

# FLOATING AND BLENDING –THE SONGS OF THE MIAO CLEANING WOMEN IN SHANGHAI

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the praxis of ‘music volunteers’ in ethnomusicology, taking the process of being engaged in the music life of Miao cleaning women working in Shanghai as an example, to reflect on the possibility of ‘engaged practice’. The ‘music volunteers’ activities help us to explore the ‘differences’ between various types of knowledge and follow in search of the ‘liquid knowledge’<sup>2</sup> that really emerges in the cultural context and power hierarchy of the city. In this process, we try to build a dynamic cultural space together, breaking the binary boundaries between urban and rural areas as well as insiders and outsiders.

## Keywords

Music volunteers; Miao songs; Singing as ceremony; Practice; Engaged ethnomusicology

Dressed in costumes with fine Miao<sup>3</sup> embroidery and wearing heavy silver necklaces brought from their hometown, six Miao women sang their homeland songs on the stage at the Power Station of Art Theatre in Shanghai on December 26, 2020.

The Thirteen Shanghai Biennale ‘Ecological Alliance’ Miao Songs Special Performance Workshop, named ‘My Floating Life—Like Water, Flowing and Blending,’ was jointly organized by the Research Institute of Ritual Music in China (RIRMC) at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music and the Power Station of Art and was developed from the friendship of Miao migrant cleaning women and myself, a ‘Music volunteer,’ in the wider fulfilment of my master thesis ‘Song as Home—the Music Life of the Miao Cleaning Women in Shanghai.’ The RIRMC also held a series of Miao song workshops for Miao migrant women in Shanghai in 2019.



Figures 1, 2, and 3: Scenes of the workshop ‘My Floating Life—Like Water, Flowing and Blending’. Photo by courtesy of Zhan Shan.

## APPLIED, ENGAGED, AND THE USUAL PRAXIS

For a long time, the praxis of ethnomusicologists has been on the margins of academic discussion. In the early research histories of ethnomusicology, practice was regarded as a kind of feedback

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<sup>2</sup> In response to the increasing recognition that human subjectivity is inevitably involved in the production of knowledge and that not everything about the universe – and the place of human beings within it – can be understood through measurement, a substantial shift away from the data-based, ‘quantitative’ methods of the natural sciences has indeed taken place over almost a century in the ‘softer’ social sciences, in educational research and in the arts and humanities. Marina Abramovic reflects that knowledge comes from experience. Robin Nelson calls this kind of experience ‘liquid knowledge’. It is something that runs through your system.

<sup>3</sup> Miao people call themselves often differently. Here is the common name used in China applied.

mechanism for fieldwork ethics but was seldom regarded as a key issue of academic concern and writing.

In 2007, the International Council for Traditional Music established a research group dedicated to the study of applied ethnomusicology. In recent years, the definition of Applied Ethnomusicology from ICTM has been widely known within ethnomusicology circles.<sup>4</sup>

The Applied Ethnomusicology Chapter of the 6th International Symposium of the International Society for Traditional Music was held by the Central Conservatory of Music in 2018; the term 'Applied Ethnomusicology' has attracted attention from some scholars in China. Yet, there is more practice than research in this field.

It is true that this sense of application of disciplinary knowledge and research results in social practice, to serve society, and to reflect the value of one's own discipline is one of the key epistemologies of applied ethnomusicology. However, the applied research and practice related to it are mostly based on the completed research reports, producing a set of application programs and activity processes that are adapted to the management of the authority. The cognition of application is the same as 'from writing reports to scholars or government using the research results as reference for application.'

This approach has gained some recognition from academics, particularly in the area of intangible cultural heritage protection. However, its limitations are also obvious. It is often separated from the actual actions and real situations of the people being studied, who are in turn 'objectified' via a kind of 'static type' of fieldwork. In addition, the application process of such cooperation with multiple institutions is often called 'field feedback' by scholars. The academic consciousness behind the term 'fieldwork feedback,' that is, the fieldwork of scholars, is to obtain research data, while all other interactions and reciprocity are beyond the fieldwork.

However, is application only the result of pure research or are interactions already encompassed by and taken for granted as part of the research process? Do our practices in fieldwork produce authoritative results or do we work with others to build and share an understanding of different musics and 'musical life'?

In this context, the discussion of 'applications' is not only a theoretical reflection but also a discussion of ethnomusicological praxis.

