of the Song dynasty [960–1279], who were full of wisdom and courage. After the Miao came out in revolt they led forces to attack them. They knew the Miao always craved drink and food. Since the weather happened to be severely cold, they slaughtered many oxen and pigs, cooked them and suspended them in the trees. The Miao mob fought each other to drink and eat. They [the brothers] surprised them and inflicted a severe defeat. Thereupon the Nine Creeks and the Eighteen Caverns were opened up, and only five surnames of the scattered Miao survived: these are the Wu, Long, Shi, Liao, and Ma clans of today. Later some disobedient people were jealous of the [brothers’] exploits and presented them with poisoned wine, giving it as if by royal command. The brothers drank it and died simultaneously. It was just at the Small Summer Festival. (Sutton 2000, p. 461).

The telling of the myth specifically referenced by the zhuiniu adds detail and nuanced meaning to the ritual performed.

The Emperor gave the brothers three flagons of wine, telling them to drink them when they arrived home. But the wine was poisoned, and all three died when they stopped to drink en route. Since the first drank only one cup, this god’s face is white. The second drank two cups and turned red, and the third three and so his image has a black face. (Sutton 2000, p. 486)

The ritual began with a rooster sacrifice. As with other ritual segments, it was essential that the sacrifice—a goat, rooster, or pig—be alive and presented at the altar prior to sacrifice “to demonstrate it is fresh. This is necessary to show they are alive before killing and sending them to the gods” (Yang 2018b).

The setting and all props and actions of this ritual were shaped and referenced, and together they constitute a retelling of the mythic narrative of three brave and loyal brothers who were generals (Figure 13). The story’s telling reaffirms Miao’s ethical forthrightness and is held up as a moral model for the zhuiniu. Association with three powerful generals also references martial prowess and protection of the family and the Miao people. The myth portrayed heroism in the face of betrayal, an analogy for the Miao condition at the hands of the Han—historical occurrences interpolated into the cosmological narrative.



Figure 13. Badai Yang at the altar for the three brothers. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

The narrative, in another variation of telling demonstrates its malleability:

In ancient times there were three brothers who were loyal generals of the emperor. After fighting courageously and winning great battles and a war for the emperor, they returned to Beijing. The success and popularity of the generals worried the emperor, and he saw them as a threat. The emperor lavished gifts on the three brother generals, including poison wines, and they died. However, they died in different ways. The poison directly killed one—his face turned black, the second saw his brother die and died of anger—his face was red. The third, discovering his two brothers poisoned and dead, died of fright—his face was white. Because of their loyalty, courage and betrayal at the emperor's hands, they became gods. The name of the three brother-generals were, Fujin, Fuyin, and Fuya (Tian 2018b).

Historical events and atrocities remain vivid in the minds and hearts of the Miao to this day. The narrative builds on the tali tree ritual by tracing the generational haunting of the Miao people, a succession of betrayals and injustices perpetrated by Han invasions and occupations. The three brothers are a widespread, dynamic, and easily digested story of injustice and betrayal. It is not Miao in origin. The myth was appropriated, enabling the Miao to revisit historical wounds, grieve, and identify with the dutiful, moral, and honorable superiority exemplified by the brothers. Their elevation to god status offered some comfort and restored some degree of self-respect, taking the sting out of the Miao defeat and colonization at the hands of the Han.

The altar table was surrounded by three chairs representing the three brothers. An open umbrella rests one chair, representing the brothers' elevated status—in ancient China, an umbrella shielded high-ranking persons from the sun. At the fourth side of the altar, Yang knelt and officiated.²² On the chairs were paper flags (white and gold) on sticks stuck into rice cakes, symbols of the armies each brother led.

On the table were arranged offerings to the three brothers: a large square container of rice stuck with burning incense sticks and seven bowls, each representing the gifts of the seven harvest gods portrayed by the earlier, inside altar ritual. Three bowls offered rice, meat, and wine as the inside altar. The seven bowls multiplied by the three bowls represent the brothers, equating to the numerologically auspicious number of twenty-one.

Yang's chants follow an established invocational pattern to send the sacrifices to their proper palaces in heaven. The sequence of the ritual is as follows: (1) inviting spiritual teachers for assistance, (2) telling the three brothers their intention, (3) identifying the family seeking assistance and reason for the offerings, (4) presenting the sacrificial offerings to the three brothers, (5) describing the offerings, (6) asking the three brothers to send the offerings to the palace inhabited by female gods, (7) declaring the family's intention of sending the water buffalo sacrifice to the second palace in heaven (more on this below), and (8) sending the helping spiritual teachers back to their proper place in heaven and closing the ritual.

Sending offerings to two distinct palaces in heaven spoke directly to the mythological origin of the zhuiniu. Each segment of the zhuiniu is part of a narrative progression. The ritual served to integrate participants into Miao mythology. The ritual takes the family on the journey. The zhuiniu constitutes a participatory reiteration and reaffirmation of the Miao worldview. The myth, in brief, may be recounted thus:

In the old times, there was a poor family. A boy from a poor family was sent to another family to bring an ox. When the boy returned, he took care of an ox for his family.

Many years later, when the boy grew into a man up, and the ox was getting old, his family would like to pay him, but the man said, "I don't want to be paid. I just want that ox." And they gave him the ox, and he took it to start his own family and get married. The ox told him that he must go to a specific place, a path, where the spirit women come wearing green cloth and there, he will find his wife.

The boy married a spirit woman, and they had a baby. Several years later, the spirit woman returned to the place, the path to heaven and took the wife and baby away. The man missed his wife and his baby and wanted to go to heaven, but he was a mortal and could not go to heaven. The water buffalo god saw this and wanted to help the man. He said, "Just stand on my horns and I would send you up to heaven."

