



The Development of the Miao Love Song Zimei Festival in Taijiang City, Guizhou Province, People's Republic of China

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This study investigates the historical development of the Miao Love Song Zimei Festival in Taijiang City, Guizhou Province, People's Republic of China. The objective was to investigate its development. Qualitative research methods were employed, using in-depth interviews and participant observation as primary tools. Data were collected on-site through fieldwork with two key informants, who were recognized transmitters of Miao folk songs, and through direct observation of festival performances and activities. Supplementary documentary sources were also reviewed. Data analysis was carried out through descriptive and interpretive approaches.

The findings reveal that the Zimei Festival has evolved through five distinct stages: ancient origins, the Tang and Song dynasties, the Ming and Qing dynasties, the modern period (1912–1949), and the contemporary period (1949–2024). Each stage reflects transformations shaped by social change, migration, and cultural exchange, with a continuous enrichment of its forms and content. Today, the Zimei Festival not only preserves Miao traditions of love song performance but also serves as a platform for cultural heritage safeguarding, tourism development, and intercultural dialogue.

Keywords

Miao love song, Zimei Festival, folk music, cultural development, Guizhou

Background and Problems of the Research

The geographical conditions in the southeast of Guizhou Province are diverse, shaped by mountains and valleys. The unique geographical advantages, climatic landscapes, and historical and cultural elements of this region have had a significant impact on the customs and love songs of the Miao people in this area. The Miao people rely on nature for their growth, and they also incorporate their love and understanding of nature into their love songs. The humid and rainy climate of southeast Guizhou, with distinct seasons, provides the Miao people with rich materials for folk stories, historical tales, and other creative emotions, which become important materials for expressing human emotions in Miao love songs. This not only reflects the Miao people's love for labor and nature and their rich emotional characteristics but also perpetuates the rich emotional culture of the Miao people and their strong desire for better emotional pursuits (Wen, 1996).

The Miao people are a migratory nation that migrated to settle in southeast Guizhou during the Tang and Song dynasties. According to the unique "son inherits father's name" system of the Miao people, young men and women here are separated by mountains, making it difficult to meet, so they can only convey their yearning through sonorous and melodious songs, gradually forming a unique multi-voice love song melody and singing style. Miao love songs that generally sung with a certain degree of formalization. Emotions between men and women are conveyed through methods such as conveying affection through objects, expressing emotions through scenery, and expressing feelings through others. "Love" becomes the core content of the lyrics and the center of expression for singers. Men and women use heartfelt songs to communicate thoughts and feelings, and express their admiration and longing for each other. Sometimes, men and women also use it to play with and tease each other, fully reflecting the wisdom and humor of both parties. Sometimes, the singing of love songs also has a certain degree of improvisation, and the singer can only respond cleverly based on the content expressed by the other party on the spot, reflecting the singer's inner world and emotions through the lyrics and phrases of the song. The lyrics are profound in meaning and rich in ideological content, generally in a five-word form, emphasizing rhyme without rhyming.

The love songs of the Miao people in Guizhou are rich in content and diverse in artistic forms, serving as an important way for the Miao people to express love and carrying the cultural traditions and national sentiments of the Miao people. Firstly, Miao songs are usually sung in three different tones: "light tone," "slow tone," and "fast tone." Secondly,

different tones and inflections also reflect the Miao people's grasp of emotions and emotional expressions. For example, a "slow tone" often expresses happiness, joy, and a sense of well-being, while a "fast tone" is often associated with sadness and melancholy, but can also express intense emotional colors. Finally, different modes and tones have different emphases when expressing different emotions (Long, 2014).

The Miao love songs in Taijiang city, Guizhou Province, are unique in their cultural connotations. As an important way for the Miao people to express emotions, the characteristics of Miao love songs lie in their themes of love, marriage, and family bonds, which blend the rich cultural and emotional connotations of the Miao people. These rich emotional connotations not only express the Miao people's desire and cherishment for love but also convey the entire nation's aspirations and pursuits for beautiful feelings and life. In addition, Miao love songs have a unique passion and warmth in emotional expression, which also reveals the positive and unfettered personality and characteristics of the Miao people. This unique emotion is more likely to touch the hearts of listeners and evoke resonance.

