

Transforming Ghosts into Mud and Sand: Religion and the Shadow Theatre of Hunan

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Communities in southern China have been known since antiquity to have been intensely involved in shamanistic activities and the worshipping of ghosts and spirits. Through a fortuitous chance, I had the opportunity during the summer of 2008 to observe a shadow show in southern Hunan that ended with ritual banishment of evil spirits. Since the role played by religion in the Chinese shadow theatre had been largely neglected prior to the publication of my book, *Chinese Shadow Theatre: History, Popular Religion and Women Warriors*, the rituals performed prior to and after the shadow plays in this instance – much more pronounced and elaborate than anything I had observed before – were of immense interest to me. This tradition of Shadows also turned out to have been a rare form known as Paper Shadows.

The study of shadow theatres was not in the original agenda of my 2008 research trip. Ye Mingsheng, a senior researcher at the Research Institute of Art of Fujian Province (*Fujiangsheng yishu yanjiuyuan*), Bradford Clark, professor at Bowling Green State University, Huang Jianxing, a graduate student, and myself were conducting a survey of puppetry in southern China. Ye had arranged for a rod puppet performance of *Tale of Fragrant Mountain* (*xiangshanzhuan*) on the life of the goddess Guanyin in Huaihua, western Hunan for us. But while in Changsha, we were informed that foreigners needed to obtain special permission to enter into this militarily sensitive region. The Cultural Bureau contacted by Ye did not want to take responsibility, so they deferred the case to the Security Bureau, which in turn inquired of the local Military Personnel, which felt the need to refer the request to the higher military

establishment in Guangdong. By then it was decided that Ye and his graduate student would go without Clark and myself, and videotape for us the one day event. We would meet with Ye two days later at Shaoyang in southern Hunan to observe a one-man glove puppet show there.

Rather than waiting at Changsha before reconnecting with Ye and Huang, Clark and I decided to visit the famous Mount Heng in southeastern Hunan en route to Shaoyang. The day we arrived at Nanyue, the main entrance to the mountain, we walked across the town until a side street led us to a vista of beautiful vegetable gardens and woods reminiscent of the village this touristy town once was. An elderly lady with a basket of home-grown squash chatted with me and invited us to visit her house down the lane. We sat on little stools in the open front courtyard of her house. Neighbors and other members of the household trickled in and joined us.

The elderly lady was the mother of the household. By early evening, her husband came home from working in the fields. The son also returned riding on a scooter. He and his wife maintained a store next to a temple in town. They usually sleep above the store. Their two children, a boy in grade school and a three-year old girl, live with the grandparents. The girl was obviously the jewel of the household (Fig 1). The family had to pay a fine in order to have this second child. We asked about shadow theatre, which was popular in this region. The son called his cousin using his cell phone and located a troupe in a village three kilometers away. We considered hiring a car to visit the troupe. But it was getting dark and cars would not be able to travel on the paths between the paddy fields leading to the village in any case.

The grandfather suggested that we have the troupe perform at his house. A few phone calls later, all was arranged for the evening. Grandmother cooked dinner for us – we had delicious homegrown vegetables, egg and tomatoes soup, and rice. The son then took me back to

my lodging on his scooter to pick up my video camera. By the time the troupe arrived, neighbors began to trickle in. The grandfather served tea to the visitors and was a visibly proud “host.” He said that more neighbors would have come if they could have gotten the word out sooner.

The troupe of a master puppeteer and two musicians arrived on two scooters after dark. The master puppeteer carried the trunk of puppets and musical instruments at the back of his scooter. One of the musicians drove the other scooter, with the other musician and some other equipment at the back. The musician riding on the back held onto the driver with his left hand and carried a bundle of bamboo poles with his right hand over his shoulder. When they noticed “foreigner” Clark, they decided to jack up the price. The son of the family approached me and said that since the troupe had to supply candles, firecrackers, mock money etc. for the rituals, could we give them 560 *yuan* (\$80) instead of the 500 *yuan* previously agreed upon? The family had been so helpful that we decided to give him 600 *yuan* for him to use as he saw fit.

