

**INTER-CULTURAL CONFLICT
AND REWRITING HISTORY:
THE CASE OF THE YI**

A Senior Scholars Thesis

by

LISA VERONICA LÓPEZ

Submitted to the Office of Undergraduate Research
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

April 2011

Major: Anthropology

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Approved by:

Research Advisor:
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ABSTRACT

Inter-Cultural Conflict and Rewriting History:
The Case of the Yi. (April 2011)

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This thesis examines why the Yi people of Liangshan – who call themselves Nuosu – in southwest China have been reviving their identity since the end of Mao’s Cultural Revolution. Ultimately, I conclude that internal pressure, or Yi desire to be Yi for identity’s sake only, is what best explains current trends in Yi cultural revival. I refute the claim that Yi cultural revival is best explained by reference to external incentives. I consider possible and general sources of external incentives and argue that they are not present, in compelling ways, to the Nuosu.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Mao Zedong endeavored to promote socialism and eliminate feudalism by homogenizing the unique identities of many ethnic minorities in China and obliterating individual traditions. Rural societies struggled to be included in Mao's political transition, even if it required suppressing their unique cultural heritages. Many of the ethnic minority groups, including the Yi of Liangshan (Nuosu)¹, were forced to assimilate into Maoism. Mao's death and the arrests of the "Gang of Four" triggered the decline of Maoism². This marked a respite for ethnic cultures, again permitting a measure of pluralism in Chinese society³. During the 1980s (post-Cultural Revolution), the Yi endeavored to restore their identity by reviving what they considered to be distinctive aspects of Yi culture. This thesis examines the internal motivations that cause the Yi of Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan province (Liangshan) to reassert their identity. Their impetus for cultural revitalization may be external (such as the desire to promote tourism or receive state funding), internal, or

This thesis follows the style of American Anthropologist.

¹Liangshan, officially known as "Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture," is in Sichuan, China. Liangshan has over 4.7 billion inhabitants and is home to the largest population of Yi ethnic minorities in China.

² The Gang of Four was largely in control during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Their radical ideas led them to be charged with treasonous crimes. Some scholars argue this marked the end of the Cultural Revolution. The Gang of Four members included: Jiang Qing (Mao Zedong's wife), Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen

³ Pluralism refers to smaller groups in a larger society who retain their ethnic identity

both. Cataloging which cultural features were revived from pre-Revolution Yi culture, those that were not, and others that were created post-Revolution will shed some light on whether or not internal or external reasoning accounts for Yi cultural rebirth. The relative emphasis, or exaggeration, the Yi place on certain cultural behaviors may also be telling. This research also will analyze existing pressures on the Yi in order to place their cultural decisions in a larger socio-political context.

Chapter II describes Yi culture and identity from three eras: 1) Pre-Revolution, 2) During the Revolution, 3) Post-Revolution. Chapter III explains a variety of theories that seek to explain cultural identity revival. It also prescribes a methodology for approaching this problem, roughly summarized as an analysis of what incentives and motivations the Nuosu have. Chapters IV and V consider and analyze internal reasons and external incentives, and Chapter VI concludes the thesis.

CHAPTER II

YI IDENTITY

In this chapter, Nuosu history and identity is broken down into three chapters: Pre-Revolution, Revolution, and Post-Revolution. The Nuosu live in subtropical mountainous regions of southwest Sichuan Province (see Figure A). The weather is relatively warm and sustains frequent rainfall. Scientists from Sichuan University measure that the “lowest elevation in this area is 500 meters above sea level and the highest peaks reach about 3,500 meters (Liu et al. 2007).” Steep-sided mountains surrounded by deep river gorges make this area difficult to navigate and travel to.

