# After Words: Writing Worlds in 21st-Century China

by

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# **Dedication**

To Teacher Mei

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### A Note on Languages and Peoples

The current political designation for residents of Berdder is as Naxi 纳西 ethnic minorities. That said, Berdder people tend to describe themselves as Naqhai or Rheekaq. Many arguments in this dissertation circle around a critical reevaluation of current Chinese concepts of ethnicity, and I find the Naxi designation specifically problematic, given that it lumps together groups who actively dislike one another. Consider, for example, that Berdder people's conventional image of Lijiang Naxi (who do actually refer to themselves as Naxi) is as spineless and avaricious bootlickers. Indeed, in Berdder, the apparently neutral phrase of "person from Lijiang" (N. Gguqbbei mei/zoq) stands in for "shiftless con-person." In contrast, Lijiang Naxi often describe Berdder peoples as uncivilized rustics, sometimes suggesting (insultingly) that they are "actually" Tibetan.

Nevertheless, current research does classify the languages spoken by these groups within a common Burmo-Qiangic Naish family<sup>1</sup>. Likewise, oral histories indicate shared migrational routes, and ethnographic research indicates many shared practices, including the use of similar oral texts, scripts, and ceremonial books. Thus, when I find it necessary to refer to this broad sociohistorical complex, I follow a common regional usage and refer to the groups as Na peoples (this usage roughly correlates with the political designation of Naxi, but lacks the Herderian presuppositions). I follow Alexis Michaud in referring to the linguistic family associated with

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Alexis Michaud, *Tone in Yongning Na Lexical Tones and Morphotonology* ([S.l.]: Language Science Press, 2017).

this complex as Naish. At the same time, I also attempt to preserve regional and local distinctions, as with Naxi (in Lijiang), and Naqhai and Rheekaq (in Berdder).

These complexities of languages and peoples inevitably feed into conventions around transcription, in a manner I hope to address more fully in the book version of this dissertation.

For the present, I have used a Naxi transcription system created by researchers from the Summer Language Institute<sup>2</sup>, which itself adapts conventions of Chinese pinyin to the sounds of the Lijiang Naish dialect.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Thomas M. Pinson and Stephanie Wang, *Naqxi Geezheeq: Beginning Naxi (Draft)* (SIL International East Asia Group, 2009).

#### **Abstract**

Since the early twentieth century, rural, ethnic areas of southwest China have been the objects of Chinese and foreign social science research. It was in part through this research that concepts of ethnicity and nation were created in China. While the peoples thusly identified have been crucial to the project of the Chinese nation, they continue to be marginalized and devalued within it. Drawing on (yes) more ethnographic research in the southwest—in a Burmo-Qiangic speaking, Naxi ethnic minority township of Yunnan Province—the dissertation explores how residents are engaging with the research about them, and through it, with their recent history.

Likewise considering the history of cultural research in the southwest, the dissertation focuses on a convergence of state and local interests: ways of writing. While Berdder traditions of writing, ranging from "pictographic" ceremonial texts to conventionalized movements across the alpine topography, have long worked to create the Berdder social world, Chinese writing has, in the history of Chinese civilization, played a no less pivotal role. This may explain why Berdder writing was long an object of Chinese research, and continues to occupy a place of fascination and trouble in mainstream Chinese culture. Giving particular attention to current state-affiliated research projects that aim to preserve and "develop" Naxi writing, I argue that these projects are by no means neutral: they allow the Chinese state to intervene in Berdder ways of worldmaking, and in doing so to reshape Berdder's possible futures. As Berdder people grapple with these circumstances, they are using their writing in new ways: to create alternative modes of voicing, to reshape public forms, and to pursue political action in the nearby cities.

The dissertation offers a social interactionally-based account of the power of writing. In particular, I focus on how writing serves, in everyday interactions as well as social movements, as a way of making and remaking worlds. In the context of modern China, this approach locates a concrete social mechanism—literacy—in nationalization efforts, while also considering the subtle ways that such efforts may be reframed and contested. Finally, by characterizing Berdder literacy practices, the research contributes to understandings of China's southwest as a distinct cultural region with ties to Himalayan peoples, with whom the history of southwestern literacy is deeply entangled.

#### **CHAPTER 1**

### Writer, Beggar, God: Reflections of/on History

During my earliest visits to Berdder, a rural valley in southwest China, in 2011 and 2012, residents warned me to stay away from their neighbor, a man I eventually would call Teacher Mei. He was a sixtysomething *ddolbba*, a local type of ritualist with a specialty in books, and like most ddolbba, he spent a great deal of time writing and reading. But unique to himself, he pursued these activities at the central sacred spot of all of Berdder, a holy spring hidden in a stand of trees at the top of Berdder's holy mountain. This is where valley residents went to speak to the gods of the mountain, and in recent years, a trickle of tourists coming in from the nearest cities had been finding their way to the same spot.

It was there I first met Teacher Mei: I had climbed said holy mountain, what residents called in the area's various Burmo-Qiangic Naish languages Bbapardduaq<sup>3</sup>, in order to figure out what people were doing, exactly, when they climbed it, too—usually in the morning, their wicker back baskets filled with branches, smoke already pouring from the top of the mountain in thick, smudged lines to the sky. I also wanted to understand how tourists had become involved in these activities, with other valley residents waiting for them at the foot of the mountain, some setting up tiny stands to sell the tourists fruits and medicinal plants, others charging a fee to escort them up the mountain's slopes astride sure-footed local horses.

On the day in question, I followed a group of Berdder people up the rocks and an intermittent, rotting wooden stair. When we reached the mountain's flat top about thirty minutes

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> With variations in pronunciation.

later, we threaded our way through a lattice of pools, streams, and scrub to arrive, finally, in a clearing ringed round by trees. Arranged before us were three stone cairns and a very deep pool. And sitting in a hovel just beside the pool was Teacher Mei. At the time, of course, I didn't know him; I just saw an elderly man with long cheekbones and an angular nose. He was bent over a stack of pages, scrawling out something across their surface, with an uneven, grease-edged pile of papers beside him. I understood at the time that he was writing. But it was hardly clear to me why he needed to be there at this hallowed, forsaken spot to do it, or why my companions continued to warn me to stay away from him.

As for the mountain, Bbapardduaq, that had drawn us all there in the first place, it was located in the northwest corner of the valley, and it was squat and white, its upper reaches sculpted into terraces and shallow pools, all bearing the marks of flowing water. The water emerged from springs and blended with melted snow in the high, surrounding peaks, and flowed down along the surfaces of Bbapardduaq. It also came up from Teacher Mei's pool, which was in fact a very deep spring. Geologists sometimes came to the valley to take rock samples, and I learned from them that much of the area's mountain water was full of calcium bicarbonate, which solidified into white travertine rock when the sun hit it. Over thousands and thousands of years, the travertine had accumulated in layers to form Bbapardduaq. The Colosseum of Rome is made of the same stuff, and there are places in Yellowstone National Park with analogous, if much smaller, formations. Meanwhile, in Hieropolis, a mausoleum is being swallowed whole, over many hundreds of years, by growing undulations of pale travertine.

Berdder people called their prayers at Bbapardduaq "praise-burning" (N. chobbazzee), and this involved speaking to the gods of the mountain through the recitation of oral texts, and also offering gifts, in the form of burnt branches, white flour, and alcohol, at the stone cairns

near where Teacher Mei sat. While it is true that such activities were ceremonial, in the sense of being repeated behaviors addressed to unseen beings, they were so habitual and, by local standards, so simple that it seemed laughable to seek the help of a ritual specialist, a ddolbba like Teacher Mei, in pursuing them. There was thus a basic local legibility in Teacher Mei's presence there at so sacred a place, but also a palpable sense of excess.

This combination of legibility and absurdity extended to the tourists. For residents of the valley, it was a joke, an irony, or a bewilderment—sometimes a combination of all these things—that tourists dutifully wheezed their way up the mountain and sought out the sacred pool, only to snap a few pictures and then wander off in search of the next scenic spot. "The tourists don't know how to praise-burn," was a common saying, which was true as far as it went, but had also come to serve as a euphemism to describe the tourists' frequent refusal to buy from the local vendors, or to rent horses.

As for ddolbba ritualists like Teacher Mei, their social role might be boiled down as follows: drawing on a combination of force of will and years of training, a ddolbba uses his books to enter into communication with powerful, nonhuman entities. Through assistance from those deities, he then intervenes in the events of the world. In that sense, ddolbba books are tools, functioning according to a tradition that stretches across much of Yunnan and Sichuan and, according to many Yunnan people I spoke to, traced its origin back to Berdder. The tradition followed the lines of patrilocal kinship, passing through houses to the men who inhabited them. It was thus not surprising that Teacher Mei had learned from his father, Grandfather Ddolggu; indeed, his father was famous in the area for the strength of his rituals, and part of Teacher Mei's ritual inheritance was the potency of his father's name.

But if ritualists were a bit like local celebrities, with people in surrounding villages knowing of them, debating their merits, and sometimes inviting them to perform, ordinary people's access to ritual knowledge itself was limited. While they were used to sharing space with ceremonial books and many people could identify a few written characters, most of them didn't know how to use the books. And while they might know some of the common oral texts, or some parts of some common oral texts, such as the one that so many people said at Bbapardduaq, they lacked the encyclopedic knowledge of them that was needed for more complicated ceremonies.

Eventually, I started to climb Bbapardduaq every day to sit beside Teacher Mei and study his books. This is how I learned that his daily writing activities were specifically a matter of copying books. This was a common activity among ritualists, given that they have never used printing presses, but often require multiple books in order to hold a single ceremony. Sometimes Teacher Mei copied a book he'd borrowed from someone else, in order to add a version of it to his own collection. Other times he copied the books he already had in order to sell them to tourists and researchers.

But, his copying was mostly a way of passing time between instances of what he considered the real work: offering up his praise-burning skills to tourists, and then charging them for his labor.

Indeed, as he copied, he kept eyes and ears closely attuned.

Hearing distant voices speaking Chinese, or occasionally, other languages—anything other than local dialects of Naish—he'd cock his head and note, "They'll be here soon." When the tourists did emerge through the foliage, he'd set down his paper and pen and arise to meet them at the center of the clearing. There he'd ask if he might help them "burn incense" (Ch.

shaoxiang), the Chinese phrase that locals used to translate "praise-burning." If the tourists said yes, he's offer some of the praise-burning oral text on their behalf ("more if I like them," he told me, "less if I don't"), in what I came to understand as an aspirational transaction. Having completed the recitation, he'd suggest, optimistically, that they might "give a little"—money, that is. To him, for the recitation. But if they didn't, or if they said they didn't want help with burning incense in the first place, he'd just shrug and pad back to his hovel.

In contrast, locals arriving to the same clearing set to work immediately, pursuing their recitations, their burning of branches, and their sprinkling of offerings with a familiarity born of lifelong repetition. The concluding portion of this process always involved removing an old plastic bottle filled with liquor from the bottom of one's back basket, and sprinkling the liquor along the sides of the central cairn and into the pool, where the gods lived.

But here is the thing: While local worshippers were praise-burning, they also paused to greet Teacher Mei, and they almost always gave him the last bits of their alcohol. He kept a bowl on the bench beside him for this purpose, and sipped on it all day. We joked that his relative sobriety or drunkenness served as a measure of the number of people who'd come to praise-burn that day. I didn't think about this much at first, beyond the joke, because giving food was so basic a gesture of goodwill in the area. And yet, people's alcohol-sharing with Teacher Mei was so frequent, and so thoroughly incorporated into their habitual movements around the cairns and pool, that I came eventually to wonder if they were making offerings to him, too, as if he were one of the gods.

And of course, here is the *other* thing, which I've already mentioned: The people filling up Teacher Mei's cup were often the very same ones who made implications about him, or openly disparaged him. Sometimes the criticisms focused on skill: he did not understand his

books; he lacked the courage or will to perform effective rituals. But the criticism also involved something like professional ethics. He will take your money, they told me.

Watch out, they said.

And I remember feeling so confused. What was Teacher Mei to them? And why did it matter so much—why was I always getting sucked into conversations of this nature?

This dissertation emerges from that confusion. Specifically, Teacher Mei's integration into a complicated set of changing religious practices, all based on a highly specific form of local literacy, combined with the often-contradictory ways people commented upon that integration, offers a jumping-off point for this analysis.

### 1.1 Gossip

Certain features of the gossip resembled a way of talking that locals described in Chinese as "cultural explanation" (Ch. wenhua jieshi). My deepest memories of cultural explanation involve a great deal of finger-shaking, of the counting off-of bullet points, and of volume kicked up a few notches above normal, as Berdder people breathlessly offered me information about...what?

"Our culture," they said, as if it were obvious.

"Naxi culture," they said, using the Chinese-language ethnic designation for themselves, which overlaps with but also differs from local self-designations in Naish languages, generally either "Naqhai" or "Rheekaq."

Yet, when speaking to tourists, researchers, and outsiders—Berdder people did not always sharply distinguish these categories—they moved quickly to explicit statements about the deepest nature of *Naxi* people. In their vocabulary and presentational style, such statements

reproduced the cultural research being produced in China about southwestern ethnic peoples. I will argue in the chapters to come that cultural explanation was a genre of speech shared between researchers and their interlocutors, and gestures to a historical process of metacultural looping<sup>4</sup>, by which the questions and indeed the published works of researchers feed back into what southwestern ethnic people say to researchers. And in turn, what they say goes on to shape future research. In talking about this process, I will also sometimes refer to "ethnic metaculture" as a way of identifying the emergent conventionalization of discourses about what constitutes Naxi (and other ethnic minority) forms of culture. The result is a set of strong correlations between the cultural explanations that locals and that many works of Naxi-focused research provide, but at the same time a lack of correlation between these statements and the actual daily practices of many Berdder residents. There is a very real sense in which acts of cultural explanation, as an expression of ethnic metacultural discourses, create a vision of Berdder life that exists only in published research, in tourist brochures, and in conversations among researchers and tourists.

A simple but crucial example involves the copying of books. In many research works on Chinese ethnic minorities that come out of a tradition of Chinese ethnology, it is taken for granted that ethnic people's motivation for most of their "traditional" activities, ranging from ritual performance to book production, is explicitly a matter of cultural transmission, and thus virtuous: it extends the given tradition, and insofar as "ethnic" tradition is a part of the Chinese nation, it celebrates China, too. This logic is replicated again in many of the explanatory statements I received from Berdder people, who insisted that they were talking to me as a way of transmitting culture, and indeed selling fruit and renting horses to support Naxi culture, too. And yet, taking Teacher Mei as an example, his book-copying activities seemed aimed more at

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Thanks to Bruce Mannheim for suggesting this phrase!

accumulating a powerful collection of books, at earning money by selling the copies he made, and at assuaging boredom. Between a noble aspiration to preserve one's own culture and a nest of desires at once competitive, material, and ordinary, there is a significant amount of space. And so I have found it worth asking what stories are embedded in the most common forms of cultural explanation.

This question has two implications. First, taken from the perspective of mainstream

Chinese culture and the state, what ends might such narratives serve? And second, looking from the direction of Berdder, what do locals stand to gain in telling these stories back to the tellers?,

And how at the same time do the stories get into local life?

I locate three narratives—the first of which is not exactly new in the annals of discourse about "traditional" peoples. It is: Naxi culture is fading! Alas, it cannot stand up against the forces of modernization and sinicization. Here there is often an additional element of blame, which goes as follows: Today's Berdder people lack the innocence that the ones before them had. And it's all very sad, of course, but it's also their fault: They're going to the city and forgetting their pasts. Their commitment to cultural transmission is lacking. They don't really care about their own culture, and it's very tragic, for them *and* for the Chinese nation.

In contrast, the second, closely related narrative, is celebratory. It says: Naxi culture is developing! Through a growing tourism market, through the work of cultural researchers, and through the increasing appearance of Berdder people in television documentaries and research publications, they are transmitting their culture courageously and with perseverance! Here the implication is that such research and documentaries are themselves a form of cultural transmission, and that participating in them is already a form of virtue and patriotism.

Then the third narrative—a narrative present in but actively obscured by the first two—is just about power. It says: The Naxi culture described in research and in explanatory conversation is how Naxi culture *should* be. If that's not what you as Naxi people have, you should change it. Or, at the very least, you should participate politely in the fiction that it *is* what you have. You should do this out of love for your ethnicity and your country, and you should also do it if you want to earn money and fame through researchers and tourists. In a word, if the visions of ethnic metaculture are not true now, you should make them true.

Taken together, these narratives offer a very specific context for cultural explanation as a genre, and they also begin to account for its emotional dimension: despite the fact that cultural explanation is almost definitionally a declarative genre, a matter of stating incontrovertible facts about the essence of ethnic life, when Berdder people spoke it to me, I felt an enormous expectation and anxiety in them. It seemed to me they were waiting for my response. Yet, no response ever felt adequate: to affirm the "facts" they were claiming felt unkind (not to mention false!). But to deny the statements felt like an act of betrayal, too, because they had so much at stake in making cultural explanation true.

As a minimal summary, then, the "culture" of cultural explanation was not a transparent reflection of reality, but it had the power of the state behind it, and an agenda for ethnic futures. Within such explanations, the repeated theme of cultural transmission, which embeds an ethics of acquiescence, speaks to the role of this genre in governance of southwestern ethnic peoples. Exploring the nature of this governance occupies much of the dissertation. And yet, because cultural explanation also afforded a shared language among Berdder residents and outsiders such as tourists and researchers, it served a pragmatic purpose, too, allowing a much less powerful group (Berdder residents) to seek good relations with a more powerful one (researchers). Finally,

because cultural explanation also carried powerful expectations about the nature of Berdder life, it fed into the way people sometimes viewed and adjusted their own daily practices. In sum, it was frequently false, but also enormously consequential.

In all such talk of culture, ddolbba are pivotal; within the unspoken rules of the genre, they are *the* culture bearers (Ch. wenhua chuancheng ren) of the Naxi ethnicity. As such, they are taken as uniquely representative of that culture. Further, the state has institutionalized their cultural iconization by creating a tiered national cultural heritage system that offers them different levels of annual financial support based on the extent to which they can attest to transmitting culture (according to the specifications of ethnic metaculture). Taking Teacher Mei as an example, while he had attained only a lower-level tier within the system of cultural heritage, he had to fill out a form every year to maintain his status. This involved attesting to the cultural items he had "transmitted" over the course of the past 12 months. The bureaucratic nature of the form combined with its highly formal Chinese instructions were all a bit overwhelming to Teacher Mei: each year when he got it in the mail, he'd call his nephew, whose Chinese was unusually good, and ask him to do something with it. Once his nephew had filled the boxes (it remains unclear with what), he'd mail it back.

But if ddolbba had become ideologized within the terms of cultural explanation as the crucial origins of Naxi-ness, it was also true that, in Berdder, they had long held a socially and religiously authoritative, and for that reason a potentially exploitative, role. And it is at this juncture that (1) gossip about Teacher Mei and (2) the genre of cultural explanation begin to come together. Indeed, in today's Berdder, it is basically impossible to talk about ddolbba practice without invoking certain features of culturally explanatory talk. But in my observation, precisely because ddolbba have come to serve as an icon of Naxi-ness in the culturally

explanatory sense, to speak about them involves an implicit commentary on cultural explanation and its narratives. I argue that ddolbba gossip opens an aperture through which to examine critically the image being constructed of Berdder history, and the social effects of that image.

At the same time, commentary about ddolbba was not just about an emergent national practice of ethnic research and cultural regimentation. A global anthropological literature attests to the complicated social role of ritualists, to their mediation of binaries of purity and danger<sup>5</sup>, life and death<sup>6</sup>, material and immaterial<sup>7</sup>—and the power they gain thereby. In Berdder, ddolba had always been celebrities: their successful mediation of such binaries, generally through the use of books, generated power and made them famous. This is to say that the very nature of their religiouwork created an ongoing potential to view them as contaminated and untrustworthy.

Not surprisingly, just as Berdder non-ritualists view ddolbba with a combination of awe and suspicion, ddolbba have developed a variety of practices to protect themselves from their non-ritualist neighbors. A variety of books and ritual practices exist simply to resist the bad influence of negative gossip, and to ensure that clients' various deceptions about the nature of their problems will not impact the ritualists performing ceremonies to address the problems. In sum, if ceremonial work gives ddolbba enormous ritual and social power, it also embeds precarity in that power.

Based on all this, my analysis roots ddolbba gossip in the longstanding social contexts of ritual practice, and it considers how that religious dimension may condition the commentary

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Douglas, Mary. Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo. New York: Praeger, 1966; Singh, Bhrigupati. Poverty and the Quest for Life: Spiritual and Material Striving in Rural India. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Maskarinec, Gregory G. The Rulings of the Night: An Ethnography of Nepalese Shaman Oral Texts. University of Wisconsin Press, 1995; Mueggler, Erik. The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, And Place In Southwest China. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Keane, Webb. "On Spirit Writing: Materialities of Language and the Religious Work of Transduction." *Journal of* the Royal Anthropological Institute 19 (2013): 1–17.

embedded in contemporary ddolbba-related gossip as well. I ask: During the period of my fieldwork, what were people trying to make sense of when they gossiped about Teacher Mei? And at the same time: What religious and social continuities might their search for understanding have held in relation to longstanding relations between ddolbba and non-ritualists? In what follows, I want to take some of their most common statements one by one, and to reconsider them as multi-faceted acts of sociohistorical commentary. To begin, when people insisted that Teacher Mei couldn't read his own books, what were the questions behind that question?

### 1.1.1 Questions about writing

Ddolbba books are oblong and rectangular, pale brown, made of a particular *gua dder* vine that grows in the surrounding mountains. The roughness of their pages comes from the strong fibers of the vine, which require several days of soaking to decompose sufficiently to be pounded into paper. As for the script that appears across these pages, it functions in part through correlation with ceremonial speech, and in part through visual iconicity, resembling objects in the world. Many of the graphs bring to mind the very trees, rocks, and plants that appear on Bbapardduaq. On the walks I eventually took with Teacher Mei, he pointed out specific plants and animals and aligned them with the graphs he had taught me.

Book-related activity took a lot of different forms, though perhaps the most common was copying, as described. There were also different types of books, which served different purposes. The crucial bifurcation in these categories was between books used for divination (N. pai), and those used for recitation (N. bbv). It seems that, in the past, ddolbba had specialized in only one of these two categories. In the present, however, most ddolbba could do a little of both, and each was indeed necessary: while a divination served to pinpoint the nature of a problem, it was

through ceremony that the problem could be addressed. During my time with Teacher Mei, we studied both sorts of books, and I also became interested in how register differences in the script correlated with particular genres of books.

While Chapter Six will devote a great deal of space to these register differences, for now it is enough to know that there was a low-status register (N. see jjyiq) used for transcribing speech, which tended to be used in divination books, as well as an ambiguous category of spellbooks (N. hually) that recorded the specific sounds of efficacious spoken phrases. It was also used in the past for "everyday" texts such as lists, letters, and legal documents. <sup>8</sup> The second register, which has been the crucial focus of most existing research, roughly correlates with a spoken register of ceremonial speech—the sort of oral texts that people recite at Bbapardduaq, for example—and it works against any sort of one-to-one relationship between graphic and spoken units. As I will argue in Chapter Six, ceremonial books' intentional attenuation of the relationship between written script and oral text actually generates ceremonial power by dramatizing a ritualist's successful mediation between book and word. It is at the same time a feat of ritual skill: precisely because a ddolbba cannot transform ceremonial register books into speech without a pre-existing inner archive of oral texts, to use such a book is also a kind of boast. For ritualists, it is one way to make fame for oneself.

All of this is to say that a ritualist's ability to use different kinds of books speaks to his quality as a ritualist, and this is especially the case with ceremonial books, in which the nature of the script register is designed to create a test of skill. Thus to specify what I have described in the previous section as a longstanding religious dimension to commentary on ritualists, Berdder

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Yu Suisheng 喻遂生, Naxi dongba wen yan jiu cong gao, di er ji 纳西东巴文研究丛稿, 第二辑 (Contributions on Naxi dongba script research, second volume) (Chengdu: Ba Shu shu she, 2008).

literate usage of ceremonial books marks a particular focus of such commentary. It is from this perspective that assertions that Teacher Mei couldn't read may be read as part of a tradition of critique.

At the same time, the critiques gained a new resonance in the light of events linked to the formation of P.R.China in the early to mid-20th century. When the Communist party established control of the national government in 1949, condemned religious practice as "feudal superstition," and moved quickly to collectivize the countryside, Berdder life was, like life almost everywhere within the new nation, fundamentally restructured. One of the consequences in Berdder had been the disruption of ddolbba pedagogical practice, by which ritualists taught students to write and use books, and to perform ceremonies. By the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 70s, vast quantities of ddolbba books—identified as signs of superstition—were destroyed; people recalled how an entire wooden house had been filled, floor to ceiling, with books, and then set on fire. As a result, when in the 1990s the government lifted sanctions on religious practice and some by-then-very-elderly ritualists began practicing again, many things had been lost or forgotten. Books were extremely hard to come by, and only a few ddolbba, if any of them, still remembered the most complicated ceremonies and ceremonial speech.

Within this history, Teacher Mei's case was at once typical and highly particular. Because he had been born in the middle of collectivization, and never known the Chinese world before 1949, he was not able to pursue formal study of ddolbba practice until China's opening in the 1990s. Yet, because he was an extremely inquisitive child who spend time hunting with his father in the mountains around Berdder (and thus far away from different forms of village surveillance), he managed to pick up a great deal of ritual knowledge in less formal ways. Thus,

when he finally did sit down to study the books when he was in his forties, he had an unusually rich foundation upon which to build.

In people's criticism of Teacher Mei's literate skill, I hear an evocation of these histories of destruction and revival. I hear them asking questions: Had the knowledge really been destroyed? What was gone for good, and what was recovered? How was it possible for them, as non-ritualists, to know? To what extent did this ambiguity create yet another site of danger, of potential contamination and/or deception, in the field of ddolbba practice?

And yet, in today's China, and especially in areas thematized by ethnic metaculture, it is impossible to ask such questions without also evoking the first narrative of cultural decline. Thus another, linked set of questions might be phrased as a response to that narrative: What does it mean to have stories of cultural death told about us? What do we gain by telling those stories, too—and what do we lose? And of course: Is it true? If our culture really is vanishing, what do we have left? What is it that we are doing now?

#### 1.1.2 Questions about fraud

But the most frequent gossip about Teacher Mei went like this: "He will try to take your money." I heard it nearly whenever I told people I was studying with him. They'd wonder if he'd asked to pray for me. Then they would laugh, and advise I keep a close eye on my wallet. During my first visits to Berdder, people also tried to teach me things to say in Naqhai to him: "I don't know how to praise-burn," for example—which in hindsight is a direct citation of the statement so frequently said of stingy tourists. In addition to commenting on me, too, it suggests that this specific flavor of gossip was conditioned by Berdder's growing enmeshment in a provincial and national tourism industry.

While Berdder received multiple buses' worth of tourists every day in the early 2000s, during the period of my fieldwork nearly two decades after, between 2016-2019, tourist companies had stopped sending most of their buses. According to the Berdder officials I spoke to, the reasons were multiple. First, the bus trip to Berdder from either of the two nearest cities, either Shangrila or Lijiang, was between four and eight hours. In southwest China's increasingly sleek tourist business, Berdder's single tourist attraction—Bbapardduaq—could no longer justify the length of the trip. Second, the roads that linked Berdder to the cities were bad: in years past, it had been commonplace for a few vehicles to slip off them each year, and shatter on the rocks below. And on the road from Lijiang to Berdder, it was *still* commonplace to lose a few people each year to falling rocks. He Yusong's wife, Wujji, had served as a tour guide in the area for several years, and recalled how, during a bathroom break, a rock came down from the heavens and felled a member of her tour group. He died immediately.

"Fate," was her explanation.

Finally, Berdder had only the beginnings of an internal tourist infrastructure. During the early 2000s, the local government had built a ticket station at the foot of Bbapardduaq, and a few people had converted parts of their homes into hostels. This was also when the nearest village, Gguddv, had organized rotating shifts of horse-renters, who pooled their daily profits and distributed them to members of the village. This created a great deal of jealousy from other villages, and some of the elderly ladies from Weishee, where I lived, sought their own profits by selling fruits and medicinal plants alongside the horse-renters.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> A few years before I began fieldwork, an actual hotel—positioned just at the foot of Bbapardduaq—had also grown up, though it seemed that the majority of its patrons were actually passing officials involved with the county government, located just a little further from Bbapardduaq.

It was around this time that Teacher Mei's father, Grandfather Ddolggu, decided to seek tourist profits by means of his ddolbba skills. He set up camp beside Bbapardduaq's spring, and began the tradition of aspirational transactions that Teacher Mei eventually inherited. It was Ddolggu's fame and power as a ritualist that justified his occupation of the spot, but, by the paradox of ddolbba authority, this also created resentment among many Berdder residents. So the logic went, why should one man be allowed to earn so much, when almost everyone else got nothing? The resentment grew when Ddolggu's younger brother—Uncle Yulheeq, also a ddolbba—claimed a place for himself at a smaller fertility shrine at a lower spring on Bbapardduaq. And at some point, yet another ritualist, this one from Bbu village, had built a hut for himself on the other side of Ddolggu's central spring.

At this time in the early 2000s, such work had brought real money, with Uncle Yulheeq—whose aspirational transactions often veered into bullying—sometimes bringing home as much as a thousand kuai a day. However, by 2016 when my dissertation fieldwork began, the number of daily buses had receded to three, with each one carrying a combination of tourists and local Berdder people returning home from their work in the city. Teacher Mei said that on average he got about 30 kuai a day. It wasn't a lot, but it still made a difference. He had herded and hunted in the mountains for about thirty years prior, and described his move to Bbapardduaq as a form of retirement: it allowed him to profit a little while enjoying the leisure of quiet writing and chatting.

All of this is to say that, while the explicit reason for Teacher Mei's mountain-sitting was profit, it seemed in practice a more complicated act, especially given how little money he actually got out of it. Nevertheless, people reserved their worse accusations for him, not his

father. This speaks, I think, to their different relationships with the people of Berdder, and to their different places in local history. I will return to this in the coming pages.

For now, I observe more broadly that, if cultural research first created the narratives around rural ethnic peoples in the southwest, it was tourism that recontextualized those narratives in a new capitalist marketplace. Through this process, cultural decline became linked to an idea of "selling out"—to the extent that researchers at a nearby Naxi culture research center advised me to stay away from Berdder: it was too influenced by tourism, they said, even though it managed to remain poor and undeveloped. Apparently the touristic influence meant that "culture" no longer counted. At the same time, and despite the obvious contradiction, I heard other researchers considering how best to increase Berdder's opening to the outside. In this view, ideas of virtuous cultural development seemed actually to presuppose participation in economic markets.

In my interpretation, these paradoxical statements motivate Berdder residents' assertion that Teacher Mei is a cheat, and I hear in them a search for alternative narrative: Is Teacher Mei *just* a fake? If he is, are we all? Does that mean our lives don't count—aren't real? Is it possible to seek profit without compromising our value in the eyes of the world?

#### 1.1.3 Questions about beggars

But of course Teacher Mei lived in Berdder, too. As a member of a small community, the gossip about him inevitably came back around to him. One day, a few weeks after a series of progressively debilitating strokes had killed his father, he talked with me about it.

We had been studying the book, *Zu bbv* (Recitation for the Ancestors), which he had copied from his father's older version, and would now have to use now in ceremonies *for* his

dead father. He seemed tired, but despite my best intentions, I was asking a lot of questions. He had started adding surreptitiously to his bowl of liquor from a bottle he'd brought with him, and sipping and losing track of our conversation.

"They say I am a beggar," he noted, gazing into the trees.

Thence he trailed off into a story from the Nationalist period, about a band of Tibetans that had wandered into the valley in search of food.

A whole band, he emphasized, and so, while people were unwilling to let them starve, it was no small thing, especially in those days, to feed them.

While he didn't provide additional details about the Tibetans, I knew from other conversations that one of Berdder's conventional images of Tibetans is as beggars. The origin of the image is perhaps wandering Tibetan monks, who do sometimes beg for food. For the Berdder people I spoke to, however, the implication of such begging was inexcusable laziness—an insistence that other people do the work you very well could be doing yourself—cloaked by an empty, and exceedingly pretentious, rhetoric of virtue. The pretension was particularly offensive, I gathered, given the longstanding power of Tibet in the area: in the preceding millennia, the Tibetan Empire had claimed Berdder at several points in history, and even now, Berdder's status as an official part of the PRC was as an Naxi ethnic county in a much larger, Tibetan ethnic autonomous zone.

"But why do they call you that?" I asked.

"Well..." he drifted off. "I sit here, asking for money, you see."

This was true, of course—though I have tried to show in the foregoing analysis that while money was part of his reason for being there, it wasn't fully explanatory. The comment about

beggary seems important, however, as an example of a type of ddolbba critique that was never posed to me directly, but seems to extend the meditation on fraud.

Still, I had heard talk of beggars several times before. Teacher Mei himself had taught me a saying: "Two beggars go at each other with canes" (N. hal mei nee hal mei mee ddv dda dda). It was, he had said, what a beggar does. What a beggar *is*. A person so helpless that he walks with a cane—and so brutish that he uses it to fight with other beggars over nothing really, just scraps.

Meanwhile, another story—a version of local history that I first heard from others, not Teacher Mei—concerned Teacher Mei's father and the Bbu ddolbba, the man who had claimed a spot on the other side of the spring in the early 2000s.

People said the two ddolbba had ended up, perhaps inevitably, competing for tourist dollars. Things came to a head one day, and they went after each other with the angular rocks placed around the edge of the spring. The story was funny—even I could feel that—but the angular rocks, I eventually learned from Teacher Mei, were alive. They were creatures of the mountain gods. People seemed to find the story disturbing, too, and in the same way explanatory.

"Just ask your teacher about it," they said.

There was a feeling that Teacher Mei would have to admit something. And that his admission would *show* something.

Eventually, I had asked him. And he had just sipped on his liquor and told me another, more sharply focused version of the tale, in which the Bbu ritualist had indeed gotten jealous one day—but not of the tourists. He had envied Ddolggu's proficiency in Tibetan, and how that allowed him to speak with, and often get money from, the stream of local Tibetans who also came to Bbapardduaq to worship. These Tibetan visitors were always quite generous in their

donations, because the ddolbbas' occupation of Bbapardduaq was fully legible to them: if you looked at the mountain as a kind of Buddhist temple, then Ddolggu, Uncle Yulheeq, and the Bbu ddolba were its monk-caretakers. It was thus only proper to offer them a few donations.

The fight had started *that* way, Teacher Mei said, and there had been only one rock, wielded by the Bbu ddolbba.

But it was a descendant of the Bbu ddolbba who now occupied the other side of the spring, and the same people who told me the story often inquired further: Does your teacher ever fight with *him*? they wanted to know.

The question had always made me uncomfortable, but it was only that day, in the wake of Ddolggu's death, that I understood the story of hungry Tibetans and the saying about beggars to be themselves different version of the story of Ddolggu and the Bbu ritualist. Not Teacher Mei's verion, but the one that others were telling. And it was all being brought down on Teacher Mei's head.

In a way, I had known already: Calling Teacher Mei a cheat, as people did continually in conversations with me, was one way to express a similar idea to a foreigner, in Chinese. Yet as I have tried to show here, "beggar" (N. hal mei) is drenched with local association. Taken in the context of history, it is a tale about the power and pretension of the Tibetan state, and the challenge of being ethical across the vicissitudes of poverty. In the context of today's touristic development and ethnic metaculture, I take it also as a critique of capitalism—not so much in the terms of state socialism, but of the communism of small communities. At the same time, by siting that critique in ritualists, the story targets the Berdder society those ritualists represent. It suggests that, in some way, everyone has become a beggar, and thus goes deeper than Chinese-

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Graeber, David. *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*. Brooklyn, N.Y.: Melville House, 2011.

language accusations of fraud: no longer an inquiry into deceit and greed, the concern becomes the banal human indignity of each.

To call Teacher Mei a beggar is to condense all Berdder residents' existential questions about their contemporary moment into an ethical evaluation of one man. It is an externalization of collective shame, pride, longing, and fear, and as such, it creates the conditions for reflection. At the same time, because Teacher Mei cannot rightly be held responsible for a whole community's history, it is so unfair. Indeed, people used the story of Ddolggu and the Bbu ritualist to collapse generations and accuse Teacher Mei of his father's sins.

Even my host dad, Yinddertal, had something to contribute here. In the three years I cumulatively spent in Berdder, I was able to exhort Teacher Mei to come home with me and join my host family for dinner on only one occasion. I remember that afterwards, Yinddertal told me, "I think your teacher is not all bad."

He seemed a bit surprised. Teacher Mei had flirted with my host mom over dinner, and eaten very little and drunk too much. But he'd also been decent. He had not behaved like a beggar with a cane.

"But when I think of his father," Yinddertal continued, "he's not much."

In other words, however unexpectedly okay Teacher Mei might have turned out to be, he remained a poor copy of his father.

And I realized that Teacher Mei himself agreed. After his father's death, he had taken off four days from his hut by the spring to organize and take part in the funeral—through a deeply drunken haze, punctuated by tearful singing. But he returned to Bbapardduaq immediately, and accepted, with a certain passive inevitability, the chocolate bars I brought him. (As a newcomer to Berdder life, my ability to express proper condolences was limited.) During those initial days,

I'd ask him when I arrived for class how he was doing, and he'd usually respond with the amount of money he'd made, or who had come so far to praise-burn. But there was one morning when he seemed to have been crying. He said he'd been thinking about generations, and how sometimes children exceed their parents. And sometimes, he said, they don't.

Why was Teacher Mei blamed so much, for everything? How did his father, who did most of the same things, escape the same sort of accusations? These questions require attention to the human specificities that made Teacher Mei truly very different from his father.

From the age of 12 to the age of 42, he had herded in the mountains, accompanied only by an occasional handful of other herders. Even during the Cultural Revolution, his commune assigned him herding duties for all the collective livestock, and he thus managed to remain up there. This, he told me, is how he weathered the Cultural Revolution, and he actually missed those days.

I am not sure that is exactly true, either; but he did certainly love herding, and he had never been comfortable in the village. Having grown up with his father, he could have performed a range of ceremonies if he'd had to, and people invited him to do so sometimes. I saw him perform the occasional naga propitiation, for example, but when it came to funerals—the single most important type of ceremony, which also involved several days' worth of human contact—he absolutely drew the line. He said it was the smell of corpses. They made him vomit.

As for weddings, to which he was often invited as a guest, he had no blanket prohibition, but told me that certain people (generally whoever happened to be hosting the wedding) had gguq, a particular kind of bewitchment or disease. Food at such homes *also* made him vomit.

And so, well, even if he did attend such an event, it was no good if he just threw up on everyone.

It felt to me that Teacher Mei was willing to accuse everyone in the valley of gguq bewitchment, if it meant not having to hang out with them.

His father, in contrast, was invited to funerals not only as a ddolbba, but also as an expert singer, who was as prepared to lead the sung exchanges between bridal parties as to boom out scandalous love lyrics during the nightly circle dances. Then in the 1990s, when researchers began to come to Berdder, Teacher Mei's father had charmed and impressed them, working with them for years to copy books, to assist with the translation of others, to have his picture taken for various news outlets. It was only at this point that he built a hut for himself beside Bbapardduaq's central spring. If people resented him for it, it was one thing among many others; and he was charming, and he was famous—not just in Berdder, but in the wider world of researchers and news shows.

In contrast, Teacher Mei was forever escaping to the mountains; only his closest relatives really knew him. As part of this, he was far less legible than his father: his general avoidance of community events, even when people needed a ddolbba, seems to have been a sticking point.

Likewise, his half-hearted pursuit of profits left people wondering what he was trying to do. I think it is unfair, but also unsurprising, that he riled up his neighbors in a way his father never had, that the scope of his life drove them to ask the implicit questions I have been tracing out, and that they pinned their own distraught feelings on something far simpler, his failure to live up to his father's example.

When Teacher Mei spoke with me that day about beggars, I could feel we were in a negotiation of some kind, and if the stakes extended to Berdder and its people, it was above all else about him. And I could also feel that I was a part of it, that he was asking me to weigh in.

"I wouldn't say beggar, I would not," I told him.

Grasping for a better interpretation, I turned to China's new logic of markets: "I think," I said, "that you're here at the spring doing business."

"Yes," he nodded. "That's what Han would say."

There was no sense of doubt or reproach in his response. To observe that Han—China's majority ethic group, now associated with urban life, mainstream culture, and power—would say a thing was not necessarily to dispute their interpretation. They were powerful; their interpretations carried weight.

Still, this didn't seem to fix things for him.

Scraping at the edges of whatever knowledge I had, I came to something I had not yet considered. It was simply: Teacher Mei speaks to the mountains. He spends his days with the words of Bbapardduaq running through his mouth, for locals, for visitors, for all the neighboring Tibetans and Nuosu who also come to pray. And when he is not reciting, he is drinking, from the offerings made to him by Berrder people. From this perspective, who or what might he also be?

## 1.1.4 Questions about gods

"Praise-burning" is my best translation of the Naqhai term, *chobbazzee*, which describes the acts already mentioned in Chapter 1, involving residents' frequent trips to Bbapardduaq to burn branches, make offerings, and recite oral texts. The term draws together *chobba*, meaning to worship or praise, with *zzee*, meaning to burn, generally in the grand sense of stoking up large pillars of smoke, the sort I saw coming off the top of Berdder before I understood what they were, or why they existed.

Praise-burning texts primarily address the rulers of Bbapardduaq, but they also name a host of other beings that occupy the mountains, springs, and caves in the nearby area. By calling

on these beings, human reciters ask them to bless their homes and often, to bless specific family members as well. What, then, of these beings?

In the broad Himalayan context, they might be described as naga—water beings associated with springs, streams, and pools, as well as caves and mountains. In images, they appear as snakes, frogs, fish, or sometimes as humans with features of the aforesaid animals.<sup>11</sup> Visual appearance aside, Himalayan ideas of naga pose them as a counterpart to humans, a set of entities with whom we share the physical earth, and must, therefore, be in perpetual negotiation over resources.<sup>12</sup>

This is true in Berdder: Because naga occupy and/or are springs, people whose fields possessed springs were obligated to make regular offerings at these springs, in order to keep the naga happy and to prevent them from damaging the crops. Likewise, people like Teacher Mei who went hunting in the mountains had to make regular offerings to the naga. There was also a general idea that naga were prone to stealing human souls (N. ahei), especially during moments of human surprise or physical weakness.

Yet as my conversations with Teacher Mei would reveal, the broad term "naga" (N. shv nee llu) that I have thus far used belies a teeming and hierarchical society. There are naga kings, shashee, and/or hei; these are the beings who control a given mountain, and they appear in Berdder books and illustrations as the half-human, half-snake entities discussed in the previous

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Robert Beer, *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, 1st ed. (Chicago: Serindia, 2003).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Charlene Makley, "The Amoral Other: State-Led Development and Mountain Deity Cults among Tibetans in Amdo Rebgong," in *Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands*, ed. Emily T. Yeh and Chris Coggins (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 229–54; Alex McKay, *Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geography*, vol. 38, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library (Leiden: Brill, 2016); P. K. Kaul, *Nāga Cult and Wooden Art in India* (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 2008); Anne-Marie Blondeau, ed., *Tibetan Mountain Deities, Their Cults and Representations: Papers Presented at a Panel of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz, 1995*, Denkschriften (Österreichische Akademie Der Wissenschaften (Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1998); Toni Huber, *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain: Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999).

chapter. But that is hardly the extent of nagas' transformative potentials and kinship system. Naga kings could also appear as wild animals, frequently snakes, as well as aspects of the landscape such as wind, trees, and rocks (especially the angular ones around cairns). They sometimes also appeared as humans bedecked in white robes, astride white horses. Meanwhile, the ordinary rocks, trees, and wild animals were *rlli zoq* and *rlli mi*, the sons and daughters of the naga kings. (In contrast, domesticated animals are identified with humans and bear no naga association.) Thus, while much has been made of the liveliness and visual appeal of Na ceremonial books' various graphs of alpine flora and fauna, those images belie a deeper truth—a matter of doxa to most people in Berdder, but so far not much discussed in the scholarship—that many of these images are representations of naga.

In sum, in Berdder, if the world is saturated with naga, what does this mean for human social life? While in Chinese, the Naxi version of naga are often translated as "nature gods" (Ch. ziran shen), I think the notion of a socially constitutive otherness may be more helpful. This notion of otherness appears most dramatically in the distinctions people draw between villages (where they live) and mountains (where naga live). Perhaps not surprisingly, given ddolbbas' specialty in mediations across poles, much of their ceremonial work involves bringing village life into conversation with the mountains, or put another way, humans into conversation with naga. Such conversations are vast because the mountains are vast, a living landscape that encircles the earth. To praise-burn is to speak to that vastness.

As I will explore in Chapter Three, there is also a tight correlation between ritual work and time spent in the mountains. Teacher Mei actually learned to hunt and herd from his father, himself a ddolbba who was able to show his son the ceremonies he needed to perform to maintain good relations with the naga while among them. By the same token, many books and

oral texts, including that of praise-burning, rehearse specific paths through the mountains as a way of moving various unseen beings—often ghosts and ancestors—across the earth.

It is through several intersecting material practices—practices in which ddolbba specialize—that such mediations and communications become possible. Most importantly, it is necessary to recite: to say oral texts that, while neither graphic nor physically material in the way of books, are held together by a combination of tight internal poetic relations, involving meter, rhyme, melody, and formulaic speech. Meanwhile, book use also matters. While often presented in scholarly literature as an aid or prop to recitation, many ritualists, especially in the past, did not actually need books to make their recitations. As reiterations of spoken words, which also visually resemble aspects of a naga landscape, the presence of books at ceremonies contributes to the efficacy and power of a given ceremony. Finally, physical movement across the landscape, as Teacher Mei pursued for most of his life, also matters. Not only is it referenced in the alpine roads that books and oral texts trace out; in addition, actual practices of navigation require great skill, and a level of embodied interaction with the naga landscape itself.

In the following section on writing, I will argue for all of these practices—recitation, book use, and alpine navigation—as writing. For the moment, it is enough to note that these practices allow people to interact with naga, and that, while alpine walking and oral recitation are to some extent available to everyone, ddolbba possess a particular specialty in all three material/communicative practices.

How, then, might this understanding of naga help make sense of Teacher Mei's increasing integration, through physical proximity to the naga spring and through offers of liquor, into praise-burning practices?

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); William F. Hanks, "Text and Textuality," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1989): 95–127.

I remember the day that my friend, another doctoral student, was to have his dissertation defense. I went to Bbapardduaq very early on a mission that was very new in my own experience of the mountain—not to attend class, but to say prayers for my friend. Most Berdder parents praise-burned for their children prior to important tests, such as the college entrance exam, so the occasion seemed like a good opportunity to try my hand at praise-burning.

I still remember how, when I arrived at his spring, Teacher Mei immediately took me in hand. Helping me off with my back basket, he directed me to a smaller nearby spring to wash my hands, then helped me arrange my branches in the central cairn. When I'd gotten the branches burning, he stood nearby and said the necessary words.

It wasn't as though he had to do that for everyone. Most people were far less hapless. But I had felt, as it had not occurred to me to feel before, that when I entered Teacher Mei's little clearing, I was actually entering his house, and he was doing his best hosting. And he was a *good* host. Not the fussy kind. Something more like the one who keeps your cup of tea topped off with hot water, and fills your pockets with sunflower seeds on the way out the door, but also does not insist on that third bowl of rice, if you really do not want it.

Ordinarily I saw things from his perspective: sitting in his hovel, with a stream of faces, back baskets, and branches passing by. Yet the experience of doing my own praise-burning turned me into one of those faces, and allowed me to see him in a new way.

The locals who came to praise-burn always chatted with Teacher Mei, sometimes very briefly, but sometimes for conversations that stretched across hours. There was one seventy-something man who would sit with Teacher Mei for the whole afternoon, telling stories and exchanging song lyrics. Or if the worshippers were Tibetans and Nuosu coming in from the surrounding mountains, then Teacher Mei would practice his Tibetan and Nuoso with them, and

ask them how to translate certain phrases. (He would then use Na script to record the phrases phonetically in one of his many notebooks.) And sometimes elderly ladies, who had come to praise-burn and to picnic, asked his help in killing the chicken they had brought for lunch. He always killed the chicken in question swiftly, cutting its throat and allowing its blood to splatter out on the rocks around the spring. As I've mentioned, pretty much everyone who offered alcohol to the naga concluded by offering it to Teacher Mei, too, and the elderly ladies—really anyone having a picnic nearby—brought Teacher Mei a plate of food as well.

I thought of all this on the day we debated whether he was a beggar.

"If that's what you are," I said, "then why do they give you all the alcohol and food?"

And though he said they were just being polite, I insisted, using everything he'd taught
me.

"The alcohol is for the various naga of Bbapardduaq," I reminded him. "And the splatters of chicken blood, the food that people place at the shrines where they eat: all that goes to the naga, too. When they give these things to you as well, isn't it just a bit that they're making you into a naga?"

He chewed on this for a while, over a few more swigs of liquor.

"I am," he said, "just a little *closer* to the naga here. They're hoping I'll help them praiseburn, even after they've gone home."

This seemed true enough, but incomplete.

"But"—I struggled to say it clearly—"do you ever *feel* a bit like a naga king of Bbapardduaq?"

There was a pause.

"Oh, well," he sighed. "Only when I'm drunk."

# 1.1.5 Images of history

It is a central argument of this dissertation that the hubbub of commentary around Teacher Mei reveals not an essential truth about him, but rather a collective local obsession with establishing a stable set of meanings around Berdder life. When people seek these meanings, they increasingly do so through the sign that has come to represent Berdder life: ddolbba. Or put another way, ddolbba have become the object through which people are able to consider and critique received knowledge about ethnic culture and ultimately, themselves.

More than any other ddolbba in the valley, Teacher Mei was an apt vessel for these critiques precisely because he was at once relatively unknown personally, and also in the bare facts of his life, troubling. By extension, I would say that Teacher Mei's indecision over what to call himself was not simply an issue of finding the right word—that finding the right word reenacted the existential/historical drama of Berdder today, a search to name what it is has been and what it is becoming, but this time in a highly personal modality. For Teacher Mei, who didn't like people much to begin with, there was something very hard about becoming the object of their gossip, and part of his personal struggle was making sense of how he had come to matter, beyond himself, for so many other people.

In tracing out Teacher Mei's and other people's attempts to find answers, I have tried to set forth some of the most conventional lenses they have with which to seek perspectives: a pre-revolutionary vision of Tibetan Buddhist power and pretension; a Chinese post-collectivization modality of business, inextricably tied to today's ethnic metaculture; and longstanding Berdder ways of communicating with nonhuman beings through what I have called writing: books, oral texts, and engagements with the topography.

I have thus far presented these ways of writing as the modality of ddolbba practice. To look upon them as perspectives on the world, as I have just suggested, is I think also true. Truer yet—and the topic of the next section—is how writing enables ddolbba and their non-ritualist neighbors to construct and renew the local social world.

#### 1.2 Writing

Berdder forms of writing are effective at building and maintaining social worlds because they are traditional. In making this point, I use the term "tradition" not as the opposite of modernity, but as a way of describing how cultural things are passed through space and time. The things, however, may belong to multiple modalities, with different requirements for "passage." For example, while ceremonial books (one type of writing) are physically material, and may thus literally be handed from one generation of ddolbba to the next, they also require literacy; that is, conventionalized techniques for seeing and deriving meaning from them must also be passed along.

This offers a useful comparison with the alpine topography (another type of writing): while it preexisted humans and is not created directly by them, it is passed through the time in the sense that Berdder people teach each other how to see it and navigate it. Put another way, it, too, requires literacy.

Finally, I come to the highly ephemeral aural objects of oral texts (a third type of writing). Their temporal passage works primarily through human memory: in this sense, the intense effort put into making oral texts compact and internally connected, containing various forms of parallelism and formulaic language, might be understood as an attempt to make them as

easily held in the memory as possible. Because specific aesthetic values guide their production, generic identification, and relevance to a given situation, they also require literacy.

What begins to come visible, then, is an ongoing feedback loop between conventions of perception, what I have described as literacy, and the material features of the material things being created and used. Insofar as the conventions remain comprehensible with respect to the things, and vice versa, there may be alterations in how people read (interpret) and write (create), but there is also continuity—there is tradition—because interpretations remain relatively consistent and relatively shared within the group.<sup>14</sup>

The role of metapragmatics, of socially prescriptive ways of communication, in creating tradition is thus to train the attention to perceive and reproduce similarities in some ways, and not in others. By extension, cultural explanation can be restated as an attempt to regulate ethnic minority culture by retraining ethnic peoples' attention to emphasize only the continuities of practice most acceptable within state ideologies and plans. I have argued that locals have instrumentalized these new metapragmatics in numerous ways, one of which is to objectify the regimenting discourses themselves and to reflect upon them, through the figure of ddolbba and especially of Teacher Mei.

It is another premise of this research that to understand the regimenting force of ethnic metaculture, of talk about ddolbba and books, one must also understand the practices themselves, as being a part of a long tradition. The question becomes: how was attention trained, particularly with respect to writing and reading practices, before the state came so powerfully onto the scene?

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Henry Glassie, Ray Cashman, Tom Mould, and Pravina Shukla, *The Individual and Tradition: Folkloristic Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); David Sutton, "Cooking in Theory: Risky Events in the Structure of the Conjuncture," *Anthropological Theory* 18, no. 1 (2018): 81–105. Thanks also to Bruce Mannheim for his thoughts on tradition and metatradition.

In ethnographically seeking such information in a context in which people are highly aware of what researchers "want" to hear, and indeed generally identify researchers as urban, Han, and/or white outsiders, my approach was not to try to deny obvious parts of my physical presence: that I am a white foreigner, not Chinese; that I am female and thus not technically allowed to learn the books, at least according to previous conventions. However, I put in enough time with Teacher Mei and a few others to have relationships that were not limited to the "research encounter" frame. This is not to say that our relationships ever "got past" their colonial context, but that they acquired enough internal momentum to gain an additional, interpersonal context as well. I think it was having that additional context that made conversations beyond the cultural explanation genre possible (that indeed made it possible to talk *about* cultural explanation). I also focused not specifically on producing translations, which has been the longstanding norm in Naxi research, but on understanding the pedagogical practices through which Berdder teachers educate their students in reading and writing.

On that basis, I conclude that practices around books, oral texts, and alpine topography share fundamental, locally salient similarities, and that writing offers the best gloss for all of them. At the same time, these practices also trouble longstanding understandings of writing as the creation of correspondences between graphic and spoken units.<sup>15</sup> In retracing the steps that brought me to this conclusion, I begin with the fundamentally aesthetic nature of all three practices.

# 1.2.1 Art as an orientation and mode of engagement

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Mark Sebba, "Introduction," in *Orthography As Social Action: Scripts, Spelling, Identity and Power*, ed. Alexandra Jaffe et al. (Boston: De Gruyter, Inc., 2012), 1–20.

My understanding of aesthetics as a part of social life derives from Roman Jakobson's ever-famous theory of speech functions<sup>16</sup>, by which different "orientations" (in German, einstellung) to a given message produce different flavors of human interaction.

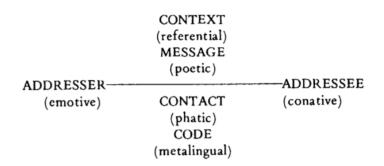


Figure 1. Jakobson's speech functions.

For example, an interaction oriented to *context* (also sometimes described as "narrated events," or simply, the message's "content") is primarily *referential*, with the other speech functions present but taking a back seat. And a message oriented to *code* (the conventions of its use and interpretation) is primarily *metalinguistic* (or, in the terms I have provided already, metapragmatic). But the orientation that concerns me here is *aesthetic* (or as Jakobson later described it, *poetic*), in which the primary orientation is to "the message itself," what Bruce Mannheim clarifies as the *form* of the message. <sup>18</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Roman Jakobson, "The Dominant," in *Language in Literature*, ed. K. Pomorska and S. Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 41–46; Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: Technology Press of Massachusetts, 1960); Roman Jakobson, "Metalanguage as a Linguistic Problem," in *Selected Writings, VII*, ed. S. Rudy (Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 1985), 113–21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: Technology Press of Massachusetts, 1960).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup> Bruce Mannheim, "Popular Song and Popular Grammar, Poetry and Metalanguage," *Word- Journal of the International Linguistic Association* 37, no. 1–2 (1986): 45–75.

The key theoretical move here is to posit a dynamic process by which human attention *creates* art, rather than assigning certain objects to art status based on stipulating their features in advance. This subtle shift from "art as a particular sort of object" to art as "a particular sort of attention to any object" introduces temporality, contingency, and culture into the process of aesthetic engagement. It makes it possible to trace how people in different cultural contexts, with very different standards of aesthetic value and theories of representation, are actually using and dealing with art, rather than implicitly judging these engagements through a lens conditioned by one's own aesthetic tradition.

From his perspective, Berdder people's uses of books, oral texts, and the landscape meet the criteria for aesthetic activity because they operate powerfully, if not completely, through an attention to form. With the books, written graphs call attention to their visual resemblances to elements of the landscape, and in doing so, demand that a viewer attend to the graphs' visual form. With the landscape, attention to form—of streams, rock formations, even the texture of the ground beneath one's feet—are fundamental to the ability to navigate. And with oral texts, their maximal use of features such as rhyme, meter, and melody calls attention to their aural form.

How, then, might aesthetic attention (that is, a primary engagement with the form of a given message) be understood in contrast to other forms of attention? While Jakobson does not address the idea of attention directly, I think it is possible to locate the idea in his work by bringing his framework into conversation with aesthetic theorists Nelson Goodman<sup>19</sup> and Stephen Mitchell.<sup>20</sup> Mitchell's contribution here is to distinguish two modalities of attention to form, what he calls (borrowing Goodman's terminology), "density" and "articulation." Broadly

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1976); Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1978).

<sup>20</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

stated, density involves a maximal attention to the granularities of form. Thus, any formal contrast, say between the edge of a cloud and the blue sky<sup>21</sup>, can be further decomposed into additional contrasts: on closer inspection, the cloud's apparent edge appears as something far more diffuse, tendrils of whiteness that fade into blue—just as the blue of the sky is fractured by areas of relative lightness and darkness, and the blackness of a passing plane. As I understand Goodman and Mitchell, dense attention might be described as a temporal process that refuses each contrast it finds, and instead digs ever deeper, seeking contrasts within contrasts, in a manner associated with artistic experience and with some forms of meditation. It is also, I think, a slightly sharper way of understanding Jakobson's aesthetic function.

As for articulation, while Mitchell poses it as the opposite of density, this is not quite right. If articulation refers simply to the identification of contrast, then I think it is better to begin with the recognition that perceptions of articulation are contained within the experience of density. However, the distinction that Goodman and Mitchell seem to be after involves making the search for ever-receding contrasts the ultimate goal of interpretation (as with dense or aesthetic attention) versus making formal contrasts a basis for other kinds of interpretation, and thus effectively instrumentalizing dense attention to arrive at interpretations that privilege other elements of a given interation, not simply the "message itself." Returning to a previous example, to interpret a message referentially (in terms of denotational meaning), requires enough dense attention to the aural form of the words to recognize them as words. However, this is merely an enabling condition; the goal is to identify the words' referents. In this case, then, formal specificities of the sound of words that exceed their identification as words are no longer relevant

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> See also Susan Gal and Judith T. Irvine, *Signs of Difference: Language and Ideology in Social Life* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

to interpretation. For example, auditory volume, emphasis, and variations in pronunciation may be ignored so long as they do not interfere with the denotational parsing of sound.

Mitchell's ultimate purpose in introducing the distinction between density and articulation is to locate an underlying principle in ideas of image versus written text. An image, he argues, is an object that is conventionally read in terms of density, and written text is conventionally received in terms of articulation (1986: 67) And while I find this distinction of enormous heuristic use, I have already demonstrated that dense and articulating attention are not actually binaries; they are rather different ways of responding to sensory contrast.<sup>22</sup> Towards an approach to the study of Berdder's script (which likewise, as a so-called "pictographic" script, has been described in terms of text and image), I want to build on Mitchell's and Goodman's thinking by considering how aesthetic experiences linked to artistic traditions seem to involve conventionalized combinations of dense *and* articulating attention—that highly conventionalized articulations, as are used in written texts, actually provide rich conditions for dense ways of perceiving.