In her article *Engaged Activist Research*, Tan Sooi Beng noted:

"In the past four decades, post-colonial, feminist, literary, and anthropological scholars have called for the decolonization of the humanities and social sciences. They raised questions about the hegemony of Western colonial thought in academic research, observed the unequal relationship between researcher and research subject, and stressed the importance of privileging the voices of the common people in the generation of knowledge" (Tan Sooi Beng, 2020:135).

In that case, there have been differing reactions to this 'crisis in representation.' For ethnomusicologists, fieldwork remains crucial. Many adopted reflexive ethnographies and transformed their understanding of fieldwork: no culture can be observed with complete objectivity, and fieldwork is not about 'representing' but about 'experiencing,' participating in and experiencing the cultural practices and performances of others, and in doing so collaborating with the research subjects in the construction of ethnographic writing related to music (Barz & Cooley, 2008).

In addition, with the restructuring of higher education institutions in Europe and the United States in the 1980s, Practice as Research (PaR) originated and flourished fast on a worldwide scale, becoming integrated in the higher education system as a professional discipline category. According to PaR proponent and British scholar Nelson, central to PaR is the concept of 'praxis': the possibility of thought within both 'theory' and 'practice' in an iterative process of 'doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing.' It implies that no technique or epistemology can yield an unmediated, self-evident truth and that practice transforms 'hard facts' into 'liquid knowing.'

Therefore, the key to the discussion of the concept of 'application' and 'engagement' in

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<sup>4</sup> Applied Ethnomusicology is the approach guided by principles of social responsibility, which extends the usual academic goal of broadening and deepening knowledge and understanding toward solving concrete problems and toward working both inside and beyond typical academic contexts.

ethnomusicology is an important presentation of epistemology of ‘fieldwork.’ Does our fieldwork make studies of people or do we study with people? Is our relationship with others an objective reflection of science or a search for the mutual construction of meaning? With these questions, this paper and the praxis on which it is based aim to find a new perspective on the relationship between researchers and interlocutors in fieldwork, that is, the praxis of ‘music volunteers.’

## MY FLOATING LIFE AND ‘FLOATERS’ IN SHANGHAI

In April 2018, my supervisor Xiao Mei learned on WeChat that a cleaning lady was heard humming Miao folk songs in a bathroom at the M50 Park in Shanghai. We found that there were quite a few Miao migrant workers in Shanghai after conversation with her.

I started my fieldwork with this Miao cleaning lady who was named Xiao Liang. She told me, 6 years ago, some fellow townsmen from Guizhou introduced her and came to Shanghai as cleaners at subway stations and shopping malls. Before that, she also shined shoes and sold newspapers to make money in different cities when she was young. She married at 17 in her hometown and gave birth to her first child shortly thereafter. After she got married, she was tired of the vagrant life and longed to settle down. However, in order to pay for children's education, she had to earn more money. Then, she came to Shanghai – the most economically developed city in China.

When I first met her, I found the district in which she worked was dotted with expensive condominiums and high-rise office blocks. However, she lived in appalling conditions with four other people. She worked from morning to midnight every day and had no rest for a whole year. As a cleaner, she was allowed to live and work in Shanghai, but she had to remain registered in her hometown. There are a lot of Miao women who have had the same experience in her hometown.

The title of the paper ‘My Floating Life’ is a folk song of the Miao ethnic group written and sung by Xiao Liang. The strenuous job on top of the poor living condition makes it impossible for them to enjoy songs as if they were at home. She always sang Miao songs with her relatives and friends through online WeChat groups. This is also the first Miao song I heard in the city, and the text seemed to be new.

Land is the host,  
people are the guests.  
Floating Like flowers on branches,  
Floating Like duckweed in wells.

Life is rough, we must be tough.  
All the way to Shanghai for our children.  
Working as a migrant worker,  
Money is hard to earn,  
Nobody cares about my complaints.<sup>5</sup>

It was in the songs like ‘My Floating Life’ that these Miao women could tell the truth of their life, which is the real situation in such large cities as Shanghai, where the ‘floating’ population stands at more than 3 million, the equivalent of one migrant for every four residents. They live in the city as ‘floaters.’ It is a special term in China, ‘floating population.’<sup>6</sup>

The group is stigmatized by the term ‘Floaters.’ In the past 3 decades in China, with rapid commercialization and a booming urban economy, nearly 100 million farmers have left the rural regions to seek for jobs and business opportunities in urban areas. These ‘floaters’ have been at the

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<sup>5</sup> In Chinese, the new text is as follows:

江山是主人,	生活虽艰苦.
人为一时客.	一切为后生.
如花开枝头,	甘愿来打工,
如井中浮萍	钱却也难挣,
	妹苦不得说.

