
“Liu Sanjie” and the Changes and Shapings of Ethnic Culture in Lingnan of China

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ABSTRACT: “Liu Sanjie” is a famous figure in a legend which spread in southern China. Nowadays she is best known to Chinese as a representative of the ethnic culture of Guangxi. It has been about 700 years since she first appeared in the records of the Southern Song Dynasty. This paper focuses on the development of the Liu Sanjie legend, discussing how a kind of “local culture” has been represented by different scholars and officials, and how these different presentations show how the people imagine foreign/native culture and “ethnic culture”.

KEY WORDS: Liu Sanjie, the Zhuang, Lingnan, Chinese Ethnic Culture

Introduction

The legend of “Liu Sanjie” 劉三姐 (The third sister of the Liu family)¹ is famous in the folklore of southern China. It has been more than 700 years since the legend is first found in the local chronicles of the Southern Song Dynasty. The legend molded a quick-wittedly, brave, beautiful woman with talent for singing. In China, many people have become acquainted with her through the 1961 movie *Liu Sanjie* which based on the legend represented a gifted singer of the Zhuang people. “Liu Sanjie” remains to this day the most famous representative of the ethnic culture of Guangxi and appears in different cultural productions.

“Liu Sanjie culture” has been a rare and important phenomenon for centuries and in the past

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¹ Liu Sanjie has different names in different versions of the legend, such as Liu Sanmei 劉三妹, Liu Sangu 劉三姑, Liu Sanpo 劉三婆, Liu Xian 劉仙 and so forth. (See Qin Guiqing 覃桂清. *Liu Sanjie Zhongheng* 劉三姐縱橫, Guangxi Minzu Chubanshe, 1992, p61-94.). Among them, “Liu Sanjie” and “Liu Sanmei” are best known by people. In general, before 1950s the name of “Liu Sanmei” is used in many cases; since 1950s, people often call her “Liu Sanjie”.

century has exerted a significant impact on Chinese culture. From the point of view of cultural geography, the “Liu Sanjie” image is scattered through southern China and connects the ancient “Baiyue” (百越) ethnic groups, the “Liangyue” (兩粵) and “Lingnan” (嶺南) areas in modern times, and Guangxi and Zhuang people in contemporary times. In the cultural development of ethnic groups and folklore, “Liu Sanjie” had been a part of texts about “savage customs” written by scholars from the “Central Plain” region, had experienced the modern folklore movement in the Republic of China, had undergone the socialist cultural transformation in the name of the mass culture after 1949, and emerged in the tourist industry and the popular culture in the late 20th century and in the 21st century. Throughout the fluctuating relation between national culture and folk culture during the passing centuries, “Liu Sanjie” has always been a cultural symbol bound up with the relation between the “Central Plain” region and the borderland, between Han people and the minorities. This paper focused on how one kind of “local culture” the story of Liu Sanjie has been represented by deferent scholars and officials, and how these different presentations show how the people imagine foreign/native culture and “ethnic culture”.

In the last 10 years the theory of ethnic groups proposed by Fredrik Barth and other Norwegian anthropologists in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organization of Culture Difference* has had a great impact on Chinese Minzu 民族 studies. Barth stresses ethnic groups as social organization, not as culture-bearing units that are identifiable by cataloguing particular assemblages of culture traits. Ethnic differences can be determined by reference to certain diacritical cultural features and by certain basic social identity. Although the social identity of members of the ethnic groups is established by essential standards, means and goals, Barth and the other authors emphasize the ethnic boundaries which are signified by specific items of culture for the ascription of ethnic identity.² In the field of Chinese studies scholars generally use “ethnic group”, a term used abroad by Barth, to stand for “Minzu” or “Shaoshu Minzu” 少數民族. This has been, in part to reflect and critique the Minzu Shibie 民族識別 (a program to identify all the country's ethnic peoples) movement launched in the middle of twentieth century, and in part to more appropriately represent all levels of groups that have arisen in a modern multi-cultural society and to reconfigure the political space.³

Wang Mingke intergrated the theory of ethnic groups with the theory of collective memory in sociology and applied them in the study of the Qiangzu 羌族 in China. He proposes a new paradigm in the study of Chinese ethnic group: examining the history of Han people and ethnic minorities from the ethnic margins. Wang Mingke thinks that the ethnic boundaries have been generated throughout the long history of China and that they still continue to change, which can be examined through diverse historic and current accounts.⁴

² Fredrik Barth(ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: the Social Organization of Culture Difference*. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1969).

³ For discussions of applying “ethnic group” in Chinese studies, see Nari Bilige 納日碧力戈, *Xiandai Beijing Xia de Zuqun Jiangou 現代背景下的族群建構* (Construction of ethnic groups in the background of modern society) (Kunming: Yunnan Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2000); Li Shaoming 李紹明, “Cong Zhongguo Yizu de Rentong Tan Zuti Lilun” 從中國彝族的認同談族體理論 (An Approach to the Ethnic Theory from the Identity of the Yi Nationality: A Discussion with Prof. Stevan Harrel), *Minzu Yanjiu 民族研究* (Ethno-National Studies), 2 (2002): 31-38; Stevan Harrel, “Re-Thinking ‘Nationality’ and ‘Ethnic Group’: A Response to Professor Li Shaoming,” *Minzu Yanjiu*, 6 (2002): 36-40.

⁴ Wang Mingke 王明珂, *Huaxia Bianyuan: Lishi Jiyi yu Zuqun Rentong 華夏邊緣：歷史記憶與族群認同*

This inspired me to look at the “Liu Sanjie” legend in a long historical process, not to trace her story and prove that “she” has a long and proud history, or to distinguish between the true and the false in different versions, but rather to investigate what the ethnic history that the changing meaning of the legend implies in Southern China.