Consider, for example, Chinese calligraphy which involves dense attention to the quality of line combined with the articulating attention necessary to read the lines as speech-compliant script. In a sense, a single object—the calligraphic text—is decomposed into at least two "levels" of form, which are received according to different modes of attention and then, in the real time of the interpretive act, brought into conversation. In this way, a heavy line, or an unexpected drop

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> See also Bruce Mannheim, "Preliminary Disciplines," *Signs and Society* 6, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 111–19; Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957).

of ink (both taken densely), may be interpreted as adding aesthetic depth to the denotational content of a given calligraphic text.

Still considering the possibility of different forms of attention brought to bear on the same object, Anglophone written poetry offers another example. In this case, articulating attention makes possible the derivation of speech from graphic form. However, this is merely a first step. Assuming that the poem is read silently, its imagined aural form may then be interpreted in various ways, depending on the specific conventions around its designated "poetic form" (whether sonnet, free verse, haiku, etc). Here Robert Pinsky's brilliant discussion of "poetry for poets" (1998) offers some insight.

Restated in my terms, Pinsky explores how, within Western traditions of lyric poetry, specific forms of conventional articulation, such as meter, allow viewers to perceive density on multiple "levels" and to bring those levels into conversation. In his discussion of meter, he explores how a poem written in iambic meter, engaging a repeating pattern of unstress / stress, actually calls attention to subtle differences between iambic feet. In this case, then, it is precisely the interplay between an idealized, uniform iambic beat (one form) and the conventional stresses, accents, and duration of pronunciation associated with the poem's phrases (another form) that draws a reader's attention to aural densities.

Taken in comparison to Chinese calligraphy, however, one form—the physical form of the script itself—is notably missing in Pinsky's analysis of Anglophone lyric poetry. Pinsky's elision of this formal level, while consistent with the conventions of the lyric poetic tradition, also gestures to another complexity in the socialization of aesthetic attention: it may involve learning not to perceive certain things, at all. In this case, and as much of Webb Keane's early work explores, it is a deeply engrained pattern of the Enlightenment to deny the material form,

and thus the material agency, of written texts. As a result, traditional aesthetic analysis of lyric poems focuses on the forms contained within their sound, and does not bring those sounds much into conversation with the written page.<sup>23</sup>

Returning to Berdder's multiple forms of writing, one of the fascinations of a so-called pictographic script for those working within the Enlightenment tradition is the "materiality" of the script itself, the way it calls attention to its visual form. But I have tried to provide a more specific way to talk about this. In the Berdder case, aesthetic conventions incline ddolbba readers to view the script densely, as graphs that resemble things in the world, while at the same time deriving a spoken text from it. Indeed, part of a ddolbba's literate skill is the ability to work in real time within the different forms thusly evoked.

And while subsequent chapters will consider the complex array of forms derived from oral texts and from landscape walking, for the moment I just want to emphasize that one of the ways these forms of writing are linked lies in their common evocation of one highly specific form, that of roads (N. rheeq). Books and oral texts involve long lists of place names that, when taken as a temporal sequence, can be used as a tool for navigating a path through the mountains. Likewise, landscape navigation involves actually looking for paths. In each case, the road itself becomes another form that jostles together with other forms and contributes to the emergent aesthetic interaction.

What I arrive at is an approach to aesthetic interpretation that resembles human social interaction. But, as a form of interaction that is constitutively partially-human, occurring between a human and a material thing, aesthetic interpretation is also highly particular.

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 $<sup>^{23}</sup>$  But see also Pinsky's discussion of "syntax and line" (1998: 25-50).

As this section has explored, one distinctive feature of social interaction, real-time dialogic emergence, also thematizes human aesthetic engagements. In one of the examples I offered, sustained literate reading of an Anglophone poem allows the sound of the poem to be derived from its written version, whether or not the poem is read aloud. The emergent sounds can then be decomposed into multiple forms (ideal meter versus variation within metrical feet) and brought into dialogue, as readers "listen" densely to them. Emergence in this case involves an ongoing derivation of forms from forms, through the interplay of dense and articulating human attention. <sup>24</sup>

Thus, while poem-reading resembles human social interaction in these broad strokes, it is also different. Perhaps most importantly, aesthetic engagements rely on the agentive and highly specific force of materiality bumping up against human forms of attention, and do not require that the nonhuman agent be a social person, too. This is the pattern I find in Berdder people's engagements with oral texts and with books: while they devote close attention to aesthetics in each case, there is not a sense in which the objects at issue are "alive."

In contrast, the naga landscape is. This difference is apparent simply in the concept of naga, by which the physical forms of springs, mountains, caves, and streams are not simply physical constraints, but ensouled beings. Nevertheless, I find that aesthetic engagement—primarily in the form of movement across roads—constitutes a crucial modality of social engagement with these beings, and indeed that it borrows conventions from the aesthetic practices brought to books and to oral texts. Here writing, which engages a particular intensity of forms of attention, becomes relevant.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> For a similar but contrasting view, see Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

## 1.2.2 Literacy ecologies

Sebba's understanding of writing—as the creation of systematic correlations between graphic units and units of speech—gives voice to a common folk and academic understanding of what writing is. That understanding is not wrong, exactly: if Anglophone and Sinophone written scripts fit this definition, so, too, do Na scripts. However, it is precisely the aesthetic complexity of Na scripts that also exceed this definition: as I have described, literate reading of them does not end with the evocation of a speech register; it may also involve noticing their formal resemblance to things in the world.

If taken within a properly interactional framework, I think Nelson Goodman's idea of notationality (1976) helpfully reframes Sebba's definition of writing.<sup>25</sup> In this view, what matters is the achievement of conventionalized correlations between any two semiotic fields, what might be described as registers.<sup>26</sup> Thus, unlike Sebba, Goodman does not stipulate the nature of the registers that must be brought into alignment; it is rather the enregisterment of semiotic fields and their subsequent alignment with one another that constitutes writing. He mentions, for example, musical notation: while graphic units (the actual musical notation) constitute one register, the other is made up of musical sounds. In sum, writing is reimagined not as a way of recording speech, but as a way of creating correspondences between two registers, of which graphic/spoken correlations are but one common example.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> On applications of Goodman to non-Western writing, see also Frank Salomon and Mercedes Niño-Murcia, *The Lettered Mountain: A Peruvian Village's Way with Writing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). <sup>26</sup> Asif Agha, "Voice, Footing, Enregisterment," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15, no. 1 (2005): 38–59; Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores, "Unsettling Race and Language: Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective," *Language in Society* 46, no. 5 (2017): 621–47.

This allows for a more granular discussion of, and differentiation within, the Berdder practices of writing I have identified. Thus, Na script used in its ceremonial register aligns itself both with ceremonial speech (one corresponding register) and the landscape (another corresponding register). Meanwhile, in the script's nonceremonial, everyday register, its evocation of the landscape is blunted through simplification of characters, but it is brought into alignment with everyday speech (the corresponding register). As for alpine walking, it involves creating correspondences between the physical terrain of the mountains and an idea of roads. Finally ceremonial speech, as speech, is an extremely flexible medium. As a minimal place to begin, I would note that its frequent listing of place-names brings it into alignment with roads, too.

To further complicate matters, these uses of writing are sometimes causally related, too. For example, oral texts/recitations are often understood as a form that is derived from ceremonial books. In addition, a single register may correspond to more than one other register: as I have mentioned elsewhere, roads as their own register correspond with the landscape, with ceremonial speech, and sometimes with usages of the written Na script. Much of the dissertation will be dedicated to tracing out these complex relations, what I will call Berdder's literacy ecology as a way of gesturing to the complicated interpendencies of its different ways of writing.

At the same time, recalling the previous section, I want to note more broadly that heavily conventionalized aesthetic engagements, as discussed in the previous section, underlie these literacy practices. This has three implications.

First and most importantly, naga beings become accessible for social contact through the aesthetic engagements built into this tradition. In that sense, Berdder demonstrates in very

concrete terms how it is that aesthetic traditions may actually make some religious practices, and specifically some relationships with unseen beings, possible.

Second, because Berdder's aesthetic tradition operates through looping processes that simultaneously socialize forms of perception and alter material forms, it is also ontological. It makes worlds. And of course, part of that world-making is rendering naga beings accessible for social contact.

Third and finally, it conditions the emergence of specific forms of publics. That is, borrowing Michael Warner's elegant formulation<sup>27</sup>, if publics are communities of "strangers," of people whose relations depend not on face-to-face interactions, but on mediations by objects such as written texts, then the aesthetic traditions in which these mediating forms are embedded affect how the publics take shape. In sum, a final ontological implication of Berdder's forms of writing lie in structuring relations among communities of strangers. In particular I will consider how longstanding relations with the naga landscape have created a distinctive public form that young Berdder men, many of them trained as ddolbba, are actively reconceiving as they move to the city to pursue work as cab drivers.

## 1.3 History

In this introduction, I have tried to generate the questions that I understand Berdder people to be asking today, and also to provide a broad ethnographic and theoretical context to guide me—not in answering the questions, exactly, but in pursuing their implications.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," in *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 65-124.

The context I have tried to make can be summarized as follows: In Berdder, writing makes social worlds, and the state is now targeting those worlds by intervening in the writing. Ddolbba gossip's frequent discussion of writing, both directly and indirectly through the image of a ritualist, is a way to reflect on (1) the nature of Berdder worlds, and (2) the way the state is reaching into them. At a deep level, the gossip asks: What is going to happen to us—and our children?

The structure of my analysis involves considering Berdder writing, state interventions into it, and local commentary. I have tried to hold this structure up to the sun, to turn it in different directions, and to look—densely! Where different angles afford connections, apparent contradictions, and problems, I have looked harder. Each chapter, then, represents one view and one determined pursuit of the contrasts and connections it reveals.

Chapter Two offers a broad outline of Berdder recitational and topographic writing practices before the consolidation of ethnic metaculture in the 1990s. Chapter Three considers the late arrival of books on the Berdder scene, and how they became incorporated into the existing literacy ecology as a way of building up political power in the face of human and naga rivals. Chapter Four looks from the direction of the Chinese state, considering how Chinese literacy played a role in the ideological formation of the nation, and continues to frame an attitude of suspicion and fear towards ethnic writing practices. Chapter Five considers the role of Berdder writing in a changing history of public formation and political action.

Taken together, the chapters begin to trace out some of the narratives taking shape among the Berdder people I know today. In the stuttering apotheosis of Teacher Mei, the cab driver's move to the city, and the ongoing gossip about ddolbba, I find a critical grappling with old forms

of writing and new ways of using them. Implicit in such struggles is an awareness of the self in time, a reflexive instrumentalization of tradition towards the ends of future-making.

# CHAPTER 2 Literacy and Self-Extension in Berdder



ggeq'a wo zoq llu mei naq nee mi ddeeq ddeeq ndrhv nee nga ju ju ndhrv mi nga me see ndhrv kuq nga chee pa

downwards from high Tibet's black rocks mountains upon mountains extend to me I don't know your names, Mountains but we meet here

—Chobbazzee (Praise-burning)

If writing practices make social worlds, how? What are the natures of those worlds? This chapter seeks a beginning of an answer to these questions in the context of Berdder and its multiple, intersecting literacies.

In doing so, I sideline the issue of ceremonial books; as I explore in Chapter Three, ceremonial books seem to be a later addition to the Berdder social world, and understanding their incorporation requires an account of the pre-existing relations between land and oral texts. Thus, in this chapter, I seek to understand, first, what I am calling a "literacy ecology," that is, the systematic denotational relations that exist between an alpine topography (one writing system)

and oral texts (another). Second, I trace how engagements with any particular written text (whether topographical or spoken) evoke the larger ecological relations, invoking a social body for which the notion of "public" offers a helpful framing concept.

That said, what I am dealing with here is hardly the notion of publics to be found in "classic" works by Habermas<sup>28</sup>, Benedict Anderson<sup>29</sup>, or more recently, Michael Warner<sup>30</sup>, in part because one of the written texts in question, the alpine topography, is personified as a vast array of social persons, specifically understood as naga (nonhuman beings associated with water and mountains). I argue that relations with the land, as its own social collective, require an account of publicity that begins with intimate, embodied interactions with the land and *through* which such intimacies make "stranger sociality," or social ties not based on face to face interaction<sup>31</sup>, possible. Thus, in contrast to Warner's emphasis on stranger sociality as the very substance of publicity, I find in Berdder a sensuous intimacy that coexists with it. This difference is, I suggest, a function of different ideologies and practices of literacy, involving specifically the difference between ideas of denotational transparency applied to written texts (in the Enlightenment tradition) versus personified written texts for which the modality of engagement is bodily movement and oral recitation (in Berdder).

Yet, and still recalling Warner, while Berddder's publics do as a result avoid "self-abstraction<sup>32</sup>," the process by which human subjects are interpellated into public forms based on identities that are not consistent with the subjects' bodily reality, the result is not necessarily a more egalitarian or inclusive mode of sociality. Instead, Berdder's version of publicity solidifies

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society.* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*; Silverstein,

<sup>&</sup>quot;Whorfianism and the Linguistic Imagination of Nationality."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Warner, Publics and Counterpublics, 2002.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 2002, 74.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject."

the identities that exist interactionally as a part of kinship practices—identities for which sex/gender is a crucial variable. Thus, the third aspect of Berdder literacy that I hope to understand is a particular modality of public participation that moves through embodiment, what I am calling, in contrast to the notion of self-abstraction, *self-extension*.

In the analysis to follow, I focus on one of the central forms of ceremonial literacy practice in Berdder, praise-burning at the local holy mountain, Bbapardduaq. I am in a good position to speak about praise-burning because my writing lessons with Teacher Mei took me to Bbapardduag most days. By virtue of sitting beside Teacher Mei at his chosen spot at the "center" of Bbapardduaq (beside the spring and cairns), I saw most everyone who came to praise-burn at Bbapardduaq most every day, from about 10 AM to 4 PM. However, in considering praise-burning, the analysis will necessarily implicate another important ceremonial literacy practice, juniper-burning, which is entangled with praise-burning but occurs primarily in homes. This broad description of common literacy practice provides a context for thinking about the role of written texts in the lives of two people, my host mom, Nyezzee (a non ritualist and a woman), and my host dad, Yinddertal (a non-ritualist and a man, though part of a ritualist lineage). While I find that their ways "in" to Berdder's literacy ecology are as a result of their gender identities quite different, there are also common patterns, involving what I can only describe as a dual mediation of sacrality and interpersonal relationship. These mediations take as an affordance Berdder's particular, extension-based structure of publicity.

In what follows, I will offer a broad description of praise-burning and juniper-burning, and from this basis consider how oral and topographical literacies are held together interactionally in a literacy ecology; how the result enables self-extension; and how self-extension through reading/writing has shaped the unfolding of my host parents' lives.

# 2.1 Praise-burning at Bbapardduag

To speak of praise-burning (N. chobbazzee), one crucial and habitual act of literacy in Berdder, is inevitably to implicate another, juniper-burning (N. hiuq rhee). As a broad sociohistorical context, it's worth noting that both acts, what are often described in Anglophone Tibetan Buddhist studies as "smoke purification" rituals, and in Tibetan as *lha bsangs*<sup>33</sup>, occur throughout the Himalaya and appear to have pre-Buddhist roots. He acts are indexed to an ontological binary placing humans (and their cultivated places) in relationship with naga beings (and their alpine places), accounting for both provides an ethnographic description of the creation through literacy practice of some fundamental elements of Berdder social worlds.

Here a brief description of naga may also be helpful. In the broad Himalayan context, naga are water beings associated with springs, streams, and pools, as well as caves and mountains. In images, they tend to be figured as snakes, frogs or fish, or sometimes as humans with features of the aforesaid animals.<sup>35</sup> Some images from *Himalayan Art Resource*'s "Naga, Snakes, and Serpents" page<sup>36</sup> offers a broad visual context:

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Nālandā Translation Committee, "A Smoke Purification Song," in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr., Princeton Readings in Religions (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 401–5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> In their article on smoke purification songs (1995), the Nālandā Translation Committee provides the following overview: "Among the most popular, widely practiced, and ancient Tibetan public rituals is the *lhasang* (*lha bsangs*), in which prayers to various deities are accompanied by the burning of fragrant substances, most commonly juniper boughs, sometimes mixed with other fragrant woods and incense. Ancient literature suggests that this is a practice that predates the introduction of Buddhism into Tibet but, like so many other rituals, was widely adapted by both Buddhists and Bonpos and became very popular. Indeed, the performance of smoke purifications in the Tibetan diaspora community has become a policy encouraged by the Tibetan government-in-exile since 1959, because it preserves a quintessentially Tibetan practice" (401).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Robert Beer, *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*, 1st ed. (Chicago: Serindia, 2003).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Jeff Watt, "Naga, Snakes & Serpents," Himalayan Art Resources, 2020, https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=906&page=2.





Figure 2. Images of naga.

Visual appearance aside, Himalayan ideas of naga pose them as a counterpart to humans, a set of entities with whom we share the physical earth, and must, therefore, be in perpetual negotiation over resources.<sup>37</sup> Beyond naga, there are also related nonhuman entities such as "lords of the earth" (T. sa bdag) and various mountain gods.<sup>38</sup> However, the distinctions among these beings do not seem to be sharply delineated in practice<sup>39</sup>, and in Berdder, the ritualists I spoke to placed deities comparable to lords of the earth and mountain gods (N. rllimi; hei; shashee) under the "larger" rubric of naga (N. shv nee llu).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Charlene Makley, "The Amoral Other: State-Led Development and Mountain Deity Cults among Tibetans in Amdo Rebgong," in *Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands*, ed. Emily T. Yeh and Chris Coggins (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 229–54; Alex McKay, *Kailas Histories: Renunciate Traditions and the Construction of Himalayan Sacred Geography*, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library (Leiden: Brill, 2016); P. K. Kaul, *Nāga Cult and Wooden Art in India* (Delhi: Eastern Book Linkers, 2008); Anne-Marie Blondeau, ed., *Tibetan Mountain Deities, Their Cults and Representations: Papers Presented at a Panel of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz, 1995*, Denkschriften (Österreichische Akademie Der Wissenschaften (Wien: Verlag der Osterreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1998); Toni Huber, *The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain: Popular Pilgrimage and Visionary Landscape in Southeast Tibet* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Robert E. Buswell and Donald S. Lopez, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Robin Kornman, "A Tribal History," in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr.(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 77–97.



Figure 3. Painting by He Dingba, 2008. Acrylic on paper.

This is well-illustrated in a ceremonial painting by one Na ritualist from Yiji (a location not too far from Berdder). While the ritualist, He Dingba, identified the image as a mountain spirit, its possession of a snake crown and snake lower body clearly identifies it as a naga, too. In what follows, therefore, I use the term "naga" to refer to the swath of water-and mountain-related beings in Berdder.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Koen Wellens, "Resilient Cosmologies: Water Deities and Divine Agency in Post-Mao China," *Anthropological Forum* 27, no. 4 (2017): 365–17; Christine Mathieu, *A History and Anthropological Study of the Ancient Kingdoms of the Sino-Tibetan Borderland—Naxi and Mosuo* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003); Joseph Rock, *The Na-Khi Naga Cult and Related Ceremonies* (Rome: Is. M.E.O, 1952).

## 2.1.1 Praise-burning and juniper-burning

"Praise-burning" is my best translation of the Naqhai term, *chobbazzee*, which describes the acts already mentioned in Chapter 1, involving residents' frequent trips to Bbapardduaq to burn branches, make offerings, and recite oral texts, as well as related acts performed when away from home, generally before meals, that involve a shortened version of food-offering and recitation to Bbapardduaq. The term draws together *chobba*, meaning to worship or praise, with *zzee*, meaning to burn, generally in the grand sense of stoking up large pillars of smoke. Praise-burning texts primarily address the naga rulers of Bbapardduaq, but they also name and acknowledge a host of other naga that occupy the mountains, springs, and caves in the nearby area. By calling on these beings, human reciters ask the naga to bless their homes and often, to bless specific family members as well.

As for juniper burning, it translates another Naqhai phrase, *hiuq rhee*, referring to similarly frequent ceremonial acts. Generally performed by the male head of the house (N. ddaq hal) in the morning before anyone has eaten breakfast, juniper-burning occurs at the foot of the household shrine, ideally located behind the firepit or stove. The primary addressees are the three most recent generations of ancestors, listed in husband/wife pairs, who now occupy the cabinet; however, oral texts actually begin by acknowledging and praising the naga of Bbapardduaq. As with praise-burning, juniper-burning also involves offering gifts of food and drink. Within the Naqhai term, *hiuq* refers to juniper (or to Chinese cypress—the plants look very similar). And while *rhee* also translates in English to "burning," it seems to involve a less visually dramatic, more smoldering process, such that small pieces of juniper wood are simply placed in an incense burner (N. xiullu) and covered with a layer of coals from the firepit or stove. The result is a seeping, fragrant smoke.

In broad summary, then, to juniper-burn is to address the ancestors of one's home, in a manner that links the house to the naga of the nearest holy mountain (Bbapardduaq). In contrast, praise-burning involves speaking directly to the naga of the mountain, while also implicating (a) a range of sky gods and ancestors and (b) a swath of the mountain's naga associates in the nearby landscape, all of whom are then directed to protect one's home. However, in both cases, a focus of words and action is historiographic writing, that is, the reiteration of form across time and space. In these cases, the form being reiterated is diagrammatic: with juniper burning, that of the house's interior firepit area, and its connection (as a sign of the whole house) to Bbapardduaq; and with praise-burning, that of Bbapardduaq's links to the other personified points in the sky and surrounding landscape, and their cumulative connection to the reciting person's house.

This summoning up of diagrammatic form gains clarity through a closer examination of the oral texts associated with each type of burning. While Appendices D and E provide a full transcription and English translation of different versions of these texts (produced through daily study sessions with Teacher Mei), what I want to offer here is a paraphrase of the common denotational texts ("content") of each, combined with information about the conventions around the texts' formal properties and contextualizations.

Praise-burning's oral texts proceed in five- and seven-syllable lines, and presuppose the reciters' location to be at the top of Bbapardduaq, itself understood as the center of all of Berdder. With the exception of occasional instructions and advice about how to praise-burn, the text consists entirely of naming, praising, and thanking a long list of powerful beings. It is through the specific structuring of this list that a diagram of the world is produced. The first part of the list sets forth beings of the sky—generally gods, apotheosized ritualists, and dead

ancestors—moving from the highest and most powerful to the lowest and least, arriving back finally at the peak of Bbapardduaq.

Thence the text recounts naga, beings of the earth. No longer gods exactly, these beings merely occupy the earth with humans, and their listing travels not in a line from high to lower, but rather moves across the land in a leftward turning spiral (left of the reciter, who is taken to be standing on Bbapardduaq facing North): up to Shangrila (known as Dukaq in the texts, and formerly the location of the nearest tusi, or native superintendent, during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries); back down again through Sanba, the county that contains Berdder and another Naqhai/Rheekaq valley, Geeddvq; around south to the city of Lijiang (known as Gguqbbei in the texts, and the political center of the former Naxi kingdom); and eventually back up to Bbapardduaq. The cumulative result of the text is a map of the universe that places Bbapardduaq at the human center of everything, crowned by a sky of gods and encircled by a web of naga. As I have also gestured to here, the web of naga coincides with, indeed underlies, overlapping human infrastructures of power.



Figure 4. The path.

It is also important to note that praise-burning is ubiquitous among Na peoples. For example, in Geeddvq, the Naqhai valley just up the road, residents have a different mountain—one that appears in Berdder texts as one name, Geeddvq Gee-cuq-cuq, in the vast encirclement of naga places—and they go there to recite comparable texts, which in their turn place Bbapardduaq in the encirclement of naga places around themselves. To praise-burn is to understand that others are praise-burning elsewhere, at other centers; it is in part, as I will explore in the pages to come, a political act, an effort to submerge all the other centers of the world into the power of one's own.

In comparison, while juniper-burning follows a similar aural form of five- to -seven-syllables lines, it presupposes the reciter's location to be at the center of a human house, thus standing between the firepit and the household shrine located behind it. And while some common phrases in the text ask directly that the house receive health, wealth, and protection, the bulk of the text likewise consists of lists. The initial portion addresses and praises the naga of Bbapardduaq, and in an optional middle section, the reciter may also provide praise-burning's list of sky gods and naga (in a repetition of the praise-burning text). However, with the exception of certain people who I suspect to be showing off for the attending ethnographer, people might mention the possibility of including this portion, but did not in practice do so. The final, absolutely obligatory portion of juniper-burning's oral text involves a recitation of the last three sets of husband-wife pairs who occupied the house.

The cumulative result of this text, then, is produce another sort of map that connects a given house, with its own powerful beings (the ancestors), to the local holy mountain, and through that mountain to a generally presupposed structure of sky and god entities. And if praise-burning engages in a political contest of centers in addition to seeking protection, then juniper-burning may be understood as a similar set of acts, albeit at the "smaller" scale of homes.

There is thus an implicit scaling<sup>41</sup> here between praise- and juniper-burning that is expressed in their diagrammatic writing of different parts of the world, and also through the participation of smoke, both visually and olfactorily, in such writing. Berdder residents often pointed out to me the pillars of smoke that praise-burning created, and in the context of the Himalaya, there is a common understanding that, especially in "smoke purification rituals,"

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> E. Summerson Carr and Michael Lempert, eds., *Scale: Discourse and Dimensions of Social Life* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

smoke serves as a physical link to beings of the sky.<sup>42</sup> In that sense, the smoke of praise-burning collaborates with the form of its spoken lists to impose a particular diagram onto the perceptible universe. In contrast, juniper burning sketches out a somewhat different set of forms, emphasizing the set-up of the hearth area, and then linking it to Bbapardduaq. It is thus meaningful that burning in this case is not at all a matter of producing smoke, but of scent, which through shared smell draws dead and living household members together. In sum, while the acts are crucially distinguished, with juniper-burning identifying itself as a smaller part of the greater praise-burning world, their forms also presuppose one another, as do their purposes: if the writing of the house depends on linking it to a holy mountain, then the writing of the mountain is meaningful only insofar as it is identified as the center of one's home area.

These entanglements manifest in various ways in praise- and juniper-burning, beyond the recited texts themselves. A standard act of praise-burning at Bbapardduaq includes within it a gesture to juniper-burning: while placing offerings of flour and alcohol along the main cairns, people also perform a very short version of juniper-burning, which uses either juniper chips or incense (now widely available and somewhat easier to transport than the aforesaid juniper chips) at a designated rock. The main difference is that the oral text does not include a mention of ancestor names. Also, each Berdder house has its own gathering spot (N. hua) on Bbapardduaq, where families go to picnic on holidays. Each gathering spot is oriented to a particular tree (linked to naga), and after praise-burning at the main cairns, people move to these gathering-spots, where they perform a full juniper-burning, including the recitation of ancestor names.

Likewise, a proper praise-burning visit to Bbapardduaq concludes by collecting leaves from a particular kind of tree, and washing them at the main spring (near the cairns), while also

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Nālandā Translation Committee, "A Smoke Purification Song," 401.

filling up one's now-empty offering bottle of alcohol with some water from the spring. People then bring the wet leaves and water back to their homes as "treasure gifts" (N. nua'al gee), which they use to perform juniper-burning once again in the space of their own homes. In these cases, they place the water (transferred into offering cups) along with the branches on the shrine. Remaining water goes into the house's designated water source, a bucket near the hearth, and small twigs from the branches go over the lintel of each door, including the gate into the animal pen.<sup>43</sup>

# 2.1.2 Berdder's alpine (naga) topography

Through their entanglement and mutual indexicality, these ceremonial literacy practices work to construct a physical world that is insistently binary, but also inextricably entwined. The nature of the binary, as expressed through these practices, is worth considering. First, praise-burning primarily addresses naga linked to watery places and/or mountains, while juniper burning primarily addresses the beings of houses. This distinction is linked to a broader contrast between the physical spaces of humans, inclusive of houses, village, and cultivated fields, versus an alpine landscape that is the domain of naga. Indeed, as I will explore in more depth in the following chapter, many different ceremonial practices work to negotiate with naga to ensure safe movement for humans across the mountains, and/or to allow humans to use certain alpine resources, such as springwater and wild animals. In the case of hunting, for example, Teacher Mei used specific oral texts to bribe naga "children" (N. rllimi) to help him steal wild animals from their naga "parents" (N. shashee) in the mountains. Likewise, the array of ceremonies

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> This discuss of praise- and juniper-burning offers a basic articulation of house-based kinship practices as well. I will return to these kinship practices, with a focus on courtship and marriage, in Chapter 5. See in particular the sections on love song.

dedicated to placating the naga of springs located on one's fields speaks to the entanglement but also the problematic difference of human and alpine domains.

While this sort of entanglement seems to occur across the Himalaya, I think the particular features of Berdder's topography have contributed to its strong salience there, in a manner linked to Berdder's centrality as a place of Na literacy.

On one of my early trips to Berdder for He Yusong's wedding, two little girls, each around six years old, adopted me, spoke to me in Naqhai that I could not at the time understand at all, and kept leading me away from wedding festivities to their favorite places in the valley. Some of the places were just theirs, had I think taken shape in the interstices of the relationship they formed between themselves: a tree's low, horizontal branch, on which they would both crouch, rocking perilously on their heels. Or the furthest corner of their uncle's apple orchard, where you could see the dark mountains rising up. In hindsight, I think it was with those mountains that we edged into a new territory, one never separate from their relationship, yet not contained by it, either.

All the villages in Berdder piped in irrigation water from high mountain springs, and I remember the little girls taking me to the place in the fields where a pipe stopped, releasing its water into a narrow concrete gully. In the place between the pipe and the gully, water splashed and flowed, and because it was the same sort of water that had, over thousands of years, produced Bbapardduaq, the splashings occurred across an expanse of white sediment, frozen in the shape of flowing water. Using the Chinese term for Bbapardduaq, Baishuitai 白水台, presumably because they knew I couldn't understand their Naqhai, they told me the area was a "little Baishuitai."

We splashed around for a while, but when I did eventually try to make my way back towards the festivities that I was officially there to attend, I remember them hanging off my limbs, begging me to stay, with a strong-fingered persistence that took me by surprise. When I promised them that we would come back here later, but needed to return to the wedding now, one of them picked up a sharp rock lying in the path and said she'd hit me with it if I tried to leave. They were very small girls, and during the wedding festivities, they had held my hands and followed me from place to place. It was as if we had entered a different sort of territory, a place outside the bounds of houses and conventional courtesy.

I think many ethnographers experience a honeymoon period where the very novelty of their presence garners them attention and engagement from local people. For me, this period spread out across those early trips, and the little girls were not the only people to spirit me off on tours of the valley. It is notable in hindsight that most of these tours focused incessantly on features I have identified as belonging to a naga topography. He Yusong took me on my first trip to Bbapardduaq, and later to two different caves: one where a former ritualist had, the local histories went, invented ceremonial books, and the other—this one crusted over with a familiar white sediment—where ritualists from his village used to go to study. He Yusong's maternal cousin took me to a nearby waterfall, and then to a white-crusted small pool with a spring at one edge. My host dad kept promising to take me to another waterfall that I later learned was a listed destination in the praise-burning text.

This is to say that Berdder's landscape was articulated by a skeleton of naga topography, consisting of mountains and bodies of water in the gaps of which human settlements had cropped up. And that topographical skeleton took strength from the specificity of Berdder's geology.

Locals distinguished white water (N. zzi par), which carried within it the potential to produce

white rock when touched by sun, from black water (N. zzi naq), which could only flow. While this white/black distinction is common throughout Na areas (note, for example, that the ethnonym "Na" is also the term for black), the distinction also corresponds to geological wisdom. According to the geologists who came to Berdder periodically to collect samples from Bbapardduaq and publish papers about it<sup>44</sup>, what locals referred to as "white water" was freshwater loaded with sufficient calcium bicarbonate to precipitate as sedimentary rock, also known as travertine, when exposed to sunlight. Yet for Berdder residents, the distinction between white and black water reached into countless dimensions of life: they identified different springs and bodies of water based on the type of water they possessed, and spoke of the different flavors of water with a connoisseurship I had come to associate with wine.

Nor did Berdder people's imaginations remain above-ground. Many of the caves I visited as a part of my Berdder tours went deep into the earth, and hit water. People also had very clear ideas about the linkages of bodies of water below the surface of the earth. For example, in a field south of Weishee village, a man's family had cared for a spring for many generations, and he and other Weishee residents recalled for me how rice loaves thrown as offerings into the Bbapardduaq spring (by the cairns) would fall deep into the earth, bob their way through underground channels, and eventually pop up at the family spring. I came to understand a valley-encompassing interlinking of springs, mountains, and elaborate caverns extending deep into the

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Hailong Sun, Zaihua Liu, and Hao Yan, "Oxygen Isotope Fractionation in Travertine-Depositing Pools at Baishuitai, Yunnan, SW China: Effects of Deposition Rates," *Geochimica et Cosmochimica Acta* 133 (2014): 340–50; Zaihua Liu et al., "Wet-Dry Seasonal Variations of Hydrochemistry and Carbonate Precipitation Rates in a Travertine-Depositing Canal at Baishuitai, Yunnan, SW China: Implications for the Formation of Biannual Laminae in Travertine and for Climatic Reconstruction," *Chemical Geology* 273, no. 3 (2010): 258–66; Hailong Sun and Zaihua Liu, "Wet-Dry Seasonal and Spatial Variations in the Δ13C and Δ18O Values of the Modern Endogenic Travertine at Baishuitai, Yunnan, SW China and Their Paleoclimatic and Paleoenvironmental Implications," *Geochimica et Cosmochimica Acta* 74, no. 3 (2010): 1016–29; Hao Yan, Hailong Sun, and Zaihua Liu, "Equilibrium vs. Kinetic Fractionation of Oxygen Isotopes in Two Low-Temperature Travertine-Depositing Systems with Differing Hydrodynamic Conditions at Baishuitai, Yunnan, SW China," *Geochimica et Cosmochimica Acta* 95 (2012): 63–78.

earth, all of which were articulated by white and black water, flowing both over and under the land. And while to a certain extent the reproduction of water and rock throughout the world may be understood as the earth's writing of itself, and while I would suggest that across the Himalaya it does tend to be seen that way, in Berdder, the recurring clumps of travertine amidst the existing water and rock acted as a sort of italics, gesturing to an unfurling, palpable naga literature.



Figure 5. Above, the view of Bbapardduaq from a position in the village located directly at its feet. Below, the view of all of the valley from a top edge of Bbapardduaq.

Further articulating the alpine topography was a three-dimensional diagrammatic structure that has been described in explicitly Buddhist contexts as mandalic. 45 This (mandalic) structure features a center and a receding periphery, with the center occupying a high point, and the periphery descending from the center. It is worth noting that the resulting form is not unlike that of a mountain, and most mountain worship in the Himalaya applies notions of high center and receding, lower periphery to the mountains in question. 46 Indeed, I would suggest that specifically Tibetan Buddhist concepts of mandala may represent a subsequent historical appropriation of longstanding practices of mountain worship. In Berdder, for example, there is no Naghai term for "mandala," and no common usage I encountered of Tibetan or Chinese terms for mandala, either. However, a vocabulary of "center" (N. gol) and "edge" (N. kuq), which can also be evoked through comparative references to highness and lowness, permeate all forms of spatial orientation.<sup>47</sup> In addition, the literacy practices I have described crucially presuppose and write Bbapardduag as a center, in this case of the valley and the surrounding landscape. Likewise, the scaling I have described involves the assertion, through juniper-burning, that a specific home is attached to that center (Bbapardduaq) as a part of its most immediate periphery.

Nor are these assumptions limited to ceremony. In recalling the story of the courtship and marriage of her friend (known in the family as "Auntie,"), my host mom, Ceerlli, cast the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Jin Li, *Reassembling Religion: Sino-Tibetan Encounters in Serta*, PhD Diss. (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2019); Charlene Makley, *The Violence of Liberation: Gender and Tibetan Buddhist Revival in Post-Mao China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); Stanley J. Tambiah, "The Galactic Polity in Southeast Asia," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 3 (2013); Daniel Preston Martin, *Mandala Cosmogony: Human Body Good Thought and the Revelation of the Secret Mother Tantras of Bon*, Asiatische Forschungen (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994); Martin Brauen trans. Martin Wilson, *The Mandala: Sacred Circle in Tibetan Buddhism* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> Blondeau, Tibetan Mountain Deities, Their Cults and Representations: Papers Presented at a Panel of the 7th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Graz, 1995; Huber, The Cult of Pure Crystal Mountain.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> Bruce Mannheim, "Ontological Foundations for Inka Archaeology," in *Andean Ontologies: New Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. María Cecilia Lozada and Henry Tantaleán (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2019), 240–70.

narrative as a movement across an earth for which the most meaningful feature was Bbapardduaq, located at the highest place in Berdder.

gee gv a mi ceeq rheeq the first time he [Uncle, Auntie's future]

husband] came down

chee me ceeq mei el woq ma

he didn't come here [to Weishee], right?

zziu ni gv lei yil na lei ceeq ma

not until they [Uncle and Auntie] had two

kids did they come

Specifically, Ceerlli describes how Uncle "came down" from his home village in two separate motions. Of all Berdder villages, Uncle's is located closest to Bbapardduaq, and thus, physical topographical realities aside, it is conceived as highest. Uncle's first motion involves relocating to a local shingle factory, located further from Bbapardduaq than his village (and thus "lower") where he lived secretly with Auntie for several years. Then after Auntie had two children by him, Uncle eventually persuaded his parents to allow him to marry her, and indeed, unusually for Berdder, to move in with her. Thus his marriage to Auntie itself appears as a second motion "down" to Auntie's village of Weishee, located yet further from Bbapardduaq.

Finally, it is worth noting that the diagrammatic hearth space of Berdder homes incorporates its own structure of high center (the shrine) and lower periphery (the outer edges of the room, where less important people generally have to sit). I understand this extension of mandalic/mountain diagrams to human homes as a final expression of the entanglement of human/naga life, as well as a site of mediation (and thus, potentially, human power over) the naga landscape.

In sum, beginning with the little girls, a whole swath of Berdder residents taught me to think of the local landscape as a smattering of human settlements held together by a vast naga topography. And while that topography could be parsed in terms of specific high centers forever in competition with one another, it was at the same time continuous, wrapping and articulating

the earth. As a result, to "read" such a topography is to witness an ongoing human/naga swirl, one that must be continually negotiated and navigated. As the few sentences from my host mom's recollections indicate, even love stories presuppose a complex set of human/naga relations. And as the very construction of hearths suggests, household life cannot escape these relations, either.

### 2.1.3 Human uses of the topography

How, then, might a world thusly constructed be instrumentalized to pursue specific human ends?

Over the course of the dissertation, I hope to expand and explore this question. For the present, a broad answer. In Berdder and many Na areas, the "afterlife" is above all else a spatial location, and it consists of what I will refer to as the Black Mountain (N. Ndhrv Naq Rra Rra Nhdrv), where dead souls to go. Incidentally, the Black Mountain's fame as the highest mountain in the world implies another set of scaling relations, such that all other mountains (including Bbapardduaq) must ultimately be contained as sacred points within its periphery. However, for present purposes, what I want to emphasize is that the Black Mountain is, by the logic of Berdder's alpine topography, physically linked to all other bodies of water and mountains. As the absolute highest thing in the world, it also connects to the sky gods mentioned in praise-burning. Thus, to engage with any alpine topographical feature—through walking, water-drinking, and certainly through the performance of burning rituals—is to engage not simply with the vast sweep of the topography itself: it is at the same time to engage, through the mediation of specific springs and mountains, with the dead on the Black Mountain and the gods to which the Black Mountain is linked.

From this broader perspective, the burning rituals I have described do diagram different components of a naga topography, but I think it is more accurate to understand such diagramming as a side effect of an attempt to communicate with a variety of beings through the topography (which is presupposed to take a particular diagrammatic form). At this level, what I have described as the "presence" of ancestors in human houses requires some clarification. While it is true that people speak of their closest three generations of ancestors as occupying their homes, they also refer to the presence of the same dead ancestors at the Black Mountain. I was the only who saw such statements as contradictory, and when I pressed people to explain, they often mentioned that everyone has multiple souls, with the capacity to occupy different places. 48 Still, people offered such explanations only when I demanded them, and I suspect the explanations to be something along the lines of a simplification for children (and ethnographers). The denotational sweep of the Naghai term for (mandalic) edge, kuq, may be useful here: it also refers to doors or gateways.<sup>49</sup> If entrance into a particular naga domain (or mandala) through its edge/gate does in fact grant mediated access to other portions of the linked topography, then the notion of extended presence, such that a dead soul might be "at" a household shrine and the Black Mountain simultaneously, begins to make sense.

## 2.1.4 Gender, praise-burning, and Ceerlli

The issue of access to places and worlds—*through* the naga topography—raises the question of how access is determined, and specifically how gender plays a role.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Mireille Mazard, "The Algebra of Souls: Ontological Multiplicity and the Transformation of Animism in Southwest China," *Social Analysis* 60, no. 1 (2016): 18–36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> For a comparable case study from Eastern Tibet, see Kornman, "A Tribal History," 79.

It is a frequent saying, by men as well as women in Berdder, that women can't pray/worship (N. chobba). This is linked to the fact that literacy in oral texts is primarily identified with men. There is some basis to this: Because some ceremonies are restricted from women, and women cannot run ceremonies as ritualists at all, they have comparatively fewer opportunities to learn the oral texts. In addition, conventional notions of ceremonial power encompass a given ritualist's training as a ritualist, the cumulative strength of his ritualist ancestors, and also his jer, something akin to mojo. For example, everyone knew that Uncle Yulheeq lacked ceremonial training, yet people still frequently hired him to run funerals because of the fame of his ritualist ancestors combined with his personal jer—or, as some people put it to me in Chinese, his gutsiness (Ch. danzi hen da 胆子很大). Likewise, a nearby ritualist had a mild intellectual disability and was greatly lacking in training as well as ritualist ancestry, yet people viewed him as possessing vast jer (perhaps in part because of the disability), and hired him frequently. The matter of jer is important for questions of gender, because it is constitutively male, indeed expressed by a written character also used to denote male genitalia. In sum, there are a combination of factors, ranging from the systematic denial of training to women, to ideologies of male ceremonial strength, that limit women's access to ceremonial oral texts (as well as books).

That said, many women I knew could and did recite oral texts, though generally quietly and/or under conditions of plausible deniability. The spread of plausibility was rather wide for praise-burning, and for juniper-burning, comparatively narrow: because juniper-burning is so insistently linked to houses, and because men are the default household heads, it is even more insistently ideologized as a male activity. Nevertheless, my host mom would do it when my host dad was gone on overnight trips, and Teacher Mei recalled his own mother doing similarly.

All of which brings me to my host parents, their relationship, and their own habitual literacy practices. One morning over breakfast, I was telling Ceerlli about my studies of praise-burning with Teacher Mei, and she mentioned going herself, alone, to praise-burn, decades ago when her husband, Yinddertal, left the valley on an ill-advised post-collectivization trading trip.

But, she told me, she didn't go any longer. Now she let her son, He Yusong, take care of such matters.

He Yusong's assumption of praise-burning responsibility was not in itself remarkable: As a ritualist, he was well-suited for any sort of event involving recitation, and with his recent marriage, he had inherited the role of household head (N. *ddaq hal*) from his dad. Back when He Yusong was a very young child, though, and when his father was gone entirely from the valley, it seems that my host mom made regular trips to Bbapardduaq to pursue her own prayers. What continues to interest me are the circumstances around my host mom's brief spate of recitational activity, and what it all might have meant to her, then and still.

As part of this, of course, I'm also interested in what it might have meant to my host dad. Based on his many stories, I know that, when he set forth on his trading mission in the 1990s, everyone at home had been advising him against it. Collectivization was just coming to an end, and while this meant that personal trading, and by extension personal wealth, were once again possibilities, no one had travelled the distant mountain roads for decades. Afraid that his loved ones might try to stop him, Yinddertal didn't provide them any warning, just quietly slipped away one day. When he returned nearly a year later, his back basket overflowing with money, it was to a valley that had already declared him dead.

But, he told me, he showed them, didn't he?

In the final bit of his story, he used all the money he'd earned to rebuild his family house, in the new "modern" style he had seen during his travels, leading everyone in the valley to be extremely jealous of him. I took this to mean that for him, at least, his achievements, the wealth and the new home, offered a resolution of sorts to a complicated chapter in his own life and the life of his family.

In contrast, my host mom's recollections of this time centered around the fact that he might have died. In such a case, his death certainly would have been a bad one, occurring away from the valley and without a proper funeral. His soul would have been wandering, rotting, going bad—in some unreachable place. Meanwhile, she would have remained in the house with Yinddertal's mother, alcoholic father, intellectually disabled uncle, and three children. Had Yinddertal really died, the care of all these people would have fallen to her. And when her father-in-law inevitably died, too, the role of household head would have come to her. She, that is, would have been left to juniper-burn and to praise-burn for the home.

When my host mom recalled facing these possibilities, she seemed filled with some combination of sadness, rage, and...something else. A very quiet something else. Which brings me back to my questions: Why did she begin to praise-burn at this time? In doing so, what did she want?

But an answer to these questions requires a far closer look at Berdder's literacy practices, involving the alpine topography as well as the oral texts. In what ways do oral texts act on naga places? What, by contrast, do bodily engagements with those places achieve?

### 2.2 Literacies and literacy practice

Katherine Martineau's 2020 analysis of orthography and literacy<sup>50</sup>, which builds on a new body of linguistic anthropological approaches to writing<sup>51</sup>, offers a foundation from which to theorize southwest China's literacy practices. While these practices have accumulated a rather sizable body of analysis already<sup>52</sup>, it is my hope that linguistic anthropology can offer some insight into the semiotic mechanisms that drive and connect them. Specifically, Martineau offers help in thinking through two problems: first, when writing systems are no longer limited to script/speech correlations, how they may become mutually entangled; and second, how embodied textual interpretation plays into acts and ideologies of literacy.

### 2.3 Literacy ecologies

Martineau understands orthography or scripts as a "metapragmatics of cross-modal correspondences that serve as resources for sociolinguistic and political action" (9). This framework is foundational to my analysis. The central idea is that writing both expresses and drives particular indexical relationships, that indeed it serves to naturalize these relationships, rendering them conventional or in more common linguistic anthropological terms, denotational.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Martineau, "Putting Our Scripts in Their Mouths."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Sebba, "Introduction"; Jaffe et al., Orthography As Social Action.

<sup>52</sup> Erik Mueggler, *The Paper Road: Archive and Experience in the Botanical Exploration of West China and Tibet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011); Erik Mueggler, "Literacy and Bondage in a Native Hereditary Lineage, Southwest China" (Harvard Department of Anthropology Colloquium, Cambridge, MA, September 24, 2018); Yu Suisheng 喻遂生, Eya, Baidi dongba wenhua diaocha yanjiu [A survey of Eya and Baidi Naxi dongba culture] 俄亚、白地东巴文化调查研究 (Beijing: Zhongguo shehui kexue chubanshe, 2016); Duncan Poupard, "Between the Oral and the Literary: The Case of the Naxi Dongba Texts," *Oral Tradition* 32, no. 1 (2018); Dongba wenhua yanjiusuo [Dongba Culture Research Institute], Naxi dongba guji yizhu quanji [An annotated collection of Naxi dongba manuscripts] (Kunming: Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 1999).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Michael Silverstein, "Denotation and the Pragmatics of Language," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. Jack Sidnell, N. J. Enfield, and Paul Kockelman, Cambridge Handbooks in Language and Linguistics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 128–57; Sabina Perrino, "Cross-Chronotope

As Martineau also observes, this delineation argues for writing's massive relevance to language ideological research: if one of the modalities that writing connects is language, then it effectively locates language in a complex nest of naturalized relations. It is at this level that orthography becomes ontological, establishing "modalities" (specific sign complexes) and building articulated relations among them.

Returning to the first problem, I want to develop Martineau's framework further to consider how, when multiple writing systems working across different modalities are at play in the same social universe, cross-modal correspondences may work to entangle the systems, in what I will describe as literacy ecologies. In Berdder specifically, I find three sets of established correspondences. The first is between the alpine topography and roads (N. rheeq), that is, established lines of movement that are at once discerned and created through movement across the land. I find a second established correspondence between oral texts and roads—as when, say, a praise-burning text uses lists of specific landscape features to trace out a path. (Note, then, that the description of roads I have offered here uses a Berdder concept, rheeq, to restate and expand the idea of diagrammatic form that I introduced in the discussion of different kinds of ceremonial burning.) And I find a third set of correspondences between (a) a knowledge of formulaic phrases and narrative structure, what might be described as a memory of oral texts, and (b) their real-time enunciation. The difficulty of disentangling these correspondences speaks to the point I am trying to make (that they are mixed up together), yet heuristically, it is worth an initial exposition that takes them one-by-one.

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Alignment in Senegalese Oral Narrative," *Language & Communication*, Temporalities in Text, 27, no. 3 (2007): 227–44.

First, alpine topography and roads. While my earlier description of this topography makes clear that its visual appearance (involving dramatic white travertine deposits) and its ideologization (as naga beings with mandalic forms) invite particular kinds of interpretation, there are also material exigences that contribute to these interpretations—and help account for the emergence and establishment of corresponding roads. Certainly in the past and even now in matters of herding and in reaching certain alpine destinations, long-distance travel away from one's village requires movement through these alpine spaces. By extension, it is primarily in alpine spaces where careful navigation is required. In the historical absence of compasses, printed maps, and certainly GPS (and in people's ongoing lack of reliance on these tools), people navigate through orientation to specific mountain peaks, springs, caves, and bodies of water precisely those landscape features identified with naga. From this perspective, it is through the exigencies of navigation, involving ongoing interaction with topographical features, that people came to impute social agency (as naga) to them. More importantly for the current analysis, the conventionalization of these modes of navigation, which involve stringing together a path across different topographical points (and naga bodies) actually produces roads. Whether or not those roads are actually visible on the earth, their presence is attested to in shared alpine knowledge, and indeed in the physical experience of navigation.

Here a diagram drawn by Teacher Mei is instructive. I requested it, using the Chinese term "map" (Ch. ditu 地图), after he had taken me on a walk through the nearby mountains to locate the source (a spring) of one of the streams that crosses Bbapardduaq. The image that he produced uses a combination of Na and Chinese script to label specific topographical points, with his village, Geeddvq, \*\* at the bottom, and above, a few of the spots we passed through, Dduapar \*\* (the spring in question), Micei hua \*\* \*\* and Bbapardduaq (written

with Chinese script as Baishuitai 白水台). However, the sweeping lines that connect these points are not visible on the surface of the earth, nor do they reflect the path we actually walked, which moved along only some of them. While Teacher Mei did not fully articulate this in our discussion, my understanding is that his image reflects conventional routes through the topography (the lines), combined with a few of the topographical features (the labels) through which the routes moved. For him, to reproduce any sort of representation of the world we had just travelled, the "natural" format involved invoking specific points linked by specific roads.

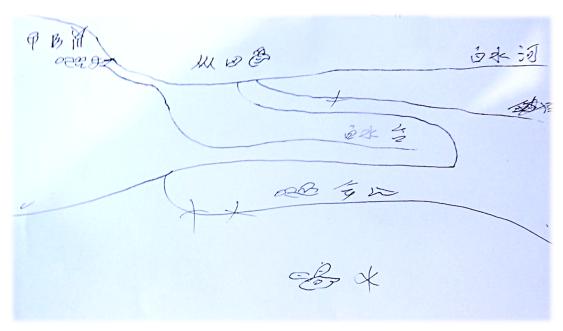


Figure 6. Teacher Mei's "map."

It is also notable that, in Teacher Mei's depiction, a river itself (what he labels in Chinese as the Baishui He 白水河) actually constitutes one of the lines/roads. Taken in the context of alpine navigation, this makes sense: rivers and streams frequently do provide paths. This notion of river-as-road reappears in another depiction of the land and alpine spaces by He Dingba, a ritualist from Yiji, in the following painting of his home village. Note that he identified the pale,

wavering blue lines as rivers, and the pale, wavering pink ones as human-made roads. Yet their form is the same, and they appear to feed into one another.



Figure 7. (Home). He Dingba. 2008. Acrylic on Dongba paper.

In sum, while the English term "road" offers a useful translation of the Naqhai term "rheeq," the conceptual framework in which it occurs, involving a modality of correspondence that diagrammatically represents lines of movement across the physical terrain rather than existing visually on it, also significantly strains Anglophone "road" concepts.

Given the power imputed to alpine spaces, as well as to their representation as roads, I find additional meaning in Yinddertal's post-collectivization trading trip. As I have mentioned, his family did not want him to attempt the journey because the roads involved had not been travelled for decades, and would in the best of circumstances require months of walking. This is to say that his undertaking was, in addition to a quest for wealth, a rediscovery of vast tracts of roads and the alpine spaces to which they are linked. And if that rediscovery was frightening to

the people who loved him, it was also heroic and glamorous to him—and based on the wistful/envious discussions I heard of Yinddertal throughout Berdder, perhaps to others as well.

The more basic question of how my host dad was able to execute such a rediscovery of roads, having never walked them before, leads me to the second set of correspondences, between oral texts and the alpine topography. As my discussion of praise- and juniper-burning have indicated (though without invoking the idea of roads until this section), the general movement of the texts is to recite specific naga points as a way of evoking roads. Returning to Teacher Mei's map (above), most of the points it features actually appear in praise-burning texts as part of their leftward-turning movement around Bbapardduaq (see also Fig. 3). And in funerary oral texts, which guide dead souls along roads reaching all the way to the Black Mountain<sup>54</sup>, the sequence of place names extends beyond Berdder and generally through the areas involved in Yinddertal's trading journey. From this perspective, it seems likely that Yinddertal learned to walk the roads through the diagrams provided by the oral texts that remained in circulation, albeit in furtive ways, throughout the Cultural Revolution. Through the herding and alpine plant-foraging that continued throughout this period, it also seems likely that he learned to walk parts of the recited roads. Thus, undertaking his longer trading trip was a matter of following roads he already knew to the more distant points provided by the oral texts he had heard.

Finally is the correspondence between remembered oral textual components, and performed oral texts. Given that I have no direct access to Berdder people's minds (or anyone's mind), claims about memory would seem to be hard to support ethnographically. Yet in the matter of oral texts, conventionalized differentiations and combinations of these texts, as they are

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> Charles McKhann, "Sacred Trails: Genealogical Mapping and the Creation of Historical Space among the Naxi of Southwest China," in *Sentiments Religieux et Identités Culturelles*, Histoire et Anthropologie Asies, 2003, 29–47; Mueggler, *The Paper Road: Archive and Experience in the Botanical Exploration of West China and Tibet*.

traceable through the representation of these texts in speech and in ceremonial books, gesture to a particular way of remembering. Recalling praise- and -juniper-burning, I have described the associated oral texts as both crucial and habitual in Berdder, and this is in part because of the incredible frequency with which such burnings are performed. Yet the oral texts themselves occur even more frequently because, as the centerpieces of foundational ceremonial acts, they are also used as building blocks in the construction of almost all other ceremonies, with their own recitations. Thus, just as Na ritualists describe specific ceremonies in terms of the sequence of books and oral texts to be recited, such books and oral texts can be further disaggregated into smaller parts, involving, for example, praise- and/or juniper-burning sections. Likewise within both burning texts: while the lists they offer are highly specific, deriving pattern only from their correspondence to alpine places, the phrases they use to present each successive term in the list are formulaic and repetitive.

All of this is to say that the very construction of Berdder oral texts seems designed for easy memorization, though not in the sense of remembering the "transcript" for a given ceremony. Instead, ritualists have a sense of elements (such as formulaic phrases, and/or specific shorter texts) as well as the narrative arcs in which these components should appear. This way of memorization is broadly consistent with the arguments of oral formulaic theory<sup>55</sup>, and it is significant to this chapter because it suggests a formal similarity between acts of recitation and movement across the landscape. Both, that is, involve a bodily mediation through which disparate elements (remembered textual components or naga locations within the landscape) are

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); John Miles Foley, *The Singer of Tales in Performance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995); Poupard, "Between the Oral and the Literary: The Case of the Naxi Dongba Texts"; Jonathan L. Ready, *Orality, Textuality, and the Homeric Epics: An Interdisciplinary Study of Oral Texts, Dictated Texts, and Wild Texts* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019); Haun Saussy, *The Ethnography of Rhythm: Orality and Its Technologies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

drawn into 'lines" (either roads or recitations). Furthermore, as I will explore in more depth in the following chapter, Berdder interlucutors frequently drew comparisons between reciting and walking, too.

In sum, Martineau's concept of written scripts as sites of metapragmatic cross-modal correspondence offers a framework for considering how alignments between different script-like sign complexes can become conventionalized and socially available. In Berdder, I have identified three main alignments:

- (1) alpine topography (naga) roads
- (2) oral texts alpine topography (naga)
- (3) remembered textual components oral texts

However, as my description of these alignments has indicated, they are also very much enmeshed: Oral texts' evocation of topographical points is meaningful only insofar as people understand the first set of alignments (between the same topographical points and roads). It is thus through reference to specific points that oral texts are able to evoke roads and verbally iconize movement along them. This type of alpine movement is iconized again at the level of textual recitation, for which the production of oral texts itself is taken to resemble road-walking. I propose the idea of "literacy ecology" to describe contexts such as Berdder, in which multiple cross-modal correspondences exist, and are entwined because certain modalities (in this case, oral texts and the topography) possess multiple conventional correspondences.

More broadly, this idea of a literacy ecology also has implications for common approaches to literacy, which tend to begin by stipulating that writing consists of a script

corresponding to speech<sup>56</sup> (while bracketing what are often described as "semasiographs"<sup>57</sup>). It is my proposition that, beyond an ideological privileging of speech, there is no empirical basis for this stipulation. Furthermore, because doing so denies any possibility of writing that corresponds to other sign complexes, it unnecessarily limits any sort of cultural research on Berdder, on southwest China, and indeed on much of the Himalaya, where speech is part of, but hardly all, of a complex system of conventional correspondences.

### 2.4 Interpretation and interaction

One of the consequences of enlarging notions of literacy to include conventional correspondences with sign complexes beyond speech is a breakdown in Enlightenment-era distinctions between "interpretation" (involving humans reading things) and "social interaction" (involving humans using things to communicate with humans).

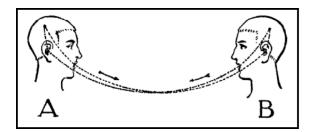


Figure 8. Saussure's talking heads.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> John DeFrancis, *Visible Speech: The Diverse Oneness of Writing Systems* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989); Erin Debenport and Anthony K. Webster, "From Literacy Literacies to Graphic Pluralism and Inscriptive Practices," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 48 (2019): 389–404; Elizabeth Hill Boone, "Introduction: Writing and Recording Knowledge," in *Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes*, ed. Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 3–26; Elizabeth Hill Boone and Walter D. Mignolo, eds., "Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica and the Andes" (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Geoffrey Sampson, Writing Systems: A Linguistic Introduction (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1985); Ignace J. Gelb, A Study of Writing; the Foundations of Grammatology (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1952).

This is well illustrated by Saussure's famous image of the talking heads<sup>58</sup>, in which interaction consists of two human subjects whose relationship is mediated by speech. Notions of interpretation are inserted within this, with each human subject interpreting the spoken message "between" them and producing a new spoken stretch.

However, these distinctions quickly break down in the southwestern Chinese context. Consider human engagements with alpine places: such engagements which can plausibly be described in terms of reading or interpretation (in which case the road's correspondence to the topography, as per Martineau's framework, functions something like a denotational text), or in terms of conversation (in which the road becomes a conversational transcript, and an idea of "cross-modal correspondence" seems to break down as well).

