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Gendered ritual and performative literacy : Yao Women, goddesses of fertility, and the Chinese imperial state

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Citation

Chen, M. (2016, June 29). *Gendered ritual and performative literacy : Yao Women, goddesses of fertility, and the Chinese imperial state*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/41195>

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Issue Date: 2016-06-29

Chapter 5. Performative Literacy: Women, Singing, and Subjectivities

This chapter probes the gendered dimension of the Yao indigenous construction of literacy and reveals the gender implications underlining the narratives of female fertility deities. Its purpose is to suggest the possibility that Yao women shared in the authorship in the composition of Yao ritual texts, specifically the ritual-master manuscripts, despite the fact they were not literate in Chinese. On this premise, the chapter views the narratives of female fertility deities who assist the Mother of Emperors in protecting pregnancy and children as the probable products of female singing written down and adopted into ritual-master manuscripts, most likely by literate men. Furthermore, the chapter argues that this specific group of narratives about the female fertility deities might point to a regionally relevant religious practice for dealing with women who did not fulfil their gender roles as wife and mother. These women either died a ‘bad death’ (*xiongsi*) or renounced their womanhood to seek transcendence.

The chapter suggests singing, that is defined as a form of ‘performative literacy’ in this research (details see below), was the vehicle for Yao women’s probable participation in the authorship of ritual texts. The significance of women in singing and music is a cross-cultural phenomenon.¹ Partly on account of the generally marginalized position of females in written traditions, women are more likely to be involved in the creative processes in song writing as well as inclined to express themselves through singing and song.² Singing and music have therefore helped to create a symbolic space in which women reflect on their assigned gender roles and their relationship with other social members in a male-dominated society.³ In certain

¹ Ellen Koskoff (ed.), *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

² May-bo Ching, ‘What Alternative Do You Have, Sixth Aunt?—Women and Marriage in Cantonese Ballads’, in Helen F Siu (ed.), *Merchants’ Daughters: Women, Commerce, and Regional Culture in South China* (HK: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 59-76.

³ Ellen B. Basso, ‘Musical Expression and Gender Identity in the Myth and Ritual of the Kalapalo of Central Brazil’, in Ellen Koskoff (ed.), *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 163-176.

cases, the songs they sing even voice a sense of resistance against the ‘discourse of power’, such as a civilizing agenda or a patrilineal ideology, even though their resistance might not have led to widespread protest or bring about any profound social change in their situation.⁴ In addition to claiming their individuality via singing, women also often act as innovators and preservers of the folksong tradition and local culture.⁵ These general characteristics of the association of women with singing and folksong are also well attested in various societies in South China.

One very pertinent illustrative example of singing as a form of women’s expressivity discovered in South China is the bridal laments (*kujiage*).⁶ Bridal laments are invariably created and performed by women. The lamentations express women’s grief at their destined fate as they have to marry into a household of a stranger and leave their natal family and close sworn-sisters. In a reflection of women’s anxiety about the patrilineal marriage pattern, a striking image of bridal laments, the one found in Guangdong and performed during wedding, concerns death, especially with reference to the groom and his family.⁷

In other cases, the female singing of laments and the hardships involved in their gender role are conversely precisely the source by which the efficacy of the ritual and ceremony of patrilineal ideology are guaranteed. In early imperial China, funeral and mourning rites emphasized the importance of female roles, namely those of the wives of the descendants of the deceased, within the patrilineal family. Women mourned inside the hall in which the coffin was placed whereas the men remained outside; on many occasions, men were expected to remain silent while the women wailed. Because of the wife’s vital role in funeral and mourning rites, the husband did not dare not to show her respect. Nevertheless, the emphasis on female roles in

⁴ Mariko Asano Tamanoi, ‘Songs as Weapons: The Culture and History of Komori (Nursemaids) in Modern Japan’, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 50/4 (1991), 793-817.

⁵ Patricia K. Shehan, ‘Balkan Women as Preservers of Traditional Music and Culture’, in Ellen Koskoff (ed.), *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 45-54.

⁶ See for example, Anne E. McLaren, *Performing Grief: Bridal Laments in Rural China* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2008).

⁷ May-bo Ching, *op. cit.* 64.

funeral and mourning rites once again embodied and conveyed patrilineal beliefs about what it was to be a woman.⁸

In the case of Yao, even though the Yao society is by no means organized around an androcentric ideology, the religious domain has been the interface at which an absolute patrilineal ideology and probable imperial intervention are vividly manifested. In other words, the Yao religious domain has modified or even created a new set of gender ideologies and male-female relations that regulate women in support of a religious tradition of male domination. If we are to understand gender as a ‘product of negotiation’ as Dorothy Ko, Jahyun Kim Haboush and Joan R. Piggott have suggested, the ritual narratives about Yao female fertility deities are one such example.⁹ As will soon be shown, the narratives of female fertility deities in Yao ritual-master texts actually have nothing to do with fertility. On the contrary, they tell of a group of women who chose to renounce or disengage themselves from their given social roles that bolstered a patrilineal ideology. Even though the songs about their protest and resistance are, again, used to support the patrilineal-oriented religious culture ritualistically, the narratives of these female fertility deities nevertheless explicitly depict different forms of female individuality and subjectivity.

To support the argument of gender as a ‘product of negotiation’, the chapter address two aspects of ‘gender’—‘a focus on women’ and ‘female subjectivities’—to elucidate the ways in which the Yao have negotiated with the imported written tradition, and the imposed gender ideals that accompany it, through their own voices, particularly through the actions of female singing and composing songs about women.

A Focus on Women: Women as Authors

Yao women’s subordination in the religious domain is said to be the result of the taboos on particular aspects of female physiology. Nevertheless, this explanation might not be the one and only reason Yao women are marginalized from religious

⁸ Bret Hinsch, *Women in Early Imperial China* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publisher, 2011), 148.

⁹ Dorothy Ko, Jahyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R. Piggott, ‘Introduction’, in Dorothy Ko *et al.* (eds), *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1-24 at 1-3.

activity. The fact that education in Chinese literacy during imperial times overlooked women in general and non-Han women in particular might also be a decisive reason.¹⁰ Even private education (*sishu jiaoyu*)—which was spontaneously organized by the Yao in southeast Yunnan during the 1930s-1940s to teach Chinese literacy and Chinese classics—was available only to men.¹¹ Indeed, most women in their sixties in Weihao are barely literate in Chinese script, let alone capable of composing written texts.

Be that as it may, the *Gazetteer of Kaihua Prefecture* (in southeastern Yunnan province) surprisingly states that, ‘the Yao people...both men and women know writing/books’.¹² It would be going too far to claim that Yao women knew how to read and write ‘books’ merely on the basis of this single record, especially as the present situation strongly indicates otherwise. Nevertheless, what is certain in the eyes of the observer who wrote the original statement is that Yao women must have participated, in one way or another, in a domain in which ‘writing/books’ was important. In the Yao case, without doubt this is the religious domain. If we break ourselves away from the presumption that emphasizes literacy as the ability to read and write, the important question that remains to be asked is not: ‘Did Yao women know how to read and write?’ The question we should ask instead is: ‘In what ways have Yao women engaged in the religious domain, contributing certain knowledge relating to rituals?’ The ethnographic materials reveal the answer to be ‘by singing’. Moreover, there is a strong possibility that the ‘books’ mentioned in the gazetteer account might have referred to either (or both) real books, such as the ‘book of singing’ (*geben*), or else women’s ‘performative literacy’ of folksongs that were integrated into ritual texts and performed in rituals (details see below).

As in many local cultures in South China, singing is of integral importance to daily interaction and ceremonial performance in Yao society. In *Notes on Lingnan*

¹⁰ Benjamin A. Elman and Alexander Woodside (eds), *Education and Society in Late Imperial China, 1600-1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994).

¹¹ Wang Li and Huang Guiquan, ‘Han wenhua dui Yaozu wenhua jiqi jiaoyu de yingxiang’ 漢文化對瑤文化及其教育的影響 (The Influences of Han Culture on the Culture and Education of the Yao Nationality), *Minzu jiaoyu yanjiu* (民族教育研究 Journal of Research on Education for Ethnic Minorities), 4/13 (2002), 61-65 at 63-64.

¹² Tang Dabin (revised), Zhao Zhen et al. (redacted), *Kaihua fuzhi juan jiu* 開化府志卷九 (The Gazetteer of Kaihua Prefecture, Volume Nine) (Beiping: Guoli beiping tushuguan, 1758, reprint in 1939). The text in Chinese reads: ‘僛人...男女皆知書’.

(*Nanyue Biji*), an entry titled ‘Fondness for Singing in Lingnan’ (*Yuesu Haoge*) describes the people in Guangdong and Guangxi in these words: ‘Whenever a happy event takes place, people celebrate the event by singing’.¹³ The Yao were especially fond of singing: ‘In Yao custom, singing is of the utmost importance. Men and women are mixed; when one sings a hundred will follow and sing in harmony’.¹⁴ Consequently, a considerable number of scholarly works have already been devoted to exploring the role of Yao female singers and their significance in both ritual and non-ritual settings.¹⁵ Many works have approached the subject particularly from the linguistic and ethno-musicological perspectives.¹⁶ I am neither a linguist nor an ethno-musicologist. What I am going to pursue is an anthropological analysis. Drawing on this specific group of linguistic and ethno-musicological ethnographies, historical accounts and materials from the ethnographic present, the following discussion of women as singers at ritual and ceremonial sites highlights the agency of women by proposing the hypothesis that women have played an important role in the authorship of ritual texts.

