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**THE YIS OF LIANGSHAN PREFECTURE
- BEYOND AND BEHIND ETHNICITY -**

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The following is a modified and considerably enlarged version of an article first published in *China News Analysis*, 1579, February 15, 1997, under the title: "Between Han and Tibetans : The Yis of Liangshan."

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On July 24 1996, the *Sichuan Daily* published a comic strip celebrating the "Covenant of Lake Yi" (夷海盟約).¹ This episode of the Long March took place in May 1935, when Commandant Liu Bocheng (劉伯承) concluded an alliance with a local leader of the much-feared Yi (彝) population. As a result, Liu was able to cross the Yi territory in the Liangshan (涼山) area in the south-west of Sichuan province and escape the Kuomintang troops which were encircling the Red Army. The small comic strip was but one of the numerous commemorations of the blood contract uniting the Yi nationality with the Chinese Communist Party. It exhibited the usual features giving an event the significance that the Party wishes it to have. It recalled that the Yi leader invited Liu Bocheng to be the first to drink of the covenant cup, filled with chicken blood, thus recognizing him as the leader of the newly formed alliance.

In a more academic vein an article published in *Minzu Yanjiu (Ethnic Studies)* on the historical significance of the "Covenant of Lake Yi" stressed the fact that such an event was symbolic of the Communist Party's invariable policy towards non-Han peoples : respecting and knowing their traditions, languages, ways of life, while directing their development under the Party leadership.²

More than sixty years after the Red Army had its first encounter with the Yi people of the Liangshan area it is interesting to raise a few questions : who were the people with whom Liu Bocheng concluded an alliance ? What is their situation like nowadays and are they likely to join in the celebration of the Lake Yi covenant ? Can anything be safely stated about the future of the Yi population of the Liangshan area and what does this case-study tell us about the present challenges to the various ethnic minorities of China ?

"WHAT IS NECESSARY IS TO RECTIFY NAMES"

"What is necessary is to rectify names." This well-known sentence of the Confucian Analects (XIII,3) is particularly appropriate each time the analyst has to deal with the denominations given to the various non-Han peoples living on Chinese territory. The rectification of names (正名) has been widely

practiced by successive Chinese regimes, and, therefore, a corrective effort is required of anyone wishing to get a clearer picture of the ethnic situation.

The Constitution of the People's Republic of China defines the country as a "unified State made up of diverse nationalities". It must be noted that the term "nationality" is only an approximate translation of the expression *minzu* (民族). Altogether, 56 "nationalities" are officially recognized in China, the Han and 55 "national minorities" (少數民族), this being largely the result of the "nationalities classification" (民族識別) process conducted from 1953 to 1956. The Yi nationality is one of these national minorities. The various subgroups belonging to this centrally-defined entity are spread throughout the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou, totaling almost seven million people. The basic problem lies in the very definition of the "Yi" people, as the subgroups it includes can differ very much in traditions, social structure, and language. People supposedly belonging to the Yi nationality speak six different languages, all part of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, but which have only 25 to 50 per cent of words in common. Four of the languages that scholars generally distinguish are fairly closely related to each other, but two of them are far closer to the Lisu and Lahu languages than to the other Yi languages.³ One of these languages has been chosen as the standard "Yi" language and, as such, is the only one taught in school, both in its oral and written form. (However, specific scripts are sometimes used for other "dialects".)

Beyond and behind ethnicity

It is clear enough that the Yi *minzu* does not constitute an ethnic group *stricto sensu*. Nevertheless, many of its subgroups share some common historical background, insofar as this can be ascertained in the very complex history of Southwestern China. Between the years 783 and 937, various non-Han peoples set up the Nanzhao (南詔) kingdom, a political entity uniting several chiefdoms. The following centuries saw these chiefdoms uniting or splintering according to circumstances.⁴ This legacy might maintain a sense of common identity. As a matter of fact, several tales pertaining to various Yi subgroups narrate the story of three brothers, often identified as the ancestors of the Han, Tibetan and "Yi" nations.⁵

More important is the fact that the way the political Center determines the frontiers of a *minzu* may lead to a new perception of one's identity. The American anthropologist Stevan Harrell observes: "Children are now taught in school that they along with a few million other people belong to the Yi *minzu*; this must have some effect on consciousness. And common interest exists, in a sense, as soon as *minzu* is defined and gets the prerequisites of minorityhood such as books about itself and, most importantly, representation in governmental bodies. The Chinese state has as much created as recognized many of the ethnic groups it governs."⁶

Incidentally, the character Yi (彝) is a strange one, as it does not seem to be used as a name for an ethnic group until very recently. It is rumored that the origin of the usage of the character is to be traced to Mao Zedong himself who substituted it to the homophonous character, Yi (夷) which simply means "barbarian".⁷ As a matter of fact, a number of the subgroups composing today the Yi nationality were generally known as Luoluo (羅羅 among other transcriptions), which in Chinese is even more derogatory than the "barbarian" Yi character.

