

# Meishan Totem Worship in Meishan Culture Context\*

LI Tao

Hunan University of Humanities, Science and Technology, Loudi, China

The unique geographical environment and humanistic spirit of Meishan region gave birth to the Witchcraft exorcism cultur in Meishan, which has been passed down for thousands of years. The unique totem worship phenomenon of Meishan people adds a footnote to the interpretation of the culture. The witchcraft culture of Meishan is the “living fossil” of the study of Meishan culture, and the totem worship of Meishan is its external cultural representation, reflecting the folk customs, religious beliefs, ethnic information, and life forms of Meishan area. The totem worship phenomenon is closely related to the concept of “animism” of Meishan people.

*Keywords:* humanistic spirit, Meishan witcho culture, totemism

## Overview of the Concept of Wuo Culture in Meishan

According to the *Hunan General History* uploaded, Hunan ancient Meishandong area “roughly between today’s Ningxiang, Shaoyang, Yiyang and Xiangxiang, the center in today’s Anhua, Xinhua area. Xinhua is the upper Meishan, Anhua is the lower Meishan.” It can be seen that the ancient Meishandong area is located in the present central Hunan, with Xinhua (including Lengshuijiang) and Anhua as the center (Cai, Liu, & Yang, 2018). The ancient Meishan area has high mountains and dense forests, ravines and clouds, and extremely bad natural conditions. Because of “no communication with China in the old days”, the news is blocked, the culture is backward, and the advanced Central Plains culture does not affect each other. Until the Song Xining five years (1072) Zhang Dun opened Meishan, Wanghua Meishan ten Dongs, who has set Anhua and Xinhua two counties; advanced Central China culture began to blend with the ancient Meishan culture; Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism culture and local witchcraft culture mutually influenced and integrated with each other, forming the ancient witchcraft culture. The formation of this culture is closely related to the extremely low level of local productivity and the closed living environment. In the process of fighting with nature, people cannot understand all the phenomena produced by nature and believed that “all things have spirits” and all things existing in nature have souls. There is a high reverence for wind, rain, thunder, electricity, tigers, snakes, butterflies, strange rocks, and ancient trees, etc. as well as dead ancestors, believing that they have magical powers beyond human beings and can give people disasters or good luck. So in order to exorcize disasters and solve difficulties, it is necessary to have a bridge to communicate with the gods. The wizard characters came into being, and they became the bridge of communication between human beings and the gods. At that time, the level of civilization and productivity was extremely low, the sorcerer imitates the movement of animal or human production and labor, producing simple, and comical dance movements, using the means of dance to achieve the purpose of bribing,

---

\* Fund Project: Hunan Social Science Fund Project in 2022: Meishan Religious Art Research (22YBX021).

LI Tao, bachelor, Lecturer, School of Arts and Design, Hunan University of Humanities, Science and Technology, Loudi, China.

pleasing the gods, and praying for blessings, thus giving rise to the primitive sorcerer dance in the primary stage, and then gradually developing from the simple sorcerer dance to the more advanced and perfect Nuo drama. In Meishan, Nuo Opera is a necessary means of communication between witches and gods, which is different from the common Meishan people who believe in ghosts and rededicate themselves to prostitution (Wang, Zhang, Hong, & Xia, 2013, p. 103). The Nuo Opera ceremony is not only grand, but also professional. The performers must have the basic skills of singing, reading, doing, and playing, and must also have the function of “communicating with gods”. Ancient Meishan people would only spend a lot of money on inviting witches to hold a major exorcism ceremony when they encountered great disasters, so as to achieve the purpose of seeking auspiciousness and driving away disasters and epidemics. Among the customs that believe in witchcraft and pay attention to sacrifice in Meishan region, the most classic and representative is the Nuo opera custom that has existed for thousands of years, which is the soul of the witchcraft culture in Meishan and its external cultural representation, reflecting the folk customs, religious beliefs, ethnic information, and farming civilization of Meishan region, and is a “living fossil” for the study of Meishan culture. Its cultural roots originated in the age of collecting, fishing, and hunting in primitive human society, and it is a cultural system with primitive mythology and primitive witchcraft as the main body. The concept of “all things have spirit” as the central idea of this cultural system has derived the primitive Meishan totem worship which is closely related to the Wuo culture of Meishan.

