A Tale of Two Song Fairs: Considering Tourism and Tradition in China's Guangxi Province

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In the Baise prefecture of the Guangxi province in Southern China, there are two Zhuang minority song fairs separated by a distance of only 60 kilometers. Both are held at caves, both feature worship practices in reverence of Zhuang deities prominent to their area, and both use antiphonal, multipart singing. These two fairs at Guangyang Mountain and Ganzhuang Mountain were very similar to each other prior to the Cultural Revolution. However, the official promotion of Ganzhuang Mountain as the home of the first Zhuang ancestor, begun in 2003 and consummated in 2004, has created a dramatic disjunction between these two song fairs. The present differences between these two fairs permit an analysis of elements of change that have recently affected Zhuang music culture. While there are several aspects of these changes that could be examined, in this essay we limit the analysis to government-sponsored tourism. The comparison between the two song fairs is used in this case to provide the perspectives of full involvement in, and absence of, government-sponsored tourism to better understand positive and negative effects inside of a given cultural context. To address those positive and negative aspects, we re-posit the questions asked by Carol Rubenstein: “What genre of culture was being formed and shown, and to what end, and at whose expense, and for whose benefit and purposes?” (1992). Information for this paper is taken from experience and research conducted by Qin Jin Dun, a native Zhuang who grew up near the Ganzhuang Mountain Song Fair, as well as fieldwork around the Baise prefecture, including visits to these two song fairs by John Widman during the 2010–2011 academic year.

It is an understatement to say that the decade after the Cultural Revolution saw a dramatic shift in government policy towards China's minorities. In the few years that followed the removal of the Gang of Four, directives switched from the systematic removal of the “Four Olds”[1] to the restoration of previous ideals of cultural promotion. A central speech by Huang Zhen outlined several goals: bringing back artists suppressed by the Gang of Four; giving minorities autonomy concerning their performing arts; applying Party policy, especially toward cultural forms of expression, while maintaining variety; building up the cultural enterprises of the minority areas without leaving out remote areas; and promoting unity among all of the nationalities (taken from a summary by Mackerras 1984:192). These policies and accompanying actions allowed much of the previous traditional activity to resume. At the same time, government involvement at all levels was increased in Zhuang traditional activity. While the Ganzhuang Mountain Song Fair saw little of this involvement, other processes emerged during the period following the Cultural Revolution that would inspire involvement at the precinct level of government. Researchers were beginning to discover legendary texts around Tianyang County regarding the origin of the world in relation to the Zhuang ancestral figure Buluotuo (Holm 2004:1). These discoveries, combined with the increased emphasis on tourism, especially as a way to simultaneously promote culture and economy, came together with the opening of the Buluotuo Cultural Festival at Ganzhuang Mountain in 2004. Since its opening, the Buluotuo Cultural Festival has taken place annually at the same time and place as the song fair and has increased its participation level from 50,000 before 2004 to nearly 200,000 participants in 2009 (Zhang and Zhang 2010). A great number of events have been added to the song fair, including academic forums discussing various aspects of Buluotuo and the cultures surrounding this ancestral figure. The landscape around Ganzhuang Mountain has also been modernized with walkways, monuments, and a refurbished temple. To better understand what kind of impact this modification has had on the traditional practices at Ganzhuang Mountain, we turn to a brief analysis of the relationship of the song fair with indigenous Zhuang culture followed by descriptions of visits taken during the spring of 2011 to the Guangyang and Ganzhuang Mountain Song Fairs.

Zhuang Identity and Zhuang Song Fairs

The Zhuang are considered the largest of China's 55 minority groups, with over 16 million people recognized as Zhuang. As with many of the southern minorities, it is useful to consider the Zhuang minority to be unified by key cultural components with notable exceptions between given branches. Most Zhuang share the common traits of using a dialect of the Thai language group, a tradition of wet-rice agriculture, animistic religious practices, and delayed-transfer marriage. Within this framework, and taking into account other cultural markers, there is a significant amount of variance. A repeated theme in the diversity of the Zhuang is the numerous terms used for self-address, with over twenty forms in the Guangxi province. The Zhuang language further emphasizes the disparity between subgroups as it is categorized most often into 12 different dialects, some of which are mutually unintelligible (Jin Li 2007:202). In the Guangxi Province, the most extreme example of linguistic contrast is the general divide between the Northern and Southern Zhuang dialects. These two broad dialects have only 65%

lexical similarity, are considered mutually unintelligible by their respective native speakers, and feature significant differences in phonological systems (Luo 2008). Differing branches of Zhuang also feature variations in traditional dress and religious practices, as well as different interpretations of courtship and marriage customs. These various disjunctions, absent in some of the more generalized cultural overviews, are important to consider when researching the Zhuang. While many of these cultural features are homogenous enough to observe relations between subgroups of Zhuang, the distinctions merit caution. Tradition identified with the Zhuang as a whole might be more accurately attributed to a single subgroup. Conversely, many of the commonalities between the various Zhuang peoples extend to other minorities in China. This relationship of general characteristics with variations among prominent details is present in the Zhuang song fairs as well.

In terms of cultural significance and range of practice, the song fair could easily be added to the list of definitive Zhuang characteristics above. Zhuang song fairs are gatherings of people from one or more villages who come together to sing antiphonal songs, primarily on the topic of romantic love. Although there are smaller, more frequent song gatherings in various Zhuang villages occurring during market days, the song fair represents the pinnacle of this kind of event, drawing larger numbers from a wider geographic area on an annual basis. As with other elements of Zhuang culture, there is a significant amount of variation in the structure of the song fair events. The most commonly cited date of the Zhuang singing fairs in both academic and popular literature is lunar March 3. In 1984, this date was officially recognized by the Guangxi government as a provincial festival. However, while lunar March 3 is a popular date for song fairs, it is by no means universal. A casual listing of 78 common song fair locations posted on different local blogs lists only five on lunar March 3. To put this in perspective, lunar February 2 and 19 each have six song fairs in separate locations, and there are 22 other song fairs listed as starting on 13 other days in lunar March outside of the third. This does not negate the depth or scope of the March 3 generalization but rather illustrates that the standard of a March 3 song fair is foreign to many who are Zhuang.

