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

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## Chapter 4. Local Negotiations with the Civilizing Project: A Focus on Goddesses of Fertility

This chapter addresses the diverse ritual constructions of female fertility that reveal the Yao's reception of and negotiation with the civilizing project, the patrilineal Daoist ordination, and one of its social consequences, the naturalization of female fertility. Sherry Ortner argues that the emergence of the state has had a profound and dynamic relationship with the regulation of women's social role and sexual behaviour. In particular, the regulation has often revolved around the idealization and symbolization of female fertility, in which a paired concept of purity and pollution is the most relevant.<sup>1</sup> Different cultures and societies have their own distinct ways of ritualistically constructing gender relations and female fertility.<sup>2</sup> In the Chinese context, it is fairly common to find that purity is often associated with the value of female chastity;<sup>3</sup> whereas pollution is symbolically related to menstrual blood and childbirth.<sup>4</sup> As will be argued in the pages to follow, the contrast between purity and pollution might be an important key in enlightening our understanding of the gender qualities ascribed to Chinese female deities and the goddesses of fertility popular among non-Han Chinese societies in South China.

Steven Sangren's study of the three Chinese female deities, Guanyin or Miaoshan, Mazu or Tian Hou (the Queen of Heaven) and the Eternal Mother<sup>5</sup> shows that purity is an integral virtue in the deification of these female deities. In other words, 'female deities must overcome the stigma of pollution associated with menstruation, sexual intercourse, death, and childbirth.'<sup>6</sup> The Chinese female deities have retained

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<sup>1</sup> Sherry B. Ortner, 'The Virgin and The State', *Feminist Studies* 4/3 (1978), 19-35.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Stephan Sparkes, *Spirits and Souls: Gender and Cosmology in an Isan Village in Northeast Thailand* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2005). Gilbert Lewis, *Day of Shining Red: An Essay on Understanding Ritual* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

<sup>3</sup> Janet M. Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> The Eternal Mother is known by a variety of names, Wu Sheng Sheng Mu, Yao Chi Jin Mu, or Wang Mu Niang Niang, among others (Sangren 1983, 9)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

virginal purity by avoiding the socially prescribed but ritually polluting role of wife, and hence the pollution associated with sex and childbirth (Guanyin and Mazu). Or, perhaps they do not have an earthly incarnation and therefore possess an intrinsic purity (the Eternal Mother).<sup>7</sup> The Lady of Linshui, whose worship is popular in Southeast China, is another famous Chinese female cult that sketched rejection of marriage and the performance of a ritual abortion (*tuotai*, a ritual act of emerging from the womb). Most importantly, besides possessing the female virtue of purity, these female deities have also received state recognition and official titles, and have ultimately been depicted as saviours or miraculous healers.<sup>8</sup> In other words, successive Chinese imperial states encouraged making the female virtue of purity integral to these female cults, because the practices have been beneficial to the enforcements of civilizing values into local societies.

A civilizing force to ‘naturalize’ the ritual construction of conceptive procreative goddesses locally respected by many southern non-Han Chinese people was also found coexisting alongside such state incorporation techniques as veneration, scriptures and texts.<sup>9</sup> Through the agency of ritual, the imposition of a state-favoured andro-centric ideology has changed the social appreciation of women and created new gender ideals for both men and women.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as the andro-centric ideology is by no means the dominant organizing principle in non-Han Chinese societies, the introduction of such a civilizing estimation has instigated different forms of negotiations between various sets of gender ideals.<sup>11</sup> Local negotiations with the consequences of the naturalization of female fertility power can be manifested in longer social processes, either in the span of one’s lifetime or centuries long, and embodied either in ritual performance or in the ways in which kinship and marriage are organized.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 10-14.

<sup>8</sup> Ho Ts’ui-p’ing, ‘Gendering Ritual Community,’ 232.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Shanshan Du and Ya-chen Chen, *Women and Gender in Contemporary Chinese Societies: Beyond Han Patriarchy* (Lexington Books, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> James Wilkerson, ‘Negotiating Local Tradition with Taoism: Female Ritual Specialists in the Zhuang Religion’, *Religion*, 37/2 (2007), 150-163. Also see Ho Ts’ui-p’ing, ‘Gendering Ritual 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 at 231.

To uncover the ways in which the Yao have negotiated with the impact of the civilizing project, that is, the naturalization of female fertility power, with a focus on gender relations and female fertility deities, this chapter begins by relocating this phenomenon in a regional context. It commences with an illustration of the prevalent flower symbolism appropriated to fertility beliefs in the Flower Cultural Sphere in southern China. It then proceeds to address the different sources of potency found among Chinese female deities and goddesses of fertility venerated in non-Han Chinese societies. This analysis is followed by an overview of the Yao cultural constructions of gender relations and shows how male-privileged ordination has ritualistically usurped the importance of female fertility. The final section is devoted to arguing why and how the practices and narratives linked to the Mother of Emperors (*dimu*), an anthropomorphized form of female fertility, might be regarded as a manifestation of the Yao's struggles to claim their autonomy in their encounters with the civilizing value of patrilineal ideology.

### **Flower Symbolism in the Flower Cultural Sphere**

This section analyses the nexus of practices and narratives surrounding goddesses of fertility and a particular mythical landscape configured as the source of life. It is important to differentiate between two sets of beliefs pertaining to these goddesses of fertility, who are generally believed to be the protectors of women and children: one is a fairly localized myth of the goddess of fertility venerated by different ethnicities in distinct locations; the other a much more widespread complex of beliefs linked to female fertility.<sup>13</sup> Guo Wei has dubbed this prevalent complex of beliefs and practices linked to female reproductive power the 'Flower Cultural Sphere' (*huawenhuaquan*), and this is the term I have adopted here.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, my enquiry into goddesses of fertility among the Yao commences with a brief overview of the widespread complex of flower symbolism connected to two specific flowers, peach blossom (*tao*) and plum blossom (*mei*).

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<sup>13</sup> Barend J. ter Haar, 'Review of The Lady of Linshui: A Chinese Female Cult', *T'oung Pao*, LXXXVIII (1992), 373-378.

<sup>14</sup> Guo Wei, *Zhongguo Nüshen* 中國女神 (Chinese Goddesses) (Nanning: Guangxi jiaoyu chubanshe, 2000).

As Ter Haar concludes, ‘All over Southern China, children are perceived as white (male) and red (female) flowers on a plant in a pot, which represents the mother and her womb’.<sup>15</sup> In the Flower Cultural Sphere of southern China, flower symbolism and an imagined garden (or grotto or valley or mountain) have constituted a cosmogenesis to explain a cosmological dimension of how a person is formed. In a nutshell, besides the corporeal aspect of a person, human souls, referred to as ‘flower souls’ (*huahun*), have been thought to reside in a flower garden from the time before their birth until puberty.

The flower symbolism for male and female not only includes the colour metaphor of white and red, it is also associated with particular flowers: plum blossom for male and peach blossom for female. In fact, as early as the mid-seventeenth century, the worship of deities of fertility, in this case the Parents of the Flowers (*Huawang Fumu*), and the parallelisms of white, plum and male versus red, peach and female, are already recorded in an account in *Guangdong Miscellanies* (*Guangdong Xinyu*). An entry on the Parents of the Flowers from ‘Miscellany on Deities’ (*shenyu*) reads as follows:

When the people in Guangdong and Guangxi pray for offspring, they ask the Parents of the Flowers for help. The verses in the prayer read, ‘Boy, white flower; girl, red flower.’ ... They draw on the metaphor ‘flowering like peach and plum’ from the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*). The *Book of Songs* uses peach and plum to refer to female and male respectively. Hence, ‘Taoyao’ (The peach tree is young and elegant) refers to girls, and the blossoming plum indicates boys. A girl is a peach and a boy is a plum.<sup>16</sup>

越人祈子，必於花王父母。有祝辭云：「白花男，紅花女。」...，蓋取《詩》「華如桃李」之義。詩以桃李二物，興男女二人，故桃夭言女也，標梅言男也。女桃而男梅也。

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<sup>15</sup> Barend ter Haar, *Ritual and Mythology of the Chinese Triads: Creating an Identity* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 90. According to Rolf A. Stein, the belief that identifies a cave-rich landscape or a rocky area with many caves as a womb appears in both modern and traditional Vietnamese and Chinese folklore. See Rolf A. Stein, *The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Religious Thought*, Phyllis Brooks (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 96.

<sup>16</sup> Qu Dajun (1630-1696), ‘Shenyu’ 神語 (Miscellany on Deities), *Guangdong Xinyu* 廣東新語 (Guangdong Miscellanies) (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1934), 214.

The parallelism of female as peach and male as plum is also revealed in the Yao cosmology relating to life and death, as Michel Strickmann has pointed out: ‘The Peach-blossom Spring—female—complements the male Plum-blossom Mountain’.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the Peach Spring Grotto, and by extension the flower garden that symbolically refers to a place of life and femaleness, the Plum Mountain is a place where the men and boys learn how to perform the rituals and constitutes a landscape associated with death and maleness/masculinity.<sup>18</sup> An indigenized Daoist sect is also called after the Plum Mountain, which is closely associated with local beliefs about hunting among many non-Han peoples in South China.<sup>19</sup>

As the discussion below will show, among the Yao the Parents of the Flowers recorded in *Guangdong Miscellanies* have continued to maintain their position among the most prominent flower deities. Most importantly, even though the flower deities often appear in pairs, an inclination to highlight the power of femaleness in fertility beliefs is readily ascertainable.

