

# Chinese Music

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vol 7 no 4





# Chinese Music

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december 1984

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# Lusheng Language — A Unique Phenomenon of Miao Music

Shyr Yin-kuan

Only when a form of culture and art has achieved a special social significance in the flow of history can it survive the long process of evolutionary selection. Music language represents mankind's thinking at a very high concentration. In the culture of Miao nationality, the music language has developed into a unique phenomenon — the lusheng language. Language is a direct expression of thinking. The lusheng language, however, is a combination of the lusheng music with the Miao language. The two are mutually supporting and complementary.

The difference of one form of art from another lies in the different treatment of the contents. We can, of course, find the same social and historical elements in music as in other forms of art. But on the other hand, we must admit that in the several thousand years of development the interrelations among various forms of art have changed. The earliest "mixed art" evolved from rituals of mystery and sorcery. All forms of art have been separated from the primitive triplicity (language, music and dance) to become more and more independent and to develop "unique forms" in order to be integrated once again on a higher level. This integration is founded where various art forms have obtained even greater independence.

The lusheng language of the Miao people is an organic,

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The author gratefully acknowledges stimulating discussions with Miss L. Chin on the subject of the paper.

subtle integration of language with music, a unique form reflecting the life and social relations of the Miaos. It gives top priority to the creation of human images in conveying inner feelings.

The Miaos did not have a unified written language until 1956 when a romanized one was created (which is not widely used). The Miaos speak a wide variety of dialects, making it very difficult for developing a unified written language. But they have found a common language — the lusheng language — to communicate with each other.

It is not clear when the lusheng language came into existence. It might have begun when lusheng music appeared. Lusheng music is representative of Miao culture and art. Archaeological finds show that lusheng music and lusheng dance have been an inseparable part of Miaos' life since primitive times. On an artifact from a Han dynasty tomb in Hezhang county, Guizhou province, are carved dance figures, and the earliest hulusheng instrument was found in a tomb in Yunnan province. Lusheng has been an important musical instrument for a number of nationalities and is still popular among Miaos, Dongs and Shuis. The Miaos, in particular, regard the skill at playing lusheng as a judgment for a young man's wisdom and ability. It must be noted that the Han tombs excavated were of high ranking officials sent by the central court to the minority areas. Local objects in them show the widespread influence of the minority culture.





Fig. 1 The grand festivity of the lusheng gettogether.

Lusheng music can be divided into two major types. The "sentimental" type is for performance which is popular in every Miao village. The second type is the lusheng language, which this article is to discuss.

In Africa there is "drum language," and in modern communications there are semaphore (flag language) and lamp signals (light language). They are used to convey certain meanings by sound, light or movements. The lusheng language is also communicative and is more artistic and beautiful.

The term "lusheng language" is an invention of the author. In the Miao language "*Ha ĭ gèŋ-ǫlǫ*" means "speaking with lusheng" or "lusheng speaks." The Miaos

in southeastern Guizhou have "blown songs" or "lusheng music in words." Its rhythm coordinates with spoken words. Under certain circumstances listeners can understand from the music what the player is trying to convey. The meaning of the music can be understood but cannot accurately be turned into words. The different dialects of the Miaos make it more difficult to translate the meaning into the Han language (Chinese).

The lusheng language spreads far beyond the Miao regions. But it is disappearing. In the Miao inhabited Guizhou province, there are not many people who can play it now. On the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau where the Miaos live in concentration, segmentary records and reference material have been found. A comparatively



large number of people at Liuzhai area in northwestern Guizhou can play or understand the lusheng language. Unfortunately no systematical studies have ever been carried out. Musical workers must compete with time to salvage this form of music.

It is impossible to explain the lusheng language in one sentence. However, it can be roughly divided into three forms as far as contents are concerned.

1. The freer and more oral type; 2. the type with certain language logic and poetry style; 3. the type with a "word-note" structure. All the melodies of the lusheng language are not long.

Among the three types of second is of highest artistic value. Although we have not found out the origin of the lusheng language, exploration of the second type will inevitably yield results.

Let's discuss these three types of the lusheng language.

