

THE ORIGIN OF *TANG-KI* WORSHIP

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Tang-ki worship evolved from aspects of the most ancient religions of China. Elements in contemporary *tang-ki* ritual-theatre are legacies of a history of more than 5000 years of ritual practice. The *tang-ki* as warrior medium developed from origins in the indigenous pre-Chinese religion, roots that can be traced to the rituals of the pre-Chinese Yao (瑶) people living in the region of southern China before the third millennium BC. These include the sacred Yu Step (禹步) as magical rite, the performance of masculinity and the convention of dancing before an altar.

The Dance of Yu is the single most powerful act of magic in Religious Taoism. The dance derived from early tribal Yao where it was part of a magical ritual which shamans performed to have powers over, and be able to capture a variety of things from poisonous snakes, to fish, to spirits. Although Eberhard (1968: 17-18)¹ links the Dance of Yu to the performance of modern female shamans of south Zhejiang and he makes no mention of the *tang-ki*, there is the note that many Yao rites were absorbed into the later Yueh (越 pinyin Yue, which will be used from now on) civilisation which was one of the feudal states of China during the Spring and Autumn (春秋) period in the Zhou dynasty. Extrapolating from this detail, I note that during the era of the Warring States (战国), Yue was conquered by the kingdom of Chu (楚) in 306 BC. Wuzhu (无诸), one of the sons of the Yue king, fled by sea and landed near the present-day city of Fuzhou (福州). There Wuzhu set himself up as king of a new empire he named Minyue (闽越), which consisted roughly of the present area of Fujian (福建) province. This was the beginning of the state of Minyue, in the south around Xiamen (厦门), the home of the Minnan or Hokkien people and the heartland of present-day *tang-ki* worship. From the juxtaposition of these two pieces of information, it is suggested that that the modern performance of *tang-ki* worship originated in Yao rites that featured the Yu Step (plate 1).

Yao rituals become Chinese:

The genealogy of *tang-ki* worship suggests that from the ur-ancestor performance of Yao ritual dance, the esoteric Yu Step was assimilated into early Chinese culture and was then passed on to feudal Yue, before finally coming to the present-day Fujian area of China with the founding of the kingdom of Minyue.

When the prototypical Yao dance was absorbed into Chinese culture, it was Sinicised through the promulgation of legends in which the magical Yu Step was appropriated as the creation of Yu the Great. The latter is one of three mythical founding emperors of Chinese civilisation, and is regarded as the legendary founder of Xia (夏) the first proto-Chinese dynasty. Significantly, Yu the Great was the principal mythical hero of Yue. His name, Da Yu (大禹) is linked to the kingdom Minyue (闽越) by the

¹ Eberhard, Wolfram, *The Local Cultures of South and East Asia*, trans. Alide Eberhard, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968).

radical/character *chong* (虫) meaning worm which also designates the *she* (蛇) snake totem of the Yao people (plate 2).



Plate 1: Hopping is an element of the Yu Step, a ritual choreography that links modern *tang-kis* with the Great Yu and the magic of the pre-Chinese Yao. Photo: By kind permission of Victor Yue.



Plate 2: Modern-day snake worship is a link to the snake totem of the ancient Yaos. Photo: Author

The genealogy of the role of the *tang-ki*:

The genealogy of the role of the *tang-ki* is presented in fig. 1. Many of the present-day performance elements of the theatre of *tang-ki* worship can be traced back to earlier figures of pre-Chinese and Chinese magicians. These elements include: mediumism, the use of an exorcising snake whip, ritual exposure, wild trance, warrior behaviour, exorcism, spirit possession and a male fetish.

Fig. 1

ROOTS OF PERFORMANCE ELEMENTS OF TANG-KI MEDIUMISM