### **Totem and Totem Worship**

#### **Totem**

“totem” is a dialect of the Ojibwa dialect of the Algonchin tribe of North American Indians. Other ethnic groups have names with the same meaning as “totem”; For example, in Australia, some tribes are called “Kopang”, some are called “Ngeti”, some are called “Murdu”, and some are called “Kenanza”; The inhabitants of Mabuiag Island in the Torres Strait call it “augud” (Zhao & Wang 2011). Chinese Ewenki called it “Gabur”; The Kemu call it “Da”. Since the term “totem” of Indians first appeared in European academic literature, the academic community collectively referred to all such objects discovered later as “totem”, and other names were replaced by “totem” (He, 1997, p. 29). American ethnographer Morgan (1818-1881) used this concept for the first time in his book in *Ancient Society*, which attracted the attention of scholars around the world. Marx said in his *Digest of Morgan’s Book Ancient Society*:

Morgan collected the names of the twenty-three clans of the Indian Ajibuwa tribe. Such as Wolf clan, bear clan, deer clan, tobacco clan, reed clan and so on. These animals and plants are the totems of these clans. Clan members all believe that one of the totems has some kind of kinship and blood relationship with their own clan. (Qu & Qian, 2006, p. 158)

Totems are represented by animals, plants, or natural phenomena. Until now, the definition of the word “totem” has not been settled, and academic opinions differ: Morgan (1981, p. 162) said that totem refers to the symbol or emblem of a clan; Lange (2006, pp. 86-87), an Englishman, believed that totems were personal protectors. According to the famous British scholar Fraser (1888, pp. 7-8), totems are both relatives and ancestors (); Yang Kun (1986), a famous ethnologist in China, said: “Totem is a kind of animal or plant or organism”, and the groups in the tribe regard “totem as their ancestors” (p. 140).

To sum up, the definition of totem can be summarized as follows: the carrier of totem can be an ancestor or a god believed in by the ethnic group, or it can be an animal or plant or a certain natural phenomenon, which has

universal and lofty supernatural powers beyond ordinary people, can bless and cause disasters, and is universally worshipped by the ethnic group.

The totem phenomenon in Meishan region revolves around the concept of “all things have spirits”. Meishan people believe that the sun, moon, water, fire, ancient trees, strange rocks, flowers, birds, insects, and fish may become “monsters” and become “totems” for Meishan people to worship as they exist for a long time. Meishan God and ancestors are unbroken and lofty “totems” in their hearts, and other totem images recognized by the Chinese nation are also worshipped, such as dragon, phoenix, kirin, and other totem images.

### **Totemism**

Totem worship is the product of clan society, and its emergence and popularity have a common basic law in the world (Qu & Qian, 2006, p. 158).

If there is a totem, there are worshippers; if there is a totem without people to worship, it will not become a totem, the first element of totem is to have worship significance. Primitive totem worship originated from the clan society. Although the primitive people in the clan society had the initial consciousness of being human, they were chaotic and had low intellectual knowledge and limited cognition of nature. They lack a basic scientific understanding of all natural phenomena and laws such as wind and rain, thunder and lightning, sun, moon and stars, the alternation of seasons and the change of day and night, and when they are unable to resist natural disasters and human diseases, they will have a dual mentality of fear and worship (Shen, 2018, p. 15), because of fear and worship. When the state of fear extends to the state of being powerless to resist, worship comes into being: rituals, dances, sounds, and even objects that they regard as precious are worshipped to various natural phenomena and laws that they consider to have some kind of superiority over their own abilities, in order to be blessed or given. Totem worship should have the following three elements: First, worshipers should have a devout mentality; Second, worshippers should have the meaning of totem, with some spiritual connotation; Third, there should be a bridge of communication between worshippers and totems. Engels said: “The particular conditions and natural objects in which a tribe or people live are carried into religion.” (Marx & Engels, 1962, p. 63). Out of survival instinct and religious mentality, primitive people regard the sun, moon and stars, wind and lightning, earth, stone, water and fire as gods or totems, praying for their mercy or grace, avoiding revenge and punishment, and reducing disasters (Shen, 2018, p. 16).

