Zheng Biao Wu, *The Ancient Oral Classics of the Miao and Historical Analysis (苗族口传经典与史事研究)*, Guizhou University Press, Guiyang (2024), ISBN 978-7-5691-0855-2

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The Miao people have a history of more than a thousand years and represent one of the 55 ethnic minorities in China. According to the latest census, their population is approximately 11.06 million. During significant ceremonial events such as weddings and funerals, Miao ritual masters recite ancient scriptures to perform rituals of worship and blessing while also educating future generations. From the late 19th to the early 21st century, researchers, including Torii Ryuzo ([1903]1936), David C. Graham (1922/1923, 1954), and Zelin Wu and Guojun Chen ([1942]2004), conducted initial collections and analyses of the ceremonial songs of the Miao people in Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan provinces. Since the mid-20th century, efforts to explore, collect and document Miao oral literature have continued, resulting in various published research outcomes at different levels (see Ma and Jin, 2006).

The Ancient Oral Classics of the Miao and Historical Analysis is a compilation of extensive narrative works that explore the reasoning behind and exposition of Miao culture. Recited by ritual masters during important ceremonial events – such as sacrifices, funerals, shamanic rituals and celebrations – these scriptures encompass various categories, including ancestor-worshipping scriptures, funeral scriptures and wedding scriptures. They address themes such as the origin of humanity, the history of the Miao people, and their day-to-day lives and practices. As a form of orally transmitted ethnic folk literature, the ancient oral classics are central to traditional Miao culture and constitute a significant treasure within China's multiethnic literary heritage.

This publication stems from the research project titled 'The collection, compilation, and research of ancient oral classics of Miao in China', led by renowned Miao scholar Feng Liu and supported by the Chinese National Social Science Foundation. Drawing on more than 30 years of research experience in Miao languages and cultures, as well as extensive documentation on Miao oral heritage compiled by generations of scholars, the aim of this research project is to collect, classify and compile the oral heritages of various Miao subgroups in China and around the world, fostering future collaboration in this field. One of the key outcomes of this research project is the publication of the Miao Oral Classics series (Volume 1), which consists of eight books. This series includes titles such as "Songs of Family Genealogy: Oral Tradition of the Mashan Sub-dialect group of Miao," "Ancient Marriage Odes of the Miao in the Upper Duliujiang River Basin," "Reedpipe Instrument Odes of the Miao in Wenshan,"

and "The Ancient Oral Classics of the Miao and Historical Analysis," among others.

In *The Ancient Oral Classics of the Miao and Historical Analysis*, Dr. Zheng Biao Wu emphasises that now is the ideal moment to engage in a comparison of previous documents and texts. By closely examining them, we can gain a deeper understanding of Miao culture, particularly in relation to its history, cosmology and cultural continuity. This exploration contributes to a broader understanding of human history and intangible heritage. To facilitate this understanding of Miao history and culture over time, the book presents a detailed classification along with crucial steps for comparison and insights into both the reasoning and methods employed. This work is structured as an atlas of exploration, presenting a multifaceted, holistic and integrative approach to the intersection under consideration.

Chapter 1, 'Review on the searching, classification, and research of the ancient oral classics of the Miao'[1], provides an overview of the oral heritage of the Miao and its classification within China. The Miao community is composed of numerous subgroups that communicate through three primary dialects: the Eastern, Central and Western dialects. Notably, the Western Dialect encompasses eight subdialects along with various local vernaculars, which adds complexity to the collection and compilation of the ancient oral classics.

In this chapter, the author summarises the documented scripts pertaining to these three linguistic groups of the Miao. Since 1949, various cultural departments and governmental organisations have initiated multiple projects aimed at gathering oral traditions across disciplines such as literature, folklore, mythology, poetry, history and law. The author catalogues 39 books from the Central Dialect group, 14 books or series from the Eastern Dialect group, and another 39 books or series from the Western Dialect group. Among the Western Dialect group, at least eight subdialects have unique versions of oral classics; however, some of these lack thorough collection and classification, as highlighted by the author. Additionally, Chapter 1 briefly reviews earlier studies on Miao oral heritage dating back to the early 20th century. For instance, the author notes that among the compiled ancient scriptures, the *Guiding the way scriptures* associated with funeral rituals hold a prominent place, whereas wedding texts are relatively scarce, and there are even fewer recitational texts related to other rituals.