To explore the hypothesis of women as authors of folksongs that were adopted into ritual texts, I first investigate the interchangeability of writing and singing. Then I suggest an alternative reading of Yao ritual texts in connection with the Immortal of Singing, Liu Sanjie, interchangeably called Liu Sanmei or Liu San. Finally, I describe the mythical and performative significance of female singers, especially that demonstrated in the roles of a ‘mother of singing’ and of ‘unmarried girls’ (*tongnü*) in

¹³ Li Diaoyuan (ed.), *Nanyue Biji* 南越筆記 (Notes on Lingnan), in Wang Yunwu (ed.), *Congshu jicheng chubian* 叢書集成初編 (Preliminary Integration of a Series of Books) (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1935-1937), 8. The text in Chinese reads: ‘凡有吉慶，必唱歌以為歡樂’.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 10. The text in Chinese reads: ‘搖俗最尚歌，男女雜選，一唱百和’.

¹⁵ Huang Huali, ‘Yaozu huan panwangyuan yishi geniang jiaose de chuancheng xiangzhuang’ 瑤族還盤王願儀式歌娘角色的傳承現狀 (Current State of the Transmission of *geniang* in the Ritual ‘Honouring a Vow to King Pan’ among the Yao), *Hunan keji xueyuan xuebao* (湖南科技學院學報 Journal of Hunan University of Science and Engineering), 28/12 (2007), 194-195. Wu Ninghua and He Mengmeng, ‘Menren nüxing gechang chuantong bianqian yanjiu’ 門人女性歌唱傳統變遷研究 (A Study of Transitions Regarding Traditional Mun Female Singing from Shangsi County in Guangxi, China), *Kundu yinyue xuekan* (關渡音樂學刊 Kuandu Music Journal), 20 (2014), 43-66.

¹⁶ For example, Zheng Changtian, *Yaozu ‘zuogetang’ de jiegou yu gongneng: Xiangnan Panyao ‘gangjie’ huodong yanjiu* 瑤族“坐歌堂”的結構與功能：湘南盤瑤“岡介”活動研究 (The Structure and Function of ‘Sitting in the Hall and Singing’ among the Yao: A Study of the Pastime of Telling Jokes among Pan Yao in Southern Hunan) (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2009). Wu Ninghua, ‘Yishi zhong de shishi: “Panwangge” yanjiu’ 儀式中的史詩—《盤王歌》研究 (Epic in Ritual: A Study of the ‘Song of King Pan’), PhD thesis (Beijing: Central Conservatory of Music, 2012).

the ritual ‘Honouring a Vow to King Pan’.

1. Interchangeability of Writing and Singing

In *The Annals of the Barbarians South of the Five Ranges* (*Lingbiao Jiman*), a book offering accounts of the cultures and customs of non-Han Chinese people in South China during the Republican Era, the author Liu Xifan (1885-1968) observes the following,

The barbarians do not have written scripts. When they narrate the histories of their forebears, they eulogize them in verse (or in the scriptures of Daoism and shamanism). Therefore, in the eyes of barbarians, folksongs are as precious as [the genres of] genealogy, history and canon in past ages.

蠻人無文字，述其先哲歷史，完全以歌詞（或道巫經典）傳誦之，故蠻民眼光下之歌謠，幾與歷代『宗譜』、『史乘』、『典章』同一珍貴。¹⁷

Therefore, Liu Xifan concludes,

[...] even the scriptures of Daoism and shamanism can be seen as folksongs. To the extent that, when they worship ancestors and deities, burn incense and venerate, at moments of solemn awe they often sing songs that narrate love affairs between men and women.

...即道巫經典，亦可以歌謠目之。甚至享祝祖考，祭祀神祇，馨香膜拜，肅穆敬畏之時，亦常涉及男女風流情歌媿媿之事。¹⁸

The observations made by Liu Xifan point out two important dimensions of the interchangeability of writing and singing. The first dimension is that, in previously non-literate societies, singing has a similar function and value to writing. The second

¹⁷ Liu Xifan, *Lingbiao Jiman* 嶺表紀蠻 (*Annals of the Barbarians South of the Five Ranges*) (Shanghai: Shanghai shangwu yinshuguan, 1934), 155.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 156. This also holds true for the folksong traditions found in southern Jiangsu, an eastern coastal province of China. See Antoinet Schimmelpenninck, *Chinese Folk Songs and Folk Singers: Shan'ge Traditions in Southern Jiangsu* (Leiden: CHIME Foundation, 1997).

point he makes is that rituals are performed as singing events, and the Daoist and shamanistic books used to perform rituals are something identical to folksongs.

1.1. Singing as 'Performative Literacy'

I argue that singing is characteristic of a form of 'performative literacy' that has been accorded an identical function and value to the ability to read and write among non-Han Chinese societies.¹⁹ David Holm uses the term 'performative literacy' to refer to 'the performative act of reciting a text'. He argues that the recitation and the copying of texts should be regarded as separate activities, and that the knowledge of reciting a text is orally conveyed among the Zhuang.²⁰ Adopting this premise, I would like to add another dimension to the definition of 'performative literacy', which is 'an enabling knowledge'—knowledge that enables actors to activate and use all the other forms of knowledge so that they continue to grow in knowledge and literary competence through their recitation and singing experiences.²¹ My purpose is to emphasize the agency of an individual in his or her acquisition of cultural knowledge conveyed through such performative interfaces as ritual performance and singing events. Therefore, the concept of 'performative literacy' can provisionally be defined as *knowledge that enables actors to engage in the acquisition and integration of all forms of knowledge through a performative interface, and that the knowledge is chiefly conveyed in verbal art that might or might not assume a permanently visible form such as manuscript.*

In a fashion similar to the way in which a person's degree of literacy among the elite classes of imperial China was chiefly judged by an ability to write good calligraphy and to demonstrate a thorough grounding in Confucian learning,²² singing has been a conventional means by which to display a person's knowledge in non-Han

¹⁹ Although I use 'performative', it has very little to do with the 'speech act theory' formulated by John Langshaw Austin (J. L. Austin), in which he highlights the acting power of words. See J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words*, J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (eds) (London, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1976[1955]).

²⁰ Holm also points out that synonym substitution is common in the recitation of Zhuang manuscripts as well as in the performance of traditional songs. See David Holm, *Mapping the Old Zhuang Character Script: A Vernacular Writing System from Southern China* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 61-63.

²¹ With reference to Sheridan Blau, 'Performative Literacy: The Habits of Mind of Highly Literate Readers,' *Voices from the Middle*, 10/3 (2003), 18-22 at 19.

²² Evelyn Sakakida Rawski, *Education and Popular Literacy in Ch'ing China* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1979), 5.

Chinese societies. The difference is that what a person needs to display is not good calligraphy or exegetical skills pertaining to the Confucian classics, but that a person's degree of 'literacy' is measured by having a good voice and being well-versed in a wide variety of genres in folksongs. In these societies, 'singing contests' (*geshi*) have been prevalent in many different contexts. In an entry in *Notes on Lingnan* by Li Diaoyuan, several lines that describe a 'singing contest' at a wedding ceremony read:

Therefore, a singing contest is often held to decide who sings the best. The best contestant will be admired and awarded the title Master of Singing. Before they go to fetch the bride, the groom must invite several others who are of similar age and appearance to him [to accompany him]. Among them, the one who displays the most creativity and is quick and clever will be appointed best man. When the side of the bride demands poems and songs while blocking their entry, the groom will compose poems and songs himself or let the best man act on his behalf. The poems and songs might or might not have literary merit. The most important thing is to spout them spontaneously without thinking to show the elegance and beauty of (the groom's side's) artistic talent.

故嘗有歌試以第高下。高者受上賞，號為歌伯。其娶婦而親迎者，婿必多求數人與己年貌相若。而才思敏給者，使為伴郎。女家索攔門詩歌，婿或捉筆為之，或使伴郎代。或文或不文，總以信口而成，才華斐美者為貴。²³

This description of a 'singing contest' at a wedding ceremony that takes place as the spouse-taker group enters the natal village of the spouse-giver's can still be witnessed at contemporary Mun weddings.²⁴ The only difference is that, because nowadays the younger generation does not usually know how to sing traditional songs, neither the groom nor the best man engages in the 'singing contest'. Instead, the contest is performed between four female singers, aged between thirty and seventy, called 'the women who block the road' ([Ch] *lanlunü*), from the spouse-giver group, and one of the two leading male seniors from the spouse-taker group, called 'great tea lad' ([Ch]

²³ Li Diaoyuan (ed.), *op. cit.* 9.

²⁴ On 15 November 2012, I participated in a Mun wedding ceremony between a He family, the spouse-taker side, from Dingcao and a Deng family, the spouse-giver side, from one of the neighbouring villages, Milü. The following description is extracted from my fieldwork notes about the wedding.

da chalang), who are in their sixties and have acquired an impressive repertoire of songs.²⁵ Most importantly, as indicated by the historical account, the two sides exchanged poems and songs either from their memory of lyrics fit for the occasion or by improvising on the scene.

