Gendered ritual and performative literacy : Yao Women, goddesses of fertility, and the Chinese imperial state

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Chapter 1. Introduction: Gendering Yao Ritual Tradition

This research presents a number of Yao perspectives, especially those embodied in their ritual tradition, in their historical experiences of encountering the others; above all, a powerful Other, the successive Chinese imperial states.[1] Nowadays the Yao are one of the fifty-six nationalities officially recognized by the communist Chinese state since the 1950s. The majority of their population lives in the mountainous areas of South China.[2] As are many ritual traditions of non-Han Chinese people in South China, Yao ritual tradition has been regarded as a hybrid tradition composed of many Daoist, Buddhist, even Confucian ritual and cultural elements, that have become intermingled with indigenous beliefs and practices.[1] Since the 1980s, their highly Daoism-laden ordination ceremony and their ritual manuscripts written in Chinese have often been singled out to use to support scholarly discussions about Yao sinification.[3] The imperial Chinese state expansion into South China that began in the Song (960-1279 AD) has been argued to have been the major facilitating force in the Yao's conversion to Daoism and their subsequent sinification.[4] In this sense, the Daoist-imperial religious and ritual heritage can be considered to have been a 'civilizing project' whose aim was to bring the Yao closer to the centre of Chinese state civilization.[5] The goal of this research is to make the discourse of Yao

[1] In this research, I use the capitalized Other to specifically refer to the Chinese imperial states.

[2] Yao are also resident in some Southeast Asian countries and in American and European countries. More details see Chapter 2.

[3] Jacques Lemoine, *Yao Ceremonial Paintings* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1982). Hu Qiwang, 'Lun yaochuan daojiao' 論瑤傳道教 (A Discussion of Yao Daoism), *Yunnan shehui kexue* (雲南社會科學 Social Sciences in Yunnan), 1 (1994), 61-69. Guo Dalie *et al*. (eds), *Yao wenhua yanjiu* 瑤文化研究 (A Study of Yao Culture), 100. Guo Wu, *Daojiao yu Yunnan wenhua: Daojiao zai Yunnan de chuanbo, yanbian ji yingxiang* 道教與雲南文化—道教在雲南的傳播、演變及影響 (Daoism and Yunnan Culture: The Diffusion, Transformation and Influence of Daoism in Yunnan), 228-233. Xu Zuxiang, *Yaozu de zongjiao yu shehui: yaozu daojiao jiqiyu Yunnan yaozu guanxi yanjiu* 瑤族的宗教與社會：瑤族道教及其與雲南瑤族關係研究 (The Religion and Society of the Yao: Yao Daoism and its Influence on the Yao in Yunnan).

[4] Michel Strickmann, 'The Tao among the Yao: Taoism and the Sinification of South China', in *Rekishi ni okeru minshû to bunka-Sakai Tadao sensei koki jukuga kinen ronshû* 歷史における民衆と文化 ― 酒井忠夫先生古稀祝賀記念論集 (Peoples and Cultures in Asiatic History: Collected Essays in Honour of Professor Tadao Sakai on His Seventieth Birthday), 23-30 at 27-28.

[5] Here, I adopt Stevan Harrell's definition of a 'civilizing project'. By 'civilizing project', Harrell means 'a kind of interaction between people, in which one group, the civilizing center, interacts with other groups (the peripheral peoples) in terms of a particular kind of inequality', as 'inequality' refers

sinification initially more abstruse but eventually more unambiguous by adding a gender dimension to the understanding of Yao ritual tradition.

Yao Daoist ordination is a ceremony whose performance bestows the qualification of a ritual specialist on a Yao man. There is no equivalent ordination ceremony specifically held for Yao women. Women can only participate in the ordination in which their husbands are the participant ordinands. By undergoing ordination, a Yao man is entitled not only to the privilege of assuming the role of a ritual specialist, he is also able to access both the repertoire of Yao ritual knowledge and Chinese literacy. In other words, Yao men are born with the right to gain access to the ritual world and are also encouraged to acquire Chinese literacy. However, the privileges accruing from ordination can be conferred on women only through marriage and they are not granted accessibility to either the ritual repertoire or Chinese literacy. This palpable gender difference in the Yao people's experience of 'being sinicised' and its social consequences is an issue that has rarely been touched upon in previous discussions of Yao religion. The gendering of Yao ritual tradition elucidates the ways in which the specific gender ideologies are articulated and how male-female relationships are formed in the Yao religious domain. Moreover, it reveals why these are significant to the enrichment of our understanding of the historical experiences the Yao have undergone in their encounter with imperial Chinese state incorporation.

Cogently, the research also highlights the positions of women in the Yao ritual tradition and their importance to the Yao's reactions to their incorporation into the dominant imperial Chinese state and the subsequent Han-Chinese cultural intervention. At face value, the position of Yao women has seemed very marginalized compared with that exercised in other ethnic groups in South China, Han Chinese included; neither a women-centred religious group nor female ritual practitioners are a feature of contemporary Yao communities.[6] The beliefs supporting taboos connected

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to 'the ideological basis in the center's claim to a superior degree of civilization, along with a commitment to raise the peripheral peoples' civilization to the level of the center, or at least closer to that level.' See Stevan Harrell, 'Introduction: Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them', in Stevan Harrell (ed.), *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 3-36 at 4.

[6] To name just a few, the three cases compared include a Han Chinese community in southern Taiwan and two non-Han Chinese peoples, the Zhuang in Guangxi and the Bai in Yunnan, respectively. See

to female menstruation, although by no means a culturally-specific phenomenon, have been appropriated to delegitimize Yao women's physicality in assuming leading positions in the religious domain.[7] To examine the way the Yao think about female fertility, apart from the female pollution beliefs, the researcher has undertaken textual analyses of ritual manuscripts referring to female fertility deities and from these sources has interpreted the implications of the ritual performances of female singing related to courtship and marriage.

This examination of the gendering of the Yao ritual tradition has been approached in three ways. Firstly, I illustrate a complex of factors that has contributed to a strong presence of patrilineal ideology and male-domination in Yao religion. This work has revealed how gender has been defined predominantly on a biological basis. Secondly, I have looked into how persons are gendered through the agency of ritual in different phases of their life cycles. This investigation indicates a complementary yet competing relationship between men and women, centered on fertility. Thirdly, I have explored the cultural and ritual significance of 'singing' and its special references to womanhood. These three points have led me to form the premise that, in the past, the Yao constructed a collective reflection of the consequences of imperial Chinese state governance, imposed in the form of patrilineal ideology and a lineage society, through the positions of women.

Cai Pei-ru, *Chuansuo tianren zhiji de nüren: Nütongji de xingbie tezhi yu shenti yihan* 穿梭天人之際的女人：女童乩的性別特質與身體意涵 (The Women Who Shuttle between Heaven and Earth: Gender Characteristics and Physical Implications of Female Mediums) (Taipei: Tangshan, 2001). Kao Ya-ning, 'Chief, God, or National Hero? Representing Nong Zhigao in Chinese Ethnic Minority Society', in David Faure and Ho Ts'ui-p'ing (eds), *Chieftains into Ancestors: Imperial Expansion and Indigenous Society in Southwest China* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013), 42-65. Lian Ruizhi, 'Surviving Conquest in Dali: Chiefs, Deities, and Ancestors', in David Faure and Ho Ts'ui-p'ing (eds), *Chieftains into Ancestors: Imperial Expansion and Indigenous Society in Southwest China* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013), 86-110.

[7] For Buddhism and female body and pollution, see Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 18-19. Diana. Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in Mahayana Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), XV-XVI. For Daoism on the female body and pollution, see Zhang Xun, 'Jizhong daojing zhong dui nüren shenti miaoshu de chutan' 幾種道經中對女人身體描述的初探 (A Preliminary Investigation of the Female Body as Described in the Daoist Canon), in Li Fengmao and Zhu Ronggui (eds), *Xingbie, shenge yu Taiwan zongjiao lunshu* 性別、神格與台灣宗教論述 (Gender, Divinity and Religious Discourses on Religion in Taiwan) (Taipei: Preparatory Office for the Institute of Chinese Literature and Philosophy, 1997), 24-47. For an example of religious belief about the female body and pollution among Han Chinese societies in Asia, see Jinhua Emma Teng, 'Religion as a Source of Oppression and Creativity for Chinese Women,' *Journal of Women and Gender Studies*, 1 (1990), 165-194.

