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The Aesthetic-Educational Mechanism of the Miao Heroic Epic "King Yalu"

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Abstract

Existing scholarship on the heroic epic Yalu Wang has tended to follow two broad trajectories: one foregrounding its aesthetic character, the other its social functions. Studies of the first kind have largely catalogued the distinctive features of the epic's aesthetic representation, while studies of the second have striven to account for its social utility. How the aesthetic force embedded in the epic actually operates within the funerary ritual upon its participants, attendees, and listeners, however, remains a question that has not been systematically addressed. Taking the ritual-aesthetic field as its unit of analysis, the present study examines the operative mechanism through which aesthetic education is carried out in Yalu Wang within that field. Preconditioned by the ritual field itself, this mechanism unfolds in three successive links: heroic narrative arousing sentiments of the sublime and the tragic; the soundscape constructing an immersive mode of perception; and collective bodily practice completing the internalization of aesthetic experience. Through these three links, aesthetic sentiment is ultimately transformed into dispositions of character. By disclosing an embodied form of aesthetic education that has long been obscured by the paradigm of visual contemplation, this study furnishes a transferable analytical framework for the aesthetic education of living oral traditions and provides an important point of reference for advancing an embodied turn within the aesthetic-education research of minority literatures.

Keywords: Yalu Wang; aesthetic education; ritual field; soundscape; embodiment

I. From Text to Field

1.1 A Review of Existing Research Pathways

Yalu Wang is a heroic epic of the Western Miao dialect. It came to light during a 2009 intangible cultural heritage survey carried out in the Mashan region of Ziyun Miao and Bouyei Autonomous County, Guizhou Province, and promptly entered scholarly view, attracting attention from folklorists, ethnologists, scholars of ethnic studies, and aestheticians. Over the decade and more that has followed, a sustained body of scholarship has accumulated along diverse paths, of which the aesthetic and the functional paths may be taken as representative.

On the aesthetic side, existing studies take textual collection and editing as their point of departure and abstract three kinds of character from the epic—the sublimity of the heroic image, the tragic character of migration narrative, and the ecological-aesthetic connotation of natural imagery—in order to address the core question of what aesthetic thought and features the epic contains. Zhang Jinyi, for example, develops an inquiry into the aesthetic thought of Yalu Wang along three dimensions—natural beauty, social beauty, and artistic beauty—and argues, as the crux of his position, that beyond these three forms the epic further contains a metaphysical beauty relating to the “self” (zi). Wu Jiani, in turn, frames her aesthetic analysis of the epic's narrative content with three categories: a beauty that is gloomy and desolate, a beauty that is fierce and tragic, and a beauty that is vigorous and grand. It is not hard to see that the aesthetic pathway of existing scholarship typically abstracts the epic from its ritual context of origin, conducts a close reading of the text, and then relies on pre-existing aesthetic categories to interpret and classify its content.

On the functional side, studies concentrate on the multiple roles Yalu Wang plays within Mashan Miao society, focusing especially on such cultural and educational functions as the construction of ethnic identity, the transmission of historical memory, and moral edification. Yang Lan, for instance, in *Social Functions of the Miao Epic Yalu Wang*, systematically

explicates the plural functions the epic carries within the everyday life of Miao society, covering the training of transmitters, the construction of ethical norms, and cultural transmission. Beyond textual analysis, studies on this pathway likewise treat ritual as a core component of the “function” category, ultimately establishing a correspondence between the functional features identified and the structural requirements of Miao society; particular attention is given to whether the various functions of the epic can be sustained in the context of digitalization. Chao Gejin has pointed out that Yalu Wang combines the features of a creation epic, a war epic, and a migration epic, and is thereby to be regarded as a compound (fuhexing) epic. This judgment is a reminder that the manifold functions catalogued above are in fact interlocked and nested within a far more complex generic structure, and whether this compound structure tends to weaken or deconstruct the educational function of the epic—and in particular whether its aesthetic-educational function can continue to exert an effect—are questions that still await further clarification.

