8. Adaptation of the Offering to the Mountain Deity among the Qiang in Northwest Sichuan: Cultural Security on Multiple Levels

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Abstract: This chapter aims to explore multiple-level cultural security concerns among the Rrmi people, who are constituents of the Qiang nationality and the Chinese nation, by examining the coexistence of two versions of their local ritual of offering to the mountain deity. The traditional local ritual of *Hsugdu* is routinized in the process of the identification of their Qiang nationality and the promotion of cultural tourism, and forms the basis of the adapted ritual of *zhuanshanhui*. *Zhuanshanhui* integrates the main content of the traditional *Hsugdu*, exemplary Qiang history and culture, and popular environmentalism. It has become the representation of the local Rrmi to outsiders and a potential touristic resource. Besides promoting cultural tourism, local Rrmi need to maintain their cultural distinctiveness to present their cultural identity and secure touristic resources while integrating themselves into the Chinese nation.

Keywords: ritual of offering to the mountain deity, Rrmi people, Qiang nationality, cultural adaptation

I still remember the first time I visited the Yunshang Administrative Village in northwest Mao County in Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in northwest Sichuan, in 2011. I was invited by a friend working in the county Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) Office (*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan bangongshi*)[1] to witness "real Qiang culture" (*zhenzhengde qiang*

1 China is a signatory to UNESCO's 2003 *Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. China allocated ample finances to preserving its domestic intangible cultural

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wenhua), which turned out to be an offering to a mountain deity (*jishanhui*). The officials intended to recommend the ritual to the provincial-level ICH, and the purpose of the trip was to film it.[2] It took us two days to finish shooting, and the locals were hospitable. I found the ritual interesting and returned to the village in 2013 to do fieldwork for my doctoral project. This time I had a different experience, at least in the beginning. My host was the village secretary of the CCP, who was also one of the nominated inheritors of the local ICH. He told me:

> I will not tell you anything about the ritual. You are just like a journalist. You are going to write it down, everyone will read your paper, and then everyone will know it. As a result, no one will come to our village to see our ritual anymore.

I was quite embarrassed at being treated as if I were there to "steal" their culture. Yet, after about six months I finally gained their trust and was able to gather some core information about the ritual. The same person then said to me that it was good to record their ritual, to write it down, because in another one or two generations, the Qiang language would probably disappear and so would the real content of the ritual.

Villagers in the region of Songping Valley in northwest Mao County in Aba Prefecture claim to have celebrated the folk offering to the mountain deity, known as *Hsugdu*[3] in Qiang language or *Zuoshan* in Chinese, for hundreds of years. The annual festival, which takes place in the sixth month of the lunar calendar,[4] is performed throughout the whole valley today. Variations of the Offering to the Mountain Deity ritual exist among some Qiang subgroups,

heritage and promoted "traditional culture" all over the country. The certified ICH is often related to the preservation and commodification of local culture (for more, see Blumenfield and Silverman 2013).

2 In the Intangible Cultural Heritage Law of the People's Republic of China, the government above the county level is empowered to investigate, recognize, record, put on file, and recommend potential ICH. The government will also fund certificated ICH and inheritors for the purpose of protection (see https://www.gov.cn/flfg/2011-02/25/content_1857449.htm, August 2023).

3 The transcription of the Qiang language in the text is based on the Qiang writing system invented in the 1990s, which was based on Latin letters. I would like to thank Chen Weikang, who is a Qiang language expert, for helping me with the spelling of the Qiang words.

4 The time of the offering to the mountain deity varies in different regions in Mao County due to their different elevations. In pre-socialist times, the ritual was held in the fourth month of the lunar calendar for Jiaochang region, the fifth month of the lunar calendar for Weimen and Sanlong, and the sixth month of the lunar calendar for Songping Valley and Qugu. Qiang in Wenchuan and Li County held their ritual on the first day of the eighth month of the lunar calendar (see Xi'nan minzu daxue yanjiuyuan 2008, 191).

as well as among subgroups of Tibetans, such as the Gyalrong and Amdo Tibetans who live in proximity to the Yunshang Rrmi and maintain the Bon traditions (La 2017; Tsering 2017; Li 2019). As one of the subgroups of the Qiang, the Yunshang Rrmi people's religion has mostly been influenced by the Bon historically. The ritual is aimed at pleasing the mountain deity so as to obtain a good harvest, an abundance of domestic animals, good luck, and agricultural and human fertility. It also links individuals to their natal land and creates a collective sense of belonging for a community. It can bring personal or communal good luck and ward off penalties from non-human beings. Yunshang Rrmi generally consider *Hsugdu* to be one of their most important and distinctive rituals.[5]

In fact, nowadays, there are two versions of the ritual: one is the routinized performance on an administrative village (*xingzhengcun*) level, which incorporates many external elements and takes place on a larger scale (see below); the other is on the hamlet (*zhaizi*) level,[6] and often the only participants are the villagers in that hamlet. The first ritual we visited was the routinized one, and the participants were from the three village groups of Yunshang Village.[7] Moreover, the contradictory statements of my host, a member of a subgroup of the partially constructed and heterogeneous Qiang nationality (*minzu*) recognized by the PRC (Wang 2003), actually reflect his sense of insecurity about the local Rrmi culture. Cultural security embraces the premise that the initial "culture" of a group, providing for common sense, will not be substituted or assimilated, that the group is able to feel a shared cultural identity, and at the same time, that the group's culture's distinctiveness, independence, and integrity should be maintained and that its culture can be inherited and developed (Chen 2012). As I will show, the secretary's concerns about cultural security manifested on multiple levels because of the complex background of the Rrmi identity, a very local identity, and the identities of the Qiang nationality and the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu*). Similar situations exist among many ethnic minorities in southwest China.

