

# Text Production of Ancient Songs of Miao People in Southern Sichuan\*

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**Abstract**—Ancient songs of Miao people in southern Sichuan are the living expressions of Miao people's ideology, and the living reflection of their unique culture and religious beliefs. The government and ancient song lovers use various measures such as audio recording, video recording and text recording to preserve such songs. Although this way is effective, it ignores the openness, polysemy, and situation of the text of Miao people's ancient songs. Only by transforming the realization form of their social functions, depending on new media in modern society, and exerting their intrinsic social functions can Miao people's ancient songs be available to truly survive.

**Keywords**—Miao people in southern Sichuan; ancient song; text

## I. INTRODUCTION

Luodu Miao people's ancient song was listed in the list of intangible cultural heritage of Sichuan Province in 2007 and is known as the "living fossil" of Miao people. Luodu Miao people's ancient song takes a Q&A form and explains natural phenomena and historical phenomena. There are strict taboos when singing the ancient songs. Such songs are usually sung during major occasions such as ancestor worship, weddings and funerals, family gatherings and festivals. Most of the singers are old people, wizards and singers. When singing, the host and the guest sit oppositely to each other and sing in Q&A (questions and answers) form. Once singing, it may last for a few days, a few nights or even half a month. Such songs are passed on by means of oral communication and memory in mind, and the ways of inheriting such ancient songs are more rigorous, such as teaching by ancestors, teaching in family, teacher-apprentice teaching, and self learning. The ancient songs are mainly performed in form of song recitation. The styles of the poems adopt the traditional symmetrical manner. The poems use a lot of rhetoric techniques such as metaphor, exaggeration, comparison, personification and rhetorical question.

## II. INHERITANCE OF ANCIENT SONGS OF MIAO PEOPLE IN SOUTHERN SICHUAN

Miao people's ancient songs integrate history, literature

and aesthetics, witness the historical growth of Miao people, and are indispensable precious spiritual and cultural wealth of Miao people and an important material for studying the culture, language and history of Miao people. In history, Miao people have no written record. The way of inheriting its culture is mainly carried out in the form of singing, thus shaping its own civilization. Music and singing and dancing play an important role in formation of its culture. The essence of Miao people's ancient songs is local, collective, and oral. At the same time, it is applied in three ritual fields such as marriage customs, funerals, and sacrifices.<sup>1</sup> From the perspective of its origin and application field, the inheritance of Miao people's ancient songs has the following characteristics:

### A. Collective Nature

Ancient songs are created by the collective, and are used for a series of ceremonial occasions (such as marriage, funeral, and ancestor worship) as open to the nation. Although the marriage and funeral rituals involve the collective behaviors of two families, it is a life ritual that every family must undergo. In the process of wedding and funeral rituals, marriage etiquette songs (such as the songs about making an offer of marriage, engagement arranged by parents, receiving and sending relatives of the bride, and sending dowry) are specially used on marriage etiquette, and not suitable for using on other occasions. The entire marriage etiquette songs mostly describe stories about the division of heaven and earth, the origin of marriage, tribal migration, ethnic formation, sub-lineage multiplication, wealth creation, etc., and adopt clever ideas and epic arrangement. In public occasions within the family's collective scope, whether people are family members or fellow countrymen, they may also appreciate the grandeur and beauty of the wedding, remind the common history of the nationality and maintain the national identity in the wedding ceremony and the singing of the ancient song. Wedding ceremony, no matter it is held by which family, is a great event of the village and ethnic group; hence people of the same village, family and town would come to see or take part in the wedding ceremony. The singing of ancient songs in funeral rites of Miao people is also similar to the nature of Miao people's

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<sup>1</sup> Zhong Jingwen. An Introduction to Folk Literature. Beijing: Higher Education Press. 2010, pp. 23-40. (in Chinese)

wedding ceremony. The singing of ancient songs on Miao people's ancestral worship ceremony is the most important ritual of the whole ethnic group; almost everyone may participate in it. Of course, the function of the ritual is generally the same as that of marriage and funeral. However, compared with the scale of the two rituals, the ancestral worship ritual involves more people and is more symbolic, and has stronger function of ethnic identity. Above all, it can be seen that weddings, funerals, and ancestral worship rituals are almost collectively participated in; but in the national cultural identity, or symbolic, participation scale, the ancestral worship ritual is more typical no matter in ethnic cultural identity, or symbolic, or in the participation scale.

