

De/re-construction of Zhuang shamanic songs in cultural festivals

Ya-ning Kao

Department of Ethnology, National Chengchi University, Taipei City, Taiwan

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the performance of Zhuang shamanic narrative songs at three festivals to explore how and why a narrative song genre that originated with Zhuang shamans is separated from shamanic ritual contexts and re-contextualized at festivals under the cultural policies instigated by the People's Republic of China in the post-socialist era.

Design/methodology/approach – The research is based on a review of publications on Zhuang performance art and fieldwork data collected in southwestern Guangxi, China.

Findings – The de-construction of Zhuang shamanic narrative song melodies dates back to the late nineteenth century, when southwestern Guangxi literati used the melodies to compose popular songs. By the 1950s, the religious elements of these narrative songs had already been obfuscated, leading Chinese scholars to select them as representative of Zhuang performance arts. Since the enactment of China's Intangible Culture Heritage (ICH) Law in the early twenty-first century, local Zhuang elites have re-constructed and re-introduced shamanic elements to narrative songs as they are performed at festivals as a means to further highlight the ethnic characteristics of the Zhuang people.

Originality/value – The paper provides detailed documentation of three cases of the restoration of shamanic elements to narrative songs sung by the Zhuang people. However, the research is limited to one community, inviting comparison with other cases, both inside and outside China, of how ICH policies impact grass-roots cultural practices.

Keywords China, De-contextualization, Re-contextualization, Intangible cultural heritage, Narrative songs, Zhuang people

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In 2005, I witnessed a female Zhuang shaman, or *memoed*, carry out two rituals in Ande, a mountainous town in southwestern Guangxi, China. The rituals held one day before a festival commemorating the national hero Nong Zhigao (紀念民族英雄儂智高活動節, hereafter the Nong Zhigao Festival). These rituals – one in a cave and one in a forest in front of Nong Zhigao Temple – were not held surreptitiously, but neither were they considered to be open to the public, media or officials (Kao, 2013). During the two rituals, I remember feeling strongly that I was witnessing an unsanctioned activity. At the time, the local Zhuang people referred to rituals as “superstitious activities” (搞迷信活動) (Kao, 2014). Zhuang shamans were not scheduled to contribute to any of the public performances at the festival the following day. However, to ensure the success of the next day's festival, and with the support of many villagers, a shaman conducted communal rituals privately with an audience of supporters.

Nearly a decade later, the performance components of Ande's cultural festivals reveal that “doing religion” has been transformed into “doing culture” among the Zhuang for local, national and international audiences. Chau (2011) summarizes two strategies Chinese actors utilize when “doing popular religion.” Chao describes the first strategy as “doing religion,” which refers to locating popular ritual practices under the umbrella of China's officially recognized religions. Since the relaxation of China's cultural policies in the 1980s, Zhuang have preferred the second strategy, “doing culture,” which is to disguise the “superstitious elements” of shamanic practices as displays of ethnic characteristics, transforming them



into “ethnic culture” or “cultural heritage.” Ande held the Culture and Art Festival of the Southern Heavenly Kingdom (南天國文化藝術節, hereafter the Culture and Art Festival) in 2013, and the Zhuang Fasting Festival (壯齋節) in 2014. At both festivals, local residents dressed in shaman-like costumes and sang songs with shamanic melodies.

The aim of this paper is to explore the process of transforming a shamanic song melody into a festival performance item. The following three central questions are considered: Which genre of songs from Zhuang shamanic ritual was selected by Chinese scholars to represent the folk culture of the Zhuang people? Under what historical circumstances was this song genre considered attractive to scholars? And which elements of Zhuang shamanic ritual were subsequently selected for performance at festivals, and by whom? These questions should be considered in light of both nationality and cultural policies implemented by the Government of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) since the 1950s, and the responses of local Zhuang people to these policies.

