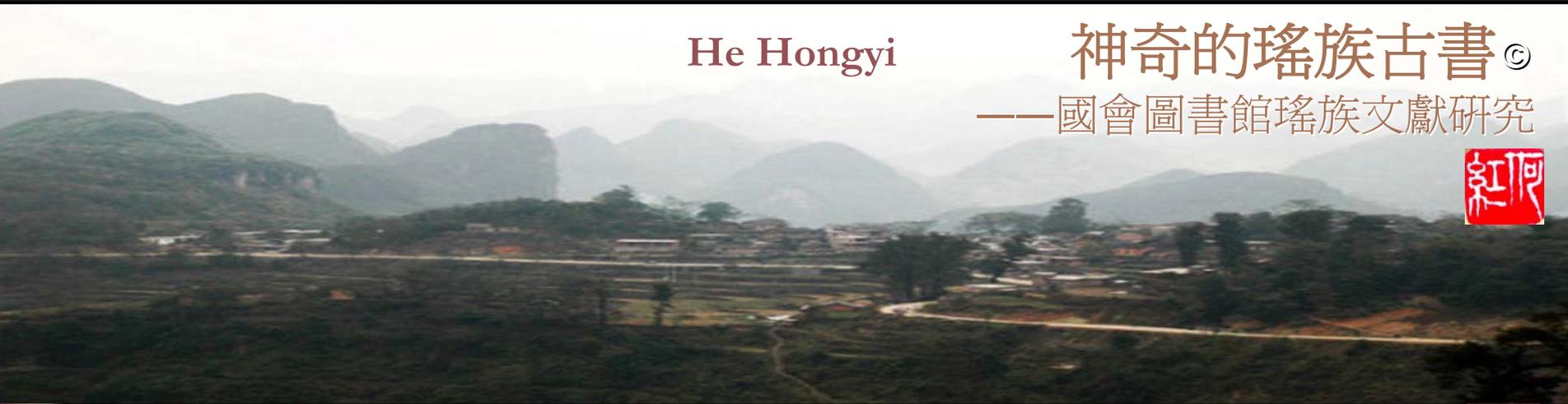


# THE MAGICAL ANCIENT BOOKS OF THE YAO PEOPLE

A Study of the Yao Manuscripts in the Collection of the Library of  
Congress

He Hongyi

神奇的瑤族古書<sup>©</sup>  
——國會圖書館瑤族文獻研究



# I. 瑤族歷史文化概貌

**An Outline of**

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**the History and Culture of the Yao People**

# 瑤族的人口分佈

## Distribution of the Yao Population

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- The Yao people in China live mainly in Guangxi, Guangdong, Yunnan, Hunan, and Guizhou provinces. Their population is about 2,600,000.
- About 600,000 Yao people live now all over the world, in countries, such as Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar/Burma, the United States, Canada, France, Switzerland, New Zealand, and Brazil, etc. There are 37,000 Yao people living in the United States.

# 瑤族的遷徙概況

## Outline of their Migration

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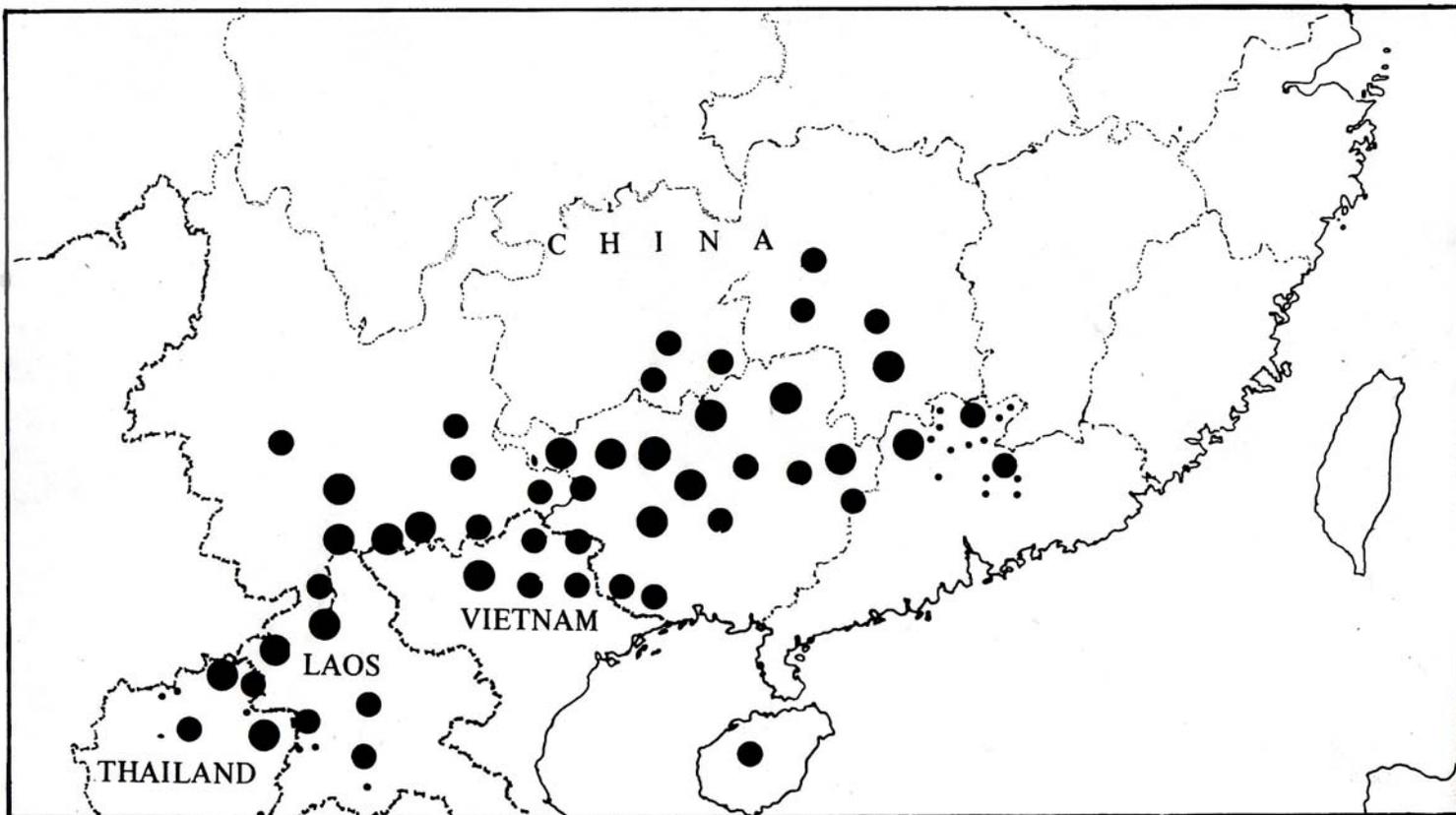
### Trilogy of the Migration of the Yao People