By analysing the different ways in which the Yao have perceived and negotiated with the interventions of the others; above all, a powerful Other, the Chinese imperial states, the researcher is able to offer a 'view from below', presenting an original exploration of a gendered dimension in Yao ritual tradition. By gendering Yao ritual tradition, the researcher is able to provide a new perspective from which to detail the dynamics and the presence of human agency in the historical processes of transcultural communication between the Yao and the others.

In establishing a solid foundation for the stated goals of the research, three investigative issues have proved very relevant: 1) Religion, State and Local Reaction; 2) Models for Understanding Cultural and Religious Hybridization; 3) Gender and Women in Ritual and Religion: A Focus on the Yao. As I address each of these three issues in turn, I shall also introduce the theoretical concepts I have utilized to tackle them.

Issues and Theories

As mentioned earlier, the Yao has in many cases been represented as a highly sinicized non-Han Chinese people because of their assimilation of Daoist texts and liturgies and the values of Chinese imperial states that accompanied them. And yet, particularly since the 1950s, the Chinese communist party-led history has described the Yao as a minority people imbued with the spirit of resistance, highlighting the numerous accounts of their previous military actions against pre-communist state regimes.[8] A juxtaposition of these two seemingly conflicting scholarly and official representations, one sinicized, one rebellious, of the ethnic Yao in modern China warrants a deeper exploration of the role religion in general and Daoism in particular has played in Yao history.

An entry about the Daoism practised by the Yao in the Republican-era *Lianshan County Gazetteer* underlines the necessity of a more explicit enquiry. This entry reads as follows: 'The intelligent children are not allowed to learn the Confucian classics;

[8] Yaozu jianshi bianxiezu, *Yaozu jianshi.* Feng Henggao (ed.), *Yaozu tongshi.* Specifically, the history of the resistance of the Yao began in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) with the Great Vine Gorge Event (*datengxia zhiyi*) in the sixteenth century and continued into the period of the Kuomintang (KMT) penetration (1912-1949).

they study only with Yao Daoists. They also have sacraments; the writing is incomprehensible.'[9] If Daoism has indeed led the Yao to embrace the influence of Chinese culture and statecraft more intimately, as the sinification argument has suggested, of which their reading of and acculturation in Confucian classics is the indicator, this entry would seem to suggest otherwise. Quite the opposite in fact, the vernacular Daoism the Yao have practised might have actually provided them precisely with the means by which to keep Confucian teachings at arm's length, thereby enabling them to assume a relative 'position' in their relations with the political patron of Confucian ideologies, the Chinese imperial state.

Although it is uncertain to what extent the case of the Yao in Lianshan, central Guangdong, is applicable to other Yao groups in distinct locations who also practise and follow Daoist rituals and liturgies, it at least sounds a note of caution to the researcher not to assume a one-way, top-down approach when examining the assimilation of Daoism (or other dominant Chinese imperial influences) into the non-Han societies. Moreover, most importantly, it reveals an urgent need to touch upon some questions, such as what roles religion might have played in Chinese state incorporation in different regions of South China or how religion and ritual might have served to act as an expressive form in local reactions to pressures for political and social incorporation into Chinese state system and or those of other Southeast Asian regimes?

1. Religion, State and Local Reaction

1-1. Chinese State Expansion in Southeast China: Lineage Society

Many scholars who study the history of the imperial Chinese state incorporation of South China, Southeast China in particular, would agree that the development of a lineage society has been a vital mechanism in bringing local

[9] The original Chinese text is '兒之聰穎者不與讀儒書，惟從徭道士學，亦有科儀，其文不可曉.' Ling Xihua, Zhan Chengxun, and He Yiluan, *Minguo Lianshan xianzhi* 民國連山縣志 (Republican era Lianshan County Gazetteer), *Zhongguo difangzhi jicheng: Guangdongfu xianzhiji, dishisi juan* 中國地方志集成：廣東府縣誌輯第 14 卷 (The Compilation of Local Gazetteers in China: The Fourteenth Volume of Guangdong Government Gazetteers) (Shanghai: Shanghai shudian chubanshe, 1928).

societies increasingly under Chinese state control.[10] David Faure's *Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China* gives an elaborate picture of how many politico-economic and socio-cultural factors intertwined to produce the flourishing development of lineage organizations in Southeast China—the region of the Pearl River Delta in particular.[11] Faure's discussion spans the periods from the pre-Ming (prior to 1368), the Ming (1368-1644), the Qing (1644-1911) and in the Republican era up to the founding of the People's Republic of China (1911-1949). He presents an eloquent description of a dynamic interaction between the development of the economy, the population and, later, land registers, the emergence of lineage organizations and, most importantly, the influence of the neo-Confucian ideology of Zhu Xi that became state orthodoxy and emphasized the right to sacrifice to distant ancestors. Among all these factors, religious practices, such as rites of ancestor worship, have become a significant element in the local cultural conduct that was encouraged by the Chinese state. As John Lagerwey concludes in his review of *Emperor and Ancestor*:

> The collective practice of sacrificing to a distant ancestor, usually the real or imaginary founder of a village or a group of villages, encouraged a sense of linear belonging which transcended space and time, and was thus one of the necessary conditions for the emergence of the vast and wealthy lineages of South China under the Ming and the Qing.[12]

Apart from the sharing of corporate property, a vital force that bolstered the development of lineage society was the collective sense of linear belonging, generated

[10] Above all, a classical study of the development of lineage society and its relationship with Chinese statecraft is Maurice Freeman's *Lineage Organization in South-Eastern China*, 2nd Edition (Berg Publ Inc., 2004).

[11] David Faure, *Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). Of course, the process of the state incorporation of local societies has continued since the founding of the People's Republic of China; in many ways it has even accelerated. For instance, Huang Shu-Min, *The Spiral Road: Change and Development in a Chinese Village Through the Eyes of a Village Leader* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989) offers a microscopic analysis of this process since the 1950s.

[12] John Lagerwey, 'Review of Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China', *China Perspectives*, 3 (2007), 1-4 at 2-3.

by ancestor worship in the family temple and the composition of literati-style genealogies.[13] But, even if the local society welcomed the new cultural policy of sacrificing to their founding ancestors introduced by the Ming and Qing states, its acceptance did not necessarily mean that the transformation of local society was completely in step with the state agenda in its incorporation of local society. For instance, Michael Szonyi argues that the law proposed in the sixteenth century that allowed local elites to offer sacrifices to distant ancestors never really succeeded in transforming the ways in which the ordinary people practised kinship and performed rituals on the village level. Specifically, the practices of local religious cults, usually including offering sacrifices to both ancestors and local gods, actually became increasingly integrated into pre-existing kinship networks between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century.[14] The limitation, or even the absence, of State sanctions in its intervention in local religious and kinship practice is even more obvious among overseas Chinese communities in a cross-border context.[15]

Doubts concerning the success of Chinese state incorporation in Southeast China have produced a critical reflection on the lineage society paradigm, consequently yielding two divergent scholarly approaches. One approach is based on the premise that the Chinese state incorporation of a local society was inevitable and implicitly assumes that it is a good thing. Ultimately such an analysis tries to locate a historical field of negotiation between the two sides.[16] The other approach has

[13] David Faure, 'The Emperor in the Village, Representing the State in South China', in Joseph McDermott (ed.), *State and Court Ritual in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 267-298.

[14] Michael Szonyi, *Practicing Kinship: Lineage and Descent in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

[15] Kenneth Dean, 'Overseas Chinese Temple and Trust Networks and Jinmen Island', in Chen Yi-yuan (ed.), *Jinmenxue guoji xueshu yantauhui lunwenji* 金門學國研討會論文集 (Collected Essays from the International Academic Conference on Jinmen Studies) (Jinmen: Jinmen wenhuaju, 2012), 533-578 at 542-546.