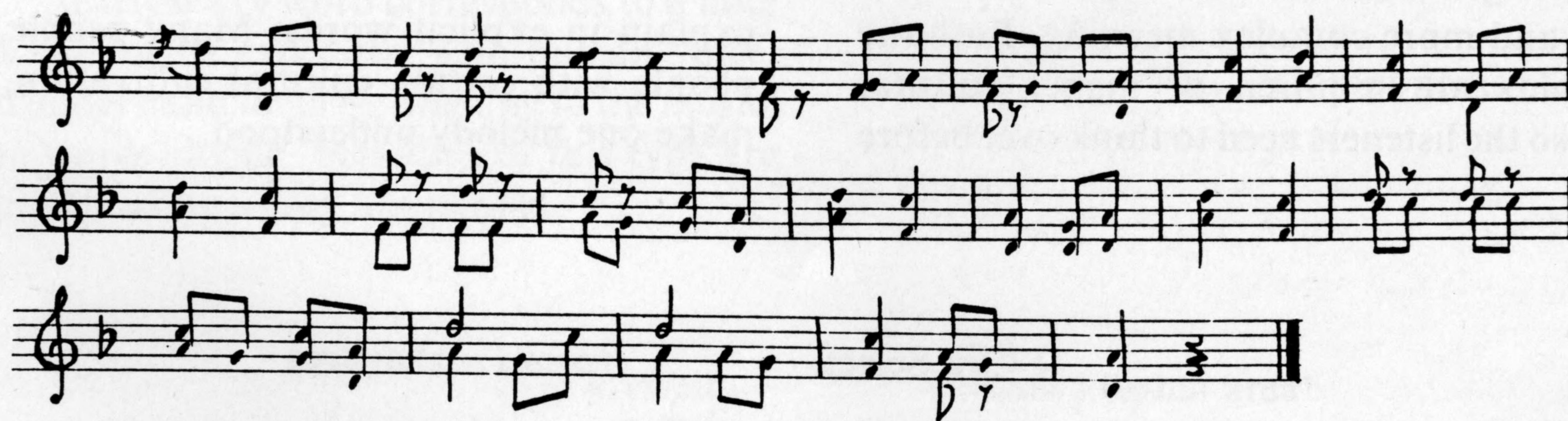
1. The freer and more oral type is comparatively crude with simple meaning. With several notes the player can convey a simple message such as "please give me that embroidered belt (expressing love)," "It's time for meal," "The gathering is over. We'll meet again," or "It's late. We should retire." As soon as the notes are out, the listeners can understand. But it is completely impossible to explain which phrase or note means what.

Begging for an Embroidered Belt from Guizhu area  
討花帶 貴筑



釋意：「朋友，請把你的花帶送給我吧！」

Translation: "Friend, please give me your embroidered belt."



釋意：「場已經完了，男女朋友們等到把秧栽齊，四月八時再來玩吧！」

Translation: "The gathering is over. Men and women friends, plant your share of trees and come again next April 8."





Fig. 2 Performers of the lusheng language and the author.

I was sitting with lusheng players and listeners in a large room one night in a Miao village. They played and chatted until three o'clock the next morning. The host saw my tired expression and played a short lusheng melody. Immediately all the guests stood up to say goodbye. Later I realized this melody was purported to ask guests to retire. Out of politeness I did not ask the meaning. Before falling asleep, I heard the host play another melody before he blew out his lamp. The impression was lasting.

2. Melodies of the second type with language logic and poetry style are longer than the first type with more dramatic rhythm and more complex meaning. Both the player and listeners are required of higher cultural cultivation. Even so the listeners need to think over before