- During the Han-Tang dynasties (206 B.C.-907 A.D.) the Yao people migrated from the middle and lower Yangtze River valley to the mountain areas of southern China;
- Around the end of the Ming dynasty and the beginning of the Qing dynasty groups of the Yao people continued to move southward, first to Guangdong, Guangxi and Yunnan provinces, from there to Vietnam, Laos, Thailand and Burma;
- Finally during the 70s and 80s of the twentieth century a large number of the Yao people, fleeing from the chaos of war in Vietnam and Laos, moved to Thailand and crossed the ocean and as refugees settled in American and European countries. There are 37,000 Yao people living in the United States.

# Map of Distribution of the Yao People in China

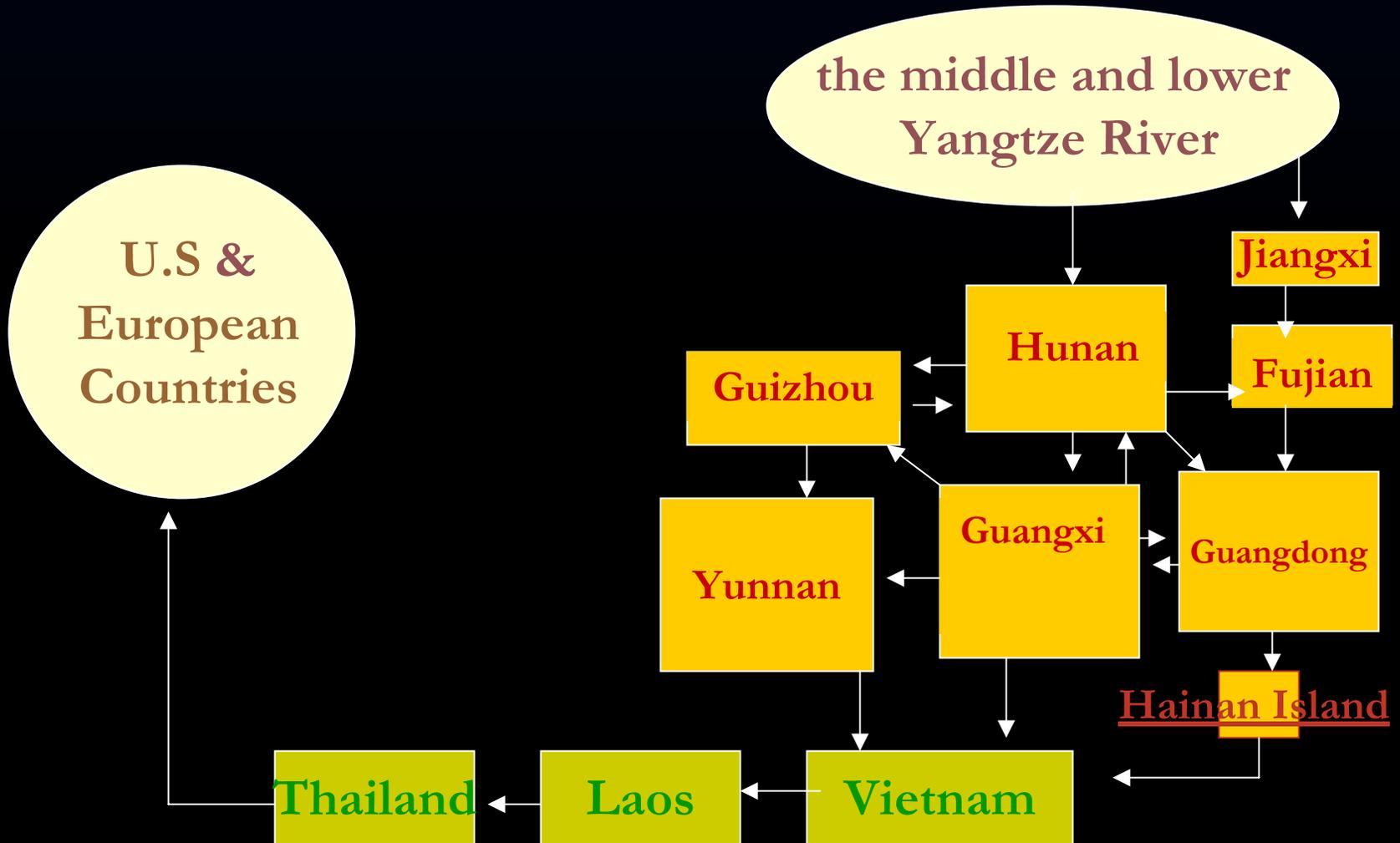


# Map of Distribution of the Yao People in Southeast Asia



Siedlungsgebiete der Yao

# A Chart Showing the Migration of the Yao People



# 瑤族的生產生活習俗

The Yao People's Production and Social Customs

开门见山 *Kai men jian shan*

**A Chinese saying which means:  
When you open the door, you see the mountains.**

**It indicates that the Yao people live in the mountains or very close to them.**



# Yao Dwellings



## **Yao Granaries with Thatched Roofs**

**These granaries serve several purposes: protection from water and mildew and prevent theft and mice. They are constructed with ingenious techniques**



**Some details of the structure of a granary. Sometimes coffins are placed under the granary.**





“靠山吃山”

**The Yao people are also named Guoshan Yao (Mountain-Crossing Yao). They rely on and live off the mountains and after finishing with one mountain, they move on to another.**

## 八角 Ba jiao

**Star aniseed is the main crop of the Yao people in  
Jinxiu Yaozu Autonomous County**



**Drying aniseed**



**Woman carrying bags of dried aniseed**



**Another livelihood for the 'White-Trouser Yao' is the magic glue tree which produces viscous fluid that is used for drawing designs on fabrics**



After the tree juice is extracted it is used to draw designs on the back of a Yao jacket.

