

The Eye of Balance—A Study on the Ritual Healing Effect of Daliao in Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Region

Zonghang Wu

Nanjing Foreign Language School, Nanjing, Jiangsu, 210000, China

Keywords: Daliao; Dai Ethnic Group; Ritual Healing; Dai Herb

Abstract: The effects of religious ornaments have always remained mysterious. While believers put faith in the fortune these ornaments bring, materialists doubt their practical effects. I have always been confused by such “magical” things: no one has ever seen their magic, yet they appeal to so many people. Such symbols and ornaments appear in nearly all cultures: the character “fu” (good fortune) in China; the nioh figure in Japan; the scarabs in Egypt, etc. Ritual healing is one purpose of such symbols. In order to better understand what compels people to these symbols as well as their functions, I conducted a study on the ritual healing effects of a local symbol at Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Region called Daliao. My presentation is the ethnography below. Bamboo six-pointed-star-shaped ornaments, known as Daliao, are a common sight throughout the Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Region in Yunnan province, hanging on doors and stuck in the ground in fields. Daliao serve as totemic guardians of the village, protecting homes and crops. Only a few studies have focused on the functions of Daliao, and collectively the consensus is that Daliao act as an overwatching eye warding off bad luck. Through field research to Manbian Village, I studied Daliaos’ functions and relating customs. In this paper, I hope to elaborate on the functions of Daliao from a medical-anthropological point of view: that Daliao serve as a stabilizer element in a community. For every community, there is a homeostasis recognized by people as the well-being and good conditions of the community as a whole and intruding this homeostasis or misplacing the elements in it leads to contamination and danger. Daliao helps Dai villagers cope with abnormalities in mind, restore stability and eliminate danger, acting to restore homeostasis in the community in the same way a medicine might within the body of a patient.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

In many villages in Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Region, Yunnan Province, bamboo-made ornaments composed of mesh-shaped hexagonal strips forming a star of David-esque shape with a diameter of about 40cm are placed in the fields and hung on doors outside houses. This is the unique cultural symbol of the Dai people called Daliao in Dai transliteration. Their basic unit is an L-shaped

bamboo strip with an angle of about 75°, which forms a small star of David in the middle. Six basic elements intertwined together form one layer. Daliao hung on doors contains seven such overlapping layers while Daliao inserted in fields usually have only one layer and are fixed in the ground with a bamboo piece passing through the middle. Herbs such as mugwort and three-leaf vitex are sometimes placed in the holes when hanging or placing Daliao. The rope for hanging Daliao is made of cogon grass. There is also sometimes a cotton thread surrounding the central area of Daliao. (As shown in Figure 1) The word Daliao is derived from the Dai language, with Da standing for eyes, and Liao standing for surveillance. Daliao is the overwatching eye that Dai people put in their fields and homes. Different Dai villages have different rituals and customs related to Daliao, and the replacement cycle for Daliao varies from village to village from once a year to once every several years. In Manbian Village, where I studied, the village replaces its Daliao every July.



Figure 1: The manufacture of Daliao

Dai society is a society where primitive religious beliefs and Buddhism are symbiotically integrated. Daliao belongs to the original belief of Dai society, and the Blessing ceremony of Daliao in Manbian Village is performed in the Jade Buddha Temple in the village. During the ceremony, villagers will bring their own Daliao into the Buddhist temple. The villagers will then pull a cotton thread around the main hall of the Buddhist temple to surround the villagers and Daliao. The village monk called Dubi will chant sutras and bless the Daliao. After that, the villagers will take their respective Daliao home, inserting the one-layer Daliao in the four directions of their homes and at the head and tail of the fields and hanging the seven-layer ones on the gates of their homes or on the door of an important room within the house.

In Dai folk beliefs, Daliao have always been used as a symbol of exorcism, appearing in healing rituals and imbued with religious significance. The Dai conception of healing is wholistic, which is consistent with the significance of Daliao in Dai culture. Daliao protect the belief system of Dai culture from being eroded by external pollution and danger. By asking the villagers in Manbian

Village about their understanding of the role of Daliao, I came to a better understanding of the cultural beliefs of Dai society and realized the practical significance and value of Daliao.

The Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Region in Yunnan Province is the largest inhabited area of the Dai people in China. Manbian Village is now prosperous with a strong traditional cultural atmosphere. Studying the traditional Daliao of the Dai people preserved in Manbian Village can help us figure out the significance of Daliao to local culture and even the entire Dai traditional culture.

1.2 Literature Review

At present, domestic research on Daliao of the Dai people is relatively scarce. When searching for papers using "Daliao" as the keyword on China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), there are only two articles published by Cui Can of Yunnan University and Jing Jing of Minzu University of China, respectively on the concept of "old" in Dai villages and the folk beliefs of the Blang people, with Daliao only as a symbol of belief. Besides that, there are no further explains. Search results based on the themes of "Daliao" with another Chinese character yielded more results. The most recent research is a thesis by Lin Yingjun and Yang Zhoushuting of Yunnan Minzu University, which focuses on the Thai ethnic group. Research entirely on the subject of Daliao can only be traced back to 1995 in the Journal of Minzu University of China ^[1]. In addition to academic publications published on CNKI, Dr. Qu Yongxian's research on Dai culture often mentions Daliao as a symbol of Dai culture and folk beliefs, but the specific role of Daliao is rarely discussed. To conclude, research on Daliao mainly serve as an auxiliary explanation in the context of larger academic research and there are few studies focusing on the specific role of Daliao. The focus of this article - the relationship between Daliao and the function of healing - is the discussion of the specific role of Daliao.

This research is based on the author's field research in Manbian Village, Menghun Town, Menghai County, Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province from July 14 to July 19, 2023.

2. Research Direction and Methods

2.1 Research Direction

By reviewing the primary information gathered during the field research in Manbian Village, this study focuses on the following questions:

- 1) How does Daliao work?
- 2) What do the villagers think of Daliao?
- 3) What is the role of Daliao in the spiritual healing process in the village?

2.2 Interview Method

This study used the semi-structured interview method in qualitative research, that is, interviews were conducted in the form of daily life conversations. It can be flexibly based on respondents' feedback, and the researchers only list the key points of the interviews.

2.3 Interviewee Briefing

In this study, four randomly selected villagers, the village Bozhang, who is a Village elderly in charge of traditional ceremonies, two Dubis, who are senior monks in charge of Buddhist ceremonies from Manbian village and from Zhanglang Buddhist Temple in the neighboring village, were selected as interviewees.

Interviewees mainly discussed the following topics:

- 1) The customs and habits of installing Daliao in the village;
- 2) The ritual reasons for this event.

2.4 Interview Process

The interviews were carried out in the form of one-on-one conversations. The research objective was explained to the interviewee before the interview began and the content of the interview was recorded using audio recordings with the consent of interviewees.

2.5 Document Filing

After the interviews, the recordings were sorted and converted into the form of a document. Some of the recording content cannot be clearly heard due to noise on site. In addition, language barriers have made some communication content difficult to interpret despite repeated confirmation. These contents have been marked in the document in the process of sorting out the recording. I have made full efforts to ensure that the transcripts are consistent with the original recording.

3. Daliao's Application in Manbian Village

3.1 Daliao's Positions

3.1.1 Around the House

In Manbian Village, most residences are one to two-story houses. Villagers usually place Daliao in the four cardinal directions of the house, east, west, north and south. Since most houses have brick walls, Daliao are also inserted into the gaps of the bricks. For houses with gates, Daliao are usually hung directly above the gate with rope. In addition, villagers will also install Daliao for houses used for non-residential purposes, such as garages and barns. During the installation, villagers prepare a bag of soil and scatter it on the ground around their houses along with the installation of Daliao.

3.1.2 Above Room Doors

Inside the villagers' houses, Daliao are also hung on the doors of some rooms. The room where the Daliao is hung varies from family to family. In some families, it will be placed above the door of the warehouse, while in others, it will be placed above the door of the living room.

3.1.3 In the Fields

Generally, villagers will insert a Daliao at the head and end of the field, and at the same time scatter soil in the field while marching through it. For some special gardens, such as tea gardens, two symmetrical Daliao are usually placed next to the gates.

