

# Analysis on the Symbolic System of Twelve-phase Masks of Baima Tibetans in Pingwu County

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## ABSTRACT

Twelve-phase masks of Baima Tibetans are the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage, has high research and conservation value. Starting with the relationship between Baima Tibetans and religion, nature and life, this paper makes a symbolic analysis of the twelve-phase masks, in order to explore the cultural symbolism under the twelve-phase masks, the religious symbolism of respecting gods and animals, the symbolic meaning of hoping that people can live in peace with nature and the yearning for a better life.

**Key words:** Baima Tibetans; Twelve-phase dance; Twelve-phase masks; Symbolism

The Baima Tibetans are known as the "oldest ethnic group in East Asia". In their long history, the Baima Tibetans have lived in relatively enclosed mountainous areas, and their social structure, production and life, religious beliefs, and ethnic culture have considerable uniqueness and authenticity. Among the distinctive ethnic cultures of the Baima Tibetans, the most representative is twelve-phase dance "Chige Zhou". Among them, the twelve-phase masks in the twelve-phase dance have significant characteristics compared to other mask dances, and are of great research value and significance. This paper starts with the relationship between the Baima Tibetans and religion, nature, and life, and conducts a symbolic analysis of the twelve-phase masks to explore the cultural symbolic meanings. At present, academic research on the Baima Tibetans mainly focuses on macro aspects such as ethnic origin, historical culture, and religious culture. There is relatively little research on micro areas such as masks and other cultural carriers. This paper explores the study of the twelve-phase masks in order to enrich the micro level research of Baima Tibetans culture, provide some reference and examples for the study of Baima Tibetans cultural carriers, and also provide some ideas for the protection of Baima Tibetans national culture.

## 1. Historical Origins and Overview of Baima Tibetan in Pingwu County, Mianyang City, Sichuan Province

The Baima Tibetans are the "oldest ethnic group in East Asia", and they are not of the same origin as Tibetan. Their ancestors are the Di ethnic group. After a long period of migration, they settled in the mountainous areas of northwest and southwest China and gradually developed into a powerful Di ethnic group. In 383 AD, the Former Qin army was defeated in the Battle of Feishui, and the Former Qin state of the Di people's regime was subsequently destroyed. The Di ethnic group fled to Pingwu County in Mianyang City, Sichuan Province, Pingwu County in Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Wenxian County in Longnan City, Gansu Province, and Ningqiang County in Hanzhong City, Shaanxi Province. For the sake of tribal security, many villages were located on high mountains, forming a relatively closed tribal structure, natural economy, and ethnic culture. After long-term development and evolution, it gradually formed the settlement of the Baima Tibetans today. In the 1950s, the country began the work of ethnic identification and statistics. Baima Tibetans are classified as Tibetan because of their high similarities in

language and living customs with Tibetans and the small number of ethnic groups. The ethnic name is Baima Tibetans.

Jiuzhaigou Valley Scenic and Historic Interest Area Baima Tibetan Village is located in Baima Tibetan Township, Pingwu County, Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, covering an area of 715 square kilometers. The Doubu River flows through the whole area. The average altitude within the township is 2200-2700 meters, with an annual average temperature of 8-12 degrees Celsius. The annual frost free period is short, the sunshine duration is long, the temperature difference between day and night is large, and the annual accumulated temperature is low. It belongs to a typical ecological climate of high cold and low temperature zone. The population of Baima Tibetan Township is 2000, and due to its unique cultural atmosphere, the local tourism industry has developed rapidly and become a pillar industry. The ethnic culture of the Baima Tibetans is significantly different from that of surrounding ethnic groups. Their ethnic beliefs are Bon and natural beliefs, and they have their own rich and colorful ethnic culture and customs. Among them, the twelve-phase dance and the twelve-phase masks they wear are the most famous and symbolic ethnic customs of the Baima Tibetans. On May 20, 2005, the twelve-phase dance was approved by the State Council of the People's Republic of China and included in the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage list.

