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The Modern Status and Future of Dongba Religion

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THE MODERN STATUS AND FUTURE OF DONGBA RELIGION

Chris DeLacy

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ABSTRACT

I have amassed data related to the changes undergone by the Dongba religion and its effects on local Naxi culture in the Eya, Baidi, Tacheng/Weixi County, and Lijiang communities. Each district was unique in that their religious practices and participation by the community was radically different as a result of outside influence (or lack thereof) as evidenced by how the religion is passed on through the generations and how the religion is publicly represented through art. As Naxi culture and the Dongba religion have already undergone an incredible amount of changes (especially the declining number of the Dongba religion's religious experts), new facilities and modes of education have sprung up to help Dongba religion continue into the modern era.

INTRODUCTION

It's easy to get lost walking through Lijiang's Old Town. Perhaps it's due to the mesmerizingly bright colors of souvenir trinkets, an endless stream of tourists crowding every alley and street, the complete absence of landmarks, or the repetitive pattern of yak meat shop followed by African drum outlet followed by scarf shop. The effect is profound. It's similar to that awed stupor Disneyland goers amble around in, without the anticipation of theme park rides, or even general excitement. But unlike Disneyland, the magic is nowhere to be found in these rambling alleyways. The prolific amount of the same shops in such a large area takes away from the historical significance of Old Town Lijiang, as the home of China's Naxi people and their cultural and political center. In fact, the tourism and commodification of the Naxi people's culture has evoked a

profoundly devastating effect on many characteristics of their lifestyle and maintaining their identity as a unique nationality.

The success of Old Town Lijiang's ability to charm tourists comes from the Naxi people's culture and their desirable indigenous merchandise. Except for the African drums. Much of the food, clothing, and handicrafts sold are culturally Naxi,

“As the main regional trade center during centuries, the Naxi developed around Lijiang a flourishing industry of handicrafts and wares, being the most famous their manufactures of leather which included all the elements needed by the tea and horse caravans, as well as copper ware. Bronze locks, containers, and decorative products were some of the most appreciated Naxi products, usually traded as far as south Yunnan and even Calcutta in India. More surprising was for modern researchers their paper-making techniques, still alive in some of their traditional communities, developed and preserved by the Dongba priests who need paper to write or paint their books, their sacred paintings, divination cards and other religious paraphernalia¹.”

A sort of exotic tourism sprung from the idea that this unique culture and these special goods can only be found here in Lijiang. At least, that's how it all started.

The first stone thrown came from a student of Dongba² (not to be confused with a Lao Dongba, the ritual experts and leaders of the religion itself), the Naxi people's religion. The origins of the transformation from Old Town Lijiang as a residential community to a conglomeration of souvenir boutiques for tourist consumption can actually be traced back from the Dongba script as it was first used in Lijiang shops on traditional Naxi wood carvings and extensive works of calligraphy done entirely in the Dongba script. This student was educated at the Dongba Culture School which opened inside of the Lijiang County Museum in 1995. The school's intent was to reeducate Naxis in their indigenous culture through literacy in the Dongba script, and once literate

¹ Ceinos 2012: 147

² In *Indigenous tourism: the commodification and management of culture*, the man credited with opening the first Naxi wood carving shop in Old Town Lijiang is referred to only as “Proprietor A”

many students turned to tourism to make money. The school almost began to cause more damage to Dongba culture than preserve it:

“Although the aim of this course is the protection and succession of cultural heritage, the existence of the course was actually encouraging the commercialization and misuse of cultural heritage, and thus could not be acknowledged as an educational activity of the museum³.”

The Dongba script is very special because it is the only written manifestation of the Naxi language, and traditionally the script itself was only used by Lao Dongbas for religious purposes, rendering the script unintelligible to a majority of the Naxi population. It is a pictographic language, similar to Chinese characters only because each word is represented by a picture, but extremely unique in its variability in meaning and appearance:

“Such a system is more like a restricted code than a true written language and, indeed, its function was simply to act as a mnemonic device to jog the Dongba’s memory as he chanted by heart, as most of the Dongba know by memory the text of the ceremonies, learned during their long apprenticeship years.⁴”

Due in part to the artistic aesthetic of the Dongba script itself (the written language is beautiful and interesting and can be visually enjoyed without the ability to pronounce or even interpret the meaning), the first Dongba wood carving and calligraphy stores were extremely successful. And the Dongba souvenir floodgates opened. If one bears only a margin of observation the Dongba script can be seen littered across every store, street, and bathroom sign in Old Town Lijiang today. Being such a complicated written language, improper translations far exceed the number of correct ones, resulting in the script’s presence in Old Town assuming more of a role of gimmick for tourists than

³ Ryan and Aicken 2005: 195

⁴ Pan 1998: 275

useful translations for locals. Needless to say, the community of Naxis who still practice the Dongba religion are displeased with how their religion and culture are being displayed.

The origin of these shops selling Dongba paraphernalia had good intentions. The Naxi people's Dongba religion has been in decline for decades. In rural Yunnan and Sichuan very few Naxi are raised in an environment that devoutly practice the Dongba religion anymore, leading to a widespread phenomenon of illiteracy and little understanding of their history and culture through lack of education. The purpose of selling traditional Naxi merchandise was to propagate Naxi culture both outwards for a profit and inwards to reestablish elements of a culture that had begun to wane.