Taijiang City is known as "the No.1 Miao County in the World." With a large Miao population and profound Miao cultural heritage, it is one of the important birthplaces of the Miao Zimei Festival. The Miao Zimei Festival is not only celebrated in Taijiang County but also has a tradition in Jianhe County. However, Taijiang County is more well-known in the inheritance and development of the Miao Zimei Festival. Since there are nine branches of Miao costumes in Taijiang County, each branch retains unique traditional cultural elements such as Miao costume-making techniques and forms of song and dance performances, providing a solid foundation for showcasing the rich and colorful Miao culture during the Zimei Festival. Moreover, Taijiang County actively promotes the inheritance and protection of Miao culture. It integrates Miao cultural courses into school education, cultivating a large number of inheritors. At the same time, it encourages family inheritance, enabling the traditions of the Miao Zimei Festival to be passed down from generation to generation. Meanwhile, the Taijiang County government attaches great importance to the Miao Zimei Festival. The first "Zimei Festival" was held in 1998, and the "Nonggaliang" activity was officially named "Zimei Festival." By continuously standardizing and enriching the activity content, the influence of the festival has been enhanced. In addition, Taijiang County has increased its publicity and promotion efforts for the Zimei Festival. Using modern media and online platforms, it has promoted the Zimei Festival to the whole country and even the world, attracting the attention of a large number of tourists and the media.



This study aims to supplement academic research by documenting the development of the Miao Zimei Festival of Love Songs and the musical characteristics of Miao love songs. By researching the historical development and evolution of the Miao Zimei Festival of Love Songs and analyzing Miao love songs, it deepens the understanding of Miao music culture and the musical characteristics of Miao love songs, promotes cultural exchanges between ethnic minorities and various regions, and introduces nationalized music to the world. At the same time, this will also enhance researchers' new understanding of Miao music.

From the reasons above, the researcher wants to study this topic to investigate the development and analyze the music characteristics of Miao love songs in Taijiang County, Guizhou Province, to ensure that this music culture can continue.

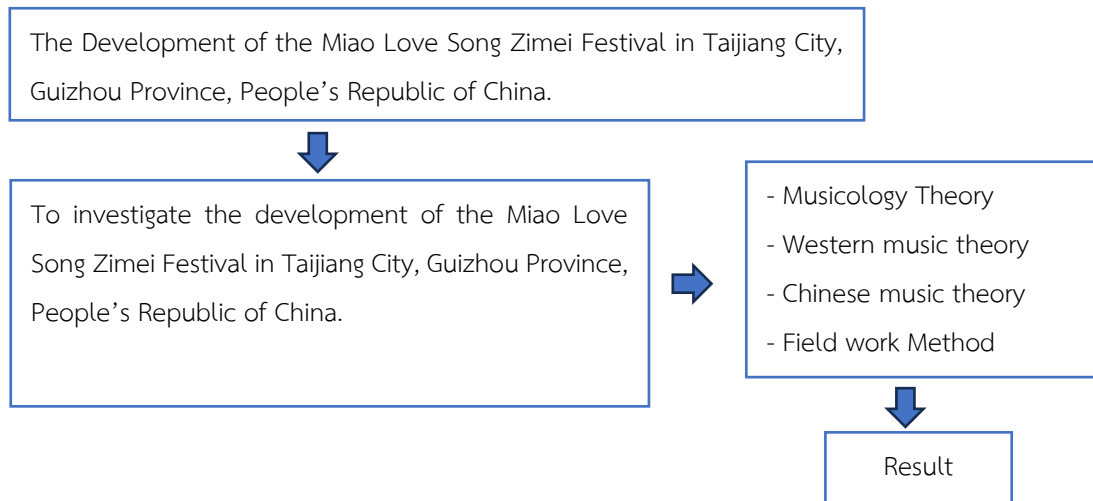
Research Objectives

To investigate the development of the Miao Love Song Zimei Festival in Taijiang City, Guizhou Province, People’s Republic of China

Research Scope and Conceptual framework

Researcher studied about development and analyzed Miao love song in Taijiang City, Guizhou Province, People’s Republic of China

Conceptual framework



Research process

1. Selection of the Research Site

Taijiang County is known as "the No.1 Miao County in the World." With a large Miao population and profound Miao cultural heritage, it is one of the important birthplaces of the Miao Zimei Festival. (From Figure 1).



