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NUOSU PROVERBS: AESTHETICS AND ARTISTRY IN FORM

Abstract: Much scholarship has looked at the uses, functions, and origins of proverbs. This study describes the form of proverbs in Nuosu, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in southwest China. A preliminary analysis demonstrates that the carefully crafted form of Nuosu proverbs reflects intricate artistry and multiple aesthetic features of the Nuosu language, making their proverbs memorable and transmissible across generations. One unusual feature of Nuosu proverbs to surface in the study is frequent negative polarity. Findings from this study provide a deeper understanding of the Nuosu language, as well as a window into linguistic aesthetic features shared with languages in the region and beyond. The research adds to our understanding of the breadth of strategies that languages employ in order to animate discourse.

Keywords: Nuosu Yi, cultural proverbs, oral literature, literary couplets, grammatical parallelism, grammatical aesthetics

1. Introduction

Proverbs are the shortest poems in a language, densely packed with artistic features. The collection and study of Chinese proverbs has a long history and active scholarship (An 2021; Chen 2021). This study contributes to our understanding of proverbs of one of the minority languages spoken in China, allowing those who read English but not Chinese to understand.

During my years of living in Liangshan and studying the Nuosu language, I discovered that Nuosu people love their proverbs. Their interest prompted me to study them as well. This analysis of Nuosu proverbs demonstrates that their carefully crafted form reflects intricate artistry, making their proverbs memorable and transmissible across generations.

Nuosu proverbs exhibit multiple aesthetic features of the Nuosu language. Some of these features, such as sound art through rhyme, are commonly found in proverbs from languages around the world; other features, such as reduplicated elaborate forms, are areal linguistic features seen in proverbs of related languages. Still other characteristics, such as frequent negative polarity, are more novel to proverb scholarship.

This preliminary analysis of the form of Nuosu proverbs contributes to our understanding of features that characterize proverbs in general and strategies languages employ to animate discourse. The artistry evident in Nuosu proverbs is what makes them memorable and allows them to endure from one generation to the next, touching on fields of language and culture vitality, sustainability, and preservation.

The Nuosu people are a subgroup of a large ethnic group in southwest China officially designated as Yi (彝). Numbering between 2 and 3 million, the Nuosu live mostly in the Liangshan (凉山, Cool Mountain) region of southern Sichuan and bordering areas of northern Yunnan and western Guizhou.

Proverbs and sayings are a rich part of the Nuosu language, a Tibeto-Burman language with its own long-standing script. For Nuosu people, being able to appropriately quote a proverb is a mark of distinction, showing mastery of the language and deep cultural knowledge. Nuosu people love to learn and use their proverbs. For some of them, a desire to know and master their proverbs is the driving motivation for learning to read and write the Nuosu script (Walters 2021). Nuosu proverbs transmit a shared understanding of the way the world is and one's place in it. The Nuosu hear these proverbs as the voice of their cultural past speaking into the present, as if their ancestors or elders were in the room.

The proverbs this paper discusses fall into one emic set, those sayings that Nuosu people refer to as $\mathcal{W} \text{ ̃} \mathcal{W} \text{ ̃}$ ($lu^{33} p\eta^{34} lu^{33} t\epsilon i^{33}$).

These proverbs are not merely Nuosu traditional wisdom, but ideas that have been crafted artistically into a metered form that showcases particular aesthetic features of the Nuosu language.

Originally part of oral literature, many of the Nuosu proverbs have been written down. There are multiple published volumes that catalogue thousands of common Nuosu proverbs including *Explanation of Nuosu Proverbs* (ᄃᄃᄃᄃᄃᄃ *Nuosu lubbyx hxati*) (Bai Mingxuan 1990b), *Han-Yi Character Dictionary of Nuosu Proverbs* (ᄃᄃᄃᄃᄃᄃ *Huo-Nip lubbyx ssixjie*) (Bai Mingxuan 1990a) and *Nuosu Proverbs* (ᄃᄃᄃᄃ *Nuosu lubbyx*) (Zhu Deqi 1985)—a volume containing 3,000 proverbs chosen by a group of Nuosu scholars from among nearly 10,000 Nuosu proverbs. The selected 3,000 proverbs touch on various aspects of Nuosu life and culture such as nature, production, learning, unity, democracy, civilization, morality, tributes and praise, justice, and opposition to evil. The proverbs are arranged in phonetic order according to the first syllable/character. Even though multiple published collections of Nuosu proverbs exist, I am not aware of published analyses describing characteristics of this literary form. This paper gives a preliminary look at the form and stylistic devices that make Nuosu proverbs so striking.

The first section of this paper briefly outlines features common to Nuosu proverbs: parallelism, syllable count, compounding, word play, lexical choice, reduplicated elaborate expressions, sound-based art, tonal art, and negative polarity. When comparative data is available, research of proverbs in related languages is noted. The second section presents 15 Nuosu proverbs. This sample was collected by asking several Nuosu friends to tell me Nuosu proverbs they liked. The 15 presented here were those that were corroborated by multiple people. Most of these proverbs are also included in the collection titled *Nuosu Proverbs* (ᄃᄃᄃᄃ *Nuosu lubbyx*) (Zhu Deqi 1985) and listed in the comprehensive Yi Language Dictionary (Yi Language Dictionary Compilations Committee (彝语大词典编纂委员会编著) 1997).

Nuosu phrases and examples in this paper are given both in the standardized Nuosu character script (sometimes called Yi script) and transcribed into the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) in which tone is marked by numbers after each syllable: 55=high tone; 34=mid-high; 33=mid-level; 21=falling tone.

Each proverb is given with an interlinear translation, followed by a short discussion of its artistic features and brief notes on the proverb's usage.

2. *The Artistry of Nuosu Proverbs*

The emic category that Nuosu refer to as *lubyx luji* (𐄎𐄏𐄐𐄑, Nuosu proverbs) or simply *lubyx* (𐄎𐄏) aligns with commonly held definitions of proverbs as being short, formulaic, metaphorical and artistic articulations of folk wisdom, having been passed down from generation to generation without a specific known author (Mieder 2004). For a Nuosu saying to belong to the category of *lubyx luji* (𐄎𐄏𐄐𐄑, Nuosu proverbs), in addition to these characteristics, certain formal features are expected, most importantly, parallelism and syllable count.

The corpus of Nuosu traditional proverbs, called *lubyx luji* (𐄎𐄏𐄐𐄑, hereafter translated simply as Nuosu proverbs), “are the crystallized life experience” of the Nuosu and “the very measure of their life and deportment” (Liu 2001:106). Nuosu proverbs can be found in their revered epic classics: *Nuosu Book of Origins* (𐄎𐄏𐄐𐄑 *hnewo tepyy*), *Nuosu Book of Instruction* (𐄎𐄏𐄐𐄑 *hmatmu tepyy*), and *Mother's Daughter* (𐄎𐄏𐄐𐄑 *axmo hnixsse*). These have been transmitted both orally and in written form from one Nuosu generation to the next over centuries (Walters 2021).

