

## The Things That Bind Us Can Also Divide Us: Ethnicity in Southwest China

Eveline Bingaman, PhD Candidate  
Institute of Anthropology, National Tsing Hua University  
Envisioning Global Asia: ASPAC 2018 Conference, June 8-10, 2018

Conference Version, please do not cite without permission

### Abstract

Anthropological studies of ethnicity have developed in many directions; from Fredrik Barth's examination of boundaries, through Anthony Smith's argument about ethnicity's role in the era of the nation-state, to the "cognitive turn" described by Rogers Brubaker. The cultural, linguistic and religious diversity found in Southeast Asia in general—and across Southwest China in particular—is a fertile ground for reexamining and reflecting on anthropological theories of ethnicity. In exploring contestations and negotiations over the symbols of ethnic identity as members of the Naxi nationality seek to define and distinguish themselves within the context of China's rapid commercialization, this paper brings Judith Nagata's concept of an "ethnic charter" to examine the evolving impacts of the PRC's ethnic policies. What it reveals is how disputes over both ownership of cultural symbols and orthodoxy of religious practice emerge between urban and rural Naxi populations as ethnic elites work actively engage with the space opened by relaxing policies surrounding "folk" religions.

### *Introduction*

In January of 2016, just as the Naxi people of Eagleback village in Sichuan province were preparing for the coming New Year's celebration, a delegation of four people arrived in the community. They were Naxi people from the Yunnan Dongba Culture Protection and Inheritance Association (雲南東巴文化與傳承協會, hereafter 'the Dongba Association'), which is based in Lijiang City, Yunnan province, the metropolitan center of the Naxi nationality in China. The main purpose of the visit was for the Dongba Association to hold a qualifications examination for the community's ritual specialists, known as dongbas. Those who passed the test would begin receiving an annual stipend to support their ritual practice and encourage their continued study of "dongba culture."

The Dongba Association's arrival was not unannounced, but had been long anticipated and, as I found, had already been the topic of much discussion. There were two main people behind the coordination of the visit; one village official (*cunguan* 村官) who has been very active in

trying to work within China's cultural heritage policies to promote Eagleback village and corner resources for it, and one local dongba who, due to his fluency in Chinese language, is a common interlocutor between the local community and Dongba related associations in urban centers in both Yunnan and Sichuan. Both had been working to coordinate this visit for over a year. Yet, leading up to their arrival and in the days following, I found that different groups within the community had decidedly different interpretations of this committee's presence in the village and their purpose while there: reactions ranged from support to caution to flat out hostility.

In examining the reactions of various groups surrounding this event, this paper proposes to argue for the usefulness of Judith Nagata's framework of an "ethnic charter" (Nagata 1981) to understand the formulations of, and changes in, local experiences of ethnic identity in the People's Republic of China (PRC) today. I argue that since the 1980s, PRC ethnic policy has focused on encouraging minority elites to articulate ethnic charters for their nationalities through a series of state funded projects to investigate histories, languages and customs (*fengsu xiguan*) of each of the recognized 55 minority nationalities. At the same time, the state has strictly controlled the format of these charters by providing the frameworks for investigation and guidelines as to what information is and is not valuable. Nevertheless, in the decades since charter articulation first began, the contents of charters have come to be successfully "primordialized" by a new generation of ethnic elites, who are now seeking to revise and update their ethnic charters for new socio-economic contexts of today. In the process, the gap between the state sanctioned charter and lived reality creates tension among different communities amalgamated within a single "nationality."

### *Ethnic Charters amid Social Change*

Since the 1970s the terms "ethnicity" and "ethnic group" have appeared more and more frequently in public discourse and likewise in academic literature, including anthropology. As a topic of anthropological enquiry, ethnicity shares a similar history with the topics of race, kinship and gender; after an initial excitement of investigation and theorization, the post-

modern/post-colonial era of critique brought a period of deconstruction which led many to conclude that none of these things actually exist outside the minds of the people studying them. Yet, experience has shown that ethnicity, like race, kinship and gender, doesn't disappear once they have been theoretically deconstructed. They continue to exist in the real world and continue to shape interactions, inspire individuals and make history.