My host's attitude shows the common worries of the locals, especially the old generation. These worries manifest at least in two ways. First, the

5 The other important festivals are the Spring Festival and collective temple festivals.

6 Here I use "hamlet" to refer to the smallest community, a *cua* in Qiang, and a *zhaizi* or a *zhai* in Chinese; one or several hamlets form a village group (*cunxiaozu*), depending on their scale; several village groups form an administrative village (*xingzhengcun*); several administrative villages form a township (*xiangzhen*), and several townships form a county (*xian*).

7 There were three village groups (*zhaizi*) in 2013, but these were officially reorganized into two later on. However, villagers still habitually refer to them as three *zhaizi* in their everyday life today.

locals are afraid of losing the particularity and authenticity of their hamlet culture, because the promotion of a Qiang identity increases the convergence of the subgroups' cultures, which can be "stolen" or imitated by the other Qiang subgroups. Second, being incorporated into the Chinese nation, they have been adopting the majority Han culture, notably the language through national education, and might eventually be assimilated.[8] These concerns are closely related to the development of the PRC's ethnic policy and the corresponding approach to economic development in this area in past decades.

Before the late Qing Empire, many ethnic groups living in the sprawling Sino-Tibetan-Qiang-Hui borderland in northwest Sichuan existed relatively autonomously. They had long historical links with the Tibetans and Han, and the borderland was the "middle ground" (White 1991) where various communities served as intermediaries between the two civilizations (Wang 2008). Its peripheral location as a frontier contributed to northwest Sichuan's relative isolation and local autonomy (Hayes 2014, 14) and, at the same time, created their hybrid culture. Living in the valleys, except when they travel to the county town or neighboring valleys, the mountain people mainly spend time in their local hamlet. Even in 2013, there was still no paved road and only 2G internet. Yet, following the establishment of the PRC and subsequent economic development, these groups living in-between have actually (to some extent) been able to manipulate favorable cultural and economic conditions to satisfy their own needs (Jinba 2014).

The Qiang we visited were a small group of people who call themselves Rrmi, living in Yunshang Administrative Village in Mao County. The village was formed from three village groups which were reorganized from six natural hamlets during the 1960s. The population was around 430 in 2021. Except for a few Tibetans and Han marrying in, the majority were classified as Qiang. The Amdo Tibetans from Songpan live to the north of the village, and the Gyalrong Tibetans from Heishui live to the west. The Amdo Tibetans speak the Amdo dialect of Tibetan, and the adjacent Gyalrong in Heishui speak a language similar to Qiang. All of them make similar offerings to the mountain deity, but Tibetans often have Bon monasteries and the Yunshang Rrmi have a localized Han-style Buddhist temple.[9] Although the Gyalrong

8 For more on the role of language in maintaining or diminishing cultural security, see Giulia Cabras' chapter in this volume.

9 Their temple was first built by a Tibetan lama before the 1950s, then destroyed in the Cultural Revolution (1966–76) and finally rebuilt in 2008 into a temple with Han Buddhist statues. Yet, the meanings of these statues were localized.

Tibetans and the Qiang speak a similar language, they cannot communicate smoothly. Sichuanese is often the lingua franca. Those who speak Rrmi (also termed Rrmea) have never formed a united or coherent ethnic group of Qiang (Wang 2003). Traditionally, their local cultural identity as members of a hamlet has been the key form of recognition. Their established social structure within a hamlet is mainly based on territory rather than lineage, like that of the neighboring Gyalrong (Chen 1947). Their relationship with the local mountain deity reflects their individual and collective belonging. Under the influence of Han culture, however, the principle of lineage gains on importance as well.

During more than seventy years of the PRC's administration of this area since 1950, there was a period of a few years during the Cultural Revolution when the Yunshang Rrmi's *Hsugdu* was banned and only practiced secretly at night.[10] In the reform era which began in 1978, the ritual was revived, and it was routinized in the early 1990s in the process of Qiang nationality-building. The Yunshang Rrmi actively participated in the construction of the Chinese nation through the principle of "diverse unity" (*duoyuan yiti*; Fei 1989) by promoting their Qiang culture, which distinguishes them from the majority Han and the Tibetans practicing Buddhism. At the same time, the Rrmi adopted the exemplary history written by Han historians and Qiang intellectuals to integrate themselves into the Qiang nationality and the Chinese nation. They are proud of their authentic Qiang culture but at the same time also experience cultural insecurity in several ways.

Based on ethnographic and historical research, this paper specifically investigates the Rrmi traditional offering to the mountain deity before the 1950s and its evolution since the ritual was restored for the public after the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). Having followed the ritual since 2011, I have discovered that varieties of the ritual exist among different Qiang sub-groups, depending on their living environment, tradition, and interpretation. Notably, the adapted versions of this ritual coexist with the traditional ones. They are more like performances "invented" (Hobsbawm 1992) by the Rrmi, mainly to represent themselves to outsiders and tourists. The rituals are larger, livelier, routinized, and mostly funded by the government. They feature the Qiang nationality's paradigmatic history, elements of Qiang cultural markers and popular themes or ideologies related to the relevant state policies. The adapted ritual has become popular and been watched by many outsiders. However, it is my main goal to record and reveal the traditional hamlet ritual, which has not often been witnessed by outsiders,

10 Interview, Yunshang Village, September 2013.

and the process of forming and refashioning the ritual in order to present a more complex picture of the participants' identities as local Rrmi, Qiang, and members of the Chinese nation. Multiple levels of identity imply the existence of multiple aspects of cultural security, or insecurity.