One Nuosu college student described their proverbs as “ancient poems.” He went on to report, “You use one of these sayings, and the old people will think you are pretty impressive. They'll have a very different view towards you. They'll say ‘Ah! *Ssahuo* (𐄎𐄏𐄐, impressive)!” (Walters 2021:118). Nuosu proverbs are often used in semi-formal occasions such as weddings and funerals as a means of teaching right behavior or expressing truths about life and the world. The proverbs' succinct distillation of broader thought makes them rich in meaning. Because of their formulaic structure and artistry, they are easy to remember, making them effective carriers and repositories of significant aspects of Nuosu culture. A Nuosu speaker will often first quote a proverb, and then expand in prose on the point the proverb has made so cleverly.

Nuosu proverbs are most often formed as brief declarative statements; they are seldom imperatives and almost never in the form of questions. Some rhetorical devices common in proverbs of other languages, such as personification, are rarely used in Nuosu proverbs. The following is an inventory of stylistic devices common to Nuosu proverbs.

2.1. *Parallelism*

The basic structure of Nuosu proverbs is fairly rigid. Most Nuosu proverbs are couplets, with strict parallelism: two clauses of equal length, each one having corresponding syntactic slots, often with repeating elements.

Proverbs having the form of couplets with parallel syntactic slots have also been described in languages in the region including other Chinese minority languages such as Bouyei (Snyder 1998) and Zhuang (Zhou 2017). A study of proverbs in Lahu, a Tibeto-Burman language spoken in China, Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos, pointed out that “the overwhelming majority” of their proverbs have a bipartite construction with parallel syntactic structure (Matisoff 2011:278). Likewise, a study of sayings and proverbs in Wa, a Mon-Khmer language spoken mainly in northern Burma and in neighboring parts of China and Thailand, concluded that “the great majority of the sayings in this collection consists of two syntactically parallel phrases” (Watkins 2013:32). However, the importance of a fixed syllable count is not discussed in these studies. A few studies, such as Snyder (1998), mention it. She wrote that many Bouyei proverbs “have the same number of syllables in each of their two lines,” though the number varied by proverb. For Nuosu proverbs, a fixed syllable count is one of the important defining features.

2.2. *Syllable Count and Compounding*

As well as having parallel syntactic slots and repeating elements, Nuosu proverbs almost without exception consist of couplets with lines of precisely 5, 7, or 9 syllables. In written Nuosu this corresponds to the number of characters because Nuosu script is a syllabary in which each symbol represents one syllable. The 3,000 proverbs in the collection *Nuosu Proverbs* (Zhu Deqi

1985) overwhelmingly conform to this syllable count pattern (5, 5; 7, 7; 9, 9). All 15 of the proverbs in my data also conform to this pattern.

Having the same number of syllables in each of their two clauses, creates a rhythm which is pleasing to the listeners. Though not as specific as Nuosu syllable count, a study in Akha, a related Tibeto-Burman language spoken in southwest China and Burma, noted that ritual language—unlike Akha’s modern speech—employs a metrical pattern in which each line has an odd-number of syllables (Hansson 2014). Hansson went on to note that the language uses prefixes, suffixes, and filler syllables to ensure the desired meter and maintain the parallel syntactical structure. In ritual language “the language has to a certain extent been manipulated or stretched in its possibilities to make it fit into the requirements of the metrical pattern” (Hansson 2014:285).

Nuosu proverbs seem to do a similar thing by compounding. Grammatical function words help establish the rhythm and structure of Nuosu proverbs by demarcating syntactic slots and creating an ideal meter. Many Nuosu function words, such as nominalizers, topic markers, and classifiers, are single-syllable forms which can be appended to other single-syllable morphemes for a pleasing two-syllable cadence.

For Nuosu proverbs, the meter of choice is to begin with a two-syllable form. Of the 15 proverbs in this data sample, with the exception of Proverb (7) and Proverb (8), all of them begin with a two-syllable item in the first syntactic slot (A and A prime). When there otherwise would be a single-syllable morpheme in that initial slot, another single-syllable morpheme will attach: a pronoun (see Proverb 10), an adjective (see Proverbs (1), (6), (9)), or most frequently, a single-syllable grammatical marker, such as the nominalizer \ddagger (su³³) or topic marker \Downarrow (li³³) (see Proverbs (2), (3), (12), (13), (14)).

Common grammatical function words that are crafted into Nuosu proverbs include nominalizers (see Proverbs (3), (9), (13), and (15)), topic markers (see Proverbs (2), (12), and (14)), and classifiers (see Proverb (2)). Nuosu language’s rich inventory of nominalizers indicates information such as the place of action, manner of action, instrument of action, result of action, and degree of action (Walters 2015:115–16). These suffixes attach

to roots, and are used in proverbs to fix morphemes into parallel patterns. The Nuosu topic marker 卩 (li³³) is used in Nuosu proverbs to clearly establish syntactic slots. It is usually repeated in both lines of the proverb appended to the first element and indicates a contrast between the first elements in each line of the couplet (A and A prime). Additionally, the large inventory of Nuosu classifiers, words used alongside nouns when they are counted or specified, adds flavor when different ones are juxtaposed where other elements remain the same (see Proverb (2)).

2.3. *Word Play*

The point of a Nuosu proverb often hinges on a clever word play. The same character used in both clauses may be compounded with or used in connection with different lexical items so that the meaning is significantly altered, highlighting something unexpected (see Proverb (4)). Another type of word play evidenced in Nuosu proverbs occurs when two opposing items fall in corresponding syntactic slots, for example ‘my kin’ and ‘my enemy’ in Proverb (10).

2.4. *Lexical Choice*

Lexical choices used in Nuosu proverbs are intentional, full of color and nuance which add to the depth of the proverb. Many Nuosu proverbs use paired items, often converse terms such as father-mother or above-below.

Another form of artistry in Nuosu proverbs is the skillful coupling of differing verbs from one semantic family. Verbs in Nuosu are rich elements, carrying many details. Walters and Atqi list thirteen different existential verbs in Nuosu, all of which might be translated in English with simply the verb ‘to be.’ Each Nuosu verb “contains additional information as to the nature of the referent in existence, the nature of the space in which the referent exists, and the posture of that existence” (see Walters and Atqi 2006: 142). Nuosu also has a large inventory of directional verbs, distinguishing vertical direction as well as movement to or away from the speaker (Walters and Walters 2003). In Nuosu proverbs, frequently the verb in each line is unique but comes from the same semantic family, for example, pairs of motion

verbs (see Proverb (7)) or existential verbs (see Proverbs (11) and (12)). The specific verbs chosen and paired with each other suggest important details that flavor the meaning and impact of the proverb.

2.5. *Reduplicated Elaborate Expressions*

Reduplication is such a productive pattern in the language that the Nuosu script has a dedicated symbol for it. In writing, Nuosu uses the symbol ㄨ to indicate that the previous syllable is repeated. The language uses various patterns of reduplicating syllables to create more vivid forms of nouns, verbs, and adjectives. These more artistic forms are often crafted into Nuosu proverbs. Literature on various other Tibeto-Burman languages describes expressions formed by reduplication or partial repetition similar to those in Nuosu. These forms have been called “elaborate expressions” (Matisoff 2011; Peterson 2014) or simply “expressives” (Wheatley 2014). In Khumi, spoken in southeastern Bangladesh, these reduplicated expressions are a stylistic choice and “speakers regard use of them as a sign of good speaking” (Peterson 2014:225). Nuosu has more than one category of reduplicated elaborate expressions.

