Chen Meiwen

Collections of Yao Manuscripts in Western Institutions

Abstract: This chapter aims to provide background information on the collections of Yao manuscripts in European and American libraries and museums. It looks at Yao manuscripts beyond a 'content approach' and focuses on the various ways in which these manuscripts found their way into overseas collections. It elaborates on three aspects of Yao manuscripts that are essential for us to understand. Most notably, the Yao are not a homogenous ethnic group, and Yao manuscript culture is not homogenous either. It is essential to study Yao manuscripts from a sub-group perspective. Overseas collections of Yao manuscripts which were acquired mostly by purchase came mainly from two Yao sub-groups, the Mien and the Mun, both Mienic-speaking peoples of the Hmong-Mien language family. I then give an overview of collections of Yao manuscripts outside China and discuss problems of classification, methods of textual transmission, reading pronunciation, the use of the character script, and other aspects of Yao manuscript cultures. Finally, I elaborate on some simple methods to differentiate between manuscripts of the Mien and the Mun sub-groups to facilitate a better understanding and appreciation of Western collections.

1 Defining Yao manuscripts

The publication of *Yao Documents* by Shiratori Yoshirō in 1975 drew scholarly interest in studying Yao manuscripts among scholars outside China.[1] Reviewing *Yao Documents*, Michel Strickmann in his ground-breaking essay 'The Tao among the Yao: Taoism and the Sinification of South China' pointed out that there was a textual relationship between Shiratori's Yao manuscripts and Daoist scriptures.[2] Since then, the study of Yao manuscripts has primarily taken a 'content approach', especially in exploring their Daoist elements.[3] This chapter aims to expand our understanding of Yao manuscripts beyond the 'content approach' by studying how the

1 Shiratori 1975.

2 Strickmann 1982.

3 For instance, Hu Qiwang 1994, 61–69.

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manuscripts in library and museum collections came to be there, and how they might be related to other aspects of their original societies and cultures.

The Yao are highly mobile non-Han ethnic peoples living in southern China, mainland Southeast Asia, and elsewhere. Over the past few centuries, they have taken their manuscripts on their migratory routes from China and Mainland Southeast Asia and in very recent times, to Western countries.[4] Some of the Yao manuscripts ended up in several European and American university libraries or museums. Until now, the scholarly articles that provide an overview of these collections are introductory in nature.[5] Their focus is not how the categorisation of Yao manuscripts came into being or how the manuscripts were written, read, or sung. Even with today's dynamic international collaboration on various digitalization projects, research on Yao manuscripts that goes beyond a 'content approach' is still scarce.[6]

Then, what is a Yao manuscript? Adam Smith offers a working definition: 'The texts are 'Yao' in the sense that they are likely to have been possessed and used by Yao individuals, and in some cases copied or composed by Yao transcribers or authors'.[7] This paper takes Smith's definition as a point of departure. In general terms, we can say that Yao people borrowed the Chinese script and modified it to write their own texts for a variety of their own religious and cultural purposes. However, it is important to notice three specific socio-political factors associated with the production of Yao manuscripts.

First and foremost, readers need to know that 'Yao' is an umbrella term that includes a number of quite different groups, having different cultures and speaking different languages. Various peoples at various times fled up into the hills to avoid taxation by predatory officials. 'Yao' was originally an exonym, not an autonym, given to them by the Chinese.[8] In China, the Yao are one of 56 nationalities officially recognised by the Chinese government. So defined, they incorporate speakers of

4 For the cross-border migration history of the Yao, see Cushman 1970.

5 Lucia Obi (2010), 'Yao Manuscripts in Western Collections', paper presented at the Yōzoku dentō bunken kenkyū kokuji shinpojūmu ヤオ族伝統文献研究国際シンポジウム [International Symposium on Research of Yao Traditions], November 23, 2010, Yokohama, Kanagawa University; Chen Peng 2018; Wu Chiayun 2019.

6 Cawthorne (2021) and Estévez (2022) are among the few works that approach Yao manuscripts both with and beyond their contents. Cawthorne demonstrated the production process of Yao manuscripts in terms of their materiality. Estévez illustrated how the Yao manuscripts attained their ritual powers through a series of rituals surrounding their production.

7 Smith 2017, 574. We note that Adam Smith says 'likely' – that is, he leaves open the possibility that manuscripts purporting to originate from Yao communities may actually be forgeries.

8 Feng Henggao (ed.) 2007.

four main language families: there are Hmongic-speaking groups (such as the Bunu), Mienic-speaking groups (such as the Mien), Kam-Sui speaking groups (the Lakkia), and Chinese dialect-speaking groups (e.g., the Pjon toa jeu) (autonyms in all cases).[9] Manuscript cultures and Daoism-laden ritual traditions can be found among all the above groups, except for the Hmongic-speaking groups. Hence, the concept of 'Yao manuscripts' encompasses the manuscripts written, owned, and used by the Mienic, Kam-Sui, and Chinese dialect-speaking groups as they are found in China.

However, outside China the Yao come mainly from two groups, the Mien and the Mun; both these groups are speakers of Mienic languages of the Hmong-Mien language family. These are the main Yao groups who migrated from China to Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos) in order to escape taxation, corvee labour, and military incursions, or to seek better living conditions. Later in the late 1970s, they also escaped to other countries (America, Canada, France, and Australia) because of the CIA's secret war in Laos (1964–1973).[10] The Yao manuscripts found outside China belong mostly to these two groups. The collections of Yao manuscripts housed in American and European libraries and museums were, for the most part, obtained from the Mien and the Mun living in Southeast Asia. In other words, the Yao manuscript collections held outside China are largely comprised of manuscripts written, owned, and used by these two groups.[11]

The second aspect is gender. In general, only Yao men can write Yao manuscripts. This characteristic relates to the fact that Yao women did not acquire Chinese literacy until the last century. The Yao composed Yao manuscripts with Chinese characters and Chinese-based vernacular graphs. Only men normally acquired Chinese literacy; therefore, they remained the sole transcribers of Yao manuscripts.[12]

The third aspect is commissioned transcription. Yao men wrote Yao manuscripts as part of a literate culture that included recitation of liturgical texts during rituals, letter-writing, and other things. Copying ritual texts from the collection of manuscripts owned by one's master is one of the ways for a disciple to learn the Chinese written characters, if he has not already had the skill, and acquire the contents. On the other hand, commissioning scribes (*daibi* 代筆) to copy manuscripts has been a conventional practice in Yao manuscript culture. Shiratori Yoshirō

9 Mao Zongwu 2004, 3, 6–8.

10 See Pourret 2002, 26 for how the Yao came to Southeast Asia; Litzinger 2000, xi; and Obi and Müller 2005, 228 for an editorial note on how the Yao came to western countries.

11 In the following discussion, I will use the term 'Yao' as shorthand to refer to the Yao groups that had such manuscript traditions.

12 Yao women participate in the manuscript culture by making paper. This paper-making tradition is still alive in the Yao (Lanten or Mun) villages in northern Laos. Women are the primary paper makers (Cawthorne 2021, 1–16).

reports that many Yao ritual manuscripts he collected and compiled for *Yao Documents* were purchased from Tung Sheng-li (Dong Shengli) 董勝利, a Han Chinese from Yunnan. Tung was married to a Yao woman and his job was to transcribe Yao manuscripts for Yao ritual specialists. In the case of a Yao manuscript made in this manner, the scribe usually added remarks and wrote his own name and the name of the commissioner at the end of the manuscript. For instance, the last page of a ritual manuscript in the Leiden collection (UB 2004–15 Folder 71) with an unidentifiable title contains the sentence, 'This book was commissioned by the disciple Li Yunkai [and] copied by a scribe surnamed Pan from Guangxi' (*Dizi Li Yunkai zhi ci Yuexi ren Panshi daibi* 弟子李雲開置 此粵西人潘氏代筆).

My focus in this chapter is on collections housed in libraries and museums outside China.[13] As Yao manuscripts are part of a living tradition, such collections are usually understood to have their origin in manuscripts that circulated or were used at the village level in Yao communities. These collections came into the possession of Western public institutions in various ways; each collection has its own story and history.

