

# A Study on Yunnan Folk Music Composers: Taking Xiaogeng Liu, Yong Chen, and Li Wan as Examples

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## Abstract:

Yunnan, a mysterious and rich land in the southwest frontier of China, is home to 26 ethnic minorities. As the province with the widest distribution and most kinds of ethnic minorities in China, Yunnan is a treasure house of ethnic music and is known as the “ocean of ethnic music.” This province, full of multicultural colors, has always been a treasured place for many music creators to find inspiration and muse. Since the founding of New China, works based on Yunnan folk music have sprung up. On this red plateau, many talented composers are not only deeply rooted in Yunnan’s rich ethnic music soil, but also use Western and systematic creative techniques as tools to continuously explore and show the unique charm of Yunnan’s ethnic minority music. There are many musical works with Yunnan ethnic characteristics, which represent the life emotions, historical legends, and cultural characteristics of various ethnic minorities, and are treasures in Chinese ethnic music. This paper will take three Yunnan folk music composers—Xiaogeng Liu, Yong Chen, and Li Wan, and one of their representatives as examples to discuss their outstanding contributions in the creation of Yunnan folk music works.

## Keywords:

Yunnan  
Folk music  
Composer  
Xiaogeng Liu  
Yong Chen  
Li Wan

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## 1. Appreciation of Xiaogeng Liu and his representative works of folk music

### 1.1. Introduction of Xiaogeng Liu

Xiaogeng Liu was born in Luquan, Yunnan Province in 1955. He is a national first-class composer and professor. He is also a member of the Chinese Musicians Association, Vice Chairman of the Yunnan Musicians

Association, and honorary Dean of Music College of Yunnan Arts University. In 1978, he was admitted to the Music Department of Yunnan Arts University to study composition with Mr. Kuanren Zhao. He graduated in 1982 to teach. He studied conducting with the American conductor George McDox in 1992. From 1996 to 1997, he was invited by the Asian Arts Institute of the

Philippines to visit and exchange as a guest artist for one year<sup>[1]</sup>.

Liu's works cover almost all musical genres, including symphonies, instrumental music, national dance drama, dance music, solo singing, chorus, and so on. He is a prolific composer with an international perspective, who is good at integrating elements of Yunnan's ethnic minority music into modern musical forms, showing a unique artistic style and profound national cultural connotation. His instrumental music "Doub le Trapeze Achans shoot the sur" and dance music Fantasia in 2000 have been performed many times in the United States, Spain, Japan, and South Korea and received high praise<sup>[2]</sup>. His large-scale national dance drama "Water-splashing Festival" won the Outstanding Drama Award of the 6th China Art Festival. The symphonic suite "Soul of the Mountain," "Impression of Shambhala," and "Lisu People" won the first prize in music works of new plays in Yunnan Province respectively. The vocal work "Dream Plateau" won the government's Top Ten Golden Song Awards. The solo work "Brother who backs the Sun" won the first prize in the National Voice of the Nation in 1990. The choral work "Leading the Yangtze River to Celebrate Together" was selected as the song of the third China Art Festival. The piano solo "Sani's Fantasia" was selected for the 1997 Hong Kong Piano Competition. The children's chorus "Mountain Boy" (with Li Wan) and "Sani's Spring Is There" won the National Radio New Song Writing Award in 1988 and 1989 respectively. The dance "Land" won the composer award in the National Minority Dance (single, double, and triple dance) Competition, and served as the music director and composer of the opening ceremony of the Fifth Traditional Minority Sports Games of the People's Republic of China<sup>[3]</sup>. In 2010, the "Yunnan Echo - Xiaogeng Chorus Collection" published by the Central Conservatory of Music Publishing House includes 16 classic original and composed choral works by Liu. His choral works are often sung by domestic and international choirs, and Liu himself is also a well-known commissioned composer.

