Resistance or Complicity

Songs of Changkhup: An Ethnographic Approach to Exploring Sipsongpanna Tai Lüe Oral Media in Contemporary China

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary China, many ethnic minority groups such as Tibetans, Mongolians, Miao, and Tai have their own oral cultures, functioning as oral media. Tai Changkhup, for example, verbally disseminate history and culture and transmit information and knowledge among the Tai ethnic minority in the Tai language. In a straightforward sense, these aspects of oral media are people in and of themselves, and can be called singers, poets, or chanters. Tai oral media, therefore, 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 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.

INTRODUCTION

> 'We say China is a country vast in territory, rich in resources and large in population; as a matter of fact, it is the Han nationality whose population is large and the minority nationalities whose territory is vast and whose resources are rich'. (Mao, 1977, p.295-96)

'Chang-Khup' is a Tai language term ('Chang' as 'can', and 'Khup' as 'sing'), meaning skilled chanters or singers. It is an ancient oral tradition which has been historically practiced by generation after generation. Changkhup also refers to a form of singing art. Throughout the history of recorded communication, human society has experienced different development stages of communication from oral, print and electronic to digital communication. Oral tradition, as the original form of communication, seems to be fading away in this digital age, and studies of oral tradition have generally been marginalised 'only as a service subdiscipline' in academia (Foley, 1990, p.1). There are various oral traditions still being practiced by certain groups across the globe, and the significance of oral traditions should be acknowledged, as they offer us a lens through which to 'learn firsthand about the world of preliterate composition and transmission of knowledge' (Foley, 1990, p.3), and more broadly, to understand the culture and history of humankind, particularly those who do not have their own written language system.

In China, over 92% of the population are Han Chinese. The rest are comprised of 55 different ethnic groups, among which exist many distinct oral cultures. Beyond a form of folk art, ethnic oral traditions are an oral communication medium, what Ugboajah (1985) entitled 'oramedia'. Those who practice oral traditions hand down their history and culture by singing or chanting. Although the Tai Changkhup has been preserved for over a thousand years, the survival dilemma in the context of Chinese modernisation cannot be ignored, and it has been facing the predicament of 'renwang yijue' (the death of artists comes to the end of art).

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, ethnic minority cultures have seen some ups and downs. In 1966, the movement to 'Destroy the Four Olds and Establish the Four News'

began in Beijing, signifying the beginning of the Cultural Revolution. It quickly fanned out to borderlands, destroying 'traditional and feudal' ethnic cultures and religious beliefs. Ethnic minorities were expected to instantly assimilate into the Han majority nation (Yan & Gao, 1996; Davis, 2005). Furthermore, the 'Speaking-Mandarin' campaign swept across China, forcing ethnic groups to learn Chinese. As Benedict Anderson stated, 'empires were socially imagined through the medium of a sacred language and written script' (1983, p.13).

As a result, Changkhup singers were repressed and labeled as revisionists and 'Niugui (cow-devils) Sheshen (snake-ghosts)' (meaning all monsters and demons) who help to restore the feudal system (Wang, 2009, p.57), and much oral literature including the epic Zhaoshutun and Nanmunuona was regarded as feudal culture to serve hereditary headman and feudalism (Feng, 2014, p.380). Certainly, the resistance arose in various forms. For Changkhup, some singers escaped to Southeast-Asian countries with their poems and scriptures, some hid or buried Tai literature and sung Changkhup secretly. For audiences, 'we hid under the quilt and listened to radio which can receive Changkhup programme from Myanmar and Thailand', as one put it.

Back in the Tai feudal lords period, a Changkhup management system was established, and Changkhup singers were promoted with certain titles to praise the king, thereby underpinning the feudal regime (Feng, 2014, p.335). As Wang puts it more straightforwardly, the 'Changkhup system became the tool of legitimising feudal suzerain system' (2009, p.46). However, this is not to say that everyone would follow the Tai's dominance. Some singers resisted the feudal regime by singing 'you are the road that I do not tread on, you are the water which I do not drink' (cited in Wang, 2009, p.46). Ironically, the present Communist government has been promoting Changkhup singers as cultural inheritors at different levels, sharing the same sense of hierarchies in the feudal age. Changkhup as oral poets are the product of the division of labour (Finnegan, 1977; Wang, 2009), which determines its role of conveying ideology. In this regard, whichever regime is in power, I believe that Changkhup will constantly be the political tool of legitimising and strengthening rule.

Until Reform and Opening-up in 1978, Beijing began to rethink the significance of ethnic minority cultures and protect residual cultures throughout the country. However, the 'culture of the capital was so hegemonic and closed which leads to the decline of noncanonical regional culture' (Mair, 1992, p.24), Beijing launched Han-centric 'civilising projects' (Harrell, 1996) to simplify the alphabet of ethnic minorities, thus building the power of its empire (Davis, 2005, p.13), while making ethnic oral culture more difficult to survive. These projects help to constitute Han Chinese culture as 'a tool of ruling class to maintain political and social control' (Gottdiener, 1985, p.981), further legitimising the rule of Han people. However, questions arise in the post-Mao era: to what extent the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution impacted Tai Changkhup; whether Tai resistance exists; and how it has been historically shaped by Han hegemony.

This study focuses on Changkhup, the oral media of the Tai Lüe minority in China, which was listed as the first batch of national intangible cultural heritage under the category of folk arts in 2006. According to Davis (2005), the Tai minority practices genuine Tai culture through Changkhup in the 'backstage' (i.e. villages and temples) of Sipongpanna, which contributed to 'ethnic revival' and can be contrasted against twisted Tai culture performed in the 'frontstage' for touristic sightseeing. Indeed, Changkhup as Tai cultural disseminators play a vital role in reconstructing and developing Tai cultures. Despite the urgent need for the protection of Changkhup heritage, I argue that a sustainable cultural inheritance cannot be achieved without listening to inheritors' voices and understanding the invisible power relations at play. Thereby, this research calls for breaking walls of 'Disneyland' (frontstage) by listening to the Changkhup songs from rural Sipongpanna.

Growing up as a Tai Lüe myself in Sipsongpanna, I am in a unique position to explore Tai Changkhup as a local compared with outside academic scholars. I have examined Changkhup as a medium by analysing its media elements, and found that Changkhup, as Tai culture practitioners, are struggling to keep their oral tradition in the course of modernisation and urbanisation (Yang, 2015). Building on my previous research since 2012, intermittent fieldwork experiences drove me to rethink the root cause of the Changkhup's dilemmas that Mao's quote

indicated above: unequal power relations between the dominant Han majority and subordinated Tai minority. By employing an ethnographic approach, this project aims to examine the resistance of Tai Changkhup, and meanwhile to demystify the so-called Tai 'ethnic revival' on the southwest Chinese borderland.

Research questions and objectives

'Resistance' has been studied in many ways, but very few in existing scholarship discuss forms of oral resistance in the field of media, communications and cultural studies. As such, this project is to theorise the oral media resistance through Tai Changkhup, how Tai oral media could be linked to 'Tai-ness,' and to further critically examine power relations between the dominant Han and the subordinated Tai. Thus, my main research question is: In which ways does Tai oral media function as a form of resistance towards Han cultural hegemony in contemporary China?

With the question of Whether Tai oral media is a form of resistance as a precondition, the following sub-questions are also considered:

- In what way does Han cultural hegemony dominate the Tai?
- What role does Tai oral media play in preserving Tai identity?
- What is the result of Tai oral media resistance?

