9. Against the Flattening of Ridges and Ravines: (Dis)locating Cultural Security through Writing with the Yi of Southwest China

Jan Karlach

Abstract: The Yi nationality, an ethnopolitical category constructed during the 1950s nationality recognition campaign, is typically portrayed by the Chinese state and its citizens as a coherent ethnic group with shared cultural characteristics. This clichéd depiction reflects the state's top-down cultural security imperative to present each nationality as a building block of the Chinese nation. However, the official Chinese narrative of ethnic coherence starts to unravel when viewed from a bottom-up perspective built on the everyday practices of the Yi and non-Yi elites as well as of other stakeholders within the Yi nationality. Drawing on longitudinal and multi-sited anthropological fieldwork, this chapter offers three ethnographic vignettes from Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou provinces that reveal how ritual practitioners and ordinary people from different Yi ethnic sub-branches and localities seek to master the hegemonic voice within a wider "Yi-osphere."

Keywords: Yi, Southwest China, hegemony, polyphonic writing, metaphysical critique

During most of 2018, I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Xichang (in Nuosu-Yi language Labbu Orro), an administrative seat of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (Nuo. Nimu) in Sichuan Province. One morning, I was abruptly awoken by my endlessly buzzing smartphone indicating streams of messages pouring into one of the discussion groups of Weixin[1]

1 The ubiquitous app developed by Chinese corporation Tencent combining messenger, social network, digital wallet, and micro-programs for various other uses.

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titled "Yi Culture Forum" (*Yizu wenhua luntan*). Since the regional variants of the internally diverse Yi language are often mutually unintelligible—with many individuals designated as members of the Yi nationality (*minzu*) not even able to speak any of these variants—the online debate concerning the equally diverse Yi scripts used across southwest China was conducted in Mandarin. The debater from Guizhou Province, a founder of the "Traditional Yi Script Study Group" (*chuantong Yiwen xuexiqun*)[2]—an initiative for recognizing the classical Nasu-Yi script as a standard for the Yi language variant dominant in Guizhou Province—argued that the new modern script used in Sichuan Province's Liangshan, which aspires to become the written standard for the whole Yi nationality, was fake. He made this claim even though a couple of years earlier, the standard script had been expanded by the inclusion of some non-Liangshan characters. Others agreed with his point. One debater from Sichuan, who endorsed the usage of this new standard script, challenged the proponent of the old writing system for "sleeping within his own culture" (*shui zai ziji wenhua limian*). "Yi culture must leave the mountains and meet the cultures of other nationalities. Only by doing so can it survive," he reiterated several times. The Yunnan debaters in the group remained silent.

The foundation of this Weixin group lay in a premise that the Yi were "not united" (*Yizu bu tuanjie*)—an alleged precondition for the decline of Yi culture and a major obstacle to the preservation of its "traditional form" (*chuantongde xingshi*). However, in the online discussion of these Yi culture experts and enthusiasts, many articulations of what does and does not count as the traditional form were mutually antithetical. After one hour, the conversation began to die out. Disappointed with this usual "gridlock" ending, one of the avatars shifted his attention from the screen of his smartphone to one of many local mountain slopes and went to graze his sheep. Through his smartphone camera lens, the chat group's wall became flooded with pictures and short video clips displaying pristine scenes of nature dotted by his livestock. At that moment, I reflected on my years of extensive travel around southwest China and my naive attempt to uncover presupposed components of Yi culture's structural assemblage and its eventual failure.

The need for a careful and reflexive treatment of "culture" in our academic writings is immensely relevant to the discussion about cultural security which took place at the late 2017 Prague gathering this volume stems from. This chapter points out that if not treated carefully, especially on the

2 The group was functioning on Tencent's earlier platform QQ.

local level, culture and cultural security can disintegrate into a device of hegemony—the consent of those being led to accept the worldviews and values of the leaders (Bates 1975, 352). Since the contemporary world is populated by nation-states that, logically, embody nationalism, cultural security works on the international level as a means for their rulers to maintain a certain worldview in competition with those of other states. This is especially visible in borderlands, where these worldviews most often collide through the local ethnic population which two or more mutually competing states share, and on which they graft their differing visions of cultural representation. The same holds true for minority groups within nation-states vis-à-vis not only the majority but also other *locally* competing ethnic groups. While the consent of minority populations to the PRC's governance is questionable, e.g., in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia, for the Yi, the situation manifests different sets of complexities. I am going to argue that various Yi elites work on positioning themselves to align with the PRC's nationalist discourse and eventually becoming a coherent, united, and singular Yi nationality as an inalienable part of the Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu*). However, the inquiry into everyday life will show that various local stakeholders compete for hegemony over the Yi cultural representations using resources provided by the state, which is dominated by the Han majority. In short, adding to the definition of culture and cultural security presented in the introductory chapter to this volume by Jarmila Ptáčková and Ondřej Klimeš, this chapter shows the cultural and identitarian representations and the attached concepts as possible means of competition for the state's resources on a local level (see also Bian Simei's and Yang Minghong and Zeng Benxiang's chapters).

