Routledge Studies in Chinese Comparative Literature and Culture

TRANSLATION/RE-CREATION

SOUTHWEST CHINESE NAXI MANUSCRIPTS IN THE WEST

Duncan Poupard

Translation/re-Creation

This book is a study of European-language translations of Naxi ritual manuscripts, the ritual literature of a small ethnic group living in southwest China's Yunnan Province.

The author discusses the translations into European languages (in English, French and German) from the late nineteenth century to the second half of the twentieth century, revealing a history of fragmentary yet interconnected translation efforts in the West. By exploring this network, he shows how translation can be understood as a metonymic "recreation" of textual worlds. As Naxi manuscripts are semi-oral texts representing an oral-formulaic tradition, their translation involves a metonymic relay of partial incorporations from manuscript/image to reading/spoken language. Therefore, the book engages in a series of textual excavations to uncover the previously occluded contemporaneous readings that would have led to the translations we can consult today, particularly in an attempt to understand how the Naxi literature came to be part of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*.

Scholars in the field of ethnic minority literature in China and translation studies will find this book beneficial, and it will make new contributions to comparative literature between the East and West.

Duncan Poupard teaches in the Department of Translation at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. His work focuses on the translation of Chinese ethnic minority literature, specifically of the Naxi minority. He has worked with museums and libraries around the world on the cataloguing of Naxi manuscripts.

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Translation/re-Creation

Southwest Chinese Naxi Manuscripts in the West

Duncan Poupard

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Note on writing and transcription

Several systems of transcribing Naxi language exist. In this book, I use the system known as "Naxi pinyin" to romanise Naxi words. Naxi pinyin is a romanisation system developed in 1956 by a Naxi language investigation team set up by the Chinese Academy of Science's Institute of Linguists and led by Naxi scholar He Jiren. The team came up with a draft plan for Naxi writing that year, which included 23 Latin letters and six special characters: three from the International Phonetic Alphabet, two Cyrillic letters, and one newly invented character. When promoting the usage of this new script, He Jiren discovered that the six special characters caused a host of problems: they were visually mismatched, difficult to learn, and hard to transcribe. Moreover, printing this script would require large investment in purchasing new printing plates. Because of these difficulties, a revised plan was drafted in 1958, making use of 26 Latin letters with no additional special characters, and with the pronunciation and usage as close to Hanyu pinyin (standard Mandarin Chinese romanisation) as possible. Naxi pinyin was further revised in the 1980s and is seeing increased exposure in both Chinese and international scholarship. I however romanise "dongba" and "Naxi" in Hanyu pinyin (not Naxi pinyin) as these have now become convention.

The desire to avoid arcane diacritics and characters is in stark contrast to Joseph Rock's romanisation system for Naxi, which uses them (umlauts, carons, macrons, etc.) in abundance. In Naxi pinyin, the sound complex "tsʰoˬ zeɬ ɭɯɬ ɤɯɬ" (the name of a legendary Naxi culture hero in International Phonetic Alphabet) is written "Coqsseileel'ee". Rock's transcription system uses the spelling "[1]Ts'o-[2]zä-[3]llü-[2]ghügh", with falling, mid and high tones represented by superscript numbers. In Naxi pinyin, the tones of Naxi language are represented by final consonants, with the final "q" indicating the falling tone, and the final "l" indicating the high-level tone. The mid-rising tone is marked by a final "f". Mid-level tones do not have a tone marker. This system avoids the superscript numerals used by Rock.

As far as possible I write out Naxi graphs in dongba script alongside Naxi pinyin. As neither the Naxi dongba or geba script (as of writing) have Unicode encoding, all Naxi graphs (outside of photos and scans of manuscripts) in this book have been written using a Naxi script input method editor.

All Chinese characters (outside of direct quotations) are presented in simplified Chinese.

Introduction: the Naxi scriptworld

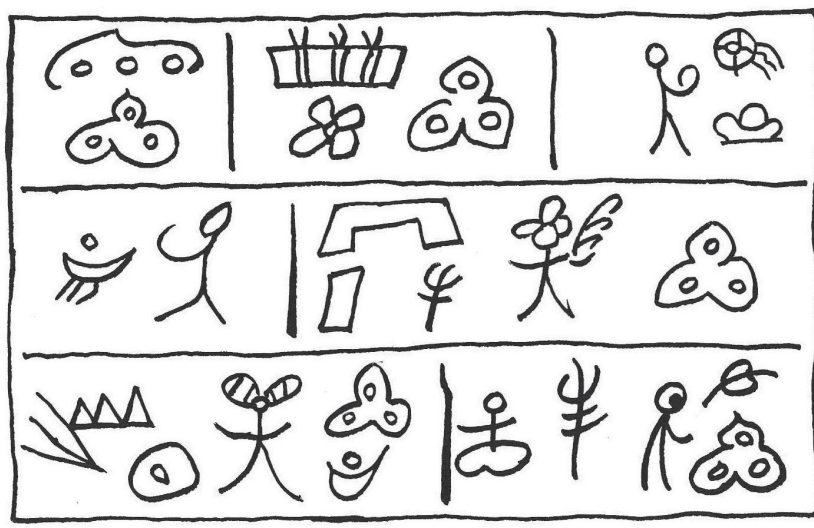

Figure 0.1 An extract from a book of Naxi dongba religious literature, based on writing in Yang (1994, 20). Calligraphy by Guo Dengyue.