From Rrmi to Qiang: Obtaining a New Ethnic Identity

The history of how the Yunshang Rrmi obtained their Qiang identity and how the Qiang identity relates to the concept of the Chinese nation provides a foundation for understanding their cultural security. It has been persuasively argued that the PRC's official identification of nationalities does not always correspond to the natural self-ascription, language, and cultural practices of an ethnic group (Harrell 2001; Kaup 2000; Wellens 2010). It is not uncommon for people speaking similar languages and practicing similar cultural activities to be identified as two distinct nationalities. There are also sub-groups in some identified nationalities. For instance, the majority Han on the east coast and in Sichuan are different, both in their language and culture. A similar situation could easily arise for people living in the borderlands. Borderland people are often multilingual and have a hybrid culture, and their identity can be multiple and dynamic. They can be identified as different nationalities in different discourses. The peoples who speak a similar Rrmi language living at the junction of Mao County and Heishui County were classified as either Qiang or Tibetan. The separation, to some extent, corresponds to their administrative territorial boundaries, but the nationality label is often less important than their local identity—for example, in the case of intermarriage with other nationalities. When a Rrmi girl identified as Tibetan marries into Yunshang village, she will put on Qiang costumes and present herself as a Qiang when necessary. The awareness of belonging to a specific nationality only arises in supra-local contexts, for example when they speak Sichuanese and have to identify themselves to outsiders or the state.

The Qiang are the earliest and one of the most active minorities recorded on oracle bones by the Chinese of the Shang dynasty (ca. 1600–ca. 1045 BCE), but the relationship between the ancient Qiang and the modern Qiang nationality is interpreted differently by various scholars. Some ethnologists consider the Qiang to have existed continuously under different dynasties throughout Chinese history. It has been argued that many Qiang tribes were scattered across the western region of the central China in different times, and they often had wars with the Chinese and among themselves. Some of

the tribes vanished or migrated to different regions and were integrated into other groups in different ways. Ultimately, only a small group migrated to the upper region of the Min River in northern Sichuan. They have lived there until the present day and are identified as Qiang (Ran et al. 1984; Ren 1984; QZJS, 2008).

In contrast, Wang Mingke (1997; 1999; 2003) argues that the term Qiang does not represent a historically continuous entity but is a name given by Han Chinese to the non-Han people they met while moving westward, and thus a description of their western ethnic boundary or a sense of otherness. The natural geography and atrocious weather on the eastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau naturally formed a frontier preventing the westward expansion of the Han in the Later Han period (25–200). People beyond this ecological frontier could not adopt the Chinese mode of food production or social organization, thus the ethnic boundary has been fixed ever since. In addition to the westward movement of the Han, in the seventh century, the old Tibetan kingdom rapidly expanded to the eastern fringe of the plateau. In the process of the Han moving westward and the Tibetans eastward, part of ancient Qiang was gradually assimilated by Han, Tibetans, and communities which today are classified as Yi. Finally, only the community living in the upper Min River Valley and the nearby Beichuan region were still recorded by the Han as Qiang people (*Qiangren*) or Qiang civilians (*Qiangmin*) and were eventually classified as Qiang by the central government in the early 1950s (Wang 2003).

Although the history of the Qiang is written and interpreted in various ways, there seems to be agreement that the Qiang were partially absorbed by the surrounding Han and Tibetans and vice versa. To a large extent, the identification of the Qiang ethnic category enhanced connections between the ethnic groups in China proper and the southwestern borderland (Wang 2003, xxii). The typical interpretation is that many nationalities of southwest China, including Tibetans, Yi, Bai, Lisu, Naxi, Pumi, and others evolved from the ancient Qiang. It is recorded on the Shang dynasty oracle bones that the Qiang were captured as slaves and sacrificed by the communities inhabiting the Central Plains, yet they also intermarried with them (Ran et al. 1984). The Qiang are therefore considered by some historians an important component of the *Huaxia*, the predecessors of the contemporary Han nationality (QZJS 2008, 2). According to some interpretations, the Chinese nation is descended from the mythical emperors Yan and Huang, hence the name *Yanhuang zisun* (the offspring of the Yan and Huang emperors). Notably, the Yan Emperor is also considered Qiang (Wang 1999). Fei Xiaotong (1989) pointed out that the Han absorbed blood from other ethnic groups but the Qiang transfused

blood to the other groups. Thus, the Han and other minorities in southwest China are "glued" together by the Qiang.

Identification of China's nationalities started during the Republic of China (1912–49), when China was transitioning from an empire to a nation state. In this period, Thomas Torrance identified the people in the upper Min River Valley as Qiang and reconstructed their history from the mythical emperor Yu the Great of the legendary Xia dynasty (ca. 2070–ca. 1600 BCE) down to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), arguing that the Qiang were monotheists and descendants of the ancient Israelites (1937). David C. Graham (1958) constructed a lineal history of the Qiang based on Chinese historical sources and pointed out that the Qiang were polytheistic members of local tribes who had migrated to the upper Min River valley. Torrance emphasized the Qiang's difference from the Han, but Graham, along with other scholars, admitted that the Qiang had absorbed many cultural elements from the Han and the Tibetans and that there was no way to identify them except by their language (Hu 1941, 25). Thus, their identification was carried out in loose accordance with the four common traits (language, territory, economic life, and culture) that Joseph Stalin considered to be constitutive of a nationality and following a linguistic taxonomy of Chinese minorities proposed by the British linguist Henry Rodolph Davies in 1898 (Mullaney 2010).

The identification of the Qiang was not consistent in a local context either. They were classified either by language, blood ties, customs, their own preferences, or a combination of these factors. In the 1950s, the Yunshang Rrmi were classified as Qiang because of their language although they practiced similar customs to the Tibetans surrounding them, e.g., *Hsugdu*. The Heishui Rrmi, who lived in the valley to the northwest of Yunshang, were initially identified as Qiang (Xi'nan minzu daxue yanjiuyuan 2008, 2), but in the late 1950s, the Heishui people were reclassified as Tibetans (Li 2009). Similar situations arose in Beichuan County in the eastern part of today's Qiang-inhabited area. Beichuan was not included in the Qiang region in the 1950s because its inhabitants lacked Qiang cultural markers (except for a few remote villages in the deep mountains close to Mao County and Songpan County whose populations could still speak Qiang and kept some traditional customs). However, many Han who had Qiang relatives changed their identity to Qiang in the 1980s, mainly due to the preferential policies towards ethnic minorities.[11]