The idea of competition between various "races," as the current nationalities were viewed in a different utilization of the term *minzu* during the rule of the Republic of China (1911–49; see Leibold 2006, 186), is not a novelty. Even though the racial connotations were dropped, this idea was transplanted via Marxist historical materialism into the socialist ideology of the PRC. In his writings, Mao Zedong praised all the nationalities of China as having equal merit in the development of Chinese civilization. He viewed the Han majority as a result of blood-mixing (*hunxue*) between nationalities over the *longue durée* (Mao [1954] 1977, 278). In his recent book, Stroup (2022, 7) turns to an analysis of intra-nationality competition. He persuasively argues that the CCP sparks contestation of the boundaries of Hui identity and that the intra-group competition over the religious notion of purity (*qingzhen*) attached to ethnic practices distracts the ethnic actors from a possible contestation of the state policies. As this chapter will eventually

show, the case of the Yi, who also possess their own conceptualization of purity, might seem similar to the case of Hui at first sight. However, the geographical, historical, and cultural context makes their case radically different.

The Birth of "Yi Culture"

Following the mega-project of nationalities' recognition-cum-classification (*minzu shibie*), the academic disciplines of PRC-style ethnology (*minzuxue*) and the strongly aligned ethnohistory (*minzushi*) both have their foundation in the method of (a)historical "downstreaming" (Shin 2006, 17), portraying every nationality (an ethnopolitical category) as rooted in history. As Kraef (2014, 147) persuasively argues, the present Yi-related cultural discourse originates in the pre-PRC works of Han-Chinese scholars: the ethnolinguist Ma Xueliang, the Harvard-trained anthropologist Lin Yaohua, and, I would add, the often-overlooked sociologist Ma Changshou. During the 1980s, their works became the building blocks of a scholarly cultural revivalist-constructionist movement which later blossomed into the establishment of the discipline of Yi studies (*Yixue*).

The Lolopo-Yi sociologist Liu Yaohan[3] was the first leader of this movement. In the unitary preface to his edited series *Collection of the Research on Yi Nationality Culture* (*Yizu wenhua yanjiu congshu*; see Liu 1986), he encouraged his colleagues, students, and acolytes to conduct research in all corners of the Yi-osphere of southwest China. His principal motivations were twofold: firstly, to shake off the unfavorable labels the Yi have acquired throughout history—especially during the Cultural Revolution, during which they were viewed as backward ex-slaveholders—by concentrating on positive cultural aspects; and secondly, to engage in the PRC's nationalist discourse by positioning the Yi as an essential integral part of the Chinese nation. Both these goals were achieved through an ambitious project of discursive social engineering, an essentialist de-fragmentation of the state-designated Yi communities scattered across Sichuan, Guizhou, and Yunnan[4] provinces. Liu and his research partners not only pictured them as sharing

3 Although he didn't have a doctorate, the native of Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan Province is often honorifically called "The first Yi Professor." He was a major voice in the academic-cum-political affairs of the Yi nationality.

4 99 percent of Yi Nationality members reside in this area, with small pockets in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and several related communities in Vietnam and Laos.

a common genealogical root but also argued that the originally unified Yi are the earliest founders of the whole Chinese civilization.

The remnants of the pan-Yi momentum of Liu's "Yi Culture" (*Yizu wenhua*)—a construct that is written with a capital "C" for the purposes of this chapter—still very much resonate within the Yi cultural and historical discourse (see Li 2009; Qiesa 2002). The notion of an ancient culture dating back tens of thousands of years even survived several persuasive waves of deconstruction (see Harrell 1995; Harrell and Li 2003). Liu's Yi holism, however, was destined not to last long due to Lin Yaohua's decades-old designation of the Liangshan Nuosu-Yi as the most ancient and authentic "archetypal Yi" (Mullaney 2010, 112). Together with their relative isolation from the surrounding world—relative to the other Yi regions, which had already been under the rule of various Chinese dynasties for centuries—this notion also nurtured the perception of the Nuosu-Yi as exceptionally ancient and thus most authentic among their "Hanified" counterparts from other regions. The PRC's scientific scholarly authorities of the 1950s thus linked their discourse with the Nuosu-Yi's essentialist ideas of purity (see Pan 1997)—a superiority of former hard-bone aristocrats (Nuo. *nuoho*) over commoners (Nuo. *quho*), whose bones are softened by their intermarriage with non-aristocratic clans or even non-Nuosu-Yi populations. The Yi have continued to hold these ideas until today and use them as the basis for their clan-based social order (Nuo. *cyvi*). The social scientists thus paradoxically began by emulating an unscientific racial concept, but then failed to fully replace "bones" with "culture."

Capitalizing on the teleological nature of Marxist historical materialism (with social evolutionism as one of its components) and its principal role in the PRC's ideology, the kernel of Yi studies found a firm seat in Liangshan during the 1990s. Other contributors to the region's importance were the high density of the Yi population vis-à-vis other ethnicities (the highest in the country, in fact) and the limited integration of the local population into state structures relative to other Yi, which made the state prioritize them in its ethnocultural politics. The Nuosu-Yi ethnologists Bamo Ayi and Bamo Qubumo—daughters of the locally influential cadre-official Bamo Erha and later gatekeepers and close collaborators of Professor Stevan Harrell (see Bamo et al. 2007), who significantly contributed to making their (Liangshan) voice heard on the international stage—articulated a need for the urgent preservation of the allegedly diminishing (Nuosu-)Yi culture. Due to the intervention of Liu Yaohua in the early 1950s, the Shynra Yi language variant of Liangshan's Xide County (Nuo. Xiddo Ladda), along with the writing system distilled from the scroll-books of the Liangshan's literate ritualists,

was established as Modern Yi (*Xiandai Yiyu*) for the whole Yi nationality (Kraef 2013). This further accentuated Liangshan's central and to a certain degree privileged position within the discourse on "Yi Culture."

