

## Ritual Practices and Functional Evolution of Sacrificial Dance in “Ying Shen Sai She”

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### Abstract

“Yin Shen Sai She” in south-east Jin area is a comprehensive folk sacrificial ritual activity, which is a cultural combination of multiple art genres and folk beliefs. Dance as one of artistic expressions in “Yin Shen Sai She”, delivers general publics’ appeal for a better life and faith in their religions through body language. This paper starts by analyzing the ritual practices of the sacrificial dance, and then dives into deep culture to explore the social functional evolution of the sacrificial dance in different context of times.

**Key words:** “Ying Shen Sai She”; Sacrificial dance; Ritual practice; Social function

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### INTRODUCTION

“Ying Shen Sai She” in south-east Jin area is a Shehuo festival with the longest history in Shanxi. Its history goes back to “La Ji” in Zhou Dynasty. It was officially named “Sai She” in Song Dynasty. In “Sai She”, people not only worship their gods in a solemn ceremony, but also dance to compete in front of gods. Therefore, dance is a common artistic expression in “Sai She”. It’s both a mark of art language and a metaphor of the inner symbol of the sacrificial ritual. Jia village, located in north-west of Lu city, still preserves the most complete “Sai She” ritual in

south-east Jin area. Dance is also an important component of that ritual. Jia village had to stop the ritual for many years in history because of wars. With the help of local government, scholars, and folk artists, Jia village resumed the ritual and was listed as national intangible cultural heritage in 2006.

Anthropologist Victor Witter Turner believes ritual is people’s stereotyped behavior when they have desires from mysterious substances or power. Jane Ellen Harrison, from the Cambridge Ritualists, indicates that arts and rituals are clan relatives. Rituals need more than inner imagination, it needs to be performed by movements. Thus, movement is considered an essential expression medium in rituals and dance as an art of body movement is widely engaged in rituals. Driven by direct purpose, people via dance in ritual convert invisible deep ideology into visible procedural expression. This paper focuses on dance in “Ying Shen Sai She” from Jia village, analyzes its performance form, and unearths the cultural heritage and social functions behind.

### 1. RITUAL PRACTICES OF SACRIFICIAL DANCE

“Ying Shen Sai She” in Jia village happens in Bi Xia Palace, the largest building in the area, every year in April 4<sup>th</sup> in lunar calendar. There are three categories: “Guan Sai”, “Xiang Sai”, and “Cun Sai”. “Guan Sai” is usually with the largest scale and hosted by the local government. People from all towns and villages can attend. “Xiang Sai” is with a smaller scale that is hosted by different villages in the same town together or in turns. Ritual in Jia village belongs to “Xiang Sai”. “Cun Sai” is with the smallest scale and smallest number of participants. It was hosted by a single village.

The formal “Sai She” ritual is consist of six procedure: “Xia Qing”, “Ying Shen”, “Xiang Sai” (breaks into First Round, Middle Round, and Last Round), and “Song

Shen". Each procedure takes one day so the whole ritual takes six days to complete. "Xia Qing" is for villages with Shehuo performance to invite gods to the palace to enjoy the three days of competitive performance. There are four different steps in "Xia Qing". "Ying Shen" in the next day means greet the gods. Participants need to carefully finish six steps to welcome the arrival of the gods. The next three days is to have the first, middle, and last round of "Xiang Sai". The last procedure "Song Shen" will happen in the last day to send the gods back. Sacrificial ritual as standalone performance happens most in the three days of "Xiang Sai". For example, the most typical "Diao Jian Zhai" in first round, "Yuan Hou Tuo Jia" in middle round, and "Tai Ping Gu" in last round. Next, we will focus on the dance in these specific rituals.

### 1.1 "Diao Jian Zhai" in First Round

First Round, the first day in "Xiang Sai", is also the third day in the whole "Sai She". There are tens of different rituals in first round and "Diao Jian Zhai" is a typical one in dance category. "Jian Zhai" means a god who protects monks' food. "Diao Jian Zhai" is to clean the area and eliminate disasters.

There are three steps in the dance program. First step is altar. The performance was on the stage of the main temple. There would be five dancers with one of them being the god of "Jian Zhai" and the other four being the guardians. The four guardians would perform the entry dance with weapons at hand first. They would stand at the four corners on the stage after the dance. The god of "Jian Zhai" would enter the stage wearing a mask and holding axes. After dancing with the drum beats, "Jian Zhai" would sit still at the center of the stage. Some representatives would go on stage to light incenses and offer sacrifice. After the ritual, dancers exit the stage. In the second step, one representative would go on stage to read praises to the god of "Jian Zhai" to thank for the protection. The last step is the typical whipping a ghost show, in which two dancers playing generals would chase a dancer playing ghost and whip him to death.