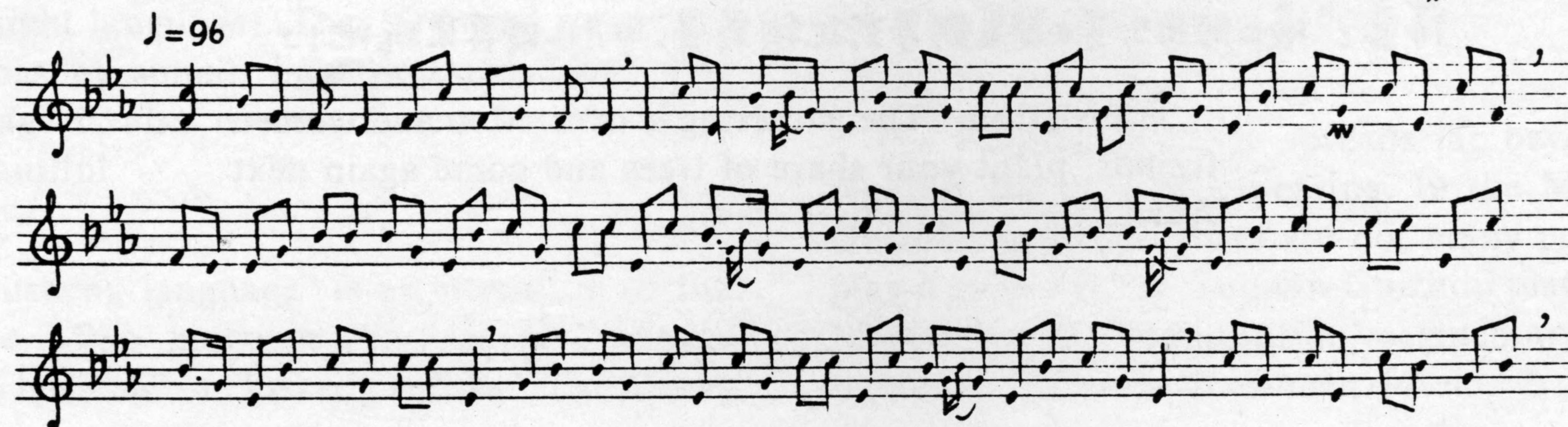
they can grasp the meaning. This type of lusheng language has literary elements and can be interpreted in Miao language. The sentences are often in pairs and sometimes they rhyme.

The lusheng language played by the Miaos in the Liuzhai area in northwestern Guizhou is the cream of this art, important for research on humanities and folklore of the local people. The few existing primary melodies are valuable source material for folk music. It is difficult to collect these melodies because even the players cannot explain in explicit words. Many people, especially old people with certain cultural cultivation, are needed to make one melody understood.

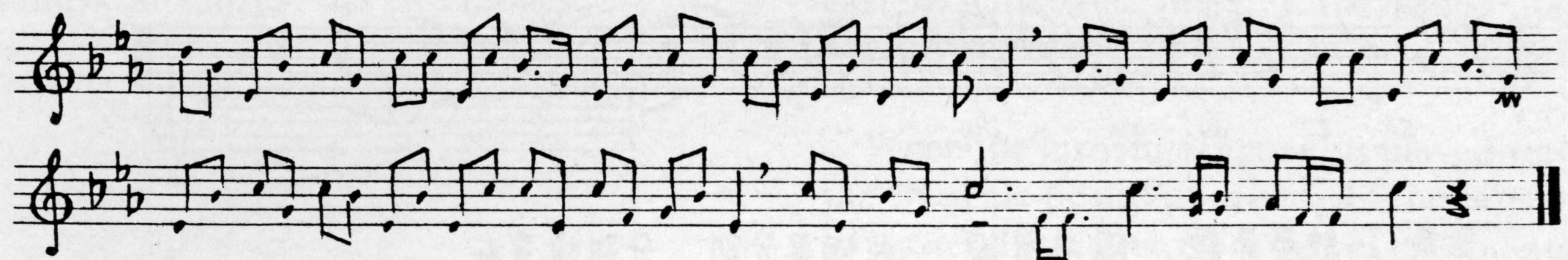
I Can Select from Liuzhai area

Gūseī mǔwūdòu 我选得了

六寨







The following is a comparison between Miao language and the Han language (in translation):

Miao language:

Gūseī mǔwū dòu!  
wūngá'niadóu zèjīsōng,  
gūakê wārōng.

Gūseī mǔwū dòu!  
zīyǎngdǒu zèjīxǐo,  
gūakê wāxǐo.

Gūseī mǔwū dòu!  
gūamǔ wànōu<sup>2</sup>zhě;  
gūseī mǔwū dòu!  
wàmǔ wànōu<sup>2</sup>tě'eī(li)  
dōunǐanqī.

Han language:

I can select (a lover),  
My mother says "no,"  
I say, "Yes."

I can select,  
My father says "no,"  
I say "yes."