Early anthropological theorizations of ethnicity were divided between two approaches. The first, known as the primordialist approach, saw ethnicity's central importance in the bonds it involved between people. Ethnicity was a shared identity that involved a form of "spiritual affinity" (Geertz 1996: 42) that comes from having a shared set of "bases" (Smith 1986)—which may be economic, political or cultural—that constituting an experience of what Sahlins calls "intersubjectivity" or "mutuality of being" (Sahlins 2013). (Although Sahlins was speaking strictly of kinship, I argue that the experience of "intersubjectivity" he describes shares enough similarity to the "spiritual affinity" that characterizes the subjective experience of ethnicity that it should be considered as an extension of the same framework. (Further clarification of this will be subject of a different version of this paper.) As a social identity, ethnicity was bigger than kinship but smaller than nationalism, and believed to fulfill a universal human need for belongingness (Isaacs 1975) that was being displaced as societies modernized and industrialized. The second approach saw its central importance not as being between individuals within a group, but in how ethnicity shaped social relations between groups (Barth 1969), mobilized social action and seemed inherently connected to social inequality within the context of modern nation-states (Glazer and Moynihan 1975).

By the 1980s there was a recognition that a full account of ethnicity needed to encompass both the subjective/emotional and instrumental dimensions (e.g. McKay 1982). One form of theoretical synthesis, proposed by Judith Nagata (1981) offered the idea of an "ethnic charter" that is flexible for purposes of social mobilization, but built on bases of shared experience that become "primordialized" by members. A "charter" is essentially a discourse that serves to rationalize a social boundary, i.e. "we/they are the people who..." As Nagata

describes, when utilized by groups claiming a common ethnicity, charters function simultaneously to provide “a definition of an ethnic boundary and [provide] a myth to explain and justify the group’s distinctiveness.”

Referencing her research on the history of ethnic relations in Malaysia, Nagata describes how of the characteristics that frequently act as “bases” of ethnicity—kinship, descent, birth place, territory of origin, language and religion—all have potential to be utilized as a charter of group identity. Essentially, these dimensions of experience provide a toolbox from which characteristics can be pulled for the purpose of articulating insider/outsider boundaries and therefore creating a basis for organizing groups for social mobilization.

Because all of these characteristics have the potential to carry with them an aura of “spiritual affinity” (Geertz 1996) they are capable “generating considerable emotion...emanating out of a corpus of basic, elemental, irreducible (“primordial”) loyalties with a power and determinism uniquely their own” (Nagata 1981:88-89). Having this potential, when there is a perceived need for ethnic mobilization, these characteristic have potential to be “used primordially”, i.e. used in public discourse to describe social lines between groups as deep-running inherited qualities and consequently inspire considerable emotion, loyalty and experiences of subjective identity.

However, once a charter has been articulated, it is not written in stone, although it is important that it appears to be. In reality, charters are flexible and can be adapted to new situations. They can have their defining elements revised, or emphasis among them shifted. Or, when social realities adjust to make a particular charter of identity unnecessary (for example, if the goal of the original social mobilization was either achieved or deemed no longer desirable), an entire charter can be abandoned and ignored in favor of other charters. With this in mind, to understand ethnicity, it is necessary to identify the “interests and issues that create, activate, sustain, and perpetuate the loyalties and sentiments that are subsequently rationalized by a primordial charter” (Nagata 1981:95).

Bringing this to the context of ethnicity in the PRC, the 1980s saw a huge shift regarding ethnic identity from the Maoist era. As we will see through the example of the Naxi, ethnic policy in the 1980s and 1990s involved recruiting minority elites to articulate charters of ethnic identity for each of the state recognized 55 minority groups. Yet, at the same time the contents and format of those charters remained strictly controlled by the state. Large scale project to investigate the history, language, customs and beliefs of each of the 55 groups were funded with the purpose of carving out a new form of social identity that could pull disparate groups together under a shared consciousness where, in many cases, shared identity had been weak at best, non-existent in others. Importantly, this needed to be done while still working within the framework of state-sanctioned ideology which deemed several common “bases” of ethnic identity including religion, marital practices and social institutions as “backwards” and thus not suitable as a rallying point for modern identities.