A world in black and white

Nuosu (諾蘇) is the word that the "Yi" people of the Liangshan area use to designate themselves. These are the people that the Red Army met in 1935. Their territory roughly corresponds to the one covered by the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture (涼山彝族自治州) in the southern part of Sichuan.

The history of the Yi and among them of the Nuosu people, is strongly linked to the colonization of the remote parts of Western China by the Han nationality. The judgment expressed by the historian Richard Von Glahn on the Song dynasty could be easily applied to other periods: "The native peoples of Southern Lu varied widely in their capacity for resistance in the penetration of Han settlement (...) The Yi, characterized by an exclusive, centralized and highly stratified social order, fiercely resisted assimilation and often achieved at least a stalemate against Han intrusion into their homelands. Furthermore, the inhospitality of their mountain habitat shielded the Yi from the brunt of Han expansion."⁸ It can be said that the reforms of 1956-1958, truly marked the end of the de facto independence of the Liangshan area.

The Nuosu people were generally referred to, in the works of Western anthropologists until 1949, as "Black Lolos" (according to the romanization more currently used). They have never been a very "popular" minority. "Black Lolos" were sometimes described as "classical Romans... harsh in appearance and deportment"⁹. Although they have a writing of their own, this has not attracted the curiosity of ethnographers as in the case of the neighboring Naxi (納西) people whose reputation owes a lot to the eccentric figure of J.F. Rock. This botanist-ethnographer has become a legend, to the point that tourists going to Lake Lugu (瀘沽) are invited to look for possible fair-haired people, the progeniture of this Western adventurer!

The distinction between "black Yi"(黑彝) and "white Yi"(白彝) has generally a social, not a geographical meaning. "Black Yi" refers to a cast of higher prestige in Nuosu society, and "White Yis" to casts of lower social prestige. This distinction is somehow misleading, at least when it is taken as being at the roots of a class system where 5 per cent of Black Yis would have ruled over the rest of the population, considered as their slaves. The Nuosu society was certainly a cast society, although its formative process is not clear. Nevertheless, the systematic use of the expression "slave society" by media and most Han scholars alike (the museum on Nuosu culture in Xichang is called the "Yi Slave Society Museum") amounts to a sheer distortion of historical realities.

Three reasons motivate the systematic use of the expression. Firstly, it reflects the fear felt by Han people of old, victims of the razzias perpetrated by barbarians from the mountainous areas. Secondly, it allows one to fill in one square in the Marxist description of the socio-historical process. And, thirdly, it justifies the reforms enforced after 1956. However, it would be unfair not to add that the knowledge of the Yi social system and common law has greatly improved in recent years.¹⁰ This knowledge is still based much more on oral sources than on examination of written records.¹¹

Clans and Casts

So, what was the Nuosu society like before 1949, and what remains of its former structure ? The central point is that the Liangshan society was and still is a clan society, clans being patrilineal, strictly exogamous and geographically scattered. In Nuosu language the clan is called **cyt vie**.¹² "The **cyt vie** was an exogamous group related to others through ties of marriage and in some times united against

others in disputes or outright warfare. (...) (It) was responsible for breeches of the social order and had mechanisms, based on precedent, for the restoration of good relations among its members and between affinally related lineages."13 Nowadays, the clan remains the dominant social institution, especially when it comes to marriages. And, in the villages, clan elders still play an important role in ensuring social order and solving disputes. After nine generations for a black Yi, seven generations for a white Yi, a son can open a new clan branch14, thus enlarging the possibilities of matrimonial alliances. These alliances are also determined by the cast system that I am going to describe.