The contribution of these two pathways should be acknowledged. Yet something else should also be observed: the longitudinal depth of the field has not been correspondingly extended. For example, the question of how aesthetic sentiment in Yalu Wang acquires the force of disposition, and the question of its precondition and mechanism, have not been adequately excavated. Investigating such a precondition and mechanism requires that work be carried out in the field on the basis of the text; only when textual and ethnographic work are combined can such depth be attained. Reading the existing literature, one finds that work in which field investigation has been carried out with care does not necessarily yield marked theoretical results, while work in which the theoretical contribution is marked is often under-supported by ethnography. On this basis the present study diverges from the two pathways sketched above as

well as from other approaches: it seeks to answer one fundamental question directly—namely, when a participant or an attendee hears a song master (geshi) chant the migration and wars of Yalu Wang within a funerary ritual, why does the body respond? Why is feeling mobilized? And how does this feeling come to settle into something lasting? For aesthetic inquiry, describing what is “beautiful” is not the same as explaining how beauty operates; for functional inquiry, stating that something is “useful” is not the same as disclosing how that usefulness actually arises. To move, therefore, from textual description to the explanation of internal mechanism is the central concern of the present study, and the radical source from which its account of the aesthetic-educational mechanism takes its bearings.

1.2 The Core Attributes of the Ritual-Aesthetic Field

The shift from outside to inside, and with it the conversion of the unit of analysis, is the key to the inquiry. This study takes the field of the entire Miao funerary ritual as its object of study—that is, the ritual-aesthetic field, a dynamic whole constituted jointly by song masters, audiences, participants, the space of the mourning hall (lingtang), the sphere of the drum, the sphere of the lusheng, bodily postures, and the sound waves of chant.

The actual mode of being of Yalu Wang is not a written text. It is a living ritual performance of chanting, embedded strictly within the specific field of the funerary ritual. Within the ritual, the song master chants throughout the night beside the coffin in the mourning hall; the listeners include the deceased's kin, members of the village, and kinfolk who have traveled from afar. The chanting extends from the onset of night until daybreak, lasting one night or several, the duration depending on the status and the economic circumstances of the deceased. There are presently three legible versions of Yalu Wang in existence, each compiled by

abstracting the epic from its ritual setting; while these have facilitated scholarly research, they have also made it easy to forget that the mode of reception proper to the epic is not reading.

Within the ritual, what Yalu Wang is for its participants is a sonic event occurring in a specific time and space. The song master's voice rises into the mourning hall; the sounds of the drum, the music of the lusheng, the tones of the suona horn, and the crash of firecrackers come rushing in; those present begin to respond in chant, to weep, to fall silent—and all of this that takes place within the field constitutes the aesthetic experience of the participants. The body, in this aesthetic experience, comes to discover the effectivity of an aesthetic education of the body: “bodily aesthetics concerns itself not only with the external form or performance of the body, but with its lived experience, and accordingly devotes itself to the improvement of our awareness of bodily states and feeling, thus providing insights of greater importance regarding our passing emotions and our enduring attitudes” (Shusterman, 2007, p. 186). Every participant who is present not only acquires an individual form of feeling, but also stores within themselves a greater number of thoughts and attitudes toward life and death. To speak of the aesthetic effect of Yalu Wang apart from the field and from bodily participation would be no different from substituting the script for the play. The force of drama lies in the special narrative of space jointly created by the actors through bodily and verbal language in company with the audience; in the same way, the aesthetic-educational force of this epic, like that of drama, requires a field jointly constructed on the ritual site by the song master and the listeners.

The specificity of this field is, in the first place, manifest in its spatial structure. The mourning hall is organized around the deceased's coffin as its center; the song master chants at the side, and the audience sits encircling the central space, producing a centripetal layout. Each participant is situated within this arrangement: the village's physical space constitutes the

community, with the deceased and the song master at its center, and the entire field is enveloped by the sacred character of ritual space. As participants, those present cannot maintain a distance from the object, nor do they observe it from the position of a detached spectator from a theater seat. The spectator is inside the ritual and is unable to withdraw from it in order to observe it. Just as a mirror cannot reflect itself—the character of the mirror itself lies within the world.

Of greater consequence is the field's non-contemplative character. The aesthetic experience of the Western aesthetic tradition—whether the “disinterested” contemplation in the Kantian sense or the later formalist insistence on the autonomy of art—presupposes a distance between subject and object. The wall of the museum gallery, the stage of the concert hall, the page of the book are all physical devices by which this distance is produced. The subject grasps the object by way of “seeing” or “reading,” and the core of aesthetic experience lies in understanding and judgment. The ritual field abolishes this distance. The participant is already absorbed into sound, space, and the gathered crowd; there is no observer's position from which one might withdraw. The manner of being in which the participant is “in the event” determines that the aesthetic education here is not brought about through “understanding the object” but is realized through being thrown, by bodily practice, into the situation. Even children of tender years, through this daily aural and visual immersion, receive this particular mode of aesthetic education.

