

How Love Stories Progress in Folk Songs: The Narrative Dynamics in Two *Tujia* Minority Ballads

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Abstract: *Tujia* minority people are renowned for their talents in improvising and singing a wide range of folk songs, among which *Xiaodiao* is particularly popular with their young generations who tend to make a confession of love or show a wide variation on the theme of love and marriage. A young male and/or female singer, whether solo or antiphonal, expresses their overflow of strong feelings with lyrics and tunes in a straightforward and sometimes quite bold manner. The “plot” that is embedded in a folk song, however, requires careful analysis in terms of narrative progression, or rather narrative dynamics, so as to uncover how the singer’s affection or the conflict between the lovebirds develops. Along with a brief introduction to ballad *Xiaodiao* and a theoretical term borrowed from narratology as an analytical tool, the present article is intended to explore how love stories are told in two *Tujia* folk songs translated by one of the authors. It seems that, albeit the national character of the Chinese people being mostly rather reserved, wooing by singing has a long tradition with strong socio-cultural grounds, especially in an agrarian country where people mostly live in very harsh mountainous areas where finding a life partner to ensure a better chance of survival and to carry on the ancestral line becomes a top priority. The significance of this research lies in its detailed analysis of specific *Tujia* folk songs within a narrative dynamic framework, which may shed some light on a broader approach to interpreting lyrical texts. The qualitative analysis does show us the possibility for the singer to construct and the audience to reconstruct a complete love story.

Keywords: Love Story, Folk Song, Narrative Dynamics, *Tujia* Ballads, *Xiaodiao*

1. A Brief Introduction to the Form and Content of *Xiaodiao*

In the wide variety of folk songs inherited and composed by *Tujia* Minority in *Enshi* area which is the only autonomous prefecture in Hubei Province among nearly thirty national minorities in China, *Xiaodiao* (popular tunes/ditties) has much to recommend with its sweet melodies and bold expressions of affections. While its tunes generally vary according to the moods of the narrators or the protagonists in the love story being told and thus differ from one another, the lyrics are almost invariably composed of several stanzas to be sung to their respective tunes. [1] Specifically, in each folk song, these stanzas normally share quite similar structures and sentence

patterns.

As for its content, one of the truly remarkable characteristics is that “love” has always been the central theme, chanting the romantic relationships with daring descriptions of various kinds of things that are likely to occur between a pair of lovebirds whose romance might even be morally or legally unacceptable. Among those widely-sung folk songs in the town of *Taiyanghe* (literally: Sun River), for instance, some are even blatantly entitled “A Love Affair”. [2] It is rare to find pure storytelling or recording of historical events. As regards its mode, more often than not, it is a female solo singer with her intention to win affection of the man she loves, or it is an antiphonal style with which the male and female singers try to show their care for each other. Perhaps in one way or another, *Xiaodiao* is likely to remind its audience of *The Book*

of *Songs*, the first collection of love songs in Chinese history, as both its form and content bear certain resemblance to those of the latter.

Given the lyrics composed into quite similar structures, tunes alike for their respective constituent stanzas, the theme of love as well as the mode of singing, the two folk songs (see the appendix) selected and translated by the authors are identified as belonging to the category of *xiaodiao*. To interpret the two ballads, what we need is a new perspective with an applicable analytical framework. With its limited popularity, there is not much literature to be found. The present paper is no more than an attempt to show the international academic community what *Tujia xiaodiao* may look like, and also a possible way to decipher the love stories encoded in lyrics.

2. Narrative Dynamics Examined

While readers care much about how a love story develops and whether Romeo and Juliet would live happily ever after, researchers usually concern themselves more with the narrative dynamics of the text and how it fuses with the readerly dynamics to push the narrative progression and realize the communication between the author and the reader. But by the early 21st century, “narratology has only been applied to analysis of epic and narrative poetry.” (142) [3] For a narrative text, its narrative dynamics come from the development of its plots in which narration progresses from the beginning to the end, and that has been termed “plot dynamics”. (p. 58) [4] In contrast, Lyric poetry has been conventionally excluded as a qualified object for narratological analysis by the international community, one of the reasons being the prejudice long held that narration and lyric texts are somehow incompatible (III) [5]. But to some extent the basic principles of narratology are similarly applicable to lyrical ballads in spite of certain creatively adaptive variations. Tentative efforts have been made in recent years to describe and interpret English poetry [6], as researchers have been striving to develop narratology to its full capacity by applying it to analysis of more genres rather than narrative texts. That encompasses poetry, drama, film, visual art, dance, game and so forth (330) [7]. The concept of narrative dynamics, originally used to analyze narratives, which is now applied to the analysis of lyrical texts, is intended for a wider perspective in interpreting folk songs.

