

## An Analysis of Educational Functions in Folk Songs of Mulao Nationality\*

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**Abstract:** Mulao nationality is a unique ethnic minority of Guangxi, China. The ancestors of Mulao ethnic minority pass their educational thoughts to their offspring through the special way of “combining education with songs”, which plays an irreplaceable role in inheriting their national culture and spirit. Taking the educational value of Mulao ethnic folk songs in Luocheng county, Guangxi, the Mulao autonomous county as the research object, this paper discusses the educational thoughts in Mulao ethnic folk songs such as gratitude, filial piety, requite favors, social morality, family view, marriage view, and open-mindedness through the forms of Mulao ethnic folk songs such as ritual songs, Gutiao songs, Zoupo Festival songs, and other forms of folk songs.

**Key words:** Mulao nationality, folk songs, education function

### 1. Introduction

Folk songs are produced spontaneously by the working people in the process of production and labor, and they have historical, cultural and educational values. What folk songs represent is the cultural achievements of a nation and its spiritual connotation. Today’s world is a diversified information world. People have many ways to get education, such as school education, family education and online education. Access to education is no longer as limited as before. The use of folk songs by ethnic minorities to educate their children is not so practical in today’s world, but it is still indispensable. This paper explores the educational function of ethnic folk songs. Through the research of this paper, the educational function of Mulao ethnic folk songs is deeply explored. As an in-service university teacher bear the duty to teach and educate people and spread knowledge. In this process, they can not only teach others, but also inherit and spread Mulao folk culture.

### 2. Mulao Nationality and Their Folk Songs

This paper mainly focuses on the Mulao folk songs in Luocheng county as it is a place where the Mulao ethnic minority live in concentrated communities and is the only Mulao ethnic minority autonomous county in China. Mulao ethnic group is an indigenous ethnic group in Luocheng county with a long history. As early as in the Spring and Autumn Period, it was included in the common system of the Baiyue nationality. Later on, this ethnic group was given different names in different generations. The transliteration name “mù lǎo zú” was finally

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confirmed in the “Guangxi Local Record” written by Xie Qikun in Jiaqing's Reign of Qing Dynasty (1766–1820). Although the historical records about the Mulao ethnic group are from the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Mulao ethnic group, as an indigenous ethnic group with its own ethnic characteristics, has been living in the Lingnan area for a long time. The Mulao language is the Dong-Shui language branch of the Zhuang-Dong group in Sino-Tibetan languages. Without characters of their own ethnic group, today's Mulao people mostly speak Chinese, Zhuang language and Gui-Liu dialect and use Chinese.

## 2.1 The Classification and Characteristics of Mulao Folk Songs

### 2.1.1 Classification

Mulao folk music adopts the Chinese music system and the main genre is folk songs. The songs can be divided into ancient songs, ritual songs, love songs, wine songs, narrative songs, married songs with tears, songs praying for children, and so on. The content sung in Mulao folk songs are mainly “Casual answers”, “Gutiao” and “Koufeng”.

“Casual answers” mostly don't have lyrics, mainly performed in the Mulao traditional “Zoupo Festival”, and are mostly love songs. “Gutiao” are long narrative poems with fixed lyrics, which mainly focus on national historical stories, myths and legends, and eulogies of national heroes, such as “The Song of Luo Cheng”. In “Gutiao (古条)”, the “古” is a variant of “故”, meaning “ancient”; and the “条” represents pieces. Therefore, “Gutiao” can be understood as a narrative song of singing history, and its main value is the education of traditional culture (Wei Wei, 2018, p. 6). “Koufeng” can be divided into two categories as “Positive Koufeng” and “rot Koufeng”, the former is sung for exhortation and teaching and the later for sarcasm. With no fixed lyrics, “Koufeng” songs are mostly impromptu in particular occasions and have a lively and witty style.