## 2. Introduction to the Twelve-phase Masks of Baima Tibetans

### (1) Overview of the Twelve-phase Masks

The masks of the Baima Tibetans can be generally divided into three categories: Chige, Chimu, and Mazhou. Mazhou is the twelve-phase masks, which also has significant differences and distinctions within the Baima Tibetans in different regions. In Baima Tibetan Township, Pingwu County, the twelve-phase masks are known as "Zhouwu" in the local Tibetan language, consisting of lions, tigers, leopards, dragons, cows, sheep, pigs, phoenixes, eagles, big ghosts, small ghosts, and "choumo" (earth mother). The twelve-phase masks (as shown in Table 1) have distinct features of "convex eyes" and "three eyes". The twelve-phase masks are usually cast by local respected carpenters, while some villages are made by specialized craftsmen who inherit the twelve-phase masks of the Baima Tibetan. According to the historical tradition of the Baima Tibetans, sacred rituals must be performed during the manufacturing process, so the production of masks has strict procedures and standards. In terms of material selection, the twelve-phase masks are made of woods, which is convenient for wearing and dancing. Therefore, lightweight woods such as paulownia and oak are generally selected. The wood collection work is carried out in May every year, and then the wood is dried to facilitate carving and the quality of the masks. After the wood is dried, it is carved by carpenters. The carving technique of carpenters is an ancestral tradition, and the carving process belongs to a confidential period. The carving techniques cannot be disclosed. The carving of the twelve-phase masks takes about ten to twenty days. In local beliefs, after the mask is carved, it cannot be changed arbitrarily, otherwise it will be considered as angering the gods and inviting punishment. The twelve-phase masks were initially colored using natural plant sap

Table 1: Attribute categories of twelve-phase masks of Baima Tibetans

| Twelve-phase<br>Masks of Baima<br>Tibetans | Mask Attribute        | Mask Category  |
|--|-----------------------|--|
|  | Fierce category       | Lions, tigers, leopards, dragons   |
|  | Static phase category | Cows, sheep, pigs  |
|  | Mysterious category   | Phoenixes, eagles, big ghosts, small ghosts, and "choumo" (earth mother) |

from the mountains, with black, red, yellow, and green as the main colors. After the mask is made, a religious ceremony will be held for the Baima Tibetans, which is similar in form to the Buddhist rituals of "consecration" and "summoning gods".

#### (2)Application of Twelve-phase Masks in Twelve-phase Dance

The Twelve-phase Dance, also known as Zhouwu, is called "Chigezhou" in the local Tibetan language, meaning "the dance of the gods". The Twelve-phase Dance is divided into three categories: Yuezhou Ganzhou, and Cuozhou, with 42 dance steps and techniques. From the sixth to the fifteenth day of the first lunar month, according to the customs of the Baima Tibetan, the ethnic group will set up a blue flag in a spacious area for one day. The Baima Tibetans will wear colorful clothing and twelve face masks to begin this special ritual performance. Zhouwu is a sacrificial dance of the Baima Tibetan, with a beautiful longing to please mountain gods, drive away ghosts and disasters, and pray for blessings. It has high ornamental and artistic value. Dance is performed by the clan's priests, young men and women, and specialized dance teams. Baima Tibetans avoid singular numbers, so the number of dancers in each twelve-phase dance is even. Among them, there are strict choices in the selection and matching of masks, so the twelve-phase masks have high importance. The application of twelve-phase masks in dance includes:

Dancers. The masks worn by Chige and Chimu are of the same gender as those worn by dancers, and zodiac masks generally do not distinguish between men and women. In specific dances, the appearance of Chige's mask is generally intimidating, while Chimu's mask has softer lines, showing the characteristics of the mask corresponding to the dancer. Masked dances are performed by the sacrificial priests, young men and women, and specialized dance teams within the tribe.

Dance. The form of dance performed by the wearer of the twelve-phase masks is related to the mask. When wearing masks such as lions, tigers, leopards, etc., dancers are required to dance quickly. When wearing masks such as cows, sheep, and pigs, wearers are required to use

peaceful dance steps similar to agricultural methods such as sowing crops. When wearing masks such as big ghosts, small ghosts, and "Choumo", the requirements for dance steps are different.

Selection of masks. Baima Tibetans avoid the singular number, so the number of dancers during each twelve-phase dance is even. When selecting masks, they usually choose four Chige and Chimu masks, as well as two masks of the zodiac sign in the twelve-phase dance.

#### (3)Connection between the Twelve-phase Masks and Tibetan Religion

In the consideration of being classified as a Tibetan, the twelve-phase dance is an important criterion for measuring the Baima Tibetans. There are also rich elements of mask dance in Tibetan religion. Most scholars believe that the indigenous religion of the Tibetan before the 8th century, Bon, was the most influential religion on the Baima Tibetans, which to some extent influenced their ethnic beliefs and traditions. In the subsequent development, due to the geographical location of the Baima Tibetans and their frequent contact with the Tibetans, factors such as Tibetan Qiangmu masks also influenced the mask culture of the Baima Tibetans. Some scholars believe that the ritual changes of "Chigezhou" are a concentrated reflection of the influence of Tibetan culture on the Baima Tibetans, which also led to the classification of the Baima Tibetans as Tibetan in the ethnic division work in the 1950s.