11 Beichuan County became the Qiang Minzu Autonomous County in 2003. According to the Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy (*Zhonghua renmin gongheguo minzu quyu zizhifa*), the minority autonomous county enjoys preferential policies

Today, with the boom of the ethnic tourism market, the various Qiang communities in different regions, like the Tibetans (see Yang Minghong and Zeng Benxiang's chapter in this volume), compete with each other in the preservation and commodification of the Qiang culture. Meanwhile, more Han are willing to change their nationality classification to join an ethnic minority. For instance, some Han in Shaanxi claimed they were the descendants of the Qiang and wanted to be reclassified as Qiang, but this request was rejected by the central government (Ren 2009). Varieties exist among the Qiang and they had been trying to act as Qiang by internalizing particular features of Qiang culture, including dress, rituals, singing and dancing, and other attributes. The offering to the mountain deity is one of the most influential Qiang cultural markers that is being spread and promoted.

The *Hsugdu* Ritual of the Rrmi

The traditional offering to the mountain is called *Hsugdu* in Rrmi; in Chinese it is called *zuoshan* (sitting on the mountain) or *jishan* (offering to the mountain). In other Qiang subgroups, this ritual is also referred to as Mountain God Gathering (*shanshenhui*), Pagoda Gathering (*tazihui*), or offering to the sky gathering (*jitianhui*). Among Tibetans, it is referred to as the "*yüllha* cult" (Karmay 1998; 2000; Huber 1999), which included two types of cult mountain: "*yüllha*" (god of the local) and "*néri*" (mountain abode). "*Yüllha*" was considered the object of "secular" worship which sought success in purely mundane activities (Karmay 1998, 426) and was essentially a non-literate tradition dealing with present life and this world. The holy mountain "*néri*" was viewed as the focus of systematic Buddhist and Bon religious worship and spiritual exercise, like circumambulation and meditation. It originated and is embedded in extensive textual traditions and mainly focuses on death and future life (Huber 1999, 22–23). Normally, every community has its own local sacred mountain in which the mountain deity dwells and receives offerings; and a pilgrimage holy mountain is considered the "abode" of some deities, who often possess an identity in Buddhist and Bon religion. This cultural diffusion results in a situation where the Yunshang and the surrounding Tibetans make similar offerings to the

on politics, economy, culture, and society. For example, minorities in the autonomous region could have more than one child during the period of the One Child Policy, and the students get extra points in the university entrance examination (https://www.gov.cn/test/2005-07/29/content_18338.htm, August 2023).

mountain deity—except for some details, which are called *Labtse* in Tibetan. The Yunshang Rrmi made offerings to their local dwelling mountain and also went for circumambulation to the regional holy mountain in Songpan: *denlong rrgvubu* in Rrmi, *Shar dung ri* in Tibetan, or *Xuebaoding* in Chinese (Snow Treasure Mountain). However, they have stopped visiting the holy mountain in recent years, mainly due to their increasing consciousness of being Qiang and their belief that it was part of Tibetan culture.

Before the 1950s, the Yunshang Rrmi were ruled by local chieftains (*tusi*) from Mao County, Songpan county, and Heishui county at different times. Their basic living unit was the hamlet. Within a hamlet, several households formed a group of people under the same house name, a *josdbuxea*, which is a unit formed on the principle of land ownership. They consider each other family and share responsibility for organizing events such as weddings or funerals. Normally, two to four house names[12] exist in a hamlet. Villagers led a half-arable and half-pastoral life, supplemented by hunting and gathering in the forest. The rich natural resources provided them with many forms of sustenance, but all were considered to be governed and protected by the mountain deity. Disputes often happened because of territorial conflicts, and the ritual maintained the territorial boundaries between hamlets.

Hsugdu is one of the most important collective rituals for praying for blessings and "fulfilling vows" to the mountain deity. Each hamlet held it on a different day in the sixth month of the Chinese lunar calendar so that friends and relatives from neighboring hamlets could take part in each other's gatherings on ritual days. Almost every hamlet had at least one *leahsea*, a sacred altar for holding bamboo sticks, which was built with a pile of stones and located on the mountaintop, in a mountain pass or at the foot of the mountain. Only hamlets that were too small to maintain their own might share a *leahsea* with their neighbors. Today, the local ritual process is the same as before, except that some new factory products, such as bottled alcohol and machine printed *lungta* (paper prayer flags), have been adopted.[13] I observed the ritual on a number of occasions. Only men could perform the ritual; women were in charge of preparing barley wine, smoked pork, and other food. Men first performed the ritual at a mountain pass. They stuck the five-color paper flags on top of the bamboo sticks and

12 The Yunshang Rrmi people maintain a traditional social structure based on the house system, which is similar to that of the surrounding Tibetans. Due to their sinicization, their house names have been changed into Han family names.

13 The *lungta* (Tib. *klung rta*) and their use were adopted by the Rrmi from Tibetan culture.

planted the other end in the grassy soil. Each man from each family had to set up one stick with the flags there. Then they took out the *lungta* and threw them into the air.

The same men would then perform a similar ritual at a small *leahsea*, which was for the deity controlling the hail stones; this time, they stuck the flags on top of the *leahsea*. Men burned the dried cedar twigs to make fragrant white smoke (everything for the ritual had to be smoked in order to be cleaned). After that, men set off the firecrackers, and then each man plugged his own bamboo stick with flags on top of the *leahsea*. Smoked pork was put on the *leahsea* as an offering. Men lit the incense and then stuck it in the cracks in the stone while walking around the *leahsea* anticlockwise and talking to the mountain deity. They told the deity their wishes for the whole hamlet or their own families. Then they opened a bottle of alcohol and finally, the men poured spirits into the bottle lid and toasted each other. The local women were not allowed to participate in the ritual—they just passed by or stood far away. As an outsider and a researcher, I was granted the privilege of getting close to watch and take pictures, but I was not allowed to touch any objects.