Each clan belongs to a cast, but decisions and bargaining take place only within the clan itself, which means that casts do not constitute a political system *per se*. Very roughly, one can distinguish the following casts: the **nzymop**15 (often transcribed: **nzymo**16) cast groups together the dominant families, often enfeoffed by the past Han dynasties. **Nzymo** used to be the political aristocracy. Black Yis or **nuoxhe** (諾合), constituted the warrior aristocracy. Among the white Yis, one can distinguish between the **quxhe** (曲合) or **quxnuo** (曲諾) and the **mgapjie** (阿加), the latter being semi-independent farmers. Even if **quhe** and **magpjie** are both white Yis, in many respects **nuoxhe** and **quhe** are closer than **quhe** and **mgapjie**, this being the case because **mgapjie** can include people of Han origin deported after victorious razzias. Those very people were the core group of the lowest cast, the **gaxy** (呷西) After three generations, the **gaxy** could enter into the **mgapjie** cast Furthermore, in the long run some would claim the **cyt vie** of their master and assert a new status. Although the cast system was very rigid, there was indeed some kind of upward mobility. More important, Nuosu scholars insist on the fact that living conditions created an egalitarian atmosphere and that a large household comprising people from different casts generated strong affective links among its members

Where do the "black" and "white" designations for the distinction between aristocracy and commoners come from? Ma Erzi (馬爾子) refers them to a feature of the Nuosu language, in which "black" has the meaning of "extremely" or "very much", whereas "white" denotes something "ordinary." Clans having closely followed the **nzymo** during the wars were recognized by him as "black" ones, the other ones being simply "white".17 This also means that the distinction is of more recent origin than it is often thought and does not denote any difference in ethnic origins between clans, as was often argued in the past.

THE LIANGSHAN PREFECTURE TODAY

In October 1952, the Liangshan Yi Nationality Autonomous Region (prefectoral level) was founded, with Zhaojue (昭覺) as regional capital, and placed under Xikang Province (西康), which was dismantled in 1955. It then became the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture under the jurisdiction of Sichuan Province. The Autonomous Prefecture covers over sixty thousand square kilometers. It comprises seventeen counties and about five hundred major villages with a total population of 3.7 million, around 2 million of the inhabitants being Nuosu.18 Xichang, the prefecture, has a population of around 250,000 and is the main satellite launching site in China. The relative prosperity of Xichang city does not hide the fact that the Liangshan Prefecture is the third poorest among the 30 autonomous prefectures in China.19

The altitude ranges on the whole from 2000 to 3000 meters, with the highest peak at 5,959 meters. Besides the Yi, Tibetans, Mongols, Miao and Lisu people among others inhabit the area, especially in the western district of Muli (木里), the ethnic variety of which makes it a kind of ethnographer's

paradise.

Past and future liberations

Looking at what the press has to say on Liangshan prefecture may give us a rather conflicting picture of the situation there. The first article to which we can refer, coming from the *People's Daily*, embodies all the stereotypes one can expect in such circumstances: the Yis of Liangshan constituted a backward, slave society until the time of the Liberation. Where hunger, desolation and isolation were reigning, one can witness joy and abundance. The abolition of the slavery system in 1956 was the fulfillment of the dream of seeing the mythical Yi ancestor coming back in the form of a gigantic bird. Nowadays, the road system extends over almost 10,000 kilometers, peasant's income has increased tenfold from 1978 to 1995, and the bank deposits have multiplied 220 times.²⁰

The second article, published in the *Farmer's Daily*, offers another perspective.²¹ Not on the past for sure: the "two thousand years" of slave society were "even darker than in Tibet", which in Chinese terminology means that they were rather dark indeed.... However, the article, entitled "The Second Liberation", shows too clearly that the first one has not fulfilled all its promises as yet. Among the seventeen counties of the Prefecture, ten belong to the "poorest counties", with 2,100,000 people whose yearly income is below the "poverty line" of 500 yuan. The scarcity of electric facilities is also mentioned, confirmed by articles from the *Sichuan Daily*, extolling the setting up of electric lines in villages of Zhaojue and Shimian (石棉) counties in July 1996.²²

The same article of the *Farmer's Daily* states as a main concern of the authorities the fact that, in the mountainous area, men and beasts generally live under the same roof, and takes pride in the fact that, during the last four years, 27,537 households have at last separated house and stable. Similar indications are given on the policies aimed at providing beds, toilets, furnaces and other basic commodities. However, the approach to these changes in lifestyle remains very technocratic. Even if the intentions are praiseworthy, one cannot but wonder if the specific way of life of a population accustomed to the severity of mountain life has ever been taken into consideration.²³

The separation between house and stable is evoked again in an article of the *Beijing Daily* relating the visit made by Li Peng (李鵬) to Puge (普格) county, in June 1997.²⁴ The tone, however, is considerably more somber. No singing Yis this time in the picture, but poor and backward people moving the heart of the Prime Minister. The answer, for Li Peng, lies in education and culture, basic for ensuring a strategy of incremental changes. One month later, in a lighter vein, but in a style reflecting more concern for accuracy than was the case before, the *People's Daily*, narrates the tribulation of a journalist joining two postmen and a horse on duty in Liangshan during the rainy season, a six day trip for a mere 90 kilometers back and forth.²⁵

A marginalized people

Other problems, extremely visible *in situ*, are hardly mentioned in the press. To one who wants to know about alcoholism, AIDS and drug consumption in such districts, the Chinese press offers very few clues. Drugs, one is led to suppose, are a thing of the past, when warlords and the Kuomintang were encouraging the growing of opium for economic purposes.

