

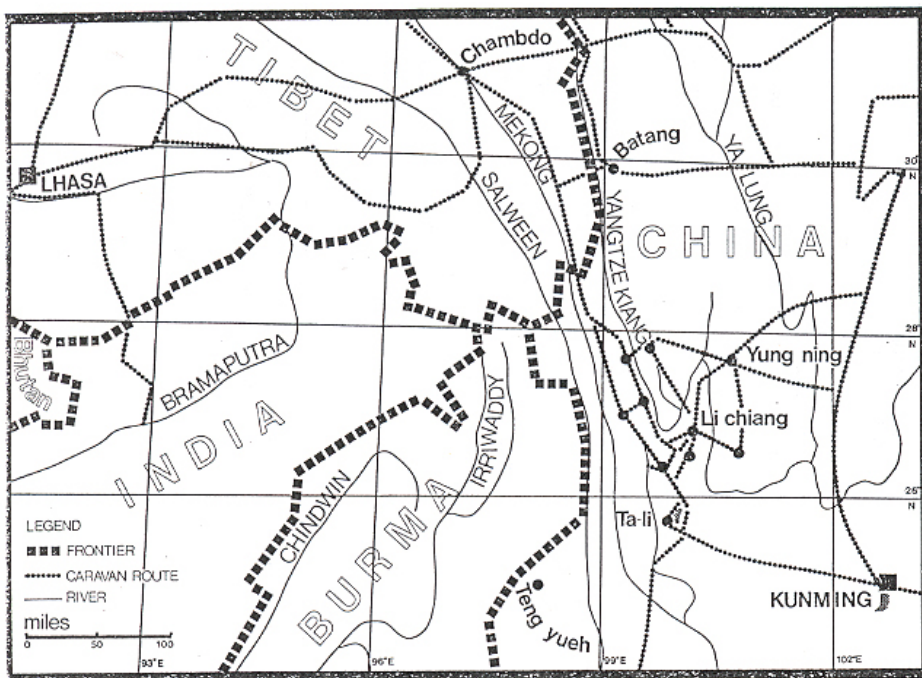
# Naxi - pictographic script and complex religious practice

Pierre Evald

And over Li Chiang,  
the snow range is turquoise  
Rock's world that he saved us for  
memory  
a thin trace in high air

Ezra Pound, Canto CXIII

Of the several theories on the migration of the Naxi we hold on to those who claim they descended from Tibetan nomads who invaded the Lijiang valley in northwestern Yunnan and settled here as farmers at an altitude of 2.500 meter. Lijiang was since centuries a much used stop on the caravan route between China and Tibet, and the city is now with 20 other locations in China on UNRSCO's World Heritage List.



A principal work on the Naxi 'The Ancient Na-Khi Kingdom of South-West China' was published in 1947 by Joseph F. Rock, an Austrian-American botanist and adventurer who lived in the Lijiang

valley from 1922 until August 1949, two months before the declaration of the People's Republic. He was the world's leading expert on Naxi culture and local botany, and he wrote ten articles for National Geographic magazine, developing his first colour photographic plates in the field in the 1920s.

His Naxi-English dictionary was prepared for publishing just prior to his death in Hawaii in 1962, and this definitive study of the Naxi pictographs was completed posthumously by an Italian publisher in 1972. During the war he had seen his plates being destroyed in Shanghai during Japanese bombing and his papers torpedoed by the Japanese in the Arabian Sea underway from Calcutta to the United States. Fortunately, his seminal dictionary of the Naxi language survived this attack on his ship off Calcutta in 1944 only because he had photostated a working copy of it while in the United States earlier. After the war he was completing it in Lijiang, and when Communist troops arrived he was permitted to depart with all his material.

**Scriptures.** The Naxi are the only ethnic group in the world to have their culture preserved in a textual writing system with images and pictographic characters (sijiulujiu) still in use. The ancient scriptures on paper or wooden boards and scrolls remain in their thousands preserved in libraries and museums worldwide. Among these we also find the earliest dance notations in the world, recordings of much significance for the study of early religious dance. Of artistic importance are wooden boards with paintings of gods planted in sacred spots in nature or used in ceremonies.

"The Na-khi manuscripts in our Western libraries are one of our unique possessions, for they represent the entire religious beliefs of a single tribe. Not only is this ethnographically rare, since few people ever invent a script to record their rites, but also there does not exist anywhere the equivalent of these 10,000 manuscripts from a small society. It is, therefore, important to know what Na-khi religion is about since we are privileged to have such an unusual opportunity, to study such texts, especially when we know so little about the beliefs of minority groups in South East Asia or the ancient Bön tradition of Tibet with which it is connected.

