

SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION OF RITUAL ELEMENTS IN THE YIFAN FESTIVAL

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ABSTRACT

The Yifan Festival is the most representative traditional ritual of the Mulao ethnic group, with a history tracing back to the Ming Dynasty over 500 years ago. As a nationally recognized intangible cultural heritage in China, the festival not only serves the functions of prayer, gratitude, and social cohesion but also plays a crucial role in the cultural inheritance and identity formation of the Mulao people. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of symbolic anthropology and symbolic interactionism, this study adopts a multi-method approach combining observation, and interviews with 24 participants including ritual masters and villagers, and participant observation during three full festival cycles. This research was conducted in Dawu and Sibazhen in Luocheng County, involving 3 ritual masters, 6 community elders, and 15 local participants. It focuses on the symbolic meanings embedded in core ritual elements such as the role of the shigong (ritual master), Nuo masks, deity paintings, ritual scriptures, and offerings. The findings reveal that the Yifan Festival establishes a spiritual connection between humans and ancestors, nature, and society through these richly symbolic material and immaterial elements. This process reflects and transmits the Mulao people's cosmology, belief systems, and cultural values. This paper aims to decode the symbolic cultural system embedded in the Yifan ritual and demonstrate its unique role in sustaining ethnic identity and safeguarding intangible heritage.

Keywords: Yifan Festival, Mulao ethnic group, ritual, symbolic interpretation, intangible cultural heritage

INTRODUCTION

1. Background and Important

Although previous studies have addressed the general form and evolution of the Yifan Festival, there remains a lack of in-depth symbolic interpretation of its core ritual components through the lens of symbolic anthropology. This study fills this gap by focusing on the interpretation of ritual props, texts, and roles.

The earliest record of "Mulao" comes from the book "New Yuan History", and after the founding of the People's Republic of China, it was formally called "mulao ethnic group" after ethnic identification. mulao ethnic group is mainly located in Luocheng mulao ethnic group autonomous county of Hechi City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (Luocheng Mulao Autonomous County Gazetteer Compilation Committee, 2021). group autonomous county in Hechi City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, and to a lesser extent in Guizhou Province.(Xiao Yongzi, 2004) They have unique religious beliefs. They have unique religious beliefs and believe in their own deities, especially during the Yifan festival, when the mulao ethnic group holds large-scale ceremonies and rituals to express their reverence and gratitude to their deities.

The Yifan Festival, also known as “Xile Yuan” or “Yifan Gongye” (literally “fulfilling a vow to the ancestors”), is the most significant traditional festival of the Mulao ethnic minority in China. It embodies the essence of Mulao culture and serves as a vital symbol of ethnic identity. The festival dates back to the sixth year of the Chenghua reign in the Ming Dynasty (1470), with a documented history of over 500 years (Wu, 2016). According to historical records, the Yifan Festival is usually held on an auspicious date around the

time of the “Beginning of Winter” solar term. It occurs every three to five years and lasts one to three days, with variations in timing across different regions. Originally, the festival was established by the Mulao people to celebrate the harvest, pray for favorable weather in the coming year, abundant crops, livestock prosperity, and communal well-being (Lei, 2009).

After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the Yifan Festival was revitalized as a celebration of agricultural abundance and as a means of preserving and promoting ethnic culture. Over time, the festival’s sacrificial rituals have been gradually simplified, shedding elements of feudal religious practice. In their place, new cultural expressions such as modern theatrical performances, singing competitions, sports events, and trade fairs have been introduced. These additions have not only enriched the festival’s content but also made it more compatible with contemporary societal aesthetics and expectations (Huang & Wei, 2012).

Today, the Yifan Festival stands as a traditional occasion through which the Mulao people express gratitude toward the Party and government, honor their ancestors, celebrate the harvest, and promote peace, unity, and ethnic development (Yin, 2012). It is both a core bearer of Mulao cultural heritage and a vivid manifestation of the pluralistic and harmonious nature of Chinese civilization. On May 20, 2006, the Yifan Festival of the Mulao ethnic group was officially inscribed in the first batch of China’s National Intangible Cultural Heritage List, marking a significant step toward its preservation and continuation.

