Chinese Theatre: An Illustrated History Through Nuoxi and Mulianxi

**Chinese Theatre: An Illustrated History Through Nuoxi and Mulianxi** is the first book in any language entirely devoted to a historical inquiry into Chinese theatre through Nuoxi and Mulianxi, the two most representative and predominant forms of Chinese temple theatre.

With a view to evaluating the role of temple theatre in the development of xiqu or traditional Chinese theatre and drama from myth to ritual to ritual drama to drama, Volume One provides a panoramic perspective that allows every aspect of Nuoxi to be considered, not in the margins of xiqu but in and of itself. Thus, this volume traces xiqu history from its shamanic roots in exorcism rituals of Nuo to various forms of ritual and theatrical performance presented at temple fairs, during community and calendrical festivals or for ceremonial functions over the course of imperial history, and into the twenty-first century, followed by an exploration of the scriptural origins and oral traditions of Mulianxi, with pivotal forms and functions of Nuoxi and Mulian storytelling, examined, explicated and illustrated in association with the development of corresponding genres of Chinese performance literature and performing arts.

This is an interdisciplinary book project that is aimed to help researchers and students of theatre history understand the ritual origins of Chinese theatre and the dynamic relationships among myth, ritual, religion and theatre.

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Chinese Theatre: An Illustrated History Through Nuoxi and Mulianxi
Volume One: From Exorcism to Entertainment

Xiaohuan Zhao
This illustration shows a masked performance scene of *Liu Wenlong Takes the Imperial Examination* (*Liu Wenlong gankao*), a Guichi Nuoxi play staged in Liujie, Guichi District, Chizhou City, Anhui Province, on the night of 2 March 2018 or the fifteenth day of the first month in the traditional Chinese lunisolar calendar, which is celebrated across China as the Lantern Festival (*Yuanxiao jie*) to mark the end of the Spring Festival period.
To William Dolby (1936–2015)
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Foreword

Temples, ritual, performance, theatre! There’s no surprise that scholars have long known of links among such concepts. But there is a very big difference between such understanding and a thorough analysis of the theatre of one country, its origins, its history and its progress. And that is what this splendid book has provided!

And among the various civilisations, China’s history is known for its length. Even more important is the fact that ritual occupies so important a place in Chinese culture, civilisation and philosophy. What this means is that the historical inquiry into Chinese theatre via the temple theatre as represented by nuoxi and Mulianxi, is analysis of much more than simply theatre or performing arts. It is analysis involving the enormous scope of Chinese thinking, behaviour and culture.

What is the nuoxi of the subtitle? It is an ancient ritual form of performance dating back to the most ancient times. Its history is wonderfully documented and analysed in Chapter 3. It is still found in parts of southern China. Though hardly as common or widespread as it once was, it can occasionally be seen among some of the minority nationalities of Guizhou and elsewhere in southern China, such as the Zhuang, Yi and Miao, and also in some Han areas.

Though there are still ritual elements in some performances, it is my impression that nowadays nuo is more folk entertainment theatre than ritual. I had the good fortune to see a performance by amateurs of several different ethnic groups on a very beautiful ancient stage in Fenghuang County, western Hunan, itself a remarkably traditional town with one of the most beautifully preserved city walls in all China. The background gave the performance a highly authentic traditional feel, but I think the actors were more interested in preserving and showcasing an ancient style than in taking part in a ritual.

And who is this Mulian who looms large enough in Chinese traditional temple theatre to earn a place in the book’s subtitle? He is a devout Buddhist monk who goes to Hell to save his mother. Why does she need saving? She is lacking in generosity and compassion and, though wealthy herself, does not like to help people. And above all, she shows no respect for the Three Treasures of Buddhism (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha), thus being condemned to eternal punishment in Hell as karmic retribution. Apart from being a Buddhist monk, Mulian is also a central figure in ritual performance, a shaman. Stories about him have become the most prevalent of all in Chinese temple and ritual theatre.
One of the most important aspects of theatre history is its interdisciplinarity. Apart from theatre, the author also takes up the study of history, religion, society and literature.

It is a study of history, because it spans the whole development of China from the most ancient times till our own times. We can see here discussions of how society and culture evolved over those many centuries. We can observe some of the main features of the main dynasties and the culture they produced.