The Dongba religion and Naxi culture are very closely related, and some communities of Naxis have a difficult time distinguishing the two. This is not to say that Naxis have no other traditions or customs outside of their religion, but Dongba religion is something that Naxis are very proud of and they consider the religious philosophies and traditions to be interwoven with their cultural identity. This paper will examine the state of Dongba religion as a whole and how it has changed and will continue to change by looking at how integrated Dongba religion is to four different Naxi communities, how the religion is outwardly portrayed, how available religious education is, and how flexible the religious community's attitude is towards foreign influence.

It is also important to note that Naxis do not exclusively exist within the confines of Lijiang. There are numerous valleys in between Lijiang and Zhongdian where thousands of Naxis live in rural farming communities and villages. Rural Naxi communities are integral to include in a conversation about the state of Dongba religion,

because there is so much regional variation amongst the practices and participation of the community involved in every Naxi community. In some of these places, namely rather isolated communities, Naxi people have lived outside of the gaze of modernity and development that cities like Lijiang have gone through in recent years, and have experienced very little change from outside influences.

DONGBA CULTURE IN ISOLATION

Just across the Yunnan border in western Sichuan, Dongba culture is alive and well in a small Naxi community called Eya. This community is unique in its geographical and social isolation; the population is entirely Naxi and has received seldom contact with the outside world until very recently. And it is because of its isolation that makes Eya a particularly special place to see how important indigenous religious practices are to a Naxi community that has been ignored by the outside world.

Eya is a remarkably easy place to find a Lao Dongba. As the leaders of the Dongba religion and the principle vessels of Naxi history, proper Dongba ritual activity, and knowledge of Dongba traditions in general they are very important community figures, kind of like celebrities. The most knowledgeable Lao Dongbas are even well known amongst the far flung greater Naxi community; most Lao Dongbas in Eya had heard of or met others from outlying communities like Baidi and Lijiang. Even the inhabitants of local non-Naxi communities like Luoji hold great respect for the Lao Dongbas of Eya.

Lao Dongbas hold a very important role in Naxi society, and Naxis will traditionally seek the aid of one:

“when there is an epidemic among the cattle, or ceremony to drive out the demons that cause epidemics must be performed. Other ceremonies are performed if anyone is killed in a fight, if a woman married two or three years has not given birth to children, when a false pregnancy occurs, when a male child is not able to speak although he is already several years old, when somebody becomes suddenly unconscious, etc⁵;

Yet more commonplace reasons for locals to consult a Lao Dongba are at birth and to help name their child, for marriage ceremonies, before building a house or road, when sick, and after death to aid the spirit’s transition to the afterlife. Traditions and “festivals performed in Eya, among the more isolated Naxi communities, reflect the importance of the Naxi to preserve archaic cultural characteristics disappeared elsewhere⁶,” and every member of the community likewise continues to seek the aid of a Lao Dongba under the aforementioned circumstances. For instance, every native of Eya was named by a Lao Dongba and as far as anyone’s memory could stretch every plot of land that had either been converted to arable farmland or a house was properly prepared and ritualistically serviced by a Lao Dongba beforehand. Dongba religion is largely concerned with the relationship between man and nature, considering the two to be brothers, and the house building ceremony is especially important in Eya because it entails the conversion of natural land and materials into a permanent use of space for humans. The usual circumstances state that “if a villager wants to build a house and needs logs, first he must apply to [a committee of Lao Dongbas], who would then approve the amount of wood that can be cut⁷” so as to not overuse natural materials and create disharmony between natural spirits and man. Eya is also unique for continuing its use of Lao Dongbas ratifying marriages, a tradition that has disappeared from many

⁵ Ceinos 2012: 121

⁶ Guo 1998

⁷ Yang 2004: 4

other Naxi communities. Several young Naxi couples from Lijiang have actually traveled to Eya for a traditional Dongba wedding in recent years⁸.

Although like most Naxi, only the Lao Dongbas were literate in the Dongba script, the regular townsfolk I spoke with were well versed in Dongba stories of creation and the history and philosophies of Dongba religion. Some Naxis in Eya found it strange that I thought of Naxi culture and the Dongba religion as separate entities. The most remarkable attribute of Eya was how knowledgeable every member of the community was about the practices and history of the Dongba religion. Eya has been remarked as a place where “ritual performance and belief are not distinguished. It means that the separation of belief from performance is inappropriate, because the participants act in the belief that their actions will have bureaucratic efficacy⁹.”

Even the religiously influenced art (and the intentions of the artists responsible) that was publicly displayed in town showed how deeply imbedded the Dongba religion was in Eya. There were no boutiques, no signs transliterated into the Dongba script anywhere to be seen, but on the door and outward facing wall of a local store, the outside walls of a guesthouse (a guesthouse called ‘The Dongba guesthouse’ I might add), and along the railing of Eya’s only bridge there were Dongba pictographs and Dongba art visible for all to see. The shop owner’s son felt that the storefront’s blank sun stained wood looked ugly, and painted a giant winged conch shell over the door for no other reason than the aesthetic of art. The artist said he always liked this symbol from when he was studying Dongba as a child. The guesthouse owner’s brother was actually a Lao Dongba, and the same one responsible for the Dongba pictographs painted on the

⁸ Interview with Mu Gua, Eya Lao Dongba

⁹ Feuchtwang 2001: 7, 10, 11

guesthouse and the bridge. The script lining the guesthouse was a creation story on one side, depicting the moment that man and nature were birthed from the same mother, and a story detailing the first Lao Dongba, Dongba Shiluo, entering a cave and reaching enlightenment on the other side. The bridge contained six animals on each side, twelve in total representing Dongba culture's assumption of the Chinese zodiac animals which complete after cycles of twelve months and twelve years.