While the establishment of the Yi nationality as an ethnic container for the unification of various Yi populations was from its outset viewed as a political *fait accompli*, its further molding spanned the following decades right up to the present day. Recently, the continuous top-down development of a collective Yi identity has seemed to follow Ma Rong's (2004) state-level holistic methodology proposed as a way of achieving ideal relationships between the nationalities through the de-politicization of the nationality concept. This culturalization found its foothold in China's Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Program (*Zhongguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu*; CICHP), effectively the PRC's localization of UNESCO's intangible heritage-oriented program. Naturally, both share the same ontological problem, as they place a much greater emphasis on preserving (thus freezing) "high cultures" as living fossils (*huohuashi*; see Mao 2013, 77) than on thinking of culture as the practice of everyday life (Williams 1965, 61–62). With substantial help from (cultural) anthropology, these projects play a significant role in the categorization and hierarchization of cultures (Farquhar and Lai 2014), as per the duality between civilization and barbarism and/or the refinement of the elite vs. the vulgarity of the lower classes (Jenks 2005, 7–8). Undoubtedly driven by good intentions, many Yi scholars seem to unreflexively take part in this project, which benefits a PRC cultural enterprise that generates desirable cultural representations but simultaneously risks glossing over the differences simmering under the holistic Yi ethnopolitical umbrella.

Metaphysical Critique of Yi Cultures: Theoretical and Methodological Orientations

To avoid the constructivism of symbolic and interpretive anthropology, my approach is inspired by a proposal of Mark Hobart (2000) to treat anthropology not as a structuring power behind "culture," but rather as (everyday) practice functioning as a radical metaphysical critique. It is practiced by tapping into presuppositions revolving around the interactions and categorizations—for the purposes of this chapter, the practices of everyday ethnicity (Brubaker et al. 2006, 169) vis-à-vis its official cultural representations—that are material rather than abstract. This then involves an inquiry into what individual people do and say on particular situated occasions to uncover the motivation for their acts. Their consequences then

provide material for an authorial analysis. It is thus essential to write not *about* the culture in particular ways but *with* those who supply us with data (Herold 2000)—in other words, to practice relationality and correspondence (Ingold 2008, 83–89)—which we then turn into our ethnographic artifacts.

This chapter ethnographically analyses the data I collected during my numerous travels to show how the PRC navigates its cultural security concerning the Yi, and how various Yi elites approach the internal differences within the Yi nationality across different regions. It adds to previous studies that mostly dealt with Yi communities in one locality (Harrell 2001; Mueggler 2001; Névot 2014). It looks at everyday discursive practices, in which the different Yi communities creatively utilize essentialist representations of Yi culture. Simultaneously, it explores how writing—a tool of discursive practice *par excellence*—could avoid falling for a particular strain among these power-laden interests. By inquiring into the presuppositions of all sides, my writing uncovers mechanisms of various hegemonic aspirations among the Yi. Simultaneously incorporating all voices encountered along the way and their critical assessment, it thus facilitates a dialogic rather than a dialectical approach—something that can be emulated in other cases similar to that of the Yi.

At the center of the following three ethnographic vignettes assembled between 2016 and 2018 in Yunnan, Guizhou, and Sichuan provinces are the text-reading ritual practitioners, the specialized Yi vocation I usually call "literati-ritualist." Since this chapter does not deal with the Yi vocation of illiterate ritualists, the male shamans and female shamanesses who depend on initiatory illness and visions, I abbreviate this designation to "ritualists." Without being designated as members of the Yi nationality, these culturally and geographically distant individuals would probably never meet each other, and I would never have met them. I connected these localities using a particular ethnographic research practice (Hobart 1996), "performing multiple arrivals and departures, collecting data from incidental conversations and encounters" (Schein 2000, 28). More than "fill[ing] the remaining blank spaces of main research" which would be supposed to provide "equally relevant information" (Schein 2000, 28), this method generated the core data for this text. The following account is not a structuralist quest for Yi culture's "*true* version, or the *earlier* one" (Lévi-Strauss 1955, 435) but rather an inquiry into possible ways to conceive of Yi "cultures" (plural emphasized) without a need to erase their local characteristics.

Depending on the local Yi language variant, the ritualists are called *bimo*, *bumo*, *beima*, *abi*, and various other designations. According to their geographic setting, the ritualists are literate in the local variant of the Yi

script (assuming there is one, as some Yi regions do not have a literary tradition) or at least in the Chinese writing system. Ritualists serve a broad range of needs, from healing and reverting an individual's or a family's life journey that has been influenced by the evil gluttonous ghosts back towards luck and prosperity to performing post-mortuary rites. They are treated with tremendous respect, which endows them with significant power. Therefore, they function as local elites, the spiritual leaders of their communities. As such, they are central to both Yi everyday life and "Yi Culture," with its vital component of "Bimo Culture" (*Bimo wenhua*). Discursively, they are portrayed as village intellectuals, psychologists, astrologists, historians, and, most importantly, carriers of Yi cultural heritage (see Aniu and Jilang 2007; Bamo 2000; Kraef 2014).