The man did so, and he came close to heaven and saw a palace. He was at the edge of heaven, and the spirit women knew he was there because he was mortal and smelled terrible, and they drove him away without seeing his wife and baby. Then the bull offered another way. "The only possible way is for you to kill me and send me as a sacrifice to the gods. And then you will have a chance to get to heaven to see your wife and son. But because I, the god of water buffalos, do not belong to that palace, I belong to the other heaven palace, when you kill me, you need to send me to another palace. Because I need to go back to my palace when I die but you can use my body, as a gift to send to the relatives of the other gods coming from your wife's family' (C. Shi 2018c).

Tian commented on the importance of the myth and how the zhuiniu enacts it.

This is the highest level of ritual. It is how the man got the chance to see his wife and son. For the Miao, it is the highest possible ritual for a mortal because they can visit heaven. That is why there are two different altars. One is to invite the gods where his wife and boy were living. That is represented by the participation of the uncle's family—the maternal part of the family. The other altar is to send the bull spirits back to his palace. (Tian 2018c).

15. Big General Doll Ghost

The last house altar ritual segment was positioned on the floor at the main entrance as an “indoor and outdoor offering” from the badaï and the host family. The threshold altar is symbolic of how the Miao co-exist as both material and spiritual—worlds inside and outside (C. Shi 2018b).

This strategically placed altar establishes the “other palace” where the water buffalo will be offered.

Each Miao house has a stone square set in the floor opposite the main entrance, the *Long Jia Kou Shuo*, which symbolizes a family’s connection to the village well. The altar is placed in relation to the stone square which connects metaphorically to the village well. A dragon is said to live in the village well, and each household’s connection to the well assures the dragon’s protection.²³ The altar is placed between the house’s main entrance and the long jai shou, “Dragon Family Mouth”, because it is powerful (Long 2018).

At sunset, the Big General Doll Ghost ritual was initiated at the altar and continued with the sacrifice of a rooster in an adjacent field (Figure 14). If practiced otherwise, it can bring bad luck and damage the ritual’s effect (C. Shi 2018b).



Figure 14. The Doll Ghost, which is performed in nearby woods. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

Shi conducted this segment following badaizha protocol. He began by calling upon the “Big General,” also known as *guan tou da jiang*, 大將軍, the highest level of official dealing with disputes or legal issues. “He is a god and great general evoked to protect the family from quarrels and legal troubles. The ritual seeks to determine possible problems, arguments, recent infractions, or causes of difficulty” (C. Shi 2018b).

The Big General supervises the Doll Ghost as a ritual within a ritual. As with other ritual segments, both are modular and can be presented as stand-alone or combined. Both were traditionally presented at night. For the La Yi demonstration, both were conducted in the afternoon. The Doll Ghost, also referred to as *du jiao da wang* 角大王, the One Horn King, was represented by a crude grass and rope totem with paper for a head and hat and a face drawn on it. When asked, Shi could not explain the meaning or origin of the Doll Ghost or One Horn King.

It is just the meaning of that ghost. The One Horn King is responsible for carrying away whatever they need in the ritual. He is the carrier of bad things away from the family. The One Horn King is one of two brothers. Both have a horn on their head. They appear in “Journey to the West” (Hong 2018c).

The altar was arranged on the floor and grass matting, “We use grass so much for the rope it is the most convenient material we have” (Ma 2018b). In addition to the Doll Ghost—One Horn King—there was an empty bowl and rice cake offerings, bowl offerings of rice, corn wine, and water, and a wooden box of rice to hold incense sticks. Unique to this altar was a large basket containing an egg and later the head of the sacrificed rooster. A series of white paper spirit figures and flags hung to either side of the altar. One set of anthropomorphic forms signified the ghosts called upon to accompany the Big General. The other flags signified the armies under the general’s command.

Using a whistling style of chant—a “dragon voice”—Shi punctuated his call by tapping and rattling the empty bowl with the *sidau* knife; the bowl would later contain the rooster’s meat. The ritual moved through seven steps, all of which required *gao* acceptance by the spirits and gods.

1. Invite teachers and gods;
2. Inform the teachers of what they are going to do;
3. Enlist teachers to ask the gods to protect the families;
4. Inform the Big General and One Horn King of the sacrifices prepared for them;
5. Move to a nearby field to sacrifice a rooster, removing evil from the house and family;
6. Return to the house to inform the Big General god of what they have done;
7. Smear the rooster’s blood onto a little ghost (a doll-like figure made of paper) to carry any curses against the family to the Big General, who will cut it off from the family. The ghost carries the curses, which concludes the day’s sequence of rituals. The house is prepared for the *zhuiniu* (Yang 2018b).

The Doll Ghost is foolish in behavior and appearance but respected for being effective. He tends to dream, and when he awakes, he is without clothing. It is forbidden to laugh at his plight, appearance, or interactions during the ritual because his function is serious (Peng 2018b). However, at the end of the ritual, all are encouraged to laugh at his effective yet foolish ways. The relationship between the serious and comedic is evident in other Miao rituals and is best explained as a tension release after a long day of ritualizing.

Under the supervision of Tian and Shi, Yang conducted the rooster sacrifice ritual in the nearby woods (Figure 15). The wide, shallow altar basket contained an egg and an empty bowl and was taken to the pre-dug hole where the rooster was sacrificed and decapitated.²⁴ The egg was also buried. The rooster’s feathers were plucked and stuck on the burial plot, and the rooster’s body was thrown to the spirits to signify the sacrifice. After a procession back to the house, the rooster was thrown at the altar. Shi took over the ritual and sprayed peach water in the four directions and then wrote to the spirits in the air with the knife point of his *shidao*. Blood from the rooster was smeared on the doll and then thrown out of the house. The doll signifies removing those that would quarrel or bring legal problems to the family (Tian 2018b).



Figure 15. L to R: Badai Yang, Tian, and Changwu sacrificing a rooster in the woods near the family home. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

A wooden bowl and meat cleaver are brought, the rooster is butchered near the altar, and its meat is put into the bowl. The altar's paper flags and figures are then burnt.

