Constructing an Ethnic Minority through Musical Theater: A Case Study of the Zhuang

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Abstract

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the communist regime announced the existence of 56 ethnic groups, comprising the Han people and 55 ethnic minorities. Since then, statements like "China has 56 ethnic groups" or "There are 56 officially recognized ethnicities" have been appearing as a description of an objective fact or commonsensical knowledge in scholarly and media discussions of Chinese music and culture. At the same time, anthropologists point out that members of the same Chinese ethnic minority may have language traits, customs, habits, and traditions that largely vary from one place to another. I contribute to this existing body of literature by examining the role of music in shaping ethnic identities, both in terms of internal cohesion and external conceptions. This article provides a case study of the Zhuang ethnic group, the largest ethnic minority in China, whose members lacked a shared set of cultural attributes or a common sense of self-identification before the 1950s. I will focus on how a Liu Sanjie-themed musical theater production was created and spread to lead registered members of the Zhuang embrace a fictional collective past, to construct shared cultural traditions among them, and to shape their sense of identity. Drawing upon both historical and ethnographic data, this article also investigates how the nationwide promotion of Liu Sanjie-themed theater has been leading Chinese citizens, who may never meet or talk to a Zhuang member, to imagine the time-honored existence, life, and thoughts of this constructed ethnic minority.

Mandarin Abstract

通过音乐剧来建构少数民族:
一个案例研究

汤凯

在中华人民共和国成立之后， 政府宣布了56个民族的存在， 其中包括汉族和55个少数民族。自那时开始，“中国有56个少数民族”或“中国有56个官方认证的少数民族”作为一种常识性背景，经常出现在

ISSN: 2791-4569 DOI: 10.52413/mm.2025.38

mdwPress

学术和媒体关于中国音乐和文化的论述之中。与此同时，人类学者们指出，在不同地区里，被认定为同一个中国少数民族的人们可能会有着截然不同的语言，习俗，和传统。通过探讨音乐是如何在民族身份形成、内部凝聚力建立，和外部概念建构中发挥作用的，本文旨在推进此讨论。 我将关注一个案例，即壮族，它不仅是中国最大的少数民族，被认定为其成员的人们并未在20世纪50年代之前形成或显示共同的文化特征。我将专注于关于刘三姐的音乐戏剧作品，探讨它们是如何被创造传播进而帮助被认定为壮族成员的人们接受一个虚构的集体记忆、建造共同的传统、进而帮助他们回答“我是谁”的。 基于历史分析和民族志的研究资料，本文探究这些关于的刘三姐的戏曲是如何在全国范围内被推广、并且帮助那些从没有见过壮族的人来想象这个民族的悠久历史和文化生活的。

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the communist regime announced the existence of 56 ethnic groups, comprising the Han, the ethnic majority occupying over 90 percent of China's population, and 55 ethnic minorities.[1] According to governmental announcements and the scholar-officials who participated in the Ethnic Identification Project, these 56 ethnic groups were identified using four Stalinist ethnic markers: common language, territory, economic mode, and shared psychological makeup manifested in a common culture (see, e.g., Fei 1981; China Ethnic Affair Commission 1986; Shi 2018). However, as some anthropologists and sociologists have already pointed out, people may not have identified with an ethnicity when they were registered to be its members, and the registered members of a given Chinese ethnic group may not share the same language, customs, traditions, history or origin myth (e.g., Harrell 1990; Mackerras 1994; Litzinger 2000).

Through a case study of the Zhuang, the largest ethnic minority of China, this article will discuss how state-arranged musical activities generated shared cultural attributes and a fictional past for a then-newly designed ethnicity. Drawing upon my intermittent field research over the past decade, I will focus on how the Chinese state used Liu Sanjie-themed musical theater to shape the ethnic identity of the Zhuang, both in terms of internal cohesion and external conceptions of the Zhuang. When examining China's frontier policies, George Moseley (1973) and Diana Lary (1996) argue that the Zhuang are a fictive "geographical minority" created to consolidate China's southern borders or to suppress Cantonese regionalism. Katherine Kaup (2000, 2002) further explores how the state has created the Zhuang by means of language development, cadre training, education, and so on. My ethnographic research suggests that music, which Kaup and others do not include in their analyses, has also been playing an important and effective role in fostering self-identification among the Zhuang population and in sharpening the imagination of countrywide audiences regarding the supposedly time-honored existence and unified culture of this ethnicity.

[1] Transliterations of Chinese terms and names in this article are based on the Hanyu Pinyin system, which is the standard phonetic scheme in the People's Republic of China. All translations of the song texts and quotations from Chinese sources are by the author. In this article, Chinese names are presented in its original structure, that is, family name first and followed by given name(s).

The Zhuang: The Largest Ethnic Minority in China

Ever since the communists established the People's Republic of China in 1949, this country has positioned itself as a multi-ethnic entity that respects diverse ethnic cultures and identities. In the early 1950s, the state launched an Ethnic Identification Project leading to the announcement of the existence of 56 ethnic groups. Between 1952 and the 1980s, every Chinese citizen was assigned an ethnic identity where they were either officially registered as belonging to the Han ethnic majority or to one of the 55 ethnic minorities. Since then, statements such as "There are 56 ethnic groups in China" or "There are 56 officially acknowledged ethnicities in China" have been repeated as commonsense knowledge in many scholarly publications and reference books (see, e.g., Clesse and Xu 2004; Guo 2013; Zang 2016).

