

## **Butterflies and Dragon-Eagles: Processing Epics from Southwest China**

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### **Introduction**

Since the 1950s large-scale government-sponsored folk literature collection projects have been carried out in China.<sup>1</sup> These include the massive Chinese Folksong Compendium (*Zhongguo geyao jicheng*), a nationwide project underway since the late 1980s to collect folksongs and oral art (Feng 1999:18-19). By the year 2002, this and related projects had resulted in the collection and publication of approximately three million folk songs, nearly two million folk stories, and a whopping seven million proverbs, as well as hundreds of local dramas, prosimetric narratives, and epics (WIPO 2002:2). For the last several years, projects large and small have been underway to document so-called “intangible culture”—a whole array of oral and performing arts traditions—perceived to be threatened by modernization and globalization. Participants in this colossal effort include individuals and groups at major think tanks such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing University, Beijing Normal University, Beijing Central Nationalities University, and the Institute of Intangible Culture at Sun Yat-sen University in Guangzhou. Many others are associated with provincial, prefectural, or county-level research or cultural institutes, publishing houses, and community organizations. And there are also unknown numbers of non-professional researchers and local tradition-bearers in local communities who carry out significant—though often unrecognized—documentation, research, and preservation of local folk culture.

Many such documentation efforts are being carried out in southwest China, an ecologically diverse area in the foothills of the Himalayas that is intersected by several of Asia’s largest rivers. It is also the most ethnically diverse area of China. China has 56 official ethnic groups, the largest of which consists of the Han people who make up over 90% of the population. Of the 55 ethnic minority groups, over 30 live in south and southwest China—many in Guizhou, Yunnan, and Sichuan provinces. Most of these groups have many subgroups that go by various local names and in some cases have populations that spread across international borders.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a revised version of the Parry/Lord Lecture that the author presented on February 10, 2011, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition at the University of Missouri, Columbia.

In this essay, I wish to explore how local individuals of two of these ethnic minority groups in southwest China are involved in what I call “processing” epic narratives of their respective ethnic groups. These individuals may wear more than one hat and include tradition-bearers who know the local lore, as well as poets, scholars, and government researchers in various local and regional organizations. The “butterflies” and “dragon-eagles” in my title indicate some of the varied content of the epic traditions. Southeast Guizhou province is home to many people of the Miao ethnic group (Miaozu), also known as Hmong and by many local names. One of their myth-epics is about a butterfly known as Mai Bang, or “Butterfly Mother,” who plays a major role in the creation of certain major and minor beings in Miao epic and ritual lore. After she forms in the heartwood of a sweet gum tree, she is released by moth grubs and a woodpecker, then grows into a beautiful butterfly. One day while flying down a river, foam from the tips of the waves splash her body. She soon discovers she is pregnant and later lays twelve precious eggs in a nest girded by mountains. The eggs eventually hatch out into various beings, including a dragon, a tiger, the Thunder God, and Jang Vang, the first ancestor of humans in our age—who after a great flood marries the only available woman, his sister. But this is the kind of thing that happens in myth-worlds.

The “dragon-eagles,” on the other hand, are part of a creation epic from the Nuosu people, a subgroup of the large and varied Yi ethnic group (Yizu). One day a woman named Pumo Hniyyr is weaving under the eaves of her house. She suddenly spies several eagles and dragon-eagles spiraling high above. When she goes out to play with them, she is splattered by three drops of blood that fall from the sky. She soon finds out she is pregnant. Not long afterward, she gives birth to an unusual child who refuses to drink his mother’s milk, sleep next to her in bed, or wear the clothes she made for him. Because of this “perverse behavior” she places him in a cave where he is raised by dragons. This is the origin of the culture-hero Zhyge Alu, who, among other things, saves the earth from an early instance of global warming by shooting down the extra suns and moons in the sky.