In Chapter 2, the author categorises existing texts of Miao oral classics into eight distinct types: prayers to gods and goddesses, ancestor worship, exorcism, wedding rituals, mourning practices, respect for natural spirits, vows, and other scripts. In each classification, the author provides a brief introduction to the different types of these scripts. For instance, the *Receiving dragon script* within the Eastern Dialect group does not resemble any prayer script based on its title. The author notes that these potentially misleading titles stem from different historical contexts and interpretations by various scholars, which is one of the challenges currently faced in the study of Miao oral heritage.

Chapters 3 to 7 provide a detailed exploration of related scripts, focusing on key concepts, practitioners, rituals and regions pertinent to the three linguistic groups of the Miao. In documenting these endangered oral classics, the author employed a method that highlights both the text and its context. This approach involves a careful recording of contextual elements, including the performance setting, the interactions between performers and the audience, and the associated ritual procedures. The author also notes that some key concepts of gods, ghosts and spirits have different names and altered pronunciations across the various subgroups of the Miao. By comparing these variations found in different oral scripts, the author contributes significantly to the discussion of cultural changes and cultural continuity. By maintaining this methodological awareness, the author preserved the full essence of these classics as 'culture in performance' and 'living tradition'.

Chapter 4 examines ancestor worship scripts among the different subgroups and reviews the migration history that these scripts reveal. The Miao people, a group that is indigenous to China, migrated from the central region of the Yangtze River to the southwestern area because of numerous failed uprisings and conflicts with the central government throughout various historical periods. Lacking a written language, their oral heritage has emerged as a vital means of preserving traditions, recounting their history of refuge and educating younger generations. Ancestor

1. Translated into English by the reviewer, as were the other chapter titles.

worship-related scripts have emerged as central oral classics within the Miao population, forming a foundation for their historical and cultural memory. During the funeral, the ritual master recites the *Guiding the way scriptures*, which serves to lead the departed soul in retracing its journey through the significant places it inhabited during its lifetime, as well as the locations where its ancestors once lived during migration. This journey culminates in a return to the ancestral homeland, allowing the soul to reunite with its forebears. While the primary function of this scripture is to guide the soul, it fundamentally outlines a migration route. The chanting of this scripture during funerals ensures that Miao communities, even as they are spread across various regions, maintain a collective memory of and yearning for their shared origins, thereby fostering a sense of communal identity that transcends both time and space. The examination of these classical scriptures in the text highlights how oral traditions have become essential for non-literate ethnic groups to preserve their cultural identities, transmit values and cultivate a sense of collective belonging.

Chapters 8 and 9 delve into the history of migration among the Miao, exploring ancient locations, places referenced in Miao oral scripts, and the ancient clan names of the Miao people. Chapter 10 explores the cosmology of the Miao through their oral traditions, highlighting their perspective on the world, the universe, nature, ethics and values of life. The ancient oral classics of the Miao weave together rituals, epics, music, dance and religious practices. They reflect the intricate linguistic artistry of the Miao people and encompass the social norms and belief systems that characterise Miao society.

Throughout the extensive course of historical development, the Miao people have cultivated a rich and vibrant cultural heritage, leaving behind a wealth of documentary classics and diverse oral traditions. *The Ancient Oral Classics of the Miao and Historical Analysis* facilitates a deeper exploration of the oral literary traditions of ethnic minorities, enriching the collection of ethnic and folk oral literature. It holds significant value as part of oral heritage and addresses important gaps in academic research. Furthermore, this book increases public knowledge of intangible cultural heritage, fosters awareness of the importance of protection, and aids in understanding the legacy and dissemination of ethnic and folk oral traditions; therefore, this research has significant practical implications.

Acknowledgements

I extend my sincere gratitude to Madame Fu Haixia and the Pengshan District Library in Sichuan Province, as well as to the Miao Cultural Development Association of Xingwen County, Sichuan Province. I would also like to thank Dr. Zhang Li from Yi Bing College and Su Jiang Yuan for their invaluable assistance in the collection of scripts pertaining to Miao oral heritage.

Funding

This study was supported by National Social Science Fund of China (Grant No. 25BMZ013).

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