We may give different answers to the question of what an ethnic group is. Nevertheless, there are some fundamental, internationally employed criteria when scholars try to decide whether a group belongs to an ethnic group. The core criterion is that the group is bound by a common set of cultural attributes, such as language or dialect, ancestry or origin myth, religion, history, musical traditions, etc. Self-identification is another important criterion, meaning the members of a recognized ethnic group identify with a common culture and view themselves as belonging to a group (see, e.g., Wijeyewardene 1990; Peoples and Bailey 2012; Chandra 2012). In the case of China, individuals and groups might not have shared a common cultural background or a sense of self-identification when they were being registered into the same ethnic category. Anthropologist Stevan Harrell (1990) points out that people categorized to be members of the Yi ethnic group have languages, customs, habits, and traditions that vary largely from one place to another. Louisa Schein (2000) notices that the recognized Miao members living in seven Chinese provinces speak dozens of mutually unintelligible dialects or languages and refer to themselves with tens of different names. However, the Chinese state has been making efforts to "stabilize the Miao as an historically continuous and culturally homogeneous entity" (ibid.: 66). Similar situations have also been observed among other ethnic minorities such as the Bai (Mackerras 1994), the Hui (Gladney 1991), and the Zhuang people (Kaup 2000), which are the subject of this analysis.

In 1952, the Chinese state announced the existence of the Zhuang ethnic group. According to the results of the national population census of 1953 reported by the China National Bureau of Statistics (1954), there were 6,611,455 people registered as Zhuang, with over 6.5 million of them living in the Guangxi Province, South China. Since then, the Zhuang have been known as the largest ethnic minority in China. The *2021 China Population Statistical Yearbook* reported that the registered Zhuang population had increased to 19,568,546 (China National Bureau of Statistics 2021).

Although Chinese governmental, academic and media publications describe the Zhuang as a millennia-old ethnicity, my research concurs with Kaup in suggesting that the Zhuang ethnic group, in some sense, did not exist before the 1950s. First, Zhuang was not recognized as an ethnicity in official or public discourse before 1949. This statement is based on my archival research on the pre-1949 governmental and print media

publications preserved in the China National Library, the Guangzhou City Library, the Guangxi Province Library, and the Hebei Province Library. In the existing body of Chinese literature, human fossils and other archeological remains unearthed in Guangxi are used to argue the lengthy history of the Zhuang ethnicity (see, e.g., Investigation Team of the History and Society of Guangxi Ethnic Minorities 1964; Huang, Huang and Zhang 1988; Zhang 1997; Liang 2021). However, these Chinese publications fail to provide evidence that these ancient Guangxi residents have shared a common, distinct culture or have identified with each other through a shared culture or as the Zhuang. Moreover, when I conducted research in Guangxi between 2016 and 2021, native residents of Congzuo, Qinzhou, and Hechi prefectures told me that they had never heard of the Zhuang before they were being registered as members. Li Zongren, a Nationalist politician and warlord who ruled Guangxi between 1925 and 1949, also confessed that he did not know who the Zhuang were or where these Zhuang people resided (Tang 2002: 62).

In addition to the lack of self-identification, the Zhuang population consists of culturally disparate tribes. Guangxi is a mountainous province. Before the road network was built in the 20th century, local residents lived as tribes or villages separated by high mountains, hindering cultural exchange (see also Su 1958; Zhong 1999; Zhou, Liu, and Bin 2019). Even though these villages have been categorized into the Zhuang ethnic group, as Katherine Kaup (2000) points out, they did not speak the same language or dialect, did not have a collective memory about the past of the group, and did not have a shared set of customs. In the late 1950s, to explain the perceived lack of shared attributes, the administrative governor of Guangxi claimed: The "Zhuang ethnic group does not have [cultural] characteristic, which is its main characteristic" (Meng 2009: 66).

This article will examine how state-arranged musical activities contributed to generating shared characteristics as the Zhuang for these culturally different tribes. This study will embody two concepts of minority. The first is "ethnic minority," as the official translation of the Chinese term *shaoshu minzu*. In China's official and mainstream public discourses, the term ethnic minority or shaoshu minzu does not have political implications but, in the words of the *Grand Chinese Dictionary*, "refers to any ethnic group other than the ethnic group that has the largest number of members in a multi-ethnic country" (Grand Chinese Dictionary Editorial Office 1986: 235). "After the founding of the People's Republic of China, 56 ethnic groups were recognized and confirmed by the central government," the Chinese Central Government (2005) further explains. "Aside from the Han ethnic group, there were 55 ethnic groups that have a smaller population than the Han. They were thus customarily called shaoshu minzu" (ibid.). At the same time, these Chinese ethnic minorities are also the groups whose rights to maintain their own distinctive cultural characteristics and traditions have been recognized and protected by laws and decrees and are advertised with artistic exhibitions and musical performances (see, e.g., Communist Party Central Committee [1950] 2013 and China National People's Congress 1984).

For the second concept of minority, I adopt a definition from the Study Group on Music and Minorities of the International Council for Traditions of Music and Dance (ICTMD), according to which the term minority encompasses "communities, groups

and/or individuals, including indigenous, migrant, and other vulnerable groups that are at higher risk of discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, race, religion, language, gender, sexual orientation, disability, political opinion, social or economic deprivation" (ICTMD Study Group on Music and Minorities n.d.).[2] Social and educational oppression against ethnic minorities is prohibited under article 4 of China's Constitution enacted in 1954 which purports to protect their right to maintain unique characteristics. Nonetheless, if we see imposed cultural regulations as a form of discrimination, these "ethnic groups having smaller populations" are also minorities according to the ICTMD definition. As Svanibor Pettan (2012) suggests, a major contribution of minority music studies is that they challenge old-fashioned theoretical models presuming homogeneity of the culture of a real or artificial community. As a pioneer of minority music studies, Ursula Hemetek (2015, 2016) calls attention to the role of music in inventing, sustaining, and negotiating the identities of minorities (see also Reyes 2007). Inspired by these pioneering researchers of music and minorities, this study explores the role of state-arranged musical activities in constructing common cultural traits among culturally disparate tribes who are officially categorized into the same larger ethnicity.