### B. Ritualistic Nature

Ancient songs have important significance and value in Miao people's culture, but the singing of Miao people's ancient songs is not independent of Miao people's culture as an art form or cultural form, but is closely related to Miao people's ethnic customs, rituals and other cultures. Such songs depend on the rituals of Miao ethnic group, and form Miao people's cultural landscape together with other cultural factors of Miao people.

Different ritual situation of Miao people have different restriction on ancient songs. Ancient songs sung in marriage ritual cannot be used in ancestral worship ritual and funeral ceremony. In the same way, ancient songs sung in ancestral worship ritual and funeral ceremony also cannot be used in other ceremonial situation. For example, the "Ritual words for blocking the road", "Ritual words for reporting gifts", "Ritual words for asking relatives", "Ritual words for calling relatives", "Ritual words for arranging dining table", "Ritual words for gifts representation", "Ritual words for moving tables" and other ancient songs used in the marriage ceremony have a strong sense of the marriage situation and presence. Therefore, Miao people's ancient songs depend on the ritual, and different ritual situation has different regulations for such songs.

### C. Oral Nature

Since Miao people have no written language, the way of cultural inheritance depends on the human-to-human oral communication. This way of inheritance makes Miao people's culture live in the process of inheritance; at the same time, in the process of human-to-human oral communication, the imparted person can interpret the key points in cultural learning through the behavior, expression, explanation and attitude of the instructor; so from this aspect, it has more sense of presence in history and the times.

However, the living heritage relies on the principle of face-to-face teaching among people. In the process of inheritance, different inheritors have different learning ability, talent, interpretation and cognition on their culture so that the living inheritance has certain variability. Therefore, not only the creation of Miao people's ancient songs is collective, but also its cultural heritage is realized collectively. The current singing status of Miao people's ancient songs is formed by superposition of variable factors in the process of living heritage.

## III. OVERVIEW OF CHINESE TRANSLATION TEXT OF THE ANCIENT SONGS OF MIAO PEOPLE IN SOUTHERN SICHUAN

In the process of researching Miao people's ancient songs, researchers have got the ancient songs used in different rituals such as marriage customs, funerals, and God worship rituals translated into Chinese; and there have been multiple variations in the Chinese translation process.

### A. Variation in Grammar

Chinese adopts monosyllabic vocabularies, while Miao people's language adopts multi-syllable words. Hence in the process that Miao people's ancient songs become a Chinese translation text, a vocabulary in Miao people's language may be described by using several vocabularies in Chinese, or vice versa.

For example, in the song "Shooting the Sun and Moon":

Yangx yuaf nuaf dout ndax deb dol nongx xongb suk yad dot zhnag

Yangx yaob nuaf dout ndax ndrangi dol nongb ndongt suk yad dot nongb

Yang Ya wants to get rid of the seed when he sees bamboo (杨亚看到竹子要断种)

Yang Yue wants to get rid of the root when he sees tree (杨跃看到树木要断根)

In the song "Song of Roots":

Zhit wef lab zhit as

Zhis wef deb ndax dex nenb ndout uat ndout

Ndout lol nyaob zhit dout let nad shob

No other reasons (不为别的啥原因)

Just for reason that there are more people than ever before (只为人烟较从多)

People lives here and there in the bay and dam site (住遍深湾满坝场噍哪索)

Zhis wef deb ndax dex nenb ndout zhas uat ndout

Ndout lol nyaob zhit dout let nad shob

Just because there are too many people (只因人烟太众多)

People lives here and there in the bay and dam site (住遍深湾满坝场噍哪索)

### B. Variation in Rhetoric and Other Rhetoric Techniques

Miao People's folk poetries are the same as that in the same dialect area. In the rules and forms of classical poetic composition, they both mainly adopt rhyming rules associated with tone repetition. In long songs, rhyming rules and tone repetition are generally used interchangeably; in short songs, rhyming rules are mainly required. The second chapter has analyzed and concluded that the rhythm and tone of Miao people's poetry is very strict. It can be roughly divided into odd and even rhythm, interval-typed rhythm, flower-inlaid rhythm, and two-sentence rhythm. However, in

the process of actually generating Chinese translation text, due to the large difference in language use habits, the rhetoric and other rhetoric techniques in the Miao people's ancient songs are not reflected in Chinese translation text.

