



Study on the Construction of Shared Cultural Symbols in the Translation and Dissemination of Chinese Ethnic Poetry Classics

Jiajia Ren

Faculty of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Kunming University of Science and Technology, Kunming, China
Email: rjbest@163.com

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Abstract

Ethnic poetic classics, as integral components of China's pluralistic yet unified cultural landscape, constitute rich repositories of material, folk, and artistic symbols that embody collective values and the ethos of the "unity of nature and humanity." The translation and dissemination of these works play a vital role in shaping shared Chinese cultural symbols and serve as an effective cultural strategy for enhancing international recognition of a shared Chinese cultural identity, thereby reinforcing the cultural confidence of the Chinese nation on the global stage.

Subject Areas

Literature

Keywords

Shared Cultural Symbols, Ethnic Poetry Classics, Translation and Dissemination

1. Introduction

Cultures reflect shared and learned values, ideals, and meanings that guide human thoughts, decisions, and actions. Within shared cultural values and norms, individuals and groups tend to uphold the rules for living in a culture because doing so engenders security, order, and expected behavior [1]. Identifying cultural symbols and investigating their origins can often provide insight into that culture's history and values. Many cultures share cultural symbols. This may happen because one culture was influenced by another and adopted its symbols as its own. Therefore, these cultural symbols have achieved a level of universality, recognized

across various societies with shared meanings.

From the perspective of the semiotic theories and taking language, materiality, ritual practices, and political symbolism as the primary forms of manifest culture, shared cultural symbols can be categorized into four types: shared linguistic and written symbols, shared material cultural symbols, shared traditional festival symbols, and shared political symbolic symbols [2]. As vital carriers of collective memory and transmitters of shared values, shared cultural symbols of the Chinese nation undergo a dynamic interplay between historical accumulation and contemporary reconstruction, thereby achieving a creative transformation from cultural resources into bonds of collective identity. Especially the ethnic poetic classics constitute an essential component of the pluralistic and integrated cultural tapestry of the Chinese nation.

The construction of cultural symbols shared across ethnic groups to enhance cultural identification has thus emerged as a vital cultural mission in strengthening the sense of community for the Chinese nation. In the history of Chinese poetry, the poetry of ethnic minorities has achieved brilliant progress and has become an integral part of the pluralistic cultural pattern of the Chinese nation. The cultural heritage of the Chinese nation has been created jointly by people of all ethnic groups since ancient times. Characterized by diverse forms, rich content, and strong ethnic features, ethnic poetic classics convey a shared national spirit, the transmission of values, and emotional resonance among different ethnic groups through material cultural symbols, folk symbols, and literary-artistic symbols. Therefore, within the national strategy of promoting Chinese culture globally, it is essential to construct shared cultural symbols across ethnic groups through translation and dissemination, and to offer in-depth interpretations of the collective cultural spirit and values embodied in these distinctive cultural symbols. Shared cultural symbols among Chinese ethnic groups are increasingly becoming a core medium for demonstrating national cohesion in international cultural communication.

2. Translation of Ethnic Creation Epics and the Conceptualization of Material Cultural Symbols

An epic is generally defined as a long narrative poem characterized by an elevated style and a vast imaginative landscape. It is rich in artistic imagination and typically recounts the origins of humankind, heroic exploits, legends, myths, and historical narratives in poetic form. Creation epics, in particular, record myths concerning the origins of the world and humanity, depicting the transformation of the cosmos from primordial chaos to ordered existence. Owing to China's diverse geographical environments and natural conditions, numerous ethnic minority groups have produced a remarkable storage of creation epics. For example, *Meige*, *Hnewo Tepyy* and *Chamu* of the Yi nationality, *Dagudaleng Laibiao* as the oldest legend of the De'ang, *Mvuh Hpa Mi Hpa* as the creation myths of the Lahu, *The Twelve Hani Songs* of Hani nationality, all are spectacular creation epics of ethnic

minorities in China.

