



Book Review of *Pleated Skirts*: An Ethnic Folk Original Picture Book on Batik

CHEN Bing

Guangxi University, China

Received: February 20, 2025

Accepted: March 5, 2025

Published: June 30, 2025

To cite this article: CHEN Bing. (2025). Book Review of *Pleated Skirts*: An Ethnic Folk Original Picture Book on Batik. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 228–236, DOI: 10.53789/j.1653–0465.2025.0502.026

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.53789/j.1653–0465.2025.0502.026>

Abstract: *Pleated Skirts*, an ethnic folk original picture book on Batik, creating intricate patterns on the fabric of Miao costumes with traditional dyeing techniques, this book has woven the intangible cultural heritage of Miao ethnic groups into a lively and interesting fairy tale, presenting young readers with a beautiful world full of folk wisdom, not only boasting boundless imagination but also aligning with traditional cultural values, promoting good and punishing evil, and emphasizing unity and mutual assistance. Adopting Miao batik as the illustration style, the unique blue and white colors and simple painting designs have fully embodied the Miao essence, especially the Danzhai batik, with the features of secondary dyeing popular in the region of west Guizhou Province, enriching the expressiveness of the picture. Additionally, the beauty of lines and blank space in traditional Chinese painting in such a book improves the children's perception of ethnic traditional art and cultivates their diverse aesthetic abilities. Thus, it is of great academic value and practical significance to study the profound connotation of the Miao traditional culture.

Keywords: Pleated skirts; Miao ethnic folk; original picture book; batik

Notes on the contributor: CHEN Bing is a professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Guangxi University, and a senior visiting scholar at the Anthropology Department of SUNY Albany, the US, from 2015 to 2017. Her recent research mainly focuses on the intangible cultural heritage projects of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, aiming to tell the stories of the 12 ethnic minorities of Guangxi to Western readers, and this book review is to facilitate the intercultural communication between China and the West via Miao batik and folk stories.

1. Introduction

Recently, the Office of the Classic China International Publishing Project announced the list of projects selected for the 2023 Classic China International Publishing Project. A total of 111 projects were selected, including the book “*Pleated Skirts*,” published by the Guangxi Minzu Publishing House, which is a folk story picture book about pleated skirts of Miao people, combining the ancient batik technique with the culture of Miao costumes. This folk story is vivid and lively, full of childlike innocence; with the traditional Miao batik



technique in illustration, it is very distinctive of the Miao ethnic group, and interesting to present Miao folk stories with the traditional Miao ethnic elements.

The Miao ethnic group has a long history of development, with Chi You as their revered ancestor, originally residing in the middle and lower reaches of the Yellow River. They are currently primarily distributed across seven provinces and regions in China, including Hunan, Hubei, Guizhou, Sichuan, Yunnan, Guangxi, and Hainan. Additionally, Miao people are scattered around the world, with populations not only in China but also in America and Southeast Asian countries such as Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. They have a rich variety of traditional festivals, including the Miao New Year, April 8th, Dragon Boat Festival, New Rice Eating Festival, Autumn Chasing Festival, Horse Fighting Festival, and Fish Stirring Festival mentioned in this batik story of Pleated Skirts.



Figure 1 The Miao ethnic group is primarily distributed across seven provinces in China, including Guizhou, Yunnan, Hunan, Hubei, Hainan, Guangdong, and Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region (National Catalogue Service for Geographic Information 2024) GS(2019)1696.

1.1 Briefings

“*Pleated Skirts*” is a folktale picture book about the Miao ethnic group’s pleated skirt, combining the ancient batik technique with the Miao ethnic costumes, inscribed in the first batch of the national intangible cultural heritage list in 2006. Wu Xuan, the author of this book, based on the folk tales of Miao people, has created a series of Miao ethnic folk picture books in 2020, including “*Ox Horn Comb*,” “*Pleated Skirts*,” and “*Hundred Birds Robe*,” which reflect Miao people’s fearless pursuits of truth, goodness, and beauty against evil forces. Collaborating with Yang Yun, a Miao batik inheritor, the text stories are presented in the form of batik paintings, using the traditional skills of the Miao people to depict Miao folk tales.