However, as limiting as these conditions were, I argue that efforts have largely been successful, and that 55 minority nationalities that did not exist prior to 1950s undoubtedly exist as meaningful social realities today. At the same time, since these ethnic charters were created by the first generation of ethnic scholars of the reform era, a new generation has inherited them and is currently in the process of making efforts to revise them in the face of a new set of “interests and issues”; social conditions that have been altered by a generation of economic growth following reform. Among the Naxi, we will see this in the differences in the activities and goals between the Dongba Culture Research Institute (DCRI), created in 1981 and the Dongba Association, founded in 2015. Yet, even as the new generation of ethnic elites (members of an ethnic minority group that play a leadership role in the community, particularly in representation of it, and may or may not have direct government ties) is pushing the limits of state policy, particularly in what is considered permissible in terms of religious activities, they are still operating within the strictly defined limits of state-sanctioned format. The example explored here shows how that format—and the charter of Naxi identity it created—captures a

significant gap between policy and practice even as its contents have been primordialized by certain members of the Naxi nationality.

### *The Naxi Nationality*

The Naxi Nationality is one of the 55 ethnic minority nationalities recognized by the PRC since ethnic classification took place in the 1950s. Historically they have occupied a space between Tibetan and Chinese empires. Particularly during the Ming Dynasty, ruling clan of the Naxi people, the Mu Native Chieftaincy (*tusi*) based in Lijiang, grew to be quite powerful, expanding their territory by negotiating their role between with empires. Yet, in 1724, the Mu Native Chieftaincy was overthrown by the Qing government and Lijiang, as well as the local Naxi population, were incorporated into the official bureaucracy of the Qing Empire and brought under direct rule, a process which deeply impacted every aspect of daily life in Lijiang, from marital and funeral practices to education.

Today the majority of the 300,000 people who make up the Naxi Nationality live in and around Lijiang which today is an urban center that, in addition to sharing in all the turbulent policies of the PRC through the Maoist era to the present, has gone through a near-complete transformation over the past two decades in large part due to tourism development. Since the mid-1990s, Lijiang has gone from being a minority backwater nestled in the mountains in the Northwest of Yunnan province to become a regional center thoroughly de-marginalized within the PRC (Su 2013).

Yet, within the population recognized as comprising the Naxi nationality, there is substantial diversity between different portions of the populace. In addition to the well documented difference between Lijiang Naxi and Yongning Mosuo populations (McKhann 1995) there is also substantial difference between urban and rural Naxi (White 1993; Chao 1995) in terms of language, social organization, marital practices and ritual practice.

According to legend, Eagleback village was originally settled by 40 families migrating from Lijiang during the height of the power of the Mu Native Chieftaincy. It is generally agreed

among scholars that Eagleback was originally a military outpost, strategically located near the confluence of three rivers in the gold-rich mountains of what became Muli. However, following Lijiang's incorporation into the Qing, Eagleback Naxi came under the authority of the Muli Tibetan Theocracy and remained so until Muli Temple was overthrown and Muli Tibetan Autonomous County was established in 1955. Therefore, prior to being "reunited" under state policy that defined them both as members of a single Naxi Nationality, the populations of Eagleback and Lijiang spent nearly 300 years of separation under different polities that shaped local society in distinct ways. Yet, since the 1980s Eagleback Naxi have been key in the creation of the Naxi ethnic charter. As will be explored below, rather than being a source of pride, this has led to division within the Eagleback community and tension between Eagleback and Lijiang Naxi people.

### *Dongbas*

Central to this story are dongbas, the ritual specialists associated with the Naxi. It is generally agreed that dongba ritual practice is historically related to the non-Buddhist tradition of Bön from Tibet. As ritual specialists, dongbas mediate between people and between humans and the spirits of the natural environment. To conduct rituals, dongbas read from ritual texts, dance, offer blood sacrifices, and use a variety of ritual instruments, including divination stones/shells, idols, and cloth. Traditionally, continuity in dongba practice is achieved from long mentorships between grandfather and father to son, making ritual practice both male dominated and associated with particular lineages.