In the mid-twentieth century, Tai-speaking peoples in Guangxi and east Yunnan who differed significantly in terms of both language and culture, and had previously referred to themselves by a variety of local ethnonyms, were officially classified as members of a single Zhuang nationality (壯族) by the PRC’s nationality identification project. As Kaup (2000) points out, the PRC initially created the Zhuang category to serve political goals. Yet, in the six decades since, a unified Zhuang consciousness has been created and reinforced by cadres and scholars who have carried out nationality policies aimed at building Zhuang identity, a process which has often involved the inventing or re-discovery of cultural elements. The transformation of a specific genre of Zhuang shaman’s songs discussed here is one example of such a response to China’s nationality-making project.

I agree with Ai that “official support for cultural heritage has centered around the elements that are most directly aligned with the CCP’s [Chinese Communist Party’s] priorities” (Ai, 2012, p. 132). As I will demonstrate, since China’s Central Government formally enacted the intangible cultural heritage (ICH) Law of the PRC in 2011, the production and display of what is defined as “cultural heritage” have been built on state-sponsored studies of folk and ethnic performances dating back the 1950s, which flourished in the 1980s, and whose funding was also directed toward CCP priorities. Thus, the transformation from “religion” or “superstition” into “culture” must be considered not only with reference to China’s law on ICH, but also in the context of several decades of Chinese scholarship on folk and ethnic cultures.

Bauman and Briggs (1990) define “de-contextualization and re-contextualization” as two aspects of the same process in which a text is separated from one social context and integrated into another. The authors point out that both aspects are developed from a more fundamental process of “en-textualization” in which discourse is decentered and a text is produced, and raise a question regarding de-contextualization: “what loosens the tie between performed discourse and its context?” (1991, p. 73) and suggest to consider “what the re-contextualized text brings with from its earlier context(s) and what emergent form, function and meaning is it given as it is re-centered” (p. 75). The genre of Zhuang shamanic song discussed here has undergone both aspects several times under different historical circumstances dating back to the late nineteenth century and discussion of how these songs have been performed in different contexts serve as an excellent example to answer this question.

The remainder of this paper is divided into five sections. The first section offers a general description of Zhuang shamans and their features. The second section reviews publications based on surveys on folk and ethnic performance undertaken by both scholars since the 1950s. A specific Zhuang shamanic song genre – narrative song – was widely adapted for use in government propaganda and treated as representative of Zhuang performance art in the mid-twentieth century onwards. The third section overviews China’s policies on ICH, or *feiyi* (非遺) as it is abbreviated in Chinese, and the impact of the policies on ritual practices.

Section Four describes the backgrounds of three festivals and the performance of narrative songs at these festivals in Ande, Guangxi, China, between 2005 and 2014. The last section provides a concluding discussion of the ongoing processes, politics and negotiations in the space created by China's *feiyi* laws as local communities find ways to "do culture" in China.

Zhuang shamans – clothing, instruments and songs

In Zhuang society in southwestern Guangxi, female shamans called *memoeds* (Zh.) coexist with another two types of ritual specialist: vernacular ritual masters (Zh. *boumo*) and Daoist priests (Zh. *boudao*) (Holm, 2003). Shamans carry out spirit journeys to visit spirits and may be possessed by the spirits they meet. Zhuang shamans share many features with shamans in other cultures, such as suffering mental or physical illness as a sign of being chosen as a successor by a dead ancestral master; the ability to access another world; and the ability to interact with spirits. Among the Zhuang, rituals conducted by well-known shamans always attract large audiences.

When conducting a ritual, a Zhuang shaman wears embroidered red clothes and a bonnet with a veil, and holds a bronze bell with five chains and a fan. The shaman is conceived as riding on a spirit horse when taking her spirit journey. The bell with five chains represents a horse's four legs and tail, and the fan is a horsewhip. Before beginning the journey, the shaman takes her seat on a mat representing a saddle, which is set up on the ground facing an altar. The shaman travels with her ancestral masters (dead shamans) and spirit soldiers on horseback to visit various spirits, become possessed by them and to complete various tasks to solve the problems encountered by the household and community. The journey is completed through songs rather than through bodily movements. The shaman takes a break during the ritual, after traveling for a while. During the break, she may drink a cup of tea and smoke tobacco through a bamboo water pipe. Audience members with good voices sing antiphonally with the shaman during the break.