There is an undeniable air of mystery surrounding manuscripts written in unfamiliar, ancient scripts. Look at the writing in Figure 0.1. Can you see any pictures in the writing? What do you think it might mean? Here is a description of an attempted reading of this writing:

> Reading the page closely, he saw that the words contained the heavens and the earth, up and down, left and right, the sun, the moon, the stars, the three peoples: Tibetan, Bai and Naxi, as well as images of the sky, cliffs and roadways. You could say it was a microcosm of the universe itself, but it was all a bit vague and abstract; nothing pointed to the meaning behind the augury. Ggeq-bbei-taq wasn't able to uncover its secrets, so he just

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> admired his master's handwriting, slowly getting lost in those sweeping, fluttering brush strokes…
>
> (Yang 1994, 20, my translation)

In this extract from a piece of modern fiction from the northwest region of China's ethnically diverse Yunnan province, a native religious practitioner (Ggeq-bbei-taq, a Naxi name) puzzles over the very same section of text, written in the Naxi dongba script;[1] a logographic writing that is often called "pictographic" for its apparent closeness to its roots as picture-writing. A logograph can be simplistically defined as a written graph that represents an individual word, as opposed to the letters of the Roman alphabet, which correspond not to words, but phonemes. But what *are* the words? Just looking at the page, we can see stick figures, celestial bodies, and plants, alongside other abstract geometric shapes. Words come to mind naturally: the stars, the sky, the grass on the earth. This is Naxi writing, from the Chinese foothills of the Himalayas.[2] This particular section of writing is in fact an oft-recurring episode from the beginning of many Naxi ritual manuscripts and could be said to be a microcosm of the Naxi cosmography. It tells of the basic workings of the universe, with the earth and the stars, the sun and moon in motion, and the geography of the peoples of the earth – represented by the Tibetans in the north, the Bai to the south, and the Naxi in the centre.[3] This beginning is not an origin story, although it appears before many origin myths. It is, in its own way, a mini genesis, a way of "setting the scene" for the ritual to come. Anthropologist Anthony Jackson says, "This is a standard opening of many different texts about the heavens being full of stars and the grass growing over the earth. It is a way of telling that the day will be an auspicious one: the Naxi believe that no action will be successful unless it is performed on a lucky day" (Jackson 1979, 212).

The short extract recounted above, from a story by late Naxi author Yang Zhengwen (who was himself of a dongba lineage) and written in Chinese, serves as an analogue for how this special kind of writing, traditionally used only by a select few ritual practitioners in the worship of nature spirits, is perceived in both East and West: as something mysterious to be deciphered, not to be *read* per se, but to be admired more as cryptic art than contemplated as literature. This pictographic delusion (or "ideogrammic myth" – that the writing speaks for itself as a form of visual communication) is not exclusive to the Western world: it is a common approach to the conception of non-logocentric writing (writing that is something other than just a substitute for speech), a way of finding divine meaning in the written word of the "other".[4]

The fact is, however, that *here*, on this particular page, these are conventional graphs with phonetic readings, the same as Chinese writing. In the prose story we are furnished with a direct translation, but importantly this translation is *not* taken to be the true meaning behind the writing – the extract is instead said to be a clue to revealing the lost sacred books of "Elmiq", a great sage who was said to be the creator of the dongba writing system.

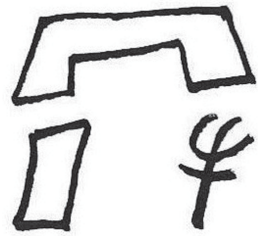

Figure 0.2 "White" cliffs. Calligraphy by Guo Dengyue.

Take the three graphs in Figure 0.2, which stand in metonymic shorthand for the intonation unit of seven morphemes, "*ggeq gge lasaq dol kee perq*" meaning, roughly, "above, by the white mountain of Lhasa". This is referring to the home of the Tibetan people, but the protagonist of the story reads the phrase like a pictographic map, ignoring the words not written (such as "Lhasa"), and focusing on the visual arrangement: a cave entrance by a cliff face and a tree. The cave entrance is the top graph, *ggeq*, meaning up or above (to the north). The cliff is *dol*, visually a plank of wood, and does in fact mean slope or hill, and the tree here is actually a corrupted form of the Naxi graph *perq*, "white". Yang's protagonist, however, tries to look beyond the words:

> The meaning was not hard to decipher. The top graph is like the shape of a cave, with a sheer wall to the bottom left, and a large tree to the bottom right. Master Ggeq-bbei-taq was quick to come to the answer: the place was somewhere only he knew about, the entrance to Nine Python Cave.
> (1994, 28)

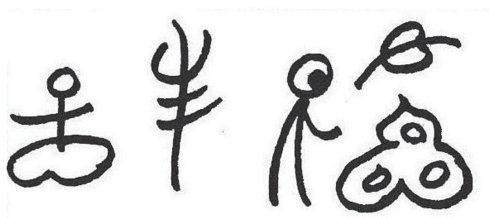

Figure 0.3 "The Naxi in the middle". Calligraphy by Guo Dengyue.

The section of text in Figure 0.3 is traditionally read "*zzee jjeq liul ggv we, naq xi hal zeeq ee*" (the Naxi who live in the middle are proficient at casting horoscopes for the day). Within the story, we again get a purely visual interpretation of the first four graphs in the image:

> The first is like a person sitting solemnly, the second like a small tree or branch, the third is a person standing side on, as if looking at something,

> and the fourth is the cave opening, shaped like three jars of tea! Those three jars of tea again! If he knew where to find them, he would definitely find the books.
>
> (Yang 1994, 28)

This is a classic (and purposeful) over-interpretation of the "pictographic" graphs. The second figure merely represents the Naxi people, not a specific person looking at a cave, and the cave itself is the camellia plant, here used as a phonetic for the Naxi *ee*, a verb here meaning "to be good at". In the story (it is of course fiction, not philology, and therefore must have some entertainment value), this pictographic understanding of the writing as a cryptic kind of map does eventually lead to the discovery of the ancient texts: it literally unlocks the "golden secrets" not decipherable to the ordinary person. Ironically, the cosmic scene depicted in the writing becomes extremely local in this visual interpretation.