In summary, the Zhuang, like many other Chinese ethnic minorities whose existence was only acknowledged after the establishment of communist China, consist of registered members who do not share a common background, language, religion, or music tradition before the 1950s. In his ethnography on the Yao ethnic minority, Ralph Litzinger (2000) suggests that the Chinese state controls minority peoples not only by marginalizing them but also by recognizing them or by creating a body of knowledge about the shared traits distinguishing them from other groups. In the following parts of this article, I will discuss how Liu Sanjie-themed musical theater productions were conceived and spread throughout the country to construct shared cultural characteristics or shared knowledge of the characteristics and to answer the question of who the Zhuang are, asked both by registered Zhuang members and by non-Zhuang Chinese citizens.

The Birth of Liu Sanjie-Themed Musical Theater

Although most Chinese citizens had not heard of the Zhuang, including people who were later being registered as members, a series of Liu Sanjie-themed musical theater productions made this freshly proposed, supposedly millennia-old ethnicity well-known to the public around 1960. This section examines the social and political context that gave birth to this type of musical representation of the Zhuang as well as the pre-existing folk elements borrowed in the process of inventing symbolic traditions for this ethnicity.

[2] See also Hemetek and Kölbl (2023) for a detailed discussion of the historical evolvement of this definition.

Liu Sanjie is the name of a fictional heroine in a variety of folk legends that have been prevalent in South China for centuries. Liu Sanjie was commonly portrayed as a female well-versed in singing. These legends have different plotlines in which Liu falls in love with a handsome scholar or happily tours between different regions by herself, is forced to commit suicide or becomes an immortal deity (see Qu 1985; Zhang 1925; Guo [1818] 2002). These legends were circulated in multiple provinces – such as Guangdong, Guizhou, Yunnan and Hunan – and among culturally diverse peoples categorized into different ethnic groups such as the Miao, the Yao, the Zhuang, as well as the Han majority (Peng 2014; Chen 2022).

Caidiao is another folk element incorporated into the musical representations of the Zhuang. As a form of theater popular in rural northern Guangxi, caidiao was developed from Han operatic genres brought into the region by migrants and visitors of the ethnic majority in and after the 15th century, and it also absorbed folk tunes from Guangxi locals of diverse ethnic identities (Cai 1988; Gu 2002). Along with Peking and Cantonese opera, caidiao has been classified by the Chinese state as x*iqu* (or *xi*), a category comprising a wide range of dramatic genres combining dance, acting, vocal and instrumental music. Xiqu or xi is commonly translated as opera (see, e.g., Idema 2015; Lam 2022). In the 1950s, the State Council inaugurated a reform of xiqu with a series of decrees, conferences, and demonstration concerts. Art workers and regional authorities were ordered to produce new compositions using the "[regional] xiqu genres influential among local people" to facilitate the implementation of the state's policies (Zhou 1951: 2, see also Chinese Dramas Journalists 1958). Caidiao was one of the Guangxi genres selected to fulfil this task.

In the winter of 1958, the Propaganda and Culture Bureaus of Liuzhou City in northern Guangxi organized a symposium on how to create new compositions based on local operatic genres. Artists and cultural cadres were invited to propose themes for new productions according to the state's ongoing agenda: to reflect not only the regional and ethnic characteristics but also the life and anti-feudalist struggles in Guangxi, which had only just become a so-called "autonomous region" of the Zhuang, namely in March 1958 (see Deng 1996: 482). The legends about Liu Sanjie were proposed, accepted, and defined as "the embodiment of the collective wisdom accumulated among the Zhuang people over thousands of years," as is stated by Zheng Tianjian (1962: 25) who attended the symposium and was appointed director of the caidiao adaptation *Liu Sanjie*. However, these legends surrounding Liu Sanjie neither solely belonged to Guangxi nor were they shared by all recognized members of the Zhuang (or even a considerable portion thereof). Staff members of the Bureaus rewrote the legends into a new story and developed a script. In the story and script set in ancient times all the character relationships and happenings were arranged according to the communist ideology around the class struggle between "oppressors" and "oppressed." The script positions Liu as a beautiful girl who is good at singing mountain songs and unites the oppressed (farmers, fishermen, etc.) to sing and fight against the feudal oppressors such as landlords and scholars. Influenced by the ongoing nationwide campaign regarding the collection of folk songs launched by Chairman Mao Zedong (Tian 1959), these cultural cadres abandoned the

conventional set of fixed melodic patterns of caidiao and replaced them with folk tunes collected from the locals. These tunes also used lyrics in Mandarin, adhering to the framework constituted by the sinicized aesthetic principles, role types, and performing techniques of caidiao (Liao 2021).

In March 1959, at a concert organized by the government of the Guangxi Province, this first version of *Liu Sanjie* was premiered as a gift from the Zhuang ethnic group to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the communist regime. While acknowledging caidiao as a genre of the Han ethnic majority, *Opera Monthly*, a magazine supervised by the Xiqu Reform Bureau of the Chinese Ministry of Culture, introduced *Liu Sanjie* to the public, as a successful case of reforming the existing forms of xiqu to tell stories of ethnic minorities (Li, Lan and Hou 1959). Two members of the Xiqu Reform Bureau who attended the concert also praised its "rich regional and ethnic characteristics" and suggested the possibility to improve this production (Deng 1996: 484). Liuzhou City Government soon founded a "*Liu Sanjie* Script and Music Composition Team" to enhance this first version.

