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

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Summary

This research presents a number of Yao perspectives, especially those embodied in their ritual tradition and in their historical experiences of encountering other political and cultural systems. Since the 1980s, their Daoism-inspired ordination ceremony and their ritual manuscripts written in Chinese have often been singled out to support scholarly discussions about Yao sinification. It has been argued that the imperial Chinese state's expansion into South China that began in the Song (960-1279) was the major driving force in the Yao's conversion to Daoism and their subsequent sinification. In this sense, the Daoist and the Chinese religious and ritual heritage can be considered to have been the result of a 'civilizing project' whose aim was to draw the Yao closer to the centre of Chinese state civilization. The goal of this research is to explore a further dimension to the discourse of Yao sinification by adding a 'gendered perspective' to the understanding of Yao ritual tradition. It also details the dynamics and the presence of human agency in the historical processes of transcultural communication between the Yao and their powerful Other, the Chinese imperial states.

The study is divided into six chapters. Chapter One offers an introduction that sets out the fundamentals of the intended research. Chapter Two situates Yao religious culture and manuscripts in the broader regional and historical context. Chapter Three reveals that religion has been an important interface at which the patrilineal ideology, an ideological basis for the development of lineage society and the facilitation of integration into the Chinese state, had been enforced in Yao society. Nonetheless, it also shows that this is where the Yao have assimilated and transformed the religious-cum-imperial influences in the light of their own cultural schema. Chapter Four addresses the cultural and political significance of the goddesses of fertility among the Yao in a regional context. It elucidates the different forms of gender ideal and gender relationship articulated in Yao cultural norms and religious performance. It also offers a close reading of the narratives surrounding a prominent female fertility deity, the Mother of Emperors, showing why the construct of the Mother of Emperors could be regarded as a manifestation of the Yao's struggles to claim their autonomy in their

encounters with the civilizing value of patrilineal ideology. Chapter Five suggests the concept of ‘performative literacy’ in order to explore the significance of Yao female singers in a ritual setting. Commencing by viewing the narratives of the twenty-four assistant female fertility deities as the probable product of female singing, the chapter goes on to illustrate the different forms of expression and action assumed by women in the face of the imposed patrilineal ideology channelled through the Yao religious interface. On the basis of my analysis, I hypothesize that the Yao women have assumed crucial positions through which the Yao were able to voice their criticisms of the social consequences of imperial Chinese state governance, imposed in the form of patrilineal ideology and a lineage society. Chapter Six is a conclusion that recapitulates the highlights of each chapter and proposes potential related topics for future research.