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Writing Balti(ness)

The Challenge of Nation-Building in a Geopolitically Contested Region

The Baltis mostly inhabit a region at the western edge of the Himalayas, also known as Baltistan. Today, Baltistan is considered to be a geographic and geopolitical border region; it is administered predominantly by Pakistan and claimed as a whole by India. Moreover, the Balti language is associated with a third entity, Tibet, while the fact that Baltis identify as Muslims, the majority Shiites, and hence consider Iran a friendly state, adds another dimension to the intricacy of their multiple belongings. Drawing on research in Baltistan in 2014 and 2017, particularly qualitative interviews with Baltis of various backgrounds, this article will show that the current endeavors to standardize a script—a variant of the Perso-Arabic, Tibetan, or Roman scripts—for the currently only sparsely written Balti language illustrate the struggle of identity formation and nation-building among Baltis during the early twenty-first century.

Keywords: Baltistan—script politics—nation-building—geopolitics—Tibetan past—Pakistan

The road from Gilgit to Skardu is a six-hour drive by car. Undoubtedly, it is one of the most beautiful road trips—along the river Indus, through valleys of the Karakoram mountain range, with mountain peaks to the right and left, some covered in snow. The view of this stark landscape is rarely interrupted by trees or human settlements, but rock inscriptions in Brahmi (*brāhmi*) and Tibetan script and rock carvings depicting ibexes, the Buddha, and *stūpas* are evidence that this region has been visited or settled by humans at least since the eighth century CE. At times, when rocks lie next to one of the few roads that cut through this seemingly inaccessible landscape, they also bear writing in Roman and/or Perso-Arabic script of more contemporary origin, as is the case for the rock close to the village of Gol (figures 1 and 2).

While in the past Buddhists left their messages in stone, today rocks in this region still serve as message boards and advertisement space, for instance for Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen Pakistan (MWM), a political organization that raises awareness of the rights of Shia Muslims in Pakistan (figure 3).



Figure 1. Rock with inscriptions in Brahmi (bottom of image), Perso-Arabic, and Roman script, and carvings of ibexes and *stūpas* close to the village of Gol, Baltistan. Photo by the author.



Figure 2. Close-up of the rock in figure 1. Photo by the author.



Figure 3. A message painted on a rock by the political Shiite organization Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen Pakistan (MWM). Photo by the author.



Figure 4. A banner of an Iranian organization called Pairavān-i vilāyat with a photo of Iran's political and religious authority, Ali Chāmene'i. Photo by the author.

The current dominance of Shia Islam and links to the Islamic Republic of Iran are obvious also when we enter Skardu, Baltistan's biggest city (see figure 4). However, a walk through Skardu also reveals references to the Tibetan past of this region, which was already called "Little Tibet" by the Mughals. Most prominent is the bilingual sign on a shop in the New Bazaar (figure 5).

Although this sign was already mentioned in several other publications (for example, Bouzas 2017, 219f.; MacDonald 2006, 193), its translation was always missing. In Urdu it says "New Baltistan vegetable and fruit shop. New Bazaar Skardu. [Proprietor:] Gulām 'Alī Tanḡūs," and in Balti, in Tibetan script, "New Baltistan shop. Vegetable and fruit trader. New Bazaar. West Tibet." West Tibet? Nobody I ask on the street about the writing in Balti seems to have a clue that they are on a street in West Tibet. Many different languages can be heard: Balti, Pashtu, Punjabi, Shina, and Urdu. But no one seems to be able to read the Tibetan script. After all, Skardu has officially been administered by Pakistan since 1949, and education takes place predominantly in Urdu, the national and official language of Pakistan. Hence, apart from the Roman script used for English, the second official language of Pakistan, Urdu and the Perso-Arabic script are omnipresent in the whole country, including here. Yet rock inscriptions and the shop sign in the New Bazaar hint at a culturally and geopolitically complex past and present of this region, where the indigenous population, the Baltis, have been searching for their identity over the last few decades.

In this article, I will discuss this struggle of identity formation and nation-building among Baltis by taking the endeavors to standardize a script for the Balti language as an example. Based particularly on qualitative interviews with Baltis of diverse



Figure 5. A shop sign with writing in Balti in Tibetan script and Urdu in the New Bazaar in Skardu. Photo by the author.

backgrounds I conducted in 2014 and 2017, I will show how the standardization of the currently only sparsely written language in a variant of the Perso-Arabic, Tibetan, or Roman scripts reflect this search for identity. Although there is a smaller Balti population in the Indian-administered districts of Kargil and Leh,¹ this article will focus solely on the Baltis in the region administered by Pakistan. My decision to do so is based on the fact that, after all, due to the different geopolitical settings in India and Pakistan, the dynamics of identity politics among Baltis differ in the two regions, despite their close proximity and contiguity.

The case of the Baltis

The Balti language and its speakers are an intriguing case for several reasons. First, Balti is today still sparsely written; there are only a few publications in Balti. Neither has the grammar of this language been officially standardized, nor its orthography. Some scholars have studied Balti and its variants and published on the topic (for example, Backstrom 2002; Ġāsingī and Wilāyat 2011; Lobsang 1995; Read 1934; Sharma 2004), but none of these studies have led to the implementation of a specific standardized form. Second, Baltis who can read and write are, as a rule, literate in Urdu, and some also in English, depending on their educational level. Literary

evidence in this region, comprising stone inscriptions in Brāhmī and Tibetan script, is very old. Moreover, due to the spread of Islam and the Quran, all Baltis are today at least familiar with the concept of writing and the value of literacy. Due to Islam and hence the importance of Arabic, as well as the two official languages of Pakistan, Urdu and English, the scripts Baltis are familiar with are Perso-Arabic and Roman. Third, linguistically, Balti is classified as a Tibetic language, the westernmost language of a continuum that continues until it reaches the western part of the Chinese province of Sichuan, in the east. It is closely related to Ladakhi and Purki (or Purgi, Puriki), two languages that are, besides Balti to a lesser extent, spoken in the neighboring region of Ladakh, which is part of today's Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. The historic connection to the east is thus evident. However, Baltistan has also experienced the migration of people from various other regions—from today's Pakistan and India, and Central and Western Asia. Most noticeable is the spread of Shia Islam among the majority of Baltis, which links them sociologically and religiously to Iran, in contrast to the overwhelming majority of Pakistan's population, who are Sunni Muslims.

Hence, in many ways, the region Baltis inhabit today seems to be a typical upland border region, reflecting the various historic belongings that are today often perceived to contradict each other.² Besides the border to the east already mentioned, with the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, the majority of Baltis live in the modern geopolitical entity of Gilgit-Baltistan, which shares a border with China in the north, a short border with Afghanistan in the west, and one with Pakistan in the south. While Gilgit-Baltistan is administered by Pakistan, India claims this region completely as part of Jammu and Kashmir. Being part of the so-called Kashmir conflict, the region is often perceived as the subject of a dispute between India and Pakistan, although China is another major geopolitical player (see, for example, Kreutzmann 2015, 285–88) in this sensitive region, since it controls some areas in the north that are also claimed by India. The recent so-called “Belt and Road Initiative” undertaken by China, for which this region constitutes the only direct access point to the Arabian Sea via the Karakoram Highway, might lead to new geopolitical tensions in the future.

More importantly, the geographic location and geopolitical fuzziness of the region in the past and present have prevented sustainable identity-building among its inhabitants, as will become apparent in this article. The difficulty in creating a distinct identity is reflected in rather late and arduous nation-building endeavors by local activists around the idea of “Baltiness.” Yet, during my stay in Baltistan in August 2017, I observed that many Baltis were also enthusiastically celebrating Pakistani Independence Day, suggesting their patriotic and national fervor. State symbols such as the Pakistani flag were omnipresent, even in domestic spaces. Thus, it is important to note that the following discussion on nation-building around the concept of “Baltiness” is limited to specific strata of Balti society. Script activists, especially, overwhelmingly belong to the urban, educated, and socioeconomically better-off segment of the Balti population. But even from my limited research in Skardu, it became quite evident that there is no single definition of “Baltiness.” As for the majority of Baltis who are considered to be socioeconomically “backward,” spread out in a web of many villages throughout Baltistan, often with little, if any, education, we neither know whether and to what extent they identify as Pakistanis,

nor do we know whether they consider themselves part of the Pakistani nation. We also do not know if and how they define Baltiness.

Balti—Baltis—Baltistan

The ethnic term “Balti” and its geographical counterpart “Baltistan” are very real in the early twenty-first century, even though the specific characteristics of the people inhabiting the region are highly contested. Moreover, the geopolitical status of the terrain in which they live is also debated, due to porous perceptions of borders, among other factors. Apart from a claim to the territory today labeled “Baltistan,” the only element of Baltiness that seems to be uncontested is the Balti language. However, there is no generally accepted standardized form of Balti regarding grammar, script, and orthography yet; there are, however, diverse varieties of this language that, although mutually intelligible, are distinguished mainly by differences in pronunciation and approximately 10 percent variable vocabulary (Backstrom 2002, 11f.). Peter C. Backstrom has classified Balti into six distinct variants spoken mainly in different valleys: Rondu Balti, Shigar Balti, Skardu Balti, Khaplu Balti, Kharmang Balti, and Chorbati Balti (*ibid.*, 11). The variant spoken in Skardu is accepted by many of my interviewees. Many other people from a variety of regions in the area also accept the Skardu variant. People in Khaplu, for instance, the second-largest city in Baltistan, also view it to be a potential form of what might be considered “standard” Balti. Backstrom also supports my observations that the Balti variant from Skardu is most widely understood, partly because of radio broadcasts from this city (*ibid.*, 24).

Dieter Schuh illustrates in his impressive three-volume publication on Baltistan (Schuh 2011a, 2011b, 2011c) that the term “Balti” has undergone some major semantic changes over the years. Balti was earlier used as a denomination for a region, even though the extent of that region sometimes deviated extensively. It was used for the people living there as well (Schuh 2011a, 66f.). Regardless of the different connotations of the term, the region today known as Baltistan never formed a geopolitical entity administered centrally for any long period of time, and it was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that Baltistan was established as a toponym for the region (Schuh 2008, 171).

Between the seventh and ninth centuries, the region apparently became part of the Tibetan Empire. There are signs that Tibetan influence began at the beginning of the seventh century (Schuh 2011b, 117), such as the fact that Baltis speak a Tibetic language, or that certain archaeological sites, such as the Buddha rock close to Skardu, suggest a Buddhist past before conversion to Shia Islam. After the decline of the Tibetan Empire, sources tell us only about Muslim missionaries or raids to and from this region. From the sixteenth century onward, it consisted of several kingdoms that were mainly restricted to valleys. The six main kingdoms were Kartaksho, Khaplu, Kiris, Roundu, Shigar, and Skardu, which were at times allies, enemies, or subjected to one or the other. It was only from roughly 1820 until 1840 that all kingdoms of present-day Baltistan were a part of one rule under Ahmad Shah. However, there is no evidence that Ahmad Shah used the term “Baltistan” officially for this territory; nor did he rule it centrally. In fact, the previous administrative structures were

maintained, and the population of these different kingdoms stayed under local rulers who were now subordinate to Ahmad Shah, mainly with regard to paying taxes to him and military fealty (*ibid.*, 65f.).

We can only speculate about the self-perception of the population during that time, but without a geopolitical union, a centralized administration, or other factors that could have contributed to a common identity or even basic nation-building—for example, a common written vernacular language or shared cultural symbols—we can assume that the inhabitants of this region did not perceive themselves as belonging to one distinct group on the basis of shared cultural or ethnolinguistic factors. In other words, it is a stretch of the imagination to speak of *the* Baltis as a homogeneous group before the nineteenth century. The one circumstance that Shia Islam was dominant in the region for centuries—at least among the urban elite—might in fact have contributed to a sense of belonging across valleys on the basis of a common religion rather than ethnicity. It seems more likely that kinship networks might have been the most important factor linking inhabitants to one another during the precolonial period.

Becoming “Balti”

Despite this, several factors have led to the present-day self-perception of forming one ethnic group and nation. The latter term, in English, was used by many of my Balti informants themselves and can also be found in publications; for instance in a booklet for learning the Tibetan script, the following is written in broken English (Amacha 2001, 4):

You belong to a nation who inherit[s] a complete social structure and a rich cultural heritage. Baltis, a smallest [nation] in number, can be counted as one of the nation[s] of the world who possesses all the qualities and cultural characteristics.

As is the case with many such identity-formation processes, we might assume that the emergence of a consciousness for a distinct Balti nation is related to, for instance, a misbalanced political interaction with some other ethnolinguistic group that might have fostered a perceived us/them dichotomy, leading to a perception of united Baltis “on the basis of their shared oppression” (Young 1990, 46) with a common language. In interviews I conducted, most Baltis referred to the Dogra rulers of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir as the first colonizers of their region. Many of them still harbor resentments against Dogri speakers and other ethnolinguistic groups often lumped together as “Kashmiris.”³ The main reason for these anti-Kashmiri sentiments is related to the new tax system established by the Dogra rulers, which has led to the impoverishment of the common people in Baltistan, who also became victims of forced labor (Schuh 2011a, 95–97) during Dogra rule (1846–1948). Hence, as soon as there was an opportunity to shake off any influence from the south—that is, from Jammu and Kashmir—the people of Gilgit-Baltistan took a bold chance. When Muslim tribal militias from other regions within Pakistan attacked the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in October 1947 and its Hindu *mahārājā* accepted the accession to India in exchange for India’s military support, it was the Gilgit Scouts, under

the leadership of the British Major William Brown, that only a few days later, on November 1, 1947, overthrew the governor Ghansara Singh, who was installed by the *mahārājā* in Gilgit. By August 1948, the Gilgit Scouts controlled Skardu and the rest of present-day Baltistan too. The region has been formally administered by Pakistan since 1949,⁴ although several Balti activists told me that some locals preferred an independent geopolitical entity. According to many of my interviewees and in the opinions of publications that I consulted (for example, Sökefeld 2018, 135), however, the general population at that time, being Muslim, preferred to accede to Pakistan rather than to India. But here, too, there is a lack of sufficient studies from or about that critical period of time. What we can assess with certainty is that since 1949 sentiments toward Pakistan have gradually been worsening among specific strata of the Balti population, contributing to a growing sense of Baltiness. This development is based upon several factors.

Vague geopolitical status and limited citizenship

The contested geopolitical status of the region and hence limited Pakistani citizenship for its inhabitants has been engendering a growing sense of an us/them binary, fostering a Pakistan/Gilgit-Baltistan dichotomy. Between 1949 and 2009 the region was administered directly from Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan. It was renamed Gilgit-Baltistan and gained limited autonomy in 2009, but the fact that the region is neither fully integrated into Pakistan nor enjoys full autonomy leads to resentments among the indigenous population. For instance, although the people of Gilgit-Baltistan carry Pakistani national identity cards, they are not allowed to vote in the general election and have no representation in the National Assembly of Pakistan (see, for example, Bouzas 2017, 207). Today, four predominantly Balti-speaking districts of Gilgit-Baltistan are considered to form Baltistan: Ghanche, Karmang, Shigar, and Skardu, while some Baltis also perceive parts of Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir as an integral part of Baltistan—either only four villages that India seized from Pakistan during the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971, or the whole district of Kargil and even parts of the Leh district. The inclusion of these Indian regions is based either on linguistic reasons—the fact that Balti is spoken as far as Kargil and Leh and the close connection between Balti, Purki, and Ladakhi—or the fact that Shia Muslims also live in those regions. Sometimes both reasons are cited together. Another plausible reason lies in the fact that the regions of present-day Baltistan and Ladakh indeed formed one administrative union, known as *wazārat* in Urdu, between 1901 and 1948. As a result, in recent times some Baltis long for a (re)unification of these regions and an imagined Greater Ladakh (see Magnusson 2011). The growing sense of belonging to a neighboring region is, among other things, doubtless a result of the imagined and actual neglect by the Pakistani state, including the socioeconomic (under)development that has plagued this region.

Socioeconomic marginalization

The decades-long socioeconomic neglect of Baltistan can be observed in the daily lives of its residents, including the lack of infrastructure (for example, electricity, roads, telecommunications, etc.) that impacts upon every field, such as education,

healthcare, agricultural support, and so on. One reason for the obvious neglect would certainly be difficult accessibility to the region but maybe also its contested geopolitical status, which would lead investors to assume that any investment there could be considered a potential loss. This seems to have changed recently with Chinese investments in the construction of the so-called Karakoram Highway, which was completed in 1979. The highway has facilitated easier access not only from the region to the rest of Pakistan but also in the other direction toward China. Yet whereas, according to my interviewees in Gilgit in 2017, this highway raised hopes locally of investments in infrastructure and new job opportunities, today it is instead seen by many as a threat to the environment, a potential danger of Chinese domination, and enabling the influx of people from other parts of Pakistan that could contribute to further socioeconomic marginalization of the indigenous population. It could also contribute to more communal tension between the predominantly Shia local population and the largely foreign Sunni population.⁵ The new Chinese and Pakistani plans for the region in the context of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), one of the biggest projects of China's Belt and Road Initiative (also referred to as the New Silk Road), seem to have increased these fears (see Howe and Hunzai 2019). In contrast to the construction of the Karakoram Highway, CPEC does not only include plans for roads, such as the one linking China with the seaport in Gwardar, but is an overall massive investment in rail and road networks throughout Pakistan, the energy sector, special economic zones, and even agriculture and science.

Many people I talked to in Skardu were extremely critical of CPEC and feared that the usual meager investments in Gilgit-Baltistan by the Pakistani state might now even go solely to the Gilgit and Diamer regions, China's "gateway" to CPEC investments, leaving Baltistan further marginalized. Whether justified or not, this fear seems very real and needs to be studied in more detail. In the long run, the expansion of the Karakoram Highway could foster a dichotomy not only between Pakistan and Gilgit-Baltistan but also between Gilgit-Diamer and Baltistan. This could be furthered by the fact that, though Baltistan is part of the present entity of Gilgit-Baltistan, the two socioeconomic and cultural centers of this region, Gilgit and Skardu, are separated by a car drive of at least six hours through what is almost a no-man's-land. Furthermore, compared to the rest of Gilgit-Baltistan, Baltistan is linguistically far more homogenous (Kreutzmann 2017, 257). This homogeneity, together with the growing fear of neglect, seems an ideal breeding ground for Balti nationalism.

In the context of emerging Balti nationalism, voices such as that of the Washington, DC-based Balti activist Senge Hasnan Sering merit particular consideration. Though he claims to speak for all of the people of Gilgit-Baltistan, his remarks in an interview from March 21, 2019 about the impact of CPEC on his home region and the potential future role of India exclusively reflect the sentiments of some Balti activists longing for a (re)unification with Indian-administered Ladakh (Ramesh 2019). M. Ramesh writes the following:

Sering said that since India claims G-B [i.e., Gilgit-Baltistan] to be its own, it should help the region. . . . Now is the time for India to start claiming G-B. India should not miss this opportunity, he said, adding wryly that "India is known for missing opportunities." "The way it can be done is by establishing a relationship with G-B,"

he said. The people of G-B look at the developments in Ladakh, such as the establishment of a Hill Council, and hope to be a part of India. “Help G-B, help us enjoy the same constitutional rights as Ladakh,” Sering said.

Being the Other in the rest of Pakistan

The way in which young men from Ghizer District, in the west of Gilgit-Baltistan, developed anti-Pakistan sentiments and a strong sense of belonging to their own linguistic group and/or home region during their studies in other regions of Pakistan, mainly Karachi, is well-known (Bodla 2014; Sökefeld 1999). This phenomenon also applies to young Balti men studying, in most cases, in Karachi, but nowadays also in Islamabad/Rawalpindi and Lahore (Magnusson 2006, 198f.). Interviewees told me, for example, that their fellow students confused Baltistan with Balochistan when they mentioned their home region. This kind of ignorance, paired with their own limited citizenship status, led not only to a sense of exclusion from other Pakistani students but also to stronger networking among Balti students, who started several initiatives in Karachi to strengthen their own culture and hence ethnolinguistic belonging. Thus, in 1986, the Baltistan Students Federation (BSF) was established in Karachi (ibid., 198). Nowadays this plays a very strong role in the Tibetan script movement, and many of the Tibetan script activists based today in Skardu have studied in Karachi or are still associated with the BSF.

Exclusion from nation-building based on Sunni Islam, and the influence of Iran

The nation-building around Sunni Islam by the Pakistani state (Nasr 2004) seems also to have contributed to identity formation among Baltis. The majority of them are Shia Muslims, so the growing violence against this minority group in Pakistan since the beginning of the 1980s contributes to the tangible fear of and estrangement from the Pakistani state among all ethnolinguistic groups in Gilgit-Baltistan, such as Shina speakers (see Sökefeld 2003b). Even today, people indigenous to Gilgit-Baltistan refer with fear to the so-called “Gilgit Massacre” of 1988 in which between 150 and 700 people were killed, mainly Shias, but also Sunnis (for example, Ali 2010; Grieser and Sökefeld 2015). As a result, throughout Gilgit-Baltistan, tension and violence between Shia and Sunni Muslims are still feared on a daily basis.

The presence of the Iranian state (see figure 4) in this region, which has unfortunately not been studied yet, might contribute to this rising conflict. According to several of my interviewees, many Baltis today live in Iran but still have strong ties to their home region. In addition to business and (religious) tourism, many Baltis also go to Iran for higher education. In fact, Iran not only supports local religious institutions in Baltistan financially and ideologically but also grants scholarships to Baltis for studying theology in Iran. They often return to Baltistan with a religious ideology standing in strong contrast to the slowly vanishing, more inclusive local religiosity. The idea that Persian Sufis converted Baltis many centuries ago is reinforced today by the activities of the Iranian state. At the same time, however, a very conservative form of Shia Islam is being spread. Nevertheless, many Baltis welcome such activities, since they lack other opportunities for creating networks of belonging and trade. Ultimately, this phenomenon seems to give many of them a sense of belonging to the

regions in the west, to the Islamic Republic of Iran, although neither Baltistan nor Gilgit-Baltistan shares a direct border with this state.

Nation-building among Baltis

All these different factors have helped strengthen the idea of a Balti nation and gave rise to Balti nationalism, especially among urban well-educated Baltis, though it is even today a very difficult endeavor to pin down “Baltiness” to a specific set of characteristics apart from the common Balti language. The fact that Baltistan was never a united geopolitical entity thus labeled and at the same time also administered or at least ideologically dominated exclusively by Baltis and/or a relatively homogenous idea of “Baltiness” prevented sustainable nation-building. One could argue that the term “nation” is, therefore, inappropriate for the Baltis, but the circumstance that it is today at times vehemently used by Balti activists/nationalists would justify its usage. Moreover, we need to keep in mind the well-known differentiation between nations with a state, so-called nation-states, in which the state usually actively promotes nation-building, and nations without states, in which groups not constituting states imagine themselves as nations for various reasons (see, for example, Chouinard 2016; Guibernau 2004). While ethnolinguistic factors are often the basis for such imaginings, a shared experience of oppression or disadvantage may intensify these, as seems the case for the Baltis.

Nations without states lack not only the tools for nation-building that official states possess, but they are also exposed to endeavors by other entities that try to include them in their own nations or to which their members themselves imagine they belong. In the case of Baltis, there are four such entities: Pakistan, the dominant political power in Baltistan that denies Baltis full Pakistani citizenship but nonetheless enforces its nation-building agenda on the local population; India, which claims Gilgit-Baltistan as part of its state Jammu and Kashmir; Iran, the state that exercises influence on the Baltis through various means on the basis of religious ties that may have existed in the past and the present; and the historic Tibetan Empire, of which the Baltistan region was apparently a part, and to which Baltis are linguistically linked. Thus, Baltis who long for self-assertion not only have to concentrate on nation-building from within but also have to consider these factors. Though the aforementioned factors may today be perceived to be external by many Balti activists, obviously depending on the different ideas of “Baltiness,” they actually reflect the multiple belongings of Baltis in the past and present. In fact, the very particularity of “Baltiness” is that Baltis look back at various histories for legitimation. As a rule, they possess multiple group identities that are selectively activated. At any given point, they may assert a pragmatic political identity with regard to Pakistan, a religious one with regard to Iran, and a linguistic one with regard to an imagined “Greater Tibet” and/or the Tibetic-speaking regions of India, which would mean Greater Ladakh (see, for example, Magnusson 2011). It is thus difficult for Balti activists to construct a unique “Baltiness” and invoke ethnic symbols (see Smith 2009) that do not automatically relate to one or the other already established geopolitical entity (in

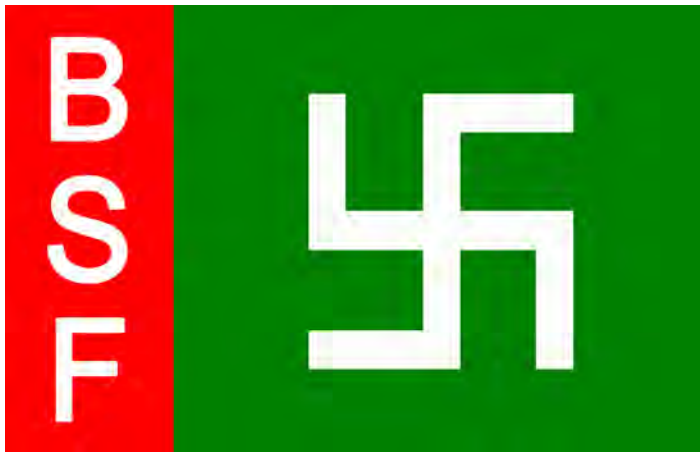


Figure 6. One version of the flag of the Baltistan Students Federation. Graphic produced by author.

the past or present). Additionally, they do not *prima facie* contradict the ideas of other Balti activists who imagine their nation differently.

Invoking the Tibetan past

One striking example of multiple senses of shared belonging is the flag of the Baltistan Students Federation (figure 6; see *Pamir Times* 2019). Although different variants of this flag exist, the *svastika* (Sanskrit) or *yungdrung* (Classical Tibetan and Balti) is always an intrinsic symbol.

This symbol can be seen also on the shop sign referred to in figure 5. It is a central element of Baltiness among a specific group of activists today. However, there are also Baltis who reject the *svastika* symbol vehemently, since they associate it with Tibet and, more importantly, Tibetan Buddhism, which is, according to them, not compatible with their Muslimness. However, interviews with activists invoking this symbol make it clear that they perceive it in a non-religious, solely cultural way, not constituting any contradiction to Islam, their lived religion.

Interestingly, global stereotypes of the “martial Muslim” and the “peaceful Buddhist” were justified by one activist based on grounds of ethnic belonging in the context of identity construction. According to him, in contrast to the rest of Pakistan, even in contrast to some other parts of Gilgit-Baltistan where communal clashes between Shia and Sunni Muslims are indeed more prone to happen, Baltistan is such a peaceful place precisely because Baltis are of Tibetan origin, and Tibetans are inherently peaceful people. Therefore, according to him, a peaceful religion such as Buddhism could flourish particularly among Tibetans. And even though the vast majority of Baltis are nowadays Muslims, their Tibetan descent still makes them inherently peace-loving people. Kenneth Iain MacDonald made similar observations during his field studies in Baltistan, though he observed that primarily the “Buddhist past, imbuing in people essential moral qualities” (MacDonald 2006, 204) and not the *Tibetan* past of the Baltis was invoked to construct their moral superiority over other groups in the region (*ibid.*). According to him, this is in line with the “stereotypical,

and largely Western, reading of historical Buddhism (which in its theocratic form was anything but peaceful)” (ibid.).

Preserving and invoking material culture

Other elements that members of the urban elite have been trying to invoke for nation-building purposes around Baltiness are less controversial. Most can be classified as elements of the region’s material culture (see also Bouzas 2017, 219–22). One example is the Balti Museum in Skardu, privately run by the highly respected



Figure 7. The so-called Buddha rock close to Skardu. Photo by the author.



Figure 8. Close-up of the Buddha rock. Photo by the author.

local intellectual Yousuf Hussain Abadi. It houses an impressive collection of more than three thousand everyday objects from the region, such as old kitchen utensils, agricultural tools, oil lamps, locks and keys, chillums, and bells. Other locals collect audio and audiovisual material on Balti folk songs and photographs of Balti daily life in the past and present. In Khaplu, there is a fort that was restored between 2005 and 2011 with the help of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture that is the pride of many Baltis I talked to. The Baltistan Culture & Development Foundation (BCDF), founded as the Baltistan Cultural Foundation (BCF) in 1998, holds a key position as the vanguard for the preservation and revival of local culture; that is, the construction of Baltiness. Apart from supporting local crafts, such as carpentry, and facilitating the development of products based on local crops, such as apricots, the organization also initiates festivals to promote the local sport, polo. In addition, it takes care of archaeological sites, such as the Buddha rock located to the south of Skardu (see figures 7 and 8).

This rock relief, dating from between 700 and 1000 CE (Schuh 2011b, 338), also contains inscriptions in Classical Tibetan. It is today regarded as the most important evidence of a Tibetan and Buddhist past in this region. The inscriptions written in Tibetan script particularly serve the purposes of linguistic activists who interpret them as literary evidence for their language.

Nation-building, writing, and education

Apart from the elements already described, which are in general essential for the production of a common culture and ultimately for successful nation-building (elements of material culture, festivals, literature, music, symbols such as the *yungdrung*, sports, and so on.), the importance for nation-building of the vernacular language in its written form is especially well documented. A prime example of this is the translation of the Bible by Martin Luther into a specific variant of German and its spread through the printing press, invented only a few decades earlier. This radical event enabled Germans to imagine themselves as belonging to a single community (see Anderson 2016, 37–46). Similar examples for emerging nations utilizing language and the production of literature in vernacular languages for nation-building are also known from outside Europe. One prime example, from South Asia, is the role of the Bengali language and its literature in the rise of Bengali national consciousness in the nineteenth century, particularly in Calcutta, during the so-called Bengal Renaissance (Dasgupta 2011; Korom 1989), as well as in the independence movement in East Pakistan that led to the emergence of Bangladesh. The separation of East Pakistan/Bangladesh from West Pakistan/Pakistan in 1971 particularly illustrates the powerful role that language and ethnolinguistic belonging can play in opposition, subnationalism, and separatism (see, for example, Dil and Dil 2011; Hamid and Jahan 2015).

Since its emergence, the Pakistani state has been pursuing an exclusive language policy, forcing Urdu upon its ethnolinguistically heterogeneous population, of whom today not even 10 percent speak Urdu as their first language. Alongside English as the language of higher education, administration, and the urban elite, Urdu was at

the very beginning introduced as the medium of instruction at the primary level and in teaching materials in most educational institutions (except in East Pakistan). Mass education may be the most important tool for nation-building, not only for spreading a common language and linguistically homogenizing the inhabitants of a specific territory, but also for inculcating crucial elements of nation-building such as the invention of national symbols, history, enemies, and so on. However, whereas on the one hand the Pakistani state is very much aware that education can serve to integrate its many ethnolinguistic groups by uniting them through Urdu, Balti activists, on the other hand, fear the government's language policy as one of the most dangerous factors contributing to the endangerment of Balti in the long run. In fact, though there are around four hundred thousand Balti speakers (*Ethnologue* 2019), the language is listed as "vulnerable" by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO 2019).

Balti activists I talked to see their language as *the* crucial element for successful nation-building. Indeed, the Balti language is the only element with which all Baltis can easily identify, while other elements are either not exclusively Balti or do not apply to all Baltis.⁶ Even though small initiatives have been implemented, for instance the broadcasting of radio and TV programs in Balti with the support of the Pakistani state, the main concern of Balti activists is that the Balti language is not taught in schools. Even in primary schools children are confronted with Urdu as the language of teaching materials and to some extent also the medium of instruction.⁷ Since the Pakistani state has not yet taken the initiative to promote Balti in a written form, teaching Balti depends greatly on non-state actors. Thus, while radio and TV programs might contribute to the standardization of an oral form of Balti, the biggest challenge to promote Balti as a written language is the standardization of its orthography and script.

Script politics in South Asia

There is no doubt that the textualization of a language and particularly its script play an important role in identity formation and the politics of various other ethnic and religious communities too, especially in contemporary South Asia (Brandt and Sohoni 2018). While the separation of Hindi/Urdu in the nineteenth century is well known and much studied (e.g., Brandt 2016), scholars have in recent years also explored other cases of bi- and multiscriptality, script revivals, and script inventions (e.g., Brandt 2018; Murphy 2018; Sarangi 2018; and Tschacher 2018). The Balti language and the current endeavors to standardize its written form thus constitute only one of several examples that help us to understand the growing importance of script among many ethnolinguistic groups in South Asia.

In contrast to Europe, with its paucity of different scripts,⁸ South Asia is the home of multiple scripts, although each South Asian state must be looked at separately, especially regarding language policy. For instance, the twenty-three official languages in India alone are written in thirteen different official scripts,⁹ while the People's Linguistic Survey of India (PLSI) stated in 2013 that 780 languages are currently spoken and eighty-six different scripts are used in India (*Hindustan Times* 2013). The

administrative structure of the Indian Union allows individual Indian states to have their own official languages and scripts and implement measures to promote them. This inclusive language policy has also led to wide-ranging developments in the field of script politics in recent times, for instance a script reform for the Meitei language (officially Manipuri since 1992) in the Indian state of Manipur (cf. Brandt 2018).

In contrast to India, Pakistan, with its (until recently) exclusive language policy favoring Urdu (and English) over other vernaculars, has left hardly any space for decisions in this field on a regional level, leading to other vernaculars being heavily neglected. Exceptions are to some extent Pashto and, first and foremost, Sindhi, which has been the official language of Sindh since 1972 (Rahman 1995). Even so, changes for other vernaculars are possible in the near future since the 18th Constitutional Amendment of 2010 made education the responsibility of the provinces. However, besides the Roman script for English, the Perso-Arabic script is used for almost all vernaculars.¹⁰ Pakistan can hence be considered for all intents and purposes homogeneous with regard to scripts. Nonetheless, activists from among ethnolinguistic minority groups are in many cases aware of the potential role that scripts can play in identity politics. This is especially the case for Baltis who embody multiple identities that seem *prima facie* to contradict each other. The issue of implementing a script for their language has thus become a serious challenge.

Balti script movements

There are currently various initiatives to write the Balti language and to implement a standardized orthography and script for it. During my field studies, I was able to talk to script activists from different factions to discuss their reasons for favoring a particular script, how they got the idea for the script they favored, what obstacles they face in implementing it, and so on. Most importantly, these different script initiatives are mostly in the hands of only a few members of the urban, educated, socioeconomically higher strata, located mainly in Skardu. Still, these activists have diverging backgrounds and networks that they can mobilize. There are representatives of the local cultural, economic, or political elite; local people with connections across international borders, especially through social networks such as Facebook (see also Magnusson 2016); Baltis who have lived for years, sometimes decades, abroad, either in other parts of Pakistan or in the so-called “West,” for instance in the United States and United Kingdom; Baltis who have returned to Baltistan after receiving higher education in other parts of Pakistan (and marginally in the “West”) and are now often employed in public service or the tourism sector; and, above all, a foreign woman, a Catholic nun, who has been living for many years in Baltistan and who is respected greatly by all of my interviewees for her knowledge of and about the Balti language. Keeping in mind that the Balti population is quite small, and the urban elite even smaller, all activists know each other, and, in some cases, work or have worked together, despite the fact that their ideas of Baltiness and script choice might diverge immensely.

Surprisingly, none of these script activists had suggested a unique endogenous script that can be exclusively identified with Baltis, at least not in any of my

interviews or discussions with them. According to several publications (Afridi 1988, 29f.; Ḥusainābādī 2009, 322; Pandey 2010), however, there were one or two other scripts in use in the region of present-day Baltistan that could qualify as unique endogenous scripts, yet none of the Balti script activists I talked to even referred to one of these or suggested one either as a potential standard script for Balti. Not much is known about the two scripts, which are labeled by Anshuman Pandey (*ibid.*) only as “Balti A” and “Balti B,” but their spread was seemingly very limited. Nonetheless, it is indeed astonishing that although Balti activists often emphasize the uniqueness of their nation, there are no attempts at all to follow the strategy that can be observed among so-called “indigenous”¹¹ groups in other regions, for instance in India or Bangladesh. There, supposedly unique and endogenous scripts are often either revived or invented to support the development of a unique culture that needs to be protected and promoted (Brandt 2014, 88–94).