For example, in the two-sentence rhythm of the song "Weaving Heaven and Earth" as used in ancestor worship ritual:

Chout ndox nzhik jangs vongl,

Chout nzhaif dout njix zhuat jid lol zongl;

When penetrating into the origins (寻根究底啊),

Rock pillar body is found (寻出了岩柱身);

Miao people's language rhymes on gl, but it is not reflected in Chinese translation text. Another example is the interval-typed rhythm in the same song:

Njix reb but ndos zhif,

Sheud xik njix reb mol zhous ndox

Njix zhuat but zhif ndos

Sheud xid njix reb mol zhous ndox

The stalagnate wakes up (石柱睡醒了)

and gets up to lead the rock pillar to visit the earth (起来引岩柱去游地)

the rock pillar wakes up (石柱睡醒了)

and gets up to lead the stalagnate to visit the heaven (起来引石柱去游天)

Miao people's language rhymes on ox, but it is not reflected in the Chinese translation text. Another example is the odd and even rhyme in the same song:

Nuaf dout dex nenb nbout nbul lol nbouf nblongx

Zhit muax ib dol ndros nil ndok ib nghaol

Xangt ndaox ngoux dongx ndok ndox zhos ib lenx

Songb laif dongx nblongx ndok ndrangl zhos ib dol

The crowds flow as much as leaves (人群涌动叶般多)

No one would help him weaving for just a shuttle (无人帮他织一梭)

There is only one god responsible for weaving the heaven (香矛讴侗织天仅一个)

and only one god responsible for weaving the earth (松乃侗朋织地就一人)

The first and third sentences rhyme on x, and the second and four sentences rhyme on ol, but they are both not reflected in the Chinese translation text.

### *C. Variation in the Music Generation of Miao People's Ancient Songs in Chinese Translation Text*

The art of song is formed by the synthesis of self-discipline and other laws of music art, the unity of content and form, and the close connection between lyrics and music.

In terms of the context of music art creation, Miao people's ancient songs are not only the inheritance and narrative of ancient culture, but also express the cultural emotions to recollection of ancestors. Therefore, in music creation, the narrative nature of the lyrics of Miao people's ancient songs requires the music melody to meet its needs, forming the characteristics of songs with many words and few tune-patterns. At the same time, Miao people's ancient songs also express the cultural emotions to recollection of ancestors. Therefore, in the melody form, the song also pays attention to the appeal for emotional expression, and forms a song-like pattern with many tune-patterns and words. However, in the process of Chinese translation, due to the variation in vocabulary, number of words and rhyming and other aspect of lyrics in Miao people's language, the Chinese translation text breaks Miao people's requirement for the function of the song, while combining with the lyrics, sentences and music in Miao people's ancient songs. For instance, after being translated into Chinese, a narrative ancient song may be reduced in vocabularies, resulting in vague and general melody in the song and insufficient combination between the lyrics and melodies. For another example, the original Miao people's ancient songs express certain emotions so that the ancient song's form is characterized by few words and many tune patterns, highlights the lyricism of the ancient song's melody; but after being translated into Chinese, the number of words increases; as a result, the aesthetic perception of the emotional melody is damaged. In the process of Chinese translation, the above factors dispel the rhythm and beauty of the songs originally existed in Miao people, resulting in a certain degree of variation in text conversion.

In addition, in terms of music notation, Miao a nation having no written history. The inheritance of its ancient songs is carried out by the face-to-face oral communication among human beings. This way of inheritance makes Miao people's culture live in the process of inheritance. From the perspective of music, such a living state is reflected in the individual improvisational characteristics of the ancient songs' inheritance process. The existence of individual improvisation features makes ancient songs appear different patterns. In the text generation of music notation, most of them use notation or staves. Of course, if recorded properly, no matter which form of notation can objectively reproduce the original and living states of ancient songs. However, at present, whether it adopts notation or stave, or notes as per requirements of the discipline, such as the recording and labeling by using restrictive symbolic terms such as tonality, tone, and bar line, the particularity of the object is ignored so that the individual improvisational features in living heritage disappears, and the text generation becomes a limited and museum-like text.