My title also contains the word “processing”—and by that I mean the process through which traditional texts are performed and received by local audiences. It also refers to the process by which some versions of stories are recorded, transcribed, translated, edited, and released in print or electronic format—a process the late Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko called the “folklore process.”<sup>2</sup> The term “processing” also carries, at least for me, a sense of the sorts of compromises and distortions inherent in the manner in which the recorded texts are preserved and communicated to new audiences. Just as natural foods or textiles are processed and marketed into products for consumption by target audiences, so too are items of oral literature. We now have genetically engineered corn, soybeans, and hemp. A box of “heart healthy” oat cereal may contain a whole list of additives, supplements, and fillers—sometimes mimicking original, truly wholesome products and directed at consumers open to healthy, natural, and eco-friendly foods. But we increasingly know it is necessary to read the fine print—just as Lauri Honko reminded us

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<sup>2</sup> See Honko 2010:15-35 for an in-depth discussion of the process of performance and textualization of oral epics. The term “processing” also appears in the title of an edited volume of folklore studies entitled *Folklore Processed: In Honour of Lauri Honko on His 60th Birthday 6th March 1992* (Kvideland 2000).

that it is necessary to understand the process of the “processing” of oral texts that occurs behind the book or website banner.<sup>3</sup>

So what about China? What is the background of their collecting and processing efforts? As noted, since the 1950s efforts were made to collect, edit, publish—and now sustain—a great number of local oral and oral-connected traditions of songs, stories, drama, and epic. It has not always been easy. Such efforts were severely interrupted in the late 1950s and throughout much of the 1960s and 1970s because of various extreme political movements. These movements began with the anti-intellectual “Anti-Rightist” movement of the late 1950s and culminated in the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, a period of ten years in which traditional folk culture, collecting, and research efforts were under direct assault. Since the late 1970s and especially since the early 1980s, as China has shifted course, collecting efforts—employing both older and newer methods of documentation have increased exponentially. Stimulated by more open policies and increased wealth due to economic reforms, folk festivals and temple fairs bustle in some places, often in concert with the ethnic tourist trade. There are also revived or new contexts for many styles of oral performance; a few traditions have even gained national or global attention in contexts hard to imagine only a few years ago.

That said, many local oral traditions are threatened, endangered, or moribund. This is especially true of some styles of folksong and epic singing performances that may soon survive only in bits and pieces in newly emerging contexts such as Chinese versions of YouTube, in digitized museum displays, or in locally made and distributed CDs or flash drives—many of which are now common in various rural areas. The number of folk singers among ethnic minority groups in parts of western Guizhou, for instance, is in rapid decline for those under age 40. In some Yi areas in northern Yunnan, there is no one able to sing or read the traditional funeral lyrics. In some places where ethnic minority languages or local dialects of Han Chinese are spoken, native tongues are replaced by Standard Chinese and whole song repertoires disappear. One example is the *imakan* (*yimakan*) narrative tradition of China’s smallest official ethnic group, the Hezhen of northeast China who number just over 4,600. According to Yu Xiaofei, who for years has been deeply involved in processing the tradition, Hezhen is now spoken by only a handful of people over 50.<sup>4</sup> Presently, no one can recite the epics in the Hezhen language.

## Case Studies

I would like to introduce two different scenarios for two different reasons. The first involves an individual who has persevered against long odds for over 60 years in his efforts to

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<sup>3</sup> This interest in the process of creation and performance was a concern that engaged Milman Parry and Albert Lord, evidenced by their drawing attention to the backgrounds of the singers and the contexts of performances. It is also a concern that prompted Lauri Honko to edit the *Textualization of Oral Epics* (2010) in which fieldworkers explain how they did their documentation. See also Lord 2000:13-14 and Foley 1995:27-28.

<sup>4</sup> Originally from northeast China, Professor Yu Xiaofei teaches at Nihon University in Tokyo, Japan. She has spent many years documenting the last performers of the Hezhen oral narrative known as *imakan* (*yimakan*). See Yu 2005:14-17.

preserve the Butterfly Mother epics. This example will also throw light on attitudes about processing epics in China and some of the rationales behind the methods. In the second case I will describe a visit to an upland village that formed part of my experience working with an epic tradition-bearer and an ethnic poet. On the one hand, we glimpse the life of the local-tradition bearer in his mountain home. On the other, we see how researchers formally and informally obtain knowledge of both tangible and intangible local knowledge that is so crucial in interpreting the imaginative “story worlds” of the epics—that is, the sort of knowledge that John Miles Foley recognized as often being crucial to understanding the “traditional referentiality” of cultural imagery in oral traditions.<sup>5</sup>

### The Butterfly Mother Project

My first case centers on a project pursued for over fifty years by Jin Dan (Jen Dang), a Miao (Hmong) epic singer, ethnographer, and scholar. Now in his eighties, Jin is from mountainous Guizhou province in southwest China.