1.3 The Auditory Construction of the Soundscape

The soundscape, also known as the acoustic landscape, refers to a sonic environment in the ecological sense—one that foregrounds the interactive relation among listener, environment, and sound, and foregrounds the perception of social and cultural information. The concept was first systematically advanced by the Canadian acoustic theorist R. Murray Schafer (2022). He

combined “sound” with “landscape” with the aim of investigating, from acoustic, psychological, sociological, and ecological perspectives, the interactive relation among sound, environment, and person in a given scene. When the Miao people chant Yalu Wang in funerary rituals to guide the spirit of the deceased back along the road to “Leidong,” the chanting of the Donglang (the master of chant in Miao funerary ritual) plays a decisive part. Without the Donglang's opening chant, none of the ritual's “operations” can take effect. Such is the importance, within soundscape theory, of the interaction between sound and person.

Among the constituents of the field, sound occupies a singular position. The chanting, the drum, the lusheng, weeping, the responses in chant (yinhe), and the like together weave an audiovisual environment that covers the mourning hall and the rest of the ritual site. It is not the “background music” of the ritual; it is the immediate object of aesthetic perception and its principal channel.

Within every ritual field, the song master's chanting is the center. The song master controls the extension of emotion by adjusting the duration of vocal portamento (tuoqiang) in accordance with the demands of content, regulates the tension of the listeners through the speed of rhythm, and inserts pauses and rests to leave room for the listeners to breathe and to respond in chant. The difference between oral and written text becomes immediately visible in the ritual: faced with repetitive content and formulaic language, the written text appears monotonous, whereas in the oral text of the ritual, sound-performance possesses a particular efficacy. In terms of affective force, because of the entry of the soundscape, the sentiment evoked by reading the written text can never occupy the same position as the sentiment gained by being on the ritual site. The soundscape, therefore, provides the listeners with a familiar structural framework and lets them, in its repetition, enter into a stable and predictable auditory rhythm; this stability is precisely the

precondition for deep immersion. The Parry-Lord school of oral poetics, although directed primarily at narrative structure, retains a stress on the property of “poetry as sounded” that may nevertheless serve as a reference for grasping the performative character of Yalu Wang (Lord, 2004).

The relation between instrumental music and chanting is not one of mere accompaniment. The rhythm of the wooden drum, low and sustained, is transmitted through the ground and through the air alike to the bodies of the listeners; its quickness or slowness and the weight of its beats sometimes signify “the tragic” and sometimes the sublime. The lusheng unfolds in the intervals of the chanting: there are notes of mourning, notes of “celebration,” notes of farewell, and notes of consolation. The several voices interweave, generating an atmosphere of grief mingled with reverence. The alternation, overlap, and echo between chanting and instrumental music compose an audiovisual commonweal suffused with the seven emotions and the six desires (qiqing liuyu). The voices of the participants—their weeping, their chanting-responses, their sighs, their subdued speech—are themselves part of the soundscape. The audience is not a silent recipient; its sound flows into the entire sonic field, forming with the song master and the instruments a configuration of “many-voicedness” (zhongsheng). The voices of individuals and of the collective fuse, communicate, and deeply converse. This mutual confirmation in hearing is precisely the condition under which the communal dimension of aesthetic experience is brought into being.

Insisting on the ritual-aesthetic field as the unit of analysis, and fastening on the operative mechanism of aesthetic education as the core question, this study interrogates the concrete paths of affective generation and bodily internalization and distills a model of the aesthetic-educational mechanism of the oral tradition. It asks how “beauty comes to belong to the human being.”

Through this analysis, the inquiry asks whether there are modes of aesthetic education that arise outside visual contemplation and textual understanding, and whether the ritual aesthetic experience embedded in oral tradition can in turn illuminate the limits of contemporary aesthetic education.

II. From Function to Mechanism

2.1 The Limits of Functional Statements

As the “encyclopedia” of the Western Miao, Yalu Wang is functionally plural and unfixed; among the most frequently cited are ethnic identification, moral edification, and the transmission of historical memory. Naming a function by its outcomes is in itself unobjectionable; what the present study requires, however, is to explain how such outcomes arise, when, where, and by whom, and—within the process—what kind of function is being conveyed, whether moral or aesthetic in character. To say that an epic carries an “ethnic identification function” is, as a statement of fact, analogous to saying that food possesses the function of satisfying hunger; neither statement touches on how food is converted into the energy of the human body, on how the digestive system operates, on how enzymes do their work, or on how nourishment is absorbed. Likewise, the statement that the epic has an ethnic identification function does not tell us which link in the chanting, which element, and by what means, brings it about that a participant develops the feeling of being a part of the collective.