This research offers four main potential contributions. First, it builds on James Scott's 'everyday forms of resistance', further exploring a 'weaker' form of resistance - oral media resistance. Second, it deploys postcolonial critique within a nation-state in the global South and applies western concepts of hegemony and cultural imperialism to China. Unlike previous studies, this research shifts the focus from power relations between the West and the Orient to the relationship between Han Chinese and the Tai minority. Third, it deepens Ugboajah's pioneering study on 'oramedia' by conceptualising oral media as a cultural resistance. Fourth, it provides a brand-new perspective for studying Chinese ethnic oral traditions by applying the approach of media, communication and cultural studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Oral Media

'Oramedia' (or 'folk media'), coined by Ugboajah, are based on indigenous culture produced and consumed by members of a group, 'they are visible cultural features by which social relationships and a world view are maintained and defined' (1985, p.166). 'Ora-Media' transmit information by word of mouth and performing techniques (Mwai, 2012, p.30), they are an oral form of communications which are conventional and interpersonal, 'with the object of imparting traditional aesthetic, historical, technical, social, ethical and religious values' (Ugboajah, 1985, p.167). Drawing on from Ugboajah, Salawu sheds light on the ethical paradigm of development by saying oramedia, as the foundation of sustainable development in Africa, are essentially oral ethics which can mobilise people towards ethnic revolution (2015, p.215). It seems that Ugboajah's term emphasises the media function of oral tradition for indigenous groups, yet I challenge that his definition ignored the most crucial feature - the 'rituality' of oral media, serving to conserve ethnic customs and rituals, which makes oral media an essential part of indigenous people's life. Putting oral media into the Chinese context, I therefore suggest that ethnic minority oral media are unique to a specific ethnic group, practiced and received by one group in their language, functioning as everyday rituals, and articulating ethnic groups' history, culture, belief system and cognition towards the world by verbally singing, chanting and performing.

Ugboajah (1989) values the importance of the indigenous language because without it, effective cultural communication cannot be guaranteed through oramedia. Unfortunately, Ugboajah died before rolling out his blueprint of 'oramedia'. Without knowing Ugboajah's research, I started studying Changkhup in 2012 and I proposed '口传媒介' (kouchuan meijie), as the term to describe it in Chinese from a media and communications perspective, which is actually what Ugboajah called 'oramedia' in English. In my research (Yang, 2015), although ethnic minority's oral culture - Changkhup as the example - was conceptualised as a medium for the first time in China, it focused on Tai cultural heritage

protection like other similar research in China, neglecting the analysis of power relations and resistance.

Overall, although 'oramedia' has been introduced thirty years ago, oramedia studies still remain untouched and there is a lack of a comprehensive understanding about its role as 'folk media' in preserving indigenous culture, especially as a potential form of resistance.

Oral tradition

Some researchers have theorised oral traditions (Vansina, 1985; Lord, 1991; Foley, 1991; Finnegan, 1992), and there are several notions with different emphasis, such as 'oral poetry' (Finnegan, 1977; Mamba & Malahleha, 1986; Lord, 1987), 'oral literature' (Finnegan, 1970; Ong, 1982; Canonici, 1990), 'oramedia' (Ugboajah, 1985), etc. 'Oral tradition' can be used, in a general sense, to describe this oral form of communication. In Jan Vansina's Oral Tradition as History, he defines oral traditions as 'verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation' (1985, p.27), and states that they are 'the representation of the past in the present, people can trace the past of illiterate groups in literate societies' (Vansina, 1985, xii). Besides, oral traditions are also performed arts in which involve performers and audiences (Finnegan, 1970; Vansina, 1985); performers' 'word-power' is exercised through the enabling event of performance (Foley, 1995, p.208).

Oral traditions consist of three main genres - genealogies, praises and tales (Peiers, 1982), manifesting certain cultural practices which pertain to particular sections of society (Mamba, 1986, 184). Moreover, oral traditions follow the given formula which constitutes signs of oral traditional composition (Lord, 1986; Foley, 1990). As Lord argues, 'traditional phrases' are tied to 'traditional ideas and subjects of the songs' (1974, p.203). However, formulas range in flexibility, and singers compose the tales during the performance situation itself. In this sense, a singer is a 'creative artist' (Lord 1962, p.186). After briefly introducing oral media/tradition, I will now turn to the specific case, that of Tai Lüe Changkhup. To understand interethnic power relations in China, we must examine how Tai has been historically marginalised as the 'Other'.

Tai Lüe as historical 'Other'

Tai Lüe (or Dai Lüe 傣泐 in Chinese) in this research refers to those living in Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture. In China, minorities are granted a degree of autonomy by the central government, but are forbidden the right of secession (Lee, 2001). Ethnic minorities have limited control over resources and development, and tensions rise when governments seek to transform their culture into marketable products (Yang, Wall & Smith, 2008). The relationship between Han and Tai can be traced back to the Han dynasty (202 BCE - 220 CE), when Chinese believed the superiority of humankind is endowed with heavenly attributes, including the potential to act humanely and morally, and thus Han Chinese assumed that they were superior over other human groups as their European counterparts did (Giersch, 2006). As Gladney notes, 'minority is to the majority as female is to male, as 'Third World' is to 'First World', and as subjectivised is to objectivised identity' (1994, p.93). I thus argue that the asymmetric power relations between Han Chinese and other ethnic groups in China can be compared to the relations between Western white 'self' and the global South as 'the Other'.

In the Qing dynasty, Tai Lüe were understood as soft, yielding, and promiscuous 'Water Baiyi' (yi夷 means 'barbarian'), a group that should and could be brought under imperial control (Giersch, 2006, p.80). As Qing power expanded in the eighteenth century, the emperor believed barbarians could be civilised through exposure to imperial culture (Giersch, 2006), although they held that 'the farther a people lived from the imperial centre, the more barbaric they were considered to be' (Giersch, 2006, p.70). Gradually, the Tai elite acculturated to imperial ways, followed by Tai commoners as they believed that adopting some Chinese practices would bring them benefits (Giersch, 2006). A survey shows that in one 17-household village, there are 3 households whose ancestors are Tai, 12 households are Yi (彝), and only 2 households whose ancestors are Han, yet nowadays they all speak Chinese and identify themselves as Han Chinese (Yunnan Editorial Board, 1984). Accordingly, they become literate in Han language, yet illiterate in their own language (Davis, 2005).

When the Communist Party of China (CPC) took power, civilising projects were practiced by the Han civilising centre to somehow create

'stigmatised identity' for peripheral minorities (Eidheim, 1969; Hsieh, 1987), as backward, uncivilised and dirty 'Others' (Harrell, 1996, p.6). Despite realising the asymmetrical relations, most research failed to clarify how Han dominance functions. To answer that, concepts of cultural imperialism and hegemony must be explained.

Cultural imperialism

Instead of examining cultural imperialism at a global level, I narrow down this concept to the national level in the context of China specifically. According to Tomlinson, cultural imperialism is essentially about 'the exalting and spreading of values and habits - a practice in which economic power plays an instrumental role' (1991, p.3). The culture dimension, compared to economic and political sphere, is increasingly relevant to the concept of 'imperialism' in modern society, as Tomlinson adds, based on how cultural factors maintain political-economic dominance. Within a nation-state, 'national culture' is the culture of dominant groups (Sparks, 2012, p.285). The control of mass media facilitates a dominant discourse of national cultures, and this inevitably confronts the other levels of 'locality' at which cultural imperialism operates (Tomlinson, 1991, p. 24) while marginalizing other older means of social communication in modern societies (p.60). To shore up national power, cultural construction and reconstruction projects establish the 'national identity' that exists in people's imagination and strengthen peoples' sense of cultural belonging (Tomlinson, 1991, p.69).