A love song that Teacher Mei taught me offers a useful contrast to the talking heads:

wei lei sher nee yu wav back when

the mountain had no roads ngullu rhee me tv lei nee ddeeg rheeg tv the musk deer made one

lei jiv lei ddeeg zee all his life

lei rhee o iiv mi he called that road his own

wei yil rlli chee kaq as of this moment yil shee yil ta bba some measly other deer

yil nee lo seig yil has walked his road

vil nee nv ni mei the musk deer's heart wrenches

ddeeq teeq wo seiq yil and there's the thing

Like many love songs, this one draws on alpine imagery as a parallel to human life. The implied human narrative evokes a longstanding romantic relationship between two people (figured by the mountain and the musk deer) that recently has been upset by the intrusion of someone else (the "measly other deer"). As for the mountain, it is at once an object of interpretation (a "written text") and also a social being, indeed the musk deer's greatest love.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>58</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966).

Enlightenment wisdom lies in the fact that alpine topography is, for most Berdder people, a collection of social persons, yet persons that do not speak. They can only be engaged with bodily, through acts of looking and of navigation that may seem more closely to resemble acts of interpretation. Webb Keane's central insight in *Christian Moderns*<sup>59</sup> is that the core of Enlightenment thinking rests on a desire to reserve social agency for humans. Thus, as he also points out, within these ideologies, oral recitations may themselves be seen as a threat to human supremacy, because the oral texts' poetic forms call attention to their own (aural) material agency. Conventional distinctions between interpretation and interaction, which presuppose a relation between subject and object (with interpretation) and between subjects (with interaction) seem motivated by a similar ideology.

Yet that is not fully explanatory, because the difference between interpretation and interaction is also one of mediation. Recalling Saussure's talking heads, speech mediates engagements between subjects, but each subjects' engagement with speech (an "object" in the sense that it is perceived as lacking agency) appears direct, with no intervening layer. This offers an illuminating contrast to Teacher Mei's love song: the two subjects are the mountain and the musk deer, yet it is also the musk deer's body that mediates the creation of the road ("the mountain had no roads / the musk deer made one"). Reading this structure back onto the engagement between a Saussurean head and the dotted lines of speech, both are now subjects, and it is as if the head, by listening to the speech, is generating through itself a diagram of the emergent spoken text. This is, of course, hardly an outlandish suggestion within existing linguistic anthropological approaches, but it also not the framing that Saussure offers. My point

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>59</sup> Webb Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

is just that there are multiple plausible ways to look at agency and mediation within a given social event. By extension, labeling a social event as "interaction" or "interpretation" at the outset is to project very specific assumptions about agency and mediation onto it, and extremely unhelpful in a context such as Berdder.

I mention all of this as a way of upholding Martineau's framework while also observing that, in the Berdder case, the existence of conventionalized correspondences between modalities, such as mountains and roads, is only partially explanatory of literacy events. It is just as important to ask where social agency is being located, and by extension, who or what is mediating who or what (indeed, Martineau makes a similar point with respect to the Indian orthographic tradition she is studying). Because Berdder life does offer conventionalized answers to these questions, I want to return briefly to the three cross-modal correspondences already identified, and to consider the play of agency and mediation within each of them.

Teacher Mei's love song offers a helpful view of the first. In this case, it is the body of the human or animal walker that mediates the relation between alpine topography and road. The walker and the topography both are social persons, and while the road is not, it has agency: as a material index of the ongoing engagement between mountain and walker, it is visible on the surface of the mountain and can (tragically, in this case) be used by another walker.

With respect to the third correspondence, between remembered textual components and recited oral texts, I have already mentioned that people tend to pose it as formally resembling mountain-walking (the first correspondence). Part of the reason for this may be that bodies play a similarly mediating role, converting geographical points and trajectories (or remembered textual pieces and narratives) into bodily action in space and time. However, in contrast to mountain-walking, I find no evidence that people see oral textual memories as themselves social persons.

Finally, the second correspondence (between oral texts and topography) introduces a different structure of agency and mediation, and raises a question implicit in the analysis so far: If it is possible to engage socially with naga through acts of walking, why is recitation necessary and/or how is it different? My answer to this question draws on an earlier discussion of ceremonial power as centered around the use of oral texts. Furthermore, I have noted that such power derives from a combination of skill, ritual lineage, and constitutively male "mojo"; and that it is focused on imposing one's personal will on the world (whether or not those impositions are understood as resolutions to problems) through negotiations, bribery, and sometimes even extortion of powerful beings. I have also suggested that, because of the Black Mountain's connection to naga topography, such negotiations must move through that landscape, that in order to enter into conversation with any powerful non-human, it is necessary to speak first to the mountains. Drawing together these points, I am inclined to view oral texts as materially agentive things that are nevertheless identified primarily as extensions of the reciter's embodied agency, and secondarily as an expression of his lineage's agency.

Crucially, then, the correspondence between oral text and topography seems to function in multiple different ways. In some cases, it is a form of address. Consider the opening line of praise-burning: "Bless you, Land!" (N. Cho Ddeeq!). Or a later, notable portion of the same text (also this chapter's epigraph, to which I will return shortly):

ggeq'a wo zoq llu mei naq nee downwards from high Tibet's black rocks mi ddeeq ddeeq
ndrhv nee nga ju ju mountains upon mountains extend to me ndhrv mi nga me see I don't know your names, Mountains ndhrv kuq nga chee pa but we meet here

But in other cases, such as the recitation of specific landscape features—this is also when the cross-modal correlation is tightest—the ritualist seems to be pursuing a self-extension so visceral

he is actually walking the mountain roads himself. Recall that funerary texts serve to guide a dead soul along roads that wind up eventually at the Black Mountain. A ritualist's recitation of these place-names is an act of will; though his physical location is at the home of the deceased, or later, at the cremation grounds, he is working to push the dead soul *to* the Black Mountain. Recall also my discussion of household shrines, and the common assertion that family ancestors are located both within the shrines and on the Black Mountain. If for them, this extension of presence seems to work through their engagement with a naga landscape, for this ritualist, he achieves a similar extension through the vehicle of his recitation, which likewise connects him to that landscape.

What begins to emerge, then, is a highly specific literacy ecology, composed of naturalized correspondences linking different sign complexes, that occur within particular structures of agency and mediation. And while Saussure's talking heads are legible within such a world, they are but a small piece of it. The final element of this world—one which keeps coming up, but I have not yet directly addressed—is the matter of self-extension.

#### 2.5 Self-extension and sacrality

For Warner, publics emerge through human engagements with circulating discourse, and it is through such discourse that they are able to partake of "stranger sociality," social ties not based on face-to-face interaction. One of the consequences of such participation is a process of "self-abstraction," by which the people involved are interpellated into public forms based on identities that are not consistent with their bodily reality. Thus, one consequence of such

abstraction, and indeed of public participation thusly pursued, is the "effacement" of people's non-normative features. It is from the context created by this chapter's analysis of literacy and literacy practice that I observe that the process of public formation and self-abstraction Warner describes seems related to a particular, distinctively Enlightenment-tradition mode of engagement with circulating, written discourse.

For present purposes, a contrast with Berdder is illustrative. The literacy practices that Warner implicitly invokes revolve around written texts such as books, documents, and letters—items that tend to be conceived as transparent vehicles of "meaning," and to which agency of any kind is neither imputed nor recognized. (As Derrida reminds us, within these conceptions, written texts have *even less* agency than those talking heads' dashed speech lines.) The transparency attributed to such written texts creates a perceptual gap between reading and writing as embodied practices and the abstract meanings that, in fact, emerge through these practices. Nevertheless, I would suggest that it is precisely this gap that affords the process of self-abstraction—that divides a reading self from a public self.

In contrast, in Berdder, the central form of written text is the alpine topography, and it exists as a collective of social persons, with whom humans engage through bodily movement and oral recitation. Not only do such self-consciously embodied literacy practices lack any such perceptual gap, their engagement in a complicated literacy ecology also means that people who walk or recite the alpine topography will inevitably enter into mediated relations with all other elements of the ecology. Thus, in contrast to Warner's self-abstraction, I find in Berdder a process of self-extension, such that sensuous intimacy with alpine spaces actually enables

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Özge Korkmaz, "How to Understand Self-Governance in Kurdistan: Agency, Performativity and Counterpublics" (Ann Arbor, MI, 2020).

stranger sociality—sociality with the diversity of human and non-human beings also engaged with the mountains.

Returning to this chapter's epigraph, this portion of praise-burning occurs towards the end of the oral text, when most of the listing of gods and landscape features has been completed. I take is as in part a form of insurance, a bit like an Acknowledgements section that recognizes all the people the author knows she has forgotten, and also as something more: the notion of "meeting" unknown, distant mountains through engagements with the familiar peaks in one's immediate vicinity offers a clear expression of the idea of self-extension I have tried to describe here. It also drips with promise, or excitement, or something: self-extension is the very basis of ceremonial power and of human relations with a world of nonhuman beings, and to meet the distant peaks of Tibet is to reach very far into a wide and numinous world.

However, given that humans who are engaged with the literacy ecology remain tied insistently to their own bodily forms, matters of identity, specifically of gender, matter intensely to how people are able to access these "publics." I have explained how women have highly constrained access to oral texts. Thus, it was notable to me that my host mom, a woman, had spent a year's time in the early 1990s making regular visits to Bbapardduaq to recite. The question of how this came to be and what the time meant to her motivates this whole chapter, and in returning to it now, I find it necessary to introduce a final, inevitable, but also notably ungraspable dimension of Berdder literacy practice: sacrality.

One common anthropological approach treats religious experience in formal terms, as interactions that employ material mediations to seek communication with "unseen beings."

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Webb Keane, "Religious Language," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26, no. 1 (1997): 47–71; Webb Keane, "On Spirit Writing: Materialities of Language and the Religious Work of Transduction," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19 (2013): 1–17.

While my understanding of self-extension rests on an elaboration of this idea, I also find the idea inadequate to an understanding of the bodily experience of the sacred. As a very minimal movement in the direction of such understanding, sacrality is phatic; it calls attention to the self's connection to an unseen and/or larger world (it is the matter of "meeting" stranger mountains). All of this is to say that self-extension as a process would seem to invite experiences of the sacred, and indeed to make the experiences widely available: if taking an alpine stroll is sufficient to reach beyond oneself to the death mountain or the whole universe, then most anyone can do it.

Yet acts of recitation, which as I have noted skew extremely towards men, are uniquely able to exert control over such a sacral world. Put another way, they make use of self-extension to do work on and through the alpine landscape, not simply to be in conversation with it. As I will explore more deeply in subsequent sections, I think my host dad was pursuing a homegrown version of this in his relentless landscape walking, through what I will call fame. This brings me to the combination of reasons that might have driven my host mom to praise-burn.

I think, when she went to Bbapardduaq to recite in the 1990s, she was above all else talking to the naga of the mountain, asking them to protect her wandering husband. I think she was also reaching out *through* them to Yinddertal. Incidentally, I know from Yinddertal's stories that he performed his own small version of praise-burning every day over the course of his journey, and I am inclined to view such acts as another kind of reaching, back to Berdder, his family, and Ceerlli. So they were both reciting their texts and looking for each other, in a way. They were meeting each other somewhere among the distant peaks. At the same time, I think my host mom may also have been extending herself into the landscape just for the sensuous experience of feeling her connection to—but also her power over—a vast world. When she did,

she might have wondered what would happen if Yinddertal did die, if she were thrust into the position of leader of the house and had to reach into the universe like this, all the time, for her own sake and the sake of her house.

#### **CHAPTER 3**

### **Stolen Copies:**

### A Brief and Speculative History of Berdder Books

zzeiq gv zzeiq bbei zee rlli wei cho

O Naga-Child, skilled in deception, I

praise you

zzeiq bbei a ggaq zee mei rlli wei cho

O Naga-Child, whose deception provides

for me, I praise you

see haiq ni nggalla mei rlli wei cho

O Naga-Child, asking only leaf-wrapped

entrails, I praise vou

—Oral hunting text

This chapter offers a broad and speculative account of how ceremonial written texts were incorporated into Berdder's literacy ecology. The books in question are oblong and pale brown, written on a rough paper made from *gua dder* vines that grow high on the mountains. Most existing Sinophone and Anglophone scholarship has deemed the script of these books "pictographic," which suggests that characters are "read" based on their visual resemblance to objects in the world (the character that "looks like" a mountain means "mountain," etc). While this chapter will complicate any such notion of transparent resemblance, and while the next chapter will consider more specifically the manner in which socioculturally framed notions of similarity conspire with socioculturally framed linguistic correspondences to produce different usages (or registers) within the script, it is also a crucial truth of Na scribal tradition that visual resemblance—that notions of copying—matter. A whole enormous lot. Indeed, as I will explore throughout this chapter, marginalia-type drawings of different beings bleed into script-writing,

just as the script's use of characters are, *as* <sup>62</sup>different sorts of beings, perpetually getting into conversation with one another.

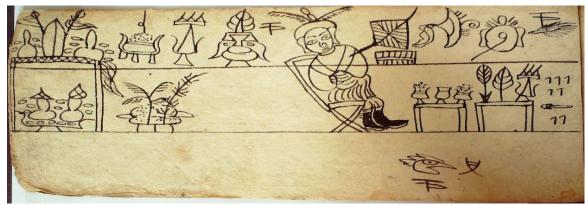


Figure 9. In this ceremonial book, the two horizontal lines across the page, generally used to organize characters used in recitation, have faded into the architecture of a ritualist's study (N. tei'ee gv), where various ritual implements and books (portrayed using their written characters) appear aligned along the "shelves."

Na scribal tradition also belongs to a domain marked specifically (and in the past, absolutely) for ddolbba ritualists, who are male. Thus, while women face some challenges in learning oral texts, ceremonial books are even harder for them to reach. The fact that I, a female foreigner, was able to study them with Teacher Mei speaks in part to my foreign-ness, which often excused me from the conventional run of female expectation in Berdder, as well as recent state-led projects aimed at "developing" Naxi culture for the explicitly-stated ends of preservation and touristic opening. Within these schemes, ritualists and other "tradition-bearers" (Ch. chuancheng ren 传承人) were threatened with notions of imminent cultural death if they did not share their knowledges and expertise with anyone who asked, whether researcher, neighbor, tourist, government official, or some combination of the aforesaid. While Chapters Seven and Eight critically examine these projects, it's enough for the moment to say that granting

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researchers, including female researchers, access to ceremonial books has become accepted throughout Na areas of Yunnan, and I definitely benefited from that. At the same time, an examination of the tradition of the books inevitably marks a turn into the (male) world of ritualists from the (male) ritualists' perspective. Thus, while last chapter's examination of alpine and oral textuality centered around the story of my host parents, both non-ritualists, in this chapter I focus on Teacher Mei (a ritualist) and his relationship with his father, his ritualist teacher. These overlapping roles, combined with the fact that Teacher Mei's father was incredibly famous throughout Berdder and its surrounding villages (for his ritual power as well as his ways with women) continues to make the relationship fraught for Teacher Mei.



Figure 10. Here Teacher Mei, sitting at his spot on Bbapardduaq, reviews a book inherited from his dad.

Thus, in considering how ceremonial books became incorporated into Berdder's existing literacy ecology, I contextualize the question in part in the rarified, highly gendered world of ritualists, which is characterized by ongoing negotiations with naga *and* with non-ritualists. In

particular, I focus on another set of ritualist-specific practices, those of hunting, which I argue served and to some extent still serve to regiment practices of oral recitation and, when books were introduced, an emergent scribal tradition as well.

Another important context consists of regional political tensions that have since at least the eighth century CE placed Berdder between the center of the former Naxi kingdom (in Lijiang) and Tibet. Taking the concept of copying as a matter of "replication with difference" I argue that copying serves in Berdder not only as a logic that underlies writing practice, but also as a way of generating ceremonial and political power within a mandalically constituted social world. Because scribal writing is ideologized as producing copies along several dimensions, its introduction into Berdder represents an escalation in ongoing struggles in both contexts, among (1) ritualists, naga, and non-ritualists, as well as (2) Berdder, Tibet, and the Naxi kingdom (and its ongoing legacy). Ultimately, I find a ritualist-specific public created through scribal practice that, by the logic of naga publicity, continues to link Teacher Mei to his father, despite his father's death in 2018. This seems very good sometimes, and at other times, less so.

Because hunting not only regiments different domains of textuality that are effectively ruled by ritualists, but also occupies the very center of Teacher Mei's recollections of his dad, it offers a good place to start.

### 3.1 Hunting, Teacher Mei, and his dad

Teacher Mei came to Bbapardduaq every single day, sometimes ignoring large holidays and almost always preferring his spot by the spring to the possibility of attending social events

63 Michael Lempert, "Imitation," Annual Review of Anthropology 43, no. 1 (2014): 379–95.

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such as weddings, funerals, and children's first-year celebrations. The only sort of event that really could dislodge him from his spot at the spring was hunting: he and a maternal cousin (also male) made regular trips to the mountains to set traps, to check their traps, and in general, at least as far as I could tell, to sneak around up there and then brag about it later. Hunting struck me as something along the lines of my dad's frequent golfing trips: an object of intense attention and a site of status negotiation that I couldn't full trace, thus also (for these reasons) kind of stupid. Nevertheless, as a responsible ethnographer, I recognized the importance it held for Teacher Mei and asked if I might accompany him on his next alpine journey.

"No," he said immediately.

Teacher Mei pretty much let me come along with him to anything, so I was surprised.

"Girl," he explained, in his terse way.

"You," he said.

While I continued to try to negotiate my way onto a hunting trip throughout my time in Berdder, Teacher Mei just couldn't get his head around the idea of my being present for such activities. Nor was hunting—in Teacher Mei's manner of making, setting, and monitoring traps—a widespread enough practice for me to be able to find someone else who actually did it. The information I present here, then, is based on accounts from Teacher Mei and a few others.

In other words, while the longstanding Na proscription on women studying ceremonial books has more or less lifted to accommodate the surge of research interest, hunting remains off limits. Perhaps not incidentally, I have not yet encountered any research on Na hunting, either.

For Teacher Mei and his dad, hunting is all about negotiations with naga, and occurring as it does in Berdder, unfolds in a context of diverse human/naga engagements. While the previous chapter considered naga/human relations in terms of humans' navigation through alpine

spaces, it is worth developing that context a little further. Naga occupy and/or are springs, so people whose fields possessed springs were obligated to make regular offerings at these springs, in order to keep the naga happy and to prevent them from damaging the crops. There was also a general idea that naga were prone to stealing human souls (N. ahei), especially during moments of surprise or physical weakness. My host mom, for example, had been taken by surprise one day in the fields by a very large snake, and later diagnosed by a ritualist as having lost a soul to it. Ceremonies to recapture stolen souls take the form of negotiations, generally involving offering food or a live chicken to the naga abductor. This is how my host mom got her soul back again. In other words, the idea of engaging in different types of trade and sometimes extortion with naga is very much taken for granted, and it is in this context that I understand hunting.



Figure 11. Naga images from the Berdder area. To the left, an image of naga rulers (N. shv kaq) from the Minda archive; to the right, naga images from the sketchpad of a young ritualist friend.

Yet as my conversations with Teacher Mei revealed, the broad term "naga" (N. shv nee llu) that I have thus far used belies a teeming and hierarchical society. There are naga kings, shashee, and/or hei; these are the beings who control a given mountain, and they appear in

Berdder books and illustrations as the half-human, half-snake entities discussed in the previous chapter (see Fig. 10, above).

But that is hardly the extent of nagas' transformative potentials and kinship system. Naga kings could also appear as wild animals, frequently snakes, as well as aspects of the landscape such as the wind, as well as trees and rocks (especially the oddly shaped ones). They sometimes also appeared as humans bedecked in white robes, astride white horses. Meanwhile, the rocks, trees, and wild animals, especially the wild animals, were rlli zog and rlli mi, the sons and daughters of the naga kings. (In contrast, note that domesticated animals are identified with humans and bear no naga association.)

While much has been made of the liveliness and visual appeal of Na ceremonial books' various images of alpine flora and fauna, those images belie a deeper truth—a matter of doxa to most people in Berdder, but so far not much discussed in the scholarship<sup>64</sup>—that many of these images are representations of naga. Consider, for example, Fig. 11, in which written characters that visually evoke different types of wild animals are being used to represent ceremonial speech. Nevertheless, the animals fall into interactions and a general "rhythmic enchainment" with one another. Likewise, in Figs. 12 and 13, the various marginalia of ceremonial books overwhelmingly depict wild animals continuing their activities beyond the realm of the written script proper.

All of this is to say that hunting presents an inevitable and extremely fraught sort of negotiation between humans and naga, given that it involves the killing of naga children. Yet, much as my host mom seemed to feel a sort of wry affection for the naga that once took her soul,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>64</sup> Mathieu, A History and Anthropological Study of the Ancient Kingdoms of the Sino-Tibetan Borderland—Naxi

<sup>65</sup> Bruce Mannheim, "Preliminary Disciplines," Signs and Society 6, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 111–19.

I find in the very substance of ceremonial books an enormous attention to, appreciation of, and even affection for the animals that ritualists like Teacher Mei are also very committed to catching and eating.



Figure 12. A brief selection of pages of ceremonial books, all from the Minda archive, that also feature very visible social interactions (whether moving together, arguing, or eating each other) among animals.



Figure 13. Ritualist marginalia skew very definitively towards animals. In these images, all taken from the Minda archive, all pictured animals are "wild" (not domesticated), meaning that they are all children of the naga.



Figure 14. Contemporary ritualist marginalia, from the sketchpads of He Yusong and his fellow ritualist student. While their sketches included gods and naga kings (in the human/snake form), there were also many, many wild animals.

Because to go hunting is to enter the domain of naga with the explicit purpose of stealing from them—of taking wild animals—the entire process is pursued through a variety of forms of deception and bribery. First, Teacher Mei described masquerading as naga, specifically as the wind, and addressing his human companions as the wind (N. Zeiheeq). Since I was not able to accompany him to observe these practices, my information here is a bit thin. However, as part of his description of a naga masquerade, he also mentioned speaking in "opposite talk" (N. dazzei geezheeq), such that people express the opposite of their actual intent through the denotational content of language. The example Teacher Mei offered was saying you are full when, in fact, you would like another serving of rice. Second, he also described making frequent prayers and offerings, following a form closely related to praise-burning, to the rlli, or children of the mountain spirit. The understanding was that these children, if properly bribed with offerings, would not tattle to their parents, and thus allow one's hunting to continue. The epigraph to this chapter is an excerpt from one such oral text.

However, for powerful ritualists capable of doing so, a more effective measure was to bring the bribery and deception together by kidnapping a naga child, carrying it back to their houses, and then keeping it there, offering it food and prayers in exchange for its ongoing support of their hunting activities. In practice, this involved taking the head and forefoot of a wild animal you had killed, mounting them on a board, and keeping them at your house near the central shrine. In Teacher Mei's words:

jia limian you rlli, suibian zou

if you've got a naga child, you can go

wherever you want

you can go to the mountains and a whole lot of animals

leopards

tigers

bu hui dou ni de bu hui dou women de

keyi zou shan shang

na ge hao duo shou

bao

fu

they won't bother you they won't bother us

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weishenme? women jia you rlli rlli shi tamen de zhuren ma na ge shi women zunjing rlli ma na ge rlli lai banping why? our house has a naga-child the naga-child oversees them so, if we respect the naga-child then it mediates for us

While Yunnan once had leopards and tigers, the tigers are gone now, and the leopards extremely rare, according to the Berdder residents I asked. I take Teacher Mei's reference to what are now basically apocryphal animals as an evocation of the romantic imaginary of hunting, as is well illustrated in the scribal animal characters and marginalia already shown.

His own family had kept such a rlli for many generations, caring for it as follows: During ordinary household juniper-burning, they would make offerings to the rlli as well. In addition, when any member of the family returned to the house having caught a wild animal, they would juniper-burn and offer some of the meat as an offering to the rlli. Teacher Mei emphasized that if you were no longer able to hunt and make wild meat offerings to the rlli, it would become upset and begin to bring misfortune, rather than protection, to your house. As a result, because collectivization in the 1950s involved a complete proscription of hunting, his family had also gotten rid of their rlli, returning it to the mountains, around the same time.

Nevertheless, Teacher Mei recalled his family's history of rlli possession with immense pride. Indeed, when I asked him when his dad had first captured the rlli and brought it back to the house (indicating my own misunderstanding that the history of their rlli possession did not stretch back further) he was indignant:

bu shi wo baba!
wo baba de baba!
wo baba baba de na ge baba!
baba baba de...qianmian ma!
women jia hen jiu yiqian...rlli!
da lie de rlli
hen jiu ye shi ddolbba de na ge bbv cher

not my dad!
my dad's dad!
my dad's dad's dad!
dad's dad's....and going back!
way back my house had a naga-child!
a naga child for hunting
way back we had the ritualist lineage too

I take this to mean that the possession of a rlli was, for Teacher Mei, partially constitutive of the ritualist lineage (N. bbv cher) of which he and his father were a part. As I explored in the previous chapter, a given ritualist's ceremonial efficacy is closely linked to the power of his lineage. Thus in a similar way, I also understand Teacher Mei to be correlating the power of a lineage with its possession of a rlli.

And while his father did return the rlli in the mid-1950s, he still continued hunting in secret. In part, this was because of the notably large size of Teacher Mei's family, composed of fourteen children counting him, plus both parents. In that sense, his father was using whatever skills he had at his disposal to keep his family fed. But hunting seems also to have been a source of immense, if secret, joy. When his father departed on hunting trips, generally late in the night (lest he be discovered), Teacher Mei, who was six or seven at the time, would creep behind him until they were so deep in the mountains Teacher Mei's dad could no longer send him back home. Then Teacher Mei would reveal himself to his father, who had perhaps known he was there all along, and they would set and check traps together. Teacher Mei recalled all this for me with a lightness that was unusual, in conversations about his father. He said he remembered being so small that he couldn't get over the gullies that crosshatched the surface of the mountains. Then his father would lift him up by the armpits and swing him to the opposite bank.

#### 3.2 Berdder oral histories

If hunting uniquely belongs to ritualists and involves complex negotiations with naga, then it also gave ritualists a particular power over the crucial channel of their power, the alpine topography. Thus one way to think of the source of ritual authority is as a particular intimacy with naga, which is itself based, as I have shown, on mutual acts of deception and theft. What I

want to focus on for this chapter is the fact that ideas of deception and theft likewise thematize Berdder oral histories of the introduction of ceremonial books into Berdder—specifically, through a theft from Tibet.

During my time in Berdder, I collected several versions of these stories, one from Ami Lazo, a ritualist of Shujjia village and the descendant of Ami Shairra, the legendary ritualist (and the protagonist of these stories) who is credited with the introduction of ceremonial books. The other version I took from He Yusong, himself belonging to a famous ritualist lineage in Weishee village. It was only years later, back in Ann Arbor writing up this dissertation, that I discovered that Ge Agan, a Naxi-ethnicity researcher of Naxi culture whose work I respect immensely, visited Berdder in the 1970s and collected the same stories<sup>66</sup>—one version from Ami Lazo's father (now deceased), and one from He Yusong's paternal uncle (also deceased). Thus, placing my collected versions in conversation with Ge Agan's allows me to trace the transformations and continuities of this story over time, within two important ritualist lineages. Beyond these stories focusing specifically on the introduction of books, during my time in Berdder, I also heard brief accounts from many different people of an ongoing competition between the Lijiang-based Naxi kingdom and Berdder (vis-à-vis Ami Shairra).

In the present chapter, I bring these stories together as follows. First, I use the different versions of what might be called "The Introduction of Books" to extrapolate a common narrative, while also to consider certain features particular to Ge Agan's collected versions, the earliest I have been able to find. Second, I bring these narratives into conversation with the larger cycle of stories recounting a Berdder/Lijiang competition.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Ge Agan 戈阿干, "Dongba wenhua shengdi: Baidi jixing 东巴文化圣地--白地纪行 [The sacred land of dongba culture: Travel notes from Baidi]," in Ge Agan: Naxi xue lunji 戈阿干: 纳西学论集 (Ge Agan: A Naxi studies anthology) (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2007), 45–79.

A brief paraphrase of Ge Agan's versions of "The Introduction of Books" offers a place to begin. According to these stories, Berdder's "pictographic" script was a local invention that had long existed in the valley. The change that occurred began when Ami Shairra (the aforesaid legendary Berdder ritualist) worked as a herder for a Tibetan Buddhist monastery, and while he was there, learned to recite Tibetan Buddhist ceremonial oral texts from their correlating scriptures, then stole the scriptures, brought them back to a cave in Berdder's surrounding mountains, and translated them into the existing Naqhai script. Afterwards, Ami was more ceremonially efficacious even than the Tibetan lamas from whom he had taken the scriptures. As a result, his fame grew to the extent that, well beyond Berdder, Tibetans villagers would invite him, not the lamas, to perform their ceremonies.

This story is actually part of a larger cycle of stories about an ongoing, life-and-death struggle between Ami Shairra (of Berdder) and Lord Mu (N. Mu Laoye 木老爷), a regional personification of the Naxi kings, in which Lord Mu poses a series of challenges to Ami. Against all odds, Ami is able to mobilize his ritual power to best Lord Mu at each challenge. Finally, feeling he has no other way to put Ami in his place, Lord Mu perfidiously murders Ami by giving him a poisoned fruit. While the tales do not address directly the role of Berdder's ceremonial books in the Ami/Lord Mu competition, the books are implied in the fact that Lord Mu is competing with Ami, the original writer of the books. It is also worth noting that the frequent function of the book-origin story, at least when Berdder people cite it in ordinary conversation these days, is to insist on the fact that Lijiang's ongoing claim to ceremonial books is false: the books belong to Berdder.

In sum, as far as these Berdder stories are concerned, Berdder's ceremonial books are a result of theft from Tibetans, by which Berdder people were able to beat the Tibetans at their

own game. And later, the Naxi kings were in competition with Berdder in part *because* of the books, which, it seems clear, they did ultimately steal. I take these stories seriously as oral histories, while also understanding that they are, like any cultural production, a reflection of particular ideologies, in this case specifically regarding ideas of theft and copying.

At the historical level, though, let me begin by addressing the question that I am *not* trying to answer, and which I don't think these stories are trying to answer, either. It is: "When was Na orthography invented?" While many scholars have attempted to establish a specific date for this<sup>67</sup>, the arguments are inconclusive, and in my view, wrongly framed: Berdder's ideology of copies (to be discussed in the next section), combined with the prevalence of graphic images throughout China's southwest, suggests that the "creation" of script is unlikely to have been a single event, but something more like a gradual conventionalization of longstanding, circulating graphic motifs, much as seems to have occurred with Cretan orthographies. From this perspective, other conventionalized but clearly related sets of visual signs, such as Tibetan thangkha iconography, Pepalese shamanic drum inscriptions, Ersu and Namuyi calendrical

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<sup>67</sup> Joseph F. Rock, *The Ancient Na-Khi Kingdom of Southwest China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948); Joseph Rock, *A Na-Khi-English Encyclopedic Dictionary, Part I* (Kunming: Yunnan Education Publishing House, 1963); Mathieu, *A History and Anthropological Study of the Ancient Kingdoms of the Sino-Tibetan Borderland—Naxi and Mosuo*; Anthony Jackson, *Na-Khi Religion: An Analytical Appraisal of the Na-Khi Ritual Texts* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979); Li Lincan 李霖灿, "Lun Moxie zu xiangxing wenzi de fayuan di 论么些族象形文字的发源地 [On the origin-place of Moxie pictographic writing]," in Moxie yanjiu lunwenji 磨些研究论文集 [Collected writings on the Moxie] (Taipei: Guoli Gugong bowuyuan, 1984), 31–34.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> Ester Salgarella, "Imagining Cretan Scripts: The Influence of Visual Motifs on the Creation of Script-Signs in Bronze Age Crete," *Annual of the British School at Athens* 116 (2021): 63–94. <sup>69</sup> Beer, *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols*.

Michael Oppitz, "Drawings on Shamanic Drums," RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics, no. 22 (1992): 62–81; Michael Oppitz, "Ritual Drums of the Naxi in the Light of Their Origin Stories," in Naxi and Moso Ethnography: Kin, Rites, Pictographs, ed. Michael Oppitz and Elisabeth Hsu (Zürich: Völkerkundemuseum Zürich, 1998), 311–42; Gregory G. Maskarinec, The Rulings of the Night: An Ethnography of Nepalese Shaman Oral Texts (Univ of Wisconsin Press, 1995); H. Sidky, Haunted by the Archaic Shaman: Himalayan Jhākris and the Discourse on Shamanism (Lexington Books, 2008).

texts, <sup>71</sup> to name just a few examples, may be understood as different enregisterments <sup>72</sup> of a common visual culture. What concerns me more is the emergence of a Na scribal tradition in which a longstanding assortment of conventionalized visual signs were made to correspond with a similarly longstanding tradition of oral textuality. In that sense, I take the story's reference to Ami's learning of Tibetan oral texts not in the sense of discovering and/or stealing Tibetan oral texts, too, but of learning that correspondences can be created between them and graphic signs. With all that said, as a general historical frame of reference, it seems clear that Na ceremonial books were in use by at least the early 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, though possibly much earlier. <sup>73</sup>

I find the story's account of sequence and lines of influence extremely persuasive in three important ways: first, that oral textual recitation preceded the introduction of ceremonial books in Berdder; second, that the scribal book tradition was adopted in from Tibet; and third, that Berdder played a central role in the dissemination of this scribal tradition. Speaking first to the sequential precedence of orality over orthography: Oral texts and songs exist throughout southwest China, and putting aside the fact that one would be hard-pressed to find a human social group, at any time or place, without an elaborated tradition of song (though plenty lack a scribal tradition in the sense of books and orthographies) there is some evidence in Chinese historical records that oral texts of roughly the kind described in Chapter One have been in circulation in China's southwest China since the fifth century CE.<sup>74</sup> In a broader sense, Naxi written texts themselves betray a close alignment with oral formulaic processes, rather than

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Zhao Liming 赵丽明 and Zhang Yan 张琰, eds., Namuyi Zangzu Pazi wenxian 纳木依藏族帕孜文献 [Namuyi Tibetan Pazi documents] (Guilin: Guangxi Shifan Daxue chubanshe, 2014).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>72</sup> Agha, "Voice, Footing, Enregisterment"; Rosa and Flores, "Unsettling Race and Language: Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective"; Rosa, *Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and the Learning of Latinidad.* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>73</sup> Jackson, Na-Khi Religion: An Analytical Appraisal of the Na-Khi Ritual Texts, 78–92.

<sup>74</sup> Fang Guoyu 方国瑜, "Bai lang feshi 白狼歌诗 (Song of the white wolf)," in Yunnan shiliao congkan 云南史料丛刊 (A collection of Yunnan historical materials). (Kunming: Yunnan Daxue Chubanshe, 1998), 84–86.

existing outside of or in place of them.<sup>75</sup> In sum, given that evidence of Na books is not certain before the 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, the temporal precedence of the oral texts seems pretty clear.

Second, given the formal similarities across Na, Tibetan Buddhist, and Bon manuscripts, combined with the fact that Tibetan Buddhist and Bon scriptures would seem to predate the existence of Naqhai ceremonial books, <sup>76</sup> it seems almost certain that Berdder people adopted scribal writing conventions from Tibet.

Third, given the ubiquity of conventionalized visual imagery throughout the Himalaya, combined with its enregisterment in various historical processes, the question of who "originally" possessed this imagery seems likewise poorly framed. However, there is broad consensus in regional histories that Berdder represents an important, longstanding site for the dissemination of specifically Na religious orthography,<sup>77</sup> and I find no immediate reason to doubt that assertion. This in turn feeds back into the story cycle's implication of a competition for power between Berdder and the Lijiang-based Naxi kingdom: Given that Naxi kings consolidated their power through claims to regional religious authority,<sup>78</sup> and that such claims moved crucially through the use of Na ceremony (and possibly scripture<sup>79</sup>), it seems entirely believable that a non-Lijiang-based center of ceremonial authority, such as Berdder, would have posed a threat.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup> Pan Anshi, "The Translation of Naxi Religious Texts," in *Naxi and Moso Ethonography: Kin, Rites, Pictographs. Switzerland: University of Zurich Museum*, ed. Michael Oppitz and Elisabeth Hsu (Zürich: Völkerkundemuseum Zürich, 1998), 275–310; Poupard, "Between the Oral and the Literary: The Case of the Naxi Dongba Texts." <sup>76</sup> Kurtis R. Schaeffer, *The Culture of the Book in Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>77</sup> Mathieu, A History and Anthropological Study of the Ancient Kingdoms of the Sino-Tibetan Borderland—Naxi and Mosuo, 144.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>78</sup> Mathieu, A History and Anthropological Study of the Ancient Kingdoms of the Sino-Tibetan Borderland—Naxi and Mosuo; Jackson, Na-Khi Religion: An Analytical Appraisal of the Na-Khi Ritual Texts; Lamu Gatusa, "On the Mosuo Daba Religion," in *Quentin Roosevelt's China: Ancestral Realms of the Naxi*, ed. Christine Mathieu and Cindy Ho (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2011), 108–13.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>79</sup> Mathieu, A History and Anthropological Study of the Ancient Kingdoms of the Sino-Tibetan Borderland—Naxi and Mosuo, 193.

Proceeding from this basis in what I understand to be historical truth, I arrive at the following question at the level of cultural ideologies: In a regional context of territorial contestation and linguistic/cultural interchange that led to enormous amounts of cultural sharing, combined with the ongoing drive for groups making different political claims to differentiate themselves from each other, how did and do Berdder people make sense of the acts of theft and copying that these stories recount? How might theft and copying actually serve the purposes of group differentiation and the making of authoritative claims? Towards an answer, I want to consider semiotically what is actually involved in assertions of theft and copying, and then to contextualize those assertions in a more specific regional history.

# 3.3 A politics of copying

Recent linguistic anthropological accounts of copying and/or imitation,<sup>80</sup> rooted in Peircean iconicity<sup>81</sup> and Nelson Goodman's approach to resemblance,<sup>82</sup> offer a helpful technical framework with which to think. In this view, copying is possible through socioculturally framed perceptions of similarity based on form.<sup>83</sup> (Put another way, without social framing, either everything is kind of the same, or nothing is exactly the same; it is only through the mediating role of cultural ideologies that people know what counts as a copy.) Furthermore, creating this baseline of similarity actually offers the necessary context for drawing attention to particular types of difference *across* copies. A good example here is poetic meter; it is only by creating a

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>80</sup> Lempert, "Imitation."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>81</sup> Charles S. Peirce, "Logic as Semiotic," in *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover Publications, 1955), 98–119.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>82</sup> Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1976).

<sup>83</sup> Bruce Mannheim, "Iconicity," Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 9, no. 1–2 (2000): 107–10.

baseline of iambs (or whatever particular metrical pattern is being used) that a shift in meter, or even a variation across the intonational patterns of iambs, comes to matter.<sup>84</sup> Notions of satire and parody turn on the same principle, of calling attention to specific differences within a context of similarity.<sup>85</sup> It is thus not surprising that the concept of "replication with difference" also plays an important role in postcolonial<sup>86</sup> and abolitionist<sup>87</sup> cultural criticism, where the concept allows for analysis of acts of replication (including apparent obedience to certain social images of "good behavior") that become a critique of the images themselves. This is to say that attention to acts of copying opens the doors for more subtle analyses of subaltern resistance and critique—though as Chapters Six and Seven will consider, it underlies acts of exploitative appropriation and certain kinds of censorship as well.

For present purposes, what matters is that in Berdder, the notion of copying as an act of replication with difference has conspired with mandalic ontologies to shape literacy ecologies as well as the movement of ceremonial/political power struggles. In considering this, I want to begin by setting forth how copies are related to mandalic politics. The previous chapter considered the inherent politics of mandalic centers: they are always in competition with one another, seeking to appropriate each other to their peripheries. Praise-burning itself is an example, involving the assertion of particular holy mountains as centers and implicitly entering into competition with other mountains' claims to centrality. A relevant historical example involves a 16th century Naxi king's visit to Berdder, an official but distant portion of his

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>84</sup> Robert Pinsky, *The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998); Michael Lempert, "On the Pragmatic Poetry of Pose: Gesture, Parallelism, Politics," *Signs and Society* 6, no. 1 (2018): 120–46.

<sup>85</sup> Lempert, "Imitation."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>86</sup> Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis (1984): 125–33.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>87</sup> Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

kingdom's territory, which, it seems almost certain, he was visiting as a way of reasserting his possession of it. It is thus not at all surprising that he marked the visit by inscribing a rock of Berdder's holy mountain, Bbapardduaq, with a poem that lay claim to the mountain in his name.<sup>88</sup>

Yet if the appropriation of other centers is one way to colonize the world from within a mandalic framework, another way to do so is by increasing and fortifying one's periphery, either through appropriation of additional land or through the production of copies, that is, "lesser" versions of a given center. That is, in this case, I find regional notions of possession moving through an idea of similarity to a given center combined with the relevant difference being a given copy's lesser status with respect to its center. This logic is visible in the common assertion that all plants and animals on a mountain are themselves naga, only lesser ones: they are children of the naga king that rules/is the mountain. Likewise with human homes, which though the departure of younger sons to start houses elsewhere, build a network of kin connections emanating from a hierarchy of centers. Stated broadly, that is, the movement of kinship through generations, whether through naga or through humans, seems understood within the same logic of copying and of mandalic centers. In this case, then, ethics are themselves political: if it is "good" to have children, that is in part because it strengthens one's house (and kinship network of houses). And if it is good to copy books, then that is as part of a house and/or a ritual lineage.

It is at the same time precisely through the circulation of copies that a specific type of political contestation, involving the appropriation of other centers' copies as a vie for one's own

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>88</sup> Fang Guoyu 方国瑜, "Naxi xiangxing wenzi de chuangshi, fu shuo biaoyin wenzi de chuangshi 纳西象形文字的 创始,附说表音文字的创始 [The origin of the Naxi pictographs, with consideration of phonetic writing's origin]," in Fang Guoyu Naxi xue lunji 方国瑜纳西学论集 [Fang Guoyu's collected essays in Naxi studies] (Beijing: Minzu chubanshe, 2007), 122–30; Mathieu, A History and Anthropological Study of the Ancient Kingdoms of the Sino-Tibetan Borderland—Naxi and Mosuo.

advancement, takes shape. Here another Berdder story offers some insight. In this story, told to me by my host dad as well as Teacher Mei, in the Nationalist period, Berdder had its own small Tibetan Buddhist temple, within which was a beautiful and powerful deity statue. However, some Tibetans passing through the area secretly cut the statue from its pedestal and carried it off to Lhasa, where they installed it in a temple there. When some Berdder people travelled to Lhasa (presumably on a pilgrimage of some sort), they came upon the statue, but noted that it had changed: its head had turned to face in the direction of Berdder, and watery tears dripped slowly from its stone eyes.

Yinddertal and Teacher Mei referred to the statue as a pusa 菩萨—the Chinese term for bodhisattva, and in much of Berdder, a generic term for powerful nonhuman being—and they did not stringently differentiate between a representation of a deity and the deity itself. At the same time, across other conversations dealing with images of deities, Berdder interlocutors tended to recognize a single deity as the origin of these copies. <sup>89</sup> There was thus a general linkage of the deity to other images of the deity, as well as to the very deity from which it was copied. <sup>90</sup> In a somewhat abstract sense, then, one might identify the deity itself as the mandalic center in this case. Yet just as an ideology of mandalic centers and peripheries, continually in hierarchical negotiation, is a crucial regional ideology, it works politically precisely because the identification of centers is fluid. In the context of this particular story, what matters is that the statue, as a Tibetan Buddhist statue, was an *apparent* expression of the Tibetan Buddhist center (in Lhasa),

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>89</sup> The conceptual framework here seems linked to my earlier discussion of the presence of dead souls simultaneously at the Black Mountain and a given household shrine, and likewise to ideas of different Buddha bodies. See, for example, Robin Kornman, "Gesar of Ling," in *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr., Princeton Readings in Religions (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 39–68. In this case, it is the dharmakaya ("dharma body") that functions as a "center."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>90</sup> Bernard Faure, "The Buddhist Icon and the Modern Gaze," Critical Inquiry 24, no. 3 (1998): 768–813.

and its instatement in Berdder would have seemed, within the mandalic logic I have described, to attest to Berdder's linkage to that center in the manner of a lesser copy.

However, the language of the story, which involved persistent references to theft, is itself an assertion of a congruent but alternative mandalic logic, such that Berdder exists as a separate and at least equivalent power. This is emphasized again in the story's conclusion, in which an object (the statue) being brought closer to its apparent source/center actually weeps, and indicates through its posture a desire to return to its *real* center, Berdder. Thus, in addition to reading a powerful regional political subtext to this story, I take it as a story about copying. The question in this case is to which center the statue belongs, either Lhasa or Berdder, and its movement across the landscape is a part, though not all, of how those identifications are made. By extension, to steal the statue is an assertion of power, just as to find it gazing towards Berdder is, too.

Given that in Berdder it is a matter of doxic truth that to reproduce an oral text, to copy a book, or to walk a road are all acts of inherent good, then one way to frame this is by thinking of the production of a copies as contributing to the strengthening of centers, in several ways. One way is simply by increasing the number of copies a particular center possesses. Another, exemplified by walking specific roads, is to map a specific mandalic structure on the world. In a more mediated way, oral texts achieve the same thing, imposing specific form on the earth that also asserts a particular mandalic structure. Consider, for example, that among the instructions for performing praise-burning that are embedded within praise-burning texts, there are frequent enticements to praise-burn, as well as threats about what happens if you don't. For example, a common refrain following the naming of a god is "if you want fertility / if you want wealth / if you want long life / praise X god" (N. nee mei al mei / heeq mei jjiai mei / zee sherl hal yil ni

mei / X chobba bbei). The implication is that repeated praise-burnings will win the reciter desirable things such as fertility, wealth, and longevity. Praise-burning also includes threats such as "if you don't praise-burn / the water you drink will taste bitter" (N. me llu bbi / teeq bbi kuq ka gv). This is to say that the oral text "wants" (is designed) to be repeated, that through its repetition it asserts the centrality of Bbapardduaq, and that in all these ways, it embeds within itself an ethics and politics of copying.

Yet in the context of mandalic politics, the body of the walker also becomes salient, not simply as a participant in copying processes, but also as its own copy to be appropriated by different centers. While it is a fundamental presupposition of the oral texts described in the previous chapter that humans are subordinated to their houses and their local sacred mountains, there is a way in which movement across the topography renders these assumptions fluid and negotiable. Ultimately, all things are centers in relations of power with other centers, and those relations are expressed in terms of which thing copies which. Recall also my host mom's love story from the previous chapter, in which it is Uncle's movement across the landscape with respect to at least four different centers (Bbapardduaq, his natal home, his temporary home, and Auntie's home in Weishee village) that indexes a narrative of his courtship and eventual marriage to Auntie.

This perspective also casts light on a powerful concept in Na areas, including Berdder, that has been translated in Anglophone scholarship as fame.<sup>91</sup> The Naqhai term, kaq kuq, combines the term for story or discursive chunk (N. kaq) with the verb for perfoming agricultural labor (N. kuq), much in the manner of spreading, tilling, and/or harvesting discourse. To acquire

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>91</sup> Mueggler, *The Paper Road: Archive and Experience in the Botanical Exploration of West China and Tibet*; Sydney D. White, "Fame and Sacrifice the Gendered Construction of Naxi Identities," *Modern China* 23, no. 3 (1997): 298–327.

fame for oneself involves becoming known widely through admirable acts but also simply through travel in the mountains. My host dad's heroic visions of his 1990s trading trip absolutely drew on this concept, which he invoked several times in his stories to me about it. Indeed, his stories allow me to link the Berdder-specific theory of publicity from last chapter to the idea of mandalic copying I have presented here: Berdder-specific uses of publicity circle around connecting oneself to a mandalic center, whether one's own home or a nearby holy mountain, and thusly seeking communication with unseen beings attached to one's mandalic center through the physical continuity of the naga topography. Fame offers a slight reconceptualization of such publicity by siting the mandalic center in a walking person's body. Thus, while funeral oral texts primarily serve to guide a dead soul to another center (the Black Mountain), to seek fame is to appropriate the areas one passes through to one's own center. To be famous, then, is to be a powerful center, and mountain travel is not simply a matter of making oneself known far and wide, but of colonizing naga centers across the landscape as copies of oneself.

There is a final way that copying matters in Berdder, and it involves exploiting the crossmodal correspondences of the literacy ecology as avenues for the production of copies across vast (crossmodal) difference. In Berdder, I find this drama of crossmodal transformation in the creation of roads out of unknown topographies (as with the pursuit of fame). I also find it in the production of oral texts from memory. Indeed, as I have discussed, there is a longstanding formal correlation between these activities, and I can now specify the nature of that correlation: both involve the production of copies across vast difference, in ways that seem to generate a great deal of power.

Nor does such power sit still. Given that oral texts assert and deny particular mandalic centers, to generate such power is to add to the force of the forms asserted. Recalling the Naxi

king's inscription of a rock at Bbapardduaq, in addition to appropriating the mountain to his own center in Lijiang, the script in which the poem is written is, very unusually for that time in Berdder, Chinese. It seems to me that this alternative script may at the time have represented yet another modality, through its difference from Berdder's habitual ways of writing attesting to a crossmodal transformative power that worked to hold the Naxi king's claim in place.

In Webb Keane's analysis of "spirit writing," he explores how actions (such as burning, burying, etc) on physically material written texts work through "semiotic transduction" to alter the state of the written message, sometimes in ways framed to communicate with a spirit world. In the context of the present discussion of copying, this insight might be restated as follows: the production of a copy across semiotic modalities is ideologized as having particular power because of the skill required to create similarity across apparent difference.

This discussion of copying helps to explain how ceremonial books became incorporated into Berdder's literacy ecology. First, the script of the books becomes framed to resemble the naga topography, and thus to copy it across modalities. Second, the oral text then copies the script. This new set of relationships productively displaces the previous oral textual relationship of memory to oral text: it not only clarifies the ideological bases of the first, replacing memory with a visual representation of the landscape (the written script), but also builds an additional crossmodal copy into acts of oral recitation (by creating a movement of topography to book, and then book to recitation). In a context of ongoing territorial contestation and mandalic ideologies of the copy, this adds ceremonial oomph to the territorial claims being made. It is an act of political escalation. In order to specify this claim, I turn now to a general historical sketch of Berdder's place within regional politics.

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<sup>92</sup> Keane, "On Spirit Writing: Materialities of Language and the Religious Work of Transduction."

### 3.4 A history of stolen copies

For more than a thousand years, Berdder existed in the interstices of different powers, powers frequently at war with one another, continually claiming the valley, imagining themselves to absorb it, and then being displaced. Taking the eighth century CE as a starting point, by this time, the Tibetan Empire had claimed and occupied northwest Yunnan, including Berdder. To the southeast, the Naxi kingdom—a polity centered in Lijiang that would, several hundred years later, claim Berdder, and eventually inscribe its rocks—had fallen under the control of the Nanzhao kingdom based yet further south in Dali. Meanwhile, Nanzhao was itself in continual negotiations with Tibet and the Chinese Tang. Page 194

It was the Mongol conquest of Yunnan in 1253 CE, through which the Mongols conferred regional authority on the Lijiang-based Naxi rulers, that the Naxi kingdom was able to extend its territorial claims ultimately to an area that included Berdder. The Naxi kings then mobilized ddolbba ceremonies (identified with Berdder) and also affiliations with the Tibetan Buddhist Karma-pa sect to solidify their claims to power. So the thinking goes, Berdder's linguistic and scribal similarities with Lijiang, combined with its ceremonial instrumentality in Naxi state power, speaks to its identity with that power. While a great deal of Na research, itself implicitly centered in Lijiang, takes Berdder's incorporation as a matter of unproblematic historical truth, the Berdder oral histories I encountered tell a rather different tale.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>93</sup> Kristina Dy-Liacco, *The Victorious Karma-Pa Has Come to 'Jang: An Examination of Naxi Patronage of the Bka'-Brgyud-Pa in the Fifteenth to Seventeenth Centuries* (Indiana University, 2005), 6; Christopher I. Beckwith, *The Tibetan Empire in Central Asia: A History of the Struggle for Great Power among Tibetans, Turks, Arabs, and Chinese during the Early Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 64–65.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>94</sup> Charles Backus, *The Nan-Chao Kingdom and T'ang China's Southwestern Frontier*, Cambridge Studies in Chinese History, Literature, and Institutions (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

<sup>95</sup> Dy-Liacco, The Victorious Karma-Pa Has Come to 'Jang.

At this level, it is worth turning briefly to some of my preliminary archival research using an archive of Na books collected in the 1950s from Lijiang, Weixi, and Sanba (the Naxiethnicity county in which Berdder is located). While many of the books collected seem to date back long before the 1950s, certainly to the Nationalist period, I mention them here not as a way of making specific claims about the nature of ceremonial practice during the time of the Naxiethnigdom, but as a broad and cursory look into the intentional differentiation of traditions of Na ceremonial practice across different locations.

With this in mind, the books share many features involving book shape, script, and types of ceremonies referenced. However, their interpretation seems to involve somewhat different kinds of knowledge and practices: when I shared printed copies of many of these books with Berdder ritualists, they found books from Weixi and Lijiang basically impossible to read, while those from the Sanba area were recognizably different from contemporary books but still basically legible/usable.

In the second case, I turn to a frequent motif throughout the books, depictions of ritualists (which, given that the book-writers were themselves ritualists, I take to be a ritualist-specific metapragmatics of the nature of being a ritualist). At this level, I find shared patterns across Lijiang and Weixi, and something notably different in the Berrder area. Many Illustrations from Lijiang and Weixi seem to be drawing on a Chinese iconography of learned scholar-official, frequently showing ritualists holding books, sometimes seated, sometimes with tools of writing.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>96</sup> Collected by the Naxi culture scholar He Zhiwu (Naxi ethnicity, trained both as a ritualist and through the Liandalegacy system in Kunming). The archive presently is stored at Beijing's Minzu University, where Professor Huang Jianming generously granted me digital copies of the entire collection.



Figure 15. From the left, the first two images are from Lijiang, and the last two from Weixi. Recall that the rectangular images with featherlike internal designs represent ceremonial books (and indeed are the Na written character for ceremonial book [N. tei'ee.]).

In other images, also from Lijiang, and Weixi, the iconography is distinctly that of Tibetan Buddhism, picturing ritualists sitting on lotuses in the manner of thangkha deity paintings, and the occasional halo and/or mandorla:



Figure 16. From left, the first two images come from Lijiang, the second two from Weixi.

In contrast, Sanba (Berdder) images of ritualists show them dressed in a traditional Na form of armor, wielding ceremonial weapons, and almost always performing ceremonial dances:



Figure 17. Berdder-area images of ritualists.

In some cases, they appear alongside different types of (typically unseen) beings with whom ceremony explicitly puts them into conversation—and of course, sometimes battle:



Figure 18. Berdder-area images of ritualists featuring the visibilization of powerful nonhuman beings.

While these images raise many questions (and require a much deeper examination of the books in question), a few points seem clear. First, Lijiang and Weixi ritualists are self-consciously borrowing imagery from elite Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist traditions in their depictions of themselves. They are in a sense incorporating copies of other, powerful traditions as a way of bolstering their own prestige (strengthening their centers). Given that ritualists were at this time in communication to some extent, that indeed travel to Berdder was viewed as a crucial component of most ritualists' learning process, 97 the stark difference with Berdder ritualists' self-representation suggests a deliberate attempt at differentiation, most likely on both sides. Read in the context of the Berdder oral history I have provided, it seems plausible that Lijiang and Weixi ritualists were making an implicit argument for the power of their own scribal traditions by taking on signs of authority that placed them beyond the Berdder orbit, just as Berdder ritualists were insisting on the distinctive centrality of their own tradition.

Given the clear role of Tibetan Buddhist visual culture in Lijiang- and Weixi-area ritualist self-depictions, but not those of Berdder, *along with* the Berdder story's assertion of book-theft from Tibetan Buddhist monks, I arrive back at the question of the history of Berdder's relation to Tibet. In fact, because of its somewhat northerly location, Berdder was actually claimed by the Tibetan Empire for a longer time and more frequently than areas in Lijiang's orbit, and its contact with Tibetan peoples seems to have involved a greater quantity of people over a longer period of time (in the present, its political designation is as a Naxi ethnicity county *within* a Tibetan ethnicity autonomous prefecture). Most Berdder people today of the generations born during the Cultural Revolution and before all speak some Tibetan, and there is a general stereotype of Tibetans as a familiar group of cultural others, marked by the hegemonic power of

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>97</sup> Ge Agan 戈阿干, "Dongba wenhua shengdi: Baidi jixing 东巴文化圣地--白地纪行 [The sacred land of dongba culture: travel notes from Baidi]."

the institutions to which they are linked, Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan state. Put another way, Berdder oral histories attest to a long history of living under the shadow of Tibetan power and Tibetan rule, but at its furthest edges and generally away from practices of religious standardization. In contrast, Lijiang is at the very heart of Na territory (in the present it is its own Naxi autonomous region), and while it could not have experienced the same habitual, everyday interchange with Tibetan peoples, it had an ongoing political relationship, led by the Naxi kings, with the Karma-pa sect, which built several temples in the Lijiang area. <sup>98</sup> I thus take Berdder ritualists' image of themselves as a deliberate self-differentiation from Tibetan groups as well.

What, then, of Tibetan images of Lijiang and Berdder? While I lack the expertise to say much on this topic, a few basic observations may be helpful. First, many Tibetan sources refer to the Naxi kingdom centered in Lijiang as 'Jang or 'Jang Satham, and with that terminology comes an understanding of it as a cultural other, though with its own infrastructure of state. However, it seems unlikely that Tibetan conceptions of 'Jang extended as far as Berdder.<sup>99</sup> It seems likely that the area was considered generally Tibetan by the Tibetans, but of a notably "barbarian" cast given that its peoples were engaged in ceremonial practices that were broadly legible within the "Himalayan" cultural sphere (perhaps even more so than other Na areas, because of Berdder's great emphasis on naga sociality).

Here the writings of one Patrul Rinpoche<sup>100</sup>, a mid-19<sup>th</sup> century lama in Kham (within the same territory as Berdder), are illuminating. Patrul Rinpoche's book identifies disengagement from naga worship specifically as a crucial step in the path towards Buddhist enlightenment.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>98</sup> Dy-Liacco, *The Victorious Karma-Pa Has Come to 'Jang*; Karl Debreczeny, *Ethnicity and Esoteric Power: Negotiating the Sino-Tibetan Synthesis in Ming Buddhist Painting*, PhD diss (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>99</sup> Dy-Liacco, *The Victorious Karma-Pa Has Come to 'Jang*; Debreczeny, *Ethnicity and Esoteric Power: Negotiating the Sino-Tibetan Synthesis in Ming Buddhist Painting.* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>100</sup> Dpal-sprul O-rgyan-'jigs-med-chos-kyi-dbang-po, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, 2nd ed., Sacred Literature Series (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998).

"Having taken refuge in the Buddha," he warns, "do not pay homage to deities within samsara" (182). In particular, "do not pay homage to local gods, owners of the ground...." (182). Here the local gods, owners of the ground, are certainly naga (within the Berdder terms set forth in Chapter One). In sum, the practices of naga worship that appear so powerfully throughout Berdder belong to the same cultural world as those of Tibetan Buddhism, but as highly denigrated cultural forms.<sup>101</sup>

This broad context creates a particular set of problems for Berdder people seeking to differentiate themselves both from Tibet and from the Lijiang-based Naxi kingdom (or its legacies), and I see their story of books as offering a response to those problems that asserts the independence and the power of Berdder as its own mandalic center. First, theft itself is an expression of differentiation, and the story clearly demonstrates the removal of scriptures from Tibet followed by their incorporation into (and indeed improvement within) the Berdder world. The same logic applies to the story of the jealous Naxi king's desire to best Ami: such jealousy, which might be understood as a desire for possession, attests to Berdder's difference from Lijiang.