The Miao ethnic group numbers over eight million members. Names for the dozens of subgroups vary widely, as do local customs and dialects. In southeast Guizhou province, there is a Miao oral performance tradition that involves the antiphonal singing of myth epics and is known as “ancient songs” (*hxak lul hxak ghot*), though it is now difficult to observe full-blown performances. The content of the narratives relates the creation and separation of heaven and earth; the creation of suns, moons, and stars by early gods; the shooting down of the extra heavenly bodies by a hero (as we saw in the Yi myth of Zhyge Alu); the birth of the ancestors of humans and other beings that hatch from Butterfly Mother’s eggs; and a great flood that acts as a precursor to the present age. Several of these motifs appear frequently in the mythic and epic lore of China and Eastern Asia.<sup>6</sup>

Since the early 1980s, several versions of the epics have been published in both Standard Chinese and bilingual Miao/Chinese volumes. The published version with which I am most familiar was initially collected in the 1950s by researchers that included Jin Dan and the late ethnolinguist Ma Xueliang. After working on and off with Jin Dan from about 1985, in 2006 I published an English version of this text in the United States under the title *Butterfly Mother: Miao (Hmong) Creation Epics from Guizhou, China*. A few lines of the English translation give some idea of the style and content of the epic. As Butterfly Mother (Bangx) emerges from her cocoon, she combs her hair and primps herself with her many hands (Jin et al. 2012:353):

When Butterfly was born, her face was mottled;  
Her tangled locks were like balls of hemp.  
What did she use to comb her hair?

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<sup>5</sup> For discussions of “traditional referentiality” in regard to Homeric epic, see Foley 1999:xiv, 201-40 and Foley 1995:42-47.

<sup>6</sup> For further information on myth-epics of several ethnic groups in China, see Yang et al. 2005 and Schipper et al. 2011.

What did she use to wash her face?  
 Her hands were slim and fingernails were sharp,  
 She used them to comb her hair,  
 So her hair was neat and clean.  
 She used misty rain water to wash her face. . . .

In late 2008, much to my surprise, I was asked by Jin Dan's son Wu Yiwen to participate in a project with The Nationalities Publishing House in Guizhou (*Guizhou minzu chubanshe*), which had agreed to publish a tri-lingual version of the epics in Miao, Chinese, and English.<sup>7</sup> This new version, which is a sort of intervention in the interests of preservation, is being made in the face of a clear decline in singers and the perceived need for a complete, master version in the Miao Romanized script, a script created and refined beginning in the 1950s. In the process of again working with Jin Dan and his children, not only did I gain more first-hand insight into how oral literature is processed in China today, but I also learned much more about Jin Dan's personal relation to the text.

### Creating a “Collective” Version

In the Afterword in the forthcoming new edition (Jin et al. 2012:621), Jin states that:

The format and content of this book is essentially similar to the 1983 Chinese version. However, in the twenty-plus years since then, we have still continued to collect and transcribe new material. Every singer has a slightly different version, and whenever we came across vivid material that could be used, we added it in. We also changed the poetic meter of the Chinese translation to lines containing seven characters, and added some explanatory notes as well.<sup>8</sup>

The quote sums up what is still a very common approach to oral literature today in China. In speaking with folklore collectors and editors, I have often heard the term *wanzheng* (完整), or “complete,” when referring to the record of a particular item of folklore—in particular, a longer song or story. Although the appreciation of multiple versions gathered in specific performance contexts has a growing place in folklore circles in China, there is still a strong tradition of creating “complete” versions of a given song cycle or story tradition that will serve as part of an ethnic group's official tradition of oral literature. These versions usually combine several versions collected from a number of singers. In some cases the participating singers and elders

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<sup>7</sup> The volume will be published in late 2012 under the title *Hxak Hlieb: Miao zu shishi (Hmong Oral Epics)*. The tri-lingual translation is being offered for those—probably a majority of potential readers—not able to follow the often difficult or obscure wording of the register of Miao used to sing the epics, and to make the text available (in Chinese and English) to the widest audience possible in local and non-local audiences. There is also concern over the introduction of a competing myth narrative in official discourse on Miao origins that stresses the common origin of ancient Miao with other Chinese tribes, rather than the hatching of the local ancestors from a butterfly's eggs.