With profound historical roots and rich cultural connotations, the Yifan Festival has continuously evolved by integrating new cultural elements and folk customs. It has developed into a comprehensive event that encompasses celebration, worship, entertainment, sports, and commerce. As

the most distinctive traditional festival of the Mulao people, it plays a crucial role in showcasing their cultural uniqueness, strengthening ethnic pride and cohesion. Moreover, the festival serves as an essential vehicle for cultural transmission: younger generations are able to engage with and learn about their history, values, and beliefs through immersive participation in the festive atmosphere, thereby deepening their understanding and sense of identity with their heritage.

2. Yifan Festival Ritual

The Yifan Festival is typically organized at the village or clan level, a structure that reinforces internal cohesion and communal solidarity. During the festival, relatives, neighbors, and friends take the opportunity to visit one another, collectively observe traditional Yifan ritual performances, enjoy signature Mulao dishes, and participate in various folk activities (Lu, 2013). These communal engagements not only deepen interpersonal bonds but also promote social harmony and unity within the local community.

The Yifan ritual is traditionally presided over by Daoist ritual master Xie Zhonghou and his ceremonial troupe. According to local practice, the ritual procedure conducted by the Xie family's master-priests (shigong) generally consists of eight sequential stages: Setting up the altar (qitan), Inviting the deities (qingsheng), Chanting the divine names (changshen), Summoning the spiritual army (zhaobing), Offering the sacrificial animal (dian sheng), Persuading the deities (quansheng), Singing the “Ox Song” (chang niuge), and Sending off the deities (songsheng) (Lu, 2013).

Table 1 Procedure of the Yifan Festival Ritual

Time		Ritual process
November 21st	night	Setting up of the altar (Qitan)
November 23st	forenoon	—
	afternoon	Inviting of Deities (Qingshen)
	night	Chanting of the Deities (Changshen)
November 23st	before dawn	Sending Off the Deities (Songsheg)

The ritual process officially begins in the evening of the 21st with the Setting up of the altar (Qitan). The ritual master (shigong) presiding over the altar lights incense and red candles, offers sacrificial items, and sings invocations while bowing to invite the presence of deities from all directions to the Yifan ritual site (Mo, 2008).

This is followed by the Inviting of Deities (Qingshen), also referred to as Qingsheng or Qingyan ("cleansing the feast"). Master Xie Zhonghou begins by listing the names of the Thirty-Six Divine Spirits on a ceremonial "Invocation Register" (Yingshen Biao). Incense is burned, red candles lit, and gongs and drums are played in accompaniment. The master employs the ritual scripture Dital Qingyan Ke (Ritual of the Earth Altar's Purification Banquet), donning the corresponding mask of each deity while dancing and singing for each one in sequence. The choreography and lyrics must be appropriately aligned with the identity and attributes of each deity. This performance continues until all thirty-six deities have been duly invoked.

The next phase, Chanting of the Deities (Changshen) also known as Zhuoyan or Shuyan ("Impure Banquet" or "Cooked Banquet") commences at 10 p.m. on the 22nd and typically concludes around 2 a.m. on the 23rd. This

stage employs the ritual scripture Chaoshang Shuyan, which recounts the origins, deeds, and mythological stories associated with the deities, embedding cosmological and moral teachings within the ceremonial narrative.

The final stage, Sending Off the Deities (Songsheg) also called Shoubing (withdrawing the troops) or Song Liangjiu (bidding farewell to Liang Jiu) takes place on the morning of the 23rd. The ritual master carries paper money offerings on a shoulder pole and chants the scripture Shoubing Guidian Songsheg Ke (Ritual for Withdrawing the Troops and Sending Off the Deities), ceremoniously returning each deity to their respective temple. Disguised as Liang Jiuguan (a key spiritual figure), the shigong symbolically escorts the gods from the site. He then shares practical guidance on agriculture, daily life, and childbirth with the villagers often delivered in a humorous and festive tone. Finally, the ritual culminates with the symbolic act of stomping on and bursting a pig's bladder, marking the conclusion of the entire Yifan Festival ceremony (Lai, 2009).

