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Huan Nuoyuan

Exorcism and Transformation in Miao Ritual Drama

Thomas Riccio



Figure 1. At Guo Gao village Badai Wu Fa Xing communicates privately to the Nuo Mother who was just “put down” and is standing on the floor in front of him and among the people. Using the gao to communicate, the badai chants, asking the Nuo Mother to accept the sacrifices and the repayment of the vow to heal the son of the household. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)

Long Wei Dong was a thin, skittish 17-year-old Miao boy living in the isolated farming village of Guo Gao, Fenghuang County, population 460. Guo Gao is nestled deep within the craggy zigzagging convolutions of the Wuling Mountains somewhere in the Xiangxi Tujia-Miao Autonomous Prefecture, southwestern Hunan Province, China.

Long Wei Dong was the subject of the *huan nuoyuan*, an ancient Miao ritual revealed in dramatic form, which would “repay the vow” his family made eight years prior to the *nuo* ghosts on his behalf. His family’s home was busy with preparations, guests were gathering, animals were being sacrificed, and food was being prepared. Seven *badai*—traditional Miao priest-shamans—were finalizing the altar arrangement and their regalia for an all-night exorcistic rite to mark the completion of Long Wei Dong’s healing.

It was bone-chilling cold, and an overcast sky blanketed the late December 2015 day. The rains had been heavy; the mountain mist hung low, thick, and earth-fragrant. The houses and outbuildings of the village blended into the rough-cut geography. The narrow winding pathways between houses and livestock stalls moved with the land, following the contours of the steep and often sheer and snaking valleys. Of the several elders I asked, no one knew the exact settlement date of Guo Gao village, but all affirmed it was “many generations old.” The village structures were made of stone, concrete, cinder block, rough-hewn wood, metal, and thatch.

The huan nuoyuan is possibly the most detailed, elaborate, and unique Miao cultural event. The public part of the ritual is enacted dramatically and in narrative form, at once a community occasion as much as entertainment, feast, spiritual event, and exorcism. The pre-public ritual activities—such as the creation of the altar decorations, spiritual house cleansing, making of rice cakes, selection of animals to be sacrificed, and preparation of food—can take 3 to 15 days. The duration and the extent of the activities of the pre-public ritual are dependent on the vow to be repaid to the spirits, on what the host family can afford, and on the availability of the administering badaï. The two public rituals I witnessed took place over a period of 24 hours. This article focuses on the sequence of huan nuoyuan public events and its relevant context.

Despite challenges of modernization, the huan nuoyuan is still widely performed throughout the Miao region during the fallow farming season, mid-November to mid-January. The Miao winter is a time for reflection, rest, reconciliation, and renewal—as it is for so many cultures throughout the world.

Intersecting Contexts

Numbering over 10 million, the Miao are one of the largest of 55 officially recognized ethnic groups in the People’s Republic of China. The Miao historically inhabited north central China. Primarily horticulturists, herders, and small game hunters, the Miao were pushed into southwest China over the millennia by the Han, who first invaded from the north in the fourth century BCE. After a succession of wars with the martial Han, the Miao found refuge in the formidable mountains of Hunan five to six hundred years ago. There they flourished to the point of overpopulating the region with groups of Miao migrating over the last several hundred years, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, to Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, where they are known as the Hmong. The word “Miao” is a derogatory name assigned by the Han and meaning cranky, unreasonable, and a little bit stupid. The Miao of China have accepted the term, much in the way Alaskan Inuit have accepted the once derogatory term “Eskimo,” and are proud of their identity. In 1949 the newly formed People’s Republic of China officially identified the Hmong and Mong people, and other linguistically and culturally related groups in southern China, as the Miao. Those Miao fleeing to the south reembraced their historical name and identify as Hmong. The origin of the term “Hmong” is unknown, it means simply, “The People.”

The village of Guo Gao is typical of the many small, impoverished, agriculturally based villages that dot the region. Today, as the Miao struggle with the complexities of globalization, the huan nuoyuan has taken on a critical significance. Survival for most rural Miao is at the subsistence level. Incomes vary: on average, from \$50 to \$150 per month—prompting many youths to leave for urban areas that have become overburdened with so many rural aspirants (Hong

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2015).¹ Villages have been left without their most able-bodied and the passing on of fragile traditions has been threatened.

Now, with China's hyperindustrialization and the adoption of advanced technology, fewer unskilled laborers are needed, and many Miao are returning home. To encourage youth to return and remain in the region, the central and regional governments have implemented several cultural initiatives. Among them are programs to document Miao culture and to develop and promote education of Miao cultural identity. The development of cultural villages to encourage domestic tourism and employment has been high on the central government's agenda.²

The Miao region's largest city, Jishou, is a crowded and undistinguished gritty and gray compendium of stores, small shops, and light industry that serves as the governmental, university, banking, and commercial hub for the Miao. Jishou stands in stark contrast with the modern, gleaming skylines found elsewhere in China. This is due, in part, to the lingering marginalization of the Miao. The Han are the dominant ethnic group in China accounting for 91 percent of the population. Until recently the Han characterized the Miao and their rituals, as well as the spiritual traditions of other ethnic groups, as primitive and superstitious, a widespread sentiment that still influences perceptions of minorities and governmental policies. Much has been improved since my first visit to the region and the provincial city in 2001, but Jishou still lags woefully behind other Chinese cities due, in no small part, to institutional and historical prejudices.

Because of their long persecution and isolation, the Miao were able to withstand, preserve, and extend their cultural and social folkways into the 21st century. There were, however, varying degrees of Miao identity and tradition. Anthropologist Louisa Schein explains that the "raw" Miao living in greater isolation have been able to preserve their traditions whereas the "cooked" Miao living closer to the Han settlements have struggled to accommodate to modern practices (2000:7). Although attitudes towards the Miao, along with other ethnic minorities, have today changed on a personal level, they are still marginalized politically, socially, and economically.

Under communism, the Miao and other ethnic minorities were internally colonized—most intensely during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976)—by a broad dissemination of political propaganda bringing Communist culture to "revolutionize" the masses into accepting a "modern identity." The hallmark of the Maoist period has given way to a confrontation with other, far more virulent forms of technology and consumer culture. Today the issue is not ideological control vs. grassroots cultural expression, but influences and changes wrought by exposure to global culture (Schein 2000:14).

Living in a harsh, unforgiving environment, the Miao became inventive and adaptive. Their long history of continuous relocation and resettlement also contributed to the resilience of the Miao, with each isolated village fending for itself in its own way, yet sharing a culture (Peng 2015³). To this day, many regional customs and dialects persist, some of which are so distinct and varied they are unintelligible to other Miao. Villages like Guo Gao and others I visited are best understood as sharing a wellspring of Miao mythology and ritual practice yet also separate microcosms, idiosyncratic extended families, often sharing a distinct dialect as well as variations of social and cultural vocabularies, shaped to the specific needs, circumstances, and geography of a village.

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all interviews were translated by Peng Jin Quan.

2. One such initiative, supported by local governmental agencies and Jishou University, sponsored my travel and research to the region.

3. Peng Jin Quan is Miao-Tujia born and raised in the region. A traditional actor turned film and television actor and director, he is an ardent student and advocate of Miao performance and has dedicated himself to its documentation and preservation. His assistance and friendship have been invaluable.