## 1.2. Appreciation of Xiaogeng Liu's representative mixed chorus "Tattoo"

### 1.2.1. Introduction to the work

Liu has been writing continuously for many years. In

recent years, he has mainly devoted himself to creating high-difficulty Yunnan-style choral works. In his choral works, he has properly applied the most preface artistic writing styles of contemporary times, such as instrumental, rhythmic, acoustical, timbral, electronic, symphonic, and behavioral. He integrates the native language genes of Yunnan ethnic minorities into his works. Here, we appreciate and analyze Liu's choral work "Tattoo"<sup>[4]</sup>.

This is a modern mixed chorus based on the special mother tongue (scripture) of the Dai region. It premiered at the opening ceremony of the 18th Asian Composers Union Congress. In 2019, Shenzhen Lily Choir won the championship of the World Chorus Competition with the simultaneous version of this song. It can be seen that the artistry and technology of the work are extremely difficult. Among them, the unique creative technique of "refining mother tongue" is derived from Liu's acquisition of Dai native language materials through years of in-depth field investigation, and then the re-composition of these materials after crushing them. Due to the difficulty of this chorus and percussion work itself, it has high technical requirements for the conductor and chorus members, so the transmission degree of the work is not high. Due to this, it will be easier to perform this work accurately, and it will also reflect the high standard of the choir<sup>[5]</sup>.

### 1.2.2. Background of the work

The story background of the song "Tattoo" comes from the "legend of the Songkran Festival." According to legend, a long time ago, the demon king occupied the beautiful Xishuangbanna, mutilated and poisoned the people, and took the seven princesses of Xishuangbanna as his wives. Among them, the most beautiful and intelligent seventh princess, Langmolida, found that the demon king could be killed by pulling out the blonde hair on his head. Thus, she pulled out the golden hair of the demon king, and at the moment the demon king's head fell, the evil fire erupted from his mouth. In order to extinguish the fire and completely destroy the demon king, the seventh princess held the head to her chest, and people could only keep spraying water on her. Finally, the evil fire was extinguished in the sixth month of the Dai calendar, and the custom of the Songkran Festival began<sup>[6]</sup>.

This chorus work describes the “tattoo” ceremony performed by Dai men in order to pray for the blessings of the gods and obtain the unlimited power to destroy the demon king. Most Dai people believe in Theravada Buddhism. “Tattoo” is a symbol of Dai culture with a long history. Its sociality, culture, and artistry make it the most important symbol in Dai culture. “Tattoo ceremony” is a rite of passage for Dai men at the age of 15. Due to the painful process, the baptism of “tattoo” shows that this adult man is a strong and brave person [7].

### 1.2.3. Artistic features

There are mainly three musical figures in the work, namely the seventh princess, the elder, and the tattooed young man. These three musical figures are respectively expressed by the soprano leader, the bass leader, and the tenor’s neck. The frequent appearance of dissonant intervals in the work and the chanting of scriptures in the chorus part are modern expressions. The ancient mysterious ritual of “tattooing” is rendered vividly. The use of Dai native language in the works makes the works more ethnic, because language is the most important symbol of a nation, the most important cultural carrier of the nation, and reflects the nation’s outlook on life and

survival. In addition to language, the use of dissonant intervals in the works, such as the appearance of the “augmented fourth” interval to express the seventh princess Langmolida, also makes the ethnic style of the works very obvious. According to Liu, such use is due to the existence of such “augmented fourth” intervals in the Dai people’s speaking tones (Figure 1) [8].



Figure 1. Example 1

In addition, the diverse and rich sound effects of the works perfectly reflect Liu’s advanced and bold artistic writing style. With the accompaniment of small bowl, wooden fish, stone, and other percussion music, the use of floor slapping and mouth strokes, the rhythm of non-logical stress, and the performance form of “meditation” during the performance process, the work also includes the breath sound when chanting scripture, and the shouting of young people when they are tattooed. All of them make the sound of the work fuller (Figure 2).

The success of this work, like most of Liu’s works,

Figure 2. Example 2

stems from his courage to break through tradition, continuous innovation, and insistence on using the native language of ethnic minorities to create. It is reflected in this song “Tattoo,” as well as many of his works. For example, he created the chorus “Waterhen” with Zhuang language singing, “Oh Ran” with Jingpo language singing, “Naxi ancient tune – Xun” with Naxi language singing. The frequent international awards and great recognition of these works also show that inheriting and carrying forward the excellent traditional culture of the nation is conducive to improving the cultural soft power and comprehensive national strength of the country.