3. Ritual Elements of the Yifan Festival

3.1 Ritual master

In the Yifan Festival, the shigong (ritual master) serves as the central figure, acting as both the presiding officiant and primary ritual performer. He fulfills significant religious and cultural functions (Lei, 2009). Typically, the ceremony is conducted by one lead shigong with the assistance of three to five co-performers.



Figure 1 Yifan Ritual master (Provided by Yifan Festival scholar Mo Wenshi)

Their costumes and ritual implements are imbued with symbolic meanings and are closely linked to Daoist traditions. The shigong usually wears a hat embroidered with the sun, moon, and the Eight Trigrams (Bagua), along with a long robe—usually in yellow or light orange—featuring motifs such as the Azure Dragon and White Tiger, underscoring the formal structure of religious rites. The ritual implements include a Seven-Star Sword, long-handled broadsword, dog-headed staff, and divination shells. These objects are not only functional tools during the rituals but also carry sacred significance within Mulao cultural cosmology.

3.2 Ritual props

3.2.1 Nuo Masks

Nuo masks used in the Yifan ritual are wooden carvings or paper-mâché face coverings representing divine entities. According to ritual masters, a complete set contains 36 masks, each corresponding to one of the 36 deities invoked during the ceremony (Wu & Wei, 2009). During ritual segments that involve theatrical and exorcistic elements, the shigong dons

specific masks while singing, chanting, gesturing, and drumming, transforming into the deity symbolically. These masks serve as powerful artistic tools for expelling evil, repaying vows, and seeking blessings. Most are carved from camphor wood using techniques such as relief, round, and openwork carving (Wu, 2016). The masks feature exaggerated realism to emphasize the divine attributes smooth painted surfaces, color treatments, and horsehair inserts to mimic beards. Eyeholes are carved, and the backs are hollowed out with side holes for tying, ensuring wearability.



Figure 2 Nuo mask used in the Mulao Yifan ritual (Author)

Field research conducted at Master Xie Zhonghou's residence in Sibazhen and the Luocheng Mulao Ethnic Museum confirms the existence of a complete set of 36 ritual masks used in the Yifan Festival. Among them, only five were handcrafted by Master Xie himself and are used in family-led ceremonies.

A clear distinction in craftsmanship is observed between the two sets. The museum masks feature bright colors and strong visual appeal but are relatively coarse in carving and lack detailed refinement. In contrast,

Master Xie's masks demonstrate fine craftsmanship and clear, intricate patterns, though their color schemes are more restrained and monochromatic.

This contrast reflects differing functional contexts: the museum masks are primarily intended for display and public education, emphasizing visual presentation, while the family-used masks focus on ritual efficacy and symbolic precision. This underscores the traditional integration of craftsmanship and belief in folk religious practice. However, only a few are actively used during ritual performances, most notably those representing “Ox Brother”, “White Horse Lady”, “Liang Jiu” and “King Wu” In the “Chanting the Deities” stage, the act of donning a mask (referred to as zhuangshen, or embodiment) allows the shigong to temporarily assume the identity of the deity (Lai, 2009). By imitating gestures and expressions, he bridges the gap between the human and the divine, heightening the ritual’s mystery and sacred atmosphere. As a form of cultural expression, these masks embody the Mulao people's religious beliefs, ritual traditions, and adaptive creativity within historical and environmental constraints.

3.2.2 paintings

The paintings used in the Yifan Festival are visual representations of the Thirty-Six Deities, typically hung above the altar and serve both devotional and ritual purposes. While academic literature on these images remains limited, existing studies note that they are central to visualizing the divine presence during ceremonies. These portraits assist worshippers in focusing their spiritual intent, creating a sacred atmosphere and facilitating visual communication with the gods.



Figure 3 Yifan ritual paintings (Author)

Mulao divine paintings are regionally distinctive and stylistically unique. They often incorporate mythological narratives, traditional motifs, and culturally coded symbols. According to the author's fieldwork, Master Xie Zhonghou of Sibazhen preserves a full set of 36 deity portraits. These images are painted on cloth with figures outlined in black ink and colored afterward. Originally painted on white cotton, the fabric has now aged to a grey tone. Each painting follows a consistent format, approximately 90 cm in height and 36 cm in width, arranged in a vertical scroll. The composition features three sections: a central deity (seated, standing, or mounted on horseback), flanked by two attendants holding ritual banners, with the deity's name inscribed in brush script at the top (right to left) (Cheng, 2018). The lower third shows four to five armed guards, visually emphasizing the central god's prominence. At the top of the picture there is a line of text written with a brush from right to left, the name of the god. In the lower third of the picture, four or five soldiers and generals escort the deity. The guards were drawn in the lower third of the picture.

