

Chinese Folk Art Facial Masks

中国民俗——面具



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Shanghai People's Fine Arts Publishing House

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The Tibetan sorcerer's dance in Gansu Province

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Colorful local opera masks (Bouyei ethnic group, Guizhou Province)

China's Facial Masks



China's facial masks have a long history. As indicated by relevant materials, lifelike facial masks spread among 39 ethnic groups in China's 24 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions.

Facial masks originated from the music and dance of prehistoric times. As a reflection of the worship of skulls, the earliest forms of facial masks were closely related to witchcrafts, funerals, burials and soul-calling rituals of primitive religions. Although no facial masks of China's prehistoric era have been unearthed up till now, they can be traced to the cliff paintings and the paintings and carvings on potteries and rocks. The exaggerated and distorted human and animal faces in the cliff paintings reveal the earliest forms of plastic arts, presenting the rich and colorful spiritual life of people living in prehistoric times. The cliff paintings discovered in China are mainly distributed in border areas where Chinese minorities live or once lived. The vivid pictures of totem worship, witchcrafts and hunting serve as an introduction to the history of facial masks evolved from primitive animal heads and bird crests, artificial heads to facial masks still often seen in altars, sanctuaries and on platforms for folk art performances in China today. As worshipped by humankind at their childhood, the gods and spirits in cliff paintings representing the natural power are the fountainhead of the culture of facial masks.

Facial masks of different nationalities in China have their distinctive ethnic features owing to differences in the geographic location, ecological environment and social development of the various ethnic groups living in China's vast territory. The earliest forms of facial masks were the instruments with magical powers to drive away evils. With facial masks on, ordinary men were transformed into ghosts and gods. Consequentially, facial masks have become important means by which humankind can obtain the magical power of gods and ghosts and accordingly, communicate with them. There is a wide variety of facial masks in China and according to their functions they can be divided into masks for sacrificial dance rites, masks for rituals of passage, masks for the protection of villages and households, masks for sacrificial rites on festivals and masks for folk operas.



Tibetan sacrificial masks

Masks for Sacrificial Dance Rites

The name and style of masks of this type differ from place to place. They are worn on religious sacrificial rites for the purpose of driving away evil ghosts and pestilences, and praying for fertility and harvest. Ethnic groups of different regions carry out different religious activities and wear different masks on different religious activities.

Manchu, Mongol, Xibe, Hezhen, Evenki, Oroqin, Daur—the ethnic groups living today on China's northeast and northwest borders, and other ethnic groups such as Uiqhur, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Korean, once believed in Shamanism. This religion worships gods of nature, animal gods and ancestral gods of clans and tribes. The sorcerers who take charge of sacrificial rites or who is responsible for driving away evil ghosts and diseases are called Shamans, gods' messengers. Shaman masks are Shamans' instruments through which Shamans can communicate with gods and thus they are regarded as symbols of gods as well.

Baima Tibetans living on the borders between Sichuan and Gansu provinces call masks for dance rites as *Caogai* mask or masks of twelve shapes. For Baima Tibetans, each village has its own animal totem. *Caogai* mask symbolizes the god of black bear. Baima Tibetans dance with masks shaped like the god of black bear to pray for his protection on the annual sacrificial rites held at the beginning of every lunar year.

Qiangmu—"religious dance" in Tibetan, is a mask dance performed on sacrificial rites in Tibetan Buddhist monasteries. With the purpose of frightening evil spirits and promoting Buddhism, *Qiangmu* is widespread among the Tibetan, Monba, Tu, Yugur, Nakhi and Mongol ethnic groups living in Qianghai, Sichuan, Gansu, Yunnan provinces and Tibet and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Regions. *Qiangmu* masks appear so monstrous and terrifying that it is believed that they have the power to frighten any evil spirits. In Inner Mongolia, *Qiangmu* masks are also called *Chama* masks. In the Yuan Dynasty, *Chama* mask dances with strong Tibetan and Mongolian flavors entered into the imperial court and since then it has been passing on from generation to generation.