The Nuo Culture

A central unifying cosmology of Miao is nuo. The term “nuo” means to “cleanse or exorcise” (Riley 1997:21) and can be best characterized as an of-the-people folk performance tradition that embodies the mythical and spiritual forces that sustain the Miao worldview. Nuo dates to the origins of the Miao people and evolved separately and parallel with the badai spirit healing tradition. To this day badai are trained in nuo mask performance and oversee its practice in many rituals and community performances, but the tradition and rituals of nuo remain distinct and ancillary to badai practice. The huan nuoyuan, because of its overlapping of healing, community, and thanksgiving objectives, remains the only instance when a badai integrates nuo in their ritual practice.

Nuo evolved as a broad and variously practiced folk tradition connecting, through mask performance and narrative, the human and spiritual world for the community. Nuo is also the Miao word for “sticky rice” (Peng 2015), which is prominently offered to the community and ghosts alike during nuo performances, further indicating the tradition’s folk origins. According to Master Badai Shi, nuo enabled the rise of the Miao and badai culture during the second age of human development, a mythological period referenced by various badai as a time when order first came into the world. “It was the era of the strong and the weak. A time when people ruled or were ruled, it was a time of tribal conflicts and chaos over 4,000 years ago. The ghosts were still close to humans, and the nuo were the ghosts who helped to bring order to the world. That is why we honor them” (Shi F.G. 2016).

The nuo tradition exists as multiple and varied customs throughout the region, with masked characters used for a variety of community and sacred events, such as harvest celebrations, Lunar New Year celebrations, and death rituals all of which are overseen but not performed by a badai. “Nuo is also performed for domestic rites, such as bringing money into the family, wishing for a baby or good marriage, a peaceful life, to drive the bad ghosts away, and for special wish fulfillment” (Chen 2016).⁴

A recent revival of nuo for community development and employment has been supported by various county and regional governments. Cultural workers hired to reestablish nuo in rural villages have created “Miao Traditional Villages” to offer domestic tourists authentic traditional culture experiences, replete with traditional foods, T-shirts, and gift shops. Several government-sponsored tourist sites and museums feature spectacular light and sound extravaganzas choreographed in musical theatre fashion. In these shows, multitudes of actors performing as badai, xiangxi (spirit mediums), and other nuo figures delight audiences.

Wu Xing Zhi, a master nuo mask maker, invited me to his busy open-air workshop to observe his process. His Jishou City workshop goes back many generations, employs 15 people, and is located on the grounds of a Taoist temple where he also produces ornate religious statues and objects. “I am Miao and enjoy most carving Nuo” (Wu X.Z. 2016). He showed me a wide variety of styles of nuo masks in various stages of completion; some were oversized, others human size. “There are many styles of nuo masks for the same character; I can make any style and also make small ones for tourist shops in Beijing.” Although not familiar with how to perform nuo, Wu was able to describe the evolution of the masks and how their hunter-gatherer and anthropomorphic origins evolved to fit the needs of a horticultural society interacting with other cultures. Isolated rural villages are more likely to commission masks of the Snake God and the Gods of Wind, Ox, Rain, and Thunder for harvest and New Year rituals⁵ (Wu X.Z. 2016). Like so much of Miao tradition, nuo was deeply influenced by Confucianism, Buddhism,

4. See Xiaohuan Zhao’s article on “Nuo Altar Theatre: Reflections on the Shamanic Origins of Chinese Theatre” in this issue of *TDR* (Zhao 2019) — *Ed.*

5. Which are still used in other nuo performances.

and Taoism. Consequently, Buddha, Lao-tzu, and Confucius dominate the central altar of nuo rituals (Riley 1997:111). The Han, Buyi, Dong, Shjui, Yi, Gelao, Yao, and other Chinese ethnicities developed their own interpretations (derived from the Miao) of nuo, which were widely practiced until the Cultural Revolution.

Site of the Ritual Drama

The satellite dishes of Guo Gao village floated like so many lotus flowers on roofs. The Long family home was part barn, general-purpose work room, and storage space. There were a few windows with wooden shutters, walls of exposed stone and cinder block, flagstone and concrete floors, and soot-blackened ceiling timbers. Haphazardly taped or nailed to the walls to brighten the gloom were Communist party posters, traditional placards for good luck and warding off evil, old calendars, and vivid color advertising and movie posters of airbrushed, smiling Chinese pop stars. In a far corner next to a pile of 50 kg bags of rice and corn was an incessantly flashing television with its sound off.

The home doubled in height at its center, soaring to 20 feet at its peak. Handmade wooden ladders gave access to the sleeping lofts next to the grain and rice storage areas. From the ceiling hung bunches of dried vegetables and bare light bulbs for illumination. At either side of the central area, the ceiling was lower. As you enter, to the left of the main double doors was a fire pit over which smoked pig meat hung. The men gathered on this side of the building, along with the musicians playing gongs and double-sided drums, providing the underscoring for the huan nuoyuan.⁶ The faces and expressions of the people in attendance were open and sincere. The setting was, however, disorienting, a collage of contrasts, mashing elements of the 18th, 19th, and 21st centuries.

Near the fire pit corner of the house was one of the few windows, which provided the daylight for two men sitting at a low table with candles and overflowing with rough yellow paper, ink pots, and brushes. A badai calligrapher and his assistant were writing messages to the ghosts. Stacks of letters to the low-level gods and ghosts were piled at a corner of the table.

Letters to the Gods

“By writing their names and letters to the gods, we call upon them to come. There are hundreds of gods,” smiled Badai Long Rui Zhen. The 42-year-old was a “farmer, husband, and father; I cannot make my living doing work as a badai” (Long R.Z. 2015). His face was leathery from farm work, his teeth stained and crooked. He learned to become a badai from his father; he was from a long hereditary line. He became an apprentice when he was 11 years old. “My father chose me out of many of his sons. I learned from my dad, but I am also the son of Heaven” (2015). After his initial training, he studied with Master Badai Long Ting Yung, an influential 84-year-old descendant of 17 generations of badai.

Because of his calligraphy skill, Badai Long Rui Zhen was charged with communicating with the gods and ghosts via his pen. Each letter was attached with “spirit money,” a rough and minutely perforated harvest-yellow square sheet of paper approximately 7 x 7 inches. The calligraphic poetic letters to the gods (cultural deities) and ghosts (a generalized term referring to spirits, ancestors, and celestials of varying and lesser rank) were tied by string to the spirit money and attached to a boat-shaped basket made of bamboo leaves and branches. The boats

6. Local musicians, playing cymbals, gongs, and double-sided drums are specially trained to perform badai rituals. Only badais are allowed to blow the *niu jiao* (oxen horn) summoning the ghosts. The musicians, like most badai, are primarily farmers and hired by a commissioning family. Musicians and the more noted badai are in high demand and travel widely, with November through January being their busiest season because of the huan nuoyuan.

would be burnt during the ritual drama “so the ghosts can use them.” The burning of money marks the transfer of one’s will heavenward via smoke. Nuts and candy are put into the boats to be “shared with the ghosts who are hungry” and the boat is elaborately decorated with paper cutouts of images to please the ghosts. Cutouts represent the four directions, with each direction having a different energy and different nature: “The East is a Dragon, Blue, and Day; West is a Tiger, White, and Sunset; North is a Turtle, Black, and Cold; and South is Firebirds, Red, and Hot. Each must be recognized and appealed to” (Long R.Z. 2015).

Badai Long Rui Zhen wrote to the dozens of names listed in the “Book of Ghosts.” As he cautioned, this was done “so no ghost is forgotten.” The letters appeal to ghost generals and soldiers—both good and evil—with the good ghosts receiving the most elaborate baskets. Each ghost receives an offering, but evil ghosts are additionally asked not to disrupt the ritual (Long R.Z. 2015).