Erik Mueggler, writing about the famous Naxiologist Joseph Rock's method of translating the Naxi texts, links the earth's geography to the textual practices of writing and reading:

> Still later, as he began to collect and translate dongba texts, he discovered dimensions of the earth's textuality which he had only glimpsed so far. It turned out that the earth was littered with texts. Until now, the earth's sociality had been an insubstantial thing for him, brought newly into being with his feet, eyes, pen, and camera. But as he collected books, read them, copied them, translated them, absorbed them into his own texts, he found that everywhere he went the earth was already an archive. He had read the earth by walking; now he read other layers in books – dongba, Chinese, and Tibetan, writing as he went. Throughout, he paid careful attention to those places where the earth opened into text and text into the earth, places marked on the earth by written inscriptions, marked in texts by place names.
>
> (2011, 288–289)

The process of reading a geographic map into the written text takes the above quote about the earth being a metaphorical archive of texts into a more literal dimension: revealing how, through the translational practice of reading, the earth opens into the text and vice versa, places are marked not by their names but by their location in relation to the pictographic signposts. Reading a Naxi book in this way is like reading and deciphering the contours of the earth. It is in itself a kind of translation; the earth is translated into the written word, and with the written word we can uncover the secrets of the earth (in which secluded cave can we find religious scriptures of great power?). The text has re-created the world, and when we read the text, we again engage in a re-creation of that world. Interpretations such as this open up some of the most important, and yet very basic, questions that can be asked about writing: "What is a written word? How can it be read, and, further, interfaced with other languages in translation?"

What this episode does show is the difficulty in understanding that this kind of enigmatic writing engenders: the story depicts a disciple of the native dongba "religion" of Yunnan province, trying, and failing, to understand the meaning behind a text. How do we read this script? He takes the written words as pictures and tries to piece them together in the form of a logic puzzle. Is the meaning locked away in the sounds, or in the graphs themselves? Are these pictures of ideas, words, or just pictures? Here our Naxi author is clearly ascribing to a particular kind of ideographic bias, one that is perhaps best espoused in Ezra Pound's "ideogrammic method" (that a pictorial form of writing can represent ideas directly).

Since the outside world's first exposure to this writing, explorers and scholars have been fascinated with, but also struggled to decipher, these enigmatic graphs. This is not unlike the Western world's attempts at deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics. Athanasius Kircher believed that "Egyptian priests had used hieroglyphic inscriptions to encode profound wisdom, and that hieroglyphs functioned as ideal symbols which had an essential, nonconventional relationship to their referents" (Stolzenberg 2013, 198); that the writing represented pure symbols of an ultimate reality. Kircher believed that hieroglyphs were a "non-discursive" language that communicated meaning without recourse to a fixed grammar or syntax (ibid., 199); an understanding that can be traced back through the centuries to Plotinus, who wrote of the Egyptian wise men that they used hieroglyphs as non-discursive images that reflected knowledge directly (see Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.8.6, 1–9). In this way, the hieroglyphs were not believed to be phonetic; to read them was to engage in a language of symbols, but no syntax. How then, to read these symbols? Kircher answered this crucial question by suggesting that the only way to read symbolic writing was to present an *ideal reading*. This meant that he *gave* symbols meaning, by writing around them, creating entire prose passages for single graphs. The logocentric reading was, to the early interpreters, a necessary imposition – to give these symbols a grammar and a syntax, hence Kircher's translations into wordy Latin prose. Kircher's method involved finding the right words for the right pictures: "After presenting arguments intended to show that the hieroglyphs were symbolic and not alphabetic, he compared them to *imprese*, whose meaning resided in the conjunction of image and text" (Stolzenberg 2013, 210). This led to a "combinatory method" of matching hieroglyphs with texts collected from various linguistic traditions. But such an understanding has its pitfalls because a language of symbols alone cannot be as accurate as a language based on concrete words.

From hieroglyphs we can move to Chinese characters. The connection between the two is clear: "We do not have to stretch our imagination too far to connect Egyptian hieroglyphics with sinograms. The enthusiasm for one can easily be spilled over into the other" (Yol Jung 2015, 225). This being the case, the stretch of the imagination required to go from hieroglyphics to dongba graphs is an even shorter distance, as the dongba graphs are a less abstract form of writing than Chinese characters (the Naxi graph for person,  *xi*, is

a stick figure, with head, arms and legs, the modern Chinese equivalent, *ren*, is merely abstracted to two legs: 人).

The idea that hieroglyphs were symbols encoding sacred mysteries of nature remained the dominant theory at least until the early eighteenth century,[5] even if most scholars doubted that Kircher had found their key. This was a theory that persisted up until the end of the nineteenth century, transposed from hieroglyphs to dongba writing as scholars searched for the pure language of the gods (in some ways, a quest that has never really reached its end). Within scholastic circles, the decoding of the hieroglyphs put paid to the theories of them as ancient symbols of nature itself; but this has nevertheless persisted with the dongba script. The flurry of activity in the late nineteenth century that saw the beginnings of a history of translations out of Naxi has somewhat abated (at least in the West), but the translations have not dispelled the ideographic myth. Did Joseph Rock (1884–1962), the man who translated volume after volume of Naxi ritual literature not do for Naxi dongba writing what Jean-François Champollion did for hieroglyphics? I would argue no; because, in the Naxi context, the ideographic understanding is not a myth: these are words *and* symbols *and* pictures rolled into one, their function dependent upon the context of their use. The irony is that the dongba manuscripts often lack a clear written syntax; some graphs are used purely symbolically (i.e. not read), and the texts themselves only truly take effect when combined with ritual performance. Where the flawed readings of the hieroglyphs were made possible by the lack of a living tradition, flawed readings of dongba graphs were made possible in part by enigmatic ritualists purposefully obfuscating the tradition. William Warburton believed that a fundamental misconception of Egyptian hieroglyphs was the belief that they had been invented to obscure wisdom from the masses. This may have been the very reason for the terse, incomplete nature of the Naxi manuscripts; a priest's claim to expertise was his ability to recite the magical text. If anyone could pick up a Naxi ritual text and read it, then why hire a ritual specialist in the first place?

