

“Chuanling” Art, the Unique Ritual of “Nianli” in Zhanjiang

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Abstract:

There are various activities and performances in annual “Nianli” of Zhanjiang area, among which the traditional “Chuanling” Nuo technique is incredible and has a unique mystery, which often arouses people’s desire for debate and exploration. This article starts from the historical development of Leizhou Peninsula and the formation of folk belief change, traces the local folk life and sacrificial culture, analyzes the historical and cultural causes of “Chuanling”, and then reveals its goodness, punishment, vigilance, and education through its external manifestations. The cultural connotation of all sentient beings, and its profound social significance behind the positive role and intention of maintaining social stability and unity, promoting rural relations and promoting local economic prosperity and development.

Keywords:

Zhanjiang, “Nianli”, “Chuanling”

1. Introduction

“Nianli”, that is, “tracing back to ancient times and presenting every year”, which means traditional folk performance staged in Western Guangdong during the Spring Festival annually. It’s a large-scale mass sacrificial ritual event held regularly in most Zhanjiang rural areas every year. The time is mostly concentrated after the Spring Festival to the Lantern Festival for worshipping the gods, the ancestors, society, and praying for good weather, the country is prosperous and the people are at peace (Figure 1).



Figure 1. “Nianli” Ritual activities.

During “Nianli”, there are various traditional cultural activities and performances. Common activities include Jiao Festival (Figure 2), lion dance, dragon dance, floating color, etc., as well as “Chuanling”, Nuo dance, crossing the sea of fire, climbing the ladder, a variety of traditional Nuo techniques such as a stabbed bed, people are competing to watch it, and it’s very lively. The most fascinating and thrilling performances is “Chuanling”, which some men’s faces, necks, tongues or ears are penetrated by needle-like metal (“Lingzhu”) of various thicknesses.



Figure 2. Jiao Festival.

2. The Cultural Causes of “Chuanling” Art

“Chuanling”, also known as “Chuanling arrow”, or “Chuansai” (Figure 3), which is an indispensable traditional performances in almost all Zhanjiang villages.



Figure 3. “Chaunling”.

2.1. The Formation of Folk Beliefs and Worship Folk Customs in Leizhou Peninsula

Located in the whole Leizhou Peninsula, Zhanjiang is graceful and outstanding. As early as in the pre-Qin period, the Baiyue ethnic group had already existed and formed a unique primitive ecological bureaucratic culture in long-term social life. The Leizhou Peninsula is a narrow terrain without great lakes and rivers. It’s the second largest minefield in the world due to obvious regional and seasonal drought and frequent thunder in rainy days. The early peninsula was a wilderness places, and various wild animals had a great impact on people’s lives. The agricultural water mainly relied on thunderstorms, the local people believed that thunder can cause clouds and rain, can bring about everything. Natural conditions and farming methods make the local folk custom belief developed, so there have always been animal god worship such as dog worship and snake worship, as well as celestial worship of Lei Chongyu.

Leizhou Peninsula is in the southernmost tip of mainland China, known as the “Heavenly Land”. It was the place where troops were stationed during the Warring States Period, the county was established here in the Western Han Dynasty. There were Taoist activities in the Jin Dynasty and a college for spreading Confucian culture was established. Since the Tang and Song Dynasties, Buddhist monks have come here to sermon preach. Therefore, in the historical military culture, Taoist culture, Buddhist culture, Confucian culture and official culture have all affected the local people’s lives. In addition, the descendants of the Han people from the Central Plains moved to Leizhou Peninsula and surrounding areas through Fujian (mostly the ancient Putian area), and they mixed with the local Baiyue ethnic group. They were influenced by Central Plains culture and Minnan culture. After a long historical development and profound Accumulation has gradually formed a unique Leizhou culture with rich internal content and distinctive characteristics.

As the local culture is affected by long-term ethnic changes, the current Leizhou culture is actually a historical and geographical intersection of indigenous culture, marine culture and Chu Yue culture, Minnan immigrant culture and Central Plains culture. The worship of gods with the Jade Emperor as the commander includes the worship of ancestors, sages, heroes and other disaster relief people, the worship of local gods, the worship of ancestors, the worship of animal gods, etc., all at the same time exist. Folk worship is often a combination of ancestor worship and various deities, such as the annual convention, which is the largest local custom of local entertainment gods and people of the biggest sacrifice.