The Roman script

Although South Asia has a vast variety of endogenous scripts, mainly derived from the Brahmi script, the Roman script (also known as the Latin script) has played an important role in almost all parts of South Asia for centuries (see Brandt 2020). As well as being used for English, the language of the former colonial power, and languages of other Europeans controlling various regions in South Asia, the Roman script has also been used for local languages since at least the sixteenth century. While in many cases it was introduced for languages that were not written down until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—so-called “tribal” languages—mainly by Christian missionaries, in other cases it was applied to South Asian languages that already had their “own” script(s), such as Konkani, an Indo-European language spoken in Goa, India that was

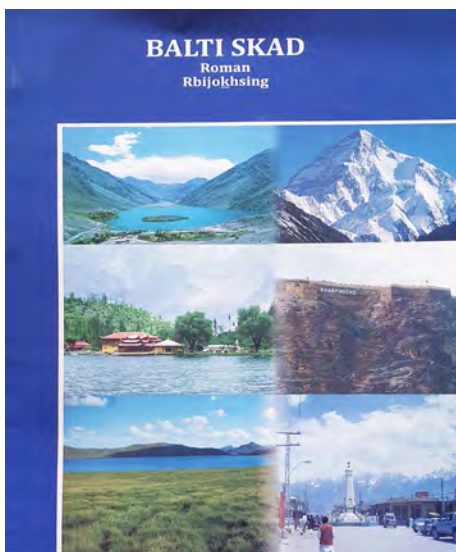


Figure 9. The brochure named *Balti Skad: Roman Rbijokhsing* (Ilhami et al. 2013) for learning Balti in Roman script, published, among others, by Eunice Jones. Image supplied by the author.

printed by the Portuguese in the Roman script from the sixteenth century onward. The introduction of the printing press in South Asia by Portuguese missionaries, in particular, led to the wider circulation of this script (Brandt and Sohoni 2018, 4).

Its use in South Asia can thus be closely associated with Christian missionaries and their endeavors to spread the gospel among the local population, and in general with the languages of European colonizers, in particular English. Since that time, however, the Roman script has also come to be associated with new technologies and used in that context, for instance on social media

or the Internet in general, and for mobile phone communication. It continues to be used voluntarily by many people in South Asia for their languages today, irrespective of whether these are otherwise written in endogenous scripts, or at all. This is the case with Balti, especially among young people using mobile text messaging and social media. Otherwise, the Roman script for Balti is hardly in use or visible at all in the public sphere.

Still, there is one initiative for standardizing Balti in Roman script. A Welsh linguist and Catholic nun, Eunice Jones, who has been living in Baltistan for many years, started the initiative. In March 2013 she joined, among others, the local intellectuals Professor Hasmat Ali Kamal Ilhami, Mohammad Kamal Jamshed, and Sheikh Ghulam Hussain Sahar to publish an A4 brochure named *Balti Skad: Roman Rbijokhsing* (Ilhami et al. 2013; see figure 9).

It contains an overview on how to write Balti in the Roman script (including several diacritics), poems, short stories, and several articles about the culture of the Baltis, written in this variant of the Roman script. The fact that Jones could persuade even prominent intellectuals and activists who actually favor other scripts for Balti to contribute to this brochure not only confirms their respect for her but also reflects the friendly competition among these different script activists.

The main argument for the Roman script is that it is already widespread in Pakistan, where English is a mandatory subject in school. Thus, Balti children do not have to learn an additional script. Although the variant of the Roman script suggested by Jones contains several diacritics, for instance a dot under specific consonants to represent retroflex sounds in Balti, she assumes that children will learn how to read and write their mother tongue very quickly. Furthermore, Balti, like Tibetic languages in general, is very rich in vowels, and the Roman script, an alphabetic writing system, can reproduce these vowels more distinctly than the Perso-Arabic script, which usually does not render short vowels at all. In interviews, activists who favor other scripts for Balti brought forward the Roman script's association with English as one argument against it. But the main argument seems to be the perception that the Roman script lacks any "authentic" connection to their language. In fact, even though young people use this script voluntarily for Balti, especially on social media and for mobile phone messages, the chances seem rather low that it will be chosen as the standard script.

The Tibetan script

Similar prospects seem to apply to the Tibetan script. While the Roman script is nowadays used to render many different languages worldwide, and is not tied to any specific language, the spread of the Tibetan script is very limited and closely linked to Classical Tibetan, its successor languages, and Tibetan Buddhism. In contrast to old scripts in general, the creation of the Tibetan script is in emic historical traditions almost unanimously attributed to one specific person, Thönmi Sambhota (Schaik 2011, 49–51). It is said that Thönmi Sambhota was sent by Songtsen Gampo, the founder of the Tibetan Empire in the seventh century, to India to devise a script for Tibetan. Finally, he supposedly came up with this script, which was accepted as the

official script and then also used for translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Classical Tibetan in the eighth century. Whereas the associations linking the Roman script with the Bible and Christianity, and the Arabic script with the Quran and Islam, are predominant but not exclusive (both scripts having been in use before the emergence of Christianity and Islam, respectively), the Tibetan script is thus tied exclusively to Tibetan Buddhism.

The close connection of Tibetan writing with Buddhism also includes the historic evidence for the script in Baltistan: the Buddha rock near Skardu (see figures 7 and 8). But the historic evidence used to support publications dedicated to the implementation of the Tibetan script (also called the Yige or Agay script) for Balti, namely that this script was used also for the latter and needs to be revived again (Amacha 2001, 4; Zakir 2017, 4), is controversial. Interestingly, some script activists I spoke to claim that the inscriptions on the famous Buddha rock are in Balti. This claim relates to how a predecessor of a modern language and the successor of a classical language are categorized and labeled. On the one hand, it is today taken as given that Modern Tibetan is *the* successor of Classical Tibetan, as is also reflected in the denominations of both languages. On the other hand, Balti is often perceived as being linguistically similar to Classical Tibetan (Backstrom 2002, 10n2), and thus it is often referred to as “archaic Tibetan” (Afridi 1988, 29) or “phonetically archaic” (Zeisler 2004, 222). Thus, why should the inscriptions of the Buddha rock not be perceived as being, actually, Classical Balti, or even Balti seen as the legitimate form of so-called Modern Tibetan? The lack of any continuous production of written Balti literature, the dearth of noteworthy Balti literary production in the Tibetan script, the small number of Baltis, and the fact that this region was never at the center of Tibetan Buddhism are four crucial factors that would seem to disqualify Balti from being *the* successor to Classical Tibetan. These facts, however, do not prevent Balti activists from perceiving the inscriptions on the Buddha rock close to Skardu as Balti. They thus use it in lobbying for the revival of what they see as the authentic script for their language.

The Tibetan script for Balti

The current endeavors to write Balti in the Tibetan script predominantly go back to initiatives by the aforementioned Yousuf Hussain Abadi. He told me in September 2014 that he had learned the Tibetan script in 1980, when he was thirty-two years old. It took him only one night to fully grasp the script, and from then on, he reported, he had been trying to convince others to use it for Balti. He told me that he had published a first book about the Balti language and the Tibetan script in 1984 and a second one in 1990. Many people, he said, learned the script with the help of his second book. He was also able not only to convince other Baltis that the Tibetan script is most suitable for their language but also to introduce several new letters, so that specific phonemes for words of Perso-Arabic origin too could be represented (Ḥusainābādī 2009, 330). Two of these new characters were recognized by the International Organization for Standardization in 2006, and are thus now part of the Unicode set for the Tibetan script.¹² But by 2006 Abadi had already changed his stance on the Tibetan script for Balti, and today he is one of the most vehement lobbyists for Balti in the Perso-Arabic

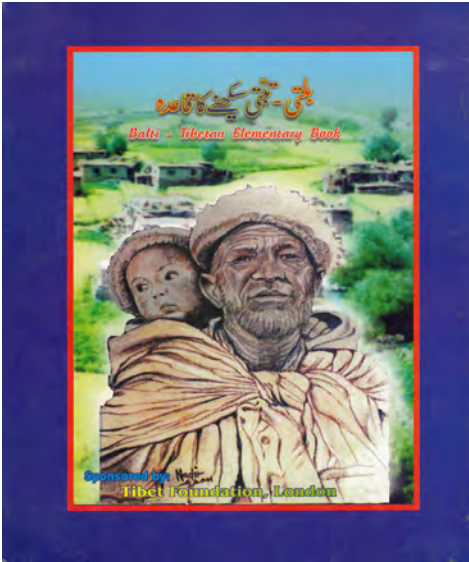


Figure 10. Elementary book for learning Balti in Tibetan script (Kāzmi & Žharīng 2001), published by the Baltistan Cultural Foundation with the support of the Tibet Foundation, London.
Image supplied by the author.



Figure 11. The latest elementary book for learning Balti in Tibetan script (Zakir 2017), published by the Baltistan Culture & Development Foundation.
Image supplied by the author.

script. However, he told me that he is still convinced that the Tibetan script can represent the Balti language far better than the Perso-Arabic script can. Nonetheless, he expressed his sympathies toward the Tibetan script and the current initiatives supporting it. The main reason behind his change of opinion is that he considers the Tibetan script as not being “practical” for the situation on the ground: the local people, he told me, are “too attached” to the Perso-Arabic script.

The activists responsible for the textbook on learning Balti in Tibetan script, published in 2001 (Kāzmi & Žharīng 2001; see figure 10), and the shop sign in Tibetan script (figure 5) are accordingly disappointed in him. Interestingly, they no longer all work together. While the initial enthusiasm of the Tibetan script endeavors brought together various Baltis with diverging backgrounds, though all were urban and formally well educated, today they are divided into different groups: some, like Abadi, backed away from the idea of writing Balti in the Tibetan script, while others are looking for diverging strategies and support to implement its use. The supporters for the Tibetan script can roughly be divided into two groups: the first is comprised of people trying to implement the script for Balti in a very organized and structured way, while the second group consists of individuals trying to spread it through private initiatives. As already mentioned, all these people know each other and have at times also worked together, regardless of their diverging opinions on various aspects of writing and preserving the Balti language.

Formally organized script activists

The Baltistan Culture & Development Foundation (BCDF), described earlier in this article, is the best-organized group of Balti activists. Today, according to its website (see references), it runs fifteen projects and receives funds from several national and

international non-government organizations (NGOs) and government institutions, such as the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme (AKRSP), the INSAF Network Pakistan (INP), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, USAID, and the Government of Pakistan. The projects are dedicated to various causes, as earlier described. However, the first project carried out by this organization and the main reason for establishing it was the promotion of the Tibetan script. With the funds of the Tibet Foundation, London (TFL), around one hundred shop signs like the one in figure 5 were hand-painted and distributed for free among shop owners in Skardu and Khaplu in 2001.¹³ An elementary book for learning Balti in the Tibetan script was published during the same year (Kāzmi and Žharīng 2001; see figure 10).

The promotion of the Tibetan script is still one of the organization's main aims, as reflected in the fact that in 2017 another elementary book (Zakir 2017; see figure 11) for the same cause was published. But the results of promoting the Tibetan script between 2001 and 2017 have been very limited. One of the main factors seems to be that adults do not learn this script, even when they support its promotion, and children cannot learn it officially at school. According to the foreword of the elementary book from 2017, the latter might change in the near future: "Recently the Legislative Assembly of Gilgit-Baltistan has passed a resolution to introduce local languages in primary school curriculum. After this development BCDF started a winter course of Yige [i.e., Tibetan] script to teachers of different schools and 25 teachers attended this course" (Zakir 2017, 4). Furthermore, it is suggested that this textbook be introduced to students in "grade 3 to 5 of English medium schools where children have learnt basic literacy of English" (*ibid.*, 5). Keeping in mind that there are only a few English-medium schools in Baltistan, and only in urban areas, the results of such measures might be very limited too.

Private initiatives by script activists

Besides the script endeavors of the BCDF, there are also several individuals who are not formally organized and who promote the Tibetan script through private initiatives. While most script activists have an urban, formally well-educated background, one of the most dedicated activists seems to be an exception. He is Nisar Ali Khsman (born in 1976), who is not associated with any organization but is, especially among young Baltis, well known for acting in Balti TV dramas and as an anchor at a local radio station. His formal profession is painting. He was actually one of the two painters responsible for the shop signs in the Tibetan script. In contrast to the other painter, he told me, he knew the Tibetan script, having learnt it in 1999 from a Shina speaker with great interest in the Balti language and Tibetan script. Additionally, he worked regularly as a cook for mountaineers climbing K2, where he met two Tibetans from China in 2005. He told me that this encounter, in which he discovered many commonalities between the language of these two mountaineers and Balti, triggered his endeavors to motivate other Baltis also to learn the Tibetan script.

The fact that Khsman did not study at all and is not a member of the socioeconomic and intellectual elite as, for instance, Yousuf Hussain Abadi is, illustrates that the endeavors to revive the Tibetan past are also being taken up by other Baltis outside the usual spectrum of activists. These others are, on the one hand, not formally

organized and, on the other hand, trying to implement the Tibetan script through alternative means. Currently, Nisar Ali Khsman teaches this script now and then to students in a college in Skardu, who attend his class voluntarily after regular classes. Furthermore, along with some allies who are also not associated with any official organization, he offers regular Tibetan script classes on the weekends, where other locals, mostly adults and some children (all male), learn the script voluntarily. Unlike the activities of the BCDF, these grassroots endeavors also target people from lower socioeconomic strata. Their highly motivated approach and continuous dialogue with people contributes to create some awareness concerning the Tibetan past among people the BCDF has not yet been able to reach. Moreover, some people have indeed learned the script in this way, though whether they will actually apply it is another question altogether. The lack of Balti publications written in the Tibetan script doubtless constitutes an obstacle for any sustainable script-teaching momentum at present.

Diverging orthographies

Apart from the different approaches to spreading the Tibetan script, there is another major, crucial difference. While the script activists linked to the BCDF prefer an orthography close to the pronunciation of modern Balti, Nisar Ali Khsman and his allies prefer an orthography that goes back to a standardization of spoken Old Tibetan from the eighth century and is still used for other modern Tibetic languages. To a great extent this orthography does not reflect the current pronunciation of these languages, but the arguments for this appear quite reasonable. These activists network with people in Ladakh, the Tibet Autonomous Region, and other Tibetic communities abroad. While they can hardly understand each other orally, they cherish their common heritage in social networks where they can communicate with each other thanks to using the same orthography. A new orthography would make their current communication far more difficult. In contrast, lobbyists for the Tibetan script and a new orthography exclusively for a Balti in line with its pronunciation seem to emphasize the uniqueness of Balti and Baltiness. Although activists from this group are aware that their present identity came into being due to various influences over the course of time, some of them believe that today it has its very own particularity, of which Baltis can be proud without activating belongings to other geopolitical entities. Moreover, these activists also believe that the old orthography hampers people learning how to read and write Balti, saying that a new orthography reflecting the pronunciation would be easier for Balti learners (Zakir 2017, 5).

Diverging orthographical preferences constitute one of several aspects illustrating the fragmentation of Baltis and their dilemma of nation-building, even though both activist groups have a major interest in preserving and promoting their language, which both deem as essential for sustainable nation-building. After all, while a new orthography might help the Tibetan script spread among Baltis, the old and standard orthography for many Tibetic languages helps them connect to other linguistically related communities globally. It also provides them with easier access to Old Tibetan sources. Thus, while the old one emphasizes Tibetan heritage and belonging to the Tibetan Empire in the past, nurturing links to other former “citizens” of this empire,

especially in the Indian-administered region of Ladakh, the new one enables people to read and write Balti better but hampers their relations with other Tibetic groups. The Pakistani state, which supports some projects of the Baltistan Culture & Development Foundation, would most likely prefer the new orthography over the old one, because it has great interest in preventing any cross-border nation-building among Baltis. Especially in view of India's geopolitical claim on Gilgit-Baltistan, the idea among some Balti activists that the "actual" Baltistan contains Indian regions, too, and Balti activists such as Senge Hasnan Sering lobbying recently for the integration of Gilgit-Baltistan into India, the Pakistani state is on the alert regarding any separatist activities in Baltistan. For that very reason, Pakistani state institutions have also supported the Perso-Arabic script for Balti in the past.

The Perso-Arabic script

Activists who lobby for the Perso-Arabic script are aware that Pakistan will neither surrender Gilgit-Baltistan to India nor grant this region full autonomy in the near future. They believe that they can preserve their mother language only by working together with the Pakistani state and compromising on the script; otherwise, the Tibetan script would be the only one for any Pakistani language that hints at potential belonging to a neighboring geopolitical entity. Furthermore, Balti children overwhelmingly have to learn Urdu first at school and thus learn a variant of the Perso-Arabic script in any case. Script activists also told me about threats from religious leaders against the Tibetan script. These leaders identify the Tibetan script with Buddhism and hence consider it "un-Islamic." Above all, all Baltis are, as far as is known, Muslims, and many are thus also familiar with the Quran in the Arabic script. Thus, the Perso-Arabic script for Balti is not only a compromise with the Pakistani state but also a symbol for Muslimness in general and, in the case of Baltis, potential belonging to Iran and Shia Islam. The limited amount of Balti literature available today is actually in the Perso-Arabic script, although in a non-standardized orthography. There is, for instance, the local poet Ehsan Ali Danish who publishes his poetry in Balti in the Perso-Arabic script (Dānish 2012). There are collections of Balti folk songs (Khargrōng and Ḥasrat 1985), proverbs (Ḥasnī 2004), some prose (Rawish 2005), and some teaching materials to learn Balti in the Perso-Arabic script. The latest booklet was published in 2015 (Baltistān Dā'irah-i Muṣannifīn 2015; see figure 12) and is based on an elementary book (Ḥusainābādī et al. 2004; see figure 13) published eleven years before. While the one published in 2004 only teaches the Perso-Arabic script for Balti and some basic vocabulary, the second also has short prose texts to practice reading Balti in the script. Interestingly, it also contains a few pages of Balti prose texts in Roman script and an introductory overview on how to use the Roman script for Balti, based on the initiative and publication by Eunice Jones previously mentioned. This obviously again reflects the respect for her and friendly competition between the Perso-Arabic and Roman script for Balti.

The main difference between the existing Balti publications in Perso-Arabic script and these two booklets (figures 12 and 13) is that some additional letters have been created to represent Balti phonemes better, which are otherwise unknown in

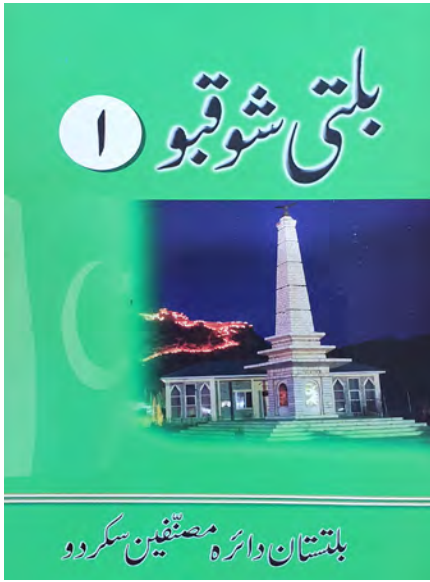


Figure 12. Textbook for improving reading skills in Balti in Perso-Arabic script and to a minor extent in Roman script (Baltistān Dā'irah-i Muṣannifin 2015), published without state support. Image supplied by the author

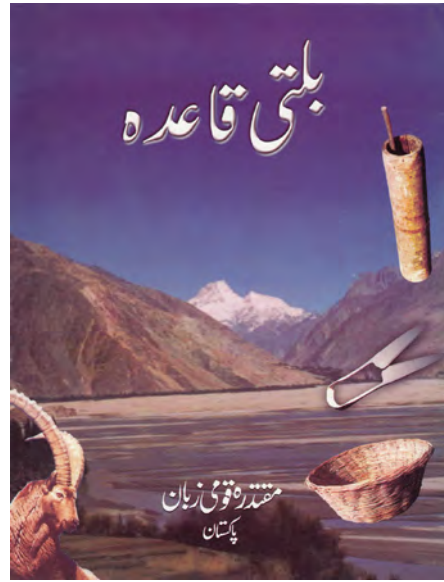


Figure 13. Elementary book for learning Balti in Perso-Arabic script (Ḥusainābādī et al. 2004), published with the support of the Pakistani state. Image supplied by the author

the script variants used for Urdu and Persian. These letters were devised by adding diacritics to existing letters known from Urdu, such as by adding an extra dot to the letter *shīn*. As in the case of the additional letters for the Tibetan script representing phonemes for Perso-Arabic loanwords, these letters too were devised by Yousuf Hussain Abadi, who had already used them in his Balti translation of the Quran, published for the first time in 1995.

According to some Balti activists also preferring the Perso-Arabic script, Abadi's Quran translation was a major and praiseworthy endeavor but is very difficult to understand for most Baltis, especially because of their unfamiliarity with these extra letters. I also learned from some activists, for instance the elderly and well-respected scholar Hashmat Ali Kamal Ilhami, that the Perso-Arabic script has been in use for the Balti language for more than a century. In the past, he told me, members of the royal families of Baltistan, in particular, used this script for their poetry in Balti. Unfortunately, I could not locate any documents as testaments to his recollections. At any rate, some activists do not see the necessity of adding any letters or diacritics to the variant of the Perso-Arabic script used otherwise for Urdu. But this seems to be the smallest problem in regard to standardizing a written form of the Balti language, as long as all script activists do not act in concert and Balti is not taught in any standardized form in schools with the support of state institutions.

Conclusion

The endeavors to standardize a written form of Balti no doubt illustrate the struggle of nation-building among members of a community that is torn between

its multiple identities, multifaceted pasts, and imagined belongings, which all ignore contemporary state borders. Due to the lack of any centralized identity formation in the past or present, and today's disputed geopolitical status, along with the circumstance that other communities have already incorporated specific elements they share with Baltis within their own nation-building, it is difficult for Baltis to emphasize any particular identity—by activating specific symbols—without automatically evoking belongings to other communities or geopolitical entities. For many Baltis, the question of which script should be the standard one for Balti, which is currently only sparsely written, is a highly emotional matter, as I also witnessed during a discussion in August 2017 at the University of Baltistan, Skardu, during which various teachers at this newly established university defended either the Perso-Arabic or Tibetan script vehemently, and at times heatedly. Interestingly, some other teachers who joined the discussion, but were seemingly confronted with this matter for the first time, could not follow the various lines of argumentation at all. The dispute at the university made it quite clear that even many quite well-educated Baltis have hardly any interest in standardizing a written form of their mother tongue. They are satisfied with the options they have to express themselves in Urdu and English. Having received their higher education in other parts of Pakistan and elsewhere, there is no doubt that they perceive themselves as citizens of Pakistan and strive for the complete integration of their region into the Pakistani state. This is also the case for most script activists I spoke to, although all of them believe in strengthening their ethnolinguistic identity, preserving and promoting their language, and nation-building endeavors to make Baltistan residents proud of their historical culture, while also promoting the recognition of the region outside of their homeland. Further, comparing the contents of the elementary books dedicated to the Roman, Tibetan, and Perso-Arabic scripts for Balti reveals slight differences reflecting diverging attitudes toward the Pakistani state. While all textbooks emphasize the uniqueness of Balti culture, especially by invoking elements of its material culture (for example, clothing, food, and woodcarving), only the two lobbying for the Perso-Arabic script contain clear references to the Pakistani state. They cite the flag (figure 12) or a prose text about Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan (figure 13). These script activists evidently compromise on the geopolitical status of Baltistan and do not doubt that it belongs to Pakistan. Their form of nation-building and nationalism can thus be classified as subnationalism, while in the case of activists preferring the Tibetan script it is less clear how they imagine the geopolitical future of Baltistan. Pakistan's future policy toward the region in question, and the steps taken to improve its constitutional and socioeconomic status, could decide whether the script activists discussed in this article will further emphasize their Tibetan past and potential belonging to the region east of Gilgit-Baltistan or come to perceive themselves more strongly as Pakistani citizens.

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NOTES

1. For studies on the Baltis in Kargil see Gupta 2014 and Magnusson 2011.
2. For an enlightening publication on *Kashmir as a Borderland: The Politics of Space and Belonging across the Line of Control*, see Bouzas 2019.
3. In this case, “Kashmiri” is used as a denomination for almost all inhabitants of the former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir living to the east of Baltistan and in today’s Indian union state of Jammu and Kashmir, and not for the actual ethnolinguistic group of Kashmiris, who only inhabit the Kashmir Valley.
4. Although the so-called Karachi Agreement was signed by representatives of India and Pakistan on July 27, 1949, and a ceasefire achieved on December 31, 1948, fights still went on in the regions of present-day Baltistan and Ladakh (Bouzas 2017, 198n1). See also Martin Sökefeld’s article on the role of Gilgit-Baltistan in the so-called Kashmir dispute (Sökefeld 2018) and Hermann Kreutzmann’s article with a similar focus (Kreutzmann 2015).
5. See the studies by Martin Sökefeld on the impact of the construction of the Karakoram Highway on the local population, for example, Sökefeld 2003a.
6. The latter circumstance refers especially to the material culture, for instance to clothing, such as the traditional caps made out of wool, which vary in style and color from valley to valley.
7. In primary schools especially, teachers often use Balti as a bridge.
8. Besides the Roman script, only the Greek script, the Cyrillic script in East and Southeast Europe, and the Armenian and the Georgian scripts in the Caucasus regions are still in use.
9. The so-called Bengali, Gujarati, Gurmukhi, Kannada, Malayalam, Meitei, Nagari, Oriya, Ol Chiki, Perso-Arabic, Roman, Tamil, and Telugu scripts.
10. For instance, Brahui is also written in the Roman script.
11. Here the term “indigenous” refers to the meaning in the sense of the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
12. Abadi designed five letters for the Tibetan script representing phonemes used for words of Perso-Arabic origin (Ḥusainābādī 2009, 330), of which /ɽ/ and /q/ were included into the Unicode set for the Tibetan script (Unicode 2019, 4).

13. During my last visit in 2017, the shop sign in figure 5 was actually the last surviving one. All the others had been replaced with new ones by the shop owners. None of the new ones are in the Tibetan script.

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Fertile Tattoos

Play, Embodiment, and the Transition to Womanhood in Drung Female Facial Tattooing

This article examines the tradition of facial tattooing among Drung women in Yunnan province, China. Now obsolete, the practice of female tattooing—by puncturing the skin, causing bleeding and pain—used to enable and mark the social and physiological time of the transition to nubility, thus preparing women for their fertile becoming. The analysis focuses on the gradual, quasi-initiatory transition to womanhood established by tattoos, both during girls’ playful trial tattoo sessions or on the occasion of the formal execution of the facial tattoo by a fully experienced woman. The article shows that tattooing should be understood as a processual construction of womanhood that builds on preparatory play and is inseparable from the specific relationships between women involving fertility, which is transmitted, “revealed,” and represented by tattooing. Passed down exclusively by women, regardless of their relationships of consanguinity or affinity, tattooing exposes a form of transversal relatedness beyond any descent and alliance relationships. The embodiment of this mystical influence is vital if a woman is to be assigned her destiny, her social role as perpetuator of life.

Keywords: Drung (Dulong, T’rung)—tattoo—body—femininity—fertility—reproduction

Western explorers of the early twentieth century who “discovered,” as it were, the Drung people and Chinese historians and ethnologists alike have not failed to emphasize the exoticism of the practice of female facial tattooing that soon became iconic of Drung culture. Nowadays one of the smallest so-called “minority nationalities” (6,930 people in 2010) in China, the Drung (Ch. Dulongzu) live in a secluded valley of north-west Yunnan Province and until recently practiced a form of swidden agriculture. They have long been associated with images of remoteness, primitiveness, and poverty.¹ The Drung have seldom attracted ethnographic attention, but one thing about them that is relatively well known and often publicized—at least in China—is that Drung women used to tattoo their faces: journalists, image hunters, and more recently tourists continue to convey the perception of women’s facial tattoos as representative of Drung culture, an image often associated with a people confined in its cultural attributes. Drung women’s tattooed faces are now posted all over the internet.²

In fact, the display of women’s tattooed faces contrasts with the superficial knowledge we have of the Drung. Their geographical isolation is no doubt the primary reason for the very limited number of ethnographic studies that exist about the Drung people (chiefly in the Chinese language). It was only in 2000 that the Dulong Valley, located to the west of the high Gaoligong Mountains, could be reached by a roughly made road. A tunnel, completed in 2014, now affords safe and reliable access to the valley—an opening to the outside world that has given development programs a significant boost and has led to sweeping socioeconomic transformations (see Gros 2014, 2017a).

Although Drung women’s facial tattoos remain a cultural icon today, Drung women have not tattooed their faces for two generations. What’s more, the rationale behind this practice among the Drung people and the various meanings that place the tattoo at the heart of Drung identity in the past, just like in the present, have rarely been truly explored. My aim in this article, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted since the late 1990s, is to contribute to restoring women’s own voices and to propose that the meanings and values attached to this practice be reconsidered.

A common and longstanding interpretation found in the literature holds that the practice of tattooing is Drung people’s adaptive response to ensure the protection of women from abductions perpetrated by their more powerful neighbors before the 1950s. This portrayal was further popularized in the novel *Bu yuan wenmian de*

nüren (The Woman Who Did Not Want to Tattoo) by Zhang Kunhua (1987), which was later made into a movie (Xie Hong 1993). It depicts in a highly caricatured manner women's resignation (or resistance) to imposed tattooing when faced with the threat of Tibetan women traffickers who would sell them as slaves. The logic of the tattoo as a protective facial disfigurement is also found in scholarly works, where the emergence of this practice has generally been interpreted in relation to attested forms of abduction and servitude (e.g., Liu Dacheng 1981; Cai Jiaqi 1983; Li Jinming 1994), or more recently, in a similar vein, as a means of protecting women from Lisu vendettas, retaliatory expeditions sometimes leading to the kidnapping of women (Zhou Huashan 2004).³ This is indeed one of several justifications that are sometimes put forth by the Drung themselves: they started tattooing women's faces, so they say, to prevent the latter from being captured and enslaved.⁴ The facial tattoo was therefore a practice determined by past interethnic relations. As a form of embodied violence, the tattoo is seen as the imprint of the past on the women's faces—an "incorporated" history so to speak. That being said, it is not a dominant and agreed-upon justification, and it leaves basic questions unanswered: would the tattoo play this protective role for women because it was considered ugly and repulsive to the potential thief? Or did it have a magical protective function? How effective was the tattoo to actually prevent women from being captured? More importantly, what other evidence of the existence of this purely feminine practice may be given?

The conventional interpretation that sees tattooing as a response to an external threat has received some criticism, from both local elites and scholars, although few alternative analyses have been put forth on the basis of long-term fieldwork. Some have suggested that, in the motif of the facial tattoo, one can see a representation of a butterfly linked to the Drung people's conceptions about what happens to the soul after death (Luo Rongfen 1995a, 1995b), while others have emphasized the need to address tattooing as a form of beautification or an expression of a kind of totemic worship (Chen Ruijin 1992; Duan Mingming 1999; Sheng Xingshi 2005). These interpretations fall short both methodologically and in terms of factual evidence, and the existing emic and etic interpretations of the meanings of tattooing need to be addressed in their changing historical context.

The early twenty-first century has accordingly seen changes in the dominant reasons and justifications that are given for practicing facial tattoos—and outsiders' interpretations are often overdetermined by their own personal interest. This has been emphasized by Chu Xiaobai (2007) who rightly points out the evolving construction of knowledge about the tattoos worn by Drung women—women who, for several decades, have been regularly questioned, scrutinized, and photographed by an increasing number of outsiders (figure 1). Zhou Yunshui (2009) has in turn alluded to the various layers of discourse on tattooing, from local cadres to villagers, and has acknowledged the influence of external discourses and how they deeply affect tattooed women's perception and presentation of themselves. Indeed, it seems for example that the recent popularization of the idea that the facial tattoo motif represents a butterfly has now led visitors and scholars alike to assume this link and thus to no doubt influence the responses they receive in return (e.g., Zheng Weichuan 2001, 181; Gao Zhiying 2015).



Figure 1. A Drung tattooed woman looking at an old photograph of herself offered by a returning Chinese photographer. Photo by the author, November 2010.

Today young women no longer have their faces tattooed, and the last women to wear tattoos, now very few, are relatively old: there were only about sixty tattooed women when I started my research in the late 1990s.⁵ Drung women's tattooing has increasingly become an artefact for public consumption. The special attention it has attracted has triggered growing concern, because safeguarding Drung women's facial tattoos is impossible—they will disappear with the last tattooed women; though, it is hoped, not just yet. As discussed in a recent article published in the newspaper *Zhongguo funü* (Chinese Women), it was decided that the twenty-six tattooed women still alive in 2015 were to be “safeguarded” as “living fossils” of traditional Drung culture—a conventional designation derived from social evolutionist orthodoxy.⁶ According to the article, the local police station in the Dulong Valley keeps health records of these last tattooed women. Their health is now closely monitored via a monthly check-up (Zhou Yulin 2015).

The disappearance of this practice today primarily raises the question of the redefinition of personal identity in the changing sociocultural and political context and how it affects the values associated with tattooing. However, far from limiting the facial tattoo's function of preventing women from being captured, Drung women's individual stories reveal its vital role in assigning a woman her destiny, her social role as a perpetuator of life.

In this article, I highlight the various ways in which the facial tattoo (*bāktūq*) is a key element for Drung women in a process of socialization. In this process, the woman's body should be considered part of a cosmological assemblage in which diverse forces condense in an interplay between the exterior and the interior. Through this lens, tattooing is regarded as part of a larger set of practices and social relations: as Terence Turner (2012) has emphasized, the “social skin” is an interface

more than a surface. The external environment does not stop at the surface of the body, and individuals are not isolated in their body but linked deep in their flesh by social relationships. The analysis of tattooing in Polynesia by Alfred Gell seems to be of a more general value and applicability here, for indeed the tattoo reveals “an inside which comes from the outside, which has been applied externally prior to being absorbed into the interior,” and thus it is “the exteriorization of the interior which is simultaneously the interiorization of the exterior” (1993, 38–39). Following these insights, I demonstrate how the tattoo technique as practiced by Drung women until the late 1950s contributed to their transition to womanhood by means of productive exchanges and influences. Tattoos were the mark of time (both physiological and social) and the mark of destiny, preparing women for their fertile becoming.

Drung tattooing in a historical and regional perspective

Many Chinese historians and ethnologists agree that Drung people’s tattooing practice probably dates back to the Tang Dynasty (618–907) because of the reference to the so-called Xiumian tribe, the “Tattooed [embroidered] Faces,” in the *Manshu* (Book of Barbarians). It is often assumed that these might well be the Drung people’s ancestors. There is scant evidence of this, and it was only centuries later that Chinese historical documents make direct reference to a group under the name of Qiuzi who were roughly located where contemporary Drung people live. However, explicit mention of tattooed women among the Qiuzi was not to be found in historical documents until the nineteenth century. Despite the scarcity of historical documents and direct observations, we nevertheless find more or less precise indications about female facial tattooing among the Drung from the late nineteenth century onward. Among the earliest eyewitnesses was the Prince d’Orléans (1898, 235), who led an expedition across the southern part of Dulong Valley to Burma (present-day Myanmar) and mentioned seeing tattoos in the shape of a “green grid.” A few years later, the Mandarin Xia Hu (named “Suppression Commissar in Charge of Nu[jiang] and Qiu[jiang] Issues,” *Tanya weiyuan qianguan Nu Qiu liang jiang shiyi*) wrote a more detailed description, mentioning that “on the upper course of the valley, the whole face of women, nose, cheeks, upper and lower lips, are all tattooed,” while “women of the lower reaches of the river only tattoo the upper and lower lips. At the [southern] extremity of the river, Qu [Qiu] and Li [Lissou] live together, and women do not usually tattoo.” Further westward in upper Burma, women’s tattoos consist, he wrote, “only in a circle on the nose and a few lines on the lower lip.” The practice was also to be found in the Adung Valley where, this time, the facial tattoo only consisted of one or two lines on the lower lip (1994, 116, 118, 119).