[16] Wen Chunlai, *Cong yiyu dao jiujiang: Song zhi Qing Guizhou xibeibu diqu de zhidu kaifa yu rentong* 從異域到舊疆：宋至清貴州西北部地區的制度、開發與認同 (From Foreign Region to Old Territory: The System, Development and Identity in Northwest Guizhou from the Song to the Qing) (Beijing: Sanlian shuju, 2008). He Xi, *Yi shen yi zu: Yuexinan xinyang goujian de shehuishi* 亦神亦祖：粵西南信仰構建的社會史 (A Social History of the Construction of Beliefs in Southwest Guangdong) (Beijing: Sanlian shuju, 2011). Xie Xiaohui, 'Miaojiang de kaifa yu difang shenqi de chongsu: Jianyu Donald Sutton taolun Baidi Tianwang chuanshuo bianqian de lishi qingjing' 苗疆的開發與地方社會神祇的重塑—兼與蘇堂棣討論白帝天王傳説變遷的歷史情境 (The Development of the Miao Frontier and the Recasting of Local Deities: A Debate with Donald Sutton on the Historical Background to Changes in the Legends of the White Emperor Heavenly Kings), *Lishi renleixue xuekan* (歷史人類學學刊 Journal of History and Anthropology), 6/1-2 (2008), 111-146.

involved casting doubts on this basic assumption, pointing out the elusive and heterogeneous aspects of Chinese state incorporation in Southeast China.[17] Below I also show that a closer look at the interaction and negotiation between imperial expansion and an indigenous society in Southwest China indicates that Chinese state governance has never been firmly established in this region.

1-2. Chinese State Expansion in Southwest China: From Chieftains to Ancestors

In Southwest China, military campaigns and civilizing projects have been two major and complementary forces, representing state violence and an ideology to justify the state monopoly over that violence respectively. In terms of administration and bureaucracy, since the Tang dynasty the *jimi* system ([control by] loose rein system) and its successor the *tusi* system (native chieftain system) have been the principal frontier institutions specifically set up to cope with the geographically and ethnically heterogeneous nature of Southwest China.[18] Native chieftains and their troops often played a dual role in the military campaigns waged by dynastic courts to put down ethnic rebellions.[19] However, the hereditary nature of the native chieftain system and its kinship-based organization were in their turn also profoundly transformed by civilizing projects, particularly with respect to Confucian ideology and imperial education.[20] Under the influence of the early Qing frontier policy, 'the transition from native officialdom to circulatory officialdom' (*gaitu guiliu*), the native

[17] Michael Szonyi, 'The Illusion of Standardizing the Gods: The Cult of the Five Emperors in Late Imperial China', *Journal of Asian Studies,* 56/1 (1997), 113-135. Donald S. Sutton, 'Ritual, Cultural Standardization, and Orthopraxy in China: Reconsidering James L. Watson's Ideas', *Modern China: An International Quarterly of History and Social Science,* 33/1 (2007), 3-21. Paul R. Katz, 'Orthopraxy and Heteropraxy Beyond the State: Standardizing Ritual in Chinese Society', *Modern China: An International Quarterly of History and Social Science,* 33/1 (2007), 72-90.

[18] John Herman, 'Empire in the Southwest: Early Qing Reforms to the Native Chieftain System', *The Journal of Asian Studies,* 56/1 (1997), 47-74.

[19] For example, David Faure, 'The Yao Wars in the Mid-Ming and Their Impact on Yao Ethnicity', in Pamela K. Crossley et al. (eds), *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity, and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 171-189. Donald S. Sutton, 'Ethnic Revolt in the Qing Empire: The Miao Uprising of 1795-1796 Reexamined', *Asia Major 3rd series,* 17/1 (2005), 105-151. Tang Xiaotao, *Langyao hezai: Mingqing shiqi Guangxi Xunzhoufu de zuqun bianqian* 俍傜何在-明清時期廣西潯州府的族群變遷 (Where Were the Lang and the Yao: Changes in Ethnic Boundaries in Xunzhou Prefecture of Guangxi during Ming and Qing times) (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2011).

[20] David Faure and Ho Ts'ui-p'ing (eds), *Chieftains into Ancestors: Imperial Expansion and Indigenous Society in Southwest China* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013).

chieftain system increasingly began to absorb selected features of the circulatory officialdom (*liuguan*) form of bureaucracy and this process eventually led to the intrusion of imperial education, ancestor worship and patrilineal ideology.[21] Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the nature and effect of the Chinese state presence in Southwest China is still open to question.

One point this contention raises is state violence and the impact of civilizing projects on local societies in Southwest China, for example, the introduction of Chinese literacy and Confucian ideology. John Herman argues that civilizing the peripheral peoples has never been the main concern of Chinese states in formulating frontier policies. From 1200 to 1700, military colonization was the principal policy of the governance of the Chinese state in Southwest China, and it proved to be relatively successful.[22] On the other hand, C. Patterson Giersch argues that different types of civilizing projects invariably followed Chinese military control in this frontier area, although their impact was not always absolute. For instance, from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, the Qing had to compete for resources and indigenous allies with the other Asian empires, namely the Tai, Burmese and Siamese kingdoms, over the area from southwest Yunnan to northern Southeast Asia.[23]

Whether one agrees with Herman or Giersch, Chinese influence was never the only presence to be found in the religious ideologies and political construction of indigenous societies in Southwest China. Nevertheless, it is also undeniable that the imperial Chinese state was one of the unavoidable 'Others' in the history of making local societies in South China.

The foregoing discussion has revealed that religion could be either a state surrogate that assisted in incorporating local societies into imperial governance, or, conversely, a field of negotiation in which local societies could express their protest

[21] James Wilkerson, 'The Wancheng Native Officialdom: Social Production and Social Reproduction', in David Faure and Ho Ts'ui-p'ing (eds), *Chieftains into Ancestors: Imperial Expansion and Indigenous Society in Southwest China* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013), 187-205.

[22] John Herman, 'The Cant of Conquest: Tusi Officials and China's Political Incorporation of the Southwest Frontier', in Pamela Crossley et al. (eds), *Empire at the Margins: Culture, Ethnicity and Frontier in Early Modern China* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 135-168. William T. Rowe, 'Education and Empire in Southwest China: Ch'en Hung-mou in Yunnan, 1733-38', in Benjamin A. Elman and Alexander Woodside (eds), *Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600-1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 417-457.

[23] C. Patterson Giersch, *Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 97-126.

and struggle for their autonomy.[24] Furthermore, religion could also be the means to keep the state at bay, as eloquently argued by James Scott.

1-3. Religion as a Means to Keep the State Away

The numerous accounts of rebellions displaying millennial characteristics and legends of charismatic rebel leaders prevalent in Zomia[25] (roughly the borderlands of Southwest China and upland Southeast Asia) have led James Scott to explore the possibility of religion being a means used by indigenous communities to keep states away. In his widely praised and critically acclaimed book, *The Art of not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, with special reference to upland Southeast Asia, Scott proposes that rebellion was a religio-political action that provided a mechanism for social renewal by overturning the existing order.[26] In support of his position, and citing the earlier work of Edmund Leach, Scott claims that ideologies of rebellion have played a pivotal role in a cyclical pattern of increasing social hierarchy followed by sudden collapse in local upland Southeast Asia societies. More generally, millennialism in upland Southeast Asia has provided a means of keeping surrounding states, including but not exclusively China, out of this part of the Asian continent. Importantly, Scott cites Buddhism as providing one ideological basis for millennial movements.[27]

Nevertheless, the fit between upland Southeast Asia and China in terms of resistance to the state remains elusive. Two of Scott's other examples within upland

[24] James Robson, 'Manuscripts from the Margins: On the Historical and Religious Dimensions of the Central Human Religion', paper presented at the conference of Frontier Societies and State-making in China 邊陲社會與國家建構, November 25-26, 2012, Hong Kong. Stephan Feuchtwang, *Popular Religion in China: The Imperial Metaphor* (Routledge, 2001).

[25] 'Zomia' is a name proposed by James Scott to refer to the geographical range stretching in the west to northwest India, in the east to north Vietnam, including the Yun-Gui plateau (in Sichuan and parts of Guangxi) and upland Southeast Asia. It emerged in James Scott's definition because of its persistent resistance to states. See James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2009), 17. Also see Ho Ts'ui-p'ing, James Wilkerson, and Huang Shuli, 'Lun James Scott gaodi dongnanya xinmingming Zomia de yiyi yu weilai' 論 James Scott 高地東南亞新命名 Zomia 的意義與未來 (A Discussion of the Significance and Future of James Scott's Notion of Calling Highland Southeast Asia 'Zomia'), *Lishi renleixue xuekan* (歷史人類學學刊 Journal of History and Anthropology), 9/1 (2010), 77-100 at 79.

