

**Hua-Miao Archive  
Songs and Stories**

**Miao Social Life**

Old marriage customs and songs about marriage

Songs M301 to M314

Introduction and Translation

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Author: R Keith Parsons

Web Site constructed by Dr Stephen Rake  
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University of Southampton

**M301**  
**Arranging marriages according to the old customs.**

*Written by Wang Ming-ji.*

Introduction.

By way of introduction to a group of six songs about marriage which he had collected, Wang Ming-ji wrote a short explanatory note which he amplified by further observations inserted in the songs themselves. This material is here brought together. The writer was at pains to point out that things had changed during the years, and some old customs had fallen into disuse, but they did apply to the time when these songs were first sung .

The expression “zi-ghao” had two meanings. It was the name given to the middleman who conducted the marriage arrangements, and it was also the word for the visits for negotiations which the middleman undertook. “A zi-ghao” means “to make marriage arrangements” or “to make a match”.

The Miao used the same sequence of twelve animals as did the Chinese for counting the passage of days or years, so that a “ba-zhu” was strictly a twelve day period. When Wang Ming-ji said “thirteen days”, what he meant was “the thirteenth day”. That is if the middlemen paid their first visit on, say, Dragon-day, their next visit would be on the thirteenth day, namely the next Dragon-day.

It is not quite clear at what point the middlemen would have to make the announcement if the bride was unwilling. Presumably she would refuse to go and meet the bridegroom, and it would then be for the middlemen to go out and break the news to him, and the whole party would have to return home.

The stipulation of an initial stay of two years after marriage did not, apparently, prevent the bride from going home, if that were necessary, to finish the “bridegroom’s gown”. The restriction on her visits was to ensure that the first child would be born in her own new home. It was considered unlucky for a woman to give birth in her parents’ home, and should this happen, elaborate and costly rites of purification had to be performed to remove the pollution, and to carry the child’s spirit to the new home where it properly belonged. If this were not done, the child would not thrive.

The Miao made their own cloth from hemp, so that the “bridegroom’s” gown would be very largely of home grown yarn, spun and woven, dyed and made up by the bride herself. For the decoration and the embroidery work it was necessary to buy some finer red, blue or brown cotton material in the Chinese markets. The presentation of some red material by the bridegroom’s family was an earnest of their good faith and serious intentions.

**M301**  
**Arranging marriages according to the old customs**

*Written by Wang Ming-ji.*

To begin with approaches had to be made, and it was necessary to make four such approaches. The time for making the approaches was at intervals of thirteen days. So it was said, "One ba-zhu, one approach excursion". (A ba-zhu is thirteen days.) Whether the bride was obtained or not, it was necessary to make the four excursions, one approach each ba-zhu.

1. Go and enquire. After this others may not.
2. Go and enquire to get a reply.
3. Go and enquire to get a firm response.
4. Go and fetch the bride.

They would bring the bridegroom to within one li, and send his friends to fetch the bride. If the bride was willing to go, and her mother and father were willing to give her to the bridegroom, then her home people would appoint the bridesmaids to accompany her. When the young men came to fetch the bride, the girls of the village would try to prevent her from going, but her parents, her sisters-in-law and her brothers would ignore them. However, when the bride was fetched, an older person went with her. The bridegroom then would take hold of the bride. With the bridesmaids properly prepared, and the bride willing to go, all would return together for a meal, then they would all depart together.

If the bride was unwilling to go, the middleman would announce that the marriage was off.

In the bridal party there had to be seven women in all, five young women, one matron and, of course, the bride. There had to be five men, including one older man, one head-man, and one nephew who was the "cattle bringer", the person who brought the cattle back from the bridegroom's family.

Explanation: When married the bride should go for about two years. The parents on both sides should be equally rich to arrange a marriage. For a marriage there were normally required, one bullock, five goats, and one pig, but provided there were seven animals it would do.

On the bride's side, it was necessary for her to make the "bridegroom's gown". Even though she was already married, the bride had to return to her parents' home to make this gown, only so would it count as the "bridegroom's gown".

## Old Miao songs about marriage. 1.

### The Woman Bang and the Man Bang-li-byu.

*Collected by Wang Ming-ji.*

#### Introduction.

Like one of Shakespeare's characters, the couple in this song "by contraries execute all things". Their son they send away "to be a bride", and their daughter they keep at home, employed in felling, transporting and erecting timber for a new house. However, when, after a long absence, the son returns with a child and, presumably, though she is not mentioned in the song, his wife, the roles are switched back to normal. The son completes the new house as a place for him to "hang his cross-bow", that is as his home, while the daughter is given a patch of ground on which "to grow hemp", that is hemp to be spun into yarn, and woven into cloth in order to make the bridal outfit and the bridegroom's gown which she will require when she gets married.

At the head of the song Wang Ming-ji inserted a note which explains that "in the beginning it was the man who was the bride". This self-contradictory statement which appears again in lines 8 and 21 presumably means that there was a time when the marriage customs were different, and that the man, rather than the woman, left home to live with the parents-in-law. Such an interpretation is not impossible, but lacking any corroborative evidence, does not appear very likely. It is much simpler to regard the song as just a "once upon a time" story, sung to amuse rather than to instruct. In the translation the problematic statement that the "son went to be a bride" has been glossed over by saying that he went to be married.

The final eight lines of the song are scarcely complimentary to the bride. With heavy sarcasm scorn is poured upon the whole idea that she was a suitable person ever to get married, but does not explain why. This sort of statement, using the same similes, appears to be a convention in marriage songs. Elsewhere, however, despite such disparaging remarks, there was no difficulty in finding a bridegroom. Perhaps the present song has lost a final section describing the daughter's eventual marriage.

Two other points call for some explanation.