Pre-revolution (prior to 1949)

The Yi have inhabited the southwestern area of China as far back as the second century; they are generally considered to be descendants of various non-Han people, although recent scholarship has challenged this claim (Harrell 1990). Thirty plus years before the Revolution, Liangshan Yi had established a slave society. Some scholars also argue that the Yi experienced an early feudal society as well as a stage while transitioning from slave and feudalism – following characteristics of the Classical Marxist Model⁴. Prior to the Revolution, the aristocratic⁵ Nuosu were divided into four *dengji* (ranks): *Nuohuo*

⁴ Classical Marxist societies experience two stages: Primitive communism (poor societies, limited division of labor) and advanced communism (large, wealthy classless societies). Within primitive communism, societies go through four modes of production: 1) slavery, 2) feudalism, 3) capitalism, 4) socialism

⁵ Privileged classes; nobility

(Black Yi) (highest), *qunuo* (White Yi), *mgajie*, and *gaxy* (lowest) (Pan 2003). Black Yi were the highest class and owned the other three. The other ranks were allowed to own the ranks below them, allowing for a layered system of ownership. Black Yi nobles made up seven percent of the total Nuosu population, *qunuo* 55 percent, *mgajie* 33 percent, and *gaxy* six percent (Li Shaoming 2003). Hu Qingjun describes slave owning as a “system⁶ whereby slave holders own both the means of production and the producers (slaves) (2003:1).”

Life was challenging for slaves. They were “toiled around like beasts of burden (Ethnic Groups 2005).” Slaves did attempt to flee their masters, but mountainous terrain made escape difficult. Some slaves went so far as to kill their masters or burn their property and land just to run away. Agriculture was the main line of production for the Yi during this time. Slash and burn⁷ was a common practice in order for farmers to create more open land.

Sudden historical changes that emerged in 1949, such as the start of The Mao Era and the founding of the People’s Republic of China, caused the Nuosu’s slave society to diminish.

⁶ Systems refer to the political, economic, and cultural structure during certain historical conditions – in the case of the Yi of Liangshan, systems before Liberation

⁷ Slash and burn is a technique used amongst agriculturalists to cut and burn away forests to make fields

Revolution (1949-76)

In 1952, the Chinese Communist Party officially established the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan⁸. The Cultural Revolution had the effect of diminishing aspects of Yi culture that were present before the Revolution (along with every other ethnic minority in China), such as their slave society. After consulting with the Yi in 1956, the people's government carried out democratic reforms in the Yi area of Sichuan and other places. The government sought to abolish slavery and allow the laboring people to enjoy their freedom and political equality. This reform also created more open land for the upcoming socialist transformation. Benefits such as political status and material benefits were awarded to Yi who assisted in promoting the democratic reform. Obviously, more slaves than slaveholders were inspired to cement their socialist values by promoting the reform. Mao Zedong, the leader of the Cultural Revolution, was in charge of reinforcing socialism by eliminating feudalistic societies in China. This had a profound effect on ethnic minorities, including the Yi. Individual Chinese identities were lost and were forced to assimilate into Maoism. Information about the Nuosu from 1966-76 is rare to come across because cultural minority studies were abandoned. Dr. Li Yu, a Chinese Sinologist at Williams College argues, “[T]here seems to be very little literature about ethnic minority representation during this period (e-mail to author, March 28, 2011)” Scholars must infer information based on history and reports from un-politicized sources during this period (which are rare to find).

⁸ Autonomous Prefecture refers to an area consisting of one or more ethnic minorities; largely populated by an ethnic minority. It is a division of provinces. Provinces make up municipalities (highest levels of cities), autonomous regions, and the special administrative regions. China has 22 provinces – The Yi of Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture is located in Sichuan province.