[26] James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, 283-323.

[27] Ibid., 291-295.

Southeast Asia in addition to Buddhism are the Lahu,[28] distributed along the interface between upland Southeast Asia and the Chinese state, and the Hmong,[29] distributed both far into upland Southeast Asia and far inside the boundaries of the Chinese state. In addition, although Scott discusses the Yao in upland Southeast Asia and Panhu, the mythic ancestor of the Yao, in a brief aside about the importance of Chinese bureaucratic control inside China alongside Yao (and even Han) resistance to this control,[30] he omits to mention the continued centrality of Daoism among the Yao, both within China and in upland Southeast Asia.[31]

A crucial point that Scott omits is the debates about whether Daoism is a pro- or an anti-state religion. In her seminal article, 'Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments-Taoist Roots in the *Apocrypha*', Anna Seidel describes the close affinity of Daoist sacraments to the thought in the *Apocrypha* that were largely employed by the imperial court.[32] Her findings led her to oppose the argument that Taoist-inspired rebellions were organized to fight against the emperor. She also points out that, 'there was never a Taoist organization sufficiently unified, strong and well-defined to set up a serious rival to the throne, nor did the officially-established Taoist church ever seek to challenge an emperor on religious grounds.'[33] On the other hand, there are scholars, as among them Zhang Zehong, who consider Daoism to be a religion that emerged from the lives of ordinary people, and was sometimes consciously utilized as an organizing principle in many peasant rebellions across Chinese history.[34] In other words, the political significance of Daoism in China is far from simple, and its

[28] Ibid., 291.
[29] Ibid., 311-312.
[30] Ibid., 125.
[31] Takemura Takuji, *Yaozu de lishi yu wenhua* 瑤族的歷史與文化 (The History and Culture of the Yao), Zhu Guichang and Jin Shaoping (trans.) (Nanning: Guangxi minzu xueyuan minzu yanjiusuo, 1986[1981]), 157-173. Jacob Cawthorne, 'Taoism and Self-Governance: The Yiu Mien of Laos', paper presented at the conference of Asian Borderlands: Enclosure, Interaction and Transformation, 2nd Conference of the Asian Borderlands Research Network, Chiang Mai University (RCSD), Thailand, November 5-7, 2010.
[32] Anna Seidel, 'Imperial Treasures and Taoist Sacraments: Taoist Roots in the Apocrypha', in Michel Strickmann (ed.), *Tantric and Taoist Studies in Honor of R.A. Stein, Vol. II* (Bruxelles: Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1983), 291-371.
[33] Ibid., 369-370.
[34] Zhang Zehong, *Wenhua chuanbo yu yishi xiangzheng: Zhongguo xinan shaoshu minzu zongjiao yu daojiao jisi yishi bijiao yanjiu* 文化傳播與儀式象徵：中國西南少數民族宗教與道教祭祀儀式比較研究 (Cultural Transmission and Ritual Symbolism: A Comparative Study of Religions and Daoist Worship Rituals among Ethnic Minorities in Southwest China) (Chengdu: Bashu shushe, 2008).

conflicting tendencies should be examined in different ways at different times from different perspectives.[35] This brings us to the question of how better to understand the various dimensions of religious traditions of universal claim and wide dispersal within given space, time, society and context.

2. Models for Understanding Cultural and Religious Hybridization

Whether on a global or local scale, the phenomenon of hybridization associated with religion and ritual is not at all unique. A ready, albeit disputable, concept and term, syncretism, often appears in this sort of discussion. Nevertheless, the major problem with syncretism is that it invites an oppositional set of such value-laden terms as 'purity' and 'impurity', and 'authenticity' and 'inauthenticity', particularly in the study of the global process of world religions; for instance, Christianity and Islam. However, in post-modern and post-colonial studies in anthropology and history, the discussion of the 'invention of tradition/culture' has eloquently invalidated the myth of cultural purity and hence ascribed a neutral and positive significance to cultural and religious syncretism.[36]

Still, the conventional concept of syncretism puts an emphasis on the actions of a dominant 'cultural group' (such as the Chinese group/state in the sinification argument) and fails to recognize the contribution of local modes of appropriation to the formation of that cross-cultural interaction and global world.[37] To transcend the limitations entailed in the concept of syncretism, such concepts as 'transculturality,'[38] 'transculturation,'[39] or 'trans-hybridity'[40] are proposed. Hence, the focus of the

[35] Liu Da, *The Tao and Chinese Culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1984), 53.
[36] Rosalind Shaw and Charles Stewart, 'Introduction: Problematizing Syncretism', in Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (eds), *Syncretism/Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London: Routledge, 1994), 1-26.
[37] See the criticism of syncretism in a project description 'How does Transculturality come into play in our Research Area?' from the project entitled 'Cluster of Excellence: Asia and Europe in a Global Context' conducted in Heidelberg University [Website document], <http://www.asia-europe.uni-heidelberg.de/en/research/b-public-spheres/overview/what-are-the-key-terms-we-use-and-what-do-we-mean-by-them/transculturality.html>, accessed 24 Feb. 2015.
[38] Wolfgang Welsch, 'Transculturality: The Puzzling form of Cultures Today', in Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash, (eds), *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World* (London: Sage, 1999), 194-213.
[39] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation, Second Edition* (Routledge, 2008).
[40] Paul R. Katz, 'Repaying a Nuo Vow in Western Hunan: A Rite of Trans-Hybridity?', *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology*, 11/2 (2013), 1-88.

investigation into the discussion of transcultural studies is placed on the networks, spaces and flow of ideas, goods and the like envisioned in and channelled through the processes of cross-cultural encounters, that might involve the interaction between the pre-existing social order and the newly invented values and ideas.[41] For instance, by bringing ethnicities to the forefront of the discussion, Guido Sprenger unfolds current ideas of indigeneity in upland Southeast Asia against the backdrop of the centre-periphery relation that structures both upland and lowland societies. He has made a comparison between the Yao from southern China across Laos to Thailand and the Rmeet of Laos, examining the effects of transcultural communication, in terms of rituals, the structure of settlements and myths, in the formation of social order. He concludes,

> …various forms of the center-periphery relation offer different points of connectivity for the modern notion of indigeneity and the options for practice that it suggests. Their definition of relationships that create the shape of ethnicities by the new value-idea of indigeneity has to build on these older forms.[42]

As such, it is doubtful 'if a boundary can be drawn between a current age of globalization and the nation-state and an earlier period of premodern relationships.'[43]

In a similar vein to the discussion of 'transculturality', in his study of communal ritual practices among the Miao people in western Hunan, Paul Katz has proposed a term 'trans-hybridity' in order to give equal prominence to the external and internal forces and agents at play in the process of transcultural communication. 'Trans-hybridity' is shorthand for two key mechanisms at work in cultural encounters associated with ritual. 'Translation' features mechanisms generally used by the state or local elites to introduce external cultural traditions (including religious ones) that only gradually gain acceptance among indigenous communities. 'Hybridity' can

[41] Nicholas Mirzoeff (ed.), *The Visual Culture Reader, 3rd edition* (Routledge, 2012).
[42] Guido Sprenger, 'Transcultural Communication and Social Order: Comparisons in Upland Southeast Asia', *Asian Ethnology*, 72/2 (2013), 299-319 at 315.
[43] Ibid.

account for unintentional forms of cultural assimilation.[44] Compared with the sometimes contentious concept syncretism, the terms 'transculturality', 'transculturation,' or 'trans-hybridity' are more apposite vehicles to convey the human agency and dynamisms present in the process of cultural-religious interaction.

The method of 'hierarchical opposition,' as articulated by Louis Dumont, is another model that puts emphasis on investigating the different levels of ideological values instead of presuming a given structure of asymmetry in any form of cultural and religious hybridization. Emerging from a critical reflection of Lévi-Strauss' static view of structuralism, Dumont points out the dimension of hierarchy and the different levels of oppositions in many part-whole relations.[45] It is noteworthy that Dumont applies the terms 'hierarchy' or 'opposition' differently.

