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Modes of Transmission in Tày, Nùng and Zhuang Manuscript Cultures

Abstract: In this chapter I first give a preliminary overview of the fieldwork project I have conducted over the past few years in the northern provinces of Vietnam and in contiguous areas on the Chinese side of the border. The methodology for this survey was developed during an earlier survey of traditional character scripts among Tai-speaking groups in Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan, and northern Vietnam. I go on to outline several quite different modes of inter-generational transmission of reading knowledge found in this region, on both sides of the border. With vernacular priests called *mogong*, who recite texts in the local language for Tai-style rituals, learning to recite the texts takes place separately from learning to read and write, resulting in practices that have been called performative literacy. With Daoist priests of both the Meishan and Maoshan schools, there is a much closer connection between text and recitation. For shamanic practitioners in northern Vietnam, including both men and women, there is a highly organised form of master-disciple transmission that involves instruction from both 'mother' and 'father' teachers, and results in a much higher level of skill in reading vernacular manuscripts. Finally, with song texts that circulate widely among the people, learning to read and learning to sing take place largely through home instruction and apprenticeship to individual song masters. I discuss the implications of these findings for fieldwork methodology and future work on manuscript cultures.

1 Introduction

With the help of Zhuang, Vietnamese, and Tày scholars, the writer has conducted a fieldwork-based survey over the past few years covering the northern provinces of Vietnam and contiguous areas on the Chinese side of the border. This project concentrates on Tai-speaking groups such as the Zhuang, Tày and Nùng that use Chinese character-based writing systems to write documents in their vernacular languages. It builds on the findings of an earlier survey of the Zhuang, Bouyei, and

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other groups based on 45 traditional texts in 45 locations in Guangxi, Guizhou, Yunnan, and northern Vietnam.[1]

In this chapter the main focus is going to be on modes of cultural transmission of literacy practices in these societies, based on investigations in the field and close analysis of actual recitations of traditional manuscripts. This experience has indicated the importance of viewing such practices holistically and at a level of linguistic and ethnographic detail much finer than the usual practices in the contemporary social sciences. This is based in turn on a mode of thinking about the scholarly vocation in general and what I take to be its chief aim, the production of coherent bodies of knowledge for the benefit of future research and future generations – all subject, of course, to rebuttal, disproof, or confirmation. At the present juncture, it has become increasingly clear that traditional societies everywhere are under threat of dismemberment and dispossession by the forces of globalisation and modernisation. It is not just languages which are endangered, but also entire cultures and societies, leading to displacement of increasing numbers of marginalised peoples. Under such circumstances, and wherever possible, scholarly work should document not just manuscripts or languages, but undertake more wide-ranging investigations that record as fully as possible all relevant aspects of the human communities being studied, including indigenous systems of knowledge, material culture, kinship and the dynamics of social interactions, and the ways in which traditional knowledge is handed down from one generation to the next. The main focus is on facts on the ground, and cultural practices in operation.

Fieldwork based on this kind of motivation is not exactly a new phenomenon, and in anthropology has sometimes been referred to as 'salvage anthropology'. Where it parts company methodologically with the other social sciences, as conventionally taught to undergraduates, is in the commitment to transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries and undertake holistic investigations that take into account – or are open to – evidence from all possibly relevant quarters. Such an approach builds on the findings of other disciplines but is not confined to either their methods or subject matter – or, for that matter, 'current debates'. In investigating previously undocumented societies, with their as-yet unfathomed patterns of social dynamics and under-documented languages, it would clearly be foolish to rule out any source of information as irrelevant *a priori*.

Being mindful of the objective of producing grounded information as a basis for future research and future generations also entails documenting social processes at a finer level of detail than is customary in the social sciences, and at a level that can be described as 'operational'. In the analysis of the way in which manuscripts are

1 For which see Holm 2013.

recited or sung in their original social context, it involves producing transcriptions of audio recordings that are more information-rich than the phonemicised transcriptions conventionally produced by scholars in linguistics.[2] In the analysis of handwriting in manuscripts, it involves paying attention to the details of the writing process as well as the graphic traces of such processes, including stroke order, degree of cursivity, and so on, as well as providing an overview of the full range of graphic variation in relation to the Chinese graphic mainstream. In the analysis of plant and animal names, it means collecting sufficient information for making generic or specific identifications *in situ* in collaboration with knowledgeable members of the local community, and collecting ample information about the way these things are used or thought about in local society. In all these cases, high-grade local information can then later be matched up with available bodies of scientific data – with calligraphic dictionaries and grammatological compendia, with dialect survey data, with zoological and botanical survey data, and so on. In principle, the basic idea is to avoid any jumping to conclusions, any premature aggregation of data, and to allow the full complexity of the field data to 'participate' in the development of hypotheses and explanation-building. It also means bringing local knowledge into dialogue with scientific data.

In one of my recent articles,[3] such attention to ongoing social processes, as well as the material artefacts generated by such processes (viz. manuscripts), led to a kind of two-stage presentation, the first an objectivised overview of textual phenomena based on field data and objective analysis, and the second a step back into an 'emic' view of the ongoing social event (such as a ritual recitation) from the point of view of the various participants on the scene as the ritual unfolded. The second step, of course, cannot be based just on the investigator's subjectivity, however informed by scholarly constructs such as 'participant observation', but needs to be based on fieldwork-derived information collected locally from participants.

Here it might be not out of place to mention briefly some of the works that have informed my theoretical understanding. An early source of inspiration was the Foxfire project, which documented many aspects of the traditional material culture of the Scotch-Irish inhabitants of rural Appalachia in the eastern United States.[4] Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice helps one move away from a focus on

2 Here we find parallels in recent trends in 'variationist linguistics', inspired by the work of William Labov among others.