In the lands of the Naxi, in the villages surrounding the great snow mountains of southwest China, we *do* have a living tradition, but one that was, and still is, hard to access. To translate the Naxi texts without a Naxi ritualist present (to provide the much-needed syntax, usually from memory), to make these manuscripts useful in the library and museum context, Western translators would have to first make their own Rosetta Stone-like parallel texts: annotated translations. Rock opens the introduction to his Naxi studies masterpiece, his *Na-khi English Encyclopaedic Dictionary*, with an allusion to the Rosetta Stone:

> The discovery of the Rosetta Stone lead [sic] to the deciphering of the Egyptian hieroglyphics which covered the walls of tombs, temples and obelisks. There was no one living, prior to that discovery, who could explain the mystery that they concealed. The sounds of the language remained

> mute. Quite different is or, perhaps better said, was the case of the mysterious pictographic symbols which covered the thick, coarse, oblong pages of the Na-khi manuscripts written by long-dead priests of a tribe restricted to a remote and circumscribed area in southwestern China.
>
> (Rock 1965, XIX)

The oral testimonies of the surviving dongba were the living "Rosetta stones" which led to the deciphering of the Naxi manuscripts. If "translation is a *persona* through whom tradition speaks" (Vieira, 1999, 107), then the dongba ritualist is someone uniquely able to channel this persona.

The Naxi and their writing

The Naxi are, by Chinese standards, a small ethnic group, with a population of around 330,000, most of whom live in and around the Lijiang basin in the Himalayan foothills of northwest Yunnan province. The Naxi language (in fact an umbrella term for a range of language varieties related to Naxi as it is spoken in Lijiang) is usually classified within the Tibeto-Burman language family, but it is writing among the Naxi that is of particular note.

Besides writing *putonghua* 普通话 with Chinese characters, they have two scripts for recording their own language, one phonetic and the other primarily logographic (touted by the Chinese authorities, somewhat misleadingly, as "the world's last living pictographs"). The Naxi name for this script is *ser jel lv jel*  , literally "wood record, stone record",[6] which scholars suggest points to the earliest materials used for recording the characters: writing is defined as marks made on wood and stone. It is now known as *dongbawen* 东巴文, literally "dongba script". The Naxi religion and its ritual specialists are both known as *dobbaq*, Chinese "dongba", which is either derived from the Tibetan *stonpa*, meaning "teacher" (according to Rock 1963, 87), or the Tibetan *bonpo*, the Bon priests from whom the dongba ritualists likely inherited many ritual manuscript traditions.[7] The dongba religion shares elements of the Tibetan Bon tradition, but also draws from Tibetan Buddhism and Taoism. The dongba have no temples, and they pass their knowledge down, father to son (although there are now dongba training schools in Lijiang). A dongba must be proficient at performing major rites such as funerals and the appeasing of nature spirits, and carrying out divinations. The dongba are true "cultural mediators". This term was introduced in 1981 by Ronald Taft, referring to a "person who facilitates communication, understanding, and action between persons or groups who differ with respect to language and culture" (Taft 1981, 53). The dongba speak the language of the spirits, and in the modern world, often speak the language of the Han Chinese as well, mediating not just between the spirit world and Naxi society, but between Naxi and Han Chinese cultural worlds. The performance of a ritual requires the recitation of the Naxi ritual texts. The majority of the extant Naxi ritual texts are written in the dongba script, a script that has stuck very close to its ideographic roots – direct

representation of the thing itself. The dongba script is comprised of several thousand graphs (the most common of which number around 1,500), which can be combined in numerous ways to create noun and verb phrases.

The Naxi do have another traditional script, a syllabary known as *ggebbaq*, which can be written in dongba like this:  , read in Chinese *geba* 哥巴 (and, as with "dongba", it is this Sinicised name that has become standard), and which He Zhiwu (1976) claims means "disciple". An example of the same five syllable noun phrase in dongba and geba would be *zzi jjieq la ler ddiuq*, "the inhabited world", literally "people, run, all, earth" or "the earth atop which the people roam". These five syllables can be written in dongba as a single compound graph (a combination of three graphic elements, a jackal, the earth, and grass),  , and in geba with five syllabic graphs,  (here the fourth graph is read *dder* and not *ler*, although the formulaic meaning remains the same; see He 2002, 215). There are fewer manuscripts written solely in geba, but geba characters also frequently appear alongside the dongba script as phonetics (with the limitation that it does not transcribe lexical tone). Geba never became as widespread as the logographic script, and the translations discussed in this book will focus on those written in the dongba script. Scholars have dated the dongba script to at least the thirteenth century (Mathieu and Ho 2011), though such efforts are complicated by the lack of dates on the ancient manuscripts. Chinese Naxiologist He Zhiwu (1985) has suggested the 7th–10th centuries as a period which likely saw the development of a written tradition. It is generally understood that the scripts are not ancient, and do not point directly to the origins of writing, but the history of writing is in any case not a competition to see who "got there first", and the dongba script in particular represents an ingenious way of recording the religious practices of a group of people, and what's more, stands as the last true logographic writing system in use today. In terms of diversity among the world's writing systems, it is of paramount importance.