<sup>8</sup> Levi Gibbs, a Ph.D. candidate at Ohio State and an expert on Chinese folksongs, aided in the translation of this quote and some of the other supporting matter in the forthcoming tri-lingual version (Jin et al. 2012).

may be involved with editors in the negotiations concerning the makeup of the final master version. In theory, such master texts—which might be best described as “collective versions”—are intended to reflect and preserve the richness and completeness of the tradition in a format that can be read and appreciated to its fullest by present or future generations without access to multiple live versions. In the past, much more so than is usual now, this stage of editing also allowed for selection or omission of content deemed crude, backward, divisive, or otherwise taboo.

### **Jin Dan and the Epic Text**

Whether one acknowledges a place for the “collective version” approach or not, Jin Dan’s epic relation to the epics gives insight into how such texts have been processed. The following is an outline of his story. As Jin Dan explains in his Afterword (Jin et al. 2012), in 1952 the famous ethnolinguist Ma Xueliang from the Central Nationalities Institute (now University) in Beijing organized a group of ethnographers, including Tai Changhou, to record Miao oral literature in southeast Guizhou. Jin Dan was hospitalized at the time but later joined the project in 1954 as an editor of the collected materials. He decided to stress the Miao epics, a tradition he was intimately familiar with, having often participated in the singing himself. He later gathered more texts from oral sources before the work was scheduled for publication. However, the project was shelved during the Anti-Rightist campaign in 1957—a political movement aimed at intellectuals. This event resulted in Jin Dan being sent to a tree farm to work for several years, and the original manuscript was lost during this period.



Image 1: Jin Dan pointing to his signature on a manuscript from the 1950s.

The project started up again in 1962 when Jin Dan contacted Professor Ma about re-collecting the work during a period of slackening political winds. At this time Jin Dan was able to get some notes about the content of the epics from Tai Changhou’s widow. This phase of re-collection and editing was taken under the most difficult conditions. At times he and a younger brother (whom he recruited for the task) collected parts of the epics when running into singers during stints as garbage collectors. While still living at the tree farm, his efforts were again interrupted by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) which threw the whole country, not to mention folklore collecting efforts, into chaos. It was only in the late 1970s that the project picked up again—which of course meant more collection, re-collection, and editing.

Until the summer of 2010, when I spent a week in Guiyang revising the English translation, I was only vaguely aware of Jin Dan's story. However, many things came into sharp focus on the last day when I told his daughter Wu Yifang that I would like to shoot some video footage of her father talking about anything he liked. The next day at noon, just before a sumptuous lunch of Miao-style sour vegetables, fish, and corn gruel, Jin Dan invited me to bring my cameras to his desk. He spoke for about twenty minutes, recounting his interaction with the epics over a span of more than 50 years—repeating and clarifying much of what he had written in his Afterword (Jin et al. 2012). He then turned to several piles of manuscripts that lay right beside the boxes of index cards he was using to carry out his latest project—a dictionary of the words in the linguistic register used in the epic singing.

The manuscripts in the piles were all written in his own hand, and each one had his signature and a date. Some were from the earliest phase of the collecting, some from the period in the late 1950s and the early 1960s. These, he explained, were manuscripts that had been turned over for “safe-keeping” to various cultural units that oversaw him during the political movements. He had been ordered to sign and date the cover pages himself so that no one else could be implicated in handling these documents that reflected “a feudal mentality” and “superstition.” But Jin Dan counted himself lucky on some accounts; he had received the texts back at the end of the troubled era and they formed the basis for not only the revival of the epic project, but also other undertakings such as the dictionary and books by Wu Yiwen. Additionally, they had led to eventual visits by his daughter Wu Yifang to the annual American Folklore Society meeting in 2006 and also The Ohio State University.