2.5.1. Four-syllable Nouns and Verbs

Four-syllable alternate forms of nouns and verbs are created by specific reduplicating patterns in Nuosu. For example, the basic word for relative (kin) is ㄨㄨ ($\text{tei}^{21} \text{ei}^{33}$), but the term often used in songs or poetry is ㄨㄨㄨㄨ ($\text{tei}^{21} \text{mo}^{21} \text{tei}^{21} \text{ei}^{33}$). “Compared to two-syllable words, the meaning of the four-syllable forms are more vivid and are frequently the preferred forms in classical literature as well as modern colloquial speech” (Ma et al. 2008:9). These four-syllable elaborate expressions are often used in Nuosu proverbs (see Proverb (8)). The inherent reduplication in these forms contributes to the cadence of the proverbs.

Studies of proverbs in related languages also reference similar reduplicated elaborate forms. Matisoff (2011) pointed out the use of four-syllable elaborate expressions in the proverbs of Lahu. Research on Wa proverbs revealed “a strong tendency in the language generally for four-syllable elaborate expressions”

which had “internal rhyme and internal syntactic symmetry” (Watkins 2013:32–33). These more vivid reduplicated elaborate expressions are an areal linguistic feature which seems to naturally surface in artistic forms such as local proverbs.

2.5.2. Three-syllable Adjectives

Another artistic elaborate form in Nuosu is their vivid three-syllable adjectives made by reduplicating the final syllable of a two-syllable form. For example, the default word for ‘black’ is (a³⁴ nɔ³³). But Nuosu’s three-syllable forms are more descriptive: 𑄎𑄏𑄗 (nɔ³³ tshɿ²¹ tshɿ²¹) denotes “deep black, what one sees when looking inside a cave or deep hole;” 𑄎𑄗𑄗 (nɔ³³ da³³ da³³) conveys the meaning of “black and thick (e.g., of a Nuosu woman’s braided hair);” and 𑄎𑄗𑄗 (nɔ³³ bu³³ bu³³) describes something “deeply black with a shiny appearance (e.g., of lacquerware)” (Ma et al. 2008). These three-syllable elaborate expressions adorn many Nuosu proverbs (see Proverbs (8) and (10)) instead of their single or two-syllable more prosaic counterparts.

2.6. Sound-based Art

Sound art through rhyme is commonly found in proverbs from languages around the world (Thompson 2020). Wheatly (2014) pointed out that while sound-based art in languages like English is based on matching initials or rhyming final syllables, Burmese uses compounding to enliven discourse. Similarly, Nuosu does not seem to lean heavily on rhymes. However, sound-based art (such as assonance and alliteration) is still evident. Some Nuosu proverbs utilize sound correspondences, either matching initials (consonants) or finals (the vowel part of the syllables) both seen in Proverb (9): tʂu²¹ la³³ lo³⁴ (𑄎𑄗𑄗, spread-come-exchange) and tʂu⁵⁵ la³³ ɲo⁵⁵ (𑄎𑄗𑄗, shrivel-come-shrink).

2.7. Tonal Art

Another kind of sound-based art is tonal art. Tonal patterns and symmetry can be seen in languages from varying regions including Asia (Huang 2019; Kordas 1990; Snyder 1998; Unseth 2017) and Africa (Kröger 2009; Owomoyela 2005). Nuosu proverbs also show tonal art. Sometimes the tonal patterns of the two

halves of the couplet match exactly (Proverb (1)), and sometimes there is a near match (see Proverbs (2), (4), (8), (9), (12), and (15)).

2.8. *Litotes and Negative Polarity*

Another feature common to Nuosu proverbs is the use of negative polarity. Nuosu proverbs contain a high number of negative particles. In my small corpus of 15 proverbs, six of them include negative polarity, five proverbs using 𐄂 (a²¹, not) in the indicative (Proverbs (1), (7), (12), (13), and (15)) and one using the negative imperative 𐄃 (tha⁵⁵, don't) (see Proverb (3)). In each of those proverbs the negative polarity is used in parallel in both halves of the couplet.

A count in the curated, printed collection *Nuosu Proverbs* (𐄂𐄃𐄄𐄅 *Nuosu lubbyx*) (Zhu Deqi 1985) revealed that out of the 3,000 proverbs, 1,072 of them employ the negative 𐄂 (a²¹, not) in parallel in both lines of the couplet—some of them using multiple instances of the negative in both lines. As well as the indicative negative 𐄂 (a²¹, not), there were also 28 proverbs with the negative imperative 𐄃 (tha⁵⁵, don't) also usually matched in both lines of the couplet, and one use of the older literary negative 𐄄 (ma²¹, not), making the total negative polarity of the corpus of 3,000 proverbs, 36.7%. The overwhelming preference for the negative 𐄂 (a²¹, not) over the negative imperative 𐄃 (tha⁵⁵, don't) also reveals the preference for Nuosu proverbs to be crafted as indicative statements of reality rather than as grammatical (negative) imperatives.

In many cases, Nuosu proverbs with the negative 𐄂 (a²¹, not) are employing litotes, a rhetorical device that makes an emphatic understatement by expressing the negative of its opposite. For example, Proverb (15) says “there is no wrong-talking” and “there is no wrong-eating and drinking.” The use of the negative 𐄂 (a²¹, not) in conjunction with the negative meaning inherent in the word “wrong” is more naturally translated in the affirmative in English: “say, eat, and drink anything you want.” Of course, Proverb (15) could be stated prosaically in Nuosu with a bland affirmative, but the use of litotes adds artistry and ring.

2.9. *Semantic Themes and Metaphors*

Considering Wa proverbs, Watkins wrote that “the first half presents a scenario which serves as a metaphor or analogy for the real-world generalization in the second half.” (Watkins 2013:34). Many Nuosu proverbs also contain concrete images in one half of the couplet. In this paper’s corpus, “iron,” “liquor,” “brooms,” “grain,” “magpies,” and “sheep” are used as metaphors. The ways that these items respond to outside forces and how they are valued provide analogies of the same for people. Differing from propositional prose, the use of metaphor has a retarding effect, prompting listeners to ponder possible connections. Metaphor requires their active participation to arrive at meaning.

Nuosu people tend to define themselves as members of a group rather than as individuals. The clan system affects every aspect of life including naming, marriage, and social order (Harrell 2001). “The clan, not the individual, is the fundamental unit of Nuosu society” (Walters 2015:4). Many Nuosu proverbs revolve around family relations, with kinship terms being key (see Proverbs (2), (4), (6), (7), (8), (9), (10), and (14)). An important assumption for the Nuosu is that the generations are mutually indebted. The older generation works for the growth and success of their children; it is hoped that children will rise up to become successful, bringing honor to their parents and their clan as a whole.

Very closely connected with ideas of kinship and family are issues of honor and shame. Honor and shame are shared by group members simply by virtue of association, not necessarily earned by individual actions and choices. Many Nuosu proverbs touch on themes of honor and shame (see Proverbs (9) and (14)). Nuosu proverbs also reinforce the wisdom, love, and sacrifice of the elder generation and call for them and their wisdom to be valued. Nuosu proverbs speak about how children reflect on their elders, bringing either honor or disgrace.

Some of the themes in Nuosu proverbs overlap with themes in proverbs of related languages. Topics in Wa proverbs include poverty and wealth; hosting guests; marriage and courting; and nature (Watkins 2013). Lahu semantic themes include unity; poverty/hunger and cold; ecology/the natural environment; the importance of education; age and youth; obligations of younger people toward their seniors; and speech and silence (Matisoff 2011).

