

THE SONG OF THE GHOST IN ITS BAMBOO CRADLE

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Before 1950, death ritual was at the center of social life in many highland Tibeto-Burman-speaking communities in Southwest China. In the township of Júzò in north-central Yunnan Province, kinship and social relations among the living were given material form in ritualized actions for the dead. The major funeral rituals performed for every person who died in this community began with Emerging from the House (*hek'ə̀dɔ*) and Emerging from the Courtyard (*kukæ̀dɔ*) performed from evening until dawn two or three days after death, after which the corpse was buried. Seven days after a woman's burial or nine days after a man's burial, Dawn-to-Dusk Sacrifice (*nihè̀pɿ*) was held around the empty space in the courtyard where the coffin had lain. During the tenth lunar month, Tenth-Month Sacrifice (*ts'ihonè̀pɿ*) was performed during the day around an effigy built for the dead person on a terrace below a central hill of graves. And two or three generations after a death, also during the tenth lunar month, Sleeping in the Forest (*likádùhè*) was held at night in a grove of gigantic trees near the same hill of graves. Especially when performed for an elderly person who had died well, these events all involved people from nearly every household in the community.

While the Communist Party did not initially forbid large-scale gatherings for rituals when it began to conduct land reform in Yunnan's highlands, the Party made it clear that all such funeral events were to be considered wasteful and distracting. Sleeping in the Forest was performed for the final time in 1949. The other major death rituals continued, diminishing in scope, until the Great Leap Forward began in 1958. For several years after the Great Leap Famine (1959-1960), the dead were buried without ceremony. Soon afterwards, people began to hold small, quiet Emerging from the House, Emerging from the Courtyard, and Dawn-to-Dusk Sacrifice vigils, slaughtering three small goats, instead of the dozen large goats these ceremonies had once required, and replacing goats with rabbits in the chaotic early

years of the Cultural Revolution. In the early 1980s, these ceremonies again were held openly, and they gradually grew in scope through the end of the century. At present, death ritual is more central than ever. Like many places in rural China, Júzò has lost much of its youthful population to migration. Most young women and many young men have moved to the cities to find work that does not involve farming. The elderly stay to die; older migrants return home to die; younger migrants return to participate in rituals for dead parents and grandparents. Funerals have replaced the collective rituals of socialism, becoming the only opportunities for people to gather with their kin and friends. People in Júzò are using practices of death to experiment with new ways of thinking about how persons are inserted into history and new understandings of how people – even “backward” people – might exhibit and internalize characteristics associated with modernity.

Two of the funeral events central to social life before 1950, however, have never been revived. At the center of Tenth-Month Sacrifice and Sleeping in the Forest was a spectacular feat of memory — an eight-hour-long chant in two versions, each composed of 72 “songs” (*chæ̀*). In the 1940s, only a few ritualists, all men, could perform this chant. These ritualists were very busy during the tenth lunar month, and they were well rewarded for their skill, taking home a whole goat, minus forelegs and pelt, after each performance. This small group of men suffered enormously between 1958 and 1978. Their treasured ritual implements were confiscated; they were starved, made the targets of struggle sessions, and sentenced to hard labor. The spirit familiars, or “ghosts of speech” (*pjné*), who inspired them to remember the great chants, also persecuted them, making them ill because they were no longer allowed to perform. By the 1980s, all in Júzò who had once memorized the great chants were dead or very ill. People who wanted to hold Tenth-Month Sacrifice for their parents or Sleeping in the Forest for their great grandparents could not find anyone to preside and sing.

In 1993, the author met Li Biyong in his home in a small mountain hamlet about a day's walk from Júzò. Li Biyong had learned the great chants as an apprentice ritualist as a youth. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, he performed nearly every day during the tenth lunar month. He fled Júzò before the Great Leap Forward and settled in a mountain house his family had used for herding goats in the summer. He set up the effigy for his tutelary spirit in his house and performed the chants for it secretly every year in order to ward off a chronic illness. In return for a payment that now seems shamefully small, Li Biyong reluctantly agreed to perform the chants for the author and to allow them to be recorded. Li Biyong died in 1995 of the illness that he believed was inflicted on him by the tutelary spirit who possessed him as he chanted.