The above-mentioned article of *Ethnic Studies* on the "Covenant of Lake Yi" can be read, however, as a warning in the face of an ever-growing problem : Nuosu and other people are not only isolated; today they are marginalized. In other words, they are now related to the structure of the modern State, only to discover that there is no space for them within. Lack of self-respect and destructive or deviant behaviour are the direct consequence of this development. However rhetorical the reference to the Long March might be, it nevertheless acts as a reminder that the "New Long March" of economic development has to respect the rights and traditions of people situated at the margins. "Will the New Long March respect the principle of equality between nationalities, the customs and languages of minorities ?... Not to respect the customs, languages and religious beliefs of national minorities seriously hurts the feelings of a nationality."²⁶ Will a new "Covenant of Lake Yi" have to be signed, and under whose auspices ?

CULTURE AND IDENTITY

The technocratic outlook of the economic development of the Liangshan area has already been noted, and it obviously constitutes a threat to the preservation of Nuosu culture and way of living. Although no trace of it can be found in the press, the ruthless way business is conducted in a part of the country which is literally the "Far West" of China is at least as destructive. But the analysis needs to be refined: who is really able to defend and promote Nuosu culture and identity ? What remains to be preserved ? And in which ways ?

The leadership problem

The above mentioned *People's Daily* article (Dec,4 1996) asserts that, in the Liangshan prefecture, 50 per cent of the Party cadres are from ethnic minorities. A study published in *Ethnic Studies* offers a more complete view of the situation.²⁷ It states that, in 1994, out of a grand total of 76,345 cadres working within the Prefecture, 21,864 (or 28.6 per cent) belong to ethnic minorities. The proportion of minority cadres is at its highest within the Party and mass organizations (48 per cent). It is especially low in industrial organizations and around 25 per cent in the educational sector. Outside the Party, the proportion of minority cadres reaches only 9.1 per cent.

Within the party, most of the minority cadres work at the village or district level. Although, on the whole, minority cadres are a little younger than was the case before, it is exactly the reverse when it comes to minority cadres within the party: 77 per cent of them are at present over 45.

Furthermore, the proportion of non-minority cadres with higher education is twice that of minority cadres. Those among the latter who have a university degree have been educated in the humanities more than in any other field. The overall picture is quite clear: the Party had built up its leadership on a network of local minority cadres now aging. Young minorities cadres have not joined the party network and meet difficulties in taking their share of the rapidly growing business opportunities. They assert their own position in the non productive sector. In other words, in the past, leaders of the Yi and other minorities were partly assimilated through the lower ranks of the Party, while today newly educated young community leaders are at risk of becoming fully estranged from the political and the economic leadership. Will this specific form of social marginalization not lead to the appearance of a group of minority intellectuals asserting their specificity against a predominantly Han environment ?

The observations made *in situ* reinforce what the statistics suggest: Party cadres belonging to ethnic

minorities play a role of control and legitimization which estranges them from their own people while endowing them with various privileges. Here again, the observations of the ethnographer Stevan Harrell while on a trip with minority cadres, are pertinent : "Many of the cadres on the trip, the majority in fact, came from poor backgrounds. (...) Nowadays, however, they had become completely used to the class differences that separated them from the workers and peasants, and living in this kind of luxury amid poverty seemed the most natural thing in the world to them." 28

Asserting one's cultural legacy

The preceding question raises another one: how will the Nuosu culture survive and evolve in today's world ? In the opinion of most researchers, the preservation of the cultural legacy demands the assessment, preservation and diffusion of the oral and written knowledge mastered by the "priest" or **bimo** (畢摩). The **bimo** was, and still is, the depositary of the sacred books, responsible for ceremonies, exorcisms and medical cures. The performance of rituals was authorized again at the beginning of the eighties, and interest in the sacred books has since greatly increased.