4. Ritual Scriptures

Yifan ritual scriptures are central texts recited by ritual masters during ceremonies.



Figure 4 Yifan ritual scriptures (Author)

The Fenxiang Ke is recited at the opening of the altar ceremony (An Tan Qing Sheng) and declares the intention of the ritual: “To offer worship for peace and blessings, to celebrate the harvest, to fulfill vows and repay grace.” The scripture details the process of inviting deities such as the Kitchen God and the Three Yuan Patriarchs. Ten offerings (incense, flowers, tea, fruit, lamp, tofu, vegetables, liquor, holy images, memorial texts, and silver money) and twelve rounds of wine toasts are performed to request protection, prosperity, family growth, livestock well-being, and good harvests (Author's fieldwork, 2025).

The Ditai Qingyan Ke is used during the "Purification Banquet" to summon gods closely associated with the ritual tradition—such as the Meishan pantheon, ancestral shigong, household deities, and local earth gods.

The Quansheng Ke involves ritual toasts to the gods, inviting them to take their seats, drink, and offer blessings—a symbolic gesture of reverence and supplication

The Chaoshang Shuyan Ke, associated with sacrificial meat offerings (shuyan or “cooked banquet”), recounts myths related to cosmology, flood

control, bridge construction, and farming, reflecting Mulao historical memory and cultural imagination.

The Ditai Zhaobing Niuge Ke includes two parts: the summoning of divine troops and the chanting of the “Ox Song.” It describes the stories of seven divine ox herders (Niuge), their miraculous deeds, and their allegiance to King Wu, summoning them to the altar to ensure livestock prosperity and bountiful crops.

Finally, the Shoubing Ke marks the ritual's closure. Through ceremonial chants, the gods are respectfully sent back to their abodes, expressing communal gratitude and reverence.

Yifan scriptures encapsulate the theological, historical, and folkloric richness of the Mulao tradition. Though rooted in agrarian supplication for blessings, prosperity, and peace, these texts continue to serve as vehicles of intergenerational cultural transmission and spiritual reflection in the modern era. By conducting the Yifan Festival, the Mulao people honor their ancestors and gods while nurturing social harmony, moral gratitude, and cultural continuity.

5. Theory and Concept

This study is grounded in symbolic anthropology, particularly drawing on the interpretive approach of Clifford Geertz, who emphasized culture as a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms. In Geertz's view, ritual practices are not merely actions but texts to be read thick descriptions of meaning-making within a cultural context (Snow, 2014). The Yifan Festival, with its intricate ceremonial roles, masks, scriptures, and mytho-historical narratives, is approached in this study as a cultural text through which the Mulao people express and reproduce their worldview, social values, and collective memory.

The researcher developed a conceptual framework for the study based on the literature review to create a conceptual framework for the study. This is shown in the figure below.

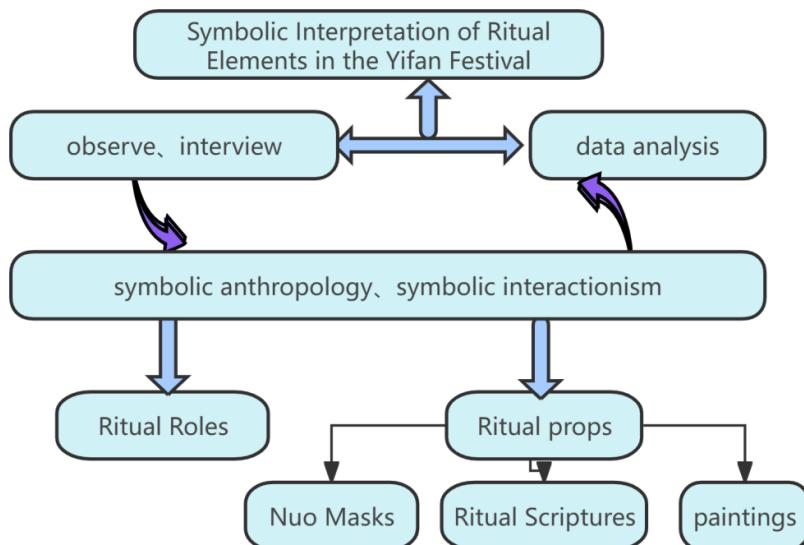


Figure 5 Conceptual framework (Author)