Post-revolution (1977-current)

After the Revolution, the Yi promoted their identity by emphasizing harmless aspects of their original culture. Slavery was deemed harmful by the new government, so it was not revived post-Revolution. Other changes included the replacement of Han officials with minority leaders in administrative positions, return to Yi language in Liangshan, and sponsored holiday celebrations (Harrell 2002). China was then divided into 56 *minzu* (ethnicities) based on four Stalinist markers: common culture, language, territory, and economy (Wu 1990). Being officially labeled as *Yi* by the government does not necessarily mean that the groups are descendants from the same origin. In the case of government classification, the Nisu, Nasu, Sani, Lipuo, Lolopo, and others have all been officially classified as *Yi*. These groups are scattered all over southwest China and may never know about how each group really differs from one another. This is just one way motivations to be *Yi* are *internal* – this will be further explained in my thesis in coming chapters. The largest *minzu* belongs to the Han Chinese. Individuals who are not part of the Han *minzu* are considered ethnic minorities. Today, the Yi account for 13 percent of China's population and the seventh largest *minzu* (Senz and Yi 2001). Out of 7 million total Yi, there are only 2 million Nuosu (Harrell 2002). Most of the Yi remained in the mountainous region of southwest China after the Cultural Revolution; Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and Guangxi provinces are home to many of these herders and farmers.

Culture

With the Nuosu, dress, housing, rituals, and language are the most prominent ethnic markers of their culture. Yi dress is rich in color – reds, blacks, blues, and yellows. All of their clothing is handmade; Yi women begin to learn how to sew at a young age and continue to practice the art of embroidery for clothing. The most notable Yi clothing item is the skirt; women wear long horizontally pleated skirts with the occasional purse hanging from their belt. A headcloth is also worn symbolizing whether or not a woman has borne a child. If she has borne a child, she will wear a large, square framed hat (see Figure B) (Harrell 2009). The younger generations of Yi women do not generally wear this style of traditional Yi dress. It is more likely that old women will wear the traditional long pleated skirt; however, everyone dresses traditionally for special occasions, such as weddings and funerals. The men wear black military-like jackets with tight sleeves and turbans. Outdoor accessories for both men and women consist of long *jieshy vala* (wool capes) with knee-length tassels at the ends (see Figure C).

Yi houses are mud-wood structures built without windows. These relatively small, dark, and damp houses do not separate into different rooms; the house is one open space with the kitchen in one corner and beds in the other. The kitchen consists of one stove dug in the earth surrounded by three stones (see Figure D). Utensils are colored with distinct ethnic Yi colors; red, black, and yellow. The utensil patterns are painted with elaborate symbols of bull eyes, clouds, and waves (see Figure E).

Common rituals amongst all Yi include the famous Torch Festival. The nationally recognized Torch Festival is celebrated every year from June 24-26. The Yi believe in the holiness of fire because it represents their passion, frankness, and bravery. The purpose of the Torch Festival is to drive away evil spirits and pray for prosperity. On the first day of the festival, family members worship their ancestors with some kind of ancestral altar in the main room of their houses. They also visit other family and friends to wish them the best. The second day is full of horse racing, bull and sheep fighting, singing competitions, beauty competitions, and other interactive competitions. The highlight of the festival falls on the third day when villages are lit up by large bonfires; the Yi sing, dance, and sit around the bonfire all night. The torch symbolizes “happiness and chasteness” which brings good luck to the people (Zhang 2009). A short video of the Torch Festival is associated with this thesis and can be found as a supplemental file in the appendix. Heavy drinking and smoking are customary traditions not only accustomed with Yi festivals and rituals, but in everyday life as well. To welcome and honor their guests, the Yi present them with *baijiu*, a Chinese distilled alcoholic beverage. During my visit with the Nuosu, I met with an elderly woman who told us stories about her son who died due to a drug overdose (which is severe problem in Liangshan Yi – I will discuss this topic in greater detail below). The elderly Yi woman insisted we accept her offer of cigarettes and *baijiu*.

The Nuosu have their own writing called *Yi* (see Figure F). Scholars estimate their distinct writing to be 6 thousand years old (3 thousand years earlier than traditional Han

writing). It is understood that Yi writing is the earliest script in China. The characters they use in writing can be traced back to findings on Neolithic pottery at Banpo in Xi'an. (Harrell and Yongxiang 2003). They also speak a language known as *Yi*. Despite officially being labeled as “Yi” by the Chinese government, the minorities of southwest China speak six different dialects.