The great chants for Tenth-Month Sacrifice and Sleeping in the Forest can be divided into three sets of twelve to twenty-four songs each. The first set of songs brings a world into existence and populates that world with living beings. The second set of songs describes the souls of the dead, placing them high in a monkey's nest looking down on animals killing each other; raising them high in a coffin above a courtyard, looking down on sons and daughters killing goats and pigs as sacrifices; and raising them high in an eagle's nest with piles of snakes, blood, and bluebottle-fly maggots. The final set of songs discuss the origins and nature of the material bodies for the dead – a very large effigy, used during Tenth-Month Sacrifice and then destroyed, and a small ancestral effigy, kept in a house for several generations after a death.

The “song of the ghost in its bamboo cradle” is from the final set of songs. The audio clip presented here is excerpted from the middle of the song, between opening and closing sections that are largely identical across all of the songs of the two chants. While some songs are unique to one version of the chant or the other, this song is present in both. This excerpt is from the Sleeping in the Forest version, and it displays the two identifying features of that chant: it is sung in a slow cadence, and the meaningless syllables *à le* are inserted into the middle of

every line. Li Biyong occasionally pauses or repeats words as he struggles to remember the song, but the transcription does not record these stumbles.

The song tells of the origins of the ancestral effigy, or *nètsʔ* — a small straight pine twig bound into the crotch of a forked chestnut twig with seven turns of thread for a woman, or nine turns for a man, and set on a woven bamboo platform and placed high on the innermost wall of a house below a “flower” of twelve chestnut leaves (see Figure). In the recording, Li Biyong breaks off singing at the song's climactic point to tell its story in his own words. A man rides out on his horse, careful not to lend it out to others. At his cousin's house, he turns back and rides home again, stopping to camp for the night. He ties his horse to a tree by a spring and hangs its saddle on a branch. Seven monkeys appear in the night. A monkey drops from the tree onto the saddle; the saddle drops onto the horse; the horse drops into the spring. The man borrows staffs from officials, kings, carpenters, and shamans to probe the spring for his horse, but he does not find it:

mò cæ à le tsæ te to
ŋo mò cæ wù kú à le bɔ mà go
bɔ kú à le wù mà go

I rode out on my golden horse
did not lend my golden horse
did not lend it

kò lo mò cæ à le tsæ k'ò lo
mò cæ à le si k'ò lo
ts'i tí à le kè chè ka
tsi' nì à le kè lí ka

turned and rode the golden horse back home
rode the golden horse back
led it through eleven gullies
led it over twelve ridges

mù he à le tsi ka næ
yi dù à le m mæ hè
lo dù à le m mæ hè
si væ à le mò p'æ du
ká væ à le ho chæ du

as the night grew to dark to see
followed closely as it went
followed closely as it came
tied the horse to a big tree
hung the saddle on a thick branch

shɪ wú à le mo yi vi
si k'ə à le si mà k'ə
mo jù à le ho lo t'è
ho jù à le mò lo t'è
mò jù à le t'è lo t'è

seven raucus monkeys appeared
in the dead of the night
a monkey fell into the saddle
the saddle fell onto the horse
the horse fell into the spring

[conversation]

[conversation]

mo jù à le ho t'è jɛ
ho jù à le mò t'è jɛ
mò jù à le t'è ka tɛ
kò lo à le tsi lo p'u chá ve

a monkey dropped into the saddle
the saddle dropped onto the horse
the horse dropped into the spring
turned and borrowed an official's silver staff

mà lo à le cæ cha ve
ká lo à le hɛ cha ve
pɪ lo à le bæ cha ve
sa cha à le ŋo ve va

borrowed a king's golden staff
borrowed a carpenter's iron staff
borrowed a shaman's wooden staff
I borrowed three staffs together

mò va à le mò ma pɔ
kò lo mò cæ à le cha ru va

probed for the horse without finding it
turned and borrowed a tapered bamboo

mò va à le mò ma pɔ
t'à zò à le sa tsi pɔ
wu zò à le sa cha pɔ

probed for the horse without feeling it
probed with three pine trees
probed with three tapered chestnut trees

t'à zò à le à bò pɛ
wu zò à le à mo pɛ
nè væ à le nè mà pɛ
nè k'u à le nè ts'ì pɛ

made the pines into father
made the chestnuts into mother
there is no greater ghost than this ghost
bound the ghost together to make an
ancestral effigy

The pine twig of the ancestral effigy is the dead father; the chestnut twig is the dead mother; the woven bamboo bed is the mother's brother, the affine who supported the couple in life and continues to support them after death. In the Tenth-Month Sacrifice version, the man seeks the horse along twelve streams. A pine tree and a chestnut tree block his way, and he understands that the pine is his father and the chestnut his mother. This parallels a ceremony in which an orphaned son, accompanied by his mother's brother (or the latter's substitute) walks up the mountain, shoots a crossbow bolt into a pine tree, and carries the tree down on his back to fashion into the male part of the ancestral effigy.