Pleated Skirts tells of the annual Fish Festival held in the Miao village. Aduo, a little Miao girl, catches fish in the pond with her friends. Aduo gets into danger when she chases a fish alone and falls into the water; however, she is fortunately rescued by the Jiyu Bird. Suddenly, a catfish spirit emerges from the water and drags Aduo into the water. The Jiyu Bird shows its sharp beak and claws to drive the catfish spirit away. Aduo, feeling embarrassed because her pants were torn in the struggle, is given a beautiful skirt made from the leaves of the Chinese fan palm by the Jiyu Bird. Wearing this skirt, Aduo happily returns to the village, and the Miao girls in the village love the skirt upon seeing it. Smart Miao girls then made pleated skirts with Chinese fan palm leaves.



Figure 2 Cover of the Pleated Skirts

The text of this book is vivid and lively, full of childlike charm. The illustrations are created using the traditional Miao batik technique, with characters that are vivid and harmonious, simple yet elegant. The composition and colors are magnificent, rich in three-dimensionality, and possess a strong ethnic characteristic as well as high artistic quality. The book's artistic style draws from Miao batik, with blue and white hues and a simple artistic approach that captures the essence of Miao batik, enhancing the visual impact of the illustrations. It also incorporates the beauty of lines and blank spaces found in traditional Chinese painting. Reading this book allows children to appreciate the beauty of batik from a young age, enhancing their sensitivity to ethnic traditional art and fostering a diverse aesthetic sensibility.

1.2 Royal Collins

In July 2021, *Ox-Horn Comb* and *Pleated Skirts*, the two batik picture books co-authored by Wu Xuan, the renowned children's literature author, and Yang Yun, the inheritor of Miao batik and embroidery, were published and distributed by Guangxi Minzu Publishing House, which signed a contract with the French Pacific Communication Publishing House for the French version to be exported to France and also signed a contract with Vietnam's Zhi Culture Co., Ltd. for the Vietnamese version to be exported to Vietnam. Followed by an English copyright export contract, the English version of *Pleated Skirts* will be published by Royal Collins Publishing Group, Inc. in July 2024. Royal Collins Publishing Group Inc. is an independent publishing house located in Montreal, Canada, established in 2012. The publishing house initially focused on publishing academic books. With branches in countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, and India, Royal Collins is dedicated to introducing significant achievements in Chinese research to the world, publishing academic works, and collaborating with authors and institutions to bring Chinese research and cultural heritage to an international audience. It has a presence in multiple countries and is recognized for its contributions to the dissemination of scholarly and cultural works.

1.3 Author and illustrator

Wu Xuan, the author of the book, is a member of the Guangxi Folk Literature and Art Association. Her representative works include “Lotus Fairy,” “Wild Magpie,” “Spring Tea,” and “Eleven Grey Geese Flying South.” Collaborating with Yang Yun, a representative inheritor of Miao embroidery of Longlin County, Baise City, Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, on the batik illustration of “Pleated Skirts,” which won the Outstanding Work Award at the 2022 Chen Bochui International Children’s Literature Award for Original Illustration Exhibition, as it is the solo set of illustrations that made it to the exhibition using batik, one of the unique intangible cultural heritage techniques of Miao ethnic groups. Yang Yun, the illustrator of this book, is an inheritor of intangible cultural heritage—Miao embroidery and batik. Her works have won multiple awards in provincial and national competitions. She was selected as one of the supported talents in the 2023 National Youth Intangible Cultural Heritage Inheritor Support Program. She was awarded “Baise Craftsman” and has won consecutive awards and received praise from industry experts. Wu Xuan and Yang Yun have collaborated on multiple occasions and have been awarded for their work. Their original batik picture scroll of the folk stories from the Zhuang region, “*Pleated Skirts*,” published by the Guangxi Minzu Publishing House, has won several awards, including the Guangxi Culture and Art Award and the Guangxi Literature and Art Huashan Award.