Hegemony

According to Gramsci (1971), hegemony signifies one group's dominance over others through coercion and consent. It is 'the ability of one class to articulate the interest of other social groups to its own' (Mouffe, 1979, p.182). This articulation as the dominant discourse operates in the structures of state and civil society, producing 'collective identities' as 'the Other' that become 'commonsense' (Reddy, 2000, p.4). Mostly, hegemony is produced in the cultural sphere through the media, universities, and religious institutions to 'manufacture consent', and 'knowledge' is socially constructed, serving to legitimate social structures (Heywood, 1994, p.100-101).

Inspired by Gramsci, Lukes (2005) identifies that hegemony is not only an unconscious process that is cultural and internalised, but also a more conscious and willful strategy of domination. Further, Gaventa argues that it constitutes 'a third form of power, in which conflict is more invisible, through the internalisation of powerlessness or through dominant ideologies, values and forms of behaviour' (2006, p.29). Indeed, the hegemonic social ideology makes subalterns not only accept the 'normal' social order, but also involves them in an active complicity, both of which are 'mystification' or 'false-consciousness' (Scott, 1985, p.39). Accordingly, hegemony contributes to the legitimacy and superiority of the ruling subject. As Reddy argues, hegemony secures the dominant position of the ruling class by assuring the control and exploitation of the subaltern (2000, p.211).

Power

In what channel can 'false-consciousness' thus be transmitted? This largely comes down to media power; according to Schiller (1976), public media, captured by a dominant power, can be used to penetrate social institutions by exercising cultural imperialism and thereby reinforcing cultural hegemony (Silverstone, 1999). Importantly, we need to be aware of the pervasiveness of power, as Foucault highlights that power is 'ubiquitous, diffuse and circulating' (Pickett, 1996, p.457), and individuals are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising power (Foucault, 1980, p.98). Unlike many approaches, Foucault believes that power transcends politics and it is neither an agency nor a structure, but that action and resistance are possible. The action to challenge power is the matter of 'detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time' (Foucault, in Rabinow 1991, p.75).

To better understand unconscious forms of cultural hegemony, symbolic power becomes relevant as a power of 'constructing [social] reality' (Bourdieu, 1990, p.166). For Thompson, symbolic power is 'the ability to intervene events, to influence actions of others, and create events by means of production and transmission of symbolic forms' (1995, p.17). Media technologies facilitate the information exchange in a way that symbolic contents are circulating everywhere. During

the process, symbolic power is exercised through consent and causes 'false-consciousness' in which the underclass perceives the elites' needs as identical to their own. As Williams (1961) put it, Chinese civilising projects, as examples of symbolic power, standardise language usage, making ethnic minorities into 'masses'. Nationalism can be used as an ideological tool to construct 'imagined community' in a way the Han ruling party practices the 'simplifying project' (e.g. simplifying ethnic languages) to assimilate ethnic groups into Han culture, further culturally unifying the nation-state. Yet the agency of the dominated cannot be ignored, and will be examined through the concept of resistance as below.

Resistance

Power and resistance as mutually-constituted categories are impossible to separate analytically (Willems & Obadare, 2014, p.7). As Foucault contends, 'where there is power, there is resistance, and this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (1978, p.95-96). Moreover, Willems argues that resistance is not only shaped by forms of power, but also conversely shapes relations of power (2010, p.6). The analysis of resistance within cultural studies is concerned with the practices of subordinate groups and everyday experience (Winter, 2014, p.251). Drawing on James Scott, resistance is not necessarily linked to overt rebellions; alternatively, it could be exercised through symbols in our everyday lives, such as rumours, gossip, folktales, and songs (1990, xiii). As he puts, 'the symbols, the norms, the ideological forms they create constitute the indispensable background to their behaviour' (1985, p38).

Aligning with Gramsci, Scott recognises that elites dominate both the physical and symbolic means of production, and that 'this symbolic hegemony allows them to control the very standards by which their rule is evaluated' (1985, p.39). Compared to the Han elite ruling class, ethnic groups could be regarded as the subaltern class who possess less economic and cultural capital. As Marx (1970)'s The German Ideology notes, that those who lack the means of material and mental production are subject to those who have it.

According to Scott, each subordinate group creates 'hidden transcripts' that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the domination (1990, xii). Beyond speech, hidden transcripts contains a

whole range of practices (p.14). Davis goes beyond the hidden transcript and suggests a resistant space - 'backstage' that operates below the radar of the state (2005, p.90), while Scott argues that the hidden transcript can be expressed even in 'front-stage' in disguised form (1990, xiii). On the other hand, some believe that 'everyday resistance' causes 'false consciousness' (White, 1986; Mitchell, 1990). As Chalcraft and Noorani summarise, "weapons of the weak" may create the illusion of agency while reinforcing radically asymmetric relations' (2007, p.8).

Scott indicates that the 'collective hidden transcript of a subordinate group often bears the forms of negation that would represent an act of rebellion' (1990, p.115). Manifested in folktales, songs of the powerless can be vehicles by which they insinuate a critique of power (Scott, 1990, xiii). This kind of resistance is hidden and invisible just like power; the powerless can make their resistance 'disguised, muted and veiled for safety's sake' (Scott, 1985, p137). But are powerless groups necessarily conscious of what they are doing?

Similarly, rightful resistance is a form of 'popular contention that operates near the boundary of authorized channels, employs the rhetoric and commitments of the powerful to curb the exercise of power' (O'Bren & Li, 2006, p2). Situating rightful resistance in rural China, O'Bren & Li argue that people are using laws, policies and officially promoted values, resorting to influential allies and recognized principles to apply pressure and defy disloyal political and economic elites. Unlike Scott's everyday resisters, rightful resistance is invariably noisy and open (O'Bren & Li, 2006, p.4). Otherwise, rightful resisters have a certain affinity with 'everyday resisters' (Scott, 1989, p.8). Their challenges are opportunistic because they lack collective consciousness (O'Brien & Li, 2006, p.3). In this sense, what result would this 'weak' resistance lead to?

Scott's idea of resistance suggests that there is hardly any absolute resistance, and that 'most of the political life of subordinate groups is to be found neither in the overt collective defiance of power-holders nor in complete hegemonic compliance, but in the vast territory between these two polar opposites' (1985, p.136). White (1986) therefore proposes 'everyday forms of collaboration' and suspects that there is more everyday collaboration than resistance (p.56). After all, 'powerless groups have self-interest in conspiring to reinforce hegemonic appearances' (Scott, 1990, xii).

Returning to the main focus of this research, select scholars have examined resistance through oral traditions. McIsaac argues that 'oral narrative' is about resisting cultural domination and colonial history (2000, p.97). Pond examines people living in Niua island's use of songs to express the hardship of lives and their independent thought in face of economic and political rule from the south (1995, p.49). Scheub furthermore illustrates how oral traditions are part of the strength of Africans, whereby they are able to tolerate the persistent onslaught of colonialism (2010, p.8). Overall, these studies revealed oral forms of resistance in narrative, either against colonialism or political oppression. Resistance through oral traditions against cultural domination requires further study, although McIsaac briefly touches on it.

