

Tibetan Masks



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Green Mask in Tibetan Opera

西藏系列画册

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*Mask of the Guardian Deity
in Sakya Monastery*

Tibetan Masks

By Zhang Ying

In Tibet masks are indispensable. They are used in the sacred dance, the local traditional opera and the folk song and dance, which have different purpose though. Some are for promotion of Buddhism, saving all living creatures, subduing evils, and spreading happiness to the lower world; some for entertaining the others and earning their own bread, while some for amusing themselves and releasing loneliness. Different purposes and motivations thus bring forth different styles of masks.

Tibetan masks can be generally divided into the following three categories: those for religious ritual, those for the Tibetan opera and those for the folk song and dance.

Religious Masks

Religious masks broadly include all those relevant to the deity or Buddha's images, so they also are referred to deity masks, such images as those of yidams (meditational deities), guardian deities and deity family members. There is no detailed and accurate record about the origin of the religious masks. The story has it that during the Tubo regime, when Padmasambhava constructed the Samye Monastery, he held various dancing events, including the animal-masked performances to expel evils. Generation of the religious masks had something to do with the nature worship of the Tibetan aboriginal religion, Bon. Until



Old man's Mask in

Tibetan Opera

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today, Tibetans still keep the habit of hanging the bodies of the fierce beast or head and horn of other animals killed by them on the door head or guardian deity nail, village shrine and home to worship, and to keep out of evils or serious illness. They also make some wooden imitation hanging on the village shrine to eliminate all natural disasters.

The development of the religious masks was closely related to the cham. In Tibetan language the cham means the sacred dance. It is prevalent in all Buddhist monasteries in Tibet. It resurrects the battle in which the yidams and guardian deities lead all living creatures defeating the evils. The timing and themes vary with monasteries, and are contingent on the guardian deities and ritual heritages enshrined. Except for the monkhood and exorcists, all roles for yidams, guardian deities and deity family members shall wear the masks during the dance. The size of the

masks lies in the position of the guardian deities, for example, the masks for the Happy Vajra and the Auspicious Goddess played in winter in the Sagya Monastery are higher than one meter, and its size together with the body wearing a huge costume is three meters or more, boasting the biggest of its kind.

When the annually held dancing event wound up, all the masks shall be hung on the hall of the guardian deity for using in the next year. Just as those permanently hung masks, they are also considered to have the supernatural power to protect all living creatures and subdue the evils.

The masks are shaped and hardened in three-dimension or semi-three-dimension with the knockout process. The raw materials are diversified, such as the cloth, paper, leather, and even in some cases, the very special ones: Tibetan essence or cattle manure. The process is to mix-up the essence or cattle manure with a variety of herbs and plant gum, then apply them on clothes layer by layer before drying and knockout, and at the last paint with colors including golden color. These kinds of masks are characterized as light, rot proofing, vermin proofing and good in tenacity. In southern Tibet, woodcarving masks are also quite popular, which were certainly influenced by the cultures of the surrounding countries, such as Nepal and Bhutan. There are also some kinds of masks made of copper, iron and stone and used either for sacred dancing or for enshrining and worship or for architectural ornament.

The religious masks with sublime and noble miens are made under a series of rigor-

ous fabricating process and Buddhist wisdom infusing procedures. Their unique features and mystique are distinguished from the other categories of the masks.

Tibetan Opera Masks

Compared with the religious mask, the masks used in the Tibetan opera are born of the folks and used also by the folks.

Tibetan opera, in Tibetan language, is called Ache Lhamo meaning sister goddess. The legend has it that in the 15th century, the eminent monk, Thangtong Gyalpa (1385 - 1464), gathered seven pretty village girls wandering around and giving performance to raise fund for building bridges. It has gradually evolved as the one with stories. That is why it was so named. The Tibetan opera is highlighted by its masks and prevailed in U-Tsang Region. During the reign of the fifth Dalai Lama, the performance in lieu of paying tax in Buddhist monasteries became indispensable ritual. From then on, the annual Shoton (Yogurt) Festival has also become the Tibetan Opera Festival. With the wide spreading of the Tibetan Buddhism, the Tibetan opera was later on brought into Kham region and soon performed by the monks of the monasteries in Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, where it was combined with the local culture, shaping another distinctive branch of the Tibetan Opera.