Song Immortal of the Baiyue Ethnic Groups

From the Southern Song dynasty to the Republican China, the Liu Sanjie legend spread primarily in the Lingnan area (Guangxi, Guangdong, Hainan), and to some degree in Fujian 福建, Hunan 湖南, Jiangxi 江西 and so on. During this period, the genres in which the legend was recorded included local gazetteers, literati miscellanea, academic papers and accounts of legend in folklore magazines, ethnographies, etc. The character of the legend was usually called “Liu Sanmei” 劉三妹.

1. The Southern Song -Qing Dynasties

From the Song to the Qing dynasty, with the process of Han political power extending to Lingnan, Han people had access to more knowledge about Lingnan as well as “Baiyue” ethnic groups, than ever before.⁵ They got this knowledge mainly from two genres, local gazetteers and literati miscellanea, written by the officials and scholars. The function of local gazetteers was to record the geography and territory of the Empire, which helped the officials to understand local situations and govern the Empire. Although what a local gazetteer records may be “local” knowledge, the narrative mode in such books does not depend on the local situation, but has a common ground in representing the “local” story as the part of a historical process and the political structure of the Empire.⁶ Literati miscellanea are the records of stories, bits of news in history and Kaoju 考據 (textual research). People often read them for pleasure as a passtime.⁷ This kind of literature thus includes a large number of legends and accounts of customs of the Nanman 南蠻 (southern savage) which are seldom recorded in the official history. They are the main resource to trace the history of ethnic customs and culture.

The earliest extant written record of Liu Sanmei is in the *Yudi Jisheng* 輿地紀勝 (Record of the landscape of the imperial domain) by Wang Xiangzhi 王象之 of the Southern Song: “Liu Sanmei was a native of Chunzhou 春州. She sat upon a stone cliff; hence its name.”⁸ This record shows “Liu Sanmei” is such a famous person in Chunzhou that people named the hill after her.

(Chinese margins: History memory and ethnic identity) (Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2006).

⁵ More details see Hu Shouwei 胡守為, *Lingnan Gushi* 嶺南古史 (The ancient history of Lingnan) (Guangzhou: Guangdong Renmin Chubanshe, 1992).

⁶ Cheng Meibao’s study of local chronicles of Guangdong since the late-Qing dynasty shows, literati’s writing of “local culture” often reflects how they imagine the Chinese culture. See Cheng Meibao 程美寶, *Diyu Wenhua yu Guojia Rentong: Wanqing Yilai “Guangdong Wenhua” Guan de Xingcheng* 地域文化與國家認同：晚清以來“廣東文化”觀的形成 (Local culture and national identity: the formation of the idea of “Guangdong culture” since the late-Qing dynasty) (Beijing: Sanlian Shudian, 2006).

⁷ See Liu Yeqiu 劉葉秋, *Lidai Biji Gaishu* 歷代筆記概述 (Summarizing the miscellanea in past dynasties) (Beijing: Beijing Chubanshe, 2006).

⁸ Wang Xiangzhi 王象之, *Yudi Jisheng* 輿地紀勝 (Record of the landscape of the imperial domain) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1992), Vol. 4, p3066. The English translation refers to Lydia H. Liu, “A Folksong Immortal and Official Popular Culture”. in *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan*, Judith T. Zeitlin & Lydia H. Liu (ed.), (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center for the Harvard-Yenching Institute and distributed by Harvard University Press, 2003), p588.

While the transformation of Liu Sanjie into a rock or an immortal is still found in later accounts, an increasing emphasis came to be placed on her skill at singing. From the beginning of the Qing dynasty, she came to be considered as an ancestor of singers of Baiyue.

A collection of folksongs, *Yuefeng Xujiu* 粵風續九 (Folksongs of Yue: a sequel to the Nine Songs), which recorded Liu Sanmei's story was popular in intellect circles. The editor of the book, Wu Qi 吳淇, born toward the end of the Ming dynasty, served the Qing as a Tuiguan 推官 (local governor) in Xunzhou 潯州 of Guangxi. During the time when he was in Guangxi, he collected and recorded about a hundred of local folksongs to form the *Yuefeng Xujiu*. In this book, Wu Qi wrote an introduction about Liu Sanmei. Due to the loss of the original book, nowadays people just read the record transcribed by other scholars from *Yuefeng Xujiu*. The most important accounts are written by Wang Shizhen 王士禎, Lu Ciyun 陸次雲, Sun Fanggui 孫芳桂 and Qu Dajun 屈大均. The two following accounts are representative:

(1) *Dongxi Xianzhi Zhiyu* 峒溪纖志志餘 (Record of Dongxi region) by Lu Ciyun

The people of Xidong 溪峒 (The southern region where Non-Han people live) originally did not know how to sing, and Liu Sanmei was the first person who skilled in songs. We do not know in which dynasty Sanmei lived. She had mastered the Way, freely composing poems on the spot. She knew each language of the savages she heard in the mountain region. She could compose songs in the local tone and rhythm. These songs were made for the ritual of marriage and Tiaoyue 跳月 (Dance in the moonlight). The native people took the songs as models. One Miao song 苗歌 said, "learn Liu Sanmei's songs when you learn to read poems". That means people not only sang but read her songs, and regarded her songs as textbooks for learning how to read. At that time, a degree holder from Baihe 白鶴 of Yongzhou 邕州, skilled in songs, came. Liu Sanmei and he climbed to the top of the Seven Star Cliff in Western Yue to sing in antiphonal style. Their sound was like that of phoenix (luanfeng 鸞鳳). Their audience, numbering in the thousands, forgot to return home and just wandered around them. After the singing stopped, people saw that Liu Sanmei and the degree holder had turned into stones, still facing each other. Even today, on clear and moonlit nights, one still seems to hear the sweet and euphonious sound. The Miao people, Yao people, Lang people, Zhuang people, worship Liu in the cave. Later singers have to offer sacrifices to Liu before they sing; only in this way can they start to sing. On the southern side of South Hill, there is Sanmei Cave. It is said Sanmei will respond when visitors call her from a distance.⁹

(2) *Guangdong Xinyu* 廣東新語 (New accounts of Guangdong) by Qu Dajun 屈大均:

Among the young women of Xinxing 新興, there was one Liu Sanmei; it is told that she was the first person to create songs. She was born during the reign of the Tang emperor Zhongzong 中宗 [705-7]. At the age of twelve, she was thoroughly versed in the Classics and Histories and was skilled in making songs. For a thousand li 里 around, those who heard of the fame of her songs came to compete with her, but all found themselves, after one day or two or three, unable to match her verses and so departed. Sanmei knew musical composition and did wondrous things with it until she attained the Way. She roamed in the hills and along the rivers of Guangxi and

⁹Lu Ciyun 陸次雲, *Dongxi Qianzhi Zhiyu* 峒溪纖志志餘 (Record of Dongxi region), in *Zhaodai Congshu* 昭代叢書 (Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1990), P450.