The importance of the bimo institution cannot be overestimated. An article in the *Yunnan Daily* states: "When it comes to the preservation of Yi culture, for the last ten years a '**bimo** phenomenon' has been developing. If you want to study the Yi language, go to the **bimo**. If you want to translate and edit Yi ancient manuscripts, go to the **bimo**. If you want to research the social history of the Yi people, go to the **bimo**. If you want to understand the customs and traditions of these people, go to the **bimo**." And the same article, reports, in a rather characteristic fashion, the opinion of Ma Gu (馬谷), a researcher from Yunnan province. For him, the recognition of the legitimacy of **bimo** activities has helped to save and collect a cultural treasure after the destruction of the Cultural Revolution. However, he pursues, it should not be forgotten that these activities constitute "a kind of religion". As such they can be used for personal profit and must remain under political control. 29

Is it possible to separate culture from religion in the way Ma Gu and the authorities do ? True, the **bimo** books can be taken simply as records of historical facts or astronomic observations, but one can presume that, cutting them from the ritual context in which their reading takes place, leads one to serious misunderstandings. As is the case for any living culture, Nuosu culture indeed cannot be only "preserved", it needs to evolve and to be reinterpreted. But who is to decide the manner in which this culture is to evolve and according to which criteria ?

Religion and identity

Whoever asks a Han living in a Nuosu area what the Nuosu religion is like will probably get the answer that "Nuosu people have no religion". This reply may seem astounding for anyone who has had a glimpse of the riches of this specific religious tradition, but this testifies to widespread prejudices. The absence of temples outside the Xichang area, the animistic and shamanistic flavour of most beliefs and practices, the fact that taboos differ from the ones encountered in Chinese popular religion, all these make ordinary Chinese consider the Nuosu people as some sort of "pre-religious" animals.

The relationship between the Nuosu religious world-view and primitive Taoist thought has recently led to controversy. The issue is less academic than it seems. On the one hand, some Nuosu scholars might be anxious to enhance the importance of their culture in the view of Chinese scholars by stating its role in the development of early Chinese thought. On the other hand, asserting a common origin for

both religious systems or stressing the Taoist influences over *Bimo* rituals allows one to ascertain that the Nuosu people belongs indeed to the Chinese nation. These debates can even be traced in newspaper articles: research, it is said, has emphasized "the mutual relationship between Taoist culture and the 'tiger world-view' of the Yi people, throwing light on the mystery surrounding the origins of Chinese civilization" and determining that its origins lay in the geographical space now inhabited by Yi people.³⁰ It is true that this statement remains modest when compared to other intellectual constructions in which the Yi people are supposedly at the roots of a various number of ethnies and cultures, including Japanese and Mayas...³¹

Other researchers will emphasize the historical specificity of Sichuan "Ba Shu" (巴蜀) culture, of which Nuosu tradition will supposedly be a part. Ideologically flawed as the debate is, it is no wonder that still other scholars claim that positively nothing acceptable can be said currently on the relationship between Nuosu religion and Taoism.³²

What has just been said should not hide the fact that serious research has actually and is currently being done on Nuosu religion. At the beginning of the eighties, Ma Xueliang (馬學良) and others were finally able to gather serious ethnographic materials on religious rituals and beliefs.³³ The pioneering work of Bamo Ayi (巴莫阿依) looks for the rationale behind the diversity of rituals.³⁴ The Center for the Study of *Bimo* Culture at Meigu (美姑) is gathering and classifying the wealth of *Bimo* manuscripts to be found in this part of the Liangshan area.³⁵ What is still lacking is the editing of ritual scriptures, allowing one to go further into the understanding of the *Weltanschauung* proper to the *Bimo* religion. This would especially facilitate the joint analysis of myths and of ritual practices, the study of which remains at present distinct.

Rites and Social Life

Indeed, the study of rituals has been the main focus of recent research on Nuosu religion. There are three main reasons for holding rituals: ensuring that deceased relatives will attain safely to the ancestors' land and will thus protect their progeniture instead of turning into hungry ghosts trying to take away the share of the living; protecting oneself against the ghosts, especially when one turns ill ; taking decisions on the basis of divination. Most of these rituals are conducted by the *bimo*, and he alone is responsible for all ceremonies having to do with the ancestor cult. But certain rituals, especially in case of illness, can be conducted by the *sun*i (蘇尼), a shaman whose prestige is lower than the *bimo*'s, as he does not master the reading of the sacred books.