I can select,  
I want to be with her,  
I can select,  
I want to live with her.

amplification tubes

air column tubes

mouth piece

finger holes

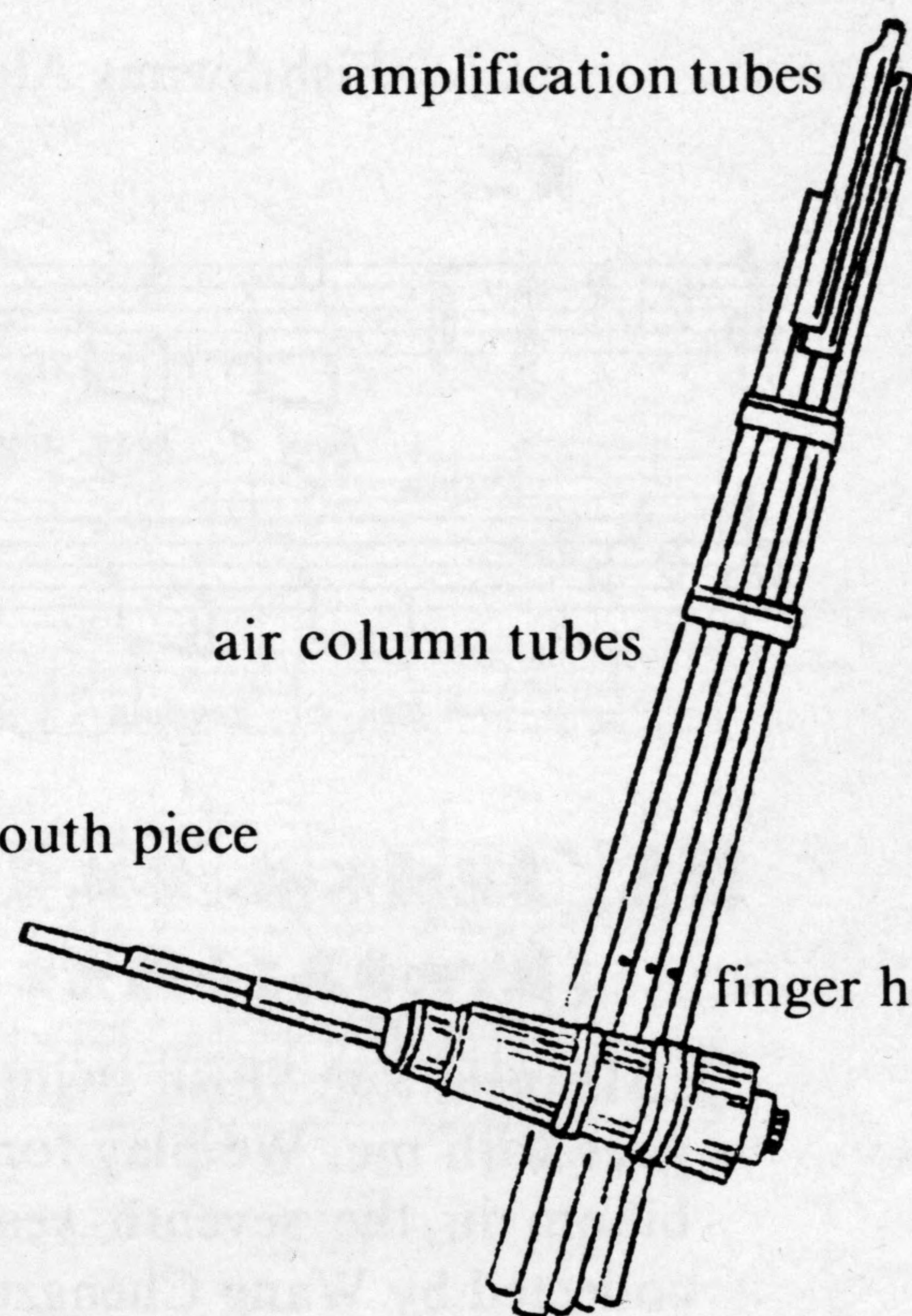


Fig. 3 Components of a lusheng.

3. The third type with a "word-note" structure is small in number. Its music is like singing so this type is called "blown songs." Nearly every word corresponds to a note but the words cannot be expressed with human voice. People have to understand them by listening to the music. Sometimes the words rhyme. Melodies of this type are very short, and played by a very few people.

