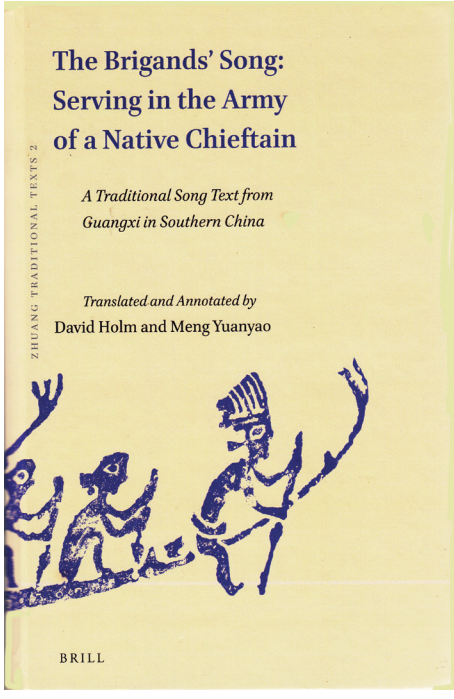
The Brigands' Song: Serving in the Army of a Native Chieftain. A Traditional Song Text from Guangxi in Southern China. Translated and annotated by David Holm and Meng Yuanyao (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2022). ISBN 978-90-04-44983-1 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-04-49875-4 (e-book). €154 (both formats).



The Brigands' Song is a Zhuang-language text for antiphonal singing from Guangxi province, originating in the early to mid-Ming era (14th to 16th century). In this volume, David Holm and Meng Yuanyao present photos of the full text, two transcriptions, an English translation, extensive annotations on linguistic and historical matters, a musical score for the recitation, glossary, concordance, several indices, a long introduction on the background and significance of the text, and a bibliography with 250 entries. This extraordinarily thorough 850-page study is a major contribution to the historical linguistics of the Tai family of languages and an unique window onto the feudal system of Tai communities in south-western China in the Ming era. The song is also a beautiful read.

Antiphonal singing—usually exchanges between male and female singers—was widespread among Tai communities, especially for courting. Among the Zhuang of Guangxi, it was not only especially widespread, but was used for many purposes other than courting, and has survived to the present day better than elsewhere. This text is a song of 2,088 lines, divided into 261 pairs of four-line verses, for two men to sing the first verse of each pair and two women to respond with the second. Several texts have been found. Holm chose a text from Pingguo county, owned by a peasant farmer, and recorded a recitation by the owner's friend in the Pingguo dialect. The song has been passed down in the owner's family for generations. The text is handwritten in a homemade chapbook with covers of cardboard from the packaging of a piece of electronic equipment. The text is written in a sinoxenic script, meaning an adaptation of Chinese characters for writing another language, using some graphs from old Chinese and some invented to convey the Zhuang. The word for word transcriptions show the original characters, a phonetic rendering from the recitation, the Zhuangwen version and English. The annotations discuss at length how the phonetic and semantic qualities of the characters have been used to render Zhuang terms.

The song tells the story of two men recruited to fight in a campaign conducted by their Tai chieftain on behalf of an imperial official. It begins with the two men and their respective partners remembering their childhood, establishing their long mutual acquaintance and their long connection to their home. A notice appears announcing the

military campaign and listing the two men among the recruits. At first, they contemplate running away or hiding, but reject the idea because of the consequences. The women help to make the kit they will need. After the sad farewells, the men leave and travel towards Guangdong for around ten days, becoming steadily wearier, smellier and more disenchanted. While the couples are apart, the format of alternating male-female verses continues, suggesting intimacy overcoming distance. The women sympathise with their men's dangers and discomforts, but also josh them for complaining, and advise them how to survive. The men eventually reach the battle. They describe the killing with a detachment that somehow intensifies the horror. The women respond with fear for their men.

M Cutting down men is like cutting down plantain,
Rows of men are like bunches of wild bananas.
The blood flows like a flood of water,
The heads pile up like stones on a dyke.

F If people are going to die then let them die
We call to our darlings to return.
Call them to return and eat breakfast.
Just don't go and die on us. (p. 131)

The campaign is suddenly abandoned. The men are demobilised and left to find their own way home. They are hungry, cold and fed up. They sell their kit, and beg, borrow and steal on the journey. On reaching home and being reunited, there is no sense of joy, only relief.

Accounts of premodern warfare, told from the perspective of the ordinary soldier, are very rare. This is an unique and very powerful example. This song was published in Chinese translation for the first time in 1961. Examining the place names mentioned on the march, some scholars identified the account with a specific campaign in 1528. Others showed that the place names differed across different manuscripts, and suggested an original story had been adapted to different localities, or the song conflated several campaigns. Most likely, it is a story that has become universal, divorced from any specific time or place, because it captures an universal experience of the people of that time.

South-western China under the early Ming was a disorderly area, which the imperial court managed through a form of feudal system. The imperial governors legitimated the chieftains of Tai and other ethnic communities in return for tribute in produce and service in war. Within the chieftaincy, men gained the right to occupy and work land in return for an obligation to serve in the chieftain's army when the imperial governor required. Although the singers of this song contemplate dodging the draft, they know that their families will be punished and they will sacrifice their livelihood. It is a song about how to survive.

Antiphonal singing is still practised in Zhuang communities, both for everyday courtship, but also at occasional festivals, which Holm and Meng call "song markets".

The Brigands' Song counts among a number of standards that are regularly performed at these events. It is now considered a "night song" and usually performed after midnight, on account of its downbeat content.

David Holm is Emeritus Professor, Dept. of Ethnology, at National Chengchi University in Taiwan. Meng Yuanyao has a doctorate from Melbourne and is Professor, Dept. of Minority Languages, at Guangxi University for Nationalities in Nanning. This is the second in a projected series of traditional Zhuang texts, following *Hanvueng: The Goose King and the Ancestral King.* Holm has also published *Killing a Buffalo for the Ancestors* (2003). The Zhuang area is turning out to be a trove of old texts. As the provenance of this story shows, these texts have survived because they were adapted into a Chinese script, because they were stored and recopied locally, and because they formed part of a tradition of communal singing, which people still value. This study is also an example of the explosion of scholarship that has accompanied the re-emergence of China. There are already over a hundred articles and dissertations on this song.

This magnificent book is principally a contribution to the study of Tai linguistics and especially to the understanding of the Zhuang language. But the song itself is a beautiful and very affecting piece of work, wonderfully captured in the seemingly artless translation. After the men set out on the journey to war, there is this exchange.

M Riding our horses to the big street.
We eat cooked rice and look around,
We look for you my darlings but do not see you,
Our hearts are empty and hollow

F The two of us stay up at home,
Constantly we talk of you
You've gone to the edge of the sky,
Have you forgotten us or do you remember? (p. 115)

Holm notes that this volume "is meant as a contribution to the work of generations of Zhuang scholars and others in documenting the cultural heritage of the Zhuang people" (p. vii).

The cover is illustrated with the image of a boat taken from a bronze drum. The image is over a millennium earlier than the song, but makes a very fetching cover. In a serendipitous touch, the designer also has the boat surfing on the barcode.

Chris Baker