The existence of facial tattooing in the region where Yunnan, Myanmar, and Tibet meet was therefore well attested from the early twentieth century and later confirmed by other travelers. The botanist F. Kingdon Ward (1924, 196–97), who traveled extensively throughout this region, evoked the diverse tattoo designs he came across, from the complete “dots and zigzags” covering the whole face in “Upper Taron [Dulong]” to the few curved lines across the chin to the corners of the mouth

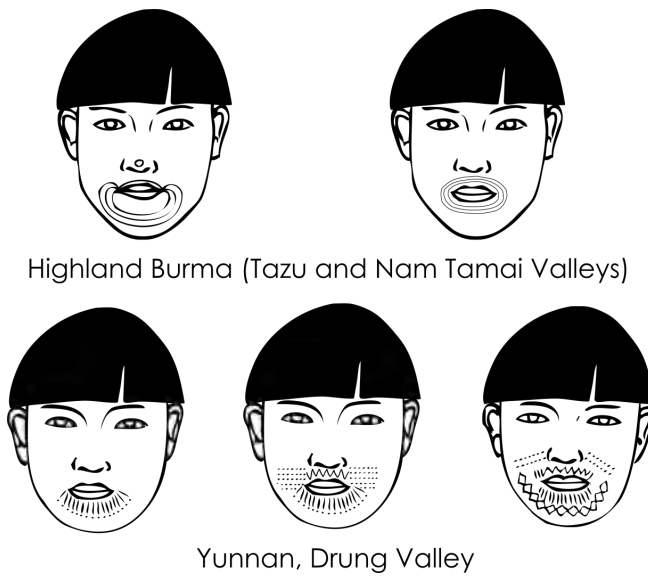


Figure 2. Variations in facial tattoo motifs. Drawing by the author (sources: Ward 1924; Duan 1999; Liu 1981, 1998).

and a circle on the tip of the nose in the Tazu and Nam Tamai Valleys (northernmost Myanmar).⁷

The rare historical documents on this region mention various tattoo motifs that previously existed among kin groups in upper Myanmar or even within the valley of the Drung (see figure 2). Facial tattoos existed up until recently among the Daru (Rawang subgroup), where they are said to have been linked to clan membership (Morse and Morse 1966, 196). One might add that the practice may have also existed among the Nung of the upper Salween Valley. The French missionary Auguste Desgodins (1872, 321–22) wrote that young girls used to have a tattoo that was “a blue moustache, going down at the corners of the mouth to the bone mandible, then back to the front of the ears.”

There are other known cases of feminine facial tattoos regionally. A comparative survey is beyond the scope of this article, but it should be noted that one of the recurrent justifications for the existence of female facial tattooing, such as among the Chin (in Myanmar) or the Apatani (in the Indian Himalayas) for example, echoes the aforementioned observations concerning the Drung: these facial markings were aimed at protecting women from being captured by potential women “thieves.”⁸

Among the Drung, the practice of female facial tattooing was once banned in the early twentieth century by the local Imperial Mandarin Xia Hu, who allegedly threatened to rip off the skin of those who were tattooed and to cut the hands of the tattooists. Then the same prohibition, accompanied by a fine, was enacted in 1930 under the Kuomintang rule. Finally the Communists definitively abolished this practice in the late 1950s because, besides the reference to bygone oppression, they saw in this practice a violation of women’s rights.⁹

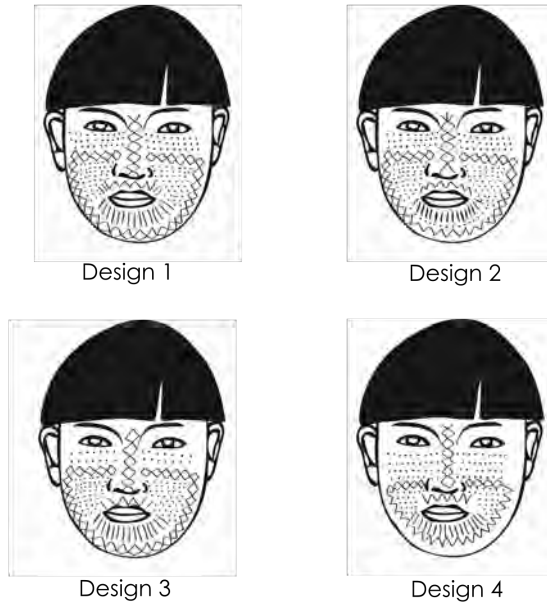


Figure 3. Variations in complete facial tattooing designs, Drung Valley. Drawing by the author.

Tattoo motifs and techniques

The sixty or so tattooed Drung women who lived in the center and in the north of the Dulong River Valley at the time of my fieldwork had, for the most part, a facial tattoo (*bāktūq*) that covered their entire face. The designs were essentially the same, and the few variations in detail (see figure 3) were due not to variations in style but to the quality of the tattoo itself, which depended on the skill of the person doing it (a woman who “knows how to prick” or *rù sō*).

The tattoo is executed with remarkable regularity, with only very minor variations (see also Cai Jiaqi 1983, 39; Gao Zhiying 2015, 70–71); the stability of the tattoo design shows that the few motifs that together form the facial tattoo are linked to specific parts of the face. Generally speaking the related vocabulary simply refers to the design that is pricked on the cheeks (*dvbàng do rù*) or pricked on the nose (*svnā do rù*), and so on. A few more descriptive terms are used, but it is often difficult to obtain explanations about this terminology. Several named patterns or designs (*rvmū*) can be identified:

1. *Mvgōp*: designates the diamond shape characteristic of the pattern tattooed on the nose and around the cheeks.
2. *Nēq-rām*: literally “eyes-line,” designates the lines of large dots under the eyes.
3. *Tùjī*: designates the smaller dots tattooed in lines on the lower part of the cheeks.
4. *Mvkāi shòn*: literally, “straight line(s) (*shòn*) on the chin (*mvkāi*).”

5. *Tākkā mvlà*: designates a zigzag pattern, such as under the nose, or on the lower part of the chin and cheeks.

It appears that these designations have no figurative meaning. Nor do these names identify a clear graphic repertoire; no symbolic discourse is drawn from this classification. The tattoo designs are made up of repeated simple geometric patterns and are not intended to function as a symbolic system. What matters most is that women's tattoos look like those of their elders—that is to say, they should conform to tradition. Thus, the meaning of the tattoo is not given by the graphic repertoire but by its properties and the context, practices, and discourses in which it is embedded.

On a practical level, it was relatively simple to master the tattooing technique. The ink was obtained from black smoke (*svmà*), which pine wood gives off when it burns, and was scraped from the bottom of the iron pot on the fireplace. This black soot was soaked (*jìn*) in water for about a week until it was properly diluted. The tattoo was first drawn using this ink, and then the pattern was hand-tapped onto the face so that the ink penetrated under the skin.

The pricking instruments were generally made using thorny brambles (*bākxreū*). A branch was cut to a length of about six inches, cleared of leaves and all thorns save for one at the end. The tattooist held this little rod in one hand, the spine against the woman's face, and with the other hand tapped it with a piece of wood to prick the skin one dot at a time. Several rods were generally used for the same tattoo, and the dull thorns were simply discarded with no special precautions.

The tattoo was generally executed in a specific order, starting at the chin and then moving up slowly. Generally speaking the *mvqōp* on the nose was the last pattern to be tattooed. The order in which the different patterns were tattooed reflects the relative importance of the lower part of the face. In the past (prior to the 1950s), one type of tattoo consisted of only the designs on the lower face, what the women I talked to—whose whole faces were tattooed—called “incomplete tattoo” (*bāktùq xuài*). Similarly, sometimes only the vertical lines under the lower lip were tattooed. A few women were tattooed this way in the late 1950s or early 1960s, when tattooing was banned. The lines on the chin (*mvkài shòn*) seem to be the most basic component of the facial tattoo.¹⁰

Playing at becoming a woman

Female initiation rites have in general received less scholarly attention than male initiations and have often been discussed with regard to their involving controversial forms of genital mutilation (e.g., Brown 1963). Their analysis has developed in light of feminist-inspired approaches to the social construction of gender, which have given rise to an increasing emphasis on women's voices and experiences and led to the reconsideration of female rites on their own terms (e.g., Turner 1985; Lutkehaus and Roscoe 1995).¹¹

In the Drung case, the day a woman got her tattoo was an important event in her existence, and one might expect that an appropriate ritual formalized this kind of rite of passage. That was not the case, insisted all the women I talked to. However, one of the things I found a priori surprising is that tattooing could also be a girls'

game. Of course, the absence of a codified ritual does not mean a lack of rituality. Some connections can easily be made between play and rite. As we shall see, while female tattooing among the Drung was not an initiation rite in a conventional sense, it nevertheless constituted a prescribed and mandatory event for all girls before marriage, which contributed to their transformation.

At the time the women with whom I talked got their tattoos, that is to say before or during the 1950s, the idea of not having a tattoo was incongruous. Up until then, all women were tattooed, and to be a woman you had to be tattooed. Some of them were afraid but gave in under pressure from their parents. In many cases, however, it was a voluntary act. Most women had their tattoo drawn at the age of ten, thirteen, or sometimes a little later. However, some had their tattoo done earlier, or at least they tried, as we will see.

One day a woman pulled up her sleeve and showed me on her forearm a tattoo, a line of *mvqōp*, similar to the pattern on her nose. “It was for fun,” she said, “when I was little, with [her sister]. She did it to me.”

Indeed, before tattooing their faces, girls would sometimes carry out a sort of test, generally on other parts of their body. It was like a game for girls, hence the idea of “fun,” my translation of the verb *agàl*, literally “to play.” It could also be a solitary game; another woman told me, “I tattooed myself here for fun,” as she showed me her right calf where three rows of dots were clearly visible. “I did it myself. On the forearm as well [a cross], that’s someone else who did it. It was just for fun, just like that . . . it was fun.” Nevertheless, when the time came, she had to go to have her face tattooed. “My parents took me,” she said, and “at the beginning I was afraid.”

For another woman, playing did not end with her having a small tattoo on her arm or leg but on her whole face. She said that her tattoo is not well done because she did it “like that, . . . for fun.” She said: “We got a tattoo because we felt like it was fun. . . . We saw people tattooed, we thought it was fun. In the past, it was said that those who were not tattooed would be captured by the Lisu people; that is what they used to tell us before. . . . They used to say that, but we, we got tattooed just like that because we thought it was fun. . . . I was not afraid that it would hurt, it was fun. For three nights we had a swollen face, big like that.”

During these games, girls who were getting a small or complete tattoo played at being adult women—all of whom were tattooed. Most often, girls drew a tattoo on each other on their arms and legs to try it out, to prepare themselves and to experiment with pain. However, playing could become decisive because, depending on how far it went, the girl could eventually end up with her whole face tattooed.

The trial runs on the arms or legs were also a way of experimenting with the pain and blood involved in the tattooing process. Therefore, before having their face tattooed, girls accessed in a playful way a sort of “social puberty,” a gradual transition, which could occur at different ages, leading to their transformation into women. Even before the nubile age, the reciprocal fashioning that took place between young women through these games also implied a kind of actualization of femininity, as I attempt to demonstrate here.

The notion of play (*agàl*) that women often used to refer to these games between girls should not therefore be equated with some form of childish frivolity. The idea

that it was done “just like that,” “for play,” was always present as the modality of what was nevertheless to be taken seriously, given that the act performed was irreversible and resulted in a real tattoo that was different in degree more than in kind to the one on the face of adult women. To paraphrase Gregory Bateson (1987), however, we could say that the playful prick denotes the facial tattoo, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the facial tattoo.¹²

“Play” as a modality of the performance of these little tattoos on body parts differs from a well-defined “game,” or “rite” for that matter, with a rigid set of rules. It emphasizes a process rather than an event, a performance based on voluntariness, intimacy, and mimicry. The tattoos that gradually took shape through young girls’ repeated and evolving playful interactions constituted a preparatory phase that is characteristic of play: as a way of “pretending,” “the preparation and repetition along with the representation and simulation” are, according to Roberte Hamayon (1995, 94), specific aspects of this modality of action.¹³

For those who had “fun” tattooing, the fear and the pain disappeared behind the play—or rather, they were part of it. As women often explained to me, to “dare” to have a tattoo was just as much a concern for the girl facing the pain of a tattoo as for the one who did the hand-tapping—the latter has to dare to inflict pain and cause bleeding.

There is an obvious continuity outside the bounds of play, which of course brings to the fore the apparent paradox of the voluntariness of play in relation to the social obligation of facial tattooing: ultimately, play is constrained by the social demand, since there is a shared understanding of what it means to be(come) a woman. It now becomes more apparent that play has a kind of symbolic efficacy in common with ritual: the action makes sense because a stake is involved. Play is a modality of the transformation it triggers and, as a result of girls’ play, tattoos on parts of the body, or more exceptionally on the face, seem to have also a *stimulating* role—the playful tattoos not only prepare the girls for their “real” facial tattoos but also accompany physiological changes and encourage the transition to potential motherhood.

Sometimes girls, feeling fully prepared, would go to find a tattooist themselves. In other cases, their parents took the initiative. For most women, the person who did the facial tattoo was a close relative: their own mother, a cousin, or an aunt, whether paternal or maternal. The realization of a woman’s facial tattoo was not the exclusive prerogative of one parent and did not stress the orientation of matrimonial exchange. The relationship, however, was never neutral. Play took place between young girls of the same generation who could be sisters or cousins, whether parallel or cross cousins.¹⁴ Having a full tattoo drawn by an experienced woman simply calls attention to the generation gap. Beyond the sphere of “play” among children is the “knowledge” of an adult. That is why, in spite of the absence of a specific rite—or something that can be identified as such in a conventional way—there is nevertheless recognition that a proper facial tattoo has to be done by a knowledgeable woman and that it is under this condition that one knows this is no longer play, not just a “kind of” doing but a true doing (Hamayon 2016, 8).

The power of tattoos

The tattoo artist is in no way a professional tattooist; as they say in Drung, it is “a person who knows how to prick” (*rù sō vtsàng*). There was often only one tattooist for several hamlets. The tattooist’s mastership, an expertise born of experience, is often associated with gradual progress. A woman had to test her own ability before acquiring this mastery, which earned her recognition as an expert tattoo artist.

It goes without saying that the facial tattoo is a particularly painful inscription. The pain of tattooing is real but tolerable—it is part of it, just like the pain of childbirth—and an intrinsic part of the transition to what is and ought to be a woman. For the women I talked to, the tattoo evoked the memory of the blood, the pain of the spine penetrating the skin, and the face that remained swollen for several days. One woman told me: “Hey! It hurt; one had to dare [to do it]. . . . For a whole day, a night, one could not stay near the fire and did not sleep well.” “It remained swollen for a month,” said another. Swelling and a sensation of heat recall the “cooking” metaphor that is often cross-culturally associated with women’s tattooing. As Lars Krutak (2007, 111) puts it, “[the] tattoo also enabled life, since it was the heat that ‘cooked’ the woman until she had achieved maturation.” In short, the tattoo *makes* a woman nubile. Whether in the preparatory, progressive aspect of girls’ play or in the formality of its execution by a tattooist, the facial tattoo is a key element in the construction of womanhood.

Following on from the playful trial runs performed by girls on their bodies, the facial tattoo is not in itself acknowledgment of the menarche but nonetheless “a powerful *moment* cognate with the recurring cycles of re-birth, transformation, and accomplishment” (Krutak 2007, 18). The facial tattoo is not a formalized event or a one-time initiation or ritual of maturity but the continuation of a transformative process, a form of initiation that unfolds over time and is performed in the intimacy of the tattooist-tattooed relationship. As such, it is an identity-bestowing process whose end (the initiated woman) is the very means of its reiteration (Zempléni 1991, 376–77). In other words, in its cumulative actions, tattooing as a process is comparable to an initiation that prepared a woman for marriage and her role as a mother.¹⁵

While never explicitly stated by the people I talked to, many of the references to blood in relation to tattooing seem to point to women’s menstruation, which, as an index of fertility, heralds the possibility of life. The responsibility of tattoo artists—of the countless stings and what they contribute to bringing about—is to reveal a power that is specific to women.

In this process that results in the tattoo “being on view,” there is the potential danger for the tattooist of no longer seeing properly, of having her “eyes affected” (*nēq ma*). The woman who receives the tattoo manifests a potentiality, a power that threatens the eyesight of the other woman, the tattoo artist, who enabled this transformation. The one who receives the tattoo has to provide a retribution (*akpeù*), or compensation (*tvpeù*), in kind (various typically feminine goods). To be more precise, it is like giving birth. The woman who assists at childbirth runs the same risk of having her eyes and vision affected. She too will receive compensation for “washing [her] eyes.” Seeing exposes the woman helper to the risk of no longer seeing.

In other words, key moments of transformation such as tattooing or childbirth carry a potential danger. In both cases, the woman who helps tattoo a young woman

or delivers a baby is in contact with what, in the other woman, is an exteriorization of interiority perhaps first manifested by blood: the blood that drips down the face of the tattooed young woman, the blood that is lost by the woman giving birth. This evocation of the woman's blood also refers to her menstruation, which the tattoo came to anticipate or validate, or in any case to accompany. Though menstrual blood is always a danger to men (it is likely to defile them, to diminish their strength, to ruin their luck at hunting, etc.), and is commonly interpreted as being linked to a form of pollution, the risk of a woman being affected highlights a more subtle ambivalence.¹⁶ There is a positive side to this feminine power, symbolized by the blood but not limited to it, once its normal flow has been restored, or perhaps more accurately *stabilized*. If these transformative events in a woman's body can, under certain conditions, affect another woman's eyesight, it is because of what constitutes an "overflow" or surplus energy: the blood from a tattoo or delivery accompanies a "birth"; it denotes a life force, or what we can simply call "fertility." The potential danger that the act of tattooing could represent for the tattooist lies in this *relating through* fertility with the woman who receives the tattoo. Therefore the "problem," so to speak, is not with women's blood itself; it lies in how the two women, equally characterized by their blood and generative power, are temporarily transitively related. I would argue that the ambivalent potentiality of women's blood could also be described in terms similar to what Edmund Leach (1961, 19) calls a form of "uncontrolled mystical influence."¹⁷ As attested to by a widely used language (shared across the most diverse traditions), the eye of women, because of their physiology, is invested with formidable power or potency. Vision and the eye are the obvious symbols of a channel of mutual influence and exchange of forces: the "envious eye" (*nēq kù*) of jealousy or the "full eye" (*nēq mvdām*) of satisfaction locates desire in the gaze with a potentially harmful effect on a household's fertility.

Vital relations

It now becomes easier to understand why, in Drung society, women alone have a facial tattoo. As we have seen, in Drung women's own accounts, the irrevocable change the tattoo represents is the end result—often after successive trial runs—of the construction of what enables them to become fully fertile women.

In the previous sections, I have shed light on what happens among women and how they intimately live the tattoo experience. The gradual construction of femininity revealed by the tattoo on Drung women's faces seems to be inseparable from the transactions that take place between women, sometimes starting at a young age, and which are parallel (complementary, one might say) to descent and alliance relationships where men often exercise their control. It is a properly feminine transmission and, as such, it establishes a form of relatedness that associates women with a generative capacity implicit in the symbolism of key elements of the tattooing process, such as the stings, the blood, and the heat of the hearth and of the swollen face. The ink is an active agent in this process, made of soot scraped off the bottom of the cooking pot in which women cook family meals on the hearth—the very center of the house, a space of cosmic ties and a symbol of matrimonial alliance.

Tattoos are vectors of womanhood whose effectiveness depends just as much on the cumulative aspect of preparatory play, the multiple stings of the spine, as on what circulates between and through women: a stimulating flow of female generative properties that allow each individual to ensure her destiny, whose collective goal is to perpetuate society. It is, of course, very common in many societies for women to be regarded as a source of life. However, it is not so much because they give birth to children or perpetuate the lineage but because, as Nicole-Claude Mathieu (2007, 16) writes, they are “a source of *regeneration* and continuation of *Life* in its primordial cosmic dimension” (emphasis in the original).¹⁸ This cosmic dimension and the notion of destiny can both justify the parallel, alluded to earlier, with the notion of mystical influence as characteristic of relations of alliance and affinity in contrast to relations of incorporation such as filiation and descent (see Leach 1961, 19–20).

This logic is explicitly personified in the figure of the female ancestress in a mythical motif shared—with some variations—among several ethnicities across southwest China. Stories of origins often include the motif, which either precedes or follows the one of the great flood, of a primordial union between an earth-born man and a sky-born woman from which humanity originates.¹⁹ In the Drung story of origin, the first Drung ancestress, Muqneqkyen, is a celestial girl who marries a man from earth.²⁰ Through this marriage, humanity is able to develop. The celestial deity Gvmeu is first and foremost a wife-giver, and it is through his daughter Muqneqkyen that humans receive cultivated grain and domestic animals. There is no better way of saying that life (wealth, fertility, etc.) comes from women, and the “mystical influence” that comes through women appears to be more generally linked to a form of alterity that is itself seen as generative, the source of all fertility (see figure 4).

The story does not go on to say whether Muqneqkyen’s face was tattooed, but the personification in her of the circulation of fertility seems to exemplify the logic manifested by facial tattoos.²¹ Whereas the story carries a broader message about matrimonial alliance and social order, the tattoo could be interpreted as a form of embodiment of this fertile mystical influence otherwise manifest in the role women play in the household economy.

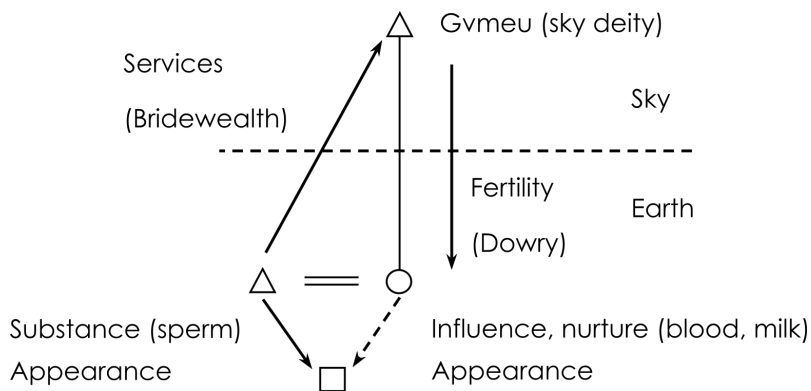


Figure 4. The primordial marriage and the external source of fertility.
Drawing by the author.

Women's tattoos reveal this strictly feminine generating force: "what comes from women" (and originally from the celestial bride) to be finally monopolized by men, via marriage. What in Drung language is generally called "good fortune" (*kārji*) is associated with the movement of alliance itself, with the married woman manifesting, in her productive activities as well as in her ritual acts, a generative power. Obviously women play a key role in the mechanism of social regeneration: however, this mechanism should be addressed more globally, not simplistically through the lens of a so-called "exchange" of women, or their fertility, by men. Here, I highlight the transmission by women of a form of relatedness, distinct from corporate kinship, constitutive of a specific power, or mystical influence. This influence is linked to processes of ritualized circulation of reproductive vitality and a more general dynamic logic that I have called the "missing share" (Gros 2007, 2012), which articulates a sense of "lacking" with the notion of the exteriority of the source of generative power; a logic similar to that of the "economies of fortune" aptly described by Giovanni Da Col (2012a, 2012b). An important characteristic of this vital influence is its outsidedness, which "can be deployed as a source of regeneration, reproduction, or circulation of life" (Da Col 2012a, 16). Clearly articulated in the mythical motif described earlier, this generative potential of outsidedness is also at play in the process of tattooing and in its interplay between interiority and exteriority. The face is the interface that mediates the process of the individuation of the woman through the permanence of the tattoo that is necessary to stabilize the generative force of life as socially reproductive. The female facial tattoo shows a power unique to women and materializes a form of relatedness that constitutes a space of their own.

Conclusion

For Drung women, tattoos are part of a longer process of shaping the individual and the body that consists of a series of cumulative actions supplemented by the marriage alliance. It is therefore inappropriate to isolate the tattoo from the body of the woman and to consider it, like any other type of ornament, as a purely stylistic system. The aesthetic interpretation distorts the value of the tattoo and its connection to the person. The important thing here is the connected body, and it is by actualization that the tattoo "makes one beautiful," so to speak. In this sense, beauty as a vitalist notion is anchored in the function that is, for the tattoo, to ensure sexual maturity, reproduction, and the creation of new social bonds.

Drung women's facial tattoos contribute to achieving a transformation and to ensuring a form of permanence. What is manifest in the tattoo—and this holds true for all women beyond their individualities—is precisely this ability to ensure the continuation of life, the permanence of the succession of generations. Each tattoo is a unique actualization but also a sign of belonging and relatedness. Women's facial tattoos therefore individualize them just as much as they bind them together through a form of "mutuality of existence" (Sahlins 2013). This circulation and appropriation of a feminine generative power leads one to consider the body as the site of an intersubjective actualization and participation. In this bio-economy of relatedness

and subjecthood, according to a constructivist view the body can therefore be understood as a provisional unit, an assemblage actualized by a multiplicity of forces and affects (Farquhar and Lock 2007).

In sum, tattooing relies on a strictly female flow of similarity that, to come back to Alfred Gell (1993) cited in the introduction, implies concomitantly the incorporation of the outside and the exteriorization of the inside, a process that in turn instantiates a differentiation in each woman. Lars Krutak (2007, 226) in his overview of female tattooing, describes this process as a reconstructed personhood “not only through the intervention of an exterior and environmental agent (spirits), but also through the creation of a ‘skin ego’ which was fundamentally derived from successive stages of bodily sensations (and the memory of them) experienced at the moment of tattoo application.” The notion of “skin-ego” referred to here is borrowed from the French psychoanalyst Didier Anzieu (2016) whose analysis of the construction of the subject through the image of the double-sidedness of skin also inspired Alfred Gell’s (1993) interpretation of the layering and wrapping—the folding of the skin upon itself—produced by the act of tattooing in the actualization of the social person.²² The process thus intimately links the individual to the social milieu and the field of relations in which they are embedded. The tattoo reflects the woman’s identification with the collective group: from then on she is not so much the object of socialization as its *agent* (Turner 2012, 494). A woman’s tattoo is therefore not so much about her identity but, more essentially, about her generative value, which is also made up of affect, temporality, and memory. The tattoo is an actual sign of active participation. What is at stake during this *passage* that is manifested in the tattoo is the transmission of the feminine, the construction of a social being beyond, strictly speaking, any descent and alliance relationships. This transversal relationship that is (necessarily) established between women is an essential part of the logic of social reproduction.

Beyond the inescapable reality of dominant patriarchal values in Drung society, the practice of female facial tattooing should not be viewed only as a particular cultural form of a “conflict in sex identity” (Brown 1963, 842ff.) that would express male domination and the way women are forced to accept having their female role as wife and mothers inscribed on their bodies. In her cross-cultural study about female initiation rites, Judith Brown (1963, 849) also points out that they could be correlated with the relative importance of women in subsistence activities. In light of this, we may consider tattooing as “gynotechnics” (Bray 1997), along with cooking, weaving, brewing beer, and many other productive activities that women carry out.²³ The facial tattooing technique, more than any other activity, engages the body and asserts the materiality of the construction of gender and of the expression of social principles. Here we are reminded of the work of Pierre Clastres (1973, 116) who, in another cultural context, describes tattooing as an incorporation of social order and highlights how society designates “the body as the only suitable space to carry the sign of *time*, the trace of a *passage*, the assignment of a *destiny*” (emphases in the original). Tattoos are the mark of time: the body is memory. To borrow from Maurice Godelier, the body is a “ventriloquist’s dummy” that, through a process of appropriation, “is asked not only to bear witness to, but to bear witness for the order

that prevails in society and the universe” (2011, 335). And as we have seen, it is the marriageable destiny that tattooing ultimately ends up revealing.²⁴

Proper attention given to women’s voices and experience has allowed me in this article to point to a form of agency that does not present itself as a form of resistance to patriarchal rule. Rather, it shows how women create meaning within a structure of domination, and if there is a (feminine) code to facial tattooing, it is not strictly speaking a “covert feminist message” (see Radner 1993). Facial tattooing among Drung women clearly played a role in producing a sense of selfhood, person, gender, and reproductive roles, in relation to various other social and cultural factors. Its importance for the social reproduction of society is of course relative, as can be said of other aspects of Drung cultural tradition that are similarly disappearing. Some women resisted the interdiction of the practice until the early 1960s, and a few had minimal tattoos drawn on their chin. Nowadays women no longer have tattoos. Further research remains to be done to assess whether the increasing global fashion of tattooing influences the possible adoption of non-traditional tattoos on other parts of the body, and how this practice would play a role in gender differentiation. It is also likely that, following tremendous changes affecting livelihood and agricultural practices, a drastic decline in traditional religious practices and a surge in the number of Christian converts, indigenous conceptions of gender roles and social reproduction are being fundamentally reshaped.

Acknowledgments

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NOTES

1. Among the earliest historical mentions by Western explorers, see d'Orléans (1898) and Kingdon Ward (1923, 1924). The most relevant references to academic writings, especially in Chinese, will be provided in the course of this article. I have reviewed some of the representational tropes of primitiveness and picturesqueness elsewhere; see Gros (2001). Drung women's facial tattooing is also mentioned in Jablonski's (2013) seminal natural history of skin (see plate 13).

2. A web search on "Dulong women" results in numerous links and images that are predominantly about tattooed women. Among many others, the All-China Women's Federation lists the "Dulong Ethnic Group" as the "Face Embroidery Tribe" (<https://web.archive.org/web/20181011091132/http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/special/minority/1707/3292-1.htm>; accessed August 28, 2021). For tourist-style descriptions over the years numerous articles in Chinese exist; for recent coverage in English, see the feature by Aviram (2017).

3. The Lisu are a numerically important group whose population is scattered over Yunnan, Myanmar, and Thailand. While trade relations and intermarriage between Lisu and Drung people were fairly common in the past, there are also stories of blood feuds and vendettas, or what is sometimes referred to by the Drung as "plunder" expeditions, during which bands of lawless Lisu would capture some individuals, women or men. For a discussion, see Gros (2011, 31–34; 2012, 177–80).

4. For a detailed discussion based on Western and Chinese sources as well as oral history, see Gros (2012, chaps. 4 and 5).

5. Given that I was unable to observe the practice of tattooing, the methodological limitations of my investigation imply that what I learned about tattooing was through the narratives of tattooed women themselves, their daughters, and their male relatives.

6. I do not have a reliable updated figure for the actual number of tattooed women at the time of publication of this article. The idea of "living fossils" of history is commonly used in China. People as well as practices have been designated as "living fossils" (such as the matrilineal Mosuo of Yunnan Province, whose matrimonial practices would attest to a surviving form of presumed "matriarchy"). The term has been applied quite broadly since the early 1990s to various sorts of customary practices or performance traditions, many of which have since entered the category of "intangible cultural heritage."

7. Kingdon Ward's numerous writings provide evidence of the practice throughout the region of the eastern Himalayas. He saw in the progressive disappearance of tattooing further west evidence that the practice may indeed be linked to forms of servitude that were more widespread when in contact with the Tibetans; see Ward (1923, 13; 1924, 196). For a classification of the so-called Qiuzi based on variations of tattoo motifs, see Siguret (1937, 1:105).

8. About the Chin, see Diran (1998, 167) and Risley (1902, 9). The Li of Hainan Island used to practice body and facial tattooing on women; see Chen Rui (1998) and Stübel (1937).

9. Women mentioned the first two decisions to prevent tattooing to me during my fieldwork. The more recent interdiction under Communist rule is congruent with that of other practices, among

minorities in particular, which were considered “primitive” or contrary to ideals of gender equality for example.

10. As Krutak (2011) pointed out, the lines on the chin were the most common tattoo motif for Eskimo women (St. Lawrence) and were “part of the ritual of social maturity, a signal to men that a woman had reached puberty. Chin stripes also served to protect women during enemy raids. . . . [T]heir chin stripes made them more recognizable as females and their lives would be spared. Once captured, however, they were bartered off as slaves.”

11. The study of initiation rituals (not to mention rites of passage more generally) is of course a classic theme within the field of anthropology. Female initiation rites have received greater attention since Richards’s (1982) classic monograph and especially over the last thirty years, with significant contributions about Melanesia and sub-Saharan Africa. The literature is too vast to be mentioned here, but see Johnson (2018) for a recent stimulating reappraisal in the context of social transformations in Malawi.

12. The original statement by Bateson (1987, 139) in “A Theory of Play and Fantasy” is as follows: “the playful nip denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite.”

13. The literature on the notions of “game” and “play” is extremely vast: beyond the pioneering work of Huizinga (1949) or Callois (1961), and the psychological-anthropological intervention of Bateson (1987), particularly noteworthy are the works on children’s folklore in Sutton-Smith et al. (1999), and the more recent theoretical contribution by Hamayon (2016). The latter builds on earlier contributions on the topic and convincingly demonstrates how “play” constitutes a multidimensional phenomenon, a modality of action rather than a type of activity, and “is a process that constructs itself” in a generative way (Hamayon 2016, 8, 65).

14. Given that villages were often relatively small and mono-lineage, and given the classificatory nature of the kinship system, there are no cases that I know of where there was no kinship relation at all between the tattooist and the tattooed.

15. For a parallel to this, in a different ethnographic context, see Turner’s (1985, 28) classic description of a woman’s initiation rite.

16. This is of course not all there is to the symbolism of blood, and menstruation in particular. See for example Buckley and Gottlieb (1988) and Knight (1995) for some of the earliest anthropological reconsiderations.

17. The logic of the ambivalent effects of conjoining particular substances like blood, semen, or salt has been theorized by Testart (1991) through a comparative analysis of mythology and beliefs. Testart’s theory (already developed in some of his earlier writings about the “ideology of blood”) shares some commonalities with Héritier’s (1994) conceptualization of the “incest of the second type” and the idea of the problem of “combining the identical” (*cumul d’identique*), which is for example said to have negative biological and social effects (diseases, infertility, wars, etc.) or climatic effects (drought or flooding). In relation to the idea of mystical influence, she states: “bodily substances and mystical substances, it’s all alike” (*substances corporelles et substances mystiques, c’est tout comme*) (1994, 326).

18. In other words, the regeneration mechanism must be apprehended in its entirety, not in its limited role in the “exchange” of women, or their fertility, by men, even if one can recognize in men the task of operator in matrimonial exchanges. There are many possible regional parallels,

and March (1984, 1987) has for example very skilfully emphasized the pivotal role of women and their link to fortune among the Tamang and Sherpa of Nepal. For further discussion in the case of the Drung, see Gros (2012, chap. 8).

19. This primordial union is generally part of a longer story of origin in which another key element, widespread throughout China and Southeast Asia, is the well-known and much-written-about motif of the flood. The Drung story of the origin is very similar to the one found among their immediate Rawang and Nung (Nu) neighbors on both sides of the Myanmar/China border. Many features are common to other ethnicities: for example, for sources available in English, among the Naxi see Jackson (1975, 222–35) and McKhann (1989, 169–71), or for the Yi see Bender and Wuwu (2019, lxxi).

20. Muqneqkyen is one of the two daughters of the sky deity. I do not have enough room here to go into the details of the story, but it is worth mentioning, in relation to my aforementioned discussion about the link between the eye and fertility, that Muqneqkyen was one-eyed (the meaning of her name) and that after marrying the earth-born man, they could not at first conceive human babies. Her older sister Muqneqram (“Sky-eye-row”) had even eyes, was pretty and hardworking, but her father did not want to give her in marriage. An equivalent difference is to be found in a version of the Naxi myth of origin, regarding the link between fertility and the eyes (horizontally or vertically aligned) of two daughters of the sky deity (Jackson 1975, 22).