What we do know is that the majority of the old ritual texts preserved in archives around the world are from the Qing dynasty and Republican-era China. These books form the basis for the literary culture and religious beliefs of the Naxi people: the dongba scriptures make up the "literature" of the Naxi. It is not a popular, secular literature, but instead an esoteric form of writing used mainly in the copying of religious ceremonies that are performed by the dongba ritualists themselves, to propitiate a vast pantheon of spirits. These ceremonies involve the construction of a ritual altar and the chanting of Naxi books. Lay Naxi are not, generally, literate in the dongba script. Some older dongba are *only* literate in the dongba script, and thus represent the fast-fading "residual orality" of a now Chinese-literate society, to use Walter Ong's terminology (Ong 1977, 151). The belief that the dongba are the last gatekeepers of a dying tradition was present before "Naxiology" as a field of study even came into existence. The first man to systematically study the Naxi, the botanist-explorer Joseph Rock (1884–1962), wrote in the preface to his Naxi dictionary:

> The omission of symbols which must be read from memory, and the interpolation of symbols which must remain unread, plus the fact that a symbol may be read twice or even three times although only written once, make the reading of a Na-khi manuscript well-nigh impossible unless one has a Dto-mba (or priest) at hand to interpret the text. Dto-mba, versed in the old traditions, are now a great rarity and by now are non-existent.
>
> (Rock 1963, xxii–xxiii)

Rock's "now" is probably when the dictionary was being drafted in the 1940s. Eulogies were being written for the dongba and their culture before the outside world knew much, if anything, about them. Such sentiments add to the perceived difficulty of the challenges Rock faced when completing his translations, and of course to their unassailable status as "final translations". If the assistance of a dongba is required to complete a translation, and they are now non-existent, then surely no more translations are possible.

The anthropologist Emily Chao writes about the dongba in the past tense, ascribing to the popular belief that the dongba script and the dongba themselves are heading toward extinction, if not already extinct. "It is estimated today that there are only about thirty to forty dongbas left; virtually all are men in their late sixties, seventies or eighties" (1996, 210). This naturally suggests to the reader that within 20 years or so there will be no dongba left to carry on their cultural tradition (i.e. by the time of writing). Michaud, Zhong and He (2017) state that the Chinese translation project that culminated in the publication of 100 volumes of annotated translations of dongba ritual books in 1999 was "prepared with the collaboration of the last generation of proficient To-mba practitioners" (2017, 152).

This is, I would argue, simply not the case. Learned dongba can still be found in the Naxi areas, who to this day conduct their religious rites and write their ritual texts. This fact does not gel with the romance of the endangered language and a dying manuscript tradition. We can in fact easily quantify the number of dongba practicing today: figures from the Lijiang Dongba Association show that, according to their own system of dongba accreditation which involves testing applicants in various subjects such as script, dance, and miscellaneous cultural knowledge, in 2012 there were 127 accredited practitioners of various levels of achievement, from "great dongba" (*da dongba* 大东巴) to "dongba student" (*dongba xueyuan* 东巴学员). As of 2016, this number had nearly doubled to 234. There is reason to believe that this number will only grow as the association continues its work of training and accrediting dongba practitioners. It must be noted however that the number of "great dongba" (those who are proficient at conducting a wide range of ceremonies) fell from six to five in the intervening four-year period (see He 2016). The picture painted by these figures is generally rosier (and yet less romantic) than that painted by Chao and Rock et al. (although of course the figures must be taken at face value for this to hold true; after all, just as scholars may be guilty of "rarefying" the dongba tradition, the official Chinese associations may be guilty of inflating their numbers). Recent years have shown fairly conclusively that the dongba

are no longer endangered, their heritage having been rescued in some (admittedly perhaps more anaemic and politically correct) form by the attention of the Chinese state. Conversely, however, translations of Naxi manuscripts into European languages have become rarer, as Naxiology has waned in the West alongside interest in this small tribe and their unique books. The "endangered" tradition is, ironically, not the dongba manuscripts themselves, but translations out of Naxi dongba into non-Asian languages.

Dongba script: fact and fiction

There are several myths surrounding the dongba script that would be useful to challenge before continuing further. An otherwise innocuous bench in Lijiang's old market square (now a central hub for tour groups) can serve as a vivid example of the inaccuracy of some common beliefs about the Naxi dongba script. Two short phrases are carved into wooden benches in the bustling "Square Market". Here we get trilingual versions (Naxi, Chinese, and English) of "take a seat" and "have a rest" with the Naxi dongba script in primary position (see Figure 0.4).

Figure 0.4 Vernacular dongba script in action: "*ddee xeq neiq*" (have a rest) and "*ddee zzeeq neiq*" (have a seat), carved into a bench in Lijiang old town's tourist centre, Square Market Street. Note that the Naxi text accompanies the wrong translations in Chinese and English.