<sup>6</sup> In Chinese it is called liudong renkou [流动人口]

front line of the capitalist economy, among whom a large number of women work as cleaners with low wages in China.

For the most part, this labor mobility is seen as a necessary and even desirable aspect of economic modernization, but labor migration from rural areas to the cities, estimated at 45 million (Ministry of Labor, 1997), is increasingly a source of concern. Roberts calculated in the article that more than 50% of the floating population in Shanghai are female workers since 1980 (Roberts 2002:492). These migrants are viewed much as guestworkers in other countries – their labor is desired, but their presence is not – and with a few exceptions, they are forbidden permanent residency.

In that case, I would like to discuss the music life of Miao women from two parts: (1) the identity of these women as Miao and a minority ethnicity and their indigeneity and (2) their migrant status – there are increasing studies on floating migrants in China from provinces and other cities.

## HOW FAR IS RESEARCHING GOING?

In my fieldwork, songs of the Miao cleaning women contain a lot of details of urban working life, so I tried to classify the songs of Miao women by the themes of mobility (as poor people), laborers (as migrant workers), gender (as women), and family (as mothers) at first and analyze the relationship between the music and identity of the urban minority groups which are more modern and mobile.

This kind of hypothesis is the beginning of my research. However, the seemingly objective perspective made me an outsider. In fact, I had already ‘observed’ them for a long time and proceeded to interview them for writing my master thesis. I asked questions such as what kind of work their families did, when they first learned music, and how they sung Miao songs after a hard day’s work; they answered them. I was asking for their oral history, and I was interested in obtaining facts of their lives that related to their songs. In short, I was collecting data.

However, I had discovered that my fieldwork thrust me into thinking about relationships: it was not just about surveying and collecting. It also was about my own identity. In the past year, the Miao cleaning women shared with me a lot of stories about their life and their songs. At the same time, I felt their disappointment about their inability to sing together.

I was sorting out a series of expressions about the social integration status of minority groups from Miao songs, but in a paradoxical way, an image of migrant workers that is more conducive to ‘control’ is uncovered.

Just upon the beginning of the thesis proposal, Xiao Mei, as the supervisor, sent a long letter to me: I hope you really tell the story in your research. Ethnographic participations are first and foremost ones of daily life. Record your life with the Miao ladies in the fields. In the process, you can experience a kind of life world constructed together. Identify the details in the field and let the real feelings permeate your writing instead of getting lost in the concept.

For me, my relationship with these Miao ladies added a dimension to my research: I became an ‘engaged student’ who might be able to do more things, instead of just a young girl hanging around them and writing something in a notebook.

When trying to engage in the life of Miao ladies and rethinking out fieldwork methodologies, we change our viewpoints toward all the issues.

## THE PRAXIS OF ‘MUSIC VOLUNTEERS’

### EVENT 1: ‘SONGS AS CEREMONY’ - MIAO FOLK SONG WORKSHOP ‘MY FLOATING LIFE’

Xiao Mei, my supervisor, had thought of becoming a ‘music volunteer’ in the city long before the research on women from the Miao ethnic group. When helping the local government to apply for

Kam Grand Choirs to be included in the list of oral and intangible cultural heritage in 2003 in Liping, Guizhou province, Xiao noticed that as many young people worked outside from beyond Liping and there were no people singing in her hometown, the transmission of minority music would be difficult. However, people do not need to sing in their hometown to save the heritage. For many ethnic groups, singing is a group activity. When conducting music research, one can seek help from such organizations as the farmer's union, labor union, and associations of townsmen and be a music volunteer in cities. This must be better than to investigate, write, and summarize the rules. Over the past few months, I have developed a close relationship with women from the Miao ethnic group. On 29<sup>th</sup> December, 2019, there was held a special thesis proposal open to Shanghai citizens with four women from the Miao ethnic group taking part at the Shanghai Zhendan Museum—conducting a Miao Folk Song Workshop named 'My floating life.'