All events involved in a narrative can, without exception, be organized along a timeline, and at the same time be linked mainly through causal relationships between lexical and syntactic items. Therefore, time and logic are normally considered as the two basic principles according to which series of events are narrated. Namely, they push the narrative progression to develop the plots. [8] For a poetic folk song meant to tell a love story, they perform the same function. In Wordsworth’s words, “Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of strong feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility.” (p. 326) [9] Such strong feelings in all probability stem from certain affections or conflicts between a man and a

woman in love under specific circumstances, which entails a narration full of emotions to be expressed in a particular time sequence and governed by a particular logic. That is to say, the time and logic principles observed by the author and the reader in narrative texts have justifiably pertinent applicability to lyrical ballads. The textual dynamics thus formed are termed “narrative dynamics” which are to be applied to the translation of the two folk songs herein.

3. Discussion

As with novels, lyric poetry may also have the basic elements that enable a narratological analysis: sequentiality, mediacy and articulation. In other words, there are happenings narrated from a particular perspective, which is characterized by consistency and relevance. Structures of narrative dynamics in the ballads that “The Deep Blue Scarf Is Five-Foot Long” and “Gifts for the Lad Over Twelve Months” are typical of *Xiaodiao* in terms of content, for both come straight to the point of wooing through affectionate singing of the solo singer with his/her loving moves, promises, consolations or warnings, despite that the former, as there is only one short verse, diverges from the general form that is characterized by lyrics composed into several stanzas. Besides, there are “references” and “cross-references” (62) [10] independently but inter-relatedly conceived, which are meant for the reader to connect and decipher the twists and turns in the love story narrated.

3.1. “The Deep Blue Scarf Is Five-Foot Long”

“The Deep Blue Scarf Is Five-Foot Long” is sung by a young male who tosses his deep blue scarf used to wrap around his head across a wall into a young woman’s hands as a token to establish their relationship. The self-expressive singer presents himself through the first point of view, and thus becomes the protagonist of the ballad, which is the same case with the female singer of the second song “Gifts for the Lad Over Twelve Months”. Moreover, in contrast to the fact that the narrator in a narrative text can hardly be recognized as the author him/herself, the protagonist as the narrator in a lyrical ballad shares more with the author, sometimes even regarded as the poet/singer him/herself.

The love story starts with his tossing of a personal possession to show his intention of taking her as his lover (whether he cares about her answer or not is not a matter to be revealed possibly because the ballad is not antiphonal, which is the same case with the second song), in which time plays a vital role in pushing things forward. It seems that his lover holds it willingly in her hands and accepts his wooing, for immediately the narrator tells the reader with enough confidence that she would never betray him, the logic for which is that since he has given her the love token and consequently won her favor, nothing would be more natural than that she is to commit herself to him ever after.

As time goes by, for fear of betrayal he lays curses upon himself and his lover, hoping for the eternity of love. It is after their marriage that the unpleasant things caused by a

supernatural power in his curses seem to occur, since what would happen to her is when she is in labor. He ruthlessly curses her suffering in childbirth if she turns out to be an unfaithful wife. As with the underdeveloped medical technology in the mountainous area they have been living for generations, it is not unlikely for the mother and child to lose their lives, whether the deliberate cruelty comes from accumulated grievances bred by his uncertainty about the child's biological father is not confessed. What we know is only his ultimate wish that their love would last long till next life. That is, if everything goes well and they have spent the rest of their life together (best happily as he has expected), he still holds high hopes for their love to be continued after their death.

In this ballad, the narrator's strong desire to perpetuate his love and his lover's loyalty starts with his tentative proposal, progresses with his first success in receiving a positive response and later with his acute anxiety about a broken family, and eventually moves further with his beautified prospect of eternal love. Time and logic serve to push the story step by step, in which, on the basis of the soundly developed narrative dynamics, the reader sees how the protagonist's powerful feelings overflow and become increasingly intense, and consequently end up with being affected by the depth of his love.

3.2. "Gifts for the Lad over Twelve Months"

"Gifts for the Lad Over Twelve Months" tells in the first-person point of view a story of a woman who sends gifts betokening her love and care to a man every month over a year (allowing him stay overnight is also a privilege she acquiesces in). The twelve stanzas are almost identical in structure, each consisting of four lines which starts with an unmistakable time of month in the traditional Chinese calendar and then proceeds with what he does (9/12) or what she does (3/12). The third line is mainly intended to fulfil an intertextual function through the narrator's citing of classics, among which *The Book of Songs* and *The Analects of Confucius* are particularly favored. With things done one by one and feelings expressed month after month, each stanza ends with a gift given to the man, and the twelve displays of affection altogether seem to indicate a smooth progression of the romance with the narrator's relentless efforts in her pursuit of love.