The ritual concluded, the six badai and the host family ate dinner together to mark the Big General's success and acceptance of the day's sacrifices. "We are eating and sitting with the big general, the one horn king and the other gods and spirits that have come today to help us. We eat with them to make sure the gods share the sacrifice, and they enjoy the fresh meat and offerings" (C. Shi 2018c).

16. Two Couples

The highest level of welcoming the gods and protecting spirit women from heaven occurs on the next day. This ritual built on the ritual events and was necessary to bring them to a positive conclusion with a successful water buffalo sacrifice (Tian 2018b).

Two young couples, the sons or daughters of the sponsoring family and their spouses, sat reverentially at the kitchen table dressed in their finest traditional clothing. Their presence, signifying the future, demonstrated the family's willingness to welcome the gods and spirits into the family. The two couples show "the heavens that the host family is using their highest level of humans to show the highest respect" (C. Shi 2018b). Ideally, to be the highest representatives of the family, the couples are married and parents with healthy children. The ritual presentation of the couples reiterates the mythology of the man separated and longing for his wife.

The two couples, signifying the family's most valued offering and future, are held up to the gods as proof of the family's intent, commitment, and devotion. "We are sending four guests. So please, the people say come" (Tian 2018c). The gao is thrown several times until the offerings are accepted.

Tian rang the *xiong* bell as he sang and chanted an announcement and reported to the gods outlining the family's intention (Figure 16). He then recited a list of gifts the family was sending. This was followed by the arrival of the uncle-in-law, who had been waiting outside. The four young people chanted and received the uncle-in-law to the family, joining the couples at the table. The uncle's arrival prompted the telling of ancient stories and

songs by Tian in Miao. Traditionally, telling stories was an opportunity for oral transference and could go on for hours with the family and community listening nearby. For the La Yi demonstration, the storytelling lasted nearly three hours.



Figure 16. Badai Tian in badaixiong regalia and ringing a bell to offer the spirits the two couples. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

The stories are the history of the Miao people from the very beginning: how they came into being, how they traveled to different places, where they had a battle, and how the twelve different branches of the people are history. The twelve branches are from the bee and eggs and turned into butterfly (Tian 2018c).

Tian told me it had been about fifty years since he last recited some stories and songs and that he had to sit quietly for many hours and practice until his memory came back to him. The process, he explained, “Made me glad and young to do this” (Tian 2018b). The other badai were similarly grateful for the unusual opportunity. “This is a rare situation, and I am happy I could practice something that I had no other chance to do” (Hong 2018b), remarked Hong Shu Jin, who was one of the six badai assisting. “The process was a good chance to communicate with other masters. It’s rare but good” (Yang 2018b).

The badai rehearsed their performances each night before they slept to allow the “spirits to help them in their dreams.” Rituals are held psychophysically as mind–body–spiritual memory, “I go to a quiet place to recall from my memory the movements, something that has long been lost. If I cannot remember the spirits are saying I should not do it” (C. Shi 2018b).

The reciting of stories and songs, which includes repetition and affirmations, served to encode an oral transfer of traditional knowledge, critical to a culture that is not text-based. The chorus-like responses of the uncle-in-law and the couples exemplified how storytelling was traditionally encoded and passed through the generations. One of the stories told by Tian was about the maple tree, which is sacred to the Miao. “Maple is the totem tree of Miao people, also known as grandmother tree. It is said that the mother butterfly, the

ancestor of the Miao people, grew from the heart of maple. Miao people's feelings for trees not only come from the worship of ancestors but also can be understood as a kind of respect for nature" (Chen and Bao 2021, p. 102). In one popular version of the Miao origin myth, a butterfly finds a home with the maple tree and births twelve eggs and the origin of culture. Each egg represents the origin of one of the Miao family names, with Wu, Ma, Luo, Long, Shi, Yang, and Yang being the most prominent.

In another telling of the butterfly myth, the creator figure Butterfly Mother (HudieMama 蝴蝶媽媽) "lays her eggs in a sweet gum tree. After being hatched by a mythical bird, the culture hero Jang Vang emerges from his shell. Industrious, but something of a trickster, Jang eventually gets into a tiff with the Thunder God over an ox, resulting in rains that flood the earth. Jang Vang and his sister survive the flood inside a giant calabash. [...] the brother and sister reluctantly marry, and the world again is repopulated" (Bender and Mair 2011, p. 276).

An interview with Long Ting Meng, a house builder, living in the Miao village of Xing Gueng, revealed how the former telling of the myth of the butterfly and maple tree influenced house building and daily life in the Fenghuang region. Each Miao village in the region historically identified a maple tree on the road just outside its borders—a descendant of the original maple tree—to protect the village. Consequently, each Miao house must have a main post made of maple wood. A central maple post is structurally and spiritually essential, and other posts may be made of maple or not. How a house is arranged and when it is built must be determined by the village badai, who use Feng Shui and fortune-telling (Long 2018).

Today, maple is easy to find but difficult to find big enough to be a house post. It is best to have two maple posts: the 'dragon' post and the 'grand' post. The maple post in a house represents a family's cause and the Miao people's cause for good fortune and to protect the family and food stored in the house. The pole used for the water buffalo killing is maple and sacred, like the house and the village tree (Long 2018).

17. Community Dance

Traditionally, the community was invited to participate in a dance to entertain the gods from heaven on the night after the couple's ritual. Received by the gods, the couples bring the gods to the community, which is a reason to celebrate. The sponsoring family and the uncle's family serve as hosts of both gods and the community, who are entertained by the dancing which takes place at the site of the water buffalo sacrifice. Traditionally, the dance lasted the entire night, culminating the following day in a series of rituals and leading to the sacrifice of the water buffalo followed by a community feast.