The origin legends and forms the song fairs take are equally diverse. Pan Quxu cites five major categories of origin legends surrounding song fairs in different areas: celebrating the harvest and praying for another harvest; finding lovers through song; remembering the death of an ancient lover; paying homage to Third Sister Liu; or the gathering of a clan or clans together (2010:52–56). The traditional forms of the song fairs generally parallel the origin legends, with the antiphonal singing of love songs being a central element present in all of the different variations. Song fairs with legends concerning the union of lovers or a perished lover are simply informal gatherings of male and female groups of various sizes singing antiphonally to each other. Before some of the major changes in the last century, individuals from the different groups would watch for potential partners of the opposite sex. After sizing each other up through song, some of the resulting couples would become lovers, with the potential to choose each other for husband and wife. Those festivals based on a religious purpose would feature some type of ceremony or personal act of worship to a totemic figure, ancestor, or deity, with antiphonal singing of different song types occurring before, after, or during the ceremony. Song fairs with the intent of gathering a clan or clans together, while still featuring love songs, would also include antiphonal singing on topics relevant to the purpose of the gatherings.

While the two fairs examined in this paper can be discussed in terms of these general forms, there are local-level variations that should be taken into account. The song fairs at Ganzhuang and Guangyang Mountains both occur among the Northern Zhuang and are part of the same linguistic subgroup.[2] In addition to these song fairs sharing analogous religious formats, before the transformation of the Ganzhuang Mountain Song Fair in 2004, many of the smaller structural details were the same. Both song fairs traditionally assembled for a brief, individualistic veneration of a deified ancestral figure through the burning of incense. This was followed by the extended singing of antiphonal songs between male and female pairs. At both festivals, the singing would frequently last through the night and could often span multiple days. Although the similarities between the traditional forms of these two song fairs are certainly close enough to be of use in comparing the effects of modern events, it is also helpful to take note of their historical differences. At Guangyang Mountain, there has been an annual appearance of female shaman figures, *xianpo*,[3] who provide intercession for those who wish to communicate with their ancestors. While xianpo do come to Ganzhuang Mountain, they do not typically serve this function for others who are present. It is also significant that, although the function of the two ancestors worshiped is similar (they are each praised for the creation of the Zhuang and the provision of critical cultural knowledge), they have separate identities. The ancestor worshipped at Guangyang is female and called Yadai. Ganzhuang's ancestral figure, Buluotuo, is male. Finally, although the primary traditional activities at both song fairs encompass ancestral worship and antiphonal singing, the traditional song fair at Ganzhuang Mountain also featured casual dragon and lion dance performances, even before they were incorporated officially into the format of the modernized fair. There was also a traditional opera troupe whose performances have since disappeared, as the dramatists are now too old to continue this custom. Despite these differences, the religious practices, lengthy antiphonal songs, and the informality of the events at the

two song fairs would have made these events appear very similar to an outside visitor before the changes at Ganzhuang Mountain. With the most prominent content of these song fairs being the namesake element of antiphonal song, an examination of the workings of Zhuang folk singing is necessary to provide a clearer picture of connections between the song fair and Zhuang culture.

Song Fair Content: A Brief Description of Zhuang Singing

In Zhuang singing, a high degree of importance is placed on the lyrical content. This can be seen in the way musical aesthetics are treated in Zhuang culture. Indigenous evaluation of singing quality in Zhuang music is based primarily on the lyrics. In this context, “witty” is a more common epithet than “beautiful.” Also, the defining feature separating one song from another relies more on lyrical content than on melodic change. A different song, more often than not, is represented by a change to another subject, though it uses the same melody. If one were to conduct a purely musical analysis of Zhuang singing, this change could be seen as stages of the same song because there is no pause in singing, just a change in topic. The prominence of lyrics in Zhuang singing is often indirectly emphasized when larger volumes of songs are published; when there is talk about compiling Zhuang songs into books, this typically means transcribing the words without an accompanying melody. For example, a recent publication of the *liao* songs[4] of the Zhuang in Pinguo County translated into English contains an explanation of how the poetry works, but possesses no transcription of any of the melodies used to sing them (Zhou Yanxian and Lu Lianzhi 2012). This omission is not unusual, as the melodies are also absent from the song books used by those who sing the liao songs.

The omission of the melodies makes more sense when one understands that much of Zhuang singing and musical practice takes place inside of single melodies long enough to encompass a couplet or quatrain of text. A given melody acts as a frame for large quantities of written or improvised poetry. These song frames are passed between generations orally and are used as vehicles for singing improvised poetry or substantial written texts. Depending on the area, the entire musical environment may consist of only a few of these tunes. The specificity of these song frames is so narrow that it is often possible to identify the township of a group of people by the song frame they are using.

Audio 1: A sample song frame from Tianyang County. All photographs and recordings by John Widman.
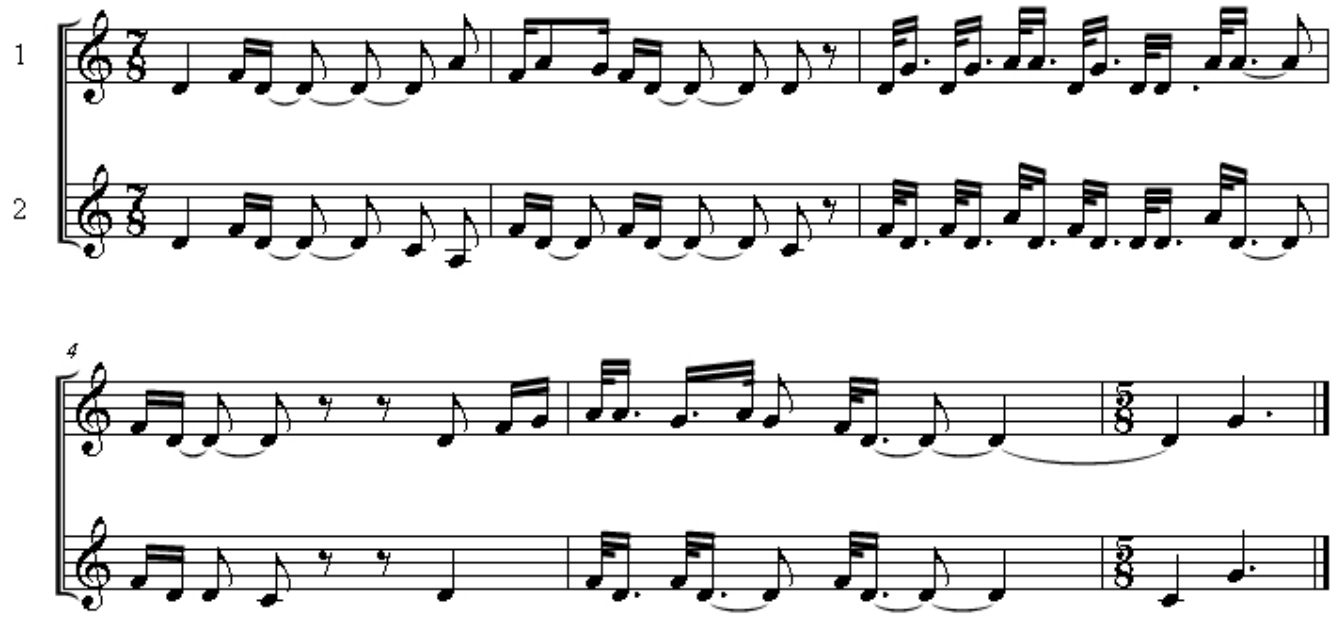