Rituals constitute the bone of social life. There is no ritual without a meal, including consumption of meat. I would even make the suggestion, that any ritual is basically a meal. A meal takes place in an orderly fashion, which sharply contrasts with the disorderly consumption of flesh that characterizes ghosts, who destroy the social fabric. Nuosu rituals are about preserving personal and social integrity by ensuring a proper distribution and reproduction of food. Besides, rituals cannot be separated from traditional medical practices, and, likewise, these practices cannot be separated from the observance of rituals. At stake is always the preservation of the physical and social body by accommodating, cajoling and controlling the forces that prey upon it.

A glimpse at Meigu County

I now illustrate the previous analyses by a few examples and preliminary findings gathered during

field research in Meigu county in March-April 1997. Meigu county (around 160,000 inhabitants, over 95 per cent of them being Nuosu) is considered to be the heartland of Nuosu country, the area in which the traditions are best preserved. Indeed, one is struck by the flourishing of religious practices, present everywhere, from the sacrifice of a chicken on the side of a road to the large-scale, elaborate ceremony meant to ensure the return of one's father and mother to the ancestors' land. Nuosu language, clothing and way of living are also well preserved.

However, even in so traditional an environment, contacts with the outside world generate strategies of adaptation. This generally does not amount to the sheer renunciation of one's customs and ways of living, but a kind of trade-off occurs between tradition and modernity. For example, in case of sickness, one can decide to go to the local dispensary or one can ask the *bimo* to perform ritual, this according to the nature of the sickness. In case of doubt, one can always ask the *bimo* to make a first diagnosis by divination. If this diagnosis seems to be accurate, the *bimo* will be asked to proceed further. If inaccurate, medication and doctor's advice will be looked for.

Another striking fact is that no specific claim for identity is put forward, as the continuation of the Nuosu's way of life is simply a matter of fact. Parents will rather express the wish that their children might learn enough Chinese for going up the mobility scale. The educational system still suffers from the conditions proper to a mountainous area where gathering children is a hazardous task. Teaching can be given by Nuosu teachers or by Han teachers, generally recruited within the adjacent areas of Sichuan. In any case, the knowledge of Chinese shown by the children remains often passive, although the situation can vary from one area to another.

New roads are built (but not paved yet) and a few initiatives take place (development of fruit production), even if social and economic conditions remain backward by any standard. For people living in the mountains, going to Meigu township generally requires a trip of several hours, and going to Xichang is a major journey. The dominant industry is forestry, with deforestation becoming a major environmental problem. A severe landslide that occurred in June 1997 in this area was certainly linked to deforestation.

Last of all, particularisms remain strong: economic vitality, the way rituals are observed, sanitary and educational conditions may vary greatly from one village to another. For instance, there is a sharp contrast between the conservative Meigu township and the village of Wahou (瓦候), four hours by road to the north. In Wahou, a village which before 1949 was a center for the cultivation of opium, the development of the wood industry, frequent contacts with other Yis in the more developed areas of Ebian (峨邊) and Mabian (馬邊) which are part of the Leshan (樂山)prefecture, the presence of numerous former **gaxy**, people kidnapped in the adjacent Han areas up until the thirties, all these contribute to a more open and entrepreneurial atmosphere, at least as much as this can be the case in so secluded an area.

The meaning of parochialism

Sometimes, the Nuosu people do not seem to care so much for a collective identity as for escaping the one that the higher political authorities want to assign to them. Village particularisms work against the building up of a "nationality" consciousness. It is rather amusing to read in the local press the efforts made by the authorities for harmonizing the time of the New Year's celebration from village to village at the level of a single county, and this "by scientific computation."³⁶ In the Nuosu area, New

Year's celebration comes after the harvest in November or December. Local calculations still prevail on the ones made by officially appointed committees. Interestingly enough, the article just quoted appeared at the time of the Torch Festival (火把節), the second largest annual feast, whose time depends on the one of the New Year's Festival. Occurring in June or July, it would be a perfect opportunity for fostering tourism, but the uncertainty surrounding its exact date, as well as local discrepancies in the time of celebration, are but one of the symptoms of the Nuosu people's passive resistance to cultural normalization.

The contrast between the mood prevailing in the Liangshan area and the one of the neighboring district of Lake Lugu, already mentioned, is very striking. The district of Lake Lugu is populated by Mosuo (摩梭) people, officially a branch of the Naxi nationality, although they refuse this assimilation. Lake Lugu remains a secluded area but its touristic scenery gives a fair idea of the future prospects for the domestic tourist industry. The need for stereotypes which makes Nuosu society the example of a slave culture makes Mosuo people the example of a matriarchal society. This helps present the Mosuo people as "warm and friendly" in journalistic language, and Lake Lugu as a romantic destination.³⁷ As a matter of fact, Mosuo people did receive foreign influences, namely Lamaism, around the fourteenth century, and this might have given them a flexibility superior to that of the hopeless Nuosu stubbornly attached to their superstitious practices and village particularism!