For the La Yi demonstration, the community dance occurred during the day in a field surrounded by forest, which is considered sacred, next to the site. "Miao villages surrounded by mountains are arranged along the mountains and rivers with winding forms, thus forming the characteristics of the integration of ancient villages with mountains, forests and water sources" (Chen and Bao 2021, p. 102). Community members, dressed traditionally, excitedly gathered at the family house then moved collectively to the site. All were eager to participate in the ritual, which had last occurred in the village in 2012. A large traditional Miao drum on a stand was positioned in the field. However, the village women who facilitated the drumming had limited skills and had to be shown the correct way to drum by the few older women. Most community members had only a general understanding of the dances, and with the drumming being so uncertain, many stood by helplessly. "Much of the dance has been lost but could be found in Guizhou province (Peng 2018b).

Traditionally, the community dances all night in a communal celebration, with revelers taking turns drumming and dancing when inspired. The evening is filled with "Many different songs, jokes, so many types of songs, there is much entertainment" (Peng 2018b).

The celebration was then carried to the family home at daybreak for a meal. The community returned to their homes to rest.

18. Fight Singing

Later in the day, a storytelling competition, called the *dui gu ge*, takes place between the officiating *badai* and the uncle. Using a talk-singing style of poetry, the *badai* and uncle compete with their knowledge of ancient songs and stories in the Miao language. Each song provoked a challenge for the other to respond with something better. As one sings, the other responds by singing questions to stump the singer, and so it goes on back and forth to the community's delight.

The following is an example of the La Yi exchange:

"Where does our nation come from?"

"Our nation originated east of Yellow River. And when we came here, many, many years ago, we fought many battles bravely against people who would destroy us and take our lands. We lost the battles in the war, but we are here today."

"How many names in our nation?"

"We have twelve names!" Then he proceeded to sing each family name and point to those in the audience that may bear those names.

"Well, who is my original mother?"

"Our mother is a butterfly. Uh, oh (singing) My mother comes from the maple tree, and she gave birth to the twelve brothers. Our brothers are very strong, very healthy, look at them!"

They can go on for many hours if you don't control them. They will continue for a month. They cannot finish. There are so many stories. If you got it printed, it would be three volumes. All of them are story songs. It is a fighting-singing duel to see who knows the mythology better. We must deliver the culture with singing in ancient a Miao for all the people, especially the young people, to know the stories. The best way is through fighting-singing (Peng 2018b).

Miao mythology, the substance of their storytelling, also expressed their mettle. They are people who fought, survived, and became stronger as they migrated from north to south to settle in the formidable and unforgiving mountains. Their storytelling style is called "fighting-singing" because it is done actively and with competition to prove themselves better and more knowledgeable than their opponent. Often the uncle brought his *badai* to help him in the knowledge duel—his *badai* whispering responses in his ear. For the La Yi reconstruction of the *zhuiniu*, Hong served in this capacity.

19. Bringing the Water Buffalo Home

After the storytelling competition, the water buffalo is led into the family home, which is a form of divination. If the water buffalo enters the house freely and calmly, it is a poor sign. An unruly and difficult entrance is considered a good sign and interpreted as the animal's willingness and impatience to return to heaven. If the water buffalo enters and looks to the right, it is considered a poor sign. Looking to the left is good, with looking upward the most auspicious. The water buffalo was then brought to the sacrifice area, a nearby clearing next to woods (Figure 17). The animal is tied to a decoratively carved pole of maple (Peng 2018b). Adjacent to the sacrifice site, a ritual altar was established.



Figure 17. Badai Shi Changwu and offering the water buffalo to the spirits at the outdoor altar. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

Traditionally, the sacrificed water buffalo had to be male and taken care of by the family since the spring. “Today, you can buy a water buffalo and bring it from another place in one day” (Peng 2018b). The water buffalo used for the La Yi demonstration was from Fenghuang County, approximately forty miles away, and borrowed from a friend of Ma Mae for the day. “Water buffalos are very valuable and used for work this time of year, and we were lucky to find one” (Ma 2018b).

The young bull was two years old, beautiful and powerfully built. In choosing a water buffalo to sacrifice they had to adhere to specific criteria to ensure acceptance by the gods.

The criteria are that the buffalo

1. Must not be common; instead, it must have a specific shape and appeal;
2. Its forefeet must have muscle;
3. It must have a square head;
4. It must be neither too fat nor too skinny;
5. It must have five colics (hair swirls on body)²⁵;
6. It must have a head colic that is pleasing;
7. Each rump should have a colic;
8. The horn should be warm to the touch;
9. Its hair must be slightly oily (healthy) and smooth (Hong 2018b; Peng 2018c).

20. Sending the Spirit to Heaven

Ritual themes and actions initiated during the house cleaning and ox sacrifice are reaffirmed. Before the physical body of the water buffalo is sacrificed, the animal’s spirit is sent to its heavenly palace. The *sending the spirit* ritual reiterates the myth of the water buffalo offering of the man wanting to see his wife and child in heaven.

The ritual segment and altar at the sacrificial site was the final, longest, most complex, and sacred, requiring the participation of all six Badai. Shi, Yang, and Wu Zhengnian shared the leadership of the ritual that alternated between the Zha and Xian schools of

practice. The Badai, dressed in the regalia of their respective schools, often performed side by side and would change clothing to address school-specific parts of the ritual.

A long rectangular board was placed on the ground at the edge of the field at the sacrifice site. This altar held nine bowls with chopsticks across each to symbolize the offerings of water, wine, sacrificial meat, and rice. Traditionally, the bowls were filled. For the reenactment, they were left empty, serving as placeholders. Behind the altar were five rows of nine paper flags hung on a string and sticks, representing the army called upon for the water buffalo's travel to heaven. As in previous rituals, a square vessel full of rice and stuck with incense was at the center of the altar. Gold-colored spirit money was burnt as an offering and a communication channel to the gods.