Although, as I have discussed in this section, neither the Liu Sanjie legends or caidiao solely belonged to the registered Zhuang members or Guangxi residents, the caidiao adaption called *Liu Sanjie* was created and premiered to reflect the cultural characteristics of the Zhuang. In the next part of this article, I will discuss how the state disseminated this production throughout Guangxi and invited new compositions borrowing varied regionally influential genres to repeat the same story of a fictional past among the registered Zhuang members and people living around them.

Spreading *Liu Sanjie* in Guangxi

Soon after the successful premiere of *Liu Sanjie* in early 1959, the Guangxi Provincial Government took two measures to promote the Liu Sanjie-themed musical theater within its jurisdiction. First, artists from the state-owned institutions of Liuzhou city toured all parts of Guangxi to deliver exemplary performances of *Liu Sanjie.* Second, the provincial government encouraged hundreds of art troupes and opera groups located in different rural and urban regions to create their own operas based on the story of Liu Sanjie.

After its premiere in 1959, *Liu Sanjie* was appointed to be an exemplary piece of the state's xiqu reform and appeared in a series of public cultural events in Nanning city, the provincial capital of Guangxi, ranging from National Day festivals to Labor Day concerts (Li and Mo 2017). On April 27, 1959, *Guangxi Daily*, the official newspaper of the provincial government, began to publish the script of *Liu Sanjie*, describing it as "adapted from a folk legend of the Zhuang ethnic group living in Guangxi" (*Guangxi Daily* 1959: n.p.). Two days later the script started appearing in regional newspapers such as *Liuzhou Daily* with the same ethnic label. At the same time, the Liuzhou City Culture and Propaganda Bureaus recruited artists from local institutions and organized

them into several troupes to deliver the performances of *Liu Sanjie* throughout Guangxi, from city to city and from village to village.

According to my ethnographic research, this tour of *Liu Sanjie* covered all major cities of Guangxi. Interviewed residents of Liuzhou, Guilin, and Nanning have confirmed that the troupes performed at the cultural palaces, theaters, and/or other major concert venues of their cities more than one time around 1960. In rural regions, these artists also gave open air performances that were freely accessible to all villagers. In rural Guilian and Yizhou, interviewed villagers told me that they had received notices from cadres of their villages, days in advance, that the caidiao *Liu Sanjie* was going to arrive at their villages, neighboring villages or counties. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, when most traditional art forms and entertainment activities were banned as feudal remnants or anti-revolutionary in mainland China, the portrayal of an intelligent, beautiful female singer incorporating familiar folk tunes attracted people's attention. The freely accessible open air performances were thus usually attended by many locals.

In the meantime, the government launched an All-Guangxi Liu Sanjie Art Joint Exhibition (*Guangxi Liu Sanjie Wenyi Huiyan Dahui*), inviting more operatic compositions to tell the same story about the Zhuang's supposed past. On January 24, 1960, the Communist Party Committee of Guangxi issued its "Decision on Holding an All-Guangxi Liu Sanjie Art Joint Exhibition." Under this decree, over 58,000 people from 1,209 professional and amateur cultural institutions or art troupes took part in the primary auditions for this joint exhibition (Huang 2022; Tan 1992). Between 2018 and 2020, I visited art troupes located in the cities of Yizhou, Liuzhou, Guilin, Chongzuo and Hechi as well as dozens of rural counties in northern Guangxi. Many senior artists still retained clear memories of this province-wide Liu Sanjie-craze they had participated in or witnessed. According to these artists, in late 1959 their troupes received instructions to create their own Liu Sanjie-themed xiqu for the exhibition using an exemplary script of the caidiao *Liu Sanjie*. These senior artists could not detail the compositions of their troupes, most of which were eliminated from the troupes' repertoires after the start of Cultural Revolution in 1966. But they mentioned some imposed rules that influenced the productions, such as modeling structure and acting style using a xiqu genre influential to their own region and replacing the existing fixed melodies of the genre with local folk songs. "Some colleagues from the [local Culture] Bureau had already collected some [folk songs] and we were able to conveniently use them," said a retired singer who was affiliated with a state-owned art institution between the late 1950s and the 1990s. "But sometimes the songs they collected were not suitable [for the scenes] and we had to go to the countryside to collect some tunes ourselves" (Interview Partner A, interview, December 10, 2018). From different parts of Guangxi, these troupes produced different works of gui'ju, caicha'ju, shigong'xi, puppet show, or even European classical opera, narrating the same story about ancient happenings allegedly originating with the Zhuang ethnic group. Among them, 21 organizations and 1,246 artists were selected. They delivered 43 versions of *Liu Sanjie* xiqu in a series of public concerts in the provincial capital as part of the joint exhibition (Li and Luo 2021).

Based on the same story advertised as originating from the Zhuang, these musical theater productions portrayed Liu in a way that invited reverence. Media reports on the performances also helped strengthen the public impression of Liu as a brave heroine manifesting lofty values. As demonstrated by a collection of newspaper reports complied by the Guangxi Daily Editorial Office (1960), Liu was portrayed not only as a brave, representative member of the Zhuang but also as a role model for all Chinese citizens, embodying wisdom, virtues, and the power of the laboring people. Magazine articles also introduced Liu as "the people's singer" or "a great singer of the people" who uses mountain songs to enlighten the masses (Zhang 1960: 55, see also, Cai 1960).