## Goddesses of Fertility in the Flower Cultural Sphere

### *1. An Overview of Goddesses of Fertility and Their Abodes*

Obviously, the complex of flowers representing fertility and the landscape representing a mythical womb must be connected with female divinities or deities whose divine powers can produce children.<sup>20</sup> The popularity of goddesses associated with flower symbolism and fertility beliefs ensure that this is a widespread and enduring local cult transcending geographical and ethnic boundaries in southern

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Strickmann, ‘The Tao among the Yao: Taoism and the Sinification of South China’, in *Rekishi ni okeru minshū to bunka-Sakai Tadao sensei koki jukuga kinen ronshū 歴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 25.

<sup>18</sup> The associations of Plum Mountain with a place where Yao males acquire the ritual repertoires and the world of the deceased are prevalent throughout Yao ritual texts. One example is a ritual manuscript entitled the *Rituals for Crossing the Thirty-Six Caves in Plum Mountain (meishan sanshiliudong ke)* from the Munich Collection (call number 293 Cod. Sin. 463).

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Lemoine, ‘Mianyao de lishi yu zongjiao chutan’ 勉瑶の歴史與宗教初探 (Preliminary Investigation into the History and Religion of the Iu-Mien), *Guangxi minzu xueyuan xuebao (廣西民族學院學報 Journal of Guangxi College for Nationalities)*, 4 (1994), 22-25.

<sup>20</sup> Rolf. A. Stein, *The World in Miniature: Container Gardens and Dwellings in Far Eastern Religious Thought*, Phyllis Brooks (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 91.

China. Furthermore, as Ho Ts'ui-p'ing aptly concludes, 'It is certainly not novel to have gendered or varied stories told of a popular cult, nor is it exceptional to have varieties of representations of any historical or mythical figures'.<sup>21</sup>

For example, a general term for goddesses of fertility in South China is the Supreme Matron (*powang*). The worship of the Supreme Matron can be found among many Han and non-Han local societies throughout the border areas of Hunan and Guangxi as well as those of Fujian, Guangxi and Yunnan (see below). Despite similarities in terminology, however, there is considerable diversification pertaining to the efficacy of the goddesses involved. For instance, the Zhuang call the Supreme Matron the Holy Mother of the Flowery Deities (*Huawang Shengmu*), who is believed to reside in an imaginary heavenly flower garden and be imbued with the divine power to give children.<sup>22</sup> In stark contrast, the cult of the Supreme Matron popular among the Min Yao and Han communities in the border areas of Hunan and Guangxi does not have any explicit associations with fertility beliefs. Instead, her worship seems to have become more intertwined with a local custom praising friendship between unmarried girls, known as 'sworn sisters of the same age bonded together' (*jielaotong* or *baitongnian*).<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, although they bear different names, nevertheless the cosmological constructions connected to flower symbolism and fertility beliefs do reveal that great similarities do persist across ethnic boundaries. For instance, among the Miao of western Hunan, people refer to the parents of a prominent local god, the White Emperor Heavenly King (*Baidi Tianwang*), as the Father of Exorcism (*Nuogong*) and his consort, the Mother of Exorcism (*Nuomu*). They are thought to

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<sup>21</sup> Ho Ts'ui-p'ing, 'Gendering Ritual 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 at 210.

<sup>22</sup> Gao Yaning, 'Zhuangzu yishi wenbenzhong de Zhuang-Han guanxi' 壯族儀式文本中的壯漢關係 (The Ethnic Relation between the Zhuang and Han Chinese in Zhuang Ritual Texts), paper presented at the conference of Xinan duominzu gongsheng guanxi xueshu huiyi 西南多民族共生關係學術會議 (The Conference of the Symbiotic Relations among Multi-Nationalities in Southwest China), Guiyang, Guizhou, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Liu Xiuli, 'Jimei zuohua zongjiao zhuti yanjiu' "姊妹坐化" 宗教主題研究 (A Study of the Religious Theme, Sworn Sisters Died Together Remaining Seated Cross-legged), *Wenhua Yichan* (文化遺產 Cultural Heritage), 3 (2010), 139-146.



rule the Peach Spring Grotto and to take care of women and children.<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, although they appear as a pair, it is the Mother of Exorcism who plays the leading role in exorcism rites, as well as commanding all the martial deities, including the fifth Lad Surnamed Zhang (*Zhang Wulang*), also referred to as the Second Lad Surnamed Zhang and Zhao (*Zhang-Zhao Erlang*), the Five Furies (*Wuchang*) and the Five Legions (*Wuying*). The rather overshadowed Father of Exorcism ‘is said to be only good for engaging in bouts of heavy drinking, as indicated by his red face’.<sup>25</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the constructions of the fertility beliefs of the Yao in Guangxi and Yunnan mainly revolve around the Parents of the Flowers and the Peach Spring Grotto. Taking the Parents of the Flowers, who are popular among the Mien, as an example, there are three ways of referring to these deities. In ritual texts, two terms in Chinese, the Parents of the Flowers (*Huahuang Fumu*) and the Father of the Flower and Mother of the Flowers (*Huagong Huamu*), are used. In daily language, people refer to them as *pianj<sup>31</sup> mien<sup>53</sup>*, as *pianj<sup>31</sup>* means flower ([Ch] *hua*) and *mien<sup>53</sup>* means spirits (ghosts or deities, [Ch] *gui* or *shen*). Although there is no certain textual or ethnographic evidence that indicates the Mien have highlighted the prominence of femaleness in the paired flower deities as the Miao have done, the Mien do venerate a distinguished goddess called the Fifth Wife of King Tang (*Tangwang Wupo*), who is thought to have produced humankind.<sup>26</sup>

The Peach Spring Grotto is a three-storeyed building. The top storey is called the Golden Palace (*jindian*), the middle storey the Silver Palace (*yindian*) and the bottom storey the Jewel Palace (*baodian*). In each storey resides a pair of Parents of the Flowers, and they are joined by 120 Fathers and Mothers of the Flower with

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<sup>24</sup> The father had the Long (Dragon) family name and the mother the Yang family name. There is a citation in Xiangxi Tujiazu Miaozu zizhizhou minjian wenxue jicheng bangongshi [XTMZMWJB] referring to a woman of the Yang family name being called *niangniang* (empress), whose task is to oblige people with children. See Xie Xiaohui, ‘From Woman’s Fertility to Masculine Authority’, 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), 111-137 at 126, 134 note 16.

<sup>25</sup> 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 17-18.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Lemoine, *Yao Ceremonial Paintings* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1982), 54-55.

different Han Chinese surnames, who also reside in the Peach Spring Grotto and have to be extended invitations to participate in the flower-related rites.<sup>27</sup>

In a similar vein, the prominent flower deities venerated among the Mun are called the Parents of the Flower Roots (*Huagen Fumu*). In ritual texts, they are referred to as the Parents of the Flower Roots of the Upper Storey (*Shanglou Huagen Fumu*) and Supreme Parents of the Flower Roots (*Powang Huagen Fumu*). In everyday language, people call them *ta*<sup>22</sup> *fa*<sup>22</sup> *mhaan*<sup>44</sup> (*ta*<sup>22</sup> *fa*<sup>22</sup>: meaning unclear, *mhaan*<sup>44</sup>: deities, [Ch] *shen*). As indicated by the name of the Parents of the Flower Roots of the Uppermost Storey, the flower garden is also a three-storey building. In the middle storey reside the flower deities called the Parents of Flowers of the Six Kingdoms in the Middle Storey (*Zhonglou Liuguo Huawang*). The flower deity of the Bottom Storey is called the Lonely Fairy Matron of the Bottom Storey (*Xialou Gudu Xianpo*). In daily language, people refer to Lonely Fairy Matron as *ni*<sup>22</sup> *wa*<sup>22</sup> *mhaan*<sup>44</sup> (*ni*<sup>22</sup>: children, *wa*<sup>22</sup>: flower). It is said that the Lonely Fairy Matron of the Bottom Storey has neither husband nor children. One of her pleasures is descending to the mortal world to play with children but, although she enjoys this pastime, her presence is harmful to the children and will bring them illness, even death.<sup>28</sup>

Most significant to the argument here is that, reminiscent of the privileged image of the Mother of Exorcism in Miao exorcist rites, the Mun have also given prominence to the Mother of Flower Roots (*Huagenmu*) in the paired flower deities called the Parents of Flower Roots. In ritual texts as well as daily language, the Mun people refer to the Mother of Flower Roots as the Mother of Emperors (*tei*<sup>35</sup> *mu*<sup>42</sup>, [Ch] *dimu*) (discussed in more detail below). Pertinently the Mother of Emperors has not taken up her abode in the Peach Spring Grotto. Instead, she is said to live in the Temple of Ao Mountain and to rule over the Flower Mountain (*huashan*).

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<sup>27</sup> Chen Meiwen, *Cong mingming tan Guangxi Tianlin Panguyao rende goucheng yu shengming de lai yuan* 從命名談廣西田林盤古瑤人的構成與生命的來源 (Conceptualizations of Personhood and the Origins of Life as Seen in Naming Traditions among the Pangu Yao of Tianlin, Guangxi) (Taipei: Tangshan, 2003), 206-211.