3. *Examples of Nuosu Proverbs*

The features of Nuosu proverbs described in section two are illustrated in the 15 Nuosu proverbs presented in this section. I have categorized the proverbs into three groups: synonymous, antithetical, and descriptive. By synonymous I mean that the parallelism of the two phrases restates the same idea using different words, or by giving a more concrete image. Proverbs I classify as antithetical use the parallelism inherent in the proverb to show a contrast. They make their point by presenting two opposing images. Proverbs in the descriptive group make their point by stating two parts of an idea, or giving two perspectives to a notion. Each line of the couplet adds to the whole.

Every proverb is listed with an interlinear translation. Grammatical glosses are listed in all caps, for example, “FUTURE” or “NEGATIVE”. When syntactic slots are referenced in the text, they are shown with capital letters beneath the glosses. Each different capital letter represents a different syntactic slot; the prime marker indicates a different element in the slot. Each proverb is followed by a discussion of its form and brief notes on the meaning and context or occasion in which the proverb is typically used. Note that in the Nuosu language, grammatical subjects and objects precede the verb in a clause.

3.1. *Synonymous Proverbs*

In synonymous proverbs each line of the couplet states the same thing. Often one line points out a human trait or abstract concept and the other line supports this by giving a concrete example or image from the natural world. In Nuosu proverbs, the order of the two parts is not rigid. In some proverbs, the concrete metaphor comes first, in others the generalization comes first, and in yet others, the two halves of the couplet may be stated in either order.

Proverb (1): 𐌀𐌃𐌆𐌇𐌈𐌉𐌊𐌋𐌌𐌍, 𐌎𐌏𐌐𐌑𐌒𐌓𐌔𐌕。 (5, 5)

“It’s no use teaching a stubborn person; it’s no use welding poor quality iron.”

The two clauses of Proverb (1) are interchangeable, giving the physical image of iron either first or last.

- | | | | | | |
|------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|
| (1a) | <i>tsho</i> ³³ | <i>di</i> ³³ | <i>hi</i> ²¹ | <i>a</i> ²¹ | <i>kha</i> ⁵⁵ |
| | <i>person</i> | <i>bad</i> | <i>teach</i> | NEGATIVE | <i>effective</i> |
| | A | | B | C | D |
| (1b) | <i>ʂu</i> ³³ | <i>di</i> ³³ | <i>tʂɿ</i> ²¹ | <i>a</i> ²¹ | <i>kha</i> ⁵⁵ |
| | <i>iron</i> | <i>bad</i> | <i>weld</i> | NEGATIVE | <i>effective</i> |
| | A' | | B' | C | D |

Proverb (1) illustrates the identical syntactic slots and syllable count structures in the two clauses of the proverb: 5, 5. These form the setting in which to clearly frame the word play where 𐄂 (*di*³³, *bad*) has two distinct meanings prompted by the lexical item it follows, 𐄃 (*tsho*³³, *person*) and 𐄄 (*ʂu*³³, *iron*). The first syntactic slot, A and A prime, are filled with a two-syllable item, the cadence of choice for Nuosu proverbs. The proverb employs negative polarity 𐄅𐄆 (*a*²¹ *kha*⁵⁵, *not effective*) instead of stating its point in the affirmative. Note the tonal pattern is identical in both halves of the couplet.

A tool, such as a plow, which breaks because of poor quality iron is of no use. Proverb (1) is used to criticize a person who will not listen to reason or advice. It is also used in response to someone who is not teachable, explaining why they do not reform.

Proverb (2): 𐄇𐄈𐄉𐄊𐄋, 𐄌𐄍𐄎𐄏𐄐。 (5, 5)

“One capable son [is enough], one bowl of liquor [is enough].”

- | | | | | | |
|------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| (2a) | <i>zu</i> ³⁴ | <i>li</i> ³³ | <i>ho</i> ³³ | <i>tʂɿ</i> ²¹ | <i>ma</i> ³³ |
| | <i>child</i> | TOPIC | <i>capable</i> | <i>one</i> | CLASSIFIER |
| (2b) | <i>ndzɿ</i> ³⁴ | <i>li</i> ³³ | <i>mbo</i> ²¹ | <i>tʂɿ</i> ²¹ | <i>tʂu</i> ²¹ |
| | <i>liquor</i> | TOPIC | <i>tasty</i> | <i>one</i> | CLASSIFIER |

The Nuosu word 𐄑¹ (*zu*³⁴, *son*) can refer in a broader sense to a child of either sex. However, male children are vital to the Nuosu because they are needed to perpetuate the family name and line. In Nuosu culture, not to have a son is unthinkable. Not having a son is reason enough to take another wife. Unlike daughters, who

¹ The underlying word is 𐄑 (*zu*³³) with a mid-level tone. Because of a tone change prompted by the context, it is written here as a mid-high tone marked with a diacritic 𐄑¹ (*zu*³⁴).

marry into the husband's clan, sons are expected to take care of you in your old age and hold a ceremony after your death to secure your spirit's safe journey to the homeland of the ancestors.

The adjective 𐄎 (mbo²¹) 'delicious and good' describes liquor in Proverb (2). Though often collocated with food and drink, the word can attribute general positive qualities to many things, including people, denoting wholesome and upright. In the parallel slot of the couplet, the adjective 𐄎 (ho³³) 'capable' describes 'son.' The term 𐄎 (ho³³) can be placed after a noun or verb to indicate being or doing the former well, being capable at some activity. Here it describes someone who excels at being a son. This son not only fulfills all the expected filial duties, but excels in his work and family as well. Such a son brings honor to his elders. Thus the first image in Proverb (2), 'an excellent son,' is the standard of honor. Not having a capable son is disgraceful.

For the Nuosu, drinking liquor brings to mind fond images of Nuosu festivities, and the forging and reinforcing of relationships. Proverb (2) is used when someone is envious of a family with many children. The hearer might respond with this proverb meaning that having just one good son is enough. With one son, you have already attained honor. No more are needed.

Proverb (3): 𐄎𐄎𐄎𐄎, 𐄎𐄎𐄎𐄎; 𐄎𐄎𐄎𐄎, 𐄎𐄎𐄎𐄎。 (5, 5; 5, 5)
***“Don't look down on young people, they will grow up (wise);
 Don't look up to young people, they will grow old (weak).”***

Proverb (3a) can be used alone, but it is sometimes also paired with a second couplet as shown here.