After making offerings to the small *leahsea*, the men would arrive at the biggest *leahsea* located on the highest mountaintop. The ritual process was the same, except that all the men would pray together for the whole hamlet. The oldest man, who was often the *cayddi* (village head), would lead the prayer by speaking to the mountain deity.[14] He would say that they had experienced a peaceful year, they were united, and the ones who fought had been punished. They asked for the mountain deity to protect their crops and herds and made a wish for a prosperous year. They also asked for more children, especially sons. Then the elders summoned deities in Beijing first, and then different mountain deities living in the nearby region, from Dujiangyan, the closest place to the Chengdu plain that venerated a mountain deity, then Mao County (in several valleys), then Songping valley, then Songpan County and the holy mountain, the *delong rigubo.* More than thirty mountain deities were summoned. The *leahsea* often had a name; some *leahsea* were named after mythological person who was considered the

14 The *Cayddi* system (*huishou zhidu*) is their traditional institutional regime, which plays a significant role in their everyday life. It contains several old men from different houses. They are in charge of organizing collective rituals, managing public affairs, and mediating internal conflicts. The contemporary *cayddi* system has been transformed into a new form in which two male household heads are nominated as *cayddi* each year; all the male households take turns at being in charge. The elders are still in charge of holding rituals but the nominated *cayddi* are in charge of other public affairs.

ancestor of the villagers. When they made an offering to the *leahsea*, they confirmed that they shared the same ancestor and were a single community.

At this stage, an individual man could ask all the male members of the village to help him fulfil his vow or make a new wish for the next year. If his wish was granted, he would fulfil the vow next year at the temple festival or *Hsugdu*. The amount required to fulfil the vow varied from a chicken to a yak, from a handful of grain to a jar of alcoholic drink made of barley. It is noteworthy that the men often released the livestock instead of killing them. After that, they would go back to the place where the women were waiting. They sat in three circles. Each was formed by people who shared the same house name. They toasted each other, ate together and later on sang and danced. Before the foundation of the PRC in 1949, some old men[15] told me that relatives living in other hamlets visited each other on the ritual day to enjoy the festival together. Babies presented for the first time would be given a ritual name[16] before the *leahsea*. If the newly born baby was a boy, the father or grandfather would carve a wooden arrow to be stuck into the *leahsea*. Then they would have horse racing, singing, and dancing. The following two to three days would be for eating, drinking, and having fun together.

Collective rituals involving offerings to the mountain deity helped the community to generate a sense of collectivity by forming a relationship with the deity and demarcating hamlet boundaries. Meanwhile, individuals also built a relationship with the mountain deity by praying and fulfilling their vows. It was a way to present how communities positioned themselves in relation to nature and to other groups and actors (Zerner et al. 2003). In the ritual, people from other hamlets, whether Qiang or Tibetans, were welcomed and many regional mountain deities were summoned to enjoy the offerings. The collective ritual helped the Yunshang people confirm their collectivity as human beings in relation to other non-human beings and as villagers within a specific hamlet in relation to other settlements in the region.

To a large extent, these meanings of the local discourse still survive today. In addition, on the administrative village and even the county level, people have developed different versions of the ritual by incorporating ritual elements from different subgroups to strengthen a common sense

15 Interview, Yunshang Village, August 2013.

16 Today, the name given in front of the *leahsea* is not used in everyday life but only in ritual space. The family name is the house's name, so the new name will indicate which house the person belongs to.

of belonging to the Qiang and, meanwhile, to develop their local touristic culture and economy.

Reviving the Ritual: Two Coexisting Versions

Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the state has restored a degree of religious freedom and other cultural rights of PRC citizens. Freedom of religious worship was enshrined in the new PRC constitution promulgated in 1982, and northwestern Sichuan saw a revival of local religious and cultural institutions. Even though the process was different for different subgroups, the general trend of adjusting to the identity of the officially classified nationality to tap into the booming ethnic tourism market was the same. From the 1980s to the early 1990s, the changes in state policy became visible in new official discourse on "quality" (*suzhi*), "material civilization" (*wuzhi wenming*) and "poverty alleviation" (*jianshao pinkun*). In 2000, the Great Opening of the West (*xibu da kaifa*) development strategy was implemented to modernize western China. Environmental and cultural protection and conservation policies were also broadly initiated (Delang and Wang 2013). These policies were intertwined with the promotion of both ecological and ethnic tourism in this region due to its geography and rich ethnic minority culture. In 2014, the Tibeto-Qiang-Yi Cultural Industry Corridor Project was launched. The project claimed that the state would utilize minority nationality cultures to a reasonable extent as resources in the cultural industry and cultural market. The purpose was to preserve and hand down cultures to new generations and cultivate the minorities' cultural industry brand, to improve the economy, and to build an "ecological civilization" (*shengtai wenming*) in the relevant regions.

The annual *Hsugdu* was revived against a complicated background. Moreover, due to the founding of the Yunshang administrative village, the villagers had to present themselves as a community to outsiders, so they created a new *Hsugdu* on the administrative village level. The newly adapted ritual was renamed *Zhuanshanhui*, literally "turning around the mountain gathering," by the ICH officials. The ritual was nominated as a provincial ICH in 2011 and gained state financial support to be held annually. Today, *Zhuanshanhui* has become one of the Qiang cultural markers and a touristic resource which involves people from the whole valley and many from other regions of Mao County.

