

CHINA

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 貴州省民族事務委員會民族語文辦公室 [Guizhou Province Nationalities
 Affairs Council, Nationalities Language Office], editors. *Bangx hxak:*
Miaozu guge gehua 苗族古歌歌花 [Song Flowers: Song Flowers of the
 Ancient Songs of the Miao Nationality]. Jin Dan 今日. [Jenb Dang], collator
 and translator. Guiyang, Guizhou: Guizhou Minzu Chubanshe, 1998.
 144 pages. (In Chinese and Miao)

Bangx hxak is a bilingual compilation of 120 “song flowers” which form part of an epic narrative tradition in southeast Guizhou province in southern China. “Flowers” (*bangx*) is the local Miao (Hmong, Hmu) nationality name for the extra-narrative asides and insertions that epic singers add to their performances of a cycle of epic myths known collectively in Chinese as the Ancient Songs (*Guge*).

Jin Dan, the collator and translator of the present work, previously collected and published a well-known version of the epics entitled *Hxak Hmub: Miaozu shishi* 苗族史詩 ([Hmu Songs: Miao Epic Poems] Beijing: Zhonguo Minjian Wenyi Chubanshe, 1983) with the well-known linguist, Ma Xueliang 馬學良 (BENDER 1988; 1990). (The actual collecting was done in the area around the town of Taijiang in the 1950s, but was not published until the early 1980s due to the chaos of the Cultural Revolution.) The Ma and Jin text was a more scholarly treatment of the cycle than the Tian Bing 田兵 et al. version published in 1979 under the title *Miaozu guge* 苗族古歌 (Ancient Songs of the Miao Nationality; published by Guizhou renmin chubanshe). A bilingual version was also published in the “inner-circulating” press in the 1980s.

The epics are sung antiphonally by pairs of singers (male/male versus female/female) who perform portions at festivals, or during the slack times in the harvest cycle. Pairs of singers may travel to other villages in search of other singers with whom they have impromptu song duels, each side trying to sing the other into a stalemate. Singers sing a portion of an epic, then elaborately ask one or more questions. The opposing team recants and answers the

question(s), adds more content to the epic narrative, then asks another question. Typically rich in rhetorical metaphor, the “flower” songs are used by the singers to tease and distract the other pair, as well as to demonstrate their own skills and knowledge. Audiences, who crowd closely around the singers, may express approval by laughter and comments, much like the public contests in which love songs and other folksongs are performed antiphonally in a number of ethnic groups all over southwest China. The lyric format of the “flowers” is generally five syllables per line with varied rhyme schemes and several local tunes.

Although commonly known as the “twelve songs,” it is unclear exactly how many epics there are. Because of the singing style, in which singers are constantly testing each other’s knowledge, anything like a standard version is impossible to define. Dealing with the flowers makes things even more complicated. The main content of the epics is called the “song bone” (*hsongd hxak*). All of the major translations stress the narrative elements of the “bone,” including only short samples of the “flowers” with which the singers preface each singing engagement, or that they insert between passages of the “bone.” According to Jin Dan, the main reason for not including the “flowers” in these publications is that the context and dynamics of each performance is different (thus generating different “flowers” and different pieces of the “bone”) and just getting at the main narrative thread of each epic is difficult. Moreover, the addition of the “flowers” would make for extremely long translations, up to twice the length.

Common themes in the epic cycle include: the creation of heaven and earth, the creation of the suns and moons from gold and silver, planting the tree seeds, the birth of Butterfly Mother (Mais Bangx), the hatching of her twelve eggs (which includes the protohuman, Jangx Vangb), the plowing of the earth by Jangx Vangb, the Great Flood, the incestuous marriage between Jangx Vangb and his sister (after they escape in a floating calabash), the origin of the local ethnic groups from the resultant ball of flesh, ancient migrations into the region, and so on.

To offer scholars (and other readers) clearer insight into the nature of the oral terrain of the epics, Jin has produced this sampling of 120 flower passages that can stand on their own as folk poems. The work also includes two introductions, one in Miao (the romanization for a major Southeast Guizhou dialect) and the other, somewhat longer one, in Mandarin. Of importance are the last sixteen pages, which are an illustrative portion of transcription in which “flowers” and “bone” are mixed. Notes explaining obscure terms are in an appendix. In all, *Bangx hxak* is a well-crafted and useful work that adds greatly to the scholarship on this local tradition of oral art.

I have translated a short sample to illustrate the mixing of the “flowers” (which share many features with local traditions of antiphonal love songs, greeting songs, etc.) and the “bone” passages. The references to the ancient grandparents concern the theme of migration down the rivers from western Hunan province into southeast Guizhou. The title of this selection is “Sample of Song Bone and Song Flowers” (*Hsongd Hxak Bangx Hxak Ait Gid Diot*) and appears in side-by-side Miao and Mandarin texts (124–25).

In the sample passage, the singers have just decided to sing about the ancient migrations down the rivers and are trading standard challenges and disclaimers about the knowledge of the epics and singing ability. The exchange picks up with the pair of “guest” singers (from another village), to whom the “hosts” (a pair of local singers) reply. The hosts sing a “flower,” then recant the question (asked previously in the exchange), answer it, then continue to move the epic forward. The theme is the rationale for the ancient ancestors’ move westwards from the overcrowded east. As when they sing antiphonal love songs, epic singers may call the other pair “brother” or “sister,” though the terms mean something more like male or female friends (or lovers). The text in normal type is the “bone,” while that in italics is “flowers.”

GUEST SINGERS

In the ancient origins in the past,
 Where were the homes of the ancestors?
 We two can't say for sure,
 We just don't understand this passage.
 It's piled so deep on the wide riverbank,
 We invite you to dig it up yourselves,
 Bring it out for everyone to see,
 As it's the only part we want.

HOST SINGERS

*The trees on Thunder Peak Hill are many,
 The waves are high on Little River
 These lips are really clever,
 Walking from village to village looking for songs.
 As if a rooster went crowing in many villages,
 As if an oxen went to fight on many fairgrounds,
 Endless villages and hamlets would be taken in.
 You trick sister's heart into floating away,
 Unaware, her spirit flies to the hills,
 all day spent missing brother's clever words.*

Come see the five pairs of parents—
 The six pairs of ancestors moving west.
 In those unknown, primal times,
 Where did those ancestors live?
 The ancestors lived at *eb zenx dlangl*,
 Where the waves meet the sky
 The earth was flat as a drying mat,
 Like the cover of a great granary.
 If birds are too many, a nest won't hold them,
 If people are too many, there's no place to live.
 Narrow places were like horse pens,
 Steep places were like the rim of a kettle.
 Feet stomped feet when using the rice treadle,
 Stoves were next to stoves when cooking.
 Houses were built like bee hives;
 Crammed together, pots, urns,
 And steam kettles were cracked.

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