### **3.Analysis on the Symbolic System of Twelve-phase Masks of Baima Tibetan**

#### (1)Overview of Symbolist Research

Symbolism refers to the expression of rich culture, ideas, and spirit through specific and comprehensive images within a certain cultural system. The research on symbolism abroad is relatively comprehensive, and has expanded from the categories of literature and anthropology to fields such as painting, sculpture, architecture, philosophy, and education. Research on symbolism in China mostly focuses on the fields of literature and art. Wang Mingning (2020) analyzed symbolism in art creation and believed that there is

a distinction between subjectivity and objectivity in the spatial structure of symbolism. Yu Xiaojie (2020) conducted a symbolic analysis of the representative work of Belgian Symbolist novelist George Roddenbach, "The Ghost of Bruges", and believed that symbolic meaning is almost everywhere, and different images run through the entire text, becoming the true soul of the novel. In China, research on symbolism in cultural carriers is just beginning, and there is relatively little analysis of symbolism in masks. Symbolism analysis of cultural carriers such as masks can help us better understand their spiritual connotations and play a positive role in promoting the protection and development of related cultural heritage.

## (2) Analysis on the Symbolic System of the Twelve-phase Masks

### ① People and Religion

The twelve-phase masks include lions, tigers, leopards, dragons, cows, sheep, pigs, phoenixes, eagles, big ghosts, small ghosts, and "Choumo." Among them, eight are animals in the forest. According to scholars' research, the Baima Tibetan has long adhered to the belief that all things have spirits. When this belief is combined with the animals in the Baima Tibetan habitat and the complex natural environment, it presents obvious characteristics of animal worship. In the long history of development, the Baima Tibetan, although their own villages were relatively closed, inevitably had contact with other ethnic groups, especially the Tibetan ancestors, and their ethnic culture was gradually influenced by it. It is confirmed that the belief system was influenced by both Bon and ethnic religion, and the religious belief that all things have spirits is always believed, which is more specifically reflected in the twelve-phase masks. The "convex eyes" and "three eyes" in the twelve-phase masks are similar to some elements of the Qiangmu mask in Tibetan Buddhism, symbolizing the inviolability and sacredness of the gods. And there are many common features in terms of category, shape, and color. In mask making and mask dancing, there are many ceremonial procedures presided over by priests, expressing respect for the gods. During the mask dance until noon or evening,

the Baima Tibetans invite dancers wearing masks to their homes for a meal. The host will offer special meat to show respect for the gods and pray for blessings. In summary, the symbolic analysis of the religious aspects of the twelve-phase masks reflects the symbolic meanings of animal worship, animism, and respect for gods among the Baima Tibetans.

### ② People and Nature

The twelve-phase masks of the Baima Tibetans first required wooden materials in the selection of masks, and plant sap was chosen as the pigment instead of other materials. In addition to the constraints of the local natural environment, the selection of masks also showed a sense of closeness to nature. In terms of the color of the masks, in addition to the black, red, and yellow colors commonly used by ethnic minorities to represent the earth, flames, and sun, green is also added as an important color. In color expression, green is the most appropriate expression of nature. By roughly categorizing the animal personalities depicted by the twelve-phase masks and the animals they represent, they can be roughly divided into several types: ferocious animals (lions, tigers, leopards, etc.), calm animals (cows, sheep, pigs), etc. Among them, the ferocious animals are hunting animals in the deep forest, and the calm animals are daily livestock in the life of the Baima Tibetans. Due to the influence of geographical environment, the Baima Tibetans have always had a traditional production method that combines farming and hunting. Under this production method, they are highly sensitive to the natural environment. Therefore, the twelve-phase masks symbolizes this complex attitude and emotion towards nature: both attachment to nature and hope to live in peace with it.

### ③ People and Life

As a grand event in the Baima Tibetans' Festival, the twelve-phase dance is already an important part of Baima Tibetan's entertainment and relaxation. During the twelve-phase dance, Baima Tibetans wear exquisite masks and colorful costumes, singing and dancing happily. No matter how busy they are working outside, Baima Tibetans will return home to celebrate during the festival. This symbolizes the recognition and praise of the Baima

Tibetans for their ethnic culture, as well as their pursuit and longing for a better life.

Fig. Analysis Frame Diagram of Symbol System of Baima Tibetan’s Twelve-phase Masks

#### 4.Conclusion

The academic research on the Baima Tibetans has shown an increasingly hot trend in recent years, and the twelve-phase masks are an important part of the rich and colorful ethnic culture of the Baima Tibetans, with high research and cultural value. This paper conducts a symbolic analysis of the twelve-phase masks of the Baima Tibetans, and derives the symbolic meanings of the masks, namely the religious symbolism of respecting gods and animal worship, the symbolism of hoping for peaceful coexistence between humans and nature, and the symbolism of pursuing a better life. The aim is to provide some reference and inspiration for the symbolic analysis and research of the micro cultural carriers of the Baima Tibetans.

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