To sum up, singing as a form of ‘performative literacy’ has an identical function and value to literacy that emphasizes the ability to read and write. A commentary contained in a version of *The Biography of the Immortal of Singing, Liu Sanmei* (*gexian Liu Sanmei zhuan*) accurately characterizes what place singing occupies in the perceptions of people in Guangdong and Guangxi, and hence provides an apt conclusion for this section: ‘However, in the eyes of people in Guangdong and Guangxi, singing is literacy. This can be ascertained from Yao folksongs, because certain lyrics state that Liu Sanmei is [the embodiment of] literacy’.²⁶

1.2 Rituals as Singing Events

If we understand singing as ‘performative literacy’, it follows that rituals and ceremonies must be one of the major interfaces at which different kinds of knowledge can be displayed, obtained and integrated, chiefly via singing. The performance of rituals as singing events in Yao society has given rise to a host of arguments. One is that, in conceptual terms, certain rituals and events are regarded as ‘antiphonal singing’ (*duige*) activities, traditionally referred to as ‘sitting in the hall and singing’ (*getang* or *zuogetang*). Compared to the ‘antiphonal singing’ that occurs spontaneously when people are at work in the mountains and entertain themselves by singing, the ‘sitting in the hall and singing’ has more ritualistic and ceremonial implications.²⁷ One ritualistic aspect of ‘sitting in the hall and singing’ is that the singing takes place at a certain point in a ceremony. Taking singing at a wedding as an example, in the section of ‘Fondness for Singing in Lingnan’ from *Notes on Lingnan*, Li Diaoyuan has described: ‘On the eve of the wedding ceremony, the

²⁵ The four female singers cannot be widows.

²⁶ Sun Fanggui and Zhi Xingfu, *Gexian Liu Sanmei zhuan* 歌僊劉三妹傳 (Biography of the Immortal of Singing, Liu Sanmei), in *Siku quanshu cunmu congshu bubian* 四庫全書存目叢書補編 (Jinan City: Qilu shushe, 2001), 79-380/381 at 381. The text in Chinese reads: ‘然粵人即唱歌為讀書。徭歌云讀書便是劉三妹可徵矣’.

²⁷ Zheng Changtian, *Yaizu ‘zuogetang’ de jiegou yu gongneng*, 56.

households of both groom and bride hold a *jiao* [a Daoist sacrificial ritual]. All of the relatives who attend the feast sing folksongs. This is called “sitting in the hall and singing”.²⁸ William W. Chiang gives another example in his study of the female script (*nishu*) in southern Hunan. Chiang describes a form of ‘sitting in the hall and singing’, also known as ‘the sad house’ (*chouwuu*), in which the unwed sisters and ritual sisters (*tongnian*, literally ‘same year’) of a prospective bride gather at the bride’s house for a period of singing within a month before the marriage date.²⁹

Writing about the Yao, Zheng Changtian elucidates that there are two kinds of ‘sitting in the hall and singing’: one is a secular ‘sitting in the hall and singing’, for instance, the ‘talking and laughing’ ([Mi] *gangjie*) activities found among the Mien in southern Hunan; the other is a religious ‘sitting in the hall and singing’ that both Mien and Mun perform, for instance, in the ritual of ‘Honouring a Vow to King Pan’, also called ‘Honouring a Vow by Sitting in the Hall and Singing’ (*huangetang liangyuan* or *huanyuan getang*).³⁰

The other reason a ritual can be regarded as a singing event is that the performance of many large-scale rituals, such as ‘Honouring a Vow to King Pan’ and ordination and wedding ceremonies, involves singing that features various forms of musicality.³¹ In principle, there are three performative acts present in Yao rituals and ceremonies: ‘reading’ (*du*), ‘intoning’ (*jiang*) and ‘singing’ (*chang*).³² The first two styles are interchangeable, referring to a performative act falling between ‘singing’ and ‘intoning’. This style of ‘singing’ features long melodies, free rhyming, repetitive

²⁸ Li Diaoyuan (ed.), *op. cit.* 9. The sentences in Chinese are ‘先一夕男女家行醮。親友與席者，或皆唱歌，名曰坐歌堂’。

²⁹ William W. Chiang, “We Two Know the Script; We Have Become Good Friends”: *Linguistic and Social Aspects of The Women’s Script Literacy in Southern Hunan, China* (Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 1995), 18-19.

³⁰ Zheng Changtian, *op. cit.* 57.

³¹ Some exceptions include ‘Ancient Incense-Burning Programme’ (*huashen xiangyi*) and ‘The Vow-Honouring Ritual of Half of the Compensation for the Village’ (*banbuzhan yuan*). These two vow-honouring rituals do not require any singing performance. See Zhang Shengzhen (ed.), *Huan Panwang yuan* 還盤王願 (Ritual for ‘Honouring a Vow for King Pan’) (Nanning: Guangxi shaoshu minzu guji zhengli chubanshui bangongshi, 2002), 564. Wu Ninghua, ‘Yishi zhong de shishi: “Panwangge” yanjiu’ 儀式中的史詩—《盤王歌》研究 (Epic in Ritual: A Study of the ‘Song of King Pan’), PhD thesis (Beijing: Central Conservatory of Music, 2012), 15.

³² Pan Jinsheng and Pan Wenxiu (eds), ‘Yaozu minsu’ 瑤族民俗 (Folk Custom of the Yao), in *Changning Wang Guayuan Pan Shenghua zongpu* 常寧王瓜源盤生華宗譜 (Genealogy of Wang Guayuan and Pan Shenghua in Changning) (unpublished manuscript, 2004), 122.

lyrics, and supporting tunes and words (*chenchiang chenci*).³³ In a secular *gangjie* singing activity, the ‘intoning’ and ‘singing’ styles take precedence;³⁴ whereas, in the ritual performance of ‘Honouring a Vow to King Pan’, all three performative acts are present. Whereas the ritual masters generally prefer to resort to the styles of ‘reading’ and ‘talking’, the female and male singers tend to utilize the style of ‘singing’.³⁵ The reading and intoning by ritual masters should be understood to resemble a ‘mumble’ (*nan*), a privileged form of communication between priest and god, in which the utterances are intentionally barely audible to others, and ‘reciting’ (*song*) a manuscript out loud. The pace of the mumbling is usually faster than the recitation. This is because the former act does not necessarily involve reading from a text; ritual masters usually ‘mumble’ the texts they have learned by heart. The latter act usually includes reciting while progressing through a manuscript page by page.³⁶ Whatever the form chosen, rituals and ceremonies never involve the silent reading of a manuscript, but utilize all three styles of performative acts. Even while engaging in reading manuscripts, they involve performances of musicality to varying degrees. Therefore, it is not surprising that Liu Xifan should state that, ‘[...] even the books of Daoism and shamanism can be seen as folksongs’, because the books are in most cases *sung out* rather than *read out* in performance.

In other words, the interchangeability of writing and singing is present in both conceptual and performative terms. On the one hand, singing is a form of ‘performative literacy’ in that a person’s proficiency is judged by how well he or she can compose songs and perform them. Most importantly, this ‘performative literacy’ is no less significant than the literacy of writing and reading. On the other hand, rituals in which Daoist and shamanistic books are present are also regarded and performed as singing events. The implication of the interchangeability of writing and singing is therefore: many folksongs composed and sung for secular purposes, for

³³ Wu Ninghua, *op. cit.* 73-74.

³⁴ Zheng Changtian, *op. cit.* 120-121.

³⁵ Wu Ninghua, *op. cit.*

³⁶ Fieldwork observations in Weihao (since 1999-) and Dingcao (3-15 Nov. 2012). See Chen Meiwèn, *Cong mingming tan Guangxi Tianlin Panguyao rende goucheng yu shengming de lai yuan* 從命名談廣西田林盤古瑤人的構成與生命的來源 (Conceptualizations of Personhood and the Origins of Life as Seen in Naming Traditions among the Pangu Yao of Tianlin, Guangxi) (Taipei: Tangshan, 2003), 134-154. Wu Ninghua, *op. cit.* 26-43. Zhang Shengzhen (ed.), *op. cit.*

instance, courtship and marriage, might have been adopted into the ritual repertoire so as to entertain the deities. If the narratives about courtship and marriage contained in ritual texts might have originated from the tradition of folksongs, the women's leading position in the composition of folksongs and singing could at least hint at the possibility of women's participation in the authorship of ritual texts, even though they were not literate. As will be argued below, women—represented by the Immortal of Singing in mythic terms and the 'mother of singing' in actual performance—enjoy a prominent role in Yao 'performative literacy,' namely, singing.

2. *Women as Inventors of Singing*

'Antiphonal singing' or 'sitting in the hall and singing' events usually involve both genders.³⁷ Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that both men and women create folksongs, and there is textual evidence describing both men and women composing songs. For example, in the Mien epic *The Great Song of King Pan*, we find such statements as 'women create songs and poems',³⁸ and 'men create the lyrics, women compose the melodies'.³⁹ Nevertheless, many non-Han peoples, including the Yao, believe that the ultimate 'inventor' of the singing tradition was not a man but an intelligent woman with a beautiful voice. The Yao, for instance, worship Liu Sanjie (Liu Sanmei or Liu San) as the Immortal of Singing (*gexian*).

Whether Liu Sanjie was a historical figure or a mythical being and has a Han Chinese origin or non-Han Chinese roots is beside the point here. The important point is that the Yao people have believed that Liu Sanjie composed and passed down to the mortal world all of the songs sung to invoke deities, detailing their biographies and the events in which they have demonstrated their divine powers. In a section from *The Great Song of King Pan*, entitled 'Women's Singing' (*nüren changge*), that is to be sung by a 'mother of singing' in the ritual of 'Honouring a Vow to King Pan', the lyrics state that, 'the third [sister] with family name Liu passed the songs down

³⁷ Zheng Changtian reports that there are three fundamental rules pertaining to the selection of *duige* participants. One is that the two parties have to be a combination of a man and a woman (Zheng Changtian, *op. cit.* 26).