### *Dongba Revival in Eagleback*

The history of dongbas in the Eagleback community goes back to the village's original founding. It is said that the first 40 families who originally left Lijiang during the Ming dynasty were led by four elite families; a headman family, a family in charge of horses (transportation), a family in charge of goats (provisions), and a family of dongba ritual specialists. Over time,

“Dongba” became a house name and individuals of other households trained as ritual specialists creating several households with lineages of dongbas in the community.

Under the PRC rule, as everywhere in China, during the Cultural Revolution all ritual practices were banned ritual specialists were persecuted as purveyors of feudal superstition. According to all personal accounts I’ve been given, all ritual activity in Eagleback came to a halt for over 20 years. In order to avoid criticism, all ritual texts and tools were thrown in the river to be washed away or hidden in the mountains, never to be recovered. In 1984 there was a change in policy and as the rural collectives were being disbanded, and former dongbas were told that the government would no longer be concerning themselves with ritual practice. During the 1960s when all the other dongbas were destroying their ritual equipment to protect themselves and their families, there has been one dongba apprentice who had been considered enough of a novice at the time that he had not been singled out during anti-superstition campaigns. Amazingly, his ritual texts had been preserved intact and after 1984 all other dongbas looking to revive ritual practice studied and copied texts from him.

Today dongba ritual practice has been revived and is flourishing in Eagleback. Not only are dongbas responsible for managing every ritual of the life cycle—including naming, coming-of-age, marriage, house building, and funerals—they are consulted in a variety of daily matters including illness, identifying auspicious days for important activities, etc. Importantly, the knowledge of dongbas is no longer considered the proprietary knowledge of particular clans, but is open to members of any household who have a desire to serve the community and can persuade a dongba master to train them as an apprentice.

### *Dongba in the context of PRC minority policy*

As mentioned above, in the 1980s and 1990s, minority elites were given the task of articulating the identity of their nationalities. This was done through a series of projects commonly coined “minority work” (*minzu gongzuo*) which concerned investigating the histories, languages, and customs of each of the 55 recognized ethnic minorities. Specific instructions and

formats as to what should be included in these were handed down from the state (e.g. Fan 2016), and several book series were published with near identical tables of contents. Yet from the bottom up, minority elites were under pressure to collect evidence of the *uniqueness* of their nationalities, finding elements to fill the requisite data while distinguishing their nationality from all other recognized groups. Essentially they were put to the task of both locating and articulating the boundaries between the 56 ‘nationalities’ (including the Han majority) that had been amalgamated from diverse populations through the process of ethnic identification which began in the 1950s. Particularly in the PRC’s southwest, which historically had been marked by considerable fluidity of identity, this was not an easy task.

Among the Naxi, the task was probably no more troublesome than it was for others, but they did have certain challenges. For the majority of the Naxi population, based in and around Lijiang, in the centuries since their incorporation into the Qing Empire, the urban population had become thoroughly Confucianized in most dimensions of life without significant social structure, ritual practice or even music distinguishing them from Han Chinese. At the same time, because the state-sanctioned format of ethnic charters still ascribed to the organizing notion of cultural evolution—which scaled societies in terms of their “advancement” toward “civilization”—characteristics that could be interpreted as evolutionary backwardness needed to be dealt with carefully.

Among the first group of ethnic elites trained at the Yunnan University for the Nationalities following the Cultural Revolution, the high level of Lijiang’s Confucianization and lack of material culture to distinguish Lijiang Naxi from surrounding communities were problematic. In this context, it was determined that the one thing that Naxi people had that none of the surrounding Tibetan, Yi, Bai or Han communities had were dongbas. Even better, dongbas had “texts” which meant that the Naxi had their own written language, marking evidence of Naxi “advancement” and dongbas were the literati of Naxi society. One complication was that among the Naxi, the ritual practice of dongbas fell into the category of “purveyors of feudal superstition,” and therefore as individuals, dongbas needed to be

“sanitized” in a way that distanced them from “religion” and associated with the term “culture” which in the Chinese language denotes both “education” and “civilization.” As Chao says most eloquently, with the creation of the concept of “dongba culture” (*dongba wenhua*) “dongba could cross the threshold of state legitimacy only by donning the robes of scholars” and their role in Naxi society was rewritten to elevate dongbas from being ordinary people able to perform necessary rituals to be elites among Naxi society; literate in Naxi history, culture, science, etc.