<sup>28</sup> Huang Guiquan, 'Landianyao de hua, dou, renguan—nahongcun Landianyao dansheng, wenghua, shuadou hen dushi liyi de diaocha yu yanjiu' 藍靛瑤的花、斗、人觀—那洪村藍靛瑤誕生、翁花、耍斗和度師禮儀的調查與研究 (The Conceptualizations of Flowers, Constellations and Person: A Survey of Birth Ceremonies, Flower Rites, Rituals for Supplementing Rice and Ordination), *Wenshan shifan gaodeng zhuanke xueyuan xuebao* (文山師範高等專科學院學報 Journal of Wenshan Teachers College), 16/3 (2003), 161-167 at 162.

After this overview of the similarities and differences between the cosmological constructions of different goddesses of fertility and their abodes, the next section moves on to illustrate the different sources of potency shared between Chinese female deities and the goddesses of fertility in the Flower Cultural Sphere venerated among the non-Han Chinese societies. It highlights the prominence accorded to female fertility potency in this worship, that contrasts sharply with the worship of Chinese female deities, whose ability to reproduce or cause reproduction has often been downplayed in the process of their deification.<sup>29</sup>

## ***2. The Different Sources of Potency Shared between Chinese Female Deities and Goddesses of Fertility in the Flower Cultural Sphere***

In essence Chinese female deities are different from male deities who are conceived as members in a celestial bureaucracy that mirrors the imperial hierarchy.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, their source of potency is not the congruent of the posts they hold but emanates from their divine qualities instead. As mentioned earlier, the female virtue of purity constitutes a great part of the spiritual efficacy of the Chinese female deities. Indeed, a study of the hagiographies of Chinese female deities unequivocally shows that either they have never entered into a marriage or have never had children. Their hagiographies concentrate heavily on their diligence in cultivating their religiosity by chanting scriptures or mastering ritual repertoires devised to rescue those in need, and most importantly, their contributions to bolstering state governance. Take Chen Jinggu, the Lady of Linshui, for example. Brigitte Bapandier concludes that,

The key elements of it [the cult of Chen Jinggu] are the battle against a snake—astral breath or harmful demon—and Chen Jinggu’s apprenticeship at Mount Lü with the ritual masters, Jiulang [the ninth lad] and Perfected Lord Xu, who pass on to her, above all, the

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<sup>29</sup> It is noteworthy that the cult of the goddess of Taishan (*Taishan niangniang* or *Bixia yuanjun*) popular in North China presents a mixed representation in this regard. Her sexuality was emphasized in some versions of her deification story, while she ‘seemed to be on a path toward co-optation and standardization much like that of Tianhou, but ultimately this process was aborted’. Kenneth Pomeranz, ‘Orthopraxy, Orthodoxy, and the Goddess(es) of Taishan,’ *Modern China*, 33/1 (2007), 22-46.

<sup>30</sup> Robert P. Weller and Meir Shahar, (eds), *Unruly Gods: Divinity and Society in China* (University of Hawaii Press, 1996).

Thunder arts and those of the Northern Dipper. She died while performing the ritual for rain, after having *tuotai* [a fatal abortion] and after taking a vow to help women.... Finally, according to some versions, Nanhai Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of the South Sea, is said to have miraculously caused her birth so that she would eliminate the snake demon of the country of Min [roughly today's Fujian]. The theme of rejecting marriage is also sketched.<sup>31</sup>

The legend and the myth apparently describe Chen Jinggu as an assiduous practitioner of rituals who, having rejected married life, decided instead to devote herself wholeheartedly to helping women and children. She is also said to be the protector of the country of Min. Quite clearly, neither marriage nor reproductive powers play or have played an essential role in contributing to the efficacy of the female cult of the Lady of Linshui.

Although not always a success, the effort of integrating local societies by dint of naturalizing of goddesses of fertility, and by extension the regulation of women's social roles and sexual behaviours, has nevertheless been deliberately??? employed in the imperial state expansion in South China. David Faure offers a graphic example of the state persecution of female fertility deities, in this case Madam Golden Flower (*Jinhua Furen*), that emerged from anti-village religion attitudes and executions in Guangdong in the sixteenth century. He states,

The clearest evidence of some impact from Wei Xiao's [Guangdong Assistant Surveillance Commissioner] efforts [to attack village religion] may be found in reports on the temple of Madam Golden Flower, known as a pretty young woman who had drowned at the nearby Fairy Pond, to whom local people prayed for sons. She came to be the personification of sorceresses... The sexual connotations of sorceresses using their physical beauty to entice the deities in pursuit of sons would not have been lost on contemporaries. Although the temple had received some official approval when it was rebuilt in 1469, it was destroyed on Wei Xiao's orders.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Brigitte Bapandier, *The Lady of Linshui: A Chinese Female Cult*, Kristin Fryklund (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 14, 29.

<sup>32</sup> David Faure, *Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China* (Stanford University Press, 2007), 103.

This account unquestionably indicates that the regional worship of goddesses of fertility was once regarded as illegal and immoral in the eyes of the Chinese state and hence targeted for domestication. Its offence was that it had indisputable associations with female autonomy in matters of sex and reproduction. Cogently, the proximity of female fertility to nature was usually embodied in the form of female shamanistic powers, namely ‘sorcery’ (*wu*). Most importantly, the vicissitudes endured by Madam Golden Flower clearly points out that throughout history the Chinese imperial state always had an interest in either choosing to utilize the power of female fertility in its imperial incorporation of local societies or, going to the other extreme, deciding to contain it by destroying it.<sup>33</sup>

However, as much past research has shown, village religions or regional cults are not so easily destroyed.<sup>34</sup> Among many non-Han Chinese societies in South China, the worship of the goddesses of fertility is heavily centred on the belief in the reproductive powers of these divinities.<sup>35</sup> Such an emphasis on the female reproductive powers on the divine level also finds its mundane extension in the ritual performance in which women who have many children and grandchildren are highly respected. For instance, as a most honourable female deity in the pantheon of both the Daoist tradition and popular belief, the local version of the Queen Mother of the West (*Xiwangmu*) venerated in Guangdong places heavy emphasis on her ability to grant children.<sup>36</sup> In ‘Miscellany on Deities’ from the *Guangdong Miscellanies*, a record of the Queen Mother of the West reads as follows:

There are many temples for worshipping the Queen Mother of the West in Guangdong.... The walls of her temple are usually decorated with the theme of protecting children. It is called the Hall of

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<sup>33</sup> The state cult of chastity (*zhenjie*), which originated in the Song (960-1279) and was practised until the Qing (1644-1911), is another explicit example of a state attempt to control female fertility. Janet Theiss has argued that the emergence of the cult of chastity was to build a foundation for bolstering a patriarchal society, and indirectly, the Chinese imperial state’s control of local society. See Janet M. Theiss, *Disgraceful Matters: The Politics of Chastity in Eighteenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 25-38.

<sup>34</sup> For example, Michael Szonyi, ‘Making Claims about Standardization and Orthopraxy in Late Imperial China: Rituals and Cults in the Fuzhou Region in Light of Watson’s Theories,’ *Modern China* 33/1 (2007), 47-71.

<sup>35</sup> Ho Ts’ui-p’ing, ‘Gendering Ritual Community’.

<sup>36</sup> Suzanne E. Cahill, *Transcendence & Divine Passion: The Queen Mother of the West in Medieval China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

Offspring. When people have children, they go to the temple and have their children take the Queen Mother of the West as their fictitious foster mother.<sup>37</sup>

廣州多有祠祀西王母，...。壁上多繪畫保嬰之事，名子孫堂，人民生子女者，多契神以為父母，....。

This account vividly illustrates the belief in the reproductive powers of the Queen Mother of the West invites people to worship her to entreat her to bless them with numerous offspring. There is no doubt that the source of potency of the Queen Mother of the West is derived from her power over fertility, rather than any ideas of her being a miraculous saviour.

Most intriguingly, Shi Lianzhu reports that a ritual practised among the She, an ethnic minority in eastern Guangdong, clearly demonstrates the beliefs in the reproductive powers of the Queen Mother of the West. In their ancestor-worship rite, the most important role is assumed by a woman who plays the part called the Queen Mother of the West (*Xihuangmu*) or the Queen Mother of the Majesty (*Huangmuniang*). There are several stipulations attached to the selection of the female candidate who is deemed worthy to assume the role of the Queen Mother of the West. For instance, the woman must have married and have two descending generations if she is to be elected to assume the role. Furthermore, there must have been female ancestors in the clan of her husband who have assumed the role in the past. That is, a lineage traced through female regenerative power is essential to the selection of the female candidate for the role. Most importantly, these provisions indicate that the female candidate who is qualified for the role of the Queen Mother of the West has already fulfilled her reproductive responsibility. Women who have performed the role of the Queen Mother of the West will be granted the right to have a ‘huge merit-making’ (*dagongde*) ceremony spanning three days and nights, meaning a solemn funeral ceremony after her death. Afterwards, these women will also be referred to as the Queen Mother of the West or the Queen Mother of the Majesty in religious contexts.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Qu Dajun, *Guangdong Xinyu*, 214.