These glorified portrayals widely inspired reverence among Guangxi residents and led some registered Zhuang members to identify with this imposed story and fictional past. When I visited the Liu Sanjie Cultural Museum located in northeastern Guangxi in 2021, the exhibit showed photos that documented farming communes, unions of factory workers, community schools as well as military units that chose to name themselves after Liu Sanjie over the past decades in different parts of Guangxi. In Luocheng, a county that was portrayed as the hometown of Liu Sanjie in the fictional story spread by the musical theater productions, local residents registered as members of the Zhuang and other ethnicities told me that they felt "proud to share the same origin as Liu Sanjie" (Interview Partner B, interview, July 22–27, 2019). In rural Congzuo, southwestern Guangxi, reverence and tourism income were the two primary reasons why the registered Zhuang members, who insisted that they had never heard of the Zhuang before 1949, did not prevent their children and grandchildren to study Liu Sanjie-themed music at school and heritage institutions over the past decades (Interview Partners C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, and M, interviews, March 14, 15, 17–29, and April 3–11, 2017).

Ever since the Compulsory Education Law was enacted in 1986, elementary and middle schools have been primary venues where children categorized as ethnically Zhuang study the story and music of Liu Sanjie along with other newly constructed markers of this ethnicity. After China signed on to the United Nations Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in August 2004, Liu Sanjie-themed music has been disseminated and promoted in the name of heritage protection. In 2006, "Liu Sanjie Folk Songs," a repertoire containing a large portion of recent compositions, was inscribed on the list of China National Intangible Cultural Heritage as a collective legacy shared by the Zhuang. In the same year, "caidiao" and "gexu," a form of musical gathering highlighted in the enhanced version and the musical version of *Liu Sanjie,* were also included in the National Heritage List as musical traditions belonging to the Zhuang of Guangxi. In different urban and rural regions of Guangxi, the Intangible Cultural Heritage Institutions were founded, offering free systematic training to Zhuang members on how to perform these inscribed heritage elements in a provincial and national standardized manner. In Guilin, Chongzuo, Hechi and Baishe, where ethnic-culture-tourism formed a formidable contribution to the local economy, graduates of these heritage institutions earned a stable salary by performing Liu Sanjie-themed music for tourists. During my last visit to Guangxi in February 2024, I noticed that an increasing

number of elementary schools were appointed as so-called Heritage Transmission Bases. In addition to excerpts from the caidiao *Liu Sanjie* being included in music textbooks as early as the late 20th century, school children took heritage courses where they learned how to sing Liu Sanjie-themed songs and compose new ones. The Zhuang children who actively participated in the performances of these songs were awarded the title of "The Little Heirs of Liu Sanjie."

In this section, I discussed the measures taken by the Guangxi Provincial Government to spread the Liu Sanjie-themed musical theater throughout its jurisdiction where most members of the registered Zhuang members were living. Although the legends of Liu Sanjie were not circulated in some regions of Guangxi, the state's cultural administrative system penetrated even remote mountain villages, repeatedly bringing these musical performances and the same story of Liu Sanjie to the recognized Zhuang people and those living around them. Over ten million local people or about 50 percent of Guangxi's population watched these performances (Wei 1960). The mutually consistent portrayals both in these theater productions and in media reports glorified Liu Sanjie not only as a heroic singer of the Zhuang but also as a role model embodying wisdom and virtues to be imitated by all Chinese citizens. The inspired pride and reverence pushed registered Zhuang members to accept this fictional past and the cultural characteristics the state attempted to construct via these invented traditions.

Imagining the Zhuang

While a variety of Liu Sanjie-themed musical theater productions repeated the same story about the Zhuang's past throughout Guangxi, an enhanced version of the caidiao *Liu Sanjie* as well as a musical film reached millions of national audiences, shaping their image of the Zhuang as an ethnic group. In *Imagined Communities* (1983), Benedict Anderson draws attention to the imagined nature of a nation-state. Anderson contends that a nation is imagined because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (ibid.: 6–7). In this case, many Chinese citizens are not able to meet or talk to registered members of the Zhuang as their fellow citizens. But, as I will argue, they imagine not only a communion but also a life, thoughts, and a unitary culture shared by these Zhuang members. State-arranged cultural activities have been supplying mutually consistent musical representations of the Zhuang, functioning as a source of such imagination.

Different from regionally disseminated productions led by local cadres involving semi-professional and amateur artists, those targeting national audiences were always sophisticatedly polished concerning form and contents. Soon after the premiere of *Liu Sanjie* in March 1959, where the Xiqu Reform Bureau of the Chinese Ministry of Culture suggested the possibility of improving this production, Liuzhou City Government founded a "*Liu Sanjie* Script and Music Composition Team" to carry out this improve-