- | | | | | | | |
|------|---|---|---|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| (3a) | <i>dzɿ⁵⁵ su³³</i> | <i>hu²¹ tha⁵⁵</i> | <i>dzɿ⁵⁵ su³³</i> | <i>zɿ³³</i> | <i>la³³</i> | <i>lu³³</i> |
| | | <i>di³³</i> | | | | |
| | <i>young</i> | <i>don't look</i> | <i>young</i> | <i>grow</i> | <i>FUTURE</i> | <i>certainly</i> |
| | <i>people</i> | <i>down on</i> | <i>people</i> | | | |
| (3b) | <i>zɿ³³ su³³</i> | <i>hu²¹ tha⁵⁵</i> | <i>zɿ³³ su³³</i> | <i>mo²¹</i> | <i>la³³</i> | <i>lu³³</i> |
| | | <i>zɿ³³</i> | | | | |
| | <i>adults</i> | <i>don't look</i> | <i>adults</i> | <i>old</i> | <i>FUTURE</i> | <i>certainly</i> |
| | | <i>up to</i> | | | | |

Proverb (3) has two parallel strings. The negative imperative 𐄂 (tha⁵⁵, don't) is repeated in parallel constructions 𐄂 𐄃𐄄 (hu²¹ tha⁵⁵ di³³, don't look down on) and 𐄂 𐄃𐄄 (hu²¹ tha⁵⁵ zɿ³³, don't look up to), showing again Nuosu proverbs' penchant for communicating emphatically by stating something in the negative. The words for 'young people' (𐄆𐄇, dzɿ⁵⁵ su³³) and 'adults' (𐄈𐄉, zɿ³³ su³³), constructed with the general nominalizer 𐄆 (su³³), show sound-based art having a matching vowel and similar initial in their first syllable.

Proverb (3) is used to express the truth that things change. Though you are poor today, you might someday be rich. The proverb encourages people not to take the present situation as the final word.

Proverb (4): 𐄊𐄋 𐄌𐄍 𐄎𐄏 𐄐𐄑, 𐄒𐄓 𐄔𐄕 𐄖𐄗 𐄘𐄙。 (7, 7)

“If you sweep too hard, it makes the grain jump; if a mother-in-law is fierce she makes the daughter-in-law leave.”

- | | | | | | |
|------|-----------------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------------------------|------------------|
| (4a) | ze ³⁴ sɿ ³³ | kɔ ³⁴ | nu ³³ | dza ²¹ ma ³³ | pɛ ³³ |
| | broom | hard | if | grain | jump |
| (4b) | a ³⁴ bo ³³ | kɔ ³⁴ | nu ³³ | ɛɿ ²¹ mo ²¹ | pɛ ³³ |
| | mother-in-law | fierce | if | daughter-in-law | leave |

Identical syntactic slots and syllable count structures in the two clauses of Proverb (4) are the setting in which to clearly frame two word plays. First, the word 𐄌 (kɔ³⁴, strong) has two distinct meanings in the two clauses, 'hard' and 'fierce,' prompted by the lexical items they follow, namely 'broom' and 'mother-in-law'. Secondly, the final word in each clause 𐄙 (pɛ³³) means 'jump' in conjunction with the lexical item 𐄎𐄏 (dza²¹ ma³³, grain), and 'leave' in collocation with 'daughter-in-law' (𐄖𐄗, ɛɿ²¹ mo²¹). These double meanings direct the listeners clearly to the point of the proverb.

Traditional Nuosu houses have dirt floors. Sacks of grain are stacked on the floor. If you sweep with too much force—angrily—dust may fly and grain may scatter. If a mother-in-law is too fierce, the daughter-in-law will leave. Proverb (4) admonishes that being unpleasantly severe causes problems. Harsh people

cannot get along for the long haul; they will undoubtedly disagree with each other and have conflict.

Proverb (5): 𐄂𐄃𐄄𐄅𐄆𐄇𐄈𐄉𐄊𐄋, 𐄌𐄍𐄎𐄏𐄐𐄑𐄒𐄓𐄔𐄕。 (9, 9)

“If a magpie starts to build its nest early, he will finish building it early; If people get up early, they will finish work early.”

(5a)	<i>a³³ tʂa⁵⁵</i>	<i>khu³³ zu³⁴</i>	<i>zɿ³⁴</i>	<i>nu³³</i>	<i>khu³³ dzi³⁴</i>	<i>zɿ³³</i>
	<i>magpie</i>	<i>build nest</i>	<i>early</i>	<i>if</i>	<i>finish nest</i>	<i>early</i>
	A	B	C	D	E	C
(5b)	<i>vo³³ tʂo³³</i>	<i>i⁵⁵ tu²¹</i>	<i>zɿ³⁴</i>	<i>nu³³</i>	<i>ŋo²¹ du³³</i>	<i>zɿ³³</i>
	<i>people</i>	<i>rise</i>	<i>early</i>	<i>if</i>	<i>finish work</i>	<i>early</i>
	A'	B'	C	D	E'	C

Interestingly, Proverb 5 has a common variant form with 5 syllables in each line: 𐄂𐄃𐄄𐄅𐄆𐄇, 𐄌𐄍𐄎𐄏𐄐𐄑 (a³³ tʂa⁵⁵ khu³³ zu³⁴ lu³⁴, vo³³ tʂo³³ ŋo²¹ mu³³ lu³⁴, Magpies put off building their nests; people put off their labor.) (Yi Language Dictionary Compilations Committee (彝语大词典编纂委员会编著) 1997:65). Proverb (5) and its variant demonstrate that while there is flexibility in word choice and meaning, the fixed syllable count of 5, 7, or 9 remains an important feature of Nuosu proverbs. Both Proverb (5) and its common variant fall into one of the expected patterns of syllable counts (9,9 and 5,5). For Nuosu proverbs, while words can be rearranged, the aligning of the couplets and their syntactic slots is fixed.

Proverb (5) employs the topic marker 𐄎 (nu³³), in this case suggesting a conditional case, which in English I translate ‘if.’ The proverb also illustrates the use of repetition as seen in identical syntactic slots (C) in both lines of the couplet.

The elements which are different in the two clauses draw the listeners’ attention to the point of the proverb, people rising with the result that their work gets finished. Magpies are a bird common to Nuosu people; they show up in Nuosu folktales as well. Proverb (5) is used to encourage the listeners not to be lazy but diligent and hardworking.

Proverb (6): སྤྱོད་ལོ་སྤྱོད་ལྷོ་སྤྱོད་, ཅེ་མེ་འུ་ལྷོ་སྤྱོད་ལྷོ་སྤྱོད་ (9, 9)

“The mom of the bad son hopes her bad son will become capable; The owner of the weak sheep hopes his weak sheep will become strong.”

(6a)	<i>zu³³ di³³</i>	<i>a²¹ mo²¹</i>	<i>zu³³ di³³</i>	<i>hɔ³⁴</i>	<i>ho³³ lo³³</i>
	<i>son bad</i>	<i>mother</i>	<i>son bad</i>	<i>capable</i>	<i>hope</i>
	A	B	A	C	D
(6b)	<i>zo³⁴ dzi³³</i>	<i>si²¹ pho³³</i>	<i>zo³⁴ dzi³³</i>	<i>tu²¹</i>	<i>ho³³ lo³³</i>
	<i>sheep weak</i>	<i>owner</i>	<i>sheep weak</i>	<i>rise</i>	<i>hope</i>
	A'	B'	A'	C	D

As well as the standard matching syntactic slots and syllable count structures in the two clauses of the couplet, Proverb (6) also repeats element A and A' within each clause. This repetition adds cadence to the proverb.

The mother of the son with bad habits hopes he will rise up through hard work and become capable (C, hɔ³⁴), skilled, and accomplished. The focus of the meaning of Proverb 6 can either be on the mother or the son: the **mother** has done so much for her son and yet he still is bad; or the **son** does not meet the mother's hopes and expectations. The proverb compares a mother's care for her children to the experience all Nuosu have in taking care of their animals. The mother has good hopes for her son, like owners have for their sheep. A good son brings honor to the family; strong, healthy sheep provide the family with material needs. The mother cannot control the outcome of her son just as people cannot ultimately control the health and wellbeing of their sheep.