It seems that before their first date in lunar January she has already lost her heart to the man and decided to do something to improve their relationship, because to make the embroidered pouch as the first try normally takes considerable time and patience, and more importantly, the gift itself is traditionally regarded as a love token in China since ancient times. The narrator does not tell how he would respond, but the time and logic between the lines let the reader know that everything seems to go well, because if he ever refused once, she would have stopped sending more gifts.

What's worth mentioning is that after she gives him a bed decorated with carved ivory in lunar September, a month later emerges a brief interlude of crisis, and it seems to serve as a good test of his faithfulness, because she tries to urge him to

distinguish the good from the bad and curb his impatience. Implicit in the lyrics is the fact that she pins all her hopes on his benevolence and righteousness, except which she can do nothing but show her willingness to give him a second chance. Fortunately, the restless and irritated man seems to believe in her words and thus tries to contain himself for a better future. Finally, when lunar December arrives, after putting everything in order, she promises him to come and meet him at night. And that is the happy ending expected and unsurprisingly found by the reader in most fairytale love stories.

In this ballad, time plays a visibly essential role in securing the narrative progression, and the less overt narrative dynamics of logic are embodied in the description of things they do to each other. For instance, the reason why the narrator gives the man she loves an embroidered pouch is because she wants to draw them closer, and a month later when he pays the second visit he reaches out his hand to give her a tender pinch—whether it is an attempt at flirtation or a gentle hint of eagerness to stay overnight is not told—as a result of which, she acquiesces in his decision. As time goes by month by month, the reader can easily predict that the man is going to do something else, that she is going to start another round of conveying her feelings and ideas about his deeds, and that she is, as always, going to send him another gift to reiterate her affection. The narrative dynamics and readerly dynamics merge together, making a simple love story resonate with a strikingly courageous woman in her painstakingly persistent pursuit of love.

4. Conclusion

Narrative communication cannot be divorced from the fusion of textual dynamics and readerly dynamics. The reader has his/her cognitive, emotional, moral or aesthetic response in accordance with the textual dynamics, and what bridges the gap between the two is the reader's explanatory, ethical and aesthetic judgments. To examine the narrative dynamics of the two ballads is to find the strength of the narrators' emotions expressed with specific structure, and more importantly, to explore how that strength progresses within its structure for its ultimate realization of a sound narration, to which the reader responds and accordingly applies his/her own judgments for an artistic resonance.

The *Tujia* ethnic minority group has mostly been living in mountainous areas where life is never easy, and folk songs have been a great comfort to them – both as a temporary relief from their straitened circumstances and as a spiritual home where they find peace and enthusiasm for romance. *Xiaodiao* tends to have a higher proportion to all other types of *Tujia* folk songs. One of the major reasons is that courting and finding a life partner play a very important role in carrying on the husband's ancestral line, and in producing enough labor force (more often for the husband's family) because in their largely agricultural society, people can hardly survive without enough staple crops which need intensive and meticulous farming. That in turn explains why *Tujia* young men and women are found singing out loud their strong feelings

(sometimes of sexual love), which is more common than what the traditionally conservative Han people do. Life forces them to meet the first level of needs in Maslow's hierarchy. They have to stay positive, try their best for wooing, establish oneself with a family so as to find a better chance for survival.

Appendix

青布帕子五尺长
青布帕子五尺长
打一个疙瘩撂过墙
千年不许疙瘩散
万年不许姐丢郎
(郎丢姐来遭雷打
姐丢郎来遭儿卡)
生不丢来死不丢
只怕阎王把簿勾
阎王勾了生死簿
奈何桥上情不丢
十二月许郎
正月是年宵,
梳头姐相交,
帮君为了君相好,
许郎花荷包。
二月惊蛰节,
伸手把姐捏,
人不知道可知夜,
许郎歇一夜。
三月桃花开,
郎从后门来,
桃花天天把花采,
许郎一双鞋。
四月麦里青,
小郎想手巾,
人不知来而不愠,
许郎花手巾。
五月是端阳,
小郎下宜昌,
教五子来名俱扬,
许郎戴麝香。
六月是三伏,
小郎下宜都,
巍巍乎来荡荡乎,
许郎穿绸服。
七月是月半,
郎到姐家玩,
悠悠子衿先生传,
许郎白蒲扇。
八月是中秋,
小郎往回走,
父母在来不远游,
许郎花枕头。
九月是重阳,
小郎要回乡,
孟子见了梁惠王,