In 1981 the Dongba Culture Research Institute (DCRI) was created in Lijiang as a work unit for Naxi scholars to investigate Naxi history, language and culture, and collect, collate and translate the dongba texts that could be found. This was done with support from Lijiang City government, the Yunnan Academy of the Social Sciences, and perhaps most importantly from the perspective of legitimacy, with the support of the Harvard-Yenching Institute. Two decades of effort produced a 100 volume collection of dongba text translations.

### *Creation of the Naxi Charter of Identity*

During the construction of the Naxi charter, places like Eagleback became regarded as precious resources to the Naxi nationality, “treasure chests” from which the Naxi Nationality as a whole could recover their past and recover the bases of Naxi identity prior to their culture being altered by Han influence. The irony of the choice of using dongbas to represent the key distinguishing feature of Naxi ethnic identity is that dongbas have not been an active presence in Lijiang life since probably the Qing dynasty. Even Joseph Rock, the Austrian-American botanist who is credited with introducing the Naxi to the Western world in the 1920s through the 40s, needed to go outside the Lijiang Basin to find dongbas capable of assisting in interpretation and translation of texts (Rock 1952:11). Sydney White, a medical anthropologist who conducted research in Lijiang in the 1980s, concluded that even prior to 1949, Naxi bodies as expressed through therapeutic practices had already been entirely “Confucianized” (White 1993) and found no evidence of dongbas acting as important therapeutic practitioners but only stories of

pervious times in rural areas (in Eagleback today, treating illness remains a major function of dongbas). Thus, the decision to make dongba culture the defining characteristic of the Naxi people had the effect of locating Naxi authenticity outside the lived experience of most Naxi people (Chao 2012).

Therefore, in order to document “traditional Naxi culture,” Naxi scholars needed to go outside Lijiang’s urban community to gather data. In this, rural spaces like Eagleback offered those “treasure chests” of information to be cherry-picked through in search of items suitable for the Naxi charter. The conscious selectivity necessary to “dig up” evidence of Naxi sophistication from the most economically backward corners of the Naxi population has been contradictory at best, exploitive at worst. While dongbas and their literacy are welcomed representatives of Naxi civilization, the polyandrous marriages dongbas officiate at are something the community is “overcoming.” In Eagleback, the nearly 300 years of rule under Muli’s Theocracy is consistently overlooked, consciously downplayed, or occasionally flat out denied by Naxi scholars as a means to maintain a distinct boundary between what is “Naxi” and what is “Tibetan” and thereby assure the purity of rural Naxi as representatives of Naxi authenticity.

In the early years, Naxi scholars at the DCRI would scour the countryside for any dongba texts that had somehow survived the Maoist Era. When they found someone who had text and/or was still able to read them, they would try to bring them and their texts back to Lijiang to live at the DCRI and assist the researchers in their study. As Chao has pointed out, this was much less of a collaborative effort than it may sound; dongbas were mainly kept for their performance abilities while it was the DCRI scholars that had full control over the interpretation of the data they collected. They were often asked to perform rituals on-call and outside normal ritual context for visiting officials. Important for the Eagleback community, two dongbas that agreed to go to Lijiang to assist at the DCRI died of mysterious illnesses, events that lead Eagleback villagers to question the motivations of Lijiang Naxi scholars visiting the community.

At the same time, in many ways the DCRI researchers were buried in a solitary project.

While the rest of the Lijiang population was busy trying to recover from the traumas of the Cultural Revolution, and continuously wary of too much enthusiasm over what had previously been regarded as dangerous expressions of “ethnic nationalism,” there was little interest in dongba culture among the urban population. In fact, most Lijiang Naxi were entirely unaware of the existence of dongba ritual specialists, having long converted to Buddhism and Confucianism. Yet that all changed with the advent of Lijiang’s tourism industry.