In general at present, affected by Chinese, many word syntaxes in Miao people's language in China is or is going to be the same as that in Chinese, while some word syntaxes in Miao people's language in foreign countries is prone to be the same as that in English and some of them preserves the grammar forms of Miao people's language or form their specific way of speaking.

#### IV. CULTURAL TRANSLATION IN THE TEXT OF ANCIENT SONGS OF MIAO PEOPLE IN SOUTHERN SICHUAN

##### A. Text in Different Context

"Text" refers to a system of symbols and meaning constructed by written words. In the study of folklore narrative, it refers to the works that have been recorded and converted into texts. In fact, the context of folklore narrative is a non-negligible environment in which it derives its meaning. This environment includes the performance of folk literature, as well as the appreciation of written texts and audio-visual texts. The context is specific and is associated with a specific time, space, and crowd. Text is a symbolic collection of folklore literature works, while context is the way of realization of the symbolic connotation<sup>2</sup>.

The context of inheritance text of Miao people's ancient song is different from its Chinese translation text. Its inheritance is rooted in the local context. The text of Miao people's ancient songs and other texts in the local context form an inter-textual pattern. The text here is a living organism. The process of performance and inheritance is the original form of the existence of oral art text, and is also the basic state of its existence. Apart from the inheritance process, the oral living text may lose its live state.

For outsiders wanting to study a nation's culture from their perspective, one of the important research paths is to get the original text converted into the context of the native language text of the researcher. Thereby, in the process of transforming the text of Miao people's ancient songs into the context of the Chinese translation text, the tone organization structure as the language of cultural representation may undergo a semantic change. Secondly, it seems to be the change in language and organizational structure, but actually is the transformation in cultural logic. Once again, Miao people's ancient songs are not only language art, but also music art. In the process of Chinese translation, this complex factor may cause the change in original form of Miao people's ancient songs. Obviously, music score is the original of a work, but it is not a simple and solidified "thing". To resurrect, it is necessary to join in the performance. There is only one kind of original music in the form of life in addition to in the form of physical form: improvisational playing or singing. However, improvisational performance has considerable limitations, not to mention its non-repeatability, which makes the discussion of the "original" non-sense<sup>3</sup>.

Above all, the context is changed in the process of transforming the text of Miao people's ancient songs into Chinese translation text, so that the realization of the contextual connotation of the symbolic collection of the original folk literature works has also been changed.

##### B. Text of Miao People's Ancient Songs for Different Purpose

As Miao people has no words, Miao people's ancient songs undertake Miao people's cultural functions such as historical memory, emotional expression and cultural inheritance, and spreading its living culture in form of collective and individual inheritance in three different ritual situations. The purpose is to preserve and inherit its history, memory and emotions by their ancient songs.

Strongly affected by Chinese culture, Miao people's language, which once was the first communication means in Miao people's community, tends to be gradually replaced by Chinese. Nowadays, many Miao people can no longer speak but only understand Miao people's language. Miao people's language is a means of expression of Miao people's ancient songs. It can be said that Miao people's ancient songs rely on Miao people's language. If the weakening of Miao people's language as its first means of communication becomes more and more obvious, Miao people's ancient songs will also lose the language carrier for its inheritance<sup>4</sup>. Based on such a historical circumstance and background of the times, transforming the text of Miao people's ancient songs into Chinese translation text is to rescue and protect it as a valuable cultural heritage. However, text is not just a pre-packaging of repeated oral literature, but also the realization of a discourse, and a process of "textualization" that practically displays an oral expression including reproducing it into text<sup>5</sup>. Yet due to the change in contexts in the process of text transformation, the characteristics of living art, and the over narrow understanding of the text, many problems appear in the cultural translation of Miao people's ancient songs which is rescuing and protecting the ancient songs. The generation of the text meaning of oral art, the generation and display of various aesthetic traits, and the completion or realization of its functions, are mainly carried out in the performance process, or rely on the performance process. Only by participating in the actual performance of the oral art text can it be available to have a deeper understanding of the generation, dissemination, meaning and function of the text, and to accurately, meticulously and comprehensively grasp various factors affecting the production of the text and investigate the individuality and inheritance of a particular text and the reasons for its formation. Since performance theory pays attention to the performance process of oral art text, it conducts a comprehensive and meticulous investigation on the context of the performance, and the interaction between and changes in various contextual factors in the performance process. The joint participation of those contextual factors and their interactions make the performance process always have some obvious or subtle changes, so that the text representation becomes a dynamic process and is also featured by new generation and changeability. New generation and changeability depend on

