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CHAPTER 5

The Yang Theater Masks of Huangtushao and Performance Practice

A man walking one thousand li
is not equal to a deity descending one step
—from the Yangxi libretto of The Lord of the Earth

This chapter examines the masks worn by the Huangtushao troupe during the performance of Yang Theater. I begin with treatment of the role of the masks within ritual performance traditions of Guizhou from an art historical perspective. A survey of the extant masks in the Huangtushao collection utilizes the hand-copied stage directions in the possession of the troupe and secondary Chinese sources to illustrate how the masks are used in performance.

In the Chinese tradition, theatre is inseparable from communal ritual. Dean, Schipper and Meulenbeld have all documented the importance of theatre as a constituent element of Daoist ritual programs in southern China and Taiwan. This survey of Yang Theater masks in Huangtushao and their roles in performance, considers the way the deities are brought to life by the troupe for their audience. As an offering to the deities and the ancestors of the family sponsoring the performance, Yang Theater constructs the temporary space to renew bonds between the spirit world and worshippers. Equally importantly, theater provides a dramatic backdrop for people to commune together and renew and strengthen alliances between families while enjoying entertainment and feasting. Prior to the arrival of the electronic age (television, movies and karaoke), ritual theatre was the grandest spectacle available. For those who have the financial resources, paying for a ritual cycle featuring theater is a necessary responsibility. Sponsoring a ritual cycle featuring Yang Theater grants the family hosting the event a great deal of prestige, by providing guests the gifts of good fortune, abundant food and spirits and a general feeling of catharsis and renewal at the event’s conclusion.

When large numbers of visitors, including the troupe members conducting the ritual, arrive at a rural residence there is no way to accommodate them all. Theater functions as an important way to keep people occupied and awake through the night, while managing limited places for

sleeping. There are instances within the librettos where the troupe extends the performance time deliberately (by repeating the same lines with minor variations) to keep people engaged and give other performers time to change and prepare, rather than adding any inherent “meaning.”

I suggest that failure to consider the multi-dimensional nature of Yang Theater by regarding it as the enactment of a play, or a purely religious phenomenon, misses its significance as what Mauss identified as a “total social fact,” an activity that has implications throughout society, in the economic, political, and religious spheres. While performances featuring Erlang, Lord Guan, Zhong Kui, and the Vanguard Who Opens the Road are overtly exorcistic and martial, bringing the hagiographies of protective deities to life, they are only one part of a total performance program that also includes vulgarity, humor, and the lampooning of social and political norms. The sacred and profane are constituent parts of the total religious, historical and social experience, not distinct or clearly differentiated entities. Theater brings all elements of village history and identity to life, within the societal institution of communal feasting and exchange. All the activity commensurate with the performance of ritual theater contributes to the strengthening of the communal alliances that order rural society.

5.1 Chinese Masks in Historical Perspective

Because Chinese masking traditions are still little examined within western literature, but are integral to the history of Chinese religious life, this chapter begins with a brief historical survey. There is a dearth of first-hand source material closely documenting masked ritual at the popular level for much of Chinese history. Yet we know today that the culture and institutions of Chinese civilization tend to replicate themselves at all strata of Chinese society. Chinese masks have a rich archeological and historical pedigree, beginning with a 5th millennium BCE Yangshao pottery mask in the British Museum collection. Huangpu Chongqing identifies five stages in the development of Chinese masks: 1) the use of masks for hunting during prehistoric times; 2) the use of qitou masks at Anyang, Henan, capital of the Shang Dynasty, which is discussed below; 3) During the Zhou masks continued to be employed in yearly court exorcism rituals; 4) During the dynasties of Wei, Jin and Tang human characters began to be introduced into period dramas, notably The Prince of Lanling, who led his troops into battle wearing a fercocious mask; 5) By the time of the Song and Yuan, the role of beast masks had diminished and they were replaced by those representing human characters from legends and heroic folk tales.

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281 Huangpu, *Guizhou Yangxi*, 163. Huangpu, referencing a performance of Han Xin mentions how the troupe, referring to soldiers, mentions soldiers of each of the four seasons, soldiers of each of the twelve months, etc.


The character qi 魌, in oracle bone and seal script examples, represents a masked person impersonating a deity in plague expulsion rituals (Fig. 5.1).285 The late Warring States source, the Rites of Zhou, is often cited as evidence of the connection between masks and ritual exorcism in China’s ancient past. The fangxiang exorcist of antiquity draped himself in a bearskin and donned a golden mask with four eyes to lead the yearly purification ritual at the imperial palace more than 2000 years ago. Burial masks made from stone and various metals have been discovered in many Han Dynasty (204BCE–220CE) tombs. Some may argue that the archeological and historical record is too far removed to be relevant to the study of modern popular culture, but these archaic examples are significant as evidence of the integral role masks and masklike images have played throughout Chinese history. Furthermore, this history reflects the intimate association of masks with the world of unseen deities and demons and their consistent use as an apotropaic device to drive away evil spirits and plague. In his preface to The Art of Chinese Ritual Masks, Piet van der Loon notes both the archaic pedigree of Chinese masking traditions and the existence of written records from as early as the second century BCE, documenting masked performances as a form of entertainment.286

Masks also function as talismanic architectural elements. Fearsome entrance guardian masks with gaping mouths, protruding tongues, exposed fangs and bulbous eyes, clutching knives in their teeth are hung directly above a home’s front doors. Known as tunkou 吞口, they are designed to terrify and engulf any baleful ghosts or evil spirits daring to cross the home’s threshold. These guardian masks are still installed above the doorway of many village homes in various parts of China today.

The canon of stylistic devices and the morphology employed in creating masks was established as early as China’s Bronze Age. Horns, furrowed (and seemingly flaming) brows, bulbous eyes, flared nostrils, gaping mouths, fangs, and beastlike features continue to be the physical characteristics chosen by mask makers to illustrate the fierce nature of protective deities in the modern period. Beginning in Chinese antiquity there is also a strong association between liminal, grotesque figures, both mortal and otherworldly, as agents of exorcism and purification.287 In the case of ritual drama in the southwest, the morphology of the physically distorted mask, representing the humorous character Qintong 秦童, is particularly disturbing (see Fig. 5.18).


The use of masks during rituals was important in the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279 CE) capital of Hangzhou, both in terms of ritual scale and the diversity of deities represented.289 Popular

286 Xue, ed., The Art of Chinese Ritual Masks, xvi.
287 Riley, Chinese Theatre, pp. 79–81.
289 Gu, The History of Chinese Masks, 250.
masked processions to expel ghosts and demons during the Song are the subject matter of two Song paintings, the “Great Nuo Picture” in the collection of the Beijing Palace Museum and the “Sketch of the Lantern Drama” in a private collection. Su Hanchen, a painter known for his illustrations of religious life during the Song, painted “The Five Blessings,” which features a group of masked figures. The commercial manufacture of masks and drums for sale during the Song is also recorded in Hong Mai’s Records of the Listener. During the Song, Guilin Prefecture made a tribute payment to the imperial court of more than 800 masks to be used during the Great Nuo procession at the capital. During this time, Guilin was especially renowned for its masked ritual troupes. While none of these masks survives today, we can read the observations of Song Dynasty poet, Lu You (1125–1210) who recorded his experience seeing this stunning collection:

For the Great Nuo Guilin Prefecture gave masks as tribute. When this tribute arrived, they called it one set. [The court] was first surprised about its smallness in number. [But it turned out that] they considered 800 masks one set. Old, young, beautiful, and hideous examples, not one of them looked alike. [The court] was greatly amazed.

The increasing military power of China’s northern tribes and the arrival of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368) may have contributed to Tibetan Lamanism supplanting grand nuo rituals at the imperial palace. After the Song Dynasty there is relatively little evidence of masks being employed in palace ritual, but there are Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) accounts of masked drama with overtly religious associations among the people of southern China. During the Ming, masked rituals continued to flourish across southern China. This period is contemporaneous with the arrival of soldiers and settlers into Guizhou Province at the Yuan-Ming transition.

The artistic and textual record of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) documents masks being employed during communal ceremonies in Guizhou. Within the first illustrated ethnography of Guizhou, the Bai Miao Tu, written in the eighteenth century, there are colorful illustrations of local people performing rituals holding masks, weapons, and beating drums and gongs at the lunar New Year. The earliest of these illustrations dates to the Qianlong reign (1735–1796). The Bai Miao Tu also contains an illustration of an individual performer grasping a halberd in his right hand and holding a mask in his left. In a Daoguang-reign (1821–1850) gazetteer from Zunyi Prefecture, specific mention is made of the local custom of performing Yang Theater in order to make sacri-

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290 Xue, ed., The Art of Chinese Ritual Masks, 43.
291 Xue, ed., The Art of Chinese Ritual Masks, 255. “人郡，造逢市有摇小鼓而售戏面具者”
293 Ibid., 250.
294 Qu, ed., Nuoyun, 5.
295 Ibid., pp. 268–269.
ficial offerings to the trinity of The Lord of the Rivers, The Lord of the Earth, and the Medicine King, by dancing and singing:

Popular custom is to use singing and dancing, called Yang Theater, as a sacrifice to the Three Lords. The Three Lords are Lord of the River, Lord of the Earth and the Medicine King.299

5.2 Mask Production in Guizhou

While masking traditions are found across the Chinese realm, Guizhou Province stands out as retaining an especially rich tradition, surviving well into the 20th century. The last prolific sculptor of masks and statuary in Fuquan was a master with the ritual name Zeng Fashun 曾法顺, active in the early 1980s. He carved a complete set of masks for the Yang Theater troupe in Disong and many of the statues found in rebuilt Lord Guan temples across the county.

While there are no longer ateliers dedicated to producing masks and sculptures in Huangtushao, there are shared practices to mask making and ritual consecration of masks across Guizhou that allow us to elucidate a general description of past production of masks in this region.300 The artisans who make masks are usually also ritual troupe members. Colloquially known as “craftsmen,” within the troupe they are also referred to as the “masters of carving.”

The woods used for making masks are primarily willow and peach. There is a belief that these woods have inherent qualities to repel ghosts and demons. From a practical perspective, willow is also an ideal sculpting material, because it resists splitting. When a tree is selected for timber, the carver first burns incense and performs a small offering ceremony before felling the tree, colloquially called a “spirit tree.” Before beginning his work, the carver makes an offering before his domestic altar. The carver often will use older masks of the character he is sculpting as a reference.301 The process of sculpting a mask involves first rough-carving the mask from a block of wood to bring out the overall shape. A shard of porcelain (today more likely a specialized knife) is used to carve fine lines and expressive wrinkles. After sanding, detailed features are added to the mask’s surface. Once the carving is completed the mask is then boiled in Tung oil (a “drying” oil that leaves a hard surface, derived from the Tung tree Vernicia Fordii). The oil temperature is regulated and the mask maker is careful not to leave the mask in the oil for too long, in order to prevent scorching. This boiling process lends the surface a pleasing yellow color and destroys any insects inhabiting the wood.302

Colors are applied to the mask after boiling. Subdued colors include yellow or brown made from earth ocher (ferrous oxide) and black produced from charcoal. Yellow is usually used for the mask’s face and black for a hat, eyebrows and pupils. These two colors are supplemented


301 Guizhou artist and ethnographer Shen Fuxin 沈福馨 has identified groups of Earth Theatre masks produced by specific carvers around Anshun. He has clearly documented the handing down of stylistic provenances by various artists.

302 Liu et al., Nuo Mian, pp. 31–35. Gu provides an excellent description of mask carving in Dejiang along with illustrations.
with some commercial red, yellow, and green. The use of commercial colors is more evident in newer masks and those that have been repainted since the time of their initial production. Historically, people living in remote areas had little access to commercial paints and little willingness to spend the money to buy them when available. Many of the masks in Huangtushao feature a simple color palette of ocher and black, suggesting considerable age and the lack of commercial oil-based paints. The masks of Lord Guan, Wang Lingguan, and Zhong Kui are exceptions; their faces are covered with commercial paint, likely added well after their initial manufacture. After painting, masks are given several coats of tung oil, lending them an attractive sheen and affording the protection of a hardened surface layer. When necessary, plugs of horsehair or human hair are inserted for facial hair and sideburns.

When the production of a mask is completed, it must be ritually consecrated through an “opening up of the eyes” 开光 before the altar. This involves an offering of incense, the request for the blessing of the lineage of troupe’s ancestral masters, and a request that the other deities worshipped by the troupe accept the new mask into the group. Grasping a burning red candle from the altar and reciting an incantation to imbue the carving with the spirit of the deity represented, the ritual master by turns points the candle at the eyes, nose, and mouth. This process sometimes also involves daubing different sensory points on the mask with blood from a cockerel’s comb, the blood being another source of yang life force that is transferred to the mask’s sensory organs.