1.4 Teamwork

Wu Meilian, the translator of this book, is a teacher at an American university and a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania (an Ivy League institution). Greg Jones, the editor of the English version of this batik book, is a graduate of Stanford University. The designer of this batik book holds a master’s degree from the Savannah College of Art and Design in the United States, having spent seven years in the U. S. and Canada. General Manager Song, editor-in-chief of Canadian Royal Collins Publishing Group Inc., was personally involved throughout and supervised the entire process of the English version of *Pleated Skirts*. Top global talents in diversified fields in this team ensure the quality of this batik book. The target audience for this book is American children aged 8 to 12, and the English language has been tailored to the linguistic habits of this age group for translation.

2. Commentary

2.1 Thick translation and its application

“Thick Translation” is a term proposed by American scholar Kwame Anthony Appiah, which refers to the “translation that seeks with its annotations and its accompanying glosses to locate the text in a rich cultural and linguistic context” (1993: 187). When he found it hard to translate the African idioms into English that cultural factors could not be fully transmitted from the source language to the target language and inevitably were lost to some extent. Moira and Mark (2004: 171) noted that the translator’s goal is to “enable the target language readers to respect the culture of the source language, as well as to better understand the way people from other countries think and express themselves.” To provide target language readers with rich cultural background



information and enhance their understanding of the translation, this theory is applicable to text translation that requires a large number of explanatory materials, including annotations, footnotes, endnotes, parentheses, etc.

With this approach, Wu Meilian, the translator of this batik book, exercised her subjective agency, furnishing target readers with extensive background and supplementary knowledge via annotations of 7 cultural notes, and 2 appendix of the author's words and the illustrator's words at the end of this book, which not only effectively diminishes the reading barriers arising from cultural disparities and offers solutions for untranslatability by amalgamating obscured meanings with the translator's intent, but also avoids the arbitrary and excessive amount of annotations that are definitely prone to detract from the fluidity of the translation, so that the target language readers would find it hard to go through the book, and diminish young readers' interest and confidence in reading this book, ultimately hindering the dissemination of Miao ethnic and Chinese culture. Therefore, in the application of thick translation theory, the translator should balance the comprehension of the source language and target language, incorporating annotations and supplementary information to achieve understanding, while accuracy and truthfulness should be ensured for the target readers.

Unlike its Chinese version, the English version of this batik book adds seven cultural notes at the end of the text, which are: Lusheng Flute, Fish Stirring Festival (Naoyu Festival), Jiyu Bird (Auspicious Bird), Miao Attire, Pandanus Leaves, Catfish Spirit, and Pleated Skirt, in order to facilitate English-speaking young readers knowing more about the folklore of the Miao people in China. Such a translation strategy belongs to the explicit depth translation method, and the augmented translation supplements and improves the relevant content of the target language so that the target language young readers can look for relevant information by themselves at the end of this batik book when they cannot comprehend the text. In this way, the English version of *Pleated Skirts* enables readers to traverse the uniqueness and splendor of foreign cultures through the comparison of diverse cultural landscapes. Moreover, as long as the translation provides more information than the source text, it can be called thick translation.

2.2 *Batik: Intangible cultural heritage of Miao Ethnic*

Batik is a traditional craft passed down through generations of the Miao people in Danzhai County, Anshun County, and Zhijin County of Guizhou Province. It was historically known as "wax dyeing" and is called "wutu" in the Miao language, which means "batik clothing." Danzhai County, Anshun County, and Zhijin County are multi-ethnic areas primarily inhabited by the Miao people. In the long-term harsh environment of isolation from the outside world, the residents here have gradually formed a self-sufficient way of life, and the ancient batik technique has thus been preserved. According to Miao customs, all women are obliged to inherit the batik craft, and every mother must teach her daughter how to make batik. Therefore, Miao women learn this craft from a young age, cultivating indigo, planting cotton, spinning yarn, weaving cloth, drawing wax, embroidering, dyeing, and cutting, passing it down from generation to generation. Under these circumstances, these Miao settlements have formed a customary culture dominated by batik art, including clothing, marriage festival customs, social ways, and funeral customs. Miao batik is an art created for the needs of the producers themselves, and its products are mainly daily necessities, including women's clothing, bed sheets, quilt covers, cloth for wrapping, headscarves, backpacks, handbags, straps, mourning cloths for funerals, and so on.