Figure 1: Transcription of song frame in the above recording.

The song frames themselves, while more rigid than Western scalar practice, do permit some forms of divergence. Certain sections of the melody might be shortened or lengthened to suit musical or textual preference. Rhythm, melody, and harmony also have a degree of flexibility within the frame on a note-for-note or word-for-word basis. These small changes, while recognizable by the outsider, make no meaningful changes to a given melody and may or may not be consciously acknowledged by the singers themselves. Also significant is the way song frames affect

the lyrics when they are transferred from spoken to sung refrains. The tones used in the Zhuang language are largely stripped away and many of the words lengthened. The addition of vocables is also prevalent in many of the singing styles. Those who are familiar with the song form, as well as what phrases and vocables are commonly used in song, can understand what is being sung despite the linguistic modifications. Conversely, those who are unfamiliar with local traditional song styles cannot understand what is being sung, even if they speak the dialect fluently. More study is needed for a complete analysis of song variations and lyric modification, as well as how songs change by area. However, the concept of a cyclical musical frame primarily used as a functional vehicle for poetic discourse is clearly a key element in Zhuang folk song.

Despite the minute variations present in the use of Zhuang singing, as well as slight changes that must have taken place when passing through generations, strictly musical change in this context has taken place at a much slower pace than that typical of variations inside of Western scalar practice. For example, the musical differences between two song frames from Zhuang towns in close proximity to each other are likely less than what is typically seen between works of a single composer writing songs in the Western scalar system. While it is easy in this context to emphasize elements representing the “non-change” (Blacking 1977) inherent in oral transmission, it is equally important to note what Nettle terms as “allowable individual variation” or non-directional change in the song frame. It is likely that such non-directional changes are driven by “a certain amount of constant changes” within the expected improvisation of song lyrics (2005:279). On the other hand, language, in the forms of improvised and written poetry, represents a social formation that is an “integral part of the music process” (Blacking 1977). In this context, a shift in lyrical meter preference through cultural contact or internal variance, and the effect of those changes on a given song frame, would be equivalent to a change in genre in a scalar based system. The importance that language plays in defining song further connects the song frame to other parts of Zhuang culture in ways that can be seen through an examination of the social function of the song fair.

Social Function and Change in the Song Fair

While it is impossible to know the exact age of the larger, regular song gatherings that are known as song fairs, they have existed in the Zhuang culture for at least the better part of a millennium. Li Xianping writes that the song festival increased in popularity around the time of the Song Dynasty (Li 1995).[5] It is important here to note that Li Xianping does not credit the Song Dynasty as the starting point of the larger song festivals in Zhuang culture. Indeed, Jeffrey Barlow identifies song fair events on bronze drums dating between the seventh century BCE and the sixth century CE, indicating that these practices pre-dated the Song Dynasty (2005). Since the Song Dynasty was a time of increased cultural contact with the Han, who would have been recording these events in writing, it is likely that references to the song fair merely appeared more often during this time. This consistency in practice over the span of several hundred years, and possibly even two or three millennia, re-illustrates the close ties between music and cultural function among the Zhuang. As the song frames serve a central role in the Zhuang musical system, song fairs and the process of presenting large volumes of poetry through song have served a central cultural function.

Traditionally, both the songs and the large song gatherings were used to initiate contact with potential sexual partners who could become future spouses. Large quantities of the lyrics in romantic songs contain various gradations of innuendo, and there are strong indications that intercourse may have followed the singing of this kind of song in some instances. Because of this, the songs and song fairs played a critical role in the process of finding life partners in Zhuang culture. The song fairs and the songs themselves provided a forum in which male and female singers could choose each other with a higher degree of freedom than the Han system of arranged marriage had allowed. Although the objective of finding a lover is a constant theme in both the traditional Zhuang musical system and in song fairs, there are also genres of non-erotic songs, as well as additional cultural functions, provided by Zhuang singing. Both erotic and non-erotic songs provide a means of conveying cultural knowledge. As the songs are primarily frames for large amounts of lyrical content, even songs with erotic content contain copious amounts of dialogue about house-building, weaving, farming, social skills, nature, and historical events. Accordingly, Barlow states, “The custom of Zhuang singing is a key to understanding both the Zhuang gender system, the Zhuang identity, and the astonishing persistence of Zhuang culture” (2005). It is additionally probable that the song fairs have changed in a similar manner to the songs themselves. As the song frames vary by area, so too do the many forms that song fairs take, making it likely that song fairs have had a certain degree of flexibility through the generations as well as through contact with other minorities. The song fair then, like the song frame, is not necessarily the manifestation of a static culture but of a central value system which allows change to varying degrees inside of the basic need fulfilled by that system. While the links between musical events and cultural function stayed intact for many centuries, they would change dramatically in the twentieth century.