³⁸ Zhang Shengzhen (ed.), *op. cit.* 347. The text in Chinese reads: '女人作歌詩'.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 569. The text in Chinese is '男人出唱歌詞，女人出唱曲子'.

directly to humans. The songs were left in the mortal world to be used as an invitation to saintly deities/ladies'.⁴⁰

Another example is from the lines of 'mumbled lyrics' (*nanci*) to be recited by the 'chief ritual master' (*shizhu*) at the beginning of the 'Feast for King Pan' (*Panwang yan*) in the second part of 'Honouring a Vow to King Pan'. They refer to the story of Liu Sanjie creating the songs offered to please the invited deities.

In the beginning there were the songs and melodies of Liu Sanjie, but I [the chief ritual master] just sing a few simple words and discordant sentences. I am afraid that the Sacred Emperor King Gao will not be satisfied. [...] The sixth lad at the beginning of a song, the seventh lad at the end of a song, they open the vine chest with a bamboo splint and hat. They invite Liu San[jie] out to sing the introduction to a song and its lyrics.

當初劉三姊妹歌章，劉三姊妹歌曲，且唱三句賤言粗語，又怕不滿龍城高王聖帝之意...歌頭六郎，歌尾七郎，打開籐箱籐篋，請出劉三歌頭，劉三歌曲，...。⁴¹

Between the lines of these lyrics, Liu Sanjie is not only referred to as the creator of the songs sung at the ritual, she has also acquired some male acolytes to assist her in the rendition of the songs. Moreover, the chief ritual master expresses the worry that his rendition of her songs might be too discordant and unsophisticated to represent the original beauty of the songs, and that this might displease the ears of the deities.⁴² In other words, the stories about Liu Sanjie in Yao religion suggest that women, represented by the Immortal of Singing, enjoy a relatively leading, not to say major status when it comes to singing. Most importantly, Liu Sanjie's story opens up the interpretative possibility that Yao women might have been anonymous authors of songs written down to be sung in ritual settings.

⁴⁰ Dong Shengli (transcribed), 'Nüren changge' 女人唱歌 (Women's Singing), in Yoshirō Shiratori (ed.), *Yao Documents* (Yōjin monjo 倭人文書) (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1975), 282-290 at 283. The sentences in Chinese are '劉三直下千歌曲 留把凡間賀聖神/娘'.

⁴¹ Zheng Changtian, *Yaozu 'zuogetang' de jiegou yu gongneng*, 352.

⁴² Because of the celestial quality of her voice, there is scholarly work arguing that Liu Sanjie was herself a sorceress. See Huang Dawu, 'Liu Sanjie de shuangchong shenfen--Gexian he wushen' 劉三姊的雙重身分—歌仙與巫神 (The Dual Identity of Liu Sanjie: An Immortal of Singing and a Sorceress), *Zhongnan minzu xueyuan xuebao* (中南民族學院學報 Bulletin of the South Central Nationalities College), 4 (1990), 56-60.

As Paul Cohen concludes, ‘Historical reconstruction, direct experience, and mythologization are, after all, all operations that every one of us performs every day of his or her life’.⁴³ The focus on Liu Sanjie as the creator of ritual songs in Yao text and performance can be interpreted as a historical reconstruction of past events in which Yao women composed the songs used to celebrate the divine deities. The story of Liu Sanjie might have also been a mythologization of people’s direct experiences of witnessing women composing songs that embody sacredness.

In the pages to follow, I elaborate on women’s prominence in ‘performative literacy’ by depicting the role of the ‘mother of singing’. In this, I argue that, even though all of the rituals and ceremonies in Yao society are performed and led by male ritual specialists who are literate in Chinese and possess a Daoism-influenced ritual repertoire, the role of the ‘mother of singing’ nevertheless points to women’s significance in transmitting local knowledge via singing.

3. ‘Mother of Singing’

In many large-scale rituals, the participation of female singers is an absolute necessity. So far, the role of Mun female singers in ordination rituals has remained a relatively unexplored topic.⁴⁴ In contrast, Mien female singers, particularly in the ritual ‘Honouring a Vow to King Pan’, have received plenty of scholarly attention. Unavoidably, the following discussion of Yao female singers will therefore rely largely on the research conducted among female singers in this particular Mien ritual in different localities.

Before commencing, it might be helpful to recount the basic storylines of the ritual ‘Honouring a Vow to King Pan’ to explain why the Yao people perform it. King Pan, usually called Panhu in the myth, was a heroic ancestor of the Yao. His veneration and worship are closely related to a myth narrating the Yao diaspora. The myth ‘Ferrying across the Ocean’ (*piaoyao guohai*) contains a collective social

⁴³ Paul A. Cohen, *History in Three Keys* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), XV.

⁴⁴ So far the only available literature on Mun female singers is an article by Wu Ninghua and He Mengmeng, ‘Menren nüxing gechang chuantong bianqian yanjiu’ 門人女性歌唱傳統變遷研究 (A Study of Transitions Regarding Traditional Mun Female Singing from Shangsi County in Guangxi, China), *Kundu yinyue xuekan* (關渡音樂學刊 Kuandu Music Journal), 20 (2014), 43-66.

memory of a forced migration. Despite the fact that there are various versions of this migration story, the fundamental narrative elements consist of Panhu as the heroic ancestor, malicious Han Chinese officials, a cruel military invasion and the Yao in flight. At the climax of this story, the Yao people travelling across the ocean in seven boats run into a disastrous storm. The people in four of the seven boats drown. In desperation, the people in the remaining three boats seek help from Panhu. Each boat makes a ritual contract with Panhu, promising to offer the sacrifices he requires. The three remaining boats reach dry land safe and sound soon afterwards.⁴⁵ Since then, the myth states, the surviving Yao people and their descendants have kept their promise and regularly offer the sacrifices Panhu requested. Significantly, in the past women might have been one of the sacrifices offered to Panhu.

A tale told by Mien ritual masters in Lanshan County, Yongzhou (on the border of Hunan and Guangdong Provinces) recounts that before the late Qing women, particularly ‘unmarried girls’—or to be more explicit, ‘virgins’—used to be kidnapped and offered as a ‘human sacrifice’ to Panhu. It is also said that having reflected on the brutality of making human sacrifices, the Mien community later transformed the role of women from sacrificial offerings into ‘singers’, offering up their beautiful voices for Panhu’s enjoyment instead. Four females, one older ‘mother of singing’ and three ‘unmarried girls’, who are usually in their teens, are invited for the ritual. Although all of them can be referred to as ‘singing ladies’ (*genü*), the ‘mother of singing’ takes the lead and plays a special role.⁴⁶

The ‘mother of singing’, called *dzuŋ*³³⁻³¹ *má*²² (*dzuŋ*³³⁻³¹: song; *má*²²: mother) in everyday Mien language, *teuŋ*³¹ *dzuŋ*²⁴ *mam*³³ (*teuŋ*³¹ *dzuŋ*²⁴: singing; *mam*³³: mother) in everyday Mun language, refers to a woman who has a good voice and a wide repertoire of songs.⁴⁷ As noted above, the beauty of her singing is equal to female’s intact regenerative power that can be offered to Panhu.⁴⁸ As will be shown

⁴⁵ Takemura Takuji, *Yaozu de lishi yu wenhua* 瑤族的歷史與文化 (The History and Culture of the Yao), Zhu Guichang and Jin Shaoping (trans.) (Nanning: Guangxi minzu xueyuan minzu yanjiusuo, 1986[1981]), 270-295. Huang Yu and Huang Fangping, *Guoji yaozu gaishu* 國際瑤族概述 (Introduction to the Yao Worldwide) (Nanning: Guangxi renmin chubanshe, 1993), 71-72. Chiao Chien, *Piaobozhong de yongheng* 漂泊中的永恆 (An Eternity in Wandering) (Jinan: Shangdong huabao chubanshe, 1999), 57-62.

⁴⁶ Huang Huali, ‘Yaozu huan panwangyuan’.

⁴⁷ Zheng Changtian, *Yaozu ‘zuogetang’ de jiegou yu gongneng*, 218.

⁴⁸ Wu Ninghua, ‘Yishi zhong de shishi’, 43-45.

below, the singing of the ‘mother of singing’ has more than just a religious prominence, it is also culturally significant because she acts as a ritualistic matron who takes charge of transmitting her singing repertoire, and very importantly her ritual knowledge, to the younger generation, represented by the ‘unmarried girls’ and ‘singing youths’.⁴⁹

Another tale told by Mien ritual masters in Hezhou, eastern Guangxi, illustrates the leading role of a ‘mother of singing’ and her relationship with three ‘unmarried girls’ and with her counterparts, the ‘singing youths’ (*gelang*), a reference to men who know how to sing Yao songs.⁵⁰ Interestingly, the story also has it that in the past the role of ‘singing youths’ was initially non-existent. Performing an ‘Honouring a Vow to King Pan’ ritual is a large social event; people come from far and wide to congratulate the host family on holding the ritual. It was said that distant guests used to arrive in the Yao village late at night because they had travelled such a long way. A traditional way for the Yao to show hospitality to guests from faraway places is to hold a ‘sitting in the hall and singing’ (*zuogetang*) that will highlight courtship and potential marital alliances. In accordance with the tradition, the host family will invite several ‘unmarried girls’ to sing with the guests. Nevertheless, because the ‘unmarried girls’ are usually too young to know how to sing, the host family also asks a ‘mother of singing’ to lead and teach them and even sing in their place.⁵¹

In actual performance, the role of a ‘mother of singing’ in leading, teaching and helping the singing is also extended to and manifested in her relationship with ‘singing youths’.⁵² Wu Ninghua reports that the ‘mother of singing’, Huang Sanmei, whom she interviewed in Hezhou said, ‘I am “mother of singing”, and I sing with the “singing youths”’. The reason I sing with them is they are ignorant of how to sing properly. So I teach them, lead them and help them with singing’.⁵³ Wu Ninghua

⁴⁹ Zheng has adduced a similar argument about the significance of the ‘mother of singing’ in transmitting singing repertoire and ritual knowledge. See Zheng Changtian, *op. cit.* 218-221.