One of the characteristics of the "Diao Jian Zhai" dance is that it leverages weapons as dance property. Usually dancers dance with axes or whip. They merge dance movements and martial art movements to deliver a mighty and fierce image. The other characteristics is the inheritance of Nuo dance. The most common dance movements in "Diao Jian Zhai" are jumping and running. No matter the way they jump with the drum beats or the run and chase, reflects the impression of Nuo dance from Zhou Dynasty. It's a perfect demonstration of inheritance of traditional culture.

### 1.2 "Yuan Hou Tuo Jia" in Middle Round

"Yuan Hou" means monkey, which is a symbol of longevity in China. Therefore, the dance is to deliver people's wish for a safer and longer life. The large amount

of humorous movements and even some of monkeys' habits, together with some martial art movements, brings a vivid flavor of life to the rigid ritual.

There are three steps in the program. First step is entry of the monkey. Due to the difficulty of the movement in the dance, dancers were always young artists. When the drum beats started, dancers would enter stage performing summersaults continuously like a monkey. They would need to speed up the summersaults following the drum beats. In the second step, dancer would dance mimicking monkeys which usually made the audience laugh. The last step is offering peaches. Dancers playing monkeys would carry fake peaches and offer them to the dancer playing gods of longevity.

The main characteristics of "Yuan Hou Tuo Jia" is dancers' lifelike imitation of monkeys. They scratch their faces and interact with the audience with their teeth showing. The details in their head and neck motion perfectly reflect monkey's habits and characteristics. Dancers also perform forward somersault, side somersault, forward roll, and other jumping moves to portray the monkey image.

### 1.3 "Tai Ping Gu" in Last Round

"Tai Ping Gu" means drum for peace. It is a combination of singing and dancing and the only dancing ritual in the fifth day. The drum used in "Tai Ping Gu" is a flat and thin one, looks like a fan. Dancers will hit the drum with a rattan or bamboo stick. Therefore, "Tai Ping Gu" is also known as "Shan Gu" (Fan Drum) or "Dan Zhang Gu" (Single Stick Drum).

There are also three steps in the program. First step, dance with music. There would be tens of different musical instruments played together, including different drums, wooden fish, cymbals, suona, and more. Dancers would hold the fan drum and dance along with the music. In the second step, dancers and staffs would dance in different formations like dragons playing. The last step is reading the praises and introduction to history of "Tai Ping Gu".

The dance movement itself is the main characteristics of "Tai Ping Gu". Dancers hold the drum in one hand and the stick in the other. The drum can be lay flat or upright. Their drumming hands move very fast in a small range. While they are playing the drums, their feet need to move with the rhythm. At the same time, they also sing with their heads tilting from side to side.

## 2. SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF SACRIFICIAL DANCE IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Bronisław Malinowski considers ritual to be an ethnic, communal, locally valuable functional performance. "Ying Shen Sai She" started in Zhou Dynasty and rapidly developed in Spring and Autumn Period and

Warring States Period. The small peasant economy in ancient Chinese society was also born during that time. Household production with male farming and female weaving satisfied people’s self sufficient daily needs, at the same time it exposed the isolation and vulnerabilities of the economy. “Sai She” sacrificial dance, born in this social context, was deeply affected by the social system and culture. Therefore, it brought special cultural attributes and functional value reflecting local society. The sacrificial dance in Jia village highlights ancient people’s survival wisdom, national characters, life footprints, and their worship and respect to nature. In addition, Confucianism and Taoism both have a great impact on the sacrificial dance, which became the main means of the ancient sacrificial rituals. The dance indicates some unique functional values.

### **2.1 Agricultural Sacrificial Function: Praying for Rain and Harvest**

Jia village is like most of other village. People make a living by agricultural labor. The quality of the harvest determines their quality of life. Therefore, people pay attention to production and wish for bumper harvest every year. However, in ancient China with low productivity, it was hard to make their wish come true. Jia village is not at a good geographical location that benefits their agricultural development. As a result, people have an even stronger desire for rain and harvest thus they host more frequent sacrificial rituals to pray. For example, in “Tai Ping Gu” there are many dance formations associated with dragon, which was considered god of water and protection in ancient time. People used to believe that dragons can bring clouds and rains which helped the harvest of crops. Therefore, they arranged the dance formations related to dragon to express their gratitude and respect. In the time full of poverty and unknown, it was more important to have such a way to seek for inner comfort. The sacrificial dance brought people courage and hope to keep them going forward.

### **2.2 Spiritual Consolation Function: Offering Tributes to Gods**

The main folk belief in Jia village is Taoism, which is a Chinese local religion. People believed in many different gods, among which many were transferred from human. When facing unmanageable natural phenomenon, ancient people failed to make scientific judgement or explanation. Instead, they developed respect and fear to that unpredictable phenomenon. People believed that they had inner connection with the gods so they treated the gods in Taoism as saviors and sent their wishes to the gods, hoping the gods can empower them. Sacrificial dance became the primary means to seek for spiritual consolation. Gods were invisible, so people presented gods’ will and image through body movements, which made them feel like the gods were there. “Diao Jian Zhai”

is an exact sample that dancers pretend to be gods in their dance. The movements look simple and sneaky but they magnify the reliability of the gods. Therefore, sacrificial dance in “Sai She” is not a combination of some random movements, but an externalized behavior from people’s thinking about the world, life, death, and destiny in historical context. People felt gods’ existence from the ritual and trusted that they had gods’ blessing, which was the most powerful inner comfort.