So what separates Eya's display of Dongba pictographs and art from that seen in Lijiang's Old Town? Although the extrinsic factors of visual aesthetic are similar, the reasons behind painting them are vastly different. All Lao Dongbas in Eya agreed that propagating Dongba culture through publicly viewable art held positive potential for educating others about and spreading Dongba religion (most also agreed that Lijiang's use of Dongba script on signs was a good idea in theory), but more importantly they felt that the art and script displayed should hold deep meaning as educational substance. Notice how the script used on the bridge didn't simply read "bridge" when transliterated. Even the shopkeeper's son, who didn't claim a total grasp of the written Dongba script, painted a conch shell sounding in all directions as a Dongba symbol representing how the lessons of Dongba religion are broadcast into all facets of life. Another main difference is that in Eya the messages of Dongba art are received and understood.

For such a small population, the number of Lao Dongbas in Eya is extraordinarily high, and each had about three students who were currently studying under them as apprentices. The stories of creation, reasons for Dongba rituals and knowledge, which are usually exclusive only to the Lao Dongbas and their disciples, appear to be

understood by (or at least familiar to) all. And these traditional stories and myths are integral to understand the Naxi world :

“For everything in this world the Naxi have an origin story at hand; for natural phenomena, for fabricated objects of both ritual and everyday use, for technological achievements, for social institutions and for religious activities. These stories tell us why things are as they are, and they attest to their right of existence¹⁰.”

Every member of the community seemed to have had exposure to the inner workings of Dongba culture through hearing traditional Naxi stories as children or through regular contact with a Lao Dongba or an apprentice as a family member or friend. Every regular Eya local I spoke with recognized the meaning of the conch shell and the animals painted on the bridge, and understood their indigenous Naxi story of creation and that of Dongba Shiluo. Most everyone also agreed that those surfaces look better now than as blank walls before too.

Despite the appearance (and unfortunate reality) of being an extremely impoverished farming community, the total engagement of Dongba religion in the lives of Eya locals reveals a rich and healthy culture. And their current state of religious involvement has not experienced a recent surge in participation, the practices of Dongba religion and the involvement of the community have a long history in Eya that have persisted to this day, which is a rather unique phenomenon to see in modern China.

The 1960s and 70s brought China into an era called the Cultural Revolution, which was characterized by a very aggressive agenda to unify China by abandoning vestiges of traditional cultures and religions so China could begin a new era on a cultural blank slate. During this time the Red Guards, the young propagators of the Cultural

¹⁰ Oppitz 1998: 7

Revolution's agenda, scoured the countryside destroying temples, burning holy books, and forbidding the practices of various religions. The Cultural Revolution had especially devastating effects in most Naxi villages, as many Lao Dongbas were forbidden to practice and were forced to burn their holy books, ritual clothing, and anything else associated with Dongba culture. But the Red Guards never made it to Eya.

During a time when Dongba religious practices came to a sudden halt in other parts of China, the Cultural Revolution marked just another decade of continued tradition as usual in Eya. The historic relics of Eya's previous Lao Dongbas were also kept safe and remain in the community to this day. Some Lao Dongba's holy religious books that could be dated back over a hundred years ago survived. Apprenticeships continued and Lao Dongbas never stopped practicing because the religion was able to continue unimpeded.

Because the Cultural Revolution had no discernible effect upon Dongba culture and the community had always continued to follow traditions, the Lao Dongbas in Eya could see no reason how Dongba culture could ever change. Each claimed that the fundamentals of Dongba religion had always been rigidly followed from generation to generation, and that no changes to the religion itself had been observed during their lifetimes. That being said, the Lao Dongbas believed that the core ideals and philosophies of the Dongba religion were static and unchanging, regardless of where and when the Dongba religion was practiced. But that's not to say that Eya and its community haven't experienced any changes. Until recently, the only means of physically accessing Eya required a few days walking either over Mt Wawa from Luoji in Yunnan or along a rocky river valley from a distant road in Muli County in Sichuan.

Today there's a road, and it's accessible enough by vehicles to bring weekly shipments of water and food to stock the local store, and brings a steady enough flow of tourists (both academic and for leisure) for someone to convert their home into a guesthouse. This is the same road responsible for bringing a young couple from Lijiang in to seek a legitimate Lao Dongba for their wedding.

From the perspective of Eya locals, the construction of the road has brought more outside influence to their valley than any other single factor in their history. Their Naxi traditional clothing was the first to go. The road brought cars into a community that had never seen such large motor vehicles before, and those cars brought mass produced clothing that was affordable. They haven't abandoned their beautiful handmade traditional outfits, but now they are reserved only for festivals and special occasions. By bringing their Naxi clothing out of everyday use, it made them seem more special too. Those same cars also brought electricity for the first time to Eya. And although not every household had one, there were rumored to be a few televisions that had been brought in as well.