⁵⁰ In this case, there are three ‘singing youth’ participants. They act interchangeably with the other role of ‘unmarried boys’ (*tongnan*). See Wu Ninghua, *op. cit.* 20.

⁵¹ Wu Ninghua, *op. cit.* 20.

⁵² Wu Ninghua, *ibid.*, 105-106.

⁵³ The statement in Chinese reads: ‘我是歌母，我和歌郎一起唱，意思是他們不會唱，我教他們唱，我帶他們一起唱，幫他們唱’。See Wu Ninghua, *ibid.*, 106.

argues that it is not really that the ‘singing youths’ really do not know how to sing; instead, the statement made by Huang Sanmei reflects a common practice observed at a ‘sitting in the hall and singing’ held with the intention of entertaining guests, but also holding out the prospect of courting and eventual marriage. The practice is to ‘help singing’ (*bangchang*). That is, whenever either of the two sides, the host family/village or the guests, fails to respond to their turn to sing, someone with more experience can join in and help. As ‘singing youth’ refers to a ‘young man’ (*housheng shaonian*) in ritual texts, supposedly they are not as experienced as the ‘mother of singing’ in terms of performance.⁵⁴ Therefore, in a similar vein to the relationship the ‘mother of singing’ has with the three ‘unmarried girls’, she also symbolically supervises the singing of the ‘singing youths’.

Here it is useful to point out two significant differences between the ritual master and the ‘mother of singing’, namely, the different ways in which they obtain their knowledge and the languages they use in ritual. Pu Hengqiang adopts the term ‘learning through imitation’ (*piaoxue*) to describe a way of learning in which a learner’s active engagement plays a large part in his or her acquisition of the intended knowledge. Any formalities with respect to content, purpose, setting and time in such a learning method are extremely flexible.⁵⁵ Indeed, unlike the knowledge that a male acquires to become a ritual specialist through the holding of an ordination, there is neither a formal ritual nor a clear genealogy of transmission manifested in the training of a ‘mother of singing’. Occasionally, the transmission of the status of a ‘mother of singing’ can be traced through the maternal line. Pan Simei (1913-2002), a late Mien ‘mother of singing’ in the Changning area of southwest Hunan, inherited her singing skills from her mother and grandmother.⁵⁶ Moreover, in contrast to ritual specialists who obtain ritual repertoires from their masters by reciting the texts at ritual and ceremonial sites and copying the ritual manuscripts, a ‘mother of singing’ builds up her singing repertoire largely by way of observing, memorizing and imitating. In other words, becoming a ‘mother of singing’ is primarily based on an individual

⁵⁴ Wu Ninghua, *ibid.*

⁵⁵ Pu Hengqiang, ‘Piao xue: zhide zhuyi de minjian yinyue chuancheng fangshi’ 剽學—值得注意的民間音樂傳承方式 (Piao Xue: A Way of Transmission Worth Studying in Folk Music), *Zhongguo yinyue* (中國音樂 Chinese Music) 3 (2002), 23-24.

⁵⁶ Zheng Changtian, *op. cit.* 219.

female's avid interest in and enthusiasm for singing; recognition is often culturally determined.

A highly praised 'mother of singing' invariably learns her singing repertoire orally. However, nowadays women's exposure to the Yao written tradition has initiated the process of writing down the folksongs they know. The aforementioned 'mother of singing', Pan Simei, knew over 2,000 songs, including those sung at both secular and religious 'sitting in the hall and singing'. She knew all the songs she sang by heart and was not literate in Chinese. Aware of her shortcoming, in order to transmit the repertoire of songs sung specifically for vow-honouring rituals, she asked literate men to write down her songs.⁵⁷ This is one of the reasons so many women now own books, in most cases, a 'book of singing'. For instance, in Dingcao, there is a group of women aged between fifty and seventy, who are gifted with beautiful voices and possess a religious songbook entitled *Songbook of Relieving People in the Red House* (*honglou duren geshu*). The lyrics written in the songbook are openings to and descriptions of different ritual programmes conducted in the ordination ceremony. The significance of the specific songbook is that, whenever an ordination ceremony is to be held, two of these women who possess such a 'book of singing' must be invited and included.

The second point here is about the respective languages a ritual master and a 'mother of singing' use in ritual performance and their significance. As Webb Keane reveals, the shift in languages used in religious performance denotes different characteristics of the deities invoked in the eyes of performers.⁵⁸ The language a Yao ritual master uses is 'religious language' that is believed to be closely related to Chinese (see Chapter 2). The language is referred to as [Ch] *guihua* by the ritual masters themselves and literally means 'ghost language'. Since the term for ghosts and deities is the same in Yao daily language (*mien*⁵³), 'ghost language' can be broadly understood as the language utilized to communicate with otherworldly beings.

⁵⁷ Zheng Changtian, *ibid.*, 217-221. It is noteworthy that the Yao women are indeed able to commit their stories to paper themselves nowadays. He Guangjuan, a Mun woman who is in her fifties I met in Dingcao, showed me many seven-syllable texts she has composed herself. One of the texts is entitled 'Song of a Bitter Life' (*kumingge*) and describes her past experience of being severely ill and her appreciation for the doctor who saved her life.

⁵⁸ Webb Keane, 'Religious Language', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 26 (1997), 47-71.

‘Ghost language’ is used to chant and recite ritual texts and invoke such Daoist deities as the Three Pure Ones (*sanqing*), among many others, for it is understood that these ‘Chinese’ deities do not know the Yao language.

In contrast, the ‘mother of singing’ uses ‘folksong language’ (*geyaoyu*). Unlike religious language that can only be utilized in ritual settings, ‘folksong language’ is commonly used in secular folksong settings as well as ritual settings among the Yao. What is most significant is that, compared with the religious language associated with non-Yao entities (Chinese, Daoist deities and so on), the voices of ‘folksong language’ are strongly associated with Yao identity. Moreover, women, represented by the ‘mother of singing’, are assigned a leading role in claiming Yao identity, particularly in the ritual of ‘Honouring a Vow to King Pan’.

The ritual of ‘Honouring a Vow to King Pan’ includes two main segments: one is the ‘Vow of the Primary Basin’ (*yuanpenyuan*), also called the ‘Vow of Ancestors’ (*zuzongyuan*); the other is the ‘Vow of Singing Hall’ (*getangyuan*), also referred to as the ‘Vow of King Pan’ (*panwangyuan*).⁵⁹ According to Wu Ninghua, there are obvious differences between the two segments both in the purposes of the ritual segment and in the languages and the music the performers use.⁶⁰ The purpose of the ‘Vow of Primary Basin’ is to invite ancestors and the deities of foreign origin (*waishen*) to come to act as witnesses to ensure the efficacy of the ritual; most of the language and music used for this segment are ‘religious language’ and Daoist music. Conversely, the aim of the ‘Vow of Singing Hall’ is to invite and entertain the Deities of Three Temples (*sanmiaoshen*) and King Pan, who are regarded as Yao deities; the principal language used for this segment is Yao folksong language accompanied by Yao tunes.⁶¹

It is in the second segment that the ‘mother of singing’ begins to play a prominent role. In this section, the non-Yao people present at the ritual have to wear

⁵⁹ The ‘Vow of the Primary Pot’ consists of three sub-segments, namely: ‘Inviting the Deities’ (*qingsheng daotan*), ‘Opening the Altar and Honouring the Vow’ (*kaitan huanyuan*), and ‘Offering Sacrifices to the Soldiers’ (*jibing shangbing*). The ‘Vow of the Singing Hall’ is the final sub-segment of the ritual, called ‘Honouring A Vow to King Pan’. It takes one and a half days to perform the ‘Vow of Primary Basin’, and one day to perform the ‘Vow of Singing Hall’. For more details about the ritual, see Wu Ninghua, *op. cit.* 33-43.

⁶⁰ Wu Ninghua, ‘Yishi zhong de shishi’, 44.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Yao turbans and are forbidden to speak other, non-Yao languages.⁶² Obviously, to have an absolutely Yao environment is a way to welcome and show respect to the Yao's own deities. Moreover, the Yao people believe that only the voice of the 'mother of singing' and her actual singing are beautiful and powerful enough to entertain them. Therefore, rather than a ritual master, the 'mother of singing' has to be the first one to sing when the section of the programme dedicated to the Yao mythic ancestor Panhu commences. Although she has to sing a fixed repertoire of songs – in this case the 'Song for Worshipping the Sacred Kings of Three Temples' (*sanmiao wang baishensheng ge*), that has been written down in texts – she is at liberty to sing 'supporting lyrics and melodies' before she begins singing the set texts. Wu Ninghua has called these improvised lyrics and melodies 'praying by singing' (*gehua de daoci*). The lyrics are nowhere to be found in ritual texts.⁶³ And this is exactly where the singing style and religious significance of the 'mother of singing', or the voice of the female, are so different from those of the ritual master.