> [The 'hierarchy' Dumont is talking about is not] in the usually accepted sense of the term….he is not referring to social stratification, nor to any other sort of ranking system, nor to the hierarchy of a scientific taxonomy, nor to mere inequality of status, though these may be expressions of it. It concerns rather the attribution of value that accompanies or occurs in any differentiation.[46]

Examining 'opposition' it becomes clear that 'the two poles of the opposition are not mutually exclusive',[47] and might even be complementary.[48] Therefore, Dumont describes 'wholeness' or 'holism' as different encompassments of ideological values that feature in a hierarchical relation. The ultimate ideological value varies in different cultures, but it is the value of utmost importance that guides people's pursuit of a better life.[49]

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[44] Paul R. Katz, 'Repaying a Nuo Vow in Western Hunan: A Rite of Trans-Hybridity?', *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology*, 11/2 (2013), 1-88 at 6-7. It is noteworthy that in contrast to the 'trans' that generally means 'across' in trans-culturality, the 'trans' used by Paul Katz specifically denotes 'translation' and it is a purposeful action entailing human agency.
[45] Robert Parkin, *Louis Dumont and Hierarchical Opposition* (Berghahn Books, 2009), 3.
[46] Ibid., 41-2.
[47] Ibid., 47.
[48] Ibid., 51.
[49] Ho Ts'ui-p'ing, 'Biandong zhong de qingshu lunli: ershi shiji wanqi zhongguo shanju zaiwaren jiawu renguan de anli' 變動中的親屬倫理：二十世紀晚期中國山居載瓦人家屋人觀的實例

To conclude, the insights provided by the transcultural approach and Dumont's method of 'hierarchical opposition' have the potential to subvert the assumption of sinification argument that predominates in the study of the Yao ritual tradition. That is, the important question raised is not if the Yao have crossed the ethnic boundary and become more Chinese or more subject to Chinese cultural influence, as suggested inexplicitly in the sinification approach. Instead, we should investigate how the modes of cultural exchange on the level of local protagonists have come into play.[50] In other words, what are the Yao perspectives on and reactions to their transcultural communications with the others, in particular, the powerful Other, the Chinese imperial state.

Nevertheless, one dimension is still underrepresented in the above discussion of transcultural approaches, that is, gender in general, and women in particular. The insufficiency of a gendered dimension in transcultural studies is particularly evident in the scholarship of Yao ritual and religion.

3. Gender and Women in Ritual and Religion: A Focus on the Yao

Many factors have hampered a proper exploration of a gendered dimension in the Yao's ritual tradition. One is, as mentioned before, because of the female pollution beliefs there are no female ritual specialists whose work can be observed in contemporary Yao communities. Furthermore, women-centred or women-led religious activities or organizations also do not seem to exist in Yao village life. The other is Yao women's inaccessibility to the Chinese written tradition that exerts such an indispensable significance on the Yao ritual tradition. However, the limited presence of women in the Yao religious domain does not necessarily reflect the Yao women's lack of enthusiasm for and knowledge of religious matters. The essential role of female singers whose participation is required in the performances of certain

(Changing Kinship Ethics for Personhood and Relatedness in a "House Society": The Hill-Dwelling Zaiwa of Late Twentieth Century China), *Taiwan renlei xuekan* (台灣人類學刊 Taiwan Journal of Anthropology) 11/2 (2013), 89-145.

[50] Haejeong Hazel Hahn, 'Puff Marries Advertising: Commercialization of Culture in Jean-Jacques Grandville's *Un Autre Monde* (1844),' in Minsoo Kang and Amy Woodson-Boulton (eds), *Visions of the Industrial Age: Image and Imagery in Nineteenth-Century European Culture* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2008), 295-316.

large-scale rituals clearly underlines the ways in which women are engaged in Yao ritual and religious tradition.

To add a gendered dimension to the exploration of Yao ritual tradition, it is necessary critically to re-examine the factors that resulted in Yao women's marginal positions in ritual and religion against a broader theoretical and regional background. The section begins with a clarification of the concept 'gender' applied in this research. It then moves on to a discussion of female pollution beliefs and women's relationships with the Chinese written tradition.

3-1. The Concept of Gender

The concept of gender is approached differently in distinct disciplines, but it invariably involves discussions of women's situations, especially in opposition to those of men.[51] This research adopts two senses of gender that have been developed by scholars in the fields of sinology and anthropology respectively. In the sinological sense of gender, I closely follow the investigative framework proposed by Dorothy Ko, Jahyun Kim Haboush and Joan R. Piggott.[52] Their framework entails three levels of exploration: 'a focus on women', 'male-female relations' and 'female subjectivity'. The first, a focus on women, 'is to return women to the center of historical analysis.' The second, the exploration of 'male-female relations' on individual and institutional levels, is to ask questions about the contexts of women's lives, revealing the power relations forged in processes of gendered negotiations. The third, the investigation of 'female subjectivity', is to highlight the texts of women's lives. The use of the term 'subjectivity' seeks to 'shift analytic focus from external structures to interior motives, identity formation, and perceptions of the world.'[53] In short, the strength of a sinological sense of gender is its emphasis on textual representations of women and the contexts in which the texts are produced. However, the sinological sense of gender might risk treating the texts and the contexts surrounding the production of the texts as given social facts, and by so doing closes its eyes to the various constructions of

[51] Catherine Lutz, 'The Gender of Theory,' in Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon, (eds), *Women Writing Culture/Culture Writing Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 249-266.
[52] Dorothy Ko et al. (eds), *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
[53] Ibid., 2.

gender and sex in different cultures.[54] Therefore, it is also important to employ an anthropological sense of gender to foreground cultural-specific gender ideologies as a historical process and cultural construct.

A useful way to begin the examination of any society's myths of gender is to look at local notions of the 'person,' that is, of what people in a particular culture think it is to be human.[55] In her study of gender systems in the islands of Southeast Asia, Shelly Errington makes an important differentiation between the concepts of Sex, sex and gender. The capitalized Sex generally indicates the given physicality of a person, especially the physicality defined by a scientific taxonomy, that is popular in Euro-American cultures. The lower-case sex denotes the aspect of cultural-specific thinking of sexual categories that is anything but the western sense of sex. While the definition of gender largely refers to the cultural and social dimension of what people make of sex, even though its variation in representation is still very much based on the physical aspect of sex.[56] On the other hand, Barbara Bodenhorn argues that gender does not necessarily correspond to the natural sex of a person and is defined by what people do.[57]

In short, the sinological sense of gender offers us a lens to look into the various images of women and gender relations in the textual world, while the anthropological sense of gender helps us to scrutinize the cultural-specific dimension of the gender systems in question. By combining the two senses of gender, this research hopes to arrive at some politico-economic and socio-cultural explanations of why and how the differences between the two genders in the Yao religious world have arisen and taken shape.

3-2. Reflections on Female Pollution Beliefs

[54] Helen F. Siu and Wing-hoi Chan, 'Introduction,' in Helen F. Siu (ed.), *Merchants' Daughters: Women, Commerce, and Regional Culture in South China* (Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 1.
[55] Shelly Errington, 'Recasting Sex, Gender, and Power: A Theoretical and Regional Overview,' in Jane Monnig Atkinson and Shelly Errington (eds), *Power and Difference: Gender in Island Southeast Asia* (Stanford University Press, 1990), 1-58.
[56] Ibid., 26-31.
[57] Barbara Bodenhorn, 'I Am Not the Great Hunter, My Wife Is: Iñupiat and Anthropological Models of Gender,' *Études/Inuit/Studies* 14/1/2 (1990), 55-74.

In his 1983 article 'Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols: Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the "Eternal Mother"', Steven Sangren has pointed out the insufficiency in the study of Chinese religion in divining 'the cultural significance of female gender in the realm of divinities'.[58] In the past three decades, the issue of women's roles and ways of participation in religion in general and Chinese religion in particular has been touched upon from various approaches.[59] A prominent approach is that of feminist anthropology. This field not only points out the importance of politics and protest implicated in people's lived religious experience, but also pays more attention to the differences between women.[60] In other words, feminist religious studies attempt to understand the religious experiences of women of different race, class and age in terms of their positions within the religious traditions with which they are faced. Certainly, women's religious experiences and their positions within that given religious tradition should be understood in relation to their roles and statuses in other life domains.