3 Holm 2017a.

4 Launched in the very late 1960's, this was a project that sought to document how people actually made things, and it involved groups of local high-school students in field investigations and interviews with knowledgeable older people. The project resulted in a series of published volumes of essays on various topics, entitled *Foxfire*, *Foxfire 2*, and so on. See Wiggington 1972.

adherence to social rules, as in earlier anthropological theory, to a focus on strategising in ongoing social life.[5] In the study of writing systems, the work of Roy Harris has been an important influence, as has the work of Florian Coulmas. Jacques Derrida's trenchant criticism of Ferdinand de Saussure is also worth taking on board.[6] In phonetics and phonology I have drawn particular inspiration from the work of Robert F. Port, a phonetician who has demonstrated the relevance of finely detailed distinctions in the articulation and reception of speech sounds in ordinary social life, and the importance of cadence in natural speech.[7] A common thread in many of these works, though one variously recognised in the writings themselves, is the concept of a non-deterministic universe, full of what Ilya Prigogine refers to as 'self-organising systems'.[8]

2 The Tày and Nùng

The Tày and Nùng are Tai-speaking peoples who inhabit the mountain and hill areas in northern Vietnam to the north of the Red River plain. The main concentrations of the Tày and Nùng populations are found in six northeastern provinces: Cao Bằng, Lạng Sơn, Bắc Kạn, Thái Nguyên, Hà Giang, and Tuyên Quang. In many districts, they comprise the great majority of the local population, with the less numerous ethnic Vietnamese population being concentrated in the towns. Unlike the better-known Tai groups of the far northwest of Vietnam,[9] with their Indic-derived writing systems, the Tày and Nùng have a sinified culture and employ a modified version of the Chinese character script to write their own languages. In this and in other respects, they are similar to the Tai-speaking peoples to the north of the Chinese border: the Zhuang, the Nong, the Sha, the Bouyei, and other groups.

The Tày have a very long history of settlement in the area, going back several thousand years, and may be considered for all intents and purposes indigenous.[10] The Nùng, by contrast, are relatively recent arrivals, having migrated into the area

5 Bourdieu 1977.

6 Derrida 1976, 29–73.

7 Port 2009. That is, in speech articulation and reception, information is carried at a much finer level than phonemes.

8 Prigogine 1997. See also the various essays in Agazzi and Montecucco (eds) 2002.

9 These groups are sometimes called the 'tribal Tai', in contradistinction to the Thai and Lao: these groups are the Black Tai, the Red Tai, and the White Tai. Unlike the Thai and Lao, these groups are not adherents of Theravada Buddhism.

10 For a brief overview of the Tày, see Holm 2019, 3–4.

from various home districts in China mostly during the last 500 years or so. The Tày speak a Central Tai language that is quite distinct from most Central Tai dialects spoken north of the border, in the southern part of Guangxi and eastern Yunnan. The Nùng are speakers of various Central Tai dialects closely related to those spoken in the southern part of Guangxi, and sub-groups are typically referred to by their place of origin. Thus the Nùng Cháo come from the area of Longzhou 龍州 in the far southwestern corner of Guangxi, and the Nùng Fanh Sling come from Wancheng 萬承 in present-day Tiandeng 天等 county, a different dialect area.[11] Altogether there are around eight distinct Nùng sub-groups in the north of Vietnam.[12]

All of these groups are literate, in the sense that they have traditional writing systems and substantial cultural content that has been transmitted from generation to generation through the written medium. This does not mean that everyone in these societies could read. The ability to read and write was more circumscribed than it has since become in the modern period. Girls, for a start, were generally not taught to read and write in traditional society. Literacy and associated skills and cultural knowledge were taught in traditional Confucian schools, which have a very long history in Vietnam as well as in China,[13] and these skills were also passed down in families through the medium of 'family teaching'. The effect overall was to make literacy or at least literate culture broadly accessible to males in Tày and Nùng society, certainly at least in the relatively prosperous villages in the rice-growing valleys, in administrative centres, and along major transport routes. Most villages seem to have had at least one or two male elders who were known locally to be the keepers of local knowledge and local traditions. Some of these men may also have been ritual specialists – Mo, Pụt, Then, or Daoist priests.[14] Such patterns are also found north of the border in the Zhuang-speaking areas of Guangxi and contiguous provinces, except there the ritual specialists were *mogong* 麼公, ritual masters (*shigong* 師公), Buddhist priests (*fogong* 佛公), and Daoist priests (*daogong* 道公).[15]

Transmission of this vernacular culture was exclusively via manuscript – that is, hand-written texts. To my knowledge there were no vernacular Tày or Nùng materials or documents in printed form. On the other hand, as in China, this vernacular

11 In Guangxi these Central Tai dialects are referred to as Southern Zhuang dialects, and the peoples classified as Zhuang. The official designations are different again in Yunnan.

12 See Holm 2010, 16–18. The Fanh Sling designation comes from the pronunciation of Wancheng in the local language. Nùng Fanh Sling groups migrated far and wide, and are even found in the southern part of Vietnam, where their languages were documented during the 1960s by Janice E. Saul, Nancy Freiberger Wilson, and other scholars working for the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

13 See Nguyễn 2020.

14 For details see further below.

15 See Holm 2003, 20–23.

literacy was dependent on teaching of the Chinese script in the schools, with a primary school curriculum based on the traditional Confucian textbooks and the Four Books, and some of these school texts almost certainly circulated in the form of traditional woodblock printed editions. Writing with a writing brush was also widely taught, and even now, over a century after the arrival of the French colonial administration and the discontinuation of traditional teaching through the medium of Chinese characters, one finds village men from literate Tày and Nùng families in the northern provinces of Vietnam who will proudly insist on writing characters in the traditional fashion with brush and ink, rather than with ball-point pens or other more convenient modern writing tools.[16]

By the late traditional period – over the last few centuries – this literate culture among the Tày and Nùng had blossomed into a rich tradition that incorporated ritual texts for a wide range of communal and household rituals, vernacular-language versions of the Confucian primers and classics taught in school, dictionaries of the vernacular Tày script, song texts for a wide range of seasonal festivals and ceremonial occasions, including wedding songs and wooing songs, moral homilies for the instruction of young people, and fictional narratives in verse form. Some of these works of fiction were based on Chinese or Vietnamese themes and subject matter, but others were *sui generis*. A survey conducted by provincial cultural departments starting in the mid-1970s revealed that there were nearly 60 fictional titles in circulation in the northern provinces of northern Vietnam.[17] Some of this rich heritage of traditional manuscripts is now being made available in a series published by the Hán Nôm Institute, which includes photo-reproductions of manuscript texts, transcriptions into romanised Tày, Vietnamese translations, and annotations.[18]

To this wide range of manuscript genres we should add family registers, usually in Chinese, medical texts, calendrical handbooks and almanacs, and Daoist ritual texts in both Chinese and vernacular-language versions. Daoists in the northern part of Vietnam are mostly of the kind called *daogong* 道公 in the south of China, and have an extensive ritual repertoire for both funerals and for other household rituals. Even as far south as Chợ Đôn in the southwestern corner of Bắc Kạn province, well to the south of the border with China, they recite their Chinese-language texts in a form of Southwestern Mandarin.[19] Often though they also have

16 Holm, fieldwork, Quảng Uyên district, Cao Bằng province, August 2015.

17 Details of titles and the areas (districts) within which these works circulate are provided in Hoàng Triều Ân 2003, 621–622.