In summary, most scholars investigate oral tradition in the African context (Lord, 1962, 1986; Finnegan, 1970; Foley,1990; Scheub, 1996; Merolla, 2012), and few have studied oral tradition from other regions. One of the stated reasons that scholars study African oral traditions is to maintain regional inter-cultural exchanges (Canonici, 1990, p.142), and to protect oral literature, as part of African development, from dying out under the influence of 'progressive cultures' (Finnegan, 1970, p.520). Despite that, limited literature expounds oral traditions as a form of cultural resistance. In China, internal cultural hegemony and imperialism as well as the centre-periphery status between Han and Tai Lüe remained after the changes of dynasties, although Davis notes that Tais are reviving underground through Changkhup. More nuanced resistance forms must be articulated, however, in order to fully examine the existing power relations. Although Scott's 'everyday forms of resistance' highlights subalterns' subtle agency, this model cannot fit in ethnic minorities' struggle in the cultural arena, particularly when it comes to the preservation of ethnic identity in China. Rightful resistance, on the other hand, seeks assistance from influential allies and combines legal tactics and collective actions to draw widespread attention, which is not the case of Changkhup. I therefore propose the term oral media resistance to understand Tai oral poets' cultural resistance against Han cultural hegemony. Through a mixture of 'everyday resistance' and 'rightful resistance', or something in between, Changkhup singers can be quiet and noisy at the same time.

Conceptual Framework

According to Gramsci, subaltern groups can be 'slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, and the proletariat' (Green, 2002, p.2). The Tai ethnic minority are subalterns vis-à-vis the Han Chinese. As evident as the western dominance in the global South, the Han ruling class exercises cultural hegemony through consensus, which produces Tai subalterns and 'the Other' as a 'sort of surrogate and underground self" (Said, 1979, p.3), makes Tai believe that their inferiority and subordination to Han Chinese is normal, and that progressive Han cultures will lead them to be civilised and developed. By transplanting Said's critique of 'orientalism' and Hechter's 'internal colonialism' (1975) to China, Schein (1997) proposes 'internal orientalism' indicating a relation between 'imaging and cultural/political dominance' that takes place inter-ethnically within China (p.73), which marginalises ethnic minorities to such a degree that they are essentially silenced (McCarthy, 2009, p.35). Through 'internal orientalism', Han dominance over Tai can be justified. Oral media resistance builds on Scott's everyday form of resistance, fighting back in disguised ways. It also resembles rightful resistance, openly proclaiming their rights in preserving ethnic identity and cultures aligning with national policies. Going beyond that, this research examines oral media resistance and to what extent oral media form a way of 'speaking back', articulating their counter-hegemonic discourse, and to what extent resistance interplays with hegemonic power. There are several ways of examining resistance; this project uses the lens of the subaltern strategy of resistance in a mostly cultural arena.

METHODOLOGY

Briefly summarised, I have conducted a 20-day ethnographic fieldwork for data collection, during which I primarily relied on participant observation and semi-structured interviewing combined with in-depth individual interviews and focus groups. Besides this, thematic analysis was mainly used for analysing data. By using several data-gathering methods, the validity of the findings can be more secure when several methods produce the same results (Bernard, 1994, p.227).

Mapping and accessing the field

The fieldwork was conducted in Sipsongpanna, China, bordering Laos and Myanmar. As an 'insider', I found it easier to access the field. Nevertheless, I realise that I am also an 'outsider' in the manner that I lack understanding of rural areas, where Tais practice their customs, traditions, and reliefs on a daily basis. Despite my Tai identity, I grew up in Han-dominated communities and barely speak Tai, let alone understanding the Tai alphabet. In this regard, the access issue of this project remained a challenge, although I gained greater access through individuals who acted as both sponsor and gatekeeper (Bryman, 2012, p.437). Depending on where singers live and performances were held, my fieldwork locations include one city, two counties and nine villages, wherein two of them are on the borders. In order to protect the singers' identities, I did not mark the specific 'field' on the map.

Map: Sipsongpanna (Jinghong as the capital)
Map: retrieved from Davis, S. (2005), courtesy of John Emerson.

Rationale

Ethnography is the most appropriate method to study Tai oral media 'in naturally occurring settings or fields by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities' (Brewer, 2000, p.6). It requires ethnographers to live with locals for extended periods in order to document and interpret their way of life, and their beliefs and values (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p.1). Yet a 'micro-ethnography' (Wolcott, 1990) can be a compromise for a particular aspect of a topic with less time needed (Bryman, 2012, p.433). Specifically, the main data-collection method of ethnography is a mixture of participant observation and interviewing; participant observers frequently conduct interviews in the field (Bryman, 2012, p.432). I situate myself as a 'participating observer' who is involved fully in the principal activities in open settings (Bryman, 2012, p.442).

Interviewing is a process of finding out what others feel and think about their worlds (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). With in-depth interviewing, researchers get to know the 'hidden feelings or attitudes of which a respondent may not be aware' (Berger, 1998, p.55). Moreover, a focus group engages a small number of people in an informal discussion, focusing on a particular topic (Wilkinson, 2004). Compared to individual interviews, focus groups provide a less stressful environment where participants share perceptions, ideas and opinions (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Additionally, focus groups produce ethnographically-rich data, and members of focus groups are similar in backgrounds and social characteristics (Bernard, 1994, p.229).

During the fieldwork, some singers rejected me at the beginning by saying 'I lack culture (mei wenhua), and do not know what to say'. In this sense, participant observation, as 'the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day activities of participants' (Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte, 1990, p.91), supplements interviewing, allowing ethnographers not only listen to what they say, but also observe what they do.

Sampling

Taking the advantage of the researchers' network with some singers, the selection of data therefore adopts a combination of purposive

sampling, snowball sampling and opportunistic sampling, following a main rule: representatives of Sipsongpanna Tai Changkhup ensuring the diversity regardless of gender, age, location, titles, etc. As Bryman notes, 'ethnographers are forced to gather information from whatever sources are available to them' (2012, p.424).

Specifically, I recruited twelve respondents across Sipongpanna, living scattered in different villages. Some are old friends that I met before, some were proposed by singers, and the rest were either recommended by the Culture Bureau or encountered in the field. Besides this, a focus group was conducted with five members who have been individually interviewed before. One is an old Changkhup master, and the rest are his apprentices. According to Kitzinger (1994), recruiting 'pre-existing groups' can make discussion as natural as possible, thereby enhancing the quality.

To sum up, twelve Tai Changkhup (six females and six males) aged 26 to 80 were interviewed within durations ranging from 31 to 67 minutes. Some cannot speak Han language fluently, some have stopped singing and currently engage in composing and teaching. Besides this, all respondents are followers of Theravada Buddhism, and all males had experienced monastic life for varying periods of time; some were Bhikku (senior monks).