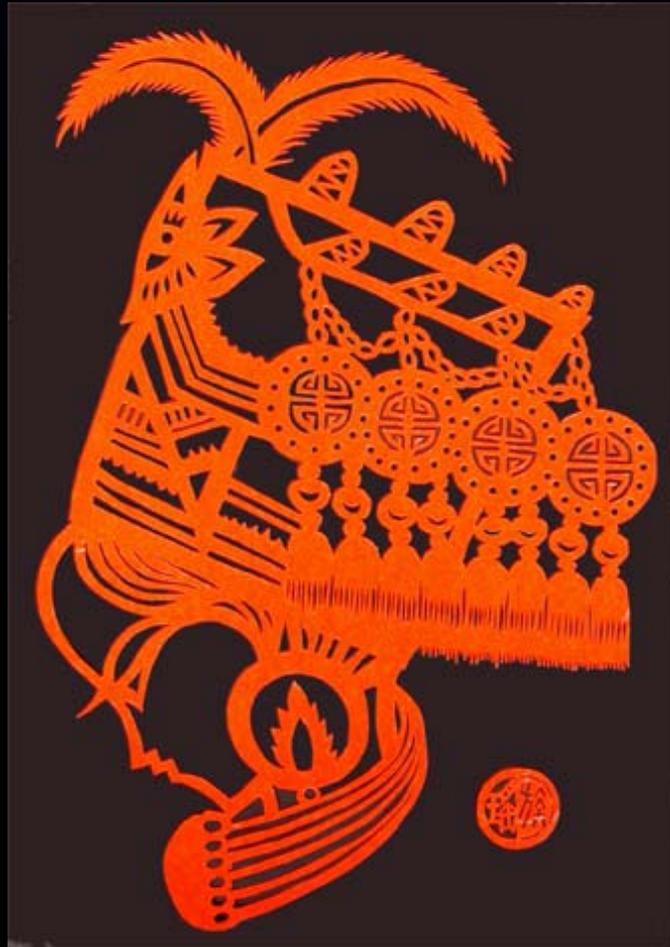


**After dyeing and embroidering, they are made into colorfully decorated clothes worn and taken by the Yao women wherever they go.**



# Yao Costumes

**There are numerous Yao tribes with different costumes**



**This paper cut depicts totem worshipping**

These women from the Shanban  
Tribe  
at the Great Yao Mountain of Jinxiu wear black and white  
head scarves.



广西金秀瑶族妇女身上  
装束和背部装束。



# Festivals of the Yao People

- The most celebrated holiday of the Yao people is the Festival Worshipping Panhu.



# The characteristic Yao religious ceremony:

## Passing Manhood Test



# Climb the “Knife Mountain” (刀山)



# Cross the Fire Sea (火海)



Depicted in the manuscripts are magic figures drawn by the  
priests ;  
are used to invoke or expel spirits and bring good or ill  
fortune



# Scrolls Depicting Legends on the Yao People's ancestor





# Yao Language and Culture

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- There are several distinct groups within the Yao people, and they speak several different languages, from different language families, such as Miao-Yao, Miao or Hmong, Tai-kadai, and Chinese.
- In 1984 the Guangxi Nationality Institute and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences created a new Yao writing system, based on the Latin alphabet.
- The documents in the collection of the Asian Division are mainly in Chinese script.

# Present Conditions of the Yao People



**Over the years the Yao people have settled down.**



**The Yao people are increasingly conscious of environmental protection. The image shows their efforts in beautifying their land.**



**Winding mountain terraces at Yaoshanzhai, Longsheng  
County, Guilin  
Guangxi Province**



# Melody and Rhythm



# Man in Harmony with Nature



# A Homestead



## Young and Old in Festive Dresses



# Uneven economic development



# Inaccessibility is accompanied by primitive life style



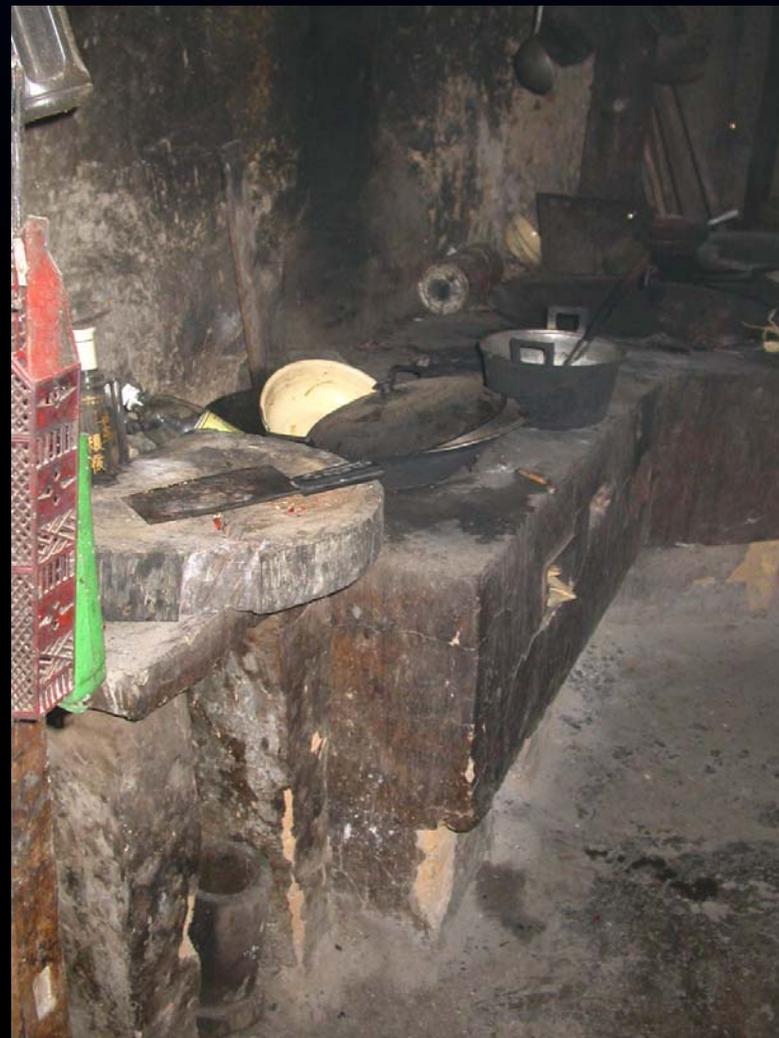
**Due to undeveloped transportation system some Yao-populated areas are still inaccessible and backward.**