Cultural heritage in China is closely related to tourism and economic development. However, "the fundamental issue is how cultural heritage is

managed, by whom, in whose interests, and with what impacts" (Blumenfield and Silverman 2013, 9). Amdo Tibetans, Gaylrong Tibetans, and Qiang practice a similar offering to the mountain deity called *Hsugdu* by the Qiang and *Labtse* by the Tibetans, but only the Qiang applied to have it registered as ICH. A Qiang official justified the certification of the offering to the mountain deity as Qiang ICH with reference to the long history of the *Hsugdu* among the Qiang and the fact that the Qiang actually applied for certification by the ICH.[17]

Labtse is very common in Amdo,[18] and was thus perhaps not considered an endangered cultural practice like those normally targeted by the ICH. There are other cultural practices registered as Tibetan ICH, such as Thangka painting, Tibetan medicine, Tibetan opera, and others.[19] *Labtse* takes place mostly in rural areas and is often in the process of being tamed by Buddhism; it might be less visible due to the dominant Buddhist culture, which is also one of the five dominant religions in China.[20] When comparing Tibetans to Qiang, the Qiang would point out that they are different from typical Tibetans believing in Buddhism, but hold an ambiguous attitude towards Tibetans from Amdo and Gaylrong practicing Bon. On the ground, this is not a big issue for the Yunshang Rrmi people, many of whom like Tibetan culture and have Tibetan relatives and friends.

The Routinization and Adaptation of the Ritual

In a sense, the objectification and routinization were rather an "adaptation" in Hobsbawm's (1992, 5) sense of taking "place for old uses in new conditions and by using old models for new purposes." According to my key informant, He Guotian, who had been the leader of the Yunshang Administrative Village for more than thirty years and the main promoter of Songping Valley's touristic development, the adapted ritual was first routinized and standardized in the 1990s as Songping Valley was being promoted as a place of interest in the county and then on the provincial level. The touristic center

17 Interview, Mao County, July 2023.

18 See, for example, Tsering 2017.

19 Telephone interview with informants from Amdo and Gyalrong Tibetan community, July 2023. China's definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage is similar to UNESCO's, but notably emphasizes the protection of ICH. Therefore, people usually get the impression that certified cultures are endangered, which is not necessarily true.

20 The CCP is officially atheist, but the government recognizes five religions. They are Buddhism, Catholicism, Daoism, Islam, and Protestantism.

only covered two villages in the valley; Yunshang Village was not included. He Guotian was from Yunshang Village, so he first formulated an adapted ritual based on the Yunshang's *Hsugdu* and then performed it on the day Songping Valley was evaluated as a national-level tourist spot (*guojiaji lüyou jingdian*) in Baila Village in 2000. At this time, different Qiang subgroups coming from different regions in Mao County gathered in Songping Valley to perform Qiang culture. The Yunshang Rrmi people finally recognized the value of their ritual and how they needed to "improve" it to make it more authentic Qiang culture.[21]

In accordance with Catherine Bell's (1997, 73) argument that the performance model of ritual emphasizes "active rather than passive roles for ritual participants who reinterpret value-laden symbols as they communicate them," the Yunshang people consciously molded, fashioned, formulated, and performed their ritual in a specific context in order to fit in with the surrounding world. The ritual also evolved in response to different themes or requirements from the government. The adapted ritual thus became a "ritualized ritual" (Douglas 2003, 3) that integrated external symbolic forms which were reinterpreted and refashioned from time to time.

Based on the traditional *Hsugdu*, He Guotian created a new *Hsugdu* at the higher village level to be held on the nineteenth day of the sixth month of the Chinese lunar calendar, which was right after the day of his own hamlet's *Hsugdu*. Villagers from the three village groups had to partake in this ritual, and outside audiences would be present. Meanwhile, the times for holding the hamlet's and the village's *Hsugdu* were also fixed. Before 1949, the time was any day of the sixth month of the lunar calendar. Everyone had to wear the unified local traditional costumes in the village-level ritual. For the convenience of visiting tourists, the village *Hsugdu* was mainly held at the foot of the mountain instead of on the mountaintop. The whole process and meaning were written down. The process was similar to that in the local rituals, but certain "special elements" from their daily life and that of other Qiang were incorporated in order to make it more standardized and to make it look more "exciting" (*renao*). For instance, special multi-voice singing, local dancing, a ritual for opening barley wine jars, jaw harp (*kouxian*) and Qiang flute (*qiangdi*) performances, traditional games, an evening campfire party, and the sacrificial slaughter of a yak were included in the ritual.

These elements were carefully selected and arranged by He Guotian and his team, and most of them were eventually recognized as Qiang ICH. Being a leader and having traveled around, he told me that he had noticed

21 Interviews, Mao County, September 2013.

the importance of "being different" or exotic in tourism. The tourists were mostly Han, so the ritual had to be exotic. Being different from Han culture was not enough; it was better also to be different from the culturally close Amdo and Gyalrong Tibetans.

With their increasing Qiang ethnic consciousness, the Yunshang Rrmi integrated other Qiang subgroups' cultural elements into the *Hsugdu* to represent their comprehensive Qiang identity. For example, the jaw harp and Qiang flute featured in the rituals as Qiang cultural markers, but I found no-one playing such instruments in their daily life. Another element was sacrificing a yak. As I mentioned above, due to the influence of Tibetan Buddhism, in the traditional ritual the Yunshang people used to release livestock in order to accumulate virtue for the next life. However, other Qiang groups, for instance the Qiang living in Heihu, would sacrifice livestock, normally a goat or a sheep, under the instruction of the Qiang ritualist *shibi* (Yu 2004). Among the Yunshang people living in the north of the Qiang area, it was the elders who practiced the ritual (La 2017). In order to make it more exotic and thrilling, and to create the semblance of a Qiang offering, the sacrifice of a yak and the distribution of its meat among the participants was added to the ritual.