To sum up, by placing a focus on 'women' in the religious domain, this section has revealed the ritual and cultural prominence of the 'mother of singing'. Mythically, women's intact regenerative power is accentuated, namely a virgin as a human sacrifice for Panhu. Later in the ritual, the emphasis on women is focused more on their beautiful singing. In an actual performance, the role of the 'mother of singing' and her relationships with the 'unmarried girls' and 'singing youths' indicate her leading status as a matron in the transmission of ritual and cultural knowledge through the medium of singing. Presumably, as awareness of literacy grew, competent female singers would ask people with the knowledge of Chinese literacy to write down their songs. Most significantly, the respective languages a ritual master and a 'mother of singing' use and the main deities with whom they engage show that women play a crucial role in delimiting the boundaries between the Yao and non-Yao. To a certain degree, women's singing reconfirms Yao identity in the presence of the language and deities of foreign origin.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 125-127.

Reviewing these examples, it is worth considering the proposition that women are the probable authors of ritual texts involving narratives about courtship and marriage. Moreover, as will be argued in the following section, these narratives might point to the different ways in which women express their subjectivities. This is a point of departure I have chosen to take in making a textual analysis of the narratives of six female fertility deities—‘roaming deities’ (*youshen*) and ‘flower names’ (*huaming*), in which the former describe women’s reflections on and resistance to the social structure of a patrilineal descent and virilocal residence; the latter illustrating women’s active religious engagements, in next section.

Females’ Subjectivities: Women who Died Young

To discuss the ways in which Yao women have embodied their subjectivities in a religious domain that revolves around an androcentric ideology, I have chosen the narratives of twenty-four female fertility deities for analysis. Despite the fact that the texts are now in the repertoire of ritual masters, to be sung by male ritual specialists in religious settings that involve asking for children, I suggest these texts be read from a ‘gendered’ perspective. That is, I propose viewing these narratives of female fertility deities as folksongs, in both their colloquial and literary forms, originally composed and sung in the secular settings in which women might have acted as the composer and performer.

In a ritual context, these narratives are invocations that call upon the deities to manifest themselves through the ritual specialist. Kristofer Schipper argues that, ‘They are, in fact, short epic ballads, describing the attributes of the god and the events during which he or she demonstrated supernatural powers’.⁶⁴ If these narratives can be viewed as short epic ballads, the rendering of the histories of these female fertility deities is hardly one of any miraculous deeds. Instead, most of the texts, particularly those in colloquial form, designated ‘roaming deities’ (*youshen*), are permeated with women’s outright resistance to marriage pattern that is focused on

⁶⁴ Kristofer Schipper, ‘Vernacular and Classical Rituals in Taoism’, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 45/1 (1985), 21-57 at 31.

patrilineality.⁶⁵ Furthermore, some of the texts, especially in literary form, entitled ‘flower names’ (*huaming*), have depicted women as active actors in their pursuit of transcendental experiences.

Though both the Mun and the Mien have similar fertility deities and flower cosmogenesis (Flower Mountain for the Mun; Peach Spring Grotto for the Mien), in terms of the textual material of performances, these texts are more commonly found among the former than the latter. In practice, these texts are in the process of becoming ‘decontextualized texts’, because the performance of rituals asking for children is in decline.⁶⁶ Therefore, my knowledge of how the fertility deities are summoned and how the texts are sung in actual performance is largely based on interview materials. Several Daoist priests and ritual masters in Dingcao and two Mun scholars, Deng Wentong and Huang Guiqian, have stated that these texts should be sung when the Mother of Emperors is invoked in such large-scale rituals as an ordination, in which a section dedicated to asking for children is included. In previous times, a ritual whose purpose was to ask for children could be a large-scale ritual as it could last for up to five days. Nowadays, at least among the Mun communities in western Guangxi, an independent ritual asking for children is seldom held. Should they be sung, the texts will be sung in the ritual master’s religious language. Given the inaccessibility of actual performances of the texts, my analysis draws heavily on textual representation, even though it does posit the texts in a larger regional context. The texts are from a specific manuscript: UB 2004-15 Folder 1 (Leiden Collection) with an unspecified title (as the cover page is lost).⁶⁷

⁶⁵ ‘Roaming deities’ (*youshen*) can also refer to an annual ritual ceremony addressed to a female deity, Liu Daning (the First Lady with the Family Name Liu). It is commonly practised among the Shanzi Yao (another ethnonym for Mun people), the Chashan Yao, the Ao Yao and the Hualan Yao in Jinxiu Yao autonomous county, Laibing city, eastern Guangxi. See Quanguo renmin daibiao dahui minzu weiyuanhui bangongshi (eds), *Guangxi Dayaoshan Yaozu shehui lishi qingkuang diaocha wuzhong* 廣西大瑤山瑤族社會歷史情況調查五種 (Five Surveys of Social and Historical Conditions of the Yao People in the Big Mountain of the Yao) (unspecified publisher, 1958), 74-75.

⁶⁶ My own fieldwork experiences in Dingcao and the interviews with Deng Wentong have both confirmed the decline in the ritual performance of ‘asking for children’ rituals. It is not absolutely clear when the decline began but, according to Zhang Daogui, one of the reasons for the decline of such a ritual might be partly attributable to the birth-control policy initiated after the 1950s.

⁶⁷ When I showed the texts to Zhang Daogui, he suggested the title of this manuscript be *Ritual of the Red-Fertility Building* (*honglou ke*). Many Yao ritual-master manuscripts contain similar narratives of ‘women who died young’. In comparison, in the Munich Collection a manuscript is entitled *Ritual of the Flower Hall* (*huatangke*) (589 Cod. Sin. 765).

There are two categories of female fertility deities who were recruited by the Flower Matron (*huapo*) to assist the Mother of Emperors in taking care of the flower cosmogenesis and sending children to parents who longed for them. One group is invariably named after a combination of a specific womanly task and a general referent for women. Womanly tasks might be ‘borrowing clothes’ (*jieyi*), ‘arranging clothes’ (*zhengyi*), ‘escorting guests’ (*guoyou*), ‘putting on make-up’ (*tiaofen*), ‘hanging the mirror’ (*guajing*) and ‘brewing wine’ (*zaojiu*). General referents for women include ‘lady’ (*niangzi*), ‘lady sister’ (*niangjie*), ‘mother’ (*mu*), ‘female’ (*nü*), ‘grandmother’ (*po*), ‘mistress’ (*furen*) and ‘young lady’ (*xiaoniang*). One example of a deity named in this way is ‘the lady who borrows clothes’ (*jieyi niangzi*). She is responsible for the clothing of the deities invoked. To a certain degree, the ritual tasks these female fertility deities have been assigned are associated with womanly tasks, for example, embroidering, performed in a daily context.⁶⁸

The other is a group of female spiritual acolytes who are referred to as ‘spirits’ (*yao*). There are two subgroups in this category: ‘roaming deities’ (*youshen*) and ‘flower names’ (*huaming*). They have been recruited by the Flower Matron to assist the Mother of Emperors in governing different parts of Flower Mountain. To a certain degree, in the ritual tasks they have been assigned, they bear a strong resemblance to the thirty-six Pojie (grandmothers and sisters) of the cult of the Lady of Linshui in southern Fujian and Taiwan or the Six Holy Ladies who assist the Queen Mother of the West in Guangdong.⁶⁹

Above all, the Chinese character *yao* 妖 used for this group of female fertility deities is particularly telling and requires further exploration. The common meaning of *yao* is demon. However, if we read the character as a combination of its radical *nü* 女 (woman) on the left side and the character *yao* 夭 (to die young) on the right side, there is another way this character can be understood, namely, as a reference to ‘women who died young’. In a sense, these female fertility deities can be regarded as

⁶⁸ Francesca Bray, *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

⁶⁹ For the cult of the Lady of Linshui, see Brigitte Bapandier, *The Lady of Linshui: A Chinese Female Cult*, Kristin Fryklund (trans.) (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008[1988]), 123-141. For the Queen Mother of the West, see Qu Dajun (1630-1696), ‘Shenyu’ 神語 (Miscellany on Deities), *Guangdong Xinyu* 廣東新語 (Guangdong Miscellanies) (Shanghai: Zhonghua shuju, 1934), 214.

possessing supernatural power in the way a demon does. Nevertheless, the meaning of ‘women who died young’ is closer to what the texts have conveyed.

Undoubtedly the richness in meanings of these narratives cannot be reduced to one single monolithic interpretation. Nonetheless, one feature that stands out is that they demonstrate women’s discontent with the marriage pattern enshrined in an androcentric ideology, namely patrilineal descent and virilocal residence. This is in fact a fairly prominent theme in folksong culture across different ethnicities and localities in China.⁷⁰ These dissatisfactions are invariably expressed in accordance with the different stages of women’s lives and the auxiliary roles they are expected to fulfil, requiring them to be dutiful daughters, loyal wives and loving mothers.⁷¹ As will be revealed below, I argue that in these texts there are two sorts of narrative describing women who either want to break free from their given destiny and social roles, particularly as wives and mothers, or do not fulfil these anticipated roles. One narrative pattern is that of women who have died a ‘bad death’. The other narrative pattern is that about women who cultivate themselves into a transcendental state.