<sup>38</sup> Shi Lianzhu, *Shezu 畲族* (The She Nationality) (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 1988), 114-115.

To sum up, a comparison of the different sources of potency pertaining to the cult of the Lady of Linshui and to a local version of the Queen Mother of the West indisputably reveals that the discourses on the power of female fertility could be downplayed or highlighted for different purposes in different contexts. Furthermore, the example of Madam Golden Flower strongly suggests that the state control of female fertility was transformed into a ‘civilizing project’ through which the political agenda of the state was implemented in an attempt to transform village religion. All this indicates that the cosmological constructions revolving around female fertility not only have a cultural meaning, they are also permeated with political significance. To support this contention, the following section elaborates on Yao cultural constructions of personhood, showing how men have sought a substitute for and downplayed female fertility through their espousal of patrilineal Daoist ordination.

## **Yao Personhood and Gender Relations**

To explore the Yao ritual constructions of female fertility and the role of the Chinese civilizing project in it, this section sets out to illustrate three aspects of Yao personhood: the corporeal, cosmological and cultivated dimensions. In my definition of personhood, I adopt the concept of the ‘partible person’ proposed by Marilyn Strathern and developed by Ho Ts’ui-ping, ‘which views persons and things as composite sites of relationships where processes of objectification, personification, and reification come together to construct personhood.’<sup>39</sup> The section focuses on the changing conceptualizations of Yao personhood with respect to the rites and norms attributed to the constructions of female fertility as well as to women’s positions in relation to men.

### ***1. The Corporeal Dimension of a Person: Bone, Blood and Breast-Milk***

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<sup>39</sup> Ho Ts’ui-p’ing, ‘Gendering Ritual Community’, 207. Also see Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). He Cuiping (Ho Ts’ui-p’ing), ‘Cong Jingpo renti tuxiang tan ren yu wu de guanxi’ 從景頗人體圖像談人與物的關係 (Between Persons and Things: A Discussion of Jingpo Human Figurines), in Huang Yinggui (ed.), *Wu yu wuzhi wenhua* 物與物質文化 (Substance and Material Cultures) (Taipei: Institute of Ethnology, Academia Sinica, 2004), 261-333.

The first aspect of Yao personhood is on the corporeal level. The Yao think that a baby is formed by the coming together of essences from both the father's and mother's sides. The father gives his 'muscle' (*jin*) and 'bone' (*gu*), and the mother gives her 'blood' (*xie*) and 'flesh' (*rou*). Li Decai told me that,

A person is like a 'flowery dragon' (*hualong*), whose birth is the result of a combination of the Father of the Flowers (*Huagong*) and the Mother of the Flowers (*Huamu*). The Father of the Flowers gives the children 'bone' and 'muscle', and the Mother of the Flowers gives the children 'flesh' and 'blood'. Originally, a 'flowery dragon' had only 'flesh' and 'blood'. Only after the 'flowery dragon' had eaten with chopsticks and a spoon could he/her obtain the 'bone'.<sup>40</sup>

Nor is Li Decai alone in his opinion. Other Mien people in Weihao also share similar ideas about men contributing 'bone' (and 'muscle') and women giving 'blood' (and 'flesh'). They say that the component of a father's Han Chinese name, the last character in the customary three-character Chinese name that will be used to name the children, symbolizes the 'bone' he has contributed. A Yao male's Han Chinese name contains a family name, a generational name (*beihangming*) and a randomly chosen Chinese character; for instance, Deng Gui-Wang 鄧貴旺. If Deng Gui-Wang has a child who has been named *ke* 客 (guest) by a ritual master after the naming ritual on the third day after his or her birth, he or she will be called *ke wang* (*wang*, 旺 prosperous). As can be seen, *wang* is the last character of the Han Chinese name of the child's father and indicates the 'bone' he gave.<sup>41</sup>

There is no explicit linguistic reference indicating the significance of women's 'blood' and 'flesh' in the physical aspect of a person. Instead, the emphasis has shifted to women's role in breast-feeding (*yangnai*). Among the gifts the spouse-taker group offers to the spouse-giver group with which they are making an alliance is what

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<sup>40</sup> Chen Meiwen, *Cong mingming tan Guangxi Tianlin Panguyao*, 88-89. The Mun people do not seem to have a well-established explanation for the corporeal construction of a person; therefore, this illustration of the corporeal dimension of personhood unfortunately cannot include a concrete example from the Mun. However, as do the Mien people, the Mun also believe that souls are sent by flower deities. See Huang Guiquan, *Yaozuzhi, xiangwan: Yunnan yaozu wenhua yu minzu rentong* 瑤族志：香碗—雲南瑤族文化與民族認同 (An Ethnography of the Yao, Incense Bowl: Culture and Ethnic Identity of the Yao in Yunnan) (Kunming: Yunnan daxue chubanshe, 2009), 167-172.

<sup>41</sup> Chen Meiwen, *ibid.*, 85-88.



are called the ‘honorarium for breast-feeding’ (*yangnaiqian*).<sup>42</sup> People told me that the money is intended to express gratitude to mothers for feeding breast-milk to the children so that they can grow up healthy.<sup>43</sup>

## **2. The Cosmological Dimension of a Person: Flower Deities as ‘others’**

In addition to the physical contribution, the second aspect of personhood that makes the birth of a baby possible is the cosmological level: the ‘flower soul’ sent by such flower deities as the Parents of the Flowers popular among the Mien and the Parents of the Flower Roots venerated by the Mun. The flower gardens in which these flower deities reside are symbolically situated outside the boundary of the household, even of the community. Citing the example of Zhuang patrilineal marriage arrangements, Ho Ts’ui-p’ing points out that, either literally or symbolically, the wife-giver group and female fertility are often associated with a cave, grotto, river or lake, all sites that are considered unknown and dangerous, because the locations of these landscapes are often situated in the wilderness, beyond the familiar boundaries of the everyday community of the spouse-taker’s group.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, it is important for the spouse-giver group to initiate the ‘Making a Bridge to Receive a Flower’ (*Yinghuaqiao*) rite, either on the wedding day itself or before a child’s first birthday, so that the flower deities know where to send the flower soul.<sup>45</sup> This has led Ho to suggest that ‘...in the construction of the androcentric house, the flower garden, the imagined tamed and civil space, is a substitute for the source of reproduction that resides with the wife-givers, who are mostly from outside—that is, from an agnatic group outside the neighborhood or village’.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast to the Zhuang insistence that spouse-givers continue to show involvement in childbirth and child-rearing after marriage, the Yao, both Mien and Mun, do not engage in reciprocal exchanges between spouse-takers and spouse-givers

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<sup>42</sup> I use spouse-taker group instead of wife-taker group to indicate the diverse patterns of marriage arrangements among the Yao.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>44</sup> Ho Ts’ui-p’ing, ‘Gendering Ritual Community’, 229-232.

<sup>45</sup> Kao Ya-ning, ‘Diversification of the Flower Ritual among the Zhuang People’, *Tai Culture: Tai/Thai Women in Asian Context*, 22 (2011), 73-92 at 79.

<sup>46</sup> Ho Ts’ui-p’ing, *op. cit.* 230.

after the spouse is taken into the household. Any expenses and prestations involved in the rituals of childbirth and child-rearing are all taken care of by the spouse-takers themselves.<sup>47</sup> If the flower garden is understood to be a symbolic substitute for the source of reproduction that refers to female fertility, taking perhaps a more male-oriented perspective, the Yao seem to relate the flower deities (though they appear in pairs, the female is usually privileged) to dangerous yet unavoidable ‘others’.

By now, especially when they are compared to Zhuang dealings with the flower deities, the otherness of the flower deities (female fertility) in the Yao cultural construction will have emerged more distinctly. Among the Zhuang, once the rite of ‘Making a Bridge and Receiving a Flower’ is completed, a tablet known as the Tablet of the Holy Mother of the Flowery Deities (*Huawang Shengmu zhi shenwei*) that is written in Chinese will be set up, the place assigned to it being on the right-hand side of the altar where it has its incense burner.<sup>48</sup> In contrast, the Yao do not worship or set up any visible tablet or statue for the Parents of the Flowers and Parents of the Flower Roots on the household altar.<sup>49</sup> These flower deities will only be invited to attend when the rites happen to involve children’s illnesses or problems identified as having been caused by them. On a symbolic level, the inside and outside boundaries of the household are often blurred because of the instability of flower souls. To ensure the fragile soul remain attached to the child until he or she reaches puberty, and to consolidate the internal-external boundaries of a household, the Yao (males) have to continue to negotiate with these flower deities from time to time by ritual means.

As a child reaches puberty, the Mien will perform a ‘Detaching from the Parents of the Flowers’ (*chaihuhuang*) rite for the child. Only after the rite has been performed is the soul of the child thought to be completely free from the control of the flower deities and the flower garden. Now his or her soul can instead be taken care of by a household spirit called the Lord Star of Fate for Every Family Member (*Hejia Daxiao Benming Xingjun*).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Chen Meiwèn, *op. cit.* 161-162. Huang Guiquan, ‘Landianyao de hua, dou, renguan’, 163.

<sup>48</sup> Kao Ya-ning, *op. cit.* 80.

<sup>49</sup> The Mother of Emperors, the extended version of the Mother of the Flower Roots, is indeed regularly venerated on the household altar (more details see below).

