

Poetry and Music: Inheritance and Innovation in Music Literature

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ABSTRACT

Taking Yi music and literature as the research object, this paper comprehensively utilizes the theories of ethnomusicology and literary anthropology to examine the historical origin, cultural roots and epochal transformation of the interpenetration and symbiosis of Yi music and literature. Rooted in the epic and ritual traditions of creation, Yi music and literature has constructed an oral poetics system represented by Le'etei and Meige in the dual dimension of "geo-relationship"; its phonetic structure realizes the musical transformation of literature through rhythmic layering, tone leveling and rhyme pattern; contemporary Yi musicians modernize the traditional elements, Contemporary Yi musicians, through the triple path of modernization of traditional elements, melodization of poetry and ritualization of the stage, have promoted Song of the Yi People, Let Us Return, and The Poetry of Jidi Majia and other works have become the new carrier of national cultural identity. The essence of Yi music and literature is "poetry and music symbiosis", and its development always follows the symbiosis mechanism of "tradition as body, innovation as use".

KEYWORDS

Poetry and music symbiosis; music literature; Inheritance and innovation; Future prospects

1 Historical origins: the multidimensional evolution from creation epics to ritual music

The music and literature of the Yi people has a long history, with rich musical forms, such as mountain songs, love songs, narrative songs, etc., which have formed a unique style over the long years. The essence of music and literature is "poetry and music symbiosis", whose origin can be traced back to the cultural stage when the primitive witch-songs and labor horns were not yet separated from each other. In the creation myths of the Yi, music and literature share the function of the historical memory of the ethnic groups through oral ceremonial performances: Le'etei (Yi Region, Sichuan) records the birth of the twelve sons of the snow tribe in the form of raps, and its pentatonic melody, together with the visualization of the lyrics such as "Ice makes bones, snow makes muscles", builds up a symbolic system for the origins of living things; Meige (Chuxiong, Yunnan Province) adopts the four-tone mode of "la-do-re-mi" to sing the myth of the creation of heaven and earth, and the narrative of "Geci Heavenly God cast down nine golden spheres" strengthens the sacred atmosphere through a fixed rhythmic pattern. The word "chuopꞌꞌ (cheers)" at the end of each section of the song guides the collective cup-raising and drinking ceremony, realizing the integration of literature-music-social behavior; Chamu (Yi Region, Southern Yunnan) divides the history of human evolution into the three generations of one-eyed, straight-eyed, and cross-eyed people, and its pentatonic pattern Its five-note pattern "do-re-mi-sol-la", combined with the flood myth, allows for the auralization of moral admonitions. The ritual scene of raising the cup and drinking wine is the core field of musical literature transmission. According to the Yi-script classic *The Deluge and Dumu*, the founder, Ancestor Apu Dumu, at the sacred Baigu Kaijia Singing Grounds, won matrimony with three celestial maidens through three sacred rounds of ritual dancing: the spiraling cosmic sway, the earth-mapping cardinal-cross steps, and the primal chaos-whirling vortex—all interwoven with extemporaneous dueling verses, thus creating the marriage tradition of "marriage by song" among the Yi people. Three major types of musical literature have been derived from this ritualized performance:

1.1 Marriage songs

such as Crying Marriage Song, Amonire, Ayi Azhi, etc., which are long lyrical poems accusing of arranged marriages, and women's sense of resistance conveyed through "heart-breaking singing"; not only is it an accusation of the irrational marriage system under the patriarchal system, but it is also a profound expression of the worry about the hometown and the relatives, as well as about the unfamiliar environment in the future. These songs are an important way to understand the Yi marriage system and the fate of women, with their sincere emotions and profound connotations.

1.2 Funeral songs

such as the A Gu Ho, Cuge, Wazile, etc., in which the history of ancestral migrations and the life experiences of the deceased are recounted in the funeral, and the chanting tone and spiraling melody of the Wise Man Bimo symbolize the path of souls returning to their ancestral realms; the funeral songs, through poetic language and pathos in tone, remember the life of the deceased, and tell of the hard work of the deceased during their lifetime, as well as of the

retention of the deceased. This custom not only reflects the Yi people's respect for the dead, but also strengthens the unity and cohesion of the community.

1.3 Songs of labor

the song of climbing the mountain, the song of ploughing, the song of buckwheat beating, etc. are highly improvisational, and the lyrics are mostly in the format of "three lines in seven" (e.g., "The sheep on the slope/have entered the pen/my poem has not returned"), echoing the rhythm of labor. Singing labor songs during labor has the effect of relieving the hard work and fatigue during labor, and it can also increase the cohesion between people.