Temple protection masks (Tibetan ethnic group, Sichuan Province)





*Z*huang, Maonan, Yao, Miao and Mulao ethnic groups and Han nationality living in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region call the sorcerers taking charge of religious activities as *Shigong*, who often wears masks on religious sacrificial rites and dances by impersonating a god. The masks worn by *Shigong* are called *Shigong* masks. As numerous gods are worshipped by the various ethnic groups, it is said that there are 72 kinds of *Shigong* masks for 32 gods. When a *Shigong* is performing Buddhist rituals, he often wears a mask singing and dancing. *Shigong* masks have different shapes and colors as the numerous gods have different virtues and characters.

Nuo rituals, rituals such as *Nuo* sacrificial rites and *Nuo* dances to drive away evil spirits and pestilence and pray for gods' blessings, are popular among Tujia, Gelao, Buyei, Dong and Yi ethnic groups and Han nationality living in Guizhou, Hunan, Sichuan, Hubei and Yunnan provinces. Masks worn on *Nuo* rituals are called *Nuotang* masks or *Duangong* masks or simply *Nuo* masks. The gods on *Nuo* masks are mostly gods from Taoism and Buddhism and some other gods are figures from historical stories.

1. Tunkou (swallowing animal masks)
(Shui ethnic group, Yunnan Province)
2. A professor carving a local opera mask
3. The carving tools of the local opera masks





The leopard mask dances of the Yi people in Yunnan

Elephant mask



Horse mask



Deer mask



Masks for Rituals of Passage

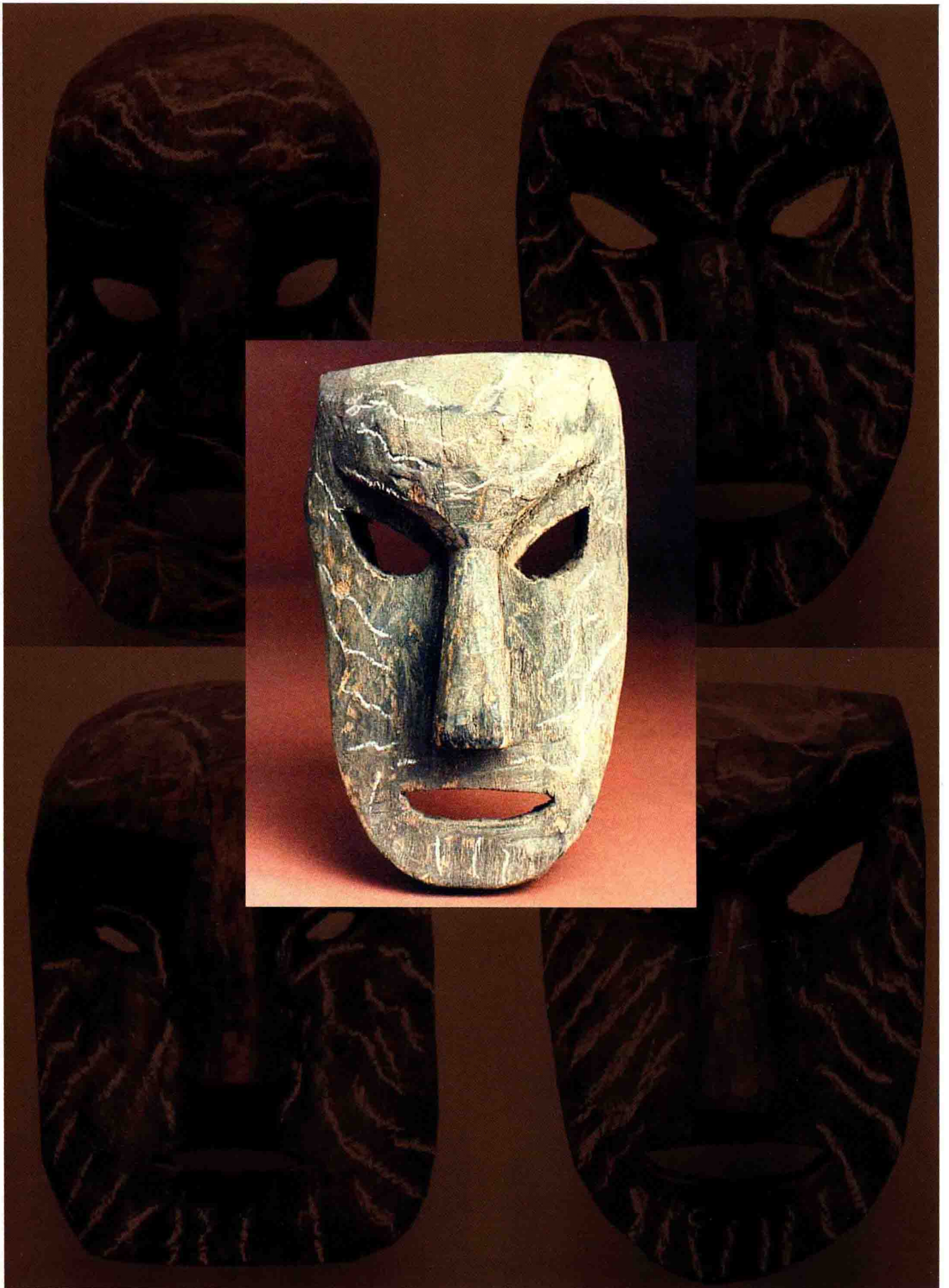
Some ethnic groups living in South China celebrate rituals that mark the important phases in an individual's life passage such as birth, naming, adulthood, marriage and funerals. Masks worn on these rituals are called masks for rituals of passage.