1. In line 9 and again in line 35 we are told that first, the daughter, and later, the son was kept at home "to learn the spirits". This expression originally concerned being initiated into the rituals of the clan worship of the ancestors and applied to boys only. A girl, on marriage, joined her husband's clan which would have different rituals. However, the phrase passed into general use and came to mean simply "kept the person at home"
2. Tree trunks, too heavy to be carried, would have to be dragged home using ropes, requiring the organisation of a team of perhaps twenty men. This, presumably, was the task undertaken by the young woman in the song. The exact significance of the three straight beams, which she could not manage, is not clear.

**M302**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 1.**

**The Woman Bang and the Man Bang-li-byu.**

*Collected by Wang Ming-ji.*

From out of scattered sky material came the dome,  
For the Woman Bang to come and live.  
Woven from scattered earth material came the ranges,  
For the Man Bang-li-byu to come and dwell.

- 5      This year we may know,  
         Know that the Woman Bang has started marriage arrangements,  
         Know that the Man Bang-li-byu has begun wedding preparations.  
         Begun preparing for their son to go and be married,  
         But they kept their daughter, the grown up young woman, at home.
- 10     This year we may know,  
         Know that the woman Bang is about to build a house,  
         Know that the man Bang-li-byu is about to build a home.  
         So they sent their daughter, the grown up young woman, to go and fell timber,  
         And they sent their daughter, the grown up young woman, to go and drag the timber  
         in.
- 15     She dragged in pillars from below on the plain,  
         She dragged in beams from above in the pass.  
         The daughter, the grown up young woman, dragged in,  
         Dragged in successfully the various timbers required,  
         Except the three beams, the straight beams, from the mountain ridge.
- 20     When others get married they may return,  
         But when their son got married he could not come.  
         However, when their son did return and reach home,  
         They sent their son to go and drag in the timber,  
         And he dragged in successfully the three beams, the straight beams, from the  
         mountain ridge.
- 25     Then they sent their daughter, the grown up young woman, to go and erect the  
         timbers.  
         She erected successfully the various timbers required,  
         Except the three beams, the straight beams, from the mountain ridge, which she  
         could not erect.
- 30     So their son, carrying his baby encircled in his arm,  
         Stretching out his hand, went and erected,  
         Erected successfully the three beams, the straight beams, from the mountain ridge.
- This year we may know,  
         Know that this year the Woman Bang is arranging a marriage,  
         Know that this year the Man Bang-li-byu is arranging a wedding

They are arranging for their daughter, the grown up young woman, to go and be  
married,  
35 But they are keeping their son at home.

This year we may know,  
Know that the Woman Bang has built a house,  
Know that the Man Bang-li-byu has built a home.  
In fact their son constructed,  
40 Constructed the Woman Bang and the Man Bang-li-byu's house.

The interior of the house provided,  
Provided their son with a place to hang his cross-bow,  
While the exterior of the house provided,  
Provided their daughter, the grown up young woman, with a place for growing  
hemp.

45 Cold water is not the thing to offer to a guest,  
Their daughter, the grown up young woman, is not the person to offer in marriage!  
Why have the Woman Bang and the Man Bang-li-byu taken,  
Taken their daughter, the grown up young woman, and offered her in marriage?

50 Wild rice and wild millet are not the seed to plant in a garden,  
Their daughter, the grown up young woman, is not the person to plant in a home!  
It is wasted effort to sow wild rice and wild millet on good soil,  
It is wasted effort to send their daughter, the grown up young woman, on the  
marriage road!

**M303**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 2.**

**Song by the bridegroom's friends**

*Collected by Wang Ming-ji.*

Introduction.

The opening line establishes the time of year. The hawthorn came into blossom in May, that is, before the onset of the summer rains.

The wine horns mentioned in the song were from water buffalo. The wide end of the horn where it joined the animal's head was blocked in with wood and sealed with varnish. A hole was bored in through the tip of the horn and fitted with a stopper. The outside of the horn was decorated with a carved pattern and then lacquered. These horns were a convenient way of storing wine and most useful for pouring it into wine cups. They could also be easily carried with a leather thong attached to either end and slung over the shoulder.

The song reflects the old custom, now long discontinued, by which, instead of a rice bowl, each guest had a small basket for his rice or maize-meal. The meat and vegetables were placed in wooden bowls on the table. For eating, each guest was provided with a wooden spoon. The use of chopsticks and pottery basins came at a later date, copied from the Chinese. The duty of the waiters was to ensure that the guests' rice baskets were kept full, and the basins of meat and vegetables, brimming.

M303

**Old Miao songs about marriage. 2.**

**Song by the bridegroom's friends.**

*Collected by Wang Ming-ji.*

The hawthorn had long been in blossom.  
The right time for the old folk to go and eat meat,  
Yet there was nothing for the marriage feast.  
At a marriage feast you should have sliced white pork!  
5 But there was nothing for the wedding feast.  
At a wedding feast you should have the best joint of mutton sliced!

But when the next day came, the man, the father sent,  
Sent two attendants wearing,  
10 Wearing black capes and bearing wine horns  
To pour clear wine, waiting at the entrance,  
To pour clear wine, waiting at the door,  
Welcoming the marriage guests, the wedding guests on arrival.

The man, the father sent,  
15 Sent two skilful waiters,  
Two skilful waiters to replenish the food baskets.  
“In replenishing the food baskets, do not be hindered,  
In replenishing the bowls, do not rest!  
20 When tomorrow comes,  
And the marriage guests, the wedding guests have eaten their fill,  
You too may eat your fill!”

**M304**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 3.**

**A match-making song.**

***Collected by Wang Ming-ji.***

Introduction.

Sometimes, before instituting the formal marriage negotiations conducted by middlemen, male members of the two families concerned might meet for some preliminary discussions. These would take place over a drink of wine. During such discussions the virtues of the prospective bride and bridegroom would be extolled by their respective relatives as bargaining counters in their haggling over the marriage settlement. The present song makes the somewhat cynical comment that, if they are really to reach a satisfactory agreement, a considerable quantity of wine will be consumed first! Throughout, the parties concerned are called “the brothers” and “the brothers-in-law”.