In 1996 a large earthquake hit Lijiang, bringing national and international attention to the impressive architecture of this 800 year old settlement. In 1997, Lijiang Old Town was added to UNESCO’s list of World Cultural Heritage and the dribble of tourists making their way to this corner of northwest Yunnan turned into a torrent. In the development of Lijiang’s own brand of ethnic tourism, dongba characters, and to a lesser extent dongbas themselves, were quickly taken up as a visual representation of Naxi uniqueness, and easily integrated into a variety of commodities sold as souvenirs. Some novice dongbas who had been trained at the DCRI entered the tourism industry, finding work in the market economy more profitable than conducting rituals for display.

Over time, the presence of dongba characters and the occasional dongba in Lijiang led to the development in what McKhann calls a “dongba consciousness” among Lijiang Naxi (McKhann 2010). Today all urban Naxi know that dongbas are the ancient scholars of Naxi society and their pictographic script is evidence that Naxi had already achieved ‘civilization’ prior to Han influence. However, interest in “dongba culture” is limited to its symbolic qualities; while the majority of Lijiang Naxi do not know how to write or read a single character, the existence of the dongba writing system has been primordialized as evidence of the greatness of the Naxi nationality and a source of pride when Naxi compare themselves to others.

*The Yunnan Dongba Culture Protection and Inheritance Network (The Dongba Association)*

In the decades since the charter of the Naxi Nationality was spelled out by the Dongba Culture Research Institute and related associations, the charter has been inherited by a new generation of Naxi people, some of whom have passionately taken up the cause of refining the charter's contents. Yet, as will become clear, even as these actors see themselves as pushing the limits of state sanctioned ethnic expression, it is obvious that these efforts to refine the bases of Naxi identity are taking place in tandem with changing ethnic policies. Both economic development (particularly tourism) and the boom of cultural heritage programs have created space within the PRC's concept of a united multi-ethnic nation for communities to revive a variety of practices, as long as these are reasonably kept within the bounds of existing ethnic policy discourse. As can be found across China, local practices that objectively appear to be religious in nature are consciously described as "culture" as a means avoid conflict with state rhetoric (Johnson 2017).

The Dongba Association, the organization responsible for the dongba qualifications exam discussed at the beginning of this paper, was created both in reaction to tourism, and on a foundation of tourism dollars. The Dongba Association was established by the owner of Jade Spring Village, a tourism park based in Lijiang that was created as both a celebration of dongba culture and as a means to, in the course of an hour to 90-minute stroll through the park, introduce tourists to the basics of dongba belief. The park is described as "the holy land of the Naxi and the source of dongba culture in Lijiang" and, under the auspices of the Nature Conservancy (美国大自然保护协会), activities conducted at the park include the recovery, organization, inheritance, research, and presentation of ancient Naxi culture (Baidu 2017). The park includes a collection of installations, including a traditional house that has been relocated from a village, complete with its original inhabitants who continued to live in it as a kind of living museum, a golden statue of a Shu deity constructed above a spring said to be the source of water for the Lijiang Basin, and a very large temple constructed in a combination of Han and Tibetan Buddhist styles.

The Dongba Association, officially established in 2015, is staffed by Naxi ethnic elites from all over, not just the Lijiang area. It includes Naxi scholars, Naxi government officials, and Naxi party members. Broadly speaking, the stated goals of the association are to preserve dongba culture among the Naxi people and assure that it is passed down to the next generation of Naxi people. Specifically, it appears that the goals of the Dongba Association are to re-popularize dongba as a belief system among the Naxi people and transform dongba ritual practice into a format that reflects the state definition of religion. Concerning the first goal, the Dongba Association sets out to train young ritual specialists, and educate older ritual specialists in the performance of specific rituals. Regarding the second goal, the Dongba Associations activities include efforts to create a complete set of ritual practice and associated texts that can be regarded as orthodox, the building of dongba temples, and instituting a dongba qualifications process as a means to establish an official hierarchy among dongba ritual practitioners.