The ghosts visiting the ritual drama include those of upper and lower rank. The principal ghosts Badai Long Rui Zhen appealed to were:

Li Mi Long, the Ghost of Dead and Fornication
 Rong, Mountain Eighth Ghost
 Donkey, Mountain Ninth Ghost
 The Ghost of Forgotten Names
 Two Dragons of the North
 The Ghost that Takes Charge of Rice
 The King in Charge of Black Land
 The Emperor Who Comes from Three Originations
 The King of Heaven that Takes Care of the Northeast
 The Ghost that Takes Care of Land and Happiness
 The Mother of the King, her name is 193 Sisters
 The Ghost with No Name, who is presented with honor
 (Long R.Z. 2015)



Figure 2. Badai Long Rui Zhen at his calligraphy table writing and preparing letters to the gods. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)



Figure 3. Letters to the gods and ghosts are wrapped around “spirit money” and placed in a large “boat” that will be burned during the huan nuoyuan, sending the wishes and desires to heaven. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)

Preparations

Nearby, the men who sat around the fire were engaged in idle talk, smoking, drinking tea, cracking pistachios, roasting and eating rice cakes as the ritual was beginning a few steps away. Most in attendance were relatives and neighbors from Guo Gau or nearby villages. They gathered either out of respect or obligation and because the promise of feasting, drinking, and socializing was a welcome break from the gray winter monotony.

On the right of the house was the kitchen and eating area with a large, woodburning oven and stove at the center. A gleaming electric refrigerator stood near the stove. Women related to the family served food and drink. The seating division by gender was not mandated but rather determined by where people congregated and was consistent with yin-yang relationships, which “balance a house” (Peng 2015). I was reminded of the many Thanksgiving and other family events in the United States I’ve experienced that also have culturally evolving male-female groupings.



Figure 4. Huan nuoyuan altar, Guo Gao village. In the foreground are two oxhorns, the niu jiao. Bowls of rice, incense, and rice cakes are offered to the Nuo Mother (left) and Nuo Father (right). (Photo by Thomas Riccio)

The main double doors opened to the center of the house, right behind the elaborately constructed altar. Above the altar, layers of colorful paper cutouts were hung from two lines of string. The cutouts were made specifically for the ritual, each symbolic of layers of heaven, the mythic Peach Flower Garden where the Miao gods and ghosts reside. The quality and precision of the paper cutouts are essential to the effectiveness of the ritual and are a major part of a badai’s training (Peng 2016).

The subject of this huan nuoyuan, Long Wei Dong, was “emotionally disturbed” and prone to mood swings and sudden outbursts of aggressive-

ness from a young age. He described his sickness as “feeling hot and then cold at times all of the sudden, then feeling nothing” (Long W.D. 2015). Concerned for his well-being, his parents called upon Wu Zheng Niam, a local 80-year-old badai master who administered several healing rituals for the family over the course of eight years. Soon after treatments began, the family made a vow to the nuo ghosts “for the recovery and good health of their troubled son” (Wu Z.N. 2015).

The vow of the family was formally proclaimed in a ceremony and marked with the creation of a *yuanzhi* (paper on which the vow is written), a piece of red paper wrapped around a bamboo frame. The yuanzhi was then hidden, affixed to the fifth beam of the house’s attic. The badai had dreams—messages from the ghosts—over the years, which prompted moving the yuanzhi to a lower beam. The final dream came a year before the huan nuoyuan, requiring the yuanzhi to be transferred to the lowest beam and then placed on the family’s altar. Long Wei Dong was feeling better, and it was time to make good on the nuo vow.

Preparations began immediately, without consideration of the family’s circumstances or ability to sponsor the event. The ritual drama is a great expense for the host family and Long Jin

Er, the boy's father, is a poor farmer (Hong 2015). Costs include paying the badai troupe and musicians: "It is costly to open their house and fully provide every aspect so the gods would accept the son's vow. But it is important for the badai and the Miao people" (Peng 2015). In a sense, the ritual had begun eight years earlier, with the nuo vow; fulfilling the vow had hung over the family ever since.

Long Wei Dong sat in the circle around the fire. His hair was trendily cut, he wore Nike sneaker knock offs, blue jeans, a glittering watch, a stylish sweater, and a jacket emblazoned with a designer logo. He obsessively yet impassively focused on his cell phone, earbuds in place, playing games. He sat oblivious to his surroundings, his feet outstretched, casually facing the crackling and smoking fire pit as gongs and drums shattered and vibrated the air. He was the eldest son but the youngest of a dozen or so men around the fire, all of them farmers. To the man, they appeared old beyond their years, weary, weathered, and worn extensions of the earth they tilled and toiled.

Openings and Connections

Shortly after 10:00 a.m., there was a long bellowing blow of an oxhorn, the *niu jiao*, followed by the poetic song chant of Master Badai Wu Zheng Niam. So began the huan nuoyuan's dramatic journey through Miao mythology. The badai troupe—seven badai disciples of varying degrees—were hired to conduct the ritual drama and would assist Master Badai Wu. The well-respected badai master was a distant relative to the host family who lived a short distance through a maze of cobbled pathways. Only three badai were necessary to conduct the ritual, as was the case at Bai Guo village which I documented three days later,⁷ but because of the severity of Long Wei Dong's illness, additional badai assembled from surrounding villages. Some were charged with gathering and organizing a multitude of objects, among them rice, incense, and spirit money; some wrote to the ghosts, while others constructed the altar and the elaborate paper cutouts that canopied the event.

The intricate, beautifully delicate paper cutouts called *jianzhi* were set to create the



Figure 5. The three badai waking up the spirits for huan nuoyuan at Bai Guo village. Note the intricately detailed paper cutouts, jianzhi, overhead. The cutouts are created for each huan nuoyuan by one badai and hung overhead to symbolize the entrance to the Peach Flower Garden where the Nuo Mother and Father, and the Miao gods and ghosts live. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)

7. Three days after documenting the huan nuoyuan in Guo Gao village I was in Bai Guo village 90 miles away doing the same. The dramaturgy of the ritual drama was the same in both iterations; however, interpretations and execution in Bai Guo was far superior in attention to detail and commitment. For example, badai at the Guo Gao iteration often enacted abbreviated versions of ritual actions or chants, leaving out sections or giving sketchy renderings. Sometimes badai did not have or did not bother to change into the required ritual regalia. The contrast between the two ritual offerings indicates regional difference and the erosion of traditional practice.

“Atmosphere of the mythical Peach Flower Garden” (Peng 2015). Other cutouts of red, orange, yellow, and white paper (each approximately 15" x 15") hung above and framed the altar. Each was a distinct representation of a place, desire, or element necessary for the exorcistic ritual drama. They included: “Palace of the Sun,” “Surround the Altar Money,” “Door Closing Money,” and a sinister-looking paper full of images of malevolent demons, known as the “The Aggrieved.” Behind the altar were paintings of the Three Pure Ones, next to them Taoist marshals, the patriarchs, and the ancestors of the badai master conducting the ritual. On top of the altar were three baskets of rice: the central one represented the presence of the Three Pure Ones; the basket on the right represented the Lord or the Nuo Father (also referred to as Nuo Lord); and the one on the left represented the Nuo Mother (also referred to as Nuom). Masks representing the Nuo Father and Mother, the mythic originators of the Miao, were placed behind their baskets of rice on bamboo staffs, their “bodies” dressed with cloth. The exact arrangement of the altar design was necessary to ensure the success of the event. The Nuo Mother and Father are present at all Nuo performances with other characters determined according to needs and objectives (Hong 2015).