# Yao Dwellings



# Nothing but the bare walls in their house



## II. A Brief Introduction to the Yao Manuscripts in the Collection of the Library of Congress



# 1. General Information:

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- **Sources: Purchases from a British dealer in 2006 and 2007**
- **Total number of manuscripts: 228**
- **Coverage dates: Qing dynasty (1644-1911) and since the twentieth century**
- **Format: scrolls and booklets**

## **Rich and diverse contents:**

**--Official documents**

**--Classics**

**--Songbooks**

**--Old popular literature of the Han people and revised Chinese teaching materials**

**--Others**

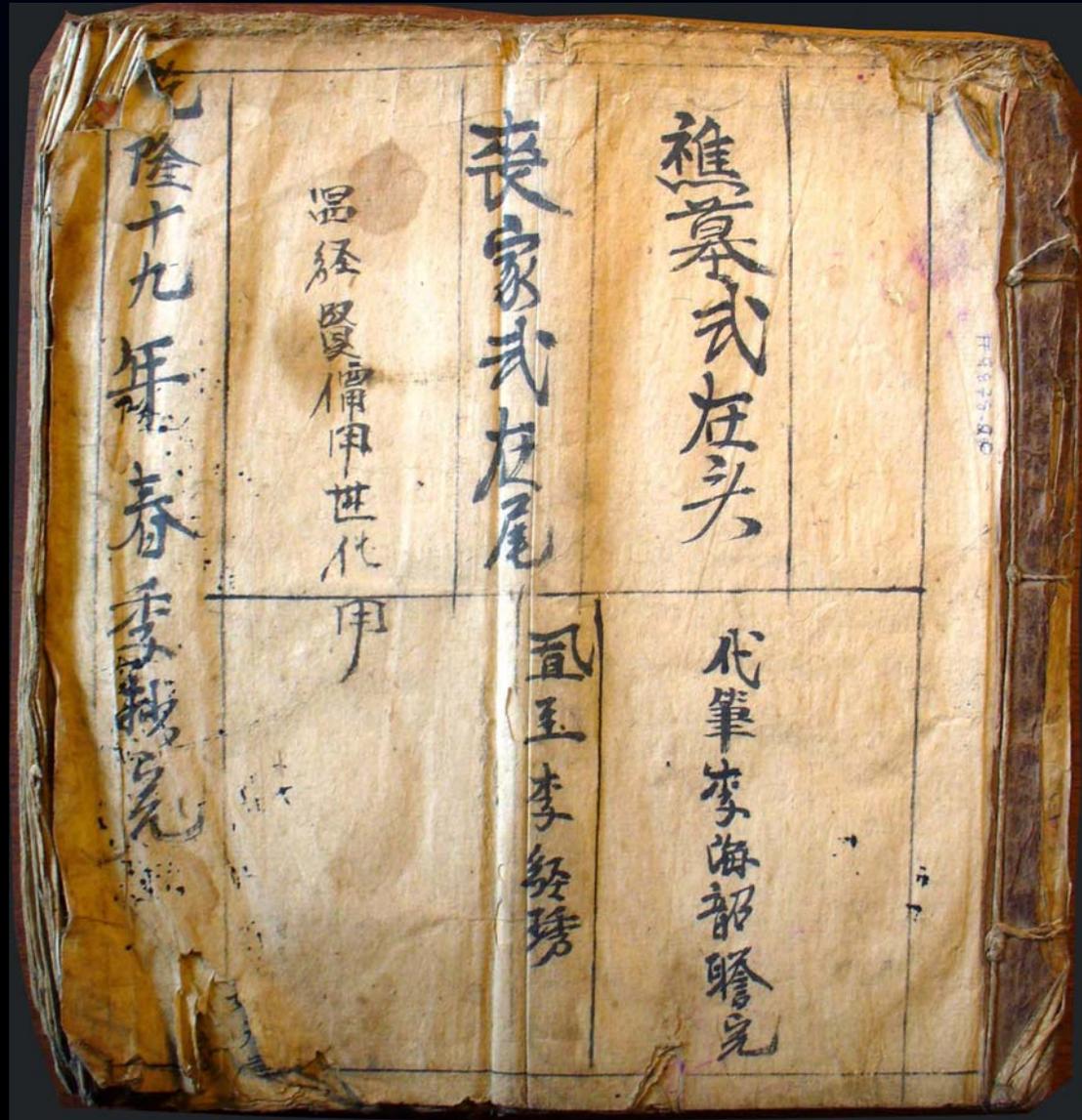
# **A Few Examples**

# An official document called Mountain-Crossing Notice (Official document)

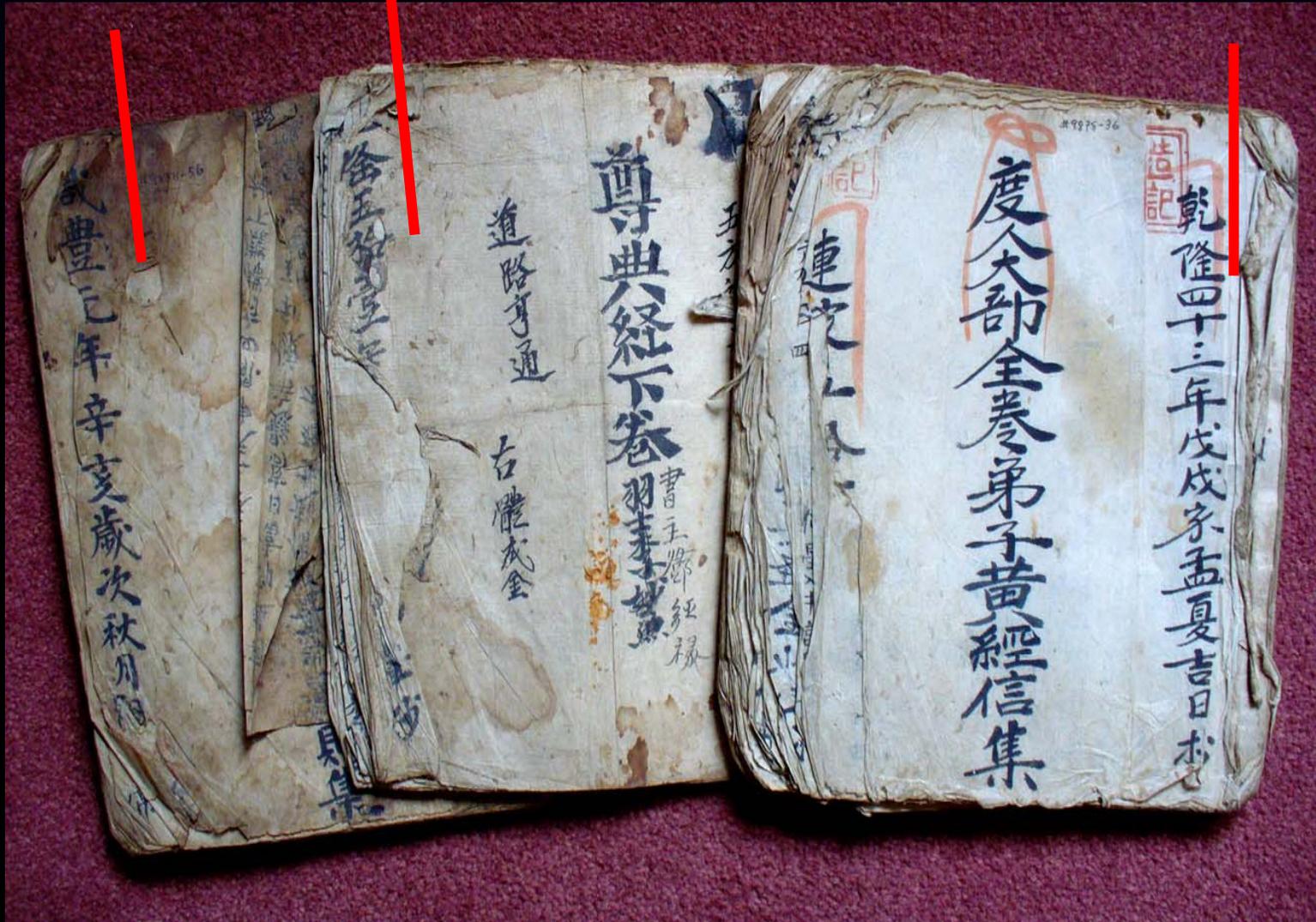
33.9 × 518.7 cm



# A document dated Qianlong 19 (1754)



# Documents dated 1777, 1786, and 1851



# A Songbook



長怕人多回酒雅