3.1.4 Above Village Gates

Large balls of hemp rope and wooden sword ornaments are hung on the village gate called Badulong in Dai language. Bozhang considers the large ball of hemp rope to be a special kind of Daliao. This year, the large ball of hemp rope on the village gate was hung by itself. The sword ornaments do not belong to the Daliao itself, although they also need to undergo a sutra chanting ceremony before hanging. Wooden swords are a continuation of the ornaments that once symbolized the strength of the stockade.

3.2 Daliao's Replacement Cycle

The Daliao in Manbian Village is replaced once a year (As shown in Figure 2). Before the replacement ceremony, you can see sporadic Daliao placed in front of many doors and on the brick walls around the houses in the village. These Daliao are dark and worn out. At the same time, compared with the green imperata hemp ropes of new Daliao, the hemp ropes passing through these Daliao are withered and yellow. The ones hanging at home are usually well-preserved. Even though they are covered with spider webs, they still hang tightly above the door. There are fewer single-layered Daliao outside the house because 1) Daliao outside the house are easily damaged by the wind, blown away or lost due to various unexpected conditions; 2) The outdoor Daliao have only one layer, making them easier to lose. They were put out a year ago, and were replaced by new ones during this year's replacement ceremony.



Figure 2: 2023 Daliao replacement ceremony at Jade Buddha Temple

However, there are also special circumstances. Bozhang said that when the village is not in good condition, similar to feeling unwell or sick, the villagers will replace their Daliao ahead of schedule. These situations include multiple people dying in succession. Under these circumstances the Daliao will be replaced and sutras will be chanted. The Daliao will also be hung on the Badulong. The Dubi from Zhanglang Village often participates in various Buddhist ceremonies in the village. He explained that in some villages, when buying a new house, you must first ask the village Bozhang to prepare and install the Daliao and then let the Dubi chant sutras.

4. Daliao's Functions

4.1 Daliao's Major Functions

Daliao's functions are mainly two: first they are a ritual belief carrier for Dai primitive beliefs and function to expel bad things. In the Dai language, Da stands for hawk and liao stands for the eye. Daliao, which stands for the hawk's eye plays the role of surveillance in Dai culture. According to the villagers, the Daliao has the power to expel virtual evils such as ghosts; they can also expel physical evils, such as thieves or unauthorized visitors of the house. Some scholars believe that in ancient times, Daliao were connected to the god of the village: when people intruded in the village, they disrespected the village god and would be punished by villagers.^[2] Second, Daliao can be also understood as the physical carrier of its appendages. Different villages have various customs of appendages. As for Manbian Village, herbs, and previously cow horns, were tied to the Daliaos. They are combined together to achieve an integrated function.

4.2 Daliao and Herbal Medicine

The herbs attached have similarities and differences from home to home. Villager A participated in the July 19th 2023 Daliao replacement ceremony. During the ceremony, Villager A tied a cluster of yamin (mugwort) to the Daliao, and a hemp rope made of hahiao (Imperata) was passed through the center of the Daliao. She then picked a few branches of guandi (three-leaf vitex) and tied them together in a bunch, attaching to Daliao (As shown in Figure 3). Villager B, on the other hand, claimed that their Daliao had salt fruit (rhus) attached to it.

There is a term in the Dai area called Ya bin, meaning medicine. “Ya bin ya, ya bin ya”, a Dai phrase, means “herb is medicine and medicine is herb.” The Dai medical system believes that the basic components of human beings are four “towers”: Wind, fire, water and earth. Mugwort, three-leaf vitex, and imperata all belong to the water tower, which has the effect of relieving heat. It's possible that hanging them on the Daliao is meant to ward off tropical diseases. This is the crystallization of the medical experience gained by the Dai people in their production and life processes.



Figure 3: Newly tied herbs (vitex)

4.3 Daliao and White Cotton Thread

In addition to herbal medicine, there is also a high probability of a white thread surrounding the center of Daliao. Cotton thread also has important cultural meaning in Dai culture: in some Dai areas, the Buddha will hold cotton thread in his hand when chanting sutras; when couples get married, there is also a ceremony of tying them together with white thread. In Manbian's Daliao replacement ceremony, the temple needs to be surrounded by white threads. Villager B said that this was to protect the people in the village from outside evils. In the regional culture of Manbian, the white thread seems to have an antiforeign character.