2 Collections of Yao manuscripts outside China

2.1 Overview

Outside China, collections of Yao manuscripts are housed in various institutes in countries that include Denmark, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Vietnam.[14] Some collecting projects are carried out by research institutions to study Yao (and other ethnic groups) in their own countries, for example the Institute of Hán-Nôm Studies in Hanoi has preserved around 3,000 manuscripts (including but not limited to Yao), and the Sơn La

13 These collections of Yao manuscripts are invariably located in the Asian Division, under a special collection of oriental origins.

14 This section lists various past and present projects to collect and digitize Yao manuscripts and conduct research on them. This listing is inevitably incomplete because the study of Yao manuscripts is a growing field. New projects, research, and publications are to be expected before the publication of this chapter. Collections of Yao manuscripts held by Yao people overseas and antique collectors can also be considered collections outside China. However, the listing here does not include them, and these too must remain beyond the scope of this research. This survey is summarised in a schematic form in Appendix 1 below.

Provincial Museum in northwestern Vietnam has 1,250 Yao and Thai manuscripts.[15] Apart from these in-country projects, methods of acquisition for academic institutes are either by purchase or by donation, or both (see below). Nowadays, collecting Yao manuscripts for research purposes is sponsored by well-known funding bodies like the British Library, and involve collaboration between researchers and the manuscripts' owners – that is, the Daoist priests and ritual masters. The Yao Dao project team based in Hong Kong University is an example of this new model.[16]

The first method of collection is by purchase through oriental art dealers. Collections of this kind, for instance, are the Yao manuscripts held in Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US. In the 1990s, through R. L. Stolper, an oriental art dealer, a large consignment of Yao manuscripts from Laos and Thailand was purchased by the following libraries, museums, and university libraries: the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford (in two consignments: 307 manuscripts and 375 manuscripts); the Bavarian State Library (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek) in Munich (2,776 manuscripts); the Institute of Chinese Studies (Institut für Sinologie) at the University of Heidelberg (220 manuscripts); and the National Museum of Ethnology (Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde) in Leiden (216 manuscripts).[17] Furthermore, two smaller collections, containing 29 and 37 manuscripts respectively, are preserved in the Asian Library of Leiden University and the Royal Library in Copenhagen.[18] The Library of Congress in Washington DC purchased its Yao manuscripts a few years later, between 2006 and 2008 (241 manuscripts).[19]

The second method of collection was through donations made by the researchers who had collected manuscripts during their fieldwork. For instance, the collections housed at the Museum of Anthropology at the Nanzan University in Nagoya, Japan, and the Museum of Avallon in Saint-Martin, France, are of this kind. The collection currently preserved in the Museum of Anthropology in Nanzan University was donated in 2000 by Shiratori Yoshirō, the author of the book *Yao Documents*.[20] Similarly, in 2008, the collection at the Museum of Avallon was donated by the French ethnographer, Jess G. Pourret, who had lived in Thailand for an extended period. Another extensive collection of Yao texts, around 2,000 (it is unclear how many are manuscripts), was donated by the Dong Sơn Today Foundation, based in Vietnam, to the Frederick and Kazuko Harris Fine Arts Library of Ohio University.

15 Volkov 2012, 242.
16 Guo Huiwen et al. 2022.
17 Chen 2016, 57–61; Wu Chiayun 2019, 18–28.
18 Kuiper 2005, 42–67; Pedersen 2016, 3–119.
19 He Hongyi 2017.
20 Shiratori Yoshirō (ed.) 1975.

How did the collections acquired by purchase make their way into the abovementioned Western public institutions? In his review article that discusses the Munich collection of Yao manuscripts, Hjorleifur Jonsson revealed that there was an ongoing international trade network from which these overseas collections of Yao manuscripts were obtained:

> By asking traders about these goods, I learned that the German library most likely acquired its collection over a few years from a calligraphy dealer in England, who bought them from a 'tribal and primitive art' dealer in Thailand. This specialist in Yao materials in turn makes collecting trips. His scouts in Laos and Vietnam have a sense of what materials attract interest and the kinds of prices paid.[21]

It is highly possible that the English art dealer Mr. Stolper did not know much about Yao culture. The Yao manuscripts he sold to Western institutions were an assembly collected from different villages across Southeast Asia through local dealers as intermediaries. Because of the acquisition method, Western collections suffer from a lack of background information. For example, if the colophon page is missing, then the information about the manuscript owner and the date of composition is also missing. Even more importantly, there will be no information about where the manuscript comes from. Such de-contextualized circumstances surrounding the collections acquired by purchase in Western institutions create particular difficulty for researchers wishing to use these manuscripts.

On the other hand, beginning in the 2000s, a new research trend in the study of Yao manuscripts began, involving the direct collection of manuscripts from Yao villages for digitization and preservation. These collections of Yao manuscripts are usually made by collaborations between researchers and Yao ritual specialists. Compared with the collections of Yao manuscripts purchased through art dealers, the origins of these Yao manuscripts are identified in these digitalizing projects. The earliest such project, sponsored by the Ford Foundation from 2006 to 2008, was: '"Culture", Texts, and Literacy in Contemporary Vietnam'. In 2008, the project accounted for over 11,000 texts of the Yao (called Dao) in Vietnam. The project's organisers hoped to develop an analytical index for digital collection and to publish the entire corpus in CD format.[22] Another small digitizing project covering around 200 manuscripts discovered in Vietnam was conducted by the research team led by Alexei Volkov at National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan, from 2007 to 2011. This

21 Jonsson 2000, 223.

22 Davis 2011, 5.

four-year project, 'Traditional Sciences among Vietnamese Minorities', investigated the religious manuscripts of the Nùng, the Tày, and the Yao (Dao).[23]

There are several digitalizing projects of Yao manuscripts administered by the British Library.[24] The first one is the 'Preservation of Yao Manuscripts from South Yunnan: Text, Image and Religion' (EAP 550) (2012). 208 manuscripts were digitized from Kunming, Yunnan by Dr. Xu Jian 徐堅 of Sun Yat-sen University.[25] Another one was 'Digital Library of the Lanten Textual Heritage' (EAP 791) (2015), led by Professor Dr. Josephus Platenkamp of Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster. This project has enabled the digitization of 768 manuscripts from northern Laos.[26] Another project is 'A Digital Library of the Lanten Textual Heritage-Phase II' (EAP 1126) (2018) led by Professor Doctor Helene Basu of Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster. This Phase II project continues the digital processing of the Lanten manuscripts in northern Laos, initiated by the EAP 791 project. This project identified 1,396 manuscripts, a more significant number of manuscripts than initially listed for preservation.[27] Digitalization is an efficient way to preserve Yao manuscripts and make their content accessible to a wider readership (see Appendix 2).

2.2 Genres and classifications

The Yao people have used the Chinese script, including orthographic characters and vernacular characters, to write down anything they deemed necessary. As a result, the manuscript genres found in the collections of Yao manuscripts, both inside and outside China, are diverse. Bradley Davis has provided a general description of the different genres of texts collected for the above-mentioned '"Culture", Texts, and Literacy in Contemporary Vietnam' project conducted in Vietnam between 2006 and 2008:

These texts covered a wide variety of subject matter related to Yao communities. Contents included songs for children, epic poems, lineage stories, guidelines related to customs and cultural practices, traditional handicrafts, weather forecasting according to traditional methods, and animal husbandry. Other texts discussed matrimonial customs, descriptions of ceremonies, rites to be performed to ensure a

23 Volkov 2012.

24 The Endangered Archives Programme (EAP) is funded by the Arcadia Foundation and administered by the BL.

25 See https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP550.

26 See https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP791.

27 See https://eap.bl.uk/project/EAP1126.

felicitous marriage, family mores, and funerary practices. A specific category of text dealt with disease prevention, remedies for illnesses, and recipes for folk medicines.[28]

Considering the different contexts in which scholars encountered Yao manuscripts, it may not be surprising that there is no consensus on even a general categorisation of Yao manuscripts. The following discussion of different classification models inside and outside China touches on the broadest classification frameworks for different collections. Before demonstrating three classification models developed for overseas collections (the Library of Congress collection, the Munich collection, and the Hong Kong Yao Dao collection), I include a discussion of two classification models suggested by Chinese scholars and offer pertinent information on the division of ritual labour between the traditions of Daoist priests and ritual masters, the religious dimensions of the category 'Songbooks', and the syncretic influences of different Daoist schools and forms of vernacular Daoism. The goal of the discussion about classification models for Yao manuscripts is to show the complexity of Yao manuscript cultures and why it is critical to study them from a sub-group perspective.