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

1. to study Symbolic Interpretation of Ritual Elements in the Yifan Festival
2. To study the symbolic interpretation of ritual elements in the Yifan Festival is to explore how the Mulao people construct and transmit cultural meaning through ritual roles, sacred objects, and performative texts, drawing on symbolic anthropology and symbolic interactionism.

RESULTS

1. The Ritual Master (Shigong): Constructing Sacred Narrative

In the Yifan Festival, the ritual master (shigong) dons sacred masks and performs the gestures, expressions, and vocal intonations of deities. In doing so, he assumes the identity of divine beings and recounts mythological narratives to participants stories of human origins, cultural heroes, and the development of agriculture and social life. This performative interaction constitutes a moment of communion between gods and humans, where religious communication, entertainment, and education are interwoven.

The shigong is the central figure in Mulao folk religious practices, responsible for officiating key ceremonies such as the Yifan Festival. Through embodied performance—mask-wearing and the mimetic enactment of deities the shigong conveys divine will, blessings, and moral guidance to the community. His role is not limited to ritual performance but extends to being a vital carrier of cultural and religious heritage.

Transmission of ritual knowledge is carried out through both familial and master-apprentice lineages. Apprentices are required to accompany the shigong in multiple ceremonies, gaining experiential knowledge of ritual procedures, scriptures, and the use of sacred objects. Only after undergoing formal rites of succession can an apprentice officiate independently. Thus, the shigong also functions as a cultural educator, preserving and disseminating ritual knowledge across generations. This dual function—ritual officiation and cultural pedagogy solidifies his status as both religious and cultural authority.

From the perspective of symbolic anthropology, the shigong is not merely a ritual specialist but also serves as a living embodiment of cultural symbols and sacred authority. In this dual role, the shigong plays a central part

in mediating the relationship between the sacred and the secular realms. The various elements associated with the shigong—his speech, gestures, and material attributes such as robes, masks, and ritual implements—constitute a complex symbolic system that facilitates communication between these two domains. Through the shigong, participants gain access to an interpretive framework for understanding divine presence and cosmological order, enabling them to navigate their place within the broader cultural and spiritual landscape.

As a symbolic actor, the shigong constructs sacred narratives through both verbal and performative modes, weaving together multiple layers of meaning. His ritual chants and bodily expressions serve to convey ancestral myths, moral teachings, and communal values, providing a foundation for shared beliefs and practices. Simultaneously, his use of symbolic costumes and tools visually re-enacts the mythic order, thereby reinforcing cultural memory and strengthening group identity. This visual re-enactment not only preserves traditional knowledge but also ensures its transmission across generations, maintaining continuity within the community.

In this capacity, the shigong functions not only as a ritual intermediary but also as a narrative architect who structures sacred meaning within the context of the Yifan Festival. By integrating diverse symbolic elements into a cohesive framework, the shigong creates a space where participants can engage with and reflect upon their collective heritage. This process fosters a deeper understanding of cultural traditions and reinforces the social bonds that underpin community cohesion.

2. Ritual props: Metaphors of Symbolic Imagery

According to Clifford Geertz's theory of symbolic anthropology, culture constitutes a system of symbols through which human beings construct

meaning and engage in social interaction (Hoskins, 2015). Within this framework, the ritual props of the Yifan Festival are not merely functional instruments; they are culturally encoded symbols imbued with profound metaphorical significance.