Ethical considerations

At the beginning of these interviews, both written and verbal informed consent had to be addressed. The recording request was clearly presented, followed by brief background information on the research. However, given the sensitive nature of the research question, while introducing the research plan to participants, I never assume Changkhup are resisting, and I didn't tell them that this research mainly concerns power relations between Han and Tai. Instead, I explored it by discreetly asking open-ended questions. More importantly, I needed to be ethnographically reflective, guaranteeing truthful portrayals and that the capacity of subalterns can be heard (Ortner, 1995, p.190)

Besides this, I engaged in moderate participation, which allows me to maintain a balance between 'insider' and 'outsider' roles (Spradley, 1980). In this research, all activities observed are open to the public and

happened in rural areas. My role was more that of a researcher rather than a community member. That said, I am still a local who has a certain degree of knowledge and connections in Tai villages.   Unavoidably, one could recognise some singers from specific stories as Changkhup are a small group of people who have popularity in the region. Hence, this research will not provide interviewee profiles (I will maintain their anonymity by referring to them as singer A to singer L), although they all gave me permission to use their real names. Additionally, in the analysis I will refer to the singers using pseudonyms, and these people are not necessarily correlated to interviewees.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

I employed thematic analysis in this research, as it focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data and helps to capture the complexities of meaning within a textual data set (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012, p.10-11). I conduct the analysis of ethnographic interview data in conjunction with the analysis of other data, e.g. field notes and documents (Roulston, 2014, p.303). Lastly, I report the results and interpretation simultaneously and integrate these findings with the narrative and discussion (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011), and weave relevant themes into a coherent Changkhup 'song' about Tai life and events in the setting studied.

Prelude

Before jumping into rural Sipsongpanna, I visited some Tai folklorists in Jinghong City. One striking comment was that Tai pop will replace traditional Changkhup in the future, simply because modernity cannot accommodate Changkhup. When one folklorist noticed I was not convinced, he started to compare the economic benefit of Tai pop to that of Changkhup. Usually, one Tai pop band can earn around 20,000 yuan after 3-hour performance, whereas Changkhup can only get 3000-4000 yuan after overnight singing, and young people barely understand the content. To some extent, time-consuming narratives of Changkhup seem incompatible with the modern fast pace of life, and Changkhup are facing the survival dilemma in this market-oriented society. As he put it, 'cultural value + nobody understands + no market = no value'.

It was necessary for me to go to the Culture Bureau, as the main department for the protection of Changkhup; here I came across Li, who is in charge of Changkhup singer management. She proposed some singers to me and was surprised by the number of singers that I had already met three years ago. I almost lost my interest until Li mentioned one name that I was not familiar with. 'This 80-year-old elder is so skilled and has written tons of songs, you really need to see him'. I took the name down, and she continued, 'Very strange, we have never heard of him before, and just found him last year (2014)'. Then I met the curator Zhang. She proudly introduced her innovation - Changkhup drama – which combines traditional Changkhup singing with drama performance. Li told me their first choice of heroine for this play was Mei due to her beautiful voice, but Mei had refused. 'Every time we contact her, she barely responds, I don't know why', Li added. With questions accumulated, I could not wait to go to the field.

Encountering Tai Changkhup

On 3 July 2015 the Manzhang village, with a history of over 500 years, officially opened to the public, boasting its debut as the first cultural village throughout China. On the playground women were rehearsing for the performance: 'Officials are coming, we can only do rubber tapping in the morning, rehearsal at noon', as one said. Behind them, two propaganda banners stood out, 'Chinese First Cultural Villages Opens to the Public - Themed Investigation for ManZhang Cultural Construction' (left), 'Growing Flowers of National Unity, Harvesting Fruits of Prosperity' (right). A Mao Zedong iconography is pasted on the wall.

Among the dancers, I met a Changkhup singer (Hua) who warmly greeted me by putting her palms together. Hua told me she is busy these days as many people including provincial officials have come to visit and 'we need to perform for them'. As part of cultural sightseeing, Changkhup singing art is also on display. Hua is one of singers in the village, and therefore has to perform whenever she is needed. 'Recently, they composed a song for our village. I will sing for you during the lunch', Hua told me. There are many singers like Hua who have been pushed to the 'front-stage', either performing for tourists or pleasing governmental officials and businessmen, so Changkhup singers are almost on call.

> Last year, there were six people from Beijing asking us to sing the origin of humankind, it lasted two days and they recorded it. (C)

> They invited me to sing about village changes. Officials come, I sing for them; people from other villages come, I sing for them; people from Mengla or Menghai county come, our chief also asks me to sing a bit, singing while drinking. They will be very happy. (A)

> I sing Changkhup in a park, tourists just watch and listen, but they don't understand the meaning. (K)

With the increasing demand for exploring authentic Tai culture, the tourist sightseeing focus seems have been gradually extended from 'front-stage' to 'backstage', or previous 'backstage' becomes nowadays 'front-stage'. From an anthropological perspective, American author Sara Davis's Song and Silence (2005) examined Tai Changkhup singers, pop music and monks, arguing that despite Han dominance Sipsongpanna Tais are stealthily reviving and reinventing oral, textual, and Buddhist cultures with other Tais across borders in the 'backstage' (p.177). I assert that the 'backstage" where Tais practice oral tradition is becoming increasingly blurred with the 'front-stage'. Current Tai revival exists in both 'stages'; Tai cultures are constantly changing and developing given a certain degree of 'modernity', and we should avoid over-romanticising 'tradition' (Tomlinson, 1991).

Collaborations with authorities

Apart from daily performances, Hua has another role as an anti-drug advocate. The government recognises the crucial role of Changkhup in advocating drug-control. By composing anti-drug knowledge into lyrics and singing it out loud, Changkhup can bring good publicity to the issue of drug use. This method can be also applied in promoting governmental policy and law. Mostly, this kind of cooperation is voluntary and highly involved in the process of singers' compositions. Nonetheless, the content is restricted to praising the social system and social change.

> Each time they ask me to sing about anti-drug or traffic rules for young people, the government tells me there is no money, but if the party needs me, big sister (refers to herself) will stick it out. Money does not really matter, as long as I can contribute to the country. (A)

> I mostly compose songs regarding national development, for instance what should be planted in the earth, what aspects should be developed. It's similar to what Song Zuying sings about Reform and Opening-up. I am told to turn national policy into songs. (D)

The lyrics primarily describe the old life in Mengyang, how we lived before, then how socialism brings new life to Mengyang, brings prosperity to us. Generally, many lyrics are about the changing world, thus every family is supposed to change. (A)

While people were sitting around the Tai bamboo table and talking under the stilt-style Tai house, a table of Tai cuisine was prepared. Hua seemed very good at enlivening the atmosphere while eating; she toasted everyone individually with some warm words, and organised group toasts along with "Sui Sui Sui" toasting cheers, before starting to sing in Tai:

Old men start beating the elephant-foot drum
Old women start singing in sweet voice
Beautiful young ladies start dancing peacock-dance
Handsome young men start blowing the cucurbit flute
Let us toast to good life, we meet here at cultural village
Let us toast to bright future, we meet here at Manzhang

This newly composed song presents a picture that Tais are skilled in singing, dancing and playing ethnic instruments, constructing an exotic and harmonious cultural village for touristic consumption. In the 'front-stage', Changkhup singers' performance is shifting from lasting and multi-layered narratives to short and catchy modern-style songs. With another round of applause and drinking, Hua continued with Chinese songs: '*Chairman Mao's books are my favorite...Chairman Mao always educates us...although we are from different places, we need to help with one another aiming for the same goals...*'. She giggled when she forgot lyrics and turned to me, 'These songs were popular when I was 13 years old, I still remember them'. Moreover, after swallowing a glass of baijiu (Chinese spirits) she started again with a piece of Peking opera this time and compared it with Tai Changkhup, 'You see, Han people's singing style is so fierce, not like our Tai people "zao heawi zao...", very soft and gentle'. Although she already can clearly sing Chinese songs, Hua is still not satisfied with her own Chinese skills: 'My Han language is not good, I am still 'mei wenhua". Many participants mentioned 'mei(without) wenhua(culture)' during my fieldwork. What they perceive as 'culture' here essentially means 'Han culture', and they tend to equate their level

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of culture with their level of familiarity with Han culture.