Image 2: Jin Dan with his daughter, Wu Yifang, and his son, Wu Yiwen.

With echoes of the story of Jin Dan and the Miao epic project thus in mind, I would like now to turn toward another set of individuals—this time of the Yi ethnic group from southern Sichuan province—with whom I am working on a project to translate a version of an oral-connected written epic belonging to a local tradition-bearer.

### Dragon-Eagles

The Yi ethnic group has over 80 subgroups with a total population of over seven million. Most live in the mountains of southwest China in the provinces of Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangxi. The largest subgroup, known as the Nuosu, numbers about two million, and its members live mostly in southern Sichuan. Known to European explorers in the pre-1949 era as the “independent Lolos” and infamous for what has been described as a “slave society,” the group once controlled an area of southern Sichuan known as the Greater and Lesser Cool Mountains (Da Liangshan and Xiao Liangshan). The Nuosu have received increasing attention due in large part to the efforts of two highly educated and well-positioned sisters—Bamo Ayi and Bamo Qubumo, often known as the Bamo sisters—and foreign researchers such as Thomas Heberer and Stevan Harrell.<sup>9</sup> Another very active promoter of Nuosu cultural preservation is poet and scholar Aku Wuwu (See Aku 2005, Aku and Bender 2006).

Aku Wuwu—also known by his Chinese name Luo Qingchun—is a poet of the Nuosu branch of the Yi ethnic group. He is presently dean of the Yi Studies Institute at the Southwest University for Nationalities in Chengdu, Sichuan province. In 2003 I was introduced to Aku by Bamo Ayi, one of the Bamo sisters. I was asked to work with Aku to translate his poetry into English; he is the only Yi poet who has created a corpus of poems in the modern Nuosu script of 819 graphs based on graphs drawn from the ancient Yi writing system still in use by priests known as *bimo*. To translate his poems into English, we developed a laborious translation technique that involves triangulation between the Nuosu script, Standard Chinese (which we both speak as a common language), and English. I soon discovered that Aku’s poetry is densely packed with imagery, stylistic features, and folk ideas from traditional Yi ritual, oral art, and the centuries-old traditions of Yi writing safeguarded by the *bimo* priests.

Aku’s most famous poem is “Calling Back the Soul of Zhyge Alu” (“*Alu yyr ku*”), in which he calls on the Nuosu to regain a sense of self by evoking the spirit of the culture-hero Zhyge Alu—who, as noted, was raised by dragons. Aku and I soon decided to assemble a multi-lingual version of the Nuosu epic *Hnewo teyy* (*The Book of Origins*), an epic of creation and origins. Although a few Chinese translations were available, we decided to attempt to find a version written in Yi from among the folk.

Drawing on his vast web of connections in the Greater Cool Mountains, Aku eventually located a willing tradition-bearer with a handwritten copy of the text. Most texts outside museums today are in the hands of *bimo* priests. The owner of this text, however, was known as a *ndeggu*, or “wise man”—a man who arbitrated disputes in the community and was a source of

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<sup>9</sup> The following works are representative of recent literature on the Nuosu: Heberer 2007, Harrell et al. 2007, Harrell 2002, Harrell et al. 2000.

many sorts of traditional knowledge. His name was Jjivo Zoqu, and in the summer of 2006 we met in a government office in a tiny town in Xide county—where he had walked eight hours down the mountain. We were accompanied by an elderly *bimo* who had also come down to add spiritual sanction to our interaction with the text. While we managed to rough out and revise a translation over the next few summers, it was not until the summer of 2009 that I finally visited Jjivo in his upland village.



Image 3: Climbing a landslide on the way to Jjivo Zoqu's homestead.

