

# Resistance or Complicity - Songs of Changkhup: An Ethnographic Approach to Exploring Sipsongpanna Tai Lüe Oral Media Resistance in Contemporary China

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In contemporary China, many ethnic minority groups such as Tibetans, Mongolians, Miao, and Tai have their own oral cultures, functioning as oral media. Changkhup from Sipsongpanna Tai region, for example, verbally disseminate history and culture and transmit information and knowledge among the Tai ethnic minority in the Tai language. Straightforwardly, oral media are people themselves, and can be called singers, poets, or chanters, thus Tai oral media is the Changkhup themselves. Situated in a specific strategy of subaltern resistance, this research aims to explore a softer 'everyday form of resistance' - oral media resistance through Tai Changkhup, thereby reflecting upon the asymmetric power relations between the Han Chinese majority and Tai ethnic minority. Taking an ethnographic approach, participant observation and interviewing combined with individual interviews and a focus group are used for data collection. Thematic analysis is primarily used for analysing data. The findings reveal that Tai oral media functions as a form of cultural resistance against Han cultural hegemony in a subtle and sometimes unconscious way to preserve Tai traditions and identity, wherein the rituality of Changkhup plays a unique role in sustaining the resistance. Essentially, Changkhup resistance is intertwined with complicity, continuously negotiating with hegemonic power and reinforcing Han cultural hegemony as a result.

Specifically, Han cultural hegemony has been historically dominating and shaping Tai culture by constructing a Chinese national identity through language, national ideology and Tai oral media. To survive and develop in Han-dominated modern society, Tai oral media has become a form of resistance, culturally and socio-economically, preventing Tai traditions and identity from fading away in confrontation with Han culture and Chinese national identity. While this resistance is subtly and sometimes unconsciously exercised by Changkhup singers mainly through ritual singing, improvisational composition and everyday cultural practices.

In terms of resistance through rituals, Changkhup's rituality requires singers to chant corresponding narratives in certain occasions, such as housewarmings, weddings, sacrificial activities and various Buddhist rituals, functioning to send ghosts away, offer blessing, or educate audiences. In a way, oral media practitioners resist Han culture by following Tai traditions and completing the rituals that are 'religious and superstitious' in the context of Han Chinese. I thus argue that Changkhup's everyday performance, cultural inheritance practices and the way of preserving Tai traditions are different forms of cultural resistance towards hegemonic Han culture.

As for resistance through improvisational singing, Tai Changkhup express concerns of Hanisation of Tais in the songs for educational purposes, urging Tais to speak Tai, study the Tai alphabet, and learn more about Tai culture. Straightforwardly, Changkhup counters Han cultural assimilation by asking Tais to preserve Tai identity. Besides this, other forms of Changkhup resistance can be exemplified by refused and protracted collaborations with Han authorities in many ways. Overall, Changkhup's resistance strategy is exemplary of oral media resistance which remains mostly in cultural arena and is practiced by religious ethnic minority subalterns, it is softer, more tactful and accommodating than 'everyday form of resistance', combining 'everyday form of cooperation', thereby negotiating with

cultural hegemony, claiming a legitimate space and autonomy for preservation and development of ethnic cultures and identity.

However, this research is not to celebrate the 'weapon of the weak' or romanticise the agency of Tai Changkhup, rather, is to provide another angle of viewing resistance accompanied by complicity. As Martín-Barbero notes, 'not every assumption of hegemonic power by the underclass is a sign of submission and not every rejection is resistance' (1993, p.76). The negotiation between Changkhup resistance and Han hegemonic power persists throughout, accordingly, creating a changing Tai identity, which largely mixes with Chinese national identity discursively constructed by Han ruling class. Hence, I contend that oral media resistance in the Tai case does not aim to utterly destroy Han cultural hegemony through 'rumor, slander and sabotage...' or through strategies of not using Han language, like what Scott's 'everyday resisters' would do. Rather, it softly claims a co-existence between Tai and Han, lacking collective awareness in collaborating with other singers.

To coexist with each other, Tai cultural complicity with Han Chinese is inevitable. Han cultural hegemony also needs to be weakened so as to give more space for Tai culture to develop. In this respect, I believe that Tai cultural revival is actually not ignored by Chinese governments, instead, is openly and collaboratively supported by Han authorities, but the way of reviving needs continuous negotiations between two sides.

Having recognised Changkhup's significance, governments and singers agree to collaborate for common-good. Despite constant discontent towards complicity, subordinated Tai singers somehow still collaborate with the hegemon. As one singer put, 'the collaboration with Han authorities is necessary if we want Tai Changkhup go further'. Therefore, Tai resistance and complicity are entangled with one another within complex power relations, and forms of resistance

are shaped by complicity, and resistance in turn also shapes the manner of Tai complicity with the Han. Accordingly, the hidden resistance through Tai oral media hence turns out to be the complicity as 'public transcripts', which facilitate the legitimisation of Han dominance, thereby ideologically reinforcing the Han cultural hegemony by praising social change brought from the CPC that leads the socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Furthermore, what Davis called 'ethnic revival' essentially constitutes a part of the Great Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and the Chinese Dream. Although Tai oral media might not be able to bring prominent social change under the current power balance, this resistance contains a potential power to raise public awareness and build up Tai identity thus leading to Tai ethnic cultural preservation and development. This research filled in gaps in oral media studies by applying an interdisciplinary approach to study resistance and hegemony, which provides a lens for viewing the oral media of other Chinese minorities.