

A Symbolic Interpretation of the Lantian Yao 'Wu Huo Gou' Ritual from the Perspective of the Theory of Bodily Transition

Ting Li

Guangdong University of Technology and Education, Guangzhou, Guangdong, 510665, China

ABSTRACT

The ultimate aim of any sub-discipline within anthropology is to study humanity, focusing on the transition from the natural to the social self. This article takes the 'Wu Huo Gou' rite of passage for Yao girls in Lantian, Longmen County, Guangdong, as its subject of study. Drawing upon rites of passage theory and the symbolic expression of ritual song and dance, it explores how Lantian Yao girls transform from a physical body (childhood) into a social body (adulthood, endowed with status, rights and obligations), and how the body expresses social relationships, identity and power. This not only demonstrates the significance of bodily transition but also embodies ancestor worship and animism, highlighting the influence of the Yao people's primitive religion, Han Taoism and the Confucian elements of traditional Chinese culture. It indicates that the 'Wu Huo Gou' ceremony and its associated dance are the result of interaction and exchange between the Yao and Han ethnic groups.

KEYWORDS

Physical transition; Lantian Yao; Wu Huo Gou; Symbolism

1 Introduction

The ultimate aim of any sub-discipline within anthropology is to study human beings, focusing on the transition from the natural to the social. John O'Neill proposed the concept of the 'multiple bodies', identifying five distinct forms: the world body, the social body, the political body, the consumer body and the medical body^[1]. The sociologist of the body, Chris Hilling, observes: 'The most fruitful way to conceptualise the body is to understand it as a phenomenon that is both biological and social, one that undergoes transformation within specific constraints as a result of its entry into and participation in society. It is precisely this dual nature—both biological and social—that renders the body both seemingly ordinary and elusive.'^[2] How does the physical body transform into a social body and a body endowed with rights? Life-cycle rites, acting as rites of passage, play a role in the cultural shaping of the body; from birth, coming of age, marriage and childbirth to death, they 'gradually transform the "natural" body into a social entity possessing identity, rights and status'^[3]. Arnold Van Gennep and Victor W. Turner referred to these as rites of passage. 'All rites of passage consist of three stages: separation, liminality (or the threshold), and reintegration. In the initial stage of separation, symbolic acts signify that an individual or group has departed from their former fixed position within the social structure, or has left a set of cultural conditions (a state); during the intermediate liminal period, the status of the ritual subject ('the passer') is ambiguous, in the third stage, the transformation is complete. At this point, the ritual subject—be it an individual or a group—returns to a stable state, thereby possessing clearly defined 'structural' rights and obligations, and is expected to behave in accordance with certain conventional norms and moral standards.'^[4] The *Liji* (Book of Rites), a seminal work on Confucian thought and the ritual norms of ancient Chinese society, describes the coming-of-age ceremony for Han Chinese women—the *jili*—as set out in the *Neize* chapter of the *Liji*: 'At the age of fifteen, she wears the hairpin; at twenty, she marries.'^[5]

Consequently, this chapter will examine the 'Wu Huo Gou' ritual performed by Lan Tian Yao girls during their coming-of-age ceremony in Longmen County, Guangdong. Drawing upon transition ritual theory and the symbolic expressions of ritual song and dance, it will explore how Lan Tian Yao girls transform from a physical body (childhood) into a social body (adulthood, endowed with status, rights and obligations), and how the body expresses social relationships, identity and power.

2 Physical Transition and Symbolism: The 'Wu Huo Gou' Ritual and its Musical and Dance Practices

The 'Wu Huo Gou' ceremony is a folk rite of passage for young girls that combines dance, faith and custom. It is held exclusively on the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, and serves to mark an important transition in a girl's journey to adulthood: After undergoing three 'Wu Huo Gou' ceremonies, girls aged thirteen or fourteen are deemed to have attained both physical and psychological maturity.