While many Zhuang customs, including singing and the song fair, shifted and faded in the presence of increased contact with, and governance by, the Han Chinese, the twentieth century represents a deeper penetration into areas that were previously too remote for consistent influence. Most of these recent changes occurred under the different phases of the communist government. Because folk songs were well-established traditions, the early communist government used these poetic dialogues as propaganda for promoting new policies (Kaup 2000:101). Pan Chunjian observes that this use of traditional singing in support of the communist party and policies proved to be a precursor to the modern (1978–present) song fair where political topics are often used in formalized singing contests (1995). The government regulation of folk traditions would increase dramatically during the Cultural Revolution, which marked one of the most significant external modern influences on the Zhuang culture and on larger Chinese traditional culture as a whole. The quest to rid China of the Four Olds effectively ceased any performance activity that was not in the interest of the state or that conflicted with Communist definitions of right living. This meant that traditional Zhuang singing was pushed underground for more than a decade because the associated lyrics and social activities were deemed immoral. Although previous ruling bodies of China had also attempted to put and end to Zhuang song fairs and singing because they offended Confucian ideals, the cessation of Zhuang singing during the Cultural Revolution occurred to a wider degree geographically than previously. This was likely due to improved transportation and government involvement in remote areas (Kaup 2000; Barlow 2005). While many of the song fairs returned at the end of the Cultural Revolution as part of folk revivals begun at the end of the 1970s, this happened in conjunction with an increased emphasis on minority education and greater access to the outside world. These influences have eroded some of the key elements underlying Zhuang culture.

In general, Zhuang who are raised in or move to the main cities in Guangxi stop using Zhuang as their primary language, switching to Mandarin instead (Bodomo 2007; Kaup 2000). Furthermore, many of those who were born in the early 1980s cannot understand traditional Zhuang singing. This appears to be due to their lack of exposure to the folk songs, making them unfamiliar with the modifications the words go through to fit into the song frames. Because of this, many of the song fairs have lost their namesake element of singing and are instead solely gatherings of relatives. Most of the song fairs that still feature singing are now supported by local governments and feature a wider array of entertainments including basketball, formal song contests, and pop dance and song styles alongside modern representations of Zhuang tradition. Traditional singing at these fairs usually occurs off to the side with small groups of older participants. While the more formal song contests contain many of the same elements as traditional singing, they are much shorter and have their topics chosen by moderators. The song fair at Guangyang Mountain, however, stands in marked contrast to most of these changes made to the government-sponsored song fairs.

The Guangyang Song Fair and Culture Shift



Figure 2: The site of the Guangyang Song Fair on a hillside, just outside of the cave used for the veneration of Yadai.

The song fair at Guangyang Mountain occurs every lunar February 19. It is located six kilometers east of Silin, at the eastern edge of the Tiandong district near the village of Guangyang. The road from Silin to Guangyang is barely wide enough to accommodate two vehicles. It rises swiftly from the floor of the Youjiang River Valley into the short, steep peaks that are typical of Southern China's geography. Many of the areas between these peaks are tilled for farming. These plots of overturned earth start at the base of the mountains and work their way up several hundred feet above the valley floors in terraces. Vehicles parked off the side of the road mark the location of the gathering. The way up is indicated by the paths worn by people ascending in small, single-file groups. After one or two switchbacks, one arrives at the nondescript cave with a worn sign to the side of the cave mouth.

The cavern itself is comparable in size to the inside of a mid-sized concert hall. It is about 30 yards from the lip of the entrance down a steep, meandering path to the bottom. Many of the stalagmites on the cave floor or cubic piles of rock serve as altars on which the incense is placed. In the middle of the main floor is a stone well underneath a rich cluster of stalactites. It is believed that drinking from this well will give the drinker good luck. In the back of the main cave is an open-faced, square tent made of red tasseled fabric housing a statue of the ancestral goddess Yadai. Worshipers come with bundles of incense, offering it at the altar in front of the tent as well at various parts of the cave. From time to time, someone will lay out paper representations of clothes, cars, ancient money, or other objects to burn in offering to their ancestors. It is believed that through this practice the worshiper will receive similar compensation in this life. Occasionally a person will have a xianpo make intercession for him/her. The person tells the xianpo what they wish to say, and the xianpo makes these requests to the ancestors in a set rhyme scheme intoned within a particular song frame.



Figure 3: The people entering and exiting the cave provide a good feel for the attendance numbers as well as the informal nature of this event.

After offering incense, most participants walk further up the hill to a series of small clearings and rock outcrops. Many gather in small groups and converse. The singing begins without fanfare. There is no gathering of people together, no announcement—only a single voice of a male singer. After a short phrase, he is joined by his male partner calling another pair of women to join them. The women sit down but do not join immediately, feigning disinterest. The men sing to them about how beautiful the women are and again invite them to join. When the women respond for the first time, they contest what the men are saying, insisting that they are, in fact, ugly. As described above, the melodies and harmonies for each quatrain are nearly identical. The songs and poetry are primarily a vehicle for the unfolding conversation. After a while, the poeticized conversation will shift from compliments and rebuttal to asking and answering questions. One pair will test the other about some aspect or nature of Zhuang culture and the opposite pair will answer. Later, the exchange moves to teasing. Each pair will goad the other about their looks, family, and character. In the final stage, they will return to complimenting each other. After 30 or 45 minutes, several other groups have started singing to each other. These songs are drawn out for several hours and may even last through the night. The hill is a steady buzz of casual dialogue and pairs singing improvised and written quatrains to each other.

The song fair at Guangyang is simple and tradition driven. People come here of their own accord as generations before them have. For the most part, there is no one to perform for, except those who are present as fellow singers, or those there to spend time with friends and family. The end goal here is simply the personal wellbeing brought about by individual worship and participation in singing, as well as casual conversation. Both the expense and the benefit go to those who decide to attend. Of course, there is a small economic benefit for the person who charges a modest fee for parking near the song fair, as well as the one or two small vendors selling snacks, incense, and paper effigies in and around the cave. While it is tempting to idealize this picture of a living, community-initiated traditional culture, we must be careful to avoid the risk of “depoliticizing what we present by valorizing an aesthetics of marginalization” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998:76). Indeed, there is a subtle but substantial cost correlated with the maintenance of traditional Zhuang culture. In general, those places and demographics that have avoided assimilation into the globalized Han Chinese context represent those who hold the lowest economic status. Because of the close ties of Zhuang cultural elements with the local language and

subsistence farming, Zhuang who wish to advance their economic status often find themselves leaving their cultural roots behind. Major changes in the Guangyang song fair can be seen through the absence of the kinds of people who would have normally attended in years past. The day the authors visited, there were not as many people because they were harvesting sugarcane, a cash crop that has taken over the farming of traditional subsistence crops. In addition to the absence of sugarcane farmers, a significant spiritual person who had attended in years past to give a religious ceremony was not present. Furthermore, there was a marked absence of people under the age of 25. A well know local folk singer credited the inability of his grandchildren to sing traditional songs to their attendance at school during the time of the song fairs (Interview, Liao Guangzhong, traditional singer, Deng Lijia tr. March 2011, Guangyang). The lack of the younger age demographic, far from being a localized phenomenon, is endemic throughout Zhuang culture. As there have been increased efforts by the Chinese government and the Zhuang themselves to improve their economic standing in the last few decades, those under 25 have mostly sought modern lifestyles, leaving many elements of their culture behind.