A notable feature of the song is the manner in which an exact scheme of parallelism is maintained, line for line and word for word, between the two seven line stanzas.

M304

**Old Miao songs about marriage. 3.**

**A match-making song.**

*Collected by Wang Ming-ji.*

The sun is shining brightly,  
Shining upon jet-black birds that fly to and fro,  
Shining upon brothers and brothers-in-law pursuing distant roads,  
Shining still on brothers and brothers in law when they come together.  
5 Then fill the vessel with clear wine and share it around and drink,  
For in drinking clear wine you can never drink enough,  
When discussing a marriage or wedding, if, discussing, you would reach an  
agreement.

The sun is shining brightly,  
Shining upon jet-black birds that fly all around,  
10 Shining on brothers and brothers-in-law pursuing separate roads,  
Shining still on brothers and brothers-in-law when they meet together.  
Then fill the vessel with clear wine and share it around and drink,  
For in drinking clear wine you will drink without limit,  
When discussing a marriage or wedding, if, discussing, you would reach satisfaction.

**M305**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 4.**

**Song about entertaining the Middleman and the Headman.**

*Collected by Wang Ming-ji.*

Introduction.

The arrival of two middlemen, one of whom was also a village headman, set the whole household of the prospective bride into a hive of activity, everyone being concerned to make the best possible impression. The bride's father personally supervised the entertainment of the visitors, making sure that they occupied the chief places at the table, that is those remote from the door. Uppermost in his mind was the possibility of a substantial addition to the livestock on his farm, which would result from a successful marriage settlement. The following day the prospective bride's aunt sought further to impress by displaying the garments that the bride would bring with her to her new home. The quantity and quality of these being a sure measure of her industry and skill. The serious negotiations for the marriage were conducted by the men-folk gathered around the open fire after the evening meal, while the women insured that the talks went smoothly by maintaining a more than ample supply of wine. For her part the prospective bride, by assiduous grooming, made sure that every day she was looking her best.

The wine which was used had been fermented and stored in large jars each containing several gallons. When it was required, it was siphoned off using a U-shaped tube made from a length of green bamboo, the internal joints of which had been burnt through with a hot wire. The wine was drawn off into smaller flasks from which the drinking cups were replenished. The metaphors of "fat" and "milk" are used to describe the quality of the wine which the women had made. As the evening wore on, those who were overcome by its potency subsided into slumber beside the fire and had to be dragged back lest sparks or falling embers set their clothing alight.

**Old Miao songs about marriage. 4.**

**Song about entertaining the middleman and the headman.**

*Collected by Wang Ming-ji.*

Who is entertaining a middleman?  
The man, the father is entertaining a middleman.  
Who is entertaining a headman?  
The man, the father is entertaining a headman.

5 He is entertaining the middleman  
Together with the headman,  
Making them sit in the highest places, because,  
Because the man, the father's livestock will be multiplied!

10 The man, the father has reserved,  
Reserved the place of honour for whom?  
He has reserved it for the middleman.  
The man, the father has reserved,  
Reserved the chief place for whom?  
He has reserved it for the headman.

15 When the next day came,  
The middleman and the headman called,  
Called the woman, the aunt's name over and over.  
The woman, the aunt took the skirts and gowns, and putting them on, went to meet,  
To meet the middleman and the headman.

20 The middleman and the headman together went and took them off,  
Took them off carefully and laid them out all round.  
Then the skirts of the woman, the aunt,  
The woman, the aunt collected from all round and carried them away.

25 When the next day came,  
The middleman and the headman called,  
Called the woman, the aunt's name again and again.  
The woman, the aunt took the skirts and aprons, and putting them on, went to meet,  
To meet the middleman and the headman.

30 The middleman and the headman forthwith went and took them off,  
Took them off carefully and laid them out all round.  
Then the aprons of the woman, the aunt,  
The woman, the aunt picked up from all round and folded them away.

35 The women's wine jars bubbled clear,  
Bubbled with the women's yeast.  
The women's wine jars bubbled over on the ground,  
Bubbled with the men's wine.  
Now take a sprig of bamboo and push it,

Push it into the neck and suck,  
Suck the “fat” from the women’s wine jars.

40 But the women’s wine jars threw,  
Threw the old folk down by the fire!

So, pull the old folk aside,  
Let them lie together on the ground,  
Like the ridges there out of doors,  
45 On the old folk’s land.

Take a sprig of bamboo and push it,  
Push it into the neck and suck,  
Suck the “milk” from the women’s wine jars.

Now the middle-aged spoke much,  
50 Spoke of the woman’s marriage,  
But the women’s wine jars threw,  
Threw the middle-aged down by the fire!

So, pull the middle-aged aside,  
Let them lie together on the ground,  
55 Like the ridges there out of doors,  
On the plains of the middle-aged.

When the next day came,  
The daughter, the adult young woman rose,  
Rose up and combed her hair,  
60 Making her hair smooth and flowing.

When the next day came,  
The daughter, the adult young woman rose,  
Rose up and combed her hair,  
Making her hair smooth, smooth indeed.

65 For there will come a day when the daughter, the adult young woman, like,  
Like a shadow passing over the crops,  
The swaying crops, will go to her marriage.

There will come a day when the daughter, the adult young woman, like,  
Like a shadow passing over the harvest,  
The swaying harvest will go to her marriage.

M306

**Old Miao songs about marriage. 5.**

**Song of collecting livestock from the bridegroom's family.**

*Collected by Wang Ming-ji.*

Introduction.

A note at the end of this song says that it was “a song of complaint because the cattle and pigs were not big enough”. The marriage arrangements had all been worked out by the middleman, including the number of animals to be given by the bridegroom's family to the bride's family. When, however, the marriage procession arrived, and the “headman”, that is the leader of the party, asked about the settlement of livestock, he received only an evasive reply. It was the duty of the younger brother to collect the beasts, and the bridegroom's family, knowing that the animals were of inferior quality, tried to hand them over to the young man, in the hope that, being inexperienced he would not demur. The song is evidence that they did not, in fact, get away with it. In a further note at the end of the song Wang Ming-ji explained that in such circumstances the matter would have to be settled by an additional payment of money or wine.