### 2.1.2 Characteristics

Mulao folk songs are different from other ethnic songs in structure and singing form. First of all, “the Mulao folk songs are all sung by two vocal part and in the only form of repetitive partsinging, without chorus nor mixed chorus” (Du Yaxiong, 2002, p. 143). Secondly, the style of Mulao folk songs is free and diversified. There are three-sentence pieces, four-sentence pieces, five-sentence pieces and six-sentence pieces, among which pieces with four sentences are the majority. In terms of the number of words in a sentence, there are three-word, five-word, seven-word and eleven-word sentences, among which the sentences with 7 words are most common. These songs are characterized by profound allegory and vivid metaphor. Last but not least, the lyrics used to be sung in ancient Mulao-language, but now they are sung in Chinese, and the lyrics are often improvised.

Mulao folk songs have been handed down over thousands of years and several generations, and have been collected and published by the older generation of artists. Now, many excellent Mulao folk songs are available. Included in the song of the “Songs of the 56 Ethnic Groups of China”, the representative work of Mulao folk songs is called “Qiangbei Song”, which is a love song with typical Mulao characteristics of man-woman singing in pairs. Why can a song be handed down for hundreds of years? In addition to the musical characteristics of Mulao folk songs and the proper use of music venues, the most important thing is the educational and inheritance functions of Mulao folk songs.

## 3. Educational Function of Mulao Folk Songs

Mulao ethnic group is a nation that loves singing very much. However, due to the inconvenient transportation

and the closed environment of the ancient Mulao ethnic group, there are very few records about Mulao folk songs in the ancient classic books. Yet the Mulao people who loved to sing were able to pass on their folk songs through their oral teaching over generations. After the establishment of Mulao ethnic minority autonomous county in Luocheng, folk song lovers and some literati began to increase their efforts in the collection and record of Mulao folk songs. The publication of many books and songbooks such as “Mulao Ethnic Ancient Songs”, “Collection of Folk Songs in Luocheng”, “Mulao Folk Songs”, “Music of Mulao Ethnic Group” and “General Annals of Ethnic Group”, etc. has provided conditions for the general public to know Mulao songs.

In ancient times, ordinary working people had little chance to receive reading education, so most of them were illiterate. So, in such a social background, how did the Mulao ethnic people inherit education? The festival activities of Mulao ethnic group mostly contain the content of moral education, and the moral education thoughts are placed in the folk songs of festival activities to cultivate the Mulao people’s good moral quality. Through oral teaching over generations, a common educational method practiced by many ethnic minorities has been formed, that is, “combining education with songs”. Education is entrusted to festival folk songs, which are used as teaching materials.

### 3.1 Educational Thought Carried by the Yifan Festival

Yifan Festival is a religious ceremony of Mulao ethnic group, whose history can be traced back to Yuan dynasty or earlier. Its central content is to hold a Yifan ashram, and during the activity, the masters invite 36 gods to celebrate the harvest and congratulate the festive season. Among the many rites in the Yifan ashram, the most important one is “Sing for gods”. In this process, the Taoist priest sings songs with rich contents, which are full of educational value.

#### 3.1.1 Filial Piety Education

Just as sung in the “Song for Ten Pieces of Exhortations” (excerpts),

头一句，讲你听 (My first word, please listen),

莫把父母当闲人 (Don’t take your parents for granted),

十月怀胎娘辛苦 (Mother suffers a lot in their ten months’ pregnancy),

养儿成人父母恩 (It’s worth all the gratitude for the love and care given by parents).

哪个虐待亲父母 (Those who abuse their parents),

蠢如牛马枉生存 (Are fool and waste life).

劝后生，不敬父母敬何人 (Li Ganfen, Hu Xiqiong, 1991, p. 96) (One word for the young, parents are the first to respect)!