While there are some in the younger generation living in remote areas who can sing traditional styles, it is still uncommon even in areas far removed from the city. Reasons given for the lack of younger people at the song fair frequently include leaving one's hometown to earn money in the larger cities or other provinces, and changing from traditional Zhuang customs to more modern lifestyles and musical tastes, such as pop music. Some quip that young men and women find each other using cell phones and Internet chat sites or dating services, so they do not need the folk songs anymore. One of the most notable effects of the modernizing lifestyle is language loss. School and work in city centers and other provinces necessitate the learning and use of Mandarin, often in a Han majority context. The teaching in some schools of the Wuming dialect, which is designated as the official dialect of Zhuang, does little to alleviate this issue, as it is often a different dialect than is spoken in the home. This is further complicated by the fact that the doors to modern technology and economic prosperity are opened primarily by learning Chinese and English, as well as by conforming to globalized variants of the majority culture (Wang and Phillion 2009). Finally, working in family fields, an environment more conducive to practicing singing, is for the most part not a viable option for those who wish to advance in society. Likewise, finding a lover by song is awkward for those who have grown up seeing too little of the song fair to learn singing methods by osmosis, and so more contemporary dating methods are used instead. Conversely, most Zhuang under 25 listen to and sing modern styles of music from China and around the world. The end result for most of the younger Zhuang is a complete switch of musical systems in the absence of both the linguistic competence and social need to use traditional song frames and improvised poetry. What is left as “Zhuang” for the younger generation to see and visit is often government-sponsored song fairs, the largest of which is now the Ganzhuang Mountain Festival.

The Ganzhuang Mountain Festival and Government-Sponsored Change



Figure 4: First day of the festival. The four tents just below center are for the song contest contestants. During the contest, the back of the stage is made visually inaccessible by the sound system, as well as by tents for the contestants and judges.

The song fair at Ganzhuang Mountain (now officially called the Buluotuo Cultural Festival) begins two weeks after the fair at Guangyang. Ganzhuang Mountain rises off the rolling plains surrounding the city of Tianyang. It is also situated in the Youjiang River Valley, approximately 60 kilometers northwest of Silin. The massive size of the attendance for this fair is immediately evident upon entering the parking area. There are multiple policemen directing the numerous cars, motorcycles, and busloads of people. A high, shallow, multi-tiered arch constructed in 2003 marks the beginning of a long, tiled path leading to the foot of the mountain. The area in front of the arch is open in order to facilitate the crowds and provide a location for the opening ceremonies. To the left of the entrance is a mass of tents for food vendors. To the right is the stage for an international lion dance competition. Once past the arch, there is a crowded, tiled pathway filled with thousands of people making their way to the mountain. Lining either side of the walk are tents and mats with people selling all sorts of foods, trinkets, and souvenirs. There are also stations closer to the mountain, which feature folk activities like throwing cloth balls through an elevated ring,[6] firecracker ball,[7] water buffalo fighting, motorcycle tomato-carrying races, and folk singing.

The main ceremony area at the base of the mountain has a sizable structure housing an equally impressive likeness of Buluotuo. In front of the structure is a large, bronzed incense altar with two smaller altars on either side. An archeological museum and a museum dedicated to the modernization of Ganzhuang Mountain mark the eastern and western borders of the ceremony area. The way up the mountain is a broad, slate staircase with an elevated groove filled with loose dirt for burning incense. There are several flat stretches on the way up with places to sit, burn incense and effigies, as well as purchase drinks, snacks, and more incense. Towards the top, the stairs narrow and are now carved from the mountainside. They lead to a small pool, a cave, and a temple where people worship. The cave and temple each have a statue of Buluotuo, as well as altars in front for burning incense, paper likenesses of money, clothes, and other worldly objects. The temple is supervised by the local Buddhist monastery (Interview, Shi Chuang Cheng, Head of the Buddhist Monastery in Tianyang, Lu Shi Xing, tr. April 2011, Tianyang). There are several red prayer flags, newly tied to the trees in front of the temple each day of the festival.



Figure 5: The ceremony at the Buluotuo Culture Festival. Here we are provided with a very different sample of crowd density, as well as the more formal and organized events at Ganzhuang Mountain.

The official Buluotuo ceremony occurs on the second day of the festival. It starts with a long processional of performing groups and representatives from several townships in Tianyang. They walk from the main entrance to the wide steps leading up to the ceremony space, where they gather and wait for their turn to present offerings to Buluotuo. The boundary between the waiting area and the surface where the observance is to be held is cordoned off with police tape, with policemen regularly spaced to make sure the observers stay outside of this boundary. Inside there are seats for dignitaries and professors, as well as platforms for the media. As the processional makes its way to the ceremonial platform, there are regular announcements over the PA broadcasting how many minutes are left before the main event commences. As with most major events in China, the ceremony begins with a speech.

The ceremony proceeds with three sets of three gong strikes: for the gods of the three worlds, for everyone in the three worlds, and for all of the people, young and old. Each set of gong strikes is considered a separate event in the program. The fourth event starts with a long trumpet blast and the raising of the ceremonial flag with the Zhuang character symbolizing Buluotuo. It is followed by a lion dance and dragon dance, with each group ending their performance in a bow to Buluotuo. The event announced as the fifth segment of the ceremony is the lighting of three sets of three large incense poles and two ceremonial candles. The next event is the local offering to Buluotuo. Following this are three bows to Buluotuo (made by all present). This is followed by more performances, songs, and speeches. These songs all praise Buluotuo and relate to elements compiled from the orally transmitted Buluotuo epic, which has been transcribed in recent history. At the end of the hour-and-a-half-long ceremony, representatives from other provinces bring their offerings, followed by the offerings from groups in the surrounding area. The representatives from the different townships sing songs of praise to Buluotuo before burning incense and effigies as well as leaving offerings of roast pig, fruit, and other edible goods. After these groups are finished, the altar is open to the general public for offering incense.