The Bozhang from the village told that before herbs were used as attachments to the Daliao, cow horns used to be hung on them. In the village's previous replacement ceremonies, the villagers had to sacrifice a chicken and tie the horns to the Daliao, which symbolized that the rooster's crow heralded the start of cattle farming in the fields. To a certain extent, this reflects the reverence and ritualization of traditional production methods in the culture of the Dai people.

4.4 Daliao and Sutra Chanting

From the above-mentioned occasions related to Daliao, we can see that Daliao, whether it in regular or special occasions are inseparable from chanting sutras. The Dubi of the Buddhist temple in Manbian, said that the sutra he recited was the Auspicious Sutra, and Auspicious Sutra's verse tell the world what true auspiciousness and happiness are. When participating in the Daliao replacement Ceremony at the Buddhist temple, Dubi sat on the left side of the main hall and chanted sutras, while the Bozhang will sprinkle a potion (water with boiled acacia beans) on the believers with a whisk. Villager B told me that at this time he was using the sutra to educate the villagers not to steal, not to rob, etc.

The Dubi also told that most of the sutras he recited were of educational significance, such as stopping evil and doing good, and the sutras also contained some blessings. However, neither mentioned the function of exorcising evil spirits. In other words, the role of chanting sutras is not to provide blessings to exorcise evil spirits, but to educate and bless.

Buddhist sutras are written in Pali, so only monks who have reached a certain level of Pali can understand the scriptures and teach them to the villagers. Can the villagers understand the teachings in the sutras? Dubi believes that 100% of the villagers cannot directly understand Pali. They must specifically teach the verse to the villagers, translate and explain the content of them in order to convey the meaning of education.

4.5 Daliao and Territory

Daliao means monitoring eye, and the meaning of its existence is partially to protect a territory. Villager B believes that placing Daliao in the field can prevent birds and insects from eating the crops; hanging Daliao at home can prevent thieves from invading the house. When thieves see the Daliao, they will think that someone is living in the home, so they will give up stealing and escape. Village B said that Daliao can ensure the people it protects stay healthy and safe.

5. Reflections and Analysis

5.1 A Society's Homeostasis

Daliao maintain the safety and stability of Dai villages. Dame Mary Douglas (1921-2007) believes that for a culture, a stable structural pattern is considered safe, and the destruction, invasion, and contamination of this pattern are regarded as unstable factors and bring danger to the people in it.^[3] If everything in the system has somewhere to belong, then the system is considered safe. If something does not find its place, then the system is considered contaminated and dangerous. And this extent of safety is determined by the people within it. Instead of an objective coefficient, it is a concept that only exists in human communities and societies, since it is measured by the human mind. For example, for a village containing 100% native villagers, the state of stability for this village is the normal daily life because they reckon that everything goes peacefully. If an intruder, no matter physical or virtual, suddenly enters this village, then the original stability is broken, since the intruder does not belong to this community, and residents find alienness and risk in the intruder. Therefore, the villagers would be initially exclusive and cautious. However, if the outsider follows the customs of the village and pass through the examinations of villagers, then the intruder is be accepted and the stability of the system restored. If the feeling of danger remains, the outsider is expelled.

5.2 Ritual Treatment with Daliao

The stability and balance of Manbian Village is a concept recognized by people that the people in the village live and work in peace and develop healthily; sudden changes, such as relocation of houses or the death of a large number of villagers destroy the original "healthy" balance of the village. When villagers sense these dangers they respond with Daliao.

A village that is not "in a well condition" can be compared to a person with an illness. The cause of individual illness is also a loss of original internal balance or a breaking of bodily homeostasis in need of treatment, whether through medication or surgery, in order to restore the body to homeostasis. By restoring homeostasis to the body, the individual regains health. When something goes wrong in a village, the villagers likewise see the original stability as broken and take measures to reverse the process. The villagers use ritual healing like Daliao.

The definition of healing is the restoration of the original balance of a disrupted organism or environment. As a part of Dai culture, Daliao plays the role of maintaining this stable balance. In the hearts of the villagers, Daliao is a surveillance eye, a guardian that can protect the farmland, bring stability when abnormalities occur, and also hold responsibility for maintaining the health and safety of the villagers. When something unexpected happens in the village, Daliao serve as tools to restore stability to the village. Villagers put up new Daliao, so that in their beliefs the Daliao normalize the anomaly and transform them into acceptable parts of the village homeostasis system.