ment (Liao 2021: 14). In July 1959, the Culture Ministry Artistic Department sent venerable lyricists and composers to Guangxi to lead this team (Shu 1999). They revised the first version of *Liu Sanjie* in several main aspects. First, the collected folk melodies were adapted to more suitably convey the messages and emotions of the script. "Shiliuqing" (literally meaning green guava), for example, was a light, pleasant folk tune, and Liuzhou locals conventionally improvised texts to this tune to express romantic love (see China Central Television Station 2016, for a video example of "Shiliuqing").[3] According to Huang Youqin (2005) who was recruited as a member of the team, this folk tune was reworked with syncopation, off-beats and added seventh chords that did not exist in the local pentatonic system in order to express the Zhuang people's resolution and strength to win a fight against class enemies. Second, the revised production highlighted some folk activities that were later promoted as ethnic traditions and characteristics of the Zhuang. Act 5 of the enhanced version of *Liu Sanjie*, for example, was set in the context of gexu, a musical festival gathering with antiphonal singing, widely practiced by multiple ethnic groups in South and Southwest China. Gexu, along with other musical traditions generated through the Liu Sanjie-themed theater, has been inscribed on the China Intangible Cultural Heritage list as part of the folk legacy of the Zhuang. Gexu has been developed and advertised, in the words of newspaper reports and academic articles, as "an activity of festival singing and gathering held by the people of Zhuang ethnic group at a specific time and place" (Mo 2018: 95, see also Wu and Liang 2023). In addition, rather than representing one of the varied hair and dressing styles of the tribes recognized as members of the Zhuang, the team designed the headdresses and costumes in a style from the Han majority of the Tang Dynasty (618–907).

An opera troupe consisting of musicians selected by the Guangxi Province Culture Bureau from the provincial joint exhibition began a national concert tour of this enhanced version of the caidiao adaption of *Liu Sanjie* in June 1960. Their first stop was Beijing, in which the troupe delivered 76 performances for over 110,000 audience members consisting of factory workers, school students, military soldiers and farmers (Xie 2021). Xu Haixia, who was a worker of the Beijing Wire Metal Factory at the time, was invited to become one of these audience members. She showed me the program pamphlet that she received at the performance. On the first page, the pamphlet highlights that "*Liu Sanjie* was adapted from a beautiful folk legend from the Zhuang ethnic group living in Guangxi." On August 28, 1960, the China Theater Association convened a symposium that defined the caidiao production *Liu Sanjie* as a great achievement of the party's cultural policy (Lu 1960). Later that year, *People's Music* released an editorial to

[3] "Shiliuqing" refers to a folk tune widely spread in Guangxi. When I visited rural Liuzhou in 2018 and 2020, I witnessed local people improvising different lyrics to this fixed tune on different occasions. Local people commonly described the tune as "gentle, sweet, and agreeable" (*youyang wanzhuan*) and they thus normally used it to express love. Today, on mainstream media and concert stages, the tune "Shiliuqing" has been performed as a folk song rather than a tune and attached to the same lyrics depicting the love between a communist soldier and his fiancée to facilitate the remembrance of the past achievements of the communists. China Central Television Station (2016) provides a filmed example of such a performance.

summarize a symposium of the China Musicians' Association. The editorial used *geju*, the Chinese translation of English term "opera," to describe the caidiao *Liu Sanjie* and called it a unique and successful experiment on presenting ethnic and regional characteristics as well as traditions in Chinese opera (Wang and Wu 1960). According to oral history interviews conducted by newspaper journalists, on October 7, 1960, the troupe performed the enhanced the caidiao *Liu Sanjie* for Chairman Mao Zedong, Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, and other communist party leaders, which is a conventional gesture of the state's endorsement of this musical representation of the Zhuang ethnic group (Wei 2013). From October 1960 to August 1961, the troupe delivered over 500 performances in 14 (out of 32) Chinese provinces and 25 cities (Huang 2022).

In July 1960, the musical film *Liu Sanjie* was developed using the enhanced caidiao stage production, beginning to spread this representation of the Zhuang in different parts of China in early 1961. As one of the most successful movies in the history of the People's Republic of China, *Liu Sanjie* depicts the phrase "From the Zhuang ethnic group of the Guangxi" right after its title, shaping many Chinese people's first impression of the Zhuang as an ethnic group. The caidiao adaption called *Liu Sanjie* and the film *Liu Sanjie* embody several common features of the musical representations of China's ethnic minorities that reached large national audiences via the state-controlled media and cultural administrative system.

First, these musical representations embody the aesthetic norms and conventions of the Han ethnic majority. The lyrics and script were written in Mandarin, the official language of China from the Han majority, rather than any existing local dialect of Guangxi or a recognized tribe of the Zhuang. This is partially because the Han occupied over 90 percent of China's population, the target audience. Another reason is the production teams consisting of artists and cultural cadres who were mostly not members of the Zhuang but who were ethnically Han and/or had received systematic training in Han-led cultural institutions supervised by the regime. When going through the lists of the cast and production crew of the musical film *Liu Sanjie* to check their officially registered ethnicities, I could barely find any member of the Zhuang. Qiao Yu, an ethnically Han playwright and lyricist born in the Shandong province and living in Beijing, was appointed to edit the script to fit the film format. Su Li, an ethnically Han film director born in the Anhui province and affiliated with the Central Cultural Management Bureau, was appointed to be the director of this film. Lei Zhenbang, an ethnically Manchu composer born in Beijing and trained in state-owned institutions located in Beijing and northeastern China, modified the music from the caidiao adaption of *Liu Sanjie* to fit the edited film scenes. Changchun Film Studio, the first film studio of Communist China located in North China near Beijing and operating directly under supervision of the Chinese Ministry of Culture, oversaw the production of this film. Therefore, a large portion of the main cast came from Northeast China, was affiliated with the Studio and did

not belong to the Zhuang. The cast acted, sang, and recited the lines in Mandarin accompanied by the Changchun Film Studio Orchestra using traditional instruments from the Han majority as well as several Western instruments such as violin and cello.[4]