The Nuo masks in the Yifan Festival form an essential component of the Mulao cultural system. Based on field research on ritual masks used in the Yifan Festival of the Mulao ethnic group, as well as interviews with local residents and ritual masters (shigong), it is evident that the deities worshipped during the festival embody rich traditional symbolism and reflect specific communal expectations related to nature, society, and life. The following summarizes the symbolic meanings and popular expectations associated with five central deities:

2.1 White Horse Maiden

Traditional Symbolism:

As a heroic savior and agricultural enlightener, the White Horse Maiden is known in legend for her supernatural strength—slaying a harmful divine lion, reclaiming grain seeds, and modeling oxen from taro and sweet potatoes to teach the Mulao people farming techniques. She is also revered as a guardian of nature, associated with favorable weather and agricultural abundance, embodying protection against natural disasters and the safeguarding of human and animal well-being.

Folk Expectations:

Worshippers pray for abundant harvests and food security, as well as protection from droughts, floods, and other environmental threats.

2.2 Niuge

Traditional Symbolism:

Ox Brother appears in the form of an ox model carved from taro and sweet potatoes, symbolizing agricultural labor and the productivity of the land. He represents the core values of diligence and cooperation in Mulao farming culture, serving as a moral embodiment of labor ethics.

Folk Expectations:

The community prays for the health of livestock, protection against epidemics, and smooth agricultural activities to ensure household stability and food production.

2.3 Liang Jiu

Traditional Symbolism:

A legendary rescuer, Liang Jiu helped free the Mulao ancestral figures from captivity, symbolizing hope and salvation in times of crisis. During the Sending-off the Deity ritual, he plays a humorous role—using props like pig bladders to interact with the crowd—demonstrating communal cohesion, optimism, and emotional relief through performance.

Folk Expectations:

Liang Jiu is invoked to dispel plagues and misfortune, purify the environment, and promote psychological comfort and community unity through humor and lighthearted interaction.

2.4 King Wu

Traditional Symbolism:

Honored alongside Liang Jiu, King Wu is regarded as a righteous historical hero and local guardian deity, symbolizing justice and virtue. His worship reinforces ancestral memory and strengthens cultural identity.

Folk Expectations:

Villagers commemorate King Wu's foundational contributions, praying for local peace and protection from external threats, thereby ensuring social stability.

2.5 Powang

Traditional Symbolism:

As the controller of the "Flower Mountain," the Queen Mother governs fertility, birth, and fate, determining the gender and destiny of newborns. She is revered as a guardian of children and life itself. In rituals such as "bridging the fate path," she is believed to dispel illness and ensure healthy growth.

Folk Expectations:

Offerings are made to seek fertility, safe pregnancies, and the continuation of the family line, as well as the health and protection of children from illness and accidents.

Table 2 Symbolic Imagery of Nuo Masks

Name	Original form	outline	colour	element	Traditional symbolism	expectations
Niuge					Symbol of agricultural productivity	Agricultural harvest, guarantee food security to resist drought, floods and other natural disasters

Name	Original form	outline	colour	element	Traditional symbolism	expectations
Baima					A savior and an enlightener of agriculture	Livestock health, prevent disease - farming smoothly, improve crop production
Liang jiu					Disaster Redeemer	Expulsion of plague and evil ease the stress in your life, enhance ethnic solidarity and psychological comfort
Wu wang					Historical heroes and local protectors	To commemorate ancestors merits, strengthen the cultural identity pray for the local peace, avoid external intrusion
Po wang					Fertility and the master of life	Son and fetus, ensure family protect children's health, reduce disease and accident

Image source: Drawn by the author

As Master Xie noted during an interview, 'Every mask holds its own spirit; we do not wear them casually, The Nuo masks serve as visual embodiments of divine presence. Each mask corresponds to one of the Thirty-Six Divine Spirits and serves as a visual embodiment of divine presence, materializing otherwise intangible spiritual forces within the performative space of the ritual. These masks are not merely decorative artifacts; rather, they function as sacred instruments that mediate between the human and the supernatural realms. When ritual masters (daoshi) wear these masks, they enact a process of "symbolic substitution" allowing the performer to transition into the role of a deity and symbolically mediate between the sacred and secular realms.