As a vital medium for transmitting knowledge and fostering cultural consensus, Cultural symbols play a significant role in shaping human cultural understanding. By promoting cultural expression and exchange, they contribute to the advancement of civilization and provide a foundation of intrinsic connection and profound identity that strengthens the unity and cohesion of national communities [3]. The Yi people's creation epic *Meige* is a long narrative poem of over 5700 lines that primarily recounts the genesis of the world and humankind. Marriage and funeral rituals, family activities, and other customs are vividly depicted throughout this ancient epic. Na Sangjin (2014) translated *Meige* into Korean [4]. The translation highlights the literary value and mythological features of Chinese ethnic poetry, and provides extensive annotations on Yi folk customs and modes of cultural transmission. Translation and study of the myths of ethnic minority helps uncover the overall cultural value of Chinese mythology, contributes to the construction of a diversified Chinese mythological system, and deepens the study of Chinese literature while promoting its flourishing development.

Axi Xianji (Ancestors of the Axi People) is the creation epic of the Axi people, a branch of the Yi nationality. It is spread in Mile County, Yunnan Province where the Axi people lives. The long poem was composed and sung by folk artists and Axi people. The full text is about 2000 lines. It consists of four parts: "prologue", "the ancient times", "men and women are one family", and "epilogue". It tells the myths and legends of Axi people (the origin of the world, the causes of natural phenomena, etc.), love and marriage between men and women, as well as early life (the hard life and hardships endured by mankind in the early days) and the customs of the Axi people. It is the root of the Axi people, which embodies the Axi people's persistence, bravery and wisdom in exploring and understanding nature, reflects their ideas of pure materialism, describes the Axi people's pursuit of genuine love, the longing and pursuit of beautiful things, and symbolizes the spirit and culture of the Axi people. Therefore, it provides valuable information and unique value for studying the history, culture, economy, philosophy, religion, ethics and aesthetic concepts of the Axi people. American anthropologist Stevan Harrell regards that the collection, introduction, translation and adaptation of *Axi Xianji* and other Yi creation epics promotes the culture of Yi nationality [5]. In traditional Chinese culture, moon, moonlight and the circular image of the moon have long been classical and important motifs. The dance "Axi Jumps over the Moon" adapted from the epic took the stage and was presented to the world as a significant shared culture symbol of Chinese ethnic culture.

Creation epics also embody the perseverance, courage, and wisdom of ethnic groups in their efforts to explore and understand nature, and they reflect a philosophy of pure materialism through distinctive material symbols. Another Yi epic, *Chamu*, demonstrates extensive knowledge of astronomy, geography, divination, calendrical systems, poetry, and literature. Lauri Honko (1999) notes that in the Yi epic *Chamu*, after the god Heiailuobosai dies, his eyes become the sun and

moon, his teeth transform into stars, his chest into hills and mountains, and his breath into wind, rain, clouds, and mist. Much like the “Pangu” creation myth, Yi mythology also portrays the universe as emerging from primordial chaos [6].

The Book of Origins (Hnewo Tepyy) is regarded as the primordial and mythological epic of the Nuosu people, a branch of the Yi nationality. In the Yi language, its title signifies a historical record transmitted orally. By depicting the harmonious relationship between the Yi people and nature, the epic expresses their aspirations for a better and happier life. It presents a panoramic view of ethnic ecology, social relations, living conditions, marriage and funeral rituals, clothing, folk songs and dances, and other traditional material culture of the Yi people. American sinologists Mark Bender and Aku Wuwu (2019) collaborated on the English translation of this epic [7]. Their translation employs transliteration for Yi terms such as personal and place names to preserve the sound and cultural texture of the original language. The work includes over 200 annotations and a 150-page preface introducing the history of the Yi nationality. This ethnographic translation approach holds significant value for enhancing the international communicative capacity of Chinese culture.

Tea functions as a shared cultural symbol in China and around the world, embodying values such as hospitality, respect, and social connection. In the De’ang creation epic *Dagu Daleng Gelaibiao* (the oldest legend of Ancestors), the ancestral worship of plants, particularly tea leaf, is vividly reflected. This epic, collectively composed within the tribe, was originally written in a Dai manuscript and spans approximately 2000 lines. It narrates the origin and development of the De’ang nationality and recounts the arduous yet harmonious relationship between the De’ang people and the natural world. Within the epic, tea is regarded by De’ang ancestors as a heavenly gift, teaching people to cherish a happy and fulfilling life.