An Eya Lao Dongba, Mu Gua, told me that "a new friend is a new road," and it didn't appear that there was any fear towards the foreign influence that the road would bring. And for the sake of preserving Eya's especially healthy Dongba culture, I hope the outside world doesn't pose a threat. Because the biggest changes that a culture undergoes aren't usually due to extrinsic factors alone, usually something within the culture itself must be evoked to change.

EMBRACING TOURISM WHILE RESISTING CHANGE IN THE BIRTHPLACE OF DONGBA

Less than 150 kilometers southwest of Eya lies an area called Baidi, a sacred site of Dongba religion. Baidi is special for being considered a place “where [Dongba] traditions are better preserved¹¹,” containing both the historic point of origin of the first Lao Dongba reaching enlightenment, and a beautiful natural geographic feature called Baishuitai. The latter is composed of hundreds of cascading clear watered terraces that are formed from natural calcium deposits within its mountain’s spring, and has long been considered a sacred site by local Naxis. There is a particular feature of Baishuitai that resembles a pregnant woman, and is believed to be the physical manifestation of their goddess of fertility and reproduction. For years “new couples, unmarried girls and women who have no sons [come to Baishuitai to] pray for descendants”¹² and there is also an annual pilgrimage to Baishuitai during early February for a festival honoring the most important gods of the natural world. The significance of Baishuitai has remained unchanged for years, but 40 years ago a paved road appeared that connected another route from Lijiang to Zhongdian straight through Baidi, soon accompanied by a daily bus route that introduced a new wave of single serving tourists that began to affect the daily lives of Baidi locals. The newly introduced tourist component has even begun to change the appearance of their local Dongba culture and create a divide within the practicing Dongba community.

An average of over 300 tourists come to Baidi to see Baishuitai everyday, and many locals have gladly made career changes to accommodate an influx of tourism

¹¹ Pinson 2006: 150

¹² Goodman 1997: 83

driven income. Restaurants, guesthouses, and locally owned convenience stores line the road the entire comfortable walking distance on either side of the entrance to Baishuitai and (with the exception of the convenience stores) are exclusively used by tourists passing through. And these new local businesses have really impacted Baidi's local economy in a positive way, resulting in the ability to buy quality materials to build new houses, pave roads even into smaller outlying villages, afford appliances to keep food fresh; increase the standard of living in general. The money generated from tourism reaches everyone in the community because the restaurant and guesthouse owners spend their money in the local farming community to buy food and materials, but keep in mind that in any economy, no matter how small, there's bound to be competition. A somewhat ironic example comes from a local medicine distributor changing its name to something more campy to attract tourists (圣地东巴大药房), translated as Dongba Holyland Pharmacy. The irony is that Naxis traditionally "take no medicines of any kind, but rely solely on their sorcerers to exorcise demons of disease¹³." Some local entrepreneurs are more than willing to exhibit their native Dongba culture to attract more customers, sometimes even contradicting traditional beliefs and uses of their religion.

Another business owner named Sa Ji actually discontinued his diligent studies of the Dongba religion to convert his home into a restaurant. Although his restaurant bears no formal title, it's the closest building to the entrance of Baishuitai and has a large red sign that broadcasts the distinctive Naxi flavor of his restaurant in both Chinese (纳西风味) and the Dongba script. Sa Ji admitted that the purpose of his sign's use of

¹³ Rock 1946: 250

transliterated Dongba script is more to display the unique culture of Naxi people to outsiders than it is to be a functional translation for those who can actually understand it. Inside of his restaurant he has painted the twelve zodiac animals with the influence of the Dongba pictographs, his interpretation of what a few gods of the Dongba religion look like, and has transliterated a two Chinese idioms into Dongba pictographs. When asked why he chose to paint the former in his restaurant, Sa Ji replied, “most Han Chinese tourists appear to be very interested in Dongba culture when they arrive in Baidi, and they all get excited when they see that their culture (particularly the zodiac animals and especially their indigenous Chinese idioms) can be translated into the Dongba script.” Sa Ji is a Naxi man who is proud of his culture and really enjoys sharing it with his customers. Some Baidi locals broadcast Dongba culture even louder.

An interaction with a Lao Dongba is practically included in the ticket price upon entering Baishuitai. There are three of them that climb Baishuitai every day, and one of them is nearly impossible to avoid, his appearance alone certainly evokes curiosity. He Ji Qie wears maybe a dozen clumsily assembled Dongba necklaces and a large leather shawl draped over his shoulders. “You are not a real Lao Dongba if you don’t wear Dongba jewelry or clothing,” he casually mentioned. He resides every day near the lower portion of Baishuitai where he has set up a small shrine honoring Dongba Shiluo, the first Lao Dongba, very close to the sacred natural manifestation of the Dongba goddess of fertility. This sharp tongued Lao Dongba is adamant about educating every passerby about the importance of the ground they’re standing on whether or not they’re eager to listen. Our interview was constantly interrupted by his insistence to

greet and inform everyone who walked by, and pester them for 2 元 for the incense he would offer them. He Ji Qie claimed to come to this sacred location every day for his own religious purposes, claiming that even if no tourists came he would still promptly return, but his actual behavior with the tourists seemed to speak otherwise. The other Lao Dongbas are more discreetly located at the top of Baishuitai and are more honest about their presence and knowledge of their religion.