“The entire process must be done in precise order and in a precise way,” Badai Hong Shi Jin stated in an interview before the huan nuoyuan at Bai Guo village (Hong 2015). The priority was to “build a bridge, so the generals and soldiers of heaven will come” (Peng 2015). The huan nuoyuan is a ritual drama, simultaneously a reiteration and reaffirmation of Miao culture, society, and cosmology. As an ingenious interweaving of ritual and dramatic forms, it provides an accessible mythic reenactment, serving as a contact and contract with the Miao ghosts.

Animal Sacrifice

The altar faced the courtyard where the animals were sacrificed. Puddles of blood thinned by rainwater spotted the enclosure. One large pig hung upside down, its entrails pulled from its steaming body cavity and placed in a pile on the gray stone. Another pig struggled and kicked until it gave way to the froth of death. Chickens, hanging from a post, fluttered frantically, awaiting the inevitable. In a large vat of boiling water, a sheep was scraped of its fur. Another small sheep, stripped and white, lay on the stone nearby. The farmers—nonchalant despite the desperate pleading of animals facing death, the blood, and the offal—joked, smoked, and chatted amidst the vapors of evaporating life. Earlier, at 7:00 a.m., before the slaughter, the animals had been dragged before the altar as offerings, in the part of the ritual known as *Jiaosheng* (Katz 2013:17), to worship the gods. Later, buckets of blood, along with spirit money daubed with the animal’s blood, was placed on the altar in front of the Three Pure Ones, represented by three unsullied bowls of rice. The Long family raised the animals for sacrifice because it is forbidden to purchase animals for the huan nuoyuan (Hong 2015).

The Badai

The male-only orally transmitted badai culture is said to have originated 4,000 years ago with the first Miao emperor, who was also the first badai. The badai are the caretakers of tradition, combining the attributes of healer, priest, shaman, storyteller, and elder. The badai convey the Miao mythology, history, and social values, by means of performance—but without trance or prophesy. “The badai holds the Miao culture of the past and the future. The word ‘badai’ combines two Miao words: ‘ba’ meaning father and dominant, and ‘dai’ meaning offspring and the ones who pass on the culture” (Shi F.G. 2016).

The culture of the badai was almost lost during their repression from 1949 to the mid-1970s, from the establishment of the People’s Republic of China through the Cultural Revolution. Master Badai Shi Fa Gao, whom I interviewed at the badai museum and archival center he founded in the village of Don Chong, told of how his grandfather had his badai implements and regalia destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Badai Shi’s grandfather and father were both arrested and persecuted as “professionals of superstition.”



Figure 6. The courtyard directly outside the family home where the sacrifice and slaughter of the animals took place. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)

The family was looked down upon by the community. I had to learn quietly at night. When I learned and trained, I did so at the risk of political and personal life. It was a very difficult time, a hard time for all Chinese people, we were all eating grass, roots, and tree bark. Now the authorities are more accepting. (Shi F.G. 2016)

During “the Cultural Revolution Badai were listed among the ‘four olds’ and characterized as ‘a religion of wizards and ghosts.’ [...] Cultural relics and manuscripts were tossed to the flames, and ceremonial utensils were smashed. Any old inheritors passed away one by one” (Riley 1997:6). It was not until the end of the Cultural Revolution that the Miao began to organize into a cultural and political entity:

The Han defeated us historically, and as conquered people, the Miao traveled to protect themselves. To survive the Miao developed a surface, there is something beneath who we are, but still, we do not show it. We must have two faces even today. (Shi F.G. 2016)

Many badai never learn to read or write, considering it a hindrance to their ability to be fully—bodily and spiritually—in the world. There are no schools for badai; the training is experiential: a personal and physical apprenticeship that lasts as long as is necessary, depending on the willingness and aptitude of the student. Some never become badai. The 58-year-old badai Hong Shu Jin, whom I interviewed in Bai Guo village, was initiated when he was 18 years old. Another badai, Wu Xiam Kun, was precocious, beginning his training at 12 and passing his examination administered by five master badai when he was 15. His initiation was followed by a village-wide presentation, community acceptance, and elaborate ceremony. When I asked him about his training, Wu replied:

There is no particular time for training. Every moment when you are still working, you still do your family work, and after the day’s work, you come back and spend a few hours in training, to learn, to try to remember words or do your actions. I tried to repeat

techniques while working on the land or in the fields; there was no special time to do this every day. There is no special school for training badai. (Wu X.K. 2016)

Badai training has three stages: (1) understanding and reciting sacred poems; (2) learning melody and singing; and (3) communicating with the ghosts through dances, gestures, decorations, and props. Learning sacred poems was foundational because poetical storytelling conveys history, the origin of the universe, how the Miao came into being, and the origin of the yin-yang. Poetry is central to how the badai speak to the gods, ghosts, and ancestors.

Poems work in rituals to release the expression of the people, be they gods or ghosts, ancestral or living. For it to be ritually effective, the poetry must be precise in form, because Miao words and language can have multiple meanings. It is complicated to learn the poetic form precisely and comprehensively convey hidden information different than what can be seen. (Shi F.G. 2016)

Spoken poetry is considered magical, and Miao culture requires the ability to recite in different languages in order to be transmitted. The poems for each god and groups of ghosts must be different (Wu X.K. 2016). As with all orally transmitted traditions, communication depends on context, understanding and/or feeling the needs of the audience, delivery, and gestural or dramatic presentation, which is constantly evolving to answer the needs of the moment.

Training in songs and singing amplifies the use of poetry. There are specific and necessary songs taught, such as the “Ancient Grey Song Between the Black and White” (Shi F.G. 2016). Other songs are determined by what communicates most effectively with local ghosts.

We learn songs to invite in the gods and ghosts, singing, reciting, highly skilled, beautiful songs and beautiful gesture movements. [...] We also learn songs to keep a safe barrier because during Huan Nuo Yuan people will drink a lot of wine, and some will become very drunk. So, we say good words and sing to keep the area peaceful, not making any mess by the gods or the soldiers from heaven. One song is to thank god, “make thanks to god to all the celestials and to give us energy”—to ask the gods to keep the area safe for today’s peace and so accidents don’t happen. (Wu X.K. 2016)

Ironically, the badai primarily speak Mandarin, the lingua franca of the region. Although Miao is used in certain badai practices, it is no longer widely spoken; and where spoken, it is subject to wide variations of dialect. The predominance of Mandarin Chinese and Han cultural influence is accepted without resentment.

Calling the Ghosts

Badai Long Rui Yun and two younger badai positioned themselves in front of the altar. Master Badai Wu Zhen Niam blew an oxborn in a long, loud staccato blast announcing the ritual to the nuo gods and ghosts. The *huibing*, “Gathering the Soldiers” scene, began with a poetic incantation to summon many generals and five legions of ghost soldiers. Badai Long Rui Yun used a whip to marshal the arrival of the soldiers only he could see. Meanwhile, two badai tossed out kernels of corn as propitiations, food for the arriving ghosts. The badai had created a bridge between the temporal and spiritual realms, enabling and guiding the event. The martial deities—generals and soldiers—and the Five Furies were under the command of the Nuo Mother, who plays the leading role in the huan nuoyuan. All would watch over and protect the proceedings, preventing disruption by evil or chaotic ghosts (Katz 2013:18). However, inviting in the Nuo Mother and Father meant inviting in evil ghosts: “The Nuo Mother and Father are gods from the ancestors. On their backs they carry evil. Still, you must invite them all in; you must bring in the evil. You must invite that which has infected the family, identifying necessary evil. They are invited in and then expelled” (Shi F.G. 2016). The demons that had caused the sickness of Long Wei Dong were also present, for, in Miao cosmology, all sickness is related to ancestral ghosts.