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This notion of denigrated Tibetan cultural forms leads to the now still very limited scholarship on Bon, a pre-Buddhist tradition that was later standardized (and differentiated from) Tibetan Buddhism in the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. While notions of Bon are therefore hard to get to the bottom of today, it's worth noting that Na traditions feature many distinctively Bon characteristics, such as a common progenitor figure, the use of leftward (not rightward) turning swastikas in their visual imagery, a death land that is reachable through movement along a road, and a strong ceremonial correlation of horses with travel to that death land. See, for example, Per Kvaerne, "The Literature of Bon," *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre, New York*, 1996; Per Kvaerne, "Tonpa Shenrab Miwo: Founder of the Bon Religion," in *Bon: The Magic Word: The Indigenous Religion of Tibet* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2007), 83–97; Per Kvaerne, *Tibet Bon Religion: A Death Ritual of the Tibetan Bonpos* (Brill, 1985); Per Kvaerne, *The Bön Religion of Tibet: The Iconography of a Living Tradition* (Shambhala Publications, 1996); Joseph Rock, "The Birth and Origin of Dto-Mba Shi-Lo, the Founder of the Mo-so Shamanism, According to Mo-so Manuscripts," *Artibus Asiae* 7, no. 1/4 (1937): 5–85; Samten G. Karmay and Jeff Watts, *Bon: The Magic Word*, 2007; Śar-rdza Bkra-śis-rgyal-mtshan, *The Treasury of Good Sayings: A Tibetan History of Bon*, ed. Samten Gyaltsen Karmay (London: Oxford University Press, 1972); Per Kvaerne, "Aspects of the Origin of the Buddhist Tradition in Tibet," *Numen* 19, no. Fasc. 1 (1972): 22–40.

Yet there is a final dimension to the story that recalls a longer-standing set of conflicts between humans and naga, and actually mobilizes those conflicts towards the emphatic, ceremonially authoritative assertion of Berdder's centrality. To trace this, I want to look at the particular story variant concerning Ami's theft of the books, from the earliest version I have (from Ge Agan's research).

## 3.5 Stolen copies in naga/human relations

The account Ge offers, in Chinese, combines versions from both of his informants, and I include his full text below. Please note that he frequently uses Chinese-language transliterations of Naqhai terms. In general, I render the terms based on the Chinese-language transliteration and then include my best guess of the Naqhai phrase in brackets. However, for clarity's sake, I render Ami's name throughout as Ami (rather than the Chinese "Aming 阿明"), and I write "Berdder" rather than the Chinese term, "Baidi 白地."

According to Jiagaji (N. Yakazzee), Ami was from Songjia (N. Shuijjia) and went by the name of Ami Naken (N. Ami Nalheeq/Nalkeeq [?]). He and his father were captured by Tibetans and taken to Tibetan lands (some ritualists say it was instead two brothers who were captured) where they were enslaved. During the day, they were forced to graze horses, and at night they lit torches for Tibetan children studying scriptures. 佳嘎吉老人说,阿明是松甲人,名叫阿明纳肯,他和他的父亲曾被藏人抓到藏地去(有东巴传为被抓去的是兄弟俩)当奴隶,白天为主人放马,夜间为学经书的藏族儿童点松明火把。

There was a sacred spring nearby, and after drinking from it, Ami became incredibly clever. Just by listening to the scripture classes, he quickly surpassed the Tibetan children, and the teaching master started to be extremely wary of him. In secret, Ami also came up with a plan: During the day when he and his father were grazing horses, one of them would ride a horse while the other would hide under a wood bridge. When the one on horseback came to the bridge, the one in hiding would stand up suddenly and wave a black goatskin.

那儿有一眼神井,阿明喝到那井水后便变得特别聪明。他通过旁听学会的经书超过了那些藏族孩子,经师便开始提防他。他也暗中想好了对策,他们白天放马时,一

人骑在马上,另一人藏身在一座木桥下,当乘骑着奔马来到木桥前,藏身者突然站起身,挥舞一领黑羊皮。

Eventually, all the horses they had overseen came to the bridge, only to [be frightened by the black goatskin and] turn tail and flee. Afterwards, Ami and his father fled with the books they had studied. When the teaching master realized, he ordered his followers to pursue them on fast horses. But none of the horses dared cross the bridge [because of their earlier fright]. After Ami returned to Baidi, it was no longer convenient to live in Songjia, and he concealed himself at the Ami Cave (or "nai ke" [N. na keel, "hiding spot"].

久而久之,那些由他们放牧的马匹一到桥头便掉头往后迅跑。后来,他们带上学成的经书开始逃跑。藏族经师察觉后,派人骑上快马追赶,然而那些马匹无一能通过 那座木桥。阿明回到白地后不便再住在松甲,就藏身在阿明岩柯(即乃科)之中。

There in the cave, he used the old books to write new ones. Then he ceremonially burned the old books, and consumed their ashes, drinking them down with water. He took the water from a well, located just below the cave. Thus, later generations of dongba come to the Ami Cave every year to ladle water from the well and hold the "dongba ji" (N. ???) ritual, as well as the "zhi zai" (N. jer jail) ceremony.

在这个洞穴里,他把旧书写成新书。他用香火焚化了那些旧书,并把灰烬用水冲进自己的肚子里。岩洞下边有一眼水井,他饮用的正是那眼水井的水。所以,后代东巴每年都要舀井水到阿明什罗藏身处举行"东巴季"(焚天香)仪式,进行"汁再"典礼。

Later in Tibetan lands, there was a problem of tiger dens, such that the tigers ate a great number of yaks. People invited Ami to perform a ceremony [to resolve the problem]. Ami just wrote a bit of "ze ke" [N. zee keel] (i.e., a "ze" demon suppression spell written on a wooden slat) and stuck the slat into a mountain pass where ferocious tigers often passed ("browsed through"). With that, the tiger demons surrendered. As a result, the Tibetan common people respected him even more. Another time, he again came to hold a ceremony, and on the evening of the first day, he vanished. People were very concerned for him, not guessing that he'd left on a ceremonial drum, flying from the direction of Daju back to Berdder.

后来,藏地出现虎穴,吃掉很多牦牛,便来请阿明施行法术。阿明仅写了一块"仄柯"(镇"仄"魔的木牌话)插在猛虎翻阅的山垭口,就把恶虎兽魔给降服了。于是,藏地百姓更敬服他了。又一次,他被聘去做法事,到了初夕之夜还不见归来,人们很为他着急,不料他骑在一面法鼓上,从大具方向飞回白地来。<sup>102</sup>

What I find most interesting here is the question that the story seems to try to answer, of the manner by which Tibetan oral texts and scriptures were re-contextualized in Berdder. In

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>102</sup> Ge Agan 戈阿干, "Dongba wenhua shengdi: Baidi jixing 东巴文化圣地--白地纪行 [The sacred land of dongba culture: travel notes from Baidi]," 60.

some ways, this continues the competitive problematic: while it is good to steal them, they cannot just be used as they are. They must be converted into Berdder things—which means specifically, by the logic I have suggested in this chapter, that they must be made into lesser copies of Bbapardduaq.

It is thus not surprising that the resulting transformation moves through a naga topography (inevitably connected to Bbapardduaq). Indeed, every act of theft is also one of transformation mediated by naga (expressed in this story by the presence of springs and wells). In the first case, when Ami learns to recite Tibetan texts, he does so after having drunk from a spring—a spring to which, the story implies, he possesses unique access. In the second case, his conversion of old (Tibetan) books into new (Berdder) ones combines praise-burning with juniper-burning (both directed to naga), and as is common in these ceremonies, incorporates water from a nearby well (linked to naga). Indeed, it is through his bodily consumption of the Tibetan books' ashes combined with the spring water that he seems to lay claim fully to the new books.

I understand the story as a whole to communicate (1) the nature of Berdder ritualists' power as based in engagements with naga, and (2) the differences of Berdder literacy practices as compared to those of Tibet. Ami's reliance on naga is an assertion of the value of the thing so frequently denigrated (naga worship) and a use of it to exceed the skills of Tibetan Buddhist monks. It is a slap in the face. There is then an explicitly counter-Tibetan Buddhist movement here that at the same time brings to light the real ontological commitments of Berdder people (to naga topographies).

At the same time, by asserting themselves as the origin of books, Berdder people also establish Lijiang and Weixi ritualists, among many others, as copies of themselves. Given the

extent to which regional history does give this origin status to Berdder, it is thus very believable that the Naxi kings would have felt threatened by it—enough, for example, to make an official state visit and to inscribe rocks at Bbapardduaq.

The final wrinkle here involves the implications of inserting ceremonial books into Berdder's existing literacy ecology. In an earlier section, I have laid out how this seems to have worked technically, but to reiterate here: The orthography participates in a series of cross-modal correspondences, itself representing the landscape while offering the graphic signs from which oral texts are derived. As I have noted, oral textual recitation is often described as a process of walking the memory's landscape, and the incorporation of written books that use distinctively alpine graphic signs actually crystallizes the existing ideology, emphasizing oral texts as the result of two transformations of the topography (from land to page, and from page to speech). By the logic of cross-modal transformation, incorporating two transformations also kicks up the power of the resulting oral texts. There is thus a very fundamental way in which ritualists specifically—the only people really trained in books—are, through their adoption of a scribal tradition, bolstering their own recitational authority.

Yet I also want to feed observations about a fundamental human/naga tension back into understandings of Na books. Given that one of the new correspondences involves a correlation of alpine topography with page, it must be understood as an act of copying naga themselves, and then appropriating them to oral texts, ritualists' expression of power. There is a looping motion here, given that the "voice" of the naga is effectively being stolen in order to speak *to* naga (as I have argued all oral texts ultimately do). All of this brings me back to the act of theft with which this chapter began, the abduction of a naga child to ensure that it continues to aid human ritualists in deceiving its parents and allowing the hunting to continue. At this level, the insertion

of pictographic books into the literacy ecology actually reproduces the form of these dangerous but potent naga-child thefts. This is to say that ceremonial books come to function as copies of naga children themselves, in a way that can only further solidify their power.

That power is strengthened in a final way by creating what amounts to an elite ritualist community, a rarefied public accessible only through the circulation of ceremonial books.



Figure 19. More marginalia from the Minda archive, this placing the iconic Berdder ritualist together with wild animals, including a naga king (the dragon) and a leopard.

### 3.6 A meeting place

The issue of publics becomes relevant again. Insofar as all elements of Berdder's literacy ecology leads back to that human confrontation with the land, all possible literacy practices grant entry to a world system that is most fundamentally articulated by the land, and through such means extends itself beyond individual, embodied interactions. At this level, the books perform an additional function as well: through the highly particular training required to gain literacy in them—something not attainable broadly, as with walking or with oral texts—I find them creating a new, inner public of ritualists, one that likewise extends in time and space and reaches towards the landscape, but is off limits to those with knowledge only of other literacy practices. Insofar as the texts also bring together images of the landscape with images of oral speech, they also

combine the core sources of power a ritualist has, providing a miniature world of sorts for them to inhabit.

To do so also has special meaning for a ceremonial tradition in which ritual power derives in part through one's lineage, which is itself expressed and maintained by the movement of rlli and books through time. This point is further emphasized in a particular, generic component of ceremonial books, an "after word" (N. kaq maiq jji) portion in which the ritualist writer shifts to the *see jjyiq* register (discussed in the next section) which allows for the conveyance of his own individual voice (rather than the generic voice of ceremonial recitations), and speaks to the descendants he knows will read his books. In one such after word written by Teacher Mei's grandfather, the ritualist warns his descendants how, based on his divining, they should avoid certain days for the setting of marital engagements. All of this is to say that ritualists really do talk to one another, over the veil of death, through their books; and their books are themselves a repetition of naga lands.

For all these reasons, I view Teacher Mei's reading of his father's books, as well as his ongoing commitment to hunting in the mountains, as a search for conversation with his dad. But what was the tone of that conversation? What did it do, or what problems might it have created? I have tried to draw out a few contextualizing threads over the last few chapters: Teacher Mei felt that his father exceeded him in pretty much every way, and this comparison became all the more overwhelming because now, in his later years, he was doing the exact same thing that his father had done—sit on Bbapardduaq and try to recite money out of tourists—and Berdder residents inevitably made the harsh comparisons for him. In the immediate wake of his father's death, I remember arriving late to class one day, to find that Teacher Mei, left to his own devices with the ceremonial liquor, was crying over his books.

At the same time, I think his relationship with his dad reached its greatest levels of difficulty only in the context of broader community judgment; I have seen no indication that his father himself brought down such judgments on his son. The private moments that Teacher Mei recalled had a very different tone, involving secret mountain missions and the gullies that seemed like canyons to his six-year-old self. My best guess is that books and hunting carved out a space apart for him and his dad, a space where the relationship could exist in a quieter, a "public" but slightly less accessible, way.

#### **CHAPTER 4**

# Writing Chinese and Minority Ethnic Mass Subjects

Are there any children left who have not yet eaten human flesh? Save the children.... 沒有吃過人的孩子,或者沒有? 救救孩子...... —Lu Xun, "Diary of a Madman" (1918)

While pursuing your studies in Marxism and entering into the life of the masses, you ought also to study these people's art: live with it, digest it, and make it part of the flesh of your own work.

在努力学习马克思主义和深入民众生活同时,应该更进一步学习人民优秀的 艺术创作,好好的体会它、消化它,使成为自己作品的一部分血肉。

—Mao Dun, "An Introduction to Folk Literature" (1955)

In Lu Xun's 1918 Chinese-language short story, "Diary of a Madman," the now-famous climactic scene involves a confrontation between the narrator (the supposed madman) and a book. Haunted by the suspicion that the everyday life of his village belies some deep and horrific secret, the narrator stays up all one night seeking answers in an ancient history book. While at first the written text is familiar, one of the many texts he spent his youth studying and learning, his vision changes deep into the night. Suddenly he sees a message written between the familiar lines: Eat people (Ch. chi ren 吃人).

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<sup>103</sup> Lu Xun 魯迅, "Kuangren riji 狂人日記 [A madman's diary]," in Na han 吶喊 [A call to arms] (Shanghai: Lu Xun quan ji chu ban she, 1947); Lu Xun, "A Madman's Diary," in *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China: The Complete Fiction of Lu Xun*, trans. Julia Lovell (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).



Figure 20. Two woodblock images illustrating "Diary of a Madman's" pivotal scene of reading. In the image to the left, the written words, "eat people," float in the air above the narrator's head. To the right, the book itself, grown larger than the narrator's body, seems itself poised to devour him.

The narrator's discovery of the old book's "true" message—to cannibalize members of one's own community—leads him to a cascade of horrendous realizations: his village and indeed all of Chinese society is cannibalistic; his family already devoured his younger sister; in ignorant complicity, he shared soup with his family and consumed his sister's flesh, too. These realizations literalize a widespread conviction among urban elite of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century China, that the social world of China was irretrievably and internally broken, incapable of resisting Japanese and Western encroachment, and requiring dramatic reinvention in order to survive. It expresses the simultaneous fear that such reinvention might come too late.<sup>104</sup>

<sup>104</sup> Theodore Huters, "Blossoms in the Snow: Lu Xun and the Dilemma of Modern Chinese Literature," *Modern China* 10, no. 1 (1984): 49–77; Yi-tsi Feuerwerker, *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant 'Other' in Modern Chinese Literature* (Stanford University Press, 1998); Xiaobing Tang, "Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman' and a Chinese Modernism," *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 107, no. 5 (1992): 1222–34; Cara Healey, "Madmen and Iron Houses: Lu Xun, Information Degradation, and Generic Hybridity in Contemporary Chinese SF," *Science Fiction Studies* 46, no. 3 (2019): 511–24; Lydia Liu, "Translating National Character: Lu Xun and Arthur Smith," in *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and* 

Historically speaking, the story marks the beginning of that attempted reinvention: among the first works of literature to be written in vernacular rather than literary Chinese, it initiated the May Fourth movement, a literary revolution that led eventually to China's socialist revolution in 1949, and thus to the establishment of today's People's Republic of China.<sup>105</sup>

This chapter builds on the simple but crucial fact that "Diary of a Madman" takes its revolutionary power from acts of literacy—in its denotational narrative, which describes the narrator's horrific discovery of his society's inner breakage, and also in its material existence as a written object, demanding readings in the vernacular. In that sense, the story offers a case study in China's literacy ecology, the transformation of that ecology, and its ultimate use in the midcentury to support mass mobilization, a project that sought to create a new literate public and led to the birth of New China in 1949. While this exploration involves applying linguistic anthropological approaches to human engagements with written texts, including works of literature, it also takes major inspiration from Karatani Kōjin's analysis of a similar shift in Japanese literature and society, what he describes as the "discovery of the landscape," which turns on a similar shift in literacy ecology.

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Translated Modernity -- China, 1900-1937 (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 45–76; Leo Ou-fan Lee, Voices from the Iron House: A Study of Lu Xun, Studies in Chinese Literature and Society (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

<sup>105</sup> Zhang Shaoying 张晓英, "Lun Lu Xun xiaoshuo 'Kuangren riji' de lianhuan hua gaibian 论鲁迅小说《狂人日记》的连环画改编 (On revisions in the illustrated editions of Lu Xun's 'Diary of a madman')," Hubei wenli xueyuan xuebao 湖北文理学院学报 38, no. 6 (2017): 65–70; Liu Dongfang 刘东方, "Lun Lu Xun yanjiu zhong de tuwen hudong jiqi jiazhi--yi zhao yannian cha tu ben 'Kuangren riji' wei yanjiu duixiang 论鲁迅研究中的图文互动及其价值——以赵延年插图本《狂人日记》为研究对象 (On the mutual engagement of illustrations in lu xun research, and the value of that engagement: Zhao Yannian's illustrated edition of 'Diary of a madman')," Lu Xun yanjiu yuekan 鲁迅研究月刊 (Lu Xun research monthly), no. 1 (2018): 65–75.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>106</sup> Karatani Kōjin, "The Discovery of Landscape," in *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*, trans. Brett de Bary (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 11–44.

Pursuing the implications of Lu Xun's story and Kōjin's analysis, my goals in this chapter are to consider how the premises built into literacy practices embed a social ontology<sup>107</sup> that carries over into the publics thusly mediated, and how shifts in literacy practice have been strategic, involving deliberate attempts at public/national formation. Building at the same time on Michael Warner's investigations of "mass publics and mass subjects," I specifically ask how these processes have generated particular subjectivities, in a transformation inadequately expressed by the commonly-invoked sequence of "tradition" into "modernity." 109

Yet the question itself requires specification. Modern Chinese subjects were not created equally: the history of China's nation-building reveals crucial differences in the extension of national/public participation *through* Sinophone written texts to (1) Sinophone rural populations and (2) non-Sinophone frontier peoples. Thus part of the history I trace lies in considering the implications of the PRC's emergent literate publics for the peoples who are claimed by the Chinese nation but do not themselves come first to Chinese speech or writing, people who have other languages and writing systems, for whom the vernacularization of written Chinese did not render texts more accessible, and for whom the effects of revolution have been, at best, uneven. I

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>107</sup> Bruce Mannheim characterizes his analysis of Inka and southern Quechua peoples as "ontologically driven" because it focuses on "what there is in the world, social and material, the causal relations among what there is in the world, and the distinctively Inka (and southern Quechua) ways of interacting with it" (2019: 240). I follow this approach, and distinguish it from other concepts of ontology (for example, Holbraad and Pederson 2017) that are less anchored in an understanding of shared social and material constraints.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>108</sup> Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>109</sup> Yi-tsi Feuerwerker, "Modern Literature: Constructing the Peasant / Searching for the Self," in *Ideology, Power, Text: Self-Representation and the Peasant 'Other' in Modern Chinese Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 25–32; Myron L. Cohen, "Cultural and Political Inventions in Modern China: The Case of the Chinese 'Peasant," *Daedalus* 122, no. 2 (1993): 151–70; Daniel Kelliher, "Chinese Communist Political Theory and the Rediscovery of the Peasantry," *Modern China* 20, no. 4 (1994): 387–415; Charles Hayford, "The Storm over the Peasant: Orientalism and Rhetoric in Constructing China," in *Contesting Master Narrative: Essays in Social History*, ed. Jeffrey Cox and Shelton Stromquist (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), 150–72.

<sup>110</sup> Howard Chiang and Alvin K. Wong, *Keywords in Queer Sinophone Studies*, Routledge Contemporary China Series (Routledge, 2020); Brian Bernards et al., eds., *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, Global Chinese Culture Sinophone Studies (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013); Shu-mei Shih, "The Concept of the Sinophone," *PMLA* 126, no. 3 (2011): 709–18.

could, of course, simply follow contemporary usage and refer to these peoples as "ethnic minorities" (Ch. shaoshu minzu 少數民族), but as this chapter also investigates, it was precisely through a 1950s "ethnic identification" project that political participation was extended to these peoples, provided they were willing to interpellate themselves into the images that the project had created for them.

Central to this chapter, and indeed to the dissertation as a whole, is a concept of historiographic desire. With this, I build on Greg Urban's work in cultural motion<sup>111</sup>, which investigates how cultural signs travel through time and space, but focus on its social (and subjective) dimension: How do people understand themselves to drive the movement of sign configurations through time and space, and what sorts of distant and future worlds do they attempt to create through such action? Because such desire is self-aware and irrevocably tied up in social acts, my discussion may also sometimes speak in terms of historiographic acts and projects. Literacy practices' ability to establish ontological relationships makes them a crucial mechanism for cultural change, and by extension a frequent object of historiographic desire. Indeed, as Lu Xun's story suggests, people have taken up writing intensely in China's drive to modernization.

From this basis, this chapter traces a genealogical narrative through three specific points:

(1) Lu Xun's story during the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century May Fourth movement, when literary vernacularization began; (2) the institutionalization of that vernacularization during the 1940s Yan'an period through the creation of socialist realism, a specific genre of written text; and (3) ethnic culture research and heritage preservation projects in southwest China today.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>111</sup> Greg Urban, "A Method for Measuring the Motion of Culture," *American Anthropologist* 112, no. 1 (2010): 122–39; Greg Urban, *Metaculture: How Culture Moves through the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

### 4.1 Invoking a national public

The crucial problem in producing such a genealogy involves accounting for how new forms of Chinese writing, linked to vernacularization as well as socialist realism, acquired social power, at any level, given the apparent contradiction: as this paper's opening scene depicts, this power seems derived from the violent rejection of earlier forms of writing-based authority. Whence, then, the new authority? In general, I will suggest that the apparent break with tradition that Lu Xun and his socialist realist writer-descendants<sup>2</sup> seek to create must be understood as a realignment of elements in literacy practices, a realignment that significantly shifts ontological relationships but preserves the old place of writing as inherently metasemiotic: that is, about all other signs.

This exposes a notable element of "modern" Chinese historiographic practice: the very actions that seek to establish a break with the past are continuously involved in pulling certain elements of the past into the future. I will argue that the story as a whole is historiographically potent, that it does actually shift reading practices, precisely by building one sort of literacy out of another.

In pursuing this argument, I approach written texts through the framework introduced in the previous chapter, and specifically focus on a simultaneous link and gap between the written text, as a physical object, and its denotationally projected text or "content." How this relationship is conceived has implications for cultural theories of representation, or as I conceive the issue, in terms of literacy participation frames<sup>112</sup>, involving how human bodies are located with respect to

<sup>112</sup> Judith Irvine, "Shadow Conversations," in Natural Histories of Discourse, ed. Michael Silverstein and Greg Urban (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 131-59; Erving Goffman, "Footing," in Forms of Talk

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written and denotational texts. In China (as in Berdder; see Chapters Two and Six), changes in conceptualizations of this relationship over time offer a touchstone from which to trace changes in literacy participation frames and the historiographic strategies to which they are linked.

In the context of the present analysis, in which the story under consideration *itself* posits a historical break in terms of ways of writing and reading, a consideration of literacy participation frames must be dual, considering how the story depicts that break through its description of literacy practices, and of how the text as a written object does or does not invite a shift in actual literacy practices. In order to do this, I want to focus on two critical scenes in the story (and in a person's reading of the story): first, the one of reading already described, and second, an opening scene involving the narrator's sight of the moon.

It is thus worth setting forth how these scenes fit into the larger written textual structure that is "Diary of a Madman." The text's denotational content is divided between an outer narrative written by a medical doctor, and an internal narrative by the madman, of which the scene of reading is a part. The outer narrative is written in classical Chinese, and describes the doctor's discovery of the madman's diary and his provision of the diary to us, the readers, as a scientific case study in mental derangement. Then the inner narrative, which forms the bulk of the text, differentiates itself from the doctor's statement by being written entirely in the vernacular, and indeed by taking on the voice of the "mad" narrator.

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(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 124–59; Stephen C. Levinson, "Putting Linguistics on a Proper Footing: Explorations in Goffman's Concepts of Participation," in *Erving Goffman: An Interdisciplinary Appreciation*, ed. P. Drew and A. Wootton (Oxford: Polity Press, 1988), 161–227.

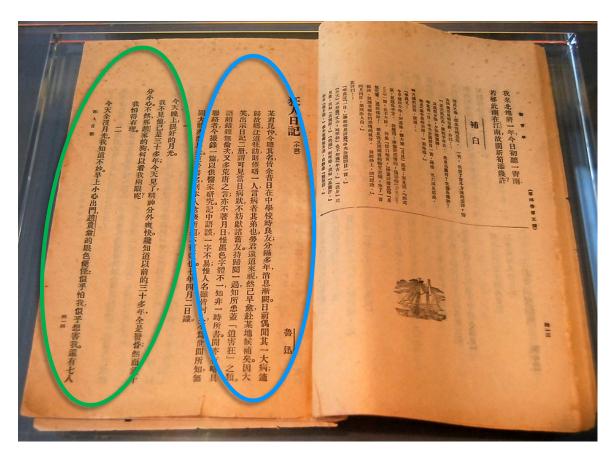


Figure 21. The first publication version of "Diary of a Madman." The blue circle marks the outer narrative by the doctor, while the green circle marks the beginning of the madman's inner narrative.

The narrative shift to the voice of the madman narrator begins with the "moon scene" already mentioned:

Tonight the moon was very bright. I haven't seen if for more than 30 years. It awakens me. The last thirty years were all a muddle, but I must be careful now. 113 今天晚上,很好的月光。我不見他,已是三十多年;今天見了,精神分外爽快。才知道以前的三十多年,全是發昏;然而需十分小心。

The nature of the narrator's prior 30-plus years is never explained; what interests me is how the break from a past muddle to present clarity both marks the appearance of the madman narrator, while also positing the moon as a causal agent of some sort.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>113</sup> My translation.

Speaking of this scene, Chinese literary critic Lee Ou-Fan draws on an East/West binary to observe the moon's potential dual interpretations: "the recurring image of the moon gives rise symbolically to a double meaning of both lunacy (in its Western connotation) and enlightenment (in its Chinese etymological implication)." On the etymological interpretation, he is referring specifically to how, "[i]n the writings of Neo-Confucian philosophers, the moon is often a sign of intellectual enlightenment." 115

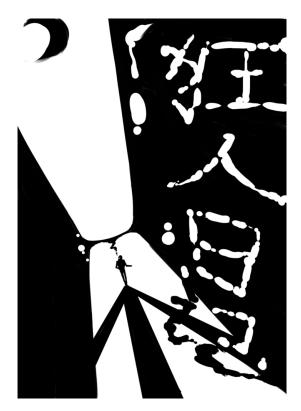


Figure 22. A woodcut illustration of "Diary of a Madman," featuring the moon. The characters written vertically to the right are the story's title.

Building on Lee Ou-fan's central insight of the potential of different conventional readings not simply of the moon, but of the written text itself, while also seeking a more nuanced distinction between types of readings, I suggest that the scene works both in the terms of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>114</sup> Lee, Voices from the Iron House, 54.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>115</sup> Lee, 208.

"classic" literary tradition from which Lu Xun is trying to break, and in terms of the socialist realist genre that emerged several decades later but retrospectively claimed Lu Xun as its ancestor. Indeed, I will argue that the story as a whole is historiographically potent, that it works to shift reading practices towards what became socialist realism, precisely by building its divergence from tradition out of the conventional elements and relations contained within that tradition's participation frame.

In order to support this claim, I want to approach each scene from the perspective of ideologies that I identify, first, with socialist realism, the style that developed subsequently and persistently claims Lu Xun as its father, and also in terms of the canonical forms of poetics (the "tradition") that came before Lu Xun's story.

I understand my own lunacy in making such an attempt. Given the centrality of writing to Chinese civilization, indeed the thousands of years through which writing has itself offered a medium and an object by which to trace civilizational continuity, any project that attempts to characterize "Chinese literary tradition" must be a bit foolhardy. I take courage from the understanding that Lu Xun's story undertakes a similar project, and any analysis of the story must come to grips with that. My way of doing so is not to try to describe an ineffable cultural essence linked to each literary genre (or more aptly, generic universe), but rather to seek out the ontological principles of literacy practice that shape each category, principles which a reader must presuppose in order to grasp a written work's most conventionally-available poetic effects. Specifically, I will look at the relations posited between written text and denotational text.

# 4.1.1 Features of "traditional" literary reading frames

In characterizing a "traditional" reading frame, I want to begin by distinguishing literature in Roman Jakobson's formal sense of written texts taken primarily in terms of form<sup>116</sup>, and then further delimiting that category to include imperial China's canonical works, all tightly indexed to a notion of continuous Chinese empire. This focuses the analysis on precisely the slice of works I understand Lu Xun himself to be targeting, the longstanding Confucian canon that underlay the imperial education system and its intimate links to officialdom and state power, as well as a more diffuse body of poetry, prose, and letters that moved among an educated elite, themselves tightly linked to officialdom.<sup>117</sup> Within this category, I identify two intertwined features of the participation frame, what I will gloss as (1) semiotic regimentation proceeding in metaformal terms, and (2) a linked "literate community" existing at that meta-level.

By "metaformal," I refer to the manner by which formal features of written texts, ranging from handwriting style and narrative "content" to verse forms, were understood to perfect the formal patterning (Ch. wen  $\dot{\chi}$ ) of other non-arbitrary domains of the world. This broad point builds on one of Stephen Owen's central arguments<sup>118</sup>, according to which written texts are a human type of formal pattern in a universe of types of patterns, overspreading any contemporary

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>116</sup> Roman Jakobson, "The Dominant," in *Language in Literature*, ed. K. Pomorska and S. Rudy (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), 41–46; Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: Technology Press of Massachusetts, 1960).

<sup>117</sup> Michael Nylan, The Five "Confucian" Classics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>118</sup> Stephen Owen, *Tradtional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

nature/culture division. The Liang Dynasty scholar Liu Xie, whose work Owen cites, makes a similar point in his poetry manual, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*<sup>119</sup>:

When we extend our observations, we find that all things, both animals and plants, have patterns of their own. Dragons and phoenixes portend wondrous events through the picturesqueness of their appearance, and tigers and leopards recall the individuality of virtuous men in their striped and spotted variegation. The sculptured colors of clouds surpass paintings in their beauty, and the blossoms of plants depend on no embroiderers for their marvelous grace. Can these features be due to external adornment? No, they are all natural. Furthermore, the sounds of the forest wind blend to produce melody comparable to that of a reed pipe or lute, and the music created when a spring strikes upon a rock is as melodious as the ringing tone of a jade instrument or bell. Therefore, just as when nature expresses itself in physical bodies there is plastic pattern, so also, when it expresses itself in sound, there is musical pattern. \$\frac{120}{120}\$ \$\frac{120}{120}\$

傍及萬品,動植皆文:龍鳳以藻繪呈瑞,虎豹以炳蔚凝姿;雲霞雕色,有逾畫工之妙;草木賁華,無待錦匠之奇。夫豈外飾,蓋自然耳。至於林籟結響,調如竽瑟;泉石激韻,和若球鍠:故形立則章成矣,聲發則文生矣。

From here, Owen and Liu Xie make the further observation that writing-as-human-pattern also *exceeds* these other patterns:

Now if things which are devoid of consciousness express themselves so extremely decoratively, can that which is endowed with mind [humans] lack a pattern proper to itself?<sup>121</sup>

夫以無識之物,鬱然有採,有心之器,其無文歟?

The notion of human writing's superiority as formal pattern is another way of marking it as *about* other types of forms; that is, given humans' existence as (still in Liu Xie's words) "the mind of the universe," human writing's fineness lies in the extent to which it expresses all other formal relations.

Arguing that Liu Xie's description of written texts does not stringently distinguish written and denotational text, I suggest that, in "traditional" reading frames, both contribute to the

121 Translation by Shi 1970. See also Owen 1985.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>119</sup> Liu Xie and Youzhong Shi, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (Taipei, Taiwan: Chung Hwa Book Co, 1970).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>120</sup> Translation by Shi 1970. See also Owen 1985.

<sup>122</sup> Translation by Shi 1970. See also Owen 1985.

reflection and regimentation of cosmic form. Beyond Liu Xie's specific text, this point is further supported by the attention long given not only to the denotational "content" of written texts, but also to literary form and to styles of calligraphy and to individual handwriting. <sup>123</sup> In sum, in "traditional" reading frames, the written text's agency lies in its union of forms taken at different media levels, in a way that was crucial to the formation of a "literate public"—an idea I adapt from Charles Sanft<sup>124</sup>—in imperial and Republican China.

This notion of a literate community is the second and final element in my characterization of a "traditional" frame. As Sanft explores, these communities were hardly those of Benedict Anderson's vision<sup>125</sup>, involving silent readers pursuing individual interactions with separate written texts. Instead, he demonstrates a broad continuum of literacies, which included even individuals brought in acoustically, by listening to texts read aloud. The utility of Sanft's approach lies in its ability to expand notions of literacy, and in doing so to expand notions of a public thusly constituted.

While Sanft's work targets a period long before Lu Xun's work first appeared, I argue for the existence of literate communities during the Qing and Republican eras, while also refining the concept of literate community with what I describe as a *hierarchy of proximity*. Within this view, those closest to written texts—in terms of their ability to parse them directly and often in terms of physical closeness, too—were in higher social positions and indeed in communication with one another on that basis (witness the memorial system and its obvious linkage to the most

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>123</sup> Yuehping Yen, *Calligraphy and Power in Contemporary Chinese Society*, Anthropology of Asia Series (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005); Lothar Ledderose, "Chinese Calligraphy: Its Aesthetic Dimension and Social Function," *Orientations Magazine*, 1986.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>124</sup> Charles Sanft, *Literate Community in Early Imperial China: The Northwestern Frontier in Han Times* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>125</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*; Silverstein, "Whorfianism and the Linguistic Imagination of Nationality."

high-status forms of literacy<sup>126</sup>). Certain features of a written participation structure are thus characterizable: those with the "highest" level of literacy, possessing direct access to writing's denotational meaning, thus also had privileged access to the written text's full power to reveal (and project) universal pattern. In that sense, the ideologization of the link between written and denotational text works to create not a sphere of reality and representation (as in the contemporary US), but rather of a supra-reality (with more direct access to truth) that is inhabited by an elite literate community.

In the following section, I show that the social efficacy of Chinese socialist realist literature depends both on a performative break with traditional reading frames (and their linked literate communities), but also on a deeply traditional attention to the coexistent forms (including the material presence) of its own written texts, as linked to a *new and expanded* sort of literate public.

# 4.1.2 Features of socialist realist reading frames

Emerging in China in the 1940s, socialist realism offered a potential solution to several linked problems in the Chinese Communist Party's mass mobilization of the peasantry. This mobilization was both the CCP's major innovation and their key to ultimate victory, as peasants—not the original objects of Marx's analysis—were far more numerous in China than factory workers. Given that the rural populace, and especially rural groups in border areas (what are now often ethnic minority areas) long occupied the lowest rungs of Chinese society, this

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>126</sup> Pei Huang, "The Confidential Memorial System of the Ch'ing Dynasty Reconsidered," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 1, no. 2 (1994): 49–111; Silas Hsiu-liang Wu, "The Memorial Systems of The Ch'ing Dynasty (1644-1911)," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 27, no. 3–4 (1967): 7–75.

mobilization worked powerfully against entrenched views of rural farmers and herders, their social value, and their capacities.

In practice, this re-visioning of peasant value towards mass mobilization meant "link[ing] outside (urban) intellectuals and peasants into an effective political force"<sup>127</sup>, and it was a real problem, given the profound cultural and historical differences between rural communities and the majority of people in Party leadership. One solution the Party proposed involved creating and disseminating "revolutionary art and literature," as an attempt speak the "language" of the rural populace. Yet the art itself, produced as it initially was by Party members themselves, was prone to the same problems, of mutual illegibility, that it sought to solve. Mao famously addresses this issue directly in his *Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art* (1967), calling for Party members more sincerely to spend time among the masses, and to learn from them.

While "going to the masses" eventually solidified as state policy, and has been framed in China as a solution to the problem Mao described<sup>129</sup>, this belies a more complex reality, which in the mid-twentieth century involved some mutual accommodation between Party members and rural groups, paired with an extension of longstanding, elite literacy practice that was paradoxically bolstered by a new form of literary art, socialist realism, which claimed to erase

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>127</sup> Ellen R. Judd, "Prelude to the 'Yan'an Talks': Problems in Transforming a Literary Intelligentsia," *Modern China* 11, no. 3 (1985): 377.

<sup>128</sup> Mao Zedong 毛澤東, Zai Yan'an wenyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua 在延安文艺座谈会上的讲话 [Talks at the Yan'an forum on literature and art] (Beijing: Ren min chu ban she, 1967); Mao Zedong, *The Political Thought of Mao Tse-Tung*, trans. Stuart R. Schram (New York: Praeger, 1969); Bonnie S. McDougall and Mao Zedong, *Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yan'an Conference on Literature and Art": A Translation of the 1943 Text with Commentary*, Michigan Papers in Chinese Studies 39 (Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies; University of Michigan, 1980).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>129</sup> Chang-tai Hung, *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature, 1918-1937*, Harvard East Asian Monographs (Cambridge, MA: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1985); Feuerwerker, *Ideology, Power, Text*; Roy Chan, "The Revolutionary Metapragmatics of Laughter in Zhao Shuli's Fiction," in *Maoist Laughter* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019), 147–61.

such social distinctions. Put another way, when pursued according to an interactional structure identified with socialist realism, writing at once mediated and disseminated the agency of Party leaders while at the same time overtly denying such mediation. This paradox, I argue, is made possible precisely by the nature of publics, which effectively project certain forms of ideal and completely nonexistent subjectivity.<sup>130</sup>

What, then, was the nature of the new written participation structure that I am identifying with socialist realism? Crucially, it involved a new ideology of alignment between denotational text and "reality," posing them as "mirror reflections" of one another. The specious assertion of a transparent link between denotational text and "reality" is well examined in linguistic anthropological research and my point is that realism as a literary genre actually builds such assertions into the pragmatic structure of human engagements with the written text. Furthermore, drawing on literary critic Marston Anderson's *The Limits of Realism* (1990), realist fiction has often been taken as a tool for social reform because its assertion of one-to-one relations between life and denotational text may be exploited to (counterintuitively) project a structure from the text *onto* reality. Thus in broad terms, the ideological power of socialist realist books in China rested on their ability to assert particular versions of reality while claiming merely to reflect what existed already. Insofar as those versions of reality involved an emergent mass will to revolution,

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>130</sup> Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>131</sup> Marston Anderson, *The Limits of Realism: Chinese Fiction in the Revolutionary Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>132</sup> Silverstein, "Denotation and the Pragmatics of Language."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>133</sup> Miyako Inoue, "What Does Language Remember?: Indexical Inversion and the Naturalized History of Japanese Women," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 14, no. 1 (2004): 39–56; Rosa and Flores, "Unsettling Race and Language: Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective."

peasants who read these works according to accepted conventions could only interpellate themselves into that mass will.<sup>134</sup>

The historiographic implications of such interpellation are worth considering. Because socialist realist works explicitly located present reality along a linear temporal trajectory moving from benighted backwardness (and feudalism) into enlightened modernity (and socialism), the effect was to render all of lived reality an index of social evolutionary development, such that any given group might be identified somewhere along the trajectory. This reduction of time to a single, ethically-loaded line shaped the horizon of historiographic desire: if the only possibility was to move backward (which was bad) or forward (which was good), then in fact the only legitimate aspiration was to charge ahead. And the way to do so was clear: it involved altering one's daily actions to resemble literary depictions of "model" (read: progressive, historiographically virtuous) citizens. But ultimately, it involved revolution, as was also depicted. In sum, peasants' interpellation by works of socialist realism reworked time such that revolution became at once an object of historiographic desire, and the pivotal mode of historiographic action.

Yet how can the persuasiveness of socialist realism be understood? Why did people engage with its written works at all?

I believe the answer ultimately lies in the longstanding authority of written texts; that is, socialist realism worked as a revolutionary tool precisely by overtly rejecting traditional reading frames even as it reinscribed certain parts of them. This point is best illustrated by contrasting modes of realism developed in Europe and North America with those created in China. While in practice the crucial element of any reading frame is the book itself, European and North

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>134</sup> Ann Anagnost, "Making History Speak," in *National Past-Times: Narrative, Representation, and Power in Modern China* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 17–44.

American realisms work to erase it, or rather to render it transparent, allowing for an unmediated one-to-one relation from denotational text to "world." Webb Keane discusses this tendency in terms of a pervasive, "modern," and definitively Christian spirit/matter divide. 135 Yet in the Chinese case, "modern" elision of the book itself coexists with a great attention to it, as "Diary of a Madman," in its iconic scene of human/book interaction, dramatically demonstrates. Indeed, Chinese socialist realist literature's ability to reflect (and thus regiment) reality seems inextricable from the traditional metaformal authority of the text.

In sum, I take socialist realist written texts as bolstering their own authority and that of the Party through two, seemingly paradoxical movements that worked to engender and shape proletarian consciousness without ever fully undermining a classed division between the Party and the peasantry, precisely through their mobilization of written texts and other discursive objects towards the creation of a new public. First, by performatively rendering denotational text equivalent to written text—by claiming its absolute representation of lived, "scientific" reality—Party intervention in the structure and message of the written text was at once erased and, through such erasure, held up as truth. Second, by retaining an attention to the material agency of the written text that harked back to older interactional modes, written texts quietly preserved a place for the Party as members of a literate elite whose ideas, now including that of socialist revolution, had inherent power. This ultimately allowed older forms of literate authority to bolster the popularization of a new ideology.

By focusing on the two pivotal scenes of "Diary," the following section considers how Lu Xun's story initiated these paradoxical movements.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>135</sup> Keane, *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*; Webb Keane, "Semiotics and the Social Analysis of Material Things," *Language and Communication* 23, no. 3–4 (2003): 409–25.

# 4.1.3 Scenes from "Diary of a Madman": the moon and the book

In centering the moon in the first scene of the diary portion, Lu Xun invites readers at the time of the text's publication to fall back on more traditional reading frames—frames for which the moon marks an entrance into a deeper understanding of the world through attention to the patterning of cosmic forms. At the same time, Lu Xun appropriates the moon to his own purposes by using it to initiate a very different series of revelations: the truth the narrator actually uncovers is that the old patterns are a dangerous lie. And if the moon sets him on track to this realization, he then pursues his own "research," in a manner strongly reminiscent of going to the masses: he attends deeply to the behavior of the people in his village, and ultimately uncovers a deeper truth within it (they are all cannibals). In that sense, Lu Xun links the narrator's initial sight of the moon not only to the later scene of reading, in which the narrator's revelation occurs, but also to an actual reader's engagement with "Diary."

Indeed, he teaches us, the readers, how to read his own story: just as the narrator must distrust the classical Chinese history book that "reveals" an ordered universe while actually sowing pain and violence, so, we, too, must view with skepticism the classical Chinese introduction that assures us the narrator is mad. In thus aligning denotational and actual reading scenes, Lu Xun, ultimately motivates and shapes his reader's historiographic desires: like the narrator, we must fight to make a new future, and the crucial methods of that fight lie in vigilant reading not only of old books, but also of the real people surrounding us.

Here the final lines of the story, in which Lu Xun's narrator speaks directly to his readers, require special attention. If as Warner suggests, publics "do not exist apart from the discourse

that addresses them,"<sup>136</sup> if they are actually brought into a being through an address to "indefinite others,"<sup>137</sup> then I have argued in this section that all of Lu Xun's story must be understood as such an address. It is notable, therefore, that the final, pivotal lines of the story address that indefinite body of others directly, calling it to action through an invocation of desperate historiographic desire: it is only through the mobilization of a new public form that the future, in the guise of the children to whom the narrator refers, can be rescued from the past.

Of course, as Xiaobing Tang observes in his masterful essay on "Diary of a Madman" such a call to action is itself shot through with contradiction. If the moon is a source of inspiration, of a person's heightened awareness of pattern in the universe (as Lee Ou-fan notes), for the writer of socialist realism, the moon is continuous with a sensorally manifest world that the written text faithfully records (and/or righteously reshapes). Lu Xun, however, has it both ways, producing a text that follows the lines of traditional writing, *through* the moon, *into* that socialist realist frame. Read retrospectively, his moon, as a site of dual but conventionally valid interpretations, also offers more specific insight into the socialist realist problem of proletarian consciousness (and public formation). This is to say that the origin of that consciousness ultimately lies beyond the proletariat, with an educated elite passionately committed to the evasion of their own pasts, but also never fully disengaged from them.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>136</sup> Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 2002, 72.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>137</sup> Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 2002.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>138</sup> Tang, "Lu Xun's 'Diary of a Madman' and a Chinese Modernism."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>139</sup> The initial portion of this chapter derives from conversations with Xiaobing Tang, and in my participation in his life-changing 2012 seminar on Lu Xun. I am deeply indebted to his insights and especially, to his love for Lu Xun, which I now share.

### 4.2 Invoking ethnic national publics

Thus far, I have considered the shifting of literacy practice in twentieth-century China as a historiographic strategy for mobilizing the Chinese populace, a strategy that called that populace into being as a national public through the circulation of new written texts. This section proceeds from the observations that China's 1950s ethnic identification involved a similar invocation of new publics, those of Chinese minority ethnic peoples; that this mobilization followed a similar ideology of offering political participation to the people who became involved (and/or were interpellated)<sup>140</sup>; and that it, too, moved through circulating discourse that relied crucially on written texts.

However, there are also important differences. First, precisely because notions of ethnicity had not yet been institutionalized by the time of Yan'an, its rural mobilization work did not stringently distinguish along contemporary ideological lines distinguishing Han (China's majority group) from "other" ethnicities. However, Yan'an's difficulties in communicating and collaborating with rural groups were only exacerbated in interactions with frontier and/or not-primarily-Sinophone peoples, as has been documented in areas of Tibet 142, Xinjiang 143, and the southwest. Indeed, the ethnic identification project was an attempt to resolve these problems, by codifying a set of "internal others" within the new nation and establishing specific terms for their national participation. (I will discuss this in more detail in the following chapter.)

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>140</sup> Mullaney, Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>141</sup> Xiaoping Cong, *Marriage, Law and Gender in Revolutionary China, 1940–1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>142</sup> Makley, *The Violence of Liberation: Gender and Tibetan Buddhist Revival in Post-Mao China*; Benno Weiner, *The Chinese Revolution on the Tibetan Frontier* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, n.d.), accessed April 15, 2022.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>143</sup> Ujin Kim, "Ethical Management of Speech among Kazak Nomads in the Chinese Altai" (PhD Dissertation, Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan, 2018); Justin M. Jacobs, *Xinjiang and the Modern Chinese State* (University of Washington Press, 2016).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>144</sup> Erik Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, And Place In Southwest China* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

In thusly imagining a marked set of ethnic publics within the unmarked national one, it created a highly specific image of the Chinese nation, as a bed of (Sinophone) Chinese-ness within which existed non-Sinophone ethnic minorities. By this logic, national citizenship required, for ethnic minorities, a double mediation: they would have to be interpellated *as* minorities before they could be interpellated as national citizens.<sup>145</sup>

Second, in the matter of ethnicity, it is "culture work" (Ch. wenhua gongzuo 文化工作), not written texts, that play the crucial role of discursively invoking ethnic publics. To state this more concretely: During Yan'an, as discussed in the previous section, the Party did initiate a genre of "culture work" through which intellectuals interacted socially with peasants, and through this contact, produced (Sinophone) socialist realist written texts that (supposedly) spoke to the needs and desires of the aforesaid peasants. Nor indeed was this work limited to fiction; it also included multiple forms of visual art, <sup>146</sup> as well as the collection and publication of "folk" literature. <sup>147</sup> However, the crucial modality of publicity was the emergent written texts. In contrast, in the matter of ethnicity, I find rather a gradual historical enregisterment <sup>148</sup> of ethnic "culture work" as the domain of discursive activity through which ethnic publics are invoked. Thus, given that much of such culture work has been and remains focused on the collection and Chinese translation of non-Sinophone minority texts, the crucial shift from rural to ethnic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>145</sup> Susan K. McCarthy, *Communist Multiculturalism: Ethnic Revival in Southwest China*, Studies on Ethnic Groups in China (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>146</sup> Christine I. Ho, *Drawing from Life: Sketching and Socialist Realism in the People's Republic of China* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>147</sup> Mao Dun, "Minjian wenxue fakanci [An introduction to folk literature]," in *Zhongguo minjian wenxue lunwenji*, ed. Zheng Shuoren (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1955); Hung, *Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature*, 1918-1937.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>148</sup> Agha, "Voice, Footing, Enregisterment"; Rosa and Flores, "Unsettling Race and Language: Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective"; Rosa, *Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and the Learning of Latinidad.* 

mobilization is to render the written texts in play the object, rather than the instrument, of discursive circulation.

In what follows, I will revisit my first meaningful engagement with enregistered ethnic culture work at an academic conference in Bejijing—a conference that also happens to be where I first met He Yusong. The conference offers a useful point of reference in sketching out a broad history of the enregisterment of ethnic culture work in China.

### 4.2.1 Doing culture

The conference was held at Tsinghua, an old Beijing university with a very large duck pond, windswept statues, and alumni such as current General Secretary of the Communist Party and Paramount Leader of China, Xi Jinping ('79). Conference attendees included a swath of Chinese scholars, many of them likewise very famous and important, who arrived in suits with polished shoes, briefcases, and sheafs of paper. Then there were the practitioners: people generally from the countryside, generally ethnic, who arrived in their "traditional" ethnic clothes and spoke generally about the (ethnic) cultural preservation work they were pursuing in their communities. The conference organizers had invited them, paid for their tickets, and arranged their activities and boarding while in Beijing. He Yusong, along with several other Berdder people involved in "dongba culture," had arrived together.

Here a note on the term, "dongba culture" (Ch. dongba wenhua 东巴文化), may be helpful. "Dongba" is the conventional Chinese written transliteration of the Naish term,

ddolbba,<sup>149</sup> which many Na people use to describe ritualists (in addition to other terms such as bbv and paiq). In Chinese, "dongba culture" thus generally serves to refer to the religions of Na peoples, without directly stating the more politically sensitive term, religion, as such.<sup>150</sup> Within the scope of this conventionalization, all Na ritualists and ceremonial participants are necessarily involved in the sphere of dongba culture.

As per the implicit dress code, He Yusong had arrived at the conference in his ceremonial accoutrements: voluminous satin robes, with a fetid hawk's talon strung around his neck and a skyscraping, five-Buddha crown atop his head. I also remember seeing that he was close to my age, in his mid-twenties, and so very tall and spindly he had to take off his crown to get through doorways. Then he would plop all the Buddhas back on his head again, politely, and continue to talk with the Chinese scholars.

At some point, I remember that he saw me seeing him from the other side of the room, and his face lit up in what might have been recognition, except for the fact that we had never met. Then he came swaying over, and introduced himself in a fully intelligible but also extremely nonstandard version of Standard Chinese. He said he was a dongba from Berdder, a valley in Yunnan Province. Berdder was the birthplace of Naxi writing, he told me, but also very undeveloped: he and his family were peasants.

He wanted to know if I had heard of Berdder, and when I told him I had, he smiled. He responded that it was very great to find a foreign girl here; he had always wanted to be friends with one.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>149</sup> Here I use the transliteration of Berdder's Naqhai pronunciation of the term. In Lijiang, for example, Naish speakers pronounce the word somewhat differently, in a way that Charles McKhann has transliterated as "ddobbaq." See McKhann, "Fleshing out the Bones: Kinship and Cosmology in Naqxi Religion" (University of Chicago, 1992). <sup>150</sup> Charles McKhann, "Essentializing Art in Southwest China: State-Minority Discourses and the Emergence of Dongba Art," in *Art, Market, and Value under Late Socialism* (CASCA-AES Annual Meeting, Vancouver, B.C., 2009).

Then, with a warmth and a sense of human sharedness that hummed in the air, he asked this question: "You also do culture, then?" (Ch. Ni ye gao wenhua ma? 你也搞文化吗?)

I remember being taken aback: while I had grown used to the phrase, "dongba culture," I was not at all clear on what it would mean to "do" (Ch. 搞) culture. Nor did I understand why He Yusong was, apparently (a) conflating his activities as a ritualist with my own as an aspiring ethnographer, or (b) finding such camaraderie in this conflation. Of course, as I spent more time with him, with academic researchers, and with the various people I came across at official events centering around ethnic culture research and preservation, I came to grasp the incredible ubiquity of the phrase, "doing culture," and to take its usage for granted, indeed to know very well how to use it myself.

Before offering my own characterization of the phrase, it may be useful to conclude my description of the conference event, and to follow it through two, subsequent events. With the conference, the main thing to note is that He Yusong's interpellation of me into the category of culture-doers seemed to gain me admission of sorts into his life and world. Having established that I did, indeed, do culture, he invited me to visit him in Berdder, and would not let it go: while at first I took his invitations as a broad courtesy disengaged from the expectation of a real visit, and while I was happy to let them go at that because there were about ten thousand other places I wanted to go in southwest China, he was insistent. He would introduce me to his parents, he said; he would take me to an alpine meadow where the flowers grew as big as pots. He also promised that he would teach me to read and write his books.

Which was, of course, my dream.

By the end of that first day of the conference, I had promised He Yusong that I would visit him when my classes ended in a few months.

And I really wanted to, and I did.

This brings me to a second relevant incident. Several years later, thanks in part to He Yusong's ongoing insistence that I continue visiting him in Berdder, I had met up with him and a small group of his kin as they took their own short vacation in the tourist city of Lijiang. We then packed ourselves into his paternal uncle's car to ride together back to Berdder, following a route frequented by tourist buses. The route departed from Lijiang and either arrived at an area known as Lugu Lake, or (in the matter of the single Lijiang tourist bus that came to Berdder most days) it continued on through Lugu Lake and arrived several hours later in Berdder.

It is a customary part of Yunnan's tourist infrastructure that tourists following this path will be stopped at a gate (marking the entrance into Lugu Lake) and asked to pay an entrance fee, even if they are merely passing through Lugu Lake on their way to some other destination. On past trips to Berdder from Lijiang, I had always paid this fee, and rarely thought much about it. In this case, however, He Yusong and his family were hell-bent that I, like them, should not have to pay anything. The result was an angry, side-of-the-road confrontation in Yunnan dialect between He Yusong and a local Han Chinese gatekeeper. While much of the conversation escaped me, the crucial explanatory phrase for He Yusong, which he bellowed repeatedly at ever-increasing volume, was: "She [Katie] came here to DO CULTURE!!!" (Ch. Ta lai dao zheli GAO WENHUA 她来到这里搞文化!!!). In sum, there was a powerful sense in which my doing of culture, as an ethnographer of Na writing-related matters, entitled me to preferential status of the sort that evaded entrance fees.

I would then hold this event in comparison to a third one, several additional years later, in which a locally famous ritualist from another village had invited me, He Yusong, and the local bureaucrat running He Yusong's village's "dongba culture" work to attend the wedding of his

daughter. As the wedding was kicking into gear, another group of people arrived. Clad in "city clothes" and speaking only Chinese, they also carried cameras and various types of sound equipment. While no one at the wedding knew them, and indeed no one had invited them, either, they introduced themselves as do-ers of culture ("Women ye zuo wenhua yi kuair 我们也做文化一块儿"). Based on this set of credentials, combined I suspect with their general appearance as educated city folk, the host ritualist allowed them to stay. With that, they promptly began filming, interviewing, and—as I will discuss shortly—advising.

One way to think about these experiences of "doing culture" is as a semiotic register of action with which people can strategically (or in my case, unintentionally) identify themselves. If as I have already mentioned, to be a Na ritualist or a Na participant in ritual activity is by the logic of this register automatically to be a do-er of culture, it is also possible to gain admission by researching the same activities. While my very whiteness (and presumed Wesstern foreignness) at the academic conference seemed to interest He Yusong, he also verified my identity as a culture do-er before welcoming me—rather aggressively, in hindsight!—to visit his home and, in short, to take my doing of culture there. The second and third events similarly thematize an idea of access—to Berdder, to a wedding—that is made possible by doing culture.

While overtly, these events employ an ideology of egalitarian participation, such that He Yusong described himself (a ritualist) and me (a researcher) as pursuing the same work, I want to suggest that the theme of access, as illustrated in these events, suggests a crucial differentiation between the studied and the studiers as well. To begin with, in all cases, the site of access is not the (foreign, Han, and only occasionally ethnic) researchers, but the ethnic people and their activities (He Yusong's house, the Berdder community, the wedding). And as the wedding illustrates, even when access is not directly offered, being a researcher allows you to assume it,

and at least in some cases, to get it. There is likewise a persistent difference in social status. If the studied peoples tend to be rural, less educated, and less wealthy, the studiers are just the opposite: The wedding crashers' bodily signs of wealth and institutional/governmental support (the equipment) and urban status (the clothes) seemed to contribute to the access they gained, just as my whiteness (linked to foreign wealth and status) did so for me. It is at this level that I return to He Yusong's initial introduction of himself, as a Naxi peasant coming from an undeveloped area. Based on the framework I have provided here, it seems to me that he was identifying himself not simply as a do-er of culture, but as a culture do-er of a specific type—the sort of person who is studied.

This combination of an explicit ideology of egalitarian same-ness combined with the pragmatic reality of hierarchical differentiation may, in fact, be the socialist equivalent of capitalist neoliberalism. (Indeed, this egalitarian ideology has proven especially difficult for some US-based researchers of ethnic minorities, familiar with a very different ideological apologia for structural inequality, to see their way around—leading to assertions that ethnic culture work creates "ethnic inclusivity," etc.) In any case, I have already considered how, during the Yan'an period, socialist realist theories of representation, as they were embedded in literacy practices, contributed to the dissemination both of the egalitarian ideology and the pragmatic hierarchical differentiation (in that case, between Party leadership and rural peoples). In the matter of ethnic culture research, I suggest, it is the enregisterment of a sphere of "culture-doing" activity, not specifically the reading or writing of written texts (though I will consider their important role shortly), that draws researchers and the studied together as apparent equals, while also marking their difference in a variety of ways. One crucial mode of differentiation involves the donning of ethnic clothing.

On ethnic clothing, the fundamental point—perhaps obvious, but crucial—is that robes, a hawk's talon necklace, and a five-buddha crown were not in the least what He Yusong or any other ritualist I knew in Berdder wore around on the regular. When I lived at He Yusong's house for three years, he would stumble downstairs every morning in a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt. He had a grey suit for special occasions, and pulled out the ceremonial gear already mentioned only for specific ceremonies. Likewise with He Yusong's non-ritualist Berdder compatriots, who arrived at the conference in their own "traditional" clothes involving white hemp tunics and pants, held together by embroidered sashes. These clothes were, much like He Yusong's ceremonial robes, reserved for special occasions, generally holidays. However, increasingly, people also wore such clothing for events involving researchers.

Since the 1950s ethnic identification project discussed in the previous section, ethnic clothing—one male and one female type for each ethnicity—has been standardized, statemandated, and mass-produced for retail stores. Indeed, as I would find out years later, He Yusong bought his ceremonial robes at a particular ethnic clothing store in Shangrila. As for the headdress, he'd made it himself, but you *could* buy it at the store, if you wanted. And at some point he had purchased one (he told me), for while the store-bought version was too sloppily printed for actual wear, its Buddha images offered a helpful guide when he was hand-painting his own. This is to say that in Berdder, traditional clothing had longstanding local currency, and people did bring it out on holidays and other occasions. However, it served at the conference as a kind of price of admission: He Yusong's belonging there rested on his identification of himself in this way, not simply through verbal assertions that he was a Naxi peasant, but also through the wearing of "ethnic" clothing that made the same claims.