This book is a study of religion. Mulian is quite clearly a primarily Buddhist figure. But shamanistic practices and beliefs are also involved in the development of the temple theatre. Theatre is also very much a part of Chinese society. It tells us a great deal about that society and how it relates with the religions and religious practices followed there.

The interrelationship with society begs the question of whether temple theatre is purely religious or is also secular. It is hardly possible for it to be purely religious, since people can and do enjoy theatre that is secular in content in temple venues. But we should never ignore the religious aspect. In Volume Two, Chapter 6 on Mulian dramas in Chinese regional theatre (difang xi), which is generally a secular form of art, the author cites the distinguished Dutch Sinologist Piet van der Loon as saying that Mulian dramas ‘performed a direct and spectacular action which served to cleanse the community of all impurities’. In other words, they were secular and a form of entertainment, but also fulfilled an important moral or religious function.

Finally, the study both of nuoxi and Mulianxi involves Chinese literature. The way Mulian saved his mother is the subject of items in many different forms of literature, including prose, poetry and narrative. He is obviously a figure who could inspire Chinese people throughout the ages, whether or not they were Buddhist.

I think the enormous detail with which Zhao Xiaohuan recounts the stories of Mulian and his virtues, compassion, openness and generosity shows this work as a model of scholarship. This detail tells the reader the various roots of the story and how they found their way into Chinese Buddhism to become a favourite popular topic. Mulian is a popular hero among ordinary Chinese for various reasons. Volume One, Chapter 4 on the origins of the Mulian myth concludes, ‘The triple role of Mulian as a devout monk, as a filial son and particularly as a quintessential shaman accounts for the enormous popularity of the Mulian myth and Mulian performance or Mulianxi in China.’

Also admirable is the way Zhao Xiaohuan discusses the forms of performance literature and performing arts dedicated to the stories of Mulian. What strikes me is the multiple forms of literature that led to the development of theatre. Stories can be presented to audiences and readers in all sorts of ways. They all have their own emotional impact, but probably reach their height when many people gather together to share the story in a performance with actors on a stage or in another recognisable venue. There is no need to be literate to enjoy a theatre show. People appreciating a drama as part of a crowd produce a strong community feeling of shared emotions.
One of the many things I like about this book is its richness in terms of direct reference to the primary sources. It is replete with quotations from them, histories, poetry of various kinds, essays, diaries, plays, fieldnotes, family and local histories, Buddhist sutras and so on. This adds colour, verisimilitude and scholarly value to the analysis. The narrative becomes more credible, more interesting, more vital.

For me, it is the interrelationships of Chinese theatre with its society, religion, literature and history and the pivotal contributions of nuoxi and Mulianxi to the development of Chinese theatre that make it so fascinating. And the fact that Zhao Xiaohuan has done such a good job of highlighting and analysing these interrelationships and contributions is among the many reasons why I regard this book as path-breaking and an example of truly excellent scholarship.

Although included among the sources on Chinese xiqu and theatre more generally, and highly appreciative of that fact, I learned an enormous amount from this book. It is an honour for me to write a foreword for it. I wish it and its author every success.

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SNU boasts China’s first and foremost museum of xiqu relics. A xiqu treasure house, indeed – for it houses more than one hundred tomb brick and stone xiqu carvings dating from the Song (960–1279), Jin (1115–1234) and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties, approximately three thousand rubbings of xiqu stelae, more than five thousand photos of xiqu relics and more than three hundred hand-copied scripts of regional, folk and ritual drama from premodern China, in addition to a sizable collection of xiqu costumes, headdresses, properties, musical instruments, puppets and shadows, among others. I feel honoured to have been granted access to the treasure house and permission to exploit its rich resources for this research project.

Richard Schechner read my essays on Huizhou temple theatre and Guizhou Nuoxi, offering very encouraging feedback and perceptive advice, which was incorporated into Zhao (2017, 2019) and adapted into Volume One: Chapters 1
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Abbreviations and conventions