Performative Unity through Ritualists: The State's Cultural Security through Materialized Academic Discourse

In mid-March, I attended an event called 2016's China's Yi Nationality Festival of Ancestral Offering (*2016 nian Zhonghua Yizu jizujie*). For the last decade, it had been organized in the capital of Weishan Hui and Yi Autonomous County in the southern part of Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture (Yunnan Province) and advertised as an integral part of the local Weishan cultural and culinary festival. Both activities were presented as "traditional activities of the nationalities" (*minzude chuantong huodong*) with Mandarin Chinese as a *lingua franca*. Upon my arrival in Weishan, I found out that while the food festival is open to the public and every visitor can mingle with locals in the streets of the local "ancient town" (*guzhen*), the offering to ancestors was a separate event for VIPs: scholars, policymakers, journalists, and other guests of honor. This disparity made me remember one of the definitions of official culture as "folk culture from which the folk had been banished and replaced by its perverse double" (Lachmann et al. 1988, 118)—the staged "folklore" that disembowels the "authentic" everyday culture (for more on "staged" and "authentic" culture, see Yang Minghong and Zeng Benxiang's chapter).

The sacrifices were about to be performed in the temple atop the Daoist sacred Weibao Mountain (*Weibaoshan*). Here stood the first in a line of figures from the pantheon of the Yi nationality's primordial ancestors, the locally revered Xinuluo. He is the historically recorded founder and the first ruler of the Nanzhao Kingdom, a multi-ethnic non-Chinese polity co-existing in parallel with the Tang dynasty between 742 and 906 (Backus

1981). Weishan is being represented as its first center. To be allowed to enter, I had engaged in some hasty networking, which led me to get to know the daughter of Mr. Cha—the local authority and organizer of the event, whom she described as "having a heart that beats for Yi culture"—who granted me with a VIP card. The next day, I was driven to the top of the mountain in a van and found myself standing in front of the temple gates as a part of a massive crowd. Security workers prevented individuals without a pass from entering. Others patrolled the forested slopes around the temple to discourage onlookers from peeking inside. At the gate I encountered unforeseen problems: I had a pass, but I lacked a food coupon, which disqualified me from entering. Dismayed, I called my friend Jjihxa, a relatively young ritualist, who was here with a representative group (*daibiaotuan*) from far-flung Liangshan. "You see? This is the power of the leader (*lingdao*)," Jjihxa proudly glossed his order to security to let me in even without the required coupon.

Visitors, organizers, and media representatives found their places and the walls of the temple started to resonate with the voice of Mr. Cha, who welcomed guests from near and far and praised the achievements of the Yi and their ancient culture. Then he smoothly transitioned to a declamation of the names of Chinese Yi Studies Societies (*Yixuehui*) based not only in southwestern cities but also outside the Yi areas—as far afield as Jiangsu Province or Beijing. The declamation of the Yi-related knowledge-production research units was a ritual of its own and took approximately the same amount of time as the main event, which immediately followed it. As five high-pitched trumpet blasts suddenly resonated through the area, a group of seven ritualists entered the stage. As well as the local representative, others came from Liangshan (Sichuan Province), Chuxiong Yi Autonomous Prefecture and Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture (both Yunnan Province), and Liupanshui Prefecture (Guizhou Province). After a short performance, the ritualist from Shuangbai County (Chuxiong) presented a spear to the statue of Xinuluo, all under the supervision of the local *abi.* Without any Yi scroll-books, the *abi* held to his Daoist texts written in Classical Chinese. He generally resembled a Daoist monk. The representatives of Chuxiong and Liupanshui worshipped a pig's head with incense, a practice which Jjihxa labeled "purely Han." Only the ritualists from Liangshan, Honghe, and Liupanshui held the scrolls and books written in different variants of Yi script.

After the act of sacrifice, the guests were allowed to come closer and observe the circle of the ritualists sitting in front of Xinuluo's statue. Jjihxa immediately remarked that the representative of Liangshan was

fake because he practiced at Xichang's (in)famous Shimazi Marketplace and did not come from Jjihxa's native Limu Moggu. Jjihxa deemed the rest fake as well, simply because they did not come from Liangshan. "They know nothing. They have like … Two scroll-books! We possess hundreds of them," he remarked. Designating those not coming from Liangshan as inauthentic using labels such as "fake" and "Han" and rhetorically clinging to a particular region, Jjihxa performed his vision of authenticity by emulating the Nuosu-Yi essentialist ideas of purity. He projected them onto the ritualist vocation, suggesting his authenticity and superiority over the others. Set in the lower part of the temple, a sumptuous, open-air dinner followed. Liters of local spirits were poured into tiny glasses from big metal kettles. Mr. Cha went from one table to another and toasted the guests. While doing so, he kept singing a refrain from the "Song of the Yi" (*Yiren zhi ge*), the lyrics of which kept blaring in an endless loop from the speakers in the background. Originally a poem by a famous Liangshan Nuosu-Yi Sinophone poet Jidi Majia, it was later turned into this popular song by the Liangshan Nuosuphone world music group *Shanying zuhe*.