A week before the event, the main organizer, Xiao Liang, and her friend Yang Mei suggested singing a 'Miao toast song,' followed by a 'Miao love song' or a 'Flying song,' and ending with another 'toast song.' She explained, 'we should first sing a song to greet everyone and thank our family for inviting us. We made this song dedicated to Xiong and her teacher.'

But, at that time, I hoped to take this important toast song as the capper of the show, so we asked if we could sing the 'Flying song' first so that the audience could quickly integrate into the atmosphere and feel the resounding characteristics of Miao folk songs. The Miao ladies were deep in thought, but they agreed to sing the 'Flying song' first.

However, on the day of the workshop, after the host introduced the first 'Miao flying song' sung by the Miao, they still changed their plans just before going on stage, singing a 'toast song' (spring comes to my hometown). Fortunately, the subsequent activities of the ladies went on as agreed upon and arranged before, singing 'Rendezvous song' (Landscape is the host and people are guests), 'Love Song' (Go to work in Shanghai), and so on. At the end of the event, the ladies sang the toast song of Miao ethnic group 'Dedicated to Xiong and the teacher.' Finally, I went on stage and sang the love song 'Song of spring' with the ladies, indicating a complete success of the event.

However, the second unexpected thing happened. Just as everyone was getting ready to leave, the ladies suddenly started singing an unplanned toast song. Although some people left the event one after another, the ladies insisted on finishing the song. After the performance, they held hands and bowed to the audience.



**Figure 4: Xiong Manyu and ladies from the Miao ethnic group sang the 'Song of spring' together. Figure 5: The ladies sang the toast song after the performance. Photo by courtesy of Zhan Shan.**

After the show, we wondered why they did so and could not wait to ask the ladies on our way home. They replied, 'We have so many guests here today and it's our first time to sing to them. We have to pay our respects. We sing the welcome song when coming in and the farewell song when we leave.'

The ladies' sudden return at the end of the concert to sing the farewell song and the reasons for it triggered my thinking. The Miao toast songs 'Welcoming guests' and 'Farewell to the guests' they sang at the event are the action knowledge that insiders would know even if the Miao people did not say in advance. The behavior 'singing as ceremony' is an essential part during their gatherings and activities as well as one of the major methods to show respects among the Miao ethnic group.

Before the performance, although we enthusiastically promoted the singing party of women from the Miao ethnic group in the workshop, we understood neither their rules of the gathering nor the purpose and significance of those songs for the Miao people. We asked those women to provide wonderful performance according to our imagination and the general rules of the workshop, but they were more willing to sing the 'Farewell to the guests' at the end of the concert.

In this end, we are deeply aware of the importance of the practical knowledge and experience on the part of insiders, which play a central role in the singing, including understanding the practical reason, operational logic of Miao songs, and the interaction and relationship development in the process of singing. Therefore, if we want to be music volunteers, we should not only find a platform to speak out for them but also understand the behavioral logic and practical knowledge of the insiders, trying to build dynamic, diverse cultural space when learning from each other's knowledge system.

## EVENT 2: DAILY PRACTICE OF 'SINGING AS CEREMONY' - MUSIC LIFE IN THE LONG ZHU YUAN COMMUNITY

In the summer vacation of 2020, I moved to the Long Zhu Yuan Community in Shanghai, where those women from the Miao ethnic group lived. In the community built by the farmers, men and women from different companies were often seen wearing cleaning and security uniforms. Apart from Aunt Xiao Liang, there were more than 10 Miao families living in the area.

As they lived close to each other, several couples from the Miao ethnic group often went for dinner at Aunt Yang Mei's house. Toast was a must to treat guests, and people would sing when drinking. After taking a few sips of rice toast brought from her hometown, she began to sing. As what they used to do in the Miao village, they sang alternately, leading to a lively game of wisdom between the host and guests. Aunt Yang Mei started with the 'Song of welcome,' and the guests returned with the 'Song of gratitude.' She sang a 'toast song.' The guests rose to their feet, drank their toast down amid congratulations, and then sang another to show gratitude. In the game with the flavor of toast, the host and the guests battled against each other and the audience were delighted to watch from the side lines.

In addition to the toast songs (hxak Jud) and toasting rituals, women from the Miao ethnic group also sing the toast songs or ancient songs at important moments in life, such as weddings, funerals, construction completion, and children's birth. They will carry out a complete process in line with the etiquette of different areas.