This distinction is no semantic nicety. Explanation by mechanism is required in order to account for why the reception of the same epic diverges so strikingly across different reception contexts. For readers unacquainted with Miao history, Yalu Wang scarcely provokes an intense affective response—its language is formulaic, its plot repetitive, and it lacks the delicate

descriptions common in written literature. When, however, readers step beyond the written text to the ritual site itself and become participants in the ritual, they find that the chanting can bring listeners to tears, can reduce kin to uncontrollable weeping in the mourning hall, and that especially the Donglang and the apprentices of Yalu Wang remain concentrated, deeply involved, and lest they be remiss in their attention. This contrast eludes functional explanation because it does not analyze the conditions under which the function is realized. Mechanism-oriented inquiry enters precisely here: what conditions make possible the operation of aesthetic force, by what paths does this force work upon the participant, and what kind of enduring effect does it leave behind?

2.2 How Sentiment Is Aroused

The generation of sentiment within the chanting of Yalu Wang is structured; it is brought about through the coordination of specific narrative types with specific sonic forms. Its central link is the alternating arousal and reciprocal intensification of sentiments of the sublime and of tragic experience.

In speaking of Yalu Wang, we must be clear about his threefold identity: as a creation hero who rebuilt the homeland, as an ancestral leader who led his people away from war, and as an ancestral god—the three layers superimposed in a single figure. First, as the creation hero who rebuilds the homeland, he opens up heaven and earth and establishes order. The verse states: Whom did Yalu Wang send to make the sun? / Whom did Yalu Wang send to make the moon? / Gasaiyong went to make the sun, Gasaiyong went to make the moon (China Folk Literature and Art Association, 2011). As creation hero, Yalu Wang assigns each task: some make the mountains and rivers, some make the sun and moon, some make the flowers, grasses, and trees.

Second, as the ancestral leader who led the Miao forebears away from war through a migration of a thousand li, traversing innumerable mountains and rivers in search of a new homeland: Yalu Wang led the Miao forebears in their migration across thirty-five regions; the route of each branch differed, and so did the place-names along the way. Third, as ancestral god he transcends life and death and becomes the object of perpetual remembrance and supplication by later generations. As the sixth son of the ancestral god, Yalu Wang possesses the quality of spirit: when in any difficulty he can directly appeal to the prophet-grandmother in the spirit-realm of Leidong, and she, dwelling in that spirit-realm, brings his wish to fulfillment. As ancestor, he is the object of Miao remembrance; as ancestral god, he is the deity whom the Miao implore for blessings. Such a triple identity endows the figure of Yalu Wang with what Kant described as “greatness”—his strength, wisdom, and deeds all exceed the reach of ordinary experience.

Such greatness is further amplified in the chanting by sonic form. When the song master comes to the passages on heroic deeds, he typically slows the rhythm, extends the portamento, and weights the drumbeats. The dilation of time carries the listener out of ordinary linear time into an extended, ritualized temporal dimension. Within that dimension, Yalu Wang, as a vast “be-ing,” is reawakened. Longinus, in *On the Sublime*, writes: “the sublime is the echo of a great soul” (Longinus et al., 2009, p. 15). The effect of the sublime is to produce in the listener a feeling of being elevated, as though one were infused with the greatness of what one hears. The aesthetic effect of hearing the Donglang chant the heroic Yalu Wang operates in exactly this way: out of reverence and worship, a dimension surpassing one's own ordinary being arises in the listener—a thrust of character.

Yet the sublime in Yalu Wang never appears in isolation; it is always encircled by suffering. The epic devotes considerable space to the departure of the Miao forebears from their homeland

in the east and to the manifold hardships endured in the long migration. Yalu Wang, although a hero, is unable to prevent the dispersal of the tribe and the loss of the homeland. His valor can repel the assaults of his elder brother, but it cannot alter the fate of migration. This migration narrative, an “Odyssean” hero-tale, generates a deeper tragic dimension. While the listeners revere and honor the hero, their souls also experience the grief of the tribe. The interweaving of reverence and grief produces an aesthetic experience far more complex and far more substantial than any single emotion. As for the expression of the spirit of Yalu Wang, “the Mashan Miao, by way of intuition and lived experience of this spirit, condense in their hearts a ‘Yalu Wang spirit’: behind their reverence for the spirit of the Donglang there remains, in the end, reverence for the spirit of Yalu Wang” (Luo, 2025). Repeated immersion in the ritual allows the depth of aesthetic education to become ever more deeply internalized in the heart.