The left side of the altar was for the army—the right for the land god to help the water buffalo on its journey. A paper and grass totem doll wearing a farmer-style hat and painted face hung among the army flags, representing the mythological man who sought to see his wife and child in heaven (Figure 18).



Figure 18. Badai Yang addressing the army of the general, which are represented by the paper flags. At the center of the altar is the Doll Ghost. To the left are ten spears representing those that will be used to sacrifice the water buffalo.

Dancing the hexagon enabled a passageway between the material and spiritual worlds to offer the land god the sacrifice. Throughout the *liu jin* was used to sweep away evil spirits. Since the site was outdoors in a less controlled environment, evil spirits could be more freely attracted and must be constantly swept away (C. Shi 2018b).

With Badai Wu officiating, the host of the *zhuiniu* (Ma Mei's father) knelt before the altar and was blessed and thanked by the spirits. The water buffalo harness was presented and blessed, as were the maple spears to be used in the water buffalo killing. The water buffalo was then brought to the altar and presented to the gods. Through chant-stylized dialog, the Wu and Yang communicate the family's intent and ask the gods if they are satisfied with the animal and accept it as a worthy offering. Throwing the *gao* confirmed the acceptance of the gods. Two gods were invited, *yushe* 神, the Miao god of fish and the god of the land (*tudi zhi shen* 土地之神)²⁶ (Peng 2018c). *Yushe* was enlisted to help the host family with the ox in spring to help protect the family and drive away evil spirits while

traveling. Now the travel is not physical but spiritual. The water buffalo sent to heaven implies the family's connection and the "traveling" of wishes to heaven—the penultimate goal and rationale for zhuiniu. The function of the god general of the army is "to fight devils and evil" (C. Shi 2018c).

The general of armies is depicted with a large army flag. Like those used historically by Miao farmer combatants, maple sticks cut as spears were presented, blessed, and placed on the bushes behind the altar.

A sacrificial rooster is brought in and its beak stuffed with rice cake and tied with a thread to protect the ritual from "any problems caused by those who would have bad words. The rooster was waved over the altar to show it is alive, then sacrificed to protect the people who will kill the water buffalo" (C. Shi 2018c).

After this, three human-sized straw figures were constructed opposite the altar serving as symbolic reminders of forces that might prevent entry into heaven.

As noted earlier, there are three sources of evil spirits, (1) those bad spirits that live in nature, (2) unnatural spirits and ghosts that haunt, and (3) those caused by those that speak poorly of others or that fight or kill each other. The three straw figures anthropomorphize these types of evil.

To assure the success of the sacred and precarious journey to heaven—whereby the spirit of both the water buffalo and the family's wishes must travel—the badai "walk the clouds" and take the spirit personally.

As fire located twenty meters from the altar heats nine-iron plow blades, the scroll of the armies (the shenxiang juan, used in the spring ritual) is unfurled in parallel with the altar. Yang and Shi walked barefoot on the scroll to "walk the clouds with the army to heaven" (C. Shi 2018c).

The shenxiang juan is rolled up and replaced by the heated iron plow blades, which are placed in a row in front of the altar. Yang and Shi then walked barefoot over the hot metal several times, symbolizing the dangerous and precarious path to heaven. Once completed, the badai carried the plow blades with their shidao and piled them before the straw figures and blows the buffalo horn to mark success (Figure 19). Doing so demonstrated that the Badai have successfully walked the clouds to heaven, demonstrating to the family, community, and guardians of heaven that they are capable and worthy (Hong 2018c).

Several blows on the sacred water buffalo horn (used as a battle call) announced their assault on the straw figures. Using the maple sticks, which would be used as spears to kill the water buffalo, the two badai attacked and destroyed the straw figures as a final gesture of overcoming all barriers and entering heaven with the spirit of the water buffalo and the will of the family. The will of the family, embodied in the delivery water buffalo spirit, was delivered and announced in heaven; the buffalo horn was blown again, and firecrackers were set off. The ritual occurred over two hours and included rounds of chanting and singing accompanied by drumming and gong playing interspersed with dialogs with the gods. The goa was thrown several times until the offerings were accepted, signifying that the spirit of the water buffalo was taken to heaven (Figure 20). With the soul of the water buffalo received into heaven, all the paper flags, the totem, and other temporary altar items are put into a pile and burnt.



Figure 19. Badai Shi Changwu blowing the water buffalo horn to announce the assault on the straw figures. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).



Figure 20. Badai Yang with a shidao knife in front of the sacrificial altar. The shidao also serves as a noise maker to attract the spirits. (Photo: Thomas Riccio).

21. Receiving the Spears

The following sequence dealt with accepting the spear carriers who will enact the sacrifice. The spear-carriers, led by the uncle-in-law, were his from the matrilineal side of the family. Three generations were represented, the uncle-in-law (the first-born male and all brothers of the host's wife), the sons of the wife's brothers (her nephews), the wife's uncle(s), and if alive, any great-uncle(s). Traditionally, Miao farm communities were known for large families, with the spear carriers numbering from a few to more than a dozen.²⁷ For the La Yi demonstration, neighbors were enlisted to play the "uncles" and spear carriers.

Historically, spears had metal heads atop maple poles. The La Yi reenactment did not sacrifice the water buffalo and instead performed the actions with non-lethal maple poles (Peng 2018c).

As the community gathers for the killing, a ritual "joking" between the host family and the uncle's family occurs for the community's entertainment. It releases tension before the taking of a life. The uncle's family pretends they want to kill the bull, and the host family will not let them do so. "It is a kind of joking, pretending, a kind of performance before it is killed" (Peng 2018c).

