



6-1-2008

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He, Hongyi and Kecskes, Lily (2008) "Religion, Rituals and Rhymes: A Preliminary Study of the Newly Acquired 241 Yao Documents in the Collection of the Asian Division of the Library of Congress," *Journal of East Asian Libraries*: Vol. 2008 : No. 145 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jeal/vol2008/iss145/14>

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RELIGION, RITUALS AND RHYMES:

A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF THE NEWLY ACQUIRED 241 YAO DOCUMENTS IN
THE COLLECTION OF THE ASIAN DIVISION OF THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS¹

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During the past three years on separate occasions the Asian Division of the Library of Congress acquired a total of 241 documents of the Yao minority, a transnational minority living mainly in China. These documents represent a wide spectrum of subjects and genres, including official documents, genealogy, religious scriptures and ritual texts, songbooks, medicinal recipes and practices with exhortative health tips, family and clan contracts and accounts. Written in Chinese script, some texts are in verse and others are written as prayers and chants. The manuscripts are hand-written books on hand-made paper, stitched together with spills and cords, but there are also richly illustrated scrolls, which are of particular value. Purchased from a London book dealer, the library's Yao manuscripts have significantly enriched and complemented its already extensive collections of Chinese minority studies, such as the Naxi collection.² Most documents are dated from the Qing dynasty up till the present day, with imperial reign names or the Republic designation, such as Jiaqing (1796-1820), Daoguang (1821-1850), Xianfeng (1851-1861), Tongzhi (1862-1874), and Xuantong (1909-1911) and *min guo*. The earliest is a ritual text detailing funereal sacrificial ceremony, entitled *Sang jia shi* 喪家式 dated the 19th year of Qianlong reign (1754) and the latest, an untitled songbook, from 1986.

The Asian Division was fortunate in obtaining the expertise and assistance of He Hongyi, professor of Chinese minority studies, of South-Central University for Minorities, Wuhan, China, who spent a year in 2007 in the United States. Prior to her work at the Library, Prof. He traveled to the Great Yao Mountain (大瑶山), Jinxiu Yao Autonomous County (金秀瑶族自治县) in Guangxi Province and visited several settlements in Nandan County (南丹县), where the "White-Trouser Yao," (白裤瑶), a Yao subgroup, live. She assembled extensive materials, including live music, and documented and recorded the life and social customs of the Yao people. Prof. He also met with Chinese researchers at Guangxi Institute of Yao Studies, Guangxi Provincial Museum, Guangxi Traditional Book Publisher, and Guangxi Research Institute of Nationalities. Without her expertise it would not have been possible to complete the processing of these documents.

There has been extensive research on Chinese minorities, including the Yao people, in recent years, especially since the 1980s. Noteworthy are the 3-volume history of the Yao people, *Yao zu tong shi* 瑶族通史 published in 2007; a series, entitled *Yao xue cong shu* 瑶学丛书 [Yao studies series], launched in 2005 with the first work in the series by Yu Shijie 玉时階, *Yao zu wen hua bian qian* 瑶族文化變遷 [Cultural changes of the Yao people]; and another series entitled *Wai guo xue zhe Zhongguo min zu yan jiu wen ku* 外國學者中國民族研究文庫 [Series of publications of foreign scholars on Chinese nationalities], containing translations of international scholars' works on the subject, among them, Takemura Takuji's (竹村卓二) *Yao zu de li shi he wen hua* 瑶族的歷史和文化: 華南, 東南亞山地民族的社會人類學研究 = The Yao people's history and culture: social anthropological research on mountainous region nationalities in South China and Southeast Asia. Zhang Youjun 张有隽 in his 1997 article³ estimated that there are three to four

² <http://international.loc.gov/intldl/naxihtml/naxihome.html>

³ "Yao zu yan jiu guo ji hua shu lun 瑶族研究国际化述论," Zhang Youjun 张有隽, in 广西民族学院学报 (哲学社会科学版) = *Journal of Guangxi University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Science)*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Jan. 1997), p. 73.

hundred researchers in China and over the world from various research institutions, including one in the US, engaging in the studies of the Yao people, international exchanges, meetings and research cooperation. Many of them have also taken field trips, focusing on various aspects of the Yao people's life, such as folk customs, costumes, languages, educational systems, migration patterns, and/or on subgroups in certain Chinese provinces or Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand, Vietnam and Laos, or other parts of the world. It is hoped that the documents in the Library of Congress will provide more sources in the Yao studies and aid in further unraveling the mystery of the Yao identity, religion, and social customs.