1. ‘Bad Deaths’: Discontented Marriage

Out of twenty-four narratives, thirteen describe a ‘bad death’ (for a full list of the twenty-four narratives, see Appendix 1). The causes of death are quite various, and include being eaten by a tiger, committing suicide, succumbing to an illness and being accidentally killed by one’s parents. Among them all, the following three narratives, those of the third and the sixth ‘roaming deities’, and the sixth ‘flower

⁷⁰ Relevant literature on this topic is plentiful. To name just a few examples: Li Zhao-hong, ‘Shaanxi jindai geyao zhong de nüxing hunyin shijie’ 陝西近代歌謠中的女性婚姻世界 (Female Marriage Reflected in Modern Shaanxi Folksongs), *Xi’an wenli xueyuan xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* (西安文理學院學報 [社會科學版] Journal of Xi’an University of Arts and Science [Social Sciences Edition]), 15/3 (2012), 1-5. Chen An-ling, ‘Yuyan pingjia jieshi minnanyu geyao de nüxing jiazhi guan’ 語言評價揭示閩南語歌謠的女性價值觀 (A Study of Female Values in Ballads in Southern Min Dialect in the Light of Language Appraisal), *Fujian yike daxue xuebao (shehui kexue ban)* (福建醫科大學學報 [社會科學版] Journal of Fujian Medical University [Social Sciences Edition]), 9/2 (2008), 29-33. Rubie S. Watson, ‘Chinese Bridal Laments: The Claims of a Dutiful Daughter’, in Bell Yung, Evelyn S. Rawski, and Rubie S. Watson (eds), *Harmony and Counterpoint: Ritual Music in Chinese Context* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 107-129. Liu Fei-Wen, ‘Literacy, Gender, and Class: Nüshu and Sisterhood Communities in Southern Rural Hunan’, *Nan Nü*, 6/2 (2004), 241-282. Anne E. McLaren, *Performing Grief: Bridal Laments in Rural China* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2008).

⁷¹ Rubie S. Watson, ‘Chinese Bridal Laments’, 107-129.

name', clearly reveal a mentality of resistance to marriage and childrearing. The three women in these stories chose to liberate themselves from wifedom and motherhood by committing suicide.

The story of the third 'roaming deity' reads as follows:

In the Pavilion of Coloured Flowers lived a girl ranked the third. The lady was surnamed Tan, and her family name was written on a white sheet of paper. [It is said that] the lady had made countless mistakes during her lifetime. [One example recounting one such mistake was as follows.] [One day,] after the Tan lady had eaten dumplings for breakfast, she left home and went to the riverside to do the laundry.

She carried the firewood on one end of her shoulder pole and her baby on the other end. The Tan lady arrived at the riverside and began to do the laundry. She washed the clothes [of the whole family] until her loins began to ache and her eyes blurred. [These arduous household chores caused her to ponder:] how much she had been suffering [from the marital life and the various duties that it entailed].

After musing a long while, she decided to commit suicide by throwing herself straight into the nine-layered river. After the Tan lady died, the Immortal Matron [took pity on her because of her arduous life,] and recruited her into her flowery pantheon to take up duties on Flower Mountain. The Tan lady was processed according to the official rules and became one of the female acolytes [to take care of the flower-garden and the flower-souls].

彩花樓上娘第三 白紙寫書妹姓譚
千錯萬錯娘自錯 莊果小娘去洗衫

早間喫餃出門去 一頭担樵一頭嬰
去到江邊娘洗濯 濯得腰痛眼都班

仔細思良成耐耐 將身直落九重灘
死了官道娘成鬼 太婆招妹管花山

The story of the Tan woman vividly illustrates the hardships entailed for a female in household chores: doing the laundry, collecting firewood, childrearing and, by extension, marital life. The Tan woman decided to escape from all of the duties involved in wifedom and motherhood by committing suicide.

If the story of the Tan woman has not made women's outright resistance to patrilineal descent and virilocal residence clear, then the story of the sixth 'roaming deity', the Hua woman, will certainly drive the point home. Her story goes as follows:

In the Pavilion of Coloured Flowers lived a girl ranked the sixth. The lady was surnamed Hua, and her family name was written on a white sheet of paper. [It is said that] the lady made countless mistakes during her lifetime. [An example recounts one such mistake happened as follows.] When the Hua girl reached the age of fifteen, her parents had accepted a marriage proposal for her. The Hua girl had to drink the tea sent by the male side and this act symbolized that the marriage bargain was settled.

So the Hua girl was married at the early age of fifteen. As a consequence of her early marriage, she suddenly found herself an outsider in another family. The Hua girl tried her best to attend to every need of her parents-in-law and her sisters-in-law.

Every day she helped in preparing the meals, beginning with pounding the grain and washing the rice. [The household chores consumed all of her time so] she was never able to spin even one hemp thread, [as she used to do at home]. She had to fetch the water from the river outside the village as well. [These burdensome household chores made her ponder:] how much she had been suffering [because of her marital life and the various duties that accompanied it]. After brooding a long while, she decided to commit suicide by throwing herself straight into the nine-layered river.

The Hua girl was willing to go to the river in the Netherworld but not the river on the edge of the village again. After the Hua lady died, the Immortal Matron [took pity on her because of her unfortunate marital life,] and recruited her into her flowery pantheon to take care of the flower-basket. The Hua lady was processed according to the official rules and became one of the female acolytes [to take care of the flower-garden and the flower-souls].

彩花楼上娘第六 白紙寫書妹姓華
千錯萬錯娘自錯 妹年十五領人茶

十五領喫人茶定 少年十五嫁人家
嫁落人家為外客 服侍公婆及妹夫

日里倒米并倒碓 不曾緝得一條藤
嫂娘思良成耐耐 拋身直落九重江

担甕下江去取水 都向黃泉条路灵

It is noteworthy that the Yao practise diverse marriage patterns that allow for bilateral descent and both virilocal and uxorilocal residence.⁷² Therefore, a Yao woman is not necessarily destined to be married out and be an ‘outsider’ in the family of her husband, as is illustrated in the last story. Nevertheless, the marriage pattern of the androcentric ideology leaves one in no doubt that this is identified as the source of the lamentations expressed in the song. Again, thinking about her arduous marital life and her invidious status as an ‘outsider’, the Hua woman decided to release from the roles assigned to her by committing suicide.

The story of the sixth ‘woman who died young’ in the subgroup of ‘flower names’ is rendered in a similar fashion as the above two narratives, only the woman in this particular story decided to free herself from the restraints imposed by a patrilineal lineage even before she entered the marital life. The story reads as follow:

In the Pavilion of Coloured Flowers lived a girl ranked sixth, surnamed Xiu. She was originally from the Peach Spring Grotto and her original surname was Zhou. The flower that symbolized the sixth girl would bloom before all the other species of flower did. The sixth girl was indeed charming and refined.

The sixth girl was also humorous and easygoing. No one was able to outwit her in anything. [Even so, such a clever girl was still destined to be married out. When she came of age,] her father agreed to a marriage deal proposed by a Lei family. He happily received the tea and the gifts that symbolized the confirmation of an engagement. [But he was not to know this was the beginning of a tragedy.]

[On the wedding day,] the Lei family sent a sedan chair to pick up the sixth girl. The sixth girl ascended the sedan chair and arrived at the Lei family. [While people were still celebrating her marriage,] the sixth girl decided to hang herself with three feet of thin red silk cord. [Deep down her heart,] she knew that it would be better to die early than to struggle all her life to be free of the duties imposed by the patrilineal lineage.

After the sixth girl died, she was processed according to the official rules and became one of the female acolytes in the Peach Spring Grotto. Today a talented man (the ritual specialist) issued an official document to summon the sixth girl to descend to the household. [Upon receiving the official invitation,] the sixth girl knew

⁷² Chen Meiwen, *Cong mingming tan Guangxi Tianlin Panguyao*, 44-53.

it was time to send the white flower-soul (boy) to the couple [who sponsored the ritual.] and join the feast.

影花弟六妹姓休 出在桃原妹姓周
百花未綻娘花綻 小娘媚兒自風流

說若小娘真好笑 別人不庇妹花油
爺領雷家人茶定 雷家茶礼歡來收

雷家轎子人來迎 小娘轎口坐門樓
三尺紅羅吊頸死 不如早死免宗由

小娘死了娘成鬼 化作奠桃花不來
今日才郎有狀請 入筵送子与郎夫

As can be seen, despite how clever and outstanding the sixth ‘flower name’ might have been in her mortal form, she was destined to be married out. Even though she decided to fulfil the duty of a filial daughter, she rejected assuming the roles of wife and mother.

In summary, the narratives of the third and sixth ‘roaming deities’ and the sixth ‘flower name’ expose a strong layer of discontent with their given fate in wifehood and motherhood in general and of married life in particular among women. The only way for them to transcend their bitter destiny was to die a ‘bad death’. Why do so many narratives of female fertility deities recount ‘bad deaths’? In particular, why does there appear to be a strong warning about and resistance to a marriage that is a patrilineal-oriented arrangement? The answers to these questions need to be sought in a regional context. Brigitte Baptandier says that a ‘bad death’ is a way to achieve ‘individualization’:

In general a bad death has the effect of individualizing the deceased, for whom ritualized mourning becomes impossible... Someone who has died a bad death is no longer a link in the unbreakable line of ancestors, but rather an individual, a sort of free electron, condemned to wander, sterile and ostracized. He or she is thus impossible to mourn.⁷³

⁷³ Brigitte Baptandier, *The Lady of Linshu*, 87.

Whether the ‘bad deaths’ are caused by an accident or are the result of a suicide, the ‘individualization’ of these female fertility deities among the Yao has made their worship similar to the worship of ‘women who died young’ (*guniang*) among other populations in southeastern China and in Taiwan. Research on the topic reveals that the worship serves as an important mechanism to amend the fate of these women who had not been able to fulfil their given roles in a patriarchal society. By worshipping them, the potential danger with which this ambiguous sexual category might threaten social order is transformed into something visible and positive. Most importantly, because they were freed from the moral and cultural expectations of ordinary women, their autonomy in their sexual pursuits and their ability to ensure birth and pregnancy is often heightened.⁷⁴ In other words, on the one hand the textual representation of female fertility deities in the Yao religious tradition is very much in line with the other forms of ‘woman who died young’ worship in southeastern China and in Taiwan. These female deities all suffered different forms of ‘bad deaths’ but eventually gained the power to give or protect children.