<sup>50</sup> Chen Meiwèn, *op. cit.* 89. The Mun do not perform such a rite. But, as noted earlier, the ‘Lonely Fairy Matron of the Bottom Storey’ is thought to be a flower deity whose engagements with children

If the logic of female fertility – as personified by the flower deities, whose femaleness is highlighted, who symbolically represent a dangerous yet unavoidable ‘other’ from a male point of view – is accepted, it seems that the Yao males have needed the long period from a person’s pre-birth to puberty to domesticate the natural force of female fertility in a ritual fashion. The next section elucidates in more detail that the natural force of female fertility is eventually completely substituted by a bloodless and hence pollution-free ritual rebirth in the patrilineal Daoist ordination.

### 3. *The Cultivated Dimension of a Person: A Ritual Rebirth*

If a person, especially a male, is to become a fully-fledged *persona* culturally, that person must undergo a Daoist ordination. By submitting to ordination, a person paves the way either to cultivate himself to be able to attain a glorious afterlife by progressively performing different levels of ordination (among the Mien),<sup>51</sup> or accumulate the merit that will enable him to be reborn into a better next life in a following reincarnation (among the Mun).<sup>52</sup>

The actual ordination procedures vary from village to village, if not indeed from subgroup to subgroup.<sup>53</sup> The following description of a programme of ordination, called *tuui*<sup>22</sup> *wi*<sup>22</sup>/*u*<sup>42</sup> *daai*<sup>22</sup> ([Ch] *diaoyuantai* or *diaowutai*, ‘Falling from the Cloudy/Fifth Platform’), is derived mainly from the Mun ordination for ritual masters in Yunnan. The materials in Mien ordination will be referred to whenever necessary.

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could cause their illness or even their death. This is a reconfirmation of the double-edged quality of the flower deities as dangerous yet unavoidable ‘others’.

<sup>51</sup> Of course, the act of undergoing ordination alone does not guarantee one’s afterlife status. A man has to get married and have male descendants to carry on the ritual legacy of the household, as discussed in Chapter 3. Only then is he regarded as having achieved the status of a cultivated person. See Chen Meiwèn, *op. cit.* 105-118.

<sup>52</sup> Apart from undergoing ordination, accumulating merit by doing good deeds during one’s lifetime, and having descendants to hold funerary rites after one’s death can contribute to a good life in one’s next incarnation. See Huang Guiquan, *Yaouzuzhi, xiangwan*, 159, 192.

<sup>53</sup> Zhang Jingsong, ‘Zhongguo Lanshanxian guoshanyao dujie yishi guocheng de xinyang yiyi ji dujie zhi gongneng’ 中國藍山縣過山瑤度戒儀式過程的信仰意義及度戒之功能 (The Ritual Implications and Functions of Ordination among the Mien people in Lanshan County, China), paper presented at the conference ヤオ族伝統文献研究国際シンポジウム (International Symposium on Research of Yao Traditions), 23 November 2010, 神奈川大学横浜 Yokohama, Kanagawa University, 1-9 at 7.

The fundamental steps in the ‘Falling from the Cloudy/Fifth Platform’ programme in the ordination for ritual masters can be elaborated as follows. As the programme commences, the ordination masters lead the ordinands to a platform constructed of bamboo and wood, situated on a piece of level ground outside the household.<sup>54</sup> The Mun believe that the platform symbolizes a ritual womb that is pregnant with the ordinands. The masters climb up the wooden ladder (it is said that it used to be a ladder of knives), followed by the ordinands. When the masters descend from the platform, they will stand on the side facing the wooden ladder; the ordinands will remain on the platform and prepare to assume a falling posture. The masters instruct the ordinands how to position themselves for the fall. The ordinands squat and clasp their calves with their arms, aligning their thumbs with their big toes, grasping the edge of the platform with their toes.<sup>55</sup>

This is the prelude to the climax of this ritual. To put it simply, their falls imitate the delivery of a baby. Eight people, including four ordination masters, wait under the platform to catch the ordinands one by one. Four random males hold up a rattan net stretched out one metre below the level of the platform. The four masters then take turns to put blankets on the rattan net. They also use their ‘swords of war’ (*zhandao*) to clear away the extra knots on the net and the decorative papers pasted on to the platform. Three masters then kneel down facing the platform, and the fourth master takes a mouthful water and extends his legs with one to his front, bent, the other stretched out backwards. As the fourth master slowly moves his bent front leg back towards himself, the ordinands begin to move themselves into the two square frames that had been made earlier along the edge of the platform. When they spy the movements of the ordinands, the three kneeling masters shout out together in Yao language, ‘Almost there, almost there!’ The fourth master spits a mouthful of water towards the ordinands, and they begin to fall from the platform, still keeping their squatting posture.

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<sup>54</sup> There is usually more than one ordinand for ordination as different households can share the expenses of holding the ritual. See Huang Guiquan, ‘Landianyao de hua, dou, renguan’, 165.

<sup>55</sup> The Mien also build a cloudy platform for ordination with a knife or wooden ladder. Only this platform is not so closely associated with the image of a ritual womb, although similarly, the Mien ordinands will also be led to climb up onto the platform by the ordination masters. This act is intended to open the heavenly gates and introduce the ordinands to the ‘Grand Supreme Elderly Lord’ (*Taishang Laojun*). Zhang Jingsong, *op. cit.* 5.

The people holding the net catch them and lower them gently onto the ground covered with generous amounts of straw. The three kneeling masters all hurry to see the ordinands. The fourth master comes to remove the blankets wrapped around the ordinands, unties the arms clasped around their calves and helps them sit on the blankets with their legs crossed. After a while, the first master joyfully informs the ordinands, ‘Now you can go to Heaven; now you can see Heaven’. Every master, every disciple and every relative of the ordinands joins in singing the following salutation, ‘carefree and happy’ (*xiaoyao kuaile*), three times, celebrating the trouble-free delivery of the ordinands. It is said that if the ordinands do not retain their posture when falling, the ordination is regarded as a failure.

After the step of ‘Falling from the Cloudy/Fifth Platform’, the masters feed the ordinands glutinous rice cooked wrapped in banana leaves. Each ordination master feeds the ordinands a small bite of the rice. It is said that these ordinands are just like newborn babies, so the parents, that is, the masters, must give them rice to nourish them.<sup>56</sup> Obviously, the whole process of ‘Falling from the Cloudy/Fifth Platform’ is an imitation of a female pregnancy and delivery. Symbolically, the patrilineal Daoist ordination has replaced the natural force of female fertility in reproduction. Significantly, only male ritual specialists and male members can conduct the ceremony, and the ritual birth is free of blood and hence of pollution.<sup>57</sup>

To conclude, Yao cultural constructions to do with the corporeal aspect of the person mostly present a complementary view of the relationship between two genders. In the cosmological dimension, female fertility, as personified by flower deities and an imagined flower garden, is perceived as a dangerous yet unavoidable ‘other’, perhaps especially from a male perspective. The femaleness assumes a dominant position in governing children’s flower souls, and hence social reproduction, in the period from pre-birth to puberty. The investigation into the cultivated aspect of a person has prompted an exploration into the significance of a ritual rebirth of the participant ordinands at ordination. Strikingly, the power of

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<sup>56</sup> Huang Guiquan, *Yaozuzhi, xiangwan*, 126-128.

<sup>57</sup> It is noteworthy that there will be two female singers participating in an ordination, who will initiate each programme by singing songs recorded in a songbook entitled *The Songbook for Relieving People in the Red House* (*honglou duren geshu*). Fieldwork notes, 8 Nov. 2012. Also see more details in Chapter 5.

female fertility has been completely overwritten, as the ritual birth has manifested itself as a bloodless and pollution-free pregnancy and delivery.

It seems that, even though Yao society might not have been overtly turned into a lineage society, the Daoist ritual rebirth, regarded as a part of the state civilizing project, still in a way has successfully substituted the significance of female fertility, that is integral to native belief. However, as David Faure has made clear, ‘Village religion was deeply rooted in established practices, and no amount of legal prohibition was ever able to eradicate them’.<sup>58</sup> Fully endorsing this statement, the following section seeks to probe the proposition as it applies to Yao religion. It analyses the practices and narratives surrounding a female fertility deity, the Mother of Emperors, who is thought to have originally been the Mother of the Flower Roots. The analysis will show that the constructions of the Mother of Emperors display a local mode of appropriation of the ideologies and discourses of religious traditions external to the community. It will also show that the power of female fertility is not submerged in this cross-cultural interactive process; instead, it can be said to be highlighted to indicate the struggles of the local society to claim their autonomy.

### **The Mother of Emperors: A ‘Trans-Hybrid’ Fertility Deity**

Many scholars working on Daoist ritual traditions in non-Han societies have advocated the need of a nuanced account of the interaction between Daoist rituals and communal religious practices. For instance, David Holm’s research on the rituals and narratives to do with a filial son, Dong Yong, in Zhuang society shows that ‘Taoist ritual elements were adopted by local communities to serve as protective covering for indigenous traditions and practices, and that the underlying “model” remained an indigenous one’.<sup>59</sup> To account for the dynamics in the interaction between Daoism and local religious practices, Paul Katz has proposed the term ‘trans-hybridity’, already introduced in Chapter 1, to be used as a conceptual tool with which to elucidate the simultaneous process of the deliberate transmission of Daoist doctrine

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<sup>58</sup> David Faure, *Emperor and Ancestor: State and Lineage in South China* (Stanford University Press, 2007), 103.

