

A Simple Spiritual Building

Guima Earth Shrine


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ABSTRACT

 The Dong People live in South-West China, in a mountainous and formerly inaccessible landscape. All Dong buildings were traditionally constructed by local carpenters. In this paper will focus on a small Dong spiritual building, an Earth shrine. It is a village shrine in Guima village. The shrine links the value of the family with the fertility of the earth. It is a communal site combining individual observances for a confirmation of shared belief, and a construction of society. The shrine also serves as a spiritual place where villagers can pray for blessing. After a short general introduction, this narrative approach addresses the building before teasing out the social and theoretical issues.

Keywords: *Dong, carpenter, Earth shrine, ritual, custom*

MAIN TEXT

The Dong People of South-West China, Province Guizhou, live in a mountainous and formerly inaccessible landscape, remaining in relative isolation. Until about fifty years ago they had no written version of their language, apart from a few people with outside connections who mastered Mandarin, so depended entirely on oral communication. They are famous for their tradition of antiphonal singing, by which myth and ritual were handed down.

The clan system is the core of the Dong ethnic group, the social system organising the Dong society, by which different people of different roles and practices work together to construct the social structure and living environment. Their buildings are predominantly

of timber, locally produced by village carpenters with community help for assembling frames, and accompanied by a rich sequence of building rituals. Their building types are distinct and recognisable: timber post *ganlan* houses, rice barns, and at the centre of every village a communal drum tower with a tall stack of roofs used for social meetings and political decisions. They also build roofed 'wind and rain' bridges as village thresholds and controllers of the water mouth, which is important for feng-shui, the practice concerned with correct orientation which is shared with the rest of China. Communal buildings have traditionally been funded by local public prescription, donations being considered propitious and adding spiritual capital for the next life in a reincarnated series. Their construction provides a vital opportunity for a carpenter to build one, not only to gain this kind of spiritual merit, but

also to display the peak of his skill. Drum towers and 'wind and rain' bridges are the most complex and highly decorated types among Dong buildings in direct reflection of their social significance, but this paper will concentrate instead (Figure 1), on a much smaller Dong spiritual building, which will allow some pursuit of detail. It is a village shrine seen and photographed on a field trip to Dong country in May 2014, and the authors were fascinated to discover that it was only around eight years old, so represents a still extant tradition. It seemed very complete, adorned with paintings, sculpted figures, and calligraphy. The remains of burned incense suggested recent offerings, while its relatively clean condition, including the presence of a sweeping brush and shovel, suggested regular use.

Nature worship is an essential part of Dong ethnic culture. In the context of worship, Dong people think that everything has a spirit, including the sun, moon, thunder, rainbow, field, mountain, river, fire, and tree. These spirits are related to people's lives. Field worship concerns both the land people occupy and that used for producing crops. The field god not only protects the safety of the land, but also influences nature of farm production. The shrine or temple of the field god tends to be placed at the head, centre or end of a village, by the entry of a road, or in front of a bridge. Every village has at least one earth shrine or temple to worship the field god.

The growing village of Guima had broken away from another village called Jitang in 1977 so it had needed its own shrine, but the villagers did not manage to achieve this until 2006. It's sitting next to a new tarmac road and car park suggests that it was meant to mark the entrance point to the village, though the connection was not clear.

Looking at the building as a structure reminds one that Dong architecture is based on a carpentry discipline, usually without drawings, and necessarily procedural in nature. The carpenters must think of the assembly process in stages, from the placing of columns onwards. Bay dimensions and the numbers of each type of component along with its mortise and tenon joints have to be borne in mind, the whole procedure mapped out in the head of the leading carpenter, who is known as the hand-ink master because he dimensions all the pieces. A standard house is built around a series of frames known as fans which constitute the gable section, and when drawings are made this is the usual subject,



Figure 1:
Front view of Guima Shrine, May 2014, photograph Peter Blundell Jones

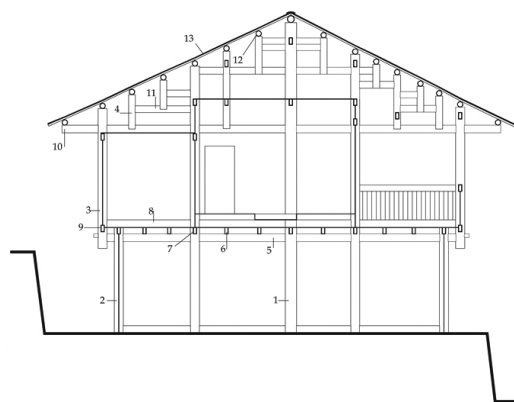


Figure 2:
Section of a typical Dong house showing a structural 'fan', drawn by Derong Kong for his PhD thesis.