Yang Yun, a 42-year-old Miao woman from De'ao Town, Longlin County, Baise City, has been immersed



Figure 3 Batik craft process in *Pleated Skirts*

in Miao culture since childhood and is deeply fascinated by Miao embroidery and batik. Her embroidery skills are so adept that they seem to bring dragons and phoenixes to life, and the patterns she creates with her batik knife are vivid and lifelike. Not only has she mastered the local Miao embroidery techniques of Longlin, but she has also visited and learned from Miao embroidery and batik masters in various Miao villages across Guizhou, Hunan, and Hubei provinces. During her time at the “Hong Fuyuan Batik Museum” in Anshun, Guizhou, she studied color batik for nearly half a year, gaining a deeper understanding and significantly improving her batik skills. It is estimated that there are about 120 types of Miao embroidery stitches, and she has mastered over 100 of them. Yang Yun remains committed to preserving the ancient crafts, learning embroidery stitches and batik techniques from various Miao branches. She seizes the opportunities of the new era for the inheritance of intangible cultural heritage, records detailed techniques through text and images, and compiles them into books to help more people understand, learn, love, and carry on the ancient crafts.



Figure 4 Yang Yun's portrait published in Beijing Youth Weekly



Intangible cultural heritage is the collective memory and living wisdom of a nation, the carrier of cultural traditions, and the root of the Chinese cultural lineage. In the ever-changing information society, inheritance is not to stick to its original form but to continue it in a way that is more adaptable to the needs of development in the modern society and to carry out living inheritance. In the face-to-face interview with Yang Yun in her workshop “Lexiu Embroidery and Batik Studio” next to Moon Lake, No. 26-2, Team 3, Zhongliang Village, Beautiful Southern Scenic Area in the suburb of Nanning city, where she began to focus on the inheritance of Miao ethnic intangible cultural heritages, she told us that with the aim of providing experience to those who love Miao embroidery and batik, spreading and promoting the skills of Miao embroidery and batik in sharing and training, and allowing more young people in the new era to learn and pass on the ancient skills, she has made full use of the knowledge she has learned to design and create different series and styles of pure handmade embroidery and batik works: clothing and related accessories (headdresses, scarves, satchels, pendants, handbags, etc.), cloth dolls, special tourism products, home decorations (decorative paintings, lamps, screens, tea mats, etc.) At the same time, she exchanges and cooperates with many folk craftsmen, teachers, and students of related cultural institutions and colleges, complementing each other’s strengths in designing and developing Miao ethnic distinctive products.

General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized in the report of the 19th Party Congress that “Culture is a country’s and nation’s soul.” In order to further promote the protection of intangible cultural heritage and pass on the unending traditional culture of the Chinese nation, Yang Yun consciously fulfills her responsibilities and obligations as an intangible hereditary bearer and has participated in the national intangible hereditary bearer group training many times and has completed the training with excellent results; she actively participates in the national and regional competitions and activities and has won a number of prizes and awards so as to contribute to the promotion and inheritance of the intangible cultural heritage. *Pleated Skirts*, the batik book illustrated by Yang Yun, is her endeavor to embrace the grandeur of ethnic vision, steadfastly upholding the original mission of Miao ethnic culture. Firmly rooted in the fertile soil of Guangxi, it spearheads the construction of Miao embroidery and batik, propelled by the twin engines of inheritance and innovation, contributing to the strength of Miao ethnic intangible cultural heritages.