Pan Qixu (潘其旭, 1983, p. 95) divides Zhuang shamanic songs into three categories or genres: journey songs, songs during the break and narrative songs. In this paper, I focus my discussion on the third category. Journey songs are sung during the shamanic journey and describe the landscape and spirits encountered by the shaman on her way. Because journey songs are the most important feature identifying shamanic ritual and demonstrating a shaman's power, no one dares to de-contextualize them from their ritual context. The songs during the break allow the shaman to express her feelings. The liveliest interactions between the shaman and audience members take place during these songs. Songs in the third category, which also take place during the ritual, tell stories. Such narrative songs first underwent de-contextualization by local Zhuang elites in the late nineteenth century. Local elites adapted Chinese or Zhuang stories to this song genre, transcribed them in square Zhuang script (方塊壯字), and taught the resulting narrative songs to blind singers to enable them to make a living as entertainers. Musicians accompanied the songs on two- or three-string instruments, and the singers were often hired for weddings, birthdays and community banquets (Interview Mo, 2013). The local elites are those who received Chinese education, were able to read and write in both Chinese and Zhuang scripts, and were fond of shamanic song melodies and poetics. These adapted shamanic narrative songs were popular before the 1950s.

Surveys of Zhuang folk arts

Beginning in the 1950s, under the CCP's regime, narrative songs were known as narrative and musical performances (曲藝) and were performed on stage to convey government propaganda and policy to the public through the medium of Zhuang culture. This development was the result of a series of national projects on ethnic and folk arts (民族民間藝術) undertaken in every province in China to identify, study and classify forms of theater, dance, song and music.

These research projects were interrupted by political movements of the 1960s and the 1970s, and it was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that the findings were published in several compendiums (集成) and series of annals (志) divided by Chinese province.

In these studies, Zhuang shamanic narrative songs, which, by the 1950s, had already been successfully de-contextualized from shamanic ritual contexts, are predominantly studied as Narrative and Musical Performances or folksong melodies (民歌曲調); their original connection with shamanic ritual is intentionally overlooked by the Chinese and Zhuang scholars documenting them. These compendiums and annals do not describe the relationship between ritual songs/dances and folk/ethnic arts. Yet, further investigation of the songs, dances and performances recorded in these publications reveals their close connection with ritual performances, even though the compilers do not emphasize the role of ritual specialist in creating, practicing and preserving them. It was not until the twenty-first century, with the publication of *Recordings of Narrative and Musical Performances of Guangxi* (广西曲艺志), that songs by ritual specialists were recognized as important components of folk culture (广西曲艺志, 2009, p. 6).

Overview of China's *feiyi* policies

The PRC's cultural policy was created mainly in response to UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of ICH (the ICH Convention). Beginning in 1980, even before the convention had been announced in 2003 and ratified in 2006, bureaucrats at various levels in China had enthusiastically sought to study and protect folk and ethnic culture, as noted above. Since 2000, China's Government has responded proactively to UNESCO's efforts to promote the protection of ICH. In China, ICH is translated as "non-material cultural heritage" (非物質文化遺產), abbreviated as *feiyi*. In 2011, the Chinese Government eventually enacted the "Law Regarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage of the People's Republic of China" (中华人民共和国非物质文化遗产法, hereafter the "*Feiyi* Law").

The definition and domains of China's *feiyi* (see Article 2, Chapter 1 of the *Feiyi* Law) differ from those of the UNESCO's ICH (see Article 2 of the ICH Convention). One important distinction is in China's fourth domain of *feiyi*: "traditional ceremonies, festivals and customs (传统礼仪、节庆等民俗)." This is close to but still different from the UNESCO's third domain of ICH: "social practices, rituals and festive events." The key distinction is that China does not recognize "rituals" as a *feiyi* domain. Likewise, this technicality deeply impacts how central and local governments in China proclaim *feiyi* masterpieces.