Farewell

from Liuzhai area

其一:

$J=120$

分

别

六

寨







译意：鉄要分鉄，銅要分銅，我倆要分別，分別情意在。

Translation: "Iron will separate; copper will separate.  
We two will separate, but our friendship will last."

Fish Swims Along the Current from Leishan area

其二： 魚兒順水游 雷 山



釋意：「魚兒順水游，妹妹順錢求，拿完五年玩，七年花開更自由。」

(註：此曲為王承祖先生所輯)

Translation: "Fish swim along the current. My lover goes with me. We play for five years, then flowers will bloom in the seventh year." (Note: this melody was collected by Wang Chengzu.)

Not all vocal language can be expressed in the lusheng language. The music tone is limited by the tone and pitch of the Miao language. The dialect spoken by the Miaos in Liuzhai has five tones — four are similar to those of the Han language and a fifth slide tone. We found out that all the melodies from Liuzhai area played on hexatonic scale instruments use only five notes except the first and last phrases of each melody. These five notes are closely coordinated with the five tones of the Miao dialect at Liuzhai.

The lusheng language can be understood only by a small circle of the Miaos of the same branch. This is one reason it cannot spread far. The written language created in modern times and more forms of communications will accelerate the disappearance of the lusheng language

from the Miao life. The majority of the Miao young people do not have the patience to learn this complicated art.

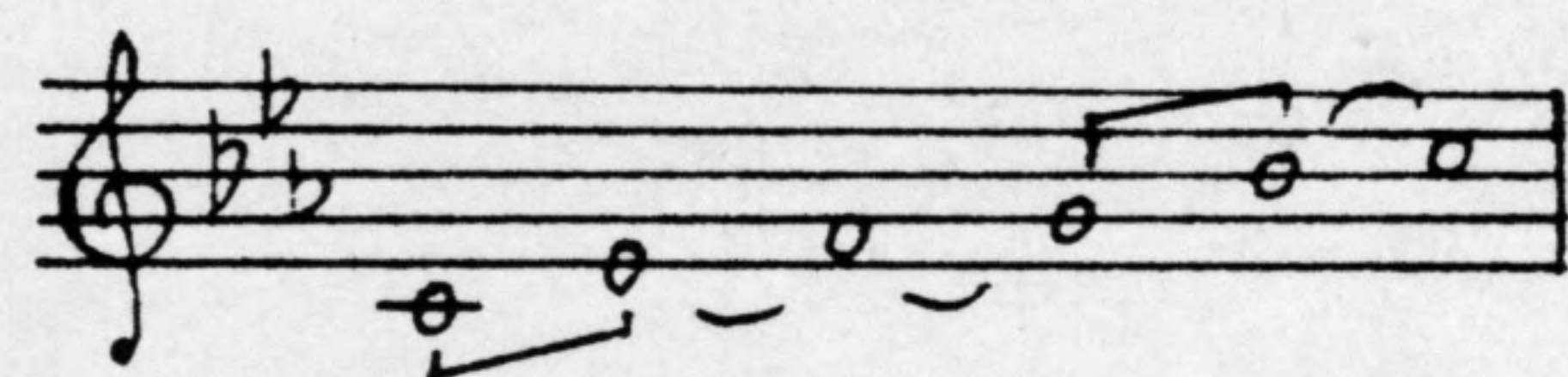
The Miaos in the Liuzhai area are located deep in the mountains in northwestern Guizhou province. They dress simply: men in black jackets with an embroidered waistband and women in short skirts with hair bound up in a knot. Because they live deep in the mountains and have few contacts with the outside, they have preserved a rare variety of the lusheng language.

Among the 6,000 Miao inhabitants at Liuzhai area only 30 can play the lusheng language. Very few outsiders can understand.