Guangdong, where resided mostly uncultivated native people. She mastered the language of every place she came to, and when she came to a certain place, she would make songs based on their language and match songs with them; and the people of this place would revere [her songs] as their model. Once she climbed a hill together with a youth from White Crane Village and sang [with him], which drew a large crowd of Yue, Yao 瑤, and Zhuang people. Men and women numbering in the thousands all took her to be an immortal. For seven days and nights the sound of singing continued unbroken until the singers turned into stone. Thereupon, the people of that locale worshipped her at Brocade Stone Cliff in Yangchun 陽春. The cliff is more than 30 Zhang 丈 high, densely forested, with a thousand ancient camphor trees screening half of it from sight. At the foot of the cliff there are stones steps, etched and embroidered with flowers of lichen, just like “bird-track” calligraphy. One stone is shaped like a curved table, large enough for a person to recline on; it gleams with a black luster, slick and shining, [and it is said to be] a relic of Sanmei. At the end of a month the sounds of sheng 笙 pipes and of cranes are often heard; and in times of bountiful harvest, it is almost as if someone mounts to the top of the cliff and sings. Sanmei is now called the “Song Immortal,” and all those who make songs, whether people of Qi 齊 or the mountain folk of Lang 儂, Yao, Zhuang, and the like, upon completing their songs must first present a copy [to Sanmei’s shrine]. The officiants keep them, and those who want the songs come and record them, leaving the originals. They gradually accumulated several cases full [of verses]. Now, after the wars, the place is desolate.¹⁰

In summary, in the literature from the Song to the Qing dynasty, the story of Liu Sanmei is a mixture of the song culture of Baiyue ethnic groups in Lingnan, with the Confucian culture and Taoist culture of Book of Song the north. Because the writers and readers of such literature are intellectuals of Han culture, a story of Song Immortal of other ethnic groups could not be accepted and disseminated unless it was reconciled with familiar cultural values.

2. The Period of the Republic of China

Since 1918, with the development of Chinese modern folklore studies, Liu Sanjie legends were recollected and published in folklore journals, at the call of the editors and the folklorists. Materials from those currently known show there are 6 stories of Liu Sanjie were published. See the following chart:

Collector	Title	Liu Sanjie’s Birthplace	Main Content	Resource of Materials
Liu Ceqi 劉策奇	<i>Liu Sanjie</i> 劉三姐	Chaomei 潮 梅·Guangdong 廣東	Liu Sanjie travelled and sang all over Guangxi and Guangdong provinces. No one could match songs with her. When she went to Liyufeng 立魚峰	<i>Geyao</i> 歌 謠 (Folksong), no. 82, 1925.

¹⁰ Qu Dajun 屈大均, *Guangdong Xinyu* 廣東新語 (New accounts of Guangdong) (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), p261. The English translation refers to Lydia H. Liu’s version, see *Writing and Materiality in China: Essays in Honor of Patrick Hanan*, p588-589.

			(fish-standing-like hill), she sang with a farmer. In the end she seemed no match for him and turned into a stone statue.	
Feng Daoxian 馮道先	<i>Hepu Minjian Liange Zhuoshi</i> 合浦民間戀歌掇拾 (Selected Love Folksongs of Hepu)	Hepu 合浦 , Guangxi, 廣西	The singer Liu Sanmei was pushed by her brother and falls down the cliff. She was rescued by grabbing a bine.	<i>Minjian Wenyi</i> 民間文藝 (Folk Literature), no. 11-12, 1927
Wang Lixi 王禮錫	Jiangxi Shan'ge yu Daoqingshan Fengsu 江西山歌與倒青山風俗 (Mountain Songs of Jiangxi and Daoqingshan Custom)	Guangdong	The erudite scholar of Jiangxi sang with Liu Sanmei in antiphonal style	Wenxue Zhoubao 文學週報 (Literature Weekly), February 1928
Yu Min 愚民	Shan'ge Yuanshi de Chuanshuo Ji Qita 山歌原始的傳說及其他 (The Legend of Mountain Songs' Origination and Other Things)	Guangdong	The degree holder Luoyin 羅隱 sang with Liu Sanmei in antiphonal style and he could not beat her.	<i>Minsu Zhoukan</i> 民俗週刊 (Folklore Weekly), no 13-14, 1928.
Ma Jinhua 馬進華	No title(fill in the questionnaire of folktales handed out by the Folklore	Guangxi	Liu Sanmei had a native talent for singing, never finding her peer. In the end she got the Way and went to the western paradise.	Zhong Jingwen, Jize Guanyu Liu Sanmei Gushi Cailiao 幾則關於劉三妹故事材料 (Some

	Academy)			Materials of Liu Sanmei Stories), <i>Minsu Zhoukan</i> , no.19-20, 1928.
Cai Shouye 蔡守業	Ibid.	Wuchuan 吳川, Guangdong	Liu Santai composed native songs. People of Dianbai threw money down to her. Finally she passed away in a sitting posture in a cave.	Ibid.

During the first half of the 20th century, researchers in folklore studies first utilized Western scientific methods to reexamine the folk society of China, providing “objective” knowledge about “folk” for the transition from an empire to a nation-state. In light of this new discourse, the story of “Liu Sanjie”, on one hand was interpreted in the frame of new literary history, on the other hand was discussed in the fields of ethnic minority and ethnic geography studies.