In less than half of an hour, the stage was set up in the sparsely furnished living room, using furniture and doors of the household. Two square dining tables with two unhinged wooden doors placed on them served as the base for the stage. Bamboo poles (Fig 2) ingeniously tied together formed the frame for the stage (Fig 3). The screen in front consisted of a thin white cloth with red borders. Red cloth draped over the sides and back of the frame completed the stage (Fig 4). Inside the stage, the main puppeteer, facing the back of the screen, hung the bodies of the shadow figures to be used for the performance on the bamboo frames to his left and right. Extra puppet heads and “furniture” were stored in trays before him (Fig 5), while headgear and weapons were kept in pockets on the sides. Two tiered wooden stands not found in other shadow theatre traditions were also placed behind the screen. They helped to secure the central rods in place when the shadow figures were not being manipulated (Fig 6). The musicians sat behind the

puppeteer and set up their instruments. One musician was in charge of the percussion instruments: a drum, a large gong, a small gong, a large cymbal, a small cymbal, a clapper and a stick called “rod” (*bangzi*). The other musician played a two-stringed violin (*erhu*). Unlike the majority of other shadow traditions, the musicians sometimes chimed in when the puppeteer he sang, creating a chorus (Fig 7).

As the cymbals announced the inception of the show, grandfather stuck two candles in the ground to one side of the front courtyard (Fig 8). There he lit the candles, offered incense, burned tissue-like yellow paper that represented money for the spirit world and set of a string of fire crackers as offerings and announcement to the ancestors and other gods and spirits in the area. The main puppeteer completed this opening ritual through an invitational prayer before the performance. I requested a play that featured at least one woman warrior; the master puppeteer who was also the director of the troupe, got to select a local favorite as the second play for the evening.

Unlike the performances in most other rural areas, the main plays proceeded without the opening playlets, in which puppets representing deities would enter the stage to bring blessings to the sponsors and audience. The troupe performed two plays that lasted for about two hours: “Xue Dingshan Fights at the Cold River Pass” (*Xue Dingshan zhan Hanjiangguan*) and “Han Xiangzi Teases His Wife” (*Han Xiangzi xiqi*), both being stand-alone excerpts of serial plays. The former was an episode from the fictional tales on a general, Xue Dingshan and an even more powerful woman warrior, Fan Lihua, popularized through the military romance, *Three Tales of the Tang* (*shuoTang shanzhuan* by Rulian Jushi, 18th century). The latter was one of many popular stories on Han Xiangzi, one of the famous Eight Immortals. Both tales were situated during the Tang dynasty (618-907).

This shadow theatre tradition is transmitted through memory. Traditions that do not use playscripts tend to result in performing less sophisticated versions of the stories that deviate considerably from the published versions of the novels or plays on the theme. In this case, Xue Dingshan's encounter with Fan Lihua (Fig 9) was so grossly simplified that the complexity of the relationship between the two was totally neglected, and a comedy was created out of one originally filled with tensions. While in the renowned novel, *Three Tales of the Tang*, the foreign or "barbarian" princess, Fan Lihua, becomes so enamored by the Chinese warrior, Xue Dingshan, that she disobeys her father and eventually commits both patricide and fratricide; in this shadow play, Fan Lihua proposes to Xue who is initially reluctant to accept her offer but then agrees to ask his father for permission. The two warriors are subsequently married with the blessings of both fathers (Fig 10). Hence, in the shadow play the marriage of Xue and Fan enables two enemy forces to join as one.

However, the resemblance between this play and the novel stops short of Fan Lihua's forwardness and Xue Dingshan's initial reluctance. In the military romance, Xue Dingshan is so obsessed by an inferiority complex vis-à-vis the militarily superior Fan Lihua that he renounces her repeatedly and is finally forced into marrying her by his father who realizes the need for her prowess to help the Chinese state against the "barbarians." Even after their marriage, Xue continues to repudiate her. It is not until she feigns death that he finally breaks down and shows love for her. Hence, while the novel represents a Chinese male fantasy in which a foreign princess renounces her own family to assist the Chinese state for the love a Chinese warrior, this shadow play celebrates the happy union of two enemy military forces through the marriage of two young warriors. The fact that Fan Lihua was supposed to have been a "barbarian" princess was all but totally ignored. Here she is just a beautiful woman warrior who proposes to a

handsome male warrior who is initially reluctant to marry her but eventually receives permission from his father after he is apprehended by her father. The simplicity of this version of the tale could be attributed to its transmission through memory rather than playscripts.

