

CEREMONIAL PAINTINGS OF THE YAO

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Figure 1.

The strip of extra paper at the center of the painting of Yuan-shi T'uan-zun repeats the original entreaty for the blessings of good luck, plenty to eat and the wealth of many animals.

A similar strip was attached during the ceremony to open the eyes of the gods.

In this example, however, the strip was glued onto the painting during a deconsecration ceremony – to close the eyes of the gods.

This painting is from a set of 13 major paintings, 4 minor paintings, 3 masks and The Dragon Bridge of the Great Tao, dated the 7th day of the 10th month of the 11th year of the Guangxu Period (1875-1908), or 1886.

All photographs by Vichai Chinalai

In the hills of northern Thailand, Laos and Vietnam and throughout the provinces of southern China are people known as the Yao who form a unique and independent tribal group. Also known as the Mien, Mun, Pu nu, Lu ngien and Lak kja, Zao, Dao and Lan Tan according to their clan and country, the Yao are the only Hill Tribe with a written legacy of history, legend and religion, preserved in Chinese writing in books, scrolls and paintings.

Yao religion is a mixture of Taoism, ancestor worship and animism, laced with magic, fortune telling and the supernatural. The goal of Taoism is to maintain cosmic safety and order through reconciliation of duality, the yin and yang. The Tao transcends all, the world of nature and the unseen. Interference with or disruption of its natural rhythm disarranges the cosmic order. The Yao believe people become spirits upon death, and therefore they worship and seek to propitiate their ancestors. Along with ancestor spirits are spirits in nature. All spirits are to be honored, thanked and appeased through the practice of elaborate rituals. An orderly relationship with the spirits contributes to the cosmic balance of the Tao.

Religious Yao men aspire to the priesthood. Ordination is the path to salvation for the Yao man and when he moves upward in the priestly hierarchy, this benefits his wife as well. Paintings representing the pantheon of Taoist gods are a major part of the most important Yao ceremonies. A set of paintings is crucial to the rise of the Yao man to the highest-level priest. Jacques Lemoine in the jacket of his book, *Yao Ceremonial Paintings*, describes the paintings as "a very rare art tradition which has remained virtually unknown in the West until recent years."

Some paintings were executed by the Yao themselves, but most were done by itinerant Chinese artists who could read and write Chinese characters. Regardless of who did the paintings they were completed under conditions of devotion and purity in a special place set aside or built for this purpose. Both the artist and his client remained celibate until the paintings were completed and a ceremony to "open the eyes" of the gods was performed. According to Lewis and Lewis in *Peoples of the Golden Triangle*, during this ceremony the gods were invited "to 'don' the pictures – in much the same way as a man wears a shirt."¹ At any point during the creation of the paintings that cleanliness or sacred devotion was called into question, the spiritual value of the paintings would become lost.

Once the paintings are finished under the right prescription, first the painter "opens the eyes" of each painting one by one, and then a *tua sai*, highest-level, priest will hold a ceremony to consecrate the set. (Fig. 1) During this ceremony the new set is hung over an already consecrated set and the gods are invited to enter the newly finished paintings as well. It takes three years and four

more glossy and thus enliven the subject. (To the Chinese, red is the colour of life.)⁴

Almost all of the paintings regardless of the mastery and innate artistic ability of the painter have a certain charm. Some sets, however, have that elusive combination of beauty (through color, detail and a fine hand), presence, and (although it isn't a pre-requisite, it often has bearing on the other attributes) age, that illuminates them and makes them sing. The set in Figure 2 is one such example.

Lemoine notes that the life span of the paintings "rarely exceeds one hundred years, though some can be twice as old."⁵ When a set of paintings wears out or for some other reason the owner wishes to replace it, perhaps giving it to a relative or putting the set up for sale, an equivalent but opposite ceremony to opening the eyes of the gods is held. This time the eyes of the gods are closed. The gods are invited to leave the paintings and the set is deconsecrated. The paintings remain inert unless another ritual takes place to make them sacred again.