造天地歌一段

第一平王造得地

第二高王造得天

第三竹王造得火

第四銅王造得錢

第二高王造得天

第四盤王造得衫

第二高王造得天

龍王蓋過月團圓

田累浪地不浪天

田累浪地不中眠

天上浪七萬丈高

烏龜背上世無毛

世出凡人第二名

七星過天第二名

出世月頭兩個賢

兩個有賢身帶錢

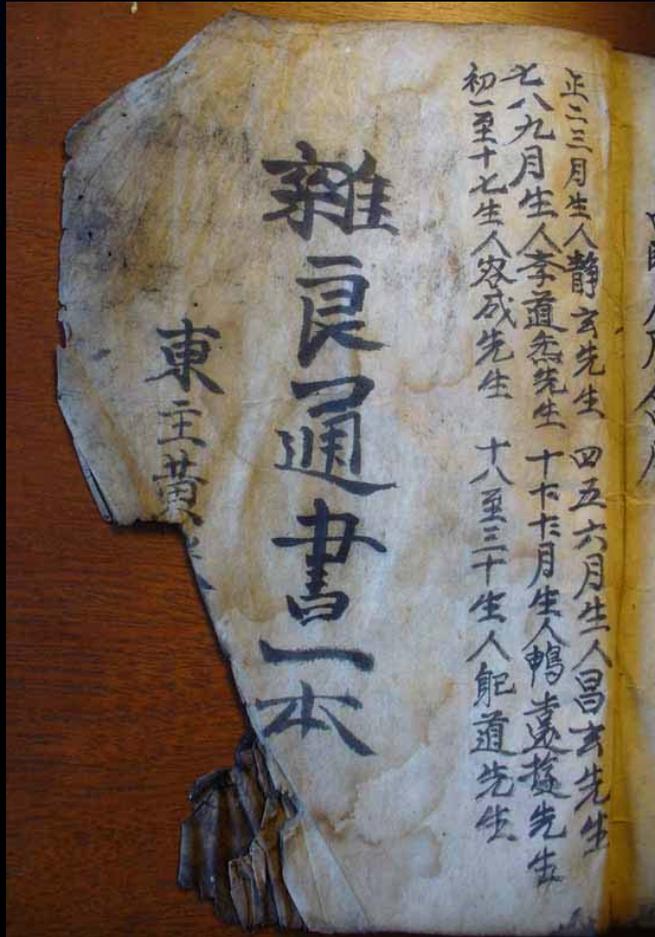
初造月頭第一寶

天子在高身落小

初造月頭十二個

十個打落銅牢國

# A Calendar and a Good Marriage Book

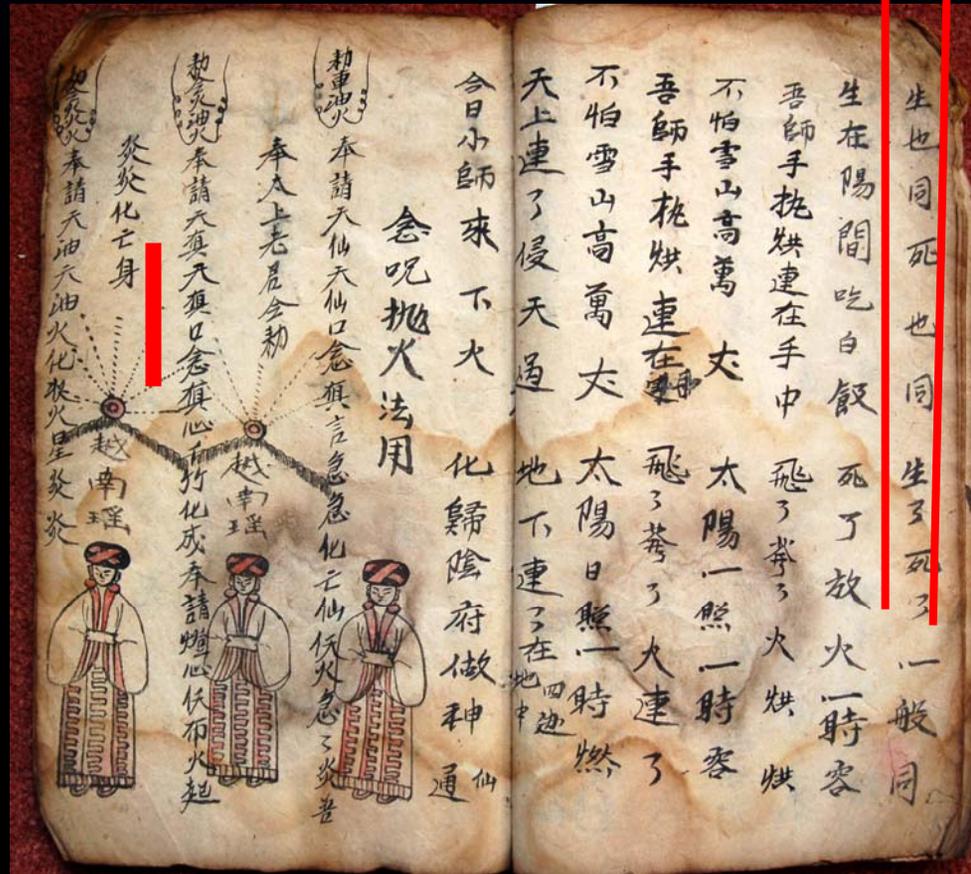


## 2. The significances of these documents:

--Valuable research materials for  
the Yao studies



# Booklets Depicting Yao Costumes



**On the right: Illustration of the costumes in one of the Yao manuscript;**

**On the left: Costumes worn by the present-day Yao women living in Washington State, USA**



## --Significance in studying folklore

- One of the books is a handwritten document dated the 18th year of Jiaqing reign (1813) . It records the ritual of cremation, a custom of the Yao people.



- The Yao people have practiced, from ancient times, burial by fire.