The aesthetic expectations of communist leaders also had an impact on the musical representations of the Zhuang. Meng Xiongqiang, a camera operator on the musical film, recalled the influence of these communist leaders on the production process of the film *Liu Sanjie.* According to Meng, the communist leaders instructed the crew to not use the traditional headdresses of local tribes registered as members of the Zhuang because they thought these headdresses were "backward" (Meng 2010: 31). Therefore, the director chose to adopt the design from the enhanced stage production, leading to Liu and other characters wearing costumes and hairstyles prevalent among the ancient Han people. The communist leaders' aesthetic preferences also affected the casting. In another memoire, Meng (2008) recollected the experience of Jinhua Fu. As a registered member of the Miao ethnic group, Fu was trained in Guangxi Cultural Cadre School and was one of the four artists portraying Liu Sanjie in the 1960 national tour of the caidiao adaption of *Liu Sanjie.* Although at the beginning Fu's name was on top of the list to perform the role of Liu Sanjie in the film, leaders of the Provincial Communist Party Committee thought Fu had "a bad mouth shape" when singing (Meng 2008: 23). Fu was thus replaced by Huang Wanqiu, an ethnically Han actor. Despite a lack of vocal skills, Huang met the conventional Han ideal of feminine beauty, or in Meng's words, she was "a petite figure" and looked "quick-witted" and "graceful" (ibid.). At the same time, Huang also met the Han director's imagination of ethnic minorities because she was "a little unruly" (ibid). Thus, Huang Wanqiu portrayed Liu Sanjie in the movie, and her voice was dubbed by Jinhua Fu.

Another convention established by this film for China's musical representations of ethnic minorities is setting the performances into natural sceneries of places that registered minority members inhabit. The film was shot in Guilin, northwestern Guangxi. The cast acted in front of scenic mountain views or sang on a boat drifting around a serene water landscape. To this day, academic and media publications continue to describe the film *Liu Sanjie* as "showing the customs and sentiments of the Zhuang people with ear-pleasing folk songs and close-to-life folk narratives against the background of the unique scenery of mountains and river of the Zhuang's hometown" (Lan 2022: 118).

Newspaper and magazine reports accompanied the national tour of the enhanced caidiao adaptation of *Liu Sanjie* as well as the film, highlighting the charms of the productions and informing the local public where and when to watch the film or attend the performance. In September 1961, *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the state council securing nationwide institutional subscriptions ranging from urban factories to farmers' communes, described *Liu Sanjie* as "radiating the unique glamour of the Zhuang ethnic group" (*People's Daily* 1961). In the same year, the February issue of *Ethnic Pictorial,* a magazine supervised by the National Ethnic Affairs Committee and

[4] See Changchun Film Studio (1961) for a YouTube video of the musical film Liu Sanjie.

freely accessible for ethnic minority members at local government agencies and community centers, used seven ethnic languages to introduce *Liu Sanjie*. The reports on Newspapers and broadcast media soon attracted millions of Chinese citizens to join the audiences. In an interview, Wang Guiyou recalled that he watched the film in mid-1962 among an audience of over 8,000 at the city square of Xian, Shanxi Province. “The tickets were only five cents,” Wang said, “not expensive at all for watching such beautiful girls and sceneries for two hours” (Interview Partner N, interview, August 4, 2019). In a published memoir, former soldiers recollected that they were “not satisfied having watched the film *Liu Sanjie* only three times” at the military camp and would thus take a bus to a neighboring town on Sundays to rewatch the film. They bought posters and vinyl records of *Liu Sanjie* and “almost every solider at our camp could sing a couple of *Liu Sanjie* songs” (Zhang and Wang 2006: 56).

From that point in time up until the 21st century, publications by the media as well as official, and academic publications told readers that the film *Liu Sanjie* represents the real-life experience and aesthetic pursuits of the Zhuang and is “the cultural symbol with which the Zhuang people living in Guangxi identify” (Lei 2013: 97). Although gexu, mountain songs, and antiphonal singing were practiced by peoples of diverse ethnicities in South and Southwest China, these publications state that said practices are cultural elements distinguishing the Zhuang ethnic group (Lin and Liu 2009, see also Wei and Xie 2009). Outcomes of folklore and theater studies informed the public that the portrayed Liu Sanjie embodies the merits shared by the brave and diligent female Zhuang members (Zhang 2019) and the she was a figure that “integrates those who objectively exist in reality with the collective memory stored in an imaginary space of the Zhuang ethnicity” (Qin 2017: 89). For many citizens who did not have a chance to visit Guangxi or meet with a Zhuang, it is through the enhanced stage production, the film *Liu Sanjie* and these media reports that they learned about the Zhuang, their history, their musical culture, and their life.

In the 21st century, new musical works in forms ranging from western classical opera to dance drama delivered new representations of the Zhuang through the theme of Liu Sanjie. These new compositions carried the basic features shared by the productions of the 1960s while reflecting the state’s new agendas and cultural policies. They were developed from the same musical theme of the caidiao adaption and the film *Liu Sanjie*, turning the tune “Shiliuqing” into a sonic signature of the Liu story and the Zhuang culture. While these adaptations used the same skeleton and set of main characters, the class struggle was no longer the center of the respective narrative. Besides, the constantly updated system of Han performing arts remained the foundation of these musical works, which were also decorated by distinguishable elements constructed or designated over the past decades as the shared characteristics and ethnic symbols for the Zhuang ethnic group.

