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

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Citation

Chen, M. (2016, June 29). *Gendered ritual and performative literacy : Yao Women, goddesses of fertility, and the Chinese imperial state*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/41195>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



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Issue Date: 2016-06-29

Chapter 6. Conclusion: A View From Below

This research has presented a number of Yao perspectives in their historical encounters with the others, especially the successive Chinese imperial states, by exploring a gendered dimension of the Yao ritual tradition. The purpose of the research has been to investigate the Yao religious domain as an interface at which the Chinese imperial state attempted to assert its civilizing projects, a male-privileging Daoist ordination in this case, by incorporating local society into official governance. Conversely, the Yao religious domain also proved to be a place at which the Yao assimilated and then transformed the religious-cum-imperial interventions in the light of their own cultural values. Most intriguingly, the research has shown that the positions of women and the agency of female singing have been appropriated into Yao's struggle to claim their autonomy in their negotiations with the Chinese civilizing projects on ritual terms.

Besides its introduction and conclusion, the research has devoted four chapters to discussions of Yao perspectives in their local reactions to the Chinese imperial state incorporation. Chapter Two begins by discussing the ways in which the Yao have projected and imagined the Chinese imperial states, especially those embodied in texts and oral stories. It points out that the Yao people have a bifurcated perception of the Chinese imperial system: the more distant and the higher the authority, the greater auspiciousness it embodies, that is, the emperors; the nearer the imperial system draws to the everyday experiences of the Yao, the more tangibly dangerous it becomes, that is, the local officials. Consequently, even though the Yao discussed here characterized a 'society of escape' and might have consciously kept a geographical and political distance from the grasping hands of Chinese imperial governance, paradoxically they do seem to have embraced the symbols relating to and radiating from the emperors. This discovery has paved the way to problematize the simplistic view of sinification in the discussion of Yao ritual tradition that implicitly treats the Yao's reception of Daoism, a religious tradition that vividly features the Chinese bureaucratic system, as a homogenous location reaction. These findings

provide the introduction to the collections of Yao ritual manuscripts to be studied in this research. The exploration of their textualities, that is, how the texts are made, in association with Yao manuscripts, has pointed out how the tradition of folksongs, especially those with reference to female fertility, has found its way to be integrated into the written tradition of ritual masters. This conclusion has opened a new window through which to explore the probability of women's engagement, in particular that of the female singer, in the making of Yao ritual texts.

Chapter Three discusses the different ways in which the Daoist ordination should be regarded as a civilizing project that is equipped with the mechanism and ideologies to make the Yao more subject to Chinese state governance. It explores two dimensions of the encompassments of the imperial ideologies and local cultural logic, examining their social consequences for gender relations at the religious interface. The emphasis on the father-son relationship, surname identity and an ideological basis, filial piety, to sustain the performance of the ritual, has made the Yao ordination almost interchangeable with patrilineal ancestor worship, that has been an important religious mechanism in facilitating the development of a lineage society. The cases of ordination found among the She and Hakka have indicated that the change or the decline in the performance of ordination had a close connection with the extent to which the two communities had been incorporated into Chinese state governance. On the face of it, on account of the taboos surrounding female pollution beliefs, the agency of Yao women seems to have been largely, if not completely, submerged in the civilizing project of the Chinese imperial state. Yet, the discussions of the pros and cons of the position of the wives of ritual specialists and their parents have opened the possibility that the Yao might well have reflected upon the social consequences of state intervention via the position of women.

Since the female pollution beliefs seem to have been a major factor in marginalizing the positions of women in Yao ritual tradition, Chapter Four has zoomed in to investigate the various levels on which the female fertility is culturally and ritually constructed. The chapter addresses three aspects of Yao personhood, including a corporeal, a cosmological and a cultivated dimension, and gender relationships constructed at different stages of a person's life cycle. It reveals that the

significance of female fertility and of the deities associated with fertility is highlighted more intensively before the onset of puberty, but the symbolic importance of female fertility has gradually been naturalized by the practice of the patrilineal Daoist ordination. At face value, it would seem that the significance of female fertility powers has been totally subsumed by a state civilizing project. And yet, when we turn our attention to the divine level and delve deeper into the stories of a locally respected female fertility deity, the Mother of Emperors, we find that the textual and ritual constructions of her deification and worship have actually helped in creating a symbolic space in which the Yao can negotiate with the cultural interventions of the others. Significantly, it has also represented a negative attitude towards the intervention of state power and shown the Yao's struggles in claiming their autonomy when faced with the powerful Other, the Chinese imperial state.