18 There are some 19 volumes thus far. The series title is *Tổng tập truyện thơ nôm các dân tộc thiểu số Việt Nam* [Collection of verse stories in the vernacular scripts of the minority peoples of Vietnam].

19 Holm, fieldwork, Chợ Đôn district, Bắc Kạn province, August 2015.

Tày or Nùng-language versions of ritual texts, especially it seems for funeral texts. Recent fieldwork has indicated that these local-language Daoists (*tudao* 土道), as they are called in western Guangxi, are found widely also in the northern provinces of Vietnam.[20]

In format all these manuscripts, both in Chinese and the local language, are of the Chinese type, thread-bound volumes with sheets of paper folded on the outer edge and characters in vertical columns, reading from the right-hand side of each page. At first sight such manuscripts look Chinese. In content, however, they are often very different.

3 What lies behind the written text: Manuscripts in their social and cultural context

But here we must take a step back. What we have discovered, through some years of fieldwork-based engagement with the cultures and manuscripts of Tai-speaking peoples in the southwestern provinces of China and across the border in Vietnam, is that there is a great deal of variety in the literate cultures – or cultures of literacy – across this broad region. Working first in western Guangxi with the texts and recitations of the *mogong* (Zhuang *bouxmo*), vernacular priests with strong ties to the traditional indigenous religious practices of the Tai peoples, I was disconcerted to discover that the 'text' as recited was often different from the text as written in the manuscript. In these texts and recitations also, analysis revealed that there were many historical layers of readings of Chinese characters, with many readings corresponding to Middle Chinese.

The second kind of text I worked with were the Zhuang or Bouyei-language texts of Ritual Masters (*shigong* 師公), vernacular Daoists of the Meishan 梅山 school, and similar vernacular texts belonging to 'local Daoists' of the so-called Maoshan 茅山 school. These texts were evidently of much more recent origin (Ming or Qing dynasty), and were written in a fairly uniform, mature vernacular script, usually with only one or two ways of writing each morpheme. This meant in turn that the recitation and the written text were in fairly close alignment, since the texts had been produced expressly for recitation in the context of Taoist rituals. Even here, however, there were variations in readings based on synonym substitution

20 Holm, fieldwork, Quảng Uyên district in Cao Bằng province and Chợ Đôn district in Bắc Kạn, August, 2015; Cao Lộc, Lộc Bình, and Vân Quan districts, Lạng Sơn province, August 2017.

and similar mechanisms, and processes of abbreviation or augmentation in actual ritual performance.

The third type were the manuscripts of the priests called *Then* in northern Vietnam, where there was a highly organised and systematic transmission of the ways in which manuscripts were recited to both male and female acolytes. The *Then*, shamanic practitioners who drew their inspiration from early strains of Buddhism and brahmanism in the Red River Valley, perform rituals that are structured as journeys up into the sky, out into the wilderness, or down to the bottom of the sea.[21] Their manuscripts are written in a mature and relatively unified script that contains many vernacular Vietnamese graphic elements, but also a layer that corresponds in readings to Early Middle Chinese.[22]

Finally, the fourth type is song texts, chapbooks used as a crib for antiphonal singing contests in traditional 'song markets'. Here, the graphic representation of the lyrics may be quite abbreviated. Evidently this is not disfunctional, as long as the owner of the chapbook knows how the lines are meant to be sung. The examples we have studied most closely have scripts that are very mixed typologically, with reading pronunciations based on a mixture of local Pinghua 平話 dialect, Southwestern Mandarin, and schoolhouse pronunciation, and with a strong preference for characters with very few brush strokes that are easy to write and easy to recognise.[23] However, even the singing partners of the men who own such chapbooks often find it difficult to read them.[24] Playscripts operate in a manner rather similar to song-books, in that the texts and the script are designed as an aid to performance, and actual recitation is subject to variation, depending on the performance context, the memory of the actors, and on-the-spot creativity.

Behind each of these manuscript types lies a different pattern of cultural transmission – that is, the conventional means by which knowledge about how to write, and how to read the manuscript, and how to make use of it in practice, is conveyed from one generation to the next. Of course, the manuscripts themselves may be treated with varying degrees of care, respect, and veneration outside the context of actual performance, but their *raison-d'etre* is their use or 'participation' in ritual,

21 Holm, 2018b and 2019, 4–19.

22 He Dawei 2023.

23 Holm and Meng, 2021. Pinghua dialects are Chinese dialects spoken by descendants of the oldest stratum of Han Chinese migrants to the Guangxi area. For a description of Pinghua, Southwestern Mandarin and schoolhouse pronunciation see Holm 2013, 38–45. On schoolhouse pronunciation see Ban Chao 1999.

24 A point also made by Meng Yuanyao in his chapter on the Brigands Song, in this volume.

ceremonial, or non-sacred performance in the ongoing social life of the community.[25] In what follows, we will explore the underlying patterns of cultural transmission for each of these types of manuscript culture in turn.

4 Performative literacy

We will first look at a pattern called performative literacy, found pre-eminently among the Tai-style male ritualists called *mogong* in Chinese.[26] *Mogong* are found among Zhuang-speaking communities in western Guangxi and eastern Yunnan, but also among the Bouyei in Guizhou and various Tai-speaking groups in northern Vietnam.[27] *Mogong* texts are ritual texts recited for the household, lineage, or village community. The act of reciting these scriptures is the central part of such rituals and indispensable for their ritual efficacy. Typically, in *mogong* ritual performance, dances and magical transformations of ritual objects play a much lesser role than they do in Daoist ritual. In northern Vietnam as well as in Guangxi, Guizhou and Yunnan, the ritual texts are cast in the form of five-syllable lines of verse, written in a form of vernacular Chinese script but recited in the local Tai dialect (see Fig. 1). Reciting the manuscript during a ritual may involve turning the pages at more or less the right time, and other performative gestures, but does not necessarily entail actual reading – focussing, that is, on each line of verse in turn (see Fig. 2). How such texts are recited is something that is memorised by the young apprentices of the older generation of master priests, often during childhood while accompanying older family members to local ritual events. Such apprentices from a young age would listen carefully to their master's recitations and follow along, adding their voices to his. By the time they were ordained, they would have developed a high degree of familiarity with a range of liturgical texts, and be able to recite them from memory. The transmission of knowledge of how to recite such texts, in other words, is oral. On the other hand, the written content of the manuscripts is preserved quite carefully from generation to generation: each generation of apprentice priests is required to copy out carefully by hand all the ritual texts that his master provides

25 It is worth noting in passing that when a man dies in the Lingnan area (Guangxi and Guangdong), all his manuscripts are usually burnt along with items of clothing and bedding, in order to get rid of the miasma of death pollution.