**Old Miao songs about marriage. 5.**

**Song of collecting livestock from the bridegroom's family.**

*Collected by Wang Ming-ji.*

Who has arranged for the middleman?  
The man, the father has arranged for the middleman.  
Who has arranged a marriage?  
The man, the father has arranged a marriage.

5 He has arranged for three bridesmaids at the marriage,  
And he has arranged for three brothers at the marriage.

He has arranged for three bridesmaids at the marriage,  
Each wearing her leg bands properly adjusted.  
He has arranged for three brothers at the marriage,  
10 Each wearing his silk gown, the brightest garment.

The brightest garments had woven braids,  
The flowing garments had woven tassels,  
Woven tassels all properly knotted,  
Woven braids all useful and fitting,  
15 To accompany the daughter the adult young woman.

When the next day came,  
As we followed one another,  
Crossing the plain, in our opinion, our appearance,  
Our appearance was worthy  
20 Worthy from the outset of the marriage,  
But we collected a marriage cow only the size of a deer!

As we followed one another,  
Crossing the plain, in our opinion, our appearance,  
Our appearance was worthy,  
25 Worthy from the outset of the marriage,  
But we collected a marriage sheep only the size of a small rabbit!

When the next day came,  
The headman would collect,  
Collect the daughter, the adult young woman's worth,  
30 But the headman could not collect it.

Then for the daughter,  
The debt was collected by the younger brother.  
He collected for the marriage a piglet only as big as a small rat!  
He collected for the marriage a kid only as big as a small rabbit!

**M307**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 6.**

**Song about serving breakfast.**

*Collected by Wang Ming-ji.*

Introduction.

In this song all had gone well with the marriage, and the bridal party was about to return home. The “bridegroom’s gown”, presented by the bride to her husband, had brought credit to both families, and, though the matter is not mentioned, presumably no fault was found with the cattle of the marriage settlement. Now on the morning of their departure, led by the bridegroom himself, the family pressed gifts of food and wine upon their guests, and offered lavish provision for the journey home.

M307

Old Miao songs about marriage. 6.

Song about serving breakfast

*Collected by Wang Ming-ji.*

The maiden stitched linen, the maiden stitched a gown,  
Stitched it for the mature, forthcoming youth, his bridegroom's gown,  
Stitched it for the mature, forthcoming youth, a gown, ample and full.

5 She stitched it, a flowing garment, a credit to her family.  
She stitched it, a garment falling in folds, a credit to his family.

Let the mature, forthcoming youth go and replenish the food baskets.  
In replenishing the food baskets do not be hindered,  
In replenishing the basins do not rest.

10 The serving lads were laughing,  
Laughing and smiling as they waited,  
Waited upon the marriage party hand and foot.

“Open the mouth of your bag and let us fill it,  
Fill it with white rice for you to carry and show,  
Show to your children at home!”

15 “Bring your flask and let us fill it,  
Fill it with clear wine for you to carry and show,  
Show to your old people at home!”

20 “You do not have anything for,  
For the marriage party to eat on the way home,  
Now do take some white rice for,  
For the marriage party to eat on the way home!”

25 “You do not have anything for,  
For the marriage party to eat on the way back,  
Now do take some white rice for,  
For the marriage party to eat on the way back!”

**M308**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 7.**

*Transcribed by Yang Yung-xin*

Introduction.

The marriage songs, for the most part, say nothing about the reactions of either the bride or the bridegroom. In this song the latter is not even mentioned, but we are told that when the bride saw the marriage party arriving she trembled. Whether this was from fear or excitement is not revealed.

The Miao were not potters. For generations now they have used earthenware basins and bowls bought from the Chinese at local markets. However the old songs reflect a time when rice was eaten from small individual baskets of woven bamboo, using, not chopsticks, but spoons carved from wood. Vegetables and meat were contained in wooden bowls set on low tables, and wine was drunk from small bowls, perhaps two inches in diameter, also carved from wooden blocks. In this song we are told that new rice baskets were provided and the wine cups were also new and “thin”, that is, finely carved.

The connection between the final section from line 60 and the rest of the song is a little obscure. The suggestion seems to be that, though their daughter has now left home, life for the parents had to go on, so they returned to the daily tasks of driving the cattle and sheep out to pasture. Nevertheless families related by marriage should keep in touch even though separated by considerable distances.

**M308**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 7.**

*Transcribed by Yang Yung-xin.*

- The stars circle the sky,  
And cold water circles the earth,  
But cold water is not the thing to offer to a guest,  
And the daughter, the adult young woman is not,  
5 Is not the person to offer in marriage!
- Who, on the bride's side, initiated the marriage?  
The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, initiated the marriage.  
Who, on the bridegroom's side initiated the wedding?  
The woman, the aunt, initiated the wedding.
- 10 The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, have caught,  
Caught the fattened chicken in order to kill it,  
And they have called in the old folk to determine a time.
- They have determined a time and determined a season, but when?  
They have determined a time and determined a season in,  
15 In Dragon month or Rabbit month,  
And on the fifteenth day.
- The middleman having eaten,  
Eaten the chicken and drunk the broth,  
The visit for fetching the bride was agreed.
- 20 The proposed time has come,  
We hear it is today,  
Today the marriage party is coming from yonder,  
From yonder the marriage party will make its winding way,  
So people from all around will be watching.
- 25 The door of the woman, the mother, and the man, the father,  
The outer door, the door of planks, faced which way?  
It faced directly toward the sunrise,  
It faced directly toward the clump of variegated bamboo.
- The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, have opened,  
30 Opened the door of planks for the arrival of the marriage party.  
The way was very smooth as though paved with silver,  
The way was very smooth as though the threshold were gold.
- The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, first arranged,  
Arranged for two attendants to go out with lighted torches.  
35 The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, next arranged,  
Arranged for two youths bearing wine horns to go and pour wine.
- So the two attendant youths went and poured wine,

Pouring clear wine they mingled with the guests,  
Pouring clear wine they mixed with the guests.