Liu Sanjie’s mountain songs were called “Yuege” because the Liu Sanjie legend of Guangxi and Guangdong was a primary focus of that time. This is in part because of the precipitous spread of the legend in the two provinces and the politically-driven centrality of Guangdong in the Chinese folklore movement. In the 1930s and 1940s, there were quite a few papers and ethnographies discussing the localities and ethnicities of the Liu Sanjie legend.

Zhong Jingwen points out, Yuege are “not the common folksongs of Yue. They are sung by the native group Kejia 客家.” And Zhang Qingshui’s linguistic study of Yuege in *Yuefeng Xujiu*, proves that Yuege are almost mountain songs of the Kejia language except that some are sung in Yueyu Baihua 粵語白話.¹¹ This conclusion was accepted by many scholars including Zhu Ziqing, who wrote of it in *Zhongguo Geyao*.¹²

Liu Xifan’s 劉錫蕃 *Lingbiao Jiman* 嶺表紀蠻 is an academic book as well as a political report. In this book, Liu Xifan regards singing as one of the realities in the “savage’s life”, and tries to reveal the cultural features of the “savage” through their songs. He wrote a chapter “the Ancestor of Savage’s Songs”, in which he listed the records of Lu Ciyun and *Xunzhou Fuzhi*, and said:

There are discrepancies between the two versions of the Liu Sanjie legend. They both are unconvincing myths. Sanmei might be a real person, who had been singing with Mr. Zhang for three days and knew he was such a good adversary that she began to love him ardently. Then they eloped together by pretending to climb the hill to sing, ...Sanmei’s fiancé probably lost her in their way. So people made a joke that she had turned into a stone. As time passed, this joke

¹¹The points of Zhong Jingwen and Zhang Qingshui, see Chen Zi'ai 陳子艾, “‘Yuefeng Xujiu’ and ‘Yufeng’ Yanjiu Santi” (Three issues of “Yuefeng Xujiu” and “Yuefeng”) 《粵風續九》與《粵風》研究三題, *Ershi Shiji Zhongguo Minsuxue Jingdian* 二十世紀中國民俗學經典·史詩歌謠卷, Yuanli 苑利 ed. (Shehui Kexue Wenxian Chubanshe, 2002), P171.

¹² Zhu Ziqing, *Zhongguo Geyao*.

became a “true history.”¹³

Compared to the romantic story described by literati of the Ming-Qing dynasty, Liu Xifan’s presumption is quite different. The former attached importance to a select number of exquisite songs, such as Meixiangsi 妹相思, which resemble poems in the Han language. So it is not strange for the literati to imagine the Song Immortal as a beautiful figure. Liu Xifan’s presumption, however, is based on his relatively deep acquaintance with the “savage”. Since he had many chances to investigate the native people of Liangyue 兩粵, he obtained a great deal of knowledge about the life of the ethnic group, and developed an impression of the savage. He thought the “savages” were people who were illiterate, dis-united, unstable in life, culturally strange, and carnal. He claimed that savages had too many babies they could not support.¹⁴ At the same time he collected Dongge 洞歌, Miaoge 苗歌, Yaoge 猺歌, Langge 狼歌 and Miaoge of the Han people 漢人苗歌, recording these songs in the Han language. He thought these songs were sang in “extremely divergent and wild language in savage regions”¹⁵, which hardly gave him the same pleasure as that the Ming and Qing Literati got from Meixiangsi. Even he felt the songs were “especially interesting,” describing the sound as “long and soft.” Liu Xifan said that the beautiful sound reminded him of culture in which songs instead of any other ritual are used to express affection. Based on the recognition and imagination of the “savage life”, Liu Xifan interpreted Liu Sanmei legend as a story about eloping.

The scholars’ reflections on “the masses” and “ethnic groups” run through the Chinese Republican-era studies of “Liu Sanjie.” Undoubtedly, in China the knowledge of the masses and ethnic groups has never been researched like this before. The scholars were anxious to “discover” the history of the masses and integrate this history into national history considered in light of modern discourse. So they “have the double vision of ‘the masses’”¹⁶. That means, in the field of folklore study, scholars attach importance to the oral literature and history while criticizing them. They research texts and conduct empirical analysis to get the true and objective knowledge of the masses. Meanwhile they explain and interpret this knowledge in relation to a historical conception of linear evolution, and regard the masses as those who should be enlightened by intellectuals.

Take Zhong Jingwen mentioned above as another example. Zhong is a famous folklorist who was born in Guangdong. As a “countryman” of Liu Sanjie, he had a passion for the Liu Sanjie legend throughout his academic life. In the 1920s, he wrote a paper “the story of Immortal Songs Liu Sanmei”. He says:

Liangyue where the Lang琅 and the Zhuang people live, lies in the distant south, removed from the influence of central dynastic culture.¹⁷

¹³ Liu Xifan 劉錫蕃, *Lingbiao Jiman 嶺表紀蠻* (Record of savage in Lingbiao area) (Taipei: Nantian Shuju, 1987). p166.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p5, p41.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p167.

¹⁶ Xu Xinjian 徐新建, *Min’ge yu Guoxue—Minguo Zaoqi “Geyao Yundong” de Huigu yu Sikao 民歌與國學——民國早期“歌謠運動”的回顧與思考* (Folksongs and Chinese traditional culture: retrospect and rethink to the folksongs studies movement in the early of the Republican China) (Chengdu: Bashu Shushe, 2006), p41.

¹⁷ Zhong Jingwen 鐘敬文, “Gexian Liu Sanmei Gushi” 歌仙劉三妹故事 (The story of song immortal Liu

Zhong did not acquire an aversion to the natives and their customs. As he recalled how he began to study the Liu Sanjie legend half a century earlier, Zhong said, “a figure like Liu Sanjie who is romantic and elegant, deserves to be admired and made as an object of academic study.”¹⁸ But, the description he makes is similar to Liu Xifan’s interpretation. It is in the discourse of folklore that they both posit Liangyue as a primitive space. In this discourse, Zhong constructs Liu Sanjie and her oral culture, as “the other” in relation to the “advanced” Han culture.