5.3 The Mask as Deity

The mask itself is a sacred object, and the set of masks are one of a ritual troupe’s most valuable possessions. The presence of a set of masks handed down through the ancestral lineage also enhances the troupe’s prestige and is material evidence of the legitimacy of the troupe. In Daoping, the last township in northern Fuquan county bordering Weng ’An County, ritual master Zhou Changzhi related an interesting story. The Daoping Yang Theater troupe has two extant Qing Dynasty masks in their possession, one representing the Earth God, and one his wife. Zhou told me that in the 19th century, most of the original masks belonging to the troupe were destroyed in a house fire. After the fire, these two surviving masks were discovered in the hollow of a tree, suggesting that the pair fled the flames on their own volition. Whatever the literal truth behind this story, it illustrates that the masks, particularly old and venerated ones, are considered vessels of particular deities spiritual power, and that the power of these deities becomes manifest in times of necessity or crisis.

In Huangtushao, the mask representing Erlang has an old iron hook on the reverse side, allowing the mask to be hung upon a wall, presumably above an altar table. During fieldwork among the Maonan people in Huanjiang County, Guangxi, I saw an identical hook on another mid-Qing Dynasty mask. An elderly Maonan informant told me during the early part of the

303 Liu et al., *Nuo Mian*, 35.
304 Personal communication on a visit to Daoping during summer 2007.
305 While travelling in the Star Mountains of New Guinea in 1992 a village elder related a nearly identical story to me about a war shield that escaped a cult house fire and was later discovered in the surrounding forest.
20th century, masks were sometimes individually worshipped, hung above the altar during smaller scale rituals, without necessarily being worn and danced, in the same way that offerings would be made before a wooden idol. This underlines the concept of the mask as an inherently sacred object, invested with the animate spirit of the deity it represents.

In Fuquan today the masks that are going to be used during a ceremony are usually placed upon the altar table itself or to the side, prior to the performance of Yang Theater. They are presented with offerings of sacred tea and liquor in five small bowls, referencing the five directions. There are taboos prohibiting performers from having sex, drinking alcohol, and eating meat in the days leading up to a performance, but these appear to have relaxed considerably. Huangpu Chongqing relates a story of a performance of Wang Lingguan where the ritual master became ill and asked another troupe member to play the role. This man had eaten dog meat the day before a performance and when he donned the mask of Wang Lingguan he immediately began suffering a debilitating headache. Onlookers also noticed his head physically swell.

In Huangtushao, prior to performing, a copper bowl is lined with spirit paper and placed upon the altar. The top of the bowl is covered tightly with a pair of small cymbals, one cymbal’s convex side facing downward into the bowl and another’s facing up. It is said the performers deposit their souls here during the duration of their performance, when their body becomes the vessel for the spirit of the deity. When the performer dons the mask he is temporarily transformed into the deity represented. I witnessed this process, known as “hiding the soul” at the temple festival for the birthday of Lord Guan. Before wearing the mask of Lord Guan, Nie Shixue, Deng’s disciple and also a ritual master, looked carefully to make sure the bowl was covered tightly. Aside from this action there were no prayers or offerings at the time the bowl was prepared and the other performers paid no attention to what Nie was doing.

When preparing to put on a mask the performer first wraps red cloth (the same red cloth is used to drape temple deities) around the top and back of his head and chin (Fig. 5.2). Red cloth is considered both auspicious and protective. In the knot fastened at the back of the head he inserts spirit paper, communicating his transformation from mortal to deity. Taking the mask in his hands the performer in turn sprays the masks eyes, nose, mouth and ears with a mouthful of sacred liquor to bring the spirit of the mask to life. This striking gesture to purify the mask, which occurs backstage, also gives the mask an extra sheen when it appears onstage.

307 The same practice is common in Tibetan temples, where protector masks are hung in chapels (gonkhang) to the protector gods.
308 Huangpu, Guizhou Yangxi, 32.
309 Riley, Chinese Theatre, pp. 110–115 for an extended description of the performer as an embodiment of the deity represented by the mask. No one in Huangtushao describes their performances in this theoretical fashion.
Guizhou Yangxi documents a Yang Theater troupe in Luodian, Guizhou praying before the seat of the Three Lords after performing to confess, repent, and apologize for any mistakes in their performance. This is to ensure the safe return of the performers’ souls after their transformation into a deity onstage.³¹⁰

While the notion of incarnated deities amongst the living is a romantic and powerful one, it does not reveal the whole story, at least not in the contemporary context of Fuquan. The mask as sacred object, imbued with the spirit of the deity represented and the notion of the masked performer as an incarnation of the deity is problematic. When I asked a troupe member directly whether the masked performer becomes the spirit represented he responded, “that’s the idea.” The notion of men becoming deities certainly makes for dramatic ethnography and it may have been strongly believed at some point in the past, but in a contemporary context the concept should not be taken too literally. Today it appears to be understood by troupe members as a conceptual idea as much as a literal one. In her observations of Earth Theater in southwestern Guizhou, Jo Riley mentions masks being handled very casually when being returned to the trunk after a performance.³¹¹ Because of an ongoing trend of simplification of ritual-performance practice we cannot know how reverently masks were treated in Fuquan before the Communist revolution. Historically, the act of opening the wooden trunk, where the masks are stored, was an important preliminary step in the performance program. Yet, in observing the performances of four different Yang Theater troupes in Fuquan over a period of seven years, I have never seen this ceremony take place.³¹² Before the temple festival for the birthday of Lord Guan the trunk containing the troupe’s masks was opened casually at the home of troupe member Xu Daxue, while he spoke via mobile phone with Deng, about which masks to bring to the temple. The masks were casually put in an old sack and tied to the back of a motorcycle to be transported to the temple.³¹³

5.4 Flexibility in Performance Practice

Another aspect of these performance traditions in southwest China further complicates the picture of a mask as a singular deity. When necessary, masks representing one deity are substituted for another deity.³¹⁴ In Huangtushao, the mask representing Liu Bei was worn to perform the role of Lu Su during the temple festival. The mask the Huangtushao troupe uses to represent Kaishan, while very old, was certainly not originally meant to represent Kaishan.³¹⁵ The mask representing

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³¹⁰ Huangpu, Guizhou Yangxi, 107.
³¹¹ Riley, Chinese Theatre, 124.
³¹² In 2005, travelling in a very remote part of Anshun, Guizhou with Shen Fuxin I witnessed that villagers burn incense and candles and present food offerings before opening their trunks containing Earth Opera masks. Gu Puguang notes that typically nuo troupes in northeast Guizhou possess no special trunks to hold their masks, thus do not conduct the trunk opening ritual. Gu, Guizhou Shaoshu Minzu Mianju Wenhua, 214.
³¹³ Huangpu, Guizhou Yangxi, 38 mentions the simplification of ritual and lessening of religious significance.
³¹⁴ Ibid., 86.
³¹⁵ See the specific description of Kaishan below for further explanation.
the Hegemon of Chu, Xiang Yu, is also used to represent Guan Yu’s sworn brother Zhang Fei. This flexibility in substituting of one mask for another is found across the region.316

This reflects flexibility and creative improvisation within the ritual framework and performance, as well as pragmatism in making due with limited resources.317 The fact that domestic performance programs are also tailored to the budget and wishes of the sponsor further indicates that ritual is recreated or modified each time it is performed. In Guizhou, we find great homogeneity in the larger ritual framework across the region with seemingly endless minor variations between different troupes, their handwritten texts, and the fluidity of their performances. Because we are examining what is essentially an oral practice (even though written documents exist), the space for reinvention and variation within a standardized set of ritual segments is great.318

One particularly frustrating aspect of this study is the inability to speak of the Huangtushao ritual masks or of performance itself definitively. When conducting fieldwork in the 1980s researcher Huangpu Chongqing encountered the same challenge in attempting to classify ritual masks from across Guizhou scientifically. He wrote: “Because sets of masks are incomplete and masks are substituted for one another, it is difficult to identify them clearly.”319 The need for clarity and exactitude demanded by researchers is not an impulse shared by local people in Huangtushao and suggests that what is important is the creation of a symbolic field inhabited by many auspicious spirits, whose power is magnified by its entirety, rather than as a collection of singular elements. This tendency reflects a society where the work of the group as a collective is very important and the contributions of individual members less so.

In 1989, the Shanghai People’s Art Publishing House, in conjunction with the Guizhou Art Research Bureau, published *Nuo Mask Art in Guizhou*. Pages 36–50 illustrate masks photographed in Huangtushao. The identifications for the masks of Lingguan and Erlang are certainly conflated. My field identifications representing several of the other masks also differ from the attributions in the book. Just as improvisation is a hallmark of Yang Theater, some masks can have multiple identities. Confusion regarding attributions also suggests much knowledge was lost during decades of Maoist repression, and that some of these plays have not been performed for many years.

### 5.5 Mask Styles in Southwest China

Looking specifically at the morphology of masks in southwest China and attempting to define regional styles, my initial investigations have identified four major style zones in Guizhou and the neighboring regions. I suggest these classifications as a starting point, rather than definitive

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316 Wan, ed., *Guizhou Gunuo*, 39 contains an illustration of Guan Yu being represented by the mask of The Judge.


318 Barth, *Cosmologies in the Making*. Barth proposes a new model for understanding the mechanisms of cultural change, emphasizing the role that individual creativity plays in it, and maintaining that cosmologies can be adequately understood only if they are regarded as knowledge in the process of communication, rather than as fixed bodies of belief.

319 Ibid., 86.
system. Attempting regional classification and identification is complicated by the chaotic, random movement of populations within Guizhou, over several centuries of sporadic warfare and conflict.

The first mask style is rooted in Sichuan and shows considerable affinity with Tibetan mask forms. This is reflected in strong three-dimensional relief carving and the menacing stylistic devices employed, including eyebrows that approximate flames, horns and fangs, and a fondness for “wrathful” faces. The second style is found in the Hunan-Guizhou border area and Jiangxi. Here mask forms tend toward softer, more rounded lines. In addition to fierce, protective deities, masks made to represent human characters have a more naturalistic appearance. A third style is found in southwestern Guizhou, with the city of Anshun representing the nexus. Here, Earth Theater masks are physically smaller than the other styles mentioned above. They have longer, narrow faces and highly elaborate openwork headdresses with protruding “wings” attached to the sides of the face, influenced by the Beijing Opera tradition. These fanciful headdresses represent the celestial constellation or star associated with a particular deity. They also employ the color palette of Beijing Opera to represent the personality traits of the character. Anshun was a military and commercial center beginning in the Ming, and both goods and people regularly travelled through Anshun on the Yunnan-Guizhou post road. The masking style has its roots further to China’s east, particularly Anhui and Jiangxi, and employs a wide variety of commercial paints. A fourth style is found in Guangxi and southernmost Guizhou, centered on Libo (which shares affinity with Guangxi in terms of food, language, and ritual, and was under Guangxi political administration before 1949). Masks in Libo tend to be even more naturalistic, larger in size and rounded, with softer contours and little relief carving. The details in the Guangxi style are brought out through fine-line painting, rather than sculptural relief. There is also a greater use of colors in Guangxi, probably because the flatter topography allowed more trade with coastal areas in neighboring Guangdong and provided access to a wider variety of commercial colors.

5.6 The Masks of Huangtushao

The masks of Huangtushao show a mixture of characteristics of the Sichuan style and also the Jiangxi-Hunan style. This is unsurprising since Fuquan sits at a crossroads between these two distinct culture areas and the people of Fuquan have a strong historical links to both Jiangxi and Sichuan.

According to the Huangtushao troupe, their set of masks and sculptures date to the reign of Qing emperor Daoguang (1820–1850). A complete set of masks would number twenty-four or thirty-six, depending on whom one asks, but in Huangtushao there are nineteen antique masks remaining. There is another incomplete set of Qing Dynasty masks in Disong Township, 15 kilometres east of Huangtushao, stylistically similar to those of Huangtushao, but obviously produced by a different hand. In the northern part of Disong, a third set of masks dating to the Qing Dynasty was destroyed during the 1952 land reform campaign, when the ritual master who owned them was labelled a landlord and summarily executed. There are two nineteenth-century

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320 The headdresses of Earth Opera masks actually represent the constellation with which a particular deity is associated.
321 Some locales once had as many as 36 masks in a set.
masks from Huangtushao “borrowed” for research, published within *Nuo Mask Art in Guizhou*, and never returned. Their current whereabouts are unknown.

At the advent of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, Red Guards following Mao’s order to “destroy the four olds” demanded ritual master Xu Longzhang, who later transmitted the title of ritual master to Deng Qiyu, to surrender the troupe’s set of masks for destruction. At the time, the village had two sets of masks. According to local informants a ruse was concocted to surrender one set of masks to the Red Guards. The second set of masks, sculptures, and altar paintings were initially hidden inside the home of an old woman who everyone in the area feared. She was notorious for her volatile temper and physically ugly appearance. Later, the trunks containing the objects were secretly carried, under cover of night, from her home, along a back path, to a small cave outside the village. This cave is located at the sunken corner of a cornfield ten minutes walk from the nearest footpath. The endless hiding places offered by Guizhou’s mountainous, karst-ridden landscape is certainly one important reason a comparatively large number of Guizhou’s antique masks were able to survive the Cultural Revolution. This sort of subterfuge to save precious objects from destruction happened all across Guizhou.³²²

According to Xu Longzhang’s daughter, during the twelve years from 1966–1978, when villagers had sick or disrespectful children, or other challenges, they would secretly visit the cave mouth to pray and leave small offerings to the deities. When the masks were finally brought out from hiding in 1978 a redeeming of vows and feast was held in Huangtushao, to apologize to the deities for the hardship they were forced to endure being stored inside the cave for so many years.