40 The daughter, the adult young woman, saw it all,  
And the daughter, the adult young woman, trembled.

The marriage party came, and the marriage party drank,  
Drank well the clear wine from fine cups.

45 The marriage party came, and the marriage party drank,  
Drank well the clear wine from new cups.

The man, the father, replenished,  
Replenished well the new baskets with white rice,  
Replenished well the basins with white pork.

50 So the marriage party came and the marriage party ate,  
Ate an evening meal of hot rice before departing,  
Ate an evening meal of white pork before departing.

The woman, the mother, grieved,  
Grieved for the woman, the mother's, daughter,  
The daughter, the adult young woman,  
55 As she arose and left the shelter of the door,  
As she departed from the shelter of the home.

The bridegroom's family also grieved,  
Grieved for the bridegroom's family, their fine long horned ox,  
Their long horned ox which had crossed over, but would not be driven back.

60 When the next day came,  
Very early in the morning,  
The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, drove out,  
Drove out the fine cattle and horses on to the plain,  
Drove out the fine cattle and horses to graze,  
65 Drove out the jostling sheep and goats to pasture.

Now those people arranged with their in-laws,  
And those folk came from their place,  
For those folk had remembered.

70 We might not take along a pig, if the journey is long,  
But, though the journey is long, we must remember to meet our in-laws.

**M309**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 8.**

*Transcribed by Yang Yung-xin.*

Introduction

The father of the young woman in this song and the man who was hoping that she might become his future daughter-in-law, are both called “the man, the father”. The confusion is somewhat mitigated by the fact that throughout the song the two men are kept apart, and, in addition, the young woman’s father is always accompanied by his wife, while the prospective mother-in-law, and, for that matter, the prospective bridegroom do not appear at all. For the sake of clarity in the translation, however, “the man her father”, and “the woman her mother” are used for the prospective bride’s parents.

The story behind the song seems to be that the appearance of skeins of yarn drying in the sun on the fence around the vegetable plot could not but draw comment from the neighbours. Moreover, the quality and the quantity of the yarn were sure indications of the skill and application of the maker. This talk reached the ears of a man on the look out for a good daughter-in-law, and he at once set to work to produce the livestock necessary to celebrate a marriage and to pay the marriage settlement. Before any official approach had been made through a middleman, however, the girl’s family let it be known that they were not interested. It is quite possible that this was not a final rejection, but simply a bargaining ploy, since the prospective father-in-law responded by arranging with a relative, whether one of his or one of theirs is not clear, to invite the girl’s parents to a meal in his house and presumably do a little special advocacy. As an added incentive, the relative chosen was one who had the reputation of being a very good cook! Whether this manoeuvre was successful, we are not told.

**M309**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 8.**

*Transcribed by Yang Yung-xin.*

- 5      With her smooth hands the girl had joined the hemp strands,  
And now the weather came out fine and good,  
Just right for the girl to carry her skeins to the river.  
Very soon the girl's skeins, the girl's yarn was hanging,  
Hanging to dry in the garden plot.
- 10     Now the man, the father had heard,  
Heard about that daughter, the adult young woman,  
And the man, the father, mated his ewes for breeding,  
And mated a pair of spotted pigs.  
So the man, the father, made arrangements,  
Mating all the flocks and herds.
- 15     But the woman, her mother, and the man, her father were of one mind,  
There would be no discussion of their daughter, the adult young woman.  
For regarding their daughter, the adult young woman,  
The woman, her mother, and the man, her father, were adamant.
- 20     They grieved that their daughter, the adult young woman  
Might rise and leave the shelter of the door.  
They grieved that their daughter, the adult young woman  
Might rise and quit the shelter of the house.
- 25     So the man, the father, arranged,  
Arranged with a relative, one who could cook.  
And the relative came and the relative called,  
Called the woman, her mother, and the man, her father, to share hospitality in the  
house.  
The relative came and the relative made,  
Made the woman, her mother, and the man, her father, share hospitality in the home.

**M310**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 9.**

*Transcribed by Yang Yung-xin.*

Introduction

In this song, the bride's parents, reluctant to allow her to go, but unwilling to turn a good offer down, refused to commit themselves. In the face, however, of a very persuasive middleman, they eventually agreed to leave the final decision to the bride. Fortunately she was in no doubt what she wanted to do.

The text is a little confusing in that it uses exactly the same formula, "the woman, the mother, and the man, the father," for the parents of both bridegroom and bride. Up to, and including, line 17 it refers to the former, while line 18 and thereafter, it refers to the latter. In translation, in order to make a clear distinction, the bride's parents are described as "the woman, her mother, and the man, her father".

In naming the months of the year the Miao adopted the same cycle of twelve animals as used by the Chinese. These are, of course, months of the lunar calendar. Mentioned in this song are Horse-month which is the second month, Sheep-month which is the third month, Rat-month which is the eighth month, Ox-month which is the ninth month, Rabbit-month which is the eleventh month and Dragon-month which is the twelfth-month. The new year usually began in late January or early February.

**M310**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 9.**

*Transcribed by Yang Yung-xin.*

With winter past and warm weather coming,  
People were at their farming early,

So, come Sheep-month and Horse-month,  
The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, began  
5 Raising all kinds of crops and filling the land,  
Planting millet broadcast and filling the place.

Come Ox-month and Rat-month,  
All the crops of broadcast millet ripened,  
Ripened golden yellow, an excellent harvest.

10 The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, discussed and debated,  
Discussed a marriage union,  
Discussed a marriage bond.

Then the woman, the mother, and the man, the father, arranged,  
Arranged for the middleman to go till he reached,  
15 Reached the in-laws' family home.