On this bench, the verb "to sit" (the middle of the three graphs in the bottom phrase, "have a seat" *ddee zzee neiq* ), is depicted by what could be called a "pictograph" of a person seated, while "to rest" (the middle of the three graphs in the top phrase, "have a rest" *ddee xeq neiq* ) is represented by a quite esoteric rebus (i.e. using a graph with an ideographic meaning to represent another word with the same or close phonetic value but with a different meaning, a "phonetic loan"). In this case the rebus is the horned head of a mythical bird, the *xe'quq*, and here only the first syllable is read, to stand in for the verb *xeq*, to rest. If Naxi dongba script were truly pictographic, of course, the word would be written by an image of a person resting (perhaps reclining on a bed or chair, or indeed against a tree, as the famous etymographic reading of the Chinese *xiu* 休, "rest", man + tree). The construction *ddee…neiq* means to perform an action briefly, *ddee* meaning one, and represented by a single mark, i.e. one in number, while *neiq* is a dynamic aspect particle (the whole construction literally meaning in English "have a little rest/sit down" etc.). *Neiq* is represented by a rebus character, the graph originally referring to the amaranth leaf, *neif* (pronounced with a rising tone). I believe examples such as this serve to debunk the following fallacies about Naxi dongba script:

1) It is not writing "proper"
   Most people see the funny little pictures of animals and what look to be stick figures that fill the pages of the ritual books and think that this cannot be a fully-fledged writing system. However, anything said in Naxi can be recorded in the Naxi dongba script; it is, put quite simply, writing. It can be used to record speech. There is a traditional mode of writing ritual manuscripts that could be deemed mnemonic, a written form so abstract that anyone who does not know the contents of the book in advance will be unable to read large parts of it, but the script can also be used to record the vernacular, and anything that is composed in this style can be read by anyone with a good enough dictionary and knowledge of spoken Naxi. The writing on the bench is an example of vernacular dongba script and shows that this is writing "proper".
2) It is pictographic/hieroglyphic (the ideogrammic myth)
   The earliest commentators on the Naxi believed that, just from looking at the dongba script, it must have been comprised mainly of pictures. As DeFrancis says, and as the work of influential figures such as Leibniz and Derrida attests, "The concept of ideographic writing is a most seductive notion" (1984, 133). Such thinking is, of course, misleading. If one does not know how to speak Naxi, it is impossible to read the dongba script, so these cannot be pictures in the normal sense. Each graph has a phonetic value. Just like in Chinese, we can clearly identify in the Naxi script the existence of phonetic elements (parts of a graph that are present merely to indicate pronunciation). There are also examples of dongba script where there is a clear one-to-one relationship between syllable and graph, and these have been evident for over a

century; this is not a new, radical departure as Michaud, He and Zhong (2017) suggest.[8]

What separates it from writing systems such as Chinese is the complexity of the graphs and their readings: we can see examples of true logographs, where one graph can represent a number of syllables or even a short phrase by itself. On the bench, the graph for rest, *xeq*, is a rebus that originally reads as a two-syllable word, *xe'quq*. Here however only the first syllable is read, and in the falling tone. In a more traditional context (such as a ritual manuscript), the graph will usually represent its original noun meaning and both syllables will be read.

3) It is already dead

There is a strongly prevalent narrative wrapped in orientalist allure that this is a dying, or even extinct written tradition. While the most learned of the old dongba are indeed a dying breed, the script carries on in new contexts: graphs are today being used in and around Lijiang in all manner of applications, on public signs (e.g. our bench), for decorative purposes, in classrooms, and by the present generation of Naxi ritual practitioners in the manuscripts they still copy and write. The script is not seeing widespread secular usage, but it is still being used in contemporary life in a certain limited capacity (there are Naxi translations of various well-known fast food brand names, for example "KFC", see Chao 2012, 79). Translation *into* Naxi dongba continues (in 2018, the main square leading to the old town of Lijiang saw the installation of Naxi dongba translation of a short essay by the rGyalrong minority writer Alai 阿来, inscribed on a large jade slab). The usage of dongba script in modern contexts does have its pitfalls, however, not least the lack of any standardisation or editorial oversight. A case in point: the two phrases carved on the bench have the Chinese and English translations attached to the wrong Naxi phrase (the Naxi "have a rest" is translated as "take a seat", and vice versa).

4) It is just for religious use

Following on from the above, and as evidenced again by the Lijiang bench, we can see that the dongba script is *not* restricted to religious manuscripts. A broader examination of the uses of the script reveals examples of diary entries, short stories, account books and letters (Yu Suisheng has published many such examples, see Yu 2003 and 2008). Unicode encoding is on the way, and with it the enticing possibility of full digitisation of the Naxi manuscripts. There is every hope that in the future, with some help from the Lijiang municipal government, the Naxi dongba script will become a vernacular writing system for all Naxi (if only perhaps a "third script" behind Chinese and English).

Traditional Naxi composition

Despite the existence of vernacular texts, this book is concerned primarily with translations of the ritual manuscripts. As has already been mentioned,

the traditional practice of writing ceremonial books is to only copy out enough words to jog the memory: not every syllable is written down; far from it, in the case of earlier manuscripts which have noticeably fewer graphs. Therefore, it can be said that the dongba script is not traditionally used to write what we would normally think of as "literature". The majority of the ritual texts are composed in this mnemonic style. That is to say, the graphs on the page are visual cues designed to aid in the recall of entire story episodes, only parts of which are actually written down. In this way, a single graph can, in extreme examples, stand metonymically for several metrical lines. Let's take a vivid example from a manuscript that tells the Naxi origin story (known in Naxi as the Coqbbertv), part of the myth which relates how the male and female ancestors of the Naxi tribe came together to beget the Naxi people, which can show just how much can be read into a select few graphs (see Figure 0.5).

Figure 0.5 Scene from the Naxi creation myth (re-created from YSSMGZCGB 1986, 187).