Abbreviations

BJCJ  Baojuan chuji
CBETA  Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association
DZ  Zhengtong daozang
ESSS  Ershisi shi
GBXQCK  Guben xiqu congkan
MSQY  Minsu quyi
MSQYCS  Minsu quyi congshu
MSYJ  Minsu yanjiu
MZYS  Minzu yishu
QH  Lida quhua huibian
QH_TSY  QH Tang Song Yuan bian
QH_M3  QH Mingdai bian (disan ji)
QH_J2  QH Jindai bian (di’er ji)
QH_J3  QH Jindai bian (disan ji)
QTS  Quan Tangshi
QTW  Quan Tangwen
SKQS  Siku quanshu
SSJZS  Shisanjing zhushu
TPGJ  Taiping guangji
TPYL  Taiping yulan
WYYJ  Wenyi yanjiu
XBZZJC  Xinbian zhuzi jicheng
XQYJ  Xiqu yanjiu
YSBJ  Yishu baijia
ZHXQ  Zhonghua xiqu
ZZJC  Zhuzi jicheng

Conventions

For Chinese romanisation, Pinyin (without tone mark) is used throughout the book except in direct quotations. No Chinese characters are provided in the running
text, captions or endnotes for Chinese terms and expressions unless necessary to avoid confusion. Instead, a glossary for them is provided at the end of each volume of the book, where Pinyin is given followed by the fantizi (traditional scripts) even if originally published in jiantizi (simplified scripts). Likewise, only romaji and romaja are given in the running text and endnotes for Japanese and Korean terms with their form in kanji/kana or hanja/hangul provided in the glossary as are their Chinese counterparts.

Non-English words and expressions are italicised throughout the book except for proper nouns and major genres of Chinese theatre (including Chinese temple theatre and regional theatre), which are in general italicised on their first occurrence only.

For premodern Chinese texts, they are cited by title rather than by author. In such cases, the juan (scroll) number is also given, followed by period and page number. Some texts reprinted in traditional folio format, in pages with flattened recto/verso sides (often with more than one to a page), are also given sequential pagination in Arabic numerals. In such cases, the scroll and page number (with recto/verso indication) of the traditional format is cited.
Chronology of dynasties and periods

Early China

Xia: ca. 2100–ca. 1600 BC
Shang: ca. 1600–1046 BC
Zhou: 1045–256 BC
  Western Zhou: 1045–771 BC
  Eastern Zhou: 770–256 BC
    Spring and Autumn Period: 770–476 BC
    Warring States Period: 475–221 BC
Qin: 221–206 BC
Han: 206 BC–AD 220
  Western Han or Former Han: 206 BC–AD 25
  Eastern Han or Later Han: AD 25–220

Medieval China

Six Dynasties (220–589)

Three Kingdoms: 220–280
  Cao Wei: 220–265
  (Western) Shu: 221–263
  (Eastern) Wu: 222–280
Jin: 266–420
  Western Jin: 266–316
  Eastern Jin: 317–420

Northern and Southern Dynasties: 420–589
Sui: 581–618
Tang: 618–907
Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms: 907–960
Song: 960–1279
  Northern Song: 960–1127
  Southern Song: 1127–1279

Liao: 947–1125
Western Xia: 1038–1227
Jin: 1115–1234
Yuan: 1271–1368

Late Imperial/Early Modern China
  Ming: 1368–1644
  Qing: 1644–1912

Modern and Contemporary China
  Republic: 1912–
  Peoples' Republic: 1949–
Introduction

This book aims to study the role of temple theatre in the development of traditional Chinese drama and theatre (xiqu), with focus primarily on the two most representative and predominant forms of temple theatre, that is Nuoxi or Nuo theatre and Mulianxi or Mulian theatre, the former being the oldest living shamanic ritual and theatrical performance in China and the latter widely hailed as ‘the ancestor of one hundred forms of xiqu’ (baixi zhi zu). Xiqu is an umbrella term for a great variety of forms that originated in different places and different periods. While sharing the common defining feature of ‘enacting a story with speech, action, song and dance’ (Wang 2007: 33), each is distinguished from the others in dialect and musical style. The twelfth century witnessed the appearance of Southern drama (nanxi), the earliest mature form of xiqu, but earlier forms of xiqu have a much longer history going back as far as the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–1045 BC) when Chinese temple theatre began to emerge in the form of shamanic ritual performance.

The relationship of ritual to drama is perhaps the most central, complex and controversial issue that confronts anyone exploring the origin and evolution of theatre. As a sacred space for ritual performance and a secular space for theatrical entertainment, Chinese temple theatre provides hope of finding proof for an essential link between ritual and drama. This book attempts to search for the historical link between religion and ritual and drama and theatre via temple theatre, and to demonstrate how Chinese temple theatre serves as the liminal continuum between ritual and theatrical performance. The specific aim of this book is thus to seek an explanation for how xiqu emerged from temple theatre and how various ritual elements and theatrical devices were synthesised into xiqu.