2.3 Advantages and disadvantages of this book

Pleated Skirts, the English version of a Miao ethnic fairy tale originating from Miao folklore, has a nice translation quality. Considering that the readers are children aged 8–12 in English-speaking countries, the English expression of this original picture book of ethnic folklore is simple, vivid, and interesting, which expresses the interest of the book in a subtle way, which can tell a good story of the Miao people of China to the outside world.

Most English translations of this batik book are doing well, except for the three following aspects. First is the title; the translator attempted to make it “The Hundred Pleats Skirt.” After reviewing all the English stories of the batik book, we changed the title to “Pleated Skirts,” as we hold that the original text emphasizes the type or style of skirt rather than the specific number of pleats, so the later translation of the title may be more appropriate. Second is a minor mistake in the title of the introductory brochure, “A New Fairy Tale Showcasing the Beauty of Batik,” which reads redundantly, so we propose to change it into “A New Fairytale of Batik



Figure 5 Batik illustrated in *Pleated Skirts*

Beauty.” Last but not least is the last sentence in the introductory brochure, which goes like this: “The current revival of traditional culture stands as a model of cultural innovation.” With its English translation different from the source language, it is better to translate it into “In the current trend of the revival of traditional culture, it can be regarded as a model of cultural innovation.”

3. Conclusion

Pleated Skirts, an ethnic folk original picture book on batik, a new fairy tale created with elements from Miao culture and illustrated in the Miao batik style, is an exceptional children’s book that presents the author and illustrator’s passion for Miao ethnic culture, transforming batik and Miao costumes, both intangible cultural heritages of the Miao people, into a vibrant and engaging narrative. The story is a blend of imaginative creativity and adherence to traditional cultural values. The narrative also aligns with the core socialist values and the overarching theme of strengthening the consciousness of the Chinese national community. Amidst the current resurgence of traditional culture, it stands as a paragon of innovation in traditional cultural expression.

Telling Chinese Miao ethnic stories to English-speaking readers. This book conveys that these are original picture books created by and for different ethnic groups, with batik art as a central theme and inspiration for the illustrations and stories. This translation preserves the cultural significance and uniqueness of the book. A new fairy tale created with the elements of Miao culture and a new children’s book painted in the style of Miao batik. In the current trend of traditional culture revival, it can be regarded as a model of traditional cultural innovation. The writing of the story also aligns with the core socialist values and the main line of forging the consciousness of the Chinese national community. The foreign publishing house made the relevant revision to the above suggestions on June 3, 2024. With a pursuit of excellence, the translation quality has met the publishing standards, making it a high-quality Chinese-English children’s book for export.

References

- Appiah, K. A. (1993). Thick Translation. *Callaloo*, 16(4), 808–819.
- CHEN Bing & HUANG Jiaqing. (2024). A Critical Discourse Analysis on the Images of China and India by Indian Mainstream Media: Taking the Hindustan Times’ Reports on Modi’s Illegal Visit to Southern Tibet as an Example. *Asia-Pacific Journal of*



Humanities and Social Sciences, 4(4), 001–01, DOI: 10.53789/j.1653–0465.2024.0404.008

Mark, S. & C. Moira. (2004). *Dictionary of translation studies*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 139–146.

UNESCO. Convention on the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions. Available online: <https://en.unesco.org/creativity/convention/texts> (accessed on 10 April 2018).

Wu, X. (2021). *Pleated skirts: An ethnic folk original picture book: Batik*, illustrated by Yang, Y., Nanning: Guangxi Minzu Publishing House.

Wu, X. (2024). *Pleated skirts: An ethnic folk original picture book: Batik*, illustrated by Yang, Y., translated by Wu, M. L., Quebec: Yoyal Collins Publishing Group Inc.

Book Information

Book Review: *Pleated Skirts*—An Ethnic Folk Original Picture Book on Batik

Written by Wu Xuan / Illustrated by Yang Yun / Translated by Wu Meilian

First published in 2024 by Royal Collins Publishing Group Inc.

Original edition: Guangxi Minzu Publishing House

ISBN 979–8–9852490–9–5

(Editors: LI Ruobing & Bonnie WANG)