This tragic experience acquires a formalized channel of expression within the ritual's formulaic framework. Weeping has its appointed occasion, chanting-response has its appointed passage, silence has its appointed place. When the Donglang chants to the passages of Yalu Wang's migration, those most deeply affected knit their brows in thought; kin recollect the past; some weep, some sob. All the kin know that the deceased, like the ancestors with Yalu Wang himself, must cross high mountains and contend with fierce beasts. At certain tragic passages the entire assembly falls silent, only the drum sounding low in the mourning hall. Grief does not erupt in disordered fashion; it is taken up into the rhythm and structure of the ritual and converted into an aesthetic feeling that is expressible, bearable, and capable of being shared in the collective. For ordinary observers, those who see feel compassion, those who hear feel desolation; for kin, those who see cover their faces and weep, those who hear are moved by mingled grief and joy.

Aristotle (1996) defined the function of tragedy in the *Poetics* as follows: through the arousal of pity and fear, these emotions are given a cathartic release. If pity and fear are not purified, they become emotional toxins that wound the soul. Tragedy, by aestheticized handling, allows these emotions, at the very moment of arousal, to find a channel for release and transformation. The suffering narrative of the chanting of Yalu Wang arouses in the listeners grief; through chanting-response and weeping this grief takes formal expression (whether by drum, by lusheng, by chanting, by suona, or the like); and in the end, by way of collective resonance, it is transformed into a solemn sense of belonging, a reverence for life, a sacred sense of the soul, and a remembrance of ancestors. The passage from grief to reverence—this transformation of tragic and sublime aesthetic feeling—is the affective mechanism through which aesthetic education becomes operative.

2.3 The Bodily Channel of Auditory Immersion

The generation of affective states requires an unobstructed channel of perception. In the ritual of Yalu Wang, this channel is principally carried by the auditory. Compared with the visual, the auditory possesses a more immediate corporeal touch. Vision presupposes a distance between subject and object; for “seeing” to take place, the object and subject stand apart. The auditory is different: sound pierces the bodily boundary of the listener and enters the listener's interior. Unlike vision, the auditory cannot be shut off and turned away in order to be transmitted; the compulsion of sound makes hearing the most effective medium in the ritual for producing immersion.

The vocal environment of the chanting acts upon the body and the emotions of the listeners through multiple mechanisms. The most basic is the drawing of bodily rhythm by rhythm itself.

The drum is transmitted to the entire body in two ways, through the ground and through the air (the latter mediated by auditory capacity). The repeated rhythm of the drumbeats will naturally bring about a synchronization of inner bodily rhythms—such as heartbeat, respiration, and muscular tension. This bodily “being-drawn-along” occurs prior to consciousness; it constitutes the embodied foundation on which the participant enters the aesthetic state.

Secondly, the rise and fall of the song master's voice directly modulates the emotional curve of the listeners. The extension of portamento produces suspense and anticipation; acceleration of rhythm produces tension and excitement; sudden pauses produce suspension and stillness. For example, the introductory (yinyan) chanting passages and the main-body chanting passages differ: in a sorrowful passage of the introduction—“warfare was not to be permitted to occur, yet warfare has already occurred; war was not to be allowed to erupt, yet war has already erupted” (China Folk Literature and Art Association, 2011).—the effect is produced even without the listeners' grasping the literal meaning of the words sung. Lord (2004), in his classic study of Yugoslav epic singers, points out that the musicality and rhythmicity of oral epic possess an affective power independent of semantic content; the hearer is often first moved by the sound and only afterward moves to grasp the meaning. An affective power of this kind that does not depend on understanding is precisely the key feature distinguishing aesthetic education in oral tradition from aesthetic education in textual reading.

Finally, the lusheng melody unfolds in the intervals of the chanting and assumes the function of emotional conversion, allowing emotion to settle and circle in purely musical form. In the Miao areas of southern and western Guizhou, the wooden drum and the lusheng typically work in concert in Miao funerary ritual; the lusheng, in turn, interacts with dance and can independently discharge a range of ritual functions such as summoning the soul of the deceased,

paying homage, performing libations, and guiding the dead on the return journey. The lusheng accomplishes narration in the form of “lusheng words” (lushengci), and a clear correspondence obtains between its melodic structure and the ritual stages. Although this observation originates in the funerary music-and-dance practices of different Miao branches, it can serve to indicate, by way of lateral evidence, that the alternation between lusheng performance and textual narration in the chanting of Yalu Wang is not an incidental matter of accompaniment; it is the intrinsic logic of the vocal-instrumental structure of Miao funerary ritual itself. The generation of this structure and function requires the participants of the ritual to undergo accumulation through the auditory aesthetic experience, and thereby to deepen the constructive effect on the aesthetic soul.