Han cultural hegemony makes Tais believe that studying Chinese and receiving Han education is the best way to become a cultured and civilised person. Therefore, Han language (Chinese) becomes a tool for the dominant to exercise Han hegemony over Tais. The 'dual role' of oral media needs to be recognized; as Levo-Henriksson (2007) would put it, one role is to promote assimilation, the other is to promote group uniqueness. In this case, Tai oral media is another tool for Han cultural hegemony to dominate Tais and assimilate them into Han culture. Changkhup can be utilised by the ruling class as it is linked to belief system of indigenous people: 'whoever controls oramedia is better equipped to mobilise and activate the masses' (Ugboajah, 1985, p.172). It is clear that Han authorities have power in asking Changkhup to sing about governmental policy and anti-drug campaign, thus mobilising more Tais to participate in Han development activities, in which Changkhup plays a crucial role in Han-Tai complicity and thus reinforcing Han cultural hegemony.

Hua is an illustrative example of a group of singers who are committed to cooperating with ruling groups. As ethnic oral media or governmental propagandists, Changkhup delivers information from 'above' to subaltern Tais. Hua's desire to learn Chinese is propelled by the desire of fusing herself with Han-dominated society which might bring her benefits. Therefore, the traditional way of singing in this sense functions as the performance providing tourists with a taste of 'Tai culture', and a mastery of Han language enables singers to entertain and please people, especially those who are in power. Besides this, the ideology of collectivism and Maoism as part of Han cultural hegemony has a large influence in the way singers associate their voluntary work with a form of contribution to the society and nation. As Hua noted, 'we should first consider the nation, then collectivity, and individuality last. I often tell my son that the Communist Party needs me, so I do not have much time for family' (she sighed). After a short farewell with me, she greeted a newly arrived TV crew, then dashed out to prepare for the upcoming performance.

Voices of Changkhup

Perceived social status and Gender issues

According to H, Changkhup singers were respected and protected by local chiefs and headmen, and possessed a rather high social status back in Tai feudal society. Yet in contemporary China, people perceive Changkhup in a different social context, in which Changkhup's social status varies dramatically. To be specific, Changkhup, as Tai cultural disseminators, are still well-received in the traditional context in which the old generation values Changkhup's function of education.

> People support us a lot. When we go out for Changkhup performance, even the hoary-haired elders will show us respect by putting their palms together devoutly. (D)

When it comes to the modern context, the entertainment function of Changkhup is more prominent.

> Changkhup have a low social status. Some, especially rich people, tend to despise us, treating us as street performers. (F)

In terms of Changkhup's social status, more findings can be drawn from the focus group which brings about gender dimension. Normally, Changkhup performance is divided into solo and antistrophic forms in which two singers (one female, one male) sing impromptu in order in the atmosphere of a singing 'battle'. Especially when it comes to house-warming events, there are many guests that need to be entertained, and antistrophic performance is a must to activate the atmosphere. Focusing on Changkhup's singing experience, five singers agreed that young and beautiful female singers are preferred regarding on-site interactions, yet sometimes they are more likely to be involved in trouble, as two female singers complained:

> Particularly those drunk men, they told me to stop singing and go out with them for more fun, then put 200 yuan as tips asking me to put it here (pointing at her breast). The Changkhup are those whom they can touch wherever they like. But we are not like this. (C)

When they gave me tips while saying that they want to buy me and kill me. I was thinking to myself, 'how dare you think you are rich, my family fortune is much more than yours'. We come to sing because singing is our hobby, not because we are counting on it for a living. (F)

Exactly, we have been through almost every situation, E added.

Male singers sitting to the side nodded, and started to say, 'If you are beautiful, those men will come and sit beside you' (J). 'Then how do Changkhup react?' I asked. 'Just bear with it, no words' (C). In Sipsongpanna, monastic life allows monks to learn the old Tai alphabet and to become literate in Tai culture, which is recorded in Buddhist scriptures, yet there is no tradition for women to do the same. Thus, male singers who received temple education are more familiar with Tai literature than their female counterparts, who in a way are perceived as inferior subalterns as the feminine and sexualized beings in such a patriarchal society. In this sense, there exists a preference for less educated and less powerful female singers who are expected to please audiences instead of transmitting Tai culture for the sake of education.

That said, female singers try to negotiate with the patriarchy to protect their own interests. Mostly they choose to tolerate the insults from drunk people, hiding their anger and dissatisfaction in order not to spoil the event. However, they can also choose to stop the performance and leave the venue after talking with the host. If singers have a good reputation, they are more likely to be able to negotiate conditions with the host, such as only singing by day and not staying overnight, and to discuss how many songs they plan to perform, etc. In short, the social status of Changkhap, especially for female singers, has been marginalised due to the amplification of Changkhup's entertainment function in modern society. Oral media resistance is reflected either in the singer's inner dissatisfaction in a quiet and disguised way, or by openly countering and avoiding the insult by breaking off performances or bargaining conditions before the performance.

Fighting with identity crisis

Certainly, the stigma does not come from nowhere. Some singers have a relatively bad reputation due to their previous misconduct, which

has an adverse impact on Changkhup vocation, thereby undermining Changkhup social status in a modern context. This change can also be linked to the reality that the quality of singers is declining these years compared with their predecessors who mastered Tai history and culture, and were well-read in Buddhist epics. Under the context of constructing Chinese national identity as 'zhonghua minzu', the Tai minority are forced to learn and use Chinese, and the simplified Tai writing system cuts off the link to Tai history recorded in old Tai script. As the legendary singer Khanan Zhuai criticised, 'Today's singers don't know the Tai Lüe language. They are not the Tai Lüe. I don't know what nationality they're supposed to be' (cited in Davis, 2005, p.121). Here arise concerns about the Tai identity crisis in a Han-dominated society, wherein most singers consider language to be the most important aspect of Tai identity.

> When I was in primary school, we learned Chinese from Mao's Quotations, studied new Tai Lüe, no old Tai Lüe. (L)

> We are not like Tais, we speak Han language and dress in Han style, since too many Han people come and live here, so Tais start following them. (B)

> People know neither old nor new Tai scripts, cannot even speak fluent Tai Lüe. (H)

Having realised this identity crisis, some singers often urge Tais to speak Tai, dress in Tai clothing and learn the old version of Tai Lüe through improvisations. A respondent told me, 'There are no written songs about Tai cultural protection, only those praising a happy life can be published'. Hence, skilled singers can orally compose these contents into songs during the performance. It reveals that Tai oral media forms a self-constructive resistant power countering Chinese national identity and functions in preserving Tai identity. Indeed, 'the field of cultural production' becomes 'the field of forces' (Bourdieu, 1993, p.30), Changkhup's oral composition is the struggle for a 'real artist' and 'real minority' (Davis, 1999, p.213). As Bourdieu notes, 'if there is a truth, it is that truth is a stake in the struggle' (1993, p.263).