Through several components of this high-profile event, Xinuluo from western Yunnan Province was connected with the Yi mythological ancestor Apu Ddumu, who allegedly lived in the far-flung Wumeng Mountains of northeast Yunnan Province's Zhaotong Prefecture and the northwest of Guizhou Province's Bijie Prefecture. The event thus performatively united all the Yi by bridging the cultural as well as the geographical distances between them. Albeit not explicitly, the event was also connected to a great debate of 1939, when Gu Jiegang feared the dissolution of Chinese territory following the Japanese intervention in northeast China and argued that the Chinese nation should be viewed and talked about as one. Contributing to the debate, Fu Sinian ([1939] 2003, 205) feared that after Siam, a Japanese ally, changed its name to Thailand, it could claim large territories of southwest China—in particular, those regions inhabited by a population that was culturally related to Thailand's ethnic majority. This population was later classified in China as the Dai nationality. Chen Bisheng ([1939] 2016, 115–18) was quick to reassure his colleagues that there was no "national question" (*minzu wenti*) in Yunnan Province (for more on the conceptualizations of the Chinese nation in the Republic of China [1912–49], see the introductory chapter to this volume by Jarmila Ptáčková and Ondřej Klimeš). Two decades later, this view was sealed by ethnologist Jiang Yingliang ([1959] 1992, 234–60). Studying both the Yi and the Dai nationalities, he compiled an essay claiming that historically, the rulers of Nanzhao were Yi and not

Dai.[5] The invented tradition (Hobsbawm 2000) in Weishan thus re-animates the political position of the PRC every year. For this purpose, the cohesion of the internally diverse Yi nationality and their inclusion in the Chinese nation (the "*Zhonghua*" descriptor in the title of the event evidenced this) is a cornerstone of the state's cultural security in southwest China.

A Local Institution and Its Way of Countering the Hegemony

My subsequent tracing of the two Yi cultural threads back to their respective localities sheds more light on the nature, mechanisms, and complex entanglements of the actors participating in the intra-Yi competition. After returning to the city, I met the *bumo* from Liupanshui in front of the local Confucian temple near my hotel. Accompanied by his young disciple, he mentioned that in Liupanshui's neighboring Weining Yi, Hui, and Miao Autonomous County,[6] there is a vocational school for *bumo*. To date, it seems to be the only full-time vocational institution for Yi ritualists. Similar endeavors were reported elsewhere, yet they functioned only on a pop-up basis (see He 2017). In August 2016, I took the only direct slow train from Chengdu to Weining, which picturesquely traversed the ridges and ravines of the Wumeng Mountains.

Guizhou Bijie Yi Language Bilingual Vocational School is located on the top floor of the Guizhou Vocational College of Industry and Trade near Cao Hai Lake. Upon entering, it was very quiet. The school spanned two floors and contained classrooms, a library, and a dormitory. In the classrooms, clusters of students crammed the local photocopied *bumo* books for the upcoming exams, some of them smoking. The walls were adorned exclusively with writings in the local Weining variant of the classical Nasu-Yi script. A poster with a busy schedule was plastered on the wall near the entrance doors of the classrooms. The curriculum ran every day of the week with a reduced workload during the weekends. Mornings were usually dedicated to theory—memorizing the characters and texts—and afternoons were reserved for the practical part, the simulation of ritual performances.

5 This claim is being modestly contested by the Shan—the same population as the Dai nationality, only using a different ethnonym outside of the PRC's borders—of both Myanmar and Thailand (see Liang 2010; Wyatt 2003). The contestation was very much alive in Shan State of Myanmar during my visit to Hsipaw in early 2014. However, the greater discursive power of the PRC ensures that their claim has almost no scholarly-cum-political traction.

6 Part of Bijie Prefecture in Guizhou Province.

According to Mr. Awi, a graduate of the school and now its employee, the youngest student was sixteen years old and the oldest was sixty-seven. In addition to the majority of the local Nasu-Yi students and a considerably smaller minority from the Yi communities of neighboring Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, there were also two Han students. "The older students come here to deepen their knowledge, as they are already quite skilled in their craft," explained my guide. The founder of the school, whose surname was Lu, introduced himself as a *bumo* who had simultaneously worked for many years in local government. The three-year study program, he explained, is being offered free of charge—including lodging and meals—and without any need to take an entrance exam. Because the institution is connected to the multi-dimensional, state-driven poverty alleviation campaign, it targets young males from rural, income-disadvantaged families. Until today, however, the project has depended every year on financial support from the private sector and donors. The governmental support connected to poverty alleviation efforts comprises only a minor part of its total budget.

Even though there was a demand for teachers from other Yi areas, the majority were locals. One of the older teachers, whose surname was Wang, was a well-respected ritualist from a local lineage. Before the 1960s, he attended a clan school of his relatives and, as he put it, gained his knowledge through very harsh educational methods. The school's founder also managed to amass quite a vast collection of classical texts—the legacy of the local translation-oriented practice, the pride of Guizhou Yi Studies. Mr. Awi remarked that Guizhou focuses on translation because a lot of local classics survived the Cultural Revolution. Now, under Wang's leadership, many of them were being canonized into the local teaching material. Jjihxa, the *bimo* from Liangshan who visited the Weishan rite, told me that he was also invited to become a teacher here. His monthly salary would have been around eight thousand yuan. He turned the offer down. Officially, the biggest issue for him was the long-term commitment and the need to move to Weining. In reality, he did not like the fact that the whole curriculum would be taught exclusively in the local Nasu-Yi language variant. Weining thus did not suit his vision of how the "Bimo Culture" should be represented.

Successful graduates of the school could obtain two certificates. Upon graduation, the school issues its diploma. Moreover, if the graduate passes a separate, higher exam in front of a commission of locally respected *bumo*, he is granted a "*bumo* certificate" (*bumozheng*). Mr. Awi admitted that even though the process of learning is arduous and stressful, it is almost impossible to make a living exclusively by being a *bumo*—even if graduates are often recruited as official performers during events and campaigns promoting

ethnic unity (*minzu tuanjie*) or CICHP-related activities. "The students also need to learn a trade, or some other occupation to sustain themselves and their future families financially," reflected Mr. Awi.