In a Han-Chinese context, the study of women and religion often seeks to discover if religion could serve as a means for women to express their subjectivity in a patriarchal social structure, as women's autonomy in family and married life is often buried in the roles (wife and mother in particular) and responsibilities (such as producing male descendants) the society expects of them to support men.[61] But women's natural fertility like menstruation, gestation and childbirth is often perceived to be an obstacle for them to acquire transcendence.[62] In particular, menstrual blood is considered to contain dangerous power in Chinese belief and the taboos surrounding it have resulted in preventing women from gaining direct access to the power associated with a constant and close relationship to the gods in male cults.[63]

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[58] P. Steven Sangren, 'Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols: Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the "Eternal Mother"', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 9/1 (1983), 4-25.
[59] Elizabeth A. Castelli (ed.), *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).
[60] Rosalind Shaw, 'Feminist Anthropology and the Gendering of Religious Studies', in Ursula King (ed.), *Religion and Gender* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1995), 65-76.
[61] Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman (eds), *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986).
[62] Elena Valussi, 'Blood, Tigers, Dragons: The Physiology of Transcendence for Women', *IASTAM Journal of Asian Medicine,* 4/1 (2008), 46-85.
[63] Jinhua Emma Teng, 'Religion as a Source of Oppression'.

Emily M. Ahern considers three different interpretations for the formation of these female-pollution beliefs: 'The first looks to the emotional significance of death and life, the second to women's social role, and the third to the system of ideas about pollution'.[64] While accepting the first and third, Ahern denies the possibility that women might consciously and deliberately manipulate the power associated with menstrual pollution to subvert the ideals that support a patriarchal society. Yet, by probing the qualities ascribed to Chinese female deities, Sangren argues that the female-pollution beliefs do reflect positive as well as negative qualities associated with women's social role in China. Female deities are unambiguously positive, for they must overcome the stigma of pollution associated with menstruation, sexual intercourse, death and childbirth. Nevertheless, they also simultaneously present negative qualities in a patriarchal society because they must renounce their role as daughter and wife, and take on the role of mother, but do not bear any children themselves.[65]

The discontinuities between the qualities associated with female deities and those associated with women do indeed highlight irresolvable existential dilemmas for Chinese women in religious domain. Deriving her conclusion from a textual comparison between the traditions of Chinese medicine and Daoist female alchemy, Elena Valussi elucidates two opposing goals in similar processes of dealing with women's physiology. In the case of Chinese medicine, the goal is to facilitate women's health, well-being, regularity and the production of children, helping women fulfil their social role and responsibility. While in the case of Daoist female alchemy, the goal is to achieve transcendence by reversing the natural process of female fertility, and in a way severing women's social bonds in family and marital life.[66] On the other hand, although religion might in many cases seem to be a source of the oppression of women because of the taboos on their menstrual blood, it can also offer a source of creativity that enables women to gain power unavailable to them in

[64] Emily M. Ahern, 'The Power and Pollution of Chinese Women', in Margery Wolf and Roxanne Witke (eds), *Women in Chinese Society* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), 193-214 at 212.
[65] P. Steven Sangren, *op. cit.*
[66] Elena Valussi, *op. cit.*

secular world; for instance, they could turn the power of their pollution around on men, in the form of black magic charms, to destroy the ritual power of male cults.[67]

Although in a non-Han Chinese context, the Han Chinese androcentric ideology is not at all a dominant social organizing principle, yet the female-pollution beliefs are somehow persistently present in religious traditions with an intimate relationship with Chinese culture, such as Daoism and Buddhism, that have been introduced into non-Han Chinese societies. Similar to Yao women's limited access to the power associated with gods and deities in Yao Daoism, De'ang women (the De'ang are a minority nationality resident in the borders of Myanmar and China) appear to assume an inferior status to men in their religious practices that are heavily intertwined with Theravada Buddhist cosmology and liturgy. For instance, it is a taboo for women to sit with, or to speak to, monks. Within the temple, 'while monks and men respectively occupy the highest and the middle levels, women and children can only sit at the lowest level, an area located at the margin of the temple, poorly lit and narrow in space'. [68] At face value, it would seem that, on account of female-pollution beliefs, non-Han Chinese women are being forced to share similar positions in religious traditions external to the community as Han Chinese women in Chinese religion. However, many scholars who study the relationship between gender and religion among Chinese minority nationalities would suggest otherwise.

Against the backdrop of women's subordination in religion that contrasts sharply with their centrality in other life domains, Du Shanshan is studying the different interactions the Mother of Grain, a locally respected goddess of agriculture, has with Gautama Buddha in De'ang religion, as told in myths and oral stories. Du has discovered that, despite the divergence in the details of the plots, different versions invariably privilege the Mother of Grain over Gautama Buddha. Therefore, Du concludes that the marginalization of women in De'ang religion might well be perceived as a consequence of the De'ang people's assimilation of Theravada Buddhism. Nonetheless, the agency of women that is absent from the ethnographic

[67] Jinhua Emma Teng, *op. cit.*

[68] Shanshan Du, 'Divine Compromises: The Mother of Grain and Gautama Buddha in De'ang Religion', in Shanshan Du and Ya-chen Chen (eds), *Women and Gender in Contemporary Chinese Societies: Beyond Han Patriarchy* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 2011), 69-88 at 73.

present is kept and manifested in the narratives surrounding the Mother of Grain and her relationships with Gautama Buddha.[69]

In contrast to the marginalized position De'ang women have assumed in Buddhism, Lian Ruizhi's study of the Nanzhao Dali Kingdom (752-902, 938-1254), a realm built on Buddhist ideology, illustrates the prominent role of female ancestors, who were latter transformed into female deities, in the lineage histories among the Bai people in the present Erhai area. Female fertility power had been considered a positive power in these histories as it was through women's marriage alliances with foreign monks (representing ritual power) and a serpent (representing the power of tribal chieftains) that the kingdom was able to resist the military and cultural colonization of the Chinese Empire.[70]

Returning to the discussion of Daoism among Chinese minority nationalities, although Yao women are largely marginalized in the actual practice of Yao Daoism, such exclusion is not at all the case with women in Zhuang religion, which is also permeated with Daoist-imperial influence. James Wilkerson depicts the agency of female ritual specialists, who represent local traditions, in Zhuang religion, showing how they negotiate for their legitimate position and social space in communal ritual performance with Daoist priests, who are symbolically on intimate terms with Chinese imperial state.[71] In the same vein as the argument made by Wilkerson, Kao Ya-ning's research on the cult of Nong Zhigao, an ethnic hero and a legendary ancestor in Zhuang society, also highlights the position of female specialists (representing the Southeast Asia structure) as being close to the Zhuang local tradition, as opposed to the position of Daoist priests (representatives of the Chinese imperial state) who are distant from the Zhuang.[72] In other words, both Wilkerson's and Kao's findings show that the agency of the female ritual specialist is an important means employed by a minority society to sustain its local tradition and ethnic identity

[69] Ibid.
[70] Lian Ruizhi (Lien Jui-Chih), *Yincang de zuxian: Miaoxiangguo de chuanshuo yu shehui* 隱藏的祖先：妙香國的傳說與社會 (Hidden Ancestors: Legends and Society of the Miaoxiang Country) (Beijing: Sanlian shudian, 2007).
[71] James Wilkerson, 'Negotiating Local Traditions with Taoism: Female ritual specialists in the Zhuang religion', *Religion,* 37/2 (2007), 150-163.
[72] Kao Ya-ning (Gao Ya-ning), 'Singing a Hero in Ritual: Nong Zhigao and His Representation Among the Zhuang People in China', PhD thesis (Melbourne: The University of Melbourne, 2009).

when confronted with religious traditions that have a profound relationship with Chinese imperial state presence. In consideration of the significance of the agency of women and the positive quality associated with female fertility in religion among Chinese minority nationalities, Ho Ts'ui-p'ing suggests viewing local society in the southwest borderland as a 'gendering ritual community', a concept that might reveal the multiple values and representations embodied in women-engaged ritual performance and religious activity, better than those incorporated in the Han Chinese androcentric ideology or in permanent material representations (lineages halls, temples, and genealogies).[73]

To sum up, female-pollution beliefs are a contributing factor in the marginalization of the position of women in religion, both in Han Chinese and non-Han Chinese societies. From what has been discussed above, religion might sometimes be a source of the oppression of women, but in many other scenarios might be a domain in which women obtain access to spiritual power that they can use to proclaim their subjectivity and even subvert the androcentric ideology. In either case, the female-pollution beliefs are hardly the one, sole dimension in understanding women's ritual participation and religious experience. The next section explores another dimension, the written tradition, in Yao religion, and women's relationship to it.