21. Chen Rui (1998), writing about the Li of Hainan Island, mentions several versions of the myth of origin that explicitly link women’s tattoos to matrimonial alliance and the perpetuation of society.

22. “Skin studies” have hugely developed over the last fifteen years with works often inspired by psychoanalysis or phenomenology and especially concerning various forms of bodily transformations in Western societies. For a recent overview, see Lafrance (2018). I have elsewhere (Gros 2019) briefly discussed the process of tattooing through the lens of topology, but this is a theoretical development that goes beyond the scope of this article.

23. See Gros (2012, 396–98, 443–44) for more detail about the role of women in these activities. Fermented beer (*neù*), which was traditionally made of corn, is essential for practicing hospitality and ritual ceremonies. The process of fermentation (a typically “generative” transformation) is the domain of women, and the making of this kind of fermented alcohol among the Drung is very similar to that found elsewhere in Southwest China, Southeast Asia, or the Himalayas for example.

24. Rajaure (1975) mentions that tattooing practices among Tharu women in Nepal were a form of sexual stimulant.

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FILM

Xie Hong. 1993. *Dulong wenmian nü* [Dulong face-tattooed women]. Emei Film Studio, 65 min.



Between Devotee and God

The Study of Atmosphere in a South Indian Temple Festival

Badagas, peasants in the South Indian Nilgiri region, take great care to prepare for the annual festival of the god Jedayasamy. In the festival week all activities are monitored to achieve a perfect performance. This article argues that devotees and visitors are affected by the special atmosphere of the place. According to the philosopher Gernot Böhme an atmosphere is a semi-object; it exists between individuals and the surrounding environment, and those who are affected by the particular atmosphere are its co-creators. Based on the concept of social aesthetics, this article examines several contexts. Devotees walk in a procession from village to village, dance in public places, and on the final day firewalking takes place. The festival atmosphere is planned, performed, and evaluated. The impact of the festival atmosphere is created by sensuous perceptions, symbolic public performances, and metaphorical references to social categories, here called reduplication.

Keywords: Hinduism—Badagas—worship (*pūjā*)—atmosphere—social aesthetics—firewalking

This article opens with a riddle: It is invisible, omnipresent, immaterial but considered almost like a thing, it influences me, and I am part of it. What is it?

In South India, temple festivals mark a special moment in the course of the annual cycle.¹ The relationship between devotee and god is transformed to a high level of intensity. Near the sanctum sanctorum there is loud music, the smell of camphor, and the heat of human bodies engaged in acts of worship. I often experienced a special atmosphere, and so did my friends and informants visiting Hindu temples. In spite of the force of these intense moments, I have neglected the study of this charged space until recently. A few academic texts make mention of this special atmosphere at Hindu temples, but to my knowledge there is no separate study taking this phenomenon as its specific focus. In my search for an appropriate method to analyze this atmosphere, I found the work by two authors especially helpful: first, documentary filmmaker David MacDougall's reflections on vision and social aesthetics in film; and second, philosopher Gernot Böhme's discussions of artworks and atmospheres in his "new aesthetics." I began to recall my own visits at Hindu temples after reading their works. The atmospheres of rituals—in my personal perception—have the capacity to condense various forms of experience into one. They evoke feelings from the past in a new formation, they are reflective and progressive, and they develop a consistent scale or format to represent abstract forms of knowledge in a totality that is accessible to our sensory system. Ritual atmospheres develop new ways of pointing out what we know in rather abstract terms by using a material, textual, or musical form. They focus my attention, appeal to me, and affect my emotional state. I would argue, therefore, that the experience of god in a complex ritual could be studied effectively with reference to the concept of atmosphere, as I develop it here.

My methodological approach has its origin in an article entitled "aesthetics of religion," in which Hubert Cancik and Hubert Mohr (1988) argue against the monopoly of textual interpretations of religion, Western logocentrism, and the focus on normative aspects of religion. Religion, they say, is experienced by all of the senses: the practice of religion and the exposure to sound, smell, taste, movement, and vision have a deep impact on believers. The sensory dimension has been overlooked by the study of religious texts. Cancik and Mohr argue for *aisthēsis*, the science of sensual perception, initially proposed by Alexander Gottfried Baumgarten in the eighteenth century against Immanuel Kant and his beauty concept of aesthetics. Baumgarten claimed that knowledge could be achieved through aesthetic perception and laid

the foundation for the study of atmosphere as a distinct methodological approach (Hauskeller 1995; Grieser 2015).

In spite of the positive reception of Cancik and Mohr's "aesthetics of religion," there are just a few studies describing the process of sensual perception in religious practice. In my opinion, the lack of empirical study is caused by methodological problems. One of the few groundbreaking scholars in this area is Birgit Meyer (2010), who investigates the aesthetics of Pentecostal charismatic churches and their sensational appeal. Her approach of "sensational forms" reveals in more detail how religious *practice* makes people *believe*. The question of persuasion is not new, since it was already a part of Clifford Geertz's famous 1973 definition of religion, where he states the following as distinct features of religion:

(1) a system of symbols (2) which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men (3) by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) *clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that* (5) *the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.* (Geertz 1973, emphasis added)

The difficult task, then, is to describe how this "aura of factuality" is constructed and why it seems "uniquely realistic." Meyer's ethnography documents the sensorial modes of religion in practice and "how the body and sensations are *subject* to powerful (competing) politico-religious formations" (2010, 759, emphasis added).

It proves to be most difficult to approach believers' sensory systems and to find words to describe them. When believers talk about their emotions in (or from) a religious context, they refer to the atmosphere that they experienced. I share the interest of Cancik and Mohr in the aesthetics of religion, and I try to approach it by describing the atmosphere of a South Indian temple festival. I shall argue, therefore, that the atmosphere is masterminded, planned, created, and finally evaluated. I have no doubt that the organizers of the festival would agree with Bruce Kapferer's words: "Performance both expresses and creates what it represents" (1979, 154). Before (re)turning to a specific South Indian temple festival, I would like to introduce the concept of atmosphere. I shall begin with the notion of atmosphere as it is understood in most of the Western world but will try to be as general as possible.

Atmosphere and social aesthetics

Atmospheres

Human beings sense and evaluate the quality of their immediate environment. The circumstances around them—the context—may be constituted by a great number of qualifiers, but those qualifiers tend to be perceived as a totality, or in relationship to this totality. The dialectic relationship between the individual and their surrounding space is the focus of my interest. I shall refer to the quality of this relationship as an "atmosphere," similar to one of the uses of the English word. An interesting aspect—and at the same time the methodological challenge—is the fact that the perceiver of the atmosphere is part of it and indeed a potential coproducer of the atmosphere perceived. The recipient tends to objectify the atmosphere, almost like an artifact,

a semi-object in its own right. The physical body and the felt body (according to Hermann Schmitz [2016]; in German, *Körper und Leib*) are in dialogue with the self-created charged space. The actor-network theory of Bruno Latour (2005) has demonstrated that actors and other agents are inseparable in the social process. Likewise the anthropology of the body has demonstrated how the physical and the cultural environment are inscribed in and on each human body.

Atmospheres are perceived with all our senses and result in emotional states. The perception of an environment is by no means a mechanical process but is highly influenced by our cultural training and specific knowledge. Today it is commonplace to assume that “people from different cultures inhabit different sensory worlds” (Hall 1968, 84). In this sense, atmospheres are part of, or influenced by, a culturally informed process of sensing. Social values help us to filter and focus our perceptions. We tend to feel what we know and know what we feel. The study of atmosphere, however, does not offer a privileged perspective or a suitable starting point. Atmospheres do not correspond to any clear taxonomy, for they lack clear demarcations. They are, though, omnipresent and at times quite powerful.

What remains unclear is the ontological status of atmospheres. In question is the issue of autonomy. Böhme refers to the phenomenology of Herrmann Schmitz, who defines atmospheres as “affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of moods” (Böhme 1993, 119). Böhme questions the autonomy of atmospheres and instead suggests that they exist only as a kind of coproduced entity. An atmosphere “is the common reality of perceiver and the perceived” (Böhme 1993, 122). Atmospheres are a perceived reality.

Social aesthetics

I propose that the best way to examine atmospheres is the method of social aesthetics.² David MacDougall begins his programmatic article on “Social Aesthetics and the Doon School,” a reference to a North Indian elite boarding school, with the following observation: “Through our senses we measure the qualities of our surroundings – the tempo of life, the dominant patterns of color, texture, movement, and behavior – and these coalesce to make the world familiar or strange” (2006, 94). His use of the term “social aesthetics” does not relate to the concept of beauty but refers to “culturally patterned sensory experience” (*ibid.*, 98) and situates it very close to my concept of atmosphere. The social aesthetic field, composed of objects and actions, is in some respect the physical manifestation of the largely internalized and invisible “embodied history” that Bourdieu calls *habitus* (*ibid.*, 98). I would like to add that Bourdieu comes very close to my own study of atmosphere, especially in the relationship of habitus and field (Bourdieu 1997, 52–111). His point of departure, however, is social categories, while I attempt an analysis of atmosphere irrespective of class, age, or gender within the physical environment and the cultural landscape.

Devotees interact with the atmosphere in and around the temple that I will describe in the following paragraphs. They express what they feel when they know that they are there. With reference to aura, a quality that radiates from an object or a center, Walter Benjamin claimed that it must be inhaled; it has to be absorbed “into one’s own bodily state of being. What is perceived is an indeterminate spatially extended quality of feeling” (as quoted in Böhme 1993, 118). Aura combines knowing

and feeling into a totality, not unlike the anthropology of emotions has asserted in other contexts (for example, Leavitt 1996).³ Kojiro Miyahara locates aesthetic knowledge “between a personal awareness of bodily sensation and impersonal conceptual knowledge,” and therefore it can be “intersubjectively understood” (2014, 68). Similar concepts have been discussed in anthropology. Piers Vitebsky calls this quality “trans-sentience” (1993, 255) and Unni Wikan “resonance” (2012). I would argue that the temple festivals analyzed in this article provide an aesthetic field that transforms the emotional states of individuals and contributes to a process of identification. Group feeling in the context of temple worship need not be shared by all, “but [it] helps individuals to navigate their own emotional states that are connected to the general cultural patterns and are idiosyncratic” (Berger 2016, 150).

The deity Jedayasamy and his annual festival

Every year Jedayasamy (*caṭāya*, matted hair; *cāmi*, deity) visits his festival in Jackanarai, a Badaga village on the southern slopes of the Nilgiri Plateau in south India. According to the local myth, long ago a beggar with matted hair came to Jackanarai and stayed for a while in a valley below the village. The forefathers gave him food, but when they saw him commanding tigers, they realized that he was a god. After being unmasked, the guest said that he could not stay and had to leave. He expressed his thanks for the community’s hospitality and promised to visit the village once a year. From Jackanarai he proceeded to the Badaga villages of Nedugula and Denadu, and then left the plateau, traveling toward the east. Today he is worshipped in these three Badaga villages as well as in Germa (close to Hasanur) in the Billiranga Hills. When I told elderly headmen and priests that Pastor Kanaka from the Basel Mission wrote in 1903 about a *new* festival for Jedayasamy in Jackanarai, they replied that this might have been the first grand festival for outsiders. His worship, they said, has a much longer history (Heidemann 2006, 390–98).

According to Badaga myths Jackanarai was one of the first villages founded by their forebearers and therefore has the status of a village with religious autonomy and its own jurisdiction. Their ancestors came from the northern regions to the Nilgiri plateau in times immemorial, because they objected to a proposed wedding of a Muslim ruler with one of their sisters. “Seven brothers” climbed up the hill and became the first inhabitants of many surrounding villages. Their sister, Elinge Hette, and her husband built the first houses on a southern ridge overseeing the plains of Karamadai and Mettupalayam. This settlement became Jackanarai and grew into an upper part with the genealogy of priests, a middle part, and a lower part from where the headmen came. A rather small part of Jackanarai is also inhabited by the Torreya, an endogamous group with special ritual and social duties. North and east of the main village nine further hamlets cropped up, founded by descendants of the original settlers and from their in-laws. Together, these thirteen hamlets (or villages) with roughly one thousand houses constitute a so-called “head village” and celebrate the festival for Jedayasamy.

In most Badaga villages the largest temple festival is for the mythical village founder (Hockings 2013). He is the assertive progenitor of the respective patriline and

worshipped as the god Hireodeya in each head village. In contrast, the benevolent goddess Hette unifies all Badaga people. Her temple is visited by Badaga from (almost) all villages. Also in Jackanarai the Hireodeya temple is used for all regular rituals associated with the planting of the first seed and for the first harvest, but the worship of Jedayasamy appears to be more important. I would argue that the worship of Jedayasamy emerged in the nineteenth century when the legal status of those who married into the village of Jackanarai became unclear (a Badaga who settles in his wife's village still comes under the jurisdiction of his native place, and it remains uncertain when his male successors gain all of the legal rights of their birthplace). The deity with the matted hair is worshipped by all families living within the head village and must be considered as an integrating force. The sociology of his festival marks a difference from other villages, but the symbolic forms, architecture, dress, music, and dance resemble those of other Badaga temple festivals.

The families of Jackanarai take great pains to prepare for Jedayasamy's arrival. Rules of purity are observed, and social harmony in the village is carefully maintained. The temple grounds are spotless, while its walls are whitewashed. A white flag is fixed on the highest tree next to the temple. A few dozen devotees prepare themselves for firewalking through abstinence and isolation. They should not sleep in their homes but in temples or school buildings for the duration of the event. The elders of Jackanarai hire several Kurumbas, classified as hunters-and-gatherers, who live in the steep slopes located in the direction of Mettupalayam. Once they were feared as sorcerers and employed as village watchmen to keep away ghosts. At the time of the festival, their drums and wind instruments can be heard throughout the entire valley. They lead the procession to all hamlets belonging to the head village. The Badaga devotees dance to their tune to mark the village boundaries. On the last day of the festival a few thousand visitors appear dressed in white and provide a visual contrast to the green grass in the temple grounds and to the surrounding tea fields.

Each year, Jedayasamy is scheduled to arrive in the afternoon, just before his devotees walk across the fire pit. So, as in many years before, his appearance is necessary for the ritual performance of his devotees and the other villagers. His presence is thus crucial, since the devotees rely on him before they enter the fire-pit arena and walk on its glowing coals. But it is only with the deity's support that the firewalkers will remain unharmed. If Jedayasamy feels uncomfortable, he will stay back, resulting in the devotees burning their feet. This has happened in the past. The fear is not just about the physical injury one might have to endure but relates also to the future of the entire village. Only Jedayasamy can bring good health for the villagers, social harmony, rain for the crops, and therefore prosperity. Devotees and visitors have all this in mind as the proceedings begin. They pray for their own wellbeing, for relatives, and for the community. With a mixture of joy, respect, and pain they prepare for this crucial moment. All participants wait for the deity's arrival, which can be anticipated by the slight shaking of tree branches and the rustling sound of the tree's dry leaves. But the ultimate confirmation is the falling of flowers from the *lingam* in the temple. The head priest is expected to confirm the arrival of Jedayasamy.

Methodological approach

I visited the Jedayasamy festival for the first time in the early 1980s. For me, a sort of exoticism affected my perception: strange music, unusual dance formations, a kind of “turban cult” combined with concepts of purity, and men walking on fire. A few Badaga friends had invited me to come for the event. For them, the Jedayasamy festival was the major event of the year and incomparable with other festivals. They pointed out many details of the temple architecture and ritual procedure. They also stressed the extreme beauty of the festival and asked me to come again the following year. In the late 1980s I was engaged in collecting data: countless photographs, and then later videos, interviews, myths, maps, conflicts, archival material, missionary reports, and other things to adorn my office shelves. Today I am a visitor. My perception is not directed at gathering data that can be added to genealogies and included in maps. I allow myself to immerse into the emotion-laden field surrounding the temple. I do not believe in Jedayasamy, but I am extremely happy when he appears. Somehow I have turned into a known and regular attendee, a senior person, like my friends whom I met in the first years.

I came to the Nilgiris with a set of questions and expectations, with particular theories and methods. In my initial research I focused on religious and political institutions and applied a rather structural approach. My ethnographic background directed my view, while my Badaga contemporaries directed my movements. Quite often they tried to show me something, but I was unable to understand. There was no method to document what they considered as beautiful, what was stunning to them, what moved their hearts. These data were too “soft” to be grasped by “hard” methods. They were too subtle, too thin, too fluid, too transient to be named, to be categorized, and to be stored in notebooks. Atmospheres can hardly be drawn in scaled maps like fields and villages; they expand like sound, and likewise they are omnipresent, dynamic, and perceived with whole bodies of people deeply invested in the event at hand. I can now go back to my memories and to the ones frozen by audio and visual documentation. During my most recent visits I could ask questions that I did not ask initially, due to my empirical agenda to which I adhered in my earliest years of fieldwork.

There is no privileged way to investigate the atmosphere of a ritual. But by combining the approaches of Gernot Böhme and David MacDougall, two visually informed writers, I hope to address a neglected phenomenon. I intend to argue that the social atmosphere is the effect of collective and planned action. The following criteria, in no particular order, should receive special attention.

First, the village, the temple, and the surrounding space must be clean and neat, houses and temples whitewashed, and a vegetarian diet must be adhered to on the festival days. In the minds of participants, such rules of observance contribute to the overall sense of the event’s purity. Purity, however, does not distinguish between physical and metaphysical dimensions. Second, village unity and solidarity must be made visible. The cooperation of the entire village indicates peace and harmony during festivities and in daily life. A village without factions has a better reputation in many aspects. It is considered as a place to do business, enter politics, or to get a daughter or a son married. Third, the festival should be grand and at the same time

extensive. If the festival extends over several days, attracts many visitors, feeds many devotees, engages many firewalkers, hosts several VIPs, and receives trans-local attention, it is considered to be a grand festival. The dimensions of the festival, however, should be appropriate to the means of the village in which it is staged. Fourth, the performance of the festival should reinforce social relationships and social categories. I would argue that a kind of performative reflection on lineages, norms, personalities, or even abstract categories is appreciated by the society. This is a kind of focused mirroring and, since it is shown in the proximity or presence of the deity, it is understood as a blueprint for the sociology of the village. In my lexicon of terms, I shall call this aspect “reduplication.”

Before I begin with the ethnographic context, though, I need to say that there is no Badaga word for atmosphere. They use (rarely) the Tamil word *cūṅṅilai*, which means “surrounding,” “context,” “air,” and by extension “atmosphere.” In case of conflict Badagas speak of a bad *cūṅṅilai*, and at good times when there is harmony they speak of an open or appropriate *cūṅṅilai*. In daily contexts there are many indirect references to social atmosphere, and I have no doubt that the Badaga understanding of atmosphere is not very different from mine. They agree that it is created by people (but I have to add, also by gods) and has a direct impact on participants in the festival; although each person feels it differently, all somehow perceive the same atmosphere. Moreover, it seems impossible to reduce the totality to singular factors, and the total is more than the sum of its elements. When I asked more questions about atmosphere, my informants disagreed among themselves about the possibility to plan its effects and the extent of the deity’s will as part of how people perceive *cūṅṅilai*. In the following section I will discuss the varied atmospheres of a few specific contexts. First, there is the village council atmosphere; second, the procession’s atmosphere; third, the atmosphere of worship (*pūjā*); and finally, the atmosphere of the firewalk.

Village councils

Badagas of Jackanarai make their decisions about the celebration of the Jedayasamy festival during their village councils several months before the festival begins. At stake is the size of the event. The contested question is how long it should last. A lengthy festival involves greater expense for each Badaga household. On the one hand, the festival should not be a financial burden, nor should villagers become indebted to moneylenders. On the other hand, a great festival will make the deity happy, resulting in good rainfalls and a prosperous year. But a celebration on a grand scale could be taken as a provocation to day laborers, who suffer from low wages. In their perception, more days of celebration equal more days with less work. The Badaga council in charge of festival planning takes these issues into account. Badaga elders consider the events of recent years and the effects a grand festival will have on the locality. The main objectors to holding a long festival worry about discontent from the laborers’ side and are concerned that indebtedness among the Badagas might lead to the sale of land and therefore loss of ancestors’ property. The proponents of the long festival argue that it is the deity’s wish to celebrate and that humans should not act against his will (for a case study see Heidemann 2006, 427–29).

The main arguments revolve around observable or traceable facts and numbers in economic transactions, such as wages, tea prices, sales or mortgages of land, presence and prosperity of moneylenders, expenditures for consumer items in the village, open conflicts or fights between landlords and laborers, disputes over wages, emigration of laborers due to low wages, and so on. But there are hidden agendas too. Factory owners of high status and questionable reputation may want to prevent a large festival to avoid the payment of advances to their clients. Village elders who speak in favor of a big festival may do so in order to celebrate their own status. Devotees may want to perform firewalking to fulfill a vow. Others might propose a large festival because of the need to invite prospective in-laws for a new wedding alliance. Such issues cannot be brought into the public discussion, because arguments regarding the festival must address the village as a whole or refer to the deity. Hidden agendas—unlike hidden transcripts in the usage of James Scott (1990)—exist without reference to the question of dominance.

The atmospheres in the councils prove to be a decisive force. Therefore, results are hard to predict. I attended many village councils and discussed the chances of success for each faction with my friends beforehand. I can recall that in many cases factory owners, politicians, headmen, and other individuals with economic power or holding public office did not win the argument. In some cases it was a determined village youth or the angry peasants of a small hamlet who turned the decision in their favor. But I cannot remember any council meeting when a decision was taken against the dominant mood of the crowd. There were several instances when the powerful men—faced with unexpected opposition—postponed the debate, but verdicts are not decided against the feelings of the majority. Leaders of factions make sure to have sufficient support on the meeting ground. They also encourage speakers with rhetorical skills to support their cause. An important balance must thus be reached in the tone of the collective voice.

All men—the powerful explicitly included—should speak respectfully but still convincingly and firmly. Shouting is considered a violation of conduct. A walkout with a big faction seems to be the more appropriate way of registering strong disagreement. In short, council meetings require emotional control, group support, and effective public speech. Long before the Jedayasamy festival begins, council members have to take atmospheres of many kinds into account. The general economic and social atmosphere in the village, possible sentiments about hidden agendas, and the interactional atmosphere within the council itself all must be carefully assessed. To achieve their goals, leaders need good arguments and good atmospheres.

Processions and dance

The most visible and dynamic element in temple festivals among the Badagas (and beyond) is processions, usually accompanied by a group of musicians. In his book titled *Sacred and Profane Beauty*, Gerardus van der Leeuw argues that a procession is a “pure and universally preserved relic of the cultic dance” (1963, 39); indeed, the Badaga formation of the “line” moves occasionally into a “circle,” and the slow walk of the men is transformed into a rhythmic dance. For van der Leeuw dance is the oldest art form, and through the dance experience a dancer experiences his or her

body and being-in-the-world differently (*ibid.*, 74). Van der Leeuw points to the same dialectic that I have discussed for atmosphere. Creating has an impact on the self. The dancers move according to the tune of the music and by so doing highlight the presence of the music and its rhythm. The dancers feel their bodies while they move, and the observer experiences music and dance as a complete phenomenon.

In the valleys of the Nilgiri plateau the sounds of the festival can be heard over long distances, and the procession is visible from afar when the men dressed in white walk through the green tea fields. Several days before the firewalking takes place, the procession visits all the hamlets of Jackanarai. At the village boundaries the devotees make a ritualized invitation to the in-laws. Each visit to a hamlet follows thoughtful consideration, because matters of status and prestige have to be considered. The size of the hamlet and its status has to be in balance with the attention it receives. I walked with the procession several times, but in recent years I used to wait in the villages or hamlets for the devotees to arrive. There is always a certain excitement. The village hosts observe the movement of the procession and estimate the time of arrival. They confirm the neatness of the village and that all are ready to welcome the dancers. In small groups, villagers discuss the recent history of the festival and recall the stops that the procession made in recent years. The duration of a break and the quality of the dance is considered, since a long stay and a beautiful dance is an expression of respect.

For the more general public, the procession and the dance performance are the first moments of an intense festival atmosphere. The days before the event were busy ones spent purchasing new clothes and special food for the festival, cleaning or whitewashing houses, and so on. Mattresses had been taken out to air in the open space where the sun could purify them; stainless steel utensils were washed and dried on the veranda. This effort created an atmosphere in its own right. Upon observation, I felt and remembered special festival occasions like Christmas or other major celebrations in Germany, but the Jedayasamy festival had its own specific profile. To receive the procession comes close to receiving God, and to welcome the dancing procession in an appropriate way requires a collective effort. All disputes in the village have to be settled before the festival starts, all village households should maintain a vegetarian diet, and all houses, verandas, and streets should be spotless. If the village community cooperates well, the reward will also go to the collective. Like at a football match, where a group of people follow particular rules and do their best to perform a particular role at a stadium, the villagers follow their own rules of purity, politeness, solidarity, and cooperation to transform the village into what Pierre Bourdieu (1997) calls a “field”; the field is not just the product of these rules but constitutes its own force, itself impacting on the social action and what follows.

The men in the procession are also excited about their reception in the village. Elders make sure that the pace is not too fast. Otherwise, the village may not have enough time to prepare their welcome. Before they enter the village, it is expected that a few young men will reach the procession as the first sign of welcome. The conundrum of formal status is then solved. The high status of a guest places him on one side, while a lower-status person walking toward the higher-status individual is mediated by a reception committee (Heidemann 2013, 57). The same process is

performed twice. First, young men leave the village to receive the procession when it approaches. Second, an elder in the village waits with a clay “spoon” and burning camphor on charcoal. A portion of the ashy essence is placed on the *pūjā* spoon of the *pūjārī*. By the final day, his clay spoon contains camphor from all of the hamlets visited.

The men in the procession are aware that they are making way for the deity to enter the village. They observe a number of rules concerning purity while walking from hamlet to hamlet and preparing for the firewalk. The men wear newly purchased clothes or those from the previous year’s festival. Their turbans are tied in a particular style with a tail dangling down the back. At the end is a knot called the “seat” of God. Day by day they become purer by eating vegetarian food that has been specially cooked for them and by observing sexual abstinence. They are “calling God” and spend time in the community of firewalkers. In their right hand they hold a bamboo stick, freshly cut from a “clean” place in the forest, a place not accessible to men and therefore not polluted. In their left hand they hold a handkerchief of a uniform color. While dancing, each performer’s cloth emphasizes the group’s movement and visually pleases the observers. Musicians lead the procession, followed by five or seven elders, behind which are the firewalkers. The young men from the hosting village then lead the procession to the common ground. The line of the procession bends into a circle and the devotees dance. They turn on their own axis forward and backward and follow the movement in the circle. Regardless of age, sex, and status, all villagers may join the dance outside the circle, but usually a small group of young men outnumber the others.

The visit of the procession constitutes a special event and creates a particular mood in the village. From what I sensed and what I heard at that time and also in retrospect, the dominant feeling is overwhelming joy—the procession, as auspicious augury, signals the deity has arrived. But there is also a sense of release and relief, since all of the preparatory tasks had been completed on time and all pending work achieved. For some, especially those who feel responsible for the success of the event, there is also a sense of tension. Something might go wrong, signs of pollution might appear, a fight could break out, or rumors could spoil the perfectly planned and carefully created atmosphere. The elders pacify troublemakers, attempt to convince the procession to stay longer, or offer more tea and puffed rice to the devotees to encourage them to make one additional dance. Though the official agenda is decided in advance by the village council and is made public, some hosts will still try to induce the procession to make a detour to a village temple or to a hero-stone. The leader of the procession has to avoid setting a precedent for such additional visits and must keep to the official schedule. The mood of the crowd has to be managed and the ritual requirements observed. In short, the highly charged atmosphere does not simply appear but must be created and protected.

Much has changed over the last thirty years. New fashions are now popular, with young girls wearing North Indian style outfits called shalwar kameez. Many of the young participants are college students who invite their friends. Photographing the festival has also become more popular, and video recordings with smart phones that are later posted on social media are not uncommon. But the basic structures of the procession and its visits have remained constant. The talk about the event focuses

on various details: the number of devotees, the quality of the dance, the perfection of turbans, and the color that was chosen for the handkerchiefs that particular year. The dancing of individual performers is discussed, whether someone is too stiff or shows off. The line of dancers should be perfect and their appearance modest. Other comments are still often about the age of elderly persons who have participated in the firewalk for more than four decades. Unmarried girls continue to have a chance to stand quite close to the men as they dance to observe their movements and speculate about possible marriage partners in the future. However, there is no talk about the more general themes discussed in the councils. There is no talk about purity, unity, or appropriateness. By observing and commenting on the procession, the younger generation learns how to participate in this emotional landscape.

My own learning was a rather long process. During the early years of my fieldwork I busied myself documenting the festival calendar, noting the semantic fields of symbols and signs, conducting interviews, and mapping the procession's movements. That there has been a drastic change in my own emotional involvement can be illustrated by the following juxtaposition. In the 1980s one man had a dispute with the village community over the right to own a personal water tap. He claimed that he had sold the ground for a well to the village on the condition of having water in his house, while others had to collect water from a common tank. It proved to be a stable agreement for several years, but a drought caused long queues at the water tank. In spite of the water shortage the man with the tap continued to water his kitchen garden and caused anger among the villagers. Finally, the village elders cut off his water supply, so he threatened to kill a goat at the time of the festival in his own backyard, which would be a clear violation of the strict purity rules in effect during the sacred event. Without emotional engagement I analyzed the case in the context of conflicting legal frameworks or legal pluralism, since the state law does not prohibit the killing of an animal on one's own premises. The village, however, would not tolerate it.

A few years ago a similar threat arose, which induced me to act emotionally. I have to admit that I was enraged, because it would destroy the harmony and beauty of the festival, as I wished it to have. In that moment I thought that Jedayasamy might not come to the village as a result of the polluting activity. I thus felt invested in the outcome of the event, which made me think that such an intentionally polluting act would be an act of infamy, making me angry. Clearly my perception of the festival has changed from a distanced, analytic focus to an engaged, aesthetic appreciation. During the first few years I was *among* them, but later I was *with* them.

The creation of a charged atmosphere within play or performance requires what Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) call "ritual commitment." Participants in ritual arenas acquire bodily knowledge about the importance of any given scenario. They then have to agree on the rules of play, and they have to learn to engage emotionally within those rules. In addition, a consensus to communicate the emotional state—either verbally or through performance—is needed. Based on implicit rules, bodily performance, and emotional participation, a charged atmosphere can be created. The intensity of the atmosphere increases through the performance itself. There is a permanent interplay of performance and perception. *Acting* within and *feeling*

a distinct atmosphere happen as a singular process. The devotees receive *social* feedback from the audience in a manner not dissimilar to the way a surfer feels the *physical* reaction of a wave's gravity, torque, and force. The perfect performance has an impact on the perception of the self. In a dancer's moment of movement, there is no distinction between social norm and physical laws.

One of the rules that the firewalkers in the procession have to follow is the enforcement of absolute purity while the procession moves according to their dance steps. They should not smoke, drink, or urinate and should restrict their communication with other people while in the procession. There is a certain relaxation of these strictures, however, when the dancers take a coffee break or halt for the rice-based vegetarian meal every evening. The turban, with its knot at the end of the "tail," is considered to be the seat of God, so it must be removed and kept in a "safe place," one that is free from pollution. The men attach their turbans to their bamboo sticks and place them on a stone-framed platform, usually constructed around a holy tree. This place is used in daily life for village elders to sit and talk. For the festival, the stony space is cleaned with brooms, often whitewashed, occasionally garlanded, and purified by performing a number of *pūjās*. Usually the head priest makes an additional *pūjā* before the men place their sticks and turbans on the platform. Without the turban the men feel freer: they can stretch their bodies; drink water, tea, or coffee; and walk in small groups away from the village ground to have more privacy for a talk or a smoke. The head priest and the village chief make sure the procession keeps up with the visitation schedule and call the men to join the procession with turban, stick, and handkerchief. The atmosphere in the village becomes more intense, and divinity is in the air when the procession sets into motion. The soundscape fills the village grounds as the firewalkers perform their last dance before departing.

What I have described—the visit of the procession to villages and hamlets—takes place repeatedly during the festival week. It is a kind of emotional rehearsal for the final day, when the visit of the deity is expected. Before I turn to the big event, it is necessary to introduce the atmosphere of a *pūjā*.

Pūjā

The word *pūjā* (worship) can refer to a short moment in everyday life or to a large event with thousands of participants around a major temple stretching over several days. "It is a ritual to honor powerful gods and goddesses, and often to express personal affection for them as well; it can also create a *unity between deity and worshiper that dissolves the differences between them*" (Fuller 1992, 56, my emphasis). On the cover of the introduction to popular Hinduism written by Christopher Fuller, who I quoted approvingly in the preceding paragraphs, we see an image of a woman in a sari doing a *pūjā*. She pours some sort of liquid on an artifact, which is not clearly visible, most likely a *lingam* (symbol of Shiva's fertile power); before her is a small tray with a camphor flame. At her left is a statue of the bull Nandi, which is associated with the deity Shiva, and on the floor to her right we can see a lemon and a small container. To understand that she is in the act of performing a *pūjā* we do not need to know

what exactly is around her, but we can understand from the context what the act is about. In India, millions of *pūjās* are done every day. Components of the *pūjā* include an idol, flowers, camphor, incense sticks, a few sacred utterances (*mantras*), and the movement of the devotees' hands.

All *pūjās* are different, but they share observable family resemblances. What I just described in the preceding paragraph is a *pūjā*—a person worshipping a deity. At this moment, the world stands still—or at least moves at a different pace. If we try to analyze any given *pūjā*, we will quickly realize that each of the components is not constitutive. A *pūjā* can be done without an idol, flowers, camphor, or incense sticks, or without the movement of a hand or uttered words. But, I would argue, a *pūjā* is always embedded in a particular atmosphere. Without the atmosphere it would be a rehearsal or an imitation but not a real *pūjā*. A *pūjā* needs—perhaps obviously—an agent and, I would like to stress, a particular atmosphere. All other elements are dispensable.

When a Hindu performs a *pūjā*, communication with a god or goddess emerges. The act of the *pūjā* makes a difference to the devotee, to the deity, and to the space around them. The space is brought into harmony with the godly presence and affects the devotee. No matter how the *pūjā* is performed, the charged space is an essential aspect of the *pūjā*. A minor place of worship, a stone at the foot of a tree, or a small idol in a private home—all these seem easily overshadowed by everyday life. But when Hindus perform *pūjā*, it creates a special kind of atmosphere filled with the sacred quality that I have attempted to describe. For a short span of time the devotee and the idol are enriched with sacred ambience. In everyday life such *pūjās* are not always highly charged and appear as almost profane practices that occur mostly in the domestic sphere. When a shopkeeper opens his business in the morning, he might interrupt a *pūjā* to receive a phone call. But strictly speaking, this is a violation of a religious norm. A common joke tells the story of a man returning home hungry, and he can smell the ready-cooked food, but he cannot start eating because his father is engaged in a never-ending *pūjā* in his household shrine.

To sum up, a particular atmosphere is the indispensable aspect of a *pūjā*. The space between the devotee and the idol is enriched with a communicative quality. The convergence of these elements has an impact on the actor and on the idol in the sense that something is conveyed. An objective third party not involved in the *pūjā* and not being transformed by it can observe this process. What the empirical observer can see is the *pūjā* as an act, but not the inner world of the person performing it. To identify the act as a *pūjā*, the observer has to sense the constitutive atmosphere. Without the altered sense of the space transformed by devotee and deity, the act could not be defined as a *pūjā*. My line of thinking here highlights the crucial role of atmosphere and the repercussions of the ritual act on the actor (or actors) conducting the performance.