Of all state parties to the convention, China has been one of the most active in responding to UNESCO's efforts to develop its ICH program. China became a member state of the ICH Convention in 2004. In 2005, the "Law Regarding the Preservation of National and Folk Culture" (民族民间文化保护法) was renamed the "Law Regarding the Preservation of Intangible Cultural Heritage" (非物质文化遗产保护法) in response to the Convention. The term *feiyi* has since been used widely in legal documents and by the mass media. Before the official enactment of the *Feiyi* Law in 2011, government bodies and cultural departments at all levels had carried out projects to investigate *feiyi* masterpieces and identify representative inheritors (传承人).

The Guangxi provincial government also took action soon after the State Council issued its "Directives" on *feiyi* protection in 2005. Every county government in Guangxi has been active in selecting and seeking official recognition for local masterpieces. For example, in 2010, in Jingxi County, two Jingxi performing arts – "Zhuang Shamanic Narrative Song" (壮族未倫) and "Zhuang Wooden Puppets" (壮族提線木偶) – were recognized by regional governments as regional *feiyi* masterpieces. Between 2006 and 2014, 11 *feiyi* masterpieces put forth by various counties or institutes in Guangxi, as representative of the Zhuang nationality, have received official approval at the national level. Two of them are related to Zhuang ritual. "Buluotuo" (a Zhuang mythic god appearing in ritual manuscripts) claimed by Tianyang

county is in the “oral folklore” (民間文學) category and the “72 Zhuang Shamanic Music” claimed by Lingyu county is in the “traditional music” (傳統音樂) category. Neither of them are recognized as falling within the fourth domain of China’s *feiyi* definition, the domain which corresponds to UNESCO’s ICH category which includes “rituals.”

The Jingxi Zhuang Museum has a performance troupe that once performed Zhuang folk arts and now acts as a walking exhibition of *feiyi*. All of the troupe’s members are amateur performers, and the group performs at the request of tourists or researchers visiting Jingxi and by invitation. Some of the items the troupe has been performing since the late 1990s were recognized as *feiyi* in the mid-2000s, and this has encouraged its members to continue performing and promoting Jingxi Zhuang culture.

One female performer started performing shamanic narrative songs in 2005 with encouragement from the troupe’s director (Interview Wang, 2013). She had picked up lyrics from local shaman’s ritual and created a new song called “Prayer for Safety” (求平安), adding it to her repertoire. When performing the song, she wears shaman-like clothes as stage costume. According to the troupe’s director, such shamanic songs are usually performed for non-local audiences to display Zhuang features and are limited to 4 mins each to ensure that the performer does not lose the audience’s attention (Interview Lu, 2013). These audiences, unfamiliar with Jingxi shamanic ritual, have no knowledge of the connection between the narrative song and ritual practice.

Yet, transforming elements of ritual specialist’s performances (including melody, poetics, manuscripts and instruments) into staged performance has become a trend in competitions among Zhuang people in the twenty-first century. Local Zhuang actors, especially those who work for government culture institutions, are under pressure to display Jingxi Zhuang characteristics so that they can compete with other counties in order to receive government funding to preserve their *feiyi* masterpieces and ultimately contribute to economic growth. Take Tanyang for example; since 2003, the county government has promoted vernacular ritual specialists and their ritual manuscripts on “Buluotuo” to represent Zhuang culture, and the Buluotuo Festival it organizes has attracted hundreds and thousands of tourists. Since then, Buluotuo has been recognized as a national *feiyi* masterpiece and registered as a Zhuang culture brand.

Shamanic rituals and songs at festivals

Since China’s central and local governments began writing and ratifying laws on the protection of folk and ethnic cultures and officially recognizing *feiyi* masterpieces at the grassroots level, people have developed various ways of displaying and performing their cultures, not all of which have received official recognition as *feiyi* masterpieces. The fact that shamanic narrative performances are promoted and performed at the county level (outlined above) has encouraged performers at the township level to go one step further and mimic shamanic ritual in stage performances, as seen at both the Culture and Art Festival (2013) and Ande Zhuang Fasting Festival (2014). Additionally, ritual specialists accustomed to practicing in private might also have been pushed to perform their rituals in public, as seen at the Fasting Festival.

