



Zhongguo minjian wenyi xiehui zhubian 中国民间文艺协会
主编 (China Folk Arts Society, ed.), *Yalu Wang: Han Miao
duizhao* 亚鲁王—汉苗对照 (*King of Yalu: Han and Miao
bilingual text*)

Beijing: Zhonghua shuju 中华书局, 2011. 763 pages. Map, prefaces,
afterword; appendix. Hardcover, 1680 yuan.

**Zhongguo minjian wenyi xiehui zhubian, ed., Yalu Wang:
Tuban bufen** 亚鲁王—图版部分 (*King of Yalu: Photograph
section*)

Beijing: Zhonghua shuju. 99 pages; color photographs; hardcover
(above price inclusive for the two volumes).

SINCE THE early 1980s there has been an increasing interest in long narrative poems of China's ethnic minority groups. A number of works that were collected in the 1950s—before the turbulence of the 1958–1976 era—were reissued, and collecting (and re-collecting) efforts began in earnest, culminating in the national Three Great Folk Literature Collections (*Sanda jicheng* 三大集成) project that resulted in the collection of millions of folk songs, stories, and proverbs. In the last ten years numerous works have been documented under the aegis of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) projects that have engulfed many areas of rural China, as well as neighboring countries. Besides official ICH projects, many other projects have been conducted, often in the hope of gaining ICH status and the reknown and economic benefits a locale may receive from recognition. In an increasing number of projects at the national and local levels, the social and performance context is being well documented in a shift away from the previously “text-centered” collections of past efforts. These often included little or no information about the process of performance, performers, and audiences, and tended to avoid information and contextual associations that would gain the label of “feudal superstition.”

A very recent project from southwest China is the publication of the first in an intended series of five volumes that documents a long narrative poem associated with the funeral rites of the Miao ethnic group in the Mashan 麻山 area in western Guizhou 贵州 province, located in China's southwest. A bilingual version, the subject of this review, was published in 2011. A companion volume supplies documentary photographs of the social and performative context. In the local Miao dialect the narrative is called *Xind Yax Lus Qim* and other, similar names. So-called “creation epics” from southwest China have been rigorously documented since the 1950s. In recent years, as the context of these traditions has been made more available in the literature, it is increasingly clear that many of these long narratives that detail the origin of the natural environment, life forms, and local human populations are associated with lifecycle rituals, including funerals. In the present case the editors have termed the King of Yalu a “hero epic” (*yingxiong shishi* 英雄史诗), a term usually reserved by Chinese scholars for traditions such as the Tibetan epic of King Gesar, the Kirghiz epic of Manas, and the Mongol epics of Gesar Khan and Janggar.

The overall story line of the eponymous narrative concerns the migrations and battles of the King of Yalu. The text of this first volume is divided into one long chapter made up of seventeen segments and a second chapter of four sections. The first three sections of chapter 1 are in large part a genealogy of King Yalu's lineage and the events leading up to his unusual birth. Split from his father and elder brothers at an early age, he and his mother must fend for themselves, along with a number of followers. Later segments concern a series of battles against various foes, the discovery of and battle over a strategic salt springs, and the establishment of a hegemonic kingdom. His success soon entails strife with two other elder brothers, forcing Yalu Wang to choose between fighting with kin or heading for the hills. The king and his followers leave behind the lowlands and head into the deep mountains, where he seeks to establish a new kingdom. The second chapter describes the setting up of this new power base, the creation of multiple suns and moons (a common motif in southwestern mythologies), the shooting down of what proved to be extra suns, and the trials and tribulations of reconstructing a kingdom that is ultimately the realm of twelve of his sons.

The narrative is sung by ritual specialists known as *donglang* 东郎 as part of the funeral rites in which the soul of the deceased is guided by the chant to the land of the ancestors. In some respects the narrative is similar to stories of the hero Zhyge Alu 支格阿鲁 (or Zhige Along 支格阿龙) that are common among some groups of the Yi 彝 ethnic group in western Guizhou and southern Sichuan 四川. The general process of soul guidance is an ancient one in China and is common in other Miao groups as well as many ethnic minority cultures in southwest China, parts of Southeast Asia, and into parts of northeast India, or what some geographers and historians are now calling "Zomia" (BAMO 2001, 455; BLACKBURN 2010). Other recent works on Miao epic narrative and funeral performance in China include *Hxak Hlieb: Miao zu* (Miao zu guge 苗族史诗/Hmong Oral Epics; WU et al. 2012), a trilingual version of Miao epic narratives from southeast Guizhou, and a theoretically nuanced dissertation on funeral narrative performance from Miao in Hunan 湖南 province (YU 2012).

The published text is a high-quality production that would presently be difficult to publish in an affordable format anywhere except China. The hardcover volumes are long, narrow rectangles that allow for over forty lines per page. Each silver fore-edged page is marked on the outer margins in five line units. The first half of the text volume is the Chinese translation, while the second half is presented in a bilinear format with the Miao text—written in Romanization—underwritten word for word in Chinese characters that follow the Miao word for word. A highly detailed afterword, written by Li Yunbing 李云兵 of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, offers a comprehensive description of the tones, phonology, tonal patterns, and other linguistic aspects of the register of Miao used in the King of Yalu epic utilizing both the International Phonetic Alphabet and a Miao Romanization which was first developed in 1956 based on earlier efforts by missionaries in the pre-1949 era. The inclusion of the Miao text is at once an acknowledgment of the original register of performance and of the local Miao culture. The Miao text, though opaque to most readers, allows, with some effort at decoding (facilitated

by Li Yunbing's afterword and the word-for-word equivalent in Chinese characters), insight into the structure and texture of the original language.