- The cremation ceremony (shown below) by the inhabitants on the Great Yao Mountain in Guangxi Province was observed and documented by Professor He during her visit there.
- Comparing this custom with the ancient records, one can gain an insight into the development and evolution of the custom of burial by fire.

Firecrackers accompany the procession of the bier  
led by the sorcerer  
in a white gown and hat.



# Dao gong, the sorcerer, holds a prayer book, chanting while walking



**Setting up the banner to call back the spirit of the dead.**



**Opening the coffin to let the spirit out.**



# Chanting the incantations



# Lighting the Torch



# Gathering for the burial

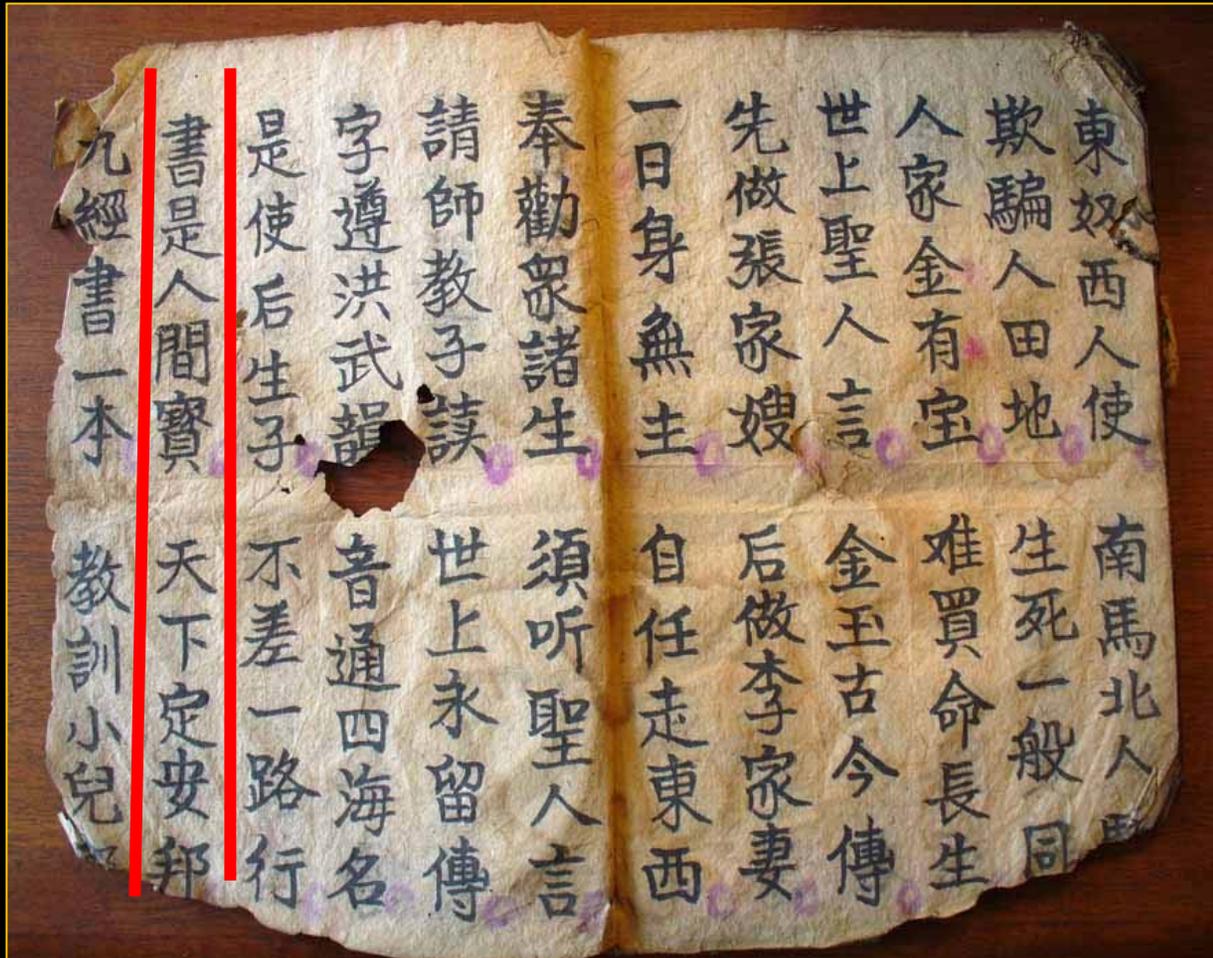


### 3. Significance in religion studies

# Taoist Deities



## 4. Research Value in Studying Logic and Pedagogy:



- “Books are treasures of the human world, they bring peace to the nation”
- “A book of nine classics provides lessons to children”