3-3. The Written Tradition and Yao Women's Relationship with It

As present-day as well as past Yao religious practice seems to be dominated by the male gender, Yao men must be ascribed the role of copyists, composing and transmitting the texts, and both the historical and ethnographic evidence has ascertained the truth of this assumption. However, what has received less attention, if not been completely neglected, from scholars in this field is the possibility of looking into Yao women's engagement in that written tradition, even though they were not literate in Chinese, through singing and folksongs.

[73] Ho Ts'ui-p'ing, 'Gendering Community Across the Chinese Southwest Borderland', in David Faure and Ho Ts'ui-p'ing (eds), *Chieftains into Ancestors: Imperial Expansion and Indigenous Society in Southwest China* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2013), 206-246.

A general picture of women, examined in the context of pre-modern China, Korea and Japan, indicates the marginality of women to the written tradition.[74] Even though this assertion might hold true in many respects, the picture has tended to be drawn on the basis of the premise that views literacy in its simplest definition—the ability to read and write—an ability sometimes only available in a restricted way to certain classes and groups of people.[75] In a Chinese context, literacy is generally praised and considered a fundamental skill by which a person can achieve higher social status, more wealth and power, and is therefore a facilitator of social mobility.[76] Specifically, the establishment and institutionalization of the civil service examination (*keju zhidu*) in the Tang-Song period (618-1279) served as an important mechanism that sustained and strengthened this sort of ideology and practice constructed around literacy in China.[77] Conversely, 'illiteracy was often equated with inferiority and lack of intelligence'.[78]

However, if we turn our attention to minority societies in the border areas between South China and Southeast Asia, we do find various heterogeneous ideologies and practices pertaining to literacy. James Scott has proposed that many ethnic minorities might have consciously chosen to reject literacy because of its immediate association with state control, therefore they decided to leave texts and writing behind in their flight. These societies, such as the Wa and the Hmong, often had stories of treachery and carelessness to explain their loss of literacy.[79] Or there are minority societies, such as the Yi, who have recognized and accepted the power of literacy and its close association with status, refinement and state bureaucracy, but

[74] Dorothy Ko, Jahyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R. Piggott, 'Introduction', in Dorothy Ko et al. (eds), *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1-24 at 20.
[75] Jack Goody, *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
[76] Ho Ping-ti, *The Ladder of Success in Imperial China: Aspects of Social Mobility, 1368-1911* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962).
[77] Glen Peterson, 'State Literacy Ideologies and the Transformation of Rural China', *Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs*, 32 (1994), 95-120 at 118.
[78] Liu Fei-Wen, 'Literacy, Gender, and Class: Nüshu and Sisterhood Communities in Southern Rural Hunan', *Nan Nü,* 6/2 (2004), 241-282 at 242.
[79] James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed,* 220-237. Nicholas Tapp, *The Hmong of China: Context, Agency, and the Imaginary* (Brill, 2001), 35-36.

have nevertheless positively privileged the value and employment of orality in social and ritual settings at a village level.[80]

To subvert the stereotypical assumption equating orality with illiteracy and inferiority, James Scott has proposed to define orality as 'a different and potentially positive medium of cultural life'. And, [orality] 'is also to be distinguished from what some have called primary illiteracy: a situation in which a social field confronts literacy for the first time'.[81] Among the different forms of orality, here we are primarily concerned with singing and its gendering and cultural implications.

As an example to illustrate James Scott's postulation, a statement from a version of *The Biography of the Immortal of Singing, Liu Sanmei* (*gexian Liu Sanmei zhuan*) aptly confirms that the people in Guangdong and Guangxi generally consider singing to have the same cultural significance as the ability to read and write. That is, singing is regarded as identical to written literacy, that the difference being that it has to be displayed publicly at a performative interface, such as a ritual setting or singing gatherings.[82] Therefore, I propose to view singing as a form of 'performative literacy', briefly, an enabling knowledge to be displayed in performative acts.[83] Women are often closely associated with the 'performative literacy', the afore-mentioned Immortal of Singing being a strong case in point, and given prominent status in ritual and singing settings.[84]

From a cultural perspective, especially among the Yao, a woman's intelligence is partly judged by how well she sings, taking into account the quality of her voice and the richness of the folksong repertoires she possesses.[85] Leaving aside

[80] Erik Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 127-158.
[81] James Scott, *op. cit.* 221.
[82] The original text in Chinese reads, '粵人即唱歌為讀書.' Sun Fanggui and Zhi Xingfu, 'The Biography of the Immortal of Singing, Liu Sanmei' (*Gexian Liu Sanmei zhuan* 歌僊劉三妹傳), in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu bubian* 四庫全書存目叢書補編 (Jinan City: Qilu shushe, 2001 [1689]), 79-380/381 at 381.
[83] David Holm, *Mapping the Old Zhuang Character Script: A Vernacular Writing System from Southern China* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 61-63. With reference to Sheridan Blau, 'Performative Literacy: The Habits of Mind of Highly Literate Readers', *Voices from the Middle,* 10/3 (2003), 18-22 at 19.
[84] See for example, Kao Ya-ning, 'Singing a Hero in Ritual', 103-138.
[85] Wu Ninghua and He Mengmeng, 'Menren nüxing gechang chuantong bianqian yanjiu' 門人女性歌唱傳統變遷研究 (A Study of Transitions Regarding Traditional Mun Female Singing from Shangsi County in Guangxi, China), *Kundu yinyue xuekan* (關渡音樂學刊 Kuandu Music Journal), 20 (2014), 43-66. Zheng Changtian, *Yaozu 'zuogetang' de jiegou yu gongneng: Xiangnan Panyao 'gangjie' huodong yanjiu* 瑤族"坐歌堂"的結構與功能：湘南盤瑤"岡介"活動研究 (The Structure and

the different approaches to the female singing acts and the songs composed for them in either Han or non-Han societies, it is generally agreed that female singing has served as a form of empowerment for voicing women's emotions, memories and life experiences. Most importantly, through its medium women would voice reflections and criticisms of their relationships with others in their roles as daughters, wives and mothers in a patriarchal marriage and society.[86]

Significantly, oral and written traditions are by no means two separate linguistic and cultural spheres, but are constantly in a state of flux of encounter, interaction, selection and hybridization.[87] Conceptually and performatively, as mentioned earlier, in southern China the oral performance of singing is regarded as identical to the ability to read and write. Conversely, even though predominantly viewed as a written tradition, such as the female scripts (*nüshu*) discovered on the border of Hunan and Guangxi, Liu Feiwen convincingly argues that '*nüshu* communication requires performance in the form of singing or chanting instead of silent reading, and this makes it mostly interchangeable with the local women's singing tradition, called *nüge* (female song)'.[88] In short, the interchangeability between singing and written literacy sounds a note of caution to the researcher, warning him or her not to rule out the possibility that Yao women are the authors of ritual texts, especially the texts conserved in the ritual-master tradition and manuscripts, even though they were neither literate in the Chinese sense nor the ritual practitioners of these texts. In other words, the Yao women's probable engagement in the written tradition has pointed to the necessity of introducing a 'gendered'

Function of 'Sitting in the Hall and Singing' among the Yao: A Study of the Pastime of Telling Jokes among Pan Yao in Southern Hunan) (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2009), 218. Wu Ninghua, 'Yishi zhong de shishi: "Panwangge" yanjiu' 儀式中的史詩─《盤王歌》研究 (Epic in Ritual: A Study of the 'Song of King Pan'), PhD thesis (Beijing: Central Conservatory of Music, 2012), 43-45.

[86] For a Han example, see Rubie S. Watson, 'Chinese Bridal Laments: The Claims of a Dutiful Daughter', in Bell Yung, Evelyn S. Rawski, and Rubie S. Watson (eds), *Harmony and Counterpoint: Ritual Music in Chinese Context* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 107-129. For a Hakka example, see Xu Xiaoying, *Gechang yu jingshen: Cunzheng shiye zhong de kejia funü shenghuo* 歌唱與敬神：村鎮視野中的客家婦女生活 (Singing and Worship: Hakka Women's Life in Village and Township) (Guilin: Guangxi shifan daxue, 2006). For an example of a group of women with close proximity in origin and geography to the Yao, see Liu Fei-Wen, 'Literacy, Gender, and Class'.