### 5.7 Ritual Performance in Local Context

Within the Huangtushao texts the masked deities who appear onstage are collectively termed the Twenty Four Wuyang Theater Deities 舞阳二十四戏神. The performance oeuvre is spoken of belonging to two categories, Zheng Theater 正戏 and Hua Theater 花戏.³²³ Zheng Theater performances feature the narratives revolving around the origins and hagiographies of the deities, namely Erlang, Lord Guan, the Vanguard Who Opens the Road, and Zhong Kui, and are part of ritual segments themselves. Hua Theater features performances in which the subject matter is human life. Much of the content is interspersed with bawdy comic relief, but still features elements of exorcism, although these exorcistic elements may not be immediately apparent to the audience. This will be explained further in the explanations of the individual masks and their performance below. Much of Yang Theater’s content would be familiar to people across China as it features the stories of the ancient conflict between the Chu and Han Kingdoms to unite the empire, The Three Kingdoms and popular tales like Meng Jiang Nü. All of these performances follow generally established outlines contained within the handwritten stage directions, but do not closely follow scripts and feature a large amount of improvisation.

One of the most powerful purported benefits of sponsoring Yang Theater is the blessing of sons. All Yang and Nuo Theater troupes possess a small male figure with articulating limbs and a phallus,

³²² Liu, ed., *Nuo Mian*, 27.

³²³ Huangpu, *Guizhou Yangxi*, 73.
known as the Prince Bodhisattva太子菩萨, also called The Prince Who Protects the Troupe押班太子. The wooden figure of the Prince is dressed with many layers of clothes, donated by mothers who were blessed with sons following the sponsoring of Yang Theater.³²⁴ Overt sexual references within performance are related to the association between these rituals and fertility. Agricultural production, material wealth, security in old age, and continuation of the patrilineal line to please the ancestors all inform the preoccupation with male heirs shared by rural communities. The expression of sexuality by male performers is an inherent part of the performance program, none more conspicuous than the appearance of the Lord of the Earth, who is closely tied to the agricultural fertility and protection of the village.³²⁵ When the Lord of the Earth dances before a seated Wang Lingguan (who is on an inspection tour of the village) his movements and hip thrusts gain intensity until he eventually swings his robe open to reveal his groin (Fig. 5.3). When I watched the performance of the Lord of the Earth at Daoping in 2007 he was wearing flesh colored pants. It is easy to imagine that in the past or when outsiders, particularly government officials, are not present the performance might be more explicit. Meir Shahar, in his study of the popular deity Jigong, recounts a story where the monk Jigong turns a somersault to reveal his phallus to the Empress Dowager, who is visiting the monastery.³²⁶

Outsiders are sometimes surprised when first confronted by the vulgarity and earthy humor of ritual theatre of southwest China. This bawdy content is in fact the rule, rather than the exception in village culture. As early as the time of the poet Qu Yuan (ca. 340–278 BCE) and The Nine Songs vulgarity was a conspicuous component of southern Chinese ritual life.³²⁷ Lewd stories and humor have long been an integral part of grassroots Chinese entertainment, also evidenced by Yuan Mei’s compilation of popular tales during the Qing Dynasty.³²⁸ Writing in

³²⁴ The attribution of reproductive power to the male figure, The Prince Bodhisattva, provides a fascinating contrast with the matrilineal society of the Maonan where during ritual performance the female Goddess of Flowers万岁娘娘 is credited with this power.
³²⁶ Shahar, Crazy Ji, pp. 87–88.
³²⁸ Yuan, Censored by Confucius.
Huangpu Chongqing describes ritual performers mimicking sexual intercourse onstage.\textsuperscript{329}

Much of Yang Theater performance also has a liminal quality, existing at the margin between the earthly and spiritual realm and contravening what is socially acceptable. Most performances traditionally take place at night. Audience members are often drinking large amounts of alcohol while feasting and have had little sleep. When masked performers come onstage we witness speech, actions, and behavior inverted from ordinary life. We can consider the performance space and the time during the ritual’s performance to be a temporary, provisional, “border” zone unmoored from normal strictures and liminality as a valuable heuristic for understanding much of what happens onstage. Liminal entities in Yang Theater include convention-defying trickster figures that appear mentally unstable, lustful monks, and violators of feudal obligations. Acting out behaviors directly in opposition to societal norms illustrates the antithesis of proper behavior through contradiction and inversion. These performances can be quite humorous, which makes them all the more welcome with the audience. Actions onstage can subtly question the establishment while ostensibly reinforcing social norms. Masks provide anonymity for performers to behave in ways normally considered vile or unacceptable.

Victor Turner posits: “if liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it potentially can be seen as a period of scrutiny for central values and axioms of the culture where it occurs.”\textsuperscript{330} Performances expose and provide catharsis for the political, economic, social and familial tensions that are part and parcel of local life. Theater provides an opportunity to “act out” feelings and frustrations that cannot normally be expressed within the confines of socially acceptable behaviors and relationships. In the dialogues between performers, particularly during performances where the subject matter is mundane, profligate cursing and insulting provides an outlet for underlying tensions within the feudal, hierarchical, and reciprocal relationships of the extended family and community. This even extends to tensions felt by villagers in the worship of the deities, for whom sacrificial offerings have been prepared at great personal burden and expense, by people who are living a very basic and tenuous existence. In the village, mutual cooperation between members of the clan lineage, in-laws, and other clans competing for limited resources is necessary for survival. There are inherent tensions in the balancing of individual, lineage, and community desires that can be poisonous if left unchecked. More than ghosts and demons are being exorcised during the performance of Yang Theater, the contradictions and angst inherent within communal and feudal relationships also are being played out and vented onstage, before ultimately being given temporary closure through catharsis. This characteristic of vernacular theatre will be evidenced in the descriptions of the performances below, but an example from the skit The Martial and Civil Scholars 文武秀才 provides a fine introduction.

The two scholars call upon a Deranged Scholar 疯秀才 at his home. Within the dialogue between the deranged man (representing the disenfranchised) and the two scholars (the gentry)

\textsuperscript{329} Huangpu et al. “Nuo Theatre in Guizhou Province,” 115.

\textsuperscript{330} Turner, The Ritual Process, 156.
we see a mocking and destruction of the institutions of reciprocity and exchange, the bedrock of Chinese society. The obligation to be hospitable and polite to one’s guests by giving them “face,” particularly those who are of a higher social class, or visitors from outside is taken very seriously. As the two scholars call the old man to come outside he responds from offstage “this man can no longer shit or piss.” The deranged scholar complains that he has not seen the two other scholars in several days. He goes on to complain the pair brings him straw sandals to eat and call them rice cakes. The example of straw sandals is particularly harsh, as they are considered lowly and foul. The man complains that once when calling on their home they served him stones to eat. The pair adamantly insists that, in fact, they served him glutinous rice balls.

Profligate cursing is part and parcel to most performances featuring spoken dialogues. De Groot, more than 100 years ago in his fieldwork in Fujian, noted the habit of local people to give their children crude nicknames: “Indeed, spectres will, on hearing such names, believe at once that the bearers are despised by everyone, and they will turn their refined maliciousness against persons of more importance.” This documentation of “inferior names” (nicknames to given to children by parents to protect them from ghost attack) shows remarkable affinity with the profanity of the Yang Theater lexicon. Dialogues are rife with references to lice, fleas, shit, piss, semen, bastards, assholes, and cunts. Like martial movements and martial weapons, charms and incantations, cursing is another tool to send evil away. Ruizendaal notes that among the puppeteers of Quanzhou the ability to talk at length about sex and excrement is the mark of the talented performer. These topics perform a central role as subject matter of improvisations.

In reenacting the supernatural order during Zheng plays, Yang Theater also re-establishes the relationship between the audience and their protectors. The physical presence of the deities is deemed essential to the perceived efficacy of the ritual. The humble space of a village courtyard becomes the sacred gathering place of the immortals and the troupe members, themselves of humble origins, become the gods. There are many elements that contribute to this transformation, including the decoration of the sacred space, the altar, and its offerings, and the performers’ costumes, but it is the donning of the masks during performance, above all, that render the transformation complete.

5.8 The Social Dimension of Yang Theater

Within the human community those invited to watch performances become active participants in the reenactment. Through the sharing of the offerings to the deities they also reaffirm long standing mutual obligations. The purification and renewal engendered by the ritual ceremony in the spiritual domain also strengthens the relationships of the extended family and friends through communal entertainment, feasting, drinking copious amounts of alcohol, and gambling. These events are usually a long time in planning, nearly always occurring after the New Year.

331 Yang, Qielan Nahun, 564.
333 Ibid., pp. 1128–1129.
334 Ruizendaal, Marionette Theatre in Quanzhou, 168.
during the brief respite from agricultural labor before the spring planting begins. Conspicuous consumption is generally frowned upon in farming communities, but the largesse shown to the deities for their protection sanctions great feasting in which all participants can share equally. This shared space also temporarily lessens the tensions between the more and less fortunate of local society through the equitable sharing of offerings.

The presentation of material and monetary gifts to the host family and the host family’s division of left-over sacrificial offerings strengthens reciprocal networks of mutual obligation. Gifts are publicly recorded and displayed in a ledger. As attendees arrive at a home sponsoring Yang Theater they make a monetary or material gift to the host. The gift is recorded and the gift available for all to see. There is a clear expectation of reciprocity between guests presenting gifts and the family receiving them. Gifting can also be in the form of labor, assisting with cooking and cleaning. Thus, through the domestic ritual cycle, the members of the community are tied to a network of deities, ancestors, and fellow community members, constituting a cyclical network of hosting, gifting, and exchange.335

Collectively, this ritual institution featuring feasting and theater is referred to as a sai 賽. The characters written on the horizontal scroll pasted above the host family’s door “A Material Offering of Gratitude” reflect the ceremony’s function as a material offering of thanks to the deities and ancestors for protection. The largesse can also be understood as binding the participants sharing the offerings to one another and uniting competing lineages through the ritual institution. The importance of the sai for local society was identified by early twentieth century reformer Liang Qichao.336 For local people these events were an inherent duty to honor their spiritual protectors, including the ancestral lineage, and obtain domestic harmony while building alliances with their neighbors in the surrounding community.

### 5.9 Yang Theater Performance

In the opening pages of the handwritten text *Rites for Inviting the Three Lords* 山圣礼请科 belonging to Deng Qiyu is a schedule for performing a ritual cycle lasting two nights and three days. Its programmatic structure is closely similar to vernacular rituals conducted by Yang and Nuo Theater practitioners across the region. In my fieldwork in Huangtushao I never witnessed a “complete” Yang Theater program as outlined in this text. I include this outline to provide a general idea of what a typical three-day ceremony included during the late Qing and Republican Period.

**First Day and Evening**

1. Arranging the Gods Upon the Altar 排神
2. Establishing the Encampment and Sacred Space 执劳
3. Inviting the Deities 请圣
4. Rites for Opening the Altar 开坛礼请
5. *The Auspicious Lad Who Attracts Wealth* 招财童子
6. *The Road Opening Vanguard Who Clears the Five Directions* 开路先锋砍五方

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335 Mauss, *The Gift*.

7. Dispatching the Yang Theater Memorial 阳戏上表
8. Erlang Receives the Sacrifice 二郎领牲

Rest

Second Afternoon
9. Lingguan Inspects the Lord of the Earth 灵官考土地
10. The Civil and Military Scholars 文武秀才
11. The Deranged Scholar, Old Woman Wang and the Beggar 疯秀才王婆花子337
12. Da Meihua, The Meihua Sisters and Mr. Yanggong 打梅花 梅花姊妹 杨公先生

Rest

Second Evening
13. Release the Five Furies 放五猖
14. Build the Bridge 搭桥
15. The Effigy 观茅
16. Kaishan Beheads the Serpent 开山斩腾蛇
17. Zhong Kui Beheads the Ghosts 钟馗斩鬼
18. Han Xin 韩信
19. Lord Guan Occupying the Passes 坐关
20. The Peach Garden Pact 坐桃园

Rest

Third Morning
21. The Three Fans Visit the Home of Tang the Second 三范到唐二家内荅

Rest
22. Meng Jiang Nü 孟姜女 and Little Monk 小和尚
23. The Judge Writes Off the Debt 勾销
24. Send the Deities Off 送圣338

When the performers are prepared to go onstage the troupe first begins playing the gongs, cymbals and drum. Simultaneously strings of firecrackers are lit before the front entrance to the home. The rhythm established by the ensemble sets the pace for Yang Theater performance and the cacophony is regarded as an additional means of purging evil spirits. Before masked actors may enter from the rear of the stage, the ritual master who is directing the performance casts his divination blocks, seeking an auspicious result. Only after confirming a successful throwing of the divination blocks, indicating that the deity to be represented onstage has in fact arrived, does the masked performer accept the invitation from the ritual master and other troupe members to dismount from his horse. According to the literal interpretation of the ritual, the performers are

337 花子 Huazi is an old term for beggar. Beggars in Yang Theater symbolize hungry ghosts.
338 Rites For Inviting the Three Lords, hereafter (SSLQK), 2.
“possessed” by the deities—though witnessing the performers in action, sometimes stumbling over their lines, calls into question the extent to which this is really part of the experience for the participants. Nevertheless, there is definite sense that the performance receives divine sanction to proceed, and that the gods are “present” at the occasion.