The middleman opened his mouth, opened his lips, and asked,  
Asked that the daughter, the adult young woman might come and be,  
Be daughter-in-law for the woman, the mother, and the man, the father.

But the woman, her mother, and the man, her father grieved,  
20 Grieved that their daughter  
Should arise and leave the shelter of the door,  
Should arise and quit the shelter of the home.

She was such an attractive person,  
The woman, her mother, and the man, her father, would not give an answer.  
25 But the middleman was undaunted,  
He kept arguing vigorously until nearly midnight.

The woman, her mother, and the man, her father, whispered together then said,  
"All right, let our daughter, the adult young woman reply".  
Thus it was she who replied to the middleman's proposal.

30 So when the next day came,  
Early, as soon as it grew light,  
The woman, her mother, and the man, her father, returned,  
Returned word for the middleman to convey to the in-laws,  
Who thus received the woman, her mother, and the man, her father's response.

35 The woman, her mother, and the man, her father, fed,  
Fed the fattened chicken in preparation for the marriage,

And fed the spotted pig in preparation for the wedding.  
The woman, her mother, and the man, her father, called,  
Called the neighbours to come,  
40 To come and determine a time and determine a date,  
And they settled on Dragon-month and Rabbit-month.

The woman, her mother, and the man, her father, arranged,  
Arranged for cooks to prepare the meat and vegetable dishes,  
And they called people to come and cook the rice.

45 They called the children to come and wait upon the guests,  
And called the daughters, the adult young women, to come and carry water.  
They called the old folk to come and eat meat,  
The called the old folk to come and drink wine.  
So they called their relatives to come and congratulate the bride.

**M311**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 10.**

*Transcribed by Yang Yung-xin*

Introduction.

Miao spinning wheels, constructed of bamboo, made a distinctive squeaking sound as they turned. The interior of the houses being rather dark, spinning was regularly done out of doors, and the sound could carry a considerable distance. In the present song, the persistent squeaking of the spinning wheel alerted the prospective parents-in law that there was an industrious, and therefore very desirable prospective bride in the vicinity.

When the middleman arrived, the young woman's parents at first refused to let her go, and the reason given was that "her body was not worn out". The word used is that which is regularly employed to describe knives or hoes, which have been worn away by constant use. The heavy labour which Miao women had to do in the home and in the fields resulted in premature ageing and a shortened life expectancy. The expression as used here means that the young woman was still strong and capable of hard work, and therefore her parents decided that she should "lay hold of the spirits". The reference is to the spirits of her parents' ancestors, and the meaning is that she should remain within her own family. Once married her obligation to these ancestors ceased, as she became a member of her husband's family.

The young woman, however, was determined to go, and the in-laws soon discovered that they had a "great bee" in their midst. Constantly busy herself, and organising everyone else, she took charge of the domestic arrangements, reorganised the farm, and even got an extension built on to the house.

**M311**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 10.**

*Transcribed by Yang Yung-xin.*

- Who had a daughter early?  
The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, had a daughter early,  
And the woman, the mother, and the man, the father,  
Their daughter, the adult young woman, grew,  
5 Grew to maturity and was fully trained,
- She had grown to maturity and was spinning,  
Spinning hemp, and the squeaking of the wheel  
Carried as far as the in-law's land,  
For there the in-laws heard it.
- 10 So the in-laws arranged,  
Arranged for the middleman to come,  
To come and ask the woman, the mother, and the man, the father,  
That the daughter, the adult young woman, might go,  
Go to the in-laws as their daughter-in-law,  
15 But the woman, the mother, and the man, the father, were unwilling.
- The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, grieved,  
Grieved that the daughter, the adult young woman,  
Looking so well and being so capable,  
Being so capable, should rise and leave the shelter of the home.
- 20 The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, grieved,  
Grieved that the daughter the adult young woman,  
Looking so well, and being so capable,  
Being so capable, should rise and quit the shelter of the door.
- 25 So at first the woman, the mother, and the man, the father, decided,  
Decided that the daughter, the adult young woman should hold fast,  
Hold fast the ancestral spirits of the woman, the mother and the man, the father.  
But the daughter, the adult young woman could not hold fast,  
So they let the daughter the adult young woman go,  
Go as the in-laws' daughter-in-law.
- 30 She went to the in-laws like a great bee, like a great wild bee!  
She took charge of the in-laws' water and meal tubs setting them firm,  
She took charge of the in-laws' farmlands with diligence,  
And she set up the in-laws' homestead making it spacious within and without.

**M312**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 11.**

*Transcribed by Yang Yung-xin.*

Introduction.

In this song the mothers of the prospective bridegroom and bride are called respectively, “the woman, the aunt” and “the woman, the mother”. The two fathers are not distinguished, both are “the man, the father”, but since neither ever appears without his wife, there is no confusion.

Having arrived on his third visit, the middleman was entitled to an answer one way or the other. By failing to give one, the parents could expect to be put under some pressure. Their problem was that they did not want to lose their particularly talented daughter, but if they refused, would another suitor come forward, and would he be any more acceptable? Moreover, time was a significant factor. Families preferred their daughters-in-law to be younger rather than older.

There are a number of isolated points, which call for some comment.

1. The Miao word “cha”, which in common speech more often takes the form “cha-cha”, has a range of meanings from a casual, “Oh dear, what a pity!” to a sincere expression of grief.
2. The “gown of longing” was the bridegroom’s gown, made for him by the bride before the marriage, as tradition required.
3. The “hlu-nza-nzyu” was the most highly regarded pattern of the Miao tribal costume. It was also the most difficult to make.
4. The Yi-bang was the great river which flowed through the ancient homeland from which the Miao were driven by the Chinese.
5. The claim that the young woman could write Chinese characters is remarkable. Before 1904 when the missionaries began to open schools in Miao villages, very few Miao boys had an opportunity to learn to read and write Chinese, while for a girl to be literate was virtually unheard of.
6. The Miao did not use animal milk in their food, so that the complaint at the end of the song must mean that the gifts brought by the in-laws, lavish though they may have been, were incommensurate even with the milk of their daughter’s babyhood.