The Reinterpretation of the Ritual

The turning point in the reinterpretation of the ritual came in 2000. The county government organized a performance in Songping Valley to promote it as one of the first tourism spots in Mao County. The show was held in Baila Village. All twenty-two townships in Mao County participated in the event (with the exception of Tumen Township in the eastern part of the county, where the ritual is not practiced due to the sinicization of the local population). The Yunshang Rrmi, as the representatives of Songping Valley, performed their *Hsugdu*. The *Hsugdu* had not been practiced in Baila village before the event, but upon He Guotian's suggestion, the local people built a *leahsea* and started to perform the ritual. It was another festive occasion on which the heterogeneous Qiang subgroups could witness each other's performances, get to know each other, and form and strengthen the Qiang identity. The *Hsugdu* was recognized as county-level ICH in 2003 and later, in 2011 as province-level ICH, under the term *Zhuanshanhui*. Traditionally, *Hsugdu* was held among relatives but not in turns by villages. An elder told me that it was a private "turn-taking" among relatives but not a collective "turn-taking" among villages. The new name has shifted the original meaning

away from a gathering of relatives living in different hamlets. It emphasizes the fixed collectivity of each village group or administrative village. It is reorganized according to the village but not the traditional relationship between people, which certainly reflects deep influence from the state, with its hopes that this formation could unite and strengthen the Qiang identity.

The second adaptation is the combination of paradigmatic Qiang history (Wang 2003) and the adopted body-armor-dance (*kaijiawu*). As I have mentioned, the written history of the Qiang dates back to around 1300–1100 BC. It is said that the ancient Qiang often had wars with the Han and among each other. Eventually, they lost the wars and migrated to the upper Min River. Even in the 1930s, Graham (1958) had recorded legends of the war between local tribes and the incoming Qiang. This history is preserved in the tradition of the body-armor-dance performed by villagers from Heihu, Chibusu, Sanlong, and Shaba towns. The body-armor-dance used to be danced at the funerals of local heroes and respected old people. All men wear armor, hold swords in their hands and dance in a circle. Interestingly, the Heishui Gyalrong Tibetans also practice this dance and have applied to have the practice recognized as Tibetan ICH.[22] The Yunshang decided to incorporate the body armor-dance into the *Hsugdu* and interpreted it as a ritual dance for sending warriors off to war. One elder told me that they would dance it before wars to pray for the safety of the warriors and victory in the war.[23] Yet in the hamlet-level *Hsugdu*, no such dance was practiced. The Yunshang have been continuously exposed to such historical stories and images on TV, in the county museum and in books. Perhaps due to suggestions from the ICH office, the local leaders chose to make use of these histories and stories in order to confirm and represent their identity as Qiang.

Third, the ideology of environmentalism and the state's discourse of building an ecological civilization was implanted into the ritual by the locals.[24] The Yunshang Rrmi people often interpret *Zhuanshanhui* as environmentally friendly and perceive the ritual as indicative of their wish and action to protect the environment. They often point out that their original sacred forest[25] is an important part of their religious system. If it

22 This dance among the Heishui Gyalrong is called *kasidawen* in Chinese and is interpreted as a dance to pray for the warriors' safety during conflicts. It is danced before the warriors' departure. The Yunshang people also adopted this interpretation. See below.

23 Interview, Yunshang Village, August 2013.

24 See also Toni Huber's (1997) exploration of how exiled Tibetans reflexively internalized Green Buddhism so as to represent their cultural and political identity.

25 Villagers were not allowed to go into the sacred forest in pre-socialist times. They maintained this habit until the government initiated logging in this region in 1980. One of their sacred forests

had not been for the state's logging project, the original forests would have survived until the present day, because their religion forbids humans to excessively exploit the natural world. However, due to the fact the ritual was not publicly practiced during the Cultural Revolution, and because atheist education was promoted in the education system, the Yunshang Rrmi's everyday attitudes towards the environment changed. Today, they herd yaks on the mountaintops and gather hynobius for sale in herbal medicines. It is this trend that the *Zhuanshanhui* ecological approach seeks to counter by promoting a sustainable relationship between humans and nature. It corresponds to the depiction of the green minorities and the state's promotion of an ecological civilization.

Paradox and Challenge: The Multiple Level Concerns of Cultural Security

Nowadays the Yunshang Rrmi people practice both the traditional *Hsugdu* and the adapted *Zhuanshanhui*. Yet they often expressed their multiple concerns about their cultural security related to the PRC's ethnic policy and the related program of local economic development through the promotion of minority cultures tourism. The Yunshang Rrmi were included in the Qiang nationality while actively participating in creating, routinizing, and representing the adapted Qiang culture. Today, they have already developed a relatively weak tourist industry (based on home-stay accommodation and local food) and evoked a strong sense of *minzu* pride, but at the same time, they have begun to experience a deeper insecurity about losing their local hamlet culture.

The traditional *Hsugdu* is practiced regularly. However, all four villages in Songping Valley—Yunshang, Huoji, Erbaxi, and Bailai villages—revived, developed or even invented a parallel institutionalized ritual performed on the valley level: the *Zhuanshanhui*. The date of the *Zhuanshanhui*, when it is performed, is right after the village *Hsugdu*. Erbaxi and Baila village did not practice *Hsugdu* before the *Zhuanshanhui*, but they built *leahsea* and started to make offerings to the mountain deity after that. From 2000 to 2018, the adapted ritual was always funded by the government, and it

was reclassified by the government as the timber forest of the administrative village due to its location, so this sacred forest was logged by the government and the villagers themselves. However, this is not a common situation. Most sacred forests and sacred trees have been preserved until today; only the common forests were cut down.

was always held in Yunshang Village. After He Guotian passed away in 2018, the four villages started to hold the ritual in turn—Huoji Village in 2020, Erbaxi Village in 2021, and Baila Village in 2022. Due to He Guotian's efforts and the Yunshang Rrmi's maintenance of the tradition, villagers from the four villages were often invited to perform together in the other *Zhuanshanhui* in the valley.