Definitions and explanations

Needless to say, any such search is conditioned by our definitions of ‘temple’, ‘theatre’, ‘temple theatre’, ‘ritual’, ‘drama’ and ‘ritual drama’. Although explicit declarations of definitions put this study in danger of easy rebuttal, despite the risks there is no other way. In religious terms, ‘temple’ is a sacred place of worship for religions or faiths other than the monotheistic ones, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Since the book studies ‘temple theatre’ in a broader socio-cultural
context than the religious or theatrical one, the word ‘temple’ is to be understood in more neutral terms as a space for the stage and the sacrifice that preserve its existence and proper functioning. Closely associated with ‘temple’ in this study is ‘temple theatre’, by which we mean both ritual/theatrical performances of all forms of performing arts and performance literature, sacred and secular, presented at temple fairs or during community and calendrical festivals or for ceremonial (celebratory and commorative) functions – as in welcoming gods and expelling ghosts (yingshen saishe), celebrating imperial ascension and marriage, marking the birth or mourning the death of a person and commemorating a military victory or the spirits of war dead – and open-air sites/stages or roofed structures designated for ritual/theatrical performances, which could be a cave, a street, a square, a shrine, a site of holy relics, a Buddhist or Daoist monastery, a lineage temple or an ancestral shrine, a courtyard, a garden, a residential house and a royal or princely court. The structures in question are therefore not always recognisable as ‘theatre’ in its modern sense: (a) a building designed for dramatic and operatic performances and (b) the (art of) dramatic and operatic performances, nor are they identifiable merely as a ‘viewing place’ in the original sense of the Greek word theatron. ‘Temple theatre’ as such distinguishes itself from Hanson’s (1959) ‘theatre-temple’, Nielsen’s (2002) ‘cultic theatre’ and Che’s (2005) ‘temple theatre’ (shenmiao juchang), all of which deal with physical structures for ritual/theatrical performances from a perspective of architectural archaeology.

For those not trained in performance and theatre but only in literature, ‘drama’ is a matter of literature, whereas ‘ritual’ is a kind of subliterature – something somewhat nebulous and amorphous. Such a view is reflected in the strong emphasis traditionally placed by historians of Chinese theatre on the surviving textual evidence as represented by the variety play (zaju) that flourished during the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) – the so-called golden age of Chinese drama (Shih 1976). They tend to think of drama in a specific sense as a literary creation – an art form that does not need to be performed. Classical anthropologists, particularly Cambridge Ritualists such as Jane Harrison, Francis Cornford and Gilbert Murray, however, think of ‘drama’ in a more general sense as ‘the re-enactment of myth through ritual’. However, both ‘drama’ and ‘ritual’ need to be rethought and reassessed by anyone who seeks to trace the history of Chinese theatre in terms of its ritual origins. ‘Drama’ needs to be understood not only in its more specific literary context, but also in the general anthropological context of Chinese temple theatre as re-enactment through ritual and ceremony of happenings, natural and supernatural, mythic and mundane, and malevolent and benign that are believed to have occurred as a divine response to human needs and deeds. As for ‘ritual’, the word should not be understood as ‘subliterature’ in comparison to ‘drama’. Rather, ‘ritual’ needs to be thought of as the self-conscious performance of structured, stylised, repeatable yet variable actions that is presented to please and placate gods, ghosts and spirits, to expel epidemic diseases and exorcise demons, and to entertain, enlighten and educate ritual and ceremony participants – not just performers but spectators as well. As such, ritual is an inclusive term meaning activities of priests-performers, actors, musicians, dancers, singers, audience
participants and spectators, and so is ritual performance that involves various xiqu elements including music, acting, singing, dancing, drumming, chanting, combat, costuming, make-up, masking and impersonating, and are therefore at once both efficacious and entertaining. In this sense, ‘ritual’ is ‘ritual drama’ and ‘ritual performance’ is ‘theatrical performance’. And accordingly, ‘theatre’ is interchangeable with ‘performance’ and vice versa. To redefine the meanings of terms related to ‘temple’ and ‘temple theatre’ is part of a larger effort to reconstruct and reinterpret the history of ritual, theatre and performance that is currently underway here.