## 2. Appreciation of Yong Chen and his representative works of folk music

### 2.1. Introduction to Yong Chen

Yong Chen, born in Yuanmou, Yunnan Province, is a famous composer, professor, master tutor, and leader of the provincial key discipline “musicology” in Yunnan Province. He is a famous teacher in colleges and universities in Yunnan Province and a music artist with remarkable achievements in all-round creation. In 1982, he graduated from Yunnan University of the Arts with a bachelor’s degree in Theoretical Composition and taught at the university. In 1984, he graduated from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music with a bachelor’s degree in Theoretical Composition and Senior Study Course of Composition and Conducting Department. He has served as Vice President of Yunnan University of the Arts, Vice President of Yunnan Normal University, Vice Chairman of Yunnan Provincial Federation of Arts and Culture, Chairman of the Yunnan Musicians Association, and director of the Chinese Musicians Association. He is also a member of the National Art Education Steering Committee, Executive Director of Yunnan Higher Education Association, member of the Provincial Degree Committee, member of the Provincial Academic Committee of Colleges and Universities, member of the Provincial Senior Position Evaluation Committee for College Teachers, etc. <sup>[9]</sup>.

Professor Chen has a great influence on the whole country. As a series of art songs he created are widely circulated in the whole country, they are selected as teaching materials by various music and art colleges.

In 1999, Professor Chen was named “One Hundred Outstanding Young Writers and Artists in the Country.” In 2000, he was named an expert who enjoyed the special government allowance of The State Council. In 1999 and 2006, he was twice awarded as the “Artist of Virtue and Art” in Yunnan Province. He has been featured in many special reports by China National Radio, China Central Television, and news media in Yunnan Province, and has been included in many classic dictionaries such as “Who’s Who in the World of Chinese Literature and Art,” “Son of the East,” and “Chinese Expert Talent Pool” <sup>[10]</sup>.

### 2.2. Appreciation of Yong Chen’s representative female solo “Torch of the Torch Festival”

#### 2.2.1. Introduction to the work

Chen’s work was written in collaboration with Yunsheng Lu, a famous lyricist in Yunnan Province. In 1999, the work was awarded the seventh National Spiritual Civilization Construction “Five and One Project Award” by the Central Propaganda Department, and achieved the “zero breakthrough” in Yunnan in this award, which has a milestone historical value and significance. Due to its strong national style and catchy and beautiful melody, it has become the repertoire of many female singers in China. There are many versions of this song on various platforms, among which the most famous versions are the version sung by Jia Lei, a well-known singer in China, and the version sung by Shu Hr, a famous singer in Yunnan Province. Each version has its own unique features.

#### 2.2.2. Background of the work

The Torch Festival is a traditional festival of the Yi, Bai, Naxi, Jino, Lahu, and other minority nationalities in Yunnan. With a profound national cultural connotation, these nationalities have fire worship, on the day of the festival will hold the ignition ceremony, and sing and dance around the torch, pray for good weather and harvest for the next year.

In this work, Chen describes the lively scene of the Yi people celebrating the Torch Festival in Honghe area of Yunnan Province. The melody is heavily integrated with the local Yi music materials and the use of the Yi language words, reflecting the language characteristics of the Yi people, expressing the joy and hope of the Yi

people during the Torch Festival and their yearning for a better life in the coming year <sup>[11]</sup>.

### 2.2.3. Artistic features

The melody of the work mainly uses the intervals of the big and small third, pure fourth, and pure fifth, which can reflect the music style of the Yi nationality. The phrase “Serolisai,” which is sung repeatedly by male and female voices, can better reflect the characteristics of Yi style. Chen cleverly used the technique of a four-degree jump in the development layout of the main melody, then entered with notes of higher octaves, and then slowly went down, thus promoting the development of the melody layers, paving the way for the mood of the chorus. In the lyrics, “Stars and red clouds” are the symbols of the gods in the hearts of the Yi people, “Please come to the stars in the sky, Please come to the red clouds in the sky” is also the description of the Yi people’s desire to pour their hearts out to the gods and pray. “Tassels, camellia” and so on are also unique flowers in Yunnan, especially in the Yi people who live in the alpine mountains and have a certain symbolic significance (Figure 3).