(Translation of the last two lines)

古人孝順多感應 至今万代久留名  
 學得書中行孝順 世事莫憂也莫  
 孝心感動天和地 皇天不昧孝心  
 今人能學古人孝 長命富貴保長生  
 湊成一本盤古記 留傳後代子孫賢

子帝  
 民國陸拾肆年乙卯歲陸月初捌日完筆

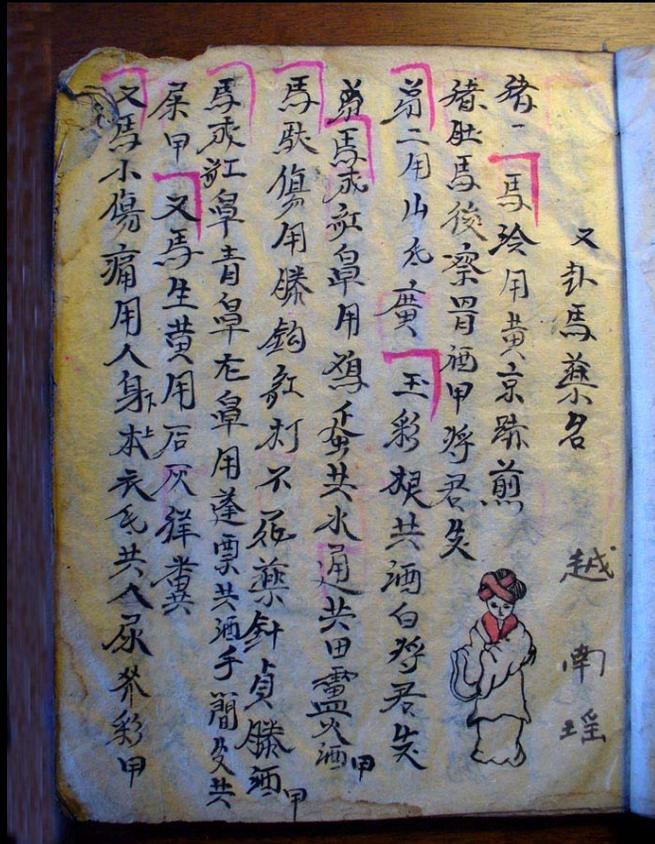
何勤字抄

Manuscript written in 1975 narrates the legend of Pangu, the mythical creator of the universe

自从盘古开天地，三皇五帝置人民，  
 多少古人敬忠孝，贤良忠孝在朝廷，  
 前人便说孝顺子，如今便说忤逆儿，  
 奉劝老人听古话，男女后生说少年，  
 老人听说盘古记，后生听说敬爷娘，  
 爷娘叫得声声应，不要高声应爷娘，  
 高声应爷天地黑，起眼看娘日月阴，  
 爷是天来娘是地，不敬父母敬何人？  
 父母在尚不孝顺，死去何必明鬼神