Following the logic of ‘individuation’, the other way Yao women are able to go beyond their given fate as wives and mothers is to seek spiritual cultivation. Among the twenty-four narratives, some of the stories told in a much more literary style depict different images of women pursuing transcendental experiences. In a similar vein to the narratives of Guanyin, Mazu and the Eternal Mother—the three most important female deities in Chinese culture who emphasize the unambiguously positive quality of purity and legitimize their liberation from wifhood and childbirth—women, as represented by female fertility deities, can be independent actors on their way to a transcendental state.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ For example in Fujian, see Brigitte Baptandier, *The Lady of Linshui*. In Taiwan, see Huang Pingying, ‘Taiwan minjian xinyang guniang de fengsi-yige Taiwan shehuishi de kaocha’ 臺灣民間信仰「孤娘」的奉祀——一個臺灣社會史的考察 (The Worship of Women who Died Young in Taiwanese Popular Belief: A Study on the Social History of Taiwan), MA thesis (National Central University, 2000). Yang Shuling, ‘Tainan diqu guniangma xinyang yu chuanshuo zhi yanjiu’ 台南地區姑娘媽信仰與傳說之研究 (Research on the Belief and Tales of Women who Died Young in the Tainan Area), MA thesis (National Cheng Kung University, 2006). Lin Fu-shih, *Guhun yu guixiong de shijie-bei Taiwan de ligui xinyang* 孤魂與鬼雄的世界——北臺灣的厲鬼信仰 (The World of Wandering Souls and Ghostly Heroes: The Belief in Vicious Ghosts in Northern Taiwan) (Taipei: Taipei xianli wenhua zhongxin, 1995).

⁷⁵ P. Steven Sangren, ‘Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols: Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu and the Eternal Mother’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 9/1 (1983), 4-25 at 11.

2. *Women's Cultivation and Transcendence*

In the same manuscript are some narratives of 'women who died young' that use literary metaphors and assign women the names of different kinds of fruit-bearing flowers. The latter aspect has given rise to the title 'flower names'. With the exception of the above-mentioned sixth 'flower name' who died a 'bad death', most of the other narratives tend to describe how beautiful and fruitful the flowers/girls are. Among them all are two narratives that interestingly depict women who are in pursuit of cultivation and transcendence by performing good deeds and reading the Classics. The text about a woman strenuously dedicated to cultivating herself reads as follows:

Deep in the East Mountains grew a camellia flower that was actually a celestial maiden ranked first [in the heavenly world]. The first celestial maiden sometimes wandered up into the mountains; sometimes down inside the fences of the village households. The camellia flower would usually bloom before all the other flowers had opened their petals, [attributable to the wondrous power the first celestial maiden possessed.] In one of her previous lives, the first celestial maiden had been a mortal and she was born into a family surnamed Pan.

Three preceding generations of the Pan family had all performed good deeds. It was a truly blessed family in which the Pan girl was steadily able to cultivate herself in her mortal guise. [After a life-time of strenuous cultivation,] the Pan girl was able to be elevated into the highest heaven of the Grand Veil (*Daluo tian*).⁷⁶ Diligently indeed had she cultivated herself. This was why her good deeds had been reported to the deities in the heavenly realm.

Whoever said that the camellia flower cannot produce seeds? Can you not see how the seeds produced by the camellia flower have spread far and wide from up in the mountains and to down inside the fences of the village households? Therefore, the believers who were present at the household altar were left in no doubt. The celestial maiden being summoned was in the form of a camellia flower and was once a cultivated mortal woman surnamed Pan.

Among the crowd gathered in front of the household altar was present a talented man (the ritual specialist). The talented man issued

⁷⁶ *Daluo tian* is the highest heaven of the permanent realm of the Primordial Beginning, one of the highest deities among the Three Pure Ones in the Daoist pantheon. See Livia Kohn (ed.), *Daoism Handbook* (Brill, 2000), 247.

an official document to summon the first celestial maiden to descend to the household. [Upon receiving the official invitation,] the first celestial maiden knew it was her duty to send the flower-souls of the children asked down to the household [that had sponsored the ritual].

東浚山茶妹弟一 半在高山半在欄
百花未綻娘花綻 昔日原來妹姓潘

三代祖宗娘修善 穩身直上大羅天
元是上界天仙女 三度修身奏上方

誰說山茶不結子 山茶結子滿山欄
眾信在壇你莫怪 妹是山茶本姓潘

今日才郎有狀請 妹來送子入家門

The story depicting a woman studying the Classics reads,

In the kingdom governed by Confucius lived a very chaste girl ranked the eleventh [in her family], surnamed Zong. The Zong girl was said to have been born with an upright spirit. The legend has it that she began to chant the scriptures when she had just turned seventeen.

People said that she chanted thousands of scrolls of scriptures per day and she always had the scriptures by her side from dawn to dusk. The reason she was so diligent in chanting the scriptures was she was destined to reveal this method of [self-]cultivation to the mortal world. After fulfilling her purpose in this world, she had been transformed into a flower by the Buddha so that people could worship its chaste spirit.

Each leaf and every branch of the chaste flower produced only one pod of seeds. It had worried the people greatly [that the chaste flower might not flourish and therefore not produce the seeds]. But the crowd gathered at the household altar need not have worried, for the chaste flower not only bloomed but also produced seeds.

Among the crowd gathered in front of the household altar was present a talented man (the ritual specialist). The talented man issued an official document to summon the chaste flower/the Zong girl to descend to the household. [Upon receiving the official invitation,] the chaste flower/the Zong girl knew it was her duty to send the flower-souls of the children asked down to the household [that had sponsored the ritual].

南貞十一妹姓宗 正是仲尼国里人
小娘生來多端正 年登十七念經文

一日念經得萬卷 念經日夜不離身
昔日小娘身有道 變佛南貞花一根

一葉一枝生一束 小妹花發好愁人

今日才郎有狀請 妹來送子与才君

Compared with the largely marginalized status of women in the Yao religious domain, these two narratives have surprisingly depicted women as prominent actors in their pursuits of cultivation and transcendence. The second story of the eleventh ‘flower name’ even employs narrative elements with Buddhist and Confucian associations. The Confucian ideology of a patriarchal society is often blamed as the source of women’s subordinate status in China.⁷⁷ Be that as it may, in this particular case, reading the Classics of Buddhism and of Confucianism is represented as a way for women to cultivate themselves. By doing so, women are then able to transcend and become immortal beings who can grant life to parents who yearn for children.

To sum up, if we accept the proposition that these ritual texts could be understood as products of female singing, there is a strong possibility that female singers were expressing women’s general attitudes towards their anticipated roles as wives and mothers. By expressing female anxieties about a patrilineal marriage, as well as by committing suicide to escape from wifedom and motherhood, these songs symbolically act as a weapon women wield to embody their subjectivities in the face of the intrusion of a patrilineal ideology and its concomitant marital arrangements. The cultivated image of women, on the other hand, tellingly indicates the Yao women’s possible engagement in religious conduct, albeit the narratives might also possibly have been generated on the basis of the Yao women’s existing awareness and knowledge of the dominant religious-cultural traditions, Confucian and Buddhist teachings.

⁷⁷ Dorothy Ko, Jahyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R. Piggott, ‘Introduction’, in Dorothy Ko et al. (eds), *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1-24. Shanshan Du and Ya-chen Chen (eds), *Women and Gender in Contemporary Chinese Societies: Beyond Han Patriarchy* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 2011).

Conclusion

This chapter suggests the importance of a ‘gendered’ perspective including two dimensions that should be borne in mind when investigating Yao religious practices and textual representations. In the first section, by placing the focus on ‘women’ specifically, I have probed the possibility of women sharing the authorship of songs written down in the manuscripts utilized by ritual masters. My purpose is to demonstrate that, even though males sing most of the texts, a ‘gendered’ perspective is urgently needed in the reading of the contents. Most significantly, women’s centrality in singing has served as a very important means to sustain and proclaim a Yao identity in the face of Chinese language and deities.

Secondly, by suggesting that these texts should be read as literary products of female singing, I interpret the narratives of female fertility deities as expressions of ‘female subjectivities’. I argue that Yao women have used them to express their anxieties about patrilineal-biased marriage in general. To escape from their assigned fate as wives and mothers, the female authors have depicted two different yet correlated images of women: one is women enduring ‘bad deaths’; the other is women cultivating themselves into a transcendental state. Both are ways of ‘individuation’ open to women to divert them from the given roles a patrilineal society expects of them.

In conclusion, the Yao women do share a situation similar to that of women in other societies, as ‘the marginality of woman to the written tradition contrasts sharply with her centrality in the realm of social and corporeal practice’.⁷⁸ This chapter reveals that Yao women have embodied a reflexive voice in the face of the importation, if not to put too fine a point on it, intrusion, of an androcentric ideology enforced through the practice of religion that has been infused with imperial metaphors. By wielding singing and songs as weapons, the Yao have sustained their indigenous ways of claiming who they are in the face of the powerful Other, the Chinese imperial state.

⁷⁸ Dorothy Ko et al. (eds), *Women and Confucian Cultures*, 20.