What is the alternative ? Is it really between normalization and passive resistance ? Will the Nuosu people find a way to assert their own legacy while accommodating trends which threaten to eventually destroy their social, cultural and natural environment ? The answer lies only partially in their own hands.

The Nuosu people certainly have to rely on the very small number of their children having received an education that makes them credible interlocutors in the eyes of the modern world. But the perception by the Chinese as a whole of the plurality of the cultures in their midst is certainly a key factor.

China still perceives its own diversity through a mixture of Han chauvinism, Marxist-Leninist stock phrases and technocratic stereotypes. Cultural pluralism remains an abstraction. Ultimately, the Nuosu people need not only to have a well-educated Nuosu elite, they also badly need better-educated Han Chinese, with whom they could build their future.

End Notes

1 *Sichuan Ribao (Sichuan Daily) (ScD)*, July 24 1996, p.3.

2 果洪升 Guo Hongsheng , "On the Historic Significance and Actual Effect of the Chinese Workers' and Peasants' Red Army's Entering into Alliance with the Yis in Mianning County, Sichuan Province in 1935." *Minzu Yanjiu (MY) (Ethnic Studies)* 1996, 2, pp.27-32.

3 David Bradley, *Proto-Loloish*, Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies Monograph Series 39, London and Malmo, Curzon Press, 1979 ; David Bradley, "Language Policy for the Yi", *The First International Conference on Yi Studies*, Seattle, March 1995

4 The Dali (大理) Kingdom, which succeeded the Nanzhao Kingdom, was finally destroyed by the army of Kublai Khan in 1253.

5 See for instance 胡華 Hu Hua ed 《彝族文學史》 (*Literary History of the Yi Nationality*) Sichuan Publishing House, 1994, p.18 ff

6 Stevan Harrell, "Ethnicity and Kin Terms Among Two Kinds of Yi", *Ethnicity and Ethnic Groups in*

China, Chien Chiao and Nicholas Tapp eds, Hong-Kong, New Asia Academic Bulletin, vol. VIII, 1989, p.197.

7 See Stevan Harrell, *ibid*, p.179.

8 Richard Von Glahn - *The Country of Streams and Grottoes, Expansion, Settlement and the Civilizing of the Sichuan Frontier in Song Times* - Harvard U.P., 1987, p.213.

9 Peter Goulart, *Forgotten Kingdom*, London, John Murray, 1955, p.49.

10 楊懷英 Yang Huaiying 《涼山彝族奴隸社會法律制度研究》, (*Studies on the Legal System of the Slave Society of the Yi Nationality of Liangshan*), Sichuan Publishing House, 1992.

11 徐曉光 Xu Xiaoguang "A Gratifying Achievement in Research on Slavery Society's Law" *MY* 1996, 2, p. 108-110.

12 Translated in Chinese by *jiazhi* (家支), or by an alliteration (此偉).

13 Ann Maxwell Hill, Eric Diehl, "A Comparative Approach to Lineage among Xiao Liangshan Nuosu (Yi) and Han", *The First International Conference on Yi Studies*, Seattle, March 1995, p.18.

14 "Many large clans have produced within them a large number of branches, and because of natural, geographic and environmental changes, these branches have themselves become clans. The Hiezy clan has given birth to over 40 subordinate clans. (...) In the most formal activities, usually people do not use the branch surname, and in marriages and funerals people use only the whole clan surname, but in ordinary life the branch surname is the surname they use." Ma Erzi, "A Brief discussion of Names and Genealogies among the Liangshan Yis...", *The First International Conference on Yi Studies*, Seattle, March 1995, p.1.

15 Translated in Chinese by *tusi* (土司) or by an alliteration (慈莫). The term *tusi* refers to the native chieftain system practiced by the various Chinese dynasties, with significant variations in the policies followed throughout the ages. For a recent synthesis on this topic, see John E. Herman, "Empire in the Southwest : Early Qing Reforms to the Native Chieftain System", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 56 (1), Febr. 1997, pp.47-74.