Firewalking

On the last day of the festival the devotees rise at 2 am, have a cold-water bath at the local stream, then take a last coffee break before sunrise. Thereafter, they do not eat or drink until they have completed their firewalking in the afternoon. In the course

of the day they form a procession and dance in the hot sun. Before firewalking they go to a sacred place and hold a burning wick in their mouth. If the wick remains lit and if they feel no pain, they are pure and proceed with confidence. A few thousand people who have gathered at the Jedayasamy temple greet them when they return. The devotees circle around the temple until the deity Jedayasamy has arrived. His presence is indicated by flowers falling from the *liṅgam* in the temple and by the rustling of the leaves of a particular tree. After a few very specific rituals they all walk over the burning embers, while visitors emphatically express their support and happiness. In the early 1990s T. K. Mathan, my close friend and at that time my field assistant, was among the firewalkers. I asked him to describe his experience, and he made a handwritten report. I paraphrase and quote here from his report to show the emotional depth of the event for participants.

Mathan was proud to become a firewalker, since none of his family members had walked on fire after his father did so thirty-five years ago. His wife had spotted a few matted hairs on their daughter's head, a sign of the deity, and also dreamt about Jedayasamy, whose hair is also matted. With the consensus of his family, Mathan joined the group of firewalkers. His father donated 2,000 rupees to provide new clothes for him and for his family. At five minutes before the auspicious hour beginning the ritual performance, he left his home to meet the other firewalkers at exactly noon. His report stresses the various rules of conduct and the fulfillment of the same during the ritual performance. Contrary to daily life, observance of purity and pollution taboos are much more prominent. As my focus here is on the concept of atmosphere, I begin with a quote in which Mathan addresses the dialectics of performance and perception. He writes the following:

Right from the first day [of the festival], the fear was in my mind about the fire, but when I joined the *kase karan* [*kāse kāran*, firewalkers], and when I saw everyone relaxed, I also could relax. (Mathan's report, p. B)

The most dramatic point in his account is the moment before Mathan entered the fire pit:

The interesting part here is, when I stood in front of the fire and when my turn came, I bowed down in front of the fire pit. Till this moment I could watch everything around, and could hear every voice around me. But when I bowed down, and got up, I just looked at the temple statue, which was facing me, prayed for the last time and stepped on the fire. In this time, most surprisingly, my eyes were almost blind, my ears were deaf, and moments later I was dumb for seconds. I did not listen to a single voice around me.

I was told that the fire pit is 24 feet long, and my feeling is that I did 20 feet without much consciousness. When I was at the last four feet, I could realize the damn hot of the fire, and my body automatically pushed me forward. After that I felt happy, that I did it successfully. (Mathan's report, p. B-C)

When I discussed this portion of his report with him, he added that his last sight of the statue of Jedayasamy appeared in black and white, with all colors missing. I could not confirm this extreme and graphic impact of the social environment on Mathan's

sensual perception with other firewalkers, because most of them stated that they had no clear memory. But to return to his experiential narrative, Mathan states that:

only after finishing I regained my consciousness. Honestly speaking I did not hear a single voice and sound around me, though thousands of people were chanting and shouting. [Through] this only I really feel the power of the God. Before we all entered the fire, I forgot [to tell] one thing: we were particularly watching the tree close to the temple. Exactly by 3 o'clock, wind blew up and . . . the particular tree was shaking. I saw other trees, but there was no shake. I could very well make out the shake in that big tree, and prayed. This made me again courageous. (Mathan's report, p. C)

After writing the first draft of the present article, I attended the Jedayasamy festival again and spoke with a few of the firewalkers. Among them were some individuals who replied to my questions about their physical sensation in detail. I paraphrase their answers: "We are not used to walking barefoot, and it causes pain during the first few days." "I concentrated on my feet while walking down to the Jedayasamy temple and observed the different surface[s]. First there is a tarmac road, then steps made from rough cut granite, then gravel, followed by a grass field, which was wet and soft, very pleasant in the morning. Finally I reached the temple with a marble-tiled terrace." The firewalkers use the same path frequently when commuting between temple and village. It seems very likely that the approach of the sacred field is accompanied by numerous sensory perceptions, like the sound of birds, cooler air, the dominant green color of the tea fields, and so on. The sequence is just one of many sensations contributing to an embodied experience of the devotees' particular sacred space. Some things about the profound experience remain unsaid, but others can be discussed. A few of my respondents mentioned the unusual practice of wearing a turban. Elderly and experienced men fix the cloth rather tightly around the skull of the younger men, which appeared to me not a pleasant sensation at all. Asking explicitly about this process, one of the novices replied that, "The turban gives me a headache, . . . and . . . a lot of pride."

In sum, the firewalkers walk and dance barefoot, wear traditional dress including a turban, live on a restricted diet, lack sleep, and are dehydrated. Under these extremely harsh conditions, they walk on fire. They spend a week without privacy and live in close physical and emotional proximity to their fellow devotees. One man said to me that, "In those days, you feel that you are part of a system, a village community!" Most of my respondents agreed with Mathan's narrative, which suggests that beauty arises from the performance of social order in perfect symbolic forms. Absolute beauty creates an atmosphere of harmony and cooperation. The deity likes this and therefore will be good to the people.

To understand the joy and the beauty of the firewalk we need to consider one more aspect, which is the broader relational context. The idea of a relationship between a social unit and its connection to each individual is expressed in several ritualized occasions in the region. The social context that forges human relationships must be considered to be rather strong. If, for example, the village council fines a person any agnate may accept the punishment, bow down, approve the verdict, and ultimately pay the fine. Old Badagas tell stories about British times when they sent brothers or cousins off to jail in their place, and they considered this by no means

as inappropriate. Positive accomplishments—a victory in a political election or the attainment of a high administrative office—are taken as a village achievement. Individual accomplishments are thus collective accomplishments that reflect on the entire group. Such collective affiliation is not uncommon in my own German society, especially if I think of a victory after a football match, for instance. In the South Indian ritual context, however, I experienced the link between a (real) person and their (imagined) social rank to be especially strong. In light of the close association of person and village, the success of firewalking appears to merit the entire village. In Mathan's narrative he perceives himself as acting on behalf of his family and his hamlet. The enormous effect of the firewalk on the shared emotional state of the village community may be better understood looking at the close link between the individual and the collective group.

Symbolizing the invisible

I argued earlier that one of the dominant aspects in creating and perceiving ritual atmosphere is reduplication, a kind of mirroring of abstract categories. From a sociological point of view, the calendar for religious festivals in Jackanarai is different from most other Gowder villages. Gowder, the largest sub-group of Badagas, worship their village founder Hireodeya in the village and the female deity named Hette in her own temple, which is located in nearby Beragani. In the immediate Jackanari area, however, a great number of agnatic families reside, which would be excluded in the festival solely associated with Hireodeya. Jedayasamy, considered as an avatar of Shiva, once visited the village in the ancient past and is worshipped by agnates and affines. The most prominent feature of the festival is the path of the procession, because it appears—at least from a distance—to knit the hamlets together into one web according to genealogical criteria. The procession and the process of firewalking make no distinction between these two marriage groups.

It is only on the last day of the two events that a distinction between the village founders and their in-laws is marked. The first takes place in seclusion, when the first fire for the firewalk is lit in front of the temple, where long sticks are placed on the ground. When the sticks burn in the middle, agnates and affines take one end each and light the big logs in the fire pit, each on one side. Hours later, they celebrate the moment when the fire meets in the middle. The second event takes place just before the firewalk. Two pots filled with pure milk—taken from a cow at first lactation—are heated next to the temple. In a kind of competition, agnates and affines heat one pot each. The first pot whose milk boils over generates good luck for the entire region, and therefore for all, for both agnates *and* affines. This milk is used for *prasād*, a food to be shared with the deity, the remainders of which are eaten by all the devotees and visitors. This kind of symbolic representation of social categories is understood by the public and celebrated as an expression of the equal status of agnates and affines. In a similar way, the relationships between different status groups among the Badagas and their neighboring groups are expressed, especially the Alu Kurumba, who participate as festival musicians. To appreciate this kind of symbolic amplification, a detailed knowledge of the peculiarities of the local society is required.

My argument about the aesthetic perception of forms goes beyond the reduplication of social structure in ritual performance. I would like to argue that the charged atmosphere of a temple festival is the prominent, perhaps privileged space, where abstract categories are made visible. These abstract categories are hardly expressed in words but are manifest in the highly charged ritual atmosphere. The categories are expressed and received in an emotionally loaded moment full of expressive content. When I spoke to participants they told me that you have to “feel” it to gain an understanding. I would like to quote Mathan’s report of one particular scene, which is less a reduplication of central values than a blueprint for them. The way in which the headman and priest relate to each other at the first opening of the temple appears to me as a moment of greatest clarity in an otherwise indifferent field. To explain this particular scene I need to refer to a concept developed and coined by Rodney Needham as “dual sovereignty” (Needham 1980).

Needham suggests that there are societies that make a clear distinction between status and power, and that accordingly, two respective hierarchies exist. So there is not just one “highest position” in society, but two. I have argued elsewhere that this is an answer to what Thomas Trautmann (1981, 285) called the central conundrum of Indian society (Heidemann 2010). Is the priestly brahman or the royal king at the apex of the social hierarchy? In Badaga society, the respective positions of the brahman and the king in broader Indian social structures are represented by the priest and the village headman. When I discussed their status within the local hierarchy, it did not lead to a satisfactory conclusion, for Mathan made a crucial observation and focused on a moment when dual sovereignty became visible. At that moment when he expressed it to me, a kind of phenomenological perfection emerged, since all major aspects of the social continuum were incorporated at the same time. According to him, the purity of the priest, the worldly power of the headman, the cooperation of priest and headman, the unity of the village, and an appropriate division of labor and responsibilities all converge. I quote Mathan’s written report once again:

600 house pujari [i.e., the main *pūjārī*] lightened the *karpooram* at the bottom of the closed door [of Jedayasamy’s temple], and the 600 house Gavvandikkay [i.e., the headman] took the key from his pocket, showed the key to the *karpooram*, prayed for a moment, and handed it over to the Wodeya Pujari. Later, Wodeya Pujari opened the door while all *kase karan* stood there chanting “oh oh ohm ohm, . . . holi holi holi.” (Mathan’s report, p. 4)

In this moment, the power and control of the temple by the headman, signified by the possession of the key, and the absolute purity of the high priest are expressed in the interaction of both (Heidemann 2010). The priest purifies the space; the headman purifies the key, then hands it to the high priest. The fact that Mathan documented this moment indicates that this very event warranted enough interest and attention to be included in his written report of a one-week festival.

The few seconds described in his report signify the transfer of the headman’s worldly power to the control of the sacred space within the *sanctum sanctorum*. The highly charged atmosphere of the ritual performance clarified the respective fields of power and status, as highlighted by Needham. Mathan continues his report

by stating that in the next moment all firewalkers bowed down. The physical act of addressing the deity verbally and then getting down on one's knees, bending forward, and touching the floor with one's forehead is an active involvement in the creation of atmosphere. The production and reception of the charged space that I have been describing merge into one. The firewalkers sense the close proximity of their neighbors' shoulders when they bow down, the division of labor between *pūjārī* and headman is acknowledged, the commitment to walk on fire is expressed, and the deity is invited to participate. Compared with the process of walking on fire, the opening of the temple appears less complex and less charged. Still, the sensual perception appears as *one* totality and evades any attempt to distinguish the impact of each sensation on participants.

By the time the firewalking begins, a few thousand people will have gathered at the temple ground.⁴ Without them, the ritual would, of course, be incomplete. To distinguish them from the firewalker devotees of Jedayasamy I shall refer to them as "visitors." They participate emotionally, not unlike spectators in a stadium during a football match. They do not feel the same anxiety as the firewalkers, and they do not feel the heat of the embers, but they watch and experience the travails of the devotees. The Indian concept of "seeing" implies more than visual perception but a transfer of matter, an engagement, or involvement (Eck 1998). Auspicious seeing is thus dialogical in that the gaze moves in both directions, from the deity to the devotee and vice versa. Young and middle-aged men near the fire pit show excitement and encourage the firewalking with loud verbal support. In contrast, the firewalkers remain calm, controlled, and do not make any emotional expressions or demonstrations.

Peter Berger (2016) has called this "negative effervescence," pointing out that the ideal north-Indian brahmanical version of death rituals avoids effervescent situations. This marks a clear contrast to low-caste death rituals, where emotional effects are made visible to others. This kind of effervescence appears to be a status marker and is apparently also foundational to ritual. Before the firewalking takes place a Torrea, a member of a Badaga sub-group, has to fall into a trance to enact this effervescence, but the group of firewalkers behave in a controlled fashion, reluctant to show their emotional state. The moment before they step into the fire, all the major figures who qualify for a role in this part of the electrified atmosphere form a long row. They represent absolute purity, for they combine agnates and affines, which means that they stand for the unity and solidarity of the entire village. The performers reduplicate the social order: the *pūjārī* and headman go first, followed by the large group of men, and finally the low-status Kurumba musicians. Each anxiously walks over the fire. The negative effervescence is a sign of a united village without conflicts, social cohesion, and trust in the village deity.

In the same article, Berger (2016) refers to Marshall Sahlins and his distinction of ritual as a process and ritual events. The first is usually controlled by the dominant sections of society and confirms social structure, while the second includes moments of potential change and transformation. I witnessed many incidents of the second type. About twenty-five years ago the Kurumba musicians refused to play music unless they were allowed to join the firewalk. To avoid tension, Badagas allowed them to join the group of firewalking men. Today, they consider themselves as participants

in the festival and not as merely providers of a particular service. In a more recent case, an expelled Badaga man ignored his banishment from rituals and participated in a funeral. This incident could not be reversed, and therefore his excommunication was lifted. In my view, it is because the ritual process confirms structure that ritual events carry such an enormous agency. In such a highly charged atmosphere acts of divergence count more than they do in daily life.

It is common for the “atmosphere,” as I have been calling it, to impact upon the inner world of an individual. In continuation of everyday experiences, I have identified other special moments in the social processes that govern Badaga society. The actions that transform the social status of a person in ritual tend to create an appropriate atmosphere. This can be seen at weddings, funerals, court cases, or other events. But why does a priest or a judge require a specific atmosphere to declare a transformation into a new status? From the realm of pedagogics we know that emotional states influence the capacity to focus, comprehend, memorize, and learn (Rauh 2012). To make words more effective, for example, main actors modify the performative atmosphere. By listening to a priest or a judge, the audience joins in an unwritten contract. The main actor speaks, and by practicing silence they anticipate their agreement with what will be said. There are other ways to signal a consensus. The audience stands up, removes their headgear, or applauds. By doing so, they create an atmosphere of attentiveness and affirmation. An act of change without a corresponding atmosphere is hardly sustainable.

I would like to go one step further in my analysis. The management of atmosphere is a condition *sine qua non* for societal intention. Irrespective of whether an actor seeks social change or continuity, part of their strategy is—or at least affects—the atmosphere. In the same way as a mirror has the capacity to reflect light rays, or can show images reflected by it, I would argue, the atmosphere is a quasi-active force surrounding us that impacts humans and their social structures. The culturally constructed atmosphere is an amplifier of an ongoing process that has the potential to serve as witness to an event. If experiencers intersubjectively recall an atmosphere as being peaceful or tense, peace or tension is created in their recollections.

Atmospheres of truth

Rather than summarizing my argument, I prefer to conclude with a last speculation about the concept of atmosphere in the celebration of Jedayasamy. In my view, which I share with my friends and contemporaries in Jackanarai, the events occurring during the festival week reflect social facts and create an atmosphere of truth.⁵ The annual procession periodically links the hamlets, which have been aligned together ever since the mythical past and reinforced by existing marriage ties. The elders who lead the procession hold an office, since they belong either to the upper or lower part of the surrounding villages. All of the devotees, however, belong to one of the hamlets belonging to the head village of Jackanarai and are either agnates or affines. The musicians share the food but eat in a separate place because they belong to the region but are considered to be “different.” In the spatial order and in the division of labor, the social structure is reflected and represented. By participating in the events,

all actors signify their affirmation of the social order. They display, perform, feel, and see what reality is beyond any doubt. Jedayasamy is expected to appear, if all of the ritual rules are followed. Indeed, the unscathed firewalkers prove his presence. At that moment of enactment, we can speak of an aura around the temple compound, which is constituted by an atmosphere that is electrified, centered on the designated holy place, and stable. The devotees and visitors experience enormous relief as a result of the event. Music is played over loudspeakers to urge people of all ages to dance in front of the temple. This merging of interests results in the collapse of distance between devotee and deity. God is in the air that all the devotees and visitors breathe. Like in ritual activities in general, virtually all elements appear to be dispensable, except the presence of the actors and their charged space. In a modification of the quote by Böhme on pictures mentioned earlier, the ritual upon which I have focused “is in a certain sense what it itself represents, that is, the represented is present in and through” (Böhme 1993, 115). And so is the atmosphere that I have elucidated in this article.

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NOTES

1. I would like to thank Peter Berger, Richard Wolf, and Dick Janney for their comments. Earlier versions of this text were presented at universities in Gröningen, Zürich, and at Harvard.
2. The concept was brought into discussion by the art critique Lars Beng Larsen and by the filmmaker David MacDougall. They published independently of each other in 1999 and introduced two rather different concepts. Larsen referred to the relationship of art and viewer: his agenda was to re-view the role of the art-recipient as active participant in the artwork. This approach, like “relational aesthetics,” investigates “artistic practices in reference to social relations that they initiate” (see Blouw n.d.). This approach was taken up in a blog by Benjamin Harris (2013), who argued for an understanding of “Body of Christ” according to an artistic approach.
3. In many moments the distinction between aura and atmosphere remains vague. An important temple, especially the sanctum sanctorum, possesses an aura, irrespective of human action.
4. I made a short video documentation of the firewalk in Jackanarai and uploaded it to YouTube on request of the villagers; see Heidemann (2015).
5. For the concept of truth that comes close to the emic view: “The origin of all reality is subjective, whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real. To call a thing real means that this thing stands in a certain relation to ourselves” (Schütz 1962, 207).

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Jiangyong “Women’s Script” in the Era of ICH Channels of Development and Transmission

The Chinese ICH (intangible cultural heritage) program has created the conditions for the invention of a new phase within the well-known “Women’s Script” tradition in Jiangyong County, Hunan. Driven by ICH recognition and promotion, Jiangyong locals have formed twin channels of inheritance practice: official inheritors and natural transmitters. With the popularization of the official inheritance practice among the local communities, the concept of “Women’s Script cultural identity” has formed. However, there is a paradox between the emerging invented tradition via ICH and the traditional, natural Women’s Script tradition (*yuanshengtai*), “discovered” by academics in the 1980s, which is based on a gendered form of script used in writing diaries, letters, and a few examples of folk literature, and which is also a basis for chanting in small groups of women. To a great extent the new form has transformed the performance mode and the core elements, while the cultural “inheritors,” comprised of new “faces of tradition,” are increasingly concerned with how Women’s Script culture can bring them more benefits than the earlier forms of the tradition. In the future, it appears that local governments and entrepreneurs will continue to utilize ICH as a means to garner attention and influence in the ICH cultural marketplace in China, as well as to generate revenue from tourism, museum shops, and so on that will in turn support the coalescence of a new, full-bodied tradition.

Keywords: Jiangyong—ICH—Women’s Script—Chinese folklore—cultural transmission

In the 1980s one of the hottest “discoveries” (Gong 1983, 122) in the folk literature of China was the so-called Women’s Script (*nüshu*) (Silber 1995, 1) of Jiangyong County, Hunan province (see figure 1).¹ The idea of a script invented and used only by women caught academic and public attention in China and abroad and has generated interest down to today (Gong 1983; Zhao 1992). Some scholars argue for an origin of the tradition centuries ago (Xie 1991, 64); others suggest a more recent development, possibly in the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911) (Gong 1992, 63). In form, the script is a syllabary comprised of approximately 395 basic graphs (Zhao 2015, 113), of which some appear to be modifications of characters in modern “regular”-style Chinese script (Zhao 2015, 2). The shape of most graphs is rhomboidal, being high on the right and low on the left. Each graph expresses one sound, and the script represents the entire phonology of the local Jiangyong dialect (Zhao 1989, 70). Each graph is written with only four strokes (oblique, arc, vertical, and dot) (Zhao 1989, 70). The script, with little variation, is used in all of the existing texts, the majority of which are letters exchanged between women and diaries. Most of the available examples were collected in the 1980s from the earliest cohort of existing inheritors such as Gao Yinxian, Yi Nianhua, Yang Huanyi, and so on (Zhao 2004, 118).

Since the 1980s, stimulated by the attention paid by scholars and other outsiders to the tradition, there has been a growth and evolution of what is now called “*Nüshu* culture” (*nüshu wenhua*), which includes stories, songs, and proverbs; these are typically written on paper, though occasionally on fans and handkerchiefs (Zhao 2015, 2). Cathy Silber, an American scholar, who came to Jiangyong County in the 1980s to investigate the Women’s Script, interviewed transmitters (such as Yi Nianhua, 1907–91) and other relevant people, collected many first-hand materials, and played a major role in publicizing Women’s Script in Western academic circles (Lemoine 2002). By the early 2000s, with the implementation of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) agendas and China’s entry into UNESCO’s Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2004,² the once inner-directed local tradition had developed into a multidimensional cultural phenomenon with government and nongovernment stakeholders.

This article is concerned with how ICH now plays a key role in the development and transmission of the Women’s Script tradition, including the evolution of the tradition under ICH, modes of transmission in emerging contexts of representation, utilization by stakeholders, community “buy in,” and individual participation. The

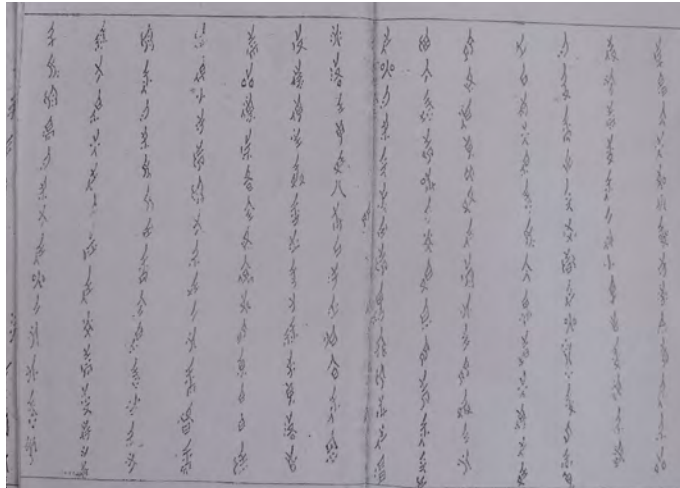


Figure 1. Images of Women’s Script. Photo by Jiangyong County government.

article will aid in understanding the transformation of folk culture in China and other places where the convergence of ICH-related factors, local economics and political policy, community dynamics, and larger currents of state policy, modernization, and globalization have impacted tradition. In the case of Women’s Script, what was once a tradition of writing, reading, and oral delivery among small groups of women is now, under the influence of ICH, mostly represented as a sort of staged performance; those local women who perform in these contrived contexts have become what Levi Gibbs has called “faces of tradition,” who play roles and garner benefits unknown to past transmitters (2018, 1).

These women with the skills to master the technology of Women’s Script performance³ (chanting and writing) for public audiences and within the emerging contexts of official oversight have become the official inheritors. Such women get many chances to perform at all kinds of occasions on behalf of various organs and levels of government, from the county up to provincial levels. The benefits they receive include social reputation, income, vocational opportunities, and so on. In return, these transmitters gradually form an awareness of the importance of handing down the tradition and construct cultural identities as “inheritors” (*chuanchengren*). As the influence of the Women’s Script culture and the new wave of transmitters have increased, many other local people have become aware of the positive attention to Women’s Script culture and have also created a new sense of local cultural identity.

In my view, two parallel channels have developed within the Women’s Script transmission activities among locals, these being emerging lines of “official inheritors” (*guanfang chuanchengren*) and the original lines of transmission among “natural transmitters” (*ziran chuanren*).⁴ Taking ICH as a fulcrum, the two channels of practice activities supplement each other and enrich the forms of Women’s Script transmission. Thus, the following discussions concern ICH in China and thoughts on the “artsification” of culture; main factors in the formation of cultural identities linked to Women’s Script culture among the new transmitters and local communities; and how local people, with especially strong Women’s Script identities and requisite

abilities, become key actors who play roles in the transmission via official and folk channels (You 2020, 9–10). The means of transmission that will be discussed include ICH research activities, stage performances, a Women’s Script academy, campus visits, standing exhibits, speeches and talks, and so on. In sum, the combined effects of these transmission practices have contributed to the establishment of Women’s Script as a facet of local and individual cultural identity.

ICH as foundation of cultural identity

Manuel Castells has observed, “Our world, and our lives, are being shaped by the conflicting trends of globalization and identity” (1997, 1). In the context of globalization, cultural exchanges between people are becoming more and more frequent. Cultural interactions and collisions between different nationalities and ethnic groups are also the normal state of world culture. Some minority cultures easily encounter the danger of extinction and disappearance in the process of mutual cultural integration. Therefore, it is necessary to reconstruct and preserve the cultural identity of groups to protect ICH. The construction of identity has important practical significance, because the cultural identity of individuals or ethnic groups means that only through the reconstruction of their own cultural identity can they truly confirm their own cultural character and spirit. According to Howard, “heritage is often used as a form of collective memory, a social construct shaped by the political, economic and social concerns of the present” (Howard 2003, 148). Social and cultural mechanisms, including cultural heritage, are the main sources of cultural identity. Cultural identity usually interweaves with the relationship between “self” and “other” (Hegel 1977), which is the common result of self-consciousness in a specific language and social network (Shen 2014, 52).

Whether as small as an ethnic group or as large as a country, people who practice similar cultural habits in their daily life will naturally form communities with common beliefs and cultural identity. With the deepening of ICH safeguarding and the research and behaviors it stimulates, the rejuvenation of traditional culture is increasingly popular, as is the integration of traditional culture into daily life. Traditional culture, as mitigated by the means of ICH, can now better translate into economic value, cultural value, and social value. In today’s perspective, cultural stakeholders can regain and strengthen a tradition’s cultural status and identity via ICH and contribute to identifying and reforming the mainstream culture of the nation, with mutual benefits (Rees 2012, 23–54). Thus, the construction of cultural identity is the means for groups to distinguish themselves from others, while the cultural memory formed by daily life activities is the internal driving force for cultural identity.

Therefore, “cultural heritage enables a community to show itself and others” (Assmann 1995, 132), and cultural heritage is the foundation and core content of cultural identity. In the current ICH safeguarding in China, ICH frames people’s cultural orientation, shapes spiritual beliefs, and, in the process, maintains the role of ICH in daily life through the restoration and construction of people’s cultural memory, thus confirming the construction of people’s cultural identity.

On the local level, ICH recognition of Women’s Script has come to be recognized as an opportunity to promote the welfare of Jiangyong people. By constructing a Women’s Script cultural identity among the locals and adapting the tradition to the needs of the contemporary socioeconomic situation, individuals, families, local businesses, and local governments can benefit. This sort of opportunity has been institutionalized by local governments throughout China to benefit local communities, in a dynamic that may have several competing agents (You 2020, 9–10). I have observed the effects of official promotion of a self-reflexive ICH discourse that includes the following principles: first paying attention to local culture from the top down; as a minority of cultural holders⁵ benefit, it feeds back to local cultural groups; and this then promotes self-awareness in local groups in terms of self-confidence and cultural identity, so as to consciously and actively inherit and disseminate local culture. In this way of thinking, a virtuous circle is formed: external stimuli effect local communities and construct local cultural self-confidence and cultural identity, and local communities thus actively and consciously inherit and transmit the local culture. To some extent in Jiangyong County, we can imagine that ICH safeguarding is the foundation and core content of Women’s Script identity. ICH safeguarding enables Women’s Script cultural groups to establish a unique and complete “consciousness system”⁶ (*yishi xiton*), as their cultural identity gradually emerges from the confluence of public and individual heritage.

As a native of Jiangyong County who has intermittently conducted fieldwork since 2010, I have witnessed the impact of ICH on local people’s thoughts and cultural attitudes. I have observed how locals have become proud of a tradition for which they cared little in the past. While doing fieldwork from 2017 to 2019, I often heard the phrase, “I am a natural Women’s Script transmitter,”⁷ which I understand as a powerful expression of heartfelt cultural identity. As cultural identity and self-confidence have become established, the practicing groups have consciously constructed a radically changed tradition, which includes the emergence of cultural brokers with the ability to go at the forefront of Women’s Script culture communication, enrich the folk protection force, and form the continuous internal force of transmission and representation.

How ICH constructs Women’s Script cultural identity

I believe ICH is a key force that has been used to construct a Women’s Script cultural identity at community and individual levels. First, the local government and individual officials have stimulated local people to realize the importance of their own culture; and second, they have created situations in which local people actively seek to align themselves with elements of the Women’s Script culture and consequently assume identities as inheritors or supporters.

Official and folk forces jointly promote the cultural identity of Women’s Script

Dorothy Noyes has noted that “traditional culture serves all the same varied purposes served by codified forms of practice, even in the contemporary world” (2010). In the context of Jiangyong County, the local cultural bureau (Sanqian Cultural Management

Office, *sanqian wenhua guanlichu*) is the primary government organ that has worked to promote and develop Women's Script culture. The official discourse about the transmission and protection of Women's Script culture originates in these organs and is propagated in the community, in a top-down pattern. Certain women, who are accorded the status of "inheritors," officially become part of this process. Through the process of publicity and performance, these Women's Script inheritors gain social recognition and high reputations. Their relatives, friends, and fellow villagers envy their opportunities to travel and see the world. Meanwhile, realizing that other locals see how they have benefitted, the inheritors begin to relate themselves with the position of inheritor and develop a new sense of "self." At the same time, communities shift their perceptions of the tradition as a marginal phenomenon belonging to a small number of women's groups to the sense that it is a tradition that incorporates and benefits the local community, thus becoming a facet of local identity.

In the process of cultural identity creation, some individuals in Jiangyong have emerged as capable inheritors who tend to be perceptive and savvy about the direction of cultural trends and how to respond to them. These traits, along with the ability to perform and build solid social networks, have allowed them to move to the forefront of Women's Script culture inheritors. Most of these individuals who engage in multiple roles of performance, propagation, and cultural brokerage, such as Chen Jun, He Yuejuan, and so on, are Jiangyong natives. Although of rural stock, they all have received a good education, have a wide range of relationship resources, are sharp, and are self-motivated. They have set up private cultural companies related to Women's Script and then rely on their companies to actively carry on the activities of Women's Script transmission. Such women are the main force in the promotion and representation of Women's Script in folk culture and supplement the work of the government organs in various ways.

As the influence of Women's Script culture has amplified, communities in Jiangyong have generally come to realize the importance of passing down and promoting the Women's Script tradition. At the same time, Jiangyong people (both women and men) are proud of having this unique female cultural tradition in their home county, which they realize has enhanced their cultural confidence and pride. The recognition and attention garnered from the outside world is a major factor in the growth of cultural self-confidence, and this sort of validation is constantly cited both officially and unofficially in the emergent discourses surrounding the tradition. This recognition by the outside world cannot be underestimated, along with the ability of the women inheritors to interact with the outside world; the attention of officials, celebrities, and visitors (including tourists) reifies the sense of local importance. As Jiangyong people have learned to reexamine their own culture, as stakeholders they have consciously stimulated the practice and development of Women's Script culture, while recognizing and identifying with their local culture from the heart.

Women's Script groups actively search for identity recognition

Even with the attention given it in recent decades, Women's Script culture has always existed on the margins of mainstream culture, with its actors and transmitters forming a minority group. If a subculture wants to obtain social identity, discourse

power, and a social sense of existence, the path to gaining public and professional recognition and sanction is difficult. Therefore, as a subculture, the groups making up Women’s Script culture naturally seek standard ways to get attention and gain relatively equal treatment. A sense of cultural identity perceivable to others offers political opportunities and social recognition. “Marked by culture, they must make culture the lever to pull themselves upward” (Noyes 2010). The motivation for Women’s Script groups to actively seek recognition of their cultural identity lies in the ICH incentive mechanism that gives value in the process of protecting and promoting the sustainable development of traditional culture. As illustrated in the following paragraphs, the ICH incentive mechanism selects outstanding performers from local communities as Women’s Script inheritors and gives them social and personal honor and more material benefits. The recognition includes honorary titles such as county-level inheritors (*xianji chuanchengren*), city-level inheritors (*shiji chuanchengren*), provincial inheritors (*shengji chuanchengren*), national inheritors (*guojiaji chuanchengren*), Women’s Script culture ambassadors (*nüshu wenhua dashi*), and Women’s Script publicity ambassadors (*nüshu xuanchuan dashi*). Inheritors are local people with excellent skills selected by the government. The various levels are recruited by local government cultural bureaus either by selective recruitment based on skill, experience, and family tradition, or in publicly announced auditions. Publicity ambassadors and cultural ambassadors are social celebrities who have been recruited by the local government to boost the brand of Women’s Script culture, and in turn boost their own careers.

Not only do the holders of these positions obtain a sense of personal honor, but they also gain a sense of responsibility and obligation to inherit and transmit the culture. Because the “tradition is in the blood” (Noyes 2010), and the cultural tradition is interactive, the groups with common cultural identity are motivated to perform out of a sense of shared cultural identity, or they will simply perform without reflecting about it. These outstanding individuals improve their social status and gain social honor and face, as they simultaneously become proud of their culture and receive respect from others participating in official activities. Likewise, due to the inheritance of Women’s Script, other locals are affected and motivated to consciously and actively take part in the transmission, while solidifying a facet of their cultural identities.

Official level: Women’s Script transmission by official inheritors

Once the selected official inheritors become the representatives of Jiangyong Women’s Script inheritance, they participate in Women’s Script performance and publicity activities on behalf of the local government organizations. The means of Women’s Script transmission and dissemination need to be considered both internally and externally. Regarding internal transmission in the area, there is a stable base for inheritance that includes the ability and conditions to cultivate new inheritors, the maintenance of a Women’s Script cultural context, and the resources to attract scholarly and more popular attention within China and abroad. An important component of this internal transmission is the Women’s Script Ecological Museum (*Nüshu shengtai bowuguan*), discussed in the following paragraphs. The external

dimension involves individuals and groups participating in cultural exchange activities, including visits to other parts of China and even abroad, which create a cultural exchange medium on behalf of the local government and other stakeholders.

Teaching and ICH research in the Women's Script Ecological Museum

Hu Meiyue, a provincial inheritor, has been serving since 2001 as a fulltime teacher of Women's Script (see figure 2). A resident of Xiawan village, she is the granddaughter of Gao Yinxian, who was the first "natural" inheritor discovered by scholars in the 1980s. Influenced by her grandmother, Hu believes that she has the responsibility to transmit Women's Script and hopes that more young people will learn it.

In the 1990s, Hu Meiyue went to her mother's village every week to teach Women's Script free of charge to the girls. Her home is about three miles away from the village, and the route was inconvenient. She spent a lot of time walking to and from the school. Because she taught Women's Script every week, it took her away from her house- and farm-work, which naturally fell on her husband, who often complained. Nevertheless, she insisted on teaching girls every week. Later, for various reasons, her teaching was interrupted for some years.

This author interviewed Hu Meiyue several times between 2009 and 2018 about her experience of inheritance. According to her story, when Hu Meiyue returned to visit her mother's home in 2001, she found that girls in the village still wanted to learn Women's Script, which aroused her desire to teach. So once again she went back every weekend to be a volunteer to teach these girls who wanted to learn. At first there were nine students, which gradually increased to more than forty. She insisted on compulsory classes, no matter rain or shine. One recollection that illustrates her devotion is that once during a big flood Hu trudged along the muddy roads and arrived just in time for class. The recollection of how her young children ran after her to lead her home with their cold and muddy feet still motivates her efforts today.