Proverb (7): མཚན་མེད་མེད་ལྷོ་, འུ་མེད་མེད་ལྷོ་ (7, 7)

“If you don't listen to your father, you run ten valleys; if you don't listen to your mother, you cross five valleys.”

(7a)	<i>pha⁵⁵</i>	<i>do²¹ a²¹ mu³³</i>	<i>tshi³³ lo³³</i>	<i>tɕ³⁴</i>
	<i>father</i>	<i>not obey</i>	<i>ten valleys</i>	<i>run</i>
(7b)	<i>mo²¹</i>	<i>do²¹ a²¹ mu³³</i>	<i>ŋu³³ lo³³</i>	<i>ŋga³³</i>
	<i>mother</i>	<i>not obey</i>	<i>five valleys</i>	<i>cross</i>

In Proverb (7), identical syntactic slots highlight the converse items 𐄂 (pha⁵⁵, father) and 𐄃 (mo²¹, mother). The converse items are not contrasted with each other, but used jointly to refer to parents or one's elders. Once again negative polarity is used, the negative 𐄄 (a²¹, not) being infixing into the two-syllable verb 𐄅 𐄆 (do²¹mu³³, obey). There is repetition of 𐄇 (lo³³, valley) in both halves though the attached number in the two clauses varies, ten and five respectively—both numbers carrying the same level tone, 33. Rather than being a pointed difference, this difference is akin to the poetic richness of picking two different words from the same semantic family, a beautiful way of saying the same truth from a nearby angle. We see this in the choice of the two verbs at the end of the clauses, also two items from one semantic set, verbs of motion.

Herding and raising crops, the Nuosu live on rugged mountains of Liangshan at elevations of 1,000-3,000 meters. These mountain slopes are crisscrossed with paths. Making a wrong turn at one point will mean that eventually you are far off from your destination. You end up putting out much more effort than necessary without achieving a satisfying outcome. Proverb (7) is used to capture the importance of listening to your mother and father. It instructs the young to heed their elders.

3.2. *Antithetical Proverbs*

A second category of Nuosu proverbs consists of couplets with contrasting meanings but no overt conjunction. In these asyndetic constructions, the contrast is made obvious simply by placing the two phrases side by side without a connector. Similarly, in Lahu proverbs the two clauses of a couplet “are usually simply juxtaposed, with nothing overtly suggesting that there is a basis for comparison between them” (Matisoff 2011:282). The two opposing points of view emphasize the main point, showing two sides of a matter. This type of Nuosu proverb may also contain one clause which is an example from the natural world.

Proverb (8): 𐑏𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕, 𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕。 (7, 7)

“Frosty air is cold; father and mother’s breath is warm.”

(8a) *vo³³ so⁵⁵ hi³³ so⁵⁵* *ŋgo³⁴ ti³³ ti³³*
snowy frosty air *cold*

(8b) *pha⁵⁵ so⁵⁵ mo²¹ so⁵⁵* *tsha³⁴ ɽ³³ ɽ³³*
father and mother’s breath *warm*

Proverb (8) illustrates a Nuosu proverb that is antithetical with a concrete example. The word play uses the morpheme 𐑓 (so⁵⁵) which can be translated as ‘air’ and ‘breath’ respectively in two different four-syllable reduplicated forms. The four-syllable elaborate expressions are beautifully crafted, each containing a matched pair: snow-frost, and father-mother. Proverb (8) also uses the Nuosu three-syllable adjectives made by reduplicating the second syllable. As well as being more colorful forms than the default two-syllable adjectives, the use of the three-syllable forms crafts the proverb into lines of 7 syllables each, fitting the desired count.

Proverb (8) affirms the blessing of being with parents. It upholds the value Nuosu attribute to their elders, remembering how much is owed to them. Parents endure hardships and labor to provide for their children when they are young. Therefore, it is the duty of the younger generation to honor this sacrifice by revering and respecting their parents and elders.

Proverb (9): 𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕, 𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕𐑓𐑕。 (9, 9)

“An obedient child, his mother blossoms where she is. A disobedient child, his mother shrinks where she sits.”

(9a) *zu³³ mu³³* *a³⁴ mo³³* *tɕu²¹ la³³ ɽ³⁴* *du³³* *mu³³*
child *mother* *spread-come-ex-* *place* *ADVERBI-*
obedient *change* *ALIZER*
 A B C D E

(9b) *zu³³ di³³* *a³⁴ mo³³* *tɕu⁵⁵ la³³ ŋo⁵⁵* *du³³* *ŋi³³*
child bad *mother* *shrivel-come-* *place* *sit*
shrink
 A' B C' D E'

Here again we see the theme of the older generation receiving honor because of the children. The word 𑖃𑖅 (zu³³ mu³) refers to a child who is obedient and capable, one who can resolve problems and accomplish needed tasks. But Proverb (9) portrays a contrast in the second half of the couplet. Shame can be brought on a mother by a disgraceful son (𑖃𑖅, zu³³ di³³).

Only two syntactic slots have contrasting items: A:A' and C:C'. Because of a difference in the sons (A:A'), the lot of their mothers (C:C') varies greatly. In one case the mother 𑖃 (tʂu²¹) 'spreads out' and 𑖃 (lɔ³⁴) 'exchanges', gaining a better place. She blossoms, is fruitful, relaxed, and confident to go about. In the second case the mother 𑖃 (tʂu⁵⁵) 'shrivels' and 𑖃 (ŋɔ⁵⁵) 'shrinks'. She withers, becomes small and tight, unable to move about and is stuck sitting in one place with her shame. Proverb (9) also artfully utilizes sound correspondences, matching in the slots C and C': 𑖃𑖃 𑖃 (tʂu²¹ la³³ lɔ³⁴) and 𑖃𑖃 𑖃 (tʂu⁵⁵ la³³ ŋɔ⁵⁵). The first set of paired verbs have the same initial consonant sound 'tʂ'; the second set of paired verbs have the same vowel sound 'o'.

Proverb (9) is often used by the older generation to instruct kids to study hard so they will be a credit to their family and bring honor to the clan.

Proverb (10): 𑖃𑖃 𑖃𑖃 𑖃𑖃 𑖃𑖃 𑖃𑖃 𑖃𑖃, 𑖃𑖃 𑖃𑖃 𑖃𑖃 𑖃𑖃 𑖃𑖃 𑖃𑖃. (9, 9)

“Wherever my relative is, is bright; wherever my enemy is, is dark.”

(10a) *i⁵⁵ tɕi²¹ kha³⁴ dzo³³ mu³³ khu³⁴ bo²¹ lo³³ lo³³*
my relative wherever place bright

(10b) *i⁵⁵ dzi³³ kha³⁴ dzo³³ mu³³ khu³⁴ nɔ³³ dzɿ⁵⁵ dzɿ²¹*
my enemy wherever place dark

Proverb (10) juxtaposes the two words 'kin' (𑖃, tɕi²¹) and 'enemy' (𑖃, dzi³³), a startling juxtaposition. Soundwise, the two words are only differentiated by a voicing contrast and a tone change. However, semantically speaking the two are at extremes of the relationship scale. Nuosu regard kin as the closest and most valued relation; enemies, historically, would be routinely beheaded.