The region of northwest Guizhou thus provided a differently positioned narrative concerning the ritualists and their role in the cultural security of their Yi region. The non-profit institution linked the bottom-up approach of the local *bumo* to the state-driven programs. Simultaneously, it remained deeply rooted in the Nasu-Yi-dominated locality to the point of not only partially rejecting the homogenizing Liangshan-based canon of "Yi Culture" but also exploring ways to subvert it. This became evident during one of my visits to Xinhua Bookstore in Liangshan's Xichang, where I came across a new textbook titled "366 Yi Conversational Sentences" (Pu and Yang 2017). Written under the patronage of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, it constituted one part of the series focusing on the representative languages of all fifty-five minority nationalities in the PRC. The Nuosu-Yi script of Liangshan is treated with a lack of interest when acting as a standard beyond Liangshan. However, the textbook represented a counterculture, since it featured Guizhou's Nasu-Yi language variant written in Latin alphabet-based transcription and was disseminated through bookstores in Liangshan. According to the vendor, I was one of the first buyers, if not the first buyer, to have appeared in the months after it had filled the shelves of the Yi-language book section. The indifference towards each other's language variants was mutual. The Yi regions beyond Liangshan thus strive to maintain their local cultural security by being passive about or outright oppositional towards the Yi official language and script.[7] Remarkably, the school in northwest Guizhou was willing to engage with texts from other Yi areas, but only after their integration into the local curriculum.

Power of the Clan: Everyday Polyphony and Competition in the Marketplace

My 2018 fieldwork concerned the *bimo* practicing in Xichang's Shimazi Marketplace. The ritualists residing in the prefectural center originated

7 One notable exception was the streets of Mengzi in Honghe in Yunnan Province. I found during my numerous visits that the standardized Yi script derived from Liangshan was increasingly present on the public street signs. However, upon inquiry, no local Yi could read it, as it did not reflect the phonetics of the local Yi language variant. In fact, the script simply uses the phonetics of standard Liangshan-based modern Yi to reflect the pronunciation of the Chinese characters written under it.

from various places in Liangshan and spoke one of the three Liangshan Yi language variants. Because vocabulary and language habits also differed between these variants, the *bimo* had to occasionally switch to the local Liangshan version of Sichuanese Mandarin when communicating among themselves as well as with some of their clients, who did not come from the same area as them. The ritualists used to occupy Binhe Street, which cut through the local lively wholesale Shimazi Marketplace—known among the ritualists in Nuosu-Yi as *bimo nyi dde*, "a place of the *bimo*"—that existed here for decades. Between 2016 and 2018, a wide, four-lane motorway was constructed in the marketplace's original location. Moving to the opposite bank of the local river, the ritualists occupied a place formerly filled with old buildings. After the Xichang authorities tore them down in the city's initial phase of gentrification, the place turned into an empty construction site suitable for *bimo* activities—rituals, text-copying, paraphernalia-making, etc.

Shimazi featured many different *bimo* interacting on daily basis in a very narrow space. Therefore, it functioned as a polyphonic place hosting a plurality of independent and unmerged voices, each of equal validity (Bakhtin 1984, 6–7). As Swancutt (2012, 60–61) points out, invitations to perform rituals from the *bimo* clients constitute a currency reflecting the amount of accumulated power and fame within the Nuosu-Yi "economy of ordeals." This fosters competition between the *bimo*, for which they utilize any accessible resources, including various platforms of the Han-dominated Chinese state. Among many ritualists of different ranks populating the Shimazi Marketplace, Vyvy and Vusa—each speaking the same local Yi language variant but originating from different clans—both received multiple invitations every day. They also possessed dozens of scroll-books written in an ancient script. Therefore, they were perceived as the local "big *bimo*." While some of their *bimo* colleagues praised the standardized Liangshan script, Vyvy and Vusa deemed it "fake."

Vusa possessed two significant advantages over Vyvy. Firstly, like Jjihxa, with whom he shared his clan surname, he originated from Limu Moggu. Dubbed the "Homeland of Bimo" (*Bimo zhi xiang*),[8] this region boasted the highest percentage of practicing ritualists (Cai et al. 2015). When I inquired into the origin of the designation, Vusa explained that it dates to 2005, when the 4th International Yi Studies Conference was held in Limu Moggu.

8 In a recent turn of events, Limu Moggu's current government, under the somewhat renewed over-emphasis on "resisting feudal superstitions" (*dizhi fengjian mixin*), rebranded the county as "Homeland of Intangible Cultural Heritage" (*feiyi zhi xiang*).

"After Moggu was proclaimed as the Homeland of Bimo, we did not need any more conferences," he reflected, explaining the role of academia in the whole process in response to my question about why few international conferences had followed since. Secondly, while practicing at Shimazi Marketplace, Vusa was simultaneously registered as the CICHP's highest, state-level Nuosu-Yi cultural heritage representative transmitter (*guojiaji daibiaoxing chuanchengren*).

My insight into the relationships between different ritualists deepened further after I learned about a project called "The Sacred Land of Nuosu Bimo" (Nuo. *Nuosu bimo pu*). It had been established on the outskirts of Xichang by three well-connected ritualists with backing from a private company with ties to the local government. From the outset, it was meant to accommodate urban Xichang ritualists following the Shimazi's decline. Those who were willing to take part would get a small office—in reality, a tiny lockable house somewhat resembling a rural structure since it was constructed from building materials usually utilized in the construction of pig pens—where clients and local cultural brokers might seek their services. These could range from ritual invitations to their homes to staged performances across Liangshan. The ritualists with kinship ties to the founders moved there but most of the others preferred to stay at Shimazi's new temporary location. They explained their decision with reference to the lack of a constant stream of potential clients because of the project's unfavorable locality.