Although there is currently no scientific evidence^[4] that can prove the direct effect of ritual healing on imbalanced factors, such as how Daliao protects crops from being eaten, the role of Daliao is undoubtedly to help villagers eliminate the "bad things" in the village. After replacing Daliao, no matter what the outcome was, the villagers all recognized in their mind that the unstable factors had been weakened and eliminated by Daliao, therefore allowing the village to return to stability. If the villagers reckon that the imbalance has been eliminated by Daliao, then the village is healed. Thus, Daliao is a healing approach in Dai society to restore social balance and maintain system stability within a society, just as medicine to a person.

5.3 Conjectures on the Symbolic Meaning of Daliaos' Appendages

Daliao's appendages have been changed from horns to vitex and mugwort. The horns are a symbol of cattle farming. I assume this may be the embodiment of Manbian villagers' production method for thousands of years. Therefore, tying them with Daliao is to let Daliao protect this civilization. Mugwort, and imperata have been found to be effective in repelling mosquitoes as well, and this is significant because Manbian Village is located in Yunnan, where the climate is hot and humid and mosquitoes are rampant. Therefore, these herbs may be commonly used by local people. I speculate that these herbs are also a manifestation of the Manbian people's own culture. From horns to herbs, what has changed are the accessories of Daliao, but what remains unchanged is the Dai people's reflection of their cultures on Daliao. By being tied to Daliao, a symbol of healing for the village, the Dai people carry their best wishes for the stability and prosperity.

6. Conclusion and Outlook

6.1 Conclusion

Through interviewing and analyzing, I reach the conclusion that every community has an idea of homeostasis and well-being and the Daliao's function is to restore this balance in people's minds when unexpected things happen. This conclusion can be generalized to human communities with such auspicious symbols: they are used by people to maintain the homeostasis of the community. When

people believe that the community has eliminated danger and contamination, then they relax caution. Daliao is the cure and guardian of Dai community.

6.2 Outlook

The results of this ethnology can help people understand the ritual treatment process of certain symbols in communities. Moreover, they could partially explain the existence of religions and the reasons people believe in them, since religion can also be a morph of the symbols discussed in the study: they help people solve their internal imbalances.

This research can shed light on the power of belief in people as well, further understanding the dynamics of the unconscious mind. Based on the discussion in part 4.4, we can see that villagers understood the sutras as magical. They believe in these magical powers and perceive the evils that ail them as defeated. This belief provides a source of strong power within the minds of villagers themselves.

This internally generated power is formed by a firm belief, regardless of the veracity of this belief in a scientific conception. Psychologists can focus on the effect of beliefs on perceptions and action formation to better understand how beliefs generate potential.

In addition, this result can be applied to modern medicines. Despite the rapid development of medicine, Iatrogenic and drug-induced diseases such as depression, nosocomial infection, interventional disability, and dysfunction are becoming more prevalent.^[5] The cause of human diseases is also the breaking of homeostasis, yet sometimes modern medicines cure disease without noticing how the cures create new imbalances of their own. A surgery, for example, that removes a diseased organ resolves the imbalances caused by malfunctioning organ but neglects the problems caused by the loss of the organ's original functions, leading to sequela like neuroses and depression leading patients to struggle with new pains. The ethnology points out the importance of homeostasis to a community, just as it to humans. Modern medical science should also develop toward a better understanding of the ways of restoring balances to an individual.

References

- [1] Zhu Depu. *The Dai artifact "Daliao" and its influence - continuation of "Exploration of the Penetration of Ancient Dai Primitive Religious Culture into Mountainous Areas"* [J]. *Journal of Minzu University of China*, 1995, (01): 53-58.
- [2] Qu Yongxian. *The Dualistic Belief of the Dai People and Its Performance in Epic* [J]. *Journal of Bose Academy*, 2019 (3).
- [3] Douglas, P. M. (2002). *Purity and danger*. Routledge.
- [4] Zhou Xiaoyuwen, & Yu Jianhua. (2019). *Review of foreign research on ritual therapy*. *Medicine and Philosophy*, 40(8), 6.
- [5] Illich, I. (2003). *Medical nemesis*. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, 57(12), 919–922.