26 This section draws on the author's previous discussions of this issue, as in Holm 2013, 61–62; and 2017a, 380–381.

27 See Holm 2017b, 173–189. On the *mogong* among Thai domains in northwestern Vietnam, see Holm 2017b, 183–184.

to him. The master's own copies of the manuscripts are normally burned along with the master's other personal belongings at the time of his death. The textual tradition, in other words, is highly conservative.

The overall effect of this cultural pattern is that the recitation of texts and the transmission (copying) of texts are de-coupled. Knowledge of how the texts are recited is absorbed through the process of apprentices listening to recitations and replicating them in their own oral performance, while knowledge of the script in which the scriptures are written is effected by transcription (making manuscript copies). These two modes for the transmission of cultural knowledge not only differ in quality, but are separated in time. Oral recitation begins quite early in the process of a young person's participation in rituals – some acolytes learn to sing along when they are well under ten years of age, usually accompanying an older relative – whereas transcription of texts takes place at a later age, when an apprentice undergoes ordination.

Thus the act of recitation in a ritual context, while it may involve turning the pages at more or less the right time, does not actually involve focussing on the pages of the manuscript, much less reading each character one by one. Reciting the text, in other words, is a performative act. This is a very common situation among ritual practitioners in Southwest China.[28] We have found in the course of conducting fieldwork interviews that priests will not necessarily be able to say what the pronunciation of an individual character is, taken at random, or even be able to recite lines of verse from the middle of a ritual segment; they will need to go back to the beginning of the section and start from there.

One consequence of this cultural pattern is: because learning how to recite the texts takes place orally, and separately from copying the manuscripts, any mismatch between the recitation and the wording of the text can go unnoticed. Over the generations, various discrepancies develop. These discrepancies happen naturally and gradually, through processes such as synonym substitution, and are not normally noticed by the priests themselves. It is possible for scholars, of course, through careful comparison of the recorded recitation and the written text, to point out where such changes have occurred, and even in many cases to show how they might have arisen. What is not possible, however, is to predict how the written texts might be recited, in the absence of field data (a recording of the recitation) and

28 This has parallels in the 'recitation literacy' of Central America. See Houston 1994, 27–49.

Fig. 1: *Mogong* manuscript, Phi Hải, Quảng Uyên district, Cao Bằng province, Vietnam; photograph by D. Holm, August 2015.

Fig. 2: Ritual recitation by *Mogong*, Phi Hải, Quảng Uyên district, Cao Bằng province, Vietnam; photograph by D. Holm, August 2015.

given only the manuscript. In many cases, it will not even be possible to say what the text means.[29]

5 Daoist vernacular ritual texts

Unlike the *mogong*, Meishan 梅山 and Maoshan 茅山 Daoists are ordained male priests who conduct the core business of their rituals in Chinese. For both groups, the primary liturgical texts are written in Chinese, and recited in Chinese. The dialect used for recitation varies from place to place and from one Daoist lineage to another, but one common pattern in the central and western parts of Guangxi is for Meishan Daoists to recite their texts in the local Chinese dialect, in Pinghua, or in a closely related 'schoolhouse pronunciation'. Daoists of the self-styled Maoshan lineage, however, tend to recite their texts in Southwestern Mandarin, both in Guangxi and in northern Vietnam.[30]

In addition to texts in Chinese, Meishan ritual masters usually also have quite a number of texts written in the Zhuang vernacular script, and recited in Zhuang. There is a great variety of such texts, including liturgical texts which call down deities and spirits into the ritual arena, narrative texts in verse encompassing a wide range of traditional stories and myths, moral homilies, and ritual theatrical pieces. While many of these pieces are intended for the entertainment of the deities and ancestors, who are deemed to be present during the ritual proceedings, as well as for the human audience, they are considered to be of a semi-sacred nature, but still, depending on the circumstances of ritual performance, they are subject to elaboration, augmentation, and truncation. Generally, the vernacular script in which they are written is more recent than that of the *mogong* texts, dating probably in large part from the eighteenth century, and is much less internally complex and many-layered.

29 Even for standard Chinese characters, readings are not confined to phonetic and semantic borrowing. There are as many as twelve different ways of reading such characters in a vernacular text. See Holm 2009, 245–292. The typology presented in that article was based on the analysis of recitations of traditional texts, as recorded in the field. It would not have been possible to develop such a typology, or even imagine some of the variations that are found in actual practice, on the basis of library research.

30 Holm, fieldwork, Cao Bằng, February and August, 2015, and Lạng Sơn, August 2017. On the diagnostic features for readings in Southwestern Mandarin see Holm 2013, 42–44.

Fig. 3: Daoist vernacular manuscript, Long Tay, Hà Nam province, Vietnam; photograph by D. Holm August 2015.

In some localities the Maoshan Daoists, who perform mainly at funerals, also have some manuscripts written in the vernacular script, and recited in the local language, ordinarily some dialect of Zhuang, Tày, or Nùng (see Fig. 3). The main function of these texts is to serve as a vernacular-language adjunct to the main ritual business, which is conducted in Chinese. This is done partly to provide families and local people with a local-language commentary – thus the content to some extent runs parallel to that of the Chinese ritual texts – and sometimes to provide light relief during the funeral process. One example of the latter type is a comic skit making fun of the *papier-maché* horse provided by the son-in-law of the deceased.[31]

Nowadays, in northern Vietnam, recitation of vernacular Daoist character texts by Tày and Nùng priests is sometimes facilitated by a transcription into the Tày or Nùng equivalent of *Quốc Ngữ*, the romanised Vietnamese script (see Fig. 4). Among the current generation of ritual practitioners, Chinese character reading and writing skills are becoming more of a rarity, and many priests find it easier to perform rituals if they write out a romanised transcription of the text for their own use. The

31 Holm 2001a.

romanised transcription is one that they can read much more easily, particularly in the stressful environment of an ongoing ritual recitation.