16 In this article, I generally follow the pinyin romanization (in italics) when there is an usual Chinese transcription for Nuosu expressions. I write for instance *Nuosu* and not **Nosu** as the romanized form of Standard Yi orthography would require. I use the Yi romanized form (in bold) when pinyin does not apply. However, in this case, a new difficulty occurs : the four tones of Nuosu Yi are marked at the end of the syllable, but not pronounced: t; x; no mark; p. These marks may be misleading for the unaccustomed English-language reader, and therefore they are often omitted in the Western literature. In case of frequent use (as is the case for the all-important **nzymo** institution) I first indicate the correct transcription and afterwards the usual one, to which I stick afterwards. In a few cases, pinyin and standard Yi transcriptions are identical, as will be the case for the term **bimo**, for which I will use bold italics. Finally, even when I use the Nuosu transcription I indicate the Chinese characters generally used in the specialized literature.

17 Ma Erzi, "A new understanding of the old social structure of the Yi in Liangshan", *Liangshan minzu yanjiu*, (*Liangshan Ethnic Studies*) (*LES*), 1993, pp.42-43. In a similar fashion, the most serious criminal cases are called "black" cases while the least serious ones are labelled "white." See Ma Erzi, 曲比石美, Qubi Shimei, "On the Yi Clans and the Homicide Cases in Old Liangshan", *LES*, 1997, p.90.

18 Statistics here are easily outdated. The figure of 2 million is also used in an article of the *Farmer's Daily* (*FD*), May 5 1996, p.2.

19 Thomas Heberer, "Nationality Conflicts and Ethnicity in the PRC. With Special Reference to the Yi in the Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture.", *The First International Conference on Yi Studies*, Seattle, March 1995, p.9.

20 *People's Daily* (*PD*), December 4 1996, p.2.

21 *FD*, art.cit.

- 22 *ScD*, August 28 1996 p.8 and August 29 1996, p.3.
- 23 For a summary description of the Yi way of life, see *Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, Boston, G.K. Hall and Co, 1994, vol.6, p. 505-508.
- 24 *Beijing Daily*, 16 June 1997, p.3
- 25 *PD*, 7,8,9 July 1997, p.2.
- 26 Guo Hongsheng, op. cit., pp. 29 & 31.
- 27 何明委 He Mingwei, "Researches on the Current Situation and the Requirement Calculation of Minority Cadres in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture", *MY*, 1996 (3), pp.10-18.
- 28 Stevan Harrell, "Jeeping against Maoism", *Positions*, 3(3), 1995, p.754.
- 29 *Yunnnan Daily (YuD)*, June 19 1996, p.3. One sometimes speaks of "**bimo** religion" (畢摩教). Religion, after all, is controlled, but superstition (迷信) is simply forbidden.
- 30 *YunD*, June 6 1996, p.7.
- 31 See for instance 隆賢君 Long Xianjun, 《中國彝族通史綱要》, (*An Outline of the History of the Yi Nationality in China*) Sichuan Nationalities Publishing House, 1993, pp.8-14. 任乃強 Ren Naiqiang, 《羌族源流探索》, (*A Probe into the Origins of of the Qiang Minority*), Chongqing Publishing House, 1984, pp1-17.
- 32 See for instance 龔鵬程 Gong Pengcheng, "Difficulties encountered in researching the Yi culture", Communication at the Beijing symposium on World Religion, August 1996, with a critical summary of the literature on the subject.
- 33 Ma Xueliang et al, 《彝族原始宗教調查報告》, *A Report Of Inquiry into the Primitive Religion of the Yis*, Beijing, Academy of Social Sciences Publishing House, 1993.
- 34 Bamo Ayi, 《彝族祖靈信仰研究》, *A Research on Yi People's Ancestral Religious Belief*, Sichuan Nationalities Press, 1994.
- 35 Center for the Study of Bimo Culture at Meigu, 《美姑彝族畢摩調查研究》, *Research and Inquiry on Bimos in Meigu County*, 1996. Texts are collected and translated by the Central Academy of Nationalities. Generally speaking, there are less texts translated and published for the Liangshan area than for the Yunnan and Guizhou Yi communities.
- 36 *Liangshan Daily*, July 23 1996, p.3.
- 37 *PD*, May 29 1996, p.11.

This article explores the current situation of the Yis at Liangshan Prefecture (Sichuan). It also provides an overview on the recent development on Yi studies. Putting a special emphasis on religious beliefs and practices it analyzes the identity problem met by the Nosu people.

本文不僅探討諾蘇（四川涼山彝族）的現狀，同時文中也對近年來的彝族研究作一綜觀。本文著重探究彝族的宗教信仰與行爲，並分析諾蘇所面臨的認同問題。