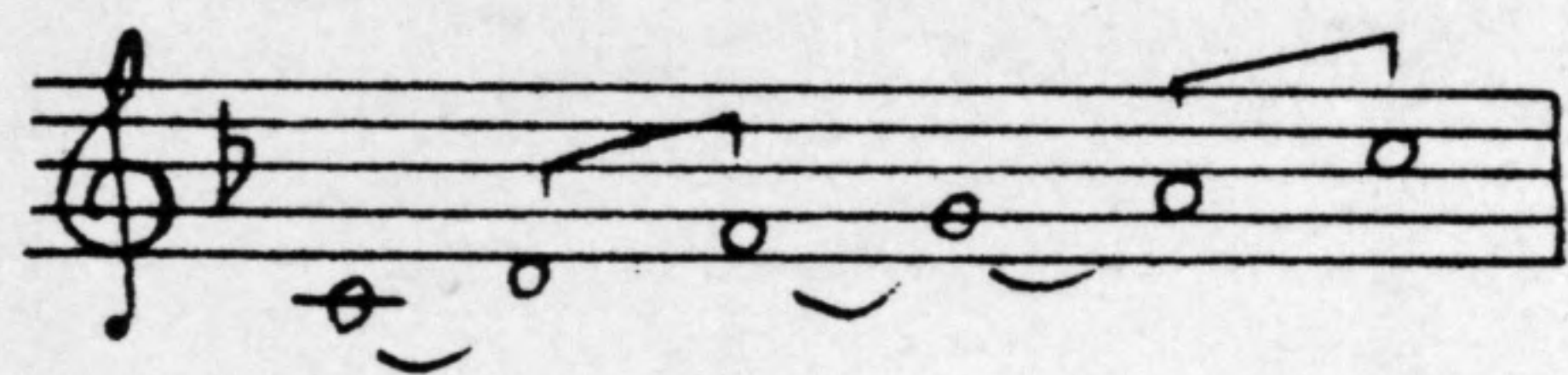


The lusheng music at Liuzhai has two modes:

The *yu* mode:



The *zhi* mode:



The *yu* mode lusheng music has more high pitch sounds and the *zhi* mode more low pitch sounds. Both can play melodies of harmony and monosyllables. (In south-

eastern Guizhou, there is the *shang* mode lusheng). Monosyllable melodies are more often performed.

When the lusheng language is played with harmony all the six scale positions are used. The tune of the opening bar is not distinctive from that of the codetta so the whole piece is played in one smooth breath. But due to simple relations between intervals harmony cannot be fully expressed. The *zhi* mode is more often used in harmony melodies. Perfect fourth and fifth and major second, representing Miao national style, often appear. For example:

Welcome from Liuzhai area 六寨

釋意：「四方八面的親朋好友們，我正在家門口吹着蘆笙迎接你們到來。」

Translation: "Friends and relatives from everywhere, I welcome you with lusheng at my door." (Note: when played in front of the gate, the latter part tends to change mode.)

Monosyllable melodies are short and terse. There is a traditional "pattern", i.e., "opening (first and second phrases) + main body + coda (one phrase)." The main body, varying in length, is all of monosyllables without

the highest pitch note and has changeable meaning. The opening and ending are of harmony notes with fixed implication. For example:

opening: "Please listen to my lusheng language."

opening: "I will begin."



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Shyr Yin-kuan

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Jiang Ping

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**COVER:** Wind instrument performance in 1949, with Wang Xiao-shou on the *haidi*, Wang Tie-chui on the *guan* and Wu Feng on the *suona*.

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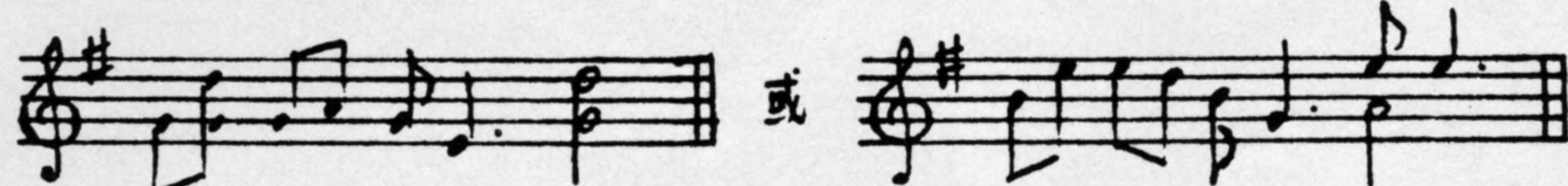
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# Lusheng Language — A Unique Phenomenon of Miao Music

Shyr Yin-kuan

ending:  "I am finished."

Lusheng melodies from the Leishan area are of monosyllables with fixed meaning. "Accompanying notes"

often appear on the upper hand in development. There is no distinction between opening and ending.