At the age of 60, He Yongxi humbly calls himself a Nianqing (young) Dongba instead of a great Lao Dongba, knowing full well that his level of religious education doesn't suffice to call himself as such. He Yongxi is knowledgeable about Dongba myths and the history of Baidi, and is literate in the Dongba script but doesn't boast a full grasp of the written language. He comes to this particular place everyday to practice writing (albeit rather simple) and to educate curious tourists if they feel compelled to ask questions or want something translated. He Yongxi terminated his formal apprenticeship under a Lao Dongba when he was a young man, but decided to continue to learn about, practice writing, and study the religion on his own. Naxis like Sa Ji and He Yongxi still consider Dongba religion to be very important to them and have incorporated elements of it into their lives, and it is precisely this manipulation of the religion that the highly respected Lao Dongbas of Baidi fear most.

Because the origins of the Dongba religion sprung from Baidi, the devoutly religious community called the Naheng (and considered the official leaders of pure Dongba religion) is morally against changes to the practice and appearance of Dongba culture for the sake of continuing their unimpeded religious tradition. There is even a mentality that exists amongst members of the Naheng that states that "all great Lao

Dongbas are considered fully initiated after they have studied with the Dongba Masters in the sacred side of Baidi¹⁴,” and anyone who independently studies is therefore not recognized as a true Lao Dongba. He Xuoren, a well known Naheng Lao Dongba from Baidi, shares this ideology, and went even further to say that “the Dongba practices outside of Baidi are simpler and inferior to those of our practices.” He voiced strong disapproval of how Dongba culture was being represented on Baishuitai and suggested that behavior like that is what lead to the unrecognizable appearance of Dongba culture in Lijiang’s Old Town. He Xuoren firmly believes that learning about Dongba religion from any source besides a well educated Lao Dongba is dangerous because a full understanding of the culture is integral to continuing the legacy of their religion. That being said, he acknowledged that while certain surface level aspects of Dongba culture have undoubtedly changed (including the continuing trend of depopulation amongst the Naheng community), the religion itself would remain static and will always continue. He Xuoren currently has three students and is confident they will all go on to be Lao Dongbas who will carry on Baidi’s rigid religious traditions.

The only Naheng Lao Dongba I spoke with who held a vastly different opinion was He Zhiben. This man is very well known in every Naxi community and is credited with having the greatest wealth of knowledge of any living Lao Dongba. And he’s the only man who forecasts a pessimistic future for the Dongba religion.

Although his beliefs about wanting Dongba culture to progress are aligned with that of He Xuoren’s, he doesn’t think it’s realistic to assume that their religion can continue in the modern era in the same way that it always has. For example, the religious community showed an amazing amount of resistance to the Cultural Revolution,

¹⁴ Mathieu 2003: 116

but the effects were devastating for the rest of Baidi. For the sake of teaching the Dongba religion, learning how to read and write their complicated script is undoubtedly important, but the most integral part of each Lao Dongba's education is the dissemination of myths and knowledge through oral history. The Naheng community's experience during the Cultural Revolution in Baidi was not unique, but what is astounding is how quickly their religion was able to recover after it was safe to do so. During that time, every garment of ritual clothing and religious text (no matter how old or important) was gathered and destroyed, every Lao Dongba was likewise forbidden to practice. On the surface, Dongba culture ceased to exist for an entire decade, but among a few of the Naheng it continued to be practiced in secret. It was such a dangerous operation that even those willing to take the risk of practicing dared not continue writing because if any evidence was found of their religious studies the penalty was removal from Baidi and probably jail. Luckily, passing information verbally left no trace. The religious community in Baidi today feels that if it survived the Cultural Revolution, no greater obstacle could possibly exist to change their ways, but He Zhiben reasons that perhaps enough damage was already caused.

When I met He Zhiben, he was sitting at home carefully painting a calendar. I saw this as an immediate talking point, because a Lao Dongba in Eya had drafted something very similar in my notebook, but upon seeing the other version he grew dispirited. The version in my notebook was drawn upside down, there were certain components that were missing or out of place, some pictographs were drawn too poorly; it was clear that it was an inferior calendar. The Lao Dongba from Eya is supposed to be considered a peer of He Zhiben's, but this fellow educated religious expert had

incorrectly scribed this symbol into my notebook. He felt it was a reflection of the current state of his religion. “My greatest fear is that in 100 years there will be no more Lao Dongbas,” he later told me during our interview, “eventually all of these books and Dongba culture will live only in a French museum.” He believes that the suspension of religious activities during the Cultural Revolution greatly impacted the standard of education every Lao Dongba received at the time, including himself¹⁵. He claims that his father and grandfather knew much more about his culture than he does, and the amount that his sons and grandsons have learned is even less. He feels even his contemporary peers’ knowledge is not at an acceptable level, and although we never addressed how he felt about the level of involvement of Dongba culture in the lives of ordinary Baidi locals, I doubt he would approve.

With the exception of Baidi’s Lao Dongbas or the few men who studied Dongba religion at some point in their youth, no one could tell me anything about Dongba culture. But everyone agreed that it was very important. Almost the entire community participates in the annual festival that takes place atop Baishuitai and most funerals are ordained by a local Lao Dongba (He Zhiben claimed to facilitate the majority of them now), but many traditions have already died off. Few marriages or births are likewise consecrated by a Lao Dongba, and no one I spoke to was named by one; everyone was born with a Chinese name. The community appeared to be very proud of their Naxi heritage and unique Dongba culture, but not enough to undertake a local education in their history or traditions. The reality is that the Naheng community is growing smaller with the passing of each generation.