CHAPTER III

APPROACHES

To address this issue, we must first be familiar with three theories describing *how* a culture revives and what the results of revival are. Three theories commonly associated with cultural are: Nativistic Movements, Revitalization Movements, and Inventing Traditions.

Theories

- 1) Nativistic Movements: Ralph Linton, a cultural anthropologist, is best known in the field of anthropology for finding a distinction between status and role. He describes *nativistic movements* as, “Any conscious, organized attempt on the part of the society’s members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of its culture (1943:230).” Unconsciously, all societies seek to continue their culture through socialization and “the normal processes of individual training” (Linton and Hallowell 1943:230). However, when a society knows that other cultures surround their territory, they consciously revive aspects of their culture because they feel as if their existence is threatened. The result of a cultural revival ultimately means reviving a practice or tradition from the past and applying a symbolic value to it in the present-day.

- 2) Revitalization Movements: Anthony Wallace is most remembered for his specialization in Native American cultures, specifically the Iroquois. His other major contribution to anthropology deals with revitalizing a culture. Similar in theory to Linton's "nativistic movements," Wallace defines *revitalization movement* as, "a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture" (Wallace 1956:265). Contrary to older beliefs that culture change was a slow-chain-like-reaction process ("introducing A induces change in B; changing B affects C; when C shifts, A is modified; this involves D...and so on ad infinitum [Wallace 1956:265]), Wallace believes that in revitalization, "A, B, C, D, E...N are shifted into a new *Gestalt*⁹ abruptly and simultaneously in intent; and frequently within a few years the new plan is put into effect by the participants in the movement (Wallace 1956:265)." Overall, a society feels their stress levels rise due to various situations and begin to employ satisfying cultural practices to help ease their stress.
- 3) Inventing Tradition: Eric Hobsbawn is a British historian who worked on literature regarding invented traditions. He argues that "traditions which appear or claim to be old are quite recent in origin and sometimes invented (Hobsbawn 1983:1)." The term *invented tradition* is used broadly in this sense, but not only does it incorporate traditions that were actually invented, constructed, but also those that are "emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and

⁹ German for a configuration or pattern of elements so unified as a whole that it cannot be described merely as a sum of its parts

dateable period” and eventually establishing themselves quickly. A society legitimizes new cultural practices for *x* reason by referencing past practices. Inventing tradition frequently occurs when rapid transformation within a society “weakens or destroys the social patterns for which ‘old’ traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable... (Hobsbawn 1983:4)”

Methodologies

There is a reason why the Yi would want to revive their culture post-Revolution. This thesis focuses on the question *why* the Yi have decided to revive their culture. The theories mentioned above do not describe “why” societies revive their culture, but rather *how* a culture revives itself and what the results of it are. Nativistic movements imply that cultural change involves a fear of cultural extinction, but this only accounts for one of many possible reasons why a culture might revive. As such, there are three possible explanations for Yi cultural revival: external, internal, or both. As I will show, these distinctions carve along salient features of cultural integrity. If motivations are external, that would mean the Yi are aware of the benefits for being a minority – monetary aid, leniency of child programs, affirmative action, etc. – and take advantage of these benefits by displaying their culture loudly. Internal motivations to be Yi simply mean that they value their culture for culture’s sake only. The next two chapters look closely at facts of external and internal motivations.