The Miao believe ancestors should be models of Confucian morality for their descendants in the living world. Specifically, ancestors should model gratitude and filial piety for the living. Descendants may, however, criticize those deceased ancestors who make trouble. Those trouble-making dead relatives are referred to as ancestral evil spirits; naturally, they do not receive the same treatment as good ancestral spirits. Evil spirits cause misfortunes such as difficult childbirth, unidentified illnesses, and unforeseen events. (Wu 2010:19)

With the huan nuoyuan, the family fulfilled their vow and reconciled with the ancestors, exorcising the evil that made Long Wei Dong sick.

Syncretism

Badai Long Rui Yun dressed in colorful red robes trimmed and embroidered with Chinese ideograms to protect himself and also honor the ghosts. On his head was a *lai*, a headpiece with five figures, marking him as a mid-level badai. In contrast, Master Badai Wu Zhen Niam had a nine-figure *lai*, the highest rank of badai mastery. Made of leather, the *lai* is elaborately painted and designed with figures representing the Taoist founding gods of Miao and badai culture. Hexian Wu explains the complex belief system of the Miao (quoting Luo Yiqun [2000:19]): “Miao belief systems are profoundly syncretic, including animism, Chinese Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. ‘Miao belief systems can be classified into four kinds: natural, ancestral, ghosts, and god worship, and totemism’” (Wu 2010:16).

Above the gods are figures from the Chinese zodiac: the rooster, dragon, and other anthropomorphic beings from the spirit world. The moon (male) and sun (female) are at the opposite sides of the headpiece, holding the world together. A red cloth holds all of the figures together and is “symbolic of how we pray for the people to ask for peace and happiness. The sun and brightness are represented in red because the nature of fire is to go up and develop” (Shi F.G. 2016).

The calls of Badai Long Hua Zhen, which he says came from a “prayer within my heart” (Long H.Z. 2015) were part of the choreographed spins and dance steps tracing the pattern of the *luo* diagram. All nuo performances, including the huan nuoyuan, are oriented around a mathematical-magical matrix known as the *luo* diagram—*luo* meaning “to take care of” (Peng 2016). Nuo performers endow the matrix with the value of a cosmological macrocosm. When nuo performers dance across the diagramed space, they participate in the recreation of mathematical and cosmological harmony. Each route across the *luo* diagram reiterates the axis mundi and serves as an act of cosmological participation (Riley 1997:9).

Communicating with the Ghosts

By 10:30 a.m. the first section of the ritual drama was off to a powerful start as a bridge between the human and spiritual world was secured and the ghosts summoned as honored guests found their places.

In addition to communicating with the ghosts in poetic form, a hand language was used. Each gesture of the elaborate system of secret hand gestures conveys an idea or emotion directly to the ghosts.

It is a way the badai can send messages to the whole world, one that transcends language barriers, a channel for interaction and communication among people, and a visualization of god’s realm. This language of sign and symbol embodies early human intelligence and ancient civilization. (Shi W. 2015:18–19)

Some ghosts ask questions when they arrive; others proclaim their background, identifying their place of origin: many were from Hunan, others from Sichuan. Long Wei Dong was brought out by a badai and positioned near the action. The teen was no longer focused on his

cell phone. He stood still, shocked by the unexpected swirling intensity around him. The badai spoke for various ghosts and directly to Long Wei Dong: “When was I born? What year was I born? I do not know why I have lived so long. I can’t remember my age.” One of the ghosts, a general, said, “I am like Mars; I am a fighting god. I bring down with me 30,000 generals and soldiers, a big army.” Another ghost, coming close to Long Wei Dong, told him: “We have come to protect the family. I bring many generals and soldiers to make you feel relaxed and secure. Oh, so many” (Long H.Z. 2015).

Then came a pronouncement by a high-ranking ghost, a different general, which outlined the organization of the house and the preparations and serving of food. Channeled by the master badai the ghost general gave instructions: “The carnivore eats meat; this is one order. Vegetarians eat vegetables; this is a different order. Who should be on this side, which should be on that side of the altar? Divide yourself up vegetarians and meat eaters” (Long H.Z. 2015).

Gao Divination

Next came the *xiamaxialuan*, altar rites ensuring that the Nuo Mother and Father, along with the ghosts inhabiting the Three Pure Ones (the three rice bowl offerings), had arrived at the altar (Katz 2013:18). For this rite, a younger badai chanted as he threw the *gao* (literally, “people”),

two curved pieces of wood from one section of bamboo (or bone or antler) that fit together to form a semicircle. The badai uses the *gao* to communicate with the ghosts, by snapping the two halves with the thumb and forefinger. The inside of the *gao* is hollow and is said to contain ghosts that give it power (Shi F.G. 2016). The outside of both *gao* pieces are either carved with a design or naturally ridged. The *gao* is also called the *qua* by some and references the divination power of the I Ching. A question is asked and the *gao* thrown: If both halves land with the carved side towards the ground, it is a bad indicator; this is called *yang gao*. If both halves land with the carved side up, it is equally negative and is called *yin gao*. If one is up and one is down,

the yin and yang are balanced and it is a positive outcome; this is called *sheng gao* (Shi F.G. 2016). The badai asked if the ghosts had arrived and the *gao* was cast to the floor five times. The result was negative after several attempts. Asked different ways and after several additional castings, the response from the ghosts was finally auspicious.

Creating Community

The sounds of activity in the host home attracted villagers who were welcomed by the family, paid their respects to Long Wei Dong, and then mingled casually: a relaxed, come-and-go-as-you-please atmosphere. The blended dynamics of a social, cultural, and spiritual event was familiar to the villagers, its elements, symbols, objectives, and expectations communally under-



Figure 7. At Guo Gao village a mid-level badai, Chen Qi Qui (center) uses the *gao* as a medium to enable communication between the host, Long Jin Er, and the Nuo Mother. The Nuo Mother’s responses to the host’s requests and questions are determined by the outcome of the throwing of the *gao*. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)

stood. For many, it was simply an opportunity to sit and chat with neighbors, have a few laughs, eat well, and drink alcohol on a cold and rainy winter day.

A novice badai stood in front of the altar for the *bao nuo* scene. “Bao nuo” literally means the repayment or retribution to the Nuo Mother and Father. The scene recounts the Miao flood myth and how the only survivors were an older brother and younger sister—the Nuo Father and Mother—whose incest resulted in the human race. As the scene unfolded, the women of the family passed around large shallow baskets of pumpkin seeds and oranges, symbolizing how the Mother and Father survived and the good fortune and fecundity they brought (Katz 2013:18).

Lunch was steaming rice topped with vegetables and slices of pork, along with rice wine, green tea, water, and fried bread sweetened with sugar. The badai sat and ate all around the altar to keep the ghosts company. It was a long lunch break, which turned into dinner, with more food, drink, and conversation. As the afternoon waned, the temperature dropped to the low 20s°F with only the kitchen stove and the fire pit providing warmth. The villagers in attendance wore a pragmatic mix of traditional thick and quilted Miao clothing and modern store-bought clothing plus down and leather jackets. By early evening the house was full of families.