¹⁵ Guo Shuhan, from 2010 interview with He Zhiben

The fear that the Dongba religion may not exist one day really resonated with He Zhiben because it's an actual danger. In fact, Dongba culture is already dying in a very serious way in other Naxi communities.

THE POSSIBILITY OF EXTINCTION

Not far from Baidi is a community that's actually called Dongba¹⁶ where there is only one Lao Dongba left. His name is Mei Hong, he's 44 years old and decided to continue studying the Dongba religion because he knew if he didn't there would be no more Lao Dongbas left in his village. His father actually forced him into an apprenticeship under the late Xi Anu (a modern great Lao Dongba comparable to He Zhiben) as a young man, but it was Mei Hong's intrinsic desire to keep his culture alive that forced him to continue his studies. Mei Hong is a rather optimistic man however, and believes that all it takes is one Lao Dongba to continue this religious tradition. He has three students who are currently on their ways to becoming Lao Dongbas, and says he is young enough to educate more interested students for years to come.

That being said, Mei Hong is well aware of the dire state of Dongba culture in Dongba. "There were more than 20 Lao Dongbas here when I was a kid," he factually stated, "then slowly they all died, and none of their students cared enough to continue their studies on their own or go to Baidi."

¹⁶ The town is Dongba (东坝) which means 'East Dam' and the religion is Dongba (东巴) which is a Chinese transliteration of the Naxi pronunciation

Mei Hong attributes the rapid decline of interest in the Naxi religion to several factors, the largest being the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution. Unlike in Baidi, the fear of punishment was too great in Dongba to continue studying the religion, even in secret. Mei Hong attributes this largely towards the fame that Xi Anu as a great Lao Dongba had achieved during the era; even he didn't dare continue to teach during the Cultural Revolution. This period of religious suppression was especially difficult to recover from because Naxi people (and their culture and religion) do not dominate the demographics of Dongba.

Their community is mostly Tibetan, while the Naxis share a minority status amongst other ethnic groups like the Yi, Han, and Lisu; Dongba religion has never historically held a prominent position because there has always been so much ethnic and cultural diversity. With the addition of a new middle school that was built ten years ago, more Han families have moved in from outlying villages since, which only further adds to the Naxis status as a minority. Although not every local of Baidi practices Dongba religion, the entire community was supportive of those who endeavored to restart religious practices after the Cultural Revolution was over. No such support existed in Dongba. Mei Hong is still very important amongst his community and claims that he is still a rather popular Lao Dongba in town, and is the fulcrum of local Dongba religious practices. Locals continue to seek him out for help with funerals, birth and naming ceremonies and has sanctioned every Naxi wedding in Dongba in the past ten years. Although Mei Hong claims that the total absence of Lao Dongbas in his community would have devastating effects on local Naxis, many young men have other priorities that continue to make it difficult for the community of Lao Dongbas to grow.

The opportunity to leave home and earn money has recently realigned continuing Dongba culture as a secondary priority. The average salary made by anyone who works in a city is higher, and the work itself is far less strenuous on the body than physical laboring in a farming community. It can be an appealing career choice when compared with the alternative of staying home and farming (and there's no tourism industry in Dongba for restaurants or guesthouses) for the rest of one's life. Becoming a Lao Dongba is not a high salary position either. It would appear that the responsibility of keeping their religion alive has fallen onto the shoulders of one Naxi man in Dongba, but what about the communities that have already succumbed to cultural extinction?

Tacheng, 50 kilometers west of Baidi, was labeled in 1998 as a "township with well preserved Naxi culture,¹⁷" and once boasted distinctly unique elements of Dongba culture that are not found in other Naxi communities¹⁸. I discovered that these descriptions are well out of date. To start, the city of Tacheng itself is mainly composed of Tibetans and the Naxis all live in outlying farming communities beyond the limits of town. Not only are there no Lao Dongbas in town, there are no Naxis. One Naxi village to the west of Tacheng called Xugong used to have two Lao Dongbas, but the most recent one passed away less than five years ago. To the east of Tacheng in Jiamu I was lucky enough to run into its village's late Lao Dongba's son, whose only remaining possessions of his father include a necklace for ritual uses and his father's handmade candlestick holders. No books, no clothing, no religious art. He said it had all been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution and the culture never recovered. His father never took another apprentice and Jiamu may never raise another Lao Dongba as a result.

¹⁷ Yu 2009: 165

¹⁸ Tacheng was described as still having shamanic *llubhus*, a role which has been absorbed by the Lao Dongbas elsewhere. Ceinos 2012: 93

When asking around these villages for a Lao Dongba, some expressed a deep feeling of loss, one shop keeper in Xugong mentioned that, “without a Lao Dongba we now have no culture.” I was told that no other villages in the area had Lao Dongbas anymore, most locals were under the impression that Dongba culture in Lijiang was still alive and well.