2.2.1 Classification for collections inside China

Chinese scholars follow the official classification of Yao by lumping together documents found in all four Yao language groups. They usually know the provenance of a manuscript, but only highlight the group differences when needed. For instance, one of the digitalization projects sponsored by British Library (EAP 550) that includes 208 manuscripts collected from Kunming by Dr. Xu Jian 徐堅 of Sun Yat-sen University only mentioned that these texts are from Yunnan but did not elaborate further on which manuscript belongs to which sub-group. Furthermore, the Chinese classifications, as represented by Zhang Youjun 張有雋, tend to give a broad classification that does not reflect on the different religious traditions and manuscript cultures among the Yao. Take Zhang Youjun's classification of Yao documents for example. He proposed grouping Yao manuscripts into six categories: 1) Charters (*guoshan wenshu* 過山文書), usually found among the Mienic-speaking group, and the Mien in particular; 2) Genealogies (*jiapu* 家譜) and Stone Tablet texts (*shipaiwen* 石牌文); the former are often referred to as 'Lists of Household Ancestors' (*jiaxiandan* 家先單) or 'Registers of Lineage and Branch' (*zongzhibu* 宗支簿) and tend to be associated most with the Mienic-speaking group, whereas the latter are

28 Davis 2011, 4-5.

closely linked with the Lakkia, a Kam-Sui-speaking group living in Jinxiu 金秀 county in eastern Guangxi;[29] 3) Religious Scriptures (*zongjiao jingshu* 宗教經書); 4) Songbooks (*geshu* 歌書); 5) Medical Books (*yixueshu* 醫學書) and 6) Contracts (*qiyueshu* 契約書).[30]

There is yet another mode of classification developed by Chinese scholars that reflects the basic division of ritual labour between the two scriptural and ritual traditions among the Mun and the Lakkia, one for Daoist priests and one for ritual masters, but is still unable to show the sub-group differences in Yao manuscript cultures, for the Mien only have a tradition of ritual masters. Huang Guiquan 黃貴權[31] and Pan Jinxiang 盤金祥[32] separately suggest a classification framework that contains three main categories for all the Yao manuscripts: Books for Gods and Spirits (*shenshu* 神書), Songbooks (*geshu* 歌書), and Miscellaneous Books (*zashu* 雜書).[33] Taking into consideration the division of ritual labour between the Daoist priests and ritual masters among the Mun and the Lakkia, in the category of Books for Gods and Spirits, they distinguish two sub-categories: Daoist-Priest Manuscripts (*daogongshu* 道公書) and Ritual-Master Manuscripts (*shigongshu* 師公書).[51]

To cover their needs as ritual specialists, the Mun Daoist priests and ritual masters own different sets of manuscripts. To give an example, a Mun Daoist priest possesses a set of ritual manuscripts for the performance of funeral ceremonies, one of which is entitled 'Ritual for Attacking Hell' (*poyuke* 破獄科). By contrast, a Mun ritual master possesses a particular set of ritual manuscripts that ensure the

29 The stone tablets are connected with traditional forms of village-level social organisation. For example, the Lakkia used them to publicize village-level laws (*xiangyue* 鄉約), serving as legal documents for every member of society to read and follow. Eastern Guangxi is not the only area where one can find stone tablets. The book edited by Huang Yu (1993) includes stone tablets collected from other parts of Guangxi, Guangdong, Hunan, and Guizhou.

30 Zhang Youjun 1991, 320–321; Zhang Youjun 1992, 71–74.

31 Huang Guiquan 2010, 497.

32 Pan Jinxiang 2009.

33 The discussion of Huang Guiquan and Pan Jinxiang's classification model combines my readings of their works on the related topic and face-to-face interview notes during my ten-day stay in Kunming in late October and early November 2012. In particular, the discussion of 'Songbooks' is from my interview notes. Similarly, Yang Minkang and Yang Xiaoxun (2000, 33) also identify three categories for the Yao manuscripts they investigated in Yunnan: Religious Scriptures, Confucian Classics, and Songbooks. Yang and Yang highlight 'Confucian Classics' in their broad classification of Yao manuscripts, while this category is labelled as Miscellaneous Books in Huang and Pan's discussion.

why 51 ? **51** For a list of Mun religious manuscripts of both Daoist priests and ritual masters found in Yunnan by Huang Guiquan, see Huang 2003, 123–126.

smooth passage of birth and pregnancy. One example is a text with the title 'Ritual for the Red Building' (*honglouke* 紅樓科).[34] 'Ritual for Attacking Hell' is a ritual segment performed for funerals, and the 'Ritual for the Red Building' is recited in rituals conducted for the living. The category Books for Gods and Spirits also includes Registers and Memorials (*biaozou* 表奏) containing formularies for petitions to the gods and spirits, and Secret Instructions (*mijue* 秘訣 or *miyu* 秘語) that sets out instructions for ritual performances. The former are used by both Daoist priests and ritual masters (including the Mien ritual masters); the latter are found only among the Mun for both Daoist priests and ritual masters and is absent among the Mien.[35]

Unlike other classifications, Huang and Pan highlight the importance of songbooks and make it a separate category. They report on two sub-categories for Songbooks found among the Mun communities in China: Literary-style Songs (*wenyan geyao* 文言歌謠) and Colloquial-style Songs (*baihua geyao* 白話歌謠). The Literary-style Songs of the Autumn Lotus (*qiulian ge* 秋蓮歌) are a reasonably specialized genre that few Yao have the expertise to compose and sing. This situation is the opposite of the Colloquial-style Songs, for instance, Letter Songs (*xin ge* 信歌) and Songs of Bridesmaids (*yuanyang ge* 鴛鴦歌) are commonly known and widely performed. As for the Mien songbooks found in China, Pan Meihua reports a similar division between Literary-style Songs and Colloquial-style Songs. The former, called 'ancient songs' (*guyan geyao* 古言歌謠), narrate the history of ancient times. Songs that do not recount the history of ancient times can be regarded as Colloquial-style Songs.[36]

Last but not least is the category of Miscellaneous Books. In this category, Huang and Pan count all the other texts that are not directly used in ritual performances, including books on Divination (*zazhan lei* 雜占類), Textbooks for Moral Education (*qimeng shu* 啟蒙書), Language Acquisition, and Dictionaries.

34 Although not great in numbers, it is not uncommon for a Mun male to be ordained in both the Daoist priest and ritual master traditions. See Liu Guangyuan 2003, 19.

35 *Mijue* is used as the generic term for the manuals of a ritual practitioner containing the methods most crucial and therefore restricted in their circulation. See Pregadio (ed.) 2008, 746–747.

36 Private conversation with Pan Meihua 盤美花 on 6 December 2013, in Nanning. Pan Meihua is of Mien origin and is a linguist and teacher at the Faculty of Arts at Guangxi University for Nationalities.

2.2.2 Classification for collections outside China

I discuss three classifications in this section, those of the Library of Congress collection, the Munich collection, and the Yao Dao project team collection, to show different approaches to the collections of Yao manuscripts outside China and the broad classifications they produced.

For the Library of Congress collection, He Hongyi 何紅一 followed the Chinese classification of Yao ethnicity and did not distinguish between manuscripts belonging to different Yao groups when dealing with the 241 manuscripts in the Library of Congress collection. In other words, the sub-group differences in Yao manuscripts cultures are only highlighted when needed. She identified six categories of manuscripts that are of Mun and Mien origin: Scriptures (*jingshu* 經書); Documents (*wenshu* 文書); Songbooks; Textbooks for Moral Education; Divination Books (*zazhan lei* 雜占類); and Others (unidentified manuscripts, *qita* 其他).