<sup>59</sup> David Holm, ‘The Exemplar of Filial Piety and the End of the Ape-Men Dong Yong in Guangxi and Guizhou Ritual Performance’, *T’oung Pao*, 90/1-3 (2004), 32-64 at 63-64.

and liturgy into village religions and their gradual absorption of indigenous beliefs and practices.<sup>60</sup> As will be argued in this section, the construction of the Mother of Emperors of the Mun gives plenty of examples of such dynamisms in the interaction between local religious practices and the dominant religious traditions of universal claims and wide disposal, such as Daoism and Buddhism, and can therefore be regarded as an outcome of ‘trans-hybridity’.

### ***1. Who is the Mother of Emperors?***

In the Mun language, the name of the Mother of Emperors is pronounced *tei*<sup>35</sup> *mu*<sup>42</sup>. The Chinese characters 帝 (*di*, emperor) and 母 (*mu*, mother) are used to transcribe the name of and refer to this goddess of fertility.<sup>61</sup> Among the surviving extant ritual manuscripts that could be consulted for this study, the earliest ritual manuscript that carries the name ‘the Mother of Emperors’ in the title was copied by a Mun Daoist priest, Lu Daode, in the ninth year of the Jiaqing Emperor (1814); the manuscript is entitled *Rituals for the Mother of Emperors (dimuke)* (Guangxi and Yunnan Collection). The date of composition of this manuscript would seem to indicate that the creation of the Mother of Emperors in the Mun Daoist tradition was initiated at least two centuries ago.

The term 帝母 can also be found in Chinese texts. In *The History of the Former Han (Hanshu)*, the ‘Queen Mother’ (*huangtaihou*) is referred to in her written form as 帝母 (*dimu*), meaning ‘the Mother of the Emperor’.<sup>62</sup> However, in a poetry written by Wang Shizhen (1526-1590) during the Ming dynasty, the Chinese term 帝母 (*dimu*) has been assigned a different meaning and is used instead to refer to the

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<sup>60</sup> Paul R.Katz, ‘Repaying a Nuo Vow in Western Hunan: A Rite of Trans-Hybridity?’, *Taiwan Journal of Anthropology*, 11/2 (2013), 1-88.

<sup>61</sup> The Chinese characters 帝母 used to refer to the Mother of Emperors are written fairly consistently throughout Mun ritual manuscripts. Therefore, although the fertility power of the Mother of Emperors does indeed run parallel to the ‘Mother Goddess’ 地母 (地 *di*, land; 母 *mu*, mother), who is associated with popular beliefs in the fertility power of the land, we should be careful not to confuse 地母, in written form, for the deity most popular among the Mun. See Hsiao Teng-fu, ‘Houtu yu dimu: Shi lun tudi zhushen ji dimu xinyang’ 后土與地母—試論土地諸神及地母信仰 (On the Gods of All the Ground and Di-Mu Belief), *Shijie zongjiao xuekan* (世界宗教學刊 Journal of World Religions), 4 (2004), 1-41.

<sup>62</sup> Zhongguo zhexue dianzishu jihua 中國哲學書電子化計畫 (Chinese Text Project), ‘The First Volume of Relatives of Queens’ (*waiqizhuan, shang* 外戚傳上) (?), [web document] <<http://ctext.org/han-shu/wai-qi-zhuan-shang/zh>>, accessed 17 Nov. 2014.

Queen Mother of the West.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, the textual reference most relevant to our understanding of the term the Mother of Emperors is a Buddhist classic, *The Mantra of Mother Hārītī* (*helidi mu zhenjing*). In it, in Chinese Mother Hārītī is called 帝母 (*dimu*) (or ‘Ghost/Demon Child Mother Deity’, *guizimu*), and her hagiography bears a close resemblance to that of the Mother of Emperors, as will soon be discussed in detail below.<sup>64</sup>

Before conducting a detailed textual analysis of the narratives of the Mother of Emperors, it is important to set the regional and village contexts of the worship of the Mother of Emperors.

### *1-1. The Mother of Emperors among the Mun and the Zhuang*

As the foregoing descriptions have hinted, the Mother of Emperors is by nature a sort of Supreme Matron whose cult is widespread across different ethnicities in South China. Nevertheless, the practice of using this specific Chinese name 帝母 (*dimu*) to refer to the Supreme Matron is found only among the Mun and the Zhuang. These two names, the Mother of Emperors and the Supreme Matron, are still used interchangeably only among the Mun, but although the Supreme Matron remains a dominant term among the Zhuang, the use of the term ‘the Mother of Emperors’ is on the wane.<sup>65</sup>

In addition to using the title ‘the Mother of Emperors’, the Mun and the Zhuang also recite a similar set of names of flower deities in the Daoist scriptural tradition, found in texts bearing such titles as *The Sublime Scriptures about the Royal Deities of the Flowers* (*taishang shuo huawang miaojing*) or *The Sublime Scriptures*

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<sup>63</sup> A full text of the poem is available at <<http://sou-yun.com/Query.aspx?type=poem&id=448779>>, accessed 17 Nov. 2014.

<sup>64</sup> A full text of the mantra is available at Zhonghua dianzi fodian xiehui 中華電子佛典協會 (CBETA), ‘Mantra of Mother Hariti’ (*helidi mu zhenjing* 詞利帝母真經) (2002), [web document] <[http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/sutra/chi\\_pdf/sutra10/T21n1261.pdf](http://buddhism.lib.ntu.edu.tw/BDLM/sutra/chi_pdf/sutra10/T21n1261.pdf)>, accessed 18 Nov. 2014.

<sup>65</sup> The textual evidence derives from a comparison between the above-mentioned manuscript of *Rituals for the Mother of Emperors* (1814) by Lu Daode, and a ritual manuscript entitled *Rituals for Passing Through the Hurdles* (*lianguanke*), composed by Qin Qixian during the Qing dynasty (year of composition unclear), collected in Mashan County, central Guangxi. Mashan texts are Xerox copies of a partial collection of Zhuang ritual manuscripts currently housed in the Special Collections Division of National Tsinghua University in Hsinchu, Taiwan. I helped catalogue this collection in February 2012 and therefore have had first-hand experience of reading these Zhuang texts.



*Concerning the Holy Mother (taishang shuo shengmu miaojing)*.<sup>66</sup> To give but a few examples, the names of the flower deities listed in these scriptures include the Parents of the Flowery Deities of the Eastern Dipper and the Heavenly Lady of Venus of the Upper Palace (*Shanggong Dongdou Huahuang Fumu Taibai Tianniang*), Great Father of the East of the Upper Palace (*Shanggong Donghuanggong Dadao*), and the Queen Mother of the West of the Upper Palace (*Shanggong Xiguo Huangmu Furen*).

So far, most of the inter-ethnic textual similarities to do with fertility deities have been discovered in Daoist ritual manuscripts, that are usually written in prose form. Such inter-ethnic textual similarities are by no means common in texts about fertility deities composed in the ritual-master tradition, that are usually written in seven-syllable verses. The inter-ethnic textual similarities found in texts about the Supreme Matron suggest that this regionally popular goddess of fertility has been enlisted into the Daoist pantheon. At the present moment, no studies have yet provided enough evidence either to define who the actors facilitating the textual interaction between local religious traditions and Daoism might have been or what their purposes were. Nevertheless, the fact that the Supreme Matron is considered a deity whose status is equivalent to that of the deities in the Daoist pantheon is thought-provoking. The next section will discuss more details about the local view that she is the wife of a Daoist martial deity, the Father of Commands (*Linggong*).

As mentioned above, it is said that the Mother of Emperors is in fact the Mother of the Flower Roots. However, the Mun people in Dingcao have another version recounting the background of the goddess. Many ritual specialists in Dingcao told me that the Mother of Emperors is the wife of the Father of Commands; while the Mother of Emperors is the protector of children, the Father of Commands rules over humankind.

In the 'Folklore Section' (*minsuzhi*) in *Annals of Guangxi (Guangxi tongzhi)*, published in 1992, it is recorded that the worship of the Father of Commands is popular among different Yao groups, and his temples are well established in many

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<sup>66</sup> The textual evidence derives from a comparison between the above-mentioned manuscripts *Rituals for the Mother of Emperors* (Mun), *Rituals for Passing Through the Hurdles* (Zhuang), and *Rituals for the Holy Mother (shengmuke)*, composed by Huang Daoping in the 1980s, collected from Mashan County.

parts of Guangxi.<sup>67</sup> One version states that he was the famous Tang dynasty general Li Jing (571-649); another stresses his mythologized image, addressing him as the Father of Commands Who Governs the Northern Prefecture (*Beifu Linggong*). It is said that the Father of Commands and Lord Guan (*Guangong*), whose miraculous powers can expel demons, are two of the most efficacious martial deities in Daoism.<sup>68</sup>

A Mun version of the story of the Father of Commands recounted to me during my stay in Dingcao by He Decai, a ritual master in his seventies, suggests that the Father of Commands was originally a leader of a group of bandits in the neighbouring areas of present-day Shangsi County, where the Mun have resided since the Qing.<sup>69</sup> These bandits led by the Father of Commands, whose mighty strength was famed far and wide, caused havoc in the prosperous villages. He Decai could not remember the exact name of the Father of Commands when he was still a mortal, but he did say the reason the Mun worship him as a guardian deity is because he was very ferocious (*xiong*). On account of his ferocity, the Father of Commands is able to expel any malign spirit.