The radiance, allure and fascination of these spiritual masterpieces add credence to Lemoine's reminder that "One must remember that Yao paintings are considered as the true abodes of the gods."⁶



Detail: Lee tian-shi from a set of 13 major paintings, 4 minor paintings, 3 masks and The Dragon Bridge of the Great Yao, dated the 7th day of the 10th month of the 11th year of the Guangxu Period (1875-1908), or 1886.

Bibliography

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Pourret, Jess G., *The Yao The Mien and Mun Yao in China, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand*, River Books, Bangkok, 2002.

National Museum of History, *Cultural Artifacts of Taoism*, China, 1999

¹ Lewis and Lewis, p. 157

² Pourret, pp.217 and 219

³ Ibid., p. 217

⁴ Lemoine, p. 37

⁵ Ibid., p. 38

⁶ Ibid., p. 36



*Detail: Dao de tien zun from a set of 14
major paintings, 2 minor paintings and
2 masks, dated the 7th day of the 10th month
of the 5th year of the Jiaqing Period
(1796-1820), or 1801.*



Figure 2. On the back of the painting of Yuan-shi tian zun: "17 pieces (paintings) at a cost of 7440 (paper money), made in Guilin (Guangxi Province, South China)." The inscription "asks for good luck, an abundance of food, a multitude of six kinds of animals: pigs, lambs, chickens, goats, cows and horses. Done in the autumn on the 18th day of the 8th month of the 6th year of the Xianfeng Period (1851-1861)," or 1857. The set also includes 2 small paintings, 2 masks, 1 priest's paper hat and The Dragon Bridge of the Great Tao.



Detail: Zheng tian-shi from a set of 17 major paintings and The Dragon Bridge of the Great Yao, dated the 18th day of the 12th month of the 11th year of the Jiaqing Period (1796-1820), or 1807.

ceremonies before the gods are deemed to settle and be sealed into a new set, and before the paintings then can be used in the performance of rituals outside of the home.²

A client may order a full set of sixteen or seventeen paintings, or for economic reasons begin with only three or five of the gods in the "minor" altar, later adding an additional number to complete the set. This is why some sets consist of sixteen or seventeen or in rare cases eighteen or nineteen paintings and others have thirteen or fourteen. To further complicate the numbers, if later fortune allows the owner to commission a complete new set of sixteen or seventeen, this may add to the original three or five, creating some duplication.

A written account of how many paintings are in a set along with the names of the painter and his client, their financial arrangements, the place of creation and the dates the paintings were begun, completed and ritualized is almost invariably recorded. This writing is usually found on the back of the painting of the central deity of the Taoist triad, on the front in a tablet at his feet, or sometimes on the back of the painting of the whole assembly of gods. Besides the bare-bones statistics of the transaction, the record typically includes a series of auspicious prayers or blessings invoking abundance in the form of generations of offspring, fertile fields and animals, material wealth; and peace and protection for the members of the household. Although no reference is made to lesser paintings in this writing, a set may also include small paintings, painted masks and a long scroll called The Dragon Bridge of the Great Tao, a 'bridge' to the supernatural.

Most of the sets of paintings we have found thus far are from the early to late 19th century, with one set dated 1919 and two 18th century sets dated 1794 and 1780. Pourret comments that "So far no Yao paintings older than 1790 have come to light...", making the set dated 1780 extremely rare. Pourret continues, "Interestingly, several Thai Yao have asserted that the Yao began using ceremonial paintings during the reign of the Manchu emperor Chien-Lung between 1736 and 1796. It is possible that before using sacred paintings, the Yao used wooden statues to represent their deities and later on Taoist gods."³

The large paintings usually required three layers of paper reinforced around the borders with paper strips and thin bamboo sticks at the top and bottom. Some paintings have a glossy appearance, especially in the red areas. Lemoine explains this: "In fact, this effect is produced by an extremely rare technique. Before mixing his colours, the painter prepared a kind of a glue by boiling the hide of an ox. The colours (always mineral) were added to this base and applied while still hot.... A final coating of glue was usually applied only to the red areas, to make them