In the totem worship ceremony, primitive sorcery, sorcery consciousness and totem worship are integrated, making totem worship more mysterious and noble, and prompting more people to believe in it. The fusion of totemism and sorcery elevated the influence of totemism to the supernatural level, including seeking genealogies and exorcising demons. At the same time, taboos have emerged. The combination of totem worship and ritual singing and dancing promoted the diversified development of worship methods and ceremonies (Qu & Qian, 2006, p. 159). The *Brief Encyclopedia Britannica* (1986, p. 22) explains the main meaning of the entry “totem worship”: (1) that the totem is a relative, companion, protector, ancestor or helper, with superhuman abilities; (2) People respect and fear totems; (3) Totemization and patterning, making it easy to recognize and remember; (4) To sanctify, slaughter, eat, or touch totems as blasphemous acts; (5) Holding special ceremonies to worship totems.

The above overview of totems has a certain universality, but there is also some ethnic totem worship of the particularity that has not been expressed, like many Chinese totems are a combination of a variety of animals,

which is people's subjective, romantic conception, such as: The unique totem images of the Chinese nation, such as the dragon, the phoenix, the unicorn, and the brave, were totem images that some special classes could worship and use in feudal society, such as the dragon and the phoenix. In feudal society, the clothes and utensils decorated with the totem images of the dragon and the phoenix could only be the special pet of the emperor and the queen, but they were worshipped by the ordinary people as auspicious and honorable totem images.

In Meishan region, totem worship is very common: ancestor worship, stone worship, ancient tree worship, Meishan God worship, sun and moon worship, etc. Totem worship psychology is deeply rooted and very common. This phenomenon is related to the geographical characteristics and closed culture of Meishan region. The ancient Meishan region has been isolated from the Central Plains culture for a long time, and the advanced Central Plains civilization cannot penetrate into it, so its own unique regional culture forms. In this primitive cultural state, the ancient Meishan people have limited cognition of nature, and under the dual mentality of fear and worship, the ancient Meishan people slowly formed the Meishan totem worship culture with the mark of Wunuo culture.

### **Meishan Witcho Culture and Totem Worship**

Meishan Witchcraft is the living remains and spiritual core of Meishan culture, which has preserved the rich folk customs, religious customs, and primitive life styles of ancient Meishan region for thousands of years. It is called the "living fossil" of the study of Meishan culture by the academic circle, and the totem worship phenomenon reflects a universal and stubborn spiritual belief of Meishan people, which is an important element of the study of ancient Meishan culture.

The culture of Wu-Nuo and the totem worship of Meishan go hand in hand. One of the manifestations of Wu-dao culture psychology in the life of Meishan people is totem worship, which is an important external manifestation of the culture of Wu-nuo in Meishan. The culture of Exorcism in Meishan is different from that outside Meishan, which has always been based on "Exorcism", that is, the operator is a professional exorcism teacher, and he himself is the future "Nuo God". The Nuo God is the ancestor and leader of the operator, and the offering Exorcism is the ancestor worship, forming a trinity model of "ancestor-Nuo God-Exorcism artist (Shigong)" (Li, 2012, pp. 164-187). Sacrificial Nuo itself is a primitive totem worship—ancestor worship, and ancestor worship is the oldest and most common sacrificial worship phenomenon in Meishan area. The sacrificial activity of Meishan Totem is the universal and lofty belief of Meishan people, among which the worship ceremony of Zhang Wulang, Chiyou, Panhu, Nuo Gong Nuo mother, Taigong and so on is very common and grand.

### **Meishan Local Gods Totem Worship**

**Hunt god Zhang Wulang worship.** According to legend, Zhang Wulang, who stands on his head, is the original god of Meishan, the god of hunting, and the Lord of Rampant, and the most prominent representative of the local gods in Meishan (Li, 2020). Zhang Wulang inverted image in the local Nuo altar is the Nuo God that must be sacrificed; each Nuo altar in the shrine below is sacrificed with Zhang Wulang inverted wood statue; he is both the god of the town house, the industry hunting God and is revered as the Meishan ancestor, in the Meishan region he enjoys a high prestige of god. Whether it is hunters, teachers, or ordinary people, they are full of worship and respect. The inverted image of Zhang Wulang has become a totem image worshipped by Meishan people (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Nuo Altar offering upside-down Zhang Wulang wood carving.