The strong assertion of the ontological fusion of ritual/theatrical character, content and function of Chinese temple theatre also has implications for the broader exercise of cross-cultural comparison, opening the door to a less overly Helleno- and Eurocentric approach to the comparative study of the origins and evolutions of theatre. By prompting and participating in cross-cultural dialogue and debate on temples, shrines, stages, streets and squares in China as a space for ritual performance and theatrical entertainment, it is hoped that this book goes beyond existing scholarship by adding depth and width to an understanding of what has been called ‘the global theatre’, at a time when Asian theatre is attracting ever-increasing attention from ‘Western actors, dancers, musicians, directors, and playwrights’ (Brandon 2011: 5).

Ritual origins of theatre

There is a highly influential – almost universal – assumption that theatre evolved from myth, ritual and ceremony. This assumption is at the heart of the ritual theory of drama developed by the Cambridge Ritualists in the early twentieth century and has been commonplace since the time of Aristotle (384–322 BC). However, hardly any clear consensus has been reached on just how this happened or whether this ever happened. Indeed, this how-question is one of the most crucial and controversial in theatre studies – a topic for a century-long heated discussion and debate among scholars of theatre history in the West. In China, modern scholarship on xiqu started in 1912 with Wang Guowei’s (1877–1927) groundbreaking A Study of Song and Yuan Xiqu (Song Yuan xiqu kao). Wang Guowei (2007: 1) began his inquiry into the history of xiqu with the rhetorical question, ‘Might the rise of song and dance have begun with ancient shamans (wu)?’ He did not answer the question but instead traced wu-shamanism or wuism to the golden age of ‘high antiquity’ (shanggu). Wang Guowei (2007: 3–4) then proposed another source of origin for xiqu, that is, the witty words, actions and impersonations of professional jesters and entertainers (paiyou) of the Zhou court during the Spring and Autumn Period (770–476 BC), thus initiating a heated discussion on the two lines of xiqu development and an equally heated debate over the ritual origins of Chinese theatre. The debate and discussion among historians of Chinese theatre are surprisingly coincident not only with the way Western scholarship has responded to the ritual theory of drama, but also with the way Western scholarship has dealt with it.

Various theories have since been proposed as inspired by Wang Guowei on the origin(s) of Chinese theatre. They may be generally described as ‘sole-ancestral’
versus ‘multi-ancestral’. The former – as represented by Piet van der Loon (1977), Tang Wenbiao (1985: 37–40), Ma Guojun (1992), Tanaka Issei (1998), Kang Baocheng (2011), Liao and Liu (2013) and Xiaohuan Zhao (2019) – holds that Chinese theatre in its various forms has one and the same origin in ancient Chinese shamanic rituals and sacrificial ceremonies. The latter – as shown in Zhou Yibai (1960), William Dolby (1976), Colin Mackerras (1990), Zeng Yongyi (2008) and Regina Llamas (2013) – is rooted in the view that various earlier forms of religious and entertaining performances including shamanic song and dance, court jesting, market storytelling and storiesinging, comic skits, acrobatics, martial arts and so on, all contributed, more or less, to the birth and growth of xiqu, the predominant form of Chinese theatre since the twelfth century. Those who view Chinese theatre as a multi-ancestral phenomenon tend to regard all the earlier forms of performance and entertainment as the sources from which xiqu evolved. In other words, the multi-ancestral theory identifies shamanic rituals and sacrificial ceremonies as merely one of the many sources of Chinese theatre, albeit the earliest one.

Upon closer examination, however, the two seemingly opposing points of view are very similar because both of them trace the origin(s) of Chinese theatre as far back as shamanic song and dance of high antiquity. The problem with the multi-ancestral theory is not its denial of any relationship between ritual and theatre, but its failure to distinguish ‘spring’ from ‘wellspring’. In our view, a spring is to its wellspring as xiqu is to wuism, from which various elements of ritual performance such as combat, costumes, masks, chanting and singing, dance and non-dance movement, facial expressions, drumming and make-up develop into xiqu. In his comment on the performances of lantern opera (dengxi) staged by village shamans in northern Sichuan, Kirby (1975: 72–73) notes, ‘In them, we can see a reflection of the process which formed the more ancient drama and which continued to transform the “mainstream” styles.’ The process is dynamic and bidirectional, or in Schechner’s words, a process ‘from ritual to theater and back’ (Schechner 2003: 121).