Cultural Function: This kind of music and literature is actually a "canon of sound", and in the unwritten era, in addition to the functions of historical record, ethical education and community identity, it also has the functions of enhancing people's aesthetic ability, educational value, physical and mental recreation, and cultural inheritance. Its inheritance relies on the "oral transmission" of the Bi Mo and the singer, forming a living system of "transmitting the text through sound and carrying the Tao through music".

2 Cultural roots: the poetics of music in the double dimension of geographical affinity

The aesthetic qualities of Yi music and literature are deeply rooted in the special geographical and humanistic structure of the Liangshan Mountains. The rugged mountainous terrain creates high and low contrasts in musical style: the climbing tune has a wide range (often exceeding 12 degrees), simulating the ups and downs of the terrain, while the mourning tune uses dense guttural trills, a metaphor for the hardships of survival. This geo-stigma is further reflected in:

2.1 Mechanisms for the transformation of musicality in literature

Taking Song of the Yi People by Jidi Majia as an example, its lyrics achieve poetico-musical fusion through a tripartite prosodic architecture:

Rhythmic Stratification: the main song adopts a 2-3-3-2 break (e.g. "I have// one thousand times// watched over// the sky"), and the chorus shifts to a 5-5/5-8 structure (e.g. "From Mt. Daliang// to the banks of the Jinsha River"), creating a sense of chanting;

Tonal Contour Dynamics: Lines launch with oblique-tone syllables ("I", "that"), intensify through dense oblique clusters mid-verse ("longing to see eagles"), and resolve via oblique-level alternation at line ends ("eagles-mountains", "posterity-future");

Rhyme Matrix: Alternating Yanqian rhyme (-an) with Huailai rhyme (-ai) ("mountains-basin-plain-sweet-closing eyes"/ "posterity-future-love"), where sonorous codas amplify mnemonic potency.

2.2 Manifestation of Literary Rhetoric in Music

Instrumental music of the Yi ethnic group often simulates literary imagery: the Yunnan jew's harp piece Going to Market imitates the sound of people in the marketplace with dense overtones; and the moon-lute recital Melodies of a Yi Village symbolizes the smoke from the cooker with open-string resonances. More crucially, musical structures embody literariness:

Tripartite Narrative Structure: Song of the Yi People was originally a two-part poem, and the composer inserted the Yi liner notes "Oh... Aya Ahiya" to form the ABA' structure, making the "Song of the Eagle Tribe" a unique piece of music. The theme of "posterity of eagles" is sublimated in the reproduction section.

Rhetorical Reinforcement: The chorus repeats "mother's milk is as sweet as honey" twice, which is analogous to the rhetorical rhetoric of literary prose and deepens the nostalgia.

Table 1 Types and functions of yi traditional ceremonial music

Type of ceremony	Repertoire	Literary themes	Musical characteristics	Capability
marriage ceremony	Crying Marriage Song, Amonire	Women's struggle for destiny	ritual falsetto glissando, free rhythm	emotional outpouring
funeral ceremony	A Gu Ho, Cuge	worship of ancestral spirits	gradual stepwise motion, ostinato bass	spirit guide
festival ceremony	Doluohe, Kushiniuniuhe	collective memory	call-response with ancestral dialogue, poly-rhythm	cultural identity

The kinship network, on the other hand, guarantees the purity of the musical literature. The Yi music heritage unfolds along three paths:

2.2.1 Inheritance by blood

parents teach their children folk songs orally, for example, the "cicada-like falsetto" technique in Butuo Alpine Songs needs to be trained from a young age;

2.2.2 Inheritance by marriage

bridal unions transport melodies from Settlement A to B, leading to the "cross-folk song fusion across micro-regional clusters"; mutual affinal exchange promotes the unity of neighbors and regional harmony.

2.2.3 Inheritance by teacher

Bimo ritualists and song guilds forge a lifelong fatherhood bond,, which enables the preservation of such educational classics as Maxmuteiyi (Maxims of Divine Teachings) and Erbierji (Proverbs of Ancient Wisdom).

3 Contemporary expression: modern transformation of traditional elements and reconstruction of identity

Since the 1990s, Yi music and literature have been transformed creatively in the tension between globalization and localization. Musicians represented by the Mountain Eagle Group and the Yi People's Manufacturing Group have grafted epic motifs, ritual sounds and popular music to form a new style that emphasizes both a sense of history and a sense of modernity. There are three paths of transformation:

3.1 Recoding of musical literary symbols

Mountain Eagle Band's Song of the Yi People: Transforms the totemic eagle imagery from Jidi Majia's poetry into a musical motive—prelude simulates eagles' cries through Jew's harp, while chorus deploys perfect-fourth leaps signifying flight, granting tangible sound to the literary declaration "I am the posterity of eagles". Yi People's Crying Marriage Song: Samples traditional bridal lament vocalism, utilizing electronic reverberation for spatial resonance to metaphorically extend female destiny into modern society.