Song Immortal of Guangxi

1. The Zhuang Culture Found and Liu Sanjie

The 1950s-1960s is a founding period in the Zhuang 壯族 culture. As the government identified the Zhuang and founded the Guangxi Zhuang Nationality Autonomous Region, there was an explosion of publications discussing the Zhuang as a new and independent ethnic group. At the same time, in order to demonstrate the consistency and attractiveness of the Zhuang culture, scholars and the government chose Liu Sanjie as the representative of the Zhuang culture.

Firstly, authors of “literary history of the Zhuang” incorporate Liu Sanjie into the “ancient literature of the Zhuang”. In 1958, under the organization of the Literary Study Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, the scholars of the cultural institution of the Guangxi Zhuang Nationality Autonomous Region and Chinese Department of Guangxi Normal College investigated the Zhuang people’s literary history and then published three collections (*Zhuangzu Minjian Geyao Ziliao* 僮族民間歌謠資料, *Zhuangzu Minjian Gushi Ziliao* 僮族民間故事資料, *Guangxi Zhuangzu Wenxue Ziliao* 廣西僮族文學資料)¹⁹ and one literary history (*Guangxi Zhuangzu Wenxue* 廣西僮族文學)²⁰. *Guangxi Zhuangzu Wenxue* takes the Zhuang as the subject of literary history and outlines “the Zhuang people’s literature” in chronological order. In this way the “literature of the Zhuang” is displayed as an independent continuity. In line with the stage-based history of ethnic groups in China, the literature of the Zhuang is divided into four periods: the legendary period, the ancient period, the modern period and the contemporary period. In introducing each period, the book emphasizes folk literature while paying attention to scholars’ literature as well. Since Liu Sanjie is said to have lived in the Tang dynasty in some legends, her story is included in the part on the ancient literature of the Zhuang. Actually almost all the folktales - Qinsun Wang 岑遜王 (King of Qinsun), Nongzhigao de Gushi 儂智高的故事 (A story of Nongzhigao), Moyi Dawang de Chuanshuo 莫一大王的傳說 (A tale of King of Moyi), Qibi Laoyao 七鼻老妖 (An old Monster of seven noses), etc - are compiled into the section on ancient time. Some of these stories are about “resisting the government of feudalism”, some are about “struggling with the beasts and monsters and bad thought”, reflecting the reality of class oppression and anti-oppression in the feudalism time and the pursuit of happiness of labor people. Obviously this is to correspond the human society history phase generated by the perspective of

Sanmei) , in *Liu Sanjie Chuanshuoji*. p9. (The original was published in *Minjian Wenyi* 民間文藝 (Folk literature), 11-12(1927)).

¹⁸Zhong Jingwen 鐘敬文, “Liu Sanjie Zongheng Xu”, 《劉三姐縱橫》序 (Preface to the history of Liu Sanjie legend) , in Qin Guiqing 覃桂清 *Liu Sanjie Zongheng* (Nanning: Guangxi Minzu Chubanshe, 1992). P2.

¹⁹ See *Guangxi Zhuangzu Wenxue* 廣西僮族文學 (Literature of the Zhuang in Guangxi), Guangxi Zhuangzu Wenxueshi Bianjishi, Guangxi Shifan Xueyuan Zhongwenxi ed. (Nanning: Guangxi Zhuangzu Zizhiq Renmin Chubanshe, 1961), p444.

²⁰ Ibid.

Marxism. Meanwhile, putting these tales in the ancient time is to confirm the history with oral materials. Thus the past of the Zhuang who have no its own written history, is not empty.

Secondly, the Communist party in Guangxi held a mass performance of *Liu Sanjie* in 1960. This kind of performance is organized by the local government of the administrative division. Since 1949, performing and viewing local operas had been an important recreation for Chinese people.²¹ In order to create new cultures, the Guangxi government called on “to create a new art with national style and local color”.²² Therefore, all levels of troupes were trying to create and arrange new plays with new theme. Almost simultaneously, Liu Sanjie legend from folklore was dramatized to Guiju 桂劇, Caidiaoju 彩調劇 and other local operas. And for the successful performance of Caidiaoju *Liu Sanjie* by the Caidiaoju troupe of Liuzhou, the story caught the interests and attentions of the Guangxi government, who then called on each troupe to perform *Liu Sanjie* throughout the entire province. As a result, some good troupes were chosen to join the mass performance of “Liu Sanjie” held on April 27, 1960 in Nanning 南寧, the capital of Guangxi.²³

During the mass performances, there are 23 performances in 11 sorts of operas shown in 5 theaters in Nanning city. Before and after that, the cultural departments of Guangxi organized discussions, published drama scripts and arranged some excellent troupes to play on the tour in Guangxi. Until early April of 1960, the creation and performance of “Liu Sanjie” became a great mass movement:

Now more than 58,000 people of 1,209 art units have participated in playing *Liu Sanjie*, in 11 sorts of dramas. There are 1,200,000 crowd who have watched *Liu Sanjie* which cover 60 per cent of Guangxi’s population...In the two special administrative areas of Baise 百色 and Liuzhou, one from every 100-200 persons has played a role in *Liu Sanjie*.²⁴

Besides, Guangxi government recreated a new Minjian Gewu Ju 民間歌舞劇 (Folk musical opera) after the mass performance. Based on Caidiaoju *Liu Sanjie* of Liuzhou, the new *Liu Sanjie* was made an exquisite play and went to Beijing to give performance, being praised greatly by quite a few leaders and critics. Either as a Caidiaoju or as a folk musical opera, it is a new drama created by the new artists according to the requirement of drama reformation of that time. Lydia

²¹ According to a report of Chinese culture department, “there are about 300,000 actors of traditional opera, and about 1,000,000 audience everyday”. So the culture department take the performances of opera as a point which just minor to the product of movie. See “Zhongyang Renmin Zhengfu Wenhuaabu 1950nian Quanguo Wenhua Yishu Gongzuo Baogao yu 1951 nian Jihua Yaodian” 中央人民政府文化部一九五〇年全國文化藝術工作報告與一九五一年計畫要點 (The work report and the points of project in 1951 of Chinese culture and art in 1950 by the Ministry of Culture of Central People’s Government), in *Xiqu Bao* 戲曲報, May 20, 1951.