Twilight, like the dawn, is a time of transition, when the ghosts can be seen. Offerings were accordingly made to eight nuo ghosts as their masks were brought out and laid on the altar on top of rice cakes and spirit money. Each ghost was asked why they had come to visit and so began the *qingshen* scene of the ritual drama (Katz 2013:18). “Qingshen” loosely means early evening relaxation, during which the gathered, having had dinner, now relax, socialize, chat, and play cards. “The Nuo ghosts have come to share the joy of the sacrifice by the family” (Peng 2015).

The Monk

The next scene was the *kaidong*, the opening of Taoyuandong, the Taoyuan Cave, the home of the Nuo Mother and Father and other deities (Katz 2013:18). The opening of the cave was moderated by the monk, who slowly and meditatively entered reciting a low, sing-song prayer. “I came here because the host is so generous, I came here from far away, and I will protect this house, and I will be very merciful to the family.” Then he slowly circled the area in front of the altar pronouncing a prayer. The first part of the prayer included new words inserted into a traditional prayer and specific to the family.

This is where they advance the story and their emotion, in the first lines. And they put much humor in these words. Then they repeat the tail of the line; they repeat the second part many times. They do this to make sure you get the meaning, even though you may not hear the words. (Peng 2015)

The clicking of the gao punctuated each stanza, sending the Monk’s prayers to the ghosts deep within the Peach Flower Garden and the Taoyuan Cave, the inner sanctums of the Miao ghosts.

The Peach Flower Garden

Peach Flower Garden mythology is central to the huan nuoyuan. The origin of the well-known Shangri-la-like myth (most likely the inspiration for the 1933 James Hilton novel, *Lost Horizon*) is Han and dates to the Qui Dynasty, two thousand years ago when a group of people hid from persecution in the steep and winding valleys overgrown with dense foliage. The refugees became lost to time for hundreds of years until an injured and unconscious fisherman drifted down a stream into Peach Flower Garden. After being healed, he left, promising to keep the garden secret. Caught by a local general he confessed and troops were sent. They too became lost to time, eventually becoming the ghost generals and soldiers, protectors of the Peach Flower Garden. The myth resonated deeply with the Miao who, as persecuted war refugees,

identified with seeking safety deep within the mountains. In 2016, I traveled through the Garden's steep and tight valleys, now a national park sanctuary. The meandering paths pulled me ever deeper into a seemingly endless otherworldly jungle-like labyrinth of exotic flora, the only place in the world with square bamboo.

The Pioneer

The longest, most theatrical, and favorite scene of the ritual drama followed: the appearance of the martial goddess, Ban Xianfeng, the Pioneer (also known as the Vanguard; Katz 2013:19). In this scene, a badai places the Pioneer nuo mask at the center of the altar (the other masks remain on a shelf beneath). The mask was always worn in earlier eras, but as the huan nuoyuan performance tradition has continued to atrophy, the mask is now merely referenced. In other huan nuoyuan rituals I have documented the performer held the mask in one hand.

They must wear their masks as the character. Somehow, at Guo Gao, they took the mask away and became more tired and lazy. I asked them, "Why do you not perform with the mask?" They said, "It is because the elder generation has disappeared and died and we cannot make the ritual like before." They don't know how to perform the mask, they have lost the tradition. (Peng 2015)



Figure 8. The Pioneer at Guo Gao village being made up by the audience; participation is part of the ritual event. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)

A badai apprentice played the Pioneer by dressing in traditional women's clothing, replete with false breasts, facial makeup, and jewelry, and adopting an effeminate character affect. The preparation was in full view of the audience, with men and women alike freely and jovially interacting with the Pioneer, squeezing her breasts, raucously conversing, or helping her with makeup and clothing. Heaven sent the Pioneer as an emissary to attract the other ghosts and the community assisted in her manifestation. Her audience-pleasing appearance also marked community acceptance of a ghost who was ambiguous, both real and unreal, female and male. The Pioneer was a Vanguard, from "in between," a place of transition and change, an embodiment of liminality.

The Pioneer and audience dialogue was an odd blend of myth, improvised situation comedy, and reality TV. As the Pioneer was getting into makeup, she expressed coquettish concerns about her appearance to the audience and showed

off her legs—satisfied with their shape and look. Some of the repartee at the Guo Gao village included: “They are so strong and beautiful from so much walking—did you see the flowers?” She then named the types of flowers and the landmarks she passed on her way to the village. “I came here in a hurry, and I stepped in shit.” She exited the house to talk to the host just outside the main doors and then began to improvise a Miao song for the host: “My left leg sends you silver and babies. My right leg sends you treasures.” This section is then followed by a musical duel of “mountain songs” between the host and the Pioneer (Katz 2013:19).

She continued to describe how beautiful the house was, then went to family members, talking about their health, appearance, and how well liked by the ghosts they are. With the Pioneer’s entrance, the demons were expelled. The Pioneer made a special point to single out Long Wei Dong, the object of the ritual drama, speaking to him in admiring terms: “How well you look, such a handsome and vigorous man you have become!” The Pioneer then took the host to the altar and danced around him. In keeping with the frivolity, the host tried to kiss the Pioneer and touch her breasts. This set off a wave of giddy laughter. The host was then presented to the Nuo Mother and Father by the Pioneer: “Meet the host of the family and take a good look at him!” Then, “Let me take a second look. I don’t see him so clearly! Look, he is making observations, his eyes are big, his mouth is big, but he is breathing through his nose.”

The Pioneer, speaking on behalf of the Nuo Mother, prophesized: “There is silver on the road to just pick up so you can buy a house, your children will have a good education, and your daughter will marry a government official. And you can purchase a daughter-in-law for your son!”

The Pioneer left the altar to engage the audience in comic antics. She mimed taking a bath, washing her hands and legs because she had become dusty during her long journey. As she washed, she gave a very detailed and sensually explicit description of her actions and what she was washing. She seductively “washed” her buttocks, vagina, and breasts, comically shivering



Figure 9. The Pioneer at Guo Gao village speaking with Long Wei Dong, the teenage boy for whom the ritual was conducted. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)

with erotic excitement. The audience laughed rapturously. She concluded her performance with, “How am I going to get to the mountain? I’m so worried! Now I must go back!”

Theatrical and entertaining, this scene took over an hour and a half to perform, revealing a generational divide: the older audience members enjoying the antics of the Pioneer; the younger ones, at first captivated, soon lost interest and retreated outside to smoke and talk—some drifted away. After this scene, many of the women left, taking their children home. The audience became more decidedly male. “After the Pioneer the women usually are not that interested. And often they don’t like the dirty jokes that the nuo characters speak as the night grows” (Peng 2015).

The Mountain Opener

After a long break to change costumes, prepare props, and burn spirit money, the scene of the young and robust Mountain Opener, Kaishan, followed. For the Guo Gao Mountain Opener scene, the badai wore street clothes and used a flag to clear the way and serve as a symbolic ax.



Figure 10. The Mountain Opener at Guo Gao village performs an abbreviated version of the story segment. Waving a flag serves to announce his arrival and symbolizes the ax needed to cut through the mountains to the house so the gods and ghost can arrive. The use of the flag is a condensed, modern interpretation shaped by economics and indicative of the Guo Gao village’s move away from traditional exactitude. (Still from the video by Thomas Riccio)

The Guo Gao scene was condensed and left out segments of the story sequence because of the badai’s limited training and familiarity with the character. The role of the Mountain Opener at both villages was performed by the youngest and least experienced badai because of its physicality. This and other character roles are considered training to familiarize the young badai with the narrative and the performance vernacular. In Bai Guo, the Mountain Opener announced his arrival from outside the house and with detailed stylized movements, gestures, and language entered wearing a character-appropriate traditional Miao costume and carrying a prop ax.⁸ None of this happened during the Guo Gao iteration.