At a Mun household altar the Father of Commands is worshipped as a Daoist deity. As his wife, the Mother of Emperors, is also guaranteed a position at the altar.<sup>70</sup> As noted earlier, the Parents of the Flower Roots are not worshipped at a household altar but only make their appearance in a household if and when invited. Consequently, were the Mother of Emperors no more than the Mother of the Flower Roots, she would not be in a position to enjoy regular offerings at the household altar. This is yet further confirmation that the Mother of Emperors, a type of Supreme Matron, is indeed elevated to the same level as a Daoist deity in the local perception.

To sum up, by referring to textual and ethnographic evidence, this section has shown that the Mother of the Flower Roots (or the Supreme Matron) could have been

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<sup>67</sup> Guangxi zhuangzu zizhiqiu difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui (eds), '*minsuzhi*' 民俗志 (Folklore Section), in *Guangxi tongzhi* 廣西通志 (Annals of Guangxi) (Nanning, Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1992), pp. 88, 134, 217 for three entries that mention the temples of the 'Father of Commands' in contemporary Yangshou county, northeast Guangxi, Laibing County, central Guangxi, and Pingle County, northeast Guangxi.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 367-369 for a short narrative regarding the birth of the 'Father of Commands'.

<sup>69</sup> Deng Wentong, 'Landian Yao qianxi yanjiu' 藍靛瑤遷徙研究 (A Study of the Migratory History of the Mun), *Guangxi minzu daxue xuebao* (廣西民族大學學報 Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities), 19/4 (1997), 76-79.

<sup>70</sup> Interview notes. Nov. 2012. Also see Guangxi zhuangzu zizhiqiu difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui (eds), *op. cit.* 368-369.

singled out and elevated to the Daoist pantheon, in which she is referred to as the Mother of Emperors and became the wife of a Daoist martial deity. Her elevation is unequivocally present in Daoist ritual manuscripts in both Mun and Zhuang societies, as well as in Mun local knowledge. As will be shown below, the narratives to do with the Mother of Emperors in the Mun ritual-master tradition also seem to have undergone an elevation similar to that she has experienced in Daoist ritual tradition. One major difference is that it is Buddhist ideologies and narratives that have been employed in the making of the Mother of Emperors in the ritual-master tradition, especially those relating to the Buddhist goddess, Mother Hārītī.

## **2. Mother Hārītī and the Mother of Emperors**

Mother Hārītī (*Helidi mu* or *Guizimu*) is an ancient Indian goddess of pregnancy and childbirth. At one time her cult was widespread throughout South and Southeast Asia, and could be found from India to Nepal and Bali.<sup>71</sup> As Geoffrey Samuel concludes,

Her worship seems to have been particularly important in Gandhāra and Mathura (present-day Pakistan and North India, first century BCE to fourth century CE)... Today, traces of her presence remain throughout South and Southeast Asia.<sup>72</sup>

Traces of the cult of Mother Hārītī can also be found in China. Lian Ruizhi's study of the female ancestors and goddesses of noble families in the Nanzhao Dali Kingdom (752-1254), Erhai area, Yunnan, before the fifteenth century indicates that the image of Mother Hārītī was incorporated into the act of deifying noble female ancestors and transmuting them into the guardian goddesses of the kingdom.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Geoffrey Samuel, 'Introduction: The Daughters of Hārītī Today', in Santi Rozario and Geoffrey Samuel (eds), *Daughters of Hariti: Childbirth and Female Healers in South and Southeast Asia* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 1-34.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>73</sup> Lian Ruizhi, 'Nüxing zuxian huo nüshen: Yunnan Erhai diqu de shizu chuanshuo yu nüshen xinyang' 女性祖先或女神—雲南洱海地區的始祖傳說與女神信仰 (Female Ancestors or Goddesses: The Legend of the Founding Ancestors and Beliefs in Goddesses), *Lishi renleixue xuekan* (歷史人類學學刊 Journal of History and Anthropology), 3/2 (2005), 25-56.

What is intriguing is that the legend of Mother Hārītī describes her as originally having been a child-eating demoness who was later converted from her cannibalistic vagaries by the Buddha. There are many versions of the legend of Mother Hārītī', but the fundamental plots can be described as follows. It is said that Mother Hārītī had hundreds of demon children whom she loved (hence the title 'Ghost/Demon Child Mother Deity'). In order to feed them, Mother Hārītī abducted and killed the children of others. Upon hearing of her evil deeds, Śākyamuni Buddha stole her youngest son and hid him under a rice bowl. Mother Hārītī searched desperately for her son and eventually came to ask Śākyamuni Buddha for help. The Buddha asked if she now understood the pains of those parents who lost their children. Mother Hārītī replied contritely that their sufferings must be many times greater than hers. In front of the Buddha, Mother Hārītī vowed to give back the children to their heart-broken parents and become a protector of pregnancy and childbirth.<sup>74</sup>

Interestingly, the narratives of the Mother of Emperors discovered in Mun ritual-master manuscripts do show undeniable similarities to the legend of Mother Hārītī set out above. The full story of the Mother of Emperors goes as follows:<sup>75</sup>

Originally the Supreme Matron was a child of the Huang family. She liked to play on the top of Mount Meru.<sup>76</sup> On top of Mount Meru grew a holy peach tree. The Holy Lady [i.e. Supreme Matron] fell pregnant after eating the fruit of the peach tree. She was pregnant for eighty-one years. [After such a long period of pregnancy], she [finally] gave birth to her first child, the Grand Supreme Elderly Lord (*Taishang Laojun*) [the mythical founder of Daoism]. When the Grand Supreme Elderly Lord grew up, he became a ruler living in a golden palace. He took care only of the heavenly, not the secular world. The

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<sup>74</sup> John S. Strong, *The Legend and Cult of Upagupta: Sanskrit Buddhism in North India and Southeast Asia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

<sup>75</sup> This version is printed in Guangxi Zhuangzu zizhiqiu 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), 296-297. It is entitled *The Vow of the Mother of Emperors* (*dimuyuan*), recorded in the *Book of Ghost Feet* (*guijiaoke*), a ritual-master manuscript composed in the year of Xinsi (probably 1941). In the verses, the Mother of Emperors is referred to interchangeably as the Heavenly Lady (*tianniang*), the Supreme Matron (*powang*) and the Holy Lady (*xianpo*).

<sup>76</sup> Mount Meru is 'also known as Sumeru or Sineru. According to ancient Indian cosmological beliefs, the axis mundi or world mountain that stands at the centre of the world, surrounded by oceans and continents'. Damien Keown, *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 177.

Supreme Matron also gave birth to the Three Pure Ones (*Sanqing*) [the highest deities in the Daoist pantheon], Pan Gu (the mythical ancestor of Chinese people), and the Third Lad (*Sanlang*). She also gave birth to Gautama Buddha (*Shijiamoni*), Maitreya (*Mi'le Pusa*) [of Buddhism] and to the Earth God of the Mortal World. Three years passed and she fell pregnant again and gave birth to [her youngest son], the Nineteenth Lad, named Flowery Forest (*Hualin*).<sup>77</sup> When Flowery Forest grew up, he led the Supreme Matron up to the frontier of the flowering sky.

She rode on clouds by cultivating herself [into transcendence] three times [implying a great deal of effort], but she still failed to reach the sky. She decided to return [to her palace] and eventually arrived on Mount Wutai.<sup>78</sup> She remained on the mountain overnight and pondered the possibility of descending to the mortal world. She thought, 'Since I am unable to cultivate myself successfully so as to become one of the heavenly deities, I would rather go to the mortal world and harm the children.' [After she had made the decision], she devoured eighteen boys and girls at one meal.

One day, on her child-eating journey, she arrived in the Kingdom of Qipo [a Buddhist kingdom]. In the kingdom there was a temple whose gate faced to the south. [Gautama Buddha lived in the temple].

When Gautama Buddha learned of the evil deeds of the Supreme Matron, he went to abduct Flowery Forest and hid him in his temple. As the Supreme Matron searched for Flowery Forest at night and could not find him, she cried so loudly her weeping caused Heaven to fall and Earth to rend. Finally the Supreme Matron arrived at the temple and learned that her son had been taken hostage by the Buddha. [She used] an iron stick to [try to] crack the temple bell but failed. She cried and her tears were like the waves running onto the shore. After [grieving so deeply], the power of the Supreme Matron was miraculously enhanced. She summoned up the soldiers of thunder to destroy the temple bell for her. But not even the 500 soldiers of thunder could destroy it. They fell one after another like water dropping into the ocean. Gautama Buddha sat inside the temple, smiling confidently. He said, 'Supreme Matron, you think your power is great, but mine is greater still. It is easy for you to eat other people's children; now you know how difficult it is to see your own child being taken. If you are willing to convert to Buddhism and follow the Buddha, I shall not hesitate to allow your son go free'.