Here it is helpful to consider an alternative scenario, in which He Yusong arrived at the conference in his grey suit. Within the semiotics of the event, this would have identified him as a researcher, and as such, he simply would not have "passed": the way he spoke standard Chinese alone would have destroyed the effect and would, I suspect, have alienated a great many attendees, both researchers and researched. My point is that the conference's claims to equality between researchers and researched rested crucially on the willingness of those researched to interpellate themselves into the standardized images of ethnicity originally created by the ethnic identification project, for which clothing is one of the most visible signs.

What, then, is the nature of ethnic difference?

### 4.2.2 Ethnic writing

Towards an answer, I want to consider how and why ethnic-identified written texts play a different role in the invocation of ethnic publics than Sinophone written texts played in the invocation of a Chinese national public. The conference offers a useful site from which to consider this question, given that its explicit focus was on ethnic scripts, or more specifically, "endangered writing systems of southwest China." However, before considering the conference, I want to outline the history of the study of "folk literature" (Ch. minjian wenxue 民间文学) as an important historical strand linking Yan'an's rural mobilization to contemporary ethnic culture work.

In China, the highly loaded term "folk" (Ch. minjian), is closely identified with rurality and peasants, and the category of "folk literature" thus indicates the sort of written art that they are understood to produce, generally oral literature such as songs and stories, though written texts are not absolutely excluded. Folk literature collection had begun in the early 1900s

as a way of seeking a national essence in the face of foreign incursion and national instability, and it was later incorporated into Yan'an-era rural mobilization, such that going to the masses involved collecting and studying their folk literature, only later to synthesize it into socialist realist forms of art.

Such collection projects gained strength after the founding of the PRC. This involved the formation of research teams that visited rural communities, gathered and entextualized a variety of linguistic materials they found there, then returned to urban areas to rework the materials into something with national currency. The function of reworked texts was dual: to record and codify particular forms of art corresponding to the "source" community, and to reinvigorate national art and culture by bringing these adapted materials to light. In an introductory essay to the 1955 publication of Folk Literature (Minjian Wenxue 民间文学), Mao Dun articulates this latter function in strikingly somatic terms, calling on authors to consume and digest folk materials:

While pursuing your studies in Marxism and entering into the life of the masses, you ought also to study these people's art: live with it, digest it, and make it part of the flesh of your own work.

在努力学习马克思主义和深入民众生活同时,应该更进一步学习人民优秀的艺术创作,好好的体会它、消化它,使成为自己作品的一部分血肉.<sup>152</sup>

The metaphor of digestion is significant, gesturing to the importance of adaptation. Folk materials might be a source of inspiration, and indeed "attain a certain standard; however, it is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>151</sup> Lydia Liu, "A Folksong Immortal and Official Popular Culture in Twentieth-Century China," in *Writing and Materiality in China*, ed. Judith Zeitlin, Lydia Liu, and Ellen Widmer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 553–612; Duan Lingyu, "Minzu minjian wenyi gaizao yu xin zhongguo wenyi zhixu jiangou—yi 'A shi ma' de zhengli wei li [The transformation of folk arts and the construction of the art of New China: Adapting 'Ashima']," Wenxue pinglun 6 (2012): 48–56; Max Lowell Bohnenkamp, "Turning Ghosts into People: 'The White-Haired Girl', Revolutionary Folklorism and the Politics of Aesthetics in Modern China" (University of Chicago, 2014).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>152</sup> Mao Dun, "Minjian wenxue fakanci [An introduction to folk literature]."

necessary for trained academics (Ch. zhuanye de wenren 专业的文人) to develop and refine them."<sup>153</sup>

Likewise at the conference, and indeed at every formal ethnic-culture themed academic event I have ever visited: while ethnic practitioners are honored in some ways, they are also continually advised on how to pursue, perform, and preserve their own ethnic culture. If they are the objects of research, they are also the students of the researchers, being taught how to *be* ethnic. This metacultural loop is likewise implied by Mao Dun's statement (and indeed Mao Zedong's remarks at Yan'an), where the very point of learning from the masses is ultimately to teach them better how to occupy the Chinese national public.

All of this is to say that the structure of folklore collection, which honored rural source communities while at the same time calling on "trained academics" to refine their art, reproduced the egalitarian/hierarchical pattern that I have identified with ethnic culture work. Indeed, the very terms, such as "doing culture," that are now identified with specifically ethnic culture work were originally used to describe these processes of folklore collection and going to the masses. Thus, while I hope to investigate the specific genealogical sequence in the future, for now I simply posit a broad historical continuity across these projects, and suggest that, while folklore collection among primarily Sinophone and/or Han groups withered away during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the revival of ethnic culture that began with China's economic opening in the 1980s and '90s also revived this culture work in the specific domain of ethnicity. 154

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>153</sup> Mao Dun.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>154</sup> Koen Wellens, *Religious Revival in the Tibetan Borderlands: The Premi of Southwest China*, Studies on Ethnic Groups in China (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2010); Wellens, "Resilient Cosmologies: Water Deities and Divine Agency in Post-Mao China"; Elise Marie Anderson, "Imperfect Perfection: Uyghur Muqam and the Practice of Cultural Renovation in the People's Republic of China" (Ph.D diss, Bloomington, IN, 2019); Charlene Makley, *The Battle for Fortune State-Led Development, Personhood, and Power among Tibetans in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Ma Jianxiong, "Local Knowledge Constructed by the State: Reinterpreting Myths and Imagining the Migration History of the Lahu in Yunnan," *Asian Ethnology* 68, no. 1 (2009): 111–29.

However, that revival occurred with one central difference: if the ultimate destination of Sinophone folk literature was incorporation into a type of national literature that also called forth the Chinese nation, then ethnic literature moves through a far narrower loop: while the majority of ethnic culture work does indeed involve the collection and Chinese translation of ethnic written and oral texts, there is little, if any, discussion of using the resulting Chinese texts to mobilize a national public. Their existence rather testifies to smaller ethnic publics contained within the Chinese nation. There is thus a way in which an image of nested groups, with minority ethnicity a component of the nation, is "mapped onto" the processes of collection, creation, and dissemination through which Chinese and ethnic written texts move.

All of which brings me back to the conference, and to He Yusong's life. I later learned from He Yusong that much of his time at the conference had been devoted to assistance with a Naxi ceremonial text translation project a professor there was pursuing. That is, he offered unpaid labor in gratitude for his invitation to the conference, his plane tickets, and his food and lodging. I also learned that, while he had been promised full compensation for these expenses, there had been an issue with the receipts, and he ended up having to fund much of the trip, except for the plane tickets, himself.<sup>156</sup>

Just as He Yusong's labor was recruited into the production of Chinese translations of Naxi written texts, another crucial part of doing culture for him involved being trained through state-led programs in the proper performance of Naxi culture. During my time in Berdder, countless events and exhibitions held in Shangrila and Lijiang, and indeed sometimes sponsored

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>155</sup> Irvine and Gal, "Language Ideology and Linguistic Differentiation"; Gal and Irvine, *Signs of Difference:* Language and Ideology in Social Life.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>156</sup> As Emily Yeh explores in the Tibetan context (2013), economic support that creates economic dependence is a crucial strategy in China's control of Tibet, and I find it permeating ethnic culture work as well. As I would later come to understand, the nature of cultural preservation projects in Berdder placed He Yusong's livelihood squarely in the hands of local cadres, preventing him from sustaining himself independently, while at the same time demanding his gratitude for their support.

by the group in attendance at the ritualist's daughter's wedding, invited him to much-touted Naxi culture-themed "training classes" (Ch. peixun ban 培训班), many of which likewise offered some financial compensation to participants. While I have been unable to attend these classes—organizers have politely led me to the door when He Yusong tried to smuggle me in—I know from accounts by He Yusong, Teacher Mei, and others, that one of the primary lessons involves sharing one's culture with anyone who cares to learn, especially researchers, as well as very specific (and based on my ethnography, entirely false) information about the functioning and "meaning" of Naxi script. (On this, see Chapter Six.)

As my previous discussion of Lu Xun explores, Chinese written texts have been and in many ways still are associated with metaformal authority and historiographic power. I am thus inclined to interpret the incredible attention that Chinese researchers continue to devote to ethnic written texts as a recognition of a similar authority and set of capacities in them. Given that the founding image of Chinese ethnicity involves a double articulation that contains ethnic difference within a larger umbrella of (Han) Chinese culture, I further suggest that ethnic written texts, as non-Chinese objects of power, pose a particular threat to this scheme. To establish them as the objects of Chinese written denotation—as is achieved through the translation projects and training classes described—thus reinscribes the given national image. At the same time, in order to maintain a persuasive narrative of equality across China's diverse peoples, ethnic minorities must themselves be recruited into the production of this work of ideological regimentation. It is thus not surprising that one of the central lessons of Naxi culture training classes (and implicitly, of conferences about ethnic writing) is that ethnic people must share their culture, that they must consent to and indeed collaborate in the research being done on them and their written texts.

He Yusong and I were both very young and very excited at that conference. I remember his visible delight in talking to me, and despite my own sense of the movement of forces around and through us that I could not trace, I was so unspeakably happy to meet him, too. In hindsight, it seems to me that He Yusong was at that point in his life extremely committed to an idea of ethnic culture work that was consistent with its stated ideologies: as a Han Chinese ethnographer once told me with great concern, "He Yusong actually thinks he can become a researcher."

### **CHAPTER 5**

#### **Refracted Histories:**

### **Ethnography in Southwest China**

Based on the many materials we have collected, it is not that dongba writing lacks the ability to record language fully. Why, then, the pattern of "more words, fewer characters"? I often ask the ritualists I meet if they might adapt the writing to record every word, and the younger or more enlightened readily agree.

从我们搜集到的许多材料来看,东巴文并非不具备完全记录语言的能力。是什么原因造成了东巴经过样(词名文小)的面貌?我觉觉会问遇到的东巴。这种情况可不

从我们搜集到的许多材料来看,东巴文并非个具备完全记录语言的能力。是什么原因造成了东巴经这样'词多字少'的面貌?我常常会问遇到的东巴,这种情况可不可以改成逐词记录,年轻一点的或者开明一点的东巴会欣然同意。

—Zhang Xiaohong (a pseudonym)

In this chapter's epigraph, I quote a popular article by a student of comparative scriptology, a Han woman I will refer to here as Xiaohong, whom I have never met.

Nevertheless, I feel that I know her pretty intimately. Throughout my time in Berdder, members of my host family shared apparently cherished stories of her with me—stories they suggested I would relate to because she and I were, they said, the same: outsiders to the valley, highly educated in their terms, researchers of culture. Nevertheless, I felt that they preferred her to me. I therefore disliked her extremely, from the very start.

Nor did such conversations, what might be glossed as stories about ethnographers, occur only in my host family, nor was Xiaohong the only one mentioned: many Berdder residents,

Teacher Mei included, waxed poetic about past encounters with different ethnographers. Some

Berdder residents actually passed such stories down through their families and were able to provide recollections to me of a visit to the valley that Joseph Rock, a relatively famous

researcher of Naxi things, made in the 1940s. (In brief summary: To their parents' vast consternation as hosts, Rock had refused to sleep in the house with them, preferring the barn. Also, he kept taking photos with a large camera.) But if these stories about *other* ethnographers summoned up vast tides of my own inner darkness, I think it would be a mistake to suggest that people were keeping and telling them for my benefit.

Indeed, the article I quote by Xiaohong (in this chapter's epigraph) fell into my hands only because He Yusong had himself preserved it, and shared it with me as part of a longer conversation about his life. Based on everything I know of He Yusong, he was immensely, shyly proud of the article, especially of the part in which Xiaohong praises his dancing. Because I encountered the article as a part of ethnographic research, and because the close attention I am bringing to ethnography as its own object of analysis requires a certain critical examination of ethnographers, myself and Xiaohong included, I have decided not to cite the article in the traditional, bibliographic way, and to provide a pseudonym, Xiaohong, for its author.

And so—ugh. Squatting in the courtyard of He Yusong's home, as he plucked a chicken nearby, I read it for the first time. After Xiaohong recounts the initial chain of events that brought her to become a student of comparative scriptology, she describes preparing to go on her first ethnographic venture—to southwest China, and ultimately to He Yusong—with all the breathlessness of a person embarking on a journey to the center of the earth, or Fairyland.

Because the specific focus of this expedition was Naxi writing, she and several other classmates chose Berdder, the reputed birthplace of Naxi writing, as their destination. There they found a very young, nervous He Yusong. Presumably it was an ordinary day when He Yusong was trying to take classes with his teacher, or maybe do work in the fields, but dropped everything to be hospitable to them, to the extent of taking them on a tour of his village and his house. As the tour

proceeded, they noticed where he kept his ceremonial robes and insisted that he put them on and dance for them.

Right then.

He Yusong was about fourteen at the time. He spoke very limited Chinese. He did what they asked.

And his dance, Xiaohong reports, was magnificent, involving the imitation of various god and animal movements. She praises it extravagantly, noting that, with his ceremonial headdress on, He Yusong really reminds her of "a wild forest beast." After having seen this dance, she says, she was convinced of his real credentials as a ritualist.

Thus the article breezily proceeds, leading me along a trail of apparently delightful events: Xiaohong notes that "not much later [after watching He Yusong's dance], He Jinnuo [the village's primary ritualist, He Yusong's teacher] adopted me as his god-daughter." Here she uses the Chinese term, *gan nv'er* 甘女兒, for what I am translating as "god-daughter," and it is important to note that this concept has no immediate equivalent in Berdder's Naish languages or kinship ideologies. However, Xiaohong never attempted to learn Naqhai, as He Yusong told me, and in Chinese, it does connote a kinship tie, an idea of adoptive daughter, combined with a sense of extreme favor and affection.

Afterwards, He Jinnuo divines his new god-daughter's fortune and concludes that her "karmic destiny is inextricably wound up with dongba books." And ultimately (as the previous chapter examines) Xiaohong asks He Jinnuo a couple questions about why his writing is so primitive, and thusly resolves "the mystery of Naxi writing." While the article concludes by praising He Yusong and He Jinnuo for preserving and honoring Naxi culture—for Naxi people,

for the Chinese nation!—its narrative form is very much an adventure tale, in which Xiaohong is the unquestioned protagonist.

While there is much to discuss here, the emphasis on ethnic clothing and dance requires immediate attention, because it takes on particular meaning in the context of the PRC's history of ethnic standardization, in which specific garb and dance styles provide visible evidence of an ethnic-identified person's interpellation into national schemes of ethnic belonging (and marginalization). As Chapter Five has explored, that history becomes visible in the expectation that He Yusong should *want* to dance—at the drop of a hat, in his special outfit—for an audience of socioeconomically-privileged, academic city folk. I see it in the suggestion that he "proves" his value to those strangers *through* his dance, and again in the bare fact that a Han researcher's narrative of this, framed as a story of adventure not unlike that of Indiana Jones, was deemed good enough for publication in a relatively well-known magazine of China.

As the previous chapter considers, it is also worth noting that Xiaohong's description of her resolution of the "mystery of dongba writing" itself indicates that she did not actually talk with He Yusong and his teacher about their books, but simply asked them to perform other actions, beyond simply dancing. That is, she had them recite their books in formal elicitation sessions, and recorded the recitations. Then she had them translate those recitations into a language she understood, Chinese, and recorded what they said. If she had at any point asked them how they taught and studied the books, or tried to learn the Naqhai words they use to talk about them, or paid attention to the contexts in which Berdder people themselves were asking ritualists to recite, then I cannot imagine her framing "the mystery" as she has done here, or of suggesting that the answer He Jinnuo provides—tradition!—is sufficiently explanatory.

All of this is to say that Xiaohong's article gives me a very bad attitude, as my grandma would put it. It leads me to say things such as: YES, this article poses a problem of ethnographic ethics, but even more fundamentally, it is a matter of bad ethnography!

Or: Look at He Yusong being grateful for the bad ways Xiaohong treats him! What is wrong with He Yusong???!!

Or (though I generally keep this bit inside my head): It's SO UNFAIR that everybody in Berdder loves Xiaohong sooooo much! It should be ME getting all that love and attention!

Yet the context in which I first came upon Xiaohong's article requires me to hold several truths alongside my own inner darkness. First, the extent to which Xiaohong riles me up suggests that there is more going on with *me* than moral outrage. Second, He Yusong reads Chinese, though not frequently and with some limits. But Xiaohong's article was simple enough for me to skim at the time, with my own Chinese limitations, and I am inclined to believe that he had read it in full, in addition to having experienced some version of the events it describes, and *still* kept and cherished it. Third, there was feeling in the stories Berdder people have told me about Xiaohong. And in addition to all Xiaohong's oblivious racism and smug self-congratulation, I can feel her affection for He Yusong and his intimates. Thus I am inclined to think that she cared a great deal about these people, in some way or another—much as I did, and do.

I return to Xiaohong's article here because I want to try, not to resolve the questions that it and my bad attitude raise, but to frame as clearly as I can what I think those questions are.

Aside from speaking directly to the complicated interpersonal process by which I produced this dissertation, these questions are tied up in the history of research on Naxi writing, and indeed of ethnographic research broadly. They call attention to the cultures within and politics between different ethnographic traditions. And they point to the ways that Berdder people, the longtime

recipients of multiple ethnographic projects, have over the course of generations, been developing both a collective set of techniques for engaging with ethnographers, and an Indigenous ethnographic tradition with its own frameworks, contradictions, and aims.

I embark on this chapter with the understanding that anthropological dissertations do not generally launch an ethnographic analysis of their own methods of knowledge production, and that some of my anthropological compatriots may view my decision as a regression to "all the navel-gazing" of *Writing Culture* times. <sup>157</sup> It may, therefore, be clarifying to speak directly to that. I think that navel-gazing is an unfair framing of the aspirations of the *Writing Culture* debates. While some works in that tradition (and in other traditions, Xiaohong, AHEM) do center ethnographers, more in the manner of protagonists than of coeval social actors, and while this detracts from my own sense of ethnographic purpose, which is to better understand relationships and relations, it seems to me that the most generous interpretation of the debates is as an attempt to subject social scientific ethnography to the consideration and theorization that its own methodology affords. This chapter pursues that goal, guided by the perspectives derived from my research on writing, historiography, and other ethnographic traditions, specifically of China and Berdder.

## 5.1 Ethnography and ethics

My interlocutors' frequent comment, that Xiaohong and I are the same, is an ethnographic proposition about *us*. To make this observation is to rehearse a truism of academic

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>157</sup> Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon, eds., *Women Writing Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography: A School of American Research Advanced Seminar* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986); Ruth Behar, "Introduction: Out of Exile," in *Women Writing Culture*, ed. Ruth Behar and Deborah A. Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 1–32.

ethnography—the ethnographed are watching the ethnographers!—and indeed of *Writing*Culture, in which the cover image makes the same point (and other points, of which it seems less aware<sup>158</sup>). But to pursue the logic of the truism is to arrive at a very particular understanding of ethnography.

That is: if "the ethnographed" are capable of doing something like ethnography on "the ethnographers," then it follows that anthropologists neither invented nor possess ethnography—that they merely represent one, highly specific sociohistorical transformation of it. Pursuing this insight further, one might distinguish two dimensions of ethnography, as (1) a structure of interaction and attention, which makes culture possible, and is available to everyone, and (2) a spatiotemporally specific academic institution that is built out of ethnography in the first sense. While I think most academic ethnographers do make this distinction in many ways, I want to follow the implications of articulating it explicitly.

One way to think of ethnography in that first and broadest sense is as a reflexive mobilization of *specific* relationships to learn about relations *generally*. Thus, social and language learning processes are ethnographic in this fundamental way, just as various forms of socially embedded commentary on social life (that is: all forms of commentary) are as well. Finally, social science research ranging from participant observation and "deep hanging out" to interviewing and surveying fall within this rubric as well.<sup>159</sup>

This approach to ethnography has the important consequence of reframing common ideological binaries of "objective science" versus "(inter)subjective relationship," binaries that tend to value academic ethnography in terms of its ability to pursue both ends of the ideological

<sup>158</sup> For example, there is also a woman in the picture, though she is not mentioned in the book's analysis.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>159</sup> H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods*, 3rd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira, 2002).

stick ("objective" science and "subjective" relationship) while preserving their contrast with one another. So, an ethnographer should be able to do the subjective bit, persuading people in the village that she is one of them, a "god-daughter," and having sentimental moments with them, and then she ought to be able to do the objective bit later, returning to her office somewhere and writing a scientific account of what she learned from all that canoodling. However, by conceiving ethnographic method as itself a practice of relationship, this approach argues against any notion of objectivity as existing outside of social life. At the same time, by emphasizing the role of reflexivity (the capacity to render any given thing an object of deliberate attention) in the creation and maintenance of human relationships, it also argues for an adjusted notion of objectivity based on reflexivity of a relationally embedded sort. This is not, to be clear, to devalue ethnographic research that prioritizes the collection of systematic data points. It is just to observe that such collection moves through relationships, too, and that the movement itself is part of, rather than external to, ethnographic knowledge production. By extension, it seems better to think of the intersubjectivity and the reflectiveness of ethnography as occurring together, as indeed depending on each other, whether you are hanging out with He Yusong or inputting data at your computer.

What, then, are the implications of this understanding of ethnography for ethnographic ethics? Webb Keane's *Ethical Life* (2015) offers a helpful starting point, characterizing ethics as interpersonal obligations created within the flow of interaction, as participants pursuing communication with one another become, simply by virtue of being in communication, simultaneously vulnerable to each other, while also responsible for protecting the vulnerabilities of others. Insofar as a relationship stretches across multiple interactions, carrying the histories of past communication events into future ones, I would call it a matter of spatiotemporally

extended, and thus perhaps even heightened, ethics. And if ethnographic methods are a practice of being in relationship, then they are constitutively ethical in these terms. Indeed, it seems to me that much of the learning about social life that occurs through participant observation rests on an ethnographer's growing awareness of the culturally specific obligations that other interactional participants perceive themselves and the ethnographer herself to be constrained by (and *not* constrained by).

This approach also speaks to the interpersonal problems that ideologies of research objectivity may create: if the pursuit of ethnographic objectivity involves an attempt to isolate ethnographic practice from the relationships within which it occurs, then involved in that is necessarily a recusal of the self from ethical accountability at this foundational, interactional level.

As for the academic institution of social scientific ethnography (ethnography in the second sense), I understand it as adding an additional component to the central matter of using relationships to learn about relations: that is, it renders the knowledge thusly gained in a public and material form, ranging from film to comic to written text. Of these forms, the written text is by far the most common. Because of its ubiquity, its relevance to the topics of my own research, and the fact that Xiaohong's article as well as this dissertation take that written form, it is what I will focus on in this chapter. From here, I want to consider how a closer attention to writing and written textual production may provide a tighter framework for thinking about academic ethnography as an ethical practice.

Following previous discussions in this dissertation, we might distinguish *writing*, as the replication of cultural forms through time (interpreting Derrida's notion of écriture or inscription), from *written texts*, one particular type of cultural form characterized by its use of

physically material orthography (interpreting work by Katherine Martineau). Thus, while written texts demonstrate the extent to which writing can occur at the object level, in Derrida's depiction, writing may also occur at the level of events themselves, as with any sort of action that is understood to repeat (holidays, interactional genres, daily habits). From this perspective, writing encompasses colloquial notions of culture and tradition, both of which presuppose repetition across space and time, as well.

If conceived in the first sense as the learning of social things through being in relationship, ethnography actually requires several kinds of writing, as I have just defined it. That is, the relationship exists based on the extent to which its participants collaborate in the replication and development of a relational narrative form, aka writing. At the same time, it is through these interactions that participants use and learn about other cultural forms (also writing). While I will not pursue this here, it seems to me, further, that these two forms of writing are related.

As for academic ethnography, I would call it a use of written texts to record or describe writing. That is, it involves orthographically representing cultural form. Furthermore, such recording or description is itself spatiotemporally circumscribed, resting on a particular, socioculturally framed mode of denotation<sup>160</sup> that prioritizes a written text's conventionalized forms of reference over its other communicative functions.<sup>161</sup> Finally, it goes almost without saying that these ethnographic written texts must be published: it is only by rendering them as objects of publicity that scholars within institutionalized academia reap the professional and economic benefits of having pursued academic ethnography in the first place. In sum,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>160</sup> Silverstein, "Denotation and the Pragmatics of Language."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>161</sup> Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics"; Jakobson, "The Dominant"; Bruce Mannheim, "Popular Song and Popular Grammar, Poetry and Metalanguage," *Word, Journal of the International Linguistic Association* 37, no. 1–2 (1986): 45–75.

ethnography in the second sense builds on the fundamental structure of social relational learning I have described, which might be restated as learning about writing, to produce and publicize written texts that denotationally represent the writing.

From this perspective, the questions that *Writing Culture* raises about representational politics might be rephrased more specifically as follows: What happens to the interpersonal obligations of ethnography in the first sense when, through the production of ethnographic written texts, those texts themselves (either directly or indirectly) become instruments of publicity? How might this transformation also generate *new* interpersonal and social obligations?

# 5.2 Academic ethnography and the ethical conundrums of publicity

Countless ethical problems emerge from academic ethnography's fundamental practice of rendering cultural knowledge public. While issues of intellectual and cultural ownership<sup>162</sup> are important here, this chapter will focus on two closely related others—what I am calling *exposure* and *extraction*—that are particularly salient to Xiaohong's article, and to the history of academic ethnography in southwest China.

By exposure, I refer to the ways that information gleaned from ethnographic relationships, if rendered in a publicly accessible form, may become extremely embarrassing, legally or politically incriminating, and/or generally harmful to the people the information concerns. A final possibility, with particular relevance to China's southwest, involves the extent to which "exposing" places or persons through publicity may alter their existential relationships to the world.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>162</sup> Michael F. Brown, "Who Owns What Spirits Share? Reflections on Commodification and Intellectual Property in New Age America," *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 17, no. 2 (1994): 7–17; Fred Myers, "Ontologies of the Image and Economies of Exchange," *American Ethnologist* 31, no. 1 (2004): 1–16.

The pivotal example here is the story of southwest China's Lijiang city, the former seat of the Naxi kingdom. In 1996, several earthquakes decimated Lijiang's recently-built structures but left untouched the (literally) longstanding architecture of its glory days. This, combined with the picturesque beauty of that antique architecture, brought Lijiang to the attention of the world, resulting in its inscription as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997. Within years, it became a national and international tourist destination, with the ultimate consequence that all of Lijiang old town's former residents have by now either been driven out of their ancestral homes by loud bars and tourists, and/or the altered economic structure of the area means that renting out their ancestral homes to entrepreneurs in the tourist sector is now their best money-earning option. At present, Lijiang's old town is populated almost entirely by entrepreneurs and tourists, and while the locals renting out their homes to them have gained a significant income source, the vast majority of profits are going to a state-led tourism company that manages the area, as well as several other semi-private Naxi-culture-themed parks.

Though to tell the story of Lijiang as a broad social tragedy is to buy into narratives of simple (ethnic) people's lost innocence, and also to overlook the extent to which Lijiang's economic and touristic development could have gone very differently if locals had been allowed more control of the process, I do think the history attests to the profound existential stakes of becoming an object of publicity.

In stark contrast to the tale of tragic lost innocence that I now hear many tourists using to narrate their own impressions of Lijiang, many ethnic Yunnanese render Lijiang's history as a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>163</sup> UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "Old Town of Lijiang," UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 1997, https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/811/; Sydney D. White, "State Discourses, Minority Policies, and the Politics of Identity in the Lijiang Naxi People's Autonomous County," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 4, no. 1–2 (1998): 9–27; Charles McKhann, "Naxi Religion and the Age of Tourism: Persistence and (Re)Creation," in *Faiths on Display: Religion, Tourism, and the Chinese State* (Blue Ridge Summit, PA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010), 183–210.

hopeful parable of economic-transformation-through-the publicization-of-ethnic-culture. The nearby city of Zhongdian, recently renamed Shangrila for the explicit purpose of attracting tourists, has set for itself the goal of becoming "a *Tibetan* Lijiang." On the several occasions that I have travelled to Eya, a rural, predominantly Naxi-ethnicity mountain settlement only recently connected to drive-able roads, residents insisted that they hoped one day to develop their area into "a second Lijiang." And among Berdder residents, it is a matter of profound grievance that their valley, the supposed origin of dongba ceremony and writing, has been denied the wealth and fame that Lijiang received. At the same time, through what I have come to view as a simultaneously insightful and flawed theory of publicity, Berdder people viewed the presence of ethnographic researchers (such as Xiaohong and me) as crucial vessels of publicity, and thus as harbingers of economic transformation in the Lijiang style. As I recall Gujjyoq (from Bbapardduaq) remarking to me one day: "We still have a whole lot more work to do here until we catch up with Lijiang. Afterall, we only have a few researchers."

This brings me inevitably to the matter of wealth and markets—and through that, to the idea of extraction. To begin, it is worth noting that wealth, too, is a matter of publicity. Boiling down several of Michael Warner's arguments<sup>165</sup>, if publics take shape through acts of address to persons extending beyond one's realm of direct acquaintance (in Warner's terms, "strangers"), then acts of consumption can be imagined as forms of address to publics taking the specific form of markets. While Warner's exploration of markets-as-publics focuses on how people, especially those marginalized from other forms of political participation, may come to view consumption as

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>164</sup> Gang Yue, "As the Dust Settles in Shangri-La: Alai's Tibet in the Era of Sino-Globalization," *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 56 (August 2008): 543–63; Ben Hillman, "Paradise Under Construction: Minorities, Myths and Modernity in Northwest Yunnan," *Asian Ethnicity* 4, no. 2 (2003): 175–88; Emily T. Yeh and Chris Coggins, eds., *Mapping Shangrila: Contested Landscapes in the Sino-Tibetan Borderlands* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>165</sup> Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject"; Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 2002; Warner, "The Mass Public and the Mass Subject."

a way "in" to political life, what concerns me here is how the publication of ethnographic texts generates money and respect for ethnographers, but not necessarily for their interlocutors. Specifying this, I would add that the academy has its own economy of status and recognition, involving hierarchies of grants, publications, professional titles, and institutions—for which notions of research value, based in the anthropological case on ethnography specifically, are foundational. That is, ethnographic texts need not produce money directly to be extractive in these terms. And more broadly, however ethnographic extraction occurs, it moves crucially through publicity.

However, in southwest China, the potentials for ethnographic extraction are at once vaster and murkier. First, I cannot overstate the extent to which state-led and corporate interests, generally in the form of ethnic cultural research, UNESCO-inspired ethnic culture preservation projects, and/or touristic development ventures, operate together. This is a practical truth and also a matter of absolute doxa in Berdder: as Gujjyoq's comment indicates, and as I began to explore in Chapter Five, there is a set of tight indexical links among ethnic tourism, ethnic cultural research, wealth, and fame. At this point, simply to fly the banner of "culture work" is implicitly to promise fame and wealth to locals who support and participate in the work.

Furthermore, these projects do generally offer their interlocutors some smaller version of the Lijiang parable: they generate *some* wealth, and they also generate products, ranging from TV documentaries and touristic advertisements to research and magazine articles, that avoid using pseudonyms and mention their interlocutors by name. While these small boons obscure the far larger extent to which profits and honors go disproportionately to the people guiding the projects, there is enough truth to their promises that many people are eager to participate.

Second, the pragmatic result of these projects is a regimentation of ethnic culture that, as recent work by Eloise Anderson (in Xinjiang)<sup>166</sup> and Charlene Makley (in Tibet)<sup>167</sup> eloquently explore, works to instantiate forms of ethnic culture that fulfill the ends of diversity (and often exotic difference) but are fundamentally apolitical, posing no risk to the ontological premises of the Chinese nation.

Just as themes of exposure and extraction thematize southwest China's current moment, they also gesture to the unique ethical problems facing ethnographers who work in the area. Whether or not one directly participates in ethnic culture work (as described in the previous chapter), Yunnan residents tend to interpellate ethnographers into this category, and to engage with them based on a linked set of expectations. In my case, many Berdder people took my whiteness as a sign that I had an even greater ability to send fame and wealth in their direction, and many were accordingly extremely eager to be in communication with me, and to support whatever sort of research project I might undertake.

Another truism of ethnographic research, one that I fully accept and think about often, involves the exploitative nature of offering economic compensation that is significantly more than one's interlocutors could earn in any other way. Contemporary southwest China offers a comparable but also different case: while the truth of many ethnographers' lives and resources mean that they are unable to offer either vast wealth or fame to their interlocutors, to a large extent that does not matter. Many interlocutors will still view us that way, and we will possess the same capacity to exploit them. This indeed is why I believe Berdder people were so willing to call me and Xiaohong the same.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>166</sup> Anderson, "Imperfect Perfection: Uyghur Muqam and the Practice of Cultural Renovation in the People's Republic of China."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>167</sup> Makley, The Battle for Fortune State-Led Development, Personhood, and Power among Tibetans in China.

All of which brings me back to Xiaohong's article. In part, the specific ideological assemblage of culture work (involving touristic development, cultural research, and culture preservation work) that has emerged in southwest China speaks to what it might have meant to He Yusong to be asked to dance, or to see his name in Xiaohong's article: to be asked to dance was to be invited into a world of fame and wealth; and whether or not the article had actually resulted in such rewards, its very existence gestured to them. It was like a promise.

At the same time, many of the elements that contribute narratively to her tale of triumphant ethnographic adventure also erase the possibility of complex Berdder responses to the publicity that she, as ethnographer, manifestly embodied. She does not consider the motives He Yusong might have had about dancing, or the aspirations for himself and his family that might have been embedded in He Jinnuo's naming of her as a god-daughter (in Chinese), along with his decision to lay claim to her future by identifying it with Naxi books. Her discussion of this particular incident is worth quoting in full:

Godfather also told my fortune, finding that my whole life's karmic destiny was mixed up with dongba scriptures. I thought to myself at the time: what a trap, making me commit my life to these books! But as of now, I am still involved with the scriptures, so maybe he was right after all!

干爹还为我算了一命,得出的结论是我这辈子和东巴经有缘。我暗自思忖,这是给我下套吧,好让我一辈子做这经书!但时至今日,我依然还在经书中打转,也许他真的算真了吧!

Given the joke about traps, this section is as close as Xiaohong's article ever comes to this sort of consideration. Nevertheless, she does not quite get there. The implication, so far as I can tell, is simply that she herself may not want to spend the rest of her life on Naxi books, not that anyone else might have an agenda in asking her to do so.

This raises the question of how Xiaohong actually did and does make sense of the situation. Did she simply not see these things, or was there a deliberate decision not to talk about

them? If so, what did this sort of silence and obscuration mean to her? In summary: in the face of cultural devastation and ongoing colonial hegemony, *how am I to understand all the perkiness*?

Towards a better frame for this question, I turn now to the history of cultural research in southwest China.

## 5.3 A brief history of Chinese social science (and ethnic metaculture)

When the Japanese invasion and occupation of North China in the 1930s forced a mass migration of people and institutions southward, all of Beijing's most famous universities made the move, and what became a consortium of Tsinghua, Peking University, and Nankai University ended up in Kunming, under the joint title of National Southwestern Associated University (Ch. Guoli xinan lianhe daxue 国立西南联合大学), or for short, Lianda. It was there on what had once been the periphery of the Chinese empire that, under the auspices of Lianda, the Chinese social scientific study of the peripheral peoples, later to become ethnic minorities (Ch. shaoshu minzu 少數民族) began.

Notably, though, this work drew powerfully on existing research by Western imperialists such as Henry Davies, a British linguist/explorer who created one of the first taxonomies of southwestern groups. 169 From this work developed a whole swath of different social sciences. 170 But most relevant to this story is the parallel emergence of ethnology (Ch. minzu xue 民族学) and anthropology (Ch. renlei xue 人类学). While the Chinese academy framed ethnology as a native Chinese social science through which only non-Han frontier peoples were to be studied,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>168</sup> Israel, *Lianda*; Yen, "Frontier Anthropology and Chinese Colonialism in the Southwestern Frontier During the Second Sino-Japanese War"; Yen, "Anthropology."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>169</sup> Mullaney, Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>170</sup> Guldin, The Saga of Anthropology in China: From Malinowski to Moscow to Mao.

anthropology was a foreign import from the West focused on the study of all human groups (in part, presumably, because Westerners had used it to study Han *as well as* border peoples).

The irony is that the new discipline claiming to embody a primordial Chinese identity—ethnology—derived much of its critical vocabulary from the West: from Davies' and other's identifications of southwestern groups, as well as from the Victorian discourses of social evolution that foreign imperialists had used to marginalize the Chinese nation. In returning to the work of ethnologists of this era, therefore, it is easy to find studies of various border peoples whose customs were depicted as primitive versions of what the Han had been, in the distant past—much as British anthropologists such as Tylor had identified distant, non-Western peoples as representatives of his own culture's past. Ethnology, then, specifically contributed to the double articulation of Chinese-ness and ethnicity described in Chapter Four, such that minority ethnicity leads "logically"—indeed by the rationality of Spencerian evolution—to (Han) Chinese-ness. 172

That said, China's development of ethnology was also specific, with research focused insistently on ethnic peoples' "exotic" sexual practices, as well as to what I am calling their historiography, that is, the particular material practices through which they move cultural forms through time. These research foci indicate, I believe, a particular convergence of attention on the part of Chinese ethnologists and Indigenous southwestern people, with the ethnologists seeking comparisons and contrasts with their own ideological baseline of mainstream Chinese culture and cultural value. Historiographic practice, as I argued in the previous chapter, played a crucial role in early twentieth-century Chinese nation-building, and it is thus not surprising that crucial

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>171</sup> Yen, "Constructing the Chinese: Paleoanthropology and Anthropology in the Chinese Frontier, 1920-1950." Stevan Harrell, "Introduction: Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them," in *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 3–36.

southwestern forms such as song and dance (generally as part of religious practice) occupied the ethnologists from the very beginning. <sup>173</sup> Likewise, regional processes of written textual production also attracted a great deal of attention, with translation of these texts into Chinese, as well as "reforms" of their writing systems, being central activities. <sup>174</sup> Finally, precisely because kinship practice was so definitive of southwestern life, but also so different from the similarly deeply valued kinship practices of mainstream Chinese worlds, it had been and remained an object of intense, often prurient scrutiny. <sup>175</sup> I mention all this as a way of locating Xiaohong's interest in He Yusong's dance (and of course, ultimately, his writing) more concretely in an institutional history of academic ethnography. <sup>176</sup> As I will consider in a subsequent section, love and desire are also crucial elements of Berdder people's response to academic ethnographic projects, and may have developed dialogically with Chinese social scientific investigations, including those of kinship practices.

Moving forward in time, even after Lianda had been disbanded, and its component universities returned to Beijing, the memory of its presence reverberated in Kunming.<sup>177</sup> After the Communist victory in 1949, the central government initiated an ethnic identification (Ch. minzu shibie 民族識別) project that deployed a team of social scientists (most linked directly to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>173</sup> Emily Wilcox, *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>174</sup> Zhou, Multilingualism in China.

<sup>175</sup> Jing Li, "Zhu Yi Fengsu [Customs of the Various Southern Barbarians]," in *Yunnan Zhilüe Jijiao [A Compilation from Brief Records of Yunnan]* (Kunming: Yunnan minzu chubanshe, 1986); Jing Li, "The Customs of Various Barbarians," in *Under Confucian Eyes: Writings on Gender in Chinese History*, ed. Susan Mann and Yu-Yin Cheng, trans. Jacqueline Armijo-Hussein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 88–100; Chuan-kang Shih, *Quest for Harmony: The Moso Traditions of Sexual Union and Family Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010); Charles McKhann, "Naxi, Rerkua, Moso, Meng: Kinship, Politics, and Ritual on the Yunnan-Sichuan Border," in *Naxi and Moso Ethnography: Kin, Rites, Pictographs*, ed. Michael Oppitz and Elizabeth Hsu (Zürich: Völkerkundemuseum Zürich, 1998), 23–45.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>176</sup> Elise Marie Anderson, "The Politics of Pop: The Rise and Repression of Uyghur Music in China," Los Angeles Review of Books, 2020, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/politics-pop-rise-repression-uyghur-music-china/; Anderson, "Imperfect Perfection: Uyghur Muqam and the Practice of Cultural Renovation in the People's Republic of China."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>177</sup> Israel, *Lianda*.

Lianda) to assign China's diverse non-Han, peripheral peoples to a finite number of ethnic groups or nationalities (Ch. minzu 民族). 178 Following intellectual historian Wang Hui's implication 179, the ethnic identification project occurred alongside several other central government-directed projects aimed at national stabilization through the standardization (institutionalized metapragmatic regimentation 180) of different cultural practices. These standardization projects include the consolidation of a "standard" Chinese spoken register (Ch. putonghua 普通話) as well as Chinese script simplification. 181 In this broad sense, ethnic identification can be understood as a parallel, standardizing attempt aimed like the others at gaining regulatory control over apparently messy/chaotic elements of the new nation.

Centered in Kunming, the ethnic identification project drew Soviet ethnology<sup>182</sup>, a central influence on the Chinese Communist Party at the time, into conversation with Lianda's emergent tradition of ethnology. While different in many ways, these traditions converged crucially around

<sup>178</sup> Mullaney, Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China; Pamela Kyle Crossley, "Thinking About Ethnicity in Early Modern China," Late Imperial China; Pasadena, Calif. 11, no. 1 (1990): 1–35; Haiyang Zhang, "Wrestling with the Connotation of Chinese 'Minzu," Economic and Political Weekly 32, no. 30 (1997): PE74–84; Yiting Chu, "Constructing Minzu: The Representation of Minzu and Zhonghua Minzu in Chinese Elementary Textbooks," Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education 39, no. 6 (November 2, 2018): 941–53; Han Jinchun 韩锦春 and Li Yifu 李毅夫, "Hanwen 'Minzu' Yi Ci de Kaoyuan Ziliao [Data of Etymological Inquiry of the Word 'Minzu' in Chinese Literature]," CASS Institute of Nationality Studies, 1985; Han Jinchun 韩锦春 and Li Yifu 李毅夫, "Hanwen 'minzu' yi ci de chuxian jiqi chuqi de shiyong qingkuang 汉文'民族'一词的出现及其初期使用情况 [The emergence and initial usage of the Chinese 'minzu' term]," Minzu yanjiu 民族研究 [Ethno-national studies], no. 2 (1984): 36–43.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>179</sup> Wang Hui, "Local Forms, Vernacular Dialects, and the War of Resistance against Japan: The 'National Forms' Debate," in *The Politics of Imagining Asia*, ed. Theodore Huters (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 95–135

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>180</sup> James Milroy, "Language Ideologies and the Consequences of Standardization," *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 5, no. 4 (2001): 530–55; Silverstein, "Whorfianism and the Linguistic Imagination of Nationality."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>181</sup> Zhong, Chinese Grammatology: Script Revolution and Literary Modernity, 1916–1958.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>182</sup> ÎÛ. V. Bromleĭ, "The Term Ethnos and Its Definition," in *Soviet Ethnology and Anthropology Today*, Studies in Anthropology (The Hague: Mouton, 1974), 55–72; ÎÛ. V. Bromleĭ, *Soviet Ethnology and Anthropology Today*, *Soviet Ethnology and Anthropology Today*, Studies in Anthropology (The Hague: Mouton, 1974); Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union, Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Culture and Society after Socialism (Cornell University Press, 2014); Nathaniel Knight, "Vocabularies of Difference: Ethnicity and Race in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia," *Kritika* 13, no. 3 (2012): 667–83.

an idea of social evolution, with Soviet ethnology contributing a set of evolutionary stages á la Marx, as well as a set of criteria—involving shared language, culture, and territory—with which to designate particular groups to particular stages. Not surprisingly, then, part of ethnic identification involved "scientifically" determining each minority ethnicity's relative evolutionary backwardness with respect to China's majority nationality, the Han.

During this time, and under the growing influence of Soviet ethnology, the discipline of anthropology (as well as most other social sciences, including sociology) were disbanded for their imputed imperialist leanings. Only ethnology remained. This meant by extension that increasingly the only objects of Chinese social scientific research were minorities, and that their study became institutionalized as they themselves, through the identification project, became increasingly stable semiotic objects as well. 184

With the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, which involved renewed calls to capture a revolutionary consciousness by rooting out internal enemies, many minority scholars who had studied minorities, even under the auspices of ethnology, were attacked for localism (Ch. difang zhuyi 地方主义), that is, over-allegiance to one's own minority group at the expense of the Chinese nation. He Wanbao, a Naxi scholar who was educated at Lianda, and had been involved in the collection and preservation of many Naxi books, faced such criticism. However, when the Cultural Revolution ended and China's opening began in the 1980s, academic study, including in all areas of the social sciences, picked back up again, and with this came a renewed

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>183</sup> Guldin, *The Saga of Anthropology in China: From Malinowski to Moscow to Mao*; Yen, "Anthropology." <sup>184</sup> Agnieszka Joniak-Luthi, *The Han* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015); Thomas S. Mullaney, *Critical Han Studies: The History, Representation, and Identity of China's Majority* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012); Crossley, "Thinking About Ethnicity in Early Modern China"; Rosa and Flores, "Unsettling Race and Language: Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective."

focus on culture—on, indeed, the study of minority cultures.<sup>185</sup> At this point, He Wanbao was rehabilitated, the books he had preserved in the local library became viable again, and he came to chair the Naxi Dongba Culture Research Institute in Lijiang. Ever since then, the Institute has led regional efforts to translate Naxi ceremonial books, producing a range of publications and research articles.<sup>186</sup>

I know He Wanbao's story through a series of informal oral history interviews I conducted with a retired Naxi ethnicity researcher of the aforesaid Institute, someone I will refer to here as Teacher Shu. As my oldest friend in southwest China, Teacher Shu and his family have been offering me care, conversation, and a place to stay since I was 22. I thus arrive at He Wanbao, as well as Teacher Shu, because they draw together another important set of links in the development of southwest China's ethnic metaculture. He Wanbao's story connects Lianda, the origin of social science as well as minority ethnicity in the contemporary Chinese sense, together with cultural research, in the form of the Institute. That cultural research, furthermore, specifically targets Naxi ceremonial books, a crucial mode of historiographic activity in the area and a longstanding object of social scientific inquiry.

Teacher Shu's life extends the network of connections yet further. Belonging to the generation of scholars that came just after He Wanbao, Teacher Shu attended college in Kunming in the early 1980s (just after the Cultural Revolution) and went on to specialize in the translation of Naxi ceremonial texts at the Institute. As a resident of Lijiang, he (along with his ancestral home in Lijiang's old town) survived the area's spate of violent earthquakes only to watch as, in ensuing years, Lijiang's international fame transformed local life. Teacher Shu and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>185</sup> Guldin, The Saga of Anthropology in China: From Malinowski to Moscow to Mao.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>186</sup> Dongba wenhua yanjiusuo [Dongba Culture Research Institute], Naxi dongba guji yizhu quanji [An annotated collection of Naxi dongba manuscripts].

his family relocated to an apartment in the surrounding city several years ago, and now, like nearly all of their friends, rent out their old house to entrepreneurs working in the tourist sector.

At present, the Wang family home is being used as a tourist hostel.

While it certainly is insulting to tell the story of Lijiang as a tragedy of lost cultural innocence, it is at least accurate in Teacher Shu's case to tell it as a tragedy of one lost house. I have gone with Teacher Shu on several occasions to visit his old home, and heard him speak of his alienation from it with sadness and anger. While obviously his family benefits from the profits they gain from renting it, Teacher Shu would never have left it if not for an incredibly loud bar that sprouted up next door, and over years of sleepless nights, eventually drove him to his current apartment.

Nevertheless, Teacher Shu also played a crucial role in extending Lijiang's new tourism-based publicity specifically to the study of Naxi books. He and a group of researchers at the Institute collaborated in the late 1990s to apply for, and in 2003 receive, "UNESCO Memory of the World" status (a title reserved for items of "documentary heritage") for Naxi ceremonial books. 187 Recalling the work that went into this application, Teacher Shu has emphasized to me that their efforts took direct inspiration from the city of Lijiang's receipt of the comparable, if slightly different, UNESCO world heritage site status several years before. Yet he noted in the same breath that part of the reasoning for seeking this status was to build a platform for Naxi culture work that reached beyond the Chinese state. This is to say that Teacher Shu's life and work crucially link cultural research, in the tradition of Lianda's emphasis on peripheral peoples, to the publicity of tourist development, while also attesting to a theory of local agency that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>187</sup> Memory of the World Registry, "Ancient Naxi Dongba Literature Manuscripts," United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2003, http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/flagship-project-activities/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered-heritage/registered-heritage-page-1/ancient-naxi-dongba-literature-manuscripts/.

instrumentalized ethnic metaculture's theory of publicity to seek some degree of autonomy for himself and other local culture workers.

Within this history, three themes seem most salient. First, while much Anglophone research on China presents minority ethnicity as a cultural construction by the Chinese state, and while I do not dispute the general contours of this point, I have here tried to specify it by contextualizing ethnic identification as (1) a form of national standardization that was paralleled by other projects being performed at the same time, and (2) a part of an emergent tradition of social science that contributed to standardization at multiple levels. This reveals crucial genealogical links between cultural research, touristic development, and cultural preservation work today: it was the research that provided the metapragmatic image of ethnicity that tourism and preservation both enforce and monetize today.

Second, the existences of He Wanbao and Teacher Shu (as well as many others like them), gesture to the vast inadequacy of (1) any framework that sites ethnic metaculture in a binary conflict between "the state" and the southwest's Indigenous groups, and (2) that metaculture's own visions of ethnic uniformity and harmony. He Wanbao and Teacher Shu are both, after all, Naxi themselves, and it is in part through their efforts that a long tradition of social scientific racism became rearticulated as a project of social and economic development in Lijiang. That said, Naxi identity simply is not a very explanatory concept in this case. Teacher Shu is a highly educated, comparatively wealthy Lijiang city-dweller, and his life bears little resemblance to that of, for example, the similarly Naxi-identified Teacher Mei, a comparatively poor peasant from a rural mountain village. Indeed, in conversations with me, Teacher Shu mobilized a familiar ethnocentricism against Teacher Mei. I remember him telling me that Teacher Mei, as "only" a rural practitioner of Naxi ceremony and books, could not "explain" his

own books, and thus could not be trusted as my teacher. Teacher Shu, for his part, had spent his life studying a comparable set of ceremonial books, but had never used them in ceremonies and only infrequently seen them being thusly used by others. Still, because he was more skilled in metacultural talk and activity, he felt his understanding exceeded Teacher Mei's.

While I link Teacher Shu's dismissiveness to the social scientific tradition he inherited, I can also attest to the fact that he was and is committed to a historiographic project of Naxi culture preservation that he and his colleagues at the Institute had together assembled *from* that social scientific tradition. Furthermore, if it was through local forms of class differentiation that He Wanbao and Teacher Shu had the opportunity to act as influential agents of state ideologies, then the same set of identities also allowed them to mobilize a framework of ethnic culture work to create a space of relative protection for themselves and their work.

Third, this history helps account for the specific expectations or "terms of engagement" that ethnographers trained in the Chinese social scientific tradition bring to their work with rural, ethnic interlocutors. According to these terms of engagement, ethnic peoples will above all else consent to the presuppositions of ethnic metaculture. To begin with, this involves expressing attachment to the state's standardized images of ethnicity—according to a logic by which valuing their own ethnic "culture" is an expression of love for the multi-ethnic Chinese nation. Second, they will embrace a combination of (a) modernization and economic development and (b) ethnic tradition that is paradoxical in its own terms, but also commits them to the double articulation of minority ethnicity mentioned in the previous chapter. Finally, interlocutors will recognize that ethnographers and the culture work they are doing is precisely a gift—to them. 189

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>188</sup> McCarthy, Communist Multiculturalism: Ethnic Revival in Southwest China.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>189</sup> Emily T. Yeh, *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013).

This is because the research will generate publicity for their culture, and publicity is an uncomplicated good. Interlocutors will understand, therefore, that they are not in a position to make demands on their ethnographers. If they are asked to change into traditional clothes and dance, they should do so out of gratitude and happiness.

The more complex reality, to which the stories of He Wanbao and Teacher Shu gesture, is that interlocutors able to comply with unspoken terms of engagement must have reached a level of collective understanding of those terms that is, at minimum, ethnographic in the first sense. They must have participated in enough research encounters and conversations about research encounters to bring a certain self-awareness to such events. That said, as He Wanbao and Teacher Shu also indicate, these terms of engagement do not occur along a uniform line distinguishing ethnic interlocutors from rigid human embodiments of a heartless state. In their various publications, papers, and collegial conversations, academic ethnographers have their own, linked terms of engagement, and in a context of no explicitly institutionalized alternative discourses to the culture complex I have outlined, it is in everyone's interest when He Yusong does want to dance.

While this history goes some way in explaining the extent to which Xiaohong's article simply does not ask certain questions, it does not yet account for the article's emotional dimension and context. I turn, then, to Xiaohong's apparent love for He Yusong, and He Yusong's apparently loving curation of her memory, her stories, and her article.

## 5.4 Feelings!

Xiaohong was not, of course, the only other ethnographer of ethnic culture that I got to know. Among a variety of others, there was Liu Xian: a Han woman like Xiaohong, and like all

three of us, very liable to be swept up in the epic romance of fieldwork. I met her the same time and place I met He Yusong—in Beijing, at the conference on endangered writing systems. She had been pursuing doctoral research on Naxi culture (in Berdder, with He Yusong), and she adopted me, I think, in part because He Yusong already had.

It speaks to Liu Xian's good nature that she did not hate me for, through my friendship with He Yusong, getting up in her ethnographic grill in a serious way. Obviously, in the matter of Xiaohong, I cannot say the same of myself. And honestly, as my own research increasingly honed in on Berdder over the years that followed, I might ultimately have ended up summoning up another green monster for Liu Xian, whose stories I also heard throughout the valley. But I didn't in this case, I think because we related so much to each other.

After all, we two had feelings—ganqing, she said—about Berdder.

Her use of the Chinese term, ganqing, is notable: while "feelings" is a valid translation, the term carries a far heavier dose of moonlight, tragic love, and flower petals.

Liu Xian and I stayed in touch over more than ten years, and I'd meet her in Beijing, or sometimes other cities closer to Berdder, where she would take me to fashionable cafes and sushi parlors, and share her fieldwork adventures with me. One of the things I always appreciated about Liu Xian was her willingness to talk with me as a confidente rather than, as I was at the beginning, a person struggling to parse her sentences. What seemed to matter to her was that I knew the Berdder people she mentioned, and generally none of the people she knew in Beijing.

In the conversation I am recalling, she was just back from a Naxi book-collecting tour, in which she had gone on a trek to the relatively inaccessible Naxi settlement of Eya, seeking out and photographing ceremonial texts as she went. Her journey followed the same general route that He Yusong's father, Yinddertal, had taken on his post-collectivization trading journey, and

He Yusong, who knew the route, too, had acted as Liu Xian's guide. However, because the mountain paths in that area remain confusing and difficult, He Yusong's cousin had come, too: having married into the nearby valley of Luozee, he lived a bit closer to Eya, and was more familiar with its paths.

Over the course of the ensuing book-collecting journey, something had developed between Liu Xian and this cousin. She recalled with tenderness how the laces of her boots kept coming untied, and he began to tie them for her each morning in a special, durable sort of knot. He also guarded public showers for her when she went to wash up. In general, she said, he looked out for her. While I remain unclear on what else may have happened between them, these technicalities seemed far less important than the outpouring of ganqing that Liu Xian recalled between them.

Above all else, she said, this man had *seen* her: a career woman, with a great job and many publications. The sort of woman who might intimidate some men. But he had seen past that, to her vulnerability. He had tied her shoes for her. Liu Xian had been dabbing at her eyes throughout the story, but she choked up at this point.

The problem, at least as I first grasped the story, was that each of them was married.

Thus, when Liu Xian went to the Shangrila airport to catch a plane back to Beijing, she and He Yusong's cousin both saw this as the end to their hiking romance. Waiting to board the plane,

Liu Xian took a picture of her shoes—she had tied them herself, in the way he had taught her—and sent it to him.

This meant, she explained to me, sobbing, that she was leaving now, but she would never forget him.

Liu Xian cried a lot, and she had ganqing of some kind for most of the people she knew in Berdder. I have heard her speak at academic conferences about the importance of caring about the places one does ethnographic research, and I have taken these statements in the ethical terms set forth earlier in this chapter. There was thus an extent to which I understood this story in the same way, contextualizing it in my appreciation for the empathetic presence that Liu Xian brought to her fieldwork, and a general understanding that precisely because ethnography *is* a matter of human relationships, it can get messy.

But a final thread ran through her narrative, a thread I did not at first notice. In the same tone of rapturous tragedy, I remember Liu Xian describing running errands with He Yusong's cousin around the city of Shangrila.

People, she told me, had mistaken him as a city dweller.

A *Naxi minority peasant*, she emphasized. But no one ever guessed.

This theme of his ability to pass as a city mouse, combined with his identity as an ethnic country mouse, a knower of the mystic mountain roads, reappeared throughout the conversation. It was the final charm; it cemented his place in her memory and her heart.

As this final thread came visible to me over the course of the conversation, I remember drawing back. I remember suddenly liking Liu Xian a great deal less. Not, to be clear, because her story implied a deception of the two absent spouses, something I could understand as the complexity internal to human relationships. I was bothered by the nature of Liu Xian's attraction: it struck me as an expression of the worst elements from the conference and indeed the national history I have described, in which ethnic difference becomes at once titillating and backward—or rather, titillating *because* it is backward. The resulting knot of desire and repulsion animates the theme of passing, which has now been refracted twice in this chapter: as Xiaohong's apparent

acceptance by a rural Naxi family, even as she remains an urban researcher from Beijing; and of this cousin's appearance as a suave city man, even as he remains an exotic rustic.

It is additionally bothersome to me that, in the context of the ethnographic terms of engagement I have described, in which the consent of rural ethnic peoples to ethnographers is a matter of national doxa, it is hard to imagine an academic ethnographer/interlocutor affair that is not at least shaded by coercion.

Finally, it bothered me that Liu Xian appeared completely oblivious to all of this. She seemed convinced that her story would make sense to me, would indeed be as moving to me as it was to her.

And honestly, in a way, I did understand. I had had my own crush on a Berdder interlocutor who was especially dedicated to Naxi books, and if the substance of that attraction moved primarily through shared interest, my attachment to Naxi books is itself a matter of shady ganqing. I mean, Edward Said might have written an *Orientalism Part II* about the history of strange old Europeans studying Asian scripts that they claim to be pictographic. <sup>190</sup> I think it is only fair to locate myself within that trajectory, which through various early Western researchers (Joseph Rock included!) found its way to Lianda, to ethnic culture as it is imagined today, and thusly to my ethnographic compatriots, Xiaohong and Liu Xian.

At this level, I can only observe that affection and care can and frequently do exist alongside complicity and violence, that the ideological structure of academic ethnography, with its specific research foci and terms of engagement in China, create the conditions for this sort of interpersonally paradoxical relationship. Thus, in the matter of Xiaohong's article, I find it

of Cantos CX-CXVII; Qian, Orientalism and Modernism: The Legacy of China in Pound and Williams.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>190</sup> Terrien de Lacouperie, *Beginnings of Writing in Central and Eastern Asia, or, Notes on 450 Embryo-Writings and Scripts* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 2009); Zhaoming Qian, *The Modernist Response to Chinese Art: Pound, Moore, Stevens* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002); Pound, *Drafts & Fragments* 

completely believable that she both cared for He Yusong and actively participated in his oppression. In today's southwest China, I am not sure it is possible to be an ethnographer and *not* do that. This is the deepest question of this chapter, and I will come back to it.

For the moment, I want to offer another perspective on ethnographic feelings, one that temporarily brackets the different histories of academic ethnography I have described in order to focus on ethnography in its first and broadest delineation. If the experience of communication is itself a triumph over the differences between people, not through erasure but through partial comprehension, and if an ethnographic orientation to such communication involves an attunement to the process of comprehension, perhaps even a reverence for it, then it seems to me that Liu Xian's story, including the bits about passing, was about all of that, too. Likewise, perhaps, with Xiaohong: can there be an adventure greater than participating in the making of comprehension across a gulf? Can such comprehension and such care for it be separated from love? I think this is part of the story she was trying to tell.