2.1 The Rite of Passage: The 'Mei-zai House'—a rite Marking the Transition from Childhood

Rituals performed to mark a departure from one's previous state are commonly referred to in anthropology as rites of passage. When Yao girls in Lantian reach the age of thirteen or fourteen, the elders of the family (grandmothers and maternal grandmothers) and their mothers will require them to participate in the 'Wu Huo Gou' ceremony. Before the fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, the elders or the mother will personally teach the girl the dance movements of the 'Wu Huo Gou', explaining the rules of the ritual and the significance (or function) of each stage. Come the early

morning of the fifteenth, the parents would head up the mountain in the dew to gather galangal leaves and mountain vines. When picked to adorn the hems of dresses, they serve to ward off mosquitoes and evil spirits. Around 7 o'clock in the evening, the girls taking part in the ceremony gather at the 'Mei Zai House', a place symbolising the threshold of childhood. Here, they are dressed by women recognised by the clan as blessed with good fortune; in local belief, women possessing 'good fortune' and a 'favourable destiny' will bring blessings to the girls. The women tie galangal leaves to the girls' arms to form sleeves, bind them to their calves to form trouser legs, and string them around their waists to form skirts. According to the tradition's custodian, He Liandi: " 'In ancient times, people were poor and had no clothes to wear. They lived in cave dwellings in the mountains, where there were many mosquitoes and insects. Turmeric leaves are large and can not only be made into skirts, but their scent also repels insects. Having the girls wear such skirts serves as a reminder of the hardships endured by our ancestors, whilst also admonishing the girls to be thrifty and manage their households diligently in the future.' "^[6] It is thus evident that dressing the girl in a gown made of turmeric leaves serves as a tribute to the ancestors. While dressing and grooming the girl, the women of good fortune instruct her on how to become a virtuous wife in her future in-laws' home. The girl participating in the coming-of-age ceremony wears a conical hat adorned with burning incense, symbolising protection from wind and rain. Nine sticks of incense are tied to her waist and arms, with three held in each hand. The numbers nine and three are characteristic of Taoist rituals. Once the incense is lit, a young girl participating in the 'Wu Huo Gou' for the third time leads the procession out of the 'Maiden's House' and towards the ancestral hall, symbolising her departure from childhood.

2.2 Rites of Passage and Song-and-dance Performances: The Marginality and Ambiguity of the Body and Identity

The threshold is sacred, ambiguous and situated on the margins.^[7] Victor Turner provided a more detailed account of the liminal state, using the term 'communitas' to describe its anti-structural and ambiguous characteristics. He argued that the liminal state—or those in it—is characterised by a lack of clarity; they are dangerous, inauspicious and impure.^[8] During the 'Wu Huo Gou' rite of passage in the Lantian Yao community, the girls find themselves in a liminal phase where both their bodies and identities exist on the margins of social categorisation, occupying a state of ambiguity between non-sociality and sociality. Thus, when the girls emerge from the 'sisters' house'—that is, upon entering the liminal phase—their bodies must be wrapped in turmeric leaves to ward off evil spirits, they must wear a conical hat topped with burning incense, with burning incense sticks inserted into their bodies, and must hold three burning incense sticks in each hand. At the same time, a group of boys of similar age provide support, known as the 'Die Huogou' (fire-scaring dogs). They set off firecrackers at the ceremonial site to scare away mischievous spirits and evil forces with the sound of the explosions, thereby 'cleansing' the area so that the girl undergoing the rite of passage may proceed smoothly through the ceremony.