The Munich collection: using 801 out of 2,776 manuscripts, Obi and Müller have classified the Munich collection into two main groups: manuscripts of a religious nature and manuscripts of a non-religious nature. They not only kept the essential distinction of 'Daoist-Priest manuscripts' and 'Ritual-Master manuscripts', but also devoted much effort to ascertain the scriptural and ritual traditions between different Yao sub-groups. According to their estimate of 100 identifiable titles, 60% of the manuscripts belong to the Mun, 30% of the manuscripts are of Mien origin, and 10 % of the manuscripts come from the Pai Yao (their autonym is dzau[53] min[53], a Mienic-speaking group). There does not seem to have manuscripts from the Lakkia group in the Munich collection.[37] Judging by the ritual function, they have further classified 'manuscripts of a religious nature' into five groups as follows: Scriptures (*jing* 經), Ritual Texts (*ke* 科), Registers and Memorials, Secret Instructions, and Minor Rites (*xiaofa* 小法). They also identified five subcategories in the 'non-religious manuscripts': Textbooks for Moral Education, Language Acquisition and Dictionaries, Epics and Songbooks, Divination Books, Documents, and Medical Texts.

The Hongkong Yao Dao project team collection: Unlike the above two library collections of Yao manuscripts, both acquired by purchase, all the Hong Kong manuscripts were collected for digitalization from a Mun village, with a population of around 4,700, located on the border of three provinces, Luang Namtha, Bokeo, and Oudomxay, in northern Laos. Joseba Estévez, a Yao Dao project team member, has conducted long-term fieldwork in this Mun village. Based on a digital corpus of

37 Obi and Muller 2005, 250.

Add to footnote 38 at the end: Please also see Joseba Estévez's chapter in this volume.

2,120 texts containing multiple entirely or partly duplicate texts, the Yao Dao research team categorized the manuscripts into three categories:

(1) Ritual texts, including liturgical texts, 'living manuscripts' (the Landian call these 'living manuscripts' *pai you* 秘語 [secret words or secret instructions]), and scriptures.[38] Scriptures are texts from the Daoist canon and used by the Daoist priests. Liturgical texts and 'living manuscripts' were further sub-categorized into Dao Kong books (i.e., Daoist-Priest Manuscripts) and Tai Kong books (i.e., Ritual-Master manuscripts);[39]
(2) Companion texts or non-religious texts (almanacs, moral teachings, learning material, songbooks);
(3) 'Limbo', meaning books lacking an external title and books that are difficult to classify without further study.[40]

The Yao Dao project team also selected a 'Reference Collection' of the best versions of a set of unique and representative texts out of the corpus. Informed by Joseba Estévez's ethnographical knowledge of the rituals in which these manuscripts are used, the classification used for the Yao Dao project team collection is more closely connected with the original social context than the Western collections. Because it is still contextualised, it can also serve as a point of comparison for research on de-contextualised Western collections for scholars wishing to understand the possible ritual functions of each manuscript and how they might have been used during ritual performances.

2.3 Discussion

As we can see, the modes of classification of Yao manuscripts varied in different contexts. The classification can be seen as a result of not only how different scholars

38 The Hong Kong Yao Dao project team use the designation 'Lanten Yao' instead of Mun or Landian Yao (a *hanyu pinyin* rendering of 藍靛瑤). These 'living manuscripts' embody deities within them and, thus, are deemed to be 'alive' by their owners. They must be covered with clothes ('dressed in uniform'). Personal email exchange with Joseba Estévez on 5 May 2023.

39 Dao Kong (for Daoist priest) and Tai Kong (for ritual master) are terms used by the Hong Kong Yao Dao project team. Personal email exchange with Joseba Estévez on 5 May 2023.

40 The information on classification came originally from a powerpoint presentation entitled 'Manuscripts as Objects of Exchange' by Joseba Estévez at the 'Yao Dao: Daoism, Ethnic Identity, and State Socialism' conference held at Hong Kong University on 16–17 December 2019. A fuller explanation of the classification framework is available in a recent publication: Guo Huiwen et al. 2022.

possessing distinct conceptions of 'Yao manuscript' and 'Yao' interacted with the material objects, but also partly on the basis of what access they had to manuscripts and other artefacts in different domains, inside China as well as outside China.

To help readers understand the division of ritual labour between the Daoist priests and ritual masters highlighted in Huang and Pan's works and interviews, the Munich collection, and the Hong Kong Yao Dao project team collection for the Mun manuscript cultures, I offer further explanation here based on my fieldwork, surveys of different overseas library collections, and readings of related secondary literature. In general, Mun Daoist priests take charge of Daoist rituals like *Zhai* 齋 (funerary rituals) and *Jiao* 醮 (communal sacrificial rituals). They also perform ordination ceremonies, ceremonies in which a man becomes a Daoist priest or a ritual master.[41] On the other hand, Mun ritual masters take charge of non-Daoist rituals that are often involved with exorcism and the curing of disease. The two types of ritual specialists often cooperate with each other in rituals and ceremonies like weddings, redemption of vows, and ordination.[42]

The main difference in the division of ritual labour between Daoist priests and ritual masters is aptly recapitulated by a saying offered by a Mun Daoist priest, Zhang Zhenzhen 張振針[43] from Dingcao 丁草 village, a Mun hamlet in Kujiao Village 枯叫村, Nanping Township 南屏鄉, Shangsi County 上思縣, Fangchenggang City 防城港市, in southwest Guangxi (the area is also known as Shiwan Dashan 十萬大山 [Ten Thousand Big Mountains]). Zhang said: 'A ritual master specializes in telling stories; a Daoist priest specializes in dealing with sadness. The former concerns matters that bring laughter; the latter is involved with matters that bring tears' (*shigong zhuanmen jiang gushi, daogong zhuanmen jiang youchou. yige guan xiao, yige guan ku* 師公專門講故事，道公專門講憂愁。一個管笑一個管哭). In other words, the speciality of a ritual master in ritual performance is to invoke the deities by reciting short dramatised narratives in verse that describe the attributes of the deities and the events through which he or she demonstrated their divine powers. The short narratives of the deities are often spiced with entertaining plots that will make people laugh. Another aspect pertinent to laughing is that the

41 See for instance, Lemoine 1982; Takemura Takuji 1986; Zhang Jinsong 2003.

42 We still need more research to determine what kinds of rituals the Yao Daoist priest and Yao ritual master perform together and how they cooperate during ritual performances. I observed the cooperation between the two types of ritual specialists in weddings during my 2012 field trip to the Mun village, Dingcao. For their cooperation in ordination and redemptions of vows (Mun), see Wu Ninghua and He Mengmeng 2014. Research on the cooperation between the Daoist priests and the ritual masters among the Lakkia still needs to be conducted.

43 I met Zhang Zhenzhen during my fieldtrip from September to November 2012.

task of a ritual master concerns the living, not the dead. By contrast, a Daoist priest takes charge in matters of death and the afterlife, subjects that are often infused with sadness.

Readers might wonder which Daoist traditions and schools the Yao have adopted. Judging from the contents recorded in the Yao manuscripts available to be investigated today, one can easily observe a highly syncretistic influence of various Daoist schools that emerged in different historical periods.[44] For instance, the contents of the Daoist-Priest manuscripts are arguably similar to those in the Daoist canon, consisting of scriptures and liturgical texts that bear the textual traits of the Daoist schools of Lingbao 靈寶 (Numinous Treasure),[45] Zhengyi 正一 (Orthodox Unity),[46] and Tianxin Zhengfa 天心正法 (True Rites of the Heart of the Heaven).[47] On the other hand, the Ritual-Master manuscripts are associated with different forms of vernacular Daoism, bearing textual and ritual traits of Lüshan 閭山 (Lü Mountain) and Meishan 梅山 (Plum Mountain) traditions, for instance.[48] However,

44 Many scholars have noticed the syncretistic influences of various Daoist schools in Yao religion. To name just a few, for instance, Yang Minkang and Yang Xiaoxun 2000, 1–22; Zhang Jinsong 2003; Obi and Muller 2005, 227–279.

45 'The name Lingbao (Numinous Treasure) was originally a description of a medium or sacred object (*bao* 寶, "treasure") into which a spirit (*ling* 靈) had descended. The Lingbao texts describe an elaborate cosmic bureaucracy and instruct practitioners to approach these celestial powers through ritual and supplication. At the apex of the pantheon is the Celestial Worthy of Original Commencement (*Yuanshi tianzun* 元始天尊)'. See Pregadio (ed.) 2008, 663–669.

46 The Zhengyi ritual tradition the Yao practice is similar to the tradition of popular Zhengyi Daoists (*huoju daoshi* 伙居道士). The Yao Daoist priests do not live in a Daoist temple or on a mountain; they live in families in a way not dissimilar to ordinary people. *Huoju daoshi* are also found on Taiwan. The 'Three Pure Ones' (*sanqing* 三清) are the highest Daoist deities to be revered. See Yang Minkang and Yang Xiaoxun 2000, 19–22.