The three festivals held in Ande in the early twenty-first century, organized by cadres of the AndeJie Residents Committee, were not new inventions but had historical roots. Before the 1950s, household representatives of the “Six Flags” community in Ande had ritual specialists conducting ritual on several occasions. For example, early in the second lunar month, the community worshipped territorial paired spirits, known as Nong Zhigao and his wife, to predict the harvest. Also, representatives of Zhuang communities usually invite ritual specialists to hold a fasting ritual once every three years to feed wandering spirits and pray for the community’s peace and safety (Wilkerson, 2007). The Zhuang town – Ande – has no exception. The fasting ritual is an occasion to enhance the territory of both human beings and spirits.

If the community collects sufficient donations, three kinds of ritual specialists are invited to hold the ritual.

The Culture and Art Festival was held on the traditional “song market” (歌墟) day in Ande, which is at the end of the third lunar month. In the past, young people went to the market on this day to sing songs antiphonally with their lovers in public. During the imperial era, Chinese literati officials stigmatized song market days as frivolous and improper, calling them “romantic street” (風流街), and later Republican era officials banned the practice all together. Yet, after the 1980s, the Song Market Day, was revived and has become a well-known Zhuang traditional festival.

Nong Zhigao Festival: shamans as private ritual specialists and as public singers

In 2005, the residents of Ande held a one-day festival to revive an annual event commemorating a Zhuang national hero, Nong Zhigao. Among many performances at the festival, two groups of singers competed for public attention: a shaman support group singing antiphonally in ritual form, and a public or “official” group singing in chorus.

Two private rituals were carried out before the public Nong Zhigao Festival. A day before the festival, a local shaman and a group of elderly women conducted two rituals: one in a cavern, inviting Nong Zhigao’s wife, a goddess of song, to take part in the festival, and the other delivering rice wine to Nong Zhigao in a forest temple. The goddess attended the rituals, possessed the shaman twice, sang antiphonally with the audience members and eventually promised to attend the official festival (for details, see Kao, 2009).

These two private rituals led to a dramatic episode during the festival on the following day. In the morning, the shaman suddenly lost consciousness, became possessed by the goddess and ran to the cavern where a procession to the festival grounds was about to begin. Initially, the festival organizers had chosen two local middle-aged singers to perform the role of the goddess in the official procession and asked them to sing a song that had been composed by literate men and set to a local folksong melody. However, the goddess herself also wanted to perform. In separate corners of the cavern, two groups of singers formed: the possessed shaman and a ritual audience member in one and the two local middle-aged singers in another. Both groups sang in the folksong melody but did not interact. As the procession began, the ritual singers took up the lead, singing in an antiphonal and improvised exchange. In contrast, the two middle-aged ladies followed at the rear of the procession into town as they recited the previously composed lyrics.

At the 2005 Nong Zhigao Festival, the shaman performed the role of ritual specialist privately, but when singing in the role of the goddess, she performed in public. In short, the Zhuang shaman conducted rituals in private and performed culture in public, but only the audience members who had attended the private rituals the day before knew that she had been possessed.

Culture and art festival: general women as shamanic narrative song singers

The 2013 Culture and Art Festival focused on presenting Ande’s culture, especially aspects recognized as *feiyi* items by the Guangxi provincial government. In 2013, the festival organizers invited guest performers to perform *feiyi* items at the opening ceremony and encouraged local singers to attend a singing competition. The local people also prepared several performance items for the opening ceremony held in Ande Culture Square, a public space in which town residents exercise and arrange group activities.

During the performance of a song entitled “Giving Thanks to Mother” (*Baomu’ en*, 報母恩) in the opening ceremony, local performers in shaman-like costumes sang newly composed lyrics to the melody of a shamanic ritual song. The singers were all middle-aged women. Mr Lo, the head of Ande Culture Station, had composed the song. Over many years, Lo had heard Ande’s elders lament the difficulties parents endure in raising children and teaching

young people to be filial. In around 2011, Lo decided to compose a song based on this lament, and wrote *Baomu'en*. As the song genre was related to shamans' ritual practice, the composer Mr Nong suggested that the singers wear shaman-like costumes and carry shamanic instruments, such as metal chains, fans and water pipes, when they sang the song at the opening ceremony. Mr Nong, who had been born and raised in Ande and retired from the You River Song and Dance Troupe in Baise, revised the lyrics by adding a phrase commonly used by shamans in ritual contexts and designed the costumes for the song's performance at the festival.