The melody of the song finally ends, and its musical image is vivid. The meaning contained in this work reflects the optimistic spirit of Yunnan ethnic minorities, and also shapes the beautiful scene of harmonious coexistence between man and nature, which is a rare

excellent work.

## 3. Appreciation of Li Wan and his representative works of folk music creation

### 3.1. Introduction to Li Wan

Li Wan, born in 1954, in Kunming, Yunnan Province, is a national first-class composer. In 1984, he was admitted to the Music Department of Yunnan University of the Arts training class for cadres. After graduating from Yunnan University of the Arts, Li Wan successively worked in the Kunming Song and Dance Troupe, Kunming Art Research Institute, and the Creation Center of the Propaganda Department of the Provincial Party Committee, and has been a professional composer ever since. Wan went to the countryside with his father to visit many villages in Yunnan. During his growth, the days of singing and dancing with ethnic minority residents nurtured him step by step to accumulate and grow into an excellent professional composer. In 1979, Wan returned to Kunming, worked as an electrician in Metallurgical Industry School, and later worked as an electrician and music teacher in Kunming No. 29 Middle School. It was in this school that he and Mingchu Jiang became colleagues, and then they became good partners and later created many popular classic works together <sup>[12]</sup>.

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'Serolisai'. It consists of five lines of music. The first line starts with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a tempo marking of 'mp'. The melody is written in numbered notation (1-7) with lyrics '赛 哪 哩 赛' repeated. The second line continues the melody with a key signature change to two sharps (F#, C#) and a dynamic marking of 'mf'. The third line has lyrics '请 来 天 上 的 星 星, 请 来 正 月 的 红 山 茶, 请 来 天 上 的 请 来 三 月 的'. The fourth line has lyrics '红 霞, 把 这 星 星, 把 这 红 霞, 马 樱 花, 把 红 山 茶, 把 马 樱 花,'. The fifth line has lyrics '都 化 作 都 化 作 火 把 节 的 火 把, 把, 都 化 作 火 把 都 化 作 火 把'. The score includes various musical notations such as rests, slurs, and dynamic markings.

Figure 3. Example 3

It is the music of Yunnan ethnic minorities that gives Wan infinite creative inspiration. He has created many well-known songs about Yunnan ethnic minorities, such as vocal works “Beating Rice Drum,” “Nujiang Major and Minor,” “Old Watch,” “Stepping on the Clouds,” and children’s chorus “Mountain Boy,” which won the first prize in the song contest for the 40th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. The theme song “Plateau Woman” for the TV series of the same name was later adapted into a mixed chorus, which was sung by many teams. The female voice trio “A Nest of Birds” with Xiaogeng Liu and Mingchu Jiang won the tenth National Spiritual Civilization Construction “Five and One Project Award” issued by the Central Propaganda Department in 2007. In recent years, the female solo singing “Long Street Banquet” has been popular all over the country, the popular version is sung by the famous singer Jing Tan. In 2009, Wan collaborated with dancer Liping Yang and lyricist Mingchu Jiang to create a wonderful large-scale original percussion dance called “The Sound of Yunnan” and served as the music director. He composed music for large-scale operas, dance dramas, and musicals such as *Ashma*, *Zheng He*, and *the Sea and Bronze Soul*, which were both appreciated and recognized by the music industry at home and abroad [13].

Since the 1980s, Wan has created more than 500 songs, composed for many large-scale dance dramas, operas, musicals, evening parties, TV dramas, and special films, and won more than 50 national awards such as the “Five and One Project Award” of the Central Propaganda Department, the “Wenhua Award” of the Ministry of Culture, and the “Flying Music Award” of the Ministry of Radio and Television. He also won five international awards. He has been awarded the honorable titles of “Kunming Young and Middle-Aged Academic and Technical leaders,” “Excellent Experts with Outstanding

Contributions in Yunnan Province,” “Excellent Experts with Outstanding Contributions in Kunming City,” and so on.