In close by Weixi, the Dongba religion once thrived as well, as their exotic traditions are described historically by Ceinos:

“Among the Naxi people living in Weixi County, the men must get the sacred water on New Year’s Day; which they hope will bless fortune to the different activities of the family during the coming year. The following days they visit friends and relatives, celebrate running competitions on the mountains, bull fighting and archery contests (a vestige of the times when hunting was on of their main economic activities), before they start their productive activities again on the eleventh day¹⁹.”

The sad reality is that all of these traditions appear to have been discontinued many years ago with the displacement of the local Naxi community. None of the Weixi locals I spoke with had any memory of Naxis partaking in these events, and in fact, the Lisu people were the only ethnic group I could locate, even the outlying farming communities were of little help to locate Naxis. One Lisu farmer on the outskirts of town could vaguely remember Weixi having a Lao Dongba in the past, and was unsure if a little community called Yezhi still had one.

Yezhi had a similar demographic layout to that of Tacheng, the town proper mainly consisted of Tibetans (who are likewise the ethnic majority of the entire region) with Naxi villages inconveniently scattered up the valley, over hills, and across the Mekong River. Most villages once had at least one Lao Dongba, but had since passed away without a trace of Dongba culture left. The only community in the entire region that still had a living Lao Dongba was called Eshe, and he is 92 years old and in failing

¹⁹ Ceinos 2012: 147

health. His name is Shao Daling, and he is more of a living reminder that the Dongba religion used to live in this village than an active member of the religious community. He has no books of his own, but was able to read from the books I had pictures of from Baidi. After the Cultural Revolution he too refused to teach new students or produce new religious literature. The locals who lead me to Shao Daling also expressed feelings of loss for their dying culture, especially bearing witness to the final years of their community's last Lao Dongba.

The previously mentioned communities have historically experienced golden eras of healthy Dongba culture, and due to contributing factors of religious suspension induced by the Cultural Revolution and a lack of support from the greater community as true ethnic minorities, the Naxi people's religion and culture are slowly dying out. Perhaps the only hope for a wide scale cultural resurgence will come from a less orthodox means of education.

REESTABLISHING DONGBA CULTURE THROUGH NONTRADITIONAL EDUCATION

In 1981, Naxi scholar Ma Borou opened up the Dongba Research Institute in Lijiang, and although controversial in its methods for obtaining and recording data, the institute's purpose was to gather Dongba books and translate them as permanent records to save the dying religion. At the time of its opening, the founders understood that:

“people categorized as Naxi rarely constructed their identity with knowledge of or reference to the dongba religion, which many of the town-based Naxi have never experienced and which is only a vague memory among the older lowland rural residents²⁰,”

²⁰ Chao 1996: 215

and sought to reestablish Dongba culture in their community in Lijiang. The research institute has been criticized for selective preservation, namely only collecting religious materials that can be studied academically like the Dongba script and religious books, but the institute's philosophy believes that from within "the Dongba scriptures there is information about the old Naxi society and the way it evolved and also about astronomy, meteorology, calendar, technology, zoology, botany, metallurgy, husbandry, and the original philosophy, history, folklore and religion of the Naxi²¹," enabling the Dongba scripts to guide the institute to understand a holistic scope of Naxi culture.

Five years after its founding, four Lao Dongbas from the surrounding communities of Lijiang and Baidi were hired at the Dongba Research Institute to help translate the manuscripts and make permanent records of their oral history. Another purpose was to use both the Lao Dongbas employed by the research institute and the information that had been accumulated to actually train the new generation of Lao Dongbas²². Contrary to what Mei Hong (the only Lao Dongba in Dongba) believes, the Dongba Research Institute believes that an extraordinary amount of information can be lost if solely administered through oral tradition (and the institute sees itself as overcoming this obstacle by keeping records of books and permanent records of oral history). The institute is also a public facility whose records are viewable to the general public. Aside from academic criticism and the total lack of endorsement from the Naheng Lao Dongbas, the local Naxi community supports the research institute for

²¹ He Zhiwu 1987: 33

²² Interview with He Zhiben, Lao Dongba from Baidi

providing Naxis more access to their own culture²³, and it isn't the only facility to establish a nontraditional academic route to preserving Dongba culture either.

In contrast to the rigidly traditional Naheng in Baidi, there is a Dongba school organized by the Rerke branch of the community for educating anyone interested in learning about Naxi culture. The school is humble in appearance, consisting only of two small classrooms that can comfortably fit a teacher and an average of ten students. At its founding 15 years ago, a Rerke Lao Dongba was the primary teacher, but he unfortunately passed away in 2008. Since then, the student with the highest aptitude, He Lifu, took over as Dongba instructor. In the same way that the Naheng define the educational practices at the Dongba Research Institute as “dangerous,” they also strongly oppose the objectives of the Rerke school being instructed by an amateur. However, the objectives of this school were never meant to be aligned with those of the Naheng, the Rerke school sought for “literacy in the Dongba script and a general education of the Dongba religion and Naxi history²⁴.” For homework a few years ago, the students were told to translate every Chinese government notice and sign in the village into the Dongba script for extra practice and to show that the Dongba script can be useful outside of strictly religious means. This school is also special for allowing women to participate in class because the role of Lao Dongba has always been reserved for Naxi men, and literacy too has always been a strictly male endeavor. The Rerke school allowed literacy for the first time to members of the Naxi community outside those training to become Lao Dongbas, which is rather revolutionary, and the same idea has now propagated on a larger scale into a Naxi community near Lijiang.