47 'The Tianxin tradition is the earliest and most influential of the new Taoist exorcistic and therapeutic traditions that became important during the Song dynasty. It had already appeared in South-eastern China by the tenth century. However, the central corpus of texts, representing its earliest documented form, was only compiled at the beginning of the twelfth century'. See Pregadio (ed.) 2008, 989–993. Strickmann's article (1982) was the earliest study to connect Yao Daoism with specific historical schools. In particular, Strickmann argues that the title '太上奉行北極驅邪院川通閭梅二教三戒陞明加職弟子' an ordained ritual master receives, indicates the incorporation of Tianxin Zhengfa in Yao Daoism. Notably, the title is only used in the Mien group.

48 The ritual tradition of Lüshan (*Lüshan jiao* 閭山教) 'was syncretically forged by grafting borrowings from different branches of Daoism and esoteric Buddhism onto a local shamanic or spirit medium substrate'. See Baptandier 2008, 17. See also Ye Mingsheng 2001, 149–184. The ritual tradition of Meishan (*Meishan jiao* 梅山教) refers to a particularly distinctive form of Daoism that mixed ritual and liturgical elements of indigenous beliefs and different Daoist schools and is widely found

the texts themselves provide merely possible indications of any specific Daoist and vernacular Daoist influences, and should be studied together with the social, cultural, and ritual contexts in which they are produced.[49]

On another note, it is important to be aware that some of the songbooks also have a ritual function. During my 2012 field trip to the Mun village Dingcao, I met a group of women aged between fifty and seventy who were gifted with beautiful voices and possessed a religious songbook entitled 'Songbook of Relieving People in the Red Building (*honglou duren geshu* 紅樓度人歌書). The lyrics written in the songbook are descriptions of different ritual programmes conducted in the ordination ceremony. The significance of this specific songbook is that whenever an ordination ceremony is to be held, two women who can sing and possess such a songbook must be invited and included. Similarly, as noted by different scholars, a songbook entitled 'Songs for King Pan' (*Panwang ge* 盤王歌) records the epic of King Pan and is only sung at the ritual of 'Repaying a Vow to King Pan' (*huan Panwang yuan* 還盤王願) among the Mien. We could also consider this specific songbook to be a religious text.[50]

Last but not least, the category of Textbooks for Moral Education, Language Acquisition, and Dictionaries, though not significant in number, indicates a long tradition of 'private schools' (*sishu* 私塾) located in the Yao villages, particularly among the Mun. These Chinese texts usually circulated in the border regions among non-Han Chinese communities in imperial China; for example, the 'Wisdom of Ancient Aphorisms' (*zengguang xianwen* 增廣賢文) was an enlarged edition of a collection of sayings used in elementary education from late Ming times.[51]

3. Linguistic features: How the manuscripts are written and read

This section discusses the linguistic features pertaining to the production and use of Yao manuscripts. It explores the questions of how the manuscripts are written

among non-Han Chinese peoples, for example Yao, Zhuang, and Tujia, but also Han Chinese communities of southern China. See Holm 2004, 32–64; Obi and Müller 2005, 235–236.

49 For an example of the Lüshan and possible Lingbao influences in Mien ritual performance, see Chen 2022, 201–244.

50 Obi and Muller 2005, 242–243, 263–265; Chen 2016, 170–171; Zheng Changtian 2009, 216–234.

51 Wang Li and Huang Guiquan 2002.

and read, including a discussion of three forms of textual transmission and a preliminary analysis of Yao languages and scripts the Yao used and created.

3.1 Titles and contents

A prominent feature of Yao manuscript culture is that manuscripts with the same titles do not necessarily contain the same contents; or, manuscripts with the same contents have different titles. This textual feature applies to both the Mien and the Mun groups.[52] Jacques Lemoine explained that textual variations result from the fact that the disciples who copied the texts from their masters ' ...will never be tempted to test their accuracy by comparing them with similar documents from another source.'[53] An alternative explanation for variation in manuscript content may be related simply to errors made by the transcriber during copying. In fact, the scribes are not passive agents in textual transmission. In the process of transcribing, they often altered, combined, added to, or omitted from the contents.[54]

The manuscripts I will examine here are from the Leiden collection of 216 manuscripts stored in the National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden, the Netherlands, and manuscripts found during my fieldwork trips to Guangxi (specifically, the manuscripts owned by Li Decai 李德才, on whom see below). By reading extensively among the 216 manuscripts in the Leiden collection and manuscripts collected during my fieldwork in Guangxi, I discovered three forms of textual transmission, which I dubbed respectively as 'faithful copy of a Daoist text', 'indigenous content under Daoist cover', and 'incorporation of folk songs'.

One ritual manuscript in the Leiden collection perfectly characterises the first form of textual transmission, a 'faithful copy of a Daoist text'. This manuscript (UB 2004-15 Folder 2), entitled 'The Second Scroll in the Scripture of the Jade Emperor' (*Yuhuang zhongjuan jing* 玉皇中卷經), was copied by a man named Li Xuanlian 李玄蓮 and produced in the first year of the Xianfeng 咸豐 reign of the Qing dynasty (1851). It is a Mun manuscript. When compared with 'Combined Scriptures of the Founding Acts of the Jade Emperor on High, the Second Scroll' (*Gaoshang yuhuang benxing jijing juan zhong* 高上玉皇本行集經卷中) in the Daoist Canon (CT 10–11), it

52 Obi and Müller (2005, 239) and Guo Huiwen et al. (2022, 33) also notice this feature of Yao manuscript culture.

53 Lemoine 1982, 29.

54 Until the mid-twentieth century, the only way to produce a Yao manuscript was to write it by hand. However, some of the Yao ritual specialists I met in Guangxi and Yunnan have started to use photocopying to multiply texts in recent years.

offered unequivocal confirmation that 'The Second Scroll in the Scripture of the Jade Emperor' in the Leiden Collection is a 'verbatim' handwritten copy of 'Combined Scriptures of the Founding Acts of the Jade Emperor on High' included in the Daoist Canon.[55] Except for a few words rearranged and inserted into the Yao text, the two texts are the same.

Another ritual manuscript in the Leiden collection of 216 manuscripts illustrates the second form of textual transmission, namely 'indigenous content under Daoist cover'. The manuscript UB 2004-15 Folder 23, with a cover bearing the title 'Scripture of Miscellaneous Kinds' (*Zhupinjing* 諸品經) in the catalogue, was copied by a man called Deng Xuanhe 鄧玄和 (the date of transcription is not given). It is also a Mun manuscript. On the first few pages of this specific manuscript, we can find the same title and content of 'Combined Scriptures of the Founding Acts of the Jade Emperor on High, the Second Scroll'. However, closer inspection made it apparent that the Daoist title and first part of the text only serve as a cover, and that the rest of the manuscript remains indigenous.[56] After selectively copying only a few lines from the Daoist scripture, the content of the text shifts into a different kind of content. From pages 23 to 28, two titles and the accompanying contents describe the regionally worshipped deities closely associated with pregnancy and childbirth, namely the Flower Deities (*huawang* 花王) and the Holy Mothers (*shengmu* 聖母). The titles read 'Wonderful Scriptures of Various Saintly Goddesses and Flower Deities Set Up by the Grand Supreme' (*Taishang she zhu shengmu huawang miaojing* 太上設諸聖母花王妙經) and 'Wonderful Scripture Narrated by the Grand Supreme for Thanking Holy Mothers and Flower Deities and of the Way to Expel Six Calamities' (*Taishang shuoxie huawang liuhai miaojing* 太上說謝花王六害妙經). This manuscript suggests that the copyist used Daoist written genre as a covering device for honouring local deities.

The third form of textual transmission is 'incorporation of folk songs'. This refers to ritual manuscripts that have absorbed folk song elements. My example here is also about regionally worshipped deities, Flower Deities (*huahuang* 花皇) and is of Mien origin. Collected during my fieldwork in Guangxi, the title of this manuscript is 'Inviting the Flower Deities and the God of the Passes to Clear the Road and Let Us Pass by the Dark Mountain' (*Qing huahuang guanshen jie xiaoguan du hua du anshan* 請花皇關神解小關度花度暗山). The manuscript was copied and

55 *Daozang* 道藏 [Daoist Canon] 1986. CT refers to Schipper 1975. The English translation of the title *Gaoshang yuhuang benxing jijing juan zhong* 高上玉皇本行集經卷中 is from 3.B.7 (pp. 1096–1097) in Schipper and Verellen 2004.