The paintings (shenxianghua), present a visual representation of spiritual hierarchy and belief structure: the composition of central deities flanked by attendants embodies notions of authority and cosmic order. Offerings—such as incense, flowers, fruit, and wine—express reverence and supplication. Each item carries a specific symbolic meaning. Incense may represent the transmission of prayers, flowers the beauty and impermanence of life, fruits the blessings of the harvest, and wine the joy of communion with the divine.

Artistic Feature Analysis Table of Deity Images in the Mulao Yifan Ritual The use of color in the deity paintings is marked by strong religious symbolism. The main deities are often depicted wearing red, blue, or yellow robes colors that represent nobility, divinity, and protective power. The attire of attendants and guardians typically features red, green, blue, and yellow, creating striking color contrasts that enhance visual impact.

Background decorations commonly include elements such as cloud patterns, banners, and ritual implements, which heighten the sense of

mystery and ceremonial atmosphere. Among them, banners symbolize divine majesty; cloud patterns reinforce the celestial imagery of deities "arriving on clouds"; and mythical creatures like white horses, black oxen, and the Black Tortoise (Xuanwu) signify different divine roles and protective functions.

In terms of decorative detail, banners, ritual implements, and mythical beasts carry important symbolic meanings. Banners are often suspended behind the main deity in varied colors" blue and yellow double banners" suggest sacred authority, while "pink flags" add visual depth. Ritual implements such as long swords, command tablets, and scrolls symbolize different aspects of divine duties: authority, judgment, and wisdom, respectively.

Drawing from symbolic interactionism, these ritual props serve as symbolic tools that generate meaning through metaphor and social interaction. Through their use in ceremonial contexts, they articulate the relationship between humans and nature, as well as between individuals and the broader social order.

Many elements of the Yifan ritual props are drawn directly from the natural world. For instance, animal and plant motifs on Nuo masks, or landscape backgrounds in divine portraits, visually reference the Mulao people's relationship with the environment. These natural symbols do not merely embellish the props but function as metaphors for harmony and coexistence. Animal imagery on masks may symbolize reverence and gratitude toward the forces of nature, while the mountains and rivers depicted in divine paintings may evoke admiration for the beauty and vitality of the natural world.

These ritual props also carry social metaphors. Specific motifs or colors used on the masks may represent social roles, moral codes, or status hierarchies within the community. Likewise, the postures and attributes of

deities in portraiture may reflect ideals of social order, authority, or cultural values. These symbolic references not only express the Mulao people's understanding of their society but also fulfill psychological needs for identity, belonging, and collective affirmation during the ritual.

Within the ritual context of the Yifan Festival, the symbolic meanings of these props are made tangible and intensified. Their interaction with the ceremonial environment—such as the daoshi's performance with the masks, the spatial arrangement of divine paintings, and the sequential offering of tribute creates a sacred temporality and spatiality. These material symbols allow participants to form spiritual connections with deities and engage in embodied cultural memory.

Furthermore, ritual props encapsulate historical memory and ethnic identity. Through multisensory experiences visual, tactile, and auditory they evoke emotional resonance, facilitate intergenerational knowledge transmission, and reinforce group identity. In this way, the ritual implements of the Yifan Festival not only enact symbolic meaning but also serve as vessels of cultural continuity and expressions of collective self-understanding.

The Ritual Scriptures (Changben), Interpreting the Mulao Spiritual Worldview and Cultural Thought Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the role of symbols in shaping human interaction and the construction of social reality. In the context of Mulao ritual scriptures (changben), this symbolic interaction is evident in the performance, recitation, and audience reception of the texts. These scriptures are not only religious texts but also dynamic instruments of cultural communication, social cohesion, and meaning-making.