**Meishan ancestor Chiyou worship.** According to the available information records, Chiyou was Meishan Tongman as the great ancestor. According to legend, Chiyou was the chief of the Jiuli tribe in the ancient times, defeated another ancestor of the Chinese Emperor Yan. After that, the Yan Emperor cooperated with the Yellow Emperor and defeated Chiyou; Chiyou fled to the ancient Meishan region (today's Xinhua Big Bear Mountain region), in order to make a comeback. Later, he was beheaded by the Yellow Emperor; yet, he didn't die with the body and head separated, and even his blood stained maple leaves. In the Meishan region, the fierce image of Chiyou's head with long double horns is revered by Meishan people as a totem image worshipped by everyone, and can be seen everywhere on the Nuo face, wood carvings, artifacts, etc., becoming the god of protection of Meishan people, respected by Meishan people as the ancestor and the majestic God of war, and becoming a totem image widely revered by Meishan people.

**Panhu worship.** The ancient Meishan ancestors believed that all things had spirits, and they regarded certain animals and plants closely related to them as protective gods and worshiped them. Such animals and plants were the totems they believed in. Panhu is a honorific of Meishan people for the hound, and is an inviolable totem in the heart of Meishan people, and also is regarded as the ancestral god. There are many strange myths and legends about Panhu. *Later Han Dynasty: Nanman Biography* said that "Gaoxinshi asked a female to marry Panhu, and she gave birth to six men and six women, who became husband and wife, stained wood skin, dyed with grass, to make good five-color clothing, all clothes have a tail shape." "Make good five-color dress, all clothes all have a tail shape" is to try to make their own dress similar to the totem, and thus obtain God's blessing (Zhang, 2005, p. 144). To this day, Yao costumes in the Meishan area are highly similar to those described in this book.

**Nuo male Nuo mother worship.** Nuo male Nuo mother is regarded as the total ancestor by Meishan Miaoyao ancestors, and known as Fuxi Nvwa by the Han. Legend is the Chinese nation on the origin of human a myth story: when flood and famine sustained, human were endangered, only Nuo male and Nuo mother, the brother and sister, worshipped the heaven and earth, got married, and reproduced offspring endless, known as Meishan Miaoyao Tong man ancestors. Nuo male and Nuo mother are the most important roles in Meishan Nuo Opera. When the Yao nationality "Qinggu Hall" sacrifices to arrange the position of the gods, Nuo male Nuo mother ranks first. In Meishan area, Nuo Opera is sung to seek the best detail and to drive away the plague. In Meishan Nuo Opera, Nuo male and Nuo mother are the embodiment of justice and kindness, which is universally respected and worshipped.

**Meishan Singing great grandfather worship.** Meishan region has always had the custom of "Singing great grandfather", when the believers feel that family life is not satisfactory, something will succeed but fails, some

people in the family are in poor health, etc., in order to pray for the blessing of “Singing great grandfather”, they will ask the local master to hold a “A surname” ceremony to eliminate disasters and bless. The “Singing great grandfather” here means the origin of the people, but also the ancestral gods believed in by the people, as a totem worship, as long as the sincere worship, it will bless the descendants, on the contrary, if it is a little disrespect, it will also fall on the descendants.

The above three local gods in Meishan are representative totem gods in Meishan region, others such as Meng Gong, Wu Xiao Fairy, Fuwang, and King of Sandong are also local gods, and they are also totem images believed and are universally worshipped by Meishan people.