As mentioned above, the Yao people are a multinational minority. The Yao in China live mainly in six provinces, Guangxi, Guangdong, Yunnan, Hunan, Jiangxi and Guizhou, scattered in 134 counties,, with a population of about 2,630,000, as recorded in the 2000 Census. There are about 600,000 Yao living in other parts of the world, mostly in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar/Burma, Canada, France, Switzerland, New Zealand, and Brazil. The estimated number of the Yao people who settled in the United States is 37,000, living mostly in California, Oregon, and Washington. Most of them may have been those who left Guangdong, entered Vietnam and Laos around the 1850s, then crossed the Mekong River to the Thai refugee camps, where they waited for a few years before entering the US. Closely associated with mountains, the Yao people were also called Mountain-crossing Yao, who relied on and lived off what the mountains offered. Around the time of the Han through Tang dynasties the Yao migrated from the middle and lower Yangtze River valley to the mountainous areas of South China. By the end of the Ming and the beginning of the Qing dynasty groups of the Yao began to move further southward, first to Guangdong, Guangxi and Yunnan provinces, then to Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma. With natural and man-made calamities, especially the chaos of war during the 70s and 80s of the twentieth century, a large number of the Yao people who had migrated to Vietnam and Laos crossed the border to Thailand, and later as refugees, moved further and settled down in the other continents, such as America and Europe. The present-day Yao no longer migrate as they had characteristically done over the centuries. The historical backgrounds of the Yao and their prolonged isolation and poverty have split them into various subgroups, resulting in variant social customs and lifestyles, as well as variant languages. This helps explain the complexity in Yao studies.

The library's 241 Yao documents are organized in six groups: religious and ritual texts (經書), 'official' documents (文書), songbooks (歌書), children's primers (漢文啟蒙教科書), calendars, books on marriage and divination (曆書, 婚書, 占書), and the remaining documents without titles (無題). Among them the largest group is that of religious and ritual texts, which includes subgroups, such as ritual texts (清醮, 清醮秘語), funeral chants (喃靈科), Daoist initiation texts (度戒科), etc. Each book bears on its cover page the name of the person who commissioned the book, as well as that of the scribe.

Noteworthy among the first group of approximately sixty types of religious and ritual scripts are Daoist scriptures, such as *Tai shang dong xuan ling bao jing juan* 太上洞玄靈寶經卷, and *Zun dian jing* 尊典經 [Texts on venerable classics], and ritual texts, such as *Bai jie mi yu* 百解秘語 [Secret directions for the redemption of the dead], *An long ke--ke* means liturgical text-- 安龍科 [Recitation to calm the earth dragon divinity], *Chao du shu* 超度書 [Book on delivering the soul], and *Sang chang ke* 喪場科 [Text on funeral ceremonies], with rhymed chants, written in 1813, recording the ritual of burial by cremation, an ancient Yao custom, which is still being practiced today. There are also ritual texts on *du jie* 度戒, the Daoist priesthood initiation, most representative of Daoist influences among the Yao people. Such books often list nine, sometimes ten, commandments, including filial piety and refraining from killing, lust, stealing, greed, etc. As witnessed by Prof. He on her field trip, the ceremonies involved, such as Cross the fire sea 過火海 and Climb the knife mountain 上刀山, are often used to signify passing to manhood of the young males.

Considered to be more valuable in the second group are the four long color illustrated scrolls in the group of 'Official' documents 文書, with the longest measuring 521.7 x 33.5 cm., all handwritten and hand-painted on hand-made paper, in Chinese script. These documents are commonly known as '*Guo shan bang* 過山榜' [Posted notice for crossing the mountains], or '*Ping huang juan die* 評皇卷牒' [King Ping's charter],