The host family pulls the bull away from the uncle's family, and then each pulls the bull in opposite directions with a pretend verbal fight ensuing. The host family threatens to take the animal back to their house, and the uncle's family threatens to take it away to theirs, and a performed physical challenge, fighting, and verbal sparring occurs. Other Miao rituals, such as the Huan Nuoyuan, include similar comedic tension breaks and distractions before or following sacrificial actions or moments of seriousness. *Before the sacrificial killing, the water buffalo was then brought back to the altar and the gods.*

22. The Water Buffalo Sacrifice

The Three Brother ritual was recalled overseeing and protecting the process of the water buffalo killing and the host family from any evil (C. Shi 2018c). The reason for so many spiritual precautions was out of fear of attracting evil spirits. A smaller table, the "general's altar," is established on which were placed "weapons" for the army. Five flags representing the five barracks of the spirit army were attached to the base of an umbrella. On the table were a *niu jiao* 牛角 buffalo horn and the shidao knife, which generals used and later adopted for badai spiritual practice. Chant singing told how to prepare for battle against evil people, spirits, or gods. There are three types of evil: (1) an enemy of the host family and thus one who had or has problems with you, (2) those who may be friendly but behind your back say things about you, and (3) unknown and predatory outlaws. "People or it could be spirit people or gods that could do harmful things" (C. Shi 2018c).

The spear-carriers circle the animal that is closely tied to the maple pole. Because the bull can fight violently and potentially injure the spear carriers, the bull was traditionally circled as wild prey and repeatedly stabbed until dead.

When the time comes for an oxen sacrifice to be staged, Miao masters are invited to commence preparations, including choosing a date, preparing all required sacrificial and other ritual items, etc. During this time, they also recount the history and significance of the oxen sacrifice to benefit the family that has chosen to stage it. A temporary altar is set up, and guests are invited to witness and participate in the rites. The water buffalo is said to shed tears as it is being led to its death, with the actual killing being done with a spear wielded by matrilineal kin. The direction the buffalo falls at the moment of its death is critical in divining the host family's future fortunes (Katz 2022, p. 93).

If the animal fell with its head in the host family's home direction, it was most auspicious, if away from the house and in another direction, less promising. If the bull falls in the opposite direction of the house, it is considered a bad omen, and the entire ritual thought a failure (Tian 2018c).

The people try to make the head fall in the host direction and even fake it. When the buffalo falls, they direct it to go in the direction of the host. But you cannot control everything you do. Like life, you must see where it naturally falls, or it is only a lie (Peng 2018c).

The gods, satisfied by the ritual and receiving the spirit of the water buffalo, oversee the dividing of the meat and the community feast that follows. The meat is not a sacrifice but a gift from the gods on which the people must feast.

The La Yi reenactment went through each ritual sequence in detail without sacrificing a water buffalo. The buffalo's body would be divided before the community feast if that were to have happened. The head and front legs go to the uncle's family. The oldest uncle takes the left front, the second uncle the right front leg, the third uncle, and the fourth the meat above the legs. "The remaining meat is divided and cooked for the community, with everyone feasting and given meat to take home" (Peng 2018c).

After the feast, the uncle and host family negotiate over the head; traditionally, the uncle takes the head. When the uncle's family is back home, the next day, the host family fell the pole that tied the water buffalo. Soon after, the head, considered a good luck charm, is gifted back to the host family. The skull is then stripped of its meat, dried, and hung on the family house as a trophy. At the time of the skull hanging, another small ritual thanking the buffalo's spirit takes place, marking the ritual's conclusion. The number of skulls a family had on its house elevated its reputation and was a source of pride that signified their ability to sponsor the ritual (Tian 2018c).

23. Conclusions

The zhuiniu ritual documentation project at La Yi village in 2018 was a unique opportunity to access the collective memory of six influential badai from the region to reenact the ritual and cultural narrative. The gathering was a response, motivated by dire circumstances. Miao traditions are threatened and need to be recorded before they vanish.

The zhuiniu ritual is a narrative embodied and conveyed through performance. It has survived to this day by being adaptive and modular as it served the practical and spiritual needs of a culture that has been historically besieged by war and colonization. Adaptability and functionality have been key to the Miao, a tenacious people who survived by cultivating the uninhabitable into fertile lands, making them their own, and flourishing. With a history of conflict and subjugation by the Han and interaction with other ethnic groups, they adapted to a diversity of social and cultural conditions, becoming a layered complexity of cultural influences. Miao belief, ritual practice, and the cosmological narratives they reference encode and bespeak their spirituality, history, and identity. Miao rituals also entwine and serve as an implicit form of political resistance by reiterating and reaffirming their distinction as place-based Cosmo-centric people.

The broadly shared cultural patterns and cosmology of Miao are best understood as an outline articulated and shaped to local contexts and expressions. Each village shares the narrative and the culture in its way to serve its own needs and conditions. Consequently, their rituals and cosmological narratives are, as the La Yi reenactment vividly demonstrates, as complex and varied as the forests, mountains, lakes, and rivers of the Miao homelands. There is no definitive zhuiniu, which perhaps explains why it has survived into the 21st century. It is personalized and shaped to local and individual need.

Pragmatism, resourcefulness, resilience, and adaptation remain essential for the Miao character and survival. How, what, and if rituals and traditions forged by historical circumstances will survive in a global world is uncertain. By considering the zhuiniu ritual we are like archeologists piecing together pottery shards. We get a glimpse of fragments, speculating on what was and possibly what the future will bring.

24. Outline of the Zhuiniu Ritual Sequence

24.1. Spring

24.1.1. Announcement

A family consults a xianniang (spirit medium) to determine if it is a good time to sponsor the ritual. If yes, the zhuiniu ritual begins with the family's announcement of intent at the beginning of the Chinese lunar New Year.

24.1.2. Ox Sacrifice

An ox is sacrificed shortly after the announcement to pay the gods for the protection of the sponsoring.

24.1.3. House Cleaning

The ox is offered, and the house is cleansed of evil spirits in preparation for the ritual. The ritual intention is announced to the god of the treasury, who is called upon to assure the family's ability to financially complete the ritual and protect the money sent to purchase the water buffalo.