What follows<sup>10</sup> are a few passages from my field notes that shed some light on how the experiences of that day influenced our process of translating and re-imagining the epic world:

August 09, 2009. The lurching Jeep finally came to a halt on the stony red clay road. Our heads and necks still intact, we climbed out of the vehicle and took stock of what we had to carry into the gorge above. Two large bottles of gift-boxed liquor, a video-camera, several digital still cameras, two large bags of candy, and a few plastic bottles of water were our pack. The money for the feast gift (*ka'bba*) didn't weigh much but was also taken into account. As the Jeep turned

<sup>10</sup> These notes, based in part on notes taken on-site, were written on August 12-13, 2011, in Chendgu, Sichuan province, China. This is their first publication.

around and started back down the mountain, we set off at a steady clip up the road, taking short cuts up the steep, slippery banks at each turn. After a few minutes, we reached a large bend that turned right into the distance. High above, directly in front and across a small, steep valley, we could make out a narrow trail that headed left uphill. . . . This was the “shortcut,” taken due to a landslide on the main road. From here on the going for the next two hours would be smooth.

Looking back over the wide valley, fields and forests seemed a far away patchwork. A few earthen houses dotted the hills, and far in the distance another range of low mountains rose above a tributary of the Anning River on its way towards the town of Mishi in Xide County. As we continued up the grade, raw pink and grey cliff sides came into view spliced with small clumps of scraggly pines and firs. Jjivo’s nephew told of how eagles nested there and could still be seen at the right moments. . . .

At several points Jjivo’s nephew stopped and pointed out rhododendrons, pine trees, and other plants that figure in the *Book of Origins*: “See how the heads of these plants bend down—Zhyge Alu first stood on them to try and shoot down the suns and moons—but they could not hold him. So today they still bow their heads. . . .”

Jjivo’s family and male representatives from all the local families stood at the hilltop eagerly waiting our ascent. An earthen wall surrounded the house and courtyard, which was lined with animal cribs made of tightly fitted logs and earth. Outside were a chicken crib, and a small log building for tools and storage. The buckwheat harvest was on and most of the locals were busy getting in the crop before it dropped its seeds, losing them into the dirt. . . .

Entering the courtyard through the low gate, we were immediately escorted inside a door in the main building to our right. As is typical of many rural Yi homes, there were no windows, and light filtered into the dim room from two square holes high in the eaves. Several large wooden chests lined the walls. We were led over to a row of tiny stools set on the hard-packed dirt floor to the right of the fire pit in which a large wok filled with boiling broth bubbled on an iron trivet set above the coals. According to the epic, it was in such a fire pit that the Apu yoqo bird flew and singed its tail feathers when it stole the secret of speech from the Sky God. Although the seat of the hosts is usually beside a house post near the fire, Jjivo sat opposite us with his family and we chatted as women carried in large wooden bowls, lathed from mountain birch and painted with lacquer and red, black, and yellow designs. . . .

Taking up our wooden spoons (*ichy*)—the ones with the handles affixed sideways so as to produce a kind of scoop—we were encouraged to dig into the bowls mounded with gummy buckwheat cakes, chunks of pork and goat meat on the bones, a pot of braised intestines, and a soup of reconstituted *voma* turnip greens, white soybean paste, and sliced potatoes. There were also whole yellow and purple potatoes of various sizes, which in accord with protocol had to be gently peeled before eating. It was still a bit early for boiled corn, usually eaten on the cob. With a flick of the wrist, the spoons skimmed aside the floating layer of fat as we scooped the contents out into our mouths—taking care not to dribble into other bowls. Pieces of meat and potato, once taken in hand, were carefully examined for a few moments, as if in appreciation of the sustenance, before being taken into the mouth in bites. Toasts between the various guests, and between the guests and host, marked the eating, which proceeded quickly, as all were aware that there were many mouths to feed and others would take their place once done. These protocols were all outlined in passages within the *Book of Origins*. . . .

Outside, one of Jjivo's grand-daughters, dressed in a pink party dress, ran to and fro among the guests, followed by several younger children. Jjivo had kept mostly aloof of the proceedings, aside from offering the obligatory toasts. Having disappeared into a low building in the courtyard, his tall, lanky form now reappeared garbed in traditional clothing: a simple, unembroidered black tunic and the bright blue wide-cut pants with unsewn cuffs that were said to be "good for fighting" and marked the former male dress code in the area. These, we were told, were his death clothes, to be worn when he was cremated so that he would be recognized by the ancestors upon entry to the land of the dead.