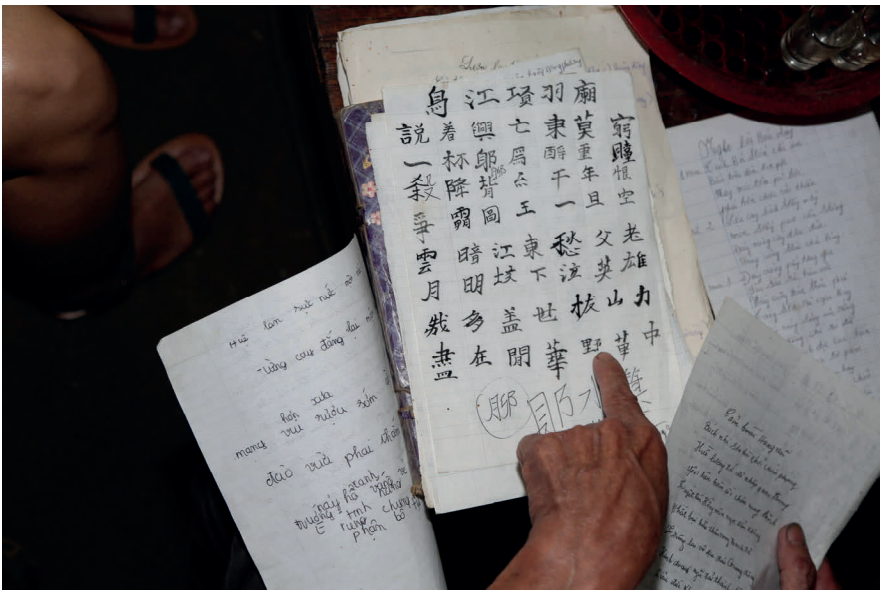

Fig. 4: Nùng An Daoist with character text and romanised transcription, Phúc Sen, Quảng Uyên district, Cao Bằng; photograph by D. Holm, August 2015.

6 Instruction from father and mother teachers among the *Then*

Among the Tày in Vietnam and in the far southwestern part of Guangxi, there are many different kinds of religious practitioners. The kinds of priesthood that are transmitted by masters who are ordained include the *Pụt* and the *Then*, as well as the *Mo* and *Tạo*. The *Pụt*, *Then*, and the *Mo* in most areas concentrate on rituals for the benefit of the living, and recite texts in the Tày language.[32] Both the *Pụt* and the

32 Of these, the *Mo* correspond to the *mogong* of Guangxi and Guizhou, while the *Tạo* are equivalent to the *daogong*. The word *Then* in Tày is pronounced much the same as English 'ten'.

Then perform rituals which involve shamanic journeys into the sky.[33] Female *Pụt* have a repertoire that is orally transmitted, but male *Pụt* and both male and female *Then* have a text-based ritual repertoire, in which ritual efficacy depends on the correct recitation of texts. The *Then* have an extensive repertoire, and most manuscripts used during ritual performance are recent copies, in large format but thread-bound and a Chinese-style textual layout (see Fig. 5). Individual *Then*, however, may also possess older manuscripts handed down within their families (see Fig. 6).

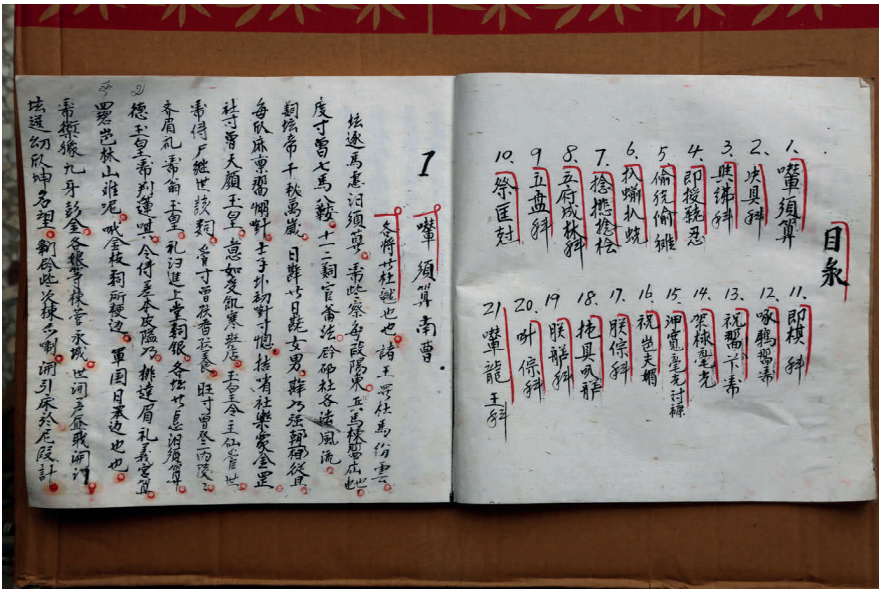

Fig. 5: Modern *Then* manuscript, Jinlongdong, Longzhou county, Guangxi; photograph by D. Holm, February 2016.

Among the *Then* there are both male and female priests, and males and females share much of the same repertoire. This is significant in itself, and quite unlike the situation in most of Guangxi, where male and female specialists may collaborate but have quite different ritual traditions, often even reciting in different languages. Male and female *Then* perform together for major communal rituals, where as many

33 Holm 2019. Interestingly, the names *Pụt* and *Then* are both written with the same character in their texts: 伕, which is a demotic allograph for 佛 *fó* 'buddha'. The Late Han and Early Middle Chinese pronunciation of 佛 *fó* was 'but'.

as a dozen priests may join in the recitation. However, there is still a difference in the performance styles of males and females. Male performance tends to be text-based, and male *Then* and *Pụt* can be seen to recite or chant directly from the relevant ritual manuscripts. They read from the manuscript that is open in front of them (see Fig. 7). Female *Then* and *Pụt* do not do this, but recite their 'texts' from memory. One could easily get the impression that female priests were not able to read, and acquired their knowledge through oral transmission.

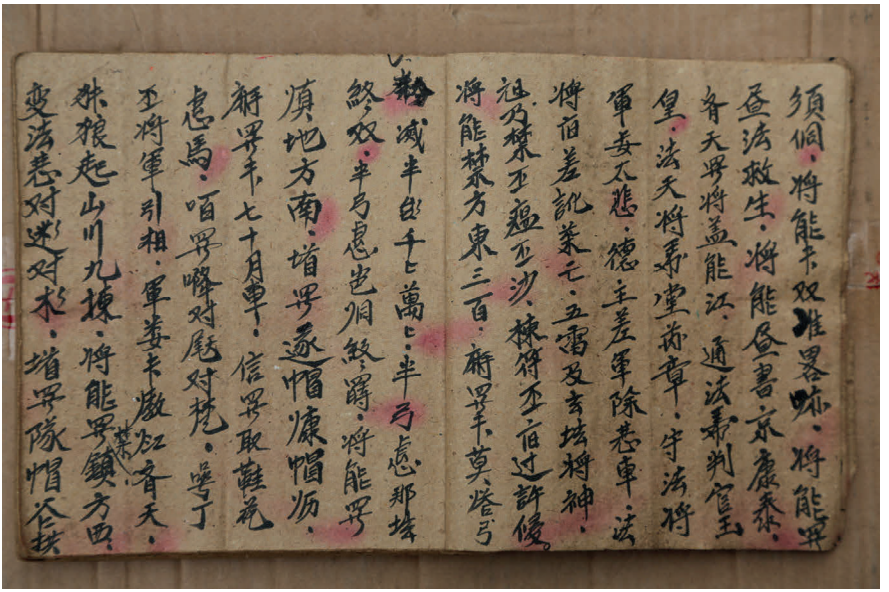

Fig. 6: Traditional Then manuscript, Jinlongdong, Longzhou county, Guangxi; photograph by D. Holm, February 2016.