[Upon hearing what the Buddha had said], the Supreme Matron took a solemn vow in the temple. Swearing an oath before the Buddha

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<sup>77</sup> In other version, the 'Flower Forest', usually two of them, are said to be the brothers of the 'Mother of Flower Roots'. See Huang Guiquan, *Yaozuzhi, xiangwan*, 92-93.

<sup>78</sup> Mount Wutai is 'one of the "Four Famous Mountains"' known as major pilgrimage sites in Chinese Buddhism'. Damien Keown, *op. cit.* 337.

made her vow as heavy as a mountain. The Supreme Matron vowed, 'If I ever eat another child again, let there be neither clouds nor stars in the sky'. After seeing the Supreme Matron take her solemn vow, Gautama Buddha released Flowery Forest, and he could finally be reunited with the Supreme Matron; they both felt as if they had once died and returned from the dead. The mother and the son entered the Palace of Ao Mountain together. They established a temple specifically for the governance of Flower Mountain. The Supreme Matron drank from a bowl of wine offered by the people praying, and she returned the bowl to them. [The reciprocal relationship between the Supreme Matron and those offering prayers] was as if, although she had eaten the children of others, she would return them when the time was ripe. The true flower would be sent to the owner of the lamp [referring to the household in which the ritual is held]. The true flower would grow up and live long and healthy ever after.

婆王原是黃家子 原在須彌頂上玩  
須彌有根仙桃樹 仙婆吃了就懷胎  
八十一年懷胎內 生下老君是頭男  
老君長大朝金闕 渺渺管天不管凡  
又生三清三尊佛 又生盤古及三郎  
又生釋迦彌勒佛 並生下界地祈王  
過後三年又懷孕 生下花林十九郎  
養得花林年長大 引婆直上秀天關

三變隨雲去不得 復歸放下五台山  
就在其山宿一夜 思量下界算必煩  
相我修善不成嘆 不如下界害兒男  
十八男兒做一短 十八女兒一短貪  
吃兒去到齊婆國 有個寺門面向南

釋迦見婆行惡大 捉取花林禁取還  
夜來婆婆尋不見 叫得天崩地又翻  
將來婆去觀宮子 說道你兒禁侍堂  
鐵棒打鐘鐘不壞 眼淚如同水過灘  
從此婆婆法力大 叫取雷兵供妹扛  
五百雷兵扛不動 跌落如同水下灘  
釋迦殿上吟吟笑 說道你乖我更乖  
你吃人兒說道易 吾禁你兒設道難  
若你皈依隨佛去 脫放你兒有何難

婆在侍堂發大愿 佛前發願重如山  
我今再吃人兒去 天上無星無虎斑  
釋迦見婆發願重 脫放花林十九郎  
花林得共婆相見 如同死去再回返  
母子同入鰲山殿 至今立廟管花山

婆吃酒缸還酒碗 吃人兒女到時還  
真花送與郎灯主 求作堂前萬歲男

Examining the Indian legend of Mother Hārītī, Samuel suggests that the complex figure of Mother Hārītī might have resulted from a process in which locally respected deities of fertility, such as Mother Hārītī, ‘were brought into a subordinate relationship with the newly developing Buddhist and Brahmanical pantheons’.<sup>79</sup> Even though this statement might contain a great deal of truth, it reveals only the top-down perspective in the interaction between local religious practices and dominant religious traditions. To balance the picture, these narratives of the Mother of Emperors found in the Mun ritual-master manuscripts offer a good example of a bottom-up perspective in the construction of the local goddess of fertility, that tellingly shows the protest and struggle in the experience of local society in its encounter with extraneous religious traditions. Therefore, I propose that the narratives of the Mother of Emperors should be viewed as an outcome of the ‘trans-hybridity’, suggested by Paul Katz, precisely to give equal weight to the external and internal cultural forces at play in the process of the interaction.

Unfortunately, there is not sufficient evidence at this point to tackle the issue of how the Yao people might have come into contact with the Buddhist ideologies and narratives.<sup>80</sup> Be this as it may, the narratives of the Mother of Emperors must have been constructed under the influence of the Indian legend of Mother Hārītī. The interesting part is that the many twists and turns taken in the Mun version of the Mother Hārītī legend tellingly reveal local perceptions of the influence of Daoism and Buddhism.

The first twist is that she is described as having become pregnant after eating the fruit of a peach tree growing on a Buddhist mountain, a scene not in the Indian version. Secondly, her children are not demons, but prominent patriarchs of the

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<sup>79</sup> Geoffrey Samuel, *op. cit.* 1-2.

<sup>80</sup> James Robson has tried to map out the spread and development of Buddhism and its impact on Yao society in central Hunan, but he admits that, ‘any attempt to write the history of Buddhism in the Xiangzhong region [central Hunan] during the pre-Ming period is fraught with difficulty (as was the case with the Daoist history) due to a shortage of reliable sources’. See 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, 1-36 at 20.

different religious traditions, including the Grand Supreme Elderly Lord of Daoism and Gautama Buddha and Maitreya of Buddhism, to name just a few. Replacing demon children by patriarchs of the dominant religious traditions clearly represents a total transformation of the Indian version. Cogently, it is this transformation that has successfully expunged the demonic nature of the Mother of Emperors and secured her the superior status of being the origin of Daoism and Buddhism.

The third important twist is that another narrative transformation underlies the reason the Mother of Emperors became a child-eating demoness: it was not because she had to feed her demon children, but because she was denied a place in the heavenly world, even though she had diligently cultivated herself. As illustrated in the cultivated aspect of the person above, the value of 'cultivation' is closely related to state-supported rites and the religious world. This narrative variation of a 'cultivated' fertility deity being denied the recognition of the civilizing centre (the heavenly world) might suggestively reveal the complex attitude of local society caused by its encounters with Daoist-Buddhist religious traditions and state power. Unquestionably, a respectful local attitude towards the power of female fertility can be ascertained, as the Mother of Emperors has been re-invented as the origin of dominant religious traditions as well as a 'cultivated' subject. Nevertheless, local society seems to have attempted to promote this 'upgraded' version of the Mother of Emperors in its efforts to be granted recognition by the civilizing centre. Unfortunately, her search for recognition was repudiated, and this led to the destructive consequence of her turning into a child-eating demoness.

The struggle of local society to create more space for negotiation, and thereby maintain its autonomy in opposition to state power and dominant religious traditions, becomes even more apparent in the last narrative variation in the Mun version of the Mother of Emperors. When the Mother of Emperors learned that the Buddha had abducted her youngest son, she did not surrender to his power immediately. Instead, she tried to win back her son by doing battle with the Buddha, before she finally succumbed to conversion to Buddhism. This introduced episode seems to indicate a failed attempt on the part of the local society to resist the civilizing force. It is true that the Mother of Emperors, the natural force of female fertility and in this story by



extension the local society, was eventually domesticated by the power of the dominant religious traditions. However, as the plot unfolds, the agency of the female gender has undoubtedly served as a crucial force in the negotiations of local society in managing the intervention of the powerful civilizing force at the village level.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has analysed various levels on which the significance of female fertility is constructed. It began by pointing out the profound metaphorical relationship between flower symbolism and female fertility in South China. It has unequivocally demonstrated that the Yao worldview of life and death is closely connected with the widespread cultural complex of fertility beliefs and flower symbolism. The investigation into the different sources of potency shared by Chinese female deities and locally respected goddesses of fertility emphasized the salience of the power of female fertility in the efficacy of the latter's development. Moreover, it revealed that the constructions of female fertility are more than a cultural practice, they have also been imbued with political significance, as successive Chinese imperial states have continued to maintain an ambivalent attitude in their dealings with village religions in general and the cults of local goddesses of fertility in particular.

In its exploration of the cultural and political impacts of the civilizing force of the state on the perceptions of female fertility in local society, the chapter has concentrated on addressing three aspects of Yao personhood and gender relationships constructed at different stages of a person's lifecycle. The investigation of the corporeal dimension of personhood revealed that the two genders have a complementary relationship. The cosmological aspect of a person betrays what is probably a male perspective in viewing the power of female fertility as dangerous yet unavoidable to social reproduction. The significant finding is that the power of female fertility has been completely overwritten by a bloodless and pollution-free ritual rebirth, performed in a Daoist ordination, in the cultivated aspect of a male person. It would seem that the significance of female fertility powers has been totally subsumed

by a state civilizing project, namely the Daoist ordination, that is constructed on patrilineal ideology and privileges maleness. But this is only one side of the story.

The chapter concluded by carrying out a close reading of the narratives and practices surrounding one goddess of fertility, the Mother of Emperors, among the Yao. The ethnographic and textual evidence strongly suggests that the making of the Mother of Emperors can be viewed as an outcome of ‘trans-hybridity’, in which new religious traditions (Daoism, Buddhism and so forth) and native beliefs are being consciously merged, modified and reinvented. Most importantly, and especially relevant to my argument, is that the power of female fertility has not only helped to create a space for negotiation in Yao historical encounters with the Chinese imperial incorporation, it has also represented a negative attitude towards the intervention of state power. As the agency of female fertility, and by extension the position of women, is pivotal to Yao reflections on and resistance to state power, the next chapter will explore the different forms of expressions and actions assumed by women in their ritual lives and as recorded in ritual texts in greater depth.