### 3.2. Appreciation of Li Wan’s representative female voice solo “Plateau Woman”

#### 3.2.1. Introduction of works

Wan’s song “Plateau Woman” is for the World Women’s United Conference. The song won the nomination award for “China Original Song” in 2007, and “New Daozi Group” sang in the fifth group final of the 13th CCTV Young Singer Grand Prix, winning the second-highest score of the night. The song was later adapted into folk dance music and premiered by Kunming Folk Song and Dance Troupe, and won the first prize in choreography, performance, and composition in the 10th National Minority Peacock Cup Single Three and Pair Dance Competition in 2000 [14].

#### 3.2.2. Background of the work

In the culture of many ethnic minorities in Yunnan, women occupy an important position in a family. Women in the plateau are the symbol of diligence and bravery. Most of them are born with the ability to sing and dance, to be independent, to have children after marriage, to bear hardships, and to work hard to support the life of a family, which is inseparable from the tradition of the Chinese nation. This song “Plateau Women” takes plateau women as the object, describing their hard work and hard life (Figure 4).

#### 3.2.3. Artistic features

The creation concept of the song “Plateau Woman” embodies the creative concept that Wan has always upheld, that is, to create the Yunnan minority dialect. Sound, language, and writing are important carriers

Figure 4 shows musical notation for the song "Plateau Woman" in staff notation with lyrics in Chinese. The notation uses numbers 1-6 and 0 for notes, with slurs and accents indicating phrasing and emphasis. The lyrics are: 太阳歌歌嘍 歌得呢, 月亮歌歌嘍 歌得呢, 女人歌歌嘍 歌不得, 女人歌下来嘍 火塘 会熄掉呢.

Figure 4. Example 4

of minority culture, especially language. The close relationship between music and language in song creation has been discussed by Mr. Yuanren Zhao, a famous linguist and musician in China. The language styles of ethnic minorities also determine their music styles. For example, the language of Dai and Hani is soft and waxy, and their music, especially their love songs, is spoken in a soft voice. The Tibetan language, on the other hand, has rough and loud music <sup>[15]</sup>.

The lyrics of this work are simple and the melody is unique, describing the lofty image of plateau women who are hard-working and brave. The melody of the song is the tone of the minority ethnic groups in Yunnan and western Yunnan when they speak Chinese. The use of quintuplets is also in line with the rhythm of their speech. The use of dialects in the lyrics, such as “Zaodi,” makes the lyrics more grounded, so the song is quickly popular in the country after the singing of “New Daozi Group.”

#### 4. Conclusion

The achievements made by Xiaogeng Liu, Yong Chen, and Li Wan in the creation of Yunnan ethnic music have actively promoted the integration and innovation of Yunnan ethnic minority music elements and modern creative techniques. These works are specific examples of inheriting and promoting Yunnan’s native ethnic minority music culture. In addition to them, many other musicians have also made important contributions to the promotion of Yunnan minority music culture. Many excellent Yunnan

minority music works have unique artistic styles and profound ethnic culture connotations, which have injected new vitality into Chinese ethnic music. These works not only enrich the treasure house of Yunnan folk music, but also provide valuable experience and inspiration for the future development of Chinese folk music.

As China’s famous musicologist and intangible cultural heritage protection expert, Qing Tian said: “Chinese music is an important part of the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation, every song carries history, every song contains culture.” Qing Tian encourages us to deeply understand China’s excellent traditional culture through music, and use music to generate resonance and pride to enhance cultural confidence.

Yunnan minority music is an important part of Chinese music. As a native music worker in Yunnan, we should shoulder the glorious mission of inheriting and promoting Yunnan minority music. We should make Yunnan minority music become an important carrier of inheriting the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation, and become a vivid embodiment of our province’s construction as a demonstration zone of national unity and progress. We should also strive to improve professional literacy and let more people know and love Yunnan minority music through various channels and platforms. We should use music as a medium to enhance exchanges and understanding among different ethnic minorities, promote ethnic unity and progress, and promote harmonious social development.

#### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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