The Tibetan opera can be divided into two main groups: the white mask opera and blue mask opera. The former is distributed in Shannan Prefecture, and was started as



Sacred Dance Scene in a Fresco of the Potala Palace

the Tashi Sholpa in Nedong County and the Bindainpa in Qoingya County, then spread to Nyemo and Lhasa. It was also brought to Moinba area and evolved to Moinba opera performed in Moinba language. It has a long history. As the fresco in Samye Monastery shows that there was a scene of the white mask opera on the occasion of the inauguration of the monastery. Though that evidence is disputable, because the fresco itself has been resurrected several times, with the last being only about 200 years ago, thus not necessarily kept the original picture. Nevertheless, the white mask opera indisputably represents the initial stage of the Tibetan opera. Its plot is rather simple and the main program is called Ngonpaton£ in which the leading roles were the Ngonpas (hunter) and Lhamos (goddess), who dance fast and sing

brightly, accompanied by incidental animal-like roaring, showing its strong features of the aboriginal culture.

The white masks take the shape of a heart, cut from flat board and painted with white or yellow background. On the mask, three holes are made to represent eyes and mouth. Around it a piece of longhaired goat hide is decorated symbolizing the beards of the master Thangtong Gyalpa. When performing, the player wear it on the forehead, with the hairs cover his face. The mask of the Bindainpa troupe has another interesting and unusual character, that is, its bottom eyelids are overlapped on the top ones. This character is said to be that of the fifth Dalai Lama, who had the origin of Qoingya County and devoted to the development of the Tibetan opera.

The blue mask opera is developed on the

basis of the white one. It has a complete set of repertoire and stylized performance, way of singing and mask. The repertoire includes eight time-honored traditional plays and is often performed in Lhasa and Xigaze. During the annual Shoton Festival, the professional and amateur troupes from different regions are summoned to Lhasa to deliver their performance, facilitating the artistic exchange and development. The blue masks have also become more and more stylized with the long period of practice.

The blue mask opera is performed in three sections. The first one is called Ngonpa as a prologue; the second is referred to as Shung meaning libretto; the third is named Tashi meaning good luck wishing. The prologue is purposed for ritual purification, paying homage to the ancestors and deities, and played by Ngonpas, Lhamos and Gyallus (patriarchs), with the Ngonpas wearing the masks. The troupe master usually plays the leading Ngonpa to narrate the libretto. The performance would last a day or more, or even three days decided by the master. The mask worn by the leading Ngonpa is elaborately made, because it is considered to be the trademark of a troupe.

The Tibetan opera mask is held to be integrity of symbols, which can be best proven by the Ngonpa mask. It contains the eight auspicious symbols, for example, the shape of the mask is like the treasure vase; the top of it represents the precious

parasol, on its forehead, the rainbow is like the golden fish, and the Sun and Moon look like the golden wheels; the eyes and mouth resemble the lotus flowers; under its nose there is the conch; on its two side hang the knots of eternity, while the brocade on the back is just like the victory banner. The masks for the other roles are simply made. Their shapes vary with status of the roles. For example, the masks for the roles, such as the king, mother or patriarch, in one play can be used for the same kind of roles in another play. They are made of flat board. Different colors of the masks are used for different kinds of roles, e.g. the red reflecting prospect and being used for the king or father; the yellow meaning wise used for the patriarch; the green symbolizing life used for the mother; the white denoting kindness



Mask of the Guardian Deity in Chagyab, Qamdo Prefecture(Knockout)

mainly used for the old man; while the half black and half white referring to the liar; and the black identifying the devil.

On some occasion, the color-role pairs can also be flexible. The masks are made according to the specific situations. For instance, the masks for the villains, clowns, old women, spirits or animals are made so from different materials with the knockout or sewing process. These kinds of masks are not quite stylized. The ways of making and styles vary from place to place, just according to the maker's own imagination or habit.

The Masks Used in Tibetan Folk Songs and Dances

The masks used in Tibetan folk songs and dances include those for yak dance, Cho dance, doe-gar and Gyidagyimo, Jidhajimo, etc.