2.4 How the Body Internalizes Experience

The arousal of emotion and the immersive experience both take place within the ritual field. But aesthetic education ought not merely to produce an experience in the moment; it seeks a lasting change of disposition. After the ritual concludes, what does the participant who wept in the mourning hall carry away? If aesthetic education were nothing more than the stimulation of feeling in the moment, its significance would be quite limited. The real question is how aesthetic experience is converted from an event of life and death into an education of character for the whole of life.

The answer lies in the body. The bodily practices of the ritual—kneeling, prostrating the head, chanting-response, weeping—are precisely the pathways by which aesthetic feeling gains its preservation.

Here we must first adjust our understanding of “the body.” Common sense tends to regard the body as the container or instrument of the mind: feelings are first produced “within,” and are

then expressed “externally” through the body. The phenomenology of the body has powerfully refuted this inner-outer dualism. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2001) repeatedly argues that the body is not something we “have” but the very mode by which we “are.” It is not the case that we sense the world in the head and then act through the body; rather, it is through the body that we perceive, understand, and grasp the world. The body is both the one who exists and existence itself. Emotion, too, is not a pre-existing “internal state” that precedes bodily expression; grief comes to be in the bodily act of weeping, and reverence is experienced in the bodily posture of kneeling. Bodily expression is not the external symbolic representation of feeling; it is the complete realization of feeling.

Starting from the theory of somatic aesthetics (*shenti meixue*), the kneeling, prostration, and chanting-response of kin in the funerary ritual are not the expression of internal feeling but the embodied generation of aesthetic experience itself. When the chanting of the epic arouses grief, the body of the participant, by a specific mode of engagement, takes part in the formation of that grief: the lowered head gives grief its bodily form; the kneeling knee makes reverence the actual state of the body. Feeling is not first formed at the psychological level and then “flows” onto the body; rather, feeling completes its own generation in the actions and postures of the body.

The repetitiousness of bodily practice brings a still deeper effect. The ritual is not a one-time event. A Mashan Miao person participates repeatedly in funerary rituals across the course of a life, repeatedly hears the chanting of Yalu Wang, and repeatedly enters into the bodily states of kneeling, chanting-response, weeping, and grief. This repetition establishes a stable correlation between specific bodily postures and specific affective states and gives rise to what may be called an aesthetic habitus. Bourdieu's concept of habitus may be usefully borrowed here: it is a system of dispositions stored in the body, capable of being automatically summoned in future

situations; it is the “history made body,” the process by which external structures are internalized as bodily dispositions. [Note: the source text cites reference for this passage, but the supplied reference list contains only entries ; the corresponding Bourdieu citation has not been located in the original manuscript and should be supplied by the author.] A Miao person who has long been away from Mashan, hearing in some strange land a lusheng melody or a fragment of the chanting of Yalu Wang, will find the body react prior to consciousness, the heart's mood flowing naturally forth. The Miao proverb “when the lusheng sounds, the soles of the feet grow itchy” is the best proof of this. Such is the result of the aesthetic education stored in the body—a result that continues to operate across time and space.

2.5 Collective Synchrony and Community

Functional studies state that Yalu Wang possesses an ethnic identification function, but they typically do not explain how this identification is actually produced within concrete experience. The answer that mechanism analysis offers is this: the synchronizing of collective bodies is the key link.

Within the ritual, bodily practice is not the isolated behavior of individuals but a collective synchrony. All together kneel, chant-response, fall silent, and weep. The consonance of bodily rhythm has a singular effect: it lets the individual feel, at the bodily level, the consonance with others and thereby gives rise, at the affective level, to an experience of “community of feeling.” From bodily synchrony to affective confluence is the basic path by which a sense of community is generated.

Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, discerned this principle in his analysis of collective ritual. He observed that when people gather to perform common bodily

actions and to issue common vocal expressions, a state of “collective effervescence” arises, within which the individual surpasses his own isolated existence and feels the force of the group. Van Gennep, in *The Rites of Passage*, likewise noted that collective bodily behavior in ritual has the function of reintegrating the individual into the group. For the funerary ritual, the common behavior of the participants is precisely the means by which the community reconstitutes its wholeness after the loss of a member.