2.2. Tracing to the Culture Origin of “Chuanling” in Zhanjiang

The earliest folk religion in China started from witchcraft that exorcised ghosts, drove away evils and eliminated diseases. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, Zhang Daoling founded the Taoism from the folk witchcraft alchemy “Mi Wu” into “Wu Dou Mi Dao”. During the same period, Buddhism was introduced into the country. In the Jin and Tang Dynasties, as Taoists and scholars absorbed a large number of Buddhist doctrines and participated in the consolidation of the original religious form of witchcraft and Taoism, Daoism was far away from witchcraft and rose to the upper ruling class. As Taoism spreads southwards, the Zhengyi religion in Orthodox Taoism spread to Lingnan through Fujian. After long-term historical development, it merged with the folk Taoism in Lingnan to form witch and Taoism. There is also a folk Taoism with the characteristics of “two gates of Taoism”, and a complete set of internal rules and regulations. The barefoot: “up knife ladder”, stomping “over the sea”, barefooted “spinning bed”, acupuncture “crossing the arrow” and other performances in the folk festivals in Zhanjiang area are the “Martial education” methods that the Wu and the Dao are good at.

The Leizhou Peninsula area in Zhanjiang has always been the ritual custom of offering sacrifices to the gods hoping to eliminate disasters, refuge, remove evil and enjoy good fortune. At the same time, people also hope to pray to the gods to punish the wicked through sacrifices, to educate all beings, and to protect life and stability. It is said that piercing the face and tongue with iron chopsticks was originally the Taoist torture by the seven halls of Hell, yama king Taishan to punish the wicked in the underworld after death. The way of mortal descendants presents the punishment of piercing iron dusters to the evildoers of the world, so that the god who lifts his head three feet can revive the world, the evildoers of the people can be awed by the hearts of the people, and be vigilant to save the world.

3. The Expression of “Chuanling”

3.1. About “Lingzhu”

“Lingzhu” is also called “Lingjian”, specially made up of metal, silver and stainless steel. They are usually made of silver or stainless steel and thick at one end and thin at the other, thick at the top and thin at the bottom, the tail is needle like. The diameter of the thick head is about 1cm to 3cm, and the length is from 0.5m to 3m, mostly about 1m (Figure 4).



Figure 4. “Lingjian” of different sizes.

Perhaps it's related to the worship or sacrifice the god, the shape of the reeds varies from place to place. Some are flat, some are round, some are square, some are curved, some are straight, some can be bent or straight, some are decorated, some are undercoated, some are naked, and have various surface shapes; generally the decoration is mostly on the thick end with a variety of different shapes.

At the beginning of the annual activity, generally three days before the parade, the village Daogong first polished and cleaned the sharp-headed “Lingzhu”, and then respectfully placed them in the local temple to be sealed. On that day of “Chuanling”, Daogong first lit incense candles to worship the temple gods, and then solemnly carried out “Lingzhu”. Some Daogong even wear pomelo leaves or renminbi on their chopsticks to drive away evil spirits (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Jiangtong who are holding “Lingzhu” waiting for “Chuanling” (Lingzhu is inserted with green pomelo leaves).

3.2. The Process of “Chuanling”

All children who are descended from the gods are men in the village, and their ages range from children, teenagers, youth, middle-aged to the elderly, they are generally not fixed candidates. Jiangtong must be bathed before “Chuanling”, and sometimes must abstain from food for three days. Before “Chuanling”, Daogong generally let Jiangtong touch or pat the god sedan, and some even yelled “Please God to protect our offspring!”. Then “Lingzhu” is used directly through the Jiangtong's cheeks, tongue and nose, ears or neck and other major parts of the head and face (Figure 6).