“Han Xiangzi Teases His Wife” illustrates how Han, who has already attained immortality, returns home to lead his wife to the path of the transcendence. This he accomplishes by transforming himself into a playboy who tries to seduce his own wife. She holds steadfast against his advances and finally earns herself the right to attain the Dao. To the audience, however, her rejection of his advances is of no surprise. An ugly, lewd clown (Fig 11) rather than a dashing playboy, his characterization provides laughter for the spectators rather than admiration for the chastity of his wife. This may have been one of the most popular plays in the region precisely because it affords many opportunities for enacting salacious humor. It is also a popular theme in the local Flower Drum Opera (*huaguxi*). I suspect, however, that the version videotaped by us was considerably toned down as is the usual case whenever women, children and “outsiders” join the audience of such plays.

Although I was able to decipher the outline of the plays, I was not able to understand their dialogues and lyrics. In preparing for this report, I asked my gardening neighbor, Li Kunyang, whose hometown is a mere thirty kilometers north of Nanyue to help me transcribe the plays. He was curious and delighted. Intimately tied to religious beliefs and practices, shadow plays were banned when he grew up in the 1960s and 1970s. I transferred the video onto a DVD and played it for him. He listened quietly for five minutes and then laughed and pronounced that he could not understand a word of it. In fact, I understood more because of my familiarity with the genre and the Fan Lihua story. Li Kunyang subsequently enlisted the assistance of Li Yun who lived within a hundred kilometers south of Moug Heng, on the same side of the mountain

as Nanyue. Li Yun arrived fully confident of his familiarity with the dialect of the region. When the videotape was shown, however, he moved closer and closer to the television and eventually conceded that although the accent was very familiar, the only words he could make out were “Fan Lihua” which I clued him on at the outset. The music was also very familiar. It was the same as that used in the Flower Drum Opera mentioned earlier. The apologies were profuse but I laughed and told them that I would include this in my report to demonstrate the tremendous disparity of Chinese dialects in remote regions.

After the conclusion of the plays, the master puppeteer stood behind the screen and performed an extended (about eight minutes) ritual that sent away any evil influences and ghosts that might have resided in the house. Judging from the characters on the talismanic block he pounded, he might have transformed the ghosts into mud and sand. This shamanic ritual included the burning of incense and mock money, chanting without music, the use of talismanic hand gestures, and the banging of a two-hundred year old wooden block called an “Order-Dispatching Ruler” (*lingchi*). Four characters are carved into each side of this rectangular block. They are: “As Soon as the Golden Whip Strikes” (*jinbian yixia*); “The Ghosts Transform into Mud and Sand” (*guihua nisha*; Fig 12); “The Five Thunder Order Dispatcher” (*wulei haoling*); and a side with talismanic character-like created symbols. Once the ghosts and spirits were exorcized and the house cleansed, the master puppeteer blessed it by tossing a mixture of tea and rice into the audience several times as he continued to chant. The grandfather, as master of the household, once again lit candles, burned mock money and set off firecrackers in the front courtyard, which ended the rituals.