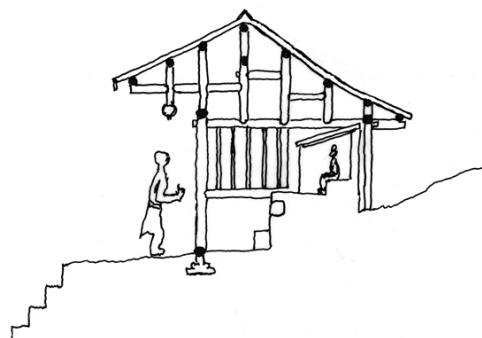


Figure 3:
Sketch section of the shrine, reconstructed from photographs, showing the structural 'fan' and a worshipper confronting the God figures.

the conceptual key to the building (Figure 2). In Chinese architecture there is no diagonal bracing, each roof purlin being supported on its own vertical post and transmitting the load through a series of vertical and horizontal interlocking timbers. This is probably of advantage in earthquakes, but it is also a way of thinking. The little shrine has just four columns supporting two fans, one on each side (Figure 3), so that the approach front is eaves rather than gable. The fan on each side has two principal columns and three short ones, precariously balanced on a horizontal beam. The front edge of the roof overhangs on a pair of hanging columns and cantilevered beams which allow an oversail to provide shelter and a sense of welcome.

There is added decoration along the eaves, as found on the more celebratory drum towers and 'wind and rain' bridges, and there is also decoration on the ridge with vertically stacked tiles, projecting horns at the ends, and a central celebratory figure (Figure 4). The construction of intersecting circles represent money in the form of an enlarged coin and vertical stacks of coins, symbolic of good fortune (Figure 5). The structure of the shrine is similar in form to that of village gates (Figure 6), which again have side frames and a roof presenting its eaves to the approach. The provision of a roof over a gate reinforces the ritual importance of the threshold and therefore asserts the village boundary, though it is no real defensive measure because it can be circumvented. Such gates are conceptually important to define territory, and to mark the place where customs like the blocking ceremony of inter-village visits can be enacted. Several Dong rituals require such definition of the boundary. As Lakoff and Johnson claim, enacting a ritual is one way to read a place, for it creates the boundary to define a territory. (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 29) After the boundary is set up, a place emerges as the rituals are enacted, united in physical form with versions in the minds of those who use it.

Architecturally the shrine presents a traditional Chinese place of honour laid out symmetrically along the centre-line, as can be found in many a house, palace or temple, always marked by symmetrical displays of statements in Chinese characters. Such a 'place of honour' may focus on the Emperor, the image of a deity, a set of ancestral tablets or a table of offerings. Our shrine is approached on axis by a flight of stone steps (Figure 7), and behind is a blind hillside stopping the axis. Spatially the little building



Figure 4:
Roof and ridge of the shrine, photograph Derong Kong.



YUAN DYNASTY COINS, AD. 1342

Figure 5:
Chinese coins from the Yuan dynasty, the probable basis for the ridge decoration.



Figure 6:
Typical Dong village gate, Tang'an, photograph Peter Blundell Jones May 2014.



Figure 7:
Longer view of the shrine and its approach steps,
photograph by Derong Kong.

suggests a house within a house, microcosm within macrocosm, for the sculpted figures of a man and a woman sit beneath their own symbolic tiled roof inside, announced by an inner group of calligraphic couplets. This inner house occupies a raised level so that worshippers can kneel in front, and they must step over a wooden tie on the ground, the threshold that contains the worship space. Painted tigers on a red background guard the centre where offerings can be made on four different levels, including a small cavity outlined in paint as a vessel. Side murals are of plants, presumably representing the staple grain that is object of worship and that must be persuaded to regenerate year by year. The wide top shelf lends itself to occasions when a generous series of food offerings need to be laid out. As it offers little space, only two or three people could be accommodated for prayer at once, but a much larger group could proceed past adding offerings.

The applied calligraphy carries many messages. The house within a house has a headboard saying 'protect my old and young', and the side couplets to left and right translate respectively as 'Two may live as long as the southern mountain' and 'Happiness is as immense as the eastern sea'. The couplets on the outer building are similarly arranged. The top one claims 'A hundred things pray for a propitious existence' and the left and right ones say respectively 'Dragon rises and phoenix dances to bless reform' and 'People are happy in the year of the horse'. At the head of the shrine under the main roof are various titles: the front one says 'Flying mountain grandfather', which may relate to research on the Yang family, who have a 'flying mountain temple' for ancestor worship. (Zhang, 2012, p. 138) The second title set behind on red cloth reads 'The God of Earth and Grain'. Every village has at least one altar for worship of the Field God. Min Zhang's research suggests that originally the Field God represented only the fertility of the fields, but later grew in scope to offer the villagers protection and ensure their safety. (Zhang, 2012, p. 109) Local villagers confirmed that it is an Earth and Grain altar, but it also carries some ancestral connotations.