24.2. Fall Harvest Season

24.2.1. Occurring over Three Days

Altars and Armies

Peachtree branches are brought from the mountains. Two altars are established in the family's home, one inside and one near the door representing inside and outside. The ritual calls the spirit armies to battle evil spirits and protect the family. The peachtree branches are boiled, and the officiating badai wash their face and hands and rinse their mouths to protect them from evil spirits and ghosts attracted to the ritual. The god of the treasury is again invoked and thanked, with support from the god and armies solicited.

Inviting the Gods and Spirits

The badai "walks the cloud" and visits heaven, where he speaks with the Gods, spirits, mythical animals, generals, and their spirit armies, asking them to serve, guide, and protect the ritual. The invitation is repeated twice to avoid any confusion. Special consideration is given to inviting the god of the "doors and gates" because entrances and thresholds are where evil spirits linger and hide. Devils and evil spirits are driven away, and some are locked up.

The Tali Tree

For dispelling historical and ancestral curses haunting the family. This ritual addresses curses at an outdoor altar hung with hemp rope, flags, and anthropomorphic figures representing evil spirits and protecting gods. The rope has looped "hooks" made of bamboo and is meant to capture evil. The rope symbolizes a bridge linking present and ancient generations of the family and is attached to a tali tree branch.

Jiuxi

A follow-up to finding and expunging any lingering and unaccounted evil spirits attracted to the house or ritual making. Jiuxi, a Miao word meaning "reasons."

For the Heavens

An altar in the house's interior is for food offerings to the gods and is meant to invite and please the gods and convey the family's wishes to the heavens. Bowls with rice, millet, and peach water surround twenty-one bowls filled with the season's harvest, buckwheat, ramie, soy, maize, wheat, sorghum, and oats. Each is a crop the gods enjoy.

Three Brothers

An outdoor table altar with three chairs reenacts the “Three Brothers” mythology. An open umbrella rest on one chair, representing the elevated status of the brothers. The mythology of the Three Brothers developed in the face of conflict with the Han and is central to Miao culture and identity and reiterates the mythological origins of the Miao, its families, and the historical injustices endured. The retelling calls upon the Three Brothers to assist in the ritual.

Big General Doll Ghost

An altar at the house’s threshold is an “indoor and outdoor offering” to the spirit beings living inside and outside—domestic and nature. A rooster is sacrificed, and peach water is sprayed in the four directions, followed by writing messages to the spirits with a knife in the air. A doll made of paper represents the Big General, who will oversee the water buffalo sacrifice. Blood from the rooster is smeared on the doll to feed the Big General.

Two Couples

Two young couples, the sons or daughters of the sponsoring family and their spouses, sit at the kitchen table dressed in their finest traditional clothing. Their presence, signifying the future, demonstrates the family’s willingness to welcome the gods and spirits into the family. The two couples show “the heavens that the host family is using their most valued representatives, married couples and parents with healthy children.

Community Dance

An all-night, community-wide celebration with drumming, singing, and dancing occurs. The couples, received by the gods, bring the gods to the community, which is a reason to celebrate. The celebration is then carried to the family home at daybreak for a meal. The community returns to their homes to rest.

Fight Singing

Later in the day, a storytelling competition between the officiating badai and the uncle. Using a talk-singing style of poetry, the badai and uncle compete with their knowledge of ancient songs and stories in the Miao language. Each song provokes a challenge for the other to respond with something better. As one sings, the other responds by singing questions to stump the singer and educate and entertain the community.

Bringing the Water Buffalo Home

The water buffalo is led through the family home for divination. If the water buffalo enters the house freely and calmly, it is a poor sign. An unruly and difficult entrance is considered a good sign and interpreted as the animal’s willingness and impatience to return to heaven. If looking to the right, it is considered a poor sign. Looking to the left is good, with looking upward the most auspicious. The water buffalo is then brought to the sacrifice area, a nearby clearing next to woods. The animal is tied to a pole of maple. Adjacent to the sacrifice site, a ritual altar is established.

Sending the Spirit to Heaven

Before the physical body of the water buffalo is sacrificed, the animal’s spirit is sent to its heavenly palace.

The general of armies is called upon to lead in the sacrifice. Maple sticks cut as spears are presented, blessed, and placed at the outdoor altar.

Receiving the Spears

Family members sacrificing the water buffalo accept the spears blessed by the heavens.

The Water Buffalo Sacrifice

The spear-carriers circle the animal closely tied to the maple pole. Because the bull can fight violently and potentially injure the spear carriers, the bull was traditionally circled as wild prey and repeatedly stabbed until dead. If the animal falls with its head in the host family's home direction, it is auspicious, if away from the house and in another direction, less promising. If the bull falls in the opposite direction of the house, it is considered a bad omen, and the entire ritual thought a failure.

The Division of Meat

A mock argument about the division of meat takes place. The water buffalo is then butchered and divided between the host family, the brother-in-law's family, and other family members. A celebration marks the end of the zhuiniu, with the community sharing in the feast.

The Water Buffalo Head

Weeks after the zhuiniu ends, the skull of the water buffalo is hung on the exterior of the family's house. It is a sign of honor and prestige on display for the community to see.

Funding: All badai were paid by the Xiangxi Tujia-Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Hunan Province in association with the Ethnography and Anthropology Department at Jishou University, Luo Kang-long, chair. My expenses while in China were covered by Jishou University where I was a visiting professor in Ethnography and Anthropology. My salary was covered by my employer, the University of Texas at Dallas and the Center for Asian Studies, Dennis Kratz, director.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethical review and approval were waived for this study. Jishou University determined the ethnographic research was exempt and posed a minimal risk to the participants and required no regulatory involvement. The author took every precaution with the participants to assure communication of information, comprehension of information, and voluntary participation.