Among male *Then* priests, then, the recitation is based directly on the act of reading the text. That is to say, the *Then* priest actually reads each line as he recites it. In talking with *Then* from Jinlongdong 金龍洞 in southwestern Guangxi, I discovered that male priests were actually able to recite lines and pronounce individual characters out of context.[34] *Mogong* usually cannot do this, and have to start over at the beginning of the text or the beginning of the section, and begin their recitation from that point. There are two factors that account for this. The first is, the Tày

34 Holm, fieldwork, Jinlongdong, Longzhou county, Guangxi, February 2016.

vernacular script is a much more standardised script, with one written form usually corresponding with one spoken word, and vice-versa, while in *mogong* texts, with their more ancient pedigree, there may be as many as five or six different ways of writing the same word. The second factor is connected with the first: the *Then* possess dictionaries of the vernacular Tày script. These dictionaries are pre-modern dictionaries, patterned after the *Er Ya* 爾雅, and come in two different versions: Chinese-Tày-Việt and Việt-Tày-Chinese (see Fig. 8).[35]

Fig. 7: Ritual recitation by *Then*, Jinlongdong, Longzhou county, Guangxi; photograph by D. Holm, February 2016.

35 Holm, fieldwork, Longzhou, February 2016.

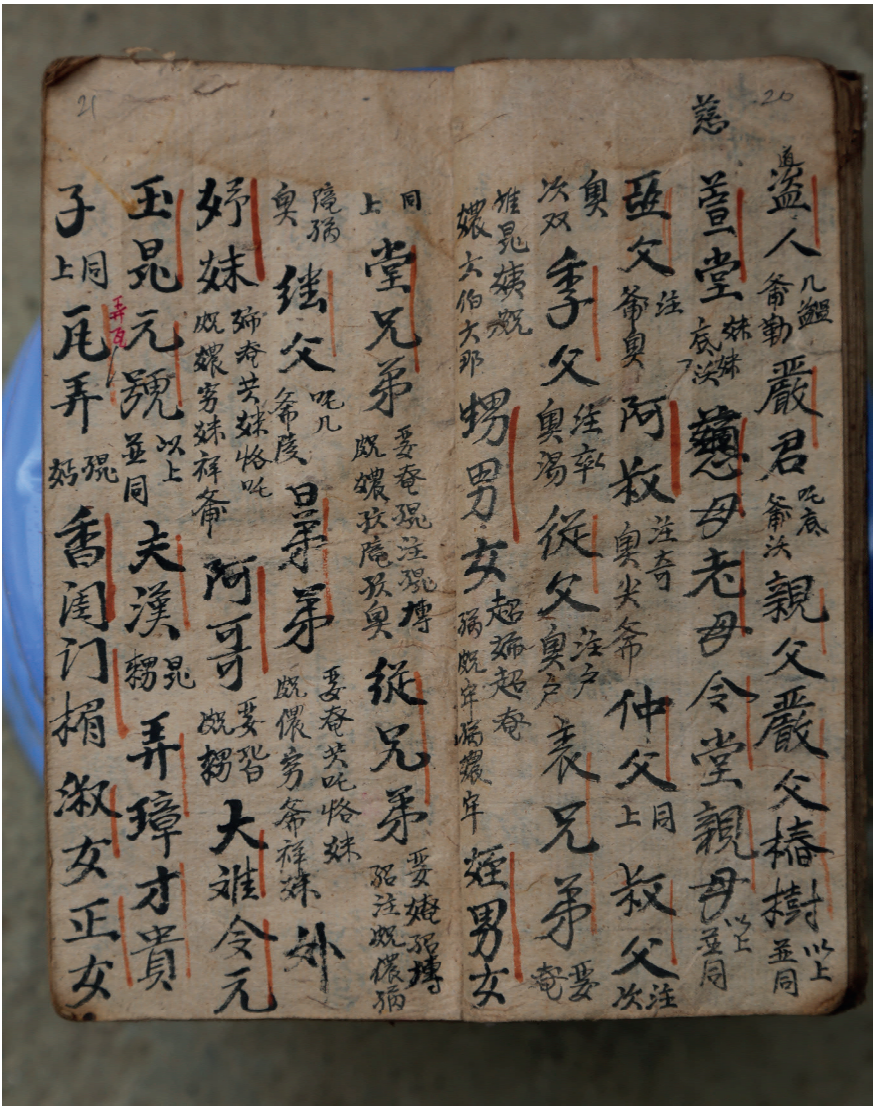

Fig. 8: Sample page of a Chinese-Tày-Việt dictionary, Jinlongdong, Longzhou county, Guangxi; photograph by D. Holm, February 2016.

Lying behind this quite different pattern of ritual performance and reading skill is a different mode of cultural transmission. Throughout the northern part of Vietnam and also among Tày communities in Guangxi, both male and female apprentice

Then are required to have one male and one female master teacher. Each aspiring *Then* student has one 'mother teacher' (*slay mẹ*) and one 'father teacher' (*slay cha*). The 'mother teacher' is usually a senior practitioner with long years of experience as a religious practitioner. The 'father teacher' is usually a senior male Daoist priest. Traditionally, the way the 'mother teacher' imparted her ritual knowledge to her 'children' was through oral instruction, since in this area girls traditionally did not go to school and would not have been able to read; the 'mother teacher' herself often could not read. The 'father teacher' taught the 'children' how to recite what was written in the liturgical manuscripts, and taught the boys how to read them.

Fig. 9: Female *Then* priest with manuscripts, Jinlongdong, Longzhou county, Guangxi; photograph by D. Holm, February 2016.

What this means is that the girl apprentice *Then* received from their male 'father teacher' a direct transmission of the contents of all the ritual texts needed for the recitation of texts during *Then* ritual performances.[36] To put this another way, female *Then* did not receive their ritual knowledge by means of oral transmission as this term is usually understood, by word of mouth from one generation to the next,

36 Holm 2019, 14–15.

down through the generations, but received the text-based knowledge necessary for the recitation of *Then* ritual texts directly from their 'father teacher', which they then committed to memory. This is a form of practice I have called 'performative orality', whereby female priests receive their instruction from male teachers in how to recite ritual texts, but perform in public without reading from any written texts.[37] The boys, however, were taught to read the same texts, and also how to write them. This is why male and female *Then* can perform rituals together. Furthermore, at least in Guangxi, where girls have been going to school since the 1950's, there are also many female *Then* who can now read ritual texts themselves, and have their own copies of the ritual manuscripts (see Fig. 9). Their schooling in Guangxi would have given them facility in reading and writing the Chinese script, unlike their counterparts over the border in Vietnam.