**M312**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 11.**

*Transcribed by Yang Yung-xin.*

This year we may know,  
Know that the woman, the aunt, and the man, the father, had arranged,  
Had arranged for the middleman to go till he reached,  
Reached the in-laws' home.

5 The middleman opened his mouth, opened his lips and asked,  
Asked that the eldest daughter of woman the mother, and the man, the father, might  
come,  
Come as the daughter-in-law of the woman, the aunt, and the man, the father.

But the woman, the mother, and the man, the father, recalled,  
Recalled that bringing up sons and daughters was no easy matter.  
10 It required much labour and hard work,  
So the woman, the mother, and the man, the father, gave no answer.

The middleman made three visits, as custom required.  
He remained seated in the woman, the mother, and the man, the father's room,  
Pressing the case with persistence all night till dawn was breaking,  
15 And the woman, the mother, and the man, the father, could make no further excuse.

The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, discussed in whispers, then said,  
"Well then, let the daughter, the adult young woman go,  
Go as the woman, the aunt, and the man, the father's daughter-in-law.

20 This year we may know,  
Know that the woman, the aunt, and the man, the father, have received,  
Have received word from the woman, the mother, and the man, the father.

So the woman, the aunt, and the man, the father fed,  
Fed the fattened chicken to prepare for the marriage,  
And fed the spotted pig to prepare for the wedding.

25 They called the neighbours, who came,  
Came to fix the time, to fix the date for the marriage.  
They fixed it for the fifth of Dragon month or Rabbit month.

Then the woman, the aunt, and the man, the father, arranged,  
Arranged for the middleman to return again, and he reached,  
30 Reached the woman, the mother, and the man, the father's home,  
To tell them the propitious date clearly,  
Namely the fifth of Rabbit month.

The marriage party came, threading its way,  
Threading its way along the winding road.  
35 The marriage party came carrying,  
Carrying meat and meal all cooked and ready, so they arrived.

But the woman, the mother, and the man, the father grieved,  
Grieved for the daughter, the adult young woman,  
In appearance so good looking.

40 They grieved for the daughter, the adult young woman,  
So able, so skilful with her hands.  
Able and skilful with her hands to do what?  
Able and skilful with her hands to make costumes.

45 She had made the daughter, the adult young woman's "gown of longing".  
She had made costumes, the hlu-nza-nzyu, with a pattern of stripes,  
She had made costumes, the hlu-nza-nzyu, gathered with nine threads.  
She had made skirts of fine material with coloured strips set side by side,  
Set like the rice fields, the long, flat fields on the plain of the Yi-bang river.

50 The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, grieved,  
Grieved for the daughter, the adult young woman,  
So able, so skilful with her hands.

55 She was able and skilful with her hands to do what?  
She was able and skilful with her hands to write.  
She could write Chinese characters distinguishing them in order,  
And matters concerning the Chinese she could write out correctly.

So the woman, the mother, and the man, the father, declared,  
That the meat and the meal that the in-laws had brought,  
Bore no comparison even with the baby milk the woman, the mother, and the man,  
the father, had provided.

Thus it is ended.

**M313**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 12.**

*Transcribed by Yang Yung-xin.*

Introduction.

An explanatory note at the beginning of the manuscript reads, “A girl went as a bride to a family where she suffered much hardship, hence this song”. This statement is not quite correct inasmuch as the girl was not yet a bride. Throughout the song she is never given the usual title accorded to brides, “nggu nie lao”, “the adult young woman”, that is one of marriageable age, but is described as “the girl, the child”, that is she was still too young to be married.

What seems to have happened was that this young girl was betrothed to a boy of about her own age, and was taken to live in his home. Her parents received gifts of food and wine in exchange for their daughter, whose position in her new home was, however, little better than that of a slave. She was required to undertake tasks, which were simply beyond her strength. An adult could carry sufficient water at one time to keep the water butt in the house topped up, but that was more than the child could manage. Likewise the pounding of millet, which was carried out in a mortar carved out of a block of stone, using an iron pestle, much too heavy for a child to handle effectively.

The advantages of this arrangement to the prospective parents-in-law in terms of a source of cheap labour in the home, are obvious. However, when the actual marriage took place there would still be a marriage settlement to be paid. Until that time the girl remained a member of her own family, and the parents in law were responsible to them for her well-being. This explains why, when the child committed suicide because of the ill treatment she had received, the in-laws were liable for a payment to her family in lieu of the marriage settlement, which would not now be forthcoming. The girl’s family came, therefore, not simply to view the grave, but to collect their dues, and they drove away a young animal, which, apart from his fully trained ploughing ox, was probably the most valuable asset the farmer possessed.

**M313**  
**Old Miao songs about marriage. 12**

*Transcribed by Yang Yung-xin.*

- Who was it desired clear wine to drink,  
And who was it desired meat to eat?  
The woman, the mother, and the man, the father, desired,  
Desired the man Jio-gha-su's wine to drink,  
5 And the woman, the mother, and the man, the father, desired,  
Desired the man Jio-gha-su's meat to eat.
- So the woman, the mother, and the man, the father, took,  
Took the daughter, the child, and betrothed her,  
Betrothed her into the family of the man Jio-gha-su.  
10 Thus the daughter, the child, arose and went,  
Went yonder to carry fresh water for the man Jio-gha-su.
- But from first thing in the morning the man Jio-gha-su scolded,  
Scolded the daughter, the child, for not carrying enough water to fill the tub.  
Every day the man Jio-gha-su cursed,  
15 Cursed the daughter, the child, till she wished to die.
- The man Jio-gha-su made,  
Made the daughter, the child, go and pound millet.  
But the man Jio-gha-su scolded,  
Scolded the daughter, the child, declaring,  
20 That the pounded millet was coarse.
- The daughter, the child, went out to pasture the cattle,  
But when the friends of the daughter, the child, raised,  
Raised their voices in song,  
The daughter, the child, raised,  
25 Raised her voice and wept.
- The daughter, the child, could not remain there,  
And the daughter, the child, arose to go. So she rose up,  
She arose to go, and returning, she came back and reached,  
Reached the outskirts of the woman, the mother, and the man, the father's place.
- 30 The daughter, the child, looked around and about,  
And she looked at the woman, the mother, and the man, the father's door.  
Then the daughter, the child, opened,  
Opened the woman, the mother, and the man, the father's door,  
But, opening it she did not allow it to rattle.
- 35 When the woman, the mother, and the man, the father, rose,  
Arose to go, they came and saw,  
Saw the daughter, the child, standing there,  
Standing at the woman, the mother, and the man, the father's door.