The leaves ride the clear wind and chase the flood.

Wherever there are tea leaves the flood recedes.

The earth is exposed.

The hills of De’ang become fertile and fragrant.

Because they are created with piles of bodies of their ancestors.

Every hill brings forth the golden fruit of their ancestors.

The tea leaves have chased the flood far away,

The land stretches long and wide.

The brothers and sisters are happy [8].

The English translation conveys the mythic, ecological, and ancestral worldview common in many Chinese ethnic epics (including De’ang/Tai/other mountain peoples). It captures a sense of cosmic causality (wind, flood, earth), territorial origin, and ancestral sacrifice, which aligns with the ethos of origin/creation songs. The tone is lyrical and solemn, preserving the ritualistic aura. The translation preserves the clear and readable syntax, evocative natural imagery and mythic tone of the original creation epic. However, some lines show literalism, semantic

ambiguity, and cultural loss, which weaken narrative cohesion and mythopoetic resonance.

Foreign scholars have long been fascinated by the imaginative power of ethnic minority creation epics and the shared cultural symbols among Chinese diverse ethnic groups. Gourd worship, for instance, is a pervasive cultural symbol in ethnic literature. *Mvuh Hpa Mi Hpa*, regarded as the Genesis narrative of the Lahu people, recounts the mythical history of their ancestors, how they made fire with stones, gathered and hunted for food, built homes and cultivated land, crafted farming tools, and gradually achieved prosperity. The epic reflects the Lahu people's early understanding of nature and their aspiration to overcome natural hardships and create an ideal life. At the center of the poem is the god Esha, who is transformed into a gourd plant. As a result, the gourd becomes revered as the cradle of humanity. The Lahu people worship it as a totem and cultural symbol believed to bring good fortune to families and future generations. Similarly, the Wa people's tale *The Legend of the Gourd* and the Achang epic *Zhepama and Zhemima* also regard the gourd as the womb of life. These narratives demonstrate that gourd culture is not limited to a single ethnic group but stands as a traditional cultural symbol shared across multiple Chinese ethnic communities.

The creation epics of China's ethnic minorities share narrative patterns and aesthetic experiences with other genesis epics around the world, revealing humanity's universal pursuit for knowledge and its heroic exploration of the unknown. These epics form an integral component of the broader corpus of Chinese mythology. Their international dissemination is therefore of great importance for deepening global understanding of Chinese literary traditions and for promoting the overall prosperity and development of Chinese literature.

3. Translation of Ethnic Heroic Epic and the Representation of National Narration

Epics not only depict an idealized reality but also shape archetypal images of the hero. They distill collective historical experience through profound artistic imagination. Characterized by a sublime and dignified style, heroic epics contain numerous narratives of heroes and their remarkable deeds. As a form of narrative poetry and oral literature, heroic epics integrate both fictional mythic elements and accounts rooted in historical events. They celebrate human potential and the power of humanity by extolling heroism.

Mineke Schipper *et al.* (2011) observe that heroic epics among China's ethnic minorities share common narrative formulas [9]. The birth, life, and death of the hero always form the structural core of these narratives. Schipper further identifies recurring thematic patterns: heroes often experience extraordinary or miraculous births, unusual childhoods, extreme hardships, and acquire immunity from harm; they confront formidable adversaries, wield supernatural powers to overcome mysterious dangers, and ultimately ascend to kingship.