Yet still no consensus whatsoever has been reached among historians of Chinese theatre on how this happened or whether this ever happened. Recently, the ritual theory of drama has been challenged by the emergence of Chinese exceptionalism, which asserts that Chineseness, including Chinese civilisation and culture, is justifiably and factually distinct and deeply rooted in China’s national history and tradition, and so is xiqu. Xiqu is peculiar to Chinese culture; it is an exceptionally complex, composite, multi-ancestral art of literature and performance (Xie 2007; Fu 2008; Zeng 2008: 11–57). The exceptionalism of xiqu history was first systematically set forth by Zhang Geng (1911–2003), the late President of the National Academy of Chinese Theatre Arts (Zhongguo xiqu xueyuan). In the opening section of *A General Introduction to Xiqu Studies* (Zhongguo xiqu tonglun), Zhang Geng states that ‘Xiqu is a self-contained system’, which took a path in its origination and evolution entirely different from that of ancient Greek and Indian theatre (Zhang and Guo 2010: 1–13).

Is Chinese theatre history really an exception? This is not the simple yes or no question it appears to be. Little direct evidence on the origins of Chinese theatre has survived, which is also the case with all other theatres of the world
including ancient Greek theatre. Equally little is known about how ‘classical Chinese drama’ as represented by Yuan zaju ‘seems suddenly to appear on the literary horizon full grown’ (Crump 1980: 3). To answer this question requires probing the history and historiography of temple theatre: why and how did temple theatre accommodate both ritual performance and theatrical entertainment? What kinds of ritual and theatrical performances were staged? Who participated in the performances, in what capacity and under what circumstances? To what extent was ritual shaped by theatre or vice versa? To what extent was xiqu shaped by temple theatre or vice versa? How did various theatrical elements such as dance, singing, miming, music, acrobatics, make-up, props, costumes and so forth develop and coalesce into a composite performance art that is xiqu? By addressing these questions and issues, this book will work towards reconstruction of the trajectory of xiqu from religious ritual to ritual drama and from ritual drama to drama.

**Theatre history in temple fairs**

Different from commercial urban entertainments, dramatic shows were usually staged in traditional China as part of temple fairs, as people widely believed that deities, including their enshrined ancestors, enjoy theatrical performance as much as they do. ‘Temple stages,’ as Dolby (1976: 186) correctly points out, ‘have played a big part in the history of Chinese drama.’ Temple theatre still plays a big part in theatrical entertainment in twenty-first-century China, particularly in its vast rural and hinterland areas.

In early 2014, I was invited to attend a symposium on Chenghuang the City God and Community Festival Performance (*shehuo*). The symposium was held in Yuci District, Jinzhong City, Shanxi, a landlocked province in North China. During the symposium, I visited the Yuci City God Temple (Chenghuang miao) and observed the local temple fairs. First built in 1362 or the twenty-second year of Zhizheng of the Yuan dynasty and relocated to the current site in 1431 or the sixth year of Xuande of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), the temple boasts one of the earliest surviving City God temples in China (Figure 0.1).

*Figure 0.1 The City God Temple of Yuci, Jinzhong City, Shanxi Province.*
The City God is a popular tutelary deity in Chinese Daoism and folk religion. The cult of the City God dates from the Six Dynasties (220–589). Indeed, the god was so popular that it was hard to find a city without a temple dedicated to him in traditional China. Under the Ming dynasty, the City God was officially entrusted with a judicial and administrative power over the dead comparable to that of King Yama in Chinese Buddhism. And from then onwards, the City God was housed in a yamen-like temple to receive sacrificial offerings and enjoy ritual and theatrical performances during temple fairs (Figure 0.2).7

The local temple fair is a six-day event held as part of the annual twenty-day Jinzhong Community Performance Festival. During the temple fair, the City God starts the day with a grandiose morning tour of inspection of his city (xuncheng) (Figure 0.3). Escorted by armed guards on both sides, the statue of the god is carried in a sedan chair and paraded throughout the town with court runners beating gongs to clear the way at the front and staff members in official robes bringing up the rear (Figure 0.4).

After the inspection tour, ritual and theatrical performances are presented inside the temple to enact the god’s miraculous deeds such as practising exorcism, summoning rain and bringing good harvest and making divine judgements (Figure 0.5).

The god is seated in the main hall of the temple to watch the performances. Outside in the square, there are ‘variety entertainment’ (zaxi) to entertain the general public. The entertainment is so called because it is a mixture of a variety