Here we have seven characters: a fir tree atop an alpine meadow, a goat, a golden brooch to signify the colour gold, a single blade of grass, a negation, and finally a leg bone, used in this instance as a rebus for the verb *pil*, to lose. This section has been translated: "Coqsseileel'ee arrived at a fir tree in an alpine meadow. Next to the tree was a golden goat, bleating in distress. Leel'ee asked the goat: 'Goat, why are you bleating so?' To which the goat replied, 'I bleat not out of leisure, but because the green grass I ate when I was younger is nowhere to be found. I am bleating because I wish to find the grass'" (author's English translation of a Chinese translation by He Fayuan, see YSSMGZCGB 1986, 190–191). Dongba He Yuncai reads this section in Naxi using 48 syllables across eight speech units (ibid., 189). Tellingly, the same formulaic passage from a different manuscript with only four written graphs (a fir tree, a goat, the negation and the grass) is given a Naxi reading of some 59 syllables in length, spread across nine intonation units (see Fang and He 1981, 499–500).

A less extreme example featuring the single blade of grass and also taken from the Naxi creation myth sees a section of only three graphs extended into two intonation units of five syllables each (see Figures 0.6 and 0.7).

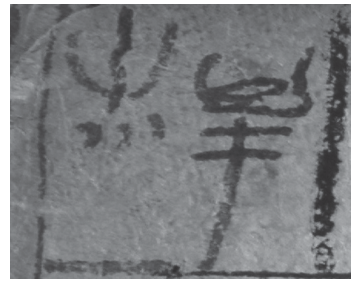

Figure 0.6 Image from Naxi ritual manuscript. Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll.no. RV-4175-26, page 8 (detail).

Figure 0.7 Dongba script notation of the intonation units as read by He Guisheng.

1. Naxi: Req / her / see / zzerq / dvl

English: Grass / green / three / patches / prop up

2. Naxi / Req / her / see / zzerq / nee

English Grass / green / three patches / particle, subject marker

In this section, the three graphs of the manuscript, "grass", "three", and the verb "to prop up", could translate to "[three clods of black soil] propped up three patches of grass; and as for the three patches of grass…". This comes from a repetitious, formulaic part of the text that recounts all the things propping up the Naxi holy mountain, and each item receives two intonation units as above. The grass is propped up by the soil (from the preceding section), and in turn the grass props up the artemisia plants (in the following section). I say "could" represent the above because the spoken text is not fixed. It could be cut down or even further embellished upon, depending on a number of factors. In Dutch missionary Elise Scharten's translation, completed no doubt with the help of a Lijiang dongba in the 1930s, we get a much-reduced version: "[three black pieces of earth with] dry stocks of grass". Just translating the graphs from this one section, Scharten writes "dry stock of grass",

seemingly only translating one single graph here: *req*, the grass, and omitting the number three alongside the verb, to prop up, which are both written.

In such a situation where a single graph (like "grass") can be expanded into a number of intonation units, or can be read and re-read multiple times but only written once, it is not difficult to see why the early-nineteenth century commentators denied the Naxi dongba script the status of "writing proper". It is non-linear, non-logocentric writing, and if you haven't memorised the oral tradition, you simply cannot read a manuscript. These are, essentially, semi-oral texts. To make things even more difficult, the graphs are not arranged linearly on the page. Traditionally, dongba script is read from left to right and from top to bottom, but this does not always hold true. Sometimes the characters are arranged in intricate collages, and at other times seemingly haphazard jumbles. Take, for example, the section of text in Figure 0.8.

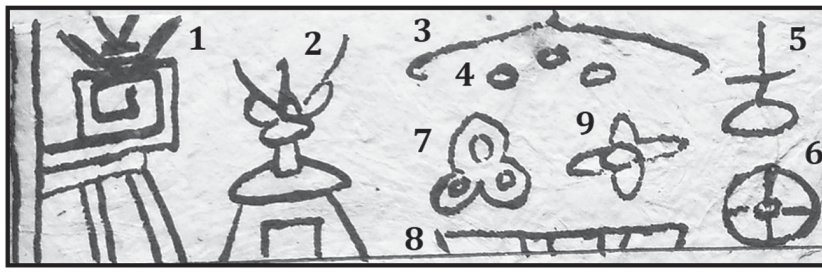

Figure 0.8 Detail from a dongba manuscript, photograph by the author. Numerical annotations represent the rough order in which the graphs are to be read (although the first two are not voiced).

Let's attempt a reading. We start on the left, where we notice a kind of geometric decorative mark (1). This is a textual caret that signifies the beginning of a manuscript or page, and is likely akin to the Tibetan *yig mgo*. Many Naxi texts have intricately designed *yig mgo*, seen most frequently on the first page of a manuscript, and occasionally on the inside pages where a manuscript contains several episodes or even ritual traditions. It is not voiced. The next graph is highly pictographic: a dongba seated in an elevated position (2). This graph *could* be read out in a number of ways, but here, at the beginning of a manuscript, it could also perhaps stand for the opening syllable of the ritual chant, the elongated "O", in which case it is a visual cue with no fixed reading, meaning something like "the dongba begins to chant". What follows is the "writing proper", although arranged in a kind of collage. The sky (3), the stars (4, three stars, for three indicates the idea of "many" – three's a crowd, even amongst the stars), and along the bottom, the earth (8). In between, there are two glittering objects: a pearl (7) and a piece of turquoise (9), two shining jewels. Finally, there are two graphs on the right, an ideographic graph that looks like a cross atop a triangle (5) that originally meant "to hang" (as an object hanging off a cross) and that is now used as a rebus for

the pronoun "this", and beneath it the sun (6). We might imagine this passage says something about the stars in the sky and the jewels of the earth, and perhaps the sun "hanging" in the sky. Unsurprisingly, knowing how to speak Naxi is the first step towards comprehension. If we knew how to read rebus graphs, we would recognise that "to hang" and "sun" together read *chee ni*, meaning "today". The other graphs are more direct representations of things themselves.