The song fair at the Buluotuo Festival is mainly relegated to a designated area near where the religious ceremony

takes place. The ten-by-ten meter platform is flanked on one side by a large sign promoting the song contest alongside an advertisement for a brand of white wine. The opposite side has two tents for the judges and there is a sound system at the back of the platform between the judges and the billboard. The side toward the path is open to spectators. There are both formal and informal processes involved in the song fair. Different teams, representing townships from the various parts of Tianyang County, sing casually the first day, and then participate in the formal song competition on the second day, after the official religious festival. The formal song competition is similar to those that take place in different towns and villages: two pairs are assigned a topic to sing about, and they exchange quatrains in conversation until one pair cannot answer. Concurrently, another informal song contest is taking place behind the stage, under the mango trees and on the grass. Here, people sing Zhuang folk songs for their own enjoyment, sometimes for several hours, exchanging quatrains in the melodies common to their townships.

Comparison of the Ganzhuang and Guangyang Song Fairs

The Buluotuo Festival is best thought of as an augmentation and formalization of the simpler traditional religious song fairs represented by the former song fair at Ganzhuang Mountain and the song fair at Guangyang Mountain discussed above. Because of this, many of the major differences between the song fairs at Guangyang and Ganzhuang Mountain can be illustrated using Donald Getz's division of planned and unplanned events, as well as his division of small and large events (2012:48–49). The traditional base of the Guangyang fair, while providing a degree of predictability, exhibits a self-defined purpose that results in a degree of relative spontaneity concerning the exact place and timing of the singing and burning of incense. There are virtually no systems of direct control, other than cultural mores and perhaps the person who arranges the placement of the vehicles, producing very little accountability outside of the individual participants. The Buluotuo Festival on the other hand has its goals and events defined by committees, key officials, and financial contributors. The program is carefully planned—from the stone path leading through the various activities and up the mountain, to the main ceremony, to the schedules for each of the exhibits present. Control is provided by the services of policemen, military personnel, medics, and even wildland firefighters. Concerning scale, at Guangyang there is worship in the cave, and the conversation and singing format represents a single-form event that is largely devoid of tourists and media intervention. The experience is generally limited to attendees who are from or grew up near Guangyang, as well as the occasional student of Zhuang culture. The Ganzhuang Mountain fair is much larger and therefore more complex; featuring casual and formal worship, singing, and folk sporting events. There are several members from the press and CCTV, and it is easy to get lost in the tens-of-thousands of moving bodies at the Buluotuo festival. The impact of the Guangyang fair is localized, with no necessity for any kind of policy to guide what already exists by tradition. Ganzhuang Mountain is known on a much wider scale, with invitations extended to attendees from other provinces and countries. The size, scope, and number of parties involved in this event require the creation and evaluation of policy decisions tailored to the festival, as well as the introduction of standard procedures inherent in the structures of the different government agencies participating. This division between the small, unplanned event at Guangyang and the large, planned event at Ganzhuang Mountain can be further seen in the musical, religious, and scholarly additions to the Buluotuo festival.

The number and type of musical styles vary greatly between locations. The ceremonies and singing at Guangyang consist of a single melody in the cave and a single melody used on the mountain when singing songs for entertainment. The musical environment at Ganzhuang Mountain features several different styles of music ranging from Chinese Pop, to Zhuang shaman melodies, to accompaniment for a Thai dance. Also, at Ganzhuang music is heard in different contexts, including formal and informal performances, prerecorded music played through the PA system, and jingles at different vendor stands. The ceremonial music is pumped through amplifiers and speakers and does not follow the traditional format.[8] One exemplary worship song performed at the festival I attended featured traditional gongs but had a non-traditional orchestra with a mixture of Chinese and Zhuang instruments. The musicians sang a song of praise while performing on their instruments. The metrical manner of the song was reminiscent of a kind of marching song and the instrumental interludes sounded more similar to Western band performances than to Zhuang traditional singing. The actual song contest at the Buluotuo fair features a wider variety of song frames because the singers are from different towns around Tianyang. Furthermore, the singing itself is augmented by the added competitive element; the competition requires a greater skill at putting words to pithy rhymes as the topics are assigned to them by the judge and could represent anything from Zhuang culture to politics.

The religious changes at the Ganzhuang fair are most evident during the ceremony itself. They can be seen, for example, in the objects used. The incense poles and ceremonial candles used at the worship event are several feet high. The effigies burned on the main, 2-by-5-meter altar fill it before they are consumed, and add to the ashes

beneath them. Before, people burned small bundles of incense sticks and left them to smolder at different sacred locations. The unification of those present through group observation and participation, along with performances honoring Buluotuo are new additions as well. Along with these acts of reverence, there are Daoist and Boumo priests who, after the ceremony, lead each of the groups to the front of the altar where they will sing and offer their gifts to Buluotuo. While the songs they play on *suona*, cymbal, and gong are likely those that were used in traditional worship to Buluotuo in other Zhuang communities, these songs did not exist in the Ganzhuang song fair before its official government promotion. Finally, the kinds of participants singing religious melodies during the ceremony represent an expansion of traditional religious norms. Generally, this type of singing is limited to shamans or Boumo priests. Before the major changes formalized in 2004, these were the only kinds of people who would sing to Buluotuo at Ganzhuang Mountain. This has been changed to incorporate the various groups now attending the Buluotuo festival. Many who sing these tunes during the course of the festival are singing recently composed melodies with added lyrics directed to Buluotuo. Also, given the number of the participants, many of those singing are clearly not shamans or priests. In contrast, at Guangyang Mountain the only one singing religious songs is the xianpo.