Edward L. Davis (2005) discusses the global influence of *Gesar*, one of China's

most representative heroic epic in China [10]. His encyclopedic approach to translation has facilitated the epic's international dissemination, and he notes that the moral principles embodied in Chinese heroic epics have drawn considerable scholarly attention worldwide. The Tibetan heroic epic *Gesar* has been transmitted primarily in Tibet and Central Asia. The term "Gesar," derived from Sanskrit, means "rebirth" or "new life." The epic recounts the exploits of the legendary King Gesar of Ling, who, through extraordinary perseverance and supernatural power, overcomes countless hardships, combats demons and violence, upholds justice, and brings prosperity to his kingdom. Gesar is often regarded as a literary, artistic, and aesthetic treasure of China's ethnic minorities. Robin Kornman *et al.* (2015) translated the epic directly from Tibetan into English in a poetic style. In the preface, translators emphasize the contemporary relevance of the epic, remarking that as the world today faces the challenges of climate change and the decline of humanism, people need the compassion, wisdom, kindness, and powerful energy of King Gesar more than ever [11].

The War Between the Black and White Realm is a heroic epic of the Naxi nationality, recorded in Naxi hieroglyphic script. Along with the creation epic *Chongbantu* and the narrative poem *Luban Lurao*, it is regarded as one of the three major epics of the Naxi people. The work recounts the origins of the universe, the formation of heaven and earth, and the emergence of humankind and all living things. It vividly portrays the grand and magnificent battles waged by the ancient Naxi tribe for the sun, moon, and stars, and celebrates the tragic love story of the young couple Gela Cimu and Dongruo Walu, who sacrifice their lives for love. The epic embodies the Naxi people's aspiration for peace and their unwavering pursuit of sincerity and love. The English translation, *A Naxi Myth: The War Between the White and Black Realm*, by Wei Qingguang, was published by American Academic Press in 2019. Featuring original Naxi hieroglyphs alongside detailed annotations, the translation vividly conveys the aesthetic beauty of Dongba culture to global readers and revitalizes the epic within the context of cross-cultural communication [12].

The hero is one of the most enduring and widely recognizable cultural symbols across Chinese ethnicities. Although heroic images take diverse forms—warriors, sages, rebels, healers, or community protectors—they converge in performing a shared cultural function: embodying values that a community collectively affirms, transmits, and renews. As a symbolic construct, the hero both reflects and shapes a society's moral imagination, transforming individual deeds into collective memory. The hero operates not merely as a literary character but as a signifier of cultural ideals, such as courage, resilience, loyalty, or sacrificial responsibility. In many ethnic traditions, heroes act as intermediaries between the spiritual and human worlds, mediating cosmological forces and ensuring communal survival. In national contexts, heroes often emerge through historical events—wars, revolutions, social movements—becoming emblematic figures around whom collective identity is consolidated.

4. Translation of Ethnic Narrative Poem and the Construction of a Community of Shared Future

In addition to creation epics and heroic epics, China's ethnic minorities possess a rich corpus of lyrical narrative poems that depict themes of love, labor, customs, ideals, and other dimensions of social life. Representative works include *Ashima* of the Sani people (a branch of the Yi nationality) and *Zhaoshutun* of the Dai nationality. These long narrative poems present vivid portrayals of the lived realities of different ethnic groups across various historical periods, reflecting economic, social, and cultural conditions, and offering valuable historical materials on the lifestyles, customs, and distinctive characteristics of ethnic minorities. Besides, these narrative poems are preserved through both oral and written traditions. Oral performances are often accompanied by ethnic musical symbols such as the Mongolian morin khuur, the Yi mouth harp, and the Dai elephant-foot drum, which extends the artistic tension of the poetry.