In contrast the badai performing at Bai Guo entered the house and proclaimed, using a stylized language, how powerful he is: “I came from the Peach Flower Cave, I saw the door open, and I came in. How many doors must I pass through to get to the host’s family? I must cut three gates with this ax! I must cut the mountain open!” The house itself became the mountain he must cut open. Upon entering the home, Kaishan improvised for laughs: “This place is very special!” Encountering a woman near the door, he began to cry: “I have been bitten, I am in pain!” Then to the audience in general he said, “What should I wear in such a fine house with such fine women?” He went to up another woman: “When I find the right woman, what will I do? I want to be her lover.”

8. During the Bai Guo village iteration of the huan nuoyuan, the Mountain Opener was played by the same badai who played the Pioneer.

As with other nuo characters, in front of the altar Kaishan told his backstory in a poetic talk-singing style. In Miao mythology, the Mountain Opener was, as a boy, so ugly at birth he was abandoned by his parents in the mountains and raised by wolves. After developing his abilities to survive, Kaishan won the admiration of the Nuo Mother who retained him as one of her generals (Katz 2013:19). This story is meant to be anticipatory and prophetic, paralleling the story of Long Wei Dong, who also went from being ugly and sick to triumphant.

As a coda, Kaishan recalled how when traveling from the Peach Flower Garden his ax dropped accidentally into the sea and he had to ask the Suanming, the Fortune-Teller, played by another badai as an old, slow-moving, stooped man, to help him. Both “the Mountain Opener and Fortune-Teller are gods with mysterious powers” (Peng 2015).



Figure 11. *The Mountain Opener at Bai Guo village in contrast does not use a flag but rather a prop ax to symbolically enact the complex details of the story segment. The use of the ax, constructed by the badai wielding it, indicates a stricter adherence to tradition. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)*

The Fortune-Teller

The Fortune-Teller, Suanming, arrived shortly before 8:00 p.m. to assist Kaishan. Wearing street clothes, carrying a backpack, holding an umbrella, and snapping his fingers, the Fortune-Teller announced, “I am very clever, and my abilities are very strong. I have been many places and met many people and gave them fortune telling and they are very happy.” Suanming helped the Mountain Opener, and by implication, the family too.

The Mountain Opener recalled how he lost his ax and how the Fortune-Teller must find it to open the mountain. The Mountain Opener pleaded with the Fortune-Teller: “Please help me find my ax, but I do not have enough money to pay you for your services. Please, you must help me, for the will of this family must be fulfilled.” Suanming refused, and the two characters argued. Kaishan theatrically beat Suanming and the ax was found. In the Bai Guo village iteration of the huan nuoyuan, rather than beating the Fortune-Teller, the Mountain Opener appealed to the host family to pay for the divination. In this variation, the host family gave the Fortune-Teller money to win the favor of the ghosts. In both variants, the Mountain Opener forged a path connecting the house to the Peach Flower Garden and the way to health and well-being.

Offerings

In the next scene, the *Xianshen* (animal offerings), water was poured into four vessels at the altar, each representing one of the four directions. This section began the process of settling the vow with the Nuo Mother and Father. The pigs and sheep sacrifices were brought to a table and placed in front of the altar forming a veritable “mountain of meat” (Katz 2013:20). Two bottles of rice wine were offered, placed near the head of the pig, which faced the altar, and the Nuo Mother (Hong 2015). In the Bai Guo village iteration, Master Badai Hong Shu Jin struck the meat with a horsewhip in order to animate the offerings and send them to the



Figure 12. Master Badai Wu Zheng Niam (right) assisted by a mid-level badai, blow oxhorns, the niu jiao, to announce the sacrificial offerings to the Nuo Mother and Father at Guo Gao village. Sacrifices include an adult and small pig, a goat, and a chicken. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)

ghosts inhabiting the Taoyuan Cave. The two-foot-long bamboo whip has 36 nodules on it, each representing a badai ritual to worship the gods. “The horse whip is used to take control and guide rituals” (Shi F.G. 2016).

A mid-level badai entered the scene to play Balang, the Han Chinese Merchant, from Jiangxi. He is a minor but significant character, a human transformed into a god. The Merchant attempted to buy the offerings to take them back to the Taoyuan Cave (Katz 2013:20). This scene began at 1:00 a.m. and lasted two and a half hours. Played for humor and as a way to enliven the early morning when audience members are either leaving or dozing in their chairs, the

Merchant and badai haggled over the price of the offerings and which portions should be allotted to the badai troupe. Balang and the master badai play stupid about how to slaughter the pig, all of it for laughs, “How should we kill the pig? Should we kill it at the mouth? The tail? At the back?” Balang responded, “It needs to be bigger,” then the badai beat the pig with his whip, “Yes, the more you beat it the bigger it gets!”

Balang explained to the audience why the sacrifice is important. He went into detail explaining the significance of each animal part offered to specific ghosts, with the Nuo Mother and Father getting the best cuts (Hong 2015). This section of the huan nuoyuan was the most precise. A badai or someone qualified must butcher the sacrificed animals in a specific way. Each part was placed on a tarp laid on the ground and organized in front of the altar; the legs of both the large and small pig were arranged together. Once the meat was organized the badai offered the sacrifice to the Nuo Mother and Father: “Anything you like, take away, you receive the first food serving” (Hong 2015).

The master badai then asked the Nuo Mother and Father to protect the house and family. “Your sacrifice is here, the pieces you prefer, arranged as you like. You should take it and protect all of the generations of this house and family.” The master badai then threw his gao to determine if the sacrifice had been accepted. The result was auspicious—on the first throw of the gao, one landed up, the other down, meaning acceptance. The meat was carried away by family members to be boiled: the heads first, then the ears are cooked in quick order; the large pig and then the small, the two sheep, and finally the chicken.

Walking of the Will

As the scene between the master badai and the Merchant concluded (at approximately 3:30 a.m.), the other badai arranged the bamboo boats containing the letters written and prepared the day before by Badai Long Rui Zhen. The dozens of hand-sized boats intricately fashioned out of bamboo contained the poetic calligraphy that adorned the colored paper. Arranged in rows in the courtyard outside the main doors of the house, the boats were set afire, sending their messages of recognition and thanks sailing to the gods and ghosts. One boat was not set afire. It was the message to the Nuo Mother and was attached to the paper representing the sun that was hanging at the altar.

The next scene, the yuanzhi rite, ensures that all ghosts recognize the vow repayment. The father brought out the vow paper, started eight years earlier to mark the family's contract with the ghosts to heal their son, Long Wei Dong. This scene occurred at approximately 4:00 a.m. and required the father (as head of the household) and the master badai to stand on the wooden bench directly in front of the altar for the "Walking of the Will." The host held the sacrifices (pig parts), in a broad and deep woven basket. On top of the meat offering was the yuanzhi (the symbol of the family's vow), which is also called the "cross of the will." Both the host and the master badai offered it to the ghosts, facing in each direction. Walking on the bench was symbolic of walking the narrow pathway of the Peach Flower Garden. As they "traveled," they sang the will of the family with the master badai conveying the purpose of their visit to the Nuo Mother and Father. The gao was thrown, this time through a *shidao*, literally "knife opening," which is a metal strip, circular in shape, to create an opening. The hilt of a ritual knife is made of brass. Throwing the gao through the opening signifies a direct communication with the Nuo Mother and Father. As the son, Long Wei Dong, looked on, the gao was thrown many times until there was an "auspicious agreement," meaning the acceptance of the sacrifice by the Nuo Mother.