From a small cloth bag Jjivo removed six red booklets and other papers marked with various seals and signatures representing the various ranks and achievement of his life. He placed



Image 4: Jjivo Zoqu reciting a passage from the *Book of Origins*.

them side by side on the ground for us to examine. Once this official *curriculum vita* had been perused by all and photographed, Jjivo now took up a seat in the widest area of the courtyard. As our cameras absorbed the scene, one of the more lively men amicably scolded him about his sartorial disarray and helped to arrange his flowing pants, that could easily be mistaken for a dress, properly between his legs. With this, Jjivo took in hand copies of the *Book of Origins* and the *Book of Practices (Hmamo teyy)* which he had hand-copied and translated from crumbly ancient scrolls into an irregular form of modern Yi script. Moments before, they had been laid carefully by the door of the small building and several of the guests and immediate relatives had respectfully passed them around and examined them. Holding a volume, he looked out at the audience assembled of men, women, and children—both guests and close

relatives—and broke into a few lines honoring the event, followed by a recitation of a passage from near the beginning of the *Book of Origins* concerning the initial creation of the sky and earth:

In the most ancient times,  
 there was no sky above;  
 were there a sky, there were no stars.  
 There was no earth below;  
 were there an earth, there was no grass.  
 In between there were no clouds,  
 the clouds had not yet formed;  
 thus there was no light within the clouds.

Crisply enunciating each word, his low, raspy voice murmured in the epic recital cadence for several minutes before abruptly stopping. The audience was still attentive, though during the recitation of passages from the *Book of Practices*, the traditional advice on Nuosu living, the attention of some members began to stray. Yet there was still a general air of deference to the social constraints involving the act of performance. His final recitation was a passage of proverbs. This sampling of texts and performance styles presented before a local audience was a highlight of the trip up the mountain. Although epic performances are usually associated with ritual events conducted by the *bimo* priests, or sung antiphonally by folksingers at funerals or weddings, this occasion was enough of an event in itself to warrant a special performance by Jjivo, though maybe not of the most typical sort. In his role as a *ndeggu*, a wise man and dispute arbitrator among the local people, Jjivo clearly had status and respect, embodied for a few moments in the act of performance. Group and individual photos followed, in every combination of kinship and guest. His one request of me was a photo of himself and me engaged in a traditional Yi wrestling hold.

At some point someone had lined up the family tools against the wall of the cooking and storage building, inside which were several large cooking woks. The items consisted of two small sickles for cutting grain, a large, long-handled wooden scoop for ladling animal feed, a sharp pointed butcher knife, a long-handled axe with a square poll. . . . Like other aspects of Nuosu material culture, the tools were bare bones. There were also several styles of baskets and sieves and on top of the stock pens, which contained pigs, goats, and a horse—well-concealed behind small wooden doors. . . .

Many of the tools, dwellings, clothing, and customs I observed appear in the *Book of Origins*—and as part of our practice Aku and I have made every effort to see, handle, and experience all such manifestations of allusions in the epics.

## Conclusion

A great deal more could be said about the many local efforts to process and sustain traditions of oral epic in the southwest and other parts of China today. For instance, Yang Zhengjiang of Guizhou province was part of a local team that documented and published a version of a lengthy funeral chant with epic properties called *King of Yalu (Yalu Wang)* from the Miao (Hmong) ethnic group (Zhongguo minjian wenyijia xiehui 2011). A few more examples from the Yi areas of the southwest include the work of local researchers such as Shi Youfu of Honghe County in Yunnan province, who has actually studied and become a *bimo* priest in order to enhance his projects, including the translation of folk narratives of his Yi subgroup, the Azhe. Huang Jianming, a researcher from the Sani sub-group of Yi in Shilin county, Yunnan, has cooperated with local officials to collect and publish oral and written versions (in Yi and Chinese translation) of a narrative poem about the local heroine Ashima and a version of a funeral chant for guiding the souls of the dead to the land of the ancestors (Huang 2012). He has also established a museum devoted to scripts of the ethnic minority groups on the campus of the Central Nationalities University in Beijing. Many of the sample texts are oral-connected epics and other verbal art. At the most local of local levels, in 2007 I documented a husband and wife



- Foley 1999 John Miles Foley. *Homer's Traditional Art*. Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press.
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