The problem is, of course, today's southwest China, and what it means to bring one's visions of ethnographic moonlight and flower petals there. The Berdder guy I mentioned, Wise-Ass, pursued long and very animated conversations with me about Naxi books, and I still remember the loveliness and the generativity of those exchanges. Wise-Ass also turned out to be married. Which felt to me like a problem, and I made this clear. Not too long after, he began telling me about Berdder's "cultural tradition" of love songs, the circle dancing and dialogic singing through which people negotiate courtship, flirtation, and affairs. He explained that, in "Naxi culture," people cared not a fig for marriage, not really; what did matter was love.

He may even have used the word ganqing.

All of this made me extraordinarily suspicious and curious and sad at the same time. And while it marked the end of my own ethnographic romance with Wise-Ass, I still think of him. I also have him to thank for two very, well, wise-ass insights. First, he showed me another example (Teacher Shu's is the first) of how the framework of ethnic culture work can become an instrument for seeking very specific ends, far beyond its espoused goals (in this case, to justify some manner of extramarital hijinks). Second, his actions suggested a direct link between ethnic culture work and Berdder's very real tradition of love singing.

### 5.5 Love and fame in berdder

Thus I began an extended investigation of love singing, through which I attended singing events, recorded them, discussed them with people, discussed them with Teacher Mei, worked with Teacher Mei to translate the recordings into Chinese, and also conducted interviews with elderly singers about the history of love-singing in the area. While this was indeed a lot of work, it did not take me much beyond the places I was already going, and the life in which I was already participating. Love-singing, which takes the form of hand-clasped circles of dancers engaged in dialogic singing, generally occurs on holidays and big events, such as marriages and funerals, and always at the margin of a given event. As a result, it was easy to miss, but also easy to notice, if you were already at the given event with your eyes peeled. In addition, love songs were the stuff of local gossip. To talk with people about them was to enter into the snarky, wistful, empathetic, jealous, fascinated speculations they were already pursuing with each other about their neighbors' love lives. In a context in which so many of the conversations I was having felt oppressively, inescapably scripted, chatting about love song was just fun.

Two findings seem most relevant to this chapter. First, Wise-Ass was strategic but also not wrong in his depiction of love-singing as transgressive of marriage. Much of the gossip I heard concerned people involved in decades-long extramarital affairs, the turning points of which were hammered out in singing events that lasted all night. While people always viewed such affairs as mildly scandalous, there was also a tacit understanding that such things happened. I am inclined to say, then, that love singing was transgressive in a way that had itself become conventionalized, and ultimately, the apparent moral lapse it suggested also reinscribed the central importance of local ideologies of marriage, based on heterosexual unions centered in ancestral homes. At the same time, the endless attention and speculation that people devoted to love song suggested a more complicated, if less explicitly articulated, collective moral stance on marital fidelity.

Second, I find an emergent set of techniques for responding to ethnographers that draws together conventional interactional structures from love song as well as from fame-seeking. While the previous chapter set forth the general contours of fame-seeking, as a mandalic practice of self-centering through which material signs of the self, as well as physical locomotion across the landscape, work together to entrench the power of that embodied center, here I focus on fame's implicit theory of publicity, which in some ways parallels Chinese publicity as a tool of national metaculture. My observation is that, within Berdder sociocultural frameworks, ethnographic terms of engagement actually appear as a way of seeking fame (and/or publicity) through something that formally (and perhaps to some extent affectively) resembles the practices of love-singing.

### 5.5.1 Love singing

Theories of voicing, as they appear in various historiographic Berdder events, offer a way into the matter of love song. The most fundamental contrast is between the embodied voices (N. kaq) of individuals in everyday conversation versus the generic voices (also known as kaq), that are identified with the specific melodies and metrical patterns of book recitation and song performance broadly construed. While both types of voicing are referred to with the same Naqhai term, kaq, it is through shifts to generic voicing (with its attendant melodies and meters) that people indicate a type of action that might be described as "performative" but which I have argued in Chapter Two is better understood in Berdder as historiographic, intentionally productive of history. Crucially, this fundamental split in ways of voicing carries not only a theory of action, as described, but also of subjectivity: while inconsequential ordinary speech (and voicing) occurs among embodied individuals, the vast consequentiality of ceremonial speech and song (with its generic voicing) engages composite social units that merely encompass individual humans, and are channeled through the ritualist's or singer's body.

With respect to ritual recitation (N. bbv) in particular, and as explored in Chapter Two, it is important to note that this is the key mode of historiographic action in Berdder and most of southwest China. Through it, a reciting ritualist uses a generic voice to channel a large swath of beings, including the naga that inhabit/are the alpine topography, as well as ancestors and gods, and in this way he directs change in the world. At this very broad level, ceremonial voicing transforms an individual human voice into a more powerful, collective force, in a way that is made perceptible through the use of specific patterns of melody and metricality. (Note that there are also internal aural differentiations, indicating different types of ceremonial voices that correspond to different types of ceremonies.)

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>191</sup> Richard Bauman, Verbal Art as Performance (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1994).

In contrast, song and dance (N. zzee zzee coq coq)—in general, singing and dancing are not ideologically or practically disaggregated—may involve but is not led by ritualists. It is a community event involving many different people, for which less training is involved, and its physical location (at the margin of "larger" ceremonies as such) is an index of its lesser social consequence. Nevertheless, it shares certain commonalities with ceremonial recitation, involving many similar oral texts, as well as the use of generic voicing: singers likewise employ their own arrangements of melody and meter, with different varieties assigned to different types of events (for example, funerals employ lyrics in the slow, low "wo zei zei" voice, while marriages involve a higher, and according to many people I spoke to, more celebratory "ya li li" voice). At this level, I should note that song/dance events seem to have been far more numerous and differentiated in the past. Based on oral history interviews with individuals born in the 1930s-50s (before and immediately after China's 1949 "Liberation"), they recall singing events once dedicated to the building of houses, critical milestones in the yearly cycle of planting and harvesting, and even particular times and activities within a single day. Given that I did not observe such events being performed in Berdder today, the focus of my analysis, though not I think a complete representation of Berdder's recent history of singing events, are the love songs already mentioned.

Speaking in terms of these love songs, there are consequential ideological and practical differences between them and ceremonial voicing. Most crucially, love songs muster a generic and collective voice that is also physically instantiated through the participation of a human chorus, while their insistent movement is to hone the generic voice back down to a dialogue between embodied individuals, the male and female singers. Put another way, I trace a transgressive movement to locate historiographic action in embodied individuals. I find no

precedent at all for this in action that is ceremonial as such, yet the vast amounts of gossip that accompany such sung acts also attest to their historiographic consequence. In order to trace this out, a more granular account of singing events is required.

Song lyrics are about wild animals, deer and ducks and bees, and sometimes also various plants and trees. These beings' partings, reunions, and mutual longing parallel the experiences of human lovers, whose own adventures are summoned up through the lyrics as a matter of narration or, if the singing has reached a particularly intense stage, of dialogue between lead singers, who are themselves the previously narrated lovers. This movement from narration to address depends on two variables, involving (1) shifts in lead singers and (2) in the type of person (in the sense of third or first person) of the generic voicing.

Thus, whenever lead singers feel they have reached the end of a swath of lyrics and wish to resume their role in the chorus, they mark their exit with framing lyrics, and transfer the responsibility of leading to someone else. This allows for a continual changing-up of lead singers. At the same time, lyrics may be sung in either third or first person. When singing folk are a mixed group, involving various kin whose relations are marked by prohibitions around sexually explicit talk, lyrics must stay in the third person—which is to say that lead singers will sing *about* love and lovers. But they will never substitute "my beloved" (*ma*) for man (*zoq*) or woman (*mi*), and thus shift the event from narration to address. When in other circumstances they do execute this shift, the switching-up of singers takes on the quality of dialogue, such that, for example, Lead Singer B is actually responding to the lyrics of Lead Singer A, and when B finishes, A will sing again to reply. And the alternating lead singers are no longer evoking love in general, but rather the particular love they two have (or do not). Not surprisingly, this is

absolutely the point that attendees and participants wait for, and which they discuss and analyze later.

In a broader sense, Berdder's system of house-based kinship and its attendant prohibitions also give shape to dance events. In the account I will provide here, I want to begin by focusing on kinship norms that existed up until the 1990s, at which point a large number of Berdder young people began seeking work in the city and finding spouses there. While I will return to this more recent kinship shortly, I can account for it more fully by first describing the kinship norms from which it emerged.

Thus, in Berdder from the 1990s reaching back to at least the Nationalist period, there was a preference for marriage between matrilateral parallel cousins (to use common anthropological terms), while matrilateral and patrilateral cross-cousin marriage were less desirable, but still better than marriage with non-kin. There was also a prohibition against marriage between patrilateral parallel cousins. However, for Nahaiq themselves, kin relations were projected not from embodied humans (as the anthropological terms imply) but rather from houses, which were in turn linked to kin groups, known as *cuq'a*. <sup>192</sup>

Thus, in Berdder visions, houses contained within them primarily a family of parents and children, and this constellation of living bodies tied into a body of kin extending into the past as deceased parents and into the future as yet-to-be-born children. Then, cross-cutting the core parent/child formation was a weighted distinction between left-side or paternal kin, through whom the house itself was passed, and right-side or maternal kin, who married out and had dual citizenship, in their fathers' as well as their husbands' houses. The result of these interpenetrating

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>192</sup> Charles McKhann, "Fleshing out the Bones: Kinship and Cosmology in Naqxi Religion" (University of Chicago, 1992).

regimes was two basic household sets, of father/son (paternal left-side kin) and mother/daughter (maternal right-side kin). The prohibition against patrilateral parallel cousin marriage was thus a prohibition against the children of brothers, which is to say members of the same house and lineage, marrying together. The preference for matrilateral parallel cousin marriage was actually a preference for marriage between the children of sisters, precisely because things were kept close to the house and lineage this way, but not to the point of incest. And the median case, of marriage between the children of brothers and sisters (or matrilateral and patrilateral cross-cousin marriage) was somewhat less preferable because, as various Berdder folk have explained, it was just a little *too* close for comfort.

This house-based kinship then became elaborated in a variety of prohibitions. The general rule was to be on one's best behavior around members of one's own kin group, the paternal left-side kin. Or as my teacher put it, quoting an old saying, around these folk, "even farting is forbidden" (*kyɛ llee ke me dduq*). Things became yet stricter around older and opposite sex left-side kin, in the former case because they were also one's elders, and in the latter because of the prohibition against marrying them. Any reference, oblique or otherwise, to sex was out, but discussion of bodily functions, or even behavior that draws attention to them, was also a massive faux pas.

Because the denotational content of lyrics involved body talk, these prohibitions also had consequences for the organization and unfolding of dance events. While village-wide dances engaged the same sexual lyrics, those lyrics had to stay in the third person—and so it was acceptable for brothers and sisters (and by extension father and daughters, and mothers and sons) to take part together. In contrast, the second type of dance *always* shifted from narration to address (to what I am calling first person), and by extension to personal exchanges about love. In

this second case, there was no greater mortification than to be nearby when one's opposite-sex patrilateral kin were dancing.

Running transverse to these kinship tensions were the relationships between same sex members of a village in the same age cohort. There were three general cohorts: unmarried young adults, married adults, and the elderly. And because same-sex members of a cohort tended to work, attend festivals, and go courting together, there simply could not be a first-person dance event performed between men and women of a single village; to do so would inevitably put opposite-sex paternal kin together, in a given dancing circle. It would be unspeakably awkward for everyone. The practice was instead for a same sex group from one village to dance with an opposite but same sex group from another village. As a result, young people were constantly forming romantic relationships with young people from other villages, even as their parents were busily seeking wives or husbands for them within the right-side kin of their village. Sometimes this led to a great deal of heartbreak. And sometimes it led to drawn-out negotiations, by which the children were able to work out marriages with their dance partners. At the same time, the persistence of dance events, as well as the fact that people continued to participate in them at all stages of life (including after marriage), served to engender and sustain extramarital romantic relationships. This is well illustrated in the lyrics to one love song that Teacher Mei taught me; the song describes a relationship that extends across the whole lives of two people, and presumably is sustained at least in part through their ongoing participation in singing events:

zoq lei ma ni gv the man and the beloved wei lei sher ni yuq long ago cei llu cei wa kv at 14 or 15 the wanted her ma sei zoq ddoq yil she wanted him

zoq lei mi ni gv the man and the woman seiq zee jjüq mei nee having their way:

ma lei pi ta la if they'd been parted seiq zee seiq pi bbi they'd still have found a way

zoq lei mi ni gv the man and the beloved ni cerq llu wa kv at 24 or 25 zoq gol ma ddoq yil he loved her she loved him

zoq lei mi ni gv
gol yil yi mei nee
ma lei pi ta la
gol yil sei pi bbi

the man and the woman
hearts entwined:
they might have been parted
but not their hearts

zoq lei ma ni gv the man and the beloved seecerq llu wa kv at 34 or 35 are ached for her ma ciq zoq ddoq yil she ached for him

zoq lei mi ni gv
ciq yil jjüq mei nee
ma lei pi ta la
ciq yil seiq pi bbiq

the man and the woman
aching for each other:
if they'd been parted
they'd still have ached

This brings me to an apparent contradiction, which continues to today, in the way people actually choose marriage partners versus the way they talk about choosing them. No one that I have spoken to has ever really been able to make up their mind as to which is the best option—to arrange marriages between the opposite sex children of sisters, as already described, or to marry "outsiders" (*bbv pal xi*), which is to say potential or real dancing partners. In contrast, in practice, the preference is overwhelmingly for marriage with matrilateral parallel cousins. This is changing, as people increasingly work and date in the city. What is notable, however, is that even people from older generations, for whom matrilateral parallel cousin marriage absolutely was the practice, exhibit a similar ambivalence in verbally choosing between such marriages and those with outsiders.

In sum, marriage practices and dance events are reaching in opposite directions, towards matrilateral right side kin, on the one hand, and towards "outsiders," on the other. Returning to

the present moment, the increasing number of Berdder people who find spouses beyond Berdder is fully explainable within the kinship ideologies I have just set forth, provided that understandings of "outsiders" are expanded beyond "other Berdder villages" to more distant places such as the nearby cities of Shangrila and Lijiang. Thus I do not find a substantive change in kinship ideology in the present, only a vast enlargement of concepts of outsiders, combined with a greater tendency actually to marry them.

Building on this, I observe that researchers themselves, coming as they do from major Chinese cities such as Kunming and Beijing, and sometimes even further afield from the US and other foreign countries, may themselves be accommodated by the category of outsider, and thus rendered desirable romantic partners as well. Before returning to those research encounters, however, I want to consider how one dance event that I attended actually played out.

#### 5.5.2 Eemi and Yulheeq

The aforesaid dance event took place as part of a funeral in 2017, involving a group of elderly women from Weishee village who had arrived to dance with a group of elderly men from Gguddv. The lead singer was Yulheeq, the eightysomething ritualist who occupied Bbapardduaq's lower shrine, and in the excerpt I provide here, he is singing to Eemi, a sixtysomething woman with whom he had had a decades-long affair.

This excerpt appears about twenty minutes after the shift from narration to address, and offers a good example of the sort of negotiations that occur at these events. It is a proposition—but in the mood of an opening shot. Yulheeq knows the night is long and a great deal more negotiation lies ahead. It is also worth noting that, in practice, each of the lines below would have been echoed in a chorus by the whole dancing circle before Yulheeq introduced a new one.

In the interest of clarity, I have excised the chorus and offer only the words that Yulheeq himself produced. The result, however, is a sequence of lines that may at certain points feel jumbled. I attribute this to the real-time nature of the event, in which Yulheeq was remembering/adapting/inventing lines as he went, and in which the accompanying circle of singers were providing a chorus that supplied its own sense of rhythmic continuity.

## Yulheeq sang:

wei lei sherni yu way back in the day Gga-ngga mu zu gol Gga-ngga mountain's bamboo field ggeq gv mu shee zu grew yellow up high gol maiq mu haiq zu grew green down low hei zu llee me woq always the trees apart haiq yil la ceiq hu tonight this golden night mu keel lei zei zei may green and yellow roots converge mu keel lei rhee rhee may green and yellow roots entwine coq mei wei chee hua we dancing village folk mu keel lei rhee rhee may green and yellow roots entwine ddee dderg mu gy llu to form a brand-new tree

duce duciq ma gv ma to jorm a orana-new tree

ggu rra me rra mei if you will or won't, then mi nee shel yel wei Women, say

I discussed and translated these lyrics with Teacher Mei, and according to him, the green and yellow bamboo stand in a parallel relation to Yulheeq and Eemi—and Yulheeq is expressing his hope that, after being apart for so long (in their respective villages), they two will be able to "come together" again this night. Like most sung propositions, a very deep-level parallel exists between dancing and sex. Yulheeq is referring in a way to their togetherness at the dance event that is happening, and in another way he is speaking of a time in the near future when he and Eemi meet up somewhere.

This dance/sex parallelism carries over into Yulheeq's mode of address, specifically at the point that he turns the responsibility for singing back over to Eemi, speaking to her as well as to the group of women with whom she arrived: *if you will or won't, then | Women, say.* I tie this

ambivalence to the fundamentally generic voice of song, which forges a larger bodily unit among dancers. At this level, then, the romance these events create exists not just between individual singers, but also between groups (the Gguddv men as a whole and the Weishee women as a whole).

Accordingly, when Eemi responds, she speaks similarly for herself but also for the group of women, and *to* Yulheeq as well as to the group of men:

hua nee chee llee shel you men talk like so haiq yil la ceiq hu tonight this golden night hua kuq la ggu zu we'll hold you to your words hua nee kual par zu you carve a bowl of white hua nee kual par zei you polish the bowl hua nee elsherl zei you polish the chopsticks cog mei wei chee hua we dancing village folk hua nee elsherl zei you polish the chopsticks but you must provide a pair ddee zu zei yel ddaig

see ceiq zzi gv dda a leaf floats on water

hua kuq lei dda yel it floats to you

In this case, the parallel is between Yulheeq's proposition, and the bowl and chopsticks. Yes, he has a great many nice things to say—the bowl and chopsticks are polished to a shine—but what will come of it all, in the end? Does he mean what he sings? While the lyrics lose a little focus here, in Teacher Mei's opinion, the general movement is clear: Eemi is asking if Yulheeq will follow through with his proposition—if they will, in fact, be lovers that night. She then turns the singing back to him, using the set phrase, a leaf floats on water / it floats to you.

Thence Yulheeq responds, offering a more strongly worded offer, to which Eemi will express more doubt. What about his wife? Where will they meet? And so it goes, in this case, till 6 AM the next morning.

But here I must point out that Yulheeq's knees had given out by the point that he and Eemi sang together—and indeed their dancing circle was seated, unusually, to accommodate Yulheeq's infirmity. And while it was true that he and Eemi had been apart for a long time, that was because he was no longer capable of walking to her village. A rendezvous that evening was out of the question. He simply could not have walked far enough, to the nearest cornfield or mountain. In the end, as I heard the incident reported later, they embraced in a corner, weeping, and then each went home.

My point is that their song was not simply a romantic negotiation, but also a typification of a particular Berdder idea of romance—an idea that reality cannot usually live up to. I think they knew it, and they also didn't; their tears at the end were, in part, a facing-up to the reality outside their song.

### 5.5.3 Ethnographic refractions

A major regret of all my fieldwork is that I did not stay for the end of Eemi's and Yulheeqs' singing. The funeral at which it all occurred was that of Teacher Mei's father, and I left because everything got to be too much. Singing had gone on for most of the night, as Teacher Mei stumbled around drunk and crying. Teacher Mei's father also happened to be Yulheeq's elder brother, so I knew that Yulheeq must be grieving, too, and Eemi for him. Meanwhile, inside the nearby house, ritualists had built up a monotonous drone of recitation. It was so cold that I kept drinking the cups of hot, sweet tea that Teacher Mei's sisters passed around, yet the only bathroom nearby was a rickety outdoor affair that drunken people kept stumbling into. I also knew that the main ceremony would pick back up again after breakfast the next morning. When around 4 AM a Weishee women said she was going home, I went with her.

As a result, I missed the culmination of the singing, in which (as friends later recalled for me) Eemi and Yulheeq shifted from romantic negotiation to the most famous and horrific of all

love lyrics, the *ye pei sheeq*, which recounts the story of love suicide. While my early departure kept me from recording this portion of the song, I later collected it from each of them, as well as from a woman in another village known for her songs, and my host dad. Though in the future I'd like to compare the different versions, for now a sketch of the lyrics' overall narrative arc helps me reconstruct the singing event after I had left.

Ye Pei Sheeq tells the story of a girl and a boy who are inexplicably abandoned by their families; who suffer terribly because of it; who find solace in each others' suffering, and fall in love; and who ultimately choose to escape the world that has treated them so harshly by committing suicide together. Their suicides, however, are figured as an alternative version of household life, in which the lovers brave a treacherous landscape to reach the impossibly distant home of Granny Monster (Yezzee Azzee), the god of love suicide, and to make new lives for themselves there. The song recounts their entrance into, and ultimate acceptance within, Granny Monster's house:

ye kuq lei pu ceeq the door of love-death opens

ye jjiai kuq nee tv entering, they come to the inner wall

zo yu al nee zzu the boy sits left of the hearth

hiu mi al nee keel burning juniper there

zoq zzi al nee llo leaving his clothing there

zoq miq al nee bber writing his name there

mi yu yil nee zzu the girl sits right of the hearth

bbai mi yil nee jeeq burning a butter lamp there

mi zzi yil nee llo *leaving her clothing there* 

mi miq yil nee bber writing her name there

ddee teeq yuyai seiq for now they are free

The story ends when their parents have a change of heart and come looking for them. The boy and girl, however, have made their choice: they remain with Granny Monster, and their parents

must return back to the human world, bereft. As with all lyrics, *Ye Pei Sheeq* can be sung in the first or the third person. Based on all the reports I heard, Eemi and Yulheeq absolutely were addressing each other; they were planning out their mutual deaths.

While the story moves through images of Granny Monster and her otherworldly house, this narrative coexists, for most Berdder listeners, with a more conventional understanding of the consequences of love suicide. By killing themselves, lovers die away from their homes and without a proper funeral. The result is inevitably a "bad death" (N. kual shee), which will prevent their souls from ever reaching the black mountain, center of the world and destination of all rightly-dying dead. Ye Pei Sheeq's description of the lovers' juniper-burning at the home of Monster Granny imagines an alternative universe, in which bad deaths do not wander the world forever as hungry ghosts, but become ceremonially attached to a new (if monstrous) house. If love suicide is framed in much Berdder storytelling as a rejection of the known, cruel universe, then conventional understandings of the consequences of love suicide—becoming hungry ghosts and wandering forever—suggest that there are not, in fact, viable alternatives to the world. In contrast, Ye Pei Sheeq's vision of Granny Monster's house suggests the possibility of real escape—of "freedom," as I have translated that portion of the lyrics. The irony is how closely Granny Monster's "freedom" resembles the world the lovers have tried to escape, to the extent that attaching themselves to her house involves the invocation of the most common of all rituals, juniper burning.

So what does it all mean? Why do these lyrics make people cry, and why are they also nearly universally acknowledged as the pinnacle of romance? Recalling the idea of outsiders that organizes the composition and unfolding of singing events, the same notion underlies and is perfected by *Ye Pei Sheeq*: in this case, the boy and girl are the ultimate outsiders, being rejected

by their own closest kin, and it is compassion for one another, in such horrific extremity, that draws them together. The ultimate tragedy is the lovers' joint decision to strip themselves of their remaining social ties by committing suicide and dying bad deaths. But this is also the romance: they choose this together. In choosing it, they become all, absolutely all, that the other one has.

The core of the narrative, then, involves stripping away social relations until all that is left is one's lover. This social divestment is echoed by the unfolding of the singing event, which moves from (1) collective narration in a generic, third-person voice that explicitly includes the whole singing circle, to (2) collective dialogue in a generic, first-person voice that centers attention on the lead singers as individuals, while still explicitly including the whole singing circle. The denotational content of that dialogue then dramatizes (3) the dialogue that will take place when the singer-lovers depart the circle to meet somewhere, alone. And, if the singing event progresses as far as Ye Pei Sheeq, then the lyrics evoke (4) a pristine state of dyadic romantic togetherness in which no other social relationships exist, period. In sum, love songs move from the collective voice of ceremony towards an embodied one, while at the same time remaining in the generic register. By keeping this movement of what might be called individuation within the generic register, the event effectively insists on its own consequentiality, apart from speech events that use embodied voices. At the same time, this pragmatic and denotational depiction of the whittling down of social ties evokes a sense of massive social loss. This sense of loss, I argue, actually creates the romance.

And thus I arrive back at research encounters. As I have already mentioned in my discussion of Xiaohong's methodology, it is now standard practice for ethnologists studying Naxi books to arrive at fieldsites, and then to meet with ritualists individually for elicitation and translation sessions, for which the participation structure is crucially dyadic, placing a researcher

insistently in conversation with a ritualist. "Interviews," another important social scientific interactional structure, are likewise insistently dyadic. And while this dyadic model of communication is taken for granted within Enlightenment traditions, I find nothing obvious or assumed about it in Berdder, where most communicative events involve multiple human and non-human agents. 193 Indeed, as love singing attests, the achievement of meaningful dyadic communication between embodied individuals requires a massive collective effort, a full night's singing, and overwhelming loss.

At this level, it is worth noting that, as far as my friends told me, Eemi and Bennder had never in all their decades of extramarital adventures ever before sung Ye Pei Sheeq together, much less in the first person. The fact that they did so on that particular night is therefore notable, and I have to believe that the death of Yulheeq's brother had something to do with it. There is a way, in these events, where one kind of loss bleeds into and heightens another.

Finally, it seems to me that Berdder traditions of love singing are also definitively ethnographic in the first sense, insofar as they call massive attention to the embodied dialogue between people, and indeed (not unlike me and my academic ethnographer friends) find the whole thing very very full of ganging. All of this is to say that the "outsider" identities of researchers, along with the interactional structures they generally demand and the reflexive framing of academic ethnographic communication, is notably romantic within the sociocultural frames of Berdder.

How, then, does fame fit into all of this? As I have already suggested, the crucial role of Chinese social science research in the production of ethnic metaculture renders the ethnographer herself an object of publicity: what an interlocutor says, performs, or makes for her has the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>193</sup> Bruce Mannheim and Krista Van Fleet, "The Dialogics of Southern Quechua Narrative," American Anthropologist 100, no. 2 (1998): 326–46; Saussure, Course in General Linguistics.

potential to be rendered part of an ethnographic text and published, made available to a vast and unknown body of strangers. Thus within the romantic structure of ethnographic dialogue lies the simultaneous temptation and danger of fame, of publicity.

This offers a context of sorts with which to understand the ideas and expectations that Wise-Ass might have brought to his conversations with me. And yet it does not feel quite sufficient. Here I recall a final wrinkle in my generally-wonderful conversations with him: sometimes he would use a booming voice to "explain" certain aspects of Naxi culture to me, and wag his finger and count off bullet points. These parts of the conversation felt notably, surprisingly alienating, but also familiar: I had seen He Yusong speak to researchers this way, and I had been with Teacher Mei when his nephew launched into a similar act of metacultural mansplanation for me. (Teacher Mei later observed, wistfully, that he had no idea where his nephew learned to do this, but he wished he could learn it, too.) This is to say that authoritative metacultural talk was not habitual in the conversations I observed among Berdder people, nor does it seem to be a practice in pedagogical settings involving the teaching of book literacy. Yet it had a way of arising and filling the air when academic ethnographers came on the scene.

Teacher Mei's implied question—where do you learn this metacultural talk?—is therefore important, and gestures to what I have come to understand as an emergent Berdder tradition of ethnography. I could perhaps say "meta-ethnography" because my hypothesis is that the tradition grew out of encounters with academic ethnographers, encounters which became conventionalized according to a synthesis of existing frameworks of love singing and fame, but also arrived dialectically at something new. This new thing, in my observation, adopts many of the techniques of academic ethnography in a modality of commentary, curiosity, and self-defense.

## 5.5.3.1 Metacultural talk and metacultural looping

During the two and a half years that I spent pursuing dissertation research in Baidi, I devoted the bulk of my time to studying and translating books and oral texts, primarily with Teacher Mei, but also with an array of other ritualists. Over the course of that, it became clear that my interlocutors were at least as interested in the art of communication with folk like me, as they were in more time-entrenched written textual arts.

They spoke repeatedly, for example, of the courage involved in admitting to researchers "I don't know"; of the bullshit answers they heard other ritualists give; of the "proper" Chinese words to use for talking about their books; of the need to practice explaining (Ch. jieshi) to researchers before you could ever really get good at it. Communication with researchers was, in short, a thing for them. A very fraught and important thing.

Here one of He Yusong's stories about Xiaohong offers a partial answer to the question of how researchers have unwittingly collaborated with their interlocutors to invent this new genre of metacultural conversation. During one of Xiaohong's initial visits to Berdder, she was working closely with He Yusong to produce a database of Naxi written characters and their "meanings." According to the database scheme, all in Chinese, meaning consisted of two parts. There was a "root meaning" (Ch. ben yi 本義), and also an "extended meaning" (Ch. yin shen yi 引申義), and Xiaohong was asking He Yusong to produce both for each character.

Here it is worth noting that, while many Chinese and English folk theories of language employ a similar denotational idea of root and extension, or literal and metaphorical meaning, these are folk theories, which carry their own social weight but do not transparently reflect the functioning of speech. As recent linguistic anthropological work investigates <sup>194</sup>, this particular understanding of denotation is only achievable through massive collective labor, often involving the production of metacultural frames such as dictionaries. There is thus a very real extent to which the labor of producing a dictionary (or dictionary database), combined with its publication and dissemination, actually creates the conditions to make the dictionary true. However, for present purposes, what interests me is a related but broader phenomenon of metacultural talk—the idea, beyond providing a specific definition of a given written character, that it is okay and indeed possible to use ordinary language to discuss and theorize the written character at all.

Because for He Yusong, these simply were not ideas he had come across in his years of studying Naxi writing with He Jinnuo, the elderly ritualist of his village. He explained to me, recalling his work with Xiaohong, that ordinary language discussion of ceremonial writing was for him a great "discovery." Furthermore, when it came to a large variety of characters, while he could use them to produce a recitation, some of their meanings, either the so-called root or the extension, eluded him.

Assuming that the problem was his own ignorance, he went to ask He Jinnuo for help. But his teacher was furious, insisting that you do not just randomly go talking about the writing this way. You talk about the writing by reciting it in ceremonial speech. Outside of recitation, there is no other way to talk about it. (Note that this roughly parallels how Xiaohong reports He Jinnuo's statement in the previous chapter, though it is not quite the same, either.)

But He Yusong was excited by his discovery, and he had come to share with Xiaohong a belief that preserving Naxi writing consisted, among other things, of assigning Chinese-language

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>194</sup> Silverstein, "Denotation and the Pragmatics of Language"; Michael Lempert, "How to Make Our Subjects Clear: Denotational Transparency and Subject Formation in the Tibetan Diaspora," *Text & Talk - An Interdisciplinary Journal of Language, Discourse Communication Studies* 27, no. 4 (2007): 509–32.

glosses to its characters. And so he persevered, very diligently working to persuade his teacher that ordinary language discussion of the books was okay.

And eventually his teacher came around, and together they worked out roots and extensions for many long lists of their books' written signs.

Of course this story itself is very much in the genre of explanation-for-researchers, and it is important to note that He Yusong offered it to me, thusly demonstrating his commitment to Chinese research values, such as cultural preservation. What I want to highlight, though, is He Yusong's depiction of his teacher's objections, which follow a pattern I observed in other Berdder ritualists who were trained before the growth of research and tourism in their area. I identify two crucial features of those earlier understandings.

First, ceremonial speech is the only acceptable genre for exegesis of ceremonial writing. This reflects, I believe, older ideologies of Naxi books. Restating arguments from Chapter Two, oral composition in the Naxi case involves the production of a recitation out of highly visual written texts that do not align in one-to-one relations with spoken words. Most salient from this perspective is the sense of transformative movement, from the book's effusion of images to highly formed, spoken lines. This also explains why books are deemed necessary, despite the fact that many older reciters can recite completely from memory, and thus without the aid of books. That is, spoken lines are not an "iteration" of the writing, in a reversal of the Derridean sense, but a truer statement of it, a skillful abstraction. They are themselves exegetical.

Second, to attempt a similar abstraction or exeges is in ordinary language edges toward ceremonial mistake, the sort that produces ghosts. This relates back to my earlier discussion of voicing; while the ceremonial voice of recitation funnels together an array of non-human beings who speak through the ritualist's production of a generic voice, ordinary language in contrast is

tied to specific human bodies, and defined by its lack of social consequence. Creating any sort of version of ceremonial writing in ordinary speech is thus not something you want to mess with.

In sum, since at least the time of Rock in the 1940s, researchers have been asking Naxi ritualists to "explain" their books, and that is a big ask, involving a type of speech that is not normally practiced or sanctioned—and indeed, according to He Yusong, rarely imagined. Contextualized within Berdder frameworks of love song and fame, I would add that the ends of such explanation, at least as far as Berdder people are concerned, seem focused more on a pragmatic result—the maintenance of a relationship with the ethnographer—than the transparent reflection of a social scientifically-created version of culture that, in truth, never existed in Berdder.

How, then, does metacultural talk work in time? How might it be generative over the course of multiple interactions? Here a notion of metacultural looping<sup>195</sup> becomes useful. By metacultural looping, I refer to a widespread phenomenon by which apparent representations of culture come to regiment social life in such a way that they render themselves true, or at least nudge social activities closer to the vision they provide. This in turn affects new cultural representations, which go on to regiment social life as well. Such looping is precisely how metacultural representations "get into" social life, and Chapter Four's discussion of socialist realism offers a relatively simple example of how the Party has initiated looping processes to pursue certain ends, in this case the mobilization of a rural populace.

As this chapter's discussion of the emergence of Chinese social science makes clear, ethnographic writing has from its inception in China been used in a similar way, only targeted specifically at those groups identified as ethnic. This observation helps me frame an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>195</sup> Taken from conversations with Bruce Mannheim about similar phenomena in the Andes.

understanding not of He Yusong's specific emotional relationship to Xiaohong's article, but to the social phenomenon by which ethnographic writing about ethnic minority culture comes back to its human referents, is indeed meant to come back to them, and in so doing provides them a script for how to receive future representations and ethnographers. My discussion of ethnographic terms of engagement can be contextualized in these ongoing metacultural cycles, and my discussion of love song and fame offers a context for how these cycles may be meaningful, but differently so, within longstanding Berdder interpretive frameworks.

For me, the remaining mystery is simply my own sense of alienation when interlocutors began to offer me (metacultural) explanations. As I've mentioned, one of the reasons I enjoyed researching love song so much was simply because the local fascination with it seemed to overwhelm people's instincts to do this. Likewise, the fact that, his own remonstrations aside, Teacher Mei never seemed especially dedicated to perfecting his own skills in metacultural explanation was, in hindsight, a key to our friendship. It was as a result so much easier to be in conversation with him, to communicate with him ethnographically in the first sense. I want to consider the possibility that metacultural talk is not actually an invitation into culture. And while it may serve in part as a pragmatic attempt to give the ethnographer what she wants, it is perhaps also a strategy of deflection—of what I will call sequestration.

### 5.5.3.2 Sequestration

Love song occurs constitutively on the edge, and in its most extreme form of love suicide, reaches into futures that are only barely imaginable. Its very claim to existence rests on typifications that exist apart from everyday action and life. I thus come to a final dimension of the conventionalized research encounter: through its antecedents in love song, such encounters

are framed as constitutively apart, marginal, secondary. Indeed, as absorbing as research or lovesinging events may be, I do not see people viewing them as the central destinations of their lives.

I thus use the term sequestration to trace the ways that Berdder people may sometimes use
research encounters, and their attendant metacultural ways of communication, not to provide a
transparent reflection of local life (as many researchers may imagine), but rather to isolate
research encounters themselves from the flow of that life.

From this perspective, some of the incidents I have already described may take on new meanings. To curate and retell stories of researchers may also be to hold the evoked events separate, to mark them off as different from other sorts of history. When He Jinnuo names Xiaohong his god-daughter (in Chinese), he is in a sense appropriating her, but in terms that make more sense within a Sinophone research frame than an everyday Berdder one. When He Yusong and He Jinnuo joined together to create definitions for their written characters, part of what made these actions acceptable in their own eyes may ultimately have been their framing as apart from ordinary life *and* from ceremony.

My larger point here is that sequestration may serve a defensive function, and perhaps this makes sense broadly as a way of shielding ordinary life from the spread of ethnic metaculture. Yet I am not sure that this alone is a sufficient or meaningful motivation for defensive behavior among the people in Berdder I came to know. It is through my host mom, and a story she told me repeatedly, that I can begin to imagine how a tacit theory of academic ethnographic isolation may seem important, but also vastly insufficient, in Berdder.

My host mom told me that the first researcher who ever came to visit their family was a Han researcher from Kunming, a man whom I will refer to as Li Rongjian. Li arrived in the early 1990s, when ethnic culture research was just beginning to pick up speed, and lived at their

home, on and off for years, to document the last years of Yinddertal's (my host dad's) father's life.

Yinddertal's father was famous in the area for his singing; indeed, in my conversations with Yulheeq (another famous singer), he praised Yinddertal's father highly for the sweetness of his voice, his knowledge of lyrics, and his ways with women. As for Li, his project was to make a documentary of Yinddertal's dad, and thus, as far as Yinddertal was concerned, to blow his father's name around the nation, generating fame for the family. Not surprisingly, I heard a great many stories about Li during my time in Berdder: Of all the ethnographers, people told me, he had stayed longest (second only to me). Perhaps because he was older and male, people didn't generally say that he and I were the same, but that we undoubtedly already were, or later would become, great friends.

Most of the stories I heard were extremely positive: Ceerlli, my host mom, proudly recalled Li identifying himself as her Naxi son. She recalled that while he never learned to speak Naqhai, he always ate all the food she gave him. (In contrast, I was a vegetarian who gave it all up for the duration of my time in Berdder, but could never eat enough meat really to satisfy her. I thus understood this recollection as a gentle indictment of my own eating.) But there was another bit, which Ceerlli shared with me only when we were alone together.

She said that Li filmed Yinddertal's father continuously. He carried his camera around and he would just set up his tripod, wherever Yinddertal's father happened to be.

Then she would pause.

Even when Yinddertal's dad was dying in the main room of their renovated house—she pointed to the area—Li filmed. He filmed the very moment that the old man took his last breath.

This last breath is the absolutely crucial moment, when a dead person's soul escapes and must be intercepted by the ancestors who the attending ritualist has called down to the bedside.

The first couple times Ceerlli told me this story, I wasn't sure how to make sense of the events she described, or what her own feelings towards them might be, and avoided voicing any personal judgements. I simply nodded, and the conversation dribbled off. But the third or fourth time she told me the story, it occurred to me that she might be trying to work something out, for herself.

I asked her how she felt about the filming, and she shrugged.

If Berdder had complicated rules for behavior among kinspeople of different categories, and also for behavior during rituals, including funerals, these rules didn't comprehend filming, especially at that time in the 1990s, for indeed Li was the first person to have done it in Berdder. There was no precedent.

I asked her how, then, Yinddertal's father had felt about being filmed.

"Oh," she said, "he'd been cursing Li. For most of his last days, he lay in bed and cursed him"

But Li couldn't understand Naqhai, and no one had translated for him.

When I inquired later with my host dad about Li's filming, he said to me that one day we would see the movie. That's how he put it. He said Li had promised to send him the film, and he expected to receive it one of these days.

My host dad's father had died in 1995, more than two decades before, yet the film had not yet arrived.

"Anyway," my host host dad concluded, his voice gaining intensity and a familiar sort of pride, "that video is in Kunming somewhere. Maybe you'll see it one day, doing culture research and all."

As much as I believe that this incident traumatized both of my host parents, they were not at all willing to condemn Li for it. Nor did they hate Li, nor indeed was Li mean. Based on the many other stories I heard about him, he felt great affection for all of them. When my host mom went to Kunming with He Yusong—it was the farthest she had ever traveled in her life, and she recalled the trip with all the breathlessness Xiaohong brought to her first Berdder trip—she visited Li. He took her to Green Lake Park, and my host mom recounted the experience to me with shining eyes.

Nor is it my intention to paint Li as a monster. The problem, one might say—the problem for my host parents and other Berdder people faced by well-intentioned, thoughtless researchers—is that they aren't.

And yet, my host mom's story circled incessantly around a breach in the fabric of the social world, and it was Li's relentless filming that made that breach. Among other things, it seems to me, he broke the frame of the romantic sequestration that seems frequently imagined to surround such research encounters. In the same way, perhaps, that breach spoke to the need to hold such encounters more stringently separate.

## 5.6 Ethnography and ethics in this dissertation

I would compare my host mom's recollection of Li's filming to that of many survivors of domestic violence, people for whom an intimate relationship twisted and punished them, leaving them with the confused sense that they had invited the behavior, or were at least wrong to be

bothered by it. I find something similar in my host dad, in all his refusing to see what had happened, trying desperately to incorporate it into a vision of the world in which he remains powerful and famous.

Here, then, I recall the massive loss that is built into Berdder's tradition of love song, and its imaginary of romantic love; loss and violence become the enabling condition. Based on the account I have provided here, then, one way to look at Berdder people's collaboration with researchers is in these terms of simultaneous desire and bereavement. It goes without saying that this complicates any simple notion of ethnographic consent and refusal.<sup>196</sup>

So I return to the question: Can ethnographic fieldwork pursued in today's southwest China be good?

But Readers, I just do not know, and I am so irrevocably biased. I have a thousand reasons to want to continue pursuing fieldwork in southwest China, not the least of which is that I love Teacher Mei and Ceerlli. Perhaps a more practical framing of the question, one that I feel able presently to look at, is to ask how ethical evaluations must change when academic ethnography is pursued with an awareness of the area's historical implication in the production of ethnic metaculture. Thus, I conclude with a very brief account of my own current responses to that question.

In general, I like Vine Deloria's suggestion<sup>197</sup> that academic ethnographers who work in poor, nonwhite areas should have to justify their presence to the communities in which they work, and that economic support—offered through appropriate channels, based on a researched

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>196</sup> Here I take inspiration from feminist philosopher Amia Srinivasan's 2021 essay on professor-student sex. The essay begins by noting that many academics have used notions of consent to obscure the complicated ethics (and politics) involved: "How could the same people who were used to wrestling with the ethics of eugenics and torture (issues you might have imagined were more clear-cut) think that all there was to say about professor-student sex was that it was fine if consensual?" (146).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>197</sup> Vine Deloria, "Anthropologists and Other Friends," in *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (New York: Avon, 1970), 78–100.

awareness of the norms and needs of the area—is one way to do so. The Appendix, "Compensation to ethnographic collaborators at my fieldsite," offers a brief account of the material compensation I offered to interlocutors. I offer it as a context for the research findings I present here; as a source of information of the kind I greatly wished I had when I began my fieldwork; and as a contribution to the conventionalization of including this sort of information in anthropological accounts of knowledge production. Nevertheless, the question that most concerned Teacher Mei (and many Berdder friends) was not directly about money. It was: Would I put their names, their real names, in my dissertation?

The American anthropological norm is of course to use pseudonyms, and as a general best practice for protecting interlocutors from the variable effects of publicity, I think it makes sense. Thus, seriously considering this question has gone against all my instincts. Yet the account I have offered in this chapter speaks to the real consequences of this question for how interlocutors' lives unfold, and also how they understand their place within academic ethnography. I have thus found it most helpful to approach the question from two directions, weighing it in terms of its potential consequences, while also considering the intentions and reasoning I believe, based on the ethnographic research I have done, to lie behind it.

On the consequences: The fundamental political sensitivity of ethnicity within China means that there are very clear reasons to protect the identities of interlocutors. That said, my dissertation excavates the mobilization of ethnic metaculture as a way of containing and regulating the latent threat of cultural difference, and while this is certainly a potentially inflammatory topic, I don't think it reveals sensitive or compromising information about the specific Berdder people I worked with. Thus it seems extremely improbable that my interlocutors would actually get in some sort of trouble because of my work. The greater issue for me has been

the possibility of contributing at any level to the production of oppressive ethnic metaculture (given that a published book is no longer in my control, nor can I foresee how my work will be interpreted and used) and of tying the known identities of my interlocutors to those potential productions. My current decision is to provide pseudonyms for all my interlocutors' Chinese names. These are the legal names by which they are marked and tracked within state bureaucracies. While Naqhai names are not, as far as I know, registered in any sort of official documents, I also provide Naqhai-language pseudonyms within the chapters. However, in the Acknowledgments section, I do name a few of my closest Berdder friends by their real Naqhai names. This allows me to point to their names in the acknowledgements of the dissertation, but also shields them from direct identification. That said, none of these individuals has been involved in the taxi-driving activities protests and strikes in the city, and I would feel differently about including their names if they had been.

As to intentions: I think my interlocutors' desire to see their names in my dissertation is itself based on the false premise that putting your name into circulation through a random student's doctoral thesis is going to win you vast wealth and fame, or at least has the potential to do so. While *I* know this is not true, it's also possible that I will be able to spin my ethnographic research into a stable income and a retirement plan, one of these days. This is to say that my work in Berdder has indeed been foundational to whatever academic future I will have. Taking this understanding of academic process as a context, then, here is how I translate my interlocutors' question: How should fellowships, publications, and other honors, as well as more tangible things such as salaries—all meaningful within academia's specific economy, and all based on my relationships with these people—be acknowledged or in some way returned to them? To put this even more concretely: If "return" means contributing proceeds from a book, or

just some portion of my salary, to people in Berdder, how much, how frequently, and to whom? If it means using the connections that academic work in the US affords to ease my interlocutors' access to resources, what sorts of access do I seek, and who specifically should I try to assist? Pursuing the question an additional step, and returning to *Writing Culture* as a call to extend ethnographic analysis to academic practices and institutions: How might discussion of this sort of ongoing relational obligation have consequences for, and be drawn into, other conversations about the academic ethics of citation, authorship, acknowledgement, and (mis)uses of power?

Finally, while my Berdder interlocutors did not ask this question, a thoughtful evaluation of my own fieldwork circumstances poses a final question, which addresses the relation of US anthropology to that of China—historically linked traditions, but in the present, tied to two nations in ongoing struggle. As this chapter has attempted to show ethnographically, however, these disciplinary histories inevitably enter into dialogue through ethnographic knowledge production, as a US ethnographer like me is thrown together with Chinese researchers, and indeed thrown into Berdder oral histories with all of them.

In such circumstances, what does it mean—ethnographically, ethically—that most existing American ethnographies of ethnic issues in China have pursued critical readings of ethnicity-based inequality in China, but have not sought to do so through a dialogue with Chinese social science, a massive component of which (ethnology) exists solely to study (and as I have argued, to configure) ethnic groups? The exclusion of that dialogue does in fact reinscribe Western imperial histories. It also makes it extremely easy for readers who are not already sympathetic to its important critiques to consign them to the category of anti-China sentiment. My incorporation of this sort of dialogue into my dissertation is at this point mostly aspirational, and I have only come to see the need for it rather late in my dissertation-writing game. That said,

pursuing these questions has reframed the project, from a study of Berdder life to the question of how in a thousand ways, Berdder life embeds its own critical images of mainstream Chinese culture, state policy, and the interlinked global histories of social science.

#### **CHAPTER 6**

# Making (In)Roads

Making ethnicity real in southwest China has involved rendering human bodies so utterly the objects of publicity that I find myself extremely reluctant to share any of the photographic images I took of Berdder people—though as I have tried to show in Chapter 6, it was often ethnographic interlocutors themselves urging me to take their pictures, and who were hurt or distraught if I did not. While my real commitment to ethnography, in all senses of the word, makes this a more complex problem than any absolute identification of the photographic image with a colonial gaze or with exploitative consumption, I have tried to be deliberate. So far, the only human photograph that I have shown in these pages is that of Teacher Mei reading his father's book—a photograph that feels important in showing his and his father's collaborative process of knowledge production, as well as my own. However, in including the image, I used "sketching" software to produce a stylized version that obscures facial features and announces its existence as a representation, rather than a transparent reflection of reality.

This chapter uses the same software to display a few additional human images: of Berdder people during several linked moments of greeting and of explicit performance for other researchers. The images, which I obtained during the summer of 2014, are notable because they encode a double layer of the photographic gaze: they are *my* photos of a group of Kunming researchers arriving in Berdder. As such, they allow me to explore a heuristic demarcation between what researchers are guided to see, and what people in Berdder actually are doing. This

in turn allows me to consider the question of where and how Berdder people have a margin of sovereignty with which to form publics and pursue their own historiographic projects.

#### 6.1 A visit from researchers in 2014

Preparation for the researchers' arrival began around 9 AM, as residents of Berdder's Weishee village gathered on the path near the "dongba school" (N. ddolbba tei'ee soq gv; Ch. dongba xuexiao 东巴学校). The school in question was a log cabin, the sort of home everyone had lived in up until my host dad Yinddertal's construction of a house in the "new" (or "Han") style in the 1990s. During the course of the community-wide house renovations that ensued, one of Weishee's residents donated his old home to serve as the dongba school, the place where young Weishee men would go to study ritual practice.

While the following pages will delve more deeply into the history of this school, for the moment, I want to address the Chinese term "dongba" so frequently appended to it: "dongba" is a Chinese-language transliteration of the Naish term for ritualist, pronounced "ddoqbbaq" in Lijiang, and in Berdder as "ddolbba." However, in Chinese-language discourse, "dongba" is almost always used as part of the longer phrase "Naxi dongba culture" (Ch. Naxi dongba wenhua 纳西东巴文化), or, in this case, "the Naxi dongba culture school," and serves as a crucial ethnic metacultural term with which researchers and locals discuss a particular, highly sanitized version of Na religion. Because this school has from its inception been oriented towards researchers, I think it is most appropriate to refer to it in Chinese, as indeed most locals did when speaking to researchers, as the "dongba school."

Thus, there on the path by the dongba school, Weishee residents were pulling their "traditional" "ethnic" clothes—this is to say the clothes they wore on holidays, and also for

researchers—out of back baskets and bags, and slowly putting them on, in preparation for the researchers' arrival at 10 AM. However, by 11 AM, the researchers had not yet arrived, and the day had grown bright and hot. Zeesheeq Keelzoq, a Weishee resident who was also the current principal of the dongba school and the former principal of Berdder's primary school, was pacing around with growing agitation, and people were muttering. Some of them removed their traditional clothes and slid off to rest in the shade.

Keelzoq had arrived to the event bearing a stack of promotional materials, all about the dongba school, which he intended to share with the arriving researchers. Such materials took the form of stapled-together books, of the size and heft of magazines. When he offered me a copy as well, I sat in the shade of the school building with some other Weishee residents, in various states of traditional dress (and undress), to review its contents.

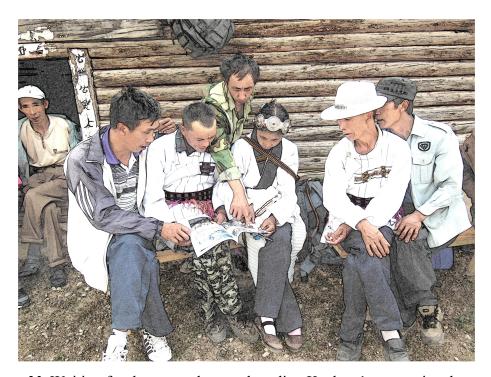


Figure 23. Waiting for the researchers and reading Keelzoq's promotional materials.

Given that that the presently unfolding event—the meeting and greeting of Kunming researchers—was organized through the dongba school, and that indeed the present Weishee residents were regular participants in such events, whose images appeared throughout Keelzoq's materials, I remember being surprised that this was their first encounter with the promotional books themselves. I will return to these materials in the next section.

In any case, we had a solid chunk of time to look. It was close to 12 PM—two hours past the time the researchers had said they would arrive—when we saw their car on a bend in the road about a mile away. People immediately dusted themselves off, reassembled their proper "ethnic" attire, and gathered in lines on either side of the road. After parking their SUV in a clearing below, the researchers emerged to much cheering and singing. In this photo, Keelzoq (to the left, in his own ethnic attire) guides the researchers down the road. Dressed in name-brand polo shirts, jeans, and sneakers, the researchers, in turn, clearly are attired in "city clothes."



Figure 24. Greeting the researchers.

The researchers included a journalist as well as several scholars from Kunming's dance academy, and the immediate, prearranged order of business was to create a video and multiple photographs documenting He Yusong and his various ritualist students dancing. This involved another change of dress, as He Yusong and his students then had to switch their traditional ethnic clothing for traditional ethnic ceremonial attire, precisely the sort that He Yusong wore to the Beijing conference where I first met him.

In the photographs below (Fig. 25), which document that documentation, I observe how He Yusong's and his students' physical stances and movements indicate an awareness of the photographer, combined with an understanding that they should not demonstrate that awareness within the photographic image. They should, for example, arrange themselves in a loop that can be encompassed by the photographic lens, but never actually look towards that lens. As for the camera man—in this moment, and indeed in the initial moments of arrival—what I witnessed was a general taking-for-granted, an assumption that people would be there to greet him, without having to cancel other plans, without waiting literally for hours in the hot sun, just as He Yusong's and his students' dancing was something given and preexisting, not carefully shaped for the specific event.

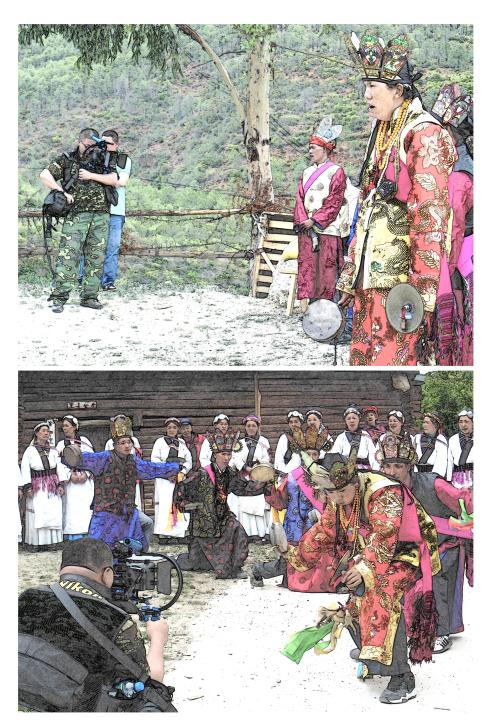


Figure 25. Dancing for the researchers.

When the dance was finished, it was time for the interview portion, the Chinese term for which—caifang—everyone in attendance, even the more elderly Weishee residents whose Chinese-speaking was highly constrained, seemed to know. He Yusong was the principal interviewee, and what this meant for him, as he and his wife Chen Wumei often discussed with me, was using his most standard Chinese to speak in the specific genre, cultural explanation, that was named and well theorized in Berdder.

In the photo below of the in-progress interview, He Yusong has altered his posture and gaze profoundly: now he looks steadily back and forth between the interviewing researcher and the camera lens; he waves his hands and marks out bullet points on his fingers, much like Keelzoq in moments of statesman-like pontification; and he speaks in clear but accented standard Chinese about (of course) the Naxi dongba culture school.



Figure 26. Interviewing and cultural explanation.

Off camera, but within the lens of my own documentation, Weishee residents can be seen removing their hot traditional clothes and wandering off for lunch.

While the interviewing was going on, I remember one of the researchers took me aside to inquire into my own activities. She was a few years older than me, and wanted to know what I was researching, specifically. She ticked off possible topics: Dance? Language? Writing? Or perhaps I was studying ethnic dress, or the role of women? When I was not sure how to answer this question, especially after having viewed the current research event that was purportedly about "dance," she instead just offered me some advice.

It seemed, she observed, that I had some time to spend here. Thus I should focus on really entering these people's lives, really understanding.

She said I might find out something important that way.

Then He Yusong's interview was over, and I remember him wandering off to bother his younger cousin. However, he did not have long to catch his breath. Activities for the day were pre-planned and tightly packed: having finished taping the dance and interview, the researchers wanted to visit Bbapardduaq, where they would have He Yusong and his students do another dance, also to be taped, before visiting the fields to document the agrarian work they believed they would fine there. (Because at this particular moment in the summer, there was no particular work to be done, He Yusong's friends described to me later "casually working a bit in the fields" [Ch. suibian zuo yi dian nong huo] for the benefit of the photographer.)

By late afternoon that day, the researchers had completed their circuit of activities, and departed. As with most events involving Berdder people and Chinese researchers, I remember feeling overwhelmed by a sense of alienation from an event that was itself clearly, if tacitly, choreographed. While at the time, I could not begin to say what the unspoken rules of the

interaction were, I could feel the weight of mutual expectation: of Keelzoq pacing in the midmorning sun, promising the researchers would arrive as the Weishee residents he had organized grew increasingly restless, or in the researchers' assumption that Keelzoq, He Yusong, and all the attending Weishee residents should naturally be prepared to greet them, to escort them around the valley, and to perform dances and farm labor for them.

As I would gradually come to understand over the ensuing years, the theme of money ran throughout these interactions, but subtly: while researchers did generally offer donations as part of their ventures into Berdder, donation amounts were rarely discussed in advance, nor did their money go directly to residents, such as He Yusong, but rather through the dongba school, which meant in practice that it went through Keelzoq. Thus one of the issues that day, when the researchers were late, involved the fact that Keelzoq had promised participating Weishee residents a fee of 30 kuai each, which within village conventions, covered their participation for half a day (until noon). Because the researchers were late, however, everyone ended up working overtime.

Nor was payment a matter of abstract ethical calculation: while the current season was not a time for labor in the fields specifically, there were countless other tasks that farmers, as Weishee residents generally were, had to do during this time, including processing harvested crops, collecting daily feed for the animals they kept at home, and pursuing a range of small sideline businesses with which to supplement the resources and income they generated through farming. In such a world, 30 kuai did not cover much, in any case. And 30 kuai for more than half a day's work-time was asking a lot.

Nevertheless, while Keelzoq often seemed to be profiting from the dongba school, and was the subject of frequent gossip among Weishee residents, his ability to do so rested largely on

his ability to conduct events of this nature in a way that was satisfying to the researchers. In short, if the dongba school created a patronage relationship between itself (and/or Keelzoq) and village residents, then at a higher level, the dongba school (and/or Keelzoq) became a client of the patrons that were researchers. I should also be clear that good relations with researchers was not simply a matter of direct funding through donations: because researchers tended to be affiliated with the governmental funding structures that supported different kinds of "cultural preservation" and/or tourist development work in Yunnan, simply being in their good graces was likewise important, economically as well as politically.

Despite all participants' awareness of the role of money and power in these interactions, the tacit understanding seemed to be that these elements should be obscured: instead, He Yusong's cultural explanations should present his own motivations as purely a matter of devotion to cultural preservation. Thus the heuristic demarcation I have set up—between what researchers are guided to see, and what Berdder people are actually doing—already begins to collapse. We might ask instead how researchers and Berdder people collaborate to produce images that present a particular vision of ethnicity to a Chinese public, which of course includes ethnic peoples themselves. This brings me back to those two hours of waiting, when I and some Weishee residents reviewed the promotional materials Keeqzoq had created. I offer a selection of them here, likewise adapted through the same sketching software.

### 6.2 Keelzog's promotional materials

The cover of the promotional book says "Diqing Prefect's Naxi Dongba Cultural Transmission School," and it features a picture of He Yusong, not unlike those just taken by the researchers, dancing:



Figure 27. Keelzoq's promotional materials: He Yusong dancing.

In this one, however, he is actually pictured in front of the "Ami Shairra Cave" (N. Ami Shairra naikoq), the site where Na ceremonial books supposedly were first created. Thus the image combines a frequent topic of research activity, dance, with Berdder's central claim to regional and historical authority: its history of books.

Then within the pamphlet itself, an essay describes the history and work of the dongba school, emphasizing its recent expansion into surrounding areas, as it has established "Naxi dongba culture transmission offices" (Ch. Naxi dongba wenhua chuanxiguan 纳西东巴文化传 习馆) throughout the villages surrounding Berdder. Keelzoq also includes a detailed spreadsheet of the names of each of the ritualists affiliated with each transmission office, the number of ceremonies each ritualist has "salvaged" (Ch. qiangjiu 抢救), and the name of each ritualist's teacher.