The first person pronoun 𠵼 (*i*⁵⁵) used with both of those items 𠵼𠵼 (*i*⁵⁵ *tei*²¹, my kin) and 𠵼𠵼 (*i*⁵⁵ *dzi*³³, my enemy) is not from the basic set of Nuosu pronouns, but rather the first person logophoric pronoun, sometimes referred to as the reported speech pronoun. These pronouns convey a sense that there is a speaker external to the current one (Gerner 2013; Liu and Li 2016). That is, the current speaker is reporting something that someone else has said. This aligns with the general view of Nuosu proverbs as being authorless wisdom, not novel text sprouting from the current speaker's mouth.

Proverb (10) also makes use of Nuosu language's vivid three-character elaborate expressions. In parallel clause-final syntactic slots, the two three-syllable reduplicated adjectives 𠵼𠵼𠵼 (*bo*²¹ *lo*³³ *lo*³³, bright) and 𠵼𠵼𠵼 (*no*³³ *dzi*⁵⁵ *dzi*²¹, dark) paint converse images.

Proverb (10) can be used when somebody comes to a new place they have never been. Because they are with someone they know, they feel at ease. Being with kin turns a strange place into a familiar one. Proverb (10) affirms the high value of kinship connections among the Nuosu.

3.3. *Descriptive Proverbs*

A third category of Nuosu proverbs are those used to simply describe a situation, phenomenon, or an aspect of life. Like other Nuosu proverbs, these proverbs are also composed of two clauses with matching syntactic slots and syllable count. Descriptive proverbs consist of two clauses that are saying the same thing, looking at something from more than one point of view, or looking at more than one aspect of the same thing.

In these proverbs we still find the use of opposites or converse lexical items to show breadth and add emphasis, for example, sky-road in Proverb (12) and mother-in-law-daughter-in-law in Proverb 14. Descriptive proverbs, perhaps because they are essentially asserting that something exists or is a certain way, often make use of the rich repertoire of existential verbs available in the Nuosu language.

Proverb (11): 𐄀𐄁𐄂𐄃𐄄, 𐄅𐄆𐄇𐄈; 𐄉𐄊𐄋𐄌𐄍𐄎𐄏𐄐𐄑. (5, 5; 5, 5)
“One may have the appearance of a monkey (weak), but the heart of a tiger (strong). A tree can grow straight on the outside, but be rotten on the inside.”

- (11a) *a*³³ *ŋu*⁵⁵ *kha*³³ *ŋɔ*³³ *ndi*⁵⁵ *la*⁵⁵ *mo*²¹ *ko*³³ *lo*³³ *ŋi*³³
monkey face EXISTEN- tiger inside EXISTEN-
TIAL TIAL
- (11b) *vo*²¹ *lu*³³ *zu*³³ *tɛɛ*³³ *dzo*³⁴ *ko*³³ *lo*³³ *zɪ*³³ *tʂhɪ*³⁴ *dzi*²¹
kind of grow straight inside corrupt become
tree

Like Proverb (3), Proverb (11) has parts that can be used independently. Line (11a) can stand alone as a proverb in its own right. Line (11b) can be paired with a different couplet. In the pairing presented in this paper, each individual couplet is antithetical within itself, asyndetically contrasting weak-strong and straight-corrupt, but used in parallel, the proverb describes something about the way the world is.

There are several pairs of matched items in Proverb (11): monkey-tiger, face (outside)-inside; straight-corrupt. The proverb elegantly ends three of its clauses with three different existential verbs, all with matching vowel sounds: the verb 𐄎 (ndi⁵⁵) is used for things which hang from or attach to larger things. The verb 𐄊 (ŋi³³), used with animate creatures, conveys a sense of a sitting posture. The verb 𐄑 (dzi²¹) is often used with large immobile things, but here also connotes an aspect of becoming (Walters and Atqi 2006:139).

Proverb (11) means that while the surface may look good, the inside may not be. The proverb describes the unknowable nature of something’s core from its exterior.

Proverb 12: 𐄒𐄓𐄔𐄕𐄖, 𐄗𐄘𐄙𐄚𐄛. (7, 7)

“The sky above is clear with no clouds; the road below is good with no stones.”

- (12a) *tho*⁵⁵ *li*³³ *mu*³³ *sa*³³ *ti*³³ *a*²¹ *ndi*⁵⁵
above TOPIC sky clear cloud NEGATIVE EXISTENTIAL

- (12b) *o⁵⁵ li³³ ga³³ sa³³ lu³³ a²¹ dzu³³*
below TOPIC road good stone NEGATIVE EXISTENTIAL

Both clauses in Proverb (12) come from nature. In converse relation to each other, the rhyming words with both matching vowels and tones, 𐄂 (tho⁵⁵) ‘above’ and 𐄃 (o⁵⁵) ‘below,’ encompass all of nature. The use of the negative makes a stronger case than would the positive declarative form. The final verbs in each line of the couplet are chosen from the same semantic family (existential verbs), but are not identical, the variety adding poetry to the proverb. The existential verb 𐄄 (ndi⁵⁵), discussed in Proverb (11), is juxtaposed to the existential verb 𐄅 (dzu³³) which “is mostly used with inanimate referents such as bones, stones, silver, plows, and corpses” (Walters and Atqi 2006:136).

Proverb (12) cleverly repeats the identical element 𐄆 (sa³³, pleasant, good) compounded with two different lexical items: 𐄇 (mu³³, sky) and 𐄈 (ga³³, road) respectively, again inspiring the listener to sit up and pay attention to what he is hearing and the nuances of meaning. This clever word play also signals the theme: 𐄆 (sa³³) ‘pleasant, good, happy, satisfied.’

Proverb (12) is used to describe a beautiful environment or a happy occasion. It can be appropriately used, for example, on a wedding day, celebrating the event’s joy by declaring that everything is right with the world. Proverb (12) signifies harmonious peace and wellbeing, the absence of problems and worry.

Proverb (13): 𐄉𐄊𐄋𐄌𐄍, 𐄎𐄏𐄐𐄑; 𐄒𐄓𐄔𐄕, 𐄖𐄗𐄘𐄙。 (5, 5; 5, 5)
“If there is no shepherd, the farmer will die of cold; If there is no farmer, the shepherd will die of hunger.”

- (13a) *lu⁵⁵ su³³ a²¹ 𐄚𐄛𐄜 𐄝𐄞𐄟 mo³³ su³³ gɔ³³ li²¹ sɿ³³*
shepherd NEGATIVE EXISTENTIAL if farmer cold die
- (13b) *mo³³ su³³ a²¹ 𐄚𐄛𐄜 𐄝𐄞𐄟 lu⁵⁵ su³³ mi⁵⁵ dzi³³ sɿ³³*
farmer NEGATIVE EXISTENTIAL if shepherd hunger die

Proverb (13) is made up of two couplets, each composed of two strings of 5 syllables. The two main items in the proverb are the two most common Nuosu roles: shepherd and farmer. By suffix-

ing the nominalizer 𠵹 (su³³) onto two verbs, 𠵹 (tu⁵⁵, plow) and 𠵹 (mo³³, herd), the nouns for ‘farmer’ and ‘shepherd’ are formed. More literally, this could be read as ‘one who plows’ and ‘one who herds’. What stands out from the repetition of identical elements in the two lines is the change in position of ‘shepherd’ and ‘farmer,’ and the change from ‘cold’ to ‘hunger.’ The last three syllables are parallel forms indicating the manner of death: ‘die-of-cold’ versus ‘die-of-hunger.’