Finally, the academic promotion of Zhuang religious practices represents a recent significant change in the Ganzhuang Mountain Song Fair. While Zhuang religion is a patchwork of varying beliefs, the Buluotuo Festival accents only one religious system, presenting it as central to all of the other forms of worship. This recent development is best summarized in a paper presented at the 2010 UK Centre for Events Management Conference. The authors note that there is substantial disagreement over the identity, function, and existence of Buluotuo. However, the overall consensus is that “Buluotuo is finally confirmed as the creator [deity] of [the] Zhuang.” They continue: “the confirmation is based on the research of scholars and full consideration of people from all works of life.” (Zhang Hong, Zhang Ling 2010). While the widespread nature of Buluotuo and similar ancestral deity figures is certainly significant, the assertion that Buluotuo is the chief ancestral figure for all Zhuang is too strong, given the variegated religious environments of the Zhuang. Even the “Buluotuo Scriptures” which are central to Mejism, the religion of Buluotuo, are not a traditionally established collection, but a recent compilation of ancient epic songs in honor of Buluotuo taken from different townships around Eastern Baise (Holm 2004:9).

It is important after making this comparison to emphasize again that the song fairs at Ganzhuang Mountain and Guangyang used to be very similar. Not long ago, there was no tile path or archway leading to Ganzhuang Mountain. There were no additional folk sports or bullfights. Neither were there the throngs of people or the endless tents selling goods. There was no need for all of the emergency and law enforcement personnel. All of these items now present on a regular basis at Ganzhuang Mountain were absent less than a decade prior to the period of research in 2011. Before 2003, there was no official ceremony, and the number of people from outside provinces was likely more in keeping with the festival at Guangyang. Even the additional events that existed at the traditional Ganzhuang Mountain fair were small features that were folk-driven in a free flow similar to the songs themselves. Now, the dragon dance occurs only in the context of the ceremony on the second day of the festival, and the lion dance occurs only during the ceremony and contest. What used to be a small-scale expression of folk religion and entertainment has now turned into an international event.

In terms of genre, while there are elements consistent with what the religious song fair at Ganzhuang Mountain used to be, the augmentations are so significant that it can no longer be considered in the same category as the song fair at Guangyang, at least in terms of traditional singing and event practices. Many of the songs used during the official ceremony and during the village presentations are merely composed using stereotypical pentatonic scales and then given Zhuang lyrics. The song frame in these cases is replaced by scalar practice. Also, the official Zhuang singing contests are arranged in such a way that the singing is limited to only two pairs of contestants who will switch when one pair is declared the winner. While the contest does use the song frames, the use is limited by available time given to the contestants. The main ceremony events, while retaining and displaying some of the practices surrounding the worship of Buluotuo in general, represent additions that were previously absent from the Ganzhuang song fair. In other areas, most rituals invoking Buluotuo are more private events, and only on occasion involve entire villages (Holm 2004:23–25).

The Effects of Modernization of the Ganzhuang Mountain Song Fair

The purpose of many of these new practices at the Ganzhuang Mountain Song Fair is summarized in the above-mentioned conference paper by the two instructors from the Guilin Institute of Tourism. The two-fold goal of these modifications is the promotion of both the economy in the Tianyang region as well as the protection the local cultural heritage (Zhang Hong and Zhang Ling 2010). The benefit is that the traditional and modern expressions of song fair and Buluotuo religious culture attract the thousands who come to the Buluotuo festival and contribute to

both the economic advancement and preservation of tradition in the community. The vast numbers of people from across Guangxi province, China, and from other countries support the local businesses involved in the growth of the Ganzhuang song fair and contribute to spreading knowledge of the Zhuang culture. In the ideal scenario, everyone is able to benefit from the tourist event. Indeed, many of these ideals are in fact realized at Ganzhuang Mountain. Reenacting the theorized roots of the Buluotuo song fair allows for the promotion of cultures from nearby townships. While the traditional form of singing is abbreviated during the song contests, it could arguably be seen as "the most colorful moments of past musical styles . . . presented for tourist consumption as definitive statements about indigenous musical cultures" (Gibson and Connell 2005:144). The playing of traditional sports, tossing cloth balls through the ring, and bull fighting are all traditional practices rejuvenated by their presence at Ganzhuang Mountain. Adding a modern flavor to the festival and increasing accessibility has greatly increased the popularity of the festival, bringing greater attention to the Zhuang nationality and culture. Finally, the masses of people who attend contribute greatly to the economy of the surrounding area. However, in addition to these positive factors, there are some expenses paid by both the traditional culture and the participants.

Concerning the participants, there is evidence that suggests that repurposing the festival for outside tourists has had too much of a constraining effect (see Getz 244–245). For example, in 2011, the burning of incense was suspended for fear of starting a wildfire, taking away an important aspect of this individual expression of worship. Also, the path up the mountain limits what used to be uninhibited access to Ganzhuang's slopes. Further constraints are seen in the beginnings of requisite affirmation of the state ideology (see Perris 1983). While many people who can understand what is being sung enjoy the song contest, the topics are pre-assigned and often require speaking positively about a preselected officially advocated political position. Additionally, this last year the singers were instructed not to sing during the first day so that they could sing for government leaders at night. While there has been much deregulation since the end of the Cultural Revolution, this degree of propaganda and performance control indicates that, though to a lesser degree, the presented cultures still "belong to the dominant power to dispose of as it sees fit" (Rubenstein 1992). For example, the government provides outfits resembling older traditional garments with more modern and decorated color schemes for some of the local Zhuang who attend. These outfits, though based on Zhuang design, are generally not seen as culturally authentic because they are based more on stereotype than on local traditional dress. This would likely change if there were additional increases in localized minority control over the event's proceedings (see Mackerras 2002:74–75).

In addition to these more recently imposed constraints, there is also some concern about the modern additions to the festival format. While they provide a massive boost to the local economy, the added contemporary traditions and older traditions not originally a part of the Ganzhuang fair obscure what is left of older local practices. While there are readings and songs from the Buluotuo scriptures, very little of the ceremony reflects the actual religious practices and ceremonies of priests invoking Buluotuo. Furthermore, these religious activities typically occurred outside of the song fair at Ganzhuang Mountain as the primary activity, until it was codified in 2004. The primary cultural event before that time was traditional antiphonal singing.