The dongba qualifications exam preceded the establishment was first held in 2012. The stated goal was to distinguish “real” dongbas from “fake” dongbas who had become plentiful in Lijiang’s tourism industry. The exam itself is held as much like a formal academic examination as possible. It includes both a written test and an oral examination in front of a test taking committee that should include as least one committee member familiar with the specific tradition of the applicant. Test takers are evaluated on their performance in the skills of ritual dance, chanting, making dough idols (described as “handicrafts” *shougong yipin*), setting up a ritual ground and describing ritual procedures. Scores are given and the test results are then collected and deliberated by the entire Dongba Association testing committee to determine what level of degree (if any) should be granted the applicant.

#### *Reactions to and results of the Dongba Qualifications Test in Eagleback*

In Eagleback, the examination was held in portable classroom borrowed from the village’s elementary school. For those dongbas who needed to travel from distant villages to the

test center, their room and board for an overnight stay in Eagleback was covered by the Dongba Association. In the end, a total of around 60 ritual specialists came to sit for the examination.

Yet, when the delegation of 4 people from the Dongba Association arrived in the village in January of 2016, people had a variety of reactions to news that Eagleback's dongbas were being asked to sit for an exam. Township government officials were concerned about the legitimacy of this cross-provincial interaction as the examination is recognized by Lijiang's city government, (located in Yunnan Province) but has no official standing in Sichuan Province. The village committee was split: some members openly supporting the visit while others were vocally against it to the point of bullying the local organizers. Young people expressed their concerns over the purpose of the Dongba Association's visit. Finally, the dongba ritual specialists themselves appeared dubious.

Firstly, members of the local township government Eya Naxi Autonomous Township, while claiming sympathy for the good intentions behind the organizers of the visitors, were not at all supportive of the visit. "First, there is an issue of authority here that hasn't been resolved," I was told by one township official. "These are people from a Yunnan organization coming to Sichuan to hold a qualifications test, but they have not gone through Sichuan provincial authorities to validate their system of qualifications." Yet, what was even more important, this official insisted, was the absurdity of a dongba qualifications test at all. "Here, it is the local people that decide whether a dongba is qualified or not, not some group of people from Lijiang making up some written test. Someone trains to become a dongba, and when their master believes they are ready, people can hire them to conduct rituals. If their rituals are ineffective or if they don't perform well, people will not engage them for their services." Essentially, according to this official, an individual's qualification as a dongba ritual practitioner comes from their relationship with the community and is developed over many years; not something that can be reduced to a test.

Members of the village committee were divided in their opinions about the group. The village head was supportive of the visit; he actively greeted the group for photo and video ops

when they arrived and provided all the expected hospitality of dinners and drinking while the committee was in the village. The party secretary, however, was one person that was openly hostile to the group's visit, even going so far as to bully the dongba who was involved in coordinating the visit, telling him that he should not be spending his time with the Dongba Association, that he was just being exploited when his knowledge should be used to benefit the local community, not people from Lijiang.

Following the local New Year festivities, the village official who had been instrumental in bringing the delegation to the village called a community meeting of young people who had previously worked as migrant laborers in urban centers but had returned to the village either permanently or for the holiday. The meeting took place in a portable classroom borrowed from the old village elementary school and attendees were given beer and peanuts in exchange for their attention. Two main points of the meeting were that; firstly, young people such as themselves who have been outside the village and are familiar with urban society need to act as leaders, preparing the community for tourism development which is expected to accompany the completion of a nearby highway. Secondly, young people need to show leadership in giving more respect for the community's dongbas. Although they are familiar with their dongbas, having grown up with them as individuals and aware of their personal histories, dongbas are different from normal people and need to be elevated in Naxi society to their proper place.

During the meeting, one young person stood to raise a question about the Dongba Association's delegation and the motivation behind the dongba qualifications test. This young man was one of the people who had worked as a migrant laborer in Lijiang and had seen how stripped down elements of dongba ritual practice have been effectively used in marketing Naxi culture for profit. Was it not the case, he asked, that the purpose of the Dongba Association was to "steal" the secrets of Eagleback's dongbas, taking that knowledge back to Lijiang for their own profit? Without a lengthy explanation, the official promised this was not the case; the visiting delegation only had Eagleback's best interests at heart and their presence in the village

was a good thing. Using the kinship appellation of “older brother” in accordance with local etiquette, the young man thanked the official for his assurance and sat back down.