Each of the deities who appear onstage during Zheng performances are informed of the reason for their summons and that the host is making a repayment of gratitude for the deities’ protection. In the latter part of each performance segment, the percussion ensemble sings, notifying the deities to listen to the reason for their presence at the ritual space:

[name of the deity]
Hear the reason for your summons

[family name of the sponsor]
Gentleman X is making an alimentary offering

The deities, physically present at the home of the sponsor, directly witness the sponsor’s offering. There are many instances throughout the course of the performance program where the Yang Theater performers bear witness the sponsor’s sacrifice. The ritual facilitates the sponsor’s direct connection and communication with the deities, and the material exchange of sacrificial goods for protection.

This interaction between performers and the surrounding event can also be seen in an excerpt from the narrative of Fan Qilang (husband of Meng Jiang Nü) travelling to the court of the First Emperor of Qin, after being conscripted to build the Great Wall. A jovial commoner named Tang the Second, who acts as an uncouth foil to the upright Fan, accompanies Fan on his journey. Tang has just finished resting at a roadside home and asks the two girls living there if there is a ritual master around. The ritual master comes onstage and informs Tang that the sponsor is in the midst of a redeeming of vows. The ritual master mentions the location and that the sponsor has prepared an altar with incense, candles, and sacrificial offerings to express his gratitude. Repeated references during performances that highlight the sponsor’s role in the ceremony reflect the importance of material offerings as payment to the deities for their protection and reinforces the notion of the deities’ physical presence at the sacred space. The sponsor is also given “face” by emphasizing his important role in the ceremony.

When Yang Theater is being performed, members of the community, particularly children, often wander to the rear of the stage to watch the performers enter and exit. Village elders sit alongside, comment and sometimes shout directions to the performers. In other words, even with the separation of an elevated stage, the community and the deities are sharing the same space, and the feeling is casual and intimate. If the impersonation of the deities through masks is a recreation of the world of supernatural beings, through the medium of the performers, then the Yang Theater oeuvre, including humorous plays, is also a recreation of a system of societal norms where, through the performance, spectators are reminded their of history, identity, and

339 Earth Theater and Nuo Theater are both performed without a stage, at the same height as the audience. Particularly in Nuo Theater there is often dialogue between performers and the audience, and the division between performers and the audience is even more transparent.
Through performance the deities are made the peoples’ own. Some characters are exemplars of Confucian filial piety, whether it be making great sacrifices to care for one’s parents, as in the examples of Little An and Meixiang, or loyalty and personal sacrifice to care for one’s spouse, as in the historical example of Meng Jiang Nü. Performances incorporate specific warnings about consequences of incorrect behavior, hubris, and failure to observe feudal obligations. These warnings are usually evidenced in trickster or buffoon characters’ direct contravention of said norms, often in a highly exaggerated, humorous manner. While full of rebellious undertones within the subject matter these performances ultimately accept the status quo, with its inherent contradictions. To again reference Ruizendaal: “There were, however, few popular movements in Chinese history that fundamentally questioned this existing orthodoxy. Indeed the whole society was geared to serving and worshipping it.”

The following descriptions of the Huangtushao masks and their accompanying roles are drawn from my own fieldwork, augmented by the content of the Huangtushao ritual texts and the pioneering fieldwork of Chinese researchers Gu Puguang, Tuo Xiuming, Huangpu Chongqing, Ran Wenyu, Shen Fuxin, and local Fuquan ethnographer Yang Guanghua. While these descriptions do not necessarily reflect the contemporary situation of what is a dying tradition, my aim is to describe and recreate the historical and symbolic context and usage of these masks within the performance of Yang Theater, to the extent that this is still possible. As this rich folk tradition is not being actively transmitted to younger initiates in Huangtushao, there is a risk that the masks will become simply theatrical props or artifacts, devoid of greater significance.

The masks in Huangtushao belong to six categories: civil, martial, elderly, youthful, male, and female. The martial gods, scholars, and monks who appear are agents of exorcism merely by their physical appearance onstage. In reading de Groot’s detailed descriptions of popular religious life in southern China at the end of the Qing Dynasty we discover the underlying rationale for why certain characters were believed to have particularly beneficial powers in the fight against evil, beginning with scholars: “the intrepid man and the man who inspires awe by shape, accoutrement and gesture, the intelligent man, likewise owing to his abundance of shen and ling, naturally possesses a special degree of resistance and power against the spectral world.”

De Groot also noted that monks are considered of little value to ghosts and demons. This is by virtue of the fact that if they were important or capable individuals their families would forbid them to embrace monasticism. They are also believed to be under the protective power of the Buddha.

Erlang 二郎神
Erlang’s hagiography has already been discussed in the previous chapter. He is the paramount deity within the Yang Theater tradition and the preeminent deity among the triad of the Lord

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342 文，武，老，少，男，女
344 Ibid., 1129.
of the River, Lord of the Earth, and the Medicine King. Lord Zhao, the ancestral master of the Huangtushao ritual troupe’s teaching is thought to be a Sui Dynasty reincarnation of this deity (Fig. 5.4). Erlang is also known as the Deity of Water and is closely associated with irrigation. Erlang’s name first appears in the Song Dynasty (960–1279). By the time of the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368), Erlang appears as subject of several *zaju* plays. Erlang was the subject of widespread worship in southwest China, and was believed to cure sickness and prevent disasters. Nineteenth-century accounts from Fuquan document large, elaborate processions leading to Erlang temples on his birthday. Historically, there were at least five independent temples dedicated to Erlang in the Fuquan area. Grand processions to Erlang’s temple featured costumed youths and drunken yamen runners. Those who had sick children would dress them in shackles and parade them to the temple hoping Erlang could cure their illness by “freeing the shackles.”

In Fuquan city, on the first day of the sixth lunar month, an announcement would be made about the upcoming temple festival. On the twenty-second a procession to the Erlang temple would enter through the city’s south gate with Erlang’s Heavenly Dog (who helped slay the dragon) receiving offerings of sacrificial rooster blood from local residents. On the twenty-fourth, Mount Breaker Kaishan and Yaban led the parade into the city through the South Gate beating drums with the statue of Erlang being carried behind. Following them were colorful decorative fish, a dragon, and paper lanterns. Officials were carried, and women rode in palanquins. On the front of the carriages were the characters “locks of the hundred families” to be opened by Erlang so the people would be freed from the bondage of plague. Sacrifices would be made by residents as the procession advanced through the town. This procession would cross back and forth through the city until finally entering the Erlang Temple in the afternoon, followed by a communal feast.

The dramatic and fierce mask representing Erlang employs the stylistic and physical features common to protective deities in Chinese religious tradition from the time of antiquity. Erlang’s bulbous, glaring eyes appear to be “looking through” the viewer. Above his red, furrowed brows, meeting at the deep crease between the bridge of his nose and his forehead, is Erlang’s third eye, a stylistic convention widely found in Sichuan and Tibet, where the origins of Erlang’s cult began. Below Erlang’s flared nostrils is an open mouth featuring a menacing pair of fangs. The fangs are embellished with protective talismans. Erlang’s threatening demeanor reflects his task of protecting the “good people” from any malicious demons or ghosts wishing to do them harm.

In slaying the flood dragon that tormented the people of Guanzhou, Erlang is closely associated with water control and irrigation. Some troupes in Guizhou also perform a play where Erlang rescues his imprisoned mother from Bishan. This is a regional adaptation of the vernacular Mulian plot found in ritual theatre across China.

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346 Ibid., 6.
348 Yang, *Fuquan Xianzhi*, 915.
Figure 5.4 The Huangtushao mask representing Li Erlang. His furrowed brow, bulbous eyes and prominent fangs are all demonic physical features useful in portraying his ferocity and scaring away evil spirits. His third eye at the center of the forehead is a stylistic convention often used on masks of the Tibetan-Sichuan style. 28cm.
Wang Lingguan 王灵官

Wang Lingguan (Fig. 5.5), Numinous Officer Wang, or Marshal Wang, is a protective deity worshipped by Daoists, and shrines dedicated to him are found near the entrance of Daoist temples across China. There is evidence that his cult was particularly strong in southwest China. He is also tied to thunder ritual and was worshipped by Ming emperor Yongle (1403–1424).351 Wang is also linked closely with the worship of Lord Guan. In the woodblock printed book on the altar of the Lord Guan Temple in Dashuigou, the opening pages give simple, specific instructions for pious men and women to construct an altar for worshipping Lord Guan. If they do not have altar paintings and idols, the book instructs worshippers to simply use cinnabar on yellow paper and write three spirit tablets. Lord Guan is to be placed in the center with Zhang Xian on his right and Wang Lingguan on his left.

The mask of Lingguan features a topknot with a crown, similar to those worn by Daoist priests, atop his head. Like the mask of Erlang, Lingguan also features a third eye on the forehead. His ears are sharply pointed and he has bulbous eyes and a flaming red beard. It is interesting to note that Lingguan’s physical appearance is consistent with his representation in other areas of southern China.352 Like Erlang, Lingguan is considered a fierce deity, whose physical presence exorcises ghosts and demons from the ritual area.

Within the Yang Theatre performance of Huangtushao, Lingguan is more than simply an exorcist. Perhaps his most formidable trait is that he possesses the ledger of good and evil deeds, meaning that he can reward the good and punish evildoers. He interrogates and punishes any ghosts or demons occupying the home of the family sponsoring the ritual. Within his libretto it is also mentioned that Wang Lingguan investigates and punishes murderers, those who kill children, evil wives and kidnappers, arsonists (who burn the mountain forests), and dishonest merchants.353

Wang Lingguan appears in the performance Lingguan Inspects the Lord of the Earth. This performance illustrates the hierarchical nature of the deities, with Lingguan as heavenly superior and the Lord of the Earth as commoner, and can also be read as an opportunity for villagers to poke fun at officials and outsiders who intermittently descend on their villages, usually to make demands that cause local people hardship. Historic examples would be forced conscription or tax collection. A more modern example is population control.

After his arrival onstage, clutching white spirit flags in each hand to command legions of spirit soldiers, Lingguan seats himself onstage and summons the local Lord of the Earth to come down from the hill and greet him.354 Lingguan is already displeased upon the Lord of the Earth’s belated arrival, for on his journey to the village each Lord of the Earth (there are many) along the

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352 Stevens, Chinese Gods, 72.
353 YXK, 30b. For a detailed examination of what gave rise to local fears of quack medicine sellers and kidnappers see ter Haar, Telling Stories.
354 Huangpu, Guizhou Yangxi, pp. 62–63. Huangpu describes Wang Lingguan coming onstage in Luodian where the master of ceremonies bows before him and presents offerings of incense, paper money and wine, asking Wang to repress evil spirits on behalf of the sponsor.
Figure 5.5 The Huangtushao mask representing Wang Lingguan. He has a small crown like those worn in depictions of Daoist immortals. He also features a third eye. The red facial hair is a later addition. The original plugs of human hair are still evident, but worn away from years of use. 27cm.
way has been absent from duty:

When I left through Heaven’s South Gate the South Gate Lord did not receive me, when I crossed the mountaintops the Mountain Lord did not receive me, when I crossed the hills and fields the Seedling Lord did not receive me, when I passed the stockade the Stockade Protecting Lord did not receive me, only now arriving here do you welcome me.355

Wang Lingguan berates the Lord of the Earth for his disrespect. The Lord of the Earth looks at Lingguan dumbfounded and compares the shape of Lingguan’s bulbous eyes to eggs. The Lord of the Earth apologizes that everyone in the village is so busy and thus has neglected to properly worship Wang. Wang retorts that he already knows what has happened, since from his perch atop the clouds he can see everything. Lingguan is informed that the sponsor has made an offering to

355 YXK, 32a.
which Lingguan retorts he already knows about the offering and the sponsor’s debt to Lingguan
has already been written off. In response the Lord of the Earth tells Lingguan to eat shit, and
Lingguan responds in kind, noting that the Lord of the Earth has been helping himself to the
sacrificial offerings of food prepared by the sponsors. At the end of this banter Lingguan reminds
the Lord of the Earth to be respectful to him. In turn, Wang Lingguan promises to protect him
and take care of the village. The Lord of the Earth promises to make offerings of strings of cash
to obtain auspicious blessings.