In yak dance, the mask is worn by the lead-dancer. The yak dance is mainly prevalent in the areas in Lhasa and Shannan. It is performed by five dancers, with one as the lead-dancer, and the other four playing two yaks, which are similar to the lion dance in Chinese Inland. The leading dancer is in a herdsman's costume, with a white mask on his head, the shape of which is like that for the blue Ngonpa.

The Cho dance is a time honored and multi-styled kind prevailing in Lhasa, Nyingchi, Shannan and Xigaze. In Shannan, it has two leading dancers standing in column, with the patriarch appearance, wearing white flat masks with white hairs and white beards. The drum player wears a long pigtail. When the performance is reaching the climax, he will

overturn his body in three dimensions, driving his pigtail rotation and sweeping the floor in a magnificent manner. Here the drums are relatively smaller and thus can be tied in the waist, allowing for larger movements; While in Xigaze, the drums are much larger and have a long handle, which is inserted in the back waistband. This makes the dance very vigorous. Here there is only one leading dancer, who is wearing a blue Ngonpa mask and standing in the center of the stage with the long-handled five-colored good luck arrows in his hand.

The doe-gar is a kind of street mendicant performance going round among the ordinary people. On the streets during the New Year Days of the Tibetan calendar, or in the Norbulingka in the summer, or on the wedding ceremonies, the doe-gar actors would be very busy, who try their best to flatter the donors and add jubilee to the public. Their masks are made without any rules, only representing the best wishes expressed by each detailed ornament or color on it. Today it has become a very popular kind of performance in Tibet.

The Jidhajimo is performed in wake of the natural disasters prevalent in U-Tsang Region. Its theme, form and mask are marked by aboriginal culture. The Gyidagyimo is a kind of performance prevalent in U-Tsang region encouraging people to defeat the natural disaster. Both its masks and stage properties are with rich marks of the aboriginal culture. This region is dominated by the agriculture and frequently suffers from the ice hail, which the local people could not find out an effec-

tive way to defeat and have to throw together and stay out performing to earn their meals. This performance represents the farmers' living and hard working on the land, and their courage and hope to defeat the natural disaster. In the end, the dancers stomp a piece of preserved sheep's leg, symbolizing to have defeated the ice hail devil and thus guaranteed the harvest for the coming year. During the performance, the audiences keep on sending tsamba and highland barley wine to the performers.

It is performed by nine or more persons, the order of appearance is as per the role's po-

sition in the family hierarchy: father, father's first younger brother, father's second younger brother, ... mother and four Indian monks, etc. The masks for the father and mother are similar to those used in the Tibetan opera, while those for the four Indian monks are made from the goats' hides painted with four different colors respectively. Considered as a kind of inauspicious performance, it can only be performed during the disaster. And the masks and stage properties must be burnt up after ending a year's performance to avoid leaving the unluck to the coming year.



Sacred Dance Scene in the Samye Monastery



Mask for the Sacred Dance





*Mask of the Hayagriva (Horse-headed Deity)
in the Sera Monastery*



*Mask of the Vajra (Thunderbolt) in
Sacred Dance*



*Mask of the Mother
of the Lion King*



*Sacred Dance Scene in
the Chigongti Monastery*



Mask of the Siren in Shannan



Mask for the Sacred Dance



Mask for the Sacred Dance



*Mask for the Sacred Dance
in Lhasa*





*Sacred Dance Scene In Summer
in the Sakya Monastery*



*Mask of the Guardian Deity
in the Potala Palace*



*Mask of the Siren
in Sakya Monas-
tery*



*Mask of the Tiger King
in Sacred Dance*



*Mask of the Naga (Dragon)
King in Sacred Dance*



*Mask of the Deer King
in Sacred Dance*



*Mask of Deity in the Chagyab Monastery,
Qamdo Prefecture (Knockout)*



White Mask



Red Mask Worn by the Roles for Kings or Ministers



Mask of the Yamankaka
(Destroyer of the Death)



Mask of the "Tuchuidhaba" in
the Potala Palace



Mask of the "Tuda" in the
Thashilunpo Monastery



Bronze Mask for Sacred Dance
in the Samye Monastery



Mask of the Guarding
Goddess (Knockout)