The first performance of *Baomu'en* had taken place during Ande's Lunar New Year festival in 2012. The song had been well received by local audience members and was performed several times before another shamanic narrative song promoting Ande's tourism was introduced to the public in 2014.

Zhuang fasting festival: shamanic rituals and narrative songs in public

At the end of the leap year, 2014, Ande residents held the Ande Zhuang Fasting Festival. To satisfy the religious needs of the local people, ritual specialists conducted a fasting ritual over the three days of the 2014 festival. To display Zhuang culture in response to political and economic needs, community members organized performances and other entertainment several months ahead of the festival.

The fasting ritual involved two types of ritual specialist, for whom altars were set up in different corners of Ande Culture Square, in contrast with "traditional" rituals, which took place around or inside temples. A local Daoist master with eight apprentices conducted rituals at two temporary altars in the west corner of the square. Three shamans carried out rituals involving a spirit journey at a temporary altar in the northeastern corner of the square.

The ritual-performing shamans were relegated to the edge of the festival grounds, whereas a group of performers dressed in shaman-like clothes performed a shamanic narrative song at the center of the square. The stage setting for the song had stage props similar to those used in a shamanic ritual, but the lyrics sung were unrelated to shamanic spirit journeys. Rather, the lyrics were composed in promotion of Ande's tourist attractions. A significant number of stage props were used, such as an offering table, sugar cane, a wine jar and a teapot, with cookies and fruit as offerings. All of the performers carried metal chains and fans in their hands and sat on mats on the ground. Two leaders of the group sat in front of the other performers, beside an offering table and the stage props.

Discussion and concluding remarks

As we have seen, shamanic narrative songs have undergone de- and re-contextualization (Bauman and Briggs, 1990) since the late nineteenth century. At that time, local literati separated shamanic narrative songs from their original ritual contexts and re-contextualized them as entertainment for household parties or community banquets by composing new lyrics. As eloquent shamans have always attracted large audiences to their rituals, the local people were familiar with and fond of shamans' ritual songs, ensuring that the re-contextualized songs were also popular. The second phase of the separation of narrative songs from the context of local people's lives and their re-contextualization as a staged performance occurred after the CCP took over China in 1949. Both Zhuang and Chinese scholars selected and promoted narrative songs as representative of Zhuang performance arts. Local performance troupes performed them on stage. For instance, after the Cultural Revolution, a Guilin performance troupe composed a narrative song entitled "Zhuang People Remember Chairman Mao" (壮家怀念毛主席). The genre of narrative song was successfully transformed into a "purer" form of art by removing its religious flavor and adding political content. The third phase, but surely not the last, of the re-contextualization of narrative songs on stage roughly coincided with the implementation of *feiyi* surveys from 2005.

Interestingly, Zhuang composers at both the county and township levels started restoring shamanic elements to the staged performance of narrative songs, recognizing that these songs had originated from shamanic ritual contexts. The three cases described above illustrate the process of disconnecting shamanic narrative songs from ritual contexts and later reconnecting narrative songs with selective shamanic ritual elements. As shamanic songs had been identified as *feiyi*, local people took new pride in displaying musical and material elements of shamanic rituals as representative of Zhuang culture.

Thus, the material elements and sounds of shamanic ritual that had been excluded during the first and second phases of de- and re-contextualization were restored in the third phase. Shamanic narrative songs were clearly attractive to Chinese scholars in the 1950s because they had already been rendered both legal and safe to access (i.e. cleansed of “superstition”). Chinese and Zhuang composers were readily able to adapt the narrative songs to create government propaganda because such songs were familiar to and considered acceptable by the Zhuang people. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, local elites decided to use several key elements of shamanic ritual, such as bronze chains, fans and costume accoutrements, especially bonnets with veil and bamboo water pipes, when local performers sang narrative songs on stage. They also adapted key sonic features of shamans’ spirit journeys; for example, performers beat bronze chains to imitate the sound of horses’ running and even hiccupped to mark the takeover or withdrawal of a possessing spirit.