40 The woman, the mother, opened her mouth and asked,  
“What is the reason for your coming?”  
The daughter, the child, answered her,  
“Of the man Jio-gha-su’s meat and meal,  
And of the man Jio-gha-su’s water and wine, does much remain?”

45 Then the man, the father began to scold,  
Scold the daughter, the child, to make her return.  
The daughter, the child, said,  
That the daughter, the child, could not stay there,  
But the man, the father would not listen.

50 The man, the father scolded,  
Scolded the daughter, the child, to make her return.  
So the daughter, the child, went till she reached,  
Went and reached the man Jio-gha-su’s place youder.

55 The man Jio-gha-su made,  
Made the daughter go to carry water,  
But the man Jio-gha-su scolded,  
Scolded the daughter, the child, for not carrying enough to fill the tub.

60 The man Jio-gha-su made,  
Made the daughter, the child, go and pound millet,  
But the man Jio-gha-su complained,  
Complained that the daughter, the child,  
Her pounded millet was coarse.

Every day the man Jio-gha-su scolded,  
Scolded the daughter, the child, till she wished to hang herself.

65 When the daughter, the child, went to carry water,  
And the daughter, the child’s friends raised,  
Raised their voices and sang,  
The daughter, the child, raised,  
Raised her voice and wept.

70 So the daughter, the child, took,  
Took a girdle and looped it,  
Looped it in the man Jio-gha-su’s loft.  
So the daughter, the child, died.

75 The man Jio-gha-su took,  
Took the daughter, the child, and buried her.  
Then the man Jio-gha-su sent back,  
Sent back word of the daughter, the child,  
Yonder to the woman, the mother, and the man, the father.

80 Thus the daughter, the child,  
Her relations and cousins, with their mothers and fathers all got to hear,  
And the daughter, the child,

Her relations and cousins, with the woman, the mother, and the man, the father all  
arrived together,  
Arrived yonder at the man Jio-gha-su's place.

The man Jio-gha-su escorted,  
Escorted the relations and cousins with the woman, the mother, and the man, the  
father,  
85 Escorted them till they reached,  
Reached the daughter, the child's burial place.

The relations and cousins with the woman, the mother and the man, the father  
Looked carefully around and about,  
Examining the daughter, the child's grave.

90 At the foot of the grave of the daughter, the child, there stood,  
Stood only a clump of reeds,  
And at the head of the grave of the daughter, the child, there stood,  
Stood only a clump of wormwood.

The woman, the mother, and the man, the father  
95 Walked around the whole area,  
And the relations and cousins with the woman, the mother and the man, the father,  
Within the area took possession,  
Took possession of the man Jio-gha-su's partly trained ox.

So they returned and reached,  
100 Reached the woman, the mother, and the man, the father's home.  
Then the woman, the aunt, opened her mouth, opened her lips and said,

“When others go as brides, they may return,  
When others go as brides they may come back,  
But when the daughter, the child, went,  
105 Went as a bride, she could not return,  
Went as a bride, she could not come back”.

Thus it is ended.

M314

**Old Miao songs about marriage. 13.**

**Song of the old folk who had no children.**

*Transcribed by Yang-yung-xin.*

Introduction.

In the elaborate similes used in this song there is artistry of considerable merit, but at the same time an element of enigma, which the listener must interpret for himself. The earth banks mentioned in the first of the two pictures of open landscape, are those which separate rice fields, and are curved because they follow the contours of the land. The absence of trees in both pictures describes an ageing couple bereft of children. Since they are called “the mother” and “the father”, the assumption is that they did have children, but had lost them.

The second pair of similes concern wild animals which have found themselves trapped, the wild cat in a grain store and the fox in a fenced garden, where both were faced with starvation because they could not eat the grain and the vegetables which they found there. So, not having a son, the man felt himself trapped, and saw his food supply dwindling. Though he still had the land he was progressively less able to farm it. The water used in a Miao household was carried by the women. With no daughter to undertake this task, the woman too felt trapped. As her own strength failed she faced an increasing problem with the supply of water for the needs of the home.

In the third pair of similes the cawing of the crow reflects an idea, common in Miao stories, that this cry is one of frustration and dejection.

M314

Old Miao songs about marriage. 13.

Song of the old folk who had no children.

*Transcribed by Yang Yung-xin.*

Good level land produced a good plain,  
And good level land produced good rice fields.

5 The curving earth banks stood on the level plain,  
But on the curving earth banks stood no planted tree,  
Likewise the man, the father, had no son.

The man, the father, was like,  
Like a wild cat clinging to a partition,  
A wild cat which could not eat grain.  
So was the man, the father, anxious about his food supply.

10 The mountain stood in open mountain country,  
But on the mountain stood no lacquer tree,  
Likewise the woman, the mother, had no daughter.

15 The woman, the mother, was like,  
Like a fox trapped in a garden,  
A fox which could not eat grass.  
So was the woman, the mother, anxious about her water supply.

The man, the father, was like an ailing magpie,  
And the woman, the mother, was like a cawing crow.