Conversely, some singers tend to embrace Han culture. As A firmly

put it, 'I love Han people. I want to learn more Chinese songs'. Indeed, peripheral minority identities are fluid and ambiguous, which is a central feature of borderlands (Horstmann & Wadley, 2006, p.20), yet ethnic minorities often shift their identities towards the majority Han, largely influenced by Mao's slogan, 'Nationalities unite' (minzu tuanjie) (Safran, 1998, p.3-6). In a way, more advanced Hans lead 'minority brothers' to the road of 'modernisation' through 'Hanification' (Davis, 1999, p.29). Interestingly, when I asked D about her opinions about Han cultural influence among Tais, I could tell she was nervous. 'There is no influence, just good', she replied in Chinese despite talking in Tai with me most of the time.

This case touches upon the second role of oral media in promoting group uniqueness. Tai oral media strengthens Tai identity by narrating unique and all-encompassing elements of Tai culture. As Ridwan, G. Okunnu, & F. Okunnu note, 'oramedia is a true carrier of culture' (2015, p.97). More importantly, Tai oral media can reach illiterate Tai people who are often left behind in a Chinese language-dominated society. As Finnegan recognises, oral media can be used not only by the powerful, but also by 'the poor, the non-literate, or the marginalised in the Third World' (1995, p.23). In this sense, the Tai minority uses oral media to promote the idea of learning Tai language, history and traditional culture, thereby preserving Tai identity. I argue that this is a way of resisting Chinese national identity and cultural hegemony.

Radio: A losing battleground

During the interview, most participants identified radio as a vital media platform for Changkhup singers to reach a wider audience from rural Sipongpanna. This is what Walter Ong called 'second orality', in which oral culture is sustained by radio, television, etc. (1982, p.11). However, authorities do not value Changkhup radio as singers do. The media integration between radio and Changkhup oral media is collapsing. Changkhup radio programmes lack updates, and what is broadcast nowadays are only old recordings. These years, the radio station only makes new programmes during the Tai New Years. Additionally, due to the radio station's arrears of paying wages, singers are unwilling to make programmes, refusing to cooperate:

In every conference, officials always push us to write more songs since radio needs new programmes. But when we submit, they will tell you there is no money, the leaders don't allocate money down. (H)

At the radio station, if I sing this year, then I only can get wages next year. Just 100-200 yuan, they call me to take it in person, but we are from villages far away from Jinghong, this amount of money cannot even cover my travel expenses. (E)

According to respondents, Changkhup's participation is taken for granted by authorities who regard Changkhup involvement in official activities as a way of providing them with opportunities for development, and hence there is no need to pay the singers. Accordingly, singers find it difficult to raise money for publications such as CDs and books. The sense of exploitation is amplified when Changkhup turn to the government for help but only receive rejection, mainly from Han officials. Compared to what singers offer to authorities, the support from the government is limited. Gradually, singers feel reluctant to work with authoritiesm not only at the radio station but also on other occasions, which constitutes another form of resistance to the powerful through non-cooperative conducts. It is fair to say that Han authorities are losing singers' trust.

They asked me to sing for two days without paying me, and I have to pay the traffic fare myself. I am old now, I don't want to serve them anymore, but they just keep begging me. (I)

The government will only contact you when they need you, I am always one call away, but when I need money for my album, they didn't offer any even if they have promised before. (F)

Only those officials who are Tai will sponsor us a bit. If they are Han people, no way. (B)

Hierarchy drama and struggle

An inspiring way for the government to encourage Changkhup is to grant officially recognised titles. Historically, Changkhup have been classified into different ranks indicating their level of singing and composing skills

as well as distinct degree of reputation. For example, 'Changkhup Meong (district)' refers to the top singer within a district and 'Changkhup Man (village)' the top singer within a village. Nowadays, with Beijing's attention to protecting ethnic cultural heritages, the inheritor system has been established by deeming singers as Changkhup inheritors at a national, provincial, prefecture or county level and providing them with an allowance to support their inheritance work. In this case, officials regard Tais as continuously in need of Han assistance, both in modernising and preserving their uniqueness (McCarthy, 2009, p.90).

The Culture Bureau has the power to select and present local candidates to Beijing. However, they did not evaluate the candidates seriously, and rashly proposed two singers as national-level inheritors, which gave rise to disputes and discontent amongst Sipsongpanna Changkhup. Accordingly, singers felt they were being treated unfairly. As one argues, 'Not everyone who is able to sing a bit can become inheritors, only those who are genuinely knowledgeable and skilled can be'. Even though officials admitted that one of the national-level inheritors is not skilled, they chose him simply because he has the title of 'Khanan', which signifies that he is knowledgeable and well-educated. Ironically, there are plenty of male Changkhup who have 'Khanan' in their name; the Culture Bureau did not even know the basic fact that in Tai society every Bhikkhu will be titled as 'Khanan' after returning to the laity.

> Whenever authorities invite me, I will make time to perform for free, and I have traveled around villages singing for public-good, but didn't receive any titles. The government did not research thoroughly in choosing inheritors, they just decided randomly. (D)

> They came to my house and hung the plaque with "the national-level cultural heritage" on it, but they don't promote me to national-level inheritor. As for current national-level inheritors, you ask them to teach, they can't articulate; you ask them to write, they also can't compose well. (H)

In fact, Changkhup's reputation given by authorities is highly related to the degree of singers' complicity with Han cultural hegemony. Only by studying Han language, adjusting traditional Changkhup into

Han's standards of taste and involving themselves in Han-dominated 'front-stage' can singers obtain more opportunities by being presented to better platforms and receiving nationwide attention. During this process, Tai singers are constructed as the exotic, religious and feminised minority 'other' contrasted against a modern, masculine and secular Han subject (McCarthy, 2009, p.90). As for Mei, who rejected the Culture Bureau's invitation to play a role in Changkhup drama, she told me that it was a provincial-level competition and officials required her to speak Chinese in the show, so the reason for her refusal was simple, 'I don't speak Han language, I don't want to go'. As a result, one official criticised her, 'Like this, you will never go out of the province'. Ironically, Mei has already become well-known in Myanmar and Thailand.

These stories revealed the incompetence of cultural management by Han authorities. Unwise decisions and unfair treatment cause Changkhup's dissatisfaction and complaints that lead, to some extent, to resistance through non-cooperation. Accordingly, that impedes cultural inheritance and development work which needs the substantial participation of Changkhup singers.

Innovation or assimilation

As Han language has become dominant throughout China, Han pop as mainstream music has become popular and influential in ethnic minority regions. Compared to traditional Changkhup, Tai pop, largely influenced by modern Han culture, is more understandable and accepted, attracting a wider audience in Sipsongpanna. To survive, today's Changkhup also sing modern pop songs and often put some in their albums, which is seen as a necessary transformation so that they can fit in the market. Tai pop is actually a classical example of Han cultural dominance over Tais; Han pop as part of Han cultural hegemony has been shaping Tai group's aesthetic cognition of music, redefining the modernity of Tai music, which traditional Changkhup could not fit in.

Despite Tai pop's increasing popularity among youngsters, Changkhup singers seem confident in traditional Changkhup without considering external cultures and Tai pop as potential threats to them. As D put it, 'there is no cultural clash between Han and Tai'. In terms of Changkhup's innovation, young singers believe Changkhup needs to

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be combined with Han culture to reach a wider audience, whereas older singers insist that innovation should mainly follow Tai traditional classics and Buddhist texts. Therefore, Changkhup has been more or less shifted by compromising its traditional elements with a more modernised and mainstream Han style, serving Han cultural tastes, in which case Tai resistance is shifting into greater complicity with Han hegemony.