This dialogue illustrates the hierarchical nature of the relationships between greater and lesser
deities (mirroring feudal relationships in the human realm), the importance of piety and respect,
and of knowing one’s own position in the hierarchy. At the same time, the cursing and banter
between an annoyed Lingguan and an initially disrespectful Lord of the Earth constitute a styl-
ized testing of the limits of feudal relationships. This echoes the stresses and strains of the dis-
enfranchised dealing with the powers that be, but ends by accepting the traditional relationships.
Once the dialogue between Wang Lingguan and the Lord of the Earth concludes, Wang seats
himself at the back of the stage. While Lingguan is seated, the Earth God performs an energetic,
spirited dance culminating in the opening of his robe to flash the audience. This too can be read
as an opportunity for the commoners to put a stick in the eye of authority.

When the Lord of the Earth has finished his performance the imperial couple and deified
ancestors, The Sacred Father of East Mountain and Sacred Mother of South Mountain are led
onstage. Two performers hold the figures facing one another, re-enacting the siblings meeting
after the great flood that left them humanity’s sole survivors.

Lord Guan 关圣帝君

Lord Guan (Fig. 5.7) is also a paramount deity in the Yang Theater tradition.356 In Huangtushao,
he is referred to as “Fourth Lord”, alongside the trinity of the Lord the River, the Lord of
Medicine and the Lord of the Earth. The mask of Lord Guan features a general’s helmet with a
topknot. His ample, fleshy face is rendered in soft relief suggesting an individual who is stout
and strong. He has narrow eyes beneath arched brows. His mustache and beard are made from
horsehair, but there has been a fair amount of loss to this beard and the paint upon his face since
the time the mask was created, likely due to the fact that this particular mask is one of the most
frequently used. Guan Yu’s face is painted a deep red, his defining physical feature, matching
descriptions of him in popular literature.

Lord Guan is a deeply revered deity in Fuquan where every township has a temple dedicated
to his worship. Lord Guan is regarded as a protector, exorcist, and bringer of good fortune,
particularly to those engaged in commerce.

The collection of stories contained in Chapters 20–26 of The Three Kingdoms make up the
content of the plays performed revolving around the life and exploits of Lord Guan. A number of

356 See ter Haar, Barend in Predagio, ed., The Routledge Encyclopedia of Taoism, pp. 454–455, for a general description of Lord
Guan’s historical significance.
Figure 5.7 The Huangtushao mask representing Lord Guan. He wears a military helmet. The red color suggests his ruddy complexion as described in *The Three Kingdoms*. The soft, rounded contours of his face suggest his stoutness and imposing physical demeanor. Within *The Three Kingdoms* Lord Guan is described as standing over nine spans, with a great beard flowing from rich, ruddy cheeks. His eyes are like those of a crimson faced phoenix, his brows like nestling silkworms, his voice like a tolling bell. 28cm.
smaller performance segments can be acted if there is not a desire to perform the entire story. During a three-day ritual cycle, a play featuring Lord Guan is performed late on the second evening. Where the Huangtushao performance diverges from the stories recorded in *The Three Kingdoms* is in the appearance of a monkey character, who comes onstage to teach Lord Guan magical arts 功法 that help protect him in his long journey to reunite with Liu Bei. The flexible appropriation of historical narrative to suit local convention points to the fact that while there is largely standardized narrative developed around deities like Lord Guan, stories become “local” within the community enacting them. His appearance brings blessings to the sponsor and also insures rain production in the case of drought, by Lord Guan by moving his spear 天上无水动干戈.

The Lord Guan narrative touches on the themes of the Peach Garden Pact, Lord Guan’s forced separation from his two sworn brothers Liu Bei and Zhang Fei, his faithful protection of Liu Bei’s wife and concubine (despite Cao Cao’s attempts to have Guan Yu betray his old master) and his

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357 Yang, *Qielan Nuohun*, pp. 189–211.
eventual reunification with his brothers at Gucheng. This canon of stories form the core of the Guan Yu mythological narrative within ritual theatre traditions across the Chinese cultural world.

When performing the Occupying of the Passes there is extensive martial swordplay culminating in the slaying of the general guarding a pass. This physical action of fighting is believed to have direct exorcistic efficacy. After slaying each general, Lord Guan raises his halberd into the air, and women with young children bring them onstage to pass under his weapon. This is believed to protect the children from plague demons.

**Liu Bei 刘备**
The mask representing Liu Bei (Figs. 5.9, 5.10) is simply carved, with black paint used to color his official hat. Red is used as an accent color on the bottom of his hat and his mouth. His face is colored with natural tung oil lacquer, rather than paint. The mask once had a beard though now only residual plugs of horsehair remain. The appearance of this mask is not particularly dramatic, perhaps reflecting the fact that Liu Bei’s chief importance is as a foil to illustrate the heroic deeds of Lord Guan. This mask is often used to substitute as a mask for characters where there is no extant mask.

*Figure 5.9* A performer dressed as Liu Bei, unsheathing his sword (baojian).
Figure 5.10 The mask portraying Liu Bei. This mask is also used to portray other characters when a specific mask does not exist. 26cm.
**Zhang Fei 张飞**
The third of the three brothers who took the oath in the Peach Garden, Zhang Fei (Fig. 5.12) is portrayed wearing a martial helmet with a topknot. His face is painted black with red and yellow accents, portraying fierce intensity and reflecting Zhang’s rash disposition. His bulbous eyes, furrowed brow and grimacing mouth reinforce his aggressive demeanor. The mask of Zhang Fei is also sometimes used to portray Zhou Cang (Fig. 5.11), one of Lord Guan’s loyal assistants. This mask is also used to represent Xiang Yu, Hegemon of Chu 霸王.

*Figure 5.11* Zhou Cang, a trusted follower in the service of Lord Guan.
Figure 5.12 A grimacing mask portraying Guan Yu’s rash comrade in arms Zhang Fei. This mask is also used to portray the Hegemon of Chu, Xiang Yu, in the play featuring Han Xin. It is also sometimes used to portray Zhou Cang, one of Lord Guan’s comrades in arms. 26cm.
Meng Jiang Nü 孟姜女
The mask used to represent Meng (Figs. 5.13, 5.14) is the same as that used to play Wife Gan. The story of Meng Jiang Nü is one of China’s most ancient dramas and is performed as ritual theatre across China. Legend says Meng Jiang Nü was a great beauty who captivated every man that saw her. The libretto sung prior to her arrival onstage is filled with sexual overtones and also suggests that the appearance of Meng Jiang Nü is connected with fertility for the family of the ritual sponsor. The plot of the tragic comedy begins with Meng, accompanied by her servant Meixiang, going to bathe in a pond. Meng is nervous that someone might see her unclothed so she instructs her servant to keep watch while she bathes. Her servant discovers Fan Qilang, a deserter from the army of Qin, perched in a nearby tree. This comic situation is fertile ground for suggestive banter between Fan and the servant girl. Meng’s racy libretto lingers over descriptions of her washing her breasts and thighs. She gazes into her hand mirror while drying off. In the mirror’s reflection Meng discovers

Figure 5.13 Meng Jiang Nü. This elaborate mask is also used to portray Wife Gan, first of Liu Bei’s wives.

358 Schipper, The Taoist Body, 78.
Figure 5.14  This mask is identified as representing both Gan Furen, first wife of Liu Bei, and Meng Jiang Nü. The elaborate crown once featured flower ornaments on both sides but the one on the right has broken off. She is wearing the phoenix crown, symbolizing her femininity and imperial status. 29cm.
Fan Qilang spying upon her. Fan Qilang quickly becomes Meng’s prospective groom, but not before suffering torrents of abuse from the future father-in-law. Fan goes to market a few days after the couple’s marriage and discovers on a wall bulletin that he is wanted for desertion. He is conscripted by the Emperor of Qin to build the Great Wall, in effect a death sentence. Meanwhile, Meng Jiang pines for her husband and looks out on the horizon daily, awaiting his return in vain. Eventually Meng sets off on a treacherous journey to the wall to carry Fan Qilang winter clothes. As Meng Jiang stops at each pass, the general in charge marvels at her courage and devotion to her husband. When she finally arrives at the construction site she learns that Fan Qilang is already dead, buried beneath the wall. Her torrents of anguished tears wash away a section of the wall and underneath she finds her husband’s remains.

Meng takes Fan Qilang’s bones to a Buddhist temple where a monk agrees to perform the proper Buddhist funeral rites for her husband’s soul to cross the bridge into the western paradise. This monk, rather than being benevolent, is portrayed as lascivious and does not miss the opportunity to sexually harass Meng before finally performing the requisite ceremony.

**Wife Gan** 甘夫人

Wife Gan is the senior of Liu Bei’s wives. In the Huangtushao troupe’s performance, Lord Guan safeguards Wife Gan and Liu Bei’s second wife, Wife Mi, escorting the pair on his perilous journey across the five passes, to be reunited with his sworn brothers Liu Bei and Zhang Fei in Gucheng.

The mask used to represent Wife Gan (also Meng Jiang Nü) is perhaps the most elaborate in the Huangtushao collection. Ornamenting her crowned coiffure is a finely carved bird ornament, originally framed by floral hairpins, the one on the left now missing. The base of her crown is a lotus blossom. Both the lotus blossom and phoenix crown are symbols of spiritual transcendence.

**Wife Mi** 糜夫人

The mask of Wife Mi (Figs. 5.15, 5.16) is painted with tung oil lacquer, giving it a pleasant golden sheen. It is carved with soft lines emphasizing femininity. Ornamenting the front of Wife Mi’s coiffure is a downward facing bird with outstretched wings. Her gently curved lips convey both benevolence and beauty.

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359 Huangpu, *Guizhou Yangxi*, 273. This mask is identified as Gan Furen, one of the wives of Liu Bei.

360 Doing fieldwork in Guizhou and Guangxi I heard anecdotal accounts that the bird is often employed as a phallic symbol.

361 This bird is also regarded as a phallic symbol signifying fertility.
Figure 5.16 The mask representing Mi Furen, second wife of Liu Bei. 26cm.
The Monk和尚

The nineteenth-century mask of the Monk illustrated on the following page (Fig. 5.18) is from the neighboring township of Disong. The mask representing the monk character in Huangtushao no longer survives. In the mask of the monk we see an ambivalent expression, which, although smiling, is hard to characterize as benevolent. The figure of the monk in popular drama is imbued with contradiction. We have already mentioned de Groot’s observation that historically monks were considered to be of low status, and in the case of itinerant monks, greeted by a great deal of skepticism and animosity by local people. Monks in Chinese literature and folktales are also portrayed negatively. Within the Outlaws of the Marsh novel the character of monk Sagacious Lu (Lu Zhishen) is portrayed as an impulsive drunkard, glutton and murderer. By the end of the Qing Dynasty many single men unable to marry wandered the roads of rural China and some wore a cassock. Twentieth-century writer, commentator, and scholar Lu Xun noted that while Chinese people held Daoist priests in high esteem, more often than not they reviled Buddhist monks. Even today wandering monks in provincial towns in the southwest are considered by locals to be imposters fleecing unsuspecting people out of their money. Nonetheless, because monks are associated with Buddhism, and the freeing of dead souls from the tortures of hell to arrive at the Western Paradise, their appearance is linked to some protective benefit.

Monks appear onstage in Guizhou’s vernacular dramas to inspect the sacrificial feast offerings and the character is sometimes referred to as The Monk Who Inspects the Sacrifice. The monk is also charged with assuring the sponsor’s redeeming of vows is genuine, but the performance of these duties is routine and met with little enthusiasm from the audience. The monk in Yang Theater is lewd and provides a great source of comic relief. Whenever the Monk appears the opportunity is not lost to engage in suggestive dialogue and trying to take advantage of any lone women he encounters.

Figure 5.17 The monk makes an appearance at a funeral ritual in Jiuzhou, Huangping. Despite a general contempt and distrust for monks, the monk’s appearance is believed to be auspicious, aiding in the saving of the soul of the deceased from the torments of the underworld. Here he engages in playful banter with the officiating ritual master to the delight of onlookers.

362 See ter Haar, Telling Stories, 130 and 245, for only two of numerous examples of monks being made scapegoats.
364 Davies, Lu Xun's Revolution, 282.
365 Gu, Guizhou Gunuo, 36.
Figure 5.18 A nineteenth century mask representing the Monk from Disong, a township southeast of Huangtushao. The face suffers areas of loss, likely due to damage from rodents while in storage. The monk’s expression is animated, but not entirely benevolent. For ordinary rural people monks were considered untrustworthy and often fraudulent. Their association with Buddhism nonetheless equipped them with some protective benefit. The monk appears as a lustful, humorous figure defying social conventions, yet he is also charged with making certain the host family has properly made the sacrificial offerings to the deities. 21cm.
The Civil and Military Scholars 文武秀才
Apart from different hats, the masks representing the Civil and Military Scholars (xiucai), are virtually identical (Fig 5.19). They can also be used to represent Fan Qilang, husband of Meng Jiangnü. One of the dreams of ritual sponsors was for their sons to pass the government examinations and achieve a position where money could be sent back to the village. The title of Xiucai was the lowest among imperial degrees, but it conferred on its holder the honor of successful scholarship and gave the bearer high status in the local community. Financial security alone, while elusive enough for the disenfranchised people of rural communities, still could not confer the prestige of one who managed to receive an education and an official position.