On Yifan festival, the most important festival of Mulao ethnic group, the “Song for Ten Pieces of Exhortations” integrates the words of educating offspring into the songs so that they can spread and be taught in the form of songs. Such a form plays an irreplaceable role in the formation of the fine moral character of the whole nation. The “Song for Ten Pieces of Exhortations” contains all aspects of human life. The parents are put in the first sentence of the folk song, from which it can be seen that Mulao ethnic group attaches great importance to the filial piety. They pay attention to respecting their parents and never forget their kindness. In the following parts, the song advises future generations to respect their teachers, respect the old and care for the young, and treat their in-laws as if they were their own parents. It also teaches people to treat their neighbors like family, which resonates with the proverb of Han nationality that “a good neighbor is better than a brother far off”. The “Song for Ten Pieces of Exhortations” also shows that it’s necessary to have some requirements for oneself, such as honesty

and kindness, cleanliness, business credibility, frugality and patriotism.

### 3.1.2 Thought of Gratitude

On the third day of each third lunar month, the Mulao people celebrate their traditional “Birthday of Powang”, also called “Huapo Festival” or “Powang Festival”. It is said that the third day of the third lunar month is the birthday of the Powang. Every year on this day, people from all the villages go to worship her. Mulao legend has it that Powang is a deity in charge of the fertility of women all over the world who lives in on the Flower Mountain and takes charge of all the flowers. Each flower in the mountain represents one person. People come to pray for a flower and Powang will give the soul of one flower, after which the prayer will get pregnant. When someone dies, their soul will go back to the Flower Mountain and thus begin a new cycle of life. Those women who have been married for a long time and have no children, can go to the Powang temple accompanied by their mother-in-law or their mother on the third day of the third lunar month to worship and sing the “Song of Praying to Powang”, which is called “praying for flowers”. The “Song of Praying to Powang” expresses the women’s longing for a child, and also expresses that she is a person who always pays back the favor. They expect to get a baby this year and come back to requite favors next year. After getting a child after the praying, on the sixth day of the next sixth lunar month, the couple will bring rich offerings to the temple, a rite called “returning flower”. At this time, they sing the “Song of Votive” to show their gratitude to Powang for giving them a baby.

一年三百六十天，长时记住，不忘殿里婆王恩 (In all the three hundred and sixty days of the year I never forgot the favor of Powang in the celestial hall).

三杯酒来三碗饭，烧香拜请，三位婆王近前来 (Pan Qi, 2011, p. 170) (Offering three cups of wine and three bowls of rice, we burn incense and pray to the three Poshen).

From the wish to have a baby, to the votive after getting a baby, the song expresses the educational function of the Mulao ceremonial folk songs. From such rite it can be seen that the Mulao nationality is a nation that always pays back and the lyrics play the role of teaching offspring to be thankful. There is also good wish for children to grow happily and healthily and become upright and kind, and honor parents, respect the old and love the young.

## 3.2 Educational View in the Folk Song of Zoupo Festival

Zoupo is a traditional custom of Mulao ethnic group, which is divided into free-style Zoupo and song festival Zoupo. The song festival type is discussed here in this paper. Song festival Zoupo is generally held during the first lunar month and August 15 Mid-Autumn festival on an earth slope, where young men and women in hats, holding flowery umbrellas and carrying food sang to each other on the hillside. It is also a way for young Mulao minority men and women to choose their marriage by singing to each other. In the past, only people from the Mulao ethnic group attended the festival. Nowadays, as a local tourist festival, the festival attracts tourists from all over the country and singers from different ethnic groups. The population who attend the festival is no longer limited to the Mulao ethnic people. During the festival, people of all nationalities are singing heartily, and the whole hillside resounds with their songs. Just like this, this festival has broken through the restrictions of language and region, brought people of all ethnic groups closer to each other, and united the Mulao people.

Children of Mulao ethnic minority listen to all kinds of folk songs and absorb the educational ideas from the time they are born. Mulao ethnic group has a lot of folk festivals, and every festival or ceremony requires singing, which is described as “no song, no festival”. As a traditional custom of the Mulao ethnic group, the Zoupo Festival is a kind of social activity in which the young Mulao men and women choose their lifelong partners

through singing. Many songs are sung on the festival, such as “invitation song”, “first acquaintance song”, “song for meeting each other”, “confirmation song”, “song for temporary parting” and so on.