Table 3 Symbolic Imagery of ritual Scripttures

Scripture Name	Main Content	Cultural Significance
Incense Offering Rite	Used in the opening “inviting deities” ritual, sequentially welcoming the 36 deities and presenting the “Ten Offerings.”	Represents the full ritual process of honoring, praying, purifying, and inviting deities. It showcases the Mulao’s complete sacrificial system and divine hierarchy.
Altar Purification & Offering Rite	A richly illustrated ritual guide with five-character rhymed verses, instructing the process of inviting deities and altar setup.	Emphasizes the sacredness and order of the ritual space, reflecting the fusion of religious aesthetics and local language in the Yifan ceremony.
Light-Inviting Chant	Story of the boy deity "Yinguang" inviting gods; includes amusing tales and divine miracles (e.g., Black Tortoise, Door Gods).	Localizes and humanizes ritual narratives, enhancing emotional connection and faith through dramatic storytelling.
Offering & Inviting Rite	Describes the ritual of toasting and respectfully inviting deities; worshippers express sincerity and request blessings and peace.	Embodies the logic of human-divine communication and reinforces the cause-effect belief in “reverence brings blessings.”
Main Feast Offering	A meat-offering ritual inviting deities to a grand feast, includes many deity chants (e.g., Earth God, Ancestors, Thunder King).	Reflects the idea of divine-human communion through food and illustrates moral teachings (filial piety, diligence, loyalty) via myth.

Scripture Name	Main Content	Cultural Significance
Summoning Divine Soldiers & Ox Songs	Invites divine soldiers and records the lives and deification of “commoner” gods; includes chants praying for livestock protection.	Shows the personification and professionalization of deities, mirroring Mulao social structure and labor division within the religious system.
Dismissal of Soldiers / Sending-off Rite	Final ritual to return deities to their realm, especially the grand send-off of General Liang Jiuguan, with Daoist chanting to dismiss divine troops.	Completes the ritual cycle and symbolizes the restoration of cosmic order; Liang Jiuguan, the commander-in-chief deity, represents this return to order.

Image source: Drawn by the author

Ritual scriptures are typically embedded within specific ceremonial contexts and are transmitted through the performative practices of ritual specialists (shigong). Through chanting, singing, and dramatized enactment, the shigong conveys the symbolic meanings embedded in the changben to the participating audience (Lei, 2008). This performance is not merely an act of divine veneration or supplication it also constitutes a form of collective social interaction. It is through this interaction that the Mulao people collaboratively construct and sustain their spiritual cosmos and moral order.

Audience members do not passively receive the content; instead, they actively interpret and reconstruct the meanings based on personal experience, cultural background, and communal values. This interpretive process is itself a

form of symbolic interaction, reflecting the Mulao community's shared understanding of divinity, cosmology, and social structure.

The changben encapsulate key elements of the Mulao spiritual and philosophical worldview, particularly ancestor worship and nature veneration. In many ritual texts, ancestral spirits are deified and revered, forming the core of ceremonial devotion. This reverence reflects the Mulao people's emphasis on lineage, familial continuity, and the moral obligation to honor past generations. Ancestor worship symbolizes not only respect for one's heritage but also a spiritual aspiration for the longevity and prosperity of the family line.

Equally significant is the worship of natural forces—sun, moon, stars, mountains, rivers, and other phenomena. This animistic orientation reveals a worldview rooted in reverence for the natural environment. Such beliefs articulate a philosophy of ecological harmony, where humans are seen as part of a sacred, interconnected world. The performance of nature-centered chants thus serves both religious and ethical functions, reaffirming the Mulao ethos of living in balance with nature.

As a textual-symbolic system, the changben serve as repositories of cultural memory. They encode the Mulao people's historical narratives, belief systems, and ethical values. Through oral transmission and scriptural preservation, these texts function as intergenerational conduits, ensuring the continuity of spiritual knowledge, cultural identity, and collective memory.

In sum, the changben are not merely liturgical recitations—they are semiotic instruments that mediate between myth and morality, cosmos and community. Through the ritual performance of these texts, the Mulao people continuously recreate their spiritual universe, reaffirm social bonds, and transmit the foundational values that sustain their cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

The ritual elements of the Yifan Festival constitute a highly structured symbolic system through which the Mulao people articulate cosmological order, social values, and collective identity. Drawing upon symbolic anthropology and interactionist theory, this study interprets ritual not merely as performative behavior, but as a cultural text wherein meaning is produced, negotiated, and transmitted. Yifan Festival represents not merely a ritual event but a cultural text a living archive of the Mulao people's worldview, historical memory, and symbolic imagination. Its continuity underscores the enduring power of ritual as a means of social integration, cultural transmission, and spiritual expression in contemporary ethnic communities.

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