CHAPTER IV

EXTERNAL

External motivations are associated with benefits of being Yi and it must be the case that it is external *if and only if* the Yi perceive and act upon these benefits. For example, in the early 1980s, when the Cultural Revolution had recently ended, ethnic minorities were given back their identities. The government offered benefits to minorities if they could *prove* they were minorities. Benefits included developmental aid for minority districts, representation of minorities in politics, a more lenient application process for population control programs, and affirmative action in education (Harrell 1990). It was during this time when the government began grouping people together into official *minzus*. Once a group has been classified as a *minzu*, it is difficult to challenge the government's official classification because the government seems generally disinterested in tuning its system of classification (Harrell 1990). The problem with this classification is that it is difficult to see any cultural similarities between the groups in the Yi *minzu*. For example, a Yi speaker from Liangshan may not be able to understand the dialects of the Lipuo (also classified as a *Yi*) from north-central Yunnan. Stevan Harrell explains that after studying the official Northern Dialect of the Yi people, also known as the Nuosu language of Liangshan, he could not understand the Lipuo (Central Yi) language of north-central Yunnan (Harrell 1995). This is reason to suspect that the minorities scattered throughout southwest China are not actually the same, as the politically defined "Yi" implies. In other words, it might be misleading to think of these

groups as all being Yi, where *Yi* is meant to single out a single minority. Since the Chinese government categorized all groups of Yi into one *minzu*, the Nuosu have been pressured to show their true colors by making themselves stand out amongst the other Yi; they have revived aspects of their culture. Even if this external motivation accurately explains the rise of Yi culture, it is still important to note that even though this cultural resurgence occurs *in response to* actions of the Chinese government, it has not occurred *because of* the Chinese government. The Yi could have reacted in a number of ways, and choosing to revive their culture is only one of many options. The Chinese government has created a situation in which the Nuosu are inclined to rebuild their culture.

Theoretically, cultural change is a common response to outside pressures, even if the exact response cannot be predicted, or entirely explained, by referring to these pressures.

Another example of external pressures to exaggerate Yi culture would be tourism. Ethnic tourism in minority regions brings in income for the developing region, in this case, Liangshan. Tourists are interested in ‘exotic’ regions and people; they want to see people dressed in rich colors and enjoy foreign music. Therefore, the Yi have an incentive to give the tourists what they want – an “exotic” culture they can pay to see. The Nuosu realize there is a monetary benefit to be Yi and display their culture proudly.

Liangshan is perhaps the most dangerous region in China. The Nuosu have the highest HIV infection prevalence in China. This is largely due to the fact that Liangshan Yi are located along the largest drug trafficking route in the world known as *The Golden*

Triangle. The most common drug trafficked in this area is heroin (Liu et al. 2009). Because they live in the highest level of poverty and have limited resources, the Nuosu are not educated about the dangers of drug-use and needle sharing, making them a vulnerable group to drug and HIV infections in Liangshan. Presumably, if cultural flourishing brings money into the region, albeit from the government of tourism, it would help relieve the drug problem that plagues Liangshan.

Analysis

In the 1980s, when China was adjusting to the end of the Revolution, government incentives to being Yi may have been an influence in cultural revival. However, in recent years (mid-1980s-current), the government has no longer been evaluating changes of identities. A recent article published by the *Beijing Review*, states "...equal rights of all citizens, regions and ethnic groups..." to be a goal of government. If this is now the case, the benefits of being a minority are no longer being rewarded in China. The Nuosu have no incentive to stand out against other minorities or Yi. Since the government was not re-evaluating ethnic minority statuses past the mid-1980s, it is hard to see how cultural revival can be explained by persistent government incentives.

Regarding tourism, the fact is that ethnic tourism is essentially absent in Liangshan. The Yi have no reason to impress outsiders with their culture if foreigners rarely visit the region. Liangshan consists of tiny villages scattered throughout mountainous regions, making transportation difficult to Yi villages in Liangshan challenging to foreigners.

During my time in China, I had the opportunity to interact with members of Nuosu.

Leaving from Qingdao – eastern China – the journey took more than two days. After 21 hours on a train, several hours through the mountains by bus, and two miles walking on a muddy footpath, I had finally arrived¹⁰. Obviously, reaching Yi of Liangshan is not an easy or tourist-friendly journey to the poorest and most dangerous part of China.