### **The Totem Worship Embodied in the Nuo Opera Vestments**

Meishan Nuo Opera vestment has a unique shape and totem connotation, which is most prominently reflected in three parts: (1) The Twenty-Eight Lunar Mansions totem worship: located in the Nuo Opera vestment back neck seam and each side of the position of one centimeter, the walking needle is the middle of 10 needles, each side of 9 needles, to represent the twenty-eighth Lunar Mansions of Taoism, respectively: horn, neck, root, room, heart, tail, basket, dipper, ox, girl, emptiness, rooftop, encampment, wall, legs, bond, stomach, hairy head, net, turtle beak, three stars, well, ghost, willow, star, extended net, wings, chariot. Its function is that when the Nuo Opera master is doing things, he invites the twenty-eight star king located in the east, east, north, and west to come down to the world to help bring down the demon (Peng & He, 2020). This is the embodiment of the totem worship of “gods and ghosts” in the Nuo opera vestments of Meishan. (2) Ternary buckle (ternary God) Totem worship: ternary buckle from top to bottom sewn in the front part of the vest, respectively representing the Taoist upper Yuan Tang, middle Yuan Ge, and lower Yuan Zhou three gods. The shape of the three-way buckle represents the three gods. When Nuo opera is performed, it is attached to the master to show the magic power, which is the “gods” worship of Meishan people. (3) Nymple totem worship: This is the animal totem image of the Nymple snake on the vesture of Shigong. The Nymple snake in Meishan area represents the auspicious meaning, and the legend is also related to the legend of Chiyou, but the worship of animals in Meishan area has a long history; The first turn is the headscarf worn by Shigong when Nuo opera is performed. It is composed of five pieces of cloth with three gods in the middle. The left and right half pieces can be synthesized into a swallowing image, which is Chiyou, the first ancestor of Meishan people. Through the totem metaphor and totem worship on the vestments, Shigong transformed the personality into the divine figure, which enhanced the sanctity and faith of Nuo drama (Figure 2).



*Figure 2. Master Gong wearing vestment.*

The totem worship embodied in the decorative patterns of Nuo opera vestments is closely related to the Nuo opera culture of Meishan, which embodies the phenomenon of multi-god worship and animal worship in Meishan region.

### **From the Meishan Wu Nuo Mask Decoration Patterns Reflected in the Totem Worship**

Meishan Wuo mask has phoenix bird, cloud pattern, fish, flame, tiger, butterfly, and other decorations, in fact, Meishan people applied the totem worship to the decoration of Nuo mask, reflecting the ancient Meishan people's yearning for a better life and the pursuit of a happy life. Nuo surface is the derivative of Nuo drama; the original meaning of Nuo drama is to have the wish of praying for good fortune, the function of Nuo surface in Nuo drama itself has the meaning of totem. The use of phoenix-bird, cloud pattern, fish, flame, tiger, butterfly, and other patterns on the Nuo surface makes the totemic meaning of Nuo surface more obvious, and also strengthens the ritual sense and folklore of Nuo Opera (Figure 3), providing a specific carrier for the phenomenon of animal and plant worship in Meishan, and providing a powerful demonstration for us to study the phenomenon of totem worship in Meishan.



*Figure 3. Lengshuijiang Su's Nuo altar Nuo mask.*

Developed to today, these totem images have derived a lot of symbolic meanings, such as: phoenix bird symbolizes the phoenix dancing nine days, expressing the meaning of auspiciousness and beauty; The fish pattern symbolizes the meaning of more than one year, carp jumping longmen, etc., expressing the connotation of grain abundance and six animals flourishing; The flame symbolizes good life with no disaster and no difficulty (the author lived in Meishan area for a long time, coal was burnt when I was young, adults are more frugal when burning coal at ordinary times, but during the special days such as the New Year Festival, especially the Spring Festival, a large amount of coal must be burnt, the flame is raging, and cannot be extinguished, symbolizing the good days of this year's prosperity); Moire symbolizes auspiciousness, harmony, wishful thinking, and consummation.

### **Totem Worship in Daily Life of Meishan Region**

In the daily life of ancient Meishan people, ancient trees, strange rocks, and cooktops are all totems worshiped by Meishan people. Ancient trees, strange rocks, and cooktops have the effect of gods and can bring disasters and blessings as time goes by. The author has lived in Lengshuijiang City, the hinterland of Meishan since childhood, and has been influenced by local people's belief in strange rocks and ancient trees: If a child

acts up and causes trouble, parents think that it is difficult for the child to grow up, they will worship a master or wizard with supernatural powers as the “father”, and some will worship ancient trees and strange rocks that they think have spirituality as the “father” (sending their children in their name is called the “boarding father”, and the person or object being sent is called the “board father”). From then on, you will be protected by them, and you will grow up smoothly. Strange stones or ancient trees play the role of totems here. In Meishan area, many ancient trees and rocks will not be cut down or destroyed by local people, and they even think that if damaged, ancient trees and rocks will bring disaster to local people. The stove is also sacred in the Meishan area: adults do not allowed children to cross over it, it is not allowed to spit on the stove or put unclean things, and there is the custom of offering sacrifices to the kitchen king during the Spring Festival.