The scene segued into *shang dashu*, a break in the action during which the host family presented a few dozen bowls of boiled meat over rice on the bench in front of the altar for the Nuo Mother's blessing. The food was then offered to the troupe and guests. It was still dark, not yet 5:00 a.m., and most of the sleepy-eyed audience of 25 did not have an appetite. Clear plastic bags of food were offered to take home.

Nuo Mother Speaks to the Host

Following the break was the *dasao bai bingma*, the final exorcistic rite. The gao was thrown until the master badai was assured it was auspicious to proceed. Then, in a sudden rush, the master badai chanted and wildly carried the Nuo Mother (the mask attached to a bamboo pole) throughout the house. The musicians added to the sudden frenzy of activity that jolted the house into wakefulness. The Nuo Mother was carried to the doorway and hurled out into the waiting hands of another badai. Outside, the rest of the troupe set off firecrackers. Soon the Nuo Mother was brought back into the house and the bamboo pole that her mask was on was set atop an upside-down bowl that had been placed on the floor in front of the altar. Spirit money was arranged around the bowl to help the Nuo Mother stand. A badai placed the family's yuanzhi on the altar in front of the standing Nuo Mother. The host, Long Jin Er, knelt in front of the Nuo Mother to worship her as the master badai chanted and tossed the gao. The badai and host dialogued with the Nuo Mother, the gao thrown to determine her response. Each question, by either the badai or the host, elicited a response of acceptance or rejection.



Figure 13. The altar of the yuanzhi: a wooden box of rice, a candle, incense, a note to the Nuo Mother, and the yuanzhi, the paper on which is inscribed the family's vow to repay the Nuo Mother for healing Long Wei Dong. The yuanzhi, which is placed at the feet of the Nuo Mother, was hidden in the upper rafters of the house eight years prior. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)

It was during this scene, with a mid-level badai and the host kneeling on a sleeping bag to protect their knees, that the badai answered his cell phone. The badai had been chanting and clicking his gao for several minutes during his dialogue with the Nuo Mother. At first, I thought the phone call was an interpolation, the badai receiving a “call” from the Nuo Mother. But it was a call from the badai’s brother, and with people waiting, the call regarding a tractor lasted nearly two minutes. After the call, watched by the audience in awkward silence, the badai picked up where he had left off without apology. The incident did not go without comment:

There are very few groups that can do this, so the family must use what they can because they just want to achieve the ritual for their son. It doesn’t matter if it is good or bad. They just do this according to the convention. If the convention is there, it is okay, but the quality is poor. The older badai in this troupe are doing very well, but the others, the young ones are not so good. And their singing, it is just like making noise. This is because so many young men are working away from the village and the older generation is tired; there is no middle. There is no competition for this group, and so they get lazy. (Peng 2016)



Figure 14. Badai Wu Fa Xing at Guo Gao village communicating with the Nuo Mother standing upright on a bamboo pole. It was considered auspicious that the Nuo Mother stood upright on the first “putting” into place, without wavering. Using the gao to communicate, the badai asks in a private spirit language, a cross between mumbling and speaking in tongues, if the Nuo Mother will bless the son. In the background stands an apprentice badai. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)

When the scene resumed, the father gave thanks for the curing of his son, and the gao response was auspicious. The host then asked for a nice girl so his son might marry. The gao response was positive on the first throw. The Nuo Mother’s quick affirmation was greeted with audible joy, relief, and many bows of thanks. “Words of congratulations are offered, and onlookers are invited to touch the yuanzhi, which was then broken up and burned” (Katz 2013:20). Badai Hong Shu Jin thanked the host: “You have donated so much, the gods must be very pleased” (Hong 2015). The Nuo Mother was returned to her altar. The repayment of the vow was complete.

Land God and Judge

After a pause, a small table was set in front of the altar as Tudi, the Land God (also referred to as Earth God) entered from outside after circling the house singing humorous songs about his hoe and other farming matters that delighted the farmers in attendance.

Then, another badai entered with a stylized walk to suggest riding a horse. He swaggered and sat at the table, joined by two family elders on either side of him. This was the *gouyuan* scene, literally meaning “checking off the vow” confirming the vow has been repaid. The nuo mask of the *Panguan*, the Judge, was placed on the table (traditionally the mask was worn), and the badai played the Judge as the son, Long Wei Dong, sat nearby. An improvised comic dialogue of personal and absurd questions dealing with judgment, justice, and the maintenance of order followed. As the *qouyuan* scene unfolded at Gao Guo village, meat and wine were

brought to the table to persuade the elders to comply with the order prescribed by the Nuo Mother.

The scene is meant to be a solemn rite, with the Judge entrusted with the task of confirming that the Nuo vow has been repaid and the ritual concluded (Katz 2013:21). The scene at Guo Gao ended up being almost entirely comic, and in some ways a welcome relief for those who had stayed up all night. The Judge was a buffoon, slamming his tablet (a carved board) to the table to punctuate each statement, resembling the use of slapsticks to accent laugh lines. This zany performance built up over 40 minutes, ending when the badai turned over the table and chairs before proudly swaggering out the door followed by the Land God who had been commenting and sounding affirmations throughout the scene.

Returning to the Peach Flower Garden

The last sequence of the public ritual scenes came at approximately 7:00 a.m. The three badai sat on the bench in front of the altar, each chanting a poetic version of the tale of the “Five Greatest Mountains” as a way to prepare the gods to return home.⁹ Then each badai, using his own gao, asked if the Nuo Mother and Father were ready to depart. The response was auspicious and the gods, with multitudes of ghost generals and soldiers accompanying them, returned home to the Peach Flower Garden and the Taoyuan Cave. The Nuo Mother and Father—their masks still on bamboo poles—were taken outside and put on the back of the host who carried them away. With the master badai leading, the host, followed by the musicians playing drums, cymbals, and gong, carried the Nuo Mother and Father to an undisclosed place in the nearby woods. This was a



Figure 15. The badai and the host of the ritual, Long Jin Er, kneel on a sleeping bag in front of the Nuo Mother, communicating questions about the future of the healed son. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)

9. The Five Mountains are recognized and worshipped by all cultures of China. Each one is the specific residence of various gods and ghosts.



Figure 16. At Bai Guo village a badai sits and holds the Panguan mask of the Judge in the gouyuan scene, one of the last in the huan nuoyuan. With improvised comic dialogue of personal and absurd questions dealing with judgment, justice, and the maintenance of order, the badai “checks off the vow” confirming the vow has been repaid to the Nuo Mother and Father. (Photo by Thomas Riccio)

place previously identified a day earlier as sacred. There the bamboo poles and clothing were burned. The masks of the Nuo Mother and Father were saved, brought back by a different route so the spirits of the Nuo Mother and Father could not follow them back. The master badai wrapped the masks carefully in a cloth for another day.

It was daybreak when the host and master badai returned. The paper decorations representing the Peach Flower Garden were removed by the host, his son, the badai troupe, and guests. The taking down of the Peach Flower Garden is called “taking off the five big mountains.” To send the Nuo Mother and Father back to the Taoyuan Cave, which is in the five sacred mountains, they must

take down the decorations (Hong 2015). The decorations were taken to the same “undisclosed” sacred spot in the woods and burned. Quickly, the altar was dismantled, the badai and musicians packed their belongings, and the family swept and restored the house. Long Wei Dong looked tired and disoriented until a smile cut across his face, “I am glad that is finished, now I can sleep” (Long W.D. 2015).

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