The modern vernacular Chinese version has often been enhanced for clarity and readability in order to make the text aesthetically acceptable to presumed audiences (both local and national) without violating the content. Although Miao and Standard Chinese are both tonal languages (although whether Miao fits into the Sino-Tibetan language family is still under dispute) with some similarities in line structure and many borrowings from Chinese (seemingly some form of southwest Mandarin), the register that has evolved for translating minority epics into Chinese has developed its own implicit conventions. One such convention is the fleshing out of sometimes very spare imagery for the sake of clarity or aesthetic concerns. For instance, in many cases this involves the use of words that are either implied from the context or appear at other points in the text and are added in at appropriate places for clarity or consistency. Thus, the volume presents a version in Miao, with word-for-word equivalents in Standard Chinese for those non-speakers/readers who wish to try and decode the original text, and a vernacular Chinese version that is available for those wishing for a more literary experience. A few lines illustrate the bilinear format, followed by my English translation of the excerpt:

Yax Lus dot lwx beis lul daed sangx,

亚鲁得井生盐来到门,

Yax Lus dot lwx njaed lul daed bied.

亚鲁得井盐来到家。

Yax Lus lom dot baeb jangk mub pus qil,

亚鲁丢得三年不赶集市,

Yax Lus lom dot baeb jangk mub pus nax. (470)

亚鲁丢得三年不赶生意。

After the King of Yalu discovered the salt springs he returned to his door,
After the King of Yalu discovered the salt springs he returned to his home.
For three years the King of Yalu did not go to market,
For three years the King of Yalu did not do business.

In the Standard Chinese version (followed by my English version of the lines), the imagery of the text has been enhanced, with the metonymic “men/*sangx*/door” becoming “*cheng*/city” (or walled city/fortress) and “home” becoming “palace.”

亚鲁王发现生盐井就回城,

亚鲁王寻到盐井后转回宫。

亚鲁王三年没有赶集市,

亚鲁王三年不再做生意。(139)

After the King of Yalu discovered the salt springs he returned to the city,
After the King of Yalu discovered the salt springs he returned to the palace.
For three years the King of Yalu did not go to market,
For three years the King of Yalu did not do business.

The back matter also includes a personal essay by the instigator and main collector of the project, Yang Zhengjiang 扬正将. Yang, a member of the Miao ethnic group, was born in the Mashan area and spent his formative years in rural settings.

After entering Guizhou Nationalities College, an extraordinarily unusual experience in his locale, he developed an interest in local oral tradition. After several years of training he began collecting and translating under the guidance of professors who suggested that Yang become a student of the *donglang* ritual specialists. After years of study, a stint as a local official, and a return to graduate school, Yang had a basic command of the epic register and was able to create written versions in Miao and Chinese based on portions of the narrative sung by five different ritualists—Yang Zaihua 杨再华, Yang Guangdong 杨光东, Chen Xinghua 陈兴华, Huang Laojin 黄老金, and Chen Xiaoman 陈小满, who are introduced in detail in the prefatory sections of the volume. Ultimately, after encouragement from many people, the project was selected as an Intangible Culture Project in 2009, and the work of editing Yang's written version of the epic was delegated to Yu Weiren 余未人, who revised the initial Chinese translation and wrote an appendix on the rhetorical features of the narrative and questions in the process of translation. Both Yang and Yu are adamant in their remarks that the text is a reliable reflection of the constantly shifting tradition, while acknowledging that the text, in Yu's words, should only be regarded as "a version" (757) that will serve as the basis of comparison for later versions. This perception of the epic process as a dynamic, living tradition is in line with current trends in epic studies that stress the idea of creation in the act of performance.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the project is the very subjective personal accounts of the engagement by the collector/translators and editors with the text of *King of Yalu*. Yu Weiren and Yang Zhenjiang both adopt a highly emotional tenor when presenting narratives about the difficult and personal process of collecting and preserving the critically endangered text, demonstrating the Chinese concept of *ganqing* 感情 (affective emotion). Yang states that the collecting and translation work "can be regarded as the story of my growth into adulthood, and maybe my entire youth" (752).

The volume of color photographs that accompanies the narrative is filled with documentary portraits of the *donglang* ritualists, images of the collectors doing fieldwork (including one photo of Yang Zhengjiang in ritual garb), images of the local environment and material culture, and stages of the funeral ritual and narrative performance, including graphic images of the sacrifice of a horse used by the spirit of the deceased on the journey to the land of the dead ancestors. The photographic volume contains a tremendous amount of visual information that is supported by captions. That said, the written introduction to the two-set volume offers only a basic sketch of the local Miao culture and overview of the funeral process. More information on cultural context may be forthcoming in other publications as indicated in the introduction to volume one.

In all, this two-volume set is a significant contribution to our understanding of long narrative poems from multiethnic southwest China and Miao/Hmong narrative traditions in particular. The teamwork and dedication of the various participants is readily evident in the very high quality of the project. We can only await in great expectation the publishing of the ensuing four volumes.

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