After the failure of the *Nuosu bimo pu*, a similar, this time directly local government-sponsored project called "Bimo Academy" (*Bimoyuan*) was planned for Sihe Township on the northern fringe of Xichang. It was supposed to function under the leadership of a "big *bimo*" from the Shama clan, who in a remarkable turn of events happened to be the same person who had represented Liangshan *bimo* during the Weishan ritual, and who had been sneered at by Jjihxa for frequenting the marketplace. Interestingly, Jjihxa never publicly criticized his relative Vusa, even though he also came to Shimazi on daily basis. Shama was directly related to Vyvy. Like the *bumo* school in Weining, Bimo Academy would entail standardization of *bimo* practices according to the traditions of Vyvy's clan to constitute a representative and authoritative sample of the local "Bimo Culture." Unlike in Weining, however, these would primarily target tourists coming right to the premises, with the accommodation of the needs of the *bimo*'s clients only a secondary concern.

Apart from "proper" clothing, the Bimo Academy guidelines would require the *bimo* texts to be in line with their imagined original form:

carved onto bamboo slips. In this matter, the state revealed its presence, as this imperative subtly dragged the representations closer to the nature of ancient Chinese classics (see Lai and Wang 2018). Vyvy was all for Shama's leadership and the project, but others refused to participate for the same reasons as with the previous project and stayed in the perpetually declining Shimazi. The principal problem, again, was that their clan heritages and habits were too different from each other. This development naturally also generated anxiety on the side of the local government, which possessed no justifiable means of pushing the *bimo* away from Shimazi other than simply waiting for the marketplace to disappear altogether under a planned construction project. At the time of writing, the Shimazi has again changed its mode of functioning and moved back to its original location. The Bimo Academy still has not materialized, and currently it seems unlikely that it ever will—at least in its original design.

The academic writing constitutive of "Yi Culture" views the Shimazi almost exclusively as a negative phenomenon. Nuosu-Yi scholars accuse the *bimo* practising in the marketplace of not being genuine (*buzhengzongde*; Mao 2013, 76), "having scanty knowledge" (*yizhibanjie*) or "not practicing according to standards and regulations" (*buzhenggui*; Luobu 2015, 149), meaning breaking several parts of the Nuosu-Yi *bimo* moral codex (Nuo. *bijie*). The crowds streaming to Shimazi Marketplace and seeking *bimo* services, however, contradict this view, and embody the change of this codex that has followed rapid urbanization. The *bimo* frequenting the marketplace are the main actors within this transformation. When I printed out the articles and showed or read them aloud to my research partners in the marketplace, they became furious. It was evident that rivalry was starting to rage even between the Nuosu-Yi scholars and the ritualists—regardless of whether the *bimo* were affiliated with any of the aforementioned institutions. Through the *bimo*, this whole situation was channeled to their followers, clients, and other laypeople, who dwelt in the orbit of their influence. Liangshan-based cultural security was thus mainly tied to the clan affiliations, and thus the kinship ties, of the *bimo*.

Discussion and Conclusions

The way the PRC thinks about cultural security when it comes to the Yi nationality was clearly visible during the rite in Weishan. It animated the discourse that was put together under the supervision of the state by the early Han scholars of Yi culture, who attributed the historical territory of the

Nanzhao Kingdom spanning over southwest China to the Yi nationality. This choice was logical. The Yi are present almost exclusively in Chinese territory, while the potentially problematic Dai, Tai, or Shan—deliberately excluded from the story about Nanzhao's political elite—also inhabit the territories of the neighboring states of Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar. Right up to the present day, the constructs of "Yi Culture" and "Bimo Culture" developed by various Yi ethnologists and ethnohistorians have helped the state with its cultural security. The state strives to repurpose the knowledge of scholars and ritualists to turn the regionally immensely diverse Yi-osphere into the culturally unified Yi nationality with a coherent ethnic group consciousness within the Chinese nation.

However, regionality is the first obstacle to this objective. Liangshan and the Nuosu-Yi were and still are very well set on a road towards hegemony over the remaining regions. Paradoxically, the standard Modern Yi language features neologisms for every PRC nationality but one. Only the "Yi nationality" is translated as "Nuosu" (see Sylu hmanyo 2019, 72). This simple example is the most telling symptom of the Yi nationality's "nuosufication" (Hein and Zhao 2016, 285). Roche (2016, 130) maintains that in the PRC, everybody must have a prescribed ethnicity even though the primary identification of various communities might lie elsewhere than in their ethnic consciousness. Paradoxically, this is also the case for the Nuosu-Yi, whose primary identity is still that of the clan (Harrell 2001, 144). The Yi regions beyond Liangshan also observe the clan affiliations to a certain degree, as the Lu and Wang *bumo* clans evidenced in Guizhou's Weining. However, the Nuosu-Yi regard their clan identity with the utmost seriousness and tie it to the idea of purity. Through this prism, as Jjihxa demonstrated, they perceive those without a strong clan consciousness as impure, and thus not genuine. Nevertheless, as the tactic of language subversion in Liangshan by the Nasu-Yi of northwest Guizhou documented, the regions beyond Liangshan are unwilling to consent to Nuosu-Yi leadership in all Yi matters.