While there is not anything inherently wrong with these additions, there is a significant "reduction of 'musical energy'" in this song fair (Kartomi 1981). This can be seen in the current location and timing of the singing. The platform for the Zhuang singing is across from the motorcycle and firecracker-ball events, which occur at the same time. There is less space for observers of the singing than is given to those who wish to see the bullfights and lion dance competitions, which are also held simultaneously with the aforementioned events. The other participants engaged in the informal singing are out of sight, under the trees and off to the side. While there is no desire on their part to sing in public, their obscurity is a marked contrast to Guangyang, where this type of singing is the primary form of entertainment. The atmosphere of the formal Ganzhuang song contest, while requiring additional skill, puts time and topical restraints on what can be sung. The topic is no longer up to the whim of the singer but to the mandate of the judges. Outside of the formal and informal song contests and the religious ceremony, there are scant other musical performances. The positioning of performers and use of music at Ganzhuang Mountain show that musical performance is of equal or less importance relative to the other entertainment events. A 2008 article on tourist destinations in Baise Prefecture doesn't even mention music as a major draw to the festival. Rather, it advertises the Buluotuo Festival as a Zhuang pilgrimage that can help other Zhuang and Thai peoples find their roots (Ganshou youjiang). The irony in this lack of emphasis is not unlike Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "Commercial Indian fair . . . embedded inside a noncommercial Smithsonian festival" (1998:68), except in this case, it is a song fair where the main emphasis is no longer singing.

Despite these burdens, it is important to observe that traditional practice, while obscured, is still permitted at the Ganzhuang song fair. This creates a duality between the advertised, promoted, and polished representations of tradition and the traditions that are very similar in form to those at Guangyang. While it is easy for the casual

spectator to miss, these unadvertised but uninhibited, indigenous-generated traditions take place at Ganzhuang Mountain every year. The folk songs are still sung before, after, and during the advertised song competition as they have been in years past. Like the song fair at Guangyang, these songs have the potential to last as long as the singers desire and to meander to whatever topic is selected by each group. One could even say that, to some degree, these traditional acts are protected by their obscurity through "safeguarding" the privacy of these personal performances (Schouten 2007:31).

Conclusion

Comparing the song fairs at Ganzhuang and Guangyang Mountains brings many of the complexities surrounding tourism and traditional culture to the forefront. While Guangyang represents the highest degree of freedom and cultural uniqueness, the lifestyle that best supports this kind of cultural activity is in decline as the Zhuang seek the quality of life offered by modernization. Tourism offers a solution to this predicament. Colin Mackerras's assertion that "the minorities want tourism, because they believe—correctly—that it will raise their standard of living" (2003:73) is relatively accurate in this situation. Furthermore, while tourism may divorce a particular aspect of culture and present it as art (see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), in some cases, it has played a critical role in cultural preservation (see Schouten 2007 and Rees 2000 for examples). As described above, there is a great deal of potential in an event as well attended as the Ganzhuang Mountain Festival. Here, there is an opportunity for the modern to exist alongside the traditional, and for economic and folk revival to share a symbiotic relationship. Much of this already occurs at Ganzhuang Mountain on an annual basis. The song fair attracts many patrons, culture enthusiasts, and scholars who contribute money and interest in addition to a wider dissemination and understanding of Zhuang culture. While there is little drawing the younger generation to view and participate in more traditional practice, the Ganzhuang Mountain Festival attracts more youth, and supplies at least some link to the past for contemporary Zhuang. Despite these benefits, one must also confront the "real threat in China that minority traditions will be lost," as well as acknowledge that "a greater sensitivity to, and support of, minority difference is sorely needed in the Han Chinese dominated government authorities" (Zhang, Yu and Lew 1995:237). Despite seeing that older forms of indigenous expression at Guangyang do not attract many of the younger generation, it is additionally critical to avoid actions that further marginalize older forms of practice. It is vital that one not promote economic and popular prominence at the expense of the uniqueness provided by cultural roots. It is also damaging to the culture when there is too much control over its development. The consequences of over-controlling culture can lead to "conflicts; loss of roots and systems, identity, and background; a distinct weakening of the sense of self-worth; and an unproductive underclass" (Rubenstein 1992). More aggressive efforts to avoid these pitfalls could be realized without much sacrifice to the newer additions at Ganzhuang Mountain. For example, a larger space could be set-aside for those who come casually to sing traditional songs. Refreshments and tents in the event of excessive heat or rain could also be provided to encourage greater attendance by folk singers. Controls could be removed from the song competitions so that they occur in a more natural way. These relatively simple steps would promote an increased interest in traditional Zhuang music without too great a cost compared to what is already expended on the larger fair. In fact, there are other song fairs in Baise that have incorporated similar measures with a good deal of success in attracting more traditional singers (Qin 2009). It is our hope that someday the same can be said of the Ganzhuang Mountain Song Fair.

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Notes

1 The "Four Olds" were: old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. By definition, the four olds encompassed most of the cultural practices of all Chinese nationalities including the Han.

2 The Youjiang dialect of the Northern Zhuang language.

3 A *xianpo* (??) or *yagim* (Youjiang Zhuang dialect) is a female person chosen by the spirits to act as a mediator between the human and the unseen world. The person chosen usually exhibits symptoms resembling physical and mental illness that are relieved when the xianpo accepts her calling. After this condition is resolved, the xianpo serves her community as a fortune teller, advisor and healer (see Jin Lee 2007:229–232).

4 This type of song is called a *liao* song for the use of the vocable "liao" at the end of every quatrain sung. The melody and characterizing vocables used for this type of song are the same regardless of whether written text is used or whether the words are improvised. The texts for these songs are gaining increasing notoriety as the sources for many of them are considered to be ancient and the writing systems used are different Zhuang variants based on Han Chinese characters.

5 The Song Dynasty ruled from 960 to 1279 CE.

6 Throwing a cloth ball through an elevated ring, while not a part of the Ganzhuang Mountain Song Fair before the opening of the 2004 festival, is a widespread part of Zhuang culture. It represents another traditional form of expressing affection for a person of the opposite sex through attempting to catch an embroidered ball tossed by the person of interest.

7 Firecracker ball is a traditional Zhuang contact sport played on a rectangular field with end zones at either end. It earns its name from the toss at the beginning of the game and after each score, where a cloth-covered metal ring is tossed vertically in the air by an explosive charge. Two teams then scramble for the "ball" attempting to conceal it and take it into the opposing team's end zone.

8 The lack of antiphonal singing in this setting is not necessarily an indicator of modern change. Traditional religious singing still employs the "song frame" technique described above but is typically not antiphonal because it is directed to the spirit world. One of the most significant musical shifts in the case of the Ganzhuang song fair is the switch in what type of singing is more prominent. Before, it was the antiphonal singing of love songs. Now it is the singing of songs directed to Buluotuo.

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