Finally, the dongbas themselves who participated in the examination seemed a mixture of hopeful, cautious and nonplussed. Much to the chagrin of the organizing dongba, the first morning of examinations, no one showed up. While all had been notified previously, it took additional days of personal visits to their homes and efforts of persuasion to convince them to come and participate. In interviews, some seemed hopeful that sitting for the exam would lead to the promised annual stipend and perhaps other resources in the future; others were confused, still others resentful of having their qualifications questioned.

I had a chance to interview one of the delegation members back in Lijiang following the visit. In a final ironic twist, when I asked about the delegation’s overall impression of Eagleback dongbas, I was told the committee was largely disappointed. Some would pass and be given degrees, but the number was based on a quota set by the association test committee and not actually based on their performance. Yet, the examination results determined that Eagleback dongbas were ignorant of large portions of “dongba culture” and not impressively knowledgeable of what is considered the standard dongba ritual repertoire.

At the end of the day, as far as I can tell, the examination, both the idea of testing and the results, have not impacted how the Sichuan villagers interact with and evaluate the abilities of their dongbas.

### *Concluding Discussion*

To understand these varying responses, in this paper I have sought to explain the importance of dongba ritual practitioners as a symbol of a unified Naxi nationality in terms of an “ethnic charter” as a means to show how these individuals and their knowledge have become a source of contention over orthodoxy and cultural resources. What is revealed is that policies that shape the social context in which Naxi ethnic identity is constructed are the same

ones that perpetuate and exacerbate the unequal relationship between the two populations leading to division over the symbol that is intended to unite them.

Here, I would like to offer a brief comparison of the social contexts within which the DCRI created the Naxi charter of identity placing dongbas at the center, and the context within which the Dongba Association today is attempting to revise that charter.

In the 1980s and 90s, in order to make dongbas an effective symbol of the Naxi nationality, in the context of contemporary politics, it was necessary to remove religious connotation. As an item to be primordialized as an ethnic charter, the *history* of dongbas as a shared part of the Naxi community was enough. And it was their *knowledge* that was valuable. In this context, the most urgent matter facing DCRI scholars was that that knowledge was being lost and the people who were able to read dongba texts were dying. Researchers were involved in a salvage project to document, record and translate for safe keeping as much of this valuable resource as possible so that it could be later mined and re-interpreted as needed. For example, the relationship between man and nature as represented in dongba texts are now being promoted as evidence of environmental consciousness of Naxi indigenous knowledge that could be utilized and spread to counter contemporary environmental challenges.

Between the DCRI and the formulation of the Dongba Association, Lijiang's tourism boom and subsequent economic development brought about a total transformation of daily life for most Lijiang Naxi. With tourism as a platform for displaying Naxi ethnic distinctiveness, things that had once been hidden during the Maoist era were transformed into performance. In the process, a "dongba consciousness" became a primordialized part of Lijiang Naxi ethnic identity. In this context, the religious background of dongbas became less taboo.

By the 2010s the presence of fake, inauthentic and plagiarized dongba and dongba writing present in the tourism industry started becoming a liability to its effectiveness as a meaningful part of the Naxi charter of ethnicity. Attempting to save dongba from cynical rejection by the Naxi people, the Dongba Association has sought to formalize "dongba culture" in terms of "folk" (*minjian*) practice and bring back its popularity, not just as a symbol of the

historical uniqueness of Naxi, but as a belief system shared by Naxi people in the present. While still building on the safe space provided for them by the DCRI, cultural heritage politics and the tourism industry, the Dongba Association wants to put the religion back into dongba.

Before leaving Lijiang the last time, I paid a visit to my oldest Naxi teacher, one of the first researchers of the DCRI who has long since retired. I asked him what he thought of the activities of the Dongba Association. His response was, "I think it's admirable what they are trying to do; I also think it's pointless. Naxi people are not going to start believing in dongba religion again, we are way past that. I don't even believe it and I spent my whole life researching it!" Thus, it remains to be seen if the Dongba Association will be successful in adding religious belief to the Naxi ethnic charter for a new generation or not.

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