qingbu pazi wu chi chang
qingbu pazi wu chi chang,
da yige geda liao guo qiang,
qiannian buxu geda san,
wannian buxu jie diu lang.
(lang diu jie lai zao lei da
jie diu lang lai zao er ka)
sheng bu diu lai si bu diu,
zhi pa yanwang ba bu gou,
yanwang gou le shengsibu,
naiheqiao shang qing bu diu.
shi er yue xu lang
zhengyue shi nianxiao,
shutou jie xiangjiao,
bangjun weile jun xianghao,
xu lang huahebao.
eryue jingzhe jie,
shenshou ba jie nie,
ren buzhi dao ke zhi ye,
xu lang xieyiye.
sanyue taohua kai,
lang cong houmen lai,
taohuayaoyao ba hua cai,
xu lang yishuang xie.
siyue mai li qing,
xiaolang xiang shoujin,
ren buzhi lai er buyun,
xu lang huashoujin.
wuyue shi duanyang,
xiaolang xia Yichang,
jiao wu zi lai ming ju yang,
xu lang dai shexiang.
liuyue shi snafu,
xiaolang xia yidu,
weiwei hu lai dangdang hu,
xu lang chuan choufu.
qiyue shi yueban,
lang dao jie jia wan,
youyouzijin, xianshen chuan,
xu lang bai pushan.
bayue shi Zhongqiu,
xiaolang wang hui zou,
fumu zai lai bu yuanyou,
xu lang huazhentou.
jiuyue shi chongyang,
xiaolang yao huixiang,
Mengzi jianle lianghuiwang,

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The Deep Blue Scarf Is Five-Foot Long (trans. LUO Na)

The deep blue scarf is five-foot long,
Tie a knot, toss it across the wall.
O'er a thousand years, ne'er will it break loose;
O'er ten thousand years, ne'er will you betray me.
(I betray you, I'd be stricken by lightning,
You betray me, you'd suffer in childbearing.)
Alive, no betrayal; dead, no betrayal.
Only fear Yama of death to tick us off.

He ticks the names; death do us part,
But on the bridge of abyss love remains.
Gifts for You Over Twelve Months (trans. LUO Na)
Month one is New Year.

I comb my hair to meet you.
Favors are done to draw us closer;
I give you a flowery pouch.
Month two awakens insects.
You reach out for a tender pinch.
Man sees no path after dark;
I give you the nod to stay overnight.
Month three blooms peach trees.
You sneak through the back door.
The peach in full blossom, I pluck some;
I give you a pair of shoes.
Month four dyes wheat green.
You want a handkerchief.
My merits unnoticed, I sulk not;
I give you a flowery handkerchief.
Month five is Dragon Boat Festival.
You leave for Yichang.
Five pupils you taught become well-known;
I give you musk perfume to wear.
Month six has dog days.
You leave for Yidu.
Lofty ambitions and generosity you have;
I give you a silk apparel.
Month seven is Spirit Festival.
You come for a visit.

A blue collar you wear, I'll miss you;
I give you a palm-leaf fan of white.
Month eight is Mid-Autumn Festival.
You turn back home.
Parents still alive, you do not travel afar;
I give you a flowery pillow.
Month nine is Double Ninth Festival.
You resolve to go home.
Mencius met King Hui of Liang (for a policy of benevolence);

许郎象牙床。
 十月小阳末，
 姐对小郎说，
 寓褒贬来别善恶，
 许郎二回着。
 冬月大凌起，
 小郎发了气，
 戒之哉来宜勉力，
 小郎别着急。
 腊月小年来，
 姐儿做安排，
 老者安来少者拜，
 许郎夜哒来。

xu lang xiangya chuang.
 shiyue xiaoyang mo,
 jie dui xiaolang shuo,
 yu baobian lai bie shan'e
 xu lang er hui zhao.
 dongyue daling qi,
 xiaolang fale qi,
 jie zhi zai lai yi mianli,
 xiaolang bie zhaoji.
 layue xiaonian lai,
 jieer zuo anpai,
 laozhe an lai shao zhe bai,
 xu lang ye da lai.

I give you an ivory bed (for a reminder of love).
 Month ten brings balmy late autumn.
 I'd talk to you.
 You should tell good from evil;
 I give you a second chance.
 Month eleven hangs thick icicles.
 You lose your temper.
 Impatience needs curbing with efforts;
 You need take it easy.
 Month twelve greets Minor New Year.
 I'd make plans.
 The old are healthy and happy with the young's greetings;
 I assure you to come after dark.

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