The group of young girls first presented a sack of dog food in the ancestral hall, lit the incense, and then kowtowed to the 'Lord of the Cave' and the clan's ancestors. A highly respected elder imparted the clan's history, customs and ancestral teachings to the girls, admonishing them to be compassionate and maternal. Beyond serving as a rite of passage, this ceremony also carries a metaphorical significance: firstly, it reflects the gratitude of the Lantian Yao people towards dogs for nursing their ancestors with their milk, viewing them as their ancestors' 'second parents'; secondly, it commemorates Panhu and honours the ancestors, representing a form of canine totem worship. Mr Ye Chunsheng noted: 'The Yao people adhere to the Panhu myth, which holds that the dragon-dog is their ancestor; consequently, they have long preserved the custom of respecting and loving dogs. The Wu Huo Gou has also evolved from the traditions of "circling whilst carrying a dog" and "worshipping the dog".'^[9] Secondly, the worship of 'Lord of the Mountain' (Dongzhu Ye): the Lantian Yao regard the Lord of the Mountain as the supreme deity of their mountain range. Thirdly, the Lantian Yao people give thanks to Panhu, the Lord of the Dong, and other ancestors for their benevolence. Whilst praying for favourable weather and bountiful harvests, they also seek blessings for girls undergoing a rite of passage (threshold period) to ensure they successfully navigate this transition.

As a rite of passage marking the threshold of adulthood, the primary form of initiation involves enabling the initiate (the girl) to fully embrace her new social role (that of an adult). After emerging from the ancestral hall, the girls proceed in an orderly manner to the earthen pond where the bonfire has been lit. Centred around the bonfire, they form a large circle at regular intervals, singing the 'Song of Wu Huo Gou' whilst moving their arms up and down and advancing in a counter-clockwise direction with a dance step that involves three steps and a single touch of the ground. The dance is characterised by a change of movement every three steps. At this moment, the circular formation creates a sacred space within the circle. Spectators may only watch from the secular space beyond the circle, thus creating two distinct worlds—the sacred and the secular—within the same physical space.^[10]

After completing the ritual of paying homage to the earth pit amidst singing and dancing, the participants proceed to pay homage to the kitchen pit whilst singing and dancing, and then to the vegetable garden. Each phase is interwoven with singing and dancing; the lyrics and choreography strictly adhere to the content of the ritual stages and reflect their respective functions. For example, the 'Wu Huo Gou Song', also known as the 'Insect-Catching Song':

First paragraph, First verse: Fire Dog, aren't you coming yet? Fire Dog, aren't you coming yet? Come on, come on,

haven't combed my hair, haven't washed my face.

Second section: What's the dog pounding in the mortar? It's pounding turmeric and taro dumplings. Come and have a bite—Grandma's counted them out.

Paragraph three: Fire-tailed pygmy shrew, fire-tailed pygmy shrew, what are you up to? Catching bugs—red bugs and white bugs—our garden's full of vegetables all winter long.

The ceremony not only serves to pray for favourable weather and a bountiful harvest in the coming year, but also highlights the 'fire worship' and nature worship inherent in the primitive religious beliefs of the Lantian Yao people. Another example is the 'Worship of the Hearth', where participants first walk in a circle around the hearth, then face it and perform the 'swinging-arms squat-step' in place, whilst singing the 'Fifteenth Song':

On the fifteenth, the companions gather together,

Gazing at the moonlight,

The moonlight shines upon the rice scales,

Dark clouds obscure the young man's affection.

On the fifteenth, the companions gather together,

Gazing at the moon's radiance,

The moon's radiance shines upon the rice scales,

Dark clouds obscure the light of the master beyond,

On the fifteenth, Ah Bao Qing turns.

How many come to the mountain pass? My elder sister cares for her daughter.

Others care for the mountain pass; on the fifteenth, the green grass turns.

How many come to the mountain pass? My mother cares not for her daughter.

Others care for the mountain pass; on the fifteenth, who will not take the path home?

To my own home, I care not for human affairs, nor for the moon.