Within Keelzoq's explicit statements, the purpose of the transmission offices was to extend the dongba school's important work of Naxi dongba cultural preservation and

transmission to other, poorer areas and ritualists. And while I was always suspicious of such statements, it took me a while to get my head around the work these offices actually presented. In the years after I first read this essay, I accompanied Keelzoq on several trips to these transmission offices and was able to witness the official signs he had erected there, often in the homes of the ritualists with whom he had affiliated. Our visits often coincided with ceremonies that the ritualists in question were conducting, and involved Keelzoq making donations (much in the manner of the Kunming researchers). As far as I can tell, his contact with the transmission offices was limited to these infrequent visits and infrequent donations.

Ultimately, I find that Keelzoq's promotional materials themselves offer the clearest view of his understanding of the role of these transmission offices in the existing relations among Weishee residents, the dongba school, and outside researchers. This requires attention to their many pages' worth of photos—photos which might be described in terms of three categories. The first category is of "cultural" activity: dancing, as well as funerals, marriages, and other ceremonies. This is to say that he provides images of most of the categories of research that the Kunming researcher herself offered to me, in our 2014 conversation, though with a prominent emphasis on what seem to be the two most-researched topics, dancing and dongba books. (Likewise, these were the sort of activities that Keelzoq would go observe at the dongba school's transmission offices.) Note, for example, that the book includes an image of Weishee people performing a romantic circle dance, as discussed in Chapter 5 (Fig. 28): Likewise, Keelzoq displays numerous human engagements with books (Fig. 29), with a ritualist using a ceremonial book to make a divination to the left, and to the right, the dongba students learning the day's page of script from a chalkboard set up in their school.



Figure 28. Keelzoq's promotional materials: Love dancing.



Figure 29. Keelzoq's promotional materials: Uses of books and script.

In a second category of images, Keelzoq displays members of the dongba school collaborating with researchers. Indeed, several photos, of which I include one below (Fig. 30, left) document their participation at the Beijing conference described in Chapter Five. In another photo (Fig. 30, right), He Yusong and his fellow students appear explaining one of their books to a researcher:



Figure 30. Keelzog's promotional materials: Research collaboration.

Thus far, the images are understandable within the logic of the research event already discussed: there is a provision of the specific types of culture that researchers expect, and there is similarly a performance of the great willingness of local people to provide these things.

However, the third category of images (see Fig. 31) was for me the greatest mystery. In these images, Keelzoq appears dressed in his best white suit—not, in other words, his ethnic attire—and seems to pop out from behind doors and around corners, thence to rain money—the bills displayed prominently—on various, notably greasy-looking ritualists, who are not themselves dressed "ethnically," either. It is important to note that each of the ritualists in question is affiliated with one of the transmission offices already mentioned.







Figure 31. Keelzoq's promotional materials: Giving money.

Having thought about it now for nearly ten years, I return to the notion of copies and of repetition with difference from Chapter Three, and propose that these images represent Keelzoq's earnest, if simultaneously massively power-seeking, vision of the research encounter. That is, he is visually reproducing the researcher/researched participant role structure that my initial photos of the Kunming researchers demonstrate. One of the differences is that, in this case, Keelzoq himself is the researcher, and the ritualists at his school's various transmission offices have become the researched. He signifies his new role in several ways, not simply through his choice of attire, but also through the accompanying written essay's resolute language of social scientific research, in which he references the "investigations" (Ch. diaocha 调查) he conducted to identify potential sites for the transmission offices, as well as in the "scientific" quantification involved in his production of the database of ritualists. All of this is to say that, in part, I understand Keelzoq's production and promotion of transmission offices as a self-conscious attempt to replicate the research encounter at a lower scale, and I take his inclusion of it within his school's promotional materials as an act of *self*-promotion as well.

However, his resulting visual replication of the research encounter, through the photographs, involves additional, illuminating differences: all overt signs of ethnicity (in the form of traditional attire) have been erased, and the exchange of money is rendered visible and indeed the absolute focus of each pictured interaction. The result is a reduction or simplification of the researcher encounter to what, for Keelzoq, at least, it actually is: a patron/client relationship. There is no overt judgment here; Keelzoq is simply arguing for his stature as someone capable of occupying the researcher (aka patron) role as well. (Here I would also recall that a repeating motif in his conversations with me and other "outside" researchers was his

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>198</sup> Sheng Long, "Numbering Land: The Mathematics of Geography and Subjectivity" (Ph.D diss, Ann Arbor, MI, University of Michigan, 2022).

insistence that "I, TOO, am a peasant!" [Ch. Wo ye shi nongmin!]. This is true, in a way, but also uniquely cringe-y, insofar as it performatively erases the distinction between himself and other Weishee residents—a distinction that he underscores and seeks to extend in this category of photos.)

At this level of ambition, and indeed desire for fame, it is worth recalling the notion of replication with difference in Berdder's specifically mandalic terms as well. Thus, just as Keelzoq copies the ethnic metacultural research encounter, he also does so in a way with unique local potency, effectively identifying Weishee as the crucial center of "Naxi dongba culture" and then building out its lesser copies, and thus its periphery, through his establishment of transmission centers. There is thus a fundamentally traditional aspect to this work, though not in the terms that the work itself sets forth.

Thus to return to the heuristic I offered at the start of this chapter, between what researchers see and what Berdder people are actually doing, the first and obvious point is that encounters with outside researchers, as well as Keelzoq's own "investigations" involving cultural transmission centers, are legible within an interactional genre that is shared among most participants, precisely because it is itself a part of ethnic metaculture. Yet Keelzoq's very representation of his own work belies a personal project that is distinct from any state-sponsored effort to establish ethnicity as a particular structure of national participation. In this case, Keelzoq is using the legibility afforded by that structure to seek personal advancement. However, because he is (despite the pragmatic import of his assertion to researchers "I, TOO, am a peasant!") actually a Berdder resident (and thus a peasant), who grew up in Berdder and on a daily basis moves through it, his pursuit of advancement is also mandalic, taking the specific form of an attempt to place himself and his school at a geographic center of power.

What I have not yet addressed directly is the enormous passion and hope that Keelzoq, as well as the many other Berdder residents I encountered, brought with them to explicitly Naxi cultural events and to interactions with researchers. Chapter Five began to consider this question by asking how ethnic metaculture's interactional terms of engagement have become enmeshed in longstanding romantic/poetic practices. Here, then, I want to pursue the question further by asking how that longing and that poetry may become transmuted into public formation and collective historiography. Insofar as this question can be understood as encompassing the issue of sovereignty at the level of publics, Michael Warner offers a useful starting point—albeit one that is not fully adequate to conceive the Berdder case.

### 6.3 Sovereign publics?

According to Warner, publics simply do not exist in authoritarian societies such as China:

A public organizes itself independently of state institutions, laws, formal frameworks of citizenship, or preexisting institutions such as the church. *If it were not possible to think of the public as organized independently of the state or other frameworks, the public could not be sovereign with respect to the state* (my italics). <sup>199</sup>

Warner is hardly the only academic putting forth such a view. Indeed, a great deal of scholarship from within the PRC makes a different but pragmatically similar argument when it asserts that Habermasian notions of the public sphere are too marked by Eurocentric ideologies to have much relevance to Chinese social formations.<sup>200</sup> This very neatly evades the possibility of public formation in China while framing the question itself as one of Western academic imperialism.

<sup>199</sup> Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 2002.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>200</sup> Tang Xiaobing 唐小兵, Xiandai Zhongguo de gonggong yulun 现代中国的公共舆论 (Public opinion in modern China), Dongfang lishi xueshu wen ku 东方历史学术文库 (The library of East Asian historical studies) (Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe (Social sciences academic press), 2012).

In contrast, I have in this dissertation followed emerging scholarship in Hong Kong and Taiwan<sup>201</sup> to tread a middle path. In this view, while there is nothing in Habermas or Warner that can transparently be brought to bear on China, there is also nothing in Warner's elegant formal description of publics, as discursively-produced stranger relations, that automatically forestalls such application. The question that arises is how, if publics are not also defined circularly in terms of their own sovereignty, the Chinese context actually refines our understandings of publicity beyond what is, clearly, a liberal Western-based perspective.

Here Warner's point about the *apparent* sovereignty of publics becomes meaningful. Proceeding from the formal definition he offers, there is at least an *experience* of sovereignty to be found in the discursive production of stranger relations, insofar as the individual takes part in and contributes to socially generative discourse. To restate a core argument from Chapter Five, one of China's most crucial tools of governance is the creation and nurturance—the *development* (Ch. fazhan 发展), to use a common phrase—of publics that are allowed to proceed discursively, but also fundamentally structured by, and sometimes strategically intervened in by, "outside" governing bodies. In this way, the limited but real scope of these publics' sovereignty becomes an essential tool for the furtherance of state power. Here socialist realist literature offers a paradigmatic example: its specific denotational ideology worked simultaneously to prescribe the nature of reality while also attributing the agency for such productions to "the people" (rather than the individuals, generally elite closely tied to state governance, who had created and instituted the conventions around the generic structure in the first place).

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>201</sup> Chang Jiang 常江, "Liuxing hua xuanchuan: Shuzi shidai zhongguo de aiguo zhuyi dongyuan 流行化宣傳:數字時代中國的愛國主義動員 (Pop propaganda: The mobilization of patriotism in China's digital age)," Er shi yi shiji pinglun 二十一世紀評論 (21st-century criticism), 2020, 38–50; Teri Silvio, "Remediation and Local Globalizations: How Taiwan's 'Digital Video Knights-Errant Puppetry' Writes the History of the New Media in Chinese," *Cultural Anthropology* 22, no. 2 (2007): 285–313.

Another, linked argument from Chapter Five makes implicit use of Warner's notion of counterpublics, which he defines in the same formal terms as a discursively produced community of strangers, with the caveat that, in this case, the engaged strangers are

...not just anybody. They are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse; ordinary people are presumed not to want to be mistaken for the kind of person who would participate in this kind of talk or be present in this kind of scene.<sup>202</sup>

In Warner's analysis, then, a counterpublic is a specialized or alternative public formation, and while his analysis (which I have suggested employs a simplistic notion of sovereignty) portrays them as a tool of counter-cultural political action, that is not their only use. In a Chinese context where highly constrained public participation is a crucial tactic in the extension of state power, it is advantageous to "develop" some counterpublics as well: their existence reinforces a sense of real sovereignty (because "counter-cultural" discourse exists), and at the same time of social acceptance and validation (the state makes space for difference). Thus to restate my understanding of Chinese ethnicity itself, it must be understood as the state-led curation of counterpublics. By extension, I have also argued for social scientific research as fulfilling a similar role for ethnic counterpublics as socialist realist literature once did for a burgeoning Chinese nation. Like socialist realism, such research's insistence on denotational (indeed scientific) transparency allows it to project ethnic counterpublics while at the same time arguing for their primordiality and indeed their existence independent of social scientific discourse.

It is thus not surprising that at the present time in China, Provincial Academies of Social Science fall directly within the purview of provincial propaganda departments<sup>203</sup>, and that a central concept in ethnology is that of "ethnic consciousness" (Ch. minzu yishi 民族意识), a

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>202</sup> Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," 2002, 120.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>203</sup> Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 11.

natural process not unlike social evolution, by which a given ethnic group comes to awareness of itself *as* a group. In the different terms I have offered here, ethnic consciousness is a foundational example of the nature of Chinese ethnic counterpublics, the existence of which is posed to the ethnic peoples as their idea, while intensively monitored and continuously structured by the state.

In such a case, my effort has been in part to bring those research practices into view, to consider them as institutions but at the same time as human things—all of which have consequences, have histories. Part of that has involved observing a simultaneous overlap and disconnect: how, in southwest China as in China's urban Sinophone centers, written texts have long taken part in processes of public formation, and how part of contemporary state governance has involved appropriating ethnic written texts into its production of ethnic counterpublics.

While such appropriation was itself a tactic of governance, I observe two unintended effects.

The first, as Keelzoq's fame-seeking demonstrates, is that ethnic metaculture work becomes an affordance, or even a cover, for other types of historiographic projects. The second is that a fundamental conflict of ontologies is erased: the very nature of ethnic counterpublics denies the possibility that other publics, possessing different poetic forms and structures of participation, might already exist. Specifically, as I have explored, there is no recognition of a preexisting, numinous naga public in Berdder, which predates ethnicity as such.

Such erasure creates its own Achilles' heel: precisely because Chinese social science has been unwilling to represent certain parts of Indigenous sociality, the result is a space of social action that cannot be regulated. That is, the state's very attempts to define ethnicity through its production of an ethnic counterpublic has afforded ethnic peoples a limited but very real space of autonomy. This exists alongside, and often in conversation with, actions that take the form of metacultural work but may, in fact, be pursuing different ends. Specifically, I will argue that

Berdder people are mobilizing these limited forms of autonomy to create a new form of public, which draws together older forms of naga publicity with the lessons in self-transformation offered by their ongoing participation in ethnic counterpublics.

At the same time, I recognize that one of the crucial tactics of historiographic action though publics, both for Berdder people and for state interests, lies in the instrumentalization of copies. Just as ethnic metaculture intervenes in local processes through empowered and strategic acts of copy-making, stealthy pursuits of other goals within this system—such as Keelzoq's pursuit of personal fame—must proceed through acts that resemble adherence to it. The result is a tangle of copies in which all parties—different levels and branches of the state, locals, and local elite—can and often do become alienated from their own goals.<sup>204</sup> Thus my second argument is that Berdder public formation often becomes derailed by these circumstances.

In what follows, my strategy is to keep "zooming out," to consider (1) the dongba school in the contexts of the histories that local people offered of it, both implicitly and explicitly; then to trace (2) the process of literacy revival that I understand, based on my fieldwork, to have been occurring in concert with it; and finally (3) to explore the convergence of these projects in Berdder people's recent migrations to the nearby city of Shangrila. It is through these mutual contextualizations that a picture of some sort of Berdder historiographic project, and its ongoing pitfalls, begins to come into view.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>204</sup> Long, "Numbering Land: The Mathematics of Geography and Subjectivity."

### 6.4 The dongba school

How, then, did Weishee' village's dongba school take shape over time? How can it be understood as its own historiographic project in time? There is no simple answer to this question, because most people I spoke to offered different historical accounts. My goal here is to provide some of those accounts, to hold them alongside what I have been able to reconstruct of the material practices through which the dongba school has moved, and to draw some inferences as to the nature of the work the school did and continues to do.

## 6.4.1 Keelzoq's history, Ge Agan's historical fiction, and some oral histories

My first formal interview with Keelzoq, on the first day of my first trip to Berdder, occurred in 2012, and in that interview I asked him to tell me the history of the dongba school. I take this account as the most ideological rendering of that history, most explicitly designed for outside researchers of ethnic metaculture. Keelzoq began as follows:

yinwei...zheyang because...well
women Berdder our Berdder
shi qian yi bei de renlei xuejia it was the previo

hi qian yi bei de renlei xuejia it was the previous generations of anthropologists

minzu xuejia ethnologists zhong wai shi ba ethnologists Chinese and foreign, yes

Zhongguo de waiguo de renlei xuejia minzu Chinese and foreign anthropologists and

xuejia ethnologists

tamen tongguo lai women Berdder diaocha
Lijiang na ge Naxi zu difang diaocha yihou...

they came to our Berdder to investigate
and to that other Naxi place, Lijiang

Berdder! and decided: Berdder! jiu li wei establishing it as

zhe ge....Naxi dongba wenhua de fayuan di! well, the origin of Naxi dongba culture!
Naxi dongba wenhua de sheng di! the sacred land of Naxi dongba culture!

shi bu shi!? right!?

Keelzoq's first move, then, is not to offer a historical narrative, but to present an argument for the value of Berdder's "culture." In making such a claim, he calls attention to Berdder's history of ceremonial book production ("the origin of Naxi dongba culture"; "the sacred land of Naxi

dongba culture") precisely through appeal to social scientific research. In that sense, his statement reiterates many of the arguments made pragmatically and visually in the promotional materials already discussed.

At the same time, while in some way the inclusion of foreign researchers in the narrative simply takes account of his addressee (me, an American doctoral student) I am inclined to find something more in it as well. Here it is helpful to bring this portion of Keelzoq's historical narrative into conversation with a short story written by Ge Agan, the Naxi-ethnicity researcher from Lijiang whose work so powerfully shaped Chapter Four, about the emergence of ethnic metacultural work, specifically "Naxi dongba culture," in China's southwest. In a manner that reminds me powerfully of Ella Deloria and Zora Neale Hurston, <sup>205</sup> Ge Agan often uses his ethnographic research as a basis for fiction-writing, and as such, his story offers an important point of reference in thinking through the beginnings of Berdder's dongba school.

Titled the "Gold-winged Garuda," the story is told from the perspective of a young Naxi girl, Aisi, whose suitor (Jinsuo, a Naxi boy from her hometown) is seeking a college education in the city of Kunming. Through his studies in the city, Jinsuo decides to try to instrumentalize ritual knowledge from their hometown for his own academic advancement, and writes a letter to Aisi outlining his plan:

Recently I asked my father for some money to buy a tape recorder. When I return [home], I plan to record a few boxes'-worth of dongba scriptures. Do you know that more and more Chinese and foreign scholars are taking interest in our Naxi people's cultural heritage? Before, we didn't recognize the value. Recently, there was a Naxi college student studying Chinese literature, and just after graduating, simply because he had a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>205</sup> María Eugenia Cotera, ""Lyin' Up a Nation": Zora Neale Hurston and the Literary Uses of the Folk," in *Native Speakers: Ella Deloria, Zora Neale Hurston, Jovita González, and the Poetics of Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 71–102; María Eugenia Cotera, "Standing on the Middle Ground: Ella Deloria's Decolonizing Methodology," in *Native Speakers: Ella Deloria, Zora Neale Hurston, Jovita González, and the Poetics of Culture* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 41–70; Ella Cara Deloria, *Waterlily* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988); Zora Neale Hurston, *Mules and Men* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969).

basic knowledge of dongba writing, he got to go abroad. Many countries have invited Naxi scholars to come and give lectures. When I come back this time, I intend to pursue some hard preliminary work. <sup>206</sup>

最近我向父亲要了一笔钱,买了台收录机。回来时,打算好好录制几盒东巴经磁带。你知道吗,我们纳西族的这笔文化遗产,当前可越来越引起海内外学者的浓烈兴趣。过去我们太不识宝了。最近,有个学中文系的纳西族大学生,才毕业不久,仅仅因为初识东巴文,已到国外去了。不少国家已提出了邀请,要纳西族学者到他们那儿去讲学.... 我这次回来,一定要进行一番刻苦的开拓工作。

In this account, Jinsuo's crucial motivation for pursuing research in "dongba culture" appears to be for personal advancement achieved through work abroad. This is I think a valid interpretation of Keelzoq's statement as well: for a person committed to fame through geographical expansion, broadcasting his voice and personhood across the ocean and into the US must have been attractive, and he actually prioritizes foreign anthropologists over Chinese ethnologists at several points in his narrative. Thus, as already discussed, there is in both Keelzoq's and Jinsuo's account an adoption of certain ethnic metacultural forms—the discussion of heritage, the trumpeting of cultural value—but these forms do not seem focused entirely on serving the nation, either. They are being strategically instrumentalized.

But I think that is not quite all. As Jinsuo's letter articulates, and as the story further explores through a series of later flashbacks, there is at the same time a recognition of the destruction and devaluing of local ritual practice in the preceding years of the Cultural Revolution. In such a context, the idea that "Chinese and foreign scholars are taking interest" in the very same practices now brings to bear at least two different sources of authority in revalidating the banished cultural forms—forms that continued to matter, if very quietly, to many local people. While as Keelzoq and Jinsuo both indicate, that revaluation itself became an instrument for personal power-seeking, I am inclined to take it, at the same time, as part of the

Zoo Ge Agan 太阿十, "Jin chi da peng 金翅大鹏 {The gold-winged garuda]," in Dongba zhi si 东巴之死 [The dongba's death] (Beijing: Zhongguo xiju chubanshe 中国戏剧出跋涉, 2004), 273.

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passion that continues to underwrite local people's pursuit of ethnic metacultural projects. This is to say that being granted an ethnic counterpublic at all is already a pretty big deal, when you did not have one before, and even a limited scope of discursive possibility still means, well, possibility.

In the second portion of his history, Keelzoq moves on to a discussion of how the school actually began. Identifying its three co-founders as himself, Yinddertal (He Yusong's father), and He Jinnuo (He Yusong's ritualist teacher, from Chapter Six), he describes their actions at the start of the school in 1997, and recalls their collective sense of loss at the idea that ritual practice might not continue:

women san ge we three na jiu at that point

gongtong zhuyi we came to a common goal

shangliang we discussed kan dao we could see

dongba wenhua women zhe dai for our generation, dongba culture jiu yijing shi chuan le it was no longer being transmitted

shi bu shi right?

tamen dongba wenhua their [the younger generation's] dongba

iiu duandai le *culture* it had a

jiu duandai le it had a generational rupture mianling shi chuan le it was facing a total loss of transmission

suoyi ne, women so, well, we

women zhe ji ge hen xinteng we three were concerned

kan zai yan li we saw it

tou zai xin shang and it hit us hard

shi bu shi right? women shi jiu qi nian right? it was in '97 that we

jiu shangliang we decided

yao zai zhe ge Weishee cun here in Weishee village
Berdder de Weishee cun Berdder's Weishee village

gao yi ge dongba wenhua chuancheng we would start a school for dongba cultural

xuexiao transmission

Thus, while Keelzoq's expressions of desire for cultural transmission fall precisely in line with the language of today's ethnic metacultural work, I want to further contextualize his statement in the oral histories I collected throughout my time in Berdder, about the Cultural Revolution-era proscription on ceremony and on non-Maoist forms of song (such as love song).

Teacher Mei, for example, recalled the frequency with which people secretly praise-burned at Bbapardduaq, and juniper-burned at home, throughout the years of the Cultural Revolution. And pretty much everyone I spoke to recalled secret funeral ceremonies: to avoid such ceremony was, after all, to doom the dead soul to eternal wandering, to never reaching the Black Mountain at all, and instead to haunting one's own home. As for Yinddertal, he recalled how his father would sing secretly in the mountains when his daily tasks involved going there to gather firewood, and then stop as soon as he got back to the village. Uncle Yulheeq told me he had done similarly.

While people rarely described such activities in terms of the current buzzword of cultural transmission, if transmission is about moving socioculturally framed practices through time, then these erstwhile practices were foundational to whatever transmission work the dongba school was able to pursue. And indeed, what Keelzoq does not say but implies is that He Jinnuo, Weishee's only remaining ritualist, was already in his seventies in 1997, and it was not clear who would take over funeral ceremonies in the village after he died. There was thus a concern about loss of transmission that was not in the least abstract: it was a matter of getting dead souls to the Black Mountain, or not. In such a circumstance, Keelzoq's statement seems to function simultaneously as an expression of national loyalty through his acceptance of metacultural forms and terminologies, and at the same time an instrumentalization of those forms in two ways: to claim authority for Berdder and for himself, and also to respond to a genuine sense of crisis, for which the emergence of ethnic metaculture afforded an infrastructure and also a space of limited movement.

# 6.4.2 Yinddertal's life

My host dad, Yinddertal, would get tipsy in the evening and tell me stories about his past adventures. Over the course of many evenings, I have pieced together a pretty lengthy life text, which allows me to contextualize the history of the dongba school in a somewhat different way, by tracing out its convergence with my host dad's self-narrativization.

As Keelzoq has already noted, Yinddertal was in fact one of the co-founders of the dongba school. In his own recollection, this was the project he took on after returning from his ill-starred, but ultimately successful, trading mission. Indeed, for him, the mission and the school were crucially linked.

I should note here that my host dad had a reputation throughout the valley as something along the lines of a used-car salesman. People said he was sneaky. I would say that, in addition to being extremely kind to me and to stray dogs, he was also opportunistic and ruthless. The substance of his trading mission was a revival of regional topographical literacy towards the ends of profiteering, in a spirit not unlike that of Ge Agan's fictional character of Jinsuo. Recognizing that cultural items—this is to say "ethnic" cultural items which had been demonized for years—were gaining monetary value in the cities, but that very rural people likely did not know of the change, he set out to buy ritual objects off of Na people living very deep in the mountains around Berdder. Lacking Yinddertal's greater knowledge of the outside world, these people were happy to sell him cherished family heirlooms for just a few coins, and indeed to equip Yinddertal with a donkey so that he could haul the purchased items to Shangrila (then Zhongdian), where he sold them at a price nearly 1000 times more than what he had paid for them.

Thus, my host dad's trading journey involved his own instrumentalization of emergent ethnic metaculture towards personal profit, with the added twist that he did not appear concerned at all for the welfare of other people (those in the mountains) who were technically designated as Naxi, thus members of his own ethnic group. And even as, during his trading journey, he performed daily praise-burnings to link himself to Bbapardduaq, his home, and his wife, he did not appear to connect his own reliance on ritual practice with the emotional value the heirlooms he gouged might have had to their original owners.

After returning home and rebuilding his house, he recalled turning his attention more specifically to the business of "culture," as he put it. In his narrative, however, unlike Keelzoq's, the dongba school was not a matter of independent arising, but an expression of competition with other dongba schools that were being set up in other Berdder villages. (Teacher Mei and others confirm that the first dongba school was, in fact, in the village of Gguddv, led by another local official and affiliated with Teacher Mei's ritualist father.) For my host dad, then, Weishee's dongba school was a competitive act not unlike his boastful building of a new, rich house.

And, as Yinddertal told me in a more somber moment, it was also a cross-generational act intended to assure the future prosperity of his family. He told me he had always understood that He Yusong was weak and sickly; he would never be able to do much work in the fields, nor were his grades especially good. If he were to achieve some kind of fame, if he were to continue the process of familial accummulation that Yinddertal's trading mission had set in motion, then it would not, most likely, be through travel, wooing, and household production, nor would it be through routes of Han-style education, leading to positions in the government. But perhaps he could "do culture" (Ch. gao wenhua) instead. Thus, when the dongba school started, Yinddertal ensured that He Yusong attended in the evenings after his day-time classes at the local primary

school. When He Yusong finished the sixth grade, Yinddertal brought him home and had him continue his dongba studies full-time with He Jinnuo.

For Yinddertal, then, the dongba school was a continuation of his own opportunistic orientation to life, as well as a historiographic attempt to ensure his family's future.

But of course, it was He Yusong who ended up bearing the burden of that imagined future.

## 6.4.3 What the dongba school did—a historical reconstruction of its practices

It is through numerous interviews—with various Weishee individuals, in addition to Keelzoq, Yinddertal, and He Yusong—that I offer the following history of the dongba school, as an institutionalized set of practices.

From its barest beginnings, the school divided its activities along a local split that corresponded with emergent research practice: it would teach people to sing and dance, on the one hand, and it would also teach specifically ritual practice, on the other. What this would mean was that songs and dance would be available to everyone, as indeed they always had been. But the crowning achievement of the school would be its training of ritualists: young boys would study how to write and recite the books, and how to weave them into complex ceremonies that often included their own, specific forms of dance as well.

The dongba school also fundamentally restructured the conventions of ritual compensation. The co-founders of the school agreed that He Jinnuo, and his students as they learned, would begin performing rituals within the valley again, as people requested them and sometimes as a kind of public service, even when no one specifically did ask for them. But unlike previous forms of ritual, in which inviting families offered gifts of meat and money as

payment, these rituals would be performed for free. As Keelzoq was wont to put it, the dongba school's ceremonies were in service of the people (Ch. wei renmin fuwu). The logic, as he explained it, was that, in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, people were unsure about requesting rituals, and to offer them for free was a strategy for revival.

But it was also more than that, because it meant that the dongba school would have to be supported through donations from various governmental bodies, as well as from researchers such as the ones described at the start of this chapter. It would have to depend on them. And in turn, ritualists affiliated with the school, as He Yusong came to be, would have to depend on Keelzoq, the school co-founder who was himself a cadre. I think it was never in my host dad's plan that his son would enter into a patron-client relationship with any of the school's co-founders, let alone Keelzoq, but that is of course what happened. By the time of my official fieldwork in 2016-18, Keelzoq's power to distribute payment to (or to withhold payment from) He Yusong had become a central tension in his relationship with Yinddertal.

Finally, the dongba school also intervened in emergent conventions around the economic instrumentalization of ethnic metaculture. Thus, while I knew various Berdder ritualists from other villages who had earned considerable money working in Lijiang's tourist industry, generally as a given shop's/bar's/restaurant's token dongba ritualist, Keelzoq required that all students of Weishee's dongba school sign a legal document prohibiting them from using their ritual knowledge to seek work in Lijiang. For Keelzoq, this was a way of fighting for the mandalic centrality of his dongba school, of protecting it from the seeping influence of Lijiang. However, it also meant that boys from poor families were not able to use one of their only competitive edges—dongba ritual knowledge—beyond the scope of Weishee's dongba school itself.

As I will discuss in the final section, most of these boys ended up seeking work in Shangrila as taxi drivers. He Yusong, however, was expected to take He Jinnuo's place—and thus, not simply to avoid work in Lijiang, but to remain in the village his whole life. I think it is fair to say, then, that the dongba school meant something very particular to He Yusong.

### 6.4.4 He Yusong's life

He Yusong was 13 when Yinddertal took him out of public school to pursue full-time ritual study with He Jinnuo. Thus, whereas the other dongba students were attending classes in the evenings, either after school or after agricultural work for their families, He Yusong would go every morning to his teacher's house, work with him till late afternoon, go home for dinner, and then head to the dongba school for the evening's public class, which the other students also attended. He Yusong was absolutely the school's chosen one, the official successor of He Jinnuo.

Leaving public school had not, in itself, been much of a loss for He Yusong. He told me that, because classes were conducted entirely in standard Chinese after the third grade, he could not really understand the teacher for his last three years of class. He sat in the back of the classroom, bored out of his mind. (He did not learn Chinese until beginning to work with Xiaohong, the researcher, several years into his full-time study with He Jinnuo.) While he told me that his boredom at school led him to be "naughty," what I further understand from his sisters is that people at school *told* him he was naughty. In fact, he was bullied terribly, by students and by teachers. His sister Yumi had gone to school one day to drop off something with him, and found several students backing him into a corner. In the moment, she of course had beaten up the offending kids. But, she said, she couldn't protect her brother all the time.

I also remember passing by the primary school one day with He Yusong. As we did, he speculated on whether a certain teacher might still be there. At some point in his public schooling career, he told me, he had forgotten his homework for the millionth time—he hated school, the last thing he wanted to do was homework—and this teacher had instructed all the children in the class to take turns spitting on him.

The complicated thing, which I never fully understood, though I understand that complicated things of this nature happen, is that some of his best friends attended that school with him. I remember asking Yumi if they had participated in the bullying. Or, what would they do when it happened? Yumi said she wasn't sure. Maybe they did stick up for him sometimes, and other times they didn't. I've also wondered other things, such as whether they spat on him, too. My relationship with He Yusong was never of the kind where I felt I could ask, but I want to underscore this dimension of village life: you never get rid of your neighbors, never. Indeed, in elder village people's vision of the Black Mountain—quite apart from its renditions in the ceremonial books—a ritualist merely transports your soul to a Black Mountain village that perfectly replicates your village in the living world, and this village of death holds all the souls of the living village's departed. Thus, even in death, you are stuck with the same people. Who most likely spat on you at some point. I understand the lure of city life as, in part, an escape from all this. In the same way, He Yusong's sentencing to stay forever in Weishee meant that he would never really get away from these people and scenes of his youth, even in life.

Still, there was also a certain sense of inevitability to He Yusong's new ritual studies. He recalled childhood games, where children would simulate funerals, and he would be assigned, continually and forever, the role of ritualist. Given his family's ritual lineage, there was a vague consensus, existing in spite of the Cultural Revolution-era moratorium on ritual, that He Yusong

was destined to become a ritualist. I take from this that the dongba school germinated something for him, a sense of relevance and purpose that reached back into his family's history and gave him social value in a way he'd have been hard-pressed to attain otherwise.

But, He Yusong recalled, his studies with He Jinnuo had been incredibly difficult. The ceremonial books he had to learn were written, he said, in an "ancient" (Ch. gudai) way. What I understand him to have meant by this, as explored specifically in Chapter Four, is that the books were written in bbv jiyiq, or recitation register, which involves working actively against any unit-to-unit correlation between spoken recitation and graphic marks. According to longstanding Berdder ritual pedagogies, the point is to know the oral texts well enough to be able to assemble them in particular structures based on cues from the written graphs. And while this was always hard—its difficulty was in part how a ritualist proved himself, and gained fame as a ritualist—it was particularly hard in the early 2000s, when He Yusong was studying, because the longstanding proscription on ceremony and recitation meant that oral texts of any kind were no longer so much in the air.

Which brings me to the fact that song and ceremonial recitation, as I have already mentioned, were a basic matter of local generic division, but it is clear that they were in fact deeply connected, not only in terms of their composition processes, but also in the sense of the actual language they used. As a result, in the years before and immediately after China's 1949 revolution, to know the songs was to gain practice not only in oral composition, as was required for acts of recitation, but also in terms of the phrases, tropes, and melodies, as many recitations involved sung verses as well. Not surprisingly, many ritualists were also accomplished singers, and vice versa. And so, while in the past to learn to read the books was a matter of expanding one's existing knowledge of songs into a new range of texts and melodies, now aligned with

graphic forms, He Yusong's textual studies involved learning the oral texts, too, largely from whole cloth.

Contributing to the difficulty was the general lack of what I will call practices of exegesis. <sup>207</sup> As He Yusong also recalled for me, He Jinnuo never actually explained things to him, at least not in the sense of offering explicit spoken discussion. The technique was to demonstrate how to do something and then allow He Yusong to imitate him. Thus, to "teach" a book was to sit beside him and recite it as He Yusong read and listened along. This might be repeated as many times as necessary, but based on my conversations with older ritualists, if you do have a stock of oral texts in your memory already, you can generally learn a given book in two or three repetitions. The book then becomes a key to re-accessing the recitational structure, but not a transcript of it in the sense of systematic, one-to-one correlations between graphic and spoken units. The problem was that, in the past, such pedagogical acts were not in fact limited to classes with one's teacher; they took place outside of official lessons, too, through song and through frequent ceremonial events. The classroom worked simply to focus a student's attention around the books.

And yet, in the present, He Yusong's task was to derive the bulk of his lessons from the classroom alone, in a context in which He Jinnuo was mostly unwilling to provide exegetical discussion of any kind. While the question of how He Yusong ultimately solved this problem takes me beyond a history of the dongba school in its own terms (and into the next section), I want to pause here to consider what the school's emergent practices meant in He Yusong's life specifically.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>207</sup> Following Bruce Mannheim's classroom lectures.

By the time He Yusong was 18, many of his childhood friends and neighbors had already left Berdder to seek work in the city, generally by driving taxis. At the time, city labor represented truly unknown seas, and his friends came home full of stories of romance and indeed, as I will explore shortly, of heroic fighting in the streets.

He Yusong told me that it all felt terribly lonesome. It also felt like a curse: Unlike his friends, he would not be able to go to the city to have adventures, to earn money, potentially to find a wife. If his friends had always been a few steps ahead of him, then the old pattern was continuing now.

However, in recalling this for me, He Yusong made it clear that his loneliness and frustration were tempered by fame, and a kind of pride. Because during this time, he was acquiring fame. Researchers, such as Xiaohong, had begun to take interest in him and the other dongba students, and the dongba school had appeared in a few television specials about Naxi culture as well. Here, again, it is worth recalling Ge Agan's story, because it helps illustrate the meaning of fame and pride in a poor, frontier context that had been for the entire history of modern China and the Chinese empire before it, actively denigrated as less civilized, less educated, less good. In such a context, being honored, even in the questionable form of ethnic metacultural publicity, means something that I am not sure I, as another researcher, can ever fully plumb. Besides He Yusong, Yinddertal was one of the most advanced ritual students the school produced, and when in 2018 I met him for tea in Shangrila (where he was then driving taxis), he moved me nearly to tears with his discussion of the school, telling me, "my heart is still there [with the school]."

Still, for He Yusong and fellow students like Yinddertal, fame and pride never translated directly into wealth. If Yinddertal's best employment option was driving taxis in Shangrila, it

was the consensus among researchers such as Liu Xian that He Yusong *should* be poor: if he stayed at home working as a ritualist, as it was his lot to do, then all he really "needed" was a living wage, enough to supplement what his family earned farming. The result was that his family was not abjectly poor, but they had significantly less income than the majority of their neighbors, who had since the 1990s begun to acquire wealth in a variety of different ways, often by getting multiple family members employed through the government. This growing contrast in familial circumstance was especially hard to bear for Yinddertal.

During my initial trips to Berdder in the immediate aftermath of He Jinnuo's death, He Yusong offered classes most nights at the dongba school, and received payment of 40 kuai per class from Keelzoq. By the time I arrived for formal fieldwork in 2016, however, He Yusong had stopped teaching—allowing, he said, his students to pursue self-study. In a broader sense, by 2016, his notion of "doing culture" had swung almost completely to the outward-facing variety, involving performing dances outside of Berdder, attending conferences, and assisting researchers with translations. This was the only way he earned substantial money beyond the scope of Keelzoq's influence. And while such work did afford a degree of financial independence from Keelzoq, it made him ever more dependent on the national industry of ethnic metaculture.

All of this is to say that, while the school was able to create a new line of cultural transmission through He Yusong, and in doing so to generate a sense of fame and pride for its participants, I don't see that it was able to provide a life for He Yusong, or a future for his family, that was immediately legible or desirable in any existing terms. Nor, of course, could the other dongba students use their knowledge to seek higher-paying jobs in Lijiang. It becomes hard at this level to disentangle Keelzoq's personal ambitions from the school's stated aspirations of reviving local ceremonial practice, and hard not to find those stated aspirations a bit empty. Nor

do He Yusong's efforts to extricate himself from Keelzoq's grasp free him from a financial dependence on other purveyors of ethnic metaculture. I remember feeling overwhelmed by how hopelessly political and complicated—fuza 复杂, I said—everything had become, and I said so to Yinddertal, in our conversation about the school. Returning to the recording of our conversation now, I understand his response as a gentle attempt to set me straight:

women jiu qi nian dao xianzai de hua ershi nian le xianzai dongba xuexiao de hua xianzai ye fazhan dao yiding de chengdu xianzai de zhe ge xuexiao women xin limian ye hen qingchu ma women chulai danshi xin hai zai nali ma zuo yishi bu guan zuo shenme yishi women...ye yao hui qu ye hui nian dongba jingshu a women chu lai le bu gao nei yi hang de

shi bu keneng de

from 1997 to the present it's been twenty years now the dongba school now it's developed to a certain point this school today.... in our hearts we [the students] are really clear we came to the city but our hearts remain with the school when ceremonies happen [back in Berdder] no matter what ceremony exactly we...all go back to Berdder and recite from the dongba books the idea of us coming to the city and abandoning all that it's impossible

I further understand this response as offering insight into the fame and pride I have already identified. What might be involved in plumbing those depths? While I do not aspire to a complete answer here, I recall that fame itself, in its Berdder conventionalization, involves a movement through naga publics. Thus, enlarging the scope of Berdder people's historiographic action beyond the school's official self-description, I want to consider how the founding of the dongba school might be understood as part of a larger project of naga management.

### 6.5 Naga management

Chapter Three begins with Teacher Mei's account of his family's possession of a rlli, a naga-child, which it used to assist with hunting until collectivization-era proscriptions on hunting made the family unable to provide sufficient wild meat to the rlli to keep it happy. Recognizing the problem, they got rid of the rlli in the 1990s. While Chapter Three focused on the longstanding practices of naga management to which Teacher Mei's family's rlli-keeping gesture, here I want to draw those practices into the history of modern China. Precisely because collectivization kept most Berdder families from pursuing hunting in the ways they had before, and also limited participation in herding (the other habitual activity that brought humans into contact with alpine spaces), collectivization actually represents a consequential intervention in human/naga relations.

It was through the repetition of stories like Teacher Mei's that I first became aware of this historical change. And there were many stories. For example, before I ever spoke to Uncle (the husband of my host mom's best friend, Auntie), I heard from neighbors of how a mountain naga had once stolen his father's soul. According to the neighbors who told me, various naga "passed the soul around up there," and by the time that Uncle's father was able to recover his lost soul, it was gnawed down just to bones. When I discussed this later with Uncle, he confirmed the history, but added that the inciting incident has been his house's naga child, which they had been unable to feed adequately because of proscriptions on hunting. Thus, in 1976, when he was 14 years old, it had fallen on him to return the naga-child to the mountains, and only then was his father able to recover his soul and his health.

Besides these stories of disgruntled naga-children and their necessary return to the mountains, Berdder houses themselves told a story of attenuated human/naga relations. When

Yinddertal rebuilt his house in the new style, the changes he instituted extended to the construction of the area around the hearth and shrine; one of his crucial moves was to remove the hei shv jjyeq wei, a low shelf near the water pail used exclusively for prayers to the naga in and around the house. While Yinddertal explained to me that this portion of the juniper-burning text could still be said, whether or not the shelf in question was present, I did not generally hear him or others say this portion of the text, though I did record versions from the very elderly that included it. I thus take Yinddertal's alteration, and its subsequent conventionalization in other household renovations, as a sign of the distancing of human social relations from naga.

Beyond these stories and altered practices, it was a fact of life in contemporary Berdder that people who wished to go travelling no longer just set off into the mountains (unless they were Teacher Mei). Instead, they went to the city, and in general, that meant driving taxis.

Interactions with naga, in other words, simply were no longer so constitutive of life. They were changing. And while I am not interested in any simplistic narrative of cultural waning (or God forbid, of modernization), I do want to take that change seriously, and to consider its effect on shared practices of public participation. Given the crucial role of Berdder's diverse literacies in human/naga relations, and by extension in publicity, I turn now to the implications of the dongba school's literacy revival for human/naga interaction, and for the sorts of publics Berdder people are invoking now.

#### 6.5.1 Revisions and circulations: Within Berdder

This brings me back to the question of how He Yusong practically resolved the new problem of oral and written textual transmission. As I have mentioned, massive numbers of books were burned during the Cultural Revolution, and at the same time, people were stopped, at

least officially, from using the oral texts, whether in recitation or in song. And while I have described this problem as one of transmission, for He Yusong, it centered directly around his great fear that his teacher, He Jinnuo, would die. That is, recalling the unspoken fear that I located in Keelzoq's narrative of the dongba school's history, He Jinnuo's death would mean that he could no longer oversee funeral ceremonies, that indeed someone would have to be found to conduct He Jinnuo's own funeral. And He Yusong knew that he was the intended replacement.

He Yusong told me he had been studying with his teacher for about three years when He Jinnuo asked him to undertake the responsibility of conducting the funeral for an elderly man. It was a test of sort, and He Yusong was terrified. Overwhelmed by the enormity of the task before him, he stumbled in his recitation, and He Jinnuo had to step in to help.

The stumble was a very big deal: to mess up a funeral recitation risks generating ghosts, and it threatens the deceased's journey to the Black Mountain. It is also fully perceptible to ordinary people in attendance, who can hear the breakdown of the oral text and its recitational cadence. Thus, He Yusong's mistake was not simply a matter of public embarrassment, but also horrifying, given that it exposed the extent to which he was not prepared to take over his teacher's ceremonial responsibilities.

As He Yusong explained to me, the thing to do was to find a way to keep He Jinnuo with him, even after He Jinnuo's inevitable death. Towards this goal, he began to create what he described as books that were *themselves* teachers. Put another way, he began copying out books from his teacher, not in recitation register (bbv jjyiq) but in basic register (see jjyiq). As discussed in more detail in Chapters Three and Four, basic register does create one-to-one graphic/spoken correlations, and as such it is used in contexts where the desire is not to create a

transformative movement across modalities (as with traditional ceremonial recitation), but rather to reproduce a specific embodied voice. Thus, traditionally, the only "legal" portion of ceremonial books that are written in basic register are the "after words" where ritualists speak in their own voices to their future descendants. As I have also considered in Chapter Four, it is a longstanding trick of ritualists to write out basic register "cheat sheets" in the margins of particularly difficult sections of ceremonial books—but this is seen as a sign of lack of skill, and not the sort of thing you would want other ritualists to see or know about. He Yusong's innovation, then, was to conventionalize the practice of using basic register within the sphere of ceremonial pedagogy and books. However, viewed in terms of longstanding ceremonial frameworks, the result did indeed record He Jinnuo's embodied voice (reciting from his books). This is consistent with He Yusong's reference to the new books as teachers.

I find something very touching here: He Yusong loved his teacher, and the idea of preserving his teacher's voice speaks to his relationship with He Jinnuo, perhaps specifically to his anticipation of his own grief with He Jinnuo's inevitable death, not simply to the issue of learning the texts well enough to oversee funerals.

However, He Yusong's innovation did not actually occur in isolation. As I explored in Chapter Four, Xiaohong and many other researchers were hell-bent on convincing "enlightened" ritualists to "modernize" their books by writing them in a way that created one-to-one correlations with speech. At the same time, I understand from conversations with Teacher Mei that, at Gguddv village's separate dongba school, his father had likewise resorted to teaching ceremonial books in basic register.

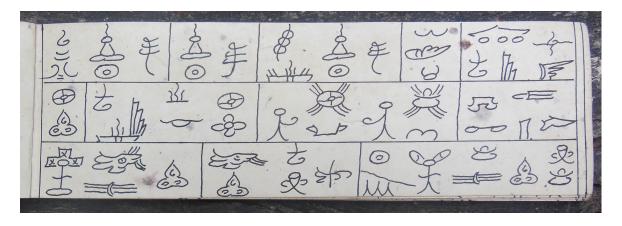


Figure 32. Teacher Mei's basic register transcription of his father's praise-burning oral text.

Teacher Mei recalled that his father had at first been violently opposed to the idea, but eventually made peace with it when he realized that most of his students would be unable to produce a recitation without relying on a full transcription of it. His thinking, in short, closely aligns with He Yusong's.

After He Jinnuo died in 2009, He Yusong did indeed take on the responsibility of performing funerals, as well as teaching classes at the dongba school. During those classes, he formalized his own creation of "teacher books" by offering the same basic-register ceremonial texts to his students. Thus, while Keelzoq (and certainly the Kunming researchers) lacked the proficiency in Na script to recognize this change, even the image that Keelzoq includes in his promotional materials—materials which in other ways cleave tightly to a rhetoric of unchanging "dongba" tradition—actually attest to what was, for ritualists, a profound shift in literacy practice and ceremonial performance. Returning to the photo already shown from those promotional materials, then, it is important to note that the writing on the black board is entirely in basic register.

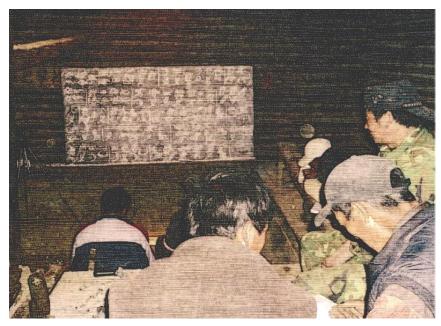


Figure 33. Keelzoq's promotional materials feature a basic register ceremonial text (on the board).

In summary, in the new circumstances of contemporary Berdder, in which knowledge of habitual songs and oral texts is less common and less shared, He Yusong's (and other ritualists') introduction of a speech-compliant script register into the writing of ceremonial texts was at once a flouting of existing ceremonial conventions and a practical response to the new circumstances around oral and written textual transmission.

Here it is important to consider why Teacher Mei's father (as well as He Jinnuo) were at first so passionately opposed to what I have described as Berdder's script revolution. If the utility of the ceremonial register was precisely to create a gap between written text and spoken recitation, to underscore the different layers of mediation that went into a recitation event and in doing so to highlight the derivation of the recitation from an overspreading alpine topography, then He Yusong's innovation also fundamentally altered the participation structure involved in

an act of ceremonial recitation. If suddenly the only "voice" being called up was that of another human ritualist, rather than the naga topography itself, then I imagine that, to Teacher Mei's father and to He Jinnuo, this register shift signified a massive loss of ceremonial power. Within the longstanding ideologies of Berdder's literacy ecologies, it was.

Yet, human sociality in Berdder had already departed meaningfully from the frequent, consequential engagements with an alpine topography of pre-revolution days, and indeed those engagements were being displaced by movement to the city. I want to consider the possibility that Berdder's script revolution can be understood as part of a collective shift through which a different, but not entirely different, public was being produced.

As already described, other Berdder villages, such as Gguddy, were pursuing a similar script revolution, most likely due in part to the shared new exigencies of transmission, and in part to the fact that ritualists within Berdder are often in communication with one another. However, this script revolution was not limited to Berdder. In the adjoining valley of Geeddyq, which contains a combination of Naqhai and Nuosu villages, and has received much less scholarly attention, something very similar was happening. Because He Yusong had been and remains in communication with several ritualists there, and because I went with him on several trips to visit them, next I want to offer what I have been able to find out about the larger context of this script revolution, across the valleys of both Berdder and Geeddyq.

# 6.5.2 Revisions and circulations: Berdder and Geeddvq valleys

Despite the fact that Berdder and Geeddvq are separated by at least a day's walk, there is a historical precedent to contact between them: according to the ancestral migration paths recorded in ceremonial books from both areas, each valley's Naqhai and Rheekaq villages can be

traced back to a single migrational path that passed first through Geeddvq (where some people settled) and then on to Berdder (where more people built houses). These settlements have been in contact reaching back at least as far as Uncle Yulheeq's youth (in the 1930s), nor is it surprising that they have been: unlike surrounding, predominantly Tibetan areas, they speak mutually intelligible Naish languages, have mutually intelligible ceremonial books and ritual practices, and occupy a landscape of common mountains, springs, and caves (as indeed appear throughout their similar oral texts and books). It follows that contemporary political designations actually link these areas together: the contemporary Naxi ethnicity township, known as Sanba, in which Berdder is located extends to Geeddvq as well.

In a slightly more complicated turn of historical events, Geeddvq's Naqhai villages have coexisted with another, nearby settlement of Nuosu villages—as far back as ceremonial books and oral histories from the area can trace. I use the term Nuosu here because it is how people in those villages identify themselves, despite their political designation as Yi, and despite many Naqhai people's pejorative references to them as Lolo. While during the initial year of my ethnography, I made several ethnographic visits to these Nuosu areas, and indeed began to study the language, this research never got very far off the ground. A range of factors led me ultimately to focus on other things, but one of them was the deep, to me inexplicable, bad feeling that Berdder and Geeddvq Na peoples had for their Nuosu neighbors. When, for example, I arranged with a Berdder friend for him to drive me to one of the Nuosu villages for an interview, he refused to enter the Nuosu family's house, and remained in his car the entire time. In a more general sense, while there is plenty of intermarriage between Geeddvq and Berdder (and some with nearby Tibetan areas, too), I never heard of any Berdder people marrying or even dating people from the nearby Nuosu villages (beyond Uncle Yulheeq's legend, of course).

Nevertheless, interchange did take place. Teacher Mei spoke a good bit of Nuosu because, during his herding days, he had sometimes hung out with other Nuosu herders, and most of the Nuosu people I have met were fluent or nearly fluent in Naqhai. As I have also mentioned, the Nuosu people of Geeddvq shared a similar understanding of the alpine topography, and often came to Bbapardduaq to pursue activities with many formal similarities to praise-burning. And while ceremonial practices differed, I understand from conversations with Geeddvq people, both Naqhai and Nuosu, that ceremonial exchange occurred as well: sometimes Naqhai people would seek help from the available Nuosu ritualists, and sometimes Nuosu people would do likewise, seeking out help from Naqhai ritualists. Much seemed to depend on a given ritualist's specific skills and reputation, regardless of his group identification.

This Nuosu angle matters a great deal to the forms of sociality taking shape in the city now, and I will return to it in the next section. For now, I want to underscore a longstanding set of practices through which Na peoples of Berdder and Geeddvq valleys have remained in communication with one another. Here He Yusong offers a good place to start: he told me he had been making periodic trips to Geeddvq since the start of his studies at the dongba school. When he went, he'd stay with another teacher, Grandfather Ddolgee, to discuss and share books. When I accompanied He Yusong on one such trip, I was able to sit nearby as they conducted one such book-sharing session. In the photo below (Fig. 39) of that session, He Yusong sits on the ground beside Grandfather Ddolgee, amidst a messy pile of books, written scraps, and books-in-progress.

As for Grandfather Ddolgee, he was one of the most respected ritualists in Geeddvq, and had played a prominent role in his valley's revival of Naqhai book literacy. However, the revival itself had involved two different variables. First, while Berdder families had managed to hide

enough of their ceremonial books that there were still books to copy and study in the 1990s, Geeddvq's Cultural Revolution-era loss of books had been almost complete. At the same time, the area was slightly less affluent than Berdder, and much less regionally famous: it had never attracted the attention of researchers in the same way. Perhaps not surprisingly, it had no dongba schools, either.



Figure 34. He Yusong and Grandfather Ddolgee

In Geeddvq, then, the revival of written books had involved a tedious process of recitation and transcription, which occurred between elderly ritual teachers (of the same generation as He Jinnuo and Teacher Mei's father) and the new students, such as Grandfather Ddolgee, that they had found. As Grandfather Ddolgee explained to me, his own teacher had taught him how to write in the basic register. Afterwards, he would spend each evening at this ritualist's home, where the ritualist would recite the oral texts he still remembered, and

Grandfather Ddolgee would carefully transcribe them in basic register. The books he uses now are a direct outcome of that labor.

Paper itself had been a problem at this time, in Berdder as well as in Geeddvq. Teacher Mei told me stories about using cigarette boxes to write out books in the early 1990s. Then, as researchers also took an interest in the traditional type of paper on which the ceremonial books had once been written, Teacher Mei gradually began making that paper again, and transferred most of his cigarette-box books back onto it. In contrast, in Geeddvq, where the influence of researchers seemed a little less thick, Grandfather Ddolgee continued to write out his books on an assortment of different kinds of paper, ranging from cigarette boxes to his own discarded deity paintings (Fig. 40).

When I asked Grandfather Ddolgee about the ceremonial prohibition on writing out books in basic register, he knew immediately what I was talking about, but explained that there had been no alternative: Geeddvq's absolute lack of books meant that they had to start somewhere. And much like He Yusong's recognition that He Jinnuo was not long for this world, Grandfather Ddolgee had understood that he needed to copy down as many oral texts as he could, before his own teacher died.

All of this is to say that, while certain changes in the practices around ceremonial books, such as the types of paper used, seemed mostly aesthetic (and in Berdder driven by the particular aesthetics of researchers), the shift in script register was consequential. However, like He Yusong, Grandfather Ddolgee found himself in a position in which, despite his understanding that he was breaking longstanding ceremonial conventions, the only viable option was to write out a new kind of book, which voiced an embodied ritualist, rather than a diffuse naga public.



Figure 35. A few pages from Grandfather Ddolgee's books. While the top and lower two photos display books written on cigarette boxes, the second photo from the top uses a discarded draft of a deity painting.

At this level, it is worth nothing that ritualists did not discuss this register shift with researchers. As Chapter Four explores, they really did not have to: while most Anglophone research on Na books fails to acknowledge the existence of registers at all, Sinophone research tends to explain the registers as a matter of evolutionary "survivals." That is, while ceremonial register represents a lingering vestige of the most primitive form of writing, basic register indicates a more "modern" development (though still significantly less advanced than Chinese). And in neither case is there any understanding of the contextual factors that lead people to choose one register over another.

Given the state of existing social science research, then, it is perhaps not surprising that ritualists did not try to explain contemporary register shifts to their social scientific interlocutors. (In my own case, I only came to trace register differences by pursuing training in ceremonial writing according to the practices that locals themselves followed.) Nevertheless, this observation brings me back to the idea that ethnic metacultural research's willful erasure of certain Indigenous practices has created a place of unregulated autonomy for the people still engaged in those practices. Specifically, Berdder's dramatic shifts in literacy practice have pretty much flown under the radar of existing research, and allowed space for them to pursue reading practices and circulations that exist outside of the conventions created by contemporary Chinese-language literacy and publics.

### 6.6 Taking the city

In one sense, Berdder people's search for jobs in the city, which began in the early 2000s, must be understood as part of a larger sociological phenomenon of rural Chinese people's movement to the city. However, within existing Berdder frameworks, such movement to the city

was highly particular—at once unprecedented and already richly imagined. While Berdder's longstanding emphasis on travel as an avenue towards fame (for men) meant that some men, such as Yinddertal, were honored for the geographical distances they were able to cover, including to the city, there was never an idea of permanent or even semi-permanent relocation to another area, as Berdder city workers now often do. There was, however, an imaginary—itself linked to the fame of travel, and perhaps especially strong for women, who had fewer chances to pursue their own long-distance movements across the landscape—about the dangers and the romance of city life.

During one of my recorded conversations with Ceerlli, my host mom, I told her how her husband, Yinddertal, once confided to me that he doubted he'd be able to marry her if they were both young today: in such a case, she'd have access to the city, where a whole swath of young men would undoubtedly be in love with her. I always found it very lovely that Yinddertal thought so highly of his wife, and felt so lucky to have ended up with her, and I shared his story with my host mom in that spirit. However, she simply nodded, and spoke wistfully of her inability to get to the city in 1970s, when she was of marriageable age:

rheeq nee al teeq rheeq mei (but) that's just the sort of time it was elbbei sheebbei long ago xi ddeeq bbi me dduq you weren't allowed to go to strange places ddee mei geeg nee ngageeg kel elders would say to us xi ddeeg bbi me ddug 'you aren't allowed to go to strange places' bbei wei la lei hvg llo zzei 'vou should stay in the village' ddeeni maig chai shel they said it so much! teejjvig elggeeg bbvpal me heeg so we didn't go to the outside

While in later years, Ceerlli did eventually take a few trips to Shangrila, and one to Kunming, I begin the chapter with her words because they frame Berdder people's movement to the city as an expression of a long-held, highly gendered romantic imaginary that, I believe, continues to shape many Berdder people's experiences of, and hopes for, city life.

However, because even now, movement to the city occurs primarily among men, in a discussion of Berdder people's work in the city, it is those men's experiences that must be the focus of my analysis. All of which brings me back to Nalmuggaq. One of the dongba school's earliest and best students, Nalmuggaq allows me to further specify Berdder people's move to the city as, in part, an outcome of the dongba school. Here he recounts how the death of He Jinnuo left him and the other (young, male) dongba students at a crossroads, which ultimately brought them to city employment:

ling jiu nian in 2009

ta si le he [He Jinnuo] died

keneng san nian yihou and maybe three years later

women jiu xiang le we just thought

xinli jiu xiang le our hearts were thinking

jia limian de hua if we stay home

mei you shenme shouru dui ba there won't be any income

suoyi chulai le ma so it's best to leave

suoyi chu lai xiang kai zhe ge che so we left and started driving

chuzuche tax

qita de bu hui ma we couldn't do other things

qita de jishu ya other skills....

women

wenhua ye bu gao we don't have a lot of culture

dui ba right?

qita gongzuo women mei fa zhao we'd have no way to find other kinds of work

suoyi xuanze kai che so we chose taxi-driving

It is worth noting that, for all that Naxi dongba matters do now receive the "culture" label, when Yinndertal uses the Chinese term "culture" in the general (unmarked) sense, he is absolutely referring to mainstream Han education, and not to the ritual training he received in Berdder. However, as I will argue in the pages to come, the dongba students' ritual knowledge of the landscape and more broadly, of Berdder poetics, actually sharpened their imagination of city life, while also offering a set of resources for dealing with it.

Among those resources is a fundamentally mandalic approach to movement across the earth. Thus, while much research has been done on rural workers in Chinese cities<sup>208</sup>, the aspect most crucially at the center of this labor for Berdder people, which appears far less in existing ethnographies, is the problem of combatting the shift there, of maintaining ties with the mandalic center one already has—that is, Bbapardduaq. For the Berdder people I spoke to, moving to the city, even on a semi-permanent basis, consisted of a ferocious attempt to extend Bpapardduaq worlds *into* the city—not simply to relocate their bodies. Thus, China's broad rural-to-urban demographic change, in all the specificity of the Berdder frameworks brought to it, offers a final context for the question of Berdder people's emergent historiographic projects.