Most of the manuscripts were collected from the area before the Communist take-over in China by the only European to study them in detail: Dr. J.F. Rock. Before his death 17 years ago, Rock had published numerous scholarly translations but he never gave a systematised account of Na-khi religion. The major stumbling block to further research in this field, apart from the pictographic script itself, has been the lack of any clear picture of the major elements of Na-khi belief." (Jackson XXX).



"The origin of the pictographic script and many of the Na-khi rites stem from the presence of proscribed Bön monks at a time when the Na-khi social structure was undergoing radical changes imposed upon it by the Chinese. The rites themselves seem to have been systematically and consciously built around certain key themes taken from the Bön sect of Tibetan Buddhism." (Jackson XXX, p.5).

For the study of Naxi ritual texts the amount of data is in abundance: over 100 ceremonies, 1,000 constituent rites, 2,000 different deities and 10,000 texts.

Of the recorded total number of Naxi scriptures (10,575, of which 90% indeed are duplicates from master copies) 7,861 are preserved in U.S.A., mainly in Library of Congress and collected by Rock, 1,493 in Europe, mainly in Marburg Staatsbibliothek and 1,221 in Asia, all in National Central Museum, Taiwan, acquired from 1944 onwards.

**Religious belief** of the Naxi is polytheism with a sublime mixture of different religious practices, each serving a particular need. Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism, or Bön to be precise, were useful in connection with the funerals and prayers for the dead. Taoism satisfied mystic and aesthetic needs, and ancestor worship, Confucianism, was necessary to keep up the contact with the departed. Animism provided a method for dealing with the unseen powers in nature, and shamanism was crucial for the protection of the living and dead from the evil spirits.

**The Dongbas** meaning 'the master interpreter of scripture' - are the Naxi ritual specialists, originally descending from the Tibetan Bön religion with rituals much in line with shamanism. Still they were not shamans nor true priests like the Bön monks, as they had no temples and no priesthood. What they did have were their guilt-like rules for their profession of banishing demons. We find volumes in their hundreds of Dongba scriptures prescribing their rituals, as mentioned. The rituals are integrating features from Bön shamanism, Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism as well as religious elements from India and Persia.

**Music** is in Lijiang performed by the only orchestra in China playing classical seventh-century music from Tang and Song dynasties, and whose members are more than 70 years old. The troupe is performing this ancient Naxi music in Lijiang, never knowing how many musicians will be able to attend the evening's performance. The music has for centuries been passed on within a family to the next generation. Of the now fewer than twenty Dongba living in and around Lijiang some occasionally supplement the musicians with ceremonial dance and song including the performance of Dongba spirit dance. This classical music was and still is a prime activity in Taoist rituals.

The ethnomusicologist Xuan Ke runs a small **Naxi collection** with clothes, paintings and old musical instruments in the upper floors of his private house in Lijiang. The museum has some relics from Joseph Rock, known by Xuan Ke and his father: His desk, two chairs, his bookcases and some of his books. Other personal items were distributed to the local families in Yuhu village where Rock lived. His study was left alone during the Cultural Revolution, and somehow all his books seem to have survived the lootings. Xuan Ke himself was during the Anti-Rightist Campaign of the 1950s sent to prison for four years, with his time in the tin mines near Vietnam altogether 21 years.

**Jade Dragon Mountain** (Mount Yulong) is with its 5596 meters the holy mountain of the Naxi people, and their god Sanduo is living on the mountain. While monasteries around Lijiang are all Tibetan in their origin and belong to the Red Hat sect, the only non-Buddhist temple in Lijiang is located near Baisha village and devoted to this mountain god and protector of the region. The temple was originally built during Tang dynasty in 779 or 785, and re-built in 1535. Still the temple is central for the worship of Sanduo and the initiations of Naxi priests. Most of the temples were extensively damaged during the Cultural Revolution.



**Frescoes** were painted by Ma Xiaoxian from Jiangxi and Gu Chang from Tibet during Ming period (1368-1644) assisted by Naxi Dongba painters, thus incorporating the painting styles of Han, Tibet and Dongba. Of the original 200 pieces the existing 55 religious frescoes are preserved in four temples around the old city. The frescoes depicted here are 'The Assembly of Buddhas' from the east wall of the Dajue Palace in Shuhe.



**Concluding remarks** The preservation of ancient Taoist religious rituals and cultural features seem to be common to the Yao and the Naxi, for the latter deeply intertwined with ancient Bön rituals. Up to this point most focus from the outside world has been on the Naxi of Lijiang in Yunnan and their obvious Bön elements, while the more off-way Yao culture with its rich Taoist heritage has been sheltered from the immense interest that has been bestowed on the Naxi culture.

This topic is still to be researched for further comparison and elaboration.

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