In the city, although staying away from the traditional context of their hometown, the Miao women still attached importance to the practice of singing ceremony and strived to break through the constraints of realistic conditions. The emergence of the mobile phone as a new medium gave them inspirations that they could conduct the domain singing activities through the domain-free network, which originated from the ancient duet activities and followed the life of the Miao people, appearing in the city in a modern way. Through WeChat and QQ Group, they have set up numerous online groups, including 'Ancient songs review meeting,' 'The king of Miao love song,' and 'Shanghai Miao folk song group,' maintaining their musical interaction and etiquette practice.

In the field where Miao ladies lived, I also found that even in a virtual place on the Internet, the traditional communication and singing of the Miao people remain. According to the relationship between the singers, different tunes are adopted to suggest a distinction and show different stages of the intimate relationship between the two sides. At the same time, in the singing of love songs, people with the same first name or staying at home together should not sing together, abiding by their rules.



**Figure 6: Miao standing on the street, singing together with a mobile phone. Photo by author.**

When we get closer, I also received a song dedicated to myself from the ladies. Once, the ladies sang to me and my mother two complimentary toast songs with completely different tunes, drawing my attention to the nuances of the Miao people's 'Singing as ceremony.' As my mother was considered Lul (older people) from the perspective of the Miao people, she would sing 'Hxak Lul'

for the elderly and ‘Hxak vangt’ for vangt, which means young people. However, in previous studies, ‘Hxak Lul’ was often sung at banquets and was translated by scholars as toast songs or ancient songs, while ‘Hxak vangt’ was often sung when traveling, most of which were called Love Songs or Fly Songs in a Han Chinese imposition. As these translated terms were fixed over time and were accepted and used by the local people, the meaning of classification was neglected.

From the etymological meaning of ‘Hxak lul’ and ‘Hxak vangt’ (songs for the elderly and the young), we can see that the core of Miao people’s cognition of their songs is the object of singing, rather than the classification of tunes. In the Miao people’s concept, the process of singing and the state of a song being placed somewhere as a text are totally different. The Miao people place great emphasis on the process of singing, believing that the song is a ripe seed that comes to life only when it is ‘planted’ and sung (Li Bingze, 2001:22).

Miao songs are a language dedicated for a certain object so that it is only in the world of human communication that its unique significance can be highlighted. Based on this, I gradually understand Miao people's practical reason of ‘Singing as ceremony’ and have found a clear main line in the singing of the Miao people’s daily life: they handle interpersonal relations with different songs and regard songs as customs and etiquette which serve as a carrier of human relations.

If we analyze a Miao singer’s view of the singing that takes place in different interpersonal relationships in the ethnic group, we can see that there is an internal hierarchy in the ‘singing ceremony.’ When she sings the ‘songs for the elderly,’ she deals with individual relationships in the singer’s own life stages such as birth, marriage, and death. When she sings the ‘songs for the young,’ she deals with relationships between men and women. In the new urban environment, she can deal with their relationship with the new social groups in the city by using the performance of the Miao flying songs and the newly composed Miao songs. In other words, the Miao ladies in fact constantly use songs to deal with themselves in relation to others, intermingle the boundaries of the crowd, and sing to express etiquette to others.

From the perspective of ‘Practical knowledge,’ this kind of practice comes from their learning from childhood. Their improvisation and use of oral forms also shape the understanding of a specific oral culture type and structure interpersonal interaction in the society and culture of the Miao ethnic group. When it comes to physical skills, the knowledge is accompanied by the long-standing oral tradition, and in the form of repeated practice and mutual respect, it gradually forms a pattern of behavior based on ‘rational’ and ‘ritual’ and deepens the regulation of human behavior. In singing as ceremony, both good songs and people acquainted with local etiquette are developed.

This is the practical knowledge of the Miao’s Singing as ceremony, which is a kind of action knowledge system, distinct from the textual knowledge system. It stands in the position of the singer, highlighting the specific connotation of practice.

Xiao Mei delivered a keynote speech on ‘Rethinking Civilization and Transcending Locality--Also on Cross-Border Ethnic Music Culture Research’ at the 2015 Annual Conference of the Beijing Ethnic Music Research and communication base, putting forward the concept of ‘singing as ceremony’ and related information for the first time. Also, she proposed the thinking and research path of the concept according to the theoretical question of ‘how ethnic groups (social communities) are constantly constructed (regenerated) through the crossing of boundaries.’ My master’s thesis ‘Songs as home--the Musical Life of the Miao Cleaning Women in the Demon City Shanghai’ is also based on the above theoretical thinking and actions of the subjects and the interaction between them. From the internal level of singing ceremony, the music and life of Miao migrant women are re-recognized.