Some Jiangtong pierce one “Lingzhu”, and some pierce two or more than three (Figure 7), but usually one Jiangtong with one “Lingzhu”, some are two or three children who are put on a “Lingzhu”, that is, a “Lingzhu” is pierced in two or three or more Jiangtong. The Jiangtong pierced by Lingzhu are all fearless, neither painful nor bleeding, and then all Jiangtong are invited to sit on the sedan chair, stand or sit (Figure 8), together with the gods in the sedan chair carried by the people in the village. The outing tour usually takes two hours to half a day, showing that the village is blessed by gods, people and animals are prosperous and safe. When the “Lingzhu” was pulled out after the wandering, as long as some incense ash was applied to the pierced skin, the wound healed immediately, and the skin was intact as it was after two or three days, without any traces of damage. It was incredible and amazing.



Figure 6. Daogong makes “Chuanling” for Jiangtong.



Figure 7. Some Jiangtong pierce more “Lingzhu”.



Figure 8. “Jiangtong” sitting on sedan chair.

The cold and hard metal, pierced through the skin, how can it not hurt? But Daogong, who use “Lingzhu” at ease; and the Jiangtong, are calm, fearless, painless during the process of “Chuanling” (Figure 9). In addition to specific techniques and strong psychology, it is really a folk stunt and also a school of sophisticated art.



Figure 9. "Chuanling" Worshipping.

4. The Cultural Connotation of "Chuanling"

The early residents of Leizhou Peninsula were united, brave, righteous, combative, and envious of hatred. They believed that there are reincarnations in cause and effect, that good people have gods protection, and that bad people are struck by thunder. With the spread of Taoism in southern China, "Chuanling" piercing of the flesh in the folk Taoism seems to be intimidating, but it stimulates their determination to overcome the fear and endure the pain to fulfill the gods' desire to shock and enlighten.

It is unclear when "Chuanling" originated, but it only exists in individual traditional folk festivals and rituals in a few regions. These traditional folk customs are mostly derived from the local early Taoist culture. According to data records, the Zhanjiang period in the Ming Dynasty was recorded in the local chronicles, and it was very popular in the Qing Dynasty. The scale was large and quite standard in the Republic of China. The date was mostly fixed at two weeks before and after the Lantern Festival every year. Lion Dance, puppet show, Nuo dance, "Chuanling", wandering, stab bed, go up the knife mountain, cross the fire and other forms. It can be seen that "Chuanling" has been in Zhanjiang for at least 500 years.

The purpose of "Chuanling" is to promote good and punish evil, warn the world. That is to say, God warns people who do evil through "Chuanling" will be severely punished, and warns the public not to harm others. This undoubtedly has an intangible constraint on people's hearts, plays a positive role in the formation of social ethos and the maintenance of stable life, and also has a positive impact on local local customs.

5. Conclusion

"Nianli" is "bigger" than New Year! This is a popular saying in some parts of Zhanjiang, which indicates that "Nianli" is more important than celebrating a new year. "Nianli" is a grand traditional cultural custom unique to the western region of Guangdong, with the worship of gods as the core, accompanied by various folk cultural performances and family banquets. It's the intangible cultural heritage passed down by the ancestors, and the best opportunity for local people to bond with relatives and friends. During "Nianli" in every year, people in each village take pride in who has the most guests. Every family invites guests, feasts, and warmly entertains gathered relatives and friends or strangers, and even participate in various "Nianli" programs. Every family hopes that their life will become more prosperous and they will enjoy more splendid hospitality year after year, so they work and live hard. This

has promoted the relations among the local villagers, the simple folk customs and the economic development.

Every year after the Spring Festival, “Nianli” of the villages will start one after another, just like hundreds of flowers contend to blossom, warm and extraordinary. In recent years, the number of foreign tourists has increased year by year. Many domestic media, especially official media, have introduced and disseminated the Zhanjiang “Nianli”, among which the highlight is always the “Chuanling” performance, which not only made “Nianli” a layer of mystery, but also arouses people’s desire to explore. It is common for people to speculate, discuss, and dispute on the phenomenon of “Chuanling” on the internet, and many people even question the authenticity, believing that it’s magic, fraud. Even the local people in Zhanjiang often have no reason for its social role and practical significance, but only know that it’s a traditional folk art inherited from generation to generation. As time goes by, people will gradually understand the original meaning of “Chuanling” and understand the original meaning behind this traditional culture, which will have a positive impact and effect on the development of society, the construction of a new countryside, the return of traditional culture and so on.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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