which were passed from generation to generation and were issued in numerous editions with copies made of each edition, which can still be found in Yao households. Such a document, often illustrated, and sometimes with a map, contains three basic parts. First it lists the twelve Yao clan names. Secondly it recounts, in various versions, the myth of the Dog King Panhu 盤瓠, whose name was already recorded in *Hou Han shu* 后漢書, *Sui shu* 隋書 and *Shui jing zhu* 水經注 and who is believed by the Yao people to be the creator of heaven and earth and their ancestor, who killed the enemy of the emperor and was awarded the title of Pan wang 盤王, the hand of one of the emperor's daughters, with whom he had twelve children. He was thus the originator of the twelve Yao clans and of many privileges for his descendants. Thirdly, the document is a proclamation of Panhu's merits and an imperial grant of entitlements of certain privileges to Panhu's descendants, with imperial edicts, lists of rights and obligations of the Yao people, such as exemption of corvée labor and taxes, freedom to worship Panhu, to migrate, to reclaim wasteland and cultivate, and follow their own customs and rites. Some of the more recent documents have been used as the basis of some Yao communities petitions to the Chinese government for protection of their rights. The documents provide a vivid illustration of the cultural, economic and social aspects of the Yao people's history, origin, as well as the legends of their heroic deeds. Most researchers consider the earliest such document originated in 628 (the 2nd year of Zhenguan of the Tang emperor Taizhong). Later editions were mostly handwritten and vary in depiction and form in different regions. However, a recent discovery has been recorded of a rare woodblock printed *Guo shan bang* in Lanshan County, Hunan Province.⁴

Singing is a favorite activity of the Yao people, as the saying goes, the Yao "sing everywhere, sing for everything, and everyone sings" (無處不歌, 無事不歌, 無人不歌). Among the songbooks are *Pan wang ge* 盤王歌 [Song of King Pan], *Yu wang ge* 漁網歌 [Song of fishing net], and *Zao tian di ge* 造天地歌 [Song of the creation of Heaven and Earth].

The most interesting book in the group of Calendars, books on marriage and divination, is *Liang yuan fa* 良缘法 [Directions to a good marriage], containing big and small secrets to a good marriage, a book given by a Li Daoyu to his relation Li Daoxian around 1830.

The most often used moral lessons the Yao people teach their children relate to filial piety and obedience. Among the children's primers are books called *Po li shu* 破理書 [Book of uncovered truth], a shortened title of *Tian xia wen zhang po li ming* 天下文章破理明 [Gaining insights through writings of the world], which teaches how one should conduct oneself and what the moral codes are. Another group of books is called *Jiu jing shu* 九經書 [Book of nine classics], written in popular text, borrowing Confucian teachings of benevolence and moral lessons, commonly called primers of morality. They often end with emphasis on the importance of reading and the role of teaching the next generation, such as "Books are treasures of the world, which will be in eternal peace." Also belonging to the group is *Pangu shu* 盤古書 [Book on Pangu] in song form, which begins with the story of Pan wang's creation of heaven and earth. These primers are similar, both in content and format, to the textbooks used to teach the children of the Yao immigrants in Toulouse, France, which presumably originated in China, and are used in Southeast Asia.⁵

There are other manuscripts of interest and value, such as traditional medicinal recipes. As is well known, Yao herbal medicine has a long history, which can be traced back to the Song dynasty (960-1279). However, early Yao medicine was often a combination of witchcraft and healing, which required sorcerers to chase away ghosts and tell fortunes before providing cures. A shamanistic script records a veterinary folk recipe

⁴ "Qing dai Lanshan Yao zu "Ping huang juan die" mu ke yin ban de chu bu kao zheng yu yan jiu 清代蓝山瑶族《评皇卷牒》木刻印版的初步考证与研究," Zhao Rongxue 赵荣学, in *Hunan ke ji xueyuan xue bao* 湖南科技学院学报, v. 28, no. 3 (Mar. 2007), p. 84-88.

⁵ According to Li Gaobao, President of the Yao Association of France, these books were written in Chinese script by teachers from Yunnan Province, and were used as textbooks in Yao schools in Laos, Thailand, and later also in France.

with a list of names of herbs. *Ma feng mi yu* 痲瘋秘語 [Secret directions to the appeasement of souls of the lepers], was written in 1905, commissioned by a master Deng for his disciple Deng Yunyan. These documents possess great research value in the study of traditional medicine and the relationship between witchcraft and folk medicine.

Recently Professor He's power point has been translated and edited to be included in the Asian Division's webpage. The author and Prof. He have also prepared to launch a project to compile a Chinese/English catalogue of the Yao collection with annotations to each document.

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