### **EVENT 3: THE EVOCATION OF ‘SINGING AS CEREMONY’ - MIAO FOLK SONG WORKSHOP ‘LIKE WATER, FLOWING AND BLENDING’**

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic prevented people from cross-geographical movement and completely changed people’s lives, especially in Wuhan, where the outbreak first began. I was floundering as a local resident of Shanghai. Around the spring festival of February 2020, I was quarantined in isolation, surrounded by new cases, on-the-hour announcements of epidemic prevention, and daily disinfection carts. During that period, such negative social behaviors as

indifference, rejection, and mutual exclusion put me in the state of uprootedness and caused me to experience alienation never felt before.

This change of situation also allowed me to experience some sense of the flowing life of Miao ladies for the first time, both physically and mentally. I fully understood that lyrics in the Miao song ‘My life, flowing like water, floating and drifting’ have been living in vain.’

Until May, I received a voice message from the aunt: ‘Xiong, it has been a long time since you listened to my songs and I miss you very much.’ After receiving this message, I remained silent for a long time. Amid the notification of epidemic prevention on the community radio outside the window, I listened to the song from the aunt again and again. The aunt sang the song with a calm and deep voice and a smooth breath. Her tone was gentle, making my hearts tremble slightly.

Apart from the daily conversation with the aunt, this voice created a new space that transcends the words themselves, enabling people to understand the song from diversified perspectives. Also, it calls the listener into it, generates power that everyday language rarely has, and lets people produce a kind of exchange of intimacies. In this steady melody and calm voice, I enjoyed inner peace rarely felt over the past 3 months since the outbreak of the epidemic and experienced the connotation of the ladies who sang in Shanghai.

When returning to their house after the epidemic, I once again listened to their songs. Those songs are full of tension, alternately interesting, and bitter. When the songs filled in between us, the songs of the Miao ladies became the mountains and forests with strength to contain and heal the hearts. These Miao songs, which failed to be understood before, became an emotional knot and tied us together.

Therefore, in December 2020, we held the second Miao folk song workshop, ‘Like water, flowing, blending -- the song for Miao ladies and me,’ the Thirteen Shanghai Biennale ‘Ecological Alliance’ Miao Songs Special Performance Workshop, jointly organized by the Research Institute of Ritual Music in China (RIRMC) at Shanghai Conservatory of Music and the Power Station of Art. The workshop focused on our songs amid the pandemic and embodied the integration of different groups.



Figures 8 and 9: ‘Like Water, flowing, blending’ Miao folk song workshop site. Photo by courtesy of Zhan Shan.

The event no longer emphasized the music classification, including ‘love songs, toast songs and ancient songs,’ nor did it take the splendid presentation of the concert as the metric. Instead, based on the objects and significance of every Miao folk song, they put the songs in the relation network of the ‘singing as ceremony’ of the Miao ladies, integrating the context of different folk songs with various stories. In doing so, they could showcase the behavioral logic and connotation of the ceremony, highlight the importance of singing to pay respect to develop social relationships among Miao people, and try to bring inspiration in this regard.

The activities of music volunteers are a fine example of the practice of ‘Singing as ceremony.’ Its significance lies in that from the perspective of the real world, the society and interpersonal relationship manifested in the singing ceremony. As Wan Jianzhong mentioned in his book ‘An Introduction to Folk Literature’ (2006:41), when people perform and spread folk literature, they lead a unique life without realizing that they are engaged in literary activities. The singing of the Miao ladies, as an activity with inner purposes, has the identity of practice subject. However, failing to enter into the discourse of modernity, it did not enter into the knowledge structure possessed by the researchers. Therefore, we need to dig into the internal viewpoint through field investigation and practice of ethnomusicology and translate the practical subjectivity of the general public to confirm



themselves. In the first event, we saw the songs and wanderings of the Miao ladies from the perspective of ‘others.’ The second event was held during the period of the covid-19 pandemic in 2020; the researcher and ‘the respondent’ exchange their wandering narrative. The action ethics of Miao ladies also crosses different contexts of wandering, touching our heart. It also inspires us to further explore the practice of ‘Music Volunteers.’