In the funerary ritual of Yalu Wang, the collective bodily synchrony differs in affective tone from the “effervescence” that Durkheim discussed—it is the synchrony of mourning and reverence—but the mechanism by which a sense of community is produced is the same. The collective sound of weeping, the shared rhythm of chanting-response, the solemnity of collective silence—all transmit to each participant the same message: your grief is not isolated; your body shares a rhythm with that of others; you belong to this community that is now mourning and remembering together. At the moment that the individual is in bodily synchrony with the group, his feeling also flows together with the group, and the individual grief is thereby converted into the community's solemn memory. In this sense, aesthetic education is not only individual but also communal education—it is through bodily synchrony that the individual confirms, in the deepest layer of feeling, his indivisibility from the group.

III. From Case to Theory

3.1 A Three-Layer Model of the Mechanism

Drawing the foregoing together, the aesthetic-educational mechanism of Yalu Wang may be distilled into a three-layered structure: the ritual-sublime layer, the auditory-immersion layer, and the embodied-internalization layer.

The ritual-sublime layer is the source of energy. The heroic narrative and the memory of suffering in the field, mediated by the vocal form of the chanting, arouse sentiments of the sublime and of tragic experience and provide the emotional energy that aesthetic education requires. The arousal of the sublime produces in the participant an impulse to converge upon the heroic personality; the catharsis of tragic experience converts grief into a solemn sense of belonging and of gratitude toward ancestors. Without this layer, there would be no content to be perceived and internalized in what follows.

The auditory-immersion layer is the channel of perception. The soundscape composed of chanting voice and of drum, lusheng, and other instruments allows emotional energy to act directly upon the body and the emotions of the participants without passing through any conceptual intermediary. Rhythm draws bodily rhythm along; melody modulates the emotional curve; the repetition and variation of sound produces the depth of immersion. Auditory immersion ensures the intensity of the aesthetic experience, so that the generation of feeling does not remain at the level of shallow sentiment but reaches a degree sufficient to alter the state of body and mind.

The embodied-internalization layer is the ultimate point of arrival. Collective bodily practice inscribes the affective experience in bodily memory and forms an aesthetic habitus that can be summoned in future situations; this allows the effects of aesthetic education to exceed the spatiotemporal limits of the ritual site. Through the repeated enactment of bodily behaviors—kneeling, prostrating the head, chanting-response, weeping—aesthetic feeling acquires its storage at the bodily level and is transformed into an enduring element of the participant's structure of character.

The three layers are mutually dependent. Without the arousal of the ritual sublime, auditory immersion would be no more than sonic stimulation; without the support of auditory immersion, the intensity of sublime feeling would be insufficient for catharsis and conversion; without the embodied-internalization layer as the point of arrival, the affective experience would dissipate as the ritual ended. Only when the three are unified is the aesthetic-educational event complete. This structure also explains why the aesthetic-educational effect of Yalu Wang cannot be fully reproduced in textual reading divorced from the ritual. The written text lacks the channel of sonic immersion and the point of arrival in bodily participation; the mechanism of aesthetic education is incomplete, and the effect is inevitably lost.

3.2 Implications for Contemporary Aesthetic Education

The significance of this model is not confined to the study of Yalu Wang; it points to a dimension long neglected in the theory of aesthetic education within the oral traditions of China's ethnic minorities, and it constitutes a critical point of reference that, starting from the periphery, casts light back upon the center.

The dominant paradigm of aesthetic education in contemporary schools is visual contemplation: art class faces the painting, music class faces the performance, literature class faces the text. The student is always in a passive position; the aesthetic experience depends upon viewing, reading, and understanding; the body is required to remain quiet and still; emotional fluctuation is confined to after-class discussion or writing. The deep presupposition of this paradigm is that the goal of aesthetic education is to cultivate the understander, and that the core of aesthetic capacity is the capacity for understanding and judgment.

The mechanism model of Yalu Wang points to a different path. In the ritual aesthetic, the goal is not to cultivate the understander but to shape the participant—one who, by being drawn into the aesthetic event, internalizes aesthetic feeling, through bodily participation, as part of his own disposition. The core of aesthetic capacity is not understanding and judgment but responsiveness (*ganshouli*) and empathic capacity (*gongqingli*). This capacity does not depend on the analytical understanding of the object but on the bodily experience of being present and taking part.

It is not being suggested that school aesthetic education should replicate the funerary ritual. The sacred space-time at the threshold of life and death on which the ritual-sublime layer depends cannot, and should not, be reproduced in an educational setting. But the implication of the mechanism does not lie in the specific form of ritual; it lies in a renewed understanding of the conditions under which aesthetic education can occur: aesthetic education can be designed to proceed by way of the construction of field, of sonic immersion, and of bodily participation, and not only by way of the display of the work, the contemplative analysis of the work, and the verbal expression of that analysis. In contemporary practice one can already discern cognate explorations: Orff music education's emphasis on bodily movement and rhythmic participation; drama education's use of role-playing and bodily expression; community arts education's attention to collective creation and joint participation. All of these touch, in varying degrees, upon the possibility of an embodied aesthetic education. Yet at the theoretical level these practices lack a framework that can systematically account for the deep relation between body and aesthetic education. The mechanism model of Yalu Wang can provide an empirical foundation, drawn from a local oral tradition, for such theoretical construction.