We photographed some of the shadow figures and interviewed the performers after the show. Most of the puppets had one rod at the back of its neck on a swinging hook. Simpler in

construction and for manipulation than the puppets of the other Chinese shadow theatre traditions, characters wearing robes with long sleeves only had a rod attached to one hand, the other arm had neither hand nor rod. However, characters not wearing robes, such as warriors and soldiers, did have two hands, each with its own rod. The figures were fairly large (about 27 inches tall). Some of the protagonists were made out of painted celluloid, but the majority of the figures were carved out of thick paper and made colorful by filling the cutout patterns in the bodies with colored plastic paper (Fig 13). The necks of the paper puppets were reinforced by strips of hide (Fig 14). Initially, the existence of an old puppet of a tiger that looked like it was made out of leather (Fig 15) led me to conclude that traditionally the form used hide but that contemporary artists used paper instead. A visit to the Shadow Theatre Museum in Chengdu this summer (2009), however, confirmed the existence of the tradition of “Paper Shadows” in Hunan. The main difference between the bodies of the old paper puppets collected by the museum and those we saw last year was the use of plastic colored paper as fillings in the bodies of the new paper puppets, rather than painting the opaque paper itself (Fig 16). Also, while the heads of the museum puppets were made of minimally colored ink painted parchment (Fig 17), the contemporary ones were made of brightly painted celluloid. Hence, the colorfully painted celluloid, and paper bodies with transparent colored plastic paper fillings are new inventions that have made this traditional form brighter and more colorful. A comparison between the clothing made out of paper (Fig 9) versus those of celluloid (Fig 10) shows the contemporary artist’s conscious choice of using the dark outlines of paper to create the effect of armor when the warriors first meet in battle. These southern Hunan puppets also differ from the figures of most of the other Chinese shadow traditions in that the faces tend to be painted rather than carved and seen “head on” rather than in profile.

When asked about the obviously exorcist ritual, the priest-puppeteer was reluctant to discuss what might be construed as “superstition.” He simply said that the blocks were to ensure safety and peace (*bao ping'an*). The particular “ruler” used here belonged to the master of his father’s master and was more than two hundred years old. The master puppeteer, Wang Donglin (Fig 6), was born in 1945. He began learning the art form when he was thirteen and had studied from his father, Wang Shousheng (b.1913) and three other masters, Zhou Fangxian, Yuan Yeqing and Wu Zhixiong. The percussionist was Wang Yueqiu (b.1942; Fig 7) and the *erhu* violinist was Wang Xinmin (b.1940). They have worked together for several decades, probably beginning sometime after the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.

Wang Donglin claimed his had been the most popular troupe in the region, performing more than 250 shows each year. Occasions for their services included the celebration of birthdays, building of houses, passing of college entrance examinations, fulfillment of vows, and purification of homes. Vow fulfillment, the sponsoring of a show promised to a deity for the granting of a favor requested of the deity, and exorcism of ghosts and evil influences from homes were the most common occasions for the sponsoring of shadow plays. Grandfather was obviously happier with the cleansing aspect of the performance than the entertainment aspect of the show.

Aside from celebrating the birthdays of mortals, shadow theatre also celebrated those of the deities that were even more important. The most significant were the three dates referred to by the locals as the “birthdays” of Guanyin (Avalokitesvara; also known as the Goddess of Mercy; Fig 18): the dates of her birth (the nineteenth day of the second month according to the lunar calendar), of her taking the tonsure (the nineteenth day of the six month), and of her deification (the nineteenth day of the ninth month). The first date was so important that its

celebration would typically last from the first day of the second month to the thirtieth day of that month when four to five troupes might perform simultaneously as many as five shows a day each at the main local Guanyin temple. The master puppeteer also noted that this particular theatrical form was even more popular before 1990. Despite general decline, it remained popular during Guanyin's "birthdays."

This was the first time I watched a shadow performance by a mere three-member troupe. Indeed, its simplicity and emphasis on religious functions may be reflections of its antiquity and as a very traditional form. I was very excited to have finally been able to observe a shadow show performed primarily to entertain ancestors and accompanied by the exorcism of evil influences at its end. In no other shadow theatre tradition have I ever seen the master puppeteer taking over so unambiguously the functions of a shamanic priest. While its disappearance during the Cultural Revolution could be traced to the suppression of traditional culture and "superstitions," one might attribute its present decline to the attrition of traditional religious beliefs among the younger population who grew up without the religious ambience. Given the nature of the function of this shadow theatre tradition, it may disappear when the local religious belief system no longer exists.

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