In 2002, Jianguyong County Government set up Women's Script Ecological Museum in Pumei village, which included a Women's Script class. Hu Meiyue's devoted teaching



Figure 2. Hu Meiyue (R) with author (L). Photo by He Yan.

attracted the government’s attention, and she was hired as a fulltime teacher in the museum. It was not, however, until 2006 that the government began to subsidize her, offer social security, and pay her as a fulltime teacher. The class was expanded in 2013 into a training course open to students from anywhere. The course has since been offered each summer for ten to fifteen days (He 2019, 159–61). The participants include Jiangyong women who love Women’s Script and study it voluntarily and Women’s Script lovers interested in ICH from all over China. The training offers basic knowledge of Women’s Script, including traditional context, origin, use, transmission, related folk customs, and so on, as well as reading and writing Women’s Script, original songs and stories, and needlework. The training course is free of charge to the trainees, and the teachers of the training course are all Women’s Script inheritors approved by the government. With the support and encouragement of the local government, the inheritors constantly improve their skills in Women’s Script calligraphy, recital, and singing, and create colorful handicrafts involving related folk arts. The purpose of the training course is to build a strong foundation for the transmission of Women’s Script culture with local, national, and global reach. The Women’s Script inheritors at the museum enthusiastically teach Women’s Script knowledge in the training class and fully demonstrate the spirit of Women’s Script to the students.

The official inheritors are united in close-knit groups. They cooperate with each other and work harmoniously to teach students in an orderly way. For example, He Yanxin teaches students basic text reading, Hu Xin teaches students basic knowledge, and Pu Lijuan recites and sings Women’s Script texts for the students. Zhou Huijuan teaches students about the “discovery” of Women’s Script, and Hu Meiyue teaches students basic needlework skills such as paper-cutting and embroidery. Each year the teachers lead the students to experience the bullfighting festival and other group activities. The students have highly praised the positive teaching practices of the inheritors, and the training course has trained nearly four hundred students from all over the country. As a new communication force, the trained students have become teachers of the tradition all over the country, thus creating a national dimension to the local cultural phenomenon. The museum complex is open to the public year round and receives half a million research-oriented tourists (*feiyi yanxue lüyouzhe*) every year, accounting for more than 65 percent of the total number of tourists visiting the area (He 2019, 159). The Women’s Script culture learning and training courses and ICH research summer camp, which are held in Jiangyong county, attract fans from all over China and around the world.

Going out: Participating in performances at home and abroad

Women’s Script inheritors are the practitioners and performers of the government’s promotion of Women’s Script culture, as well as the inheritors who are active in the “front stage” of performance that presents the tradition to various target audiences (Davis 2005, 25–52). Their images represent the local image and national image, and, like the famous Shaanxi folk singer Wang Xiangrong, studied by Gibbs, they become the “faces of tradition” of the local culture (2018, 02). The subject of an exclusively women’s script tradition is intrinsically interesting to many people, due to the rarity

of such scripts anywhere and the low literacy rate among rural people in premodern China. The success of efforts to propagate Jiangyong Women's Script regionally, nationally, and globally depends in large part on the effectiveness of the female inheritors, who through live performances and classes transmit the tradition to audiences wholly ignorant of the *yuanshengtai* ("original state")⁸ of the tradition or its new formats before the recent efforts at popularization.

Hu Xin is the youngest inheritor of Women's Script and the most important one to be cultivated by the government. She frequently participates in cultural exchange activities in many different venues. Before each performance, she practices at home, improves her skills, and tries to give the best performance to her audience. Since 2009, Hu Xin has shouldered the responsibility of going out to exhibit and publicize the culture of Women's Script. She has continuously cultivated herself and grown via the performances. In 2009, she participated in Hunan Province's "grand achievement exhibition" (*jiangguo liushiyi zhounian huihuang chengjiu zhan*), celebrating the 61st anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. She recalls that "it was the first time I went out to promote Women's Script, and I was very excited. I went to Changsha and after returning, I felt that there were too many things to learn. I heard people speak Mandarin so well, but I didn't feel a bit humiliated. After I came back, I often listened to [and modeled] news broadcast hosts. I learned to speak, read more books, and enriched all aspects of my knowledge" (Zhou 2013, 36). In August 2008, Hu Xin participated in public relations activities during Hunan Activity Week at the Shanghai World Expo. She gave demonstrations of calligraphy, recital, and embroidery. The magical Women's Script attracted many people to stop and watch. They marveled at the wisdom of Jiangyong women, which aroused their imaginations about the birthplace of the tradition.

In 2012, Hu Xin went to Taiwan with Hu Meiyue to participate in the cross-straits ICH exchange activities held by the Chinese Ministry of Culture. In a special performance of "Chu Feng Xiang Yun" (*chufeng xiangyun*), she performed Women's Script calligraphy and sang Women's Script songs for the audience, fully demonstrating the charm of Hunan ICH, promoting cultural exchange, and enhancing the Chinese cultural identity of Taiwan compatriots. In 2013, she was the heroine of Tan Dun's *Women's Script* symphony and micro movie epic (*weidiaying shishi*). In 2016, she went to Switzerland and France to participate in the 7th "Chinese Day" celebration of the United Nations; she wrote a full-length version of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in Women's script, which was presented to Ursula Mueller at the United Nations. She has also been involved in events promoting the Women's Script tradition and the related arts of paper-cutting and calligraphy in Macao, Scotland, and elsewhere.

Individual internal and external transmission practice

In addition to participating in government-level performance activities, the official inheritors also actively carry out private enterprises. He Jinghua has set up the Jinghua Women's Script Academy to teach Women's Script for free for those of all ages who would like to learn. Pu Lijuan brings Women's Script culture to college campuses and gives lectures and speeches on the tradition in primary and secondary

schools all over China. The following sections introduce in detail some of their entrepreneurial activities.

Jinghua Women’s Script Academy

Since 2000, He Jinghua has run the Jinghua Women’s Script Academy at her home (see figure 3). She has transcribed more than 160 original Women’s Script works and created more than fifty. She teaches the tradition to women who love it. At present, she has trained more than four hundred women and been interviewed by over two hundred people, including Women’s Script scholars, college students, and other social practitioners. Among her disciples are He Yuejuan and Chen Jun, both of whom have been active contributors and disseminators in the Women’s Script culture industry. Touching stories of He Jinghua’s selfless deeds in transmitting and popularizing the culture have been spread widely by her beneficiaries.

This author interviewed He Jinghua from 2009 to 2019 about her experience of Women’s Script inheritance. In one interview she related how in July 2014, CCTV’s “society and law” channel paid a special visit to Jinghua Women’s Script Academy. The reporters were deeply moved to see He Jinghua’s deeds. They wrote in her guestbook that, “Aunt He is really great, and does big things with her little strength.” The CCTV reporters immediately recommended that He Jinghua take part in the national TV “Community Hero” (*shequ yingxiong*) competition with the Jinghua Women’s Script Academy project. Despite her advanced age and the summer heat, in order to win the competition, she organized one thousand local people to stage a Women’s Script dance rehearsal in Phoenix Square in the Jiangyong County, as shown in figure 4. After recording the event, she took the video to Beijing to participate in the competition. The video was broadcast nationally and fully demonstrated He Jinghua’s persistent spirit in preserving and promoting Women’s Script culture. In the end, inspired by her win, she devoted the 200,000 yuan in prize money to the expansion



Figure 3. He Jinghua (center) teaches Women’s Script in her Women’s Script Academy. Photo courtesy of He Jinghua.

and development of the academy. But He Jinghua was ill after the competition in 2014—she suffered a stroke and was paralyzed in bed. Her husband accompanied and cared for her the entire time. Her daughter worried that her father was too old to take care of her mother, so she invited a young woman, Zhou Yajuan, from Qianjiadong village as a caregiver. Zhou Yajuan is a smart young woman and was soon able to understand He Jinghua’s mind. Therefore, Zhou Yajuan said to He Jinghua, “When you feel bored, you can teach me to sing Women’s Script songs.” He Jinghua did not hesitate to accept Zhou Yajuan as an apprentice, though she was still paralyzed in bed. Every day, as Zhou Yajuan massaged and soaked Jinghua’s feet, she learned to sing Women’s Script songs and write Women’s Script, and she gradually mastered the basic knowledge and skills. He Jinghua said to Zhou Yajuan, “Yajuan, thank you for your care. I want to pass on the knowledge of Women’s Script reading, writing, and singing to you without holding back anything. I hope you can study hard.” He Jinghua places great hopes on Zhou Yajuan and wants to cultivate more inheritors like her to pass on the tradition generation to generation. Up to now, although He Jinghua is in a wheelchair every day, she still adheres to the practice of Women’s Scrip transmission and receives an endless stream of visitors and learners, letting her husband push her wheelchair as she participates in publicity and research activities in the name of the Jinghua Women’s Script Academy.

Pu Lijuan’s campus visits

Pu Lijuan was named as an inheritor of Women’s Script by the Jiangyong County Sanqian cultural management office in 2010. She is the daughter of He Jinghua, so she is influenced by a nurturing family atmosphere. Not only has she mastered the basic skills of performance, but she also has a strong sense of responsibility to transmit the Women’s Script culture. In order to popularize the ICH-transmission-sanctioned practice of the culture on school campuses, she spent much personal time and effort



Figure 4. The “Community Hero” dance, organized by He Jinghua. Photo courtesy of He Jinghua.

to travel to universities, middle schools, and primary schools all over Hunan province and other parts of China.

For instance, in March 2017, Pu Lijuan gave a lecture on Women’s Script culture to the college students in the School of Arts of Hunan Normal University. She introduced the basic knowledge of Women’s Script. She described the script style as “feminine” and “elegant” and how there are only four strokes in the writing of Women’s Script: point, vertical, oblique, and arc, “which fully show the charm of women.” When she gave lectures to the students of Hunan Normal University, she stressed that the most important thing for Women’s Script culture transmission is the inheritance of “women’s virtues” (*nü de*).⁹

Farther afield, in 2018 Pu Lijuan went to Beijing Beiman Girls No. 12 Middle School to give a lecture, earnestly teaching the students that “a strong youth is the strength of the country, and a wise youth is the wisdom of the country.” She hoped that they would seize the opportunity to cherish the peaceful and harmonious atmosphere of campus life and work hard for the development of the country—which included sustaining traditional folk arts like Women’s Script.

Pu Lijuan’s Women’s Script practice in the campuses has made Women’s Script culture more real and comprehensible to university, middle school, and primary school students, thereby arousing interest and curiosity and laying a foundation for expanding transmission. Pu Lijuan’s practice on entering the campus is made up of four main components.

First, she gives students basic knowledge of the nature of the Women’s Script phonetic characters, then asks them to do sample reading and writing exercises. To increase interaction, she lets the students guess the meaning of certain characters. Second, she relates the history of Women’s Script—how it was discovered, and how it has been promoted over time. Third, she introduces her own experience of female script acquisition and her ICH practice since she was assessed as an official inheritor. Fourth, she demonstrates script calligraphy and paper-cut handicraft to the students. These highly expressive and interactive ways stimulate the interest of students, are effective publicity, and successfully introduce Women’s Script culture onto educational campuses.

Folk level: Conscious transmission and natural transmitters

Women’s Script transmission across gender and occupation

Before 2009, when I went into the field to do research on Women’s Script, I found that only a few of the official Women’s Script inheritors thought that their task of transmitting the culture was of great importance. While they relied on what little power they had to teach and propagate Women’s Script, they were all anxious about the future. When I visited with local women in parts of Jiangyong not associated with areas where the Women’s Script culture was a tradition, they indifferently told me, “that’s their Women’s Script not ours.” Until 2010 or so, Women’s Script culture was yet to be widely recognized among the people of Jiangyong. It was limited to the towns of Shang Jiangxu and Xiaopu in Jiangyong county. With the increase of

safeguarding efforts, especially since the time of ICH recognition, the local culture has been increasingly valued by the government and all sectors of society, and the effects of cultural exchanges with the outside world have fed back into the local area, greatly changing the local people's opinions about the tradition and awareness of the need for cultural protection. Most of them no longer regard the culture passed down by their ancestors as useless and now take pride in it as a valued tradition.

As a case in point, one of my former classmates recently registered on the new media app TikTok using the net name "Jiangyong cousin." He uses TikTok to introduce Women's Script culture online, with the catchphrase "a cousin from Jiangyong—the birthplace of Women's Script, who is working on Yao people's (*Yaozu*) culture to promote my hometown."¹⁰ Within weeks, he had over sixteen thousand hits on the short video he posted. He now lives between the bustling coastal economic zone of Shenzhen, where he runs a factory, and Jiangyong county. Though he confuses the local Yao and Han cultures, he has taken the initiative to link the culture of his hometown with Jiangyong Women's Script, testifying to the awareness and support of the tradition by local people.

When I recently visited the towns of Shang Jiangxu, Huang Jialing, Song Bai, Yun Shan, Xia Cengpu, and Xiao Pu in Jiangyong County and asked about Women's Script, the villagers—especially middle-aged and older females—told me that they are the natural transmitters, since they grew up under the influence of Women's Script culture and learned about it from their families. This further illustrates how locals' perceptions of the tradition have changed over time due to ICH safeguarding in the early twenty-first century.

Conscious practice of cultural brokers

The ICH safeguarding has produced good results in the local area. Many natural transmitters actively and consciously participate in the protection of Women's Script. Although a number of women are recognized by the local government and ICH as official inheritors, there are other women who act within the private sphere as cultural brokers and promoters of the tradition. Among this emerging body of cultural entrepreneurs is He Yuejuan (introduced earlier in the article), an active practitioner of Women's Script, who not only bills herself as a "natural transmitter" but acts as a highly successful cultural broker. She actively participated in getting ICH recognition and still makes every effort for its promotion. In 2010 He Yuejuan registered the official trademark "Women's Script Gentlewomen" (*junzi nü*) and a business company under that title. After the establishment of the company, she staged Women's Script exhibitions, gave speeches, and convened academic seminars in the name of her company, inviting national and world media to publicize and report on the events.

In 2009, she went to her brother's house in Beijing. During her stay, she took part in a cultural exhibition in the well-known 798 Art District in Beijing with her brother. In the exhibition, she saw a calligraphic work by the famous calligrapher Huang Miaozi, who used twenty-six obscure radicals to make eighty-eight equally obscure characters. The piece sold at auction for 880,000 yuan (about US\$124,950). Inspired by this interest in calligraphy, He Yuejuan worked with her brother to prepare an

exhibition of Women’s Script calligraphic works in the 798 Art District. She bought a copy of *Collected Chinese Women’s Script* and copied it twice. The exhibit also contained originals of Women’s Script calligraphy by Yang Huanyi (an original inheritor, 1909–2004) and a book called *Dictionary of Women’s Script* (Zhou 2002). These books acted as textbooks for her to learn the script, taking several months to master the words for reading and writing (she didn’t know how to read or write Women’s Script before, until she learned on her own from textbooks). Once she had mastered the calligraphy, He Yuejuan selected March 8, 2010, the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day, to begin a month-long exhibition of her Women’s Script calligraphy in the 798 Art Center under the name of Women’s Script Gentlewomen Culture Company. According to He Yuejuan, the exhibit had a great impact, with dozens of media reporting on the event, including a personal interview by CCTV.

During Spring Festival in 2012, Tang Chunlin,¹¹ a native of Yongzhou City, Shuangpai County, Hunan, returned to Jiangyong from the United States. His mother-in-law was very interested in Jiangyong Women’s Script, so he visited the Women’s Script museum accompanied by the then county magistrate to obtain information about the introduction or display of Women’s Script. As there were no Women’s Script items in the museum, He Yuejuan presented the guests with her own Women’s Script materials and, in addition, gave Tang Chunlin some t-shirts and fans with Women’s Script characters. After receiving these materials from He Yuejuan, Tang Chunlin recommended Women’s Script culture to the United Nations, where it was performed on Chinese Day, April 19, 2012. He Jinghua, Pu Lijuan, Hu Meiyue, and Hu Xin were among the official inheritors who participated in the event, giving live demonstrations of the calligraphy.

Despite her success, He Yuejuan has not been recognized as an official inheritor and thus has her own views on the status of the transmitter role. In particular, she believes misunderstandings exist in the standards by which inheritors are currently evaluated. The existing official inheritors are all rural women living in rural areas. They don’t have extensive networking resources or good educational backgrounds, so they often have insufficient understanding of the situation of Women’s Script promotion and preservation, and they lack strong abilities to communicate in some social situations. They can only perform their roles in regular ways within the established framework, at times and occasions set by government units, resulting in a standardized, highly stylized performance mode. He Yuejuan believes that the inheritors should be the ones to determine how to best promote the culture externally. Although she has not received official recognition, despite her private success in promoting the tradition, she feels she should qualify, pointing to her understanding of Chinese, English, and Jiangyong dialect. She also notes her wide range of social contacts, proficiency in reading and writing Women’s Script, and background knowledge of the tradition.

Persisting in transmitting Women’s Script as a natural transmitter, besides the 2010 exhibition in Beijing, she also founded the Women’s Script Image Art Studio in Jiangyong County. Her goal is to build the studio into a base for locals and visitors who are interested in maintaining Women’s Script culture. In her studio, she displays many ICH “artsification” works, including some by her brother that not only cross

traditional gender boundaries of production but mix elements of Women's Script with Western abstract art forms. In these efforts, she feels she has expanded the scope of development of Women's Script, and that the combination of Western abstract art with Women's Script not only improves the "artistic taste" (*yishu pinwei*) of Women's Script but also adapts to current trends of art consumption in China, as shown in figure 5. In another dimension of transmission and promotion, she has, at her own expense, organized groups of ten or so scholars in seminars in her studio to discuss how to develop the Women's Script cultural industry and use it to produce economic benefits.

He Yuejuan is representative of the emerging group of local women who have found themselves in the role of cultural broker yet are not recognized by the government as official ICH-sanctioned inheritors. On the one hand, He Yuejuan shoulders the responsibility of taking up the task of transmission from the aging natural successors. Yet, unlike her forebears, she relies on official cultural units and extensive social resources to sanction and fund her activities. Such unofficial ICH-era transmitters consciously and actively carry out diverse practices of Women's Script inheritance and transmission (for example, holding seminars and meetings on Women's Script, as shown in figure 6). They enrich the form of inheritance from the folk level to the official level of representational art, manifested in both stage performances and graphic arts. These add a rich dimension to the present thriving and "multi-faced" Women's Script cultural tradition that is being promoted and transmitted within both official and unofficial channels; both are new developments on the root of the pre-1980s Women's Script folk tradition, in today's cultural context.

Conclusion

At present, we can clearly see that under the ICH, a new performing tradition of Women's Script has gradually formed, and great changes have taken place both in the form of performance and in the recognition of local women's cultural identity, which leads to the paradox between tradition and inheritance.



Figure 5. Abstract painting techniques mixed with Women's Script, created by He Yuejuan's studio. Photo by He Yuejuan.



Figure 6. Activity held in the Women’s Script Image Art Studio. Photo by the author.

Before the 1980s, Women’s Script was mainly used for letters between Jiangyong women and for writing autobiographies, volumes for creating fictive kinship ties called “making sisters books” (*jiejiao shu*), and “bridal books” (*sanzhao shu*), about proper behavior of new wives and so on. Two to seven women sat around the house and recited Women’s Script. However, after the 1980s, especially since the implementation of ICH in China, the performance tradition of Women’s Script has changed completely, and the original tradition has no longer spread informally among women. As I mentioned earlier in the article, the tradition of Women’s Script has taken on a new form, in a new tradition dominated by stage performance, which is mainly in three forms:

1. Writing Women’s Script calligraphy
2. Singing songs
3. Doing hand embroidery

Under the promotion of ICH, the tradition of Jiangyong Women’s Script has become a new cultural form that is quite different from the old one: “A new tradition was invented” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992, 1). I think this is an inevitable result of the process of dissemination and construction of tradition in China. Emily Wilcox, in her study of the adaptation of Chinese folk dances to stage performance, has expressed a similar view, suggesting that attitudes toward the changing of tradition, foregrounded in China by pronouncements dating from Mao’s *Yan’an Talks on Arts and Literature*, hinge on the idea that folk forms must evolve to suit the realities of a modern socialist state (2018, 86).

Twenty or thirty years ago, there was a heated discussion in Chinese folklore circles about maintaining traditional “authenticity” (*benzhen xing*) (Guba 1989, 142–56) and the idea of *yuanshengtai*. This was in response to the long-held research paradigm among Chinese folklorists of identifying cultural “survivals” (Gao 1996, 6) and determining the authenticity or *yuanshengtai* of an item of folklore, thus creating a bottleneck that hindered the folklore research process. At the beginning of the rise

of ICH in China, the discussion of *yuanshengtai* and authenticity continued, because the main force in the early ICH era was folklorists, who introduced the traditional research paradigm into the implementation of ICH practices in China. However, as ICH has developed in China, the “original form of tradition” model has not met the requirements of society. Some folklorists have boldly broken with the traditional paradigm and research focused on authenticity and *yuanshengtai*. Instead they have turned to look at the development of tradition from the perspective of dynamic development (*dongtai guan*)¹² and believe that focus on the concept of *yuanshengtai* can no longer reflect the contemporary social practice of tradition or serve as a theoretical model. For example, Liu Xiaochun believes that in the context of ICH, the concept of *yuanshengtai*, from the invention to the popularization of the term, has become synonymous in the public imagination with ICH, which is a myth created by mass culture. There are no “living fossils” of tradition in real life, and only when people abandon the fantasy of *yuanshengtai* and look at folk customs from the perspective of inheritance, change, and development can folk customs have endless vitality (2008, 153).

Breaking with the paradigm of *yuanshengtai* has been conducive to the development of culture and understanding how folk culture adapts to the emerging social needs of an era. Taking Women’s Script as an example, in the past, Jianguo women’s cultural identity in relation to Women’s Script was formed in the context of family inheritance. Within the scope of clan groups or villages, tradition-bearers used their own words to educate their daughters, communicate with their sisters, and build intimate friendships, in order to make space for their own voices within the patriarchal society. But by the early 1980s, this old tradition was dying out. In a sense, Chinese ICH has created a new context for the continuation and enhancement of the endangered Women’s Script tradition. The older small-group form has been displaced and replaced by a model of pure stage performance, which is actively propagated and displayed in contemporary performance venues. The newly invented stage performance tradition transcends family clan, gender, and region and in its revived form is now equated to a large extent with “Women’s Script culture” in the local community and everyday life (Lefebvre 1991, 130). And why has the folk tradition transformed in this direction? As the *yuanshengtai* Women’s Script model became no longer suitable for contemporary society, ICH became an opportunity to revive and transmit Women’s Script in a format that concretely benefits locals. The cultural holders are most concerned about whether their culture can bring tangible benefits to their lives and whether they can improve their social status and expand their social networks, while whether this cultural shift maintains the *yuanshengtai* form is of no concern. Therefore, what matters is that the new “traditional form” of Women’s Script, with its widened audience and multifaceted input into cultural identity, has pragmatically brought benefits to the inheritors, communities, and local government organs that support and promote its line of development, rather than concerns over authenticity or *yuanshengtai*.

I believe that when the new performance form of Women’s Script becomes widely accepted by the locals, this new form will become integrated in daily life and produce practical value. The concept of ICH protection in China is now a practical one, reflected

in the slogan “see people, see things, and see life” (*jianren jianwu jianshenghuo*) (Xiang 2017, 124). Once-endangered traditions, which had become separated from people’s lives, are now enshrined under the mantle of ICH and reenter contemporary life; these traditions play roles in developing rural cultural tourism, increasing farmers’ income, solving the local employment of rural populations, and so on.

Women’s Script is only a single case in the development of Chinese ICH. In fact, there are many local traditions that are caught up in similar processes of cultural transmutation, a situation that must be faced by Chinese folklorists, despite lingering attachments to notions of authenticity or *yuanshengtai* (Yuan and Gu 2009, 43; Wu 2015, 66–68). Thus, ICH plays several roles in Chinese society today, not only as a means of reviving traditional culture but also as a means to solve certain social problems in China.

From this discussion, we know that China’s ICH plays a huge role in the development and transmission of tradition; many of the disappearing traditions that did not adapt to the development of the times have reentered people’s everyday lives via ICH. I believe this is not only the process of new invention of tradition but also the process of cultural continuity. Taking Women’s Script as an example, although the tradition of Women’s Script has been “saved” and is vigorously developing in new directions, its original, traditional *yuanshengtai* form has changed to a large extent. We can even imagine that today’s Women’s Script tradition is only a shell of what once was a living vernacular form that played important roles in some women’s private lives or close-knit groups. Yet, the new core traditional elements have been invented beneath that shell—like new stalks on a now-dormant root. In this sense, it has lost authenticity. However, from the perspective of both the natural and official inheritors of Women’s Script culture, they seem unconcerned as to whether the culture retains its authenticity, being more focused, in a pragmatic way, on whether it can bring them benefits and economic rewards in this life. Thus, as the development of Women’s Script culture under ICH brings them tangible benefits, they enact the invention of tradition and consciously practice transmission.

I have shown that Jiangyong locals transmit Women’s Script practice in two channels: one is via official inheritors, the other via the natural transmitters. Under the guidance of local government organs, the official inheritors participate in performance and communication activities that represent the interests of the local culture and even national culture. Audiences are mostly official diplomatic or academic groups, and performances consist of singing songs, writing Women’s Script calligraphy, and displaying embroidery. In their channel, the natural transmitters mainly transmit Women’s Script at the folk level rather than officially. Through their own social relations and abilities, they carry out Women’s Script exhibits, speeches, performances, tourism-related activities, and so on, greatly enriching the whole of Women’s Script heritage, which as a result expands the social influence and impact of Women’s Script culture.

The invention of a new tradition of Women’s Script is a direct result of the institutional practice of ICH in China. As we have seen, ICH is like a double-edged sword, accelerating the destruction of the old tradition and the sidelining of “natural” inheritors, while promoting the emergence of a new tradition, represented by new

faces. Moving forward, can ICH, tinged with a strong political color, continue to play a positive role in the process of tradition invention and transmission? What will be the long-term effects on local cultures in China? What does it lead to in the future? The Women's Script is one type of case, though as we have seen in Ziyang You's work among folk literati in Shanxi (2020, 7–9), the arc of heritage development may differ in local contexts. Whatever the future holds, the impact of ICH on the Women's Script heritage is an index and example of what happens when a local tradition meets official structures with global reach.

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NOTES

1. This article is supported by the International Program for PhD Candidates, Sun Yat-sen University, and by China's National Social Science Fund Major Project "Intangible Cultural Heritage Representative Project Lists and Representative Inheritors System Improvement Design Research" [17ZDA168].
2. In August 2004, the Standing Committee of the Tenth National People's Congress in China ratified China's accession to the *Convention*; from then on, China has been carrying out the ICH safeguarding policy, such as drawing up representative ICH project lists (2006), evaluating representative inheritors (2007), and creating ICH protection law (2011).
3. In this article, the term "performance" refers to verbal art as studied by the performance school of folkloristics, as in Bauman (1984).
4. "Official inheritors" are those who became one of the four levels of officially sanctioned inheritors. It is considered an honor to gain such recognition. Natural transmitters, who have no official government recognition (though a few may be highly visible in the community and to local government organs), think of themselves as "authentic" or real inheritors, since they learned Women's Script from their families and in daily life. Thus, I term them "natural transmitters."
5. "Cultural holders" are members of a certain culture. In Jiangyong, the term usually refers to average people but also includes elites such as cultural brokers, official inheritors, and so on.
6. "Consciousness system" refers to a group with a strong sense of identification with the shared culture. With this sense of identification, members consciously carry out cultural practice.
7. The local community, except the official inheritors, think that they are the producers of the natural transmitters of Women's Script. I interviewed local people from different villages in Jiangyong. Among them are: Yi Jijuan, Yi Shanzhu, Yi Ruijing, Jiang Mancu, Gong Suhua, He Yuejuan, and so on.

8. The concept of *yuanshengtai* is related to ideas of authenticity and the survival of folklore. In terms of authenticity, *yuanshengtai* is the original state of an item of culture, often associated (in a social evolutionary sense) with an earlier stage of social development.

9. In the past, “women’s virtues” referred to Confucian demands on women, such as “three obediences and four virtues” (*sancong side*). However, since the 1950s, official conceptions of traditional female morality in contemporary society have changed, and women now pursue independence and self-reliance. Pu Lijuan Women’s Script teachings sometimes advocate a return to the traditional Confucian moral education of ancient China, in which a woman would serve her husband, obey her husband, and keep her chastity. Such thinking, though against official ideology, has occasionally surfaced in other contexts in Chinese discourse in recent years, though met with widespread criticism.

10. The Yao are one of the fifty-six ethnic groups officially recognized by the government of the People’s Republic of China, of which nationally the Han (*Hanzu*) is the majority. Jiangyong is a multi-ethnic county, with a long history of interaction between the Han (who constitute the majority population) and Yao, resulting in communities in which cultural influences have flowed both ways. The Yao aspect of local culture has also been utilized in the creation of local identity and promotion and commodification of the local Jiangyong and Hunan culture (Jiangyong County 2013, 48).

11. In 2003, Tang Chunlin was officially employed by the United Nations and entered the United Nations Secretariat’s Geneva office. In 2006 he was transferred to the joint inspection unit of the United Nations, and he was then subsequently transferred to the budget department of the United Nations management department in 2008.

12. Dynamic development is based on the view of Marx’s concept of development. Everything is in dynamic development, therefore culture also changes with the development of society.

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The Nechung Oracle and the Construction of Identity in the Tibetan Diaspora

Since the mid-17th century until 1959, the Tibetan government routinely consulted an oracle known as the Nechung Oracle. The Tibetan government in exile, located in Dharamsala, India, continues to practice oracular consultation within the diaspora. When possessed by a deity, the Nechung Oracle is believed to give advice regarding political questions. In 2017 a member of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile lambasted this practice, provoking a mass protest against him. This article discusses the status of oracles in the diaspora, especially the Nechung Oracle. While local oracles have almost disappeared outside Tibet itself, high-status oracles are extremely valued in the diaspora. Based on a recent survey made by the author, this article discusses why this is so. One conclusion is that the Dalai Lama's endorsement of the Nechung Oracle makes it an important "tradition," which together with other cultural elements is crucial for identity formation in the Tibetan diaspora. Such a selective process leads to an "essentialist" view of Tibetan culture. A second conclusion is that a vocal minority among diasporic Tibetans regard the Nechung Oracle as no longer relevant, being incompatible with democratic ideals.

Keywords: Nechung Oracle—spirit possession—Tibetan diaspora—tradition—identity formation—essentialism

Scholars have long studied oracular practices inside and outside Tibet. Many have also been interested in whether the Tibetan oracles, characterized by spirit possession, can be linked to the concept of shamanism, and also whether they are a pre-Buddhist or Buddhist phenomenon. However, these are questions that will not be discussed in this article. Instead, I will discuss what oracles signify to the Tibetans in the global diaspora¹ today, focusing in particular on the Nechung Oracle, who takes his name from the monastery of Nechung (*gNas chung*) in which he resides.

After providing a brief history of the relationship between the Nechung Oracle and the Dalai Lama, I will discuss divergent views on oracles based on findings from ethnographic and historical sources, as well as an online survey I conducted, and I will suggest why many Tibetans in the diaspora have lost touch with local oracular practice. The second part of my article will emphasize how the Nechung Oracle has become an element of Tibetan diasporic identity building. Today, the Nechung Oracle has a dual function in the Tibetan community: one is that of oracular practice in the form of ritualistic consultation, the other being its symbolic meaning to Tibetans for their identity building. Hence, apart from being part of a religious belief system, the Nechung Oracle is also one of several cultural elements that mold the Tibetan diasporic identity. To analyze this process, I will use the concepts of tradition and ethnicity in order to see how Tibetans in the diaspora have developed a strong consciousness of what they regard as their traditional culture, selecting certain cultural elements, among them the Nechung Oracle, to create what might be called a “neo-Tibetan identity”: a homogeneous ethnic Tibetan national identity based on what Tibetans believe is a continuation of the old Tibet. Thus, while the Dalai Lama is regarded as the “political and spiritual leader of Tibet,” according to my survey many Tibetans also maintain that the Nechung Oracle is the “State Oracle of Tibet.” Finally, I shall discuss how Tibetans in the diaspora use coercive essentialism in maintaining this identity.

The turning point of the status of the Nechung Oracle in the Tibetan diaspora took place during a meeting on September 20, 2017, when Tenpa Yarphel, a member of the Tibetan Parliament in Exile (*Bod mi mang spyi ’thus lhan tshogs*), not only lambasted the practice of the Tibetan government in exile, known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA),² of consulting the Nechung Oracle but also mimicked the contorted voice of the possessed oracle. This was not the first time he had spoken in

the Tibetan parliament on this topic, as a year earlier he had expressed similar views. In 2016, contesting the practice of having recourse to a state oracle, he said,

Nechung is a state oracle [*gzhung 'brel sku rten*]. . . I wonder what sort of “state” this refers to? Does it mean the state oracle consulted by the Ganden Phodrang government in former times, implying that it [the Ganden Phodrang government] is still functioning at present, or does it refer to the government in exile? Somehow, we need to make a clear distinction between these two governments. The Nechung Oracle and the deity of Nechung are not relevant to every Tibetan. I, for instance, have nothing to do with them. Every [Tibetan] Buddhist tradition has its own oracles. Invoking the deities as a justification for government is not proper. (Tibet TV 2017, author’s translation)

This sparked passionate opposition from many diasporic Tibetans in locations such as India, New York, and Toronto, and especially from older or middle-aged women. However, he was not the first to speak out against the practice of the oracle in the diaspora, as will be shown in the following paragraphs.

One might ask why a member of parliament, who is moreover a monk, would condemn the practice of consulting the Nechung Oracle by the Tibetan government in exile based in Dharamsala, India. What is the Nechung Oracle’s official status? Why did many Tibetans protest against Tenpa Yarphel? And are there other Tibetans who share Tenpa Yarphel’s opinion? To answer these questions, one needs to understand the historical and cultural context of the Nechung Oracle, as well as the views of Tibetans today.

This article is based primarily on a survey that I made in April and October 2020. The questions I put to my survey respondents—who will remain anonymous in this article—dealt with their belief in oracles in general, and the Nechung Oracle in particular, as well as the reasons for the importance of the Nechung Oracle and their reaction to Tenpa Yarphel’s comments on the Nechung Oracle. The majority of the respondents filled in an online questionnaire, while the remainder were visited by research assistants in India who obtained answers to the same questionnaire in person. The questionnaire was returned by a total of 68 respondents aged 14 to 84. For the purpose of analysis, I have divided them according to the criteria of gender, age, place of residence, and occupation. Out of the 68 respondents, 33 are men and 30 women, with five respondents not providing information about gender. I have divided them into three age groups: 35 and below, 36 to 50, and 51 and above.

Geographically, there are five respondents from Western Europe and four from North America, with the remainder, 59, being from India, including two from Nepal; of the respondents in India, 12 are from settlements.³ My respondents come from a wide range of backgrounds, including students, health workers, scholars, teachers, NGO employees, a hairdresser, a photographer, housewives, farmers, an ex-Indian Army officer, a yoga instructor, and a monk. In addition to the survey, I have also made use of a few interviews I conducted during a short fieldtrip to India from December 2019 to January 2020. Although the total number of respondents is limited, the distinctions made according to sex, age, and location, and not least the wide range of occupations, make it possible to establish the existence of certain patterns.

Tibetan oracular tradition

In this article, the term “oracle” will be used to refer to a person who acts as the medium of a deity at certain moments, and whose status is permanent whether or not she or he is in a state of trance. The term will also be used to refer to the institution of the oracle as an ongoing tradition.

According to traditional Tibetan tripartite cosmology, the world is constituted of three levels: the heavenly realm, the intermediate world, and the underground regions. Rolf Alfred Stein quotes a Tibetan verse: “Tuṣita land of gods, Jambudvīpa land of men, Anavatapta land of *nāgas*,⁴ these are the three kinds of land” (1972, 197). Thus, at the top level we find the gods; in the middle zone the world of humans, animals, and various spirits; and below the surface of the earth the abode of nonhuman beings called *lu* (*klu*).⁵ However, as Giuseppe Tucci points out, these boundaries are not firmly fixed (1984, 167).