56 A similar pattern in Zhuang Daoist texts is discussed in Holm 2004, 63–64.

owned by Li Decai 李德才 from Weihao 偉好 village in Tianlin 田林 county, Baise 百色 municipal region, Guangxi. Unsurprisingly, my search did not find any titles or contents from the Daoist Canon corresponding to this ritual manuscript. Therefore, a search through a compilation of folk songs and stories of the Yao, Compilation of Yao Folksongs and Stories from the Dayaoshan, Guangxi (*Guangxi Dayaoshan Yaozu geyao gushiji* 廣西大瑤山瑤族歌謠故事集) was conducted.[57] Fortunately, this search identified part of the contents of the ritual manuscript, the part concerning the twelve months of changes among the blooming of the flowers, in a folk song entitled the 'Song of the Flowers' (*gehua* 歌花).[58] This ritual manuscript perfectly exemplifies an inter-textual relationship between folksongs and ritual texts.[59] Kristofer Schipper also reported a similar textual phenomenon among the ritual-master texts in southern Taiwan. It appears that borrowing folksong elements to describe the four seasons of the agricultural year when referring to birth and pregnancy may have been common practice across ethnic boundaries in South China.[60]

3.2 Sounds and scripts

Much ethnographic evidence shows that Yao manuscripts, especially manuscripts of religious nature, are still in use in the everyday life of Yao communities in South China and Southeast Asia.[61] How are these manuscripts read during ritual performances? I was not trained in linguistics, so I relied on secondary literature of this topic to give a general picture of the sounds and scripts associated with Yao manuscript culture.

57 Quanguo renmin daibiao dahui Minzu weiyuanhui bangongshi (ed.) 1958.

58 Quanguo renmin daibiao dahui Minzu weiyuanhui bangongshi (ed.) 1958, 38–39.

59 Zheng Changtian 2009, 216–234.

60 Schipper 1985, 31.

61 To name just a few instances, see Chen Meiwen 2018 for the Mien manuscript culture and ritual performance in northeastern Guangxi; Huang Guiquan 2010 for the Mun religious culture and manuscript tradition in southeastern Yunnan, Zhang Jinsong 2003 for the Mien ordination ceremony and its accompanied manuscripts in southwestern Hunan, Estévez 2022 for the Mun religious performance and manuscript tradition in northern Laos.

3.2.1 Sounds

The Mien and the Mun, the two Yao groups most crucial to understand the Western collections of Yao manuscripts, both have three kinds of languages spoken for different settings: in scholarship on the Yao languages, the first type is called 'daily language' (*richangyu* 日常語), used in daily interactions. The second type is 'folk song language' (*geyaoyu* 歌謠語), used during folk song performances.[62] The last type is 'religious language' (*zongjiaoyu* 宗教語), used exclusively in religious settings.[63] To give an example of these three different languages spoken by the Mun, the Mun term meaning 'no' is pronounced *ma* in daily language, *jam* in folksong language, and *pat* in religious language.[64]

Pan Meihua further explains that the religious language is distinct from daily and folksong languages. She reports on four ways the Mien perceive and name religious language. In Lao Cai province, northern Vietnam, the Mien refer to it as *tsie wa* 斜話. The Mien in Baise 百色, western Guangxi, call it *Wuzhou hua* 梧州話 ('Wuzhou dialect'). In Hezhou 賀州, northeastern Guangxi, they call it *lin tsieu siŋ* 連州聲 (Lin tsieu or Lianzhou is the name of a place in northwestern Guangdong). Furthermore, the Mien ritual masters in Hezhou describe it as neither a Yao language nor a Han-Chinese language, but *mien wa* 鬼話, literally meaning 'ghost language'. Since the term for ghosts and deities is the same in Mien daily language (mien[53]), 'ghost language' can be broadly understood as the language utilised to communicate with otherworldly beings. 'Ghost language' is used to chant and recite ritual texts and invoke such Daoist deities as the Three Pure Ones (*sanqing* 三清), among many others, for it is understood that these 'Chinese' deities do not know the Yao language.[65] The Chinese pronunciations used by the Yao are not Modern Standard Chinese (MSC), but are based on the Pinghua dialect, earlier pronunciations of Chinese and occasionally the local variety of Southwestern Mandarin (SWM), Gui-Liu hua 桂柳話.[66]

62 Purnell 1988, 143–155.

63 Pan Meihua 2008.

64 Huang Guiquan 2009, 7.

65 Pan Meihua 2008.

66 Pan Meihua 2008. Gui-Liuhua is now the lingua franca in Guangxi, the speech of Guilin and Liuzhou. See Holm 2013, 42–44.

3.2.2 Scripts

The characters found in Yao manuscripts can be grouped into two groups: those borrowed from the Chinese script, including orthographic Chinese characters and vernacular Chinese characters (*suzi* 俗字), and those which the Yao invented.[67] Like Zhuang scripts, most of the characters used by the Yao are standard Chinese graphs found throughout the Chinese cultural region.[68] The Yao used Chinese vernacular characters of the kind that are found throughout the Chinese cultural area. Examples of such vernacular graphs for Chinese can be found listed in A Glossary of Vernacular Characters in use since the Song and Yuan Dynasties (*Song-Yuan yilai suzipu* 宋元以來俗字譜), which includes 6,240 commonly-used Chinese characters selected from twelve block-printed editions of the popular literature of the Song (960–1279), Yuan (1271–1368), Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties.[69] Some of these familiar Chinese characters appear in Daoist scriptures and liturgical texts as well.[70]

The Yao adopted these Chinese characters to represent either the original Chinese word, including sound and meaning, or borrow them phonetically or semantically to represent native Yao words. For instance, the Mun borrowed 'culture' (*wenhua* 文化, the Mun pronunciation is *ban wa*) to represent the original meaning of the Chinese word. In the folksong language, they used 'extremity, to carry' (*duan* 端) only phonetically to mean 'men' (*nanzi* 男子) (the Mun pronunciation is *toon*). Also in the folksong language, they borrowed 'know' (*zhi* 知) only semantically to represent a Mun native word and pronounce it as *pei*.[71]

There are also a small number of Yao-invented graphs, mostly modified Chinese characters related graphically to an original Chinese character, which, within the academic circle of Yao studies in China, are called *Yao suzi* 瑤俗字 (Yao demotic characters) or *fangkuai Yaowen* 方塊瑤文 (square Yao script) in Chinese. Yao demotic characters frequently appear in the ritual texts of the Mun but are less frequent in the ritual texts of the Mien.[72] Though not exhaustively, we can at least identify three ways in which the Yao made demotic characters:[73]

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67 He Jing 2017, 205–224.
68 See Holm 2006, 125–176 for the example of Zhuang scripts.
69 Liu Fu and Li Jiarui (eds) 1930; Yu Yang 2009, 144–145.
70 He Hongyi and Wang Ping 2012, 183.
71 Huang Guiquan 2003, 59.
72 Feng Henggao (ed.) 2007, 278.
73 He Hongyi and Wang Ping 2012, 183; Song Enchang 1991, 27–28.

(1) Adding or reducing semantic components (*zengjian yifu* 增減意符). An example of adding semantic components is an orthographic Chinese character meaning 'pacify, install' (*an* 安). The Yao added a 'tree' (*mu* 木) radical on the left (桉) or 'grass' (*cao* 艸) on top (荌) to mean 'pacify' or 'install'. The Chinese character 'save, help' (*jiu* 救) is an example that illustrates reducing semantic components. It sometimes consists of only the left part 'beseech' (*qiu* 求), leaving out the right-hand component 'rap, tap' (*sui* 攵), yet it still means 'to rescue'.

(2) Contextually transformed (*leihua* 類化). The way a character is written is influenced by the combination of characters proceeding or after it. There are plenty of examples, including in the term 'lake of blood' (*xuehu* 血湖), where the 'blood' (*xue* 血) sometimes appears in a form with the 'water' (*sui* 氵) radical added on its left (洫), because it is influenced by 'lake' (*hu* 湖).