For the people who constituted these rural communities the opportunity to receive an education to become an official was more ideal than reality. None of the members of the Huangtushao troupe received more than a rudimentary elementary education. While basic education became more widespread after the 1949 revolution, at least until the onset of the Cultural Revolution, most elderly people never had the opportunity to learn to read. This is consistent with troupe members in other rural communities across Guizhou. The Xiucai represent the Chinese ideal of education as means of self-cultivation, social mobility, and erudition. Furthermore they demonstrate that while these communities were at the bottom of the societal hierarchy, rather than proposing the abolishment of institutions based upon rule by a small, educated elite, they too subscribed to the myth of a meritocracy and the possibility of social advancement through study and determination.

The performance of The Civil and Military Scholars is a slapstick comedy involving the interplay of two scholars and the Deranged Scholar 疯秀才, a villager who fancies himself a scholar, but has no manners or ability. This performance is closely related to the nüo play Gansheng Goes to Take the Imperial Examination 甘生赶考 and both feature the appearance of the beloved and grotesque Qintong 秦僮 as the book-carrying porter of the examination candidate. The libretto begins with the importance of study for boys, and government and military service as timeless paths to success. There is a contrast between the great effort required to read the classics and the natural process of the tilling and planting of the soil that results in a harvest.

These two Xiucai deities are not found in written compendiums of Chinese folk gods, but we can consider them as deities of learning or of the hope for an opportunity for education. The xiucai who appear during Yang Theater are benevolent spirits of former scholars. Worshipping them brings material blessings of gold and silver. When asked how they miraculously arrived at the altar con-

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367 WWXC, 2. “读的诗书通大丘, 不以耕种自然收” “To read the Book of Odes rely on Confucius, it’s not like tilling and planting for a natural harvest.”
368 Ibid., 2. “白天不怕人看见, 夜晚不怕贼来偷” “Do not fear people seeing you [studying] in the day, At night do not fear thieves stealing [it].”
369 Ibid., 4. “三伯秀才参拜你, 早落黄金, 夜落银” “Worship the Scholars, Receive gold ingots in the morning and silver at night.”
Figure 5.19 The Civil and Military Scholars. These two masks share an almost identical facial morphology and coloring to the masks of the two wives of Liu Bei, Han Xin and Little An. The masks of the scholars can also be used interchangeably to play Fan Qilang, the husband of Meng Jiang Nü. 26 cm.
sidering the arduous mountain roads and treacherous waterways their immortal origins are revealed. The deep fog shrouds the perilous mountain passes, thus they are oblivious to the potential danger. They travel treacherous waterways, but their boat is so high they cannot see the shoals below.\textsuperscript{370} Lastly, they sing that they have arrived before the altar through the smoke of the incense burner.\textsuperscript{371}

Once the acknowledgment of learning and obeisance to the deities has taken place, the dialogue quickly descends into a crass humorous exchange between the two genuine scholars and the deranged scholar. The interaction takes place as they journey to the capital to sit for the imperial examination. The plot either involves the deranged scholar sleeping with someone else’s wife or with the proprietress of the inn in the capital where he is staying. The back and forth question-and-answer between the performers contains ridiculous, juvenile allusions to things being suddenly big and small (phallicues), scatological references, female underwear, and passing gas. The two compare improvised poems (the one refined and the other vulgar) and calligraphy (the two scholars can write calligraphy, while the deranged scholars merely puts ink blots on the paper). This dialogue, contrasting the unsophisticated oaf with the two “genuine” scholars can initially be read as pure entertainment, exhibiting the crude humor of the underclass. Yet, this sketch also expresses the tensions and stark contrasts between the privileged, learned gentry, and the disenfranchised poor looking up from the bottom. A painful reality is acknowledged and diffused through humor. Here, too, the performance highlights and provides an outlet for social tensions, while ultimately buttressing the status quo.

**Han Xin 韩信**

All Yang Theater troupes perform *Han Xin Pursues the Hegemon of Chu* 韩信追霸王. The mask of Zhang Fei is often used to represent the Hegemon of Chu. The mask of Han Xin (Fig. 5.21) portrays a calm, youthful figure wearing a Han Dynasty style military helmet with a topknot. His face is colored with tung oil and lacquer. The carving is gentle and refined. The facial features of this mask are nearly identical to the masks of the two scholars in the Huangtushao collection, the only distinguishing difference between the three being the headwear. Han Xin is also represented on an altar painting indicating his high position amongst the deities worshipped in Huangtushao. Like Lord Guan, Han’s great apotropaic power comes from his unjust murder and subsequent existence as a vengeful ghost.

A pre-eminent general of the Chu-Han contention (206–208 BCE), the period following the fall of China’s first emperor Qin, Han Xin, has been the subject of popular theater at least since the twelfth century. The story of the Chu-Han contention was actually more popular than *The Three Kingdoms* prior to the establishment of the Ming Dynasty. Zhu Yuanzhang, the first Ming emperor, attempted to eradicate this performance tradition because the figure of crude peasant emperor Liu Bang, founder of the Han Dynasty, was thought to be an allusion to criticize the coarse and unrefined Zhu.\textsuperscript{372}

\textsuperscript{370} Ibid., 4. “我干路来，水路也来。你干路来有好多山，水路来有好多滩。我干路来烟雾沉沉不见山，我水路来船高水低不见滩。” “I come by road and also by waterway.” “If you come by road there are many mountains, if you come by waterway there are many shoals.” “The smoke and fog obscure the mountains, the boat is so high above the water I can’t see the shoals.”

\textsuperscript{371} Ibid., 4. “我从讲坛香内来。” “I came from the altar’s incense smoke.”

\textsuperscript{372} On the popularity of vernacular drama around the battle between Han and Chu, see Wilt Idema, “The Founding of the Han Dynasty in Early Drama: The Autocratic Suppression of Popular Debunking.” In: W. L. Idema and E. Zürcher eds., *Thought and Law in Qin and Han China*, pp. 183–207.
Han Xin is a source of inspiration and paragon of determination for Chinese people because he endured a fatherless childhood of abject poverty and rose to greatness. As a young man in his hometown he endured humiliation from a local ruffian. Rather than exacting retribution and killing the bully, he restrained his anger so that he could achieve greatness later in life. There is evidence that worship of Han Xin was especially important for disenfranchised people living on the margins of society.373 For the people of Huangtusao, Han Xin’s story is a morality tale, including injunctions against improper behavior.

When Deng Qiyu began performing with the Huangtusao troupe as a young man, he was warned that he must wait until after age 32 to begin performing the role of Han Xin, otherwise at the age of 32 he would encounter many difficulties. According to Deng’s elder informants, Han Xin died a premature death at 32 years of age due to five great sins committed during his life.

Figure 5.20 The fortune teller Han Xin encounters in Han Xin Pursues the Hegemon of Chu. The Yang Theater troupe in Daoping have incorporated contemporary costumes and props into their performance.

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Figure 5.21 The mask representing Han Xin, featuring a youthful expression and a military helmet. Han Xin was both worshipped and reviled at various points in Chinese history. Southerners saw Xiang Yu, Hegemon of Chu, as something of a folk hero. Han Xin ambushed and slayed Xiang Yu on the orders of future Han emperor Liu Bang. Later, after becoming emperor, Han Xin was also unjustly murdered at the hands of Liu Bang’s wife. Han Xin’s power as an atropaic figure comes from the fact that he is a vengeful, hungry ghost. 26cm.
The first was to bury his critically ill mother at Qinglong Mountain before she breathed her last breath. Second, he killed his wife because they could not get along with each other. Third, he defected from the service of his commander and feudal lord, Xiang Yu, to join the army of Liu Bang. Fourth, he participated in the ambush that led to the annihilation of Xiang Yu’s forces at Gaixia. Fifth, Han Xin pursued Xiang Yu until, in desperation, his former lord committed suicide along the bank of the Wu River. Han Xin’s actions violated notions of filial piety to his mother, and loyalty to his former feudal lord, Xiang Yu. The historical reality is that Empress Lü, wife of Emperor Liu Bang, grew increasingly distrustful of Han and had him cruelly executed at the age of 32. In Huangtushao, the popular explanation for his premature death is that each of his grievous sins subtracted eight years from his natural life.

The Lord of the Earth 土地
Within the Yangxi libretto for The Lord of the Earth he is credited with chasing away ravenous White Tiger spirits. An undated Qing Dynasty entry describes the Lord of the Earth (Figs. 5.22, 5.23) and his wife: “The Lord of the Earth is a local tutelary deity, worshipped throughout village lanes, in stone or wooden shrines. There are those without a sculpture, they take a wooden board of one foot or so long and two inches wide, inscribe it with the [name of] its lord, saying Lord of the Earth So-and-So. As for sculptures of the Lord of the Earth, those with bright white hair and beard are called Grandpa, those with a coiffure are called Grandma. They are offered sacrifices of paper money and candles, meats and wine, and sometimes a rooster. Locals say that if the Lord of the Earth is powerful then tigers and panthers stay away. They also say that elderly people in the villages who are honest and upright act as [Lords or Ladies of the Earth] after their death.”

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374 Usually it is said Han Xin indiscriminately killed two woodcutters when asking for directions, the story that he killed his young wife appears to be a local variant.
Figure 5.23 The mask representing The Lord of the Earth, the most important local tutelary deity. Associated closely with fertility and the fecundity of agricultural production, the performance of the Lord of the Earth is humorous, lewd and highly suggestive. The Lord of the Earth can also be understood as the spiritual representative of the villagers in interactions with higher celestial deities who are visiting during the course of a ritual cycle featuring Yang Theater. 27cm.
In the past there were many different Lords of the Earth venerated by the people of Huangtushao. Perhaps the most important for the ritual masters themselves is the lord who stands sentry at the Southern Gate of Heaven. He is represented on a scroll painting by Deng Qiyu that is hung behind the seat of the Merit Officers in the courtyard (Fig. 3.19). The ritual masters rely on the cooperation of this lord to make sure their memorials reach the palace of the Jade Emperor. There are also lords of the surrounding mountains and bridges, of crops, of the locale, the flower garden, a sentry who leads the spirit soldiers, and of the village home. Domestic altars in Huangtushao all have a seat for the Lord of the Earth of Longevity 长生土地 and his wife 瑞庆夫人. Despite the identities of these various lords, within the Yang Theater performance tradition he is represented as a singular entity. As the tutelary deity of the village he leads the other deities to the altar, including the Five Furies, who are represented next to the Lord of the Earth on the tablet beneath the altar table on Deng’s domestic shrine. The Lord of the Earth’s tablet and the Yang Theater libretto outlining his performance both reference the Lord’s association with protecting social order. On the oldest set of Huangtushao altar paintings he is illustrated in the lower register of paintings representing Lord Guan and Han Xin, leading the spirit soldiers of the five directions to the altar. A passage from his libretto begins:

Here comes the Lord of the Earth, here he comes, with a beard and white quiver. In the coming morning I’ll shoot (and bring rain) from the rosy clouds, at night I’ll shoot the mosquitos and other insects.

I’ve been passing through the clouds all day, the gong shakes the heavens, the drum shakes the earth, wonderful incense smoke, what good deed is going on here?  

The official of the ceremony responds:

An offering of Wuyang Flower Theater, the invitation was sent.

The Lord of the Earth replies to the officiant:

Mortals have eyes, they don’t dare to sloppily worship deities under false pretenses. Host, what colorful decoration is on the front of your house?

The officiant informs Tudi:

That is the Hall of The Lord of the River, The Lord of the Earth and the Medicine King.

Because of the Lord of the Earth’s close connection with the villagers he is especially beloved, but often does not get the respect he thinks he deserves. He complains that the shepherd boy accidentally knocks over the incense burner at his shrine. In Majie, the Huangtushao hamlet where Deng Qiyu lives, the original shrine to the Lord of the Earth is in ruins and abandoned. However, the roadside shrine to the Lord of the Earth closer to the north-south provincial highway is also the site of a large sacred tree and many people still actively burn incense there and place padlocks and red fabric on the tree to represent vows they have made.

376 YXK, pp. 25–26
377 YXK, 24.
The appearance of the Lord of the Earth provides opportunity for bawdy comic relief about village life and the relationships between husbands and wives:

Everyone else’s husband is like a husband, mine is like a big caterpillar, who sleeps until midnight and never dares move.378

The choice of a caterpillar as a physical object of comparison is an obvious one.

Others wives look like wives, mine looks like a big basket, two breasts like dried eggplants and a stomach like a lantern.

The Lord of the Earth is closely associated with fecundity, both for crops and human fertility. The connection between the lord, human fecundity, and the agricultural economy is an obvious one. His libretto also credits him with delivering gold and silver, and sons who will become officials.379 More offspring, particularly sons, means more hands to work in the fields and security for parents in old age. Sons are expected to remain in the ancestral village and care for their parents. Finally, the presence of the Lord of the Earth drives away evil spirits, protects the peace of the village, and blesses the village residents with longevity.