Figure 1. Taijiang County, Qian Dongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture, Guizhou Province, China Source:// chinafolio.com

2. Selection of key informants

The criteria to select key informants

- 1) Informants must be Miao people who have been living in Taijiang County at least ten years or more.
- 2) One must have rich experience in performing Miao love songs.
- 3) They must be representative transmitter of Miao love songs and folk songs who have been engaged in transmission for over ten years and have won awards more than five times.

From the criteria the research chooses 2 key informants Tian Zhongming, Miao nationality, born in 1976, from Fangzhao Village, Fangzhao Town, Taijiang County, Guizhou Province, has been the provincial representative transmitter of the national intangible cultural heritage project "Miao Multi-voice Folk Songs". (From Figure 2)



Figure 2. Tian ZhimingSource: Tian Zhiming, (2004)

Zhao Mingying, female, Miao, the original town Fang Zhao village, in 2012 by qiandongnan intangible cultural heritage Miao multi-vocal folk song project representative transmission, from 1995 to 2004. (From Figure 3).



Figure 3. Zhao MingyingSource: Zhao Mingying , (2004)

3. This study employed two primary research tools: the interview form and the observation form.

3.1 Interview Form

The interview form was designed to gather qualitative data through face-to-face interactions between the researcher and key informants. This tool allowed for flexible and adaptive questioning, enabling the researcher to probe deeper based on participants' responses. This approach facilitated the collection of rich, detailed, and first-hand information.

Development Process of the Interview Form:

- 1) The initial draft of the interview form was created based on the research objectives and core research questions.
- 2) The draft was submitted to the academic advisor for review and feedback.



3) Revisions were made to address identified gaps and improve clarity and comprehensiveness.

4) The finalized interview form was then utilized in the fieldwork phase of the research.

3.2 Observation Form

The observation form was used to systematically record behaviors, events, and contextual factors during fieldwork. It supported the collection of direct, non-verbal, and environmental data that complemented the interview findings.

Development Process of the Observation Form:

1) An observation form was designed based on research objectives and relevant questions related to participant behaviors and settings.

2) The form was submitted to the academic advisor for revise.

3) Suggestions and feedback were incorporated to refine the content and structure of the form.

4) The revised observation form was employed during field research, with further minor adjustments made as needed to ensure data accuracy and completeness.

4. Data collection

Data collection is an initial understanding of the relevant information through the interview and observation methods, enabling researcher to gain basic insights into this topic. Data collection was conducted through interviews with informants directly about history and development, and observations at festivals were used to observe singing and performing activities in order to analyze the development.

5. Data analysis

Data analysis was carried out through descriptive and interpretive approaches, synthesizing historical accounts, oral testimonies, and musical features.

The Development of Miao Love Songs during the Zimei Festival in Taijiang, Guizhou Based on collected data, the historical development of the Miao Love Song Zimei Festival can be categorized into five distinct stages:

1) Origin in Ancient Times (around 2500 BC)

2) Tang and Song Dynasties (618–1279 AD)

3) Ming and Qing Dynasties (1279–1912 AD)

4) Modern Period (1912–1949 AD)

5) Contemporary Period (1949–2024 AD)

5.1 Origin in Ancient Times (around 2500 BC)

The cultural roots of the Miao people trace back to approximately 2500 BC, when they lived in tribal settlements near rivers and mountains and practiced slash-and-burn agriculture. Deeply spiritual, they revered natural elements and developed music, dance, and poetry to express emotions and document their way of life (Ma, 2010). Miao love songs likely originated as spontaneous expressions of daily experiences. These evolved alongside legends associated with the Zimei Festival, including a well-known tale of women searching for lost hunters, weaving flower belts, and celebrating reunion with Zimei rice and communal singing (Zeng & Gu, 2017). Antiphonal singing became a central feature of the festival, allowing young men and women to express affection and form emotional bonds. Over time, the festival became a space for lyrical creativity, while love songs enriched the festival with romantic and cultural significance.