3.2 Cross-border experiments with poetic and musical symbioses

The 2021 album The Poetry of Gidi Makar marks the avant-garde exploration of Yi music and literature:

Sound Installation: The juxtaposition of rattles, chords and French trumpets in Folk Song echoes the surreal imagery of "drunkenness with chords" in the poems;

Language Game: Yi Soul inserts Yi-language glottal scat singing to mimic the secret language of the ancestors, practicing the Yi proverb "Poetry is the salt of the earth";

Ritual scene reconstruction: Zhizhu Temple Concert reconstructs the stage with a fire pit and an altar, so that the chanting of the poem Ancestors becomes a "sound ritual" that connects the gods and the human beings.

3.3 Modern representations of geographic affinities

Centered on "Return to Zizipuwu (Ancestral Homeland)", Let Us Return employs a call-response literary architecture: "Tell me who yet softly calls / That voice drifting through millennia." Musically, this manifests through female vocal hums invoking male narration, and the polyphonic technique is a metaphor for ethnic dispersion and root-seeking. At contemporary festivals like Torch Music Festival, traditional antiphonal singing transforms into performative suites, making the pieces like Jumping Moon Tune and Left Foot Dance Tune cultural symbols shared by multiple ethnic groups.

Table 2 Representative groups and works of the modern transformation of Yi Music and literature

Groups/Musician	Representative Work	Traditional Element Transformation	Literary Expression
Mountain Eagle Band	Song of the Yi People Lady of the	Jew's harps-simulated eagle cries + perfect-fourth melodic leaps	Totemic imagery from Jidi Majia's poetry
Yi People's Manufacturing Band	Thatched Hut Poetry of Jidi Majia	Bridal lament sampling + electronic reverberation Yi-language glottal scat singing	Fate of matrilineal transmission, Ancestral cryptography
Sun Tribe Band	Let Us Return	Female vocables instigating male narration	Call-response architecture of root-seeking narratives

4 Innovative practices: strategies for the creation and dissemination of music literature in contemporary times

The innovative practice of contemporary Yi music and literature is reflected in the deconstruction and reorganization of traditional elements. Taking the songwriting of Gideon's poetry as a source of lyrics as an example, the core strategies include:

4.1 Melodic reinvention of poetry

Jike Qubu, composer of *Song of the Yi People*, emphasizes that "melodies must align with Yi cognitive schemata." The verse employs the Liangshan folk tetratonic scale (la-do-re-mi), yet substitutes the traditional moon-lute with piano accompaniment. The chorus section—"Oh... Aya Ahiya"—directly transplants Bimo cantillation tones, secularizing sacred acoustics. This feelingful iconicity enables modern audiences to decode cultural DNA through melodic syntax .

4.2 Transmedia narratives of literary motifs

The music video for *Let Us Return* employs the black/red/yellow ternary cosmology to saturate each frame. Spanning shots synchronize with lyrics "from Mt. Daliang to the bank of Golden-Sands River," geographically overlaying landscapes with the metaphor "Mother's milk like honey," thus transmuting homesickness into neurosynesthetic catharsis. This articulation embodies what McDowell theorizes as Expressive Contact Zones, forging dialogic bridges between traditional aesthetics and contemporary sensibilities.

4.3 Cultural restoration of stage rituals

Groups like the Chuyin Culture & Arts Troupe transpose nuptial and Torch Festival rituals onto theatrical stages. In performances of *Crying Marriage Song*, the bride dances solo under raking light while draped in a wool mantle, as elder chorales sits and sings Amonire—embodying literary texts through corporeal poetics. Such praxis proves that the vitality of musical literature lies in the "contemporary restoration of rituals" - when the stage becomes a new kind of singing venue, the tradition lives on.

5 Conclusion: the living legacy of the poetry and music symbiosis

The essence of Yi music and literature is "poetry and music symbiosis" rooted in mountain civilization. it originates from ritual performances of creation epics, evolving within geo-kinship networks into genres like marriage songs, funeral songs, and labor songs; its cultural roots are reflected in the transformation of the musicality of literature (phonetic structure, prose narrative) and the literary rhetoric in music (imagery simulation, tripartite form); its contemporary transformation takes the paths of symbolic rearranging, poetic and musical experimentation, and stage restoration, making *Songs of the Yi* and *Poetry of Jidi Majia* the best of its kind.

The modern significance of Yi music and literature lies in the fact that it is not only the "gene pool" of traditional culture - preserving the collective memory of the ethnic groups through sound and voice; but also the "laboratory" for innovation and transformation. - proving in the context of globalization that "the more national, the more global". When the songs made by Yi people echo in the hall of Zhizhu Temple, what we hear is not only the secret language of our ancestors, but also the wisdom of a nation that uses poetry and music as a boat to traverse the flood of time.

About the Author

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