At the song's center is the slapstick sequence: monkey drops into saddle, saddle drops onto horse, horse drops into the depths of the spring. This sequence deploys a series of near homonyms: *mo*, monkey; *mò*, horse and, absent but implied, *mó*, underworld. The songs of the two great chants describe the souls of the dead as monkeys (*mo*), abandoned in the forest before being located and given material bodies. The songs portray coffins as strong white horses (*mò*), which carry the dead to their destination. In the songs, a dead soul becomes a complex, layered assemblage, which includes wild (monkey) and domesticated (encoffined) layers. The monkey dropping onto the saddle and the saddle onto the horse enacts this layering. Finally, the horse drops into the spring, the underworld, *mó*.

The song contemplates the problem of how a dead soul, lost in the depths, might be found and matched with the material body of an ancestral effigy. This problem was made more difficult when people in Júzò, under pressure from the imperial state and local Confucian elites, replaced cremation with burial in the late nineteenth century. Earlier in the song, a conventional passage about gifts ends with a couplet unique to this song, which seems to come from the time when the dead were cremated at the mountain's foot and their ashes buried beneath small stones.

a k'è nǎ thè t'à sǐ nǎ tsɛ
smoke ascends along paired green pines
 kà lì pǎ mo gè
[we] gave you a wide grave site

Now that burial has replaced cremation, the smoke of corpses no longer settled on green pines, and this material link between the dead body and the ancestral effigy that replaces it is lost. The buried corpse descends into the profound depths of the underworld, and the search for the dead soul must rely upon contingency — the flight of the crossbow bolt, the pine or chestnut trees rearing up the orphan's path. The absence of any material link between corpse and effigy means that the living can never be certain that the soul is actually found and installed in the body. This uncertainty is one of the reasons that funerals are repeated again and again for decades — not only in the major rites already mentioned, but also in smaller rituals that occur every year.

The parallel problem of how living souls might be reliably and stably matched with living bodies came to dominate political life in Júzò during the three decades that followed the final, public performance of the Tenth-Month Sacrifice version of the great chants in 1957. All of the state campaigns of the socialist period insisted that identities be fixed and that people be held responsible for their attitudes, affects, words, and histories. People in rural China were disciplined to admit to the identities assigned to them during Land Reform (landlord, rich peasant, middle peasant, poor peasant, local bully, purveyor of superstition), to feel approved emotions with authentic sincerity, and to mouth appropriate phrases with heartfelt feeling. In Júzò, people responded by insisting on the difficulty and contingency of the project of matching souls with bodies. They understood the young local activists of the Cultural Revolution to be possessed by Chairman Mao. They concluded that the most destructive of these activists were possessed and killed by a set of ancestral spirits they had insulted. Many found themselves possessed by ghosts of those who died during the Great Leap Famine and afterwards. During the

1980s, many funerals were devoted to settling the wandering souls of the dead of the socialist period, who possessed their descendants, making them ill and killing them. Today, every death is seen as a bad death, unloosing a wild soul that will inevitably find its way into the living bodies of others.

These contexts involve living bodies as well as living and dead souls. But the question they raise is nevertheless fundamentally parallel to the question raised by the “song of the ghost in its bamboo cradle.” The song suggests that the match between souls and bodies is mysterious and uncertain, and that creating and stabilizing this link requires dedicated work as well as a measure of luck – searching along twelve streams until one’s path is blocked, or borrowing the staffs of officials, kings, carpenters and shamans to probe in vain. This suggestion opposes the modernizing insistence that souls and bodies must be seen as naturally and fundamentally bound together (identities, affects, words, or histories, owned by or embedded in particular bodies). This opposition is the underlying theme of the many secret histories of relations between living persons and invisible beings that are woven through the encounter of highland communities in Yunnan with secularizing socialism and post-socialism.



An ancestral effigy – a pine twig (father) bound to a chestnut twig (mother) lying on a bamboo bed (affine) and gazing up at a flower of chestnut leaves.