5.2 Tang and Song Dynasties (618–1279 AD)

During this era, the Miao inhabited relatively stable communities across present-day Guizhou Province, Hunan Province, and Guangxi Province. While central government influence grew, Miao tribal autonomy persisted. Agricultural advancements transitioned from slash-and-burn to intensive farming, laying the foundation for broader cultural development (Jiang, 2000). Miao belief systems particularly animism and ancestor worship remained strong, and artistic practices flourished. Love songs became more refined, addressing complex emotional narratives and labor experiences (Li, 2000). Melodic structures incorporated musical elements from neighboring Han traditions, such as grace notes and rhythmic variation. Performance styles diversified, including antiphonal duets, choruses, and harmonized accompaniment. The Zimei Festival grew more structured, with fixed seasonal dates and formalized rituals, including ancestral sacrifices, dance, and competitions (Wu, 1999). It became an essential platform for courtship, artistic display, and intergenerational transmission of Miao identity.

5.3 Ming and Qing Dynasties (1279–1912 AD)

During this period, administrative reforms particularly the replacement of native chieftains with state-appointed officials increased Miao integration into broader Chinese society (Li, 2024). Han agricultural methods and commercial practices spread, improving local production and fostering economic growth.

Despite Confucian influence, the Miao retained cultural distinctiveness. Love songs expanded in theme, incorporating reflections on family, trade, and ethnic pride. Influenced by

Han ideals of patriotism and poetic form, lyrics adopted antithetical structure and explored deeper emotional nuances. Melodic forms grew more complex, and singing styles evolved from bold solos to more delicate and emotive performances. The transmission of love songs became more systematic through “song masters” who trained younger generations (Wu, 1999). The Zimei Festival also expanded, incorporating martial arts, archery, and the display of crafts like embroidery and batik, which conveyed spiritual and historical symbolism (Long & Yang, 2015). It drew participants from beyond the Miao community, enhanced intercultural exchange, and elevated the festival as a site for musical and cultural innovation (Guo, 2023).

5.4 Modern Period (1912–1949 AD)

Amid political upheaval and war, Miao love songs increasingly reflected national crises and emotional resilience. Themes of war, longing, and sorrow emerged, as did patriotic and anti-Japanese sentiments (Li, 1993). Inspired by the New Culture Movement, love songs began promoting freedom in love and gender equality. Musical styles diversified with the inclusion of group choruses and harmonies, especially in educational and military contexts. Modern instruments like harmonicas and accordions were adopted, enriching the traditional soundscape. Dissemination expanded beyond oral tradition to include newspapers, radio, and school curricula. Despite wartime hardship, the Zimei Festival endured albeit in simplified form. Rituals like sacrifices and antiphonal singing continued, and new values such as gender equality and national unity were incorporated into festival activities, reinforcing cultural pride and cohesion (Xiang, 2019).

5.5 Contemporary Period (1949–2024 AD)

Since 1949, the Zimei Festival has adapted alongside national transformation. In its early years, economic hardship limited the festival’s reach, but core customs like Zimei rice preparation and “Youfang” courtship persisted (Peng, 2015). During the 1980s–1990s, reforms spurred economic growth in Miao areas and drew scholarly and governmental interest to the festival. In 1998, Taijiang County formally supported the Zimei Festival, initiating a model of “private-run with public assistance” (Wang & Huang, 2017). In the 21st century, national recognition followed: the Zimei Festival was listed as an intangible cultural heritage project. It evolved to incorporate bonfire parties, stage performances, and multimedia, becoming a prominent tourism brand (Yu & Tian, 2007). After 2013, improved infrastructure and poverty alleviation enhanced local participation. In 2024, Taijiang hosted over 869,100 visitors, generating more than 1.042 billion Yuan in tourism revenue. Events like the “Butterfly Mother” performance, the grand costume parade, and the Wengni River antiphonal singing featuring