The stars shine brightly in the sky; on the fifteenth, who will not find their way home? The household belongs to its own master, I care not for human kindness, nor for the moon; the stars shine brightly, in the sky.^[11]

The dance movements and songs serve to remind young girls that one of their primary duties as future housewives will be to manage the household's daily necessities. Meanwhile, the fire in the hearth and the bonfire in the courtyard together symbolise the eternal flame, reflecting the primitive survival needs and harsh living conditions of the Lantian Yao ancestors when they lived in caves and had to kindle fires, as well as their worship of the Kitchen God. During the 'Worship of the Vegetable Garden' ceremony, the 'Wu Huo Gou' (also known as the 'Bug-Catching Song') is sung once more, accompanied by a 'hand-swinging squat-step' performed on the spot, moving from side to side.

After an hour of ritual performances, the incense had largely burned out and the 'Wu Huo Gou' ceremony was drawing to a close. The ritual participants made their way to the riverbank, where they removed their turmeric-leaf skirts, garments and conical hats, and cast them into the river along with the burnt-out incense, symbolising the 'banishment of plagues and epidemics'. Professor Li Guotao believes that this action is identical to the practice described in the *Book of the Later Han* regarding the Great Nuo Ritual of the Eastern Han Dynasty, where 'knights from the Five Camps passed the fire and cast it into the Luo River'. Both share the meaning of casting away misfortune into the water, indicating that the Lantian Yao Wu Huo Gou has absorbed certain practices from ancient Nuo rituals.^[12] In fact, 'ancient semi-civilised peoples regarded disease as an invisible enemy; consequently, the medical techniques used to treat and cure disease were essentially a means of using magic to counter the enemy's attacks'.^[13] The 'Wu Huo Gou' reflects the Yao people of Lantian's hopes for warding off epidemics and ensuring good health.

2.3 Rituals of Gathering: The Initial Formation and Experience of the Social Nature of the Body

Once the Lan Tian Yao girl has thrown her 'amulet' (turmeric leaves wrapped around her body) into the river, it signifies that she has crossed the threshold and entered a relatively safe state; this can also be regarded as a rite of union. At this point, the boy walks to the opposite bank of the river and faces the girl. The primary means of this free love is singing duets, using song to convey feelings and as a medium for courtship. It is said that in the past, the man participating in the singing duet could not be from the same clan; he had to be from a different clan or village. The first thing to ask the other party during the singing duet was:

"I wonder where you come from, young lady?" "Which village are you from?" Only once it has been established that they are not from the local village can the singing begin. Nowadays, the event usually starts with Stationmaster Yang leading the first verse, followed by a girl singing a section of a mountain song, and then a boy responding with a verse based on the content.

Woman: The front gate leads straight to the Third Police Station, the back gate leads straight to the iron cage~ I've been through hell and back, and if you want to be with your mother, it's just too hard.

Man: I'm not afraid if you lock the front door, nor if you seal the back door tight~ Even tigers have days when their eyes grow heavy, so naturally they'll be led away, their beauty fading.

Woman: The front gate is locked tight, the back gate is barred with iron grilles~ I've been through all sorts of trouble,

but if you want to be with your mother, it's just too hard.

Man: I'm not afraid if you lock the front door, nor if you bar the back door—even tigers have days when their eyes grow heavy, so naturally they'll come round, and I'll see your true face.

The suggestive lyrics give girls their first taste of the subtle dynamics between men and women; this stage is, in fact, teaching girls how to court boys, with the ultimate aim of leading to marriage.

The entire ceremony described above is performed through song and dance to convey the intentions of the Yao people of Lantian. During the ritual period, the dance must strictly adhere to the prescribed pattern of three steps followed by a single touch of the ground; although the dance has become considerably simpler compared to the past, the core movement of three steps followed by a single touch of the ground remains unchanged. The songs performed at each stage of the ceremony, as well as the number of times they are repeated, must also adhere to the ceremonial rules, namely that each song is sung three times. The singing and dancing during the ceremony help the girl to complete her physical transition.