### 3.2.1 Educational View of Love

Singing in the Zoupo Festival is not just about feelings; what’s more important is to sing well. The better one sings, the more favored they will be by others. At the time of leaving, they sing the “farewell song” to show that they are reluctant to part and look forward to meet again and give gift to each other. When it comes to the Mid-Autumn Festival, young men generally give moon cakes to young women, who send their hand made same-year shoes, also called mandarin duck shoes, meaning an affectionate couple. So there is the saying of “Boy sends cakes on the Mid-Autumn Festival and girl gives shoes on the Double Ninth Festival. According to the “Mulao Ethnic Customs” by Wu Caizhen, the girl pricks her finger with a embroidery needle to leave two drops of blood in the shoes to show her allegiance for love. At this time, the man will use folk songs to express his appreciation for the same-age shoes, also express the hard-won love will be cherished by him more in a side.

穿鞋走到岔路口 (Walking to the fork road in my new shows),  
眼望鞋头双泪流 (I have my eyes filled with tears seeing them),  
穿上新鞋又叹气 (I cannot help but sigh even in the new shows),  
一脚一步一回头 (He Shuqiang, 2010, p. 63) (Look backward every step I take).

### 3.2.2 Views on Family Education

The songs of the festival play a very important role in the hearts of the Mulao minority. In this activity, through the singing of young men and women, the educational thoughts are spread in the whole Mulao minority society and the younger generation of Mulaos are civilized. This also plays a normative role in the whole society. Many folk songs express the instruction of the elders to the younger generation. Below is a song describes the imagination of new life together by a pair of young man and woman after pledging love in the Zoupo Festival, in which they imagined that they will be treat each other with respect, jointly honor their parents, educate their offspring, and construct a better life. It has taught young men and women that they should share the joys and sorrows of life and create a happy life together.

As sung in the “Song of True Love” (He Shuqiang, 2010, p. 64) (excerpts),

有缘我俩同家住 (If fate brings us together to make a home),  
慢做世界慢亮心 (We will take time to do things and brighten each other’s heart),  
一碗冷饭分做俩 (Even one bowl of cold rice can be separated into two),  
一条白布同哥分 (One piece of cloth can be shared with my man).  
有缘我俩同家住 (If fate brings us together to make a home),  
正忧命短不忧穷 (We will worry not about poverty but about the shortness of life),  
若是穷来做米贩 (If we have to sell rice to make a living),  
双挑白米我挑糠 (I will choose the rice for her and chaff for myself).  
真是好 (How nice),  
夫妻生活乐融融 (So happy a couple we will make).

## 3.3 View of Marriage Carried by the Gutiao song “Zhu Maichen”

The ancient songs of Mulao minority (mostly songs about ethnic history, historical allusions and heroes) contain profound educational significance. For example, “Zhu Maichen”, a song sung on the night of Mulao minority wedding, is of profound educational significance to the newly-married couple. It uses historical allusions

to teach women that they should abide by women's morality and be faithful to their husband unto death. They should not be like Zhu Maichen's wife, who abandoned him because he was poor, and ask to reunite when he became an official. The educational view here is similar to the thought of "a woman follows her husband no matter what his lot is" which the Han nation asks women to follow. The song also teaches a man to be like Zhu Maichen, who was diligent and studied hard and finally come out on top, although his family was poor. "Zhu Maichen" conveys the marriage view of "sharing happiness and sorrow" between husband and wife ((He Shuqiang, 2010, p. 56).

In such an atmosphere of loving singing, influenced by the environment and taught by parents orally, the Mulao people have their education deep ingrained to folk songs.