**Meixiang** 梅香

There is no extant mask to represent Meixiang, who is also known as Mei Hua. Meixiang was a common appellation for a slave girl or maid during imperial times and appears at least as early as the Yuan dramas documented by West and Idema.380 The performance of *Striking Mei Hua* 打梅花 occurs early in the performance program. While this program enacts the story of orphans Meixiang and her younger sister, in search of their missing parents, it is actually performed to expel all hungry ghosts from the village. Most Yang and Nuo Theater troupes across Guizhou, southern Sichuan and western Hunan perform the story of Meixiang. The plot revolves around the impoverished Meixiang and her younger sister. The siblings’ parents have long left the village in search of work to keep the family alive, but have now disappeared far from home and left the young girls to fend for themselves. Premature or accidental death outside the village, particularly by violence, is a worst-case scenario for a rural family in the southwest. It is believed death under these conditions and the failure to perform proper exorcism and funeral rites means a wandering, vengeful ghost can return to afflict the family. Whenever such a death occurs, it is necessary to hire a troupe of ritual masters to perform an exorcism to recover the malevolent ghost of the deceased, provide blood offerings to a substitute effigy and then send the demonic spirit safely beyond the human world.

When Meixiang and her sister discover an aunt who has been caring for them plans to marry them off to her two oafish sons they desperately set off far from home in search of their mother. Eventually the siblings encounter a fortune teller, who, with the assistance of a Buddhist monk,

378 Ibid., 27.
379 Ibid, 28.
380 West & Idema, *Monks, Bandits, Lovers and Immortals*, xviii.
performs the proper rituals to exorcise the ghost of Meixiang’s mother and fulfill Meixiang’s filial obligations. The fortune teller and monk also take the opportunity to sexually harass and engage in racy banter with the pair. Here, the presence of a “Daoist” fortuneteller and “Buddhist” monk imitate the reality of local funerary practice. The first evening of a typical three-day funerary ritual in Guizhou consists of Daoist rites of exorcism and the second night Buddhist rites for the soul to be safely dispatched to the western paradise. Both these ritual programs are typically conducted by the same funerary troupe. Usually the troupe performs the ritual in Daoist attire the first night and yellow Buddhist robes on the second one. At the conclusion of the performance, from offstage, the ritual masters chant that Meixiang and her mother have already reunited. The path to the human world through the “ghost door” is closed. All ghosts are banished from the village.

**Monkey**

The monkey (Figs. 5.24, 5.25) is one of the twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac. The monkey of Huangtushao is also sometimes called the Monkey King 猴王. The sorts of stories found in *Journey to the West* featuring the exploits of monkey deity Sun Wukong probably circulated widely among the common people of China long before they were ever committed to print. The Chinese name for monkey 猴 is a homophone for the word meaning nobleman or high official 侯. It is also a homophone for lineage descendents 后. The monkey has very early associations with Daoism. Warring States era military strategist Sun Bin 孙膑 (died 316 B.C.) recorded a story of how, while pursuing martial arts training with his master, a White Monkey appeared one night to steal fruit. This monkey reappeared a second night to deliver sacred scrolls and was thus recognized as a transcendent being. Corbey, in his study *The Metaphysics of Apes*, notes the presence of primates as liminal figures connecting humans to the world of the deities in

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381 Welch, *Chinese Art*, 137.
382 Mollier, *Buddhism and Daoism Face to Face: Scripture, Ritual and Iconographic Exchange in Medieval China*, 40.
Figure 5.25 The Monkey. The monkey is a trickster figure closely associated with good fortune and magical powers. He appears in Lord Guan Crosses the Five Passes to teach Lord Guan magical arts necessary to survive his perilous journey to reunite with his sworn brothers Liu Bei and Zhang Fei. He can also appear onstage to provide comic relief or perform an acrobatic dance. 26cm.
popular traditions worldwide.\textsuperscript{383} The monkey is also associated with magic and passing along magical skills to humans.\textsuperscript{384} It is in precisely this role that the monkey appears onstage to Lord Guan, to provide the magical skills necessary to his survival when crossing the Five Passes to reunite with Liu Bei and Zhang Fei.

A younger performer who is capable of performing gymnastics and acrobatic feats to delight the crowd usually wears the mask of Monkey. Despite his reputation as a trickster, the monkey is believed to bring health, good fortune and success to people by driving away evil spirits.\textsuperscript{385}

**Yuanwai** 员外\textsuperscript{386}

Yuanwai (Fig. 5.26) is an archaic term for landlord.\textsuperscript{387} Yuan Wai is the patriarch of the Fan clan and father of three sons. He appears in the performance of the Meng Jiang Nü narrative. One day agents of Emperor Qin, called *gongchai* 公差 arrive in the village looking for conscripts to build the Great Wall.\textsuperscript{388} Two of Fan’s sons are already too old to join the military, so his youngest son is ordered to report to the Qin court. In the interplay between Fan Yuanwai and the agents of Emperor Qin we sense the tension between the members of the community and outside officials.

The narrative of Fan Qilang also plays out the conflict and inherent tension between going to work outside the village and a male’s filial responsibility to help the extended family with farm labor and care for his parents in old age. At the outskirts of the village Fan Qilang meets Tang the Second, who agrees to accompany Fan on his journey to the Qin court. Tang the Second is a jovial trickster whose earthiness contrasts with Fan Qilang’s refinement. Even if the viewer is unfamiliar with the story being played out, the contrasting physical appearance of these two masks indicates to the viewer a stark difference in the social class of the two characters. While Fan Qilang is straightforward in his dealings with those he meets on the road, Tang the Second tries to cheat the boatman who ferries the pair across the river out of his fee. Tang also takes every opportunity to flirt with the girls running the inn when the pair stops for a meal and drink.

When Fan Qilang finally arrives at the Qin court the emperor realizes his talents and makes him an officer at the Great Wall. Unfortunately even this award does not save him from his eventual death there, which is picked up in the conclusion to the story of *Meng Jiang Nü*. The mask of Yuanwai can also be used to portray the fortune teller encountered by Meixiang and her sister on their journey to find their parents.


\textsuperscript{386} This title is an abbreviation for 员外郎.

\textsuperscript{387} In *Art of Guizhou Masks* this mask is identified as Liangshan Lord of the Earth.

\textsuperscript{388} The *gongchai* 公差 were yamen bailiffs notorious for their brutality. A Chinese dictionary entry describes the *gongchai* capturing peasants and leading them like leading dogs 公差捕老农, 牵人如牵狗. http://www.zdic.net/c/c/31/76231.htm retrieved February 14, 2016.
This mask can be used to represent the Liangshan Lord of the Earth. Originally it was ornamented with plugs of white hair on the eyebrows, mustache and beard, communicating the character's status as a respected village elder. This mask can also represent Yuan Wai, the father of Fan Qilang (husband of Meng Jiang Nü). 27cm.
Qintong 秦僮
The mask of Qintong (Figs. 5.27, 5.28) is no longer in Huangtushao. It was taken from the village by a Guiyang based researcher in the mid-1980s “for research” and never returned. Qintong is an important humorous character in both Yang and Nuo Theater traditions. The most distinctive trait of Qintong masks from across Guizhou is their physically distorted appearance. One story recounts that Qintong was originally a son of the Jade Emperor. Because he was born severely deformed, the Jade Emperor kicked him through the Southern Gate of Heaven and down to earth. He was adopted by a family surnamed Qin. Qintong was a kind-hearted soul who performed many good deeds to help those around him, and for this Li Laojun made him immortal. In Huangtushao, Qintong appears in the performance of *The Scholars* where he serves as a porter for the scholars travelling to the capital to take the imperial examination.

Within the Yang and Nuo Theater tradition of northern Guizhou Qintong also has a wife with a similarly distorted face. The couple perform a play where they have an infant son (bringing a wish of fertility to the sponsor). The climax of the humorous story is when the baby boy Mrs. Qintong is holding suddenly pees on the audience, a feat accomplished by a small, concealed plastic bottle (in the past an animal’s intestine or bladder could be used for a similar purpose). I had the pleasure of receiving this surprise while visiting Meitan County in 2010.

The mask itself is grotesque, if less so than many other examples of the same character from elsewhere in Guizhou. The morphology of a twisted face with an exaggerated turban and topknot is used on jester-like figures across ritual theater genres. The distorted face is also used for humorous characters in the Beijing Opera tradition. The unsettling, physically grotesque appearance of Qintong is useful in driving away evil spirits and reflects the perception of physically deformed people as liminal beings not belonging entirely to the human world.

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389 The mask of Qintong illustrated here is published in Xue, ed., *The Art of Chinese Ritual Masks*, 164, Plate 393. It is attributed to Pingzhuang Township, Cengong County, Guizhou. The image illustrated was photographed by Katie Loux.


391 The distorted physical features of Qintong are closely related to those of Tiaofu 挑夫, the character of the porter in ritual drama of northern Guangxi. Among the Maonan people this physical distortion is attributed to Tiaofu’s physical discomfort at carrying people and goods across the mountains.


393 Gu et al., *Nuoxi Mianju Yishu*, 150 for a related Earth Theater mask.

Figure 5.28 Qintong, or Crooked Mouth Qintong. Legend says Qintong was born a son of the Yellow Emperor, kicked out of Heaven for his hideous appearance. On earth he was adopted by a family surnamed Qin. He spent his life achieving merit by doing good deeds for others. Masks with particularly disturbing physical features are also believed to be especially efficacious in dispelling evil. This and other older examples feature protruding teeth, suggesting fangs.
Tang the Second 唐二
The mask of Tang the Second (Figs. 5.29, 5.30) depicts a bearded, expressive peasant wearing a distinctive turban. This morphology is also used in other parts of Guizhou for this comic, jester character. Tang the Second is a character found in Yang and Nuo Theater traditions. The role of this jovial character is flexible. In addition to his appearance alongside Fan Qilang in the Meng Jiang Nü story, Tang can appear onstage randomly to provide entertainment and inject humor into skits. These humorous dialogues are improvised.

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395 Wang, ed., Zhongguo Minjian Meishu Quanji, Vol. 11. See Figure 327 for a related hat being worn by a performer of the Qin Qiang tradition, popular in Shanxi and China’s northwest.
Figure 5.30 Tang the Second. Tang is a jovial, rustic elderly villager who acts as a trickster, comic foil for more upright characters. His unique turban is also found among humorous characters in other regional opera traditions. 26cm.
Zhong Kui 钟馗
The mask of Zhong Kui (Fig. 5.31) is carved in the same style as the masks of Wang Lingguan and Erlang and is obviously from the same carver’s hand. Like the other masks of fierce, protective deities he has demonic features—namely a furrowed brow, bulbous eyes and upper and lower protruding fangs. Zhong Kui, popular slayer of ghosts and demons, appears in the performance Zhong Kui Slays Ghosts 钟馗斩鬼. The popular worship of Zhong Kui likely began with a story attributed to Tang Dynasty Emperor Xuanzong (712–756). According to later Song Dynasty sources, once the Emperor was gravely ill. In a feverish dream he envisioned two ghosts. The smaller of the two ghosts stole a purse from Xuanzong’s beloved consort Yang Guifei and a flute that belonged to the emperor. The larger ghost, dressed in an official’s hat and the robe of an imperial scholar, captured the smaller ghost, tore out his eye and ate it. He then introduced himself to Emperor Xuanzong as Zhong Kui. He told the Emperor he had committed suicide after failing to achieve high honors in the imperial examinations. Henceforth, Zhong Kui pledged to rid the empire of ghosts and demons. After recovering from his illness Xuanzong commissioned court painter Wu Daozi to produce an image of Zhong Kui. While this painting does not survive, it likely influenced many latter depictions of this protective demon queller. Zhong Kui became closely associated with exorcisms at the eve of Chinese New Year. During the Song Dynasty the “Dance of Zhong Kui” was featured in theatrical performances viewed by both elite and common people. Zhong Kui wears a martial robe and grasps a sword. Five youths in facial makeup portraying little ghosts 小鬼 may appear onstage with him. A fascinating example of the general homogeneity of popular conceptions of folk deities can be drawn by comparing a reproduction Qing Dynasty woodblock print from Shandong Province, which illustrates Zhong Kui in an identical arrangement, surrounded by five accompanying small demons. Zhong Kui captures and drives ghosts from the home of the ritual sponsor.

Little An 安安
Little An (Fig. 5.32) is a filial and studious son, featured in the performance Little An Delivers Rice 安安送米. The mask of Little An is distinctive among the Huangtushao maks due to its diminutive size, suggesting the character’s youthfulness, and that it is worn by a young performer. It is very sensitively carved, likely because its representation of a cherished son full of potential for the future resonates so strongly with all members of the community. A youthful lad is also a symbol of purity and by association a powerful dispeller of evil. This mask is also used to represent the Auspicious Son Who Attracts Wealth 招财童子.

The mask of Little An wears a Qing Dynasty style cap. The mask has playful eyes, a gentle smile and two small dimples on its cheeks. The play Little An Delivers Rice is performed

396 Zhong Kui has been part of the popular imagination for well over 1000 years. See the Yuan Dynasty painting The Demon Queller Zhong Kui Giving His Sister Away in Marriage, Yan Geng (active late 13th century) in the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection.