Nuosu people’s main work is farming and herding. The shepherd without the farmer will die because he is lacking the food that the farmer can grow. Without the shepherd, the farmer will die because he does not have the wool to weave into the Nuosu traditional felt capes. Proverb (13) is used to show that both roles are important; neither one is more important than the other. People must rely on each other.

Interestingly, Proverb (13) has another well-known form with the same meaning in which the elements have been rearranged into a 9, 9 syllable pattern: 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹, 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹. (tu⁵⁵su³³ a²¹ŋu³³, vo³³ tsho³³ gɔ³³li²¹sɿ³³; mo³³su³³ a²¹ŋu³³, vo³³ tsho³³ mi⁵⁵dzi³³sɿ³³), “If there is no shepherd, people will die of cold; if there is no farmer, people will die of hunger.” (Yi Language Dictionary Compilations Committee (彝语大词典编纂委员会 编著) 1997:664). Again, this demonstrates the foundational nature of the syllable count and parallelism of Nuosu proverb structure.

Proverb (14): 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹, 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹 𠵹. (5, 5)

“The mother-in-law does wrong, but the daughter-in-law carries the bad name.”

- | | | | | |
|-------|-------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| (14a) | ndi ⁵⁵ | li ³³ | a ³⁴ bo ³³ | ndi ⁵⁵ |
| | mistake | TOPIC | mother-in-law | mistakes |
| (14b) | mi ³³ | di ³³ | ɛɿ ²¹ mo ²¹ | pɿ ²¹ |
| | name | bad | daughter-in-law | carry |

Proverb (14) speaks of 𠵹 (mi³³, name). This term is broader than the English gloss suggests. It refers to one’s reputation, with either honor or shame attached. The first half of the couplet uses

the word ndi^{55} twice. The first ndi^{55} (ndi⁵⁵, mistake) is used as a noun, the wrong choice. The second ndi^{55} (ndi⁵⁵, to make a mistake) is used as a verb. The repetition gives the proverb pleasant, poetic wording, and fills out the syllable count.

The final verb $\text{p}\eta^{21}$ (p η^{21} , carry) is one of many different Nuosu verbs which indicate methods of carrying. For example, to carry using a pole is indicated with the verb thi^{33} (thi³³); the word $\text{t}\epsilon\epsilon^{33}$ (t $\epsilon\epsilon^{33}$) means to carry on one’s shoulders. The Nuosu verb $\text{p}\eta^{21}$ (p η^{21}) is used for the action of carrying a load on one’s back. Rural Nuosu peasants going from their fields to home or to market in the Nuosu mountain region daily carry ($\text{p}\eta^{21}$, p η^{21}) large, loosely woven baskets of potatoes, other produce, or one-hundred-pound sacks of seed on their backs. The heavy loads are borne as part of the necessary work of life. Proverb (14) depicts a daughter-in-law, through no wrong of her own doing, continually bearing the weight of a bad reputation.

Proverb (14) points out that there are injustices in life. Sometimes it is not the one who does wrong who carries the shame; another does. The proverb is not an indignant value judgement on this situation, to either praise the willing bearer of another’s shame, or to criticize the one who does not carry his own disgrace. The proverb simply states that this is the way things are.

Proverb (15): $\text{t}\eta^{21} \text{t}\eta^{21} \text{t}\eta^{21} \text{t}\eta^{21} \text{t}\eta^{21} \text{t}\eta^{21} \text{t}\eta^{21}$, $\text{t}\eta^{21} \text{t}\eta^{21} \text{t}\eta^{21} \text{t}\eta^{21} \text{t}\eta^{21} \text{t}\eta^{21} \text{t}\eta^{21}$. (9, 9)
“At a wedding for three days you can say anything you want; at Yi New Year for three days you can eat or drink anything you want.”

(15a)	$\epsilon\eta^{21} \epsilon i^{33}$	$s\text{o}^{33} \eta i^{21}$	$hi^{21} \text{zo}^{55} \text{bu}^{33}$ $\text{zo}^{55} \text{du}^{33}$	a^{21}	$d\text{zo}^{33}$
	wedding	three days	wrong talking and chatting	NEGATIVE	EXISTEN- TIAL
	A	B	C	D	E
(15b)	$khu^{55} \epsilon\eta^{33}$	$s\text{o}^{33} \eta i^{21}$	$dzu^{33} \text{zo}^{55} \text{ndo}^{33}$ $\text{zo}^{55} \text{du}^{33}$	a^{21}	$d\text{zo}^{33}$
	Nuosu New Year	three days	wrong eating and drinking	NEGATIVE	EXISTEN- TIAL
	A'	B	C'	D	E

In Proverb (15), the highlighted element C, which is different in the two halves of the couplet, uses two four-character elaborate expressions with a reduplicated verb 𐄀 (zo⁵⁵, to err) and the nominalizer 𐄁 (du³³) suffixed on the end. Each half of the couplet makes use of litotes, making emphatic understatements: ‘say anything you want,’ and ‘eat or drink anything you want.’

Hosting and being guests are important aspects of Nuosu culture with specified behavior and etiquette attached to each role. A host can use Proverb (15) to show his generosity as he encourages guests to eat, talk, and enjoy themselves. Proverb (15) is particularly appropriate at weddings or during the Nuosu New Year time when each family slaughters a pig and feasts together. The proverb encapsulates the joy of the collective and celebrates their life together.

4. Conclusion

The carefully crafted form of 𐄀𐄁𐄀𐄁 (lu³³ pɿ³⁴ lu³³ tɛi³³, Nuosu proverbs) reflects intricate artistry and multiple aesthetic features of the Nuosu language, making them memorable and transmissible across generations. A defining feature of these sayings is their fixed syllable count and syntactic parallelism. Nuosu proverbs are couplets with matching lines of odd-numbered syllables, either 5, 7, or 9. The rhythm this pattern engenders, coupled with marked parallel syntactic slots, adds symmetry and enables people to clearly see correspondences and contrasts in meaning. Nuosu proverbs employ typical literary devices such as analogies, metaphors, and rhyming. A more careful look, however, uncovers additional formal features such as compounding, word play, lexical choice, reduplicated elaborate expressions, sound-based art, tonal art, litotes and negative polarity.

The artistic form of Nuosu proverbs intensifies the impact of what is said and provides enjoyment, satisfying the human longing for beauty and craftsmanship. The proverbs add Nuosu cultural essence to traditional occasions and group ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. The earthy images used in the proverbs reference common experiences the Nuosu share as a cultural community. These short pithy sayings prescribe proper behavior, teach values, and give inspiration to the Nuosu people.

Understanding the deeper meanings under the surface of Nuosu proverbs gives us a glimpse into the minds and hearts of the Nuosu people; understanding the proverbs' form shows their beautiful artistry. Looking carefully at the form of Nuosu proverbs can facilitate comparisons across languages and the discovery of new linguistic features in proverbs. It can also deepen our understanding of strategies languages use to enrich and embellish discourse and the role that formulaic sayings play in preserving cultural traditions and values across centuries.

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