²² “Decision on holding the Guangxi mass performance of Liu Sanjie by the communist party committee of Guangxi the Zhuang Nationality Autonomous Region”, *Zhongguo Xiqu Zhi (Guangxi Juan)* 中國戲曲志 (廣西卷) (The history of Chinese traditional dramas (Volume of Guangxi)), Edit Committee of *Zhongguo Xiqu Zhi (Guangxi Juan)* edit., (Zhongguo ISBN Zhongxin Chuban, 1995), p662.

²³ Ibid, p662-663.

²⁴ “Guanghui Canli de PianZhang——Woqu *Liu Sanjie* Chuangzuo he Yanchu Huodong Huigu” 光輝燦麗的篇章——我區《劉三姐》創作和演出活動回顧 (The splendor chapter: a review of the creation and performance of Liu Sanjie in Guangxi), in *Liu Sanjie Pinglunji* 劉三姐評論集 (Essays on *Liu Sanjie*), Deng Fanping 鄧凡平 ed. (Nanning: Guangxi Minzu Chubanshe, 1996), p522.

Liu points, on the content, Caidiaoju and folk musical opera rewrote a main plot which was Liu Sanjie struggling with a landlord, to cater for the main narrative of “class struggle”. On the music form, the drama troupes made “a synthesis of Guangxi Caidiao operatic tunes with folk melodies and dance music”. “The mixing of folk melodies character of folk mountain songs” “helped popularizing the musical drama *Liu Sanjie* among different dialect groups and made it accessible across the vast areas of the mainland”.²⁵ It is the “new” opera form and the administrative means that made *Liu Sanjie* as a collective production become the cultural representative of Guangxi and the Zhuang people.

Thirdly, During the time when dramas of *Liu Sanjie* were popular in Guangxi, Chuangchun 長春 Studio completed a movie *Liu Sanjie*, which was on in 1961. This movie takes the story of Caidiaoju as an original version, uses mountain songs in antiphonal singing as the main scenes, and makes Guilin’s beautiful scene as background. Like other contemporary films on ethnic groups, this musical feature stands out the ethnic people who are skilled at both singing and dancing, and manifests the ethnic members living in a big Chinese family happily. If the local operas popularize the Liu Sanjie culture all over Guangxi, then the movie put the Zhuang’s image into the mass’s memory in the discourse of minority culture created by the government.

During the history of Liu Sanjie culture, the movement of recreating Liu Sanjie in 1950s-60s is a turning point. From that time, Liu Sanjie has become a symbol of Guangxi deflating from that of Lingnan region, and a symbol of the Zhuang deflating from that of the Baiyue ethnic groups.



Figure 1: Poster of the movie *Liu Sanjie*

²⁵ Lydia H. Liu, “A Folksong Immortal and Official Popular Culture”, p576, p577.

2. The “New Liu Sanjie” in the 21st Century

Since 1990s, with the process of deepening the economic restructuring, “it ought to be a new thought of producing a range of ethnic culture brands worthy of national and international acclaim”²⁶ “Liu Sanjie” has already been a successful representative of ethnic culture of Guangxi from 1960s, then it is undoubtedly logical for all levels of government to develop cultural industries related to “Liu Sanjie”.

Guilin: the Performance of *Impression Liu Sanjie*

Impression Liu Sanjie is a the grand landscape performance directed by Chinese famous director Zhang Yimou 張藝謀. The location of performance is on the confluence of the Li river 灕江 and the Tianjia river 田家河, surrounded by 12 hills on the east side of Yangshuo county 陽朔縣, Guilin city 桂林市. The time of performance is every night during the whole year except for flood time (it often happens in July and August) .

The creators of *Impression Liu Sanjie* stress “it is a show in which the actors perform with the nature”.²⁷ Because, during the performance, what the audience see are not a coherent story or beautiful dances, but hills shining magically irritated by strong lights at night, colorful changes in formation swathed in ever-changing lights, peasants with ethnic costume igniting lights on their boats and rowing their bamboo rafts...The audience sit out of door and watch the actors performing influenced by the weather in the landscape. That is the meaning of “performing with the nature”.

At the very beginning of the show, a man narrates:” today I am standing in the landscape and looking for the lady named Liu Sanjie and a dream of singing mountain songs.” Here “Liu Sanjie” the narrator looking for is the one in the director’s childhood memory of the film *Liu Sanjie*.²⁸ The ethnic feature demonstrated by the film is the motive that *Impression Liu Sanjie* tries to develop. However, the ethnic features are not those of the Zhuang, but the “collective characters” in lives and cultures of the southern ethnic groups: the actors showing the costume of the Miao 苗族, the Dong 侗族, the Zhuang 壯族, the Yao 瑤族, singing the Dongzu Dage 侗族大歌 (one kind of folksongs of the Dong), the peasants fishing and herding...

One climax of this show is a pretty girl, dancing gracefully on a huge reaphook-shape yellow “moon” which glides on the river slowly. And then, a team of girls in white with long hair dance on the “bank” floating on the water. They show lingering looks to their lovers, with love songs transcribed centuries:

The vine looks for a tree to entwine,
How can a tree looks for a vine?
If the green vines do not cling to the tree,

²⁶Tang Zhengzhu 唐正柱, “Guanyu ‘Liu Sanjie’ yu Minzu Wenhua Pinpai Yanjiu de Ruogan Wenti” 關於“劉三姐”與民族文化品牌研究的若干問題 (Some issues of “Liu Sanjie” and ethnic cultural brands studies), *Liu Sanjie Wenhua Pinpai Yanjiu* 劉三姐文化品牌研究 (Studies on cultural brands of Liu Sanjie) (Nanning: Guangxi Renmin Chubenshe, 2002), p9.