### 3.4 Educational View Carried by the Married Songs With Tears

After the selection in the Zoupo Festival, young men and women who fall for each other will be paired as same-age. They can't decide their marriage on their own and have to be approved by parents and bridged by go-betweens, though. There are many procedures in the wedding ceremony, including the crying marriage custom. After the previous series of procedures, it is time for the bride to go to her husband's house. Before she leaves her own home, the bride's parents would set a table to offer sacrifices to her ancestors. The bride would pour wine with her own hands to show that she would not forget her ancestors. The bride is supported by her sister-in-law or aunt in her own family to bid farewell to her parents and brothers and sisters. On the road to her husband's home, a handful of rice is needed to cross a bridge, a fork in the road, etc., to pray for safety to gods; it on the other hand shows that the bride won't forget her original family and these rice can serve as marks for her to find the way home. All brides have to sing the crying marriage song at the wedding. Those don't cry or cried badly will be regarded as not unfilial, inept and unlucky. Therefore, the Mulao girls practice crying at the marriage even from an early age. One month before the wedding, ten girls in good relationship with the bride in the same village will come to her house to assist in making with dowries. They will sing the crying marriage song along with the bride on the wedding, so they are called "ten sisters sending the bride" in Mulao nationality.

As sung in the "Crying Marriage Song" (excerpts),

布妮啊，辛苦养大， 恩难报 (I have been raised up with so much toil, the debt of gratitude cannot be paid),  
唯有下世来报答 (I will repay you in my afterlife).  
兄长啊，今日出嫁， 我离去 (My brother, from today on I will not be here),  
照顾父母托给你 (Please take good care of our parents).

The Crying Marriage Song mainly expresses the gratitude to parents for giving life, and the self-reproach for not being able to take care of parents in the future; the reluctance part a sister and feelings for brother, as well as the bitterness of being a daughter-in-law after marriage. It can be seen from the lyrics that the bride's reluctance to give up on her parents and relatives has also taught us that we should always remember the kindness of our parents.

The moral education of mournful songs Mulao ethnic group attaches great importance to funeral rituals, emphasizing that people go back to the place where their ancestors lived after they died. Therefore, they would sing out the mistakes of the deceased in the form of songs in the funeral, begging for forgiveness, so as to lighten their souls and help them get redemption.

It is sung in the "Confession Song" (excerpts):

男女愚蠢不知天，时常放火去烧山 (Being so foolish that they don't know the law of nature and often set fire to the forest).

烧死树木不要紧，烧死虫蚁万万千 (It doesn't matter that trees are burnt, what matters is the death of thousands of lives of insects).

放火烧山有的罪，罪消除 (Let the sin of setting fire to forest be cleared off).

五谷人间做粮食，养成生命最高强 (The five cereals serve as food to nurture strongest power of life).

一朝保暖无收拾，丢在泥地做鼠粮 (They left them to the mice once they get well-off).

抛贱五谷有的罪，罪消除 (Huang Siyu, 2014, p. 4) (Let the sin of abandoning food be cleared off).

The “Confession Song” listed above is a sacrificial song sung by the mage Mulao minority when someone has passed away and a religious rite is being held. The mage hopes that the god can forgive the deceased person for the sins they committed while they were alive through penitence to the god. However, it is also sung for the alive. The content of the lyrics is a kind of repentance for what the deceased had done before his death, but between the lines, it reveals a kind of education for people, teaching people to abide by social morality and paying attention to the cultivation of social moral quality. It teaches people not to set the mountain on fire since many insects and trees will die, not to waste food and to cherish the hard-won food, and not to be lazy and to be diligent.

#### 4. Conclusion

To sum up, the Mulao folk songs are widely used in daily life. The Mulao people love singing and attach great importance to the educational function of the Mulao folk songs. The form of “teaching through songs” itself has the function of spreading the Mulao culture and educating the Mulao people. It is not only the embodiment and inheritance of the Mulao minority spirit in the folk songs, but also a true portrayal of the life of the Mulao minority people. The educational significance of Mulao folk songs can be deeply understood by exploring and analyzing Mulao folk songs. Then, the educational function of Mulao folk songs can be spread to educate more people in that the Mulao folk songs are widely sung. Meanwhile, studying their educational function can help Mulao folk songs to be better protected and inherited. The educational function of folk songs can promote national pride and form cultural confidence. This is an important reason for the enduring popularity of folk songs, which still play an indispensable role in today's society.

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