Local people can very easily distinguish narrative songs from shamanic journey songs. Staged shamanic narrative songs are displayed to outsiders while the shaman’s “superstitious” journey songs remain meaningful to those who need a shaman to solve personal or community problems. Zhuang shamanic rituals which involve spirit possession are still referred to as “superstition” (*minxi*, 迷信) in Mandarin conversations, but, at the same time, are considered essential for assuring the success of public festivals. This has led to the dynamic negotiation of the roles of song and ritual in public performances.

In the 2005 festival, two groups of singers – a shaman support group and an “official” group – both performed in public. The folksong sang by the shaman was not identified as “superstitious” in the festival context, but the ritual journey done before the festival absolutely was, and thus needed to be performed in private. In the 2014 festival, only those newly composed songs adapted from shamanic narrative song’s melody and shaman’s ritual elements were allowed to be sung in public. On top of this, participants received government funding for their performance. In contrast, the rituals conducted by Daoist priests and shamans on the edges of the square were not funded by the government. However, the performers (or “fake shamans” as local people called them) could not replace the three real shamans who conducted rituals. In short, over the last century, elements of Zhuang shamanic ritual which were first abandoned are now being restored in staged performances. At the same time, shamanic journeys still play important role in local Zhuang community.

Byrne (2012) points out that many Asian counties have carried out anti-superstition campaigns to suppress popular religion in order to establish modern nation-states. China, Vietnam and South Korea are no exception, but reactions to these campaigns differ, not only across countries but even across different ethnic groups within the same country. The Zhuang case of “making culture” distinguishes it from cases among other ethnic groups in China and other Asian counties who seek to identify ICH masterpieces. In China, Han Chinese adapt the “making religion” strategy to transform popular religion into practices related to official recognized religions, such as Buddhism or Daoism (Chau, 2011). However, restricted by China’s *feiyi* definition and domains, the Chinese Government does not recognize the religious practices of ethnic minorities as *feiyi* masterpieces, making “doing culture” an alternative strategy. In contrast, both South Korea and Vietnam develop shamanic practices into official recognized religion or beliefs (the “making religion” strategy) and into ICH masterpieces (see Kendall, 2009; Ngo, 2006; Nguyen, 2018).

Future researchers should consider the impact of surveys of folk culture and arts and the development of *feiyi* laws from several perspectives and/or through comparison with other case studies. First, they should understand that whilst both were national trends, these surveys and *feiyi* laws by no means created unified practices, but offered grounds for negotiation between individuals in the community and between levels of bureaucracy. Although some leeway was available in defining potential *feiyi* items, the process remained politically slippery. Second, the practice of presenting *feiyi* in a festival format significantly affected the items themselves, especially with regard to their audiences. Community cultural and/or religious activities were turned into festival events or *jie* (節), stripping away their religious contexts and re-contextualizing them folk art performances. Ho Ts'ui-ping (何翠萍, 2008) criticizes Chinese scholars for transcribing, translating and publishing orally performed ritual chants without considering their context. She suggests that Chinese literati – specifically, in her study of Jingpo literati – should consider Bauman and Briggs's account of the de- and re-contextualization of oral performance in the publication of Jingpo ritual texts. The Zhuang case outlined here supports her assertion. Finally, future investigation should consider how current *feiyi* practices impact the public roles and private practices of Zhuang ritual specialists in the future.

Note on non-English words and informant's names

In the main text, traditional Chinese characters are used to translate proper names and terms. When a Chinese legal document or official document is cited, the original text is provided in simplified Chinese. For Zhuang terms, I use the Zhuang spelling system (abbreviated as Zh.) modified by Liao Hanbo (廖汉波, 2010) from the Standard Zhuang Script (標準壯文) created in the 1950s by Chinese linguists. In the list of references, the titles of books, journals and articles are given in either simplified or traditional Chinese characters as at their first publication. All informants names are pseudonyms.

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Corresponding author

Ya-ning Kao can be contacted at: kaoy@nccu.edu.tw

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