The main differences between the local *Hsugdu* and the adapted *Zhuanshanhui* in Yunshang Village are summarized in Figure 8.1:

	Hsugdu	*Zhuanshanhui*
Participants	villagers in a hamlet	villagers in the administrative village, sometimes the whole valley, always with outsiders, e.g., performers from other Qiang subgroups, officials, tourists, journalists, researchers, etc.
Location	*leahsea* on the mountaintop	*leahsea* at the foot of the mountain
Ritual process	traditional ritual process of offering to the mountain	traditional ritual process and cultural performances from other Qiang subgroups from outside the valley
Main purpose	pleasing local mountain deity and to prey for the hamlet's prosperity and fertility	representing Qiang to outsiders, inheriting the ICH and attracting tourists

Figure 8.1: Differences between the local Hsugdu and the adapted Zhuanshanhui

However, the coexistence of the two versions of the ritual seems to confirm Hobsbawm's (1992, 14) idea of the paradox of inventing a tradition, which is that modern nations and their impedimenta generally claim to be the very opposite of novel and constructed. When the Yunshang Rrmi claim that *Zhuanshanhui* is their cultural inheritance, they are in fact rooting a constructed past in remote antiquity; and when they wear their daily clothes—normally men wear factory-made modern clothes and woman both modern and traditional clothes—and practice *Hsugdu* with no outsiders, that is their true self and convention. Their distinctiveness makes them particularly attractive to outsiders. Yet due to the mutual imitation and competition among the sub-groups (see also Jan Karlach's chapter in this volume) and even among villages in the same valley, and due to the government's involvement, the adapted ritual is in danger of becoming more and more similar to the other Qiang rituals. For example, some of my Yunshang

informants think that the offering to the mountain deity at the county level is an imitation or replication of their ritual. I was told that this was because one man from the village was working in a tourist spot in Mao County—the Chinese Ancient Qiang Castle (*zhongguo guqiangcheng*)—and taught them the ritual process. Several men said he was a cultural traitor to the village. In fact, the ritual at the county level combines elements from several Qiang subgroups, but such scandals highlight people's fear of losing their local cultural particularity, and their consciousness of the ownership of culture in the growing ICH recognition and cultural tourism.

Cultural property has been widely discussed in relation to the commodification of ethnicity, the "native" cultural products and practices. Cultural identity has been increasingly claimed as property by its living heirs, who reconstruct, brand and sell it self-consciously in consumable forms (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009, 29), such as the *Zhuanshanhui*. "Who owns the native culture" has also become the object of contention in multiple levels, such as tensions between the "cultural traitor" or the promoter of *Zhuanshanhui* He Guotian and other villagers, different Qiang communities, or even between Qiang and Tibetans. Yet, as I have mentioned above, in a culturally hybrid and poor region, the contention can be more critical, as power relations and individual agencies all influence the results. The sense of cultural ownership increases their sense of cultural (in)security.

Another correspondent question is about cultural authenticity. The Yunshang people claim to represent the "authentic" Qiang culture, although they reproduce the process of the ritual, reinterpret its meanings and accept the new *Zhuanshanhui* as an authentic form of Qiang culture. Currently, the concept of authenticity has taken the evolutionary nature of culture and heritage into consideration. Authenticity is thus seen as a process of mixing rather than a static object (Xie 2010). Adaptation of the Rrmi ritual involves different stakeholders, the Qiang communities, the outsiders and the government. According to Xie, authenticity is a mutable concept that evolves in various stages of ethnic tourism development. In the stage of "situational adaptations" tourism can inject new meanings and/or values into current cultures, and eventually culture and tourism become inseparable (Xie 2010, 44). Tourism development as an inseparable goal of ICH recognition thus brings new values and practices also to Yunshang Rrmi. Within the Qiang nationality state discourse, they lean to be the more "authentic" Qiang. As a result, Rrmi and Qiang identities interact, entangle, and become interchangeable.

Within the context of Chinese nation, the Qiang feel increasing cultural insecurity through the accelerating sinicization, demonstrated in particular through the loss of the local Rrmi language. Children are educated in

Mandarin, and as a result the youngest generation has almost stopped speaking Rrmi, although they can understand it. "If you lose the language, then you will lose the most important part of the culture," the elders often say, "the culture will only be an empty shell."[26] The same seems to be happening with the ritual.

Simultaneously, due to development and globalization, young people—especially those with an education, notably woman—tend to leave for the cities, which endangers the preservation of the common cultural heritage of the Rrmi. Recording the *Hsugdu* thus becomes an acceptable way of preserving the local culture, in case it disappears one day. In this respect, the Yunshang people embrace their Qiang identity to maintain some differences from the majority Han.

Conclusion

The simultaneous promotion of both identities (that of the Chinese nation and those of minority nationalities) according to the "diverse unity" (*duoyuan yiti*) principle can both enhance and diminish the cultural security of China's ethnic groups. The Yunshang Rrmi's worship of the mountain deity is a major component of their cultural identity. At the same time, the Rrmi are one of the constituents of the Qiang nationality, together with many other subgroups defined by their own respective cultures. They are also a constituent part of the Chinese nation and Chinese culture (*Zhonghua wenhua*). In general, ethnic minorities need to preserve their distinct culture to present their cultural identity on the one hand, while on the other, they need to integrate themselves into the Chinese nation through "interaction, exchange, and fusion" (*jiaowang*, *jiaoliu*, *jiaorong*; Jin et al. 2011; see also the introductory chapter by Jarmila Ptáčková and Ondřej Klimeš). Meanwhile, the state encourages minority regions to develop their local economies mainly by advancing ethnic tourism. Cultural distinctiveness and authenticity play an important role in this form of tourism. In these situations, local communities can feel confident about their ethnic cultures but also experience feelings of cultural insecurity. When facing the majority Han people, local communities can fear assimilation due to the encroachment of Han culture and hope to keep the mystique of their culture; when facing other sub-groups included in the same minority nationality, they worry that their distinctive culture will be imitated or appropriated. As for the Yunshang Rrmi, they consciously preserve their cultural practices in the form of the

26 Interview with local male informant aged sixty-one, Yunshang Village, 2013.

Hsugdu in order to distinguish themselves from neighboring communities of Han and Tibetans, but they are also ready to identify themselves with the Qiang nationality and Chinese culture through the modified cultural practice of the *Zhuanshanhui*.

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