Because it is rather difficult to reach these people in such a remote part of China, the Yi are not in a position to secure money from the tourism industry. When I met with this group of people, I was the first Westerner they had ever met. Needless to say, the Nuosu have not been exposed to external influences and certainly would not have any reason to show the world *they are Yi* for tourism's sake.

Lastly, the Chinese government is notorious for covering up undesirable information about China. Therefore, international attention to Yi drug problems is not in China's best interest, and the Chinese government should see no reason to endorse it. If money is going to come to Liangshan to fight drugs, it probably will not be as a result of Yi cultural expression. As I have shown, Yi cultural expression more or less occurs in a vacuum, almost completely removed from the concern of the Chinese government or international community.

¹⁰ Even Chengdu, the nearest conceivable (although unlikely) tourist destination is over 550 kilometers (roughly 10 hours by car) away. For those without access to a car, the quickest route to Liangshan involves navigating a labyrinthine network of trains and buses.

CHAPTER V

INTERNAL

The decision to revive Yi culture is internal if done solely for the sake of Yi cultural identity. While the question of cultural revival may be prompted by external factors, the decision and collective effort of the Yi of Liangshan to *be* Nuosu can nonetheless be internal. Identifying internal motivations are difficult, however. If there are external benefits to a cultural activity, these external benefits are only received if the culture seeking them exercises its culture in a way that appears to be motivated internally. Put bluntly, if it looks fake, the money does not come.

In the last chapter, I argued that Yi cultural revival cannot be explained externally. The incentive scheme is not in place for the Yi to receive external benefits for cultural expression. If this is correct, then it *must* be that Yi cultural revival is internally motivated. The evidence I have provided is mostly negative against the claim that Yi revival is *presently* external. Only internal motivations remain as a possible explanation.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In the case of Liangshan Yi, motivations to be Yi are internal. External influences to be Yi are currently not recognized; there are no benefits to proving their *minzu* as a distinct minority. It is ingrained in Nuosu's nature to express their cultural traditions because they simply value Yi culture for themselves. According to Stevan Harrell, to be Yi means "to instill pride in their own people...(2001:188)" Beyond that, the value one places in culture is something of a common and universal mystery. There is something about people that makes them interested in who they are as a member of a distinct ethnic group. Referring to this quality is the only way to explain recent Yi cultural revitalization.

Understanding the diversity of ethnicity may reflect upon what the future has in store for China as a nation in the future. Further research on China's ethnic policy effectiveness and extensive fieldwork are required in order to *fully* understand motivations to be Yi. Also, having an insider's perspective may alter or add more insight to this argument. Culture is always changing whether it is fast or slow paced and it can be interpreted many different ways. The ideas presented in this research are only one of many.

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APPENDIX



Figure A. Map of China Highlighting Liangshan Region.
(Wikipedia 2007)



Figure B. Nuosu Woman with Child.



Figure C. *Jieshy Vala.*



Figure D. Nuosu Stove with Three Stones.



Figure E. Yi Utensils.

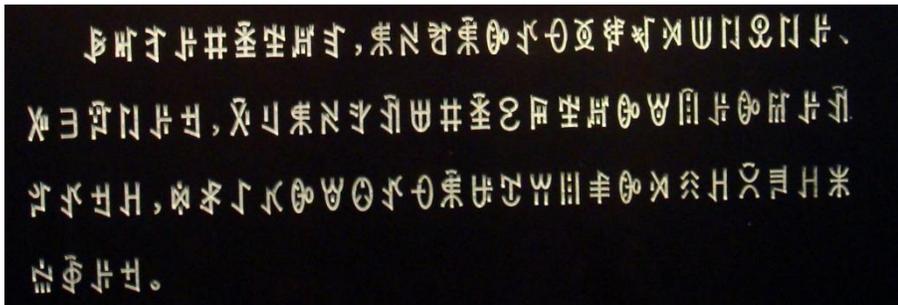


Figure F. Yi Script.

Figure G. Video of Yi man at Torch Festival can be found as a supplemental file

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