## 5. Other research values:

### To Study Yao Herbal Medicine



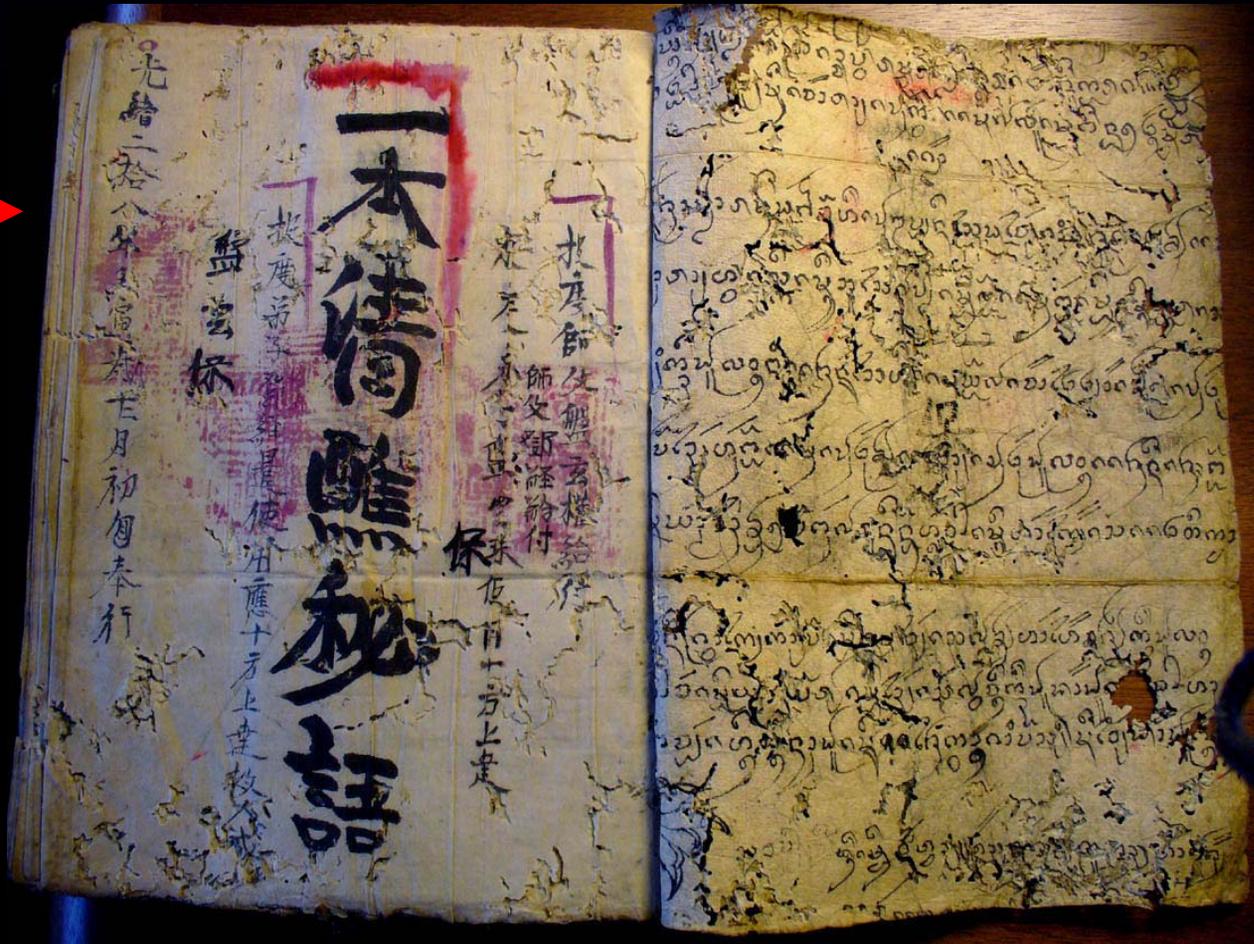
# A close-up of Yao Herbal Medicines



# Research Value in Linguistics Studies

Fragments of Pattra-leaf scriptures on the covers of a  
Yao Manuscript

1902年

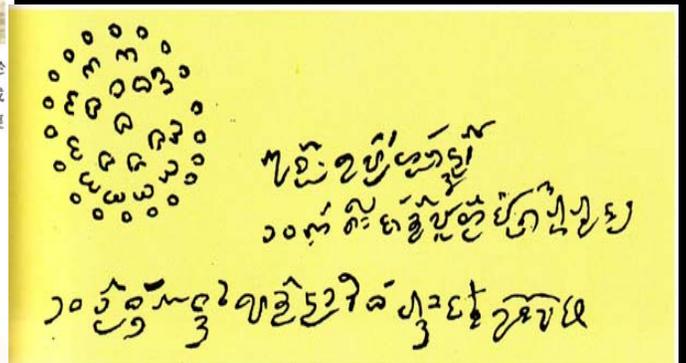


# Manuscripts

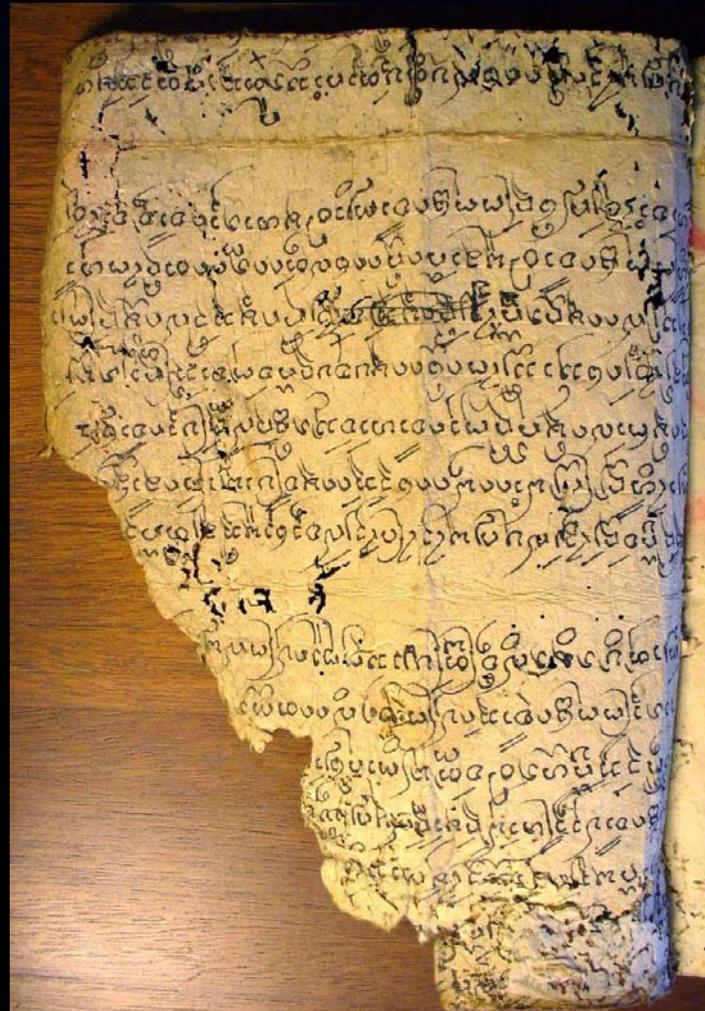
## Pattra-leaf scriptures on palm leaves & on paper



貝葉經，是用形如棕樹的一種熱帶植物貝樹頂端的大葉，以鐵針刻寫文字於葉上，塗上一種植物油，用紅繩繫成冊，邊沿上染以紅漆，題上金字封面，形成別具民族特殊風格的書籍裝幀藝術形式。每一經書由數十葉組成，每一葉上的經文刻得細緻精巧，鏤麗清晰。



**Fragments of  
Pattra-leaf  
scriptures on  
the cover of a  
Yao  
manuscript**



# Processing the Yao Manuscripts in the Asian Division Collection

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## 1. Extensive preparations prior to the processing:

--Trips to Guangxi Institute of Yao Studies, Guangxi Provincial Museum, Guangxi Traditional Book Publisher, Guangxi Research Institute of Minorities

■ --Visits to and discussions with Chinese scholars

■ --Gathered relevant materials

■ --A field trip to the Great Yao Mountain (Daoyao Shan), Jinxiu, Guangxi Province; and visit to the dwellings in Nandan, inhabited by a group of Yao, called “White-Trousers”

## 2. Research methodology:

■ -- Reading, deciphering, and analyzing of each manuscript

■ -- Grouping the materials by subject

■ -- Compare similar manuscripts

## 3. Objectives:

■ -- Sort, group, and classify the materials

■ -- Create a catalogue to be posted on the Division’s website; to share the resources with other institutions with similar resources.

- **Preservation of the Asian Division  
Yao Manuscripts**

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- 1. Identify the documents for preservation
- 2. Repair and conserve the materials in phases beginning with the heavily damaged ones
- 3. Digitize the material, sequester the materials to avoid further damage, and provide web access to researchers.

# A heavily damaged manuscript



## **Conclusion:**

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- **1. A global minority, the Yaos are an extraordinary people. The richness of their culture, though often inaccessible, are manifested, on the one hand, in their perseverance in preserving tenaciously their tradition, and, on the other hand, in adapting, in the course of their migration, the cultures of other nations.**
- **2. Their tortuous experience has demonstrated their ability to adjust and the vitality of their culture. It provides a typical example of the vicissitudes and adjustment of the cultures of nationalities of the pluralistic world.**

~~3. It was a tremendous achievement to have these documents preserved throughout the long periods of their migration. The documents represent great contribution of the Yao people to the world's valuable cultural heritage. They are also the key to our understanding of the Yao people and their culture which deserves close attention of our society.~~

4. The collection has immense value in the study of the minorities, their folklore, religion, linguistics, literature and art. They await scholars and interested researchers for further studies.

- END -