## REFLECTIONS ON THE PRAXIS OF ‘MUSIC VOLUNTEERS’

As many researchers studying on the ‘labor issue’ have pointed out, ‘because of the household registration system and profound ideological impact, their status as ‘second-class citizens’ reveal themselves. In addition, they are intensely aware of their ‘other’ status under the urban-rural dual system in their daily life. Especially migrant women, who hardly have any socially scarce resources, flock to the city and are destined to suffer the mental tearing of the construction of subjectivity’ (Shi Yong, 2018:20).

The exclusion and ‘othering’ of working women in the state system are universal fates for the group. According to this reasoning, several social institutions that assist women begin to bring together working women to demonstrate the subjective creation of their interests and identities. These behaviors and acts do contribute to the realization of working women’s individual awareness, but more often than not, they only reproduce the hierarchy of the mainstream discourse in a crude manner. This construction of subjectivity also further deepens the institutional legacy of power relations and consciousness between the ‘city’ and the ‘countryside.’

In their interactions with the city, they succumb to the discourse of the urban elite and focus on their personal ‘breakout’ and ‘adaptation’ to the city, rather than on understanding their actual lives. This will inevitably rationalize the city’s oppression upon them and obscure the institutional context.

Therefore, we need a new identity to engage in the ‘labor issue’ to break the certainty of ‘migrant workers’ identity and the limitation of urban–rural dichotomy.

Music volunteers remain engaged in musical forms and through activities seek ever-changing knowledge that comes from within the subject, reawaken our feelings and experiences, and move away from repeating narratives about objectified individuals in order to re-perceive the varied meanings of music and life through the noncategorical thinking of the ‘other.’

Experience evokes a participatory presence, a sensitive contact with the world to be understood, a rapport with its people, and a concreteness of perception. Experience also suggests a cumulative, deepening knowledge.

It focuses not only on ‘volunteering’ -- speaking out for and empowering an organization to have a say and social rights with arts – but also on the presence of voice and action. In various activities and events, cracks appear and edges emerge, and then we become truly aware of the ‘differences’ that exist. In the iterative process of ‘doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing,’ theory and practice are integrated to unearth new knowledge.

As one begins to grasp the musical lives of Miao women, including meditating on the two ‘incidents’ that occurred in the first Miao song workshop, one also learns that only from the perspective of the performers themselves we can understand the logic of their actions as well as the Miao ‘Singing as ceremony’ of practical knowledge, which is then integrated into this knowledge system.

In addition to the researchers themselves, audience response indicates that the urban audience for the Miao songs discovered ‘differences’ in numerous, interactive interpretations. For instance, in the 2020 Miao song workshop ‘Like water, flowing and blending,’ they sang the toast song ‘Shanghai is a good place’ for the audience, and the audience received the following message: Every type of life is like water drifting. After they came to the city, the land and water changed. Respect is all that we can give to each other. Because the mountain streams, riverbeds, and climate are so different when each drifting river departs...We feel each other’s open hearts, and when we receive precious hearts, it’s like returning to the earliest homeland of humanity. How the Miao ladies survive while being allowed to sing their traditional songs in the city? We try to be more loving and even more indulgent like we take care of our own way of coming, so that they can get the same moonlight in a

different place. Just as aunt Xiao Liang sang, ‘My loved ones from home, don't be sad for me.’

Undoubtedly, people's interaction and feedback went beyond the event itself to an open, diverse, and interactive perspective.

It is also in line with the ‘Water’ theme of the 13th Shanghai Museum of Contemporary Art Biennale. All the participants were immersed in the Urban Floaters, and the songs of the Miao women shown in the workshop penetrated through different times and spaces and through the interaction with the researchers and the audience. They were being awoken and enlightened in diverse historical context, exhibiting significant penetrating power and logical power among different urban groups.

## FROM ‘HARD FACTS’ TO ‘LIQUID KNOWING’

When one returns to the issue of ‘application’ and ‘engagement’ of ethnomusicologists, they will find that what requires most is not the generation of knowledge in a narrow sense. Instead, one actualizes the knowledge flow between different systems through practice, through intersubjective transfer, and through unearthing and appreciating the practical reason.