For instance, a dance drama called *Liu Sanjie* was produced in 2018 under the supervision of Guangxi Propaganda Bureau (see Nanning Art Theater 2023 for a video recording of the dance drama *Liu Sanjie*). Li Cangshang, a non-Zhuang composer, developed the melodic excerpts borrowed from the musical film to carry the rhythmic

patterns he designed for each main character (Zheng 2019). Yang Litong, an ethnically Han choreographer, composed the dance in a style labelled as "Chinese modern dance" that was established by the Beijing Academy of Dance by combining Han traditional dances, classical ballet and modern western dance. "Unruly" body movements were employed as decorations to "represent the characteristics of the Zhuang female" (Yu 2019: 123). The costumes of the main characters inherited the design from the 1961 film. However, the headdresses borrowed from some Guangxi local tribes which used to be abandoned as "backward" but had now been inscribed as intangible cultural heritage elements were presented by supporting roles of this dance drama to show the ethnic distinctiveness. Stage design and pictures projected on the backdrop reproduced the natural sceneries of Guangxi as the supposed original living environment of the Zhuang. In spring 2021 in Guilin city, I attended a performance of *Impressions of Liu Sanjie,* a multi-media musical show produced as early as 2004 that is still being presented almost every day for domestic and international tourists. *Impression of Liu Sanjie* was performed by over 600 artists in a unique theater built right on the Li river surrounded by mountains, the most famous tourist site of Guangxi (see Guangwei Culture Co. 2020 for a video excerpt of *Impression of Liu Sanjie*). The plotline and music of this show were developed using the film *Liu Sanjie*. The artists literally performed in the water to give the audience the most realistic experience of the fictional Liu story and to present gexu and other cultural elements that have been promoted as the collective legacy of the Zhuang.

To summarize these historical developments, the state arranged the production and presentation of musicals, operas and dance dramas since the early 1960s to shape how Chinese citizens living outside of Guangxi perceive the Zhuang as an ethnic group. Benedict Anderson (1983) points out that a nation is an imagined community because its members usually do not get to meet each other but images of their communion exist in their minds. The present case study suggests that these images are not just about communion and it emphasizes that state-arranged musical activities also help people imagine the lives and experiences of their peer citizens. These state-sponsored representations were composed in Mandarin and presented before the natural sceneries of Guangxi, depicting some cultural forms to be the traditions of the Zhuang. They were composed by Han artists or artists trained in Han-led institutions, and were thus based on cultural norms and aesthetic expectations established among the ethnic majority. Some distinguishable cultural elements such as symbolic "unruly" dance movements, short and catchy excerpts of folk tunes and embroidery patterns from local tribes were used to decorate the work to underline its supposed ethnic uniqueness. These musical performances have been used to answer the questions of what and who the Zhuang are, asked by those who did not have a chance to meet people from this state-conceived ethnic minority.

Conclusion

A case study of the Zhuang, the largest ethnic minority in China, this article examined the role of state-arranged musical activities in the process of actualizing a newly conceived ethnic minority. The state claims that ethnic groups in China were recognized according to the four Stalinist ethnic markers; that is, shared language, territory, economic life, and a common culture. However, my research suggests that the Zhuang, like some other Chinese ethnic minorities, consisted of registered members who did not speak the same language and did not identify with the same culture before the 1950s. However, around 1960, a series of Liu Sanjie-themed musical theater productions began to be disseminated throughout Guangxi where most registered Zhuang members lived, to tell a streamlined story about a fictional past of the Zhuang. Meanwhile, a polished caidiao adaption called *Liu Sanjie* and a musical film of the same name began to tour around the country, reaching millions of Chinese citizens and thus forming their imagination of the life, culture, and supposedly time-honored existence of the Zhuang ethnicity.

This article aimed to contribute to Music and Minorities Research by revealing the role of invented music traditions in the state-led process of creating an ethnic minority. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983) have noted that in modern societies some traditions that appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin and are sometimes deliberately invented. These deliberately invented traditions may draw on elements from the past but are crafted by current authorities in response to ongoing social circumstances and to fulfil political agendas. Inventing traditions, as Eric Hobsbawm positions it, is essentially a process characterized by imposing repetition and by the attempt to establish factitious historic continuity, to build social cohesion, or membership of real or artificial communities (Hobsbawm 1983: 2, 9). In this Chinese case, these Liu Sanjie-themed musical theater productions were composed and delivered by non-Zhuang artists according to the aesthetic principles and musical norms of the Han ethnic majority, drawing on elements from folk legends and tunes that did not solely belong to or originate from the registered Zhuang members. However, they were labelled as ethnically Zhuang on regional national stages, in media reports and in articles. For many Chinese citizens who did not have a chance to meet any Zhuang member, it was through these Liu Sanjie-themed musical performances that they were informed about the supposed life and culture of the Zhuang ethnicity. Over the past decades, the elements repeatedly portrayed in these musical works – such as the fictional singer and her mountain songs, gexu gathering, and the antiphonal singing style – became well-known, nationwide cultural symbols of the Zhuang and were officially inscribed to evidence the past and present unity of the ethnicity. The reverence and admiration induced by these glorified portrayals, along with tourism income and national reputation generated through these Liu Sanjie-themed musical activities, led the registered Zhuang members embrace the imposed ethnic attributes and identity.

Acknowledgements

I would like to firstly express my gratitude to Ursula Hemetek and Malik Sharif who offered continuous advice and support throughout the writing process of this article. I would also like to thank my colleagues at Music and Minorities Research Center, particularly Claudia Strate and Eva Leick, for many inspiring exchanges of ideas over the past years. Last but not least, I am very grateful to the two anonymous readers whose constructive comments and insightful suggestions have led to substantial improvements of the manuscript.

This research was funded in part by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) [10.55776/Z352].

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Ethnographic Data

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