[87] Lien Chinfa, 'Language Adaptation in Taoist Liturgical Texts', in David Johnson (ed.), *Ritual and Scripture in Chinese Popular Religion* (Berkeley, CA: Chinese Popular Culture Project, 1995), 219-246.

[88] Liu Fei-Wen, 'Literacy, Gender, and Class', 246.

perspective in the investigation of Yao ritual tradition, and especially the interpretation of ritual-master texts, such as the texts about female fertility deities.

Mixed Methodologies: Library Survey and Fieldwork Investigation

At the beginning of my study of the narratives about and practices linked to the locally respected female fertility deities, in particular the Mother of Emperors, worshipped by the Yao, one question was constantly gnawing at my mind: what is the significance of the texts about female fertility deities? That is, do these texts entail a wider regional and cross-ethnic cultural and religious significance, despite the fact that the majority has been discovered in the ritual texts conserved by one of the Yao subgroups, the Mun?

As I have delved into the textual analysis and ethnographic investigation of the Mother of Emperors, most of my worries about the applicability of the texts derived from one particular Yao group have gradually faded away. That is, when I realized that, although the knowledge and representation of the Mother of Emperors does indeed pertain to this specific group of people, nevertheless the construct of the knowledge and representation is firmly rooted in the beliefs surrounding the power of female fertility in southern China, that has been called the 'Flower Cultural Sphere' (*huawenhuaquan*) by Guo Wei.[89] The Mother of Emperors is only one of the transformations of the regionally prevalent and inter-ethnically relevant cultural phenomena associated with female fertility. In a sense, the narratives and practices surrounding the Mother of Emperors and her female spiritual subordinates can be regarded as a particular kind of 'knowledge', dominated by a 'series of transformations', whose birth is based on already existing knowledge.[90]

So far, all that has been extracted from Yao ritual manuscripts about the goddesses of fertility are fragmented stories in forms of chants and songs. As the authorship of the Yao ritual manuscripts remains elusive, it is hard to say with any exactitude whether these fragmented textual narratives of the goddesses of fertility

[89] Guo Wei, *Zhongguo Nüshen* 中國女神 (Chinese Goddesses) (Nanning: Guangxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000).
[90] With reference to Marilyn Strathern (ed.), *Shifting Contexts: Transformations in Anthropological Knowledge* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 6.

might represent the folklore of one coherent cultural region and one social group of believers, or whether they are simply a product of the erudite mind of one literate author.[91]

Despite the fragmentation of these textual descriptions, after these contents have been passed under review, this research does suggest that they have 'a fundamental symbolic unity' underlying them.[92] In a manner similar to Brigitte Baptandier's approaches to the stories of the Lady of Linshui, *Linshui Pingyao Chuan*, this research also treats the seemingly unrelated stories of goddesses of fertility as written in Yao ritual manuscripts as a repository of anecdotes (that is, short, amusing stories about real incidents or persons), rather than as a novel (that is, a fictitious prose narrative of book-length). To strengthen this hypothesis, the research compares these textual narratives stories with related local folklore, customs, norms and ritual practices.

This research utilizes mixed methodologies. The first is the library survey. The Yao manuscripts I have employed in making my textual analysis originate from two kinds of sources. The first is my own collection that consists of copies of manuscripts gathered during various field trips to Guangxi and Yunnan between 1999 and 2012 (hereafter the Guangxi and Yunnan Collection). The second manuscript source is composed of collections preserved in different libraries and museums in Europe. I obtained the first group of Yao manuscripts not by purchasing them but by visiting their present owners and asking their permission to make either digital or hard copies of the texts. For my study of the second group of Yao manuscripts, I have undertaken separate research trips to access the collections of Yao manuscripts preserved in the four different locations in Europe.

The second method I have employed is fieldwork investigation. In order to conduct my investigation into Yao manuscripts, I travelled to two Yao villages located in western Guangxi. The first is Weihao 偉好, a Mien hamlet in Fanchang Village 凡昌村, Lizhou Township 利周鄉, Tianlin County 田林縣, Baice City 百色

[91] Barend J. ter Haar, 'Review of La dame-du-bord-de-l'eau (Nanterre, Société d'ethnologie, 1988)', *T'oung Pao,* LXXXVIII (1992), 373-378.
[92] Brigitte Baptandier, *The Lady of Linshui: A Chinese Female Cult*, Kristin Fryklund (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 20-22.

市, in northwest Guangxi; the second is Dingcao 丁草, a Mun hamlet in Kujiao Village 枯叫村, Nanping Township 南屏鄉, Shangsi County 上思縣, Fangchenggang City 防城港市, in southwest Guangxi (the area is also known as Shiwan Dashan 十萬大山 [Ten Thousand Big Mountains]). Weihao has been an anthropological fieldwork site of mine since I commenced my MA thesis research in 1999. My familiarity with the Mien language and the people in this particular village made it a natural choice to do research on Yao manuscripts. The reason I went to Dingcao was the connection I had been able to establish there with the help of Deng Wentong and Wang Meigui.

Deng Wentong is a retired teacher of Mun origin and an ordained Daoist priest, who has written widely on many aspects of Yao studies. When Deng learned that I had been researching Yao narratives and practices centring on the goddesses of fertility for my PhD project, he kindly directed my attention to the *Social and Historical Survey of the Yao People in Guangxi, Volume Six* (*Guangxi yaozu shehui lishi diaocha diliuce*).[93] He told me that many manuscripts, including the texts containing stories of goddesses of fertility, had been confiscated in the vicinity of Fangchenggang City during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Fortunately, in the 1980s they were rescued from the police station in Shangsi County by a research team in which Deng Wentong had personally participated, and some of the contents of the manuscript collection were compiled and published in this volume.[94] A compelling desire to reposition the printed contents of the manuscripts in their provenance, including the relevant manuscripts kept in several of the European library collections I had reviewed, spurred me on to grasp any possibility to visit one of these Mun villages in the course of this research.

Wang Meigui's connections with and knowledge of several Mun villages in Shangsi, including Dingcao, strengthened my resolve to go to Dingcao. Wang Meiguan was a secretary at the College of Ethnology and Sociology of Guangxi

[93] Guangxi Zhuangzu zizhiqu bianjizu, *Guangxi yaozu shehui lishi diaocha diliuce* 廣西瑤族社會歷史調查第六冊 (The Social and Historical Survey of the Yao People in Guangxi, Volume Six) (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1987).

[94] The majority of the members of the research team were teachers and researchers from the present Guangxi University for Nationalities (previously Guangxi College for Nationalities). Apart from Deng Wentong, the team also included the late Zhang Youjun, another well-known Chinese scholar of Yao studies. Deng said it was mainly thanks to Zhang's efforts that the collection of confiscated texts was able to be processed and published.

University for Nationalities when we met in 2012. She has a master's degree in religion and conducted fieldwork for her master's thesis in Shangsi in 2007. When she learned what the purpose of my investigation was, she immediately pinpointed Dingcao for me, stressing the presence of the many skilled ritual specialists resident there. Through her I was able to visit Dingcao and meet the people and collect the data I present in this research.

Introduction to Each Chapter

This introduction has set out the fundamentals of the intended research. Chapter Two situates Yao religious culture and manuscripts in the broader regional and historical context. Chapter Three reveals that religion has been an important interface at which the patrilineal ideology, an ideological basis for the development of lineage society and the facilitation of integration into the Chinese state, had been enforced in Yao society. Nonetheless, it also shows that this is where the Yao have assimilated and transformed the religious-cum-imperial influences in the light of their own cultural schema. Chapter Four addresses the cultural and political significance of the goddesses of fertility among the Yao in a regional context. It elucidates the different forms of gender ideal and gender relationship articulated in Yao cultural norms and religious performance. It also offers a close reading of the narratives surrounding the Mother of Emperors, showing why the construct of the Mother of Emperors could be regarded as a manifestation of the Yao's struggles to claim their autonomy in their encounters with the civilizing value of patrilineal ideology. Chapter Five suggests the concept of 'performative literacy' in order to explore the significance of Yao female singers in a ritual setting. Commencing by viewing the narratives of the twenty-four assistant female fertility deities as the probable product of female singing, the chapter goes on to illustrate the different forms of expression and action assumed by women in the face of the imposed patrilineal ideology channelled through the Yao religious interface. The conclusion recapitulates the highlights of each chapter and proposes potential related topics for future research.