²⁷ Introduction to *Impression Liu Sanjie* by tourism website of Guilin, see <http://www.netguilin.cn>.

²⁸ “General Introduction to *Impression Liu Sanjie*”, see

http://art.china.cn/impression/liusanjie/txt/2006-09/07/content_168387.htm

The Spring will pass by in vain.

To associate to affiliate,

We swear to love for one hundred years.

The one who passes away at the ninety-seventh year,

He or she will wait on the Naihe Bridge 奈何橋 for three years.

The intention of the director might show the beauty and affectionateness of the southern ethnic women though the images of the moon lady (the actress is called “the fifth generation ‘Liu Sanjie’”) and girls in white. Undoubtedly, it is a stereotyped imaginary pattern. The arrangement of love songs are more lingering, arousing people’s memory to the related stories.

It is interesting that the mass, stated as the subject of folktale time after time in the 20th century, is mentioned again. The media report this show not only has improved the peasants’ living standards by hiring 400 local peasants as minor actors, but has raised their moral lever and changed their badness in living habit. And many peasant actors are reported that they are proud of themselves as they can “participate in such high level performance and win so much approval form domestic and foreign audience”.²⁹

From here we can see how the tales “from the folk” return to the life of the mass. When the government and cultural institutes recreate Liu Sanjie legend in a commercial show, and make it a product of tourism, the inhabitants of seven villages near the location of the performance have to change their idea and living style according to the commercial contract. To some extent they accept these changes, as the show can improve their standards of material lives. But during the process, they have no any power to decide how to represent Liu Sanjie and mountain songs. The reasons they can participant in the performance are they can take on the physical jobs such as rowing boats, drawing red silk and it can reduce the cost for hiring peasants. (By contrast, Caidiaoju and film *Liu Sanjie* take hundreds of folk singers’ songs as original version). So Liu Sanjie has become an “advanced ethnic culture”³⁰ that can save peasants and sublimate their quality but not belong to them. “Liu Sanjie” is a dream pursued by others——strangely, them play themselves who are not real in the dream.

Nanning: the Nanning International Folk Song Arts Festival

The Nanning International Folk Song Arts Festival began in 1999, is mainly composed of theme events--culture, business and trade and tourism where the cultural event includes an Opening Evening. From 2004 the China-Asian Expo is held annually in Nanning during the festival time. Then the Opening Evening has changed to be one of national arts events as an Opening Evening of China-Asian Expo.

The organizers insist the festival base on the folksong culture. They claim it originates from the Gexu 歌圩 (a traditional songfest popular among the Zhuang people) on Sanyuesan 三月三

²⁹ See “Yinxiang Liu Sanjie: Yige Pinpai Jihuo Duochong Xiaoying” 《印象·劉三姐》：一個文化品牌啟動多重效應 (*Impression Liu Sanjie: a cultural brand produces the multiple effects*) , <http://www.gx.xinhuanet.com> , December 15th ,2006.

³⁰ See *Liu Sanjie Wenhua Pinpai Yanjiu*, p3.

(March 3rd in lunar calendar) . During the festival, some songfests are organized in Nanning and its suburb for people to sing freely.

At every Opening Evening, there is at least one performance related to “Liu Sanjie”——sometimes singing a mountain song of Liu Sanjie, sometimes introducing a young and potential female singer and calling her as “Liu Sanjie”. Take *Shan’ge Haobi Chunjiangshui* 山歌好比春江水 (The mountain songs are like the water of Spring river), an arrangement of mountain song sung at the Opening Evening of 1999 as an example. Its music comes from that of a folksong *Shiliuqing* 石榴青 (Green guava) . Before 1999, Caodiaoju *Liu Sanjie* also adapted the folksong. By comparing the three songs, He Zhengrong 何政榮 thinks the folksong “is plain, simple and nature in style, less ornamentation in music”. The song in Caidiaoju is “full with vigor, clarity and fervor”. And the one in the festival, although is “vigorous, wild and more savagery”, “but the tonic of melody, the musical mode and the thinking mode implied in music is hard to be substituted”. In conclusion, the author thinks “the modern music is not opposed to the traditional music; the modern folksong is developing in basis on the traditional one.”

I might agree with this point about the relation of the “new folksongs” and the “traditional folksongs”. But if we examine the roles these modern folksongs play in modern society, we can see the “new folksongs” are sung to meet the consume pattern of popular culture in cities, to cater to the imagination of foreign visitors, most of whom come from Southeast Asian countries. Under such condition the real subject of “folk” is canceled, and the folksong is actually “the other” in a “folk song festival”.

Once again, “Liu Sanjie” and “folksong” become “performance” to the citizen and tourists. People watching “Liu Sanjie” is to view the ethnicity and barbarism represented by “her”, of course, this time, in a form of urban popular music.

Yizhou (宜州): “Liu Sanjie Xiang” 劉三姐鄉

Different from the grand performances in Guilin and Nanning, Yizhou, a county-level city in the northern Guangxi, carries out the strategy of constructing Liu Sanjie cultural brand required by the Party committee of Guangxi by naming a township as “Liu Sanjie Xiang”.

The original name of “Liu Sanjie Xiang” is “Liuhe Xiang” 流河鄉(Flowing river township), which is dominated by Yizhou city government.

The native people think they have sufficient reasons to change the name. First, there is an account on Liu Sanjie was a native of Liuhe Xiang, that

is recorded in *Yishan Xianzhi* 宜山縣誌 (Gazatteer of Yishan county) of the Qing dynasty. It tells Liu Sanjie was a Zhuang woman born in Xiajian 下梔 village. Her older brother hated her because she loved singing. One day when she was scrambling vines on an edge of a cliff beside the village to chop wood, her brother cut the vines so that Liu Sanjie fell into the river and died. Today in a fissure of a cliff facing the river, there is a small wood, which the villagers think is leftover shoulder pole belonged to Liu Sanjie. Second, today the custom of singing is still popular among the people there. People especially aged people like singing in festivals and in

ritual occasions.