As for the gods, lay people as well as clerics consider that,

To protect the Buddhist religion and its institutions against adversaries, as well as to preserve the integrity of its teachings, is a task assigned . . . to an important group of deities, best known under the name *chos skyong*. (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975, 3)

Some of the “protectors of the Dharma” (*chökyong*, *chos skyong*), or simply “protectors” (*sungma*, *srung ma*), may at certain times take possession of a medium through whom they can speak and thus become involved in mundane issues (*ibid.*, 409; Diemberger 2005, 130). Among these are the gods of the Nechung Oracle, Pehar (*Pe har*) and his emissary Dorje Drakden (*rDo rje drag ldan*).⁶ In accordance with their duties, the *sungma* are generally depicted as fierce, brandishing weapons and crushing human as well as supernatural enemies under their feet (*ibid.*, 3–4).

Among Tibetans, oracular possession almost always proceeds in the same way irrespective of the status of the oracle. As John V. Bellezza describes, oracular possession is

marked by radical changes in speech and comportment. Typically, possession occurs after the necessary invocations and offerings have been made to various gods. . . . the *lha-pa* [mediums] commonly exhibit profuse perspiration, signs of great physical strain, extraordinary strength, seizures, foaming at the mouth, and disappearance of the irises in the back of the head. (2005, 7)

One may distinguish two main categories of oracle. On the one hand there are high-ranking, institutionalized mediums, known as *kuten* (*sku rten*, “physical bases [for the deity]”) (Dalai Lama 1990, 232; Diemberger 2005, 127) and also known as *chöjé* (*chos rje*, “Lord of Dharma”). On the other hand, at a local level oracles are known by non-honorific titles such as *pawo* (*dpa’ bo*, “hero”), *pamo* (*dpa’ mo*, “heroine”), *lhapa* (*lha pa*, “god-person”), or, more explicitly, *lhabab* (*lha ’bab*, “[medium] on whom gods descend”) or *lhaka* (*lha bka’*, “[medium of] god’s speech”) (Diemberger 2005, 127; Bellezza 2005, 4).

The status and function of oracles mainly depends on the status of the deity. Oracles of lower status are consulted for the health problems not just of humans but

also of livestock, for conflict resolution, for private as well as communal decision-making, and for weather forecasting; they are also consulted to bring good luck and give protection, or for exorcising evil spirits (Havnevik 2002, 261; Berglie 1976; Diemberger 2005, 115, 121, 157; Belleza 2005, 1). High-status oracles also prophesize the reincarnation of high-ranking Tibetan lamas and are consulted in connection with political decision-making. According to Hildegard Diemberger the local oracle is often possessed by the territorial deities who inhabit nearby mountains, rocks, lakes, or springs, and when this geographical context is severed, for instance by migration, “the reference of the broader landscape is recreated by the recitation of narratives” (2005, 130, 121).⁷

Unlike Ioan Lewis’s (1971) well-known theory of peripheral versus central spirit possession, claiming that the former is a female while the latter is a male domain (paraphrased in Diemberger 2005, 145), Hildegard Diemberger states that in the Tibetan context, both low- and high-status oracles can be of either sex and come from any social background (*ibid.*, 141). Although this dichotomized classification of spirit possession, with low-status oracles who are mostly women referred to by non-honorific terms on the one hand, and high-status oracles who are mostly men referred to by honorific terms on the other, might seem to support Lewis’s theory, a careful analysis of the Tibetan oracles shows that status hierarchies are fluid and are established through “a field of social negotiation” (Diemberger 2005, 145–46). Oracles originally belonging to a lower level can be recognized as belonging to a higher level irrespective of sex. Similarly, regional recognition of status differs (*ibid.*).⁸

Thus, there are both male and female state oracles in the Tibetan exile community today, chiefly the ones that were consulted by the Lhasa government prior to the uprising in 1959, namely the Nechung Oracle, the Gadong (*dGa’ gdong*) Oracle, and the female oracle of the Tsering Chenga (*Tshe ring mched lnga*, “Five Sisters of Long Life”) goddesses (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975, 176–81; Diemberger 2005, 155). Of these three, the Nechung Oracle is of particular importance to Tibetans in the diaspora, as will be discussed in the following paragraphs. In the 1990s the Dalai Lama also officially recognized two laywomen, Namsel Donma and Kelsang Dolma, as high-ranking mediums (Sidky 2011, 86–87). Moreover, during the interregnum period after the passing away of the former Nechung Oracle (1984) and the installing of the present one (1987), the CTA consulted a female oracle (Nair 2010, 6).

The Nechung Oracle and the Dalai Lama

Thupten Ngodup (b. 1957) is the current Nechung Oracle, and the 14th oracle in the line. When not in a state of possession, he is a monk, albeit of high status. He is the medium of the deity Dorje Drakden, “The Renowned Thunderbolt,” the emanation or emissary of Pehar.⁹ The latter deity was, at least until the mid-17th century, believed to be the deity who spoke through the oracle (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975, 125).¹⁰ The tradition of the Tibetan government consulting the Nechung Oracle goes back to the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–82) (*ibid.*, 449).

Popular Tibetan beliefs concerning the Nechung Oracle are similar to what is written in the *Nechung Karchag*, an inscription preserved inside the Nechung

Monastery in Lhasa and composed partly by the Fifth Dalai Lama and partly by the subsequent regent Sangye Gyatso (*Sangs rgyas rgya mtsho*, 1643–1705),¹¹ translated into English by Christopher Bell (2016). It states that Pehar was installed in Samye (*bSam yas*) monastery during the reign of King Trisong Detsen (*Khri srong lde btsan*, 742–97 CE) in order to protect the newly founded monastery. The narrative goes on to say that the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava, who played a crucial role in establishing Samye monastery as the first Buddhist monastery on the Tibetan Plateau, subdued Pehar and bound him with an oath to protect Buddhism in Tibet (Karmay 2014, 27). It is further believed that the deity was later transferred to Nechung Monastery in Lhasa and hence was called the “Nechung deity.”¹²

After the Tibetan exodus to India in 1959, the Nechung Monastery was re-established in 1984 in Dharamsala, in the Himalayan foothills of Himachal Pradesh, just below the headquarters of the CTA. The deity is believed to reside there. Although the Nechung Oracle is not mentioned in the charter of the Tibetan government in exile, it is still recognized as the official “State Oracle of the Central Tibetan Administration” (Central Tibetan Administration 2019).

The Kashag, “Council of Ministers,” is responsible for consulting the Nechung Oracle on behalf of the CTA on a regular basis as well as on special occasions. During an oracular session, a monk from the Nechung Monastery writes down the oracle’s message spoken in trance and passes it on to the Department of Religion and Culture (*Chos rig lhan khang*), with the Department arranging the rituals and prayers as advised by the oracle. Moreover, the Department is also responsible for looking after the needs of the state oracles (all of them referred to as *kuten*), including their monthly honorarium.

Conforming to the tradition of the Ganden Phodrang government in Lhasa, the Nechung Oracle is still consulted twice a year by the CTA—once in winter, on the tenth day of the first month according to the Tibetan lunar calendar, and once in summer, around the fifth day of the fifth Tibetan month. The Dalai Lama also consults him seven or eight times a year. Previously, it was necessary to seek the permission of the Dalai Lama before consulting the Nechung Oracle; however, since 2011 the Kashag can consult the Nechung Oracle on its own initiative. An official consultation with the CTA is usually not made public. Tibetan NGOs or monasteries can also ask for a consultation, which are regarded as private.¹³

According to the *Nechung Karchag*, the relationship between the Dalai Lamas and the oracle goes back to the Second Dalai Lama, Gendun Gyatso (*dGe ’dun rgya mtsho*, 1475–1542) (Bell 2016, 187). The fact that the Nechung Oracle played a significant role in the search for the reincarnation of not only the present Dalai Lama¹⁴ but also in that of the Seventh¹⁵ (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975, 449–50) and the Thirteenth, and also in identifying the genuine reincarnation of the Sixth Dalai Lama (van Schaik 2011, 135), is of great importance to Tibetans.

In his autobiography, the Dalai Lama emphasizes the importance of the Nechung Oracle for Tibetans, saying that “the responsibility of Nechung and the responsibility of Dalai Lama towards Tibet are the same, though we act in different ways”; he points out that his task of leadership is peaceful, while the oracle’s role as the protector and defender is wrathful (1990, 234). An example of the importance of the Nechung

Oracle in modern Tibetan history is the events in 1949, when the present Dalai Lama was fourteen years old. The Nechung Oracle, asked about the danger looming from China, responded with an action rather than by speaking. Looking toward the east, he bent his neck fifteen times, ignoring the weight of the heavy headdress, leaving no one in doubt that the danger was coming from China (ibid.). Furthermore, 14 out of my 68 respondents as well as three other informants recounted the historical narrative of March 1959, in which the oracle played an important role by saving the life of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. The Nechung Oracle insisted that the Dalai Lama should escape and even drew a map showing the route to India (Dalai Lama 1990, 149). According to the Dalai Lama himself, the deity also told those present that once the Nechung Oracle had recovered from the possession, the Dalai Lama should leave immediately toward the south and predicted that no harm would happen on the way (Avedon 1986, 216–17).¹⁶ The Dalai Lama immediately left and shortly after, about one hundred thousand Tibetans followed him into exile in 1959. This and similar narratives resonate deeply among Tibetans in exile; they have been imprinted on the minds of Tibetans like myself, who were born in exile, by Martin Scorsese's 1997 film *Kundun*.

The controversy concerning the Nechung Oracle

Criticism of oracles is not a new phenomenon. Gendun Choephel (1903–51), who is regarded as the first Tibetan modern intellectual and revered as one of Tibet's greatest modern poets, was fiercely critical of the Nechung Oracle in a poem that begins,

Hey! After I had gone away
Some nonsense-talking lama
Said that Nechung, king of deeds,
Did not let me stay because I was too proud.
If he is a protector who purifies,
How could he permit those impure monks to stay? . . .
There is no purpose in four-fanged king Nechung
To banish to who knows where
Those who study and ponder the Victor's (Buddha's) teachings
Braving hardships of heat, cold, and fatigue. . . .
But when the king above (Nechung) looks at them, there is no difference.

(Lopez Jr. 2009, 65)

“Four-fanged” refers to the Nechung Oracle, who is depicted having a fierce mouth with four fangs; in general, all the deities who descend on oracles have this appearance. Gendun Choephel was notorious among the monks in Central Tibet for openly questioning the status of the monastic system and its ideology. His words “after I had gone away” refer to the fact that he left Tibet for India in 1936 and later also traveled to Sri Lanka, where he was greatly influenced by Theravāda Buddhist monks.

Likewise, referring to his fieldwork in the early 1950s, René de Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975) wrote that although most Tibetans firmly believe the prophecies of the “oracle priests,” there were, especially among the educated, some who “regard oracles if not as imposters, then at least as strange pathologic cases” (ibid., 440).

In the 2006 documentary film by David Cherniack *The Oracle: Reflection on Self*, Jamyang Norbu, a Tibetan writer in exile, affirmed that in “old Tibet” oracles were openly criticized and booed in public for incorrect predictions. Invoking the historical instance of the British invasion of 1904, he says,

Seven hundred Tibetans in one day were massacred!¹⁷ He [the oracle] said Tibetans were not to worry as the heavenly armies would back up the militia and that he would be there to lead the heavenly armies. . . . seven hundred Tibetans in the militia were slaughtered and people avoid responsibility by asking that oracle.

In the contemporary Tibetan exile community, criticism of oracles is not limited to verbal communication but also takes the form of anonymous posting of memes in social media ridiculing them (*The New York Times* 2016).

Unlike others who have spoken out against the Nechung Oracle, Tenpa Yarphel was condemned by hundreds of Tibetans around the world because the 2017 parliamentary session was broadcast live by Tibet TV, a news channel owned by the CTA. A group of Tibetans in India, mainly consisting of women waving pieces of black cloth at him, protested his statements by shouting slogans such as, “We totally oppose you!” (*mtha' gcig tu ngo rgol yod*), “Disgraceful!” (*zhabs 'dren red*), and “It is shameful that you are a monk” (*na bza' dmar po gyon nas zhabs 'dren red*). They aimed further protests at those who accompanied him, shouting “All those who support him go against His Holiness the Dalai Lama!” (*kho la rgyab skyor byed mkhan tshang ma rgyal ba rin po che la ngo rgol byed mkhan red*) (Lhak Sam 2018a). The waving of black cloth at Tenpa Yarphel was a way of demonizing him, as in traditional Tibetan belief the black signifies demons and even pollution (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975, 307). Demonizing nonconformists comes from the idea that they are people who create disharmony among the “unified” Tibetans in the diaspora, just as demons might do.

Similarly, Tibetans in Toronto and New York organized protests against Tenpa Yarphel. In Toronto, Tibetans held a poster-sized photo of the Dalai Lama, together with placards saying, “Tenpa Yarphel. We are demanding your resignation from Tibetan Member of Parliament,” “We are not protesting against our government, CTA,” “Stop disrespecting State Oracle,” and “Stop causing fraction in Tibetan community [*sic*]” (Lhak Sam 2018b). A middle-aged woman, Karma Sonam, stated that they did not want Tenpa Yarphel to come to the Tibetan community in Toronto because he was a person who spoke against the Dalai Lama (*ibid.*, my translation).

Apart from these protests, how widely do Tenpa Yarphel’s views resonate in the Tibetan diasporic community? In my survey, 13 respondents were not aware of Tenpa Yarphel’s 2017 parliamentary speech, while nine were aware of it but remained neutral; three did not comment at all. This leaves 43 people who had taken a standpoint with regard to Tenpa Yarphel, of whom 13 agreed with him. The remaining 30 respondents, comprising a considerable majority, disagreed with him and for the most part severely criticized him. However, out of 68 respondents, 13 made a point of referring to the right to expression in a democratic system. Among the 30 who disagreed with him, five said he had the right to expression; likewise, five of the 13 who agreed with him pointed out that he was exercising his right to expression. Three who remained neutral about the incident did refer to the right

to expression; for instance, one of them wrote, “Any opinion can be expressed in a democratic system,” while an 82-year-old man wrote, “I am not surprised because the world is changing, and Tibetan society is also changing.”

As stated, there were 13 respondents who agreed with Tenpa Yarphel, but reservations were expressed in some cases. For instance, three respondents wrote that they “partially” agreed, and others felt that he could have expressed his views in a better way. One of them wrote, “he has a point but he should have respected people’s sentiments.” Among those who favored him without reservation, one wrote, “If CTA consults the Nechung Oracle what is the use of Parliament?” Another respondent wrote, “I am all for him. Get rid of the Nechung [sic].” Hence, Tenpa Yarphel himself and the statements of a number of my respondents exemplify a small but vocal minority in the diasporic community. These are mainly young people, although a few older Tibetans do not accept the political role of the Nechung Oracle.

Generally speaking, however, those in the majority group were equally, if not more, vocal in speaking out against Tenpa Yarphel. Thus, one of them said, “This is not the way an MP should speak about oracles, especially of the Nechung. I was annoyed when I heard about him saying that, and him being a monk as well.” Some said that he brought the entire Tibetan monastic community into disrepute, or that he created religious disharmony and hence was unqualified for the position of MP. Another wrote, “He is a Kagyu Lama, maybe he believes in the Kagyu oracle,” insinuating that since Tenpa Yarphel did not belong to the dominant Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, he would not be loyal to the Nechung Oracle. Two respondents even expressed the opinion that he might be paid by the Chinese. No less than six respondents said that his statements hurt the sentiments of the majority of Tibetans and that he had no right to do that; thus, one respondent wrote that, “He may not believe in it [the Oracle], but he should respect the sentiments of those who do.”

In other words, the survey shows that those who criticize Tenpa Yarphel and support the CTA’s practice of consulting the Nechung Oracle form a solid majority; hence, it is not surprising that many Tibetans protested in public.

Why is the Nechung Oracle questioned or not questioned?

Of my 68 respondents, 52 of them replied that they believed in the Nechung Oracle and 12 that they did not, while four remained neutral. There were many reasons why respondents stated they believed in the Nechung Oracle. Forty-two believed that the Nechung Oracle is not only the personal protector of the Dalai Lama but also the “protector of Tibet,” and thus of all Tibetans, while 12 cherished the Oracle as “traditional culture.” Four said that since the Dalai Lama believes in the Nechung Oracle, they do, too; one, referring to the Dalai Lama, said he had faith in the Oracle because “My root guru (*rtsa ba’i bla ma*) has much experience of them [oracles].”

A 51-year-old ex-army officer from the Bylakuppe Tibetan settlement in Karnataka, India said that when he was in service, any major decision as far as the Tibetan personnel were concerned was made after consulting the Nechung Oracle. Others made similar statements, such as, “The Nechung Oracle has historical and sentimental importance to the Tibetans as the State Oracle,” and “Having such a

unique culture is an advantage for our future.” Six respondents who believed in the Nechung Oracle said they did so because they were Buddhists, and one of them, a 24-year-old woman, even said “As long as the Buddha dharma continues to prevail in the world, consulting oracular tradition will be relevant to our society.” Fourteen respondents, referring to the Dalai Lama’s escape from Tibet in 1959, believed that the Oracle’s pronouncements were reliable, while only three said that the Nechung Oracle had not helped Tibetans in the past.

According to my survey, there were ten respondents who neither believed in the Nechung Oracle nor in oracles of any kind. They gave as their reasons that oracular practice was “superstitious,” “outdated,” “irrational,” and “a mockery of democracy.” One of my respondents wrote, “I think it’s a psychological issue with the people and their brain.” In addition, there were eight who were not sure of their belief in oracles in general, modifying their belief with words like “somewhat,” “do not know,” “a bit skeptical,” and so on.

In my survey there were 14 respondents who questioned the practice of consulting the Nechung Oracle on political matters, although some of them accepted consultation of oracles in private matters. A 37-year-old Tibetan working as a legal researcher wrote that people can consult oracles on a personal level, “but allowing consultation at the state level makes a mockery of our democracy and of secularism.”

Another young Tibetan man who believes in the reality of oracular possession and who has witnessed his uncle consulting a local oracle for medical reasons, nevertheless wrote, “It is absolutely ridiculous for a government to consult an oracle, and if it does, what is the use of democracy?” These sentiments are shared by a number of Tibetans, especially in the age group of 35 and below, who believe that consulting the Nechung Oracle on political matters is “obsolete.”

Among the respondents who were against the CTA consulting the Nechung Oracle, there was some variation according to age group. Of 46 Tibetans below the age of 35, 11 were against while two were neutral; from the age group of 36 to 50, only one out of five was against; and among the 17 respondents in the age group 51 and above, only one was against and two were neutral. Hence the survey shows that the oldest age group is overwhelmingly in favor of the Nechung Oracle, while the youngest is much more divided, although people who are against the Nechung Oracle are still a minority. Overall, a clear majority views oracular practice favorably.

The decline of local oracles

With regard to oracles in general, the number of respondents who have faith in them was 49, almost the same as for the Nechung Oracle; however, there was a certain amount of overlap with belief in the Nechung Oracle. At least 13 respondents referred to the Nechung Oracle instead of local oracles when I asked about oracles in general, with others modifying their belief in oracles, for instance replying that, “There are a few true oracles; however, I think many are fake.”

Out of 68 respondents, 45 have never consulted any local oracle, while 23 have or have seen their family and friends do so. While this may seem to constitute a substantial minority, younger Tibetans sometimes confuse local oracles and the

state oracle or even deities like Palden Lhamo (*dPal ldan lha mo*), an important female protective deity. Some of my informants as well as respondents mentioned the names of local oracles who were old or who had already passed away.

A large majority, 52 respondents, said that they were not aware of any local oracle in their community, with only 12 being aware of such oracles. Of these 12, four live in Dharamsala, one in Kollegal Tibetan settlement, and two elsewhere in India (without indicating a specific location). There was one each in London, Switzerland, Canada, and New York, while one indicated no location. According to my informants and respondents, the Tibetan settlements in Bylakuppe, Mundgod, Darjeeling, and Ravangla, India have no local oracles. Compared to belief in the Nechung Oracle, there has been a significant decrease over time in the consultation of local oracles among Tibetans in the diaspora when faced with illness or other problems. My survey shows that more and more Tibetans, irrespective of age, no longer consult local oracles.

However, I am not implying that Tibetans no longer rely on other kinds of supernatural guidance. For instance, two of my respondents also stated that they had never consulted local oracles but would like to if they had the chance. Moreover, the sister of one of my informants, living in the Tibetan settlement in Mundgod in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, was believed to be possessed by a malignant spirit known as a *söndré* (*gson 'dre*). Her family approached an elderly monk from a Kagyu monastery who performed some simple rituals, but this did not help her, so as a last resort they took her to a *baba*, a Muslim ritualist. There was no question of looking for a Tibetan *lhabab*.

One of my respondents from Bylakuppe Tibetan settlement wrote that he had consulted a female local oracle from Ladakh in the settlement, and two other respondents from the same settlement said they had heard about her. He underwent the oracular healing method called *jib*, meaning “sucking”:

When I told her that I have a problem in my stomach she held my stomach and bit it. Later, I saw a teeth’s mark (he laughed). It was like a hot iron, so I had to scream. She then took out a black and red thing that looked like a liver in a glass bowl half-filled with water. . . . I couldn’t say that she was bluffing. Later when I shared this experience with friends in Ladakh, they told me that it is a fake healing.

One of my respondents, a 31-year-old man, had consulted a local oracle with his family; he thought the experience was scary:

The person possessed held the sword up and after chanting some mantra stabbed the patient and then covered the spot up with a red cloth. However, once the cloth was removed there was no wound and the patient seemed to be a little relieved.

It was also interesting that a man who now lives in North America said that he contacts oracles in Dharamsala and that a consultation costs \$100. In spite of these examples, the question arises as to why local oracles are no longer consulted in the diaspora to any great extent. Several interrelated factors could be pointed to as providing possible explanations.

Modern healthcare

In traditional Tibetan society, the oracles provided what Arthur Kleinman (1980) calls a “healthcare system.” Diemberger points out that the most frequently posed questions to the deity primarily concern health problems; in many inaccessible areas inside Tibet there is no modern healthcare system, so oracles remain the first, even the only, person to turn to when faced with health problems (Diemberger 2005, 120). Per-Arne Berglie (1976) also commented that the main activity of the Tibetan “spirit-mediums” was curing illness. It must be kept in mind, however, that Berglie described the situation in a Tibetan refugee camp in Nepal decades ago, namely during 1970 and 1971, which actually resonates with the some of the respondents who said that they had heard of local oracles when they were children in the 1970s.

Modern healthcare systems as well as the availability of Tibetan traditional medicine in almost all the Tibetans settlements in India and Nepal have surely affected the tradition of consulting oracles. In my survey, a few Tibetans in the diaspora who still consult local oracles asserted that they generally do so only when they have problems in choosing the right hospital for medical treatment or sometimes when choosing a college for their studies or the right country to emigrate to. A young man said that this has been an established practice in his family:

When my aunt got sick with dengue in the city of Anand, Gujarat, my uncle consulted a Lama oracle from Tibet via WeChat and the oracle advised him to change the hospital. Out of the three hospital names he provided, the oracle chose one and my family followed the instruction. As soon as my aunt was shifted to the chosen hospital, the doctor immediately diagnosed the illness and she got better within days.

With regard to illness, therefore, in the Tibetan diaspora there seems to be a shift in the function of oracles—if an oracle is consulted at all—from curing illness to the less crucial role of helping people to choose the right hospital.

Modern education

Another reason for the decline of local oracles is the well-organized modern education system in the exile community. Berglie wrote that, “the hereditary transmission of the office was very important—a long line of *pawo* in the family was taken as a guarantee of the trustworthiness of performing” (1976, 88). This is where the advent of modern education has reduced the practice, because it is unlikely that children of the first generation of exile oracles will carry on the tradition. Two of my informants stated that they had friends whose parents were *pawo* or *lhabab*, but their friends had not continued the tradition. Likewise, two of my respondents, who are 25- and 30-year-old women, wrote that their grandfather and great-uncle, respectively, were local oracles. Both respondents were skeptical about the relevance of the oracles in today’s society. One of my respondents, who is a doctor, wrote that she would not consult oracles. She explained,

They were useful in the days when Tibetans were a largely illiterate and uneducated society, and oracles were people Tibetans went to when they had important decisions to make, or didn’t know what to do in a dilemma. I believe that we make

our own destiny, and we shouldn't consult an oracle for decisions but weigh up the risks and benefits ourselves using our own brains.

The primacy of monasticism

The promotion and development of scholastic and intellectual skills that give priority to meditational and philosophical study is a dominant trend in the large monastic establishments in the diaspora. From a Buddhist perspective, the minor or local deities, and hence also local oracles, are deemed to be of a “low stature, belonging to the worldly sphere, and still involved in the mundane issues” (Diemberger 2005). With the ascendancy of these monasteries, traditional village monasteries that are still found in Sikkim, Ladakh, and some parts of Nepal play only a minor role in the diasporic community. Could this mean that beliefs regarding illness caused by *lu* or malignant spirits such *dré* (*'dre*) and *dü* (*bdud*) are also disappearing? If so, with the healthcare system and modern education, there is no longer a place for local oracles, and so oracular practices are marginalized. However, Tibetans still go to monasteries for supernatural guidance in the form of divination (*mo*) or for astrological prognostication.

Although the phenomenon of possession is very similar in the case of local as well as high-status oracles, with the virtual disappearance of local oracles and the criticism of the Nechung Oracle, one might have expected that faith in the Nechung Oracle would also have declined in the diaspora, but this does not seem to be the case—in fact, a few high-status oracles, including the Nechung Oracle, have survived and are thriving in a new political environment. This is the opposite of what Diemberger describes in her study of female oracles inside Tibet, where local oracles survived after the 1959 exodus and the Cultural Revolution, but high-status oracles disappeared (2005, 119).

It is time to take a closer look at why high-status oracles, and above all the Nechung Oracle, have survived in the diaspora. As already noted, for the majority of Tibetans, the Nechung Oracle is very significant. Thus, they believe that the practice of the Nechung Oracle should be continued for various reasons. Of the many reasons given by my respondents, two stand out: firstly, as already noted, the role played by the Nechung Oracle during the events of 1959 in which the Nechung Oracle is perceived to have ensured the Dalai Lama's life by advising him to escape to India—hence, the Nechung Oracle is the protector of the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans; and secondly, the importance of the Nechung Oracle to Tibetan traditional culture and thus in maintaining Tibetan identity.

The Nechung Oracle as “tradition”

The tradition of consulting the Nechung Oracle by the Lhasa-based Tibetan government is a historical fact, although whether this practice was recognized in all parts of pre-1959 Tibet is far from certain; nor does the Nechung Oracle seem to have been known as “the Oracle of Tibet” before 1959. This seems to be the main reason why Tenpa Yarphel argued against the legitimacy of the Nechung Oracle, questioning

how the tradition of the pre-1959 Lhasa-based government of consulting the oracle could be relevant for all Tibetans.

Although the Nechung Oracle was originally associated with the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism, since the seventeenth century it has been associated primarily with the dominant Gelugpa school. Nebesky-Wojkowitz writes that it is within the Gelugpa school that Pehar has been assigned to the main place among “the worldly protector deities,” while the deity occupies a rather inferior position in other schools. Thus, a Nyingma source classifies some of the most important protective deities into nine groups, Pehar being placed not in the first but in the fifth rank (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975, 94).

However, in the diaspora the Nechung Oracle is important because, as already pointed out, he is believed to be the oracle of the Dalai Lama and hence of Tibet. Of my respondents, 20 pointed out that consulting the Nechung Oracle is an “ancient tradition of Tibet” or “The Nechung Oracle is part of our culture and identity.” One of them emphasized,

I think there is no harm in following traditions dating back thousands of years, and if the Oracle does give reliable advice then it should be relevant. I think there are a majority of Tibetans who believe in it and His Holiness still seeks its advice now and then, so I think we shouldn't be questioning its relevance.

Hence, there is a shift underway from the Nechung Oracle as a Lhasa-centric institution to a pan-Tibetan one. What we are witnessing in the Tibetan community in exile is a process that is moving toward defining Tibetan identity as a homogenous culture and tradition. Because of its historical background, the Nechung Oracle is a politically important “tradition” for Tibetans in the diaspora. Thus, even if some do not believe in the efficacy of consulting the Oracle, my survey shows that many Tibetans believe it is a part of their “ancient tradition” or “part of our long tradition,” and that it should be appreciated as such. One of my respondents said, “I personally appreciate the Nechung oracle in more of a traditional, cultural way rather than as a means of decision-making.”

Thus, in the view of these respondents the Nechung Oracle is a tradition that has been handed down unchanged from the past. This understanding of “tradition” is, however, questionable. The American folklorist Elliott Oring writes that tradition “involves the notion of transferring or transmitting and has been applied to the act of handing over or handing down as well as to those objects that are handed over or handed down” (Oring 2012, 221). However, he also emphasizes that tradition should not only be seen as a mere product but also as a process that he calls “cultural reproduction”—“the means by which culture is reproduced in transmission and repetition” (*ibid.*, 223). He further states that,

Things from the past are altered. . . . Continuity and stability depend on what people preserve for good or ill, consciously and unconsciously – of the thought and behavior of the past. (*ibid.*, 225)

This way of regarding “tradition” can be applied to the Nechung Oracle, for there is no doubt that, at least for a majority in the diaspora community, it has “unconsciously or consciously” become a pan-Tibetan tradition and hence must be preserved. The

change here is in its symbolic meanings. As mentioned, the majority of Tibetans—whether they believe in the Oracle or not—agree that the Nechung Oracle is of great significance for Tibetans. Thus, what was once the oracle of the Gelug school and the Ganden Phodrang government is today understood by many Tibetans to be a pan-Tibetan oracle: the State Oracle of Tibet.

Neo-Tibetan identity and the politics of Tibetan culture

The position of the Dalai Lama as the supreme spiritual (and traditionally also political) leader of all Tibetans without doubt constitutes a crucial element of “Tibetan traditional culture” in the diaspora. Hence, loyalty toward the Dalai Lama plays a key role in molding a unified Tibetan national identity (Anand 2000, 282; Korom 1997, 4). As we have seen, the reason why Tibetans attacked Tenpa Yarphel was the fact that the Dalai Lama has a close relationship with the Nechung Oracle.

A powerful indication of the paramount importance of the Dalai Lama in the diaspora is the fact that his photo adorns every home, restaurant, cafe, and shop; it protects vehicles and is found prominently displayed in every monastery irrespective of school of Buddhism (including monasteries belonging to the Bön religion, whose followers do not usually regard themselves as Buddhists). However, Clare Harris, a British professor of visual anthropology, states that displaying the Dalai Lama’s picture prior to 1959 was a practice restricted to the Gelug school (Harris 1999, 80).¹⁸

In other words, the Dalai Lama as well as the Nechung Oracle have spanned the boundaries separating the different schools of Tibetan Buddhism. For instance, in the absence of the Dalai Lama, in 2016 the 17th Karmapa, head of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, presided over a ritual possession of the Nechung Oracle in the Tsuklagkhang (Main Temple) in Dharamsala, an unprecedented event (Bhangzoed 2016).

According to the Tibetan historian Tsering Shakya, this change in the perception of past practices or traditions in the diaspora is a “manipulation of symbols” (1993). Over time there certainly has been a shift of emphasis in the diaspora away from regional cultural elements toward a symbolic pan-Tibetan culture. In this connection, the CTA has surely played a significant role in constructing these new narratives. However, I suggest that this has only been possible because some cultural elements have been given center stage or been imbued with new symbolic meaning by diasporic Tibetans in general in the belief that a unified national identity is a precondition for the attainment of a free Tibet. This is also emphasized by Steven Venturino, who argues that in the case of Tibetans, exile is not perceived as a permanent condition but as a basis for attaining their ultimate goal—“to reclaim a geographical homeland” (Venturino 1997, 99).

It is therefore apparent that a homogenous Tibetan identity is being created to achieve a political goal in accordance with Max Weber’s statement that “it is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity” (quoted in Jenkins 2008, 10). Having been placed in one single ethnic category of *pöpa* or “Tibetans” (*bod pa*, from *Bod*, “Tibet”), the majority of Tibetans in the diaspora now strive to define a “shared culture” and thereby create

a unified Tibetan community, even though they originate from different regions of the Tibetan plateau. Tibetans also seem to have adopted “romantic images of Tibet as homogenous, peaceful, and most recently, in harmony with nature” (Korom 1997, 3).

Fredrik Barth argues that, “The critical focus of investigation . . . becomes that ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses” (1969, 15). Hence, according to Barth a “shared culture” is “best understood as generated in and by processes of ethnic boundary maintenance, rather than the other way around” (paraphrased by Jenkins 2008, 13). However, in the case of the Tibetan diasporic community, a shared culture is the crucial element in creating social boundaries, as geographical boundaries on the ground—namely, in Tibet—are beyond their control and therefore imaginary.

In fact, the shared culture assists in reinforcing their social as well as imagined territorial boundary, distinguishing them above all from the Chinese. As Don Handelman argues, both culture “and the ethnic boundary mutually modify but support one another” (1977, 200). Thus, the protests against Tenpa Yarphel are generated by the feeling that he has transgressed the boundaries of a shared culture, of which the tradition of the Nechung Oracle is a significant element.

Together with a few other cultural elements such as the national flag, the national anthem, the Tibetan language (especially the dialect of Central Tibet), and above all the Dalai Lama as the spiritual and political leader of all Tibetans, the Nechung Oracle has become one of the markers of what may be called a “neo-Tibetan” identity in the diaspora. This way of forming a Tibetan identity is an expression of an essentialist line of thinking inasmuch as selected cultural elements are taken as being inherent to the Tibetan identity, and hence “authentic.” Venturino has pointed out that such essentialist claims are constructed in the Tibetan diaspora “as a *means* to a particular political end—national independence for some, genuine cultural autonomy for others” (1997, 103).

Regina Bendix argues that “The most powerful modern political movement, nationalism, builds on the essentialist notions inherent in authenticity” (1997, 7). In this process, Tibetans in the diaspora, committed to preserving this “authentic culture” for the future of Tibet, seem to be moving toward what might be called “coercive essentialism.” Thus, aggressive protests are triggered when anyone in the community questions established identity markers and thus fails to abide by the dominant norms. This pattern has become commonplace in the diaspora in recent years, and is, I suggest, an indirect result of what is happening inside Tibet, where assimilation to the dominant Chinese culture has led to the disappearance of certain elements of Tibetan culture. Consequently, preserving this culture is perceived as crucial by diasporic Tibetans in order to retain their ethnic identity (Dolma 2017, 20).

Conclusion

To the majority of diasporic Tibetans, the Nechung Oracle is an important element of their identity. Therefore, today the Nechung Oracle has not only a ritualistic but also a symbolic importance, as explained by a 64-year-old woman: “The Nechung Oracle is so important. As a Tibetan on the one hand, and secondly, as we are Buddhist; besides

we are the people who follow the advice of His Holiness the Dalai Lama.” The force of the dominant group was so powerful that in 2018 Tenpa Yarphel felt compelled to write an open letter that was disseminated through social media; while not retracting the views expressed in parliament the year before, he nevertheless struck a conciliatory note in the letter, writing:

Therefore, I am requesting from the bottom of my heart that people on the two sides should think about the common root issue of Tibet, so as to have a more open mind and tolerance; to put behind us the conflicts and protests that happened during His Holiness the Dalai Lama’s Birthday celebration in New York; and to stop spreading letters and activities and hateful speech, which are harming the unity of Tibet. (Author’s translation)

Hans Vermeulen and Cora Govers argue that people become aware of their culture and start to “repair” their culture when they are “losing or fear they will lose their cultural distinctiveness” (2000, 4). This, I would argue, is precisely what is happening in the Tibetan diaspora. The coercive essentialist view adopted by many Tibetans is a means, in their view, to preserve their culture, perceived as being in danger of disappearing both inside and outside Tibet. For the majority of Tibetans in the diaspora, their shared culture is perceived as ensuring their identity and their distinctiveness from the Chinese, and thus, in the long term, their claim to their lost homeland.