Ashima is a classic narrative poem of China's ethnic minorities and has been translated into more than 20 languages. This long folk poem records the social life of the Sani people of the Yi nationality. The long poem was written by the ancestors of the Sani, and has been passed down in the form of oral tradition. The legend has become a part of the daily life, wedding and funeral ceremonies and other customs of the Sani people, thus, sang from generation to generation among the Sani people. According to its narrative plot, this long poem can be roughly divided into 8 parts: "prologue", "prayer to God", "growth", "engagement", "marriage", "pursuit", "test", and "ending". It tells the story of Ashima, a beautiful and kind girl who was born in a poor family in Azhudi, a village of the Sani people. Azhi, the son of headman Rebubala also admires Ashima, so he sent a matchmaker to propose marriage. Ashima's parents couldn't refuse the matchmaker's persuasion and married Ashima to Azhi. Later, Ahei heard of the news and rushed home and saved Ashima. Rebubala made several tough tests for Ahei through hard labor, singing competitions, and even forced the tiger to bite Ahei. In the end, Ahei rescued Ashima from the tiger's mouth by his wisdom and courage. Unfortunately, on the way home, they were trapped by the devil. The devil used magic to freeze Ashima on the cliff. Ahei had tried to save her, but she had become a lofty stone statue. The rebellious Ashima did not succumb to the evil force. Her sounds still echoed on the mountains to stay with the Sani people. Stone figures in Chinese ethnic literature are sculptures made from stone that typically depict deities or important historical and legendary figures. *Hailibu the Hunter*, the Mongolian flood folklore, also stands as one of the most powerful embodiments of communal ethics and sacrificial heroism. The legend narrates how Hailibu learns of an impending flood from animal and chooses to save his people at the cost of turning into stone. His transformation into a stone statue is not merely a narrative ending but a culturally charged symbol that crystallizes core Mongolian values—courage, loyalty, selflessness, and moral responsibility toward the collective. As a shared cultural symbol, the stone statue preserves the collective memory. The immovable

stone form suggests permanence and endurance, ensuring that their sacrifice remains visibly anchored in the landscape and the community's consciousness. Nowadays, this narrative poem has been adapted and transformed into various art forms, such as the Yi opera, the Huadeng opera Ashima, the dance and the movie of Ashima, etc. The earliest English translation in China was produced by Gladys Yang (1955) [13]. The book's cover features illustrations of traditional Yi costumes. Gladys Yang's translation adopts an innovative ballad form that faithfully preserves the style and rhythm of the original poem. In the preface, Gladys Yang introduced the findings of this poem and cultural customs of the Sani people of the Yi nationality.

The Dai nationality inhabits the frontier regions of China adjacent to Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, making cross-border contact and cultural exchange both convenient and essential. *Zhaoshutun* was the first Dai classic poem to be translated into Chinese after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. It originated from the Dai Buddhist classic Beiye Sutra, which passes down the Buddhist story through the inscription of the scripts on the patra leaves. It is a cultural epic that presents the ethnic spirit of the Chinese people's pursuit of a peaceful and promising life, and the worship of the virtues such as benevolence, kindness, courtesy, and devotion to the family and nation. There are 12 chapters in the whole poem, namely "poet's song", "Prince Zhaoshutun", "Mengdongban has seven girls", "hunter", "farewell", "love", "thread-tying ceremony", "war", "disaster", "chasing", "arrived at Mengdongban" and "the reunion". *Zhaoshutun* obviously follows a swan-maiden archetype in terms of narration. It is also a romantic legend about a fairy bird falling in love with an earthly man, who remains faithful after many trials and tests, and finally they reunite. In the past 20 years, with the implementation of the "Cultural Going Global" and "One Belt, One Road" initiatives, the important value of ethnic minority classics has been emphasized again. In order to deepen the cultural exchanges and cooperation with foreign countries, and create representative cultural products, *Zhaoshutun* compiled by Yan Die and other scholars has been published many editions in the new era, which reflects the canonization process of this narrative poem from an ethnic minority classic to the treasure of Chinese literature.

In 1961, based on the English adaptation of *Zhaoshutun* by Gladys Yang, the Foreign Languages Press republished the story with the illustrations of heavy color painting of Cheng Shifa, which innovatively provides more chances for foreigners to appreciate the cultural heritages of the ethnic minorities. Since the 1980s, China has ushered in a new era of translation and research on the ethnic minority classics. The scholars in multi-ethnic regions such as southwest China have achieved a series of achievements in the introduction of ethnic minority literary works. In 2018, the bilingual version of *Zhaoshutun* by Li Changyin as a part of "English Translation Program of Classic Works of Yunnan Ethnic Minorities" was published, which opens a new page for Chinese literature's going global. In 2020, another English version of *Zhaoshutun* by Chen Lanfang was published by Wuhan

University Press. It makes a joint exploration for the protection and inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage of the Dai nationality, as well as for the establishment of a relationship with mutual understanding and equal cultural exchanges with foreign countries.