3 The Gradual Nature and Significance of Physical Transition

3.1 The Gradual Nature of Physical Transition

A girl's transition from childhood to adulthood cannot be achieved through a single 'Wu Huo Gou' ceremony; it requires participation in three such ceremonies to complete the full transformation from a natural body to a social body. These three stages of physical transition take at least two to three years. After undergoing the first 'Wu Huo Gou' ceremony, the girl's bodily socialisation begins to take shape; at this stage, parents teach her skills and knowledge regarding cooking and farming. Following the second 'Wu Huo Gou' ceremony, her sense of social responsibility deepens, and she takes the initiative to assist her family with household chores and farm work, whilst also learning love songs. The girls are acutely aware of the importance of mastering all aspects of domestic and agricultural skills during this year, for once the third 'Wu Huo Gou' ceremony concludes, she becomes an adult and faces the major life transition of marriage. Without a firm grasp of these practical skills, she will be unable to manage a household effectively. For the third 'Wu Huo Gou' ceremony, the girl travels to the site on her own. Her independent labour and participation in the ritual signify that she is fully prepared for this turning point in her life. Upon the conclusion of the third 'Wu Huo Gou' ceremony, the girl's physical being is fully transformed into a social body; she holds a place within the clan, shouldering the responsibility of supporting her family whilst also possessing the right to pursue romance. The three 'Wu Huo Gou' ceremonies progressively enhance the girl's awareness and capacity to fulfil the social responsibilities expected of an adult.

3.2 The Significance of Physical Transition

Birth ceremonies, coming-of-age ceremonies, weddings and funerals form an integral part of the life cycle rituals for Yao women. Among the Lantian Yao, the coming-of-age ceremony for girls is the longest in duration. During the separation rite in the 'Mei-zai House', the girl is adorned by women of good fortune using turmeric leaves, conical hats and incense in preparation for the rite of passage; her departure from the 'Mei-zai House' signifies her departure from childhood and her former social structure and identity. The rites of passage then move to the ancestral hall, the earthen pond, the hearth pond and the vegetable garden. As the threshold figures in these rites are considered dangerous, the first part of the ceremony involves paying homage to the ancestors to seek their protection. At the same time, the boys set off firecrackers in the ceremonial area to purify the site and drive away evil spirits. Through the waving of incense and the singing and Wu Huo Gou songs, the girl comes to understand the social responsibilities and rights that adulthood entails. Once the incense has burned out and the protective attire—including the yellow ginger leaf garments and conical hat—has been discarded into the river, the girl and the boy stand by the riverbank for a singing contest. This allows the girl to experience, for the first time, the adult right to engage in courtship through song, marking the transition from a natural body to a social body. The extended period between the first and third Wu Huo Gou ceremonies allows the threshold-crossers to gradually transition, both physically and psychologically, from passively adapting to actively embracing their new role (that of an adult) and the social responsibilities and rights that come with it.

At the same time, the 'Wu Huo Gou' ritual, as a form of performance, reveals the anti-structural relationships between men and women in society. According to Turner's theories of the 'Structure of Status' and 'Anti-structure', 'when ritual participants find themselves within this limited spatio-temporal context, their identities, status and social ranks exhibit a structure (anti-structure) that is diametrically opposed to normal social structural relationships'. In daily life, although the Yao people of Lantian uphold gender equality—with both men marrying women and women marrying men considered normal—in practice, following the tradition of ancestor worship, men serve as the heads of the household, and all important matters must be decided by them. Throughout the entire ceremony, however, the girl takes centre stage, whilst the boy acts as a 'servant' throughout, setting off firecrackers before and after each ritual segment to clear obstacles for the girl and ensure she successfully completes each part of the ceremony, thus revealing a structure that is the inverse of that found in daily life. This indicates that the disparity in the positions of men and women in daily life and within the rituals subtly influences the procedures and structure of the ceremonies, as well as the principles governing song and

dance performances. For instance, during the ritual (the liminal period), the girl must perform specific songs and dances at specific stages, and the sequence must never be reversed; only then can the ritual achieve its intended effect. Before and after the ritual (the liminal period), however, song and dance performances are relatively free.