7 Traditional song texts

Throughout the far south of China in pre-modern times, there was a vibrant and pervasive culture of songs and song texts. Seasonal song contests used to be widespread throughout the region, including the whole of Guangxi and, at least until the eighteenth century, western Guangdong and further afield. In the more sinified districts in eastern Guangxi, part of the repertoire was sung in Chinese and part in the local language, but part was also often written in Chinese and sung in the local language. In many of these areas, written songbooks circulated in vast numbers.[38]

The songbooks were mostly in the form of small threadbound volumes, sometimes only an inch or so high and three or four inches wide (2.5 cm × 7–10 cm), with song lyrics written in columns Chinese-fashion from right to left (see Fig. 10). In these song manuscripts, any characters in the lines of song that were repeated from a previous stanza or otherwise predictable from context were often indicated by a straight line, rather than written out in full. The booklets were small enough so that they could be tucked up a sleeve and taken along to song markets and other performance venues, where they could be pulled out and consulted by the young male singers during performance. In Zhuang-speaking areas as well as generally in the rest of China, it was characteristic in late traditional times that only male children went to school, only males could read, and only males had songbooks. The

37 Holm 2019.

38 The eighteenth-century *Guangdong xinyu* 廣東新語 describes a cave shrine devoted to the song goddess Liu Sanmei 劉三妹 in western Guangdong, where there were 'trunkfuls' of songbooks donated by worshipping song artists. See Holm 2004, 205–206.

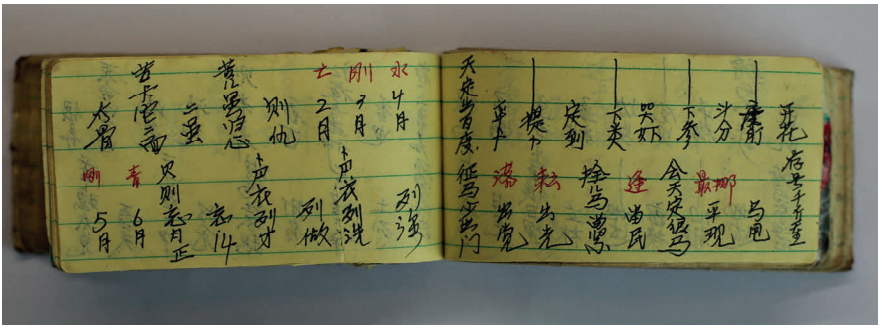

Fig. 10: Song booklet, Yexu parish, Pingguo county, Guangxi, written on exercise notebook paper; photograph by D. Holm, December 2015.

young female singers were also instructed in the art of traditional singing and impromptu versification, but they relied on memory during performance, and their lyrics generally followed those of the men, with the alteration of a few words or a line or two per stanza. Songs were sung antiphonally, with two young male singers and two young female singers taking turns to sing a stanza each. The songs were sung in two-part harmony, with the lead singer singing descant and the other chiming in, singing the same lyrics a fourth or fifth lower.[39]

Such performances were part of a wider cultural pattern in which youths and girls chose their marriage partners through participation in such song markets, rather than via arranged marriages Chinese-style. Thus until recently it used to be uncommon for any young person of marriageable age not to be able to sing in the local style and not to be able to have reasonable command of the local repertoire. It is no exaggeration to say that one's marriage prospects depended on being able to sing, and being able to sing well.

According to field investigations, one mechanism for the transmission of knowledge and skills involved in singing the traditional repertoire took place between famous singing masters and aspiring young singers who sought their instruction.[40] Particularly outstanding song masters might travel around and put in an appearance at a number of local song markets. The students of any one song master would make copies of his songbooks for their own use, and the script they employed

39 For the musical score of a sample stanza from the Brigands Song, see Holm and Meng 2021, 54–55. The singing style was quite unlike Chinese.

40 For details see Qin Naichang 2005, 95–96.

would replicate that of their master's songbooks. The important point to note is that this form of transmission was particularistic, from song master to disciple.

Fig. 11: Antiphonal singing at a Traditional Song Market, Taiping, Pingguo county, Guangxi; photograph by D. Holm, February 2016.

Transmission of song texts also took place within families, with fathers teaching their sons how to read the family's song texts and sing the songs in the traditional manner. Boys would attend village schools and learn to read and write Chinese, and at a certain point would be required by their fathers to make their own copies of the family's song texts. Then in performance at song markets, young men of marriageable age would use these texts as a crib for antiphonal singing of extensive bodies of traditional song, with two young men singing the male parts and two young women singing the female parts (see Fig. 11).

What actually happens in the course of performance is that the two male singers bring along a chapbook, usually one belonging to the lead singer. Between stanzas of song, while the female singers are singing their lyrics, the men quickly confer, and the owner of the chapbook quietly reads the lyrics of the next stanza to his singing partner. There would be no need to do this if the singing partner were able to read the lyrics in the other man's chapbook. This is true even in areas where the lyrics are relatively standardised – in other words, in areas where there ought

to be a high degree of predictability in actual content even if the graphic form is particularistic and variable.

It should be clear that scholars working on such song texts would find themselves in a similar situation, unable to fully comprehend what is written without the help of the traditional owner.

There is also a mode of transmission involving song texts which are written in Chinese but recited in the local language. I discuss an example of this kind of practice among the Mulam in northeastern Guangxi.[41] In such cases, of course, the text itself is in Chinese, so if you only had the manuscript to hand, you would not have any idea that it was recited in another language.

8 Some observations on methodology

What kind of methodological approach is needed, then, in order to tease out these complexities? At the very least, we need a recitation of the text as well as a photofacsimile of the manuscript in question. A transcription of the recitation into the International Phonetic Alphabet can then be prepared and matched up, word for word, with the characters in the manuscript. Any departures from an expected range of readings for the Chinese or vernacular graphs can then be noted and followed up with further investigation either in the field or in the library. It was the discovery of such unexpected or seemingly idiosyncratic readings of characters in the manuscripts that led to further investigations in the field and a subsequent focus on the patterns of cultural transmission that lay behind them. Further and wider reading on cognitive anthropology and literacy then led to the recognition that performative literacy as found among the *mogong* in western Guangxi actually had parallels elsewhere, and was not *sui generis*.