over 10,000 participants highlighted both cultural continuity and innovation (Xinhua News Agency, 2024; Tencent News, 2024; Taijiang County Media Center, 2024). Today, the Zimei Festival is not only a celebration of love but also a driver of local industries in music, silverwork, and embroidery. It nurtures new generations of cultural practitioners while sustaining the Miao community's creative vitality, unity, and heritage. From the data the researcher can summarized in the table below

Table 1 Summary Miao Love song

Historical Period	Key Developments
Ancient Origins (~2500 BC)	Tribal life near nature; origin of love songs and Zimei Festival from legends; emotional expression through music and rituals.
Tang and Song Dynasties (618–1279 AD)	Stable society; enriched love song lyrics; standardized Zimei Festival rituals; emergence of antiphonal and chorus singing.
Ming and Qing Dynasties (1279–1912 AD)	Cultural blending with Han people; love songs reflected patriotism and social themes; formalized song transmission by 'song masters.'
Modern Period (1912–1949 AD)	Impact of war and social unrest; love songs expressed resistance and modern ideals; radio and schools supported cultural transmission.
Contemporary Period (1949–2024 AD)	Cultural preservation and tourism integration; Zimei Festival became a national heritage; modern elements attracted wide audiences and boosted the economy.



Discussion

A large amount of data collected through on site interviews, observations, and literature reviews provides a rich and complex exploration of the cultural, historical, and social aspects that have shaped this unique musical tradition in the Miao love songs of the Zimei Festival in Taijiang County, Guizhou Province.

Through the research and analysis of the development of the Miao Love Song Zimei Festival in Taijiang County, along with the historical changes of the Miao ethnic group, the Miao love songs have undergone historical evolutions in several stages and been preserved to this day. Just as the scholar Wei (2024) wrote, new musical content was added at each stage of development, thus promoting the spread and development of Miao musical culture.

The Taijiang Zimei Festival, as a dazzling pearl in the feast of Miao culture, is just like what scholar Hu (2018) wrote. The Zimei Festival is even more one of the most important festivals in Taijiang County, Guizhou Province, and the Miao love song culture contained therein shines even more brightly. This festival not only celebrates the unity and friendship of the ethnic group but also conveys and promotes the essence of ethnic culture. It is also a necessary venue for demonstrating Miao love songs. It not only provides a good cultural life platform for the local people but also enables more people to understand the Miao music culture.

When Miao love songs are sung during the Zimei Festival, just as scholars Liu, & Gu. (2023) wrote, the mountains, rivers, flowers, birds, fish and insects depicted in the lyrics are all vivid portrayals of the life of the Miao people and are also the crystallization of their emotions and wisdom. These lyrics have been passed down from generation to generation and have continuously evolved over the long years, thus preserving the social and cultural environment of the Miao ethnic group.

From the perspective of musicology, just as scholar Wang (2021) mentioned the melody and rhythm of Miao love songs have unique charm. The melody of Miao love songs also has the characteristics of recurrence and echo. There are certain connections and echoes between the preceding and following phrases, making the melody of the whole song more coherent and smooth. However, surrounded by modern music elements, on the basis of maintaining its original flavor, appropriate innovation and integration should be carried out to attract more young listeners and make this ancient music form radiate new vitality in the new era.

In terms of inheritance and protection, just as scholars Yuan & Wu (2015). stated, there are already quite a number of bars, such as carrying out Miao music culture in campuses and cultivating inheritors of intangible cultural heritage. A more complete and sustainable inheritance system should be constructed to ensure that Miao love songs will continue to be sung in the years to come and will not be submerged by the torrent of time.

Suggestion

Various organizations involved in arts and culture can use this information to develop strategies for preserving these songs or promoting their popularity. Educational institutions can also use this knowledge to develop folk song lessons for interested students, thus continuing to preserve this wisdom.



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