<sup>2</sup> Wang Manli. Text Behind Text: Study of the Context of the Ancient Song of Miao People "Shuo Gu Chang Jin". Master's thesis of Central China Normal University in 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Lu Xiaoling. On the Freedom of Text Interpretation and Creation in Music Performances, Chinese Musicology (Quarterly), No. 2, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> See the Guizhou Rural Culture Survey Report.

<sup>5</sup> Bauman, Richard and Charles L. Briggs. 1990. "Poetics and performance as critical perspectives on language and social life". Annual Review of Anthropology 19.



each other, and the former feature embodies and contains changeability<sup>6</sup>.

## V. CONCLUSION

In history, Miao nationality is a frequently-migrated nation. In order to jointly resist various possible disasters or wars at any time, Miao people often live in clusters and families from generation to generation. The common blood relationship and relatives ties them together closely. The recognition of the nation and the worship of the ancestors make them regard their culture as a valuable wealth. They concern about their cultural communication very much. Although they have no written record, ancient songs can be used for communicating their precious historical memories and their ancestors' great achievements and unite their nation into a closely-dependent community.

Singing ancient songs plays the role of communication and also has the nature of a competition. The inheritance of a live state is passed on in various ways of singing and antiphonal singing between individuals, between individual and collective, and between collectives. The singer's victory is not a personal honor, but an honor of a party and a group. This can be regarded as one of the factors that promote the unceasing inheritance of ancient songs. The ancient songs have been infiltrated into various aspects in people's life such as weddings and funerals; and the majesty of the ancient songs gave people no reason to refuse to learn and accept it. This is because the ancient songs of Miao people are sacred and cannot be ignored and despised. Nowadays, Miao people's society is in the period of social transformation. Affected by external culture and modernity, it is inevitably involved in the tide of modernization and globalization that is happening in all parts of contemporary China. Due to the impact on traditional culture, the diversification of values, the lack of foundations and many other factors, the inheritance of ancient songs encounters certain difficulties and even gets in danger of extinction. However, the older generation has been willing but unable to do something different, while the younger generation is not that interested in it. This case brings unprecedented challenges to Miao people's ancient songs.

In this context, the government has applied it for heritage, taken a variety of measures to protect the inheritors, and contributed to the rescue and protect it both in fund and manpower by means of audio recording, video recording and text recording. "Text" is an open, polysemous and evolving network and is constantly added with new meaning in its development<sup>7</sup>. The productive protection is surely important and feasible in the intangible cultural heritage. However, the unique scenes of Miao people's ancient songs cannot be reflected and restored in such protection. Bourdieu also believes that anthropologists as researchers must place their

research in the process of living cultural practice<sup>8</sup>. Miao people's ancient songs can truly survive only if the realization form of its social functions is transformed and its intrinsic social function is exerted by virtue of new media in modern society. It is true that people are actively seeking suitable ways to transform its social functions, so as to integrate the ancient songs into people's daily life, further give a new life to the precious ethnic cultural heritage, and once again exert its psychological power to call for collective emotions.<sup>9</sup> However, apart from its cultural context, it is worth of continuous consideration and reflection on the extent of primitive social functions that Miao people's ancient songs can own. This situation is not pessimistic, but a warning.

Tyner once said, "Text is no longer a 'cultural relics' passed down in the year of flood, but is in a dynamic process of being constantly innovated and reconstructed; it is no longer a reflection of the tradition and culture as shaped by the collective, or the super-organism cultural matters that can travel around independently, but is rooted in a specific situation; its form, meaning and function are all rooted in the scenes and events defined by the culture; it is no longer a fixed product static and fixed as a matter, but a dynamic process formed for the vivid interaction over and over again and the interweaved negotiation between various factors".<sup>10</sup> Perhaps, it is needed to keep on believing Tyner.

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