Névot (2019, 196–231) presents the relationship between the Sani-Yi *bimo*-scholars in Yunnan Province who engage with the Chinese state on the one hand, and their peers who are allegedly not interested in ethnopolitics and related power competition on the other, in a bi-polar manner as a sort of "schism." In my perception, the "us vs. them" dichotomy might be too simplistic. The state does indeed intervene in Yi ethnic matters. In Liangshan, it has sought to dismantle bone hardness-based kinship system since the period of high socialism (see Pan 1997) and replace it with the concept of culture. However, the replacement has not fully happened yet, and so the forms of competition have become layered and created a

very complex power landscape. The ritualists naturally seek to attract reputation, fame, and authority. Their mutual competition for power is hard-wired into their vocation. In regions without a strong adherence to the concept of bone hardness-based superiority like Weishan and Weining, they tend to compete by cultural means such as local variants of the language, scripts, and ritual practice. However, as seen in Shimazi Marketplace, in Liangshan the struggle for power raging between local clans, Liangshan's own regions, and even between *bimo* and the Nuosu-Yi scholars derives from the bone hardness. To be a "big *bimo*" is to be well connected to resources, whether local resources or those of the state. Those who do not have access to resources often desire them. The tactics they use to acquire them function from the bottom up, often through institutions such as local research centers or the CICHP. The goal of many is to gain the ability to influence the cultural and political discourse in a top-down manner through these institutions.

In contrast to the situation observed by Stroup (2022) among the Hui or by Névot among the Sani-Yi, the state does not necessarily have the upper hand in *all* local ethnic matters regarding the Yi. Various stakeholders of Nasu-Yi and Nuosu-Yi are opposed to each other's institutions. In some respects, this competition could be productive for the Chinese state. But in the case of the Liangshan Nuosu-Yi, the opposition running through variously positioned clans could turn into potentially unproductive local opposition to a variety of state policies, especially if these policies are associated with a clan that has a lot of adversaries. Therefore, to maintain its cultural security, the state needs to balance the idea of the Yi nationality's cultural coherence with the danger of alienating the Yi regions from each other or incautiously causing the Yi regions of Yunnan and Guizhou to put a wedge between themselves and the prioritized Liangshan. In short, the state needs to offer various regional Yi cultural representations a certain room to maneuver and even allow a certain degree of manipulation by different local actors.

When discussing cultural security for national and linguistic minorities, Carbonneau et al. (2021) see them as competing for resources with a larger society. I have shown that this is not the case among the Yi, who take advantage of larger society's resources in their mutual competition. So, what is cultural security for Yi cultures? Since "cultures" is rendered in the plural, it is clear that for each Yi region, the term carries different overtones. For northwest Guizhou, cultural security means having the possibility to develop its own standard language and script, along with its own curriculum of *bimo* practice. For the Nuosu-Yi, cultural security

means the maintenance of a social order that hinges on essentialist ideas of purity, which then facilitates their desired hegemony over the other Yi regions. But this is exactly the point where the "moral good" (Carbonneau et al. 2021, 52) this concept of cultural security strives to promote runs into the danger of ethnocentrism. While superiority derived from the alleged bone hardness is a part of the moral code for the Nuosu-Yi, from the perspective of Western scholars and even the CCP, there is no moral good in promoting such inequality. It is a great paradox that this puts Western scholars on the same side as the CCP, albeit for different reasons. For the CCP, the parallel social structure potentially undermines its ideology, authority, and stability. For Western scholars, it runs against values that promote the autonomy of the individual. While the CCP seeks to politically unify the Yi nationality through a slow erosion of its internal differences—including the "culturalization" of the Nuosu-Yi primordialist social order—scholarly work could move in a more creative direction. In their writings, scholars can engage in relationality and correspondence with each of the Yi cultures—and the cultures of other similarly dislocated communities in the PRC and beyond—by envisioning the different Yi regions as embodying diverse cultural practices. The practice of writing can weaken aspirations for hegemony—as hegemony further aspires to totality, and culture can be one of its principal devices—by turning towards polyphony, keeping in mind that *all* voices are equally valid. To achieve this, scholars need a holistic understanding of the Yi-osphere, not only of its constituents in isolation. Such boundary-making would cause them, so to say, to "sleep within their own respective cultures." Furthermore, the scholarly authorial voice should approach all actors critically—from the state to the regional Yi cultures.

The cultural security of the Yi cultures thus dwells in their dislocation and a certain degree of disunity, in a situation where each of its cultures fails to achieve hegemony. On the side of the non-PRC scholars, this does not mean that any unity between the Yi cultures should be questioned *a priori*. The Yi-osphere needs to be approached as composed of loosely connected and yet distinctive communities. In an ideal scenario, the Yi could localize the theoretical model of "diverse unity" (*duoyuan yiti*; Fei 1999), an outwardly unified but internally diverse entity, which was originally meant for the conceptualization of the Chinese nation. As scholars, we should focus our inquiry on culture. We should reject its structuring power in our writing and use it analytically as a radical metaphysical critique. Only by doing this can we avoid the slippery slope of the written culture eventually becoming a device of direct or proxy hegemony.

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About the Author

Jan Karlach, formerly a research fellow at the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences, is currently a research associate at COSMOVIS, Department of Theology & Religious Studies, King's College London. He focuses on the Nuosu-Yi of Southwest China, their cosmology, envisioning of historical as well as contemporary identity, and their negotiations of Chinese state-driven modernity in areas of poverty alleviation, environmental protection, and the infrastructural development (including the internet).
Email: jan.karlach@gmail.com