Of course, and it almost goes without saying, a precondition for such research is that the researcher should have sufficient command of the local language to make informed judgments about the language of the text. Such judgments, however preliminary, can then be brought into dialogue with native language speakers and a range of other informants, and serve as an epistemological check on the information from any single source. The traditional owners of manuscripts are naturally the primary source of information, and what they say needs to be recorded in full, but at least under conditions of performative literacy, their notions about the meaning of individual morphemes or lines of verse may be somewhat vague, or in

41 Holm 2013, 74–76.

some cases just guesswork. Under these conditions there is no substitute for combining the emic with the etic.

Local informants and even traditional owners of manuscripts are not the only source of information about words found in manuscripts. Very often we have found that some words come from elsewhere, and are not known or recognised in the local dialect, even if their pronunciation is preserved or if the character used to write them carries traces of a pronunciation from elsewhere.[42] Our method here is to report what local people tell us, but to supplement this with information taken from a variety of other sources: fieldwork in other localities, dialect survey material, and so on. Such is the overall degree of mobility among Tai peoples in southern China and northern Vietnam and further afield that we often find the key information in sources at some considerable distance from our field site. In the case of the texts from Donglan and the Tianyang Bama border area, most of our exotic readings came from the Bouyei-speaking areas to the north (up-river along the Hongshui 紅水 River), or – surprisingly – from the southern dialect areas and northern Vietnam. Thus far, the most distant clue we have found to what was obviously the correct explanation for a word unknown locally came from Shan (in northern Myanmar).[43]

For that matter, we also look at substrate languages for information about particular morphemes, which in Guangxi means primarily Buyang and Gelao.[44]

Thus, within the scope of fieldwork investigations we include the social and cultural setting and local history, as well as the manuscript itself and its traditional owner. Potentially at least a wide range of factors are relevant, including village history, local knowledge of any past migration, family history, availability of schools and family-based instruction, and so on. Neither the script (the 'writing system') nor the manuscript exists in isolation: rather, they are intricately connected with ongoing social practices. Rather than focussing just on the relationship between the script and the spoken language, our aim is to record the way the manuscript is traditionally recited along with the cultural context in 'literacy practices'.

In the area of phonetics and phonology, many of our recording and analytical procedures are similar to those used in field linguistics. What we have found, though, is that each locality we investigate is to some extent new and undocumented. Even if there exist dialect survey data for nearby locations, we are likely to discover

42 On which see Holm 2015.

43 This is not to say that the particular word was borrowed from Shan, but rather procedurally, in this case, that we included the whole geographic spectrum of Tai-Kadai language material in our search, and found the relevant word was documented in a Shan wordlist.

44 See the discussion about 'crows' and 'eagles' in Holm and Meng Yuanyao 2015, 426–430.

that there are differences in tonal contours and in the phonetic realisation of initial consonants, vowels, and codas in the local spoken language (or languages). Even within families, father and mother will often come from different villages and speak in ways that are subtly or obviously different.

In analysis, a narrow transcription along with sufficient information about the local social and linguistic environment also allows one to identify signs of dialect mixing in the speech of informants. Without this information, the recorded data, with as many as three or four quite different 'allophones' for a single putative initial consonant, would prove quite resistant to analysis. Dialect mixing is common in all of the areas investigated so far.

Another matter that requires careful investigation and analysis is the layer of Chinese readings and borrowings in the manuscript material.[45] The relevant historical layer of Chinese for the analysis of particular readings may vary between near-contemporary Southwestern Mandarin to Late or Early Middle Chinese or Han-period Chinese or even Old Chinese.[46]

Results of a survey of vernacular scripts can also be brought to bear in investigations of a wide range of social-historical factors, such as the domains of the native chieftaincies in the western part of Guangxi, the westward spread of ritual masters of the Meishan Daoist school, the prevalence of local village schools in Tai-speaking areas, and so on. In Vietnam, the distribution of the relatively unified Tày vernacular script needs to be investigated in light of the history of the Mạc dynasty, which had its capital in the Tày-speaking province of Cao Bằng for a period of 70 years. One aspect of our current research is to investigate commonalities in scripts and migration pathways of the various Nùng sub-groups in Vietnam.[47]

9 Conclusion

Knowledge of the script and how to read and write it are practices that need to be transmitted to younger generations in each generation if the tradition is not to die out. What we have found is that methods of transmission of literacy practices in the Tai-speaking regions are far from uniform. These things need to be investigated locally in every locality and for every genre – ritual texts, song texts, playscripts, moral homilies, and so on – since their pathways of transmission and modes of use

45 I have discussed these issues at some length in Holm 2013.

46 See discussion in Holm 2018a.

47 See e.g. Holm 2020a.

in society are so very different. In this chapter I have briefly described four quite different modes of transmission:

(1) performative literacy, common among the vernacular priests (*mogong*) in the western part of Guangxi, Guizhou, Eastern Yunnan, and in northern Vietnam, in which reciting the texts is a performative act in which very little actual reading takes place during the recitation;
(2) ritual texts of Ritual Masters and Daoist priests, where the recitation follows the manuscript more closely, aided by the use of a relatively mature vernacular script;
(3) a highly 'literate' and regionally integrated form of literacy among the Tày shamanic practitioners (*Then*), with female priests in performance engaging in a practice which we may call 'performative orality';
(4) song text literacy transmitted by family-based instruction or song master-student relationships, conveying knowledge of a particularistic simplified character script designed for ease of reading in the context of song market singing competitions.

None of these different kinds of literacy practices could be predicted on the basis of any writing systems theory. They are radically different from each other, and operate with local script variants which are also typologically quite different.

Manuscripts housed in library collections or museums are of course artefacts which have been de-contextualised, taken out of the social milieu in which they served social purposes and in which they were part of an ongoing process. Just how useful such manuscripts might be to scholarship – and even to what extent they can be decoded at all – is, as we have seen here, something that would vary greatly, depending on what kind of literacy practices lie behind them. At the very least, it is vitally important to track down whatever information about modes of transmission can still be found, that is, if the place of origin is known either in general or specifically.

There is another remedy, which is to undertake broad spectrum fieldwork and philological investigations of the kind I have described in this article and use the information systematically to build up our knowledge about living manuscripts in living social contexts. Such knowledge could then be brought to bear on the materials housed in library collections.

A final remedy would be a variation on 'returning the manuscripts to the original owners'. That is to say, manuscripts from libraries in digitised form can be taken to the field and used as material for in-depth discussions with knowledgeable

men and women in village communities, in areas where the relevant literacy practices are still alive or still within living memory.

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