It is the case that people need to construct a shrine and statues to embody and incarnate the spiritual idea of the god. The shrine and the rituals carried out within it make the field god exist. It does not matter whether the god has existed in material form, for while they believe in it, people are offered a concrete psychological relief, an assurance of safety and a good harvest from this land. The relief and assurance can be seen and felt through the processes of construction and subsequent enactments of ritual. This is also a construction that maintains their belief in the living environment. Meanwhile, the 'service' or 'power' scope of the god is local, related to people's lives and the things with which they are working, in this case it relates to the earth which is vital to agriculture. A parallel example dedicated to a different purpose is the Mazhu Temple as described by Xiaomei Wu and Jindan Zhou. (Wu and Zhou, 2015, pp. 150-151) Mazhu is a goddess worshipped by coastal people along the east and south China sea, who protects the people working and travelling on the sea. As the field survey of village belief made by Tongju Diao and others shows, people's beliefs tend to be closely related to their sources of livelihood. (Diao and etc, 2012, p. 137)

Local people say that the two figures in the Guima Earth Shrine are the Earth Grandfather and Earth Grandmother, and the texts both praise the benefits of being a couple and refer to caring links between generations. Thus the shrine links the value of the family with the fertility of the earth, a familiar idea in anthropology from many parts of the world.¹ The new shrine repeats the same figures as found in Jitang, the village from which Guima broke away, demonstrating a persistence of beliefs and rituals associated precisely with this couple. They belong to a pantheon of multiple Gods in imperial China, which may seem strange to an atheistic or monotheistic audience, but which allowed the sharing of an elaborate imagined and symbolic realm. The Gods persisted at a popular level under Communism to re-emerge when the political regime relaxed its repression of religious practices in the 1990s. In rural China the persistent belief in reincarnation, and in the three worlds of heaven, human beings, and underworld, have fostered continuing support for these kinds of symbolic representations, and the Earth God is a figure of primary importance. He regulates the fertility of the land and assures the success of crops. Under the imperial regime, until 1911, the ploughing of the first furrow on a primal field at the temple of agriculture by the Emperor was celebrated annually in Beijing.

The adoption of agriculture relates also to the calendar. Many early societies could get by without one, but when people moved north to experience changing seasons and became reliant on tilling the ground, the harvest of an adequate crop became essential, necessitating propitiations of the powers above who determined the weather. The Chinese calendar follows the ancient lunar system, in which the motions of sun and moon intersect every sixty years, and it was under strict control of the Emperor. Emerging from Daoist numerology, it linked time and space, and astrological reckonings are still used for tasks and events of many kinds, for example to decide the day to assemble a house, or to get married, calculated against the couple's birthdates. Although without writing, the Dong have certainly been numerate, as versed in the symbolic values attached to numbers as in the rest of China.

Offerings to the God of Earth chime with this, ritual observances being held at certain key times to mark the progress of the year.

Agriculture requires inter-generational continuity, such as the planting of trees one will never see mature, or the laborious construction of another rice terrace from which only future generations will profit. When combined with a belief in reincarnation, this fosters the notion that the single life is not so short, but part of a continuing cycle. Old people in an oral culture become the primary repositories of knowledge and communal memory must be looked after by young. Respect for ancestors is deeply embedded in Chinese society by Confucianism, which stresses respect for parents and patriarchy. It is reflected across China in ancestral halls and temples, and in elaborate rituals for burying the dead. This shows why the Earth God is called Grandfather, and why he needs to be accompanied by an Earth Grandmother, who represents the female principle and balance of yin and yang.

The Dong also have a mythical first couple like Adam and Eve in Western culture, called Zhang Liang and Zhang Mei, (Geary, 2003, p. 151) but more interesting for the matriarchal principle is their primary Goddess Sa Sui, the Village Grandmother, whose cult balances the patriarchy of the village drum tower, and who may represent the persisting memory of an earlier matriarchal society. (Geary, 2003, p. 88) Shrines to her are often erected at village entrances, but do not usually represent her in physical form, preferring a symbolism of rounded stones. Sa Sui shrines also receive offerings to mark particular points in the calendar, such as the gathering of the harvest, the New Year, Jiaxu day and the periodic public events of water buffalo fights, which require offerings to Sa Sui beforehand. (Geary, 2003, pp. 65, 186, 195, 202)

To understand the Guima shrine more fully research is needed to ascertain what happens there over the course of a year, what kinds of offerings are made, and what they mean. On community occasions the presence of a common site combining individual observances is a confirmation of shared belief, but

¹ Classic African examples are Marcel Griaule's writings on the Dogon and Pierre Bourdieu's essay on the Kabyle House.

the words and actions performed together can also confirm a socially constructed reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). On ordinary days the shrine may also serve as a place where individuals go in private to pray for comfort, and to entreat the powers above for a solution to their personal problems, even just to provide a place of retreat and contemplation. The use of churches for this purpose in Western society is not so very different.

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