'Human beings' are entities possessing the dual attributes of 'biological nature' and 'social nature'. The process of transition through Wu Huo Gou ritual demonstrates that the significance of this transition lies in the following: on the one hand, once a girl has participated in Wu Huo Gou ritual three times, she becomes an individual capable of independent action; at this point, her body becomes a social body in which rights and obligations coexist, and she has acquired the qualities and capabilities necessary to independently shoulder social responsibilities. On the other hand, human beings are entities in a state of constant development and change; their 'bodies are not merely constrained by social relations, nor are they merely imbued with social relations, but rather they actively construct these relations'.

4 Conclusion

This paper employs a combination of rites-of-passage theory and symbolic theory for analysis. As a rite of passage for Yao girls in Lantian, the Wu Huo Gou not only signifies physical transition but also embodies ancestor worship and animism. It highlights the interplay of the Yao people's primitive religion, Han Taoism and the Confucian elements of traditional Chinese culture, demonstrating that the Wu Huo Gou and its choreography are the result of cultural exchange between the Yao and Han peoples.

Funding

This paper is a preliminary outcome of the Ministry of Education's General Project for Humanities and Social Sciences Research entitled 'A Study on the Symbiotic Transmission and Development of Traditional Dances among Ethnic Groups in the Nanling Corridor' (NO: 23YJA760054). Guangdong Technical Normal University Graduate Student Innovation Project : "Research on the Cultivation of Performance Skills and Sense of Community Among Vocational Dance Majors—A Perspective from the 'Field-Habitus' Theory" (NO: 991710460)

About the Author

Ting Li, Professor at the School of Music, Guangdong University of Technology; main research areas: dance anthropology.

References

- [1] John O'Neill: *Body Forms: Five Bodies in Modern Society* [M]. Chunfeng Literature and Art Press, 2000, pp. 3–13.
- [2] Chris Hilling: *Body and Social Theory* [M]. translated by Li Kang, Peking University Press, 2010, p. 12.
- [3] Feng Zhiming: 'The Cultural Transformation of the "Natural" Body: The Transitional Significance of Yao Weddings' [J]. in *Journal of Guangxi Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, Issue 1, 2016, p. 64.
- [4] Victor W. Turner: 'Ambiguity: The Threshold Period of Rite-of-Passage Rituals' [C]. in Shi Zong (ed.): *Selected Readings in Western Religious Anthropology* (Vol. 2), Sanlian Press, 1995, pp. 512–520.
- [5] Edmund Leach: *Culture and Communication* [M]. translated by Guo Fan, Sun Yat-sen University Press, 1990, pp. 34–35.
- [6] Victor Turner: *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* [M]. translated by Huang Jianbo, Renmin University of China Press, 2006, pp. 94–109.
- [7] See Mr Ye Chunsheng, *Lingnan Folk Culture* [M]. Guangzhou: Guangdong Higher Education Press, 2000, p. 180.
- [8] See Lan Wensi, 'Thresholds, Fusion and Memory: The Las Festival in Benzi Lan, Northwest Yunnan' [M]. *Journal of Guizhou University*, Vol. 3, 2022, p. 58.
- [9] Li Guotan and Long Saizhou: 'A Study of the "Wu Huo Gou"' [J]. *Cultural Heritage*, Issue 1, 2010, p. 64.
- [10] Fang Jisheng: *An Introduction to Folklore* [M]. Beijing Normal University Press, 1980, p. 41.
- [11] Turner, Victor. *The Anthropology of Performance* [M]. New York: PAJ Publications, 1986, p. 8.
- [12] Chris Hilling. *Body and Social Theory* [M]. Translated by Li Kang. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2010, p. 13.
- [13] For further reading, see the author's seminal work *The Dance of China: An Anthropological Study of Traditional Yao Dance* [M]. Guangzhou: Guangdong People's Publishing House, February 2025.