As derivative products created on the basis of people's belief in ghosts and gods, in witchcrafts and in the immortal soul, masks for rituals of passage are mostly worn on funerals and have specific cultural connotations. *Dujie* masks are masks worn by the Yao ethnic group on *Dujie* rituals practiced in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Yunnan Province that mark the Yao boys' initiation into adulthood and society, after which the Yao boys can get married, have children and take part in religious activities. The Yi and Hani ethnic groups living in Yunnan Province and the Tujia ethnic group living in Hunan and Hubei provinces wear masks on wedding ceremonies to drive away evil spirits and pray for gods' blessings for the newly-wed. The Jino, Va, Jingpo, Buyei, Zhuang, Yi, Nakhi and Miao ethnic groups living in Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces wear masks on funerals showing their belief in the immortal soul and their ancestor worship.

For masks of rituals of passage worn by Chinese minorities, there are magic and bizarre animal masks as well as solemn and terrifying gods' masks. These masks express the Chinese minority people's understanding of life and death, their reverence for life and their aspiration for a better and happier life.

Animal masks for the Tibetan sorcerers' dance are being made





Masks for Protection of Villages and Households

The Chinese folks have the custom to put objects around their villages and households in the hope that the objects will protect their villages and households. This custom can be traced back to prehistoric times. There is a variety of objects which are believed to have the function of protecting villages and households. When these objects are placed, grand religious ceremonies will be held to drive away evil spirits and plagues.

The custom of putting objects in the hope of protecting villages is more preserved among the ethnic groups living in South China, especially in Guizhou and Yunnan provinces. Most of the objects used for this purpose are in god images, which are placed at the entrance of villages to protect the well-being of the villagers. The Hani people living in Yunnan province build *Longba* Gate at the entrance of their villages to mark the dividing line between the human world and the ghost world. The Va people put wood post carved with two human foots at the entrance of their villages. The Zhuang people and the Yi people living in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Yunnan Province put stone posts and stone houses at the entrance of their villages and stone tablets called "*Shigandang*" at crossroads or at the foot of bridges.

The use of these objects for the protection of households reflects the mingling of the Han culture and the culture of the Chinese minorities. In Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in Qihai province and Tibet Autonomous Region, there are objects in the shape of heaven animals on the rooftops, knock-holders with animal faces on the doors and masks of guardians of Buddhist teachings hung in the rooms. Animal heads, horns and masks are hung at the doors of the common people's houses and pictures of magic signs pasted on the doors. The Baima Tibetans hang *Caogai* masks at the door.

Tunkou, "swallowing animal masks" are so named because the mouths of the animals on the masks are wide open as if misfortunes and evil spirits can be swallowed by these terrifying animals. The Yi, Bai, Buyei, Sui, Yao ethnic groups living in Yunnan, Guizhou Province and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region still have the custom of hanging *Tunkou* at the door and the Yi people in Yunnan put brick cats on rooftops to protect their households.