> If we want more people get to know Tai Changkhup, we have to combine Tai traditional elements with Han modern elements. (F)

> I will base on Buddhist scriptures and change a bit so as to fit in modern context. Otherwise, the deep meaning of Tai culture will disappear. (D)

> Why do some young people like my songs? Because I combine modern language to sing. Old singers stick to using Pali language, people don't understand. For instance, "Changkhup" was called "Nawan" before, but who knows "Nawan" means today's "Changkhup?" (F)

> Pop music is no threat to Changkhup, there are still people in villages listening to Changkhup, because it is kind of formal and ritual, not like those songs that Ai Khamjian sings, random humming. (D)

Rituality

Facing the powerful modern culture, McIsaac (2000) questioned whether traditional knowledge and cultural practice can constitute a form of resistance. I argue that Changkhup's everyday ritual, cultural practices and inheritance is essentially resisting Han cultural hegemony, although singers are not necessarily conscious of it. Further, singer D, who does not consider external cultures a threat to Changkhup, revealed that the uniqueness of Changkhup lies in its rituality, which is the reason why Changkhup cannot be replaced by other music genres. Generally, Changkhup singing is a must-do during various Tai occasions and activities such as housewarmings, weddings, promoting monks, and village rituals, etc. Changkhup singers have to sing corresponding songs conforming to each occasion. In this case, Ugboajah's definition of oramedia overlooked the fact that oral media is part of cultural ritual

and identity of indigenous groups. The rituality of Tai oral media was also discussed in the focus group, which proved the irreplaceability of Changkhup from another aspect.

> Changkhup glud-vgong is our tradition. We believe ghosts will move in first when we build new houses. Thus, Changkhup performances are needed as a ritual to send ghosts away, it otherwise causes the household an unhappy life. (H)

> You pay 20,000 to hire popular singers for 2 hours, can they send ghosts away? Of course not. (I)

> Changkhup sing from the house base to the roof, which kind of timbers are needed, for what function...it takes several hours to narrative and complete a whole ritual. (C)

Clearly, the rituality of Changkhup maintains resistance against the dominant Han culture based on facts that Tai rituals are ethnic, religious and somewhat superstitious in the context of Han culture. However, it is rituality that becomes the key to Changkhup's survival in modern society, because all kinds of traditional rituals constitute Tai society and serve as part of everyday Tai life.

Epilogue: Fleeting Carnival or Determined Songs

When I still was in London, Ling had told me that there would be an opening ceremony for her Changkhup training institute by the end of July. I congratulated her for making such achievements since I interviewed her in 2012. On the day of the opening ceremony, I took a rural passenger transport and arrived at the venue. Changkhup singers, novices, media crew and government officials came one after another. It was like a cultural carnival, with most people dressed up in Tai costume, and I was no exception.

The national-level Changkhup Ni saw me. 'Aiyo (interjection), Wensaeng (she called my Tai name), it just struck me this morning that you are coming and I wanted to call you but I was afraid you were still sleeping, otherwise I would have driven you here'. I thanked her and greeted other people as well. I was surprised that so many famous

Changkhup singers gathered together at this event, including the one (Wang) who was just 'found' by the Culture Bureau, although actually he has long been prominent and respected in Sipsongpanna Tai society.

The ceremony began with the keynote speech from the Culture Bureau, which reviewed Changkhup protection work and conveyed the determination of Changkhup inheritance. As the most respected old Changkhup in the county, Tong (provincial-level inheritor) first performed a short piece. Followed by Tong's apprentice Ling, the director of this new training institute, as Ling sung in front of sitting officials:

Today is a good day
I extend my warm welcome to present honored officials
Changkhup training institute can't be established without you
I wish Tai Changkhup can be better inherited
Thanks everyone for your presence and support
Thanks government official for your concerns and support
I wish Tai Changkhup can unite as one
Passing down our Changkhup culture from generation to generation...

After the ceremony, a three-day training class began with 30 students registered aged from 7 to 28. The first lesson was delivered by Ni in Tai, mainly about the introduction of Changkhup. The classroom was crowded with novices, singers, officials and journalists. Awkwardly, Ni sometimes was not sure about the knowledge she was delivering, stopped several times and asked Tong and Wang, who were seated nearby, for help. In this regard, it reminded me of what Tong had told me before, 'The national-level inheritor also relies on me'. Indeed, singers who are not able to compose songs often turn to elder Tong and Wang for songs. An interesting situation is created by the fact that those who can compose songs and truly understand Tai history normally have lower titles acknowledged by Han authorities.

For Ling the training institute, partially financed by the government, is not just a classroom for training novices, but also a platform to cohere Sipsongpanna Changkhup for the sake of Tai cultural inheritance. After the short carnival, the training class seems empty after the ceremony day, leaving Ling alone teaching novices, whose sound echoed Ling's, forming

waves of Changkhup tune reverberating in the room, also resounding in the Changkhup novices' hearts.

Conclusion

This article revealed that 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 a Han-dominated modern society, Tai oral media has become a form of resistance, both culturally and socio-economically, preventing Tai traditions and identity from fading away in confrontation with Han culture and Chinese national identity. 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 ward off ghosts, offer blessings, 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 the Han Chinese. I thus argue that Changkhup's everyday performance, cultural inheritance practices and the mode 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 relegated to the 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, it provides another angle to view 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 as discursively constructed by the 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 by not using Han language, in the way that 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. As Willems and Obadare might put it, the agency of Tai Changkhup is fragmented and dispersed into individual acts of 'accommodation' and 'getting by' (2014, p.6).

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. As Davis noted ten years ago, the 'Chinese state continues to ignore as long as the Tai revival quietly negotiates its demands behind the scenes' (2005, p.176). I believe that Tai cultural revival is actually not ignored by Chinese governments. Instead, it is openly and collaboratively supported by Han authorities, but the methods of this revival require continuous negotiation between these two sides.

Having recognised Changkhup's significance, governments and singers agree to collaborate for the common good. Despite constant discontent towards complicity, subordinated Tai singers somehow still collaborate with the hegemon. As one singer put it, 'The collaboration with Han authorities is necessary if we want Tai Changkhup to go further'. Therefore, Tai resistance and complicity are entangled with one another and positioned within complex power relations. These forms of resistance are shaped by complicity, and resistance in turn also shapes the manner of Tai complicity with the Han. Accordingly, it can be said that

'the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask' of resistance (Scott, 1990, p.3). The hidden resistance through Tai oral media thus turns out to be a form of complicity as 'public transcripts', which facilitate the legitimisation of Han dominance, thereby ideologically reinforcing Han cultural hegemony by praising social change brought from the CPC that leads the socialism with Chinese characteristics.

Furthermore, what Davis referred to as '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 fills an important gap in oral media studies by applying an interdisciplinary approach to study resistance and hegemony, providing a lens through which to view the oral media of other Chinese minorities. However, given limited time, this project only provided a small glimpse of Tai oral media resistance and complicity occurring within current power relations, and complexity remains. I therefore suggest further studies that could follow: 1) methodologically, textually-focused analysis in Changkhup songs; 2) the audience's reception in relation to 'hidden transcript' and the effects of resistance; 3) looking beyond borders to explore how Tai oral media weaves transnational networks contributing to 'pan-Tai revival' in the upper Mekong delta.

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