Chapter Five has paid close attention to a reading of the narratives of a group of female fertility deities, called 'roaming deities' (*Youshen*), who are acolytes of the Mother of Emperors, assisting in the protection of women and children. Unlike the Mother of Emperor who is inherently a divine being, the stories of these 'roaming deities' present different ways by which a person becomes a deity, albeit in one of the ways she might have to undergo a violent death. Having established the close association of women with 'singing', defined as 'performative literacy', and based on the understanding of the leading position of a 'mother of singing' in rituals dedicated to indigenous deities, the chapter suggests viewing these narratives of 'roaming deities' as probable products of female singing that in the past were integrated into ritual master manuscripts. In so doing, I argue that the female authors have used this rhetorical device to express their anxieties about patrilineal-biased marriage in general. Cogently, two different yet correlated images of women are depicted: one is of women enduring 'bad deaths'; the other is of women cultivating themselves into a transcendental state. Both are considered ways of 'individuation' open to women to divert them from the given roles a patrilineal society expects of them. In other words, these narratives suggestively points to the ways in which female authors express female subjectivities as well as conveying a collective criticism made by the Yao of the Chinese patrilineal ideology.

To conclude, by combining the methods of textual analysis and fieldwork investigation, with a focus on the narratives and practices surrounding female fertility and female fertility deities, the present study has been able to reveal that the Yao had actually utilized the positions of women and the act of female singing in their negotiations with and remodelling of the external religious-cum-imperial power. More importantly, it has also attempted to offer a ‘gendered perspective’, which I dub a ‘view from below’, revealing the human agency and dynamisms embedded in the transcultural dimension of Yao ritual tradition. The results of the present research are therefore highly relevant to two fields of study: the state and society, and gender and religion.

The State and Society: The Position of Women

The history of a non-Han Chinese minority society found in Chinese official historical documentation has invariably been written from the perspective of the state. This poses the dilemma of how is it possible to write a history of a minority society from that people’s own point of view, particularly as they had not invented a writing system of their own? In this research, my intention has been to reconstruct a minority history from a local viewpoint by analysing the ritual texts and folksongs composed by the minority people themselves—even though the texts and songs were composed in the margins of the same religious culture that had initially been taken over from or influenced by the dominant Chinese culture.

Unquestionably, both the dating and authorship of the ritual texts and folksong are difficult to determine with any certitude, and undeniably the contents are also open to different ways of interpretation. Consequently, the narratives and information recounted in the texts and songs still remain partially elusive in any attempts to link them to any given historical events as these are recorded in official Chinese-language documents. Be that as it may, a reconstruction of an event-centred past for the Yao has never been the utmost concern for this study. Instead, being acutely aware of the limitations as well as the potential inherent in Yao ritual manuscripts and female singing, all this study intends to do is to underline the importance of the position of

women in understanding the historical interaction between the successive Chinese imperial states and a minority society.

As Paul Cohen has indicated in his dual approaches to the history of the Boxers, the term ‘history’ he uses sometimes ‘refer[s] to the formal process of reconstruction of the past that is the historian's characteristic function....’, and at other times ‘encompass[es] the variety of ways, including experience and myth, in which people in general think about and relate to the past.’¹ The materials utilized in my analysis throughout this study might not be enough to be submitted to ‘a formal process of reconstruction of the past’, but they definitely encapsulate abundant information recounting the Yao’s experiences and mythical concepts revealing how they think about and relate themselves to the past.

The present study has concentrated on exploring the cultural constructions of female fertility and female fertility deities in Yao ritual manuscripts. It has shown the potential offered by these locally phrased ritual documentations, in either oral or written form, for more thematic analyses of Yao history and religion.

Gender and Religion: Seeking Women’s Hidden Agency

This research commenced with a quest to contextualize the female fertility associated texts and folksongs contained in Yao ritual master manuscripts. Its initial intention was to discover the hidden significance of female gender and female fertility deities. At first, any bid to make enquiries about the agency of women in Yao religion seemed to be a mission impossible, as neither the ethnographic present nor the Chinese-written historical documentation seemed to offer sufficient clues on which to base such an investigation. Fortunately, the prominence of female singers in ritual performance and village life and the close relationship between women and singing all hinted at a direction in which to look in order to find out the different ways in which women’s agency has been embodied. What is even more intriguing, the agency of female fertility, as anthromorphized in locally respected female fertility deities, and

¹ Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), XV.

female singing have also been positioned and appropriated in the Yao's historical reactions to the state's incorporation agenda.

Ho Ts'ui-p'ing has concluded that 'the goddesses of the southwest empower not the deprived second gender but the conquered communities and the lost kingdom in the historical process of making China'.² In the case of the Yao, the construction of the goddesses has not empowered the conquered communities or the lost kingdoms in the historical process of making China, but it certainly does vividly represent the human agency and dynamisms present in local reactions to the process of Chinese imperial state expansion. In the course of that process, Yao women have not only helped to maintain the Yao cultural tradition and identity through their singing and songs, they have also succeeded in casting doubt on and levelling criticism at the emphasis on patrilineal ideology and descent, so prevalent in the making of Chinese society.

In conclusion, my study of the Yao religious culture and ritual manuscripts has shown the need to position an enquiry into a specific group of minority people in a historical, regional and cross-ethnic context. It has detailed a transcultural dimension in Yao religion by highlighting the significance of female fertility deities and in the act of female singing. In a broader sense, the outcome of the research has also strongly indicated the importance of a 'gendered perspective' in any future investigation of the relationship between the Chinese imperial state and minority society, and a religious tradition with a long history of male-orientation.

² 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 239.