²³ Interview with He Shiwu, local Naxi elementary school teacher

²⁴ Interview with He Lifu

There is a very special elementary school less than 20 minutes outside of Lijiang in a place called Baisha. A local teacher named He Shiwu joined the staff 10 years ago and was the driving force behind including a class about Naxi culture into the school's weekly curriculum. This class is like an elective class to the rest of state mandated educational classes like math, Chinese, history, etc., and every student grades one through five attends it twice a week. The Naxi culture class includes Naxi history, learning how to read and write the Dongba script, how to perform ritual dances, and the songs that accompany them for several different ceremonies. He Shiwu claims that "teaching Naxi language and Dongba traditions early is the most effective method for preserving Naxi culture." By educating Naxi children with the Naxi language (many of whom speak only Chinese at home), literacy in the Dongba script becomes much easier, and the ability to understand the Dongba religion becomes easier as well because "most of the works of the Naxi literature can be found in the Dongba manuscripts, the encyclopedia of traditional Naxi culture²⁵." This idea has recently caught on in other schools throughout Lijiang. He Shiwu mentioned Hua Shanzhen, Lashihai, Huangcun, and said at least two more elementary schools in the area have also begun teaching Naxi language and the Dongba script in school; the widespread use of the script will help transcend solely religious means for a more practical purpose.

The intent of the school's education is to give the regular Naxi people literacy is noteworthy; it's the first time in history such a high percentage of Naxis have been educated in the Dongba script and culture. Because an education in their religion is integral to understanding their written language, the impact of a new generation of literate Naxis may be able to save the Dongba religion from extinction.

²⁵ Goodman 1997: 125-6

CONCLUSION

Under traditional circumstances, the Dongba religion requires an amazing amount of belief. The Lao Dongbas were once the only members of the Naxi community who were endowed with literacy and a full knowledge of their religious practices and are the only ones with a total understanding of Naxi history and culture. But all of that is changing as the number of Lao Dongbas continues to dwindle (along with their comparative wealth of knowledge) and the number of educated common Naxis increases. It's also possible that many Naxi communities could soon resemble areas like Tacheng and Weixi, and in order for the Dongba religion to continue in villages without Lao Dongbas, more members of those communities will need to be educated in their religion and culture. But can Dongba religion even exist without Lao Dongbas?

It can if whole Naxi communities receive an education in and begin to understand their own religion. Without Lao Dongbas certain elements of Naxi culture would undoubtedly change, but the culture has already been changing with the loss of information that comes with the passing of every generation. The possibilities of entirely literate Naxi communities are endless for creating new works of poetry, art, and myths inspired by the Dongba religion. The amount of literature produced by Lao Dongbas has been decreasing ever since the Cultural Revolution, and the opportunities for regular Naxis to add to their people's body of written works become more attainable with widespread literacy.

It's clear that Dongba culture is undergoing rapid changes. According to Ceinos:

“Many of the beliefs and traditions that the Naxi preserved until some decades ago, are disappearing quickly; others are suffering deep changes, and it is impossible to venture if they will have in the future the same importance to Naxi lives and values, as the economic development and the outside influences are eroding the same roots of their culture and religion²⁶.”

Despite the efforts of the Dongba Research Institute to amass translations and records of Dongba religious texts, the teaching because “while the Naxi scholars have some understanding of Dongba pictographic script, non of them has mastered the language or is capable of translating the texts without the aid of the Lao Dongbas²⁷.” In a sense, it may no longer be plausible to preserve authentic Naxi culture and religion. Although Ma Borou, the founder of the Dongba Research Institute, wishes to educate a new generation of Lao Dongbas, “many younger villagers think Ma odd for seeking to valorize the practices of the Lao Dongba; Dongbas are perceived as of another time, and the promotion of the Lao Dongba is associated with moving backwards rather than toward modernization and the future²⁸.” Naxi communities will soon need to embrace a radical change to save their culture and religion.

Every Naxi community highlighted in this paper appears to be in a different state ranging from a culture relatively unchanged from outside influence to a culture singing its swan song. Which is rather ironic, considering most Lao Dongbas believe their religion and culture to be static entities unable to change. The data, however, reveals that Naxi culture has already undergone severe changes, most of which the Naxi people had no control over. By educating Naxi children in elementary schools about their own religion, they would have agency of the change being administered upon their culture for the first time. The ideals propagated by the elementary school in Baisha could have

²⁶ Ceinos 2012: 245

²⁷ Chao 1996: 217

²⁸ Chao 1996: 215

wonderful effects on greater Naxi culture if successful. In Jiamu, a local had expressed that without Lao Dongbas Naxis have no culture of their own, but not if all Naxis were endowed with the power of literacy and cultural knowledge.

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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

One month is barely enough time to study the tip the iceberg that is the Dongba religion. The wealth of information that lies below the surface level includes regional

variation of the interpreted meaning of Dongba pictographs and subtleties in differences between ceremonial rituals by Lao Dongbas, all of which I never touched on because my time was too short.

Other Naxi communities including Baoshan and Mingying could be studied in the future, as I also did not have enough time to reach those locations. I would be really interested to see how the cultural practices in Eya change with the introduction of its road to Muli County and the outside influences it will bring to the community.