In 2022, *The Legend of the Peacock Princess* was published by Royal Collins Press in UK. The book has only 24 pages with an introduction as follows, “the Legend of the Peacock Princess is a story from Xishuangbanna, an area in Yunnan Province in southwest China. It is the retelling of a beautiful love story of a magical peacock and how the peacock and the peacock dance, symbolizing peace and happiness, are special in the hearts of the Dai people. Obviously, the book is designed for children. In the same year, young scholars Hao Huixiao and Ren Jiajia published the monograph *Studies on English Translation of Prince Zhaoshutun: An Ancient Dai Ballad*. American scholar on Chinese Mark Bender states in the preface, “this version of Prince Zhaoshutun has its advantages in sticking close to original styles of expression, and this innovative English translation joins other versions of the story in film and digital media to offer the story of Zhaoshutun to audiences worldwide. The theoretical part of this monograph reproduces the diverse and harmonious ethnic characteristics of Chinese culture through multiple theoretical perspectives, explores the multi-modal attributes of this intangible cultural heritage, and shows its aesthetics in the construction of Chinese national community consciousness. For the translation part, it attempts to use the poetic rhyme and rhythm of ballad to reproduce the beauty of forms and sounds of the Dai poetry” [14]. The dialogue and cooperation between the author and domestic and foreign experts and scholars have guaranteed the effectiveness of the translation work, and also allowed foreign readers to experience the rich and colorful ethnic minority cultures of China to a great extent. Generally speaking, the English translations of *Zhaoshutun* mainly include picture books adaptations, compiled versions, prose and poetic translations. Generations of innovations have provided diversified exploration paths for the promotion of ethnic minority literature.

On the whole, Gladys Yang’s translation reconstructs the narrative formula of *Zhaoshutun* from his birth, encounter to the Peacock Princess, war, separation, test, and reunion by the approach of excerpts translation. The benevolence of Prince Zhaoshutun, the elegance of Princess Peacock, and the patriotic passion of the Dai people who sacrifice their own interests for the nation are vividly portrayed, and inspire readers’ emotional resonance and empathy with its unique and evocative structure. At the end of the poem, the Dai people gave their best wishes to Prince Zhaoshutun and Princess Peacock, which indicated their longing for the peaceful and prosperous life, it writes, “Zhaoshutun and Nanmarouna lived long and happily together. May your days be sweeter than the pineapple of Mengdongban!” Gladys Yang’s deep translation approach reflects her concern for a community with a shared future for mankind.

In a postcolonial context where Western ideas continue to exert powerful global

influence, the cultures of China's ethnic minorities are called upon to undertake responsibilities that extend beyond literary creation itself. For instance, the Yi people's philosophical poem *Hmamu Teyy* (Philosophy of Conduct) articulates a comprehensive system that integrates personal cultivation, family ethics, and social progress. Hani people's poetic work *Duma Jianshou* embodies the profound ecological inspiration of the ancient people, revealing their harmonious worldview shaped through generations of interaction with the natural environment, which contributes meaningfully to global conversations on environmental protection and the shared future of humanity. This abundant educational and ecological wisdom still await deeper exploration, interpretation, and dissemination by translators and scholars. Translation, undoubtedly, serves as a crucial medium for constructing and affirming national identity and national image, and it plays an essential role in reshaping the shared Chinese cultural symbols.

5. Conclusion

Chinese ethnic poetic classics, collectively created by diverse minority groups, endow profound historical and cultural significance. As invaluable literary and artistic treasures, they enrich both Chinese and world literature and have become part of humanity's shared cultural heritage. Their global dissemination calls for a strong academic community of translators and scholars with an international vision, supported by interdisciplinary collaboration. With the rise of digital museums and virtual exhibition platforms, new spaces and media for cultural communication are rapidly expanding. By embracing multimodal strategies, such as online digital exhibitions and digital translation versions, Chinese ethnic poetic classics can enter wider global circuits and further secure their place on the world literary stage.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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