In Meishan area, the concept of “animism” is deeply rooted, and there are many examples of totem worship. Meishan people’s totem worship psychology of reverence for nature is a kind of belief that Meishan people gradually developed in the process of fighting against nature and in the unique closed geographical environment and human environment, which plays a psychological comfort role for the ancient Meishan people. It enhances their confidence and courage in production, life, and survival, and is also a kind of spiritual sustenance for their yearning for a better life. Only in Meishan people’s cultural atmosphere of “believing in ghosts and gods and being good at prostitution” can the unique totem worship phenomenon of Meishan people be produced.

### Conclusion

The characteristic of Wu-Nuo culture in Meishan is Wu-culture, which is an ancient relic with the most regional characteristics, the most tenacious vitality, and the best embodiment of the folklore of Meishan culture. It is a “living fossil” for the study of Meishan culture, which is closely related to the ancient belief of “animism” and the phenomenon of totem worship is an external manifestation of Meishan culture.

Totem and totem worship exist in every primitive tribe of civilization of human origin and have been left to the highly developed modern civilization era. Totem worship is everywhere in Meishan area today. Although this kind of totem worship is an ancient relic and has backward elements in understanding, up to now, this totem worship phenomenon of Gumeishan people has an indelible positive force in the history of human civilization, which promotes its positive power and courage to overcome difficulties, and is also a spiritual sustenance of Gumeishan people for a better life.

Meishan area still retains a large number of ancient folk beliefs, and totem culture is one of the most representative forms of expression (Li & Chen, 2017). Meishan Wuo culture is the spiritual totem in the heart of Meishan, which has lasted for thousands of years and has gone step by step from the primitive civilization era to the highly developed modern civilization era. Its historical value, folk value, and social value are immeasurable, and adopting reasonable methods and paths to protect and inherit is a challenging topic.

### References

- Britannica Editors. (1986). *The concise encyclopedia Britannica* (Vol. 8). Beijing: Encyclopedia of China Dictionary Press.
- Cai, L., Liu, C. J., & Yang, L. X. (2018). The inheritance dilemma and development of Nuo Drama in Meishan. *Yihai*, 61(10), 144-145.
- Fraser. (1888). *Origins of the family and clan*. London: Adam and Charles Black.
- He, X. L. (1997). *Chinese totem culture*. Beijing: China Social Sciences Press.
- Lange, J. (2006). *Indian travels*. Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House.
- Li, C., & Chen, F. H. (2017). Application of totem culture in Meishan area in food packaging design. *Hunan Packaging*, 38(12), 60-64.

- Li, H. J. (2020). Further discussion on Zhang Wulang' belief. *Journal of Hunan University of Humanities and Science and Technology*, 37(3), 48-52.
- Li, X. W. (2012). *Meishan Chiyou: South Chugen vein, spirit of Huxiang*. Changsha: Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House.
- Marx, & Engels. (1962). *The complete works of Marx and Engels* (Vol. 27). Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Morgan. (1981). *Ancient society*. Beijing: Commercial Printing House.
- Peng, Z. Y., & He, J. W. (2020). Analysis on the shape and meaning of Nuo Opera vestments. *Hunan Social Sciences*, 33(2), 152.
- Qu, L. Y., & Qian, F. (2006). *Introduction to oriental Nuo culture*. Taiyuan: Shanxi Education Press.
- Shen, Z. (2018). Study on the artistic value of Chizhou Nuo opera mask and its derivative design (M.Sc. thesis, Anhui University of Technology, 2018).
- Wang, Y., Zhang, Y., Hong, X. Z., & Xia, J. Q. (2013). *A supplement to the chapters of Chu Ci*. Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House.
- Yang, K. (1986). *Development history of primitive society*. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press.
- Zhang, Z. W. (2005). *Proceedings of the third Meishan cultural symposium in China*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Tianma Books Co., LTD.
- Zhao, J., & Wang, G. Y. (2011). Analysis on the phenomenon and significance of ethnic totem pattern. *Liaoning Silk*, 39(4), 24-25.