At the level of bringing intangible cultural heritage into the schools, in the case of oral traditions such as Yalu Wang, one might explore a path of listening–imitation–bodily participation–creative expression: listening to chanting recordings so as to build up an auditory sense; imitating the rhythms and timbres of the song master in order to enter into the interior of the sound; experiencing a community feeling through collective chanting-response and bodily movement; and finally undertaking creative transformation in the form of drawing, drama, or writing. This is different from treating the epic as a literary text to be lectured on; it attempts to reconstruct certain of the conditions under which aesthetic education arises—sonic immersion and bodily participation—even if it cannot reproduce the sacredness of the ritual field.

3.3 The Ethical Boundary of Transformation

In discussing contemporary transformation, one issue that cannot be bypassed is the ethical boundary of culture. The funerary ritual possesses, within Mashan Miao society, a sacred character; the chanting of Yalu Wang is, in the first instance, an internal life-practice of the ethnic group, and is not a cultural performance for outsiders to view. To detach ritual elements from their original context for educational purposes carries in itself a risk of secularizing the sacred and of objectifying the practice of the subject. This is not a peripheral issue that can be set aside; it is the fundamental condition that determines whether the entire scheme of transformation is justified.

Accordingly, any scheme of transformation must take the informed consent and active participation of cultural holders as its precondition. The subjects of transformation should be the song masters, transmitters, and community members of the Miao community itself, and not external educators or researchers. What external parties can provide is not the design of the

scheme but the conditions of dialogue and the support of resources. Nor is the goal of transformation the cultivation of Miao-culture “appreciators”—a more refined version of the viewer's role, still lodged in the position of looking. The true meaning of the aesthetic education of Yalu Wang lies precisely in breaking with the position of looking; it requires that the participant's body truly enter in.

This ethical limitation does not weaken the value of the research. On the contrary, it brings to light a deeper fact: the aesthetic education of Yalu Wang has its force precisely because it is real—real death, real mourning, real communal memory, real turning-points of life. One predicament of contemporary aesthetic education is perhaps that the aesthetic experience it provides is too safe, too much like an exercise, lacking the force of direct contact with the depths of life. It is not that aesthetic education should manufacture danger or grief; rather, if it wholly insulates itself from those heavy things in life—death, suffering, loss, impermanence—it forfeits the capacity to shape an integral personality. The implications of Yalu Wang exceed the level of intangible heritage preservation or ethnic education; they point to a fundamental question in the theory of aesthetic education: how aesthetic education may once again become something directly relevant to the lived experience of human beings.

Conclusion

With respect to how the heroic epic chanted within the funerary ritual achieves aesthetic education at the level of the participant, existing research has not yet offered a clear answer. None of the earlier research pathways has touched upon the mechanism through which the aesthetic effect is generated. Their common limitation lies in taking as the unit of analysis the epic text itself, thereby excluding the process of interaction between recipient and text.

The realization of aesthetic education depends upon the construction of the ritual-aesthetic field. Heroic narrative arouses the sublime and tragic experience, providing the affective energy; the soundscape builds an immersive channel of perception, allowing feeling to act directly upon body and emotion without passing through conceptual intermediaries; collective bodily practice inscribes the affective experience in bodily memory, shaping an aesthetic habitus that can be activated by future situations. The three together compose the mechanism structure of “ritual-sublime → auditory-immersion → embodied-internalization.”

The research carries out the move from the description of attributes—what is “beautiful” and what is “useful”—to the explanation, at the level of process, of how these arise; the move from the epic text to the ritual-aesthetic field; and the move from a single case to the distillation of a general model. Hence, aesthetic education need not necessarily proceed by way of the contemplative distance of subject from object; it may also take its start from the immersive participation of a subject who is himself part of the field. Yalu Wang preserves a sample of an aesthetic-educational formation that has been obscured by the visuocentric aesthetic tradition; the analysis of its mechanism constitutes a revelation of the fundamental deviation of contemporary aesthetic-education theory. In future work one may advance comparison with the oral epics of other ethnic groups and dialogue with experimental work in embodied aesthetic education.

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