(3) Using the ready-made structure or components to create new graphs (*jieyong xiancheng jiegou huo bujian jiangou xin zi* 借用現成結構或部件建構新字). For example, the Yao created a demotic character ! (*ye*) for 'father' and " (*niang*) for 'mother,' using 'father' (*fu* 父) as a basic component. The character 'above' (*shang* 上) has been added above the graph 'father' to make the demotic character ! (*ye*). And, the character 'below' (*xia* 下) has been added below the graph 'father' to create the demotic character for 'mother'.[74]

3.3 Discussion

This section has described forms of textual transmission, pronunciation, and Chinese-style characters associated with Yao manuscripts. It elucidates three identifiable forms of textual transmission in the Yao manner of composing religious texts. Though the details of historical context remain elusive, the first form of textual transmission, 'faithful copy of a Daoist text', proves that the Yao – in this case, the forebears of the Mun – had access to Daoist scriptures. The second form of textual transmission, 'indigenous content under Daoist cover', shows that copyists were not passive agents when transcribing texts. Apart from creating verbatim copies of Daoist scriptures, the Mun seemed to have consciously utilised the Daoist written genre as a rhetorical cover to record ritual texts devoted to their

74 This example comes from the Mun. Feng Henggao (ed.) 2007, 829. It is worth mentioning that the Yao used two or more modified Chinese characters to refer to the same word. For instance, the radical 'legs' (*bo* 癶) with the character 'mother' (*niang* 娘) underneath it is also used to mean 'mother': 孃 (*niang*).

own deities. The third form of textual transmission, 'incorporation of folk songs', evidence from the Mien manuscript culture, tellingly indicates that folksongs are also integrated into ritual texts, instantiating a transition from orality to textuality and characteristic of an enduring inter-textual relationship between folk songs and ritual texts, a textual feature shared beyond ethnic boundaries that can be traced back to the *Yuefeng xujiu* 粵風續九, an early Qing folksong collection including songs from both Han and non-Han Chinese peoples in Guangxi.[75]

Because the Yao adopted the Chinese characters used throughout the Chinese cultural region, many Yao texts including liturgical texts are written in Chinese, and it is these texts which readers think they can understand. However, some Yao texts also contain native Yao words, and for an understanding of these it is necessary to possess knowledge of the relevant Yao language. Similar to the discussion of classifications for Yao manuscripts, it is essential to understand the linguistic features associated with Yao manuscript cultures from a sub-group perspective.

4. Differentiating between manuscripts of the Mien and Mun

As previously mentioned, the Mien and the Mun are the only two groups of Yao people who are resident both in South China and highland Southeast Asia. Via art dealers, their manuscripts found their way into special collections in Western public institutions. During their trips to the West, many manuscripts lost their covers and colophons, some pages were lost, and sometimes their pages got torn or damaged. The provenance of each manuscript is not clear, either. How these manuscripts were assembled presents a tremendous challenge for researchers wishing to use these collections. One basic question is: how does one differentiate between manuscripts of the Mien and the Mun? It is essential to distinguish between the manuscript cultures of these two Yao groups because, as mentioned above, they have adopted different religious traditions and manuscript cultures. So it is important to understand as clearly as possible which manuscript belongs to which group when utilising library and museum collections.

Obi and Müller in their article provide invaluable clues to solving this problem. One of the crucial clues is ordination names (*faming* 法名). On the colophon pages of a Yao manuscript, the transcriber would write down the ordination name of the book owner (sometimes the transcriber himself or the person who commissioned

75 Pan Meihua 2013.

the transcription). Frequently, one will find more than one ordination name written down in a Yao manuscript. These are the names of male descendants who inherit the manuscripts or the disciples who received the manuscripts from their masters.[76]

The Mun and the Mien have two different ways of naming postulants following an ordination ceremony. For the Mun, who have adopted two ritual traditions, a Daoist priest tradition and a ritual master tradition, the ordination names of these two kinds of ritual practitioners are significantly different. To clarify, here are examples of a Mun Daoist-priest-style ordination name and a ritual-master-style ordination name: Li Dao-de 李道德 (Daoist-priest-style) and Pan Xian-gui 盤顯貴 (ritual-master-style). The Daoist-priest-style ordination name uses a set of generational names, including Dao 道, Jing 經, Yun 雲, Xuan 玄, and Miao 妙 in sequence for the middle character. In contrast, the ritual-master ordination name uses another set of generational names, among them Fa 法, Li 利, Ying 應, Xian 顯, and Sheng 勝 sequentially for the middle character. By looking at the middle character of the ordination name, it is possible to recognise immediately whether it is a Mun manuscript and which religious tradition the manuscript owners have inherited.[77]

The Mien, who only have the ritual master tradition, have at least four levels of ordination in their clerical hierarchy. In order of sequence, they are *kwa dang* (hanging the lamps), *tou sai* (ordination of the master), *chia tse* (additional duties), *pwang ko* (or *chia tai*) (enfeoffing liturgies) (all pronunciations are Mien religious language).[78] A postulant receives an ordination name according to the level of ordination ceremony he has undergone. A postulant who has received *kwa dang* ordination will be given an ordination name with the specific character *fa* 法 in the middle, for instance, Li Fa-tong 李法通. This format of an ordination name remains the same until *tou sai* but will change into Li Tong San Lang 李通三郎 when the postulant reaches the level of *chia tse*. The ultimate ordination name consists of the postulant's surname, a non-numeric character followed by a numeral (indicating birth order) and then the character lang 郎 (a respected title for men, gentlemen, and husbands). With this simple method, I identified 83 Mun manuscripts and four

76 Obi and Müller collected 2,000 names from 801 manuscripts. See Obi and Müller 2005, 265–267.

77 It is not uncommon for two ordination names with different middle characters to be mentioned together on the cover of a manuscript or somewhere inside the text. In a few cases, the copyist may have mastered two religious traditions. It is also noteworthy that since there are different sets of generational names for the middle character in the ordination name, the Mun use certain characters in both the Dao 道 and Shi 師 traditions, such as Miao 妙 and Sheng 勝. Nevertheless, the middle character in the ordination name in the Mun manuscript is a handy identifier to determine the origin of the Yao manuscript.

78 Mclntosh 2012, 4–6.

Mien manuscripts from the Leiden collection of 216 manuscripts, with 200 identifiable Yao manuscripts, resulting in a 43.5 % identification rate.

Attentive readers may notice that the Mun and the Mien might share the same ordination names with the character *fa* 法, a character used in the Mun ritual master tradition and at the first two levels of Mien ordination ceremonies. Should this occur, we could look further at the titles and specific hints in the contents. A key difference mentioned in Obi and Müller's article is that, compared with the Mun, the Mien do not have a separate genre of Ritual (*ke* 科). In other words, a manuscript carrying *ke* in its title is invariably of Mun origin. Furthermore, when giving a scripture (*jing shu* 經書) a title, the Mun tend to use *Jing* 經 in the title, while the Mien use *Shu* 書. In terms of content, if the text involves a goddess of fertility, Imperial Mother (*Dimu* 帝母), or a Daoist martial deity, the Father of Commands (*Linggong* 令公) (usually in pair), then it is a Mun manuscript. Only the Mun pay worship to this pair of deities, and not the Mien.

In sum, it would be useful for researchers to pay attention to these clues regarding the origins of these randomly assembled manuscripts in order to utilise the western library and museum collections more effectively, especially the collections acquired by purchase. In addition to ascertaining which are the authentic Yao manuscripts, researchers also need to be aware of the distinctive features of the Mien and the Mun manuscript cultures. Obi and Müller conducted a painstaking investigation to determine the origins of the 801 manuscripts in the Munich collection. Their work proves to be an invaluable reference. This section offers some simple methods a researcher can use to determine the origins of the Yao manuscripts in Western collections: by looking at the ordination names recorded in the texts, the titles of the manuscripts, and the specific deities the Mun worship, we can often tell very quickly which manuscript culture we are dealing with.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has explored different contexts in which the Yao adopted and integrated the Chinese written culture, local beliefs, and regional folksong cultures to write their manuscripts. It provided information useful for exploring wider topics, including but not limited to religious interactions between Yao and Han Chinese cultures. For instance, the discussion on the linguistic features of Yao manuscripts indicated a long history of how non-Han Chinese people appropriated, integrated, and transformed the Chinese spoken and written languages into their religious and cultural lives. It also touched upon how scholars came up with

different classification models that reflect on their concepts of Yao and Yao manuscripts and how they encountered Yao manuscripts in specific contexts. All of the discussion pointed out the importance of studying Yao manuscript cultures from a sub-group perspective.