They Come When You Miss Them from Leishan area

想 你 們 才 來 雷 山



*Ni'o ou yoda lan, biansha nio'ou yio da lan,*  
*bianshej nio'ou yioda lan. nio'ou yio da lan.*

釋意：「這條河好，魚才喜歡來；你們地方好，我們才願來。」〔此曲為王承祖先生所輯〕



Fig. 4 Overture to a lusheng dance.





Fig. 5 A lusheng dance duo.



Fig. 6 A lusheng dance solo.





Fig. 7 A Flower Miao performer.

Translation: "This river is good, so fish comes; your place is good, so we come." (Collected by Wang Chengzu.)

Apart from lusheng melodies of monosyllables and polysyllables, there are also melodies of both monosyllables and polysyllables, but their number is very small. The example below is played in tenor. Its main tune is at the lower part:

Merry Journey from Liuzhai area

Qīogěnmkī 行路乐 六 寨

♩ = 102

苗語: Biagà niosòugi kùasàdǎ, cō-sànggènmùgīe,  
m̄-jiagia<sup>2</sup>rùni shuàbàdǎ gǔoxinlo<sup>2</sup>.

釋意:「我們年輕人,吹着蘆笙在路上行走,心裏非常愉快和高興。」



Translation: "We young people play lusheng when we travel. Our heart merry and happy."

Sometimes the rhythm and pitch of the Miao language can be discerned from the rhythm and intervals of the melodies. Sometimes listeners can tell that the player is ruminating a message while he repeats a phrase. But more often than not, no one can explain the relationship between a music phrase and an actual meaning it conveys. Even experts say that words (or oral interpretation) cannot sufficiently or accurately explain the musical meaning.

We cannot explain with conventional musical terms such as "motive" and "phrase" the "sentences" of the lusheng language. We cannot divide them with bars but have to use commas. Usually the musical phrase is longer

than the "sentence" if that could be translated.

Lusheng is a musical instrument exclusively for men. When a young man plays lusheng to express his love to a girl, she will answer with a "mouth string," — conversation with music.

The lusheng language from the Liuzhai can be divided into two major types:

1. The Gěngzhùnj-Zhǔa type for narration and sentimental expression. This type uses disyllables on six scale steps. It has the feature of harmony. The melodies may be long and short and phrases are flexible. This type includes melodies on occasions of receiving guests, toasting, narrating a story and for happy events. For example:

Welcoming the Bride from Liuzhai area

Adagio ♩ = 70

迎 親 六 寨

釋意: Kūacòng dǔabong zē,  
Kūacòng dǔabong blang,  
biyā zàofù kūacòng (nǐ),  
(a) lǎo mào' aǐ.

漢語: 接親的來了,  
迎客的來了,  
我們招呼他(她),  
請(來)吃晚飯。

Translation: "They have come to fetch the bride,  
They have come to receive guests.  
We greet them, and ask them to have dinner."

2. The second type is to express love of young people. It mostly uses monosyllables and has preludes to the opening and ending bars to attract listeners' attention.

A particular type of the lusheng language is a cyclical form of dialogue, sometimes with one or several ancient folksongs inserted. The contents of this type mostly tell history, fairytales and folk legends of the Miao people, so it is very valuable for studies on Miao culture and history. Unfortunately, the author could only find two persons who could play a part of a lusheng language Suite in ballad singing style which is recorded below:





Fig. 8 A performance of the mouth string.



Fig. 9 A skilled young performer.



Àdaũ mǒ'ateī ndǒzhòujìzhòu

套曲：說唱式蘆笙語《歷史歌》片段

六 寨

Inquirer's music

(1) The lusheng language

問方音乐：

芦笙語

(♩=78)

Musical score for 'The lusheng language' consisting of five staves of music in 3/8 time, key of B-flat major. The notation includes various rhythmic values and melodic lines.

(2) The Ancient song

宣唱古歌

(♩=90)

Musical score for 'The Ancient song' consisting of four staves of music in 3/8 time, key of B-flat major. The score includes lyrics in Chinese characters and Pinyin.