### **2.3 Social Integration Function: Promoting Ethnic Identity**

Other than pleasing the gods and praying, sacrificial dance had a social integration function. It helped promote emotional communication among people and enhanced individual’s belonging and cohesion within the community. In ancient society, life was simple and boring. Farmers worked for the whole day. There were not many contacts or entertainments. “Sai She”, as a gathering among different villages, provided a chance for people to relax from their work. So that they could release themselves from depression and pressure. People also needed to work together during the event to rehearsal and perform. Especially in sacrificial dances, people who were strangers to each other needed to collaborate. For example, in “Diao Jian Zhai” dancers would perform catching a ghost on stage and then deliberately let the ghost escape. The dancer playing the ghost would pass through audiences from the stage and run around in the village. The other dancers would chase behind the ghost. Villagers and audiences would also actively participate and interact with the dancers. Together they would become a giant audience team. The whole performance would exceed the space limit as in a normal show. Village and streets all become performance venue. In the performance, the gap between human and god was effectively reduced and the whole community naturally developed cohesion.

## **3. SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF SACRIFICIAL DANCE IN CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVE**

Leonid Naumovich Stolovich considers art’s functional system as a complex and interconnected organization. It changes with development of a society, transitions from a function to another. In agricultural society, limited by society development level, people prayed for health and harvest via sacrificial dance. Time goes by, with the advance in technology, many impossible problems in ancient society got scientific solutions. People’s desire for harvest and communication were satisfied with the help of machine and internet. They no longer rely on gods, thus the original social functions of the sacrificial dance are no longer valid. Instead the new social cultural functions arise. 1960s is a milestone of the functional evolution of

the sacrificial dance in Jia village. Before this, the dances were focusing on the mysterious worship style. After resumed from the break due to wars, the dances gradually delivered a different flavor of entertaining and realistic. There are fewer serious sacrificial dances in the “Xiang Sai” ritual. But the recreational dances in the “Xia Qing” ritual become more popular. Folk entertainment, Intangible cultural heritage, and local tourism development become the new social functions of the sacrificial dances.

### 3.1 Cultural Heritage Value

In 2006, the first applications of intangible heritage projects started and became popular. “Sai She” in Jia village is a typical representation of the traditional “Sai She”, therefore it was accepted as one of the first national intangible heritages. Dance, music, drama, etiquette, and many other components of the “Sai She” provide important reference values to study in the fields of contemporary culture and art. There was already international conference hosted in Jia village with hundreds of scholars from the world participating 15 years ago. Recently, with the help from local government, “Sai She” in Jia village receives more protection as well as attention. Local artists work hard to resume the rituals and dances, and impart them to the younger generation. Young people in local area start to understand “Sai She” and get involve in preparation, rehearsal, and performance. Inheritance happens during these rehearsals and performances with not just the external presentation of the dance but also the cultural spirit and national sentiment behind.

### 3.2 Tourism Economic Value

Many village starts to develop local tourism projects to improve life quality of the local villagers. Local government helps to integrate the local historical and cultural background into these projects to make sure each village is unique. Jia village, as a birthplace of “Ying Shen Sai She”, is rich in cultural resources. There are 14 ancient temples in Jia village, including Bi Xia Palace which is a major historical and cultural protected site. The unique mysterious worship rituals, historical ancient buildings, simple and unsophisticated local customs, and myths and

legends attract tourists from many places. Every year in lunar April, “Ying Shen Sai She” culture and art festival is hosted in Jia village. Tourists come to light an incense and watch a “Sai She” performance, which has become the new identity of Jia village. The tourism industry stimulates the local economy and improves life quality. People become aware of the value of culture and build their confidence in development.

## 4. SUMMARY

“Ying Shen Sai She” in Jia village is the most completely preserved group warship ritual in south-east Jin area. “Diao Jian Zhai”, “Yuan Hou Tuo Jia”, “Tai Ping Gu” and other sacrificial dances play an important role in the ritual. They are the primary artistic means for villagers to communicate to each other, to gods, and to nature. The sacrificial dance implies the folk beliefs and bears ancient people’s inner desire, memory of life, and national spirit. From a functional perspective, the sacrificial dance was used to pray for goods, thank gods, and express feelings in ancient society. In modern society, the functions differ and become cultural heritage, entertainment, and economic boost. Government, community, and individual should work together with emphasize on the social functional value to better inherit the sacrificial dance.

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