The chapter first gave an overview of collections of Yao manuscripts outside China and addressed the issue of classification. It showed that the answer to the question 'what is a Yao manuscript' is not self-evident. Next, it discussed three forms of textual transmission manifested in Yao religious manuscripts: 'faithful copy of a Daoist text', 'indigenous content under Daoist cover', and 'incorporation of folk songs'. The analysis of these three forms shows that while a verbatim replication of a Daoist text seems standard practice, the influence of local elements can often be identified in the Yao written tradition (for instance, locally worshipped deities and the folk songs sung in a secular setting). In particular, the 'incorporation of folk songs' indicates a transition from orality to textuality, characterising an enduring inter-textual relationship between folk songs and ritual texts across ethnic boundaries.

It then elaborated on the linguistic features of the sounds and characters associated with performing and making the Yao manuscripts. It is important to understand the Yao, both the Mien and the Mun, speak three kinds of Yao languages: daily language, folk song language, and religious language.[79] Graphically, they have shown proficiency in the employment of the Chinese character script for a wide variety of purposes. Though not great in number, they have both created Yao demotic characters to represent words in their own language (more among the Mun and less among the Mien). The use of these Yao vernacular graphs may vary from place to place and remains a matter to be investigated systematically. Finally, this chapter looked at how to distinguish between the Mien and the Mun manuscripts in the collections of Yao manuscripts, particularly those housed in Western public institutions and acquired by purchase. Based on the data generated in Obi and Müller's 2005 article, the chapter offered some simple methods to determine at least some information on the origins of these manuscripts (for example, the format of the ordination names).

The information provided in this chapter is meant to increase the accessibility of Western collections of Yao manuscripts and help interested researchers take the first steps in situating those de-contextualized manuscripts in specific contexts. It is hoped that researchers in the field of Yao studies, manuscript cultures, ethnic studies will then be able to utilise these Western collections more efficiently and make contributions to the growing field of international Yao studies.

79 On this topic see also the discussion in Cawthorne in this volume.

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Appendix 1: Collections of Yao manuscripts outside China and research on them

Europe

Copenhagen (Denmark), Det Kongelige Bibliotek

Call numbers: Cod. Yao 1–37

Number of manuscripts: 50, acquired from donations and by purchase[80]

Main publications: Pedersen 2016

Heidelberg (Germany), Universität Heidelberg, Centrum für Asiatische und Trans-kulturelle Studien (CATS) Bibliothek

Number of manuscripts: 220, all acquired by purchase[81]

An exhibition of the Yao manuscripts stored at Heidelberg University can be found on-line: <https://projects.zo.uni-heidelberg.de/cats/library/exhibitions/yao/#/> (accessed on 15 July 2022).

Leiden (the Netherlands), Universiteitsbibliotheek, Asian Library

Call numbers: Or. 23.085–108, Or. 23.294–296, Or 26.311–312

Number of manuscripts: 29, all acquired by purchase

Main publications: Kuiper 2005, 42–67

80 37 manuscripts were collected in northern Thailand in 1970 and donated by Jesper Trier. Six manuscripts were purchased from R. L. Stolper.

81 Reportedly, these manuscripts were acquired together in northern Laos from a ritual master and headman of a village. The collection has a number of copies of the same texts and manuscripts from different families. It is unlikely that the man said to be a ritual master and headman was the original owner, but rather a collector or trader.

This collection was acquired through a special grant provided to the Asian Library by B.J. ter Haar in January 1993. The collection was purchased in northern Thailand, probably from Michael Goh's tribal and primitive art shop 'The Lost Heavens' in Chiang Mai.[82]

Leiden (the Netherlands), Museum Volkenkunde (National Museum of Ethnology)

Call numbers: UB 2004-15 Folder 1–216

Number of manuscripts: 216, all acquired by purchase

Munich (Germany), Bayerische Staatsbibliothek

Call numbers: Cod. Sin. 147–2928

Number of manuscripts: 2,776, all acquired by purchase

Main publications: Höllmann and Friedrich 2004 (the catalogue contains only about 30% of the collection); Obi and Müller 2005 (detailed introductory article)

Avallon (France), Musée de l'Avallonnais Jean Després

Number of manuscripts: unknown, from donations

South-east Asia/East Asia

Hanoi (Vietnam), Institute of Hán-Nôm Studies

Number of manuscripts: unknown

Main publications: Yuenan Laojiesheng wenhua tiyu lüyou ting (eds) 2011[83]

Nagoya (Japan), Museum of Anthropology at Nanzan University

Number of manuscripts: 220, from donations

Main publications: Kanagawa daigaku daigakuin rekishi minzoku shiryō-gaku kenkyū-ka 2014

Zheng Hui 2011 provides a brief discussion about the collections of Yao manuscripts stored in the Museum of Anthropology at Nanzan University and the Institute of Hán-Nôm Studies in Hanoi.

Sơn La (Vietnam), Provincial Museum in Sơn La (Bảo tàng tỉnh Sơn La)

Number of manuscripts: around 50 Yao (Dao) manuscripts, along with 1200 Thai (Thái) manuscripts[84]

United States of America

Athens, OH, Ohio University, Alden Library, Frederick and Kazuko Harris Fine Arts Library

82 Kuiper 2005, 42.

83 This book, published in Chinese, is a work of collaboration between scholars from Vietnam and Guangxi.

84 The information is from Prof. David Holm's personal communication with Kiều Thảo, lecturer in Linguistics at the Northwestern University (Sơn La) (Đại học Tây Bắc, Sơn La), 8 December 2023.

Number of manuscripts: unknown, they were donated by the Dong Sơn Today Foundation. It is said that there are around 2,000 manuscripts involving Yao religion and culture.

Washington DC, Library of Congress

Number of manuscripts: 241, all acquired by purchase

Main publications: Yu Yang 2009; Yu Yang 2011; He Hongyi and Wang Ping 2012; He Hongyi, Huang Pingli and Chen Peng 2013; Huang Pingli, He Hongyi, and Chen Peng 2013; He Hongyi 2017

United Kingdom

Oxford, Bodleian Library

Sinica 3241–Sinica 3547

Number of manuscripts: 307, all acquired by purchase, almost all digitized on https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/ (accessed on 8 February 2020)[85]

Main publications: Guo Wu 2012a and 2012b; Hu Xiaoliu 2013; Xu Fei 2016

Oxford, Bodleian Library

Dep. Stolper 1–Dep. Stolper 907, the manuscripts remain a private collection of the Stolper family

Number of manuscripts: 375, all acquired by purchase[86]

Appendix 2: Digitisation projects for Yao manuscripts

2006–2008: 'Culture', Texts, and Literacy in Contemporary

Location: Vietnam

Sponsor: Ford Foundation

Results: Analytical index for the digital collection; the entire corpus on CD format (not available)

2007–2011: Traditional Sciences among Vietnamese Minorities

Location: Vietnam

Sponsor: National Science Council (now National Science and Technology Council, Taiwan)

Results: Around 200 manuscripts of Nùng, the Tày, and the Yao (not available online)

85 The total number of this collection is 307, instead of 317, because there are missing cod. number and overlapping cod. number.

86 Even though the cod number is from 1 to 907, the exact number of the manuscripts is not 907 but 375 (1-189, 213-218, 314-413, 817-887, 898-907). See Xu Fei 2016, 77.

2012: Preservation of Yao Manuscripts from South Yunnan: Text, Image and Religion (EAP 550)

Location: Kunming, Yunnan, China

Sponsor: British Library

Results: 208 manuscripts (available online)

2015: Digital Library of the Lanten Textual Heritage (EAP 791)

Location: Northern Laos

Sponsor: British Library

Results: 768 manuscripts (available online)

2018–2020: A Digital Library of the Lanten Textual Heritage-Phase II (EAP 1126

Location: Northern Laos

Sponsor: British Library

Continuation of the EAP 791 project (available online)