Informed Consent Statement: All participants were fully informed and agreed to the objectives of the research project and gave either oral (for those illiterate) or written informed consent for interviews, photographs, and video documentation. All project documentation is held by the Xiangxi Tujia-Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Hunan Province Cultural Ministry, Jishou, China. Ma Mei, director.

Data Availability Statement: All interviews, photographs, and video documentation are available through the Xiangxi Tujia-Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Hunan Province Cultural Ministry, Jishou, China. Ma Mei, director.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ This paper is presented from the perspective of performance studies and performance ethnography. The author is not a scholar of Chinese culture nor an anthropologist by training and does not read or speak Chinese. He has worked internationally with a variety of ethnic and tribal groups documenting performance and ritual practices and traditions.
- ² My first visit to the region was in 2001. Since then, dirt roads have been paved with asphalt, bridges, and major highways now exist with a regional airport in the offing. Electrification is ubiquitous, along with television and cell phones. Many young people have left the region to work in urban areas, and the region is relatively prosperous, educated, and aware of the larger world. These advances have brought profound economic, social, and cultural change that has rapidly eroded and challenged Miao traditions and village life.
- ³ The term zimei means divining person and can be applied to male or female practitioners.
- ⁴ For the Miao, all sickness is related to the spirits.
- ⁵ More on the distinction between badaixiong and badaizha will be discussed below.
- ⁶ There are several historical accounts of the Miao zhuiniu ritual dating from the 1930s and 40s and as recently as 2000. David Holm's *Killing a Buffalo for the Ancestors* is informative; however, it depicts the buffalo killing ritual of the Zhuang people, and to compare these rituals in detail is beyond the scope of this paper.

- 7 Many Miao badai insist that their practices, beliefs, and cosmology pre-date Daoism and were historically appropriated and popularized by the literate Daoists who could extend their influence far beyond the orally transmitted traditions of the Miao. Separate analysis and comparative study of the exchange and influences of Miao and Daoist ritual practices are extensive and beyond the scope of this paper.
- 8 A frequent difficulty when conducting field research in the region was the variety of Miao dialects, which were sometimes unintelligible to my translators.
- 9 The author first visited the region in 2001. At that time, the roads were poor, few homes were electrified, televisions were given to each family by the government only to sit inert in barn-like homes, and there was no access to digital communication of any sort. Villages today have been transformed by an influx of money from Miao working in urban areas. Televisions, cell phones, farm machinery, new homes, and automobiles are standard.
- 10 The use of the *Yijing* by the badai is not primary, but rather best understood as one of several tools adapted and applied to their divinatory and ritual practice. A further, in-depth study of the relationship between the *Yijing* and badai spiritual practice is beyond the scope of this paper and the author's research.
- 11 The term "school" was used by the badai to identify a body of knowledge and set of techniques associated with a localized practice. Traditionally, badai knowledge passed from father to son. Today, it is no longer an exception for a badai master to take on a worthy student apprentice who may or may not be related.
- 12 All badai were paid by the Xiangxi Tujia-Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Hunan Province in association with the Ethnography and Anthropology Department at Jishou University, Luo Kanglong, chair. My salary was covered by my employer, the University of Texas at Dallas and the Center for Asian Studies, Dennis Kratz, director. All participants gave human subject permission for interviews and the use of their image (photographic and video) for documentation. Releases are held by the Xiangxi Tujia-Miao Autonomous Prefecture of Hunan Province Autonomous Prefecture Cultural Ministry.
- 13 Badai Yang did not master the Miao language, which is necessary to become a badaixiong.
- 14 The origins and meanings of many patterns, actions, and words are often only vaguely known. However, their sacredness is never challenged. Adherence and exactitude of ritual execution are unquestioned. I found the exact unquestioning adherence to ritual patterns, sequences, and forms while working with various indigenous groups, among them the !Xuu and Khwe Bushmen of the Kalahari, the Inupiat of Alaska, and the Sakha of central Siberia. In nonliterate cultures, ritual is considered a "text" bespeaking the ancestors.
- 15 Seven Fairies are seven daughters of the mythical Jade Emperor (Yuhuang dadi 玉皇大帝), the venerable god who rules the whole universe. Like an emperor of the human world, he is second only to the Three Pristine Ones, who are the most venerable gods of Daoism (Yin 2005, p. 1).
- 16 The Miao do not personify their gods; however, when needed, they use Han representations.
- 17 The Miao believe the peach fruit was first cultivated in China and that it is therefore sacred.
- 18 *Nggiaox* is a bridge in Miao that is specific to the Miao culture god. The term has no Chinese equivalent cosmologically.
- 19 For the La Yi demonstration, the ritual began mid-morning.
- 20 Incense is burnt throughout the ritual.
- 21 Two types of horns are used by badai; one is made from a water buffalo horn, and the other, in the shape of a horn, is made of brass. Both were historically used in battle; only the water buffalo horn was used during the ritual I attended. "There are thirty-six ways to blow the horn which must only now be used for ritual purposes because it has much spiritual power" (S. Shi 2016).
- 22 In an alternative telling of the story, one of the brothers discovers the emperor's plot and escapes having only enough time to take an umbrella.
- 23 For the dragon ritual, the community gathers at the village well and parades in a human line holding umbrellas to the family home of the zhuiniu sponsor. This ritual is often interpolated into the zhuiniu. The ritual can also be performed separately as part of a village celebration. The details of this ritual are extensive and deserve separate consideration beyond the scope of this essay.
- 24 At this point, badai Yang's phone rang with a country-western song as a ringtone—the event paused as he talked to a relative. Afterward, the three badai discussed what to do next.
- 25 Adhering to the five essential elements.
- 26 Ghunb Mloul is a Miao name of yushe, the fish god.
- 27 The Miao and other rural populations were exempt from the CCP's "one child policy" because of the need for farm labor.

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