The discussion and study of ‘practical reason’ in ethnomusicology may be traced back to American ethnomusicologist Mantel Hood's ‘Bi-musicality’ in the second half of the 20th century. Hood first proposed an expressive, embodied approach to cognition in a formal educational setting, emphasizing the importance of performance practice. He held that ‘the training of ears, eyes, hands and voice and fluency gained in these skills assure a real comprehension of theoretical studies’ (Shelemay, 1996:37).

With the reform of higher education systems in Europe and the United States in the 1980s, PaR originated and grew rapidly around the world, embedded in higher education systems as a professional discipline. According to the recognition of ‘practice’ by Robin Nielsen, ‘doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing’ iterative processes, one can see that the core of PaR also lies in the continuous interaction between subjects, constant intermingling and transfer, and that as a new way to constitute new insights in research, practices play a role in generating and testing knowledge. Practices transform ‘hard facts’ into ‘liquid knowledge’ (Nielsen, 2013).

While fully recognizing the importance of close-up, tacit, haptic know-how seeks a means to establish as fully as possible an articulation of ‘liquid knowing’ and a shift through intersubjectivity into the know-what of shared and corroborated soft knowledge, in turn resonating with the harder know-that of established conceptual frameworks.

Tim Ingold once stated that anthropologists are more inclined to get engaged in ‘Learning by doing.’ Over time, he adds, the idea of ‘ethnographic fieldwork’ perpetuates the notion that what you are doing in the field is gathering material on people and their lives—or what, to burnish your social scientific credentials, you might call ‘qualitative data’—which you will subsequently analyze and write up. That is why, participant observation is so often described in textbooks as a method of data collection. Although, literally, a datum is a thing given (from the Latin dare, ‘to give’), in the vocabulary of science, it has come to mean that which is there for the taking – a ‘fact’ that has already precipitated out from the ebb and flow of life in which it once was formed (Ingold, 2018:18). This is why so much ink has been spilled on the practical and ethical dilemmas of combining participation and observation. But, there is really no contradiction between participation and observation; indeed, you simply cannot have one without the other. The great mistake is to confuse observation with objectification. To observe is not, in itself, to objectify. It is to notice what people are saying and doing, to watch and listen, and to respond in your own practice (Tim Ingold, 2017:26).

“As ethnomusicologists, it is what we do, and what we undergo. And we do it and undergo it out of recognition of what we owe to others for our own practical and moral education. Fieldwork is not a technique of data gathering but an ontological commitment. And that commitment is fundamental to the discipline of anthropology.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Xiao Mei's speech in the lecture ‘Applied Musical Anthropology--a Case Study Centered on Traditional Chinese Music’ at the Shanghai Conservatory of Music. (September 27, 2021).

Therefore, when we reflect on the ethnomusicology of ‘application,’ we must also recognize that not only it is a name for ‘application’ but also it embraces a variety of perspectives of action and methods of engagement.

As Anthony Seeger pointed out, we should carefully consider the terms we use for applications of ethnomusicology outside academia. One can see in the multiplication of terms for applied anthropology and organizations something like the super market branding phenomenon, where one brand (of biscuits, for example) subdivides itself in order to get more shelf space (low-salt, low-fat, high-fiber, flavored original, and so forth). Repeatedly, setting one approach apart from another creates a fragmentation and divisiveness that can weaken the whole. Applied ethnomusicology should be defined broadly enough so that different kinds of approaches can feel they can participate in and contribute to it (Anthony Seeger, 2021:26).

Similarly, Diamond and El-Shawan Castelo-Branco, the editors of *Transforming Ethnomusicology* (2020), hold that “we specifically did not identify this volume as ‘Applied Ethnomusicology’, though some of the authors claim that affiliation Rather we offer a critical discussion of a range of socially engaged approaches as well as their deep historical roots which we consider fundamental to the ethnomusicological endeavor” (Beverley Diamond & El-Shawan Castelo-Branco, 2021:5).

The study of ‘applied,’ ‘engaged,’ and ‘praxis’ in ethnomusicology does not take knowledge production as a means or seek to gain power and exert control through the acquisition of knowledge since it focuses on practice and what is happening around it and participates in it, instead of pursuing illusory objectivity. It points toward a different way of ‘doing’ science, more modest, humane, and sustainable than much of what passes for science today<sup>8</sup>, with a view to realizing an ultimate concern for the future of humanity.

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<sup>8</sup> Here is expressed the author’s thought at a not yet experienced stage and, therefore, it might be very judgemental towards all scientific efforts undertaken up to date.

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