Dāng (ya) yā bì hāi (ya) zūa, dāng (ya) dǎ bì hāi yā zūa, bì (ya) hāi bì (ya) hāi,  
 hāi dǒ zòu lǒ dì shāu, hāi dī shòu (lǎi) dī sòu lǎng, bì (ya) hāi dǒ zhòu  
 sǒ gǎtòu yīn dǒ lá zī ndó mǎ, dī lǎ mò zǒ zòu, yì lǎn zhò (la) gē zhì  
 lǒ, yǒng gú zhì (la) gē dòu dì (la) dǐ gù lǎo dǐ gù lǎo.

釋意. 問：1.「古來沒有天，歷來沒有地；是誰來治天？是誰來治地？」

2.「天像巴(堆)鷄屎，地像巴(堆)鴨屎，開天辟地是誰人？你曉得就講出來。」

[演奏、演唱者：楊樹章，男，苗族，48歲]



Translation: Question: 1

“There had no sky, there had no earth. Then who administered the sky, and who administered the earth?”

“Sky looks like a pile of chicken droppings;

the earth looks like a pile of duck droppings. Who created the sky and earth? If you know, say it.”

(played and sung by Yang Shuzhang of Miao nationality, 48 years of age).

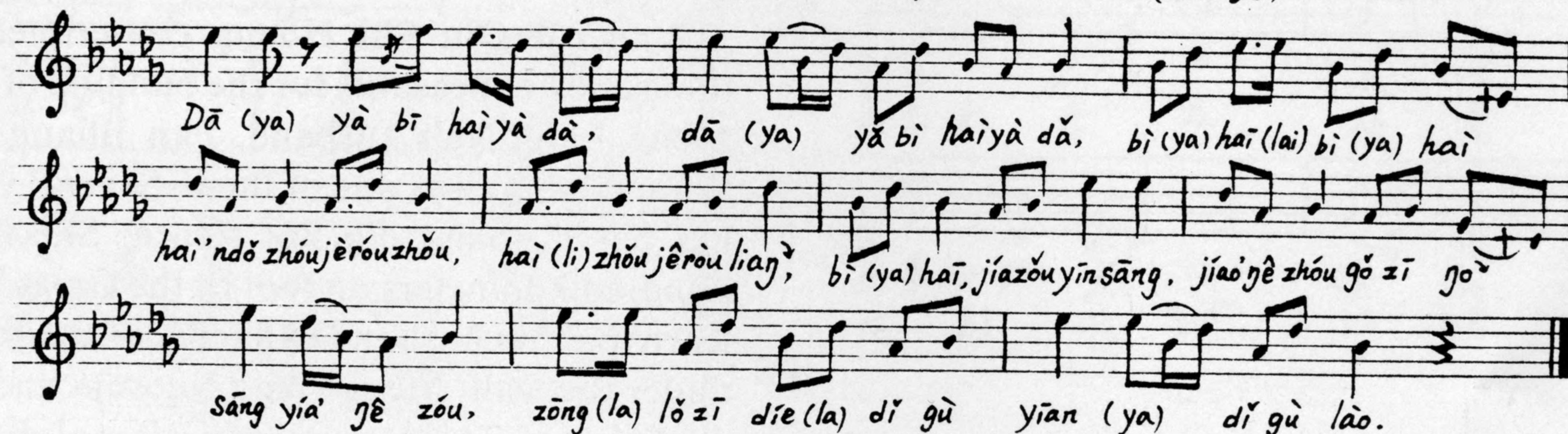
Replier's music (1) The Lusheng language

答方音乐： 芦笙语 (♩ = 78)



(2) The Song of History

宣唱古歌 (♩ = 90)



釋意. 答: 1. “古來沒有天, 歷來沒有地; 是“槃瓠”來開天, 是苗家來辟地。”

2. “天像巴(堆)鷄屎, 地像巴(堆)鴨屎; 開天辟地是苗家, 我曉得我講出來。”

(演奏、演唱者: 楊光亮, 男, 苗族, 39歲)

Translation:

(1) “There was no sky and earth in ancient times; Panhu opened up the sky and the Miaos created the earth.”

(2) “The sky looks like a pile of chicken droppings; the earth looks like a pile of duck droppings. The Miaos created the sky and

earth, I know, so I tell you.”

(played and sung by Yang Guangliang, a Miao man 39 years old.)

The lusheng language of the ancient Miao nationality is a treasure of the Miaos as well as the world's culture. It has been a medium to convey beautiful feelings and contains rich historical materials. We have begun studying this too late but we will do our best.