398 Johnson and Sung, Domesticated Deities and Auspicious Emblems, 140.

399 There is no extant text for this play in Huangtushao and it does not appear to have been performed for many years. The plot outline comes from Yang, Qielen Nahun, pp. 634–651.
Figure 5.31  The mask of demon slayer Zhong Kui features sharp ears and protruding fangs lending an especially aggressive, demonic countenance. This mask was also likely used historically to represent the Judge Who Erases the Debt. Near the conclusion of a ritual theater cycle a troupe member representing The Judge comes onstage with a calligraphy brush in hand to didactically represent the “striking out” of the sponsor’s debt in the account books of the underworld. 27cm.
Figure 5.32 This mask can be used to represent The Auspicious Lad Who Attracts Wealth or Little An, the filial son. Its diminutive, tender appearance communicates the purity of a promising young lad and the hopes of parents for the next generation. This mask is especially sensitively carved and features small dimples on each cheek. 20cm.
especially for those praying for the birth of a son, and is part of an extended ritual program. Little An is in the repertoire of both Yang and Nuo Theater troupes.400

The subject matter of this story illustrates the harm caused by village gossip, tensions between the patrilineal clan and women who marry into the family, and the importance of upright behavior. The plot revolves around a malicious aunt who viciously slanders Little An’s mother behind her back. She tells Little An’s paternal grandmother that she witnessed Little An’s mother practicing sorcery, burning incense and paper money, and reciting incantations to have the Thunder God strike her mother-in-law dead. Despite the pleadings of husband and son, Little An’s paternal grandmother banishes the mother from the house. Distraught, Little An’s mother goes to the riverbank prepared to commit suicide and is only saved by the intervention of immortal Tai Bai 太白星. Tai Bai provides Little An’s mother with supernatural medicine. He instructs her that Little An’s grandmother will become gravely ill. When her mother-in-law does in fact become ill, Little An’s mother returns with the medicine to cure her. At this time the truth is revealed. Little An’s mother is forgiven and the family reunited. For the period of time Little An’s mother is away from the home, Little An performs his filial duty by delivering her meals at the temple where she has sought temporary refuge. This simple morality play reinforces the notion that the good may prosper in spite of hardships, and the importance of filial obligations. Little An also illustrates the tension between mother and daughter-in-law, living together under the same roof. Traditionally a daughter-in-law essentially becomes the property of the family she marries into. There is obvious potential for conflict and trauma in such a scenario, particularly when everyone is living in close quarters in a single house or compound.

Young Daughter-in-Law 幺儿媳妇
This mask (Fig. 5.33) was identified by some villagers as representing Kaishan, the Fierce General, but this is certainly a convolution. In the nuo tradition, Kaishan’s axe handle is destroyed by pests, and he takes it to be repaired. This mask represents the daughter in law of the blacksmith charged with repairing it. The three—Kaishan, the Blacksmith and the Young Daughter-in-Law—appear on stage together in a humorous dialogue.401

The Vanguard Who Opens the Road 开路先锋
The Vanguard Who Opens the Road is also known as the Mount Breaker 开山 or the Mount Breaking Fierce General 开山猛将 (Fig. 5.34). The arrival of the deities, portrayed by masked troupe members is thought of as a journey from Heaven or the netherworld to the altar and stage. Like an inspection tour by government officers, extensive work is undertaken to prepare for a dignitaries arrival. The Vanguard is tasked with clearing the roads of the five directions from any obstructions that might stand in the way of arriving deities. Clearing the road to the underworld is also necessary so the ritual masters can banish ghosts and demons and free lost souls from the torments of hell. Illness, particularly mental illness, is also believed to be associated with the stealing of one’s soul. Kailu can clear the obstacles associated with Guizhou’s mountain environment to rescue souls and return them

401 Liu et al., Nuo Mian, 30.
to the living. There is a direct benefit for the community through Kailu’s appearance as he pacifies the territory surrounding the home and village.

When he appears onstage Kailu carries battle-axes in both hands and employs martial arts in his battle against recalcitrant evil spirits. While informants in Huangtushao have appropriated the mask of Young Daughter in law to represent Kailu, there are extant published examples to correct this erroneous identification.

Figure 5.33 This mask, representing Young Daughter-in-Law, features a prominent pair of ponytails atop her head. Young Daughter-in-Law is the wife of a local blacksmith who helps the Vanguard that Clears the Path to repair his battle axe. 26cm.


403 Liu et. al., *Nuo Mian*, pp. 78–87.
The mask of Kailu employs red paint, horns, bulbous eyes, a furrowed brow, and grimacing fangs to communicate his fierce countenance. Like other protective deities of demonic origin, he serves the ritual masters and community in the performance of merit-based rituals in exchange for offerings and advancement in the spirit hierarchy. Northern Guizhou, late 19th/early 20th century (25 cm).
5.10 Bringing Tradition to Life

The underlying rationale for performing Yang Theater is the expulsion of ghosts and demons in order to obtain domestic peace and harmony. This is accomplished through the presentation of offerings, including theater, to the deities. Yang Theater also brings happiness to the assembled audience. Fecundity in agriculture, protection of domestic livestock, the blessing of male heirs to continue the lineage and communal harmony are also purported benefits. Ritual theater strengthens the bond between humanity and its spiritual protectors. Communal feasting deepens the unspoken alliance the community members have made with one another to insure mutual survival.

Daily life in the village for most of the year is monotonous, consisting of arduous physical labor to grow enough food to survive, living in close quarters, conservation of limited resources, and suppressing individual desires for the welfare of the extended family and community. Theater is the most lavish entertainment and extravagance a sponsoring family can provide for their guests, granting the host family a great deal of face and prestige, giving the members of the community a chance to relax and enjoy themselves, and binding guests to reciprocate in the future.

Impersonation of the deities via masks makes ritual exchange of offerings between the sponsoring family and its protector deities possible. Without a context for these material transactions, based upon reciprocal obligation and revolving around direct interaction and exchange in the form of food and beverages between men and their supernatural protectors, the security, good fortune and unity sought by the community in their battle against unseen evil forces would be impossible.

The primary context for Yang Theater is the agricultural community. Life within this community requires a high degree of mutual cooperation between members, associated with the annual round of farming activities. At the same time the community is at the mercy of the weather, disease and pestilence, random events, competition for scarce resources, and (sometimes) hostile neighbors. To meet the needs of this community, the Yang Theater ritual program neutralizes many of these ills. This is linked to a belief that these ills are caused by the agency of ghosts, which must be periodically driven away from the household or the village in order for the inhabitants to prosper. Ceremonies for driving away such spirits are found across Asia and restore a degree of “control” to communities that are often at the mercy of forces they cannot influence. The common feature of such ceremonies is the calling of powerful protector deities to do the “driving away,” their propitiation with offerings, then bidding them farewell when the exorcism is complete. This exorcism is, however, a temporary solution. Eventually the evil spirits return and the ritual cycle must be performed again. The “possession” of the performers by the powerful deities is also an essential element of such performances.

The re-creation of historical myths, as they are understood in the villages animates timeless themes about cultural values, particularly the illustration of moral truths like loyalty, brotherhood, and filial piety through the enacting of popular folklore, particularly in the narratives revolving around the Chu-Han contention, Lord Guan, and Meng Jiang Nü. Visual culture and imagery has an
especially important role among largely non-literate communities where performance and “seeing” is the chief means of cultural transmission. An oral and visual performance tradition is the primary means of perpetuating history, belief, and identity amongst the villagers of Guizhou, and has preserved their culture and collective identity for hundreds of years.

Performances based on the hagiographies of the deities are a didactic reminder of the importance of celestial protectors, their responsibilities and a way of concretely manifesting the deities responsible for protecting mortals by exorcising evil spirits.

The alternation of performances by grave and wrathful gods with humorous skits is another feature of Yang Theater that is shared by many performance traditions across Asia. It is telling that these humorous plays are the ones that generate the greatest enthusiasm from the audience. Humor is necessary to maintain the interest of active participants and observers in rituals that often last several days. These skits also importantly provide the agency for venting of societal tensions by exposing conflicts and contradictions within the community and providing temporary resolution.

We should, however, be wary of overemphasizing the content of individual performances when considering their impact on their audience. The masked troupe members onstage have familiarity with the stories they are acting and awareness of the apotropaic functions of particular performances, which audience members may or may not understand. For individual audience members the degree of understanding and interest regarding content varies a great deal. Because performers are wearing masks and their voices are not amplified, much of what is sung or spoken is unintelligible to onlookers. Anyone who has witnessed performances of this type in the Chinese countryside knows entertainment often seems like a backdrop for the gambling and socializing taking place, with ebbs and flows in the level of audience interest. The communal feasting, drinking, and gambling that accompany these rituals provides the opportunity for renewing of bonds and strengthening of the communal relationships necessary for survival, prosperity, and the lessening of tensions that work against mutual cooperation. The conclusion of these activities brings both renewal and catharsis for the sponsors and their invited guests. The sponsor can feel reassured that his obligations to the deities have been fulfilled and that these protectors have recognized his sacrifice. In sponsoring Yang Theater, equilibrium is restored between community members and between the sponsor’s family and the deities and ancestors responsible for their protection. Alliance building between men and spirits, and community members with one another assumes greater significance in a society where state power and order have only an intermittent presence. Building and nurturing a network of alliances is the chief means of ensuring peace and security.

The Yang Theater performance program takes place as one component of a ritual framework common to communal ritual traditions across China consisting of 1) procession, 2) exorcism and purification, 3) a presentation of a memorial or petition to the gods, 4) a presentation of sacrificial offerings, 5) theatrical performance, and 6) sending the deities away. The ritual

404 Ruizendaal, Marionette Theatre in Quanzhou, 343. He writes that more than half of stage language is unintelligible to the audience.
complex includes elements recognizable as Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist, but cannot be reduced to clear, singular categorization. In performances like Meixiang and Monkey we see the interplay of symbols (fortune tellers, divination and ritual exorcism) typically associated with Daoism, and symbols (monks and funeral rites) typically understood as Buddhist. Confucian values like filial piety, reverence for education, and the importance of proper ritual performance also inform the teachings of the troupe and the content of their performances. The ritual text itself specifically mentions the Auspicious Deities of the Three Teachings 三教福神. These elements blend in such a way that attempts to separate them apart tend to fail, and can in fact obscure understanding of how ritual in Guizhou is an accretion of many different influences, which together constitute a coherent system guiding individual and group conduct in relation to society, ancestors, and the spirit world.

Within the text of the Memorial of Thanksgiving, the masked theatrical performances are itemized as one of the collection of offerings for the assembled deities. Taken at face value, theater is overtly religious in its presentation as a material offering. The masked performances also banish ghosts and demons and bring the audience happiness and good fortune. While the religious function of these performances has been well documented, an overemphasis on their religious dimension compromises a fuller picture of their role within local society.

If we focus on Yang Theater and other varieties of vernacular theater as exclusively religious or apotropaic in nature, left unexplained is the extensive incorporation of folk history, parables and (often bawdy) comedy into the repertoire. We also risk losing sight of another key aspect of performance-based ritual, that of spectacle and entertainment. In ten years of intermittent research and travels around southwest China I have heard a similar comment from many informants across a wide geographical area. Because I have heard the same sentiment, expressed in a closely related way, from many divergent sources, it bears repeating here: “When we were young there was no television.” These masked performances are very important as a source of entertainment for villagers and a distraction from a mundane life working in the fields and caring for livestock. Many informants have shared stories about how as children they excitedly anticipated the performances, particularly those occurring around New Year festivities.

Beyond functioning as entertainment for the assembled guests they also function as a living history. Elders have an opportunity to educate children about the bravery of Lord Guan’s example and his exemplary character by pointing to him onstage. Within the troupe itself there are also sayings that point to the troupe’s understanding of their own role onstage as teachers to the audience. “Those onstage educate the audience” and the years of study required to fulfill this responsibly means “to stand onstage one day you must study ten years.” Thus the troupe is a religious institution preserving tradition through time and the social organism that brings the beliefs, identity, and understanding of the world to life before the eyes of the community’s members, reminding them of their shared history, shared obligations to the deities and the ancestors, and their identity as members of a shared civilization.

405 YXX, 15a
Figure 5.35  This mask of Han Xin from Disong has a helmet featuring two dragons flying above the sea chasing a pearl. Significant loss has occurred during the time the mask has been in storage. 29cm.
5.11 Stylistic Variations

I am including four additional masks (Figs. 5.35–5.38) from Disong, Fuquan as comparative examples to demonstrate that there was considerable room for stylistic variation between mask types belonging to different troupes. None of these masks has been used for performing in the modern period. They belong to the elderly son of a deceased ritual master who was active before the 1949 Chinese revolution.

Figure 5.36 This mask from Disong, representing Lord Guan, also features a helmet ornamented with dragons. The carving of the helmet’s protective earflaps are particularly well rendered and three-dimensional, making it unique among extant examples. The plugs of hair are completely lost leaving only the holes where they were originally inserted. 29cm.
This mask of Wang Lingguan from Disong is poorly carved around the mouth, giving it an unfinished appearance. It almost appears as if the carver did not have time to finish his work. 28cm.
Figure 5.38 The mask of Monkey from Disong also shows significant loss including a field repair to a split on the left hand side of the face. 27cm.