Discounting the first two graphs, the remaining seven can be read as 20 syllables. First, the sky and the stars stand for two whole intonation units; *mee shuaq geeq chee zzeeq / geeq zzeeq chee ni ee* (the stars emerge in the high heavens, the stars shine bright today). The gaph for star, *gee*, is read twice. But to read "today", which occurs in the spoken Naxi before the final phoneme *ee*, which means bright, we must go directly to the final two graphs on the right, then jump back to the pearl, *ee* (to shine). Next, the earth and the turquoise together represent another two intonation units, "*ddiuq ddeeq req chee yuq / req yuq chee ni herq*" (the grass grows on the wide earth, the grass grows green today).[9] Note how the "grass", a focal point of the written text in the previous two examples, is now missing completely – we must supply it from memory, for we know the grass grows atop the earth. Furthermore, we have to once again make use of "today" to the right, and then go back left, to the piece of turquoise which stands for the colour green, "*herq*". The final phoneme to be read is, therefore, not at the rightmost section of this extract. We read from the left, then to the right, back left, then down, to the right and back left again. To say dongba script is read left to right is, then, clearly an oversimplification. This is indeed the general direction of reading, but we must frequently jump ahead and double back. This kind of written record is not fixed. Many manuscripts will supply the "grass" that was omitted above, growing on top of the earth in an ideographic compound (see for example Figure 1.6). Some may omit the two graphs for "today" altogether (but they would still be read!). Clearly then, some graphs are written but not read, some graphs are read but not written, some graphs are read multiple times, and the graphs are frequently read "out of order", at least by our linear standards.

The most formulaic sections such as the above can be read by anyone familiar enough with their composition (albeit by relying on some previous testimony of a dongba, either orally or recorded in a book). All the translators mentioned in this book were working with manuscripts written in this kind of traditional style, and, not having direct access to the oral traditions behind the manuscripts, they all had help, either from native dongba practitioners (an ordained ritual master) or from earlier translators who had enlisted the aid of such a person. It is a tragedy of Naxiology that the names of so many of these local informants were not mentioned by those to whom the translation is finally attributed, their invaluable contributions going mostly unrecognised.

Notes

1 "Dongba" (Chinese: 东巴) is the Chinese pinyin romanisation of the Naxi word, *dobbaq* (Naxi pinyin romanisation). The word is sometimes transcribed "dtô-mbà" or "Tomba" after the Naxiologist Joseph Rock's own system of transcription. It is at once the name of the Naxi logographic writing system, the Naxi religious practitioners, and their native religion.

2 The Naxi (as they are most commonly known in Chinese pinyin romanisation, written "Naqxi" in Naxi pinyin) are a minority group who live in parts of China's Yunnan and Sichuan provinces. Their centre of population is Lijiang municipality in Northwest Yunnan. They are one of China's 56 officially-recognised ethnic groups. J.F. Rock's *The Ancient Na-khi Kingdom of Southwest China* (1947) is the classic anthropological introduction to the people, their history and geographical situation. In Chinese, Fang Guoyu and He Zhiwu's *Naxi xiangxing wenzipu* (1981) is a celebrated dictionary of the Naxi "pictographs" which contains some introductory material on the Naxi culture and their writing system, and this serves as one of the best general introductions to the script. For an English translation of the chapter dealing with the structure and classification of the Naxi characters, see Cawthorne (2010).

3 This mytho-geography reflects the actual situation of the Naxi people, with the Tibetan areas of Diqing municipality to the north of the cultural centre of the Naxi, Lijiang, and Tibet proper to the northwest, while the Bai people are primarily found to the south, in the regions of Jianchuan and Dali.

4 For Derrida, logocentrism was "the privileging of presence as sound, wherein writing becomes a signifier of a signifier. Derrida associates logocentrism with a kind of ethnocentrism, an imposition of the Western conception of the supremacy of phonetic writing. He begins *Of Grammatology* by defining logocentrism as the "metaphysics of phonetic writing (for example, of the alphabet) which was fundamentally – for enigmatic yet essential reasons that are inaccessible to a simple historical relativism – nothing but the most original and powerful ethnocentrism, in the process of imposing itself upon the world, controlling in one and the same order" (1976, 3).

5 Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, thought that the world provided man with a grammar of hieroglyphs, and said that the poet "shall use nature as his hieroglyphic" (Emerson 1875, 58).

6 Here the abstract verb is depicted via a rebus: while we have two graphs derived from pictographs, a tree and a pile of stones, the verb *jel*, to record, is portrayed with the graph for bracelet, *jjiuq*, as a rebus.

7 The prolific Naxiologist, Yang Fuquan, has discussed the connection between *dobbaq*, *stonpa* and *bonpo* (possibly rendered into Naxi as "*biu bbbiuq*") at length, see Yang (2012, 298–334)

8 Michaud, He and Zhong (2017) say that He Limin's *Tongsu dongbawen* (2007), essentially a dongba script textbook aimed at popularising the script, "adopts a one-to-one correspondence between characters and syllables…thereby sinicizing the Naxi writing system; this is a radical departure from traditional usage, but it demonstrates that the set of characters allows for an exhaustive transcription of the spoken language" (153). The concluding statement is no doubt true, but it is unclear that this method of composition is a Sinicisation, and the vernacular mode of composition also has a long history (i.e. there are many examples of vernacular

colophons with one-to-one correspondence between characters and syllables on manuscripts from the nineteenth century).

9 For this reading see He Limin (2007, 1).

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Translating (and re-creating) worlds

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Conclusion

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