Third, the local government develops tourism and folksong culture actively. For tourism, Xiajian River is the key beauty spot of Yizhou. It ranked in the first key points of interest of Guangxi in 1989. Presently there are travelling programs including “visiting the Zhuang culture in Liu Sanjie’s hometown” and “drifting in bamboo boats in Gulong river 古龍河”. Tourism is a new source of economic growth.³¹ For folksong culture, only in 2002, Yizhou government held more than 1000 mountain songs matches and performances.³²

A striking example in developing folksong culture is the construction of Liu Sanjie Shuyuan 劉三姐書院 (Liu Sanjie academy) near the Xiang government building. Liu Sanjie Shuyuan is ornamented with the red penthouse roof and well-colored wall, with two stone lions outside the gate, to mimic an aura of “antiquity”. There is a room exhibiting living articles of the Zhuang, a manuscript of scenario of *Liu Sanjie* by a local intellect who is considered as the first person who created local drama of *Liu Sanjie*. Outside the exhibition room, there is a square space. A mosaic picture of phoenix, a traditional design of the Zhuang is on the ground. And a standing statue of Liu Sanjie with ancient clothes and a bob, lips opening seeming as she is singing, is at a corner. In fact “Liu Sanjie Shuyuan” is a small museum for officials and tourists to visit.

“Shuyuan” is a teaching institute in traditional China. It is strange to construct a Shuyuan to memory Liu Sanjie who is a figure of oral culture. After the May 4th generation intellectuals seeing Liu Sanjie culture as part of substrate culture, the intellectuals of a small city and countryside in the 21st century seem to recovery the same imagination as that of the Qing literati: considering Liu Sanjie as a mix of oral culture and written culture. This image of Liu Sanjie, however, reflects their thinking of themselves: educated persons born in and familiar with country societies. Furthermore, “Liu Sanjie heat” of 1950s-60s gives them so deep impression that the image of Liu Sanjie they create is just like the one on the stage and the screen: wearing in some “ancient” custom to show her is a Song Immortal of the Zhuang.

Base in the cases above, Yizhou government decide to name the township after Liu Sanjie, to promote the local development of economy with Liu Sanjie’s influence. At the ceremony of changing name on July 30th, 2004, Liang Shengli 梁勝利, the Party Secretary of Hechi city, which the Yizhou city belongs to said, “We hope sincerely that Yizhou will take this as a turning point, promoting ‘Liu Sanjie’ the cultural branding, dedicating to create, develop and sustain the rich cultural deposits of it...Speed up the development of tourism, and attempting to make Yizhou an outstanding tourist city of Guangxi.” Like other speeches given by Chinese officials, this speech sounds as cliché, but is resolved and directional. It implies the city government will allocate more fund to Liu Sanjie Xiang to develop.

In Chinese, the character “Xiang” of “Liu Sanjie Xiang” has double meanings. The character means an administrate unit as well as hometown. Liu Sanjie legend spread all over Guangxi and Guangdong, and more than one places compete to be the hometown of Liu Sanjie. The success of Liuhe Xiang is a result of the planning of tourism of Guangxi and the devotion of Yizhou and

³¹Huang Bo 黃波, “Chuangyou Yingping, Hongyang Liu Sanjie Lvyou Wenhua Pinpai” 創優迎評, 弘揚劉三姐旅遊文化品牌 (A report for government work, not published in public).

³² Qin Huining 覃慧寧 made the statistics according to *Yizhou Daily*.

Liuhe Xiang government.

In the three cases above, we can see the government, the intellectuals, the commercial institutes and the mass cooperate to some extent. They create and show the ethnicity through “new Liu Sanjies” to foreigners. Here we can see “Liu Sanjie” is a very flexible sign to show ethnicity. Thanks to the great influence of the film *Liu Sanjie*, “she” can represent culture of the Zhuang people to others. Meanwhile, due to the legend spreading in Guangxi widely, “Liu Sanjie” can be used as a general symbol of the ethnic minority status of Guangxi.

A Brief Conclusion

“Liu Sanjie” is a sign that indicates the folk culture of Lingnan is translated and brought into the world of Han people culture. Since “she” was discovered earlier, “Liu Sanjie” had been a representative of barren territory of the centre empire. From the middle of the 20th century, “she” has implied the Zhuang group who are skilled at singing have joint to a big family of Chinese nation peacefully. Later products of “Cultural Industries of Liu Sanjie” are resulting from this history.

As an ethnic cultural symbol, “Liu Sanjie” has become the representative on of Guangxi deflating from that of Lingnan region. We know in the Republican China it is scholars of Guangdong who study Liu Sanjie mostly and at that time Liu Sanjie as a folktale of Liangyue (including Guangdong and Guangxi) was discussed. But from 1949, Guangdong has gradually desavagized and become the developed area in China. Thus, “Liu Sanjie” presenting the singing custom as ethnic groups, does not fit to be the very presentation of Guangdong. On the contrary, Guangxi needs a symbolic image containing the feature of the Zhuang people. Thus the representation of savage folk custom of Lingnan in past became that of the minority culture of Guangxi province. That is how “Liu Sanjie” “drew back to” be represented Guangxi culture from Lingnan culture.

In the process of the representation, while symbolizing the Lingnan region culture as others to the north China, “Liu Sanjie” is also the tradition narrated and represented by Chinese language, which distinguishes it from indigenous culture that only spread within the minorities, thus it is earlier and sooner absorbed and appreciated by later Han culture. Different forms of Liu Sanjie culture, as the variations of trans-ethnic cultural practice, reveal how authors use “Liu Sanjie” to differentiate the Han people and the Zhuang people, and even demonstrate how people in different area of Guangxi shoot for resources by striving for cultural representation. The historical transformation reflects the historical changes of geography and ethnic groups in Lingnan.

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