While pursuing fieldwork, I passed through Shangrila frequently on supply trips, and I also took off two months to follow my Berdder friends to the city and to pursue focused "urban" fieldwork. This involved living at a hostel in Shangrila's old town section while visiting and meeting with Berdder friends on a near-daily basis. Honestly, this was one of the dreariest parts of my fieldwork; it meant losing all the daily routines I had developed through interactions with household members and neighbors in Berdder, and helped me understand the enormous sense of fragmentation that Berdder people described in their own experiences of city life. At the same time, my work allowed me to see how Berdder itself, as a geographic center, offered a solution of sorts to that fragmentation.

In what follows, I want to trace Berdder people's lives in the city through a consideration of how existing cultural frameworks, such as notions of a mandalic and expansive alpine

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>208</sup> Haiyan Lee, *The Stranger and the Chinese Moral Imagination* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City: Reconfigurations of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China's Floating Population* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Hairong Yan, *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Shao-hua Liu, *Passage to Manhood: Youth Migration, Heroin, and Aids in Southwest China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011).

topography, have supported their shift to the city, while at the same time required adaptation. That adaptation, I argue, has so far occurred primarily through young Berdder men's work as taxi-drivers, a job they have used to gain access to new and different urban topographies.

## 6.6.1 Mandalic expansion

When my host mom praise-burned for my host dad on his trading journey in the 1990s, she was not inventing something new, but adopting a longstanding local method for protecting and reaching out to Berdder people who are travelling far from home. At the time, I think she could not have imagined that, three decades later, the majority of local visitors to Bbapardduaq would be either (a) old people (the ones living continuously in the village) going there to pray for absent children and grandchildren, who were working or attending school in the city, or (b) returning city workers and students, who now punctuate their departures from and arrivals to the valley with praise-burning trips to Bbapardduaq. If, then, Ceerlli's praise-burning for Yinddertal offered a way to reach out to him, to hold him still within the sphere of Berdder life, how had her methods been adapted to the context of the late 2010s?

In thinking through this question, different Berdder concepts of houses offer a place to start. The most crucial distinction here is between *yagol* and *huaddv*. The concept of yagol includes the mandalic term for "center" (N. gol), and it refers to houses that have shrines, that is, which are understood to contain ancestors and to count within kinship reckoning. In contrast, huaddv, translate-able as "erected gathering spot" and often referencing tents and temporary shelters, describes the dwellings that herders often build for themselves in the mountains. While for herders like Teacher Mei who returned to the same spots each year, these shelters became elaborated to look and function much like the wooden cabins in the valley below, people always

corrected me if I referred to them as yagol. As I came to understand, maintaining the yagol/huaddv distinction was a way of reinforcing the mandalic centrality of yagol-type dwellings in the village, and posing the activities of herders as a temporary departure from house-life in the village. Finally, a third term, *zee*, refers to the materiality of a human dwelling, and seems neutral with respect to locating the dwelling in a mandalic structure.

From the perspective of this terminology, it is meaningful that Berdder people living in the city, even in apartments they owned, referred to those apartments as huaddy (temporary dwellings) or zee (dwellings), but never as yagol (ancestral homes). It was a matter of shared doxa that yagol could only be found back in Berdder, in the village, and that whatever one did in the city was an extension of that fundamental valley life.

Longstanding understandings of the alpine topography, which were encoded in praise-burning and juniper-burning texts, contributed to Berdder people's geographical placement of city life. Shangrila, the closest and most frequent city destination—about four hours by bus, and sometimes as fast as 45 minutes if you were driving your own taxi in good weather—was insistently a part of the known alpine topography. To illustrate this, it is helpful to review the diagram from Chapter Two, which illustrates the circular path that praise-burning traces around Bbapardduaq (see below, Fig. 41). Note that the location labelled in white as "Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture" actually marks the city of Shangrila. The other place names written in blue indicate locations that Berdder oral texts habitually reference, and of those, at least three occur definitely within the bounds of contemporary Shangrila city. Beginning with Dukaq Aiqna wei (which appears in the diagram), there is also Holci-rrai-gga wei and Mu-nyi-la-heeq wei (which are not marked in the diagram), but appear commonly in oral texts.

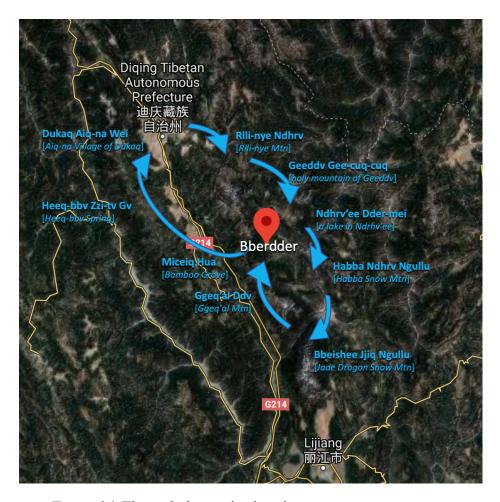


Figure 36. The path that praise-burning traces.

The first two locations, Dukaq Aiq-na wei and Holci-rrai-gga wei, were for the Berdder drivers I knew immediately identifiable with two Shangrila temples, Baiji Temple (Fig. 42), and Dabao Temple (Fig. 43), and most of the drivers I knew frequently visited them, often on the days they did not have to drive, to praise-burn. That said, for these Berdder drivers, praise-burning in Shangrila was not without its challenges: some of the branches required for proper praise-burning were not available in the city, but they made the best of it. Here, then, it is helpful to recall that Yinddertal also praise-burned during his 1990s trading journey, and his prayers acted to connect his body to its distant home and center in Berdder. I think it is clear that the drivers I know were pursuing something similar.



Figure 37. Baiji Temple (Ch. Baiji Si 白鸡寺), or Temple of the White Chicken. Indeed it has many chickens. Most Berdder people identified it as the Naqhai praise-burning text's Dukaq Aiq na wei, translatable as Temple of the Black Chicken.



Figure 38. Dabao Temple (Ch. Dabao Si 大宝寺), or Temple of Great Treasure. Most Berdder people identified it as (in the Naqhai praise-burning text) Holci-rrai-gga wei, with no clear translation beyond its existence as a central destination or temple. The temple has its own cat, with a bed beneath an inner stairwell. (See the cat in photo to the right.)



Figure 39. Songzanlin Temple (Ch. Songzanlin Si 松赞林寺). Older Berdder people identified it as (in the Naqhai praise-burning text) Mu-nyi-la-heeq wei, with no clear translation beyond its existence as a central destination or temple. As the largest Buddhist temple in the area, it now charges admission to tourists, and seems to have fallen out of use with visiting Sanba people.

As for the third Shangrila-area location mentioned in Berdder oral texts, Mu-nyi-la-heeq wei, while everyone understood it as falling within the general area of Shangrila, the younger drivers I knew were unsure of its precise geographical referent. However, older people in Berdder, travelers like my host dad and herders like Teacher Mei, assumed that it referred to Shangrila's largest Buddhist temple, Songzanlin (Fig. 44). As my photograph indicates, Songzanlin has been fully incorporated into Shangrila's Tibetan-culture tourist industry, and now charges rather steep entry tickets. As a result, the drivers I knew did not frequently visit it, and certainly did not praise-burn there; so I think it is not surprising that they simply thought less about this location, which was not a part of their lived Shangrila realities.<sup>209</sup> In sum, part of these

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>209</sup> Le An Wang Dui 勒安旺堆, ed., Diqing zhou Zangzu zi zhi zhou zhi 迪庆州藏族自治州志 [Gazetteers of Diqing prefecture's Tibetan autonomous prefecture], vol. 1. (Kunming: Yunnan minzu chubanshe, 2003); Diqing Zhou Zangxue Yanjiuyuan 迪庆州藏学研究院, Yunnan zangchuan fojiao fazhan jianshi 云南藏传佛教发展简史 [A concise history of Tibetan Buddhism in Yunnan] (Kunming: Yunnan minzu chubanshe, 2015); Zhongdian xian

drivers' activities in Shangrila involved a motivation of the old landmarks towards the ends of a mandalic restructuring of the city space, with Bbapardduaq (and thus Berdder) marked insistently as the center. And while their praise-burning activities offer a visible and conventional sign of such mandalic restructuring, it is perhaps no accident that the labor they sought out in the city was taxi-driving, which consists of recursive movements across the earth.

Beyond a ceremonial and pragmatic restructuring of city space, the drivers I knew had also begun to establish a human infrastructure of known Sanba people (encompassing people from Berdder as well as Geeddvq). This involved an encyclopedic knowledge of where Sanba individuals lived; indeed, my interviewing process was substantially easier because the drivers I knew could immediately drive me to interview any Sanba individual whose name came up in our conversations. There was at the same time a gradual consolidation of living space; many of the drivers I knew had already moved into one of the two apartment complexes where large communities of Sanba people already lived. It was precisely through this emergent human infrastructure that my urban ethnography was possible: I pursued the lines of relationships emanating from Bbapardduaq, meeting the people I already knew as they gathered for meals and activities, and then I followed the relationships they were forming with other Sanba people, many of whom they got to know only through their work in the city.

Nor was this emergent human infrastructure of Sanba people simply an extension of existing Sanba forms of sociality. For example, on the taxi ride to Dabao Temple, the driver ended up being a relative of Alin, a Sanba driver who had, through the same networks, lived for several years with Yindderjjyoq, one of the dongba students from Berdder. The driver in turn

zhi

zhi biancuan weiyuan hui bangongshi 中甸县志编篡委员会办公室, (Minguo) Zhongdian xianzhi 民国中甸县志 [Nationalist period Zhongdian county annals], 1991.

knew Yindderjjyoq and most of my Berdder friends in the city, and he also provided a careful description of his own praise-burning activities at Dabao Temple every weekend. What felt very surprising to me at the time was the fact that Alin and this driver both turned out to be Nuosu—a group that Naqhai people in the Sanba area have historically excluded from their more formal modes of sociality (marriage, meal-sharing, etc). Yet, Alin had lived and worked with Yindderjjyoq, and the driver was not only on good terms with all of them, but pursuing his own praise-burning activities at the same places. All of this is to say that something was growing in the city, too, something that included but also extended beyond the naga public that Bbapardduaq itself afforded.

### 6.6.2 New topographies (and poetics)

If one of the challenges of city life was maintaining and nurturing one's ties to home, then the other central impediment was day-to-day survival. This involved the inescapable need to make money, in face of the prejudice most Sanba experienced for their often sun-darkened skin, nonstandard Chinese, and limited Chinese education. Yet, putting aside matters of interpersonal bad feeling, they also faced a tangle of urban infrastructures—of governance, of legal procedure, of organized crime—for which Berdder life offered little preparation, and city life offered little support. And these infrastructures impinged on pretty much everything, from the bureaucratic mazes involved in renting an apartment, to the different forms of identification required to get a job, to the largely unregulated dangers of certain areas of Shangrila at night.

Taxi-driving brought all of these problems to the fore. The first involved the incredible bureaucratic complexity, linked to the forms of social literacy and wealth required to navigate it.

Just to get hired as a driver required three weeks of driving lessons that had to be taken in the

city, and paid for individually by each student, as well as five different forms of official identification, each of which required a different application process. Having satisfied these requirements, drivers could apply for employment through one of two taxi organizations, either the Diqing prefectural government's Public Transportation Service (Ch. jiaoyun gongsi 交运公司) or a "control center" (Ch. guanli zhongxin 管理中心) run through an administrative portion of the prefectural government. According to the office worker, an accountant whose English name was Tony, whom I interviewed at the Public Transportation Service, these taxi organizations hold equivalent ranks in the prefectural government, but are run through different branches and have no direct communication with each other.

As the drivers I interviewed explained, while the two taxi organizations have different requirements, their worldview is similar. The Public Transportation Service supplies the taxis and hires drivers to operate them on a yearly basis, charging the drivers a fee of 3,000 kuai a month for the use of the taxis. In contrast, the control center hired drivers who were required to purchase their own taxis through the center, and then to pay a slightly lower fee every month to maintain their legal certifications through the organization. In both cases, drivers undertook liability for any damages their cars might receive, and were responsible for covering repair expenses. While the fees involved were pretty steep in both cases, especially given the fact that both organizations continued to add new taxis and/or drivers, and thus to chip away at the total profits any single driver could make, the core problem to which most drivers alluded was the lack of safety. In Nalmuggaq's succinct summation, the Public Transportation Service "doesn't care what happens to the drivers, as long as the cars are okay." Drivers like Yindderjjyoq and Alin who worked for the control center said that owning their own taxis gave them more freedom

to set their own work schedules, but afforded no further protection from the dangers of taxi driving.



Figure 40. The office of Shangrila's Public Transport Service (Ch. jiaoyun gongsi 交运公司) In the documents displayed on the wall, drivers' images and Chinese names appear alongside the plate numbers of their assigned cars.

These dangers—a second crucial site of difficulty—were real, and well-known to Sanba people in the city, as well as to the various Berdder people I knew back in the valley. As the drivers put it to me matter-of-factly, one or two of them would be killed on the job every one or two years. When I interviewed Nyabba Yulheeq, the first Weishee man to drive taxis in the city, he recalled one of the earliest deaths, when a fellow Weishee driver had been found dead inside his car, which was parked near Songzanlin Temple. Yulheeq assumed that a passenger had asked to be taken out to the temple, and then had killed the driver. He said the police had done nothing.

I also remember how, during one of my early trips to Berdder in 2013, I had been having breakfast with He Yusong's family when a neighbor brought the news that a young man, also a Weishee driver, had been found dead in the city. While I don't have a lot of details on the incident, I remember the horrible silence that fell after we received the news. Later, Yinddertal told me that this was what happened to young people who went to the city and got caught up in crime (Ch. hei shehui). Yet, even in his understanding of the incident, which attributed much of the blame to the dead young man, there was a persistent sense of alienation: the police, people said, would not do anything to help.

But if taxi-driving was bureaucratically dense and also put drivers in daily, physical danger, it also posed a problem to their ability to earn money, at all. As all the drivers described to me, in the early 2000s, it was possible to earn solid wages taxi-driving, if you got paid for the labor you did. But at night, when the driving was also at its most dangerous, many passengers, either drunk or simply emboldened, would refuse to pay their fares. In these cases, the drivers

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>210</sup> Emily Chao, *Lijiang Stories: Shamans, Taxi Drivers, and Runaway Brides in Reform-Era China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012).

felt they could only depend on each other—not their employers, and certainly not the police—to insist on their proper payment. As Alin succinctly put it:

xianzi women zhe ge hangye de hua women chuzuche hangye de hua tamen you qian hui lai qifu tamen he le jiu ye hui lai qifu women tai xiaoqi le women zhe ge hangye shi when you work in our line of business our taxi-driving line of business rich people will take advantage of you people who drink they'll also take advantage of you we get cheated so much in this line of business

The result was nightly fighting in the streets. It was Yindderjjyoq, He Yusong's best friend, who first told me about it. On one of his frequent trips back home to Berdder, he had shown me a weapon (Fig. 46) of the sort he used in Shangrila, an "extra" that he kept at home, just in case. It was specifically a long, heavy knife with a sharpened edge, and he demonstrated the hacking motion he would use when wielding it on another human body.



Figure 41. A typical "knife" used by Sanba drivers, often stored under their seats. The lower edge is sharpened, while the upper one is dull. That's my foot in the lower left, for a sense of proportion.

While I remember finding Yindderjjyoq's demonstration of his own described behavior incongruous, terrifying, and fantastical, not the sort of thing actually to be believed, the lives of these young men were not, in fact, at all remote from me. During my supply trips to the city and especially during my two months of intense urban study, I ran into them frequently, without even meaning to. This, after all, was the nature of their work: they were continuously driving around town, looking for passengers. When I was waiting for a taxi, or just walking down the street, one of them often would appear in his cab, without any prior planning, and insist on taking me to the next interview, or wherever I happened to be going. I also remember getting horribly lost once, only to have Alin's taxi miraculously hove into sight.

My own descriptions here of the violence they were involved in, combined with my familiarity with them, may also seem incongruous, or perhaps unwise on my part, but it really didn't feel that way at the time. Because most of them were friends with He Yusong, I knew them already, and because I'd been going to Berdder for years before I undertook the specifically city-focused portion of my fieldwork, I also knew most of their parents, grandparents, sisters, wives, and young children back in Berdder. Thus, while I certainly was not a "Berdder person" or a "Sanba person" in the ways they were, the relationships I formed with them were based on a common link to Sanba and Berdder, and had a certain steadiness because of this.

During my earliest trips to Shangrila, though, it was Yindderjjyoq I knew the best. Encountering him later in Shangrila, in his taxi, I immediately asked to see where he kept his knife, and he gamely withdrew it from beneath his seat. It was indeed the same sort of long, metal blade he had shown me in Berdder. In addition, he withdrew a heavy chain and another knife, also from beneath the seat.

He had to use them every few nights, he told me proudly.

As I continued to talk with additional Sanba drivers, it became clear that they fought together, in groups, calling each other up with cell phones or two-way radios if one of them "had a problem" while driving. As Yindderjjyoq explained, referring to the drivers as a brotherhood (Ch. xiongdi hui):

xiongdi hui....
ruguo shi, zheli chu yi tao shiqing
da yi ge dianhua ma
quanbu hui dao na ge difang le
ruguo yi ge da gei ni
ni jiu tongzhi ba ge ren

our brotherhood....
suppose something happened here
you could just make a call
and all of us would come
if somebody calls you
then you let eight more people know about it

When I asked Nalmuggaq what, specifically, constituted a reason to make such a call, he explained:

che fei jiu shi tamen bu yuanyi fu qian zhuyao shi nage yuanyin haiyou tamen jiu zui le yihou jiu gen ni luan shuo hua, dui ma it's for cab fare they [the passengers] aren't willing to pay mostly that's the reason also sometimes they get drunk and speak roughly to you, you know

And while most Sanba drivers, like Nalmuggaq, attributed the fighting to bad behavior on the part of passengers, it is not clear to me that all fights started this way; indeed, the drivers' stories rarely included a specific description of the inciting incident.

Nor did their stories provide a consistent identity or set of identities for the problematic passengers. When I asked, drivers provided a range of different answers. For example:

zhe xie chengke...
zhe ge shi bu yiding de
you xie shi zhe li de
bendi de Zangzu
you xie shi Diqiing de
you xie shi Weixi de

these passengers...
there is nothing set about them
some are from here
local Tibetans
some from [other parts of] Diqing
some from Weixi

Or:

Sichuan de Hanzu Sichuan de Zangzu hen you shili zai women zhebian

Han from Sichuan Tibetans from Sichuan they're very powerful around these parts

As the second comment here suggests ("they're very powerful around these parts"), and as the following section will explore more specifically, organized crime in Shangrila came from multiple vectors, not only Sanba. However, at least among the Sanba drivers, their resentments never seemed to center continuously or unilaterally on a specific ethnic group, location, or crime leader; what seemed to matter more than the individuals they were fighting was the resentment itself.

Indeed, it seems to me that the experience of making the shift to city life was problematic precisely because it created difficulties for them that were at once overwhelming and diffuse. While many drivers said terrible things about the taxi organizations that employed them, they didn't have enough contact with the management of these organizations to know individuals on whom they could focus their anger. It was much the same with Shangrila's police force. And in the matter of pervasive urban/rural prejudice, or simply their lack of literacy in the mazes of city life, there was, again, rarely a clear individual on whom to pin the blame. It seems to me in hindsight that their rude, drunken, privileged passengers served a powerful semiotic function, embodying and through their bodies iconizing the real forces of marginalization these Sanba people were experiencing.

In addition to meeting with drivers at their homes to share meals and listen to their stories, I also convinced Alin to allow me to accompany him on some of his late-night driving shifts. Such accompaniment involved sitting in the passenger seat and talking with him as he drove in circles around the city, for hours each night. While I was never present for an actual fight, I did witness him in continual communication with other Sanba drivers, via cell phone as

well as through a two-way radio system they were at the time in the process of installing in many Sanba drivers' cars. They met each other for snacks over the course of their late-night driving, and also frequently stopped their cars to climb out and observe emerging events, of various kinds. One night, for example, Alin and I observed a minor accident between a taxi driver (not from Sanba) and a private motorist. Alin immediately parked his taxi and pottered out to help broker a deal between the two offended parties, without ever calling the police. While Alin was particularly eager to involve himself in late-night events of this sort (I think this is why he allowed me to tag along as well), there was a general sense among Sanba drivers that, at night, they owned the roads.

Other taxi drivers, many of them Han from Sichuan who had come to Shangrila in search of work, echoed these sentiments: they spoke with a combination of frustration and grudging respect for the Sanba drivers. The most frequent adjective they used was "ferocious" (Ch. xiong  $\[ oxedow{\boxtimes} \]$ ), and they made it clear that they literally steered clear of them, *especially* at night.

But it is not really possible to talk about any of this without bringing poetics back into it, nor, given the fact that much of my information derived from the stories drivers shared with me, do I think my fieldwork is fully separable from the heroic poetry they themselves saw in their late-night adventures. I have to confess that, at first, all the poetry distracted me from the violence and danger these drivers were facing. Yet in a way, I think that was their collective intention: a thick layer of romance transmuted what might have been a frustrating and terrifying shift into unfamiliar lands into an adventure, and an experience of brotherhood.

In these stories and conversations about driving, I began to notice certain recurring images. One image was of the collective force of Sanba drivers, all converging on a spot and emerging from their cars, knives in hand. Many of the drivers, as I have mentioned, had known

each other back in Berdder through the dongba school, and even those who hadn't were involved in praise-burning, both at home in Sanba and in Shangrila. It is thus worth noting that a concluding portion of the praise-burning text itself evokes a similar image, as it describes an army of Naqhai men defeating enemies in the Tibetan North and Bai (as well as Yi) South:

rhu gguq gv lei ceeq rhu la ddeeq see ceiq hol pu chee lei ceeq rhu gvfu nye chee kual mei chee lei tv our enemies' heads: we cut them off one hundred and eighteen of their hands: we take them from their bleeding heads, we carve out the eyes

Closely linked to the image of collective, heroic battling was of individual acts of courage. For example, when I asked Alin how he decided a situation had escalated to the point that he need to call in his "brothers," he offered the following boast:

zhi shi wo shizai da bu ying tamen shi ba tamen ren duo de shihou, wo jiu gei tamen da dianhua yiban san, si ge ren, si, wu ge ren, wo bu hui gei tamen da dianhua yi ban, si wu ge ren wo neng da de ying

only if I really can't win the fight on my own if there are too many people, I'll make a call usually if it's three or four people, or four or five, I won't make the call usually I can beat four or five people

A third, crucial theme involved the exchanges that occurred through and after a fight. As a general rule, what mattered to the Sanba drivers was injuring the other party; I think it is fair to say that they were not ever trying to kill people, and that when one of their own was killed, as occasionally happened, the event was shocking, somber, and horrible. In ordinary circumstances, after injuring the offending party or parties, the Sanba drivers would try to leave the scene. If the police did not become involved, then they really could just depart. But in most cases, they ended up either running from the police, usually on foot, or if people at the scene reported their license plate numbers to the police, then they might get called into the police department later. Then the drivers' stories would into elaborate narratives involving the payment of medical fees to the

passengers they had injured. Here Alin's narrative of an encounter with 12 passengers offers a comparatively simple example:

wo qunian fu le yi ci shi er wan si lai fu le yi ci tamen lai le shi'er ge ren, na tian wanshang na tian wanshang tamen lai le tamen shi yi jia mianbaoche zuo le 12 ge ren tamen lai dao wo de fangxiang ba wo de che yu dao lubian qu le suoyi wo jiu xia che gei tamen tao le lilun de shihou tamen...
wo pei le 2 wan 4 wo kan le yi dao tamen tamen mei ren nazhe yi ba dao

I had to pay once last year
I paid 24,000 once
that night 12 people came at me
the night they came
they were in a minibus
it held 12 people
they came in my direction
and pushed my cab off the road
so I got out and I was reasoning with them

they...
I had to pay 24,000
I cut them
each of them was carrying a knife

At this level, it is impossible to ignore the correlation between longstanding methods of naga management in Berdder with the exchanges taking place here between Sanba drivers and their passengers. As I have explored in Chapters Two and Three, the human/naga relationship is fraught with tension that manifests in ongoing exchanges of material goods, in the form of offerings (to the naga) and natural resources (taken from the naga), as well as in various practices of violent extortion (as with the theft of naga children). I have also mentioned that naga frequently steal human souls, and must be threatened and reasoned with before the souls can be regained. The powerful result of these ongoing exchanges was the reproduction in time of a human/naga relationship—a relationship that collectivization's limitations on hunting and herding worked to attenuate.

What I find in contemporary Shangrila is a set of very similar practices that drivers are using on their human but decidedly not Sanba passengers—passengers who, as I have described, seem to be standing in for a far vaster but more diffuse system that is the city itself. Thus, in addition to offering a scapegoat for the real frustrations these Sanba drivers are experiencing in

the city, the passengers also offer a material presence through which the drivers can begin building ties of interdependence, of relationship, with Shangrila. As Chapter 6 considered in a different way, violence is not necessarily about driving people away; it can also be about creating social ties. That is what I find among these Sanba drivers, and it is of course inextricable from their boastful efforts—so reminiscent of my host dad—to achieve fame through their movements in the world.

This brings me back to the physical experience of driving, of moving across a new topography of destinations and roads. At this final level, it is worth noting that one of Yindderjjyoq's claims to fame in Berdder was as a master of "magic places": he had spent his childhood seeking out springs and caves in the nearby mountains, and indeed took me to several over the course of my time in Berdder. Likewise, Alin had herded for several years before moving to work in the city, and during his herding years, he had encountered Teacher Mei on several occasions. They apparently knew each other. Many of the drivers, that is, had particularly close experiences with the mountains, despite the fact that the general motion of Berdder social life seemed to be moving away from the alpine landscape. Thus perhaps it is not surprising that in these young men's recollections of their experiences of driving at night in the city, there was also a lonesome, windswept sense that reminded me of nothing more than Teacher Mei's particular versions of love song—songs he created and sang for his own amusement while herding.

I concluded Chapter 1's story of Teacher Mei by suggesting, in jest or desperation, that he himself was becoming a naga of Bbapardduaq. And while I don't think the suggestion is right, exactly, it does seem to get at something. Maybe it is better to say that Teacher Mei loved the mountains, and had his doubts about most other people and things. In the single self-created song

he ever shared with me, he subtly transforms the conventions of love singing into an expression of love for the mountains themselves.

jjiq par ga rhushu jjiq mu ga zzi ggeq ga rhu me shu bbi jjiq mu jjv me dder the cloud aches for the goose aging because of it if not for all the aching the cloud would still be young

zzi naq bbai rhushu zzi mu bbai zzi ggeq bbai rhu me shu bbi zzi mu jjv me dder the pool aches for the duck aging because of it if not for all the aching the pool would still be young

ngullu ngu rhushu llu mu ngu zziggeq ngu rhu me shu bbi llu mu jjv me dder the mountain aches for the silver aging because of it if not for all the aching the mountain would still be young

yibbi haiqzzi shu zzi mu haiq zziggeq haiq rhu me shu bbi zzi mu jjv me dder the river aches for the gold aging because of it if not for all the aching the river would still be young

zoq jjyoq ma rhu shu zoq mu ma zziggeq ma rhu me shu bbi zoq mu jjy me dde

the man aches for his beloved aging because of her if not for all the aching he'd still be young

While it is a commonplace of most love songs to proceed through an image of the sky and another image of water before arriving, finally, at a picture of human life, Teacher Mei's lyrics take their time. He moves through sky and water twice (the cloud, the pool, the mountain, the river) before finally arriving at a human man. And while most song lyrics evoke things of sky and water as parallels for human life, I think it is more plausible, in Teacher Mei's case, that human life is a parallel for *them*, that indeed the love he is feeling is as much for the human "beloved" in the final stanza as it is for all the other naga-creatures of the sky and land that earlier portions of the lyrics describe: cloud, goose, pool, duck, mountain, silver, river, gold.

Yet the lyrics are very much about unrequited love, and I find that in Teacher Mei's relationship with the mountains, too. He was, after all, inextricably tied to a house (yagol) in the valley below. His house (huaddv) in the high peaks, just like the additional shelter he'd built for himself at Bbapardduaq, was temporary: he always eventually had to leave these places and return to the complications of human life below.

And while I don't think the Sanba drivers I got to know loved the city, exactly, they fixated on it, they fought with it, they tried to escape it but couldn't. I think ultimately their stories were about longing, and the best way I have found to understand them is through the glimpses I have had of Teacher Mei and the Berdder mountains.

#### 6.6.3 Agie's life

A final, inescapable theme of the Sanba drivers' stories was that of Aqie. He was a man from Geeddvq who had become extremely wealthy and powerful in Shangrila, and ultimately been murdered in the streets several years ago. If Shangrila residents were not also from Sanba, they tended to describe Aqie as a "crime leader" (Ch. hei shehui laoda). However, in one of my first conversations with Yindderjjyoq about taxi-driving, I made the mistake of using the same expression. Yindderjjyoq immediately corrected me:

Sanba de laoda ma *laoda* ta de xiongdi feichang duo ta de renpin ye feichang hao feichang shangliang

Sanba's leader he [Aqie] was a leader he had a whole lot of brothers he was incredibly good incredibly kind

Yindderjjyoq continued:

biru shuo, women liang ge bu shi xihuan dui ma bu renshi ma dui ba for example, we two suppose we don't like each other, right like we don't know each other, right ni shi Sanba wo ye shi Sanba danshi women liang ge bu renshi na ge danshi wo yudao yi dian kunnan gen ta shuo yihou neng bu neng bang yi xia? na shihou ta yi xin yi yi de ta hui bangzhu renjia

you're from Sanba
I'm also from Sanba
but
we don't know each other
but I run into trouble
if I let him [Aqie] know
'could you please help out a little?'
then
single-mindedly
he would help

But in fact pretty much any Sanba person I spoke to, whether in the city or back home in Berdder and Geeddvq, had a story to tell about Aqie. Teacher Mei recalled how he would come every few months to Bbapardduaq to praise-burn, and always contributed generously to the fund that was Teacher Mei. Many Sanba drivers spoke of him with tenderness: he was the sort of person who would take your cab and call you his brother, but still insist on paying. Even random old people in Berdder would tell me he was mixed up in trouble in Shangrila, but very powerful and very kind.

Most importantly, though, and as indeed Yindderjjyoq's statement suggests, people of Sanba claimed him as their own. His presence had been a unifying force. And from that unity, Sanba people gained respect in a world beyond Sanba. As one driver put it: "As soon as people in the city find out where we're from, they respect us 300 times more." Such respect had not, it seemed, translated into job opportunities beyond taxi work. Indeed, many other jobs would reject applicants simply because they were from Sanba, and thusly carried an implicit threat of violence. However, I learned that Aqie lay at the root of many of the poetic themes of their driving.

In the first case, he was able to intervene in their fighting in such a way as to shield them from police punishment sometimes, and more broadly to create a shared pool of funding that was available to any driver who incurred medical bills (of the injured party) through fighting. Aqie,

people told me, was involved in a variety of construction projects in Shangrila, and through that work (obviously shady) had acquired some friends in the police station. Thus many drivers reported being captured by the police, calling Aqie, and being released shortly after. More profoundly, Aqie organized the drivers sufficiently to create a common pool of money, which I believe made it possible for Alin (as mentioned earlier) to pay off a 24,000 kuai medical bill. It also functioned more broadly as insurance to assist the drivers with unexpected car maintenance issues. It was insurance that they simply did not have otherwise.

In addition, Aqie created the brotherhood (Ch. xiongdi hui) that Yindderjjyoq mentioned. Through this brotherhood, Aqie ensured that all Sanba drivers had each other's names, plate numbers, and phone numbers, and that they understood that (as Yindderjjyoq also stated) if one of the "brothers" reached out to them for help, they should go, and they should also call at least eight additional "brothers" asking them to go, too. This is the infrastructure by which drivers were able to converge on a location, and emerge together from their cabs, knives in hand. It is, I believe, at the heart of the genuine fear I saw in other drivers who spoke of Sanba people, and it also follows a pattern that seems to crosscut organized crime across many different places: in the absence of other forms of social networks and security, Aqie stepped in.

But if Aqie was indeed a crime lord, whose power was rooted in his ties to Sanba and Sanba drivers, I think it's also important to point out that the Sanba drivers themselves did not seem to be involved systematically in other forms of urban crime. They knew, for example, where the brothels were, and where to go for drugs, but in none of our storytelling sessions and in none of my ride-arounds with Alin did I see them doing anything but ferrying passengers to and from these places. They also seemed aware of counterfeiting and money laundering schemes going on in Shangrila, but I saw no evidence that these were activities in which they actually

participated. (In contrast, Teacher Mei's son, who spent a great deal of time in the city but never drove taxis, actually ended up in a prison near Lijiang because of his involvement in the creation of fake IDs.) I want to be clear that I am not applying any particular sense of virtue or vice to these activities, beyond observing the basic violence involved in some of them. My point is that, as much as the Sanba drivers offer a useful comparison to other cases of marginalized groups that become involved in organized crime, they are also highly particular, and that particularity is powerfully conditioned by the Sanba social worlds to which they insistently attached themselves.

Indeed, a key outcome of their involvement with Aqie was concerted and highly motivated political action. In 2013, the Public Transportation Service was planning to add an additional 100 cars to its taxi pool, and the Sanba drivers were outraged: the population of Shangrila was not increasingly substantially, so to put these additional cabs on the road would inevitably mean less proft for all drivers. As a result, the Sanba drivers organized a strike, which involved parking hundreds of taxi and refusing to drive until the prefectural government agreed to raise the base rate for calculating cab fare. While the information I was able to gather on this strike was, by 2017, much less granular than what I gathered on later strikes, I was actually in Berdder during 2013 pursuing predissertation fieldwork: I remember talk over meals each day about the progress of the strike, and I remember the village-wide celebrations that took place when the government ultimately acceded to the drivers' demands.

In the same year, Aqie was murdered. The taxi drivers marked it as the time that all their lives had changed.

### 6.6.4 Agie's death

On one of my late-night taxi shifts with Alin, he took me to where it happened: a brightly lit, multi-floored building in the middle of a public square.



Figure 42. The night club in Shangrila where Aqie was murdered, and his friends injured.

Thanks to their phone tree, most of the drivers I knew had arrived at the public square a few moments after the incident had occurred, and they shared a common narrative of what had happened: Aqie had been going to a restaurant on the building's third floor with some friends when someone—a Tibetan, all the drivers said—had exploded from a nearby car, run up the steps behind him, and attacked him with a hatchet. He toppled over the railing and hit the ground, his chest cut wide open. The assassin hacked all other members of the party as well,

before jumping back into his car and disappearing. Aqie died there on the cement, and while his friends were injured badly, they survived.

The drivers were still extremely unsure of why this had happened, but most of them mentioned one of Aqie's construction projects: it was a major project involving the building of an expensive neighborhood, and there had been a dispute over a shipment of building materials. The other party was, they said, a Tibetan "leader" (Ch. laoda). They suspected it was a Tibetan group behind the violence, but no one was sure. While the drivers also reported that some Tibetan guy had eventually turned himself in for committing the murder, they didn't believe he had actually done it, merely that he was the person chosen by the group to take the blame. Again, throughout their stories was a consistent lack of faith in the police. They said the police had done nothing, not really.

I also remember the news of Aqie's death hitting Berdder. I had been there for another summer's bout of predissertation research, and we had been eating breakfast, again, when a neighbor brought the news. And again, there was a silence followed by storytelling: while my host parents, Ceerlli and Yinddertal, were more willing that Yindderjjyoq to acknowledge Aqie implication in crime, they insisted he had been so kind. They spoke with sadness of his bereaved wife and children in Geeddvq.

In contrast, during my urban fieldwork, I spoke to a researcher at Shangrila's Tibetan Studies Research Institute about Aqie. The researcher was herself Naxi but from a different area, Weixi. She had married a Tibetan man from Weixi, and subsequently lived with him for many years in Shangrila. She, too, recalled Aqie's death: on the day it happened, her little boy, about six years old at the time, came home from school that day and immediately whispered to her, "Mama, today that crime leader got killed!" (Ch. Mama, jintian na ge hei shehui laoda bei sha

le!). She asked what it meant to him, and he responded, with apparent glee: "Now those kids from Sanba won't dare misbehave!" (Ch. Xianzai Sanba de na xie xiao haizi dou bu gan tiao le!). She was surprised and discomfited by her son's response, but took it as a general pulse of Shangrila society at that time.

I find her son's response reflected from a different perspective in the drivers' own recollections, which focused on the respect and authority that they, as Sanba drivers, had possessed when Aqie's power was at its height, and which they lost with his death:

yiqian women
na ge laoda hai mei si de shihou
mei si de shihou
paoche ye bu hui you ren qifu ni
bu guan ni zuo shenme shengyi, dou bu
hui you ren lai qifu ni
xianzai bu shi le

before, we back when that leader [Aqie] hadn't died yet before he'd died taxi passengers wouldn't take advantage of you no matter what work you did, people wouldn't take advantage of you it's not like that now

Several days after Aqie's murder, his family members arrived in Shangrila to collect his corpse. As they departed back to Geeddvq to hold a funeral for him there, all the Sanba taxi drivers followed slowly after them, creating a funeral train so vast that it snarled the roads of Shangrila for hours.

Yet in my observation, Aqie's death did not, in fact, mark an end to the Sanba drivers' solidarity and political action. While the brotherhood had disintegrated immediately after Aqie's death, Yindderjjyoq and Alin were in the process of reviving it, creating different Wechat groups (to which, despite my earnest requests, they did not invite me), and installing two-way radios in many Sanba drivers' cars.

In addition, they had taken over the organization of another Sanba driver's strike in 2016, when the Transportation Service was preparing to add 100 more taxis. Lasting three days, from December 12 to December 16, the drivers recalled getting nearly 150 taxis off the road, enough

to shut much of the city's transportation down. While the strike, like Aqie's death, never made it into local news, the drivers themselves curated extensive collections of photos and videos that attested to the scope of their strike (see Figs. 48-50).

As they narrated for me, the strike had begun when they parked their cars in the same public square where Aqie had been killed, just in front of the office of the Transportation Service. While leaders of the Service had originally wanted to talk with them within the building, Yindderjjyoq and Alin had had an earlier experience of bargaining with the Service in which they allowed several driver representatives to meet with government leaders behind closed doors. The driver representatives had immediately caved, and Yindderjjyoq and Alin marked this as a lesson learned: they refused to meet with any government leaders privately, and insisted on holding the bargaining outside, among their own cars. Nevertheless, they reported being surrounded by the police at one point, and being taken into the police station for a brief period. While none of them said explicitly that this had been terrifying (this would have gone against their poetic tradition!), I think it clearly was.

Their specific demands followed the pattern set in 2013: If the Service insisted on increasing the number of cabs, then they needed to raise the price of cab fare, too. For trips that did not exceed three gongli, they wanted the price raised from seven to eight kuai, and for trips between three and four gongli, they wanted to raise the price to 10 kuai. They also wanted to raise the fare prices for nighttime rides, but I didn't get the specific numbers for this.





Figure 43. From the Sanba drivers' archive. The top two photos document the number of parked taxis during the strike, while the lower photo shows a group of striking Sanba drivers listening to one of their leaders.





Figure 44. From the Sanba drivers' archive. Above, more of the gathered drivers in conversation; below, more parked cars.

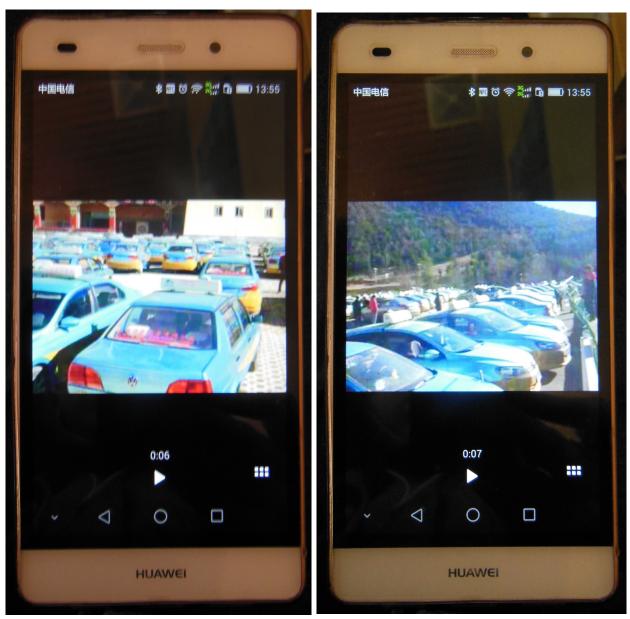


Figure 45. From the Sanba drivers' archive: Most of the photos they shared with me were via Wechat, and for whatever reason, I was not able to download these particular photos. Therefore, I just took pictures of them with a second camera separate from my phone. In hindsight, I think these photos, which document yet more parked cars, attest to something more than my own technological difficulties: they also offer a useful view of the digital materialities of circulation through which Sanba drivers are moving now. That is, much of their strike proceeded through cell phone and Wechat communication.

In any case, the drivers counted their strike as a success, for the most part. Bargaining culminated in a meeting between the drivers and some government leaders at athletic fields in another part of Shangrila. There the leaders agreed to raise prices for daytime rides, as the drivers had requested, but they did not agree to raise prices for nighttime taxi rides.

I remember asking one of the drivers—not a leader like Yindderjjyoq and Alin, but just a participant—if he had been scared during this time. While I understood that such a question went against all codes of honor and boasting within their brotherhood, I was trying to understand how they had imagined and dared this sort of organization and action. Especially in the context of ongoing struggle in Shangrila, the man's response, therefore, struck me: He said they knew they were not bad. They were good people who were acting legally, and they had each other's support.

While this response covers over the brotherhood-internal tensions to which Yindderjjyoq and Alin have alluded in other conversations, I mention it here because the pride this man seemed to feel for his brotherhood, and indeed the confidence it seemed to give him, reminded me powerfully of Nalmuggaq's discussion of the dongba school. By this I mean that the sentiment I have felt among those former dongba students may be linked to this larger sociality beyond the dongba school—which is closely tied to the ceremonial literacies the school was, in its way, trying to revive.

### 6.6.5 Conclusion

If the urban elite of early 20<sup>th</sup> century China were borne down by what they saw as a whole civilization's existential crisis, I note a similar feeling in Berdder today. In the case of Berdder people, though, the escalating event is precisely the birth of "modern" China, through

which they *became* ethnic minorities, consigned to the ideological fringes of the nation, even as the crucial objects and material practices that constituted former worlds were being chipped away. This is to say that ethnic consciousness, as it tends to be described, was forced upon them even as the modalities through which that might have been processed in local terms were being limited and sometimes literally burned.

It's worth noting that Aqie's organizational work seems to fulfill the basic demand of public formation, drawing together a diffuse group of people identified with Sanba, but clearly overspreading longstanding conventions of Naqhai and Nuosu differentiation. Here I recall one of Yindderjjyoq's elaborate stories about an escape from the police. In this particular story, the officer had actually let them go when he realized that they and he were all from Sanba.

Yindderjjyoq narrated this portion as follows:

na ge ren shi women de yi ge xiang ma

that guy [the officer] was from our
township
yi ge minzu, dui ma

one of us, you know

Crucially, his assertion, "one of us, you know," might also be translated as "we were the same people" or "we were the same ethnicity." That is, he uses the Chinese term, minzu 民族, used to describe nationality as well as China's internal "ethnic" groups<sup>211</sup>, but applies it to people, both Naqhai and Nuosu, from within Berdder. Put another way, he re-appropriates a Chinese concept of ethnic counterpublics to describe an emerging social formation of "Sanba people."

With this in mind, many of the driver statements recorded in the previous pages can be reread as an invocation of "stranger relations" (recalling Warner). For example, Nalmuggaq

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>211</sup> Chu, "Constructing Minzu"; Han Jinchun 韩锦春 and Li Yifu 李毅夫, "Hanwen 'minzu' yi ci de chuxian jiqi chuqi de shiyong qingkuang 汉文'民族'一词的出现及其初期使用情况 [The emergence and initial usage of the Chinese 'minzu' term]"; Harrell, "Introduction: Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them."

speaks of the dongba students coming to work in the city, but insists that "our hearts are still with the school." While his statement appears to stay within existing interpersonal relationships, it does nevertheless envision a constriction of physical space that connects the students across relatively vast distances back to Berdder. Nalmuggaq's statement, that is, seems to invoke a public in the older naga style. However, Yindderjjyoq's later description of Aqie's greatness extends that naga public beyond its own longstanding imaginary, when he insists that Aqie's contribution was to help people not because he knew them personally, but simply on the basis of their common origin from Sanba. All of this is to say that the social configuration I witness the Sanba drivers building was neither an innovation from whole cloth, nor was it a simple translation of naga publics into a new urban modality.

Onddo Duzhi, a thirtysomething man from Weishee, had been with Aqie on the night he was killed, and Duzhi himself sustained a hatchet injury that sliced him open from lower abdomen to neck. Many of the drivers I knew spoke of Duzhi as a new leader who was less directly involved with crime and more focused on using the connections—in his words, the "platform" (Ch. pingtai)—that his relationship with Aqie afforded to expand Shangrila's budding ethnic tourism industry into Sanba. When I eventually met with him at a Shangrila coffee shop, our conversation went immediately to our shared affection for Bbapardduaq. Thence he veered into an account of his hatchet injury, and in doing so, gestured to Sanba's emerging new sociality:

yiqian
wo zhu yiyuan de shihou
dang shi wo sheng bing de shihou
wo dou shuo le ma
wo dang shi
ruguo yi ban ren de hua
ta keneng haipa si, dui ma
ta keneng zhende hui si ma
zhe ge ren te xintai....
dan nei shihou wo juede:
wo bu hui si
jiu shi dao wo qu shi de shihou
wo juede wo bu hui si
weishenme? yinwei wo shuo
Bpapardduaq hui baoyou de

before
when I was in the hospital
at the time when I got hurt
I've told you
at that time
if it were a regular person
he'd probably be afraid of dying, right
he might actually die
this person's mentality....
but I felt then:
I am not going to die
even if it reaches the point that I am dying
I will feel, I am not going to die
why? because I say
Bbapardduaq will protect me

That is, Duzhi envisions a world in which he remains connected to Bbapardduaq while in the city. However, that connection seems inextricable from the "platform" that Aqie, and Aqie's brotherhood, have bequeathed him.

Finally, I emphasize that Duzhi's and these drivers' new ways of linking themselves to one another seem to flow largely below the threshold of awareness of the groups they were mobilizing to push back against. For example, when I spoke to Tony, the office worker at the Transportation Service, he acknowledged that the Service had not had any clue of the strike until the day it began. As for Aqie, Tony had heard of him, though not by name, only as a crime leader, and he did not appear to draw any particular connections among Aqie's activities, the taxi driver strikes, or Sanba people's various literacies. I still remember that Tony was extremely nice. He told me that, "ugly" (Ch. nanting) as it was to say, it was possible that he and I might have seen the world as narrowly as the drivers if we had been in their place. His advice for me was that, if I really wanted to understand Naxi (not Naqhai, not Nuosu, and certainly not Sanba) culture, I should go back to the village and seek out dongba practitioners.

Tony's statement exemplifies a crucial theme of the dissertation, that the location of what is Naxi, as far as ethnic metaculture is concerned, is in poor villages, where ethnic people are wearing their ethnic clothes, and preferably singing and dancing. Yet, as I have also tried to show, assumptions of this nature also mean less state oversight and regulation in the social spaces that do not fit ethnic metacultural criteria. It is in these spaces where I see people thinking critically about their own histories, continuing to build social worlds that hold naga, and pursuing political action in the city.

# Appendices

# Appendix A:

# **Compensation to Ethnographic Interlocutors**

Compensating ethnographic interlocutors is so hard. For, like, a million reasons. If you're a graduate student doing ethnographic research, it is unlikely that you are swimming in money, and even if you were lucky enough to get funding for your research, that funding is not necessarily going to leave you a lot of margin for generosity. I want to acknowledge the tricky financial straits of students first. But the emphasis of this appendix is on our interlocutors.

I should also be clear that my thoughts on ethnographic compensation are rooted in a specific ethnographic situation, involving a marginalized, relatively poor, ethnic minority group, and a white researcher from the US (myself). In short, my interlocutors and I occupied two poles of the proverbial privilege stick. Still, even for readers who may be engaged in very different ethnographic circumstances, I hope that what I say will might offer a useful perspective.

Here's the second reason that compensation is hard: the people who have done the most and sacrificed the most for you have also most likely gotten to know you and to consider you a friend. Compensating them materially is so important, and yet it can also appear as a rejection of the friendship. This is especially an issue when the people in question care a great deal about hospitality. And so indeed did He Yusong and his family. When I first came to visit them in Berdder, I stayed in their house for a couple days—his parents kept asking me to stay longer, and I felt they actually meant it—and I had every intention of offering them payment for the housing,

food, and assistance they had offered me during this time. But, when my last day in Berdder arrived, I awkwardly offered He Yusong a wad of bills, and he promptly threw it on the ground.

"Aren't we friends?" he asked me.

It was the closest thing to a fight I have ever had with him.

Besides refusing to take my money, he also told me that I was a student. I was poor, he said. He couldn't possibly accept money from me until I had a real job.

I remember feeling some combination of moved and horrible: I appreciated the value he put on our friendship, and hated to feel I had messed that up. I also recognized there was a politics of dignity at work: perhaps precisely because my American student identity did mark me as possessing wealth and privilege, he found it particularly difficult to accept my money.

But I also couldn't escape the feeling that He Yusong's and his family's hospitality, combined with their somewhat romantic visions of student poverty, were coming together in a way that left me only two choices: to smash my relationship with them, or to take significant advantage of them.

In the years that followed, I was able to talk with other China researchers about their methods of compensation, to hear Berdder residents discuss among themselves how compensation ought to go, and to watch Berdder residents compensating each other. All these things have helped me think; I will begin with advice from Liu Xian, a Chinese researcher who did her dissertation research in Berdder, and cared a great deal about getting things right with people (she also appears in Chapter Five).

After my first failed attempt to pay He Yusong, I had asked Liu Xian for help, and her basic message was not to shove wads of money at people. (In hindsight, this seems obvious, but the utter discombobulation of my first few visits to Berdder led me to a number of very bad

judgment calls.) Liu Xian's method was instead to make the payment as official and bureaucratic as possible. She would tell He Yusong that she was going to pay him a labor fee (Ch. laowu fei), and she would tell him exactly how she calculated it. At the time, she said she paid around 100 RMB per day, if he were just helping with research; but if she were also living at his home, then it needed to be a little more, up to 180 per day. At the end of her time in Berdder, she'd write it all out on a pad of paper, sign her name, and get He Yusong to sign his name, too. Only then would she give him money.

I boil down this advice as follows: Monetary compensation to interlocutors, especially the ones you care about, should be as depersonalized as possible. This depersonalization allows both of you to view the transaction as something separate from your relationship, neither charity nor coldness.

In the years that followed, I not only lived by this principle, but also pursued it further. Before each trip to Berdder, I'd get my department or whatever funding source I had at the time to write out a letter stipulating that a certain amount of my research funds needed to go to interlocutors based on a set of criteria and a calculation, generally along the lines of Liu Xian's arrangement. Sometimes the letters were bilingual documents including Chinese and English; sometimes they were only in English. The language didn't matter nearly as much as the bureaucratic materiality of the letter, which I could show He Yusong and use as a basis for our transactions. Once I started bringing these letters, he grumbled a bit, but he also began accepting my money. To me, it was such a relief, and I suspect it may have been for He Yusong, too.

On this topic, one further note: Yes, there is a certain sleight of hand involved in my letter technique. But I don't view it as dishonesty, exactly. If it hadn't occurred to my departments or other funders to require that I compensate my interlocutors in a clear and

consistent way, it should have. They were always very happy to put the text I provided into an official letter, and the letter then helped me, too, setting forth guidelines that I could follow over the course of the trip. And, of course, having the letter just made ethical compensation so much easier interpersonally.

What about amounts, though? During my initial visits to Berdder, I followed Liu Xian's formula pretty closely, but by 2016, when my extended dissertation fieldwork began, prices seemed to have risen. Researchers at a nearby Naxi culture institute recommended 200 RMB per day for researchers who were living for a few days with local families. They told me that, given the years-long length of my fieldwork, I could pay less per day, but should compensate my host family in other ways, too, primarily through gifts. I ended up paying 160 kuai per day, and also covered a few unexpected household expenses such as buying a generator when our village lost electricity for a few weeks.

As for gifts, the best time to give them seemed to be when returning from trips, so whenever I went on supply or research trips to the city, I tried to bring something back for my family. In this, I took cues from Berdder people who worked in the cities, and likewise always brought gifts for their family members when they returned home. Their preferred gifts took the form of food, often fruits or produce that were difficult to come by in Berdder. Dairy products were also popular: You could not go wrong with a gift of Tibetan cheese or Tibetan yoghurt, nor was it difficult to find these things at the various farmers' markets and roadside stands around Shangrila.

That said, in some situations, money can itself work as a gift. When my fieldwork ended, I had an idea of some of the family expenses that He Yusong as well as Teacher Mei were facing, and gave them all the cash I had left. It was a good bit of cash, though I can't recall the

amount. I remember putting it in red envelopes to mark it not as payment but as "gift," and I remember that the exchange with each of them felt so different from that first awkward breakdown with He Yusong. The paradoxical difference in this latter case was that we actually did know each other at that point. I think the preexisting relationship made it possible for a less mediated monetary exchange to strengthen our relationship rather than smashing it. Also, of course, red envelopes help.

So far, I have focused on my host family because they were the ones with whom I was most materially entangled, and through whom I worked out a general approach to material compensation. That said, there were many other people who helped me with my research, and I tried to compensate them as well, in a manner that was appropriate and respectful. So, for example, I paid Teacher Mei for his writing lessons, and included a stipulation about this in my quasi-deceptive funding letters. My host dad, Yinddertal, sometimes helped me arrange and conduct interviews, and yet another stipulation in my letters set forth the payment he would receive for his occasional stints as research assistant.

As for the people I interviewed, I tried to bring them a small gift, generally a block of green tea or some liquor, but also to recognize that the time they spent talking to me was time they could have devoted to work in the fields, or to some other economically productive task. For this reason, I also offered about 100 RMB at the end of each interview. Because interviewees generally knew me less well, they were generally more willing to accept payment. Also, it was my host dad who oversaw payments, and he had perfected the art of slipping a bill in a person's pocket and making them feel all right about it.

Finally, ethnographic compensation is hard because materially compensating people is never enough. It is necessary but insufficient: ultimately, there is just no way to make returns

when people are inviting you into their lives and helping you understand. At this level, I think you just have to be grateful. And I think you also ideally feel motivated by gratitude and affection (not by a desire to erase the interpersonal "debt") to do things for them in the same spirit.

But I am getting wistful and self-righteous, so I think it's time to end this.

# Appendix B:

#### **Names**

# **Topographical**

- **Berdder Bbapardduaq**, a sacred mountain marking the center of **Berdder**, the valley where I pursued the bulk of my fieldwork. People identify mostly as Naqhai or Rheekaq (current state ethnic designation: Naxi). On the far peripheries of the area are several Nuosu (state designation: Yi), Tibetan, and Han settlements.
- Weishee, Berdder's only predominantly Rheekaq villages, where I lived with He Yusong and his family.
- **Gguddv**, a predominantly Naqhai village, where Teacher Mei and many of his relatives lived.
- **Geeddvq Geecuqcuq**, a sacred mountain marking the center of **Geeddvq**, the valley North of Berdder. Here there is one settlement of Naqhai and Rheekaq villages, and another nearby settlement of Nuosu villages.
- The Black Mountain, known in Naqhai as "Ndhrv Naq Rra Rra Ndhrv," the tallest, blackest mountain in the world, where dead souls go. Located North of Berdder, towards Tibet.
- Sanba, a "Naxi township" (Ch. Naxi zu xiang 纳西族乡), which consists primarily of Berdder and Geeddvq. Located within Diqing, a Tibetan autonomous prefecture (Ch. Zang zu zizhi zhou 藏族自治州).
- Shangrila, formerly Zhongdian, a city north of Geeddvq and Berdder.
- **Lijiang**, a city south of Berdder, once the political center of the Naxi kingdom, now an international tourist hub. Located in a Naxi autonomous county (Ch. Naxi zu zizhi xian 纳西族自治县).

# My host family in Weishee

- **He Yusong**, the young Berdder ritualist who invited me to do my fieldwork from his house in Weishee village. In his early thirties at the time of my fieldwork.
- Ceerlli, He Yusong's mom, in her mid-sixties at the time of my fieldwork.
- Yinddertal, He Yusong's dad, in his mid-sixties at the time of my fieldwork.
- Wujji, He Yusong's wife, in her early thirties at the time of my fieldwork.
- Yumi, He Yusong's older sister, who tried to protect He Yusong from bullies and taught me my entire vocabulary of Naqhai swear words.
- **Big Uncle**, He Yusong's elder paternal uncle. Because he was intellectually disabled as a child, he never married, but remained at his natal home with his younger brother, Yinddertal.

# Teacher Mei and his family

- **Teacher Mei**, a Berdder ritualist living in Gguddv village. In his mid-sixties at the time of my fieldwork.
- **Grandfather Ddolggu**, Teacher Mei's father, a famous Berdder ritualist and singer in his eighties, who died during my fieldwork in 2018.
- Uncle Yulheeq, Teacher Mei's paternal uncle (his father's younger brother), a famous Berdder ritualist and singer in his eighties. He occupied the fertility shrine located at Berdder's midsection, and recited money out of tourists for many years. His widespread nickname, (maternal) Uncle Yulheeq, alludes to his reputation as a cad and/or dirty old man. He was always extremely kind to me. He died in 2021.

### Other Berdder and Sanba folk

- Auntie, Ceerlli's best friend, married to a guy the family referred to as (paternal) Uncle.
   They had lived through their own epic romance, familial tragedy, and extensive naga drama.
- **Eemi**, the widowed mother-in-law of one of He Yusong's sisters; had a longstanding romantic relationship with Uncle Yulheeq.

- Wise-Ass, Gujjyoq's younger brother and Ceerlli's husband. Also a ticket collector at the government office at the foot of Bbapardduaq. His nickname indicates his reputation.
- Yindderjjyoq, He Yusong's best friend, who studied to be a ritualist with him for many years. Now a cab driver and the co-leader of an unofficial cab driver's union in Shangrila.
- **Nalmuggaq**, He Yusong's close friend, who also studied to be a ritualist, and joined Yindderjiyoq in the city to work as a cab driver.
- **Alin**, Yindderjjyoq's friend, from a Nuosu village in Geeddvq. Worked as a cab driver in Shangrila, and co-led the union with Yindderjjyoq.
- **He Jinnuo**, He Yusong's ritualist teacher. He had served as a ritualist's assistant prior to 1949 and became involved in Naxi cultural revival during the 1990s.
- **Zeesheeq Keelzoq**, a Berdder cadre; also the principal of Weishee's dongba school.
- **Grandfather Ddolgee**, the seventy-something Geeddvq ritualist who He Yusong visited from time to time.
- Aqie, the crime lord and/or leader from Sanba who first brought together Sanba taxi drivers in Shangrila.

## **Cultural researchers**

- **Teacher Shu**, a Naxi researcher of Naxi culture, from Lijiang. Affiliated with a local research institute, in his early seventies.
- **Ge Agan**, a Naxi researcher of Naxi culture, from a village near Lijiang. I rely on his research and his short stories (based on his research) throughout the dissertation.
- Liu Xian, a Beijing-based Han researcher of Naxi culture. Affiliated with a Beijing publishing house, in her thirties. Pursued frequent fieldwork in Berdder, and spent many hours with me in Beijing cafes.
- **Zhang Xiaohong**, a Xiamen-based Han researcher of Naxi culture. Affiliated with Xiamen University, in her thirties. Pursued frequent fieldwork in Berdder, and while I never met her, she haunted my time in Berdder.
- Li Rongjian, a Kunming-based Han/Naxi researcher of Naxi culture. The first researcher to work with He Yusong and his family, in the early 1990s.

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