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NOTES

1. This article is strictly about Tibetans in the diaspora, who fled Tibet after the Dalai Lama did so in 1959, and whose descendants are now living in India, Nepal, and in other countries around the world. It considers those Tibetans who are registered by the Central Tibetan Administration in India. The study does not, however, consider people from Spiti and Ladakh, India nor from Mustang, Solu Khumbu, and so on in Nepal as a part of the diaspora, as they have lived in their present locations for more than a thousand years, even while sharing Tibetan culture and religion.

2. In 1642 the Fifth Dalai Lama became the head of a religious state with its seat in Lhasa, ruling a territory that roughly corresponded to the present-day Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). He established the Tibetan state, the government of which, based in Lhasa, was known as the Ganden Phodrang (*dGa'ldan pho brang*). At the same time, he was the spiritual head of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, which had a large and influential network of monasteries in almost every part of the Tibetan Plateau. Successive Dalai Lamas thereafter remained head of that state until 1959. After the Chinese takeover of Tibet in 1959, the Dalai Lama, and subsequently thousands of Tibetans, went into exile, initially into India and Nepal, and later to other parts of the world. In India, the Tibetan government in exile was formed, headed by the Dalai Lama, and in more recent years has become officially known as the Central Tibetan Administration (CTA). The CTA claims to represent Tibetans inside and outside Tibet. It provides schools and health services and organizes cultural activities and economic development projects for the Tibetan community in exile. The Dalai Lama formally relinquished his political leadership in 2011.

3. The number of respondents living in settlements may seem low because young Tibetans tend to shift to cities or towns to find jobs and education.

4. The *nāgas* being aquatic beings, their “land,” in this case, is a lake, namely, Anavatapta.

5. Note that Stein uses Sanskrit terms for the three levels, rather than Tibetan. *Tuṣita* is one of the many Buddhist heavenly worlds; *Jambudvīpa* is the southern continent of the four continents believed to surround the central mountain of Sumeru, the center of the world in Buddhist cosmology; and Anavatapta is a lake close to Mount Kailasha in western Tibet, sacred to Hindus and Buddhists alike. The *lu* are believed to be spirits who live under the ground or are connected with bodies of water. They appear in the form of, or are associated with, snakes and spiders (see Schrempf 2015, 486). As is the case with other spirits, they can cause disease and other problems if irritated by humans, for example through pollution.

6. However, these divisions are not regarded as a rigid system, because by the power of the merit they acquired by protecting Buddhism, the deities from the lower group tend to move beyond *saṃsāra*, thus becoming *'jig rten las 'das pa'i srung ma*.

7. Place is not of great importance for spirit mediums in the diaspora. For example, one of my respondents from a Tibetan settlement said that a local oracle was called from Ladakh to perform rituals. If place were important, the Tibetans would have gone to Ladakh and not the other way around. As for the high-status Nechung Oracle, the location has been shifted from Lhasa in Tibet to Dharamsala in India without its status being diminished at all.

8. In the context of Nepal, Gellner points to a similar condition of flexibility that he calls “peripheral” or “half way central cults.” Moreover, he stresses that the peripheral cults are dominated by women, not because of a decline in women’s position but as the result of women taking advantage of an *improvement* in their status and opportunities (1994, 29).

9. Referring to Longdöl Lama (*Klong rdol bla ma*) (1719–94), Nebesky-Wojkowitz states that Dorje Drakden “is one of the most important figures in the retinue of Peihar, since he is believed to occupy the position of a ‘chief minister’ of the *sku lnga* group” (1975, 124–25), translated as “Five Sovereign Spirits” by Christopher Bell (2016, 146).

10. According to the autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama (Karmay 2014) and the *Nechung Karchak* (Bell 2016), it was the deity Peihar who spoke through the Nechung Oracle. Nebesky-Wojkowitz mentions that there was a popular belief among Tibetans that Peihar would soon

become a *'jig rten las 'das pa'i srung ma*, meaning “a protector who has transcended the round of rebirths,” and that accordingly he was more and more reluctant to speak through the Nechung Oracle (1975, 125). Scholars have chosen different ways of describing the relationship between deities who are believed to possess the medium. Sidky (2011, 80) states that Dorje Drakden is an emanation of Pehar, whereas Havnevik (2002, 266) writes that Pehar and Dorje Drakden are distinct deities and that both of them can possess the medium.

11. The regent is someone who is appointed to function as a temporary head of state after the Dalai Lama has passed away and until the new one is found.

12. For further information on these two deities, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975) and Bell (2016). On various versions of the story of how Pehar was brought to Lhasa, see Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975, 104–6). I have not been able to ascertain the exact founding date of the Nechung Monastery. However, it was renovated in 1682 during the reign of the Fifth Dalai Lama (Bell 2016, 106).

13. Email correspondence, August 27, 2020, from the former minister of religion and culture (*chos rig bka' blon*), Karma Gelek Yuthok.

14. After the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama in 1933, his body remained seated facing the south. However, it was later noticed that his head had turned toward the east. The Nechung Oracle was consulted, and he threw his white scarf toward the rising sun (Harrer 1981, 298). Thus, the Nechung Oracle was involved in the identification of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, who was born in Amdo, to the east of Central Tibet.

15. The Nechung Oracle declared that the successor of the Sixth Dalai Lama had been born in Lithang in eastern Tibet, where he was eventually found and duly enthroned in Lhasa.

16. According to Goldstein, the answer as to whether the Dalai Lama should come to power “lay in appeal to an authority above the regent; either the Dalai Lama, or the protective deities and oracles.” The Tibetan government chose the latter, and through the Nechung Oracle the center of power was shifted to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, who was just fifteen years old at the time (Goldstein 1991, 701).

17. In 1903 Lord Curzon, the viceroy of British India, organized a military expedition to Tibet consisting of 2,500 soldiers, led by Francis Younghusband. After a couple of engagements, and one in which several hundred Tibetans were killed by British Maxim guns (then used for the first time in war), the British forces reached Lhasa in 1904. This is the “massacre” to which Jamyang Norbu referred. On the so-called “Younghusband expedition,” see Sam van Schaik (2011, 169–79); Shakabpa (1984, 205–20); Fleming (1986); and Mehra (2005).

18. Clare Harris maintains that the custom of having the Dalai Lama’s icon prominently displayed in public and private is “a result of [the] host culture of India but also of ideological battles fought in the visual field during the 1960s and 1970s in Chinese-controlled Tibet” (1999, 82).

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Becoming Christian to Remain Chinese

Language Socialization and Identity Formation at the Chinese Christian Church of Berlin

With a case study of the Chinese Christian Church of Berlin, the biggest Chinese Christian congregation in Germany, this article deconstructs the calibration of a migrant religious community by analyzing the strategies of its leaders and the incentives of its members. Based on ethnographic data from extensive fieldwork, it documents how a Christian church transformed its structure and profile over the years to become an additional venue for Chinese language learning and Chinese identity formation. The article points out that migrant religious institutions do not necessarily have to function as sites of integration; they may also serve as an important space of socialization for migrant families, passing on the heritage language and culture from one generation to the next.

Keywords: Migration—migrant church—Chinese diaspora—Chinese Christians—language socialization

In *Getting Saved in America*, Carolyn Chen titled the introduction as “Becoming Religious by Becoming American,” where she discussed how religions and religious conversions remake the Taiwanese immigrants in the US into Americans (Chen 2008). Many scholars have explored the role of religion in the migrant experience in the US (e.g., Levitt 2003; Alba, Raboteau, and DeWind 2009; Chen and Jeung 2012). Besides being a place of worship and fellowship, religious organizations may also serve as a vital platform for migrant communities. On the structural level, religious institutions may facilitate social, cultural, economic, or even political activities to help immigrants navigate life in the host country and expand their networks (e.g., Chen and Jeung 2000; Foley and Hoge 2007). On the individual level, religious rituals and vocabularies may provide important tools to mediate the challenges immigrants face in the new land, which would help them (re)construct their identities and orientations in the new life (e.g., Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2002; Lawrence 2002; Yang and Ebaugh 2001).

In Germany, migrant religious communities, particularly non-Muslim religious communities, have not yet received much attention. Among the current literature on non-Muslim religious communities in Germany, scholars tend to examine these communities through the lens of integration. A number of works have evaluated migrant churches and temples in terms of their contribution in strengthening the sense of identification with German society among the immigrants (Dümling 2011; Nagel 2014; Elwert 2015; Weiß 2017; Schiffauer 2006; Baumann 2004). This article sets the focus on the religious community itself and its role in the life of its members. Taking the Chinese Christian Church of Berlin (CCCB)—the biggest Chinese Christian congregation in Germany—as an example, the article deconstructs how the church became an additional space of socialization for Chinese migrant families, and how it realized the transmission of Chinese culture and language across generations.

Based on extensive fieldwork during 2011–2012 and 2015–2016,¹ this article provides a close-up case study of CCCB and analyzes the different factors in this process. The article shows that the composition of CCCB was the outcome of two coinciding factors. First, CCCB leadership made a strategic decision to strengthen its constituency by prioritizing the needs of families and adapting the structure and the agenda of the church accordingly; second, the steps taken to implement this strategy catered to needs among the Chinese migrant families and their wish to enhance the Chinese language capacity as well as Chinese cultural identity of their children. CCCB

thus became more than “just” a religious community: it transformed into a new venue for Chinese language learning and Chinese identity formation. By illustrating these aspects, most of which have gone unnoticed in prior research, this research offers new perspectives on migrant religious communities besides their role in the process of integration.

A brief history of CCCB and its unique profile

CCCB started as an informal Bible group of seven people in West Berlin in the 1980s, most of whom were Chinese-speaking students at Free University Berlin. As the number of members reached fifty, the community officially registered as a nonprofit association in Berlin in 1994. In 1999, through a network of Chinese-speaking pastors and active church members from Taiwan and the US, Rutgers Community Christian Church (RCCC), a Chinese Christian community in New Jersey with pronounced Baptist characteristics, became the backer for CCCB. Not only did RCCC provide CCCB with financial support but also sent its senior members to preach in Berlin regularly. The current pastor of CCCB, Li Xu, was introduced to Berlin through the elders of RCCC in 2006 and was later ordained in Berlin in 2010. With transnational support from RCCC in New Jersey, the number of church members has kept growing ever since. With roughly 250 members in 2016, it was the biggest Chinese Protestant congregation in Germany. Since 2006 CCCB rented the church building of *Evangelische Kirchengemeinde am Hohenzollernplatz* (Protestant Church at Hohenzollernplatz) in the southwestern part of the city, where they held their weekly service every Sunday afternoon and “an evening of worship” every Thursday evening.

Chinese churches in Germany mainly exist in the form of *Freikirchen* (free churches) within the German categorization of church institutions and often focus on missionary work (Währisch-Oblau 2005; Oblau 2006, 2011). Most Chinese churches in Germany are founded and supported through mission societies or mission-oriented institutions overseas, typically from Chinese Christian communities in the US. Scholars have pointed out that Chinese Christian communities overseas, both in the US and Europe, insistently emphasize the mission exclusively among ethnic Chinese immigrants (Yang 2002, 2010). Similarly, the majority of members at CCCB were missionized and newly converted to Christianity after arriving in Germany.² The name of the church, *Bolin huaren jiaohui* (Berlin Chinese Church), implied that the threshold of entrance was Chinese ethnicity. The congregation of CCCB mainly consisted of first-generation Chinese immigrants, most of whom were Chinese citizens born in mainland China, and the second generation, many of whom were German citizens born in Germany. During the time of my fieldwork, there were a handful of members coming from Taiwan and Malaysia, as well.³

As a Chinese migrant church in Germany, CCCB developed a unique profile over the years. It had neither contact with German churches in the city, nor with any church in China. An annual “Christian Camp” was organized together among several active Chinese Christian churches in Germany, where members of CCCB also took part occasionally. However, in comparison, RCCC in New Jersey and its strong American Baptist church characteristics had rather the strongest influence on the structure and

dogma of CCCB through their years-long cooperation, particularly through Pastor Xu, who was baptized in a Baptist church in Taiwan himself. Although reflecting the Baptist tradition in theology and practice, the leadership of CCCB preferred to leave the definition of their denomination open and fluid. Besides positioning themselves in strong opposition to the Catholic Church (often with harsh criticism), CCCB branded itself as a general and benevolent church for all Christians and emphasized being “an independent church” that “does not belong to any denomination” (interview with Pastor Xu, December 2012).

The incentives of members at CCCB

How did CCCB become an additional socialization space for Chinese migrant families? What drew these families into the church, and what made them stay and actively participate? With extensive ethnographic data from two fieldwork sites—Sunday service at church and Saturday Bible study group—this section will explore the three main incentives among first-generation Chinese immigrants to bring their children to the Christian community over the weekend: the input of Chinese language and culture, the socialization of Chinese friends and contacts, and the perceived superiority of being Christian.

“Immersed in the Chinese environment” at the church

David⁴ was five years old, when I first met him during a Sunday service at CCCB in 2014. Both of his parents were Chinese immigrants who came to Germany first around 2002 as students, stayed and found jobs after graduation, and founded a family in Berlin with two adorable children. David was the younger one, born and raised in Berlin. He was in the last year of kindergarten when we met. After a big smile and a cheerful “Hallo” from him, I asked him in Chinese, “What’s your name?” The smile disappeared, and the five-year-old suddenly put on a stern face, shook his head slowly, and said to me “*Deutsch, bitte*”—“German, please.”

His parents were not at all surprised by his reaction. As a matter of fact, David’s lack of interest and capacity for speaking Chinese were rather part of the reason why his parents considered it necessary to take him to the church every week. David’s father, Mr. Xie, explained to me: “There [at Chinese language school] a teacher is teaching, children have to sit there and learn, it’s all fake, and children know that! . . . But here at church, this is a very natural environment . . . real and authentic. We are not pretending that we are teaching Chinese, but we all are just speaking Chinese naturally, this is very real. Only here children can really be immersed in the Chinese environment” (interview with Mr. Xie, December 2011).

During my fieldwork at CCCB, I encountered many parents who brought their children to church activities with similar motivation: language. To many first-generation Chinese immigrants, their children’s capacity for speaking Chinese represented the pedagogic ideas of Chinese parenting tradition, the continuity of Chinese culture and Chinese identity, and the inner connection between parents and children. While the core agenda of a Christian church like CCCB was meant to strengthen the Christian faith of its congregation, the unwritten goal of cultivating

Chinese language skill among children had become a priority for the community organizers in recent years. Teachers who supervised Sunday school at CCCB were asked to speak Chinese in the classroom, as it was the expectation from parents.

As many second-generation Chinese immigrants were not fluent in Chinese, conducting Sunday school in Chinese could be challenging for the teachers. Ms. Zheng, one of the teachers in the class for children between six and eight years old, considered it important to “set the rules straight” with the young pupils in her class and to make sure they were in a Chinese-speaking environment as long as they were in the church. “We are the Chinese church, if we don’t even speak Chinese here, where else?” Ms. Zheng asked me rhetorically. “We tell some stories, but mainly do handiwork and drawings. . . . We, teachers and parents, we have to set the examples to speak Chinese, not only in the classroom, but everywhere in the church, anytime on Sunday afternoon” (oral communication, September 2015).

CCCB provided Chinese immigrants in Berlin with a unique environment where Chinese was the dominant language. Parents not only valued the Chinese-speaking environment within the church but also the Chinese traditions and customs in the community life of CCCB. The major Chinese traditional festivals were elaborately planned and earnestly celebrated, both during the Sunday service and among Bible groups. Pastor Xu gave festive sermons, and church leaders offered special programs echoing major Chinese holidays. The church committee and Bible Group Captains organized grand entertainment shows and a lavish banquet during Spring Festival. Among all these activities, the engagement of children always played a prominent role.

Parents spoke highly of the “Chinese-ness” in the setting of CCCB and these Chinese events. Ms. Ye, a mother of two daughters, expressed her motivation in this way: “When they are here, they can meet other Chinese children. Even if they do not always speak Chinese to each other, to hear Chinese everywhere is already very helpful. . . . It is very important for us to have this environment, to bring our children here and let them be immersed in the Chinese culture.” Ms. Ye was particularly pleased when she saw this “immersion” went beyond the church hall. During the course of my fieldwork, the elder daughter of Ms. Ye became good friends with two other girls her age from the same Sunday school class. Ms. Ye’s face lit up every time she talked about her daughter’s friendship: “They will go to a birthday party together next weekend! . . . This is really good! . . . Ah, this is exactly why we insist on bringing them to church every Sunday! So that they can have Chinese kids as friends!” (oral communication, September and November 2015).

Ms. Meng, mother of three children and Sunday school teacher herself, agreed with Ms. Ye completely. “I tried different Chinese language schools before, it didn’t work very well. My sons hate it when they have to go to ‘school’ over the weekend. . . . Then I slowly realized that it is much better to take them here! Actually, the most important thing is not to have Chinese classes, but rather the Chinese environment! Think about how we grew up, right? Which one of us learnt Chinese during Chinese class at Chinese language school? It is after all the environment!” (oral communication, November 2015).

“Make real Chinese friends” at Bible group meeting

It was Saturday. The CCCB Bible group Noah’s Ark was meeting in the parish house of Trinity Church in Charlottenburg in the western part of Berlin to have their weekly gathering. The meeting began at 9:30 in the morning with a prayer. The group sang a few gospel songs together, before they proceeded to the main session of Bible reading, interwoven with discussions and testimonies. The entire Noah’s Ark group consisted of about twenty adults and fifteen children, while an average turnout was usually about twelve to fifteen adults and ten to twelve children.

The venue of this Bible group meeting was only five hundred meters from Huade Chinese Language School, the biggest Chinese language school in Berlin. *Huade*, literally meaning “China and Germany,” was founded in 1992 and attracted more than five hundred pupils every Saturday in 2016. All the children in Noah’s Ark were attending Huade School at the same time, which was why the timetable of the Bible group connected closely with the schedule of the Chinese language school. Every Saturday morning, parents first brought their children to Huade School, where classes started at 9 am, before they walked together to the Bible group meeting. As the meeting ended punctually at 11:45, parents picked up all the children from Huade School, where the Chinese language classes ended at midday. Every Saturday around noon, the entire Noah’s Ark group shared a common lunch together, which they referred to as the “Feast of Love.” Each member brought one or two dishes from home; all the dishes were put on a long table to create a buffet.

This Saturday was no exception. I sat down next to Mr. Song at the lunch table, who was attending the Bible group with the elder two of his three children. Both Mr. Song and his wife were born and raised in Fujian Province in South China. They came to Germany to study in 2000, then stayed and founded a family. Mr. Song was working as a software engineer in a small town near Frankfurt (am Main) as we met, while his wife and their children lived in Berlin. “Actually, we could have moved. My wife stays at home anyway. But we decided to keep the family here and I commute every week. People all say that schools in Hessen are actually better, but that town [where I work] is too small! No Chinese church, no [Chinese] Bible groups, not to talk about a Chinese language school, not possible at all! How can my children learn any Chinese?” Mr. Song drove at least five hours each way to commute, and I could almost see all the miles on his face as we were speaking. “But it is not easy for my wife, either. She has to take care of three children here, all by herself! Our youngest is only two years old!” (interview with Mr. Song, February 2016).

In spite of the hardship of taking care of three children by oneself, the exhaustion of driving more than five hours twice a week, and the fact that the public schools in Hessen had a better reputation, Mr. Song and his wife still preferred to keep the family in Berlin. The Chinese Church, Bible group, and the Chinese language school were the reasons Mr. Song gave me when I asked him about his motivation to stay in Berlin. Mr. Song’s nine-year-old daughter, SS, was circling around the buffet table with her best friend, QQ, as I was talking to her father. QQ’s parents joined our conversation, as they were very glad to see SS as a regular play date for their daughter. “They go to the language school together and sit in the same classroom,” said the mother of QQ, “here [pointing at the playground] they play together, and tomorrow [Sunday] they

can be together at church for a whole afternoon.” QQ’s father added, “it does not even matter if they are speaking German among themselves, it matters that they make friends, make real Chinese friends” (oral communication, February 2016).

Besides the immersion in Chinese language and culture, parents at CCCB desired the potential friend circle and social life their children could cultivate during their participation in the Saturday Bible group meeting and Sunday school. For the rest of the week, parents frequently and enthusiastically arranged play dates and other get-together possibilities to strengthen the contacts and relationships among the Chinese friends their children made at CCCB. They believed in the impact of being in a particular setting and being in constant contact with a particular group of people—“a natural environment” that would enhance the Chinese language capacity of their children while enlarging their Chinese social circle and strengthening their Chinese identity.

The meaning of being Christian

Besides the importance of bringing the second generation into close contact with Chinese language and culture as well as friends and acquaintances, the value of Christian faith was also an essential incentive. The CCCB church leadership emphasized repeatedly and explicitly the superiority of being Christian, while the adult members of CCCB passed it on to the next generation as a motive to spend a significant part of their weekend within the church community.

At CCCB, the positive impact of Christianity on the quality of family life was addressed publicly and frequently. Pastor Xu, church committee members, and Bible Group Captains often talked about the importance of choosing the *zhengque de pei’ou* (correct spouse) to form a *jianquan de jiating* (sound family), which meant that choosing a Christian partner was the only way to have a good family life. Among the members of CCCB, a “Christian life” was understood not only as one way of leading a good life, but it was the very definition of a good life. During all the baptism ceremonies I attended, as the newly baptized member stood up from the water after the full-immersion ritual, the crowd unanimously expressed their happiness by shouting, “Now you can finally have a good life!”

Such emphasis on the “sound family” was passed on to the second generation. The preaching and teaching of leading a Christian life was the main theme at Sunday service and Sunday school. For many parents, it was also crucial to encourage their children to take part in more church activities to provide them with a sense of “how other Chinese Christians live” and “cultivate friendships with other Chinese Christian children.” Pastor Xu mentioned these points in his sermons and constantly reminded all the members in the congregation to be “confident about their choice to lead a better life.” This self-awareness of being “better” was particularly visible during their missionary work. They approached non-Christian Chinese and asked questions like “Are you happy?” and “Do you have a meaningful life?” When the answers were “Yes,” they asked the follow-up questions, “How can you possibly be happy, when you are not Christian?” and “How can you have a meaningful life, when you do not know God?” The missionaries at CCCB often reminded each other to be “friendly and polite, to show our Christian character,” because in their opinion, these virtues were the unique qualities that only Christians could possess.

Parents brought their children to CCCB over the weekend, as they were deeply convinced of the positive impact a Christian church could have on the younger generation. “Why should I bring them to some language school, when they can be in the house of God?” asked one parent, while chatting with me in Martin Luther Room during Pastor Xu’s sermon. Besides the wish for the second generation to have a Chinese-speaking environment on weekends, the conviction of church being a “better place” and Christians being “better people” played an essential role as well to motivate the first-generation Chinese immigrants to bring their children to CCCB.

“More than 200 Chinese gathering together is itself the best environment for children,” said Ms. Huang. She and her husband had been active members of CCCB for almost ten years. Living in the outskirts of Berlin, the couple had to drive fifty minutes each way every Sunday afternoon to attend church service with their two children. When I asked her about their motivation, she summed up her belief in this way: “Good values, good world view, and spiritual life orientation. Parents do not even need to guide children to learn anything here, they are already surrounded by the best education, all in Chinese, they can just watch, hear, and learn. For parents, there is no better place to bring your children to!” (interview with Ms. Huang, May 2016).

Analysis: The incentives of first-generation Chinese immigrants at CCCB

Parents like Mr. Xie and Mr. Song appreciated the “natural environment” of speaking Chinese and making Chinese friends at CCCB, as well as the advantage of being immersed in a Christian community at the same time. Compared to alternative institutions like Chinese language schools, parents embraced the implicit socialization at CCCB, where knowledge was delivered through informal corporeal interaction with personal observations and experiences. When parents praised the “real and authentic” environment, they were addressing the impact of implicit socialization, where the transmission of principles, habitus, and cultural capital could be far more effective and formative than the explicit one written in the textbooks (Bourdieu and Passeron 2011). Not only could their children improve their knowledge of Chinese language and culture, the perceived superiority of being around fellow Christians served as added incentive to bring the children to service on Sunday and Bible group meetings on Saturday. The first-generation Chinese immigrants placed their children into the reproduction of a culture they approved of as parents and counted on the informal, unscripted “diffuse education” to enhance their Chinese identity and provide moral guidance.

Parents like Ms. Huang considered “good values” and a “good worldview” as unique features of CCCB that could not be found elsewhere, especially compared to their everyday life routine. Compared to the alternative of Chinese language schools, parents particularly approved of the Christian setting at CCCB. As they believed in the superiority of Christianity, incubation at a Christian church served not only as a favorable method of transmitting the Christian faith from one generation to the next but also the foundation of a good life for their children’s overall future. This attitude echoes findings among Asian migrant families in the US. The older generation in Asian American families often hold the opinion that the public schools in the US do not offer any “moral education” to their children (Chen 2006, 2008; Zhou and

Bankston 1998; Yang 2010). Min Zhou and Carl Bankston illustrate how Buddhist and Catholic institutions transmit the heritage language and culture to the younger generation. Chen and Yang both describe how Christian churches become very attractive among Chinese immigrants by framing children's obedience to parents with Christian vocabulary and invoking the authority of Jesus Christ to discipline the younger generation. Among my interlocutors in Berlin, applying Christian doctrines on the second generation as a parenting tool played a minor role. However, the shared faith in Christianity conveyed numerous advantages of spending weekends with the Christian community. Combined with the Chinese language programs and Chinese social contacts, taking part in Christian church and its Bible group meetings created new paths for the second-generation immigrants to strengthen their Chinese identity, and to enhance the connection between parents and children.

Both the faith in implicit socialization and the faith in the superiority of Christianity laid a solid foundation for the first-generation Chinese immigrants to bring their children to CCCB over the weekend. Meanwhile, the church leadership keenly detected the "faith" among the parents and effectively offered an answer to their wishes. In the next section, I will analyze the church's strategies and illustrate how the pastor and church committee together designed their church programs to effectively provide Chinese immigrant families in Berlin with a place that could go far beyond being a house of worship.

The strategies of the church leadership at CCCB

It might seem natural that Chinese migrant families were drawn to CCCB, as it provided them with an ideal setting to pass on Chinese language and culture and the Christian faith and networks from one generation to the next. However, in comparison with other Chinese churches in Germany and Chinese Christians overseas, the demographic structure of CCCB was rather an exceptional case of its own. As I will show in the following paragraphs, the active participation of families at CCCB was the outcome of intentional strategies by the church leadership.

A shift in the demographic structure of the congregation

Among the Chinese population in Germany, students constituted a significant proportion. At the end of 2015, 119,590 Chinese citizens resided in Germany with Chinese passports, 32 percent of whom were holding residence permits for educational purposes. Chinese students have been the largest group of foreign students at German universities since 2004. Not only have Chinese students made up a substantial percentage on German campuses, they have also become the growing, if not dominant, power among Chinese Protestant communities across the country (Oblau 2006; Lüdde 2011). For decades, CCCB was a student-based community as well. The student-focused profile of CCCB back then was not only the consequence of the demographic features of Chinese residents in Germany. Among Chinese Christians overseas, in Europe as well as in North America, many churches refer to *Zhongguo yixiang* (God's Chinese vision) that China "will rise not only in the economic sphere but also in the spiritual realm" (Cao 2019, 9). Built on this vision of a "China mission,"

many Chinese missionaries and church leaders overseas specifically target Chinese students, as students are likely to return to China and therefore bring the gospel back to their homeland (Huang and Hsiao 2015). Being closely connected with RCCC in the US, CCCB was shaped by the “China mission,” too, and had once undertaken a variety of mission activities that specifically targeted Chinese students in Berlin.

However, the participation of students was consistently decreasing in more recent years, while families with children became the majority. Back in 2003, CCCB had fourteen Bible groups, six of which consisted entirely of students, while almost all eight other groups had members who were students. In 2012, only one out of the eleven Bible groups was for students. Throughout the years of my fieldwork (2011–2012 and 2015–2016), there was a clear demographic shift among members of CCCB. Especially since 2010 when Xu Li became the ordained pastor, the proportion of students kept declining. Jobholders and families with children became the focus of the church leadership and started playing the central role in its activities.

By the end of my fieldwork in 2016, CCCB had roughly 250 members in total, and young participants under the age of eighteen constituted between one-third and one-half of the community. A regular Sunday service at CCCB usually attracted around one hundred to 120 adults and sixty to eighty children. It was no coincidence that parents overwhelmingly spoke in favor of the church as an ideal space to be on the weekend. The church leadership devoted many personnel and resources into the development and improvement of Sunday school, as well as adjusting their schedule with school holidays and integrating children into various aspects of the church life. During the time of my fieldwork, there were four classes for different age groups at Sunday school. Each class was taught and supervised by six to eight church members. This meant that among the one hundred to 120 adults attending Sunday service, about thirty of them were involved in teaching classes at Sunday school for the second generation. As the work of Sunday school became increasingly important, the church committee added a new Department of Children into its organizational structure and held weekly meetings to arrange Sunday school and to offer special events for children of different ages.

In consequence, CCCB became a family-based congregation with a high percentage of children, while students only played a minor role. This composition contrasted significantly with other Chinese Christian communities in the country, most of which featured a high percentage of student participation, and this composition was the outcome of the CCCB church leadership’s strategies.

A shift in the baptism doctrine

By providing an environment for speaking Chinese language and emphasizing Chinese cultural heritage, CCCB managed to create desirable conditions for the first-generation Chinese immigrants in Berlin to bring their children over the weekend—not only to read the Bible and attend Sunday service to enhance their Christian faith but also to strengthen the second generation’s capacity for speaking Chinese language and sense of Chinese identity. Over the course of my fieldwork, CCCB took several measures to attract more families with children and keep children in the church. Besides adding the Department of Children, enhancing personnel at Sunday

school, and deploying resources into programs for children and families, the CCCB leadership were also willing to shift their theological principle on key issues.

As discussed in the previous section, the theology and practices of CCCB were heavily influenced by American Baptist tradition through the years-long patronage from RCCC in New Jersey, although both Pastor Xu and the church committee considered the church to be a nondenominational Christian community. Compared to Lutheran churches in Germany, one of the main features of CCCB was their refusal of infant baptism. Like many Baptist churches, CCCB only baptized adults and accepted only full immersion into water as the legitimate ritual.⁵ When I first visited their Sunday service in December 2010, Pastor Xu told me affirmatively that they would not offer any baptism, confirmation, or communion to anyone under the age of eighteen (interview with Pastor Xu, December 2010).

Interestingly, as the number of children within the congregation kept growing, the principle of adult-only baptism was silently changing. At the age of fourteen, children belonging to a Christian denomination in Germany conventionally celebrate confirmation of their Christian faith with bountiful presents from family and friends. However, as CCCB did not permit baptism under the age of eighteen, the young members could not take part in the same ritual with their peers and consequentially became resistant toward going to church with their parents. At the end of 2012, CCCB started offering “exceptional” baptism to teenagers, first at the age of fourteen, and later lowered to twelve, so that they could take part in the confirmation ceremony with their German friends and classmates. To emphasize that this was the “exception,” members between the ages of twelve and fourteen were accepted for baptism in different batches, one batch every six months. The sequence of baptism had thus become a public display of how the church committee evaluated the behavior of each teenager and rated every one with a different grade.

Instead of considering baptism as the unconditional love from God, CCCB was determined to transform the meaning of baptism into a prize to win and a reward to gain. Teachers and parents were rather pleased to see this change of policy. Not only did it allow children to take part in the confirmation with their German peers when they reached the age of fourteen, it also served as an extra scale to measure the performance of the second generation at church. This shift of confirmation policy showed how much CCCB valued the participation of families and children at their church. Deeply influenced by Baptist tradition, CCCB’s doctrines of performing only full-immersion baptism only for adults had been the bedrock of their belief. Nevertheless, when their position on baptism led to the reluctance of the second generation to take part in the church activities, the church committee efficiently started searching for solutions and eventually reset the ground of their theological belief.

Analysis: The strategies of CCCB church leadership

The input of Chinese language and culture, the socialization of Chinese friends and acquaintances, and the advantage of being Christian altogether made CCCB particularly attractive to Chinese immigrant families, especially families with children. CCCB’s strategies proved to be very effective, as both the number of families

and the proportion of young children continued to grow. The growth in membership translated directly into increased donations and the accumulation of wealth at CCCB. Due to Germany's migration policies in the past decades, the dominant channel of migration from China to Germany was education. Among the Chinese migrant families who obtained long-term settlement permits, a significant percentage of them were university graduates working as white-collar professionals with middle-class financial capacity. Compared to students, most of whom could only offer a few coins out of their pocket money each week, the well-off migrant families had a clear advantage in terms of donations.

In Germany, for members of German Protestant and Catholic churches, their contribution to the church is collected by church tax based on their monthly income, which is 9 percent (8 percent in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg) of the income tax. However, for members of CCCB, the contribution rule was to donate 10 percent of the entire net income. The church committee of CCCB emphasized repeatedly that this was according to the biblical tradition of "tithe donation,"⁶ and a good Christian shall not bargain with God. To put these rules into perspective: the average monthly gross salary in Berlin in 2015 was 2,953 euros. A person with this income would pay 38 euros a month as a member of a German Protestant or Catholic church, while 186 euros a month as a member of CCCB. This particular donation rule together with the growing number of memberships led to the substantial accumulation of wealth at CCCB. Although the leadership carefully guarded the financial state of the church, it was known during the time of my fieldwork that they had already started searching for land in Berlin to purchase and to build their own church with their own funds.

Parents shared faith in the implicit socialization as a powerful medium to transmit knowledge and competence, and to transform the habitus and cultural capital of the next generation. The leadership of CCCB made a conscious choice to cater to the wishes of parents and restructured the congregation from student-focused to family-focused. Providing programs featuring Chinese language and culture and Chinese friends and social contacts, CCCB became an ideal venue for Chinese migrant families to extend their education over the weekend to strengthen the Chinese identity of the second generation in a Christian community. Based on the increasing number of members, the strategies of the church leadership proved to be very effective. With the enlargement of programs and the accumulation of wealth, the influence of CCCB as a migrant Christian church was impressively on the rise.

Can this model be learned and followed by other Chinese Christian communities? On the one hand, a great number of Chinese Christians overseas believe in "God's China vision" and place their hope on the mobility of students to bring the Christian gospel to mainland China in the long run (Cao 2019). Guided by this long-term goal, the focus on students would consequently still be the priority among Chinese Christian communities for the time being. On the other hand, as the percentage of multigeneration Chinese migrant families gradually grows, the demographic features of Chinese overseas could lead to a changing profile of overseas Christian communities. In Germany for example, similar shifts could be observed among Chinese churches in a number of small cities and towns in recent years, as the role of the second generation became increasingly important in each community. The

“success” of CCCB could be copied and pasted—a success in terms of membership, donations, and influence—when the church leadership determinedly prioritizes the needs of migrant families rather than students. However, as in the case of CCCB, disapproval from students and criticism from other Chinese Christians were inevitably a part of this development as well.⁷

Conclusion

With ethnographic data, this article shows that the unique structure of CCCB was the result of a combination of two main factors. First, the first-generation Chinese immigrants shared faith in the implicit socialization taking place within a good “environment” in which to spend time with their children over the weekend, as well as the wish for a more pronounced Chinese identity for their children. Second, the CCCB leadership was keenly aware of the potential of having a family-based congregation, and they decisively prioritized the demand of families with children by transforming their structure, programs, and dogma, while redistributing personnel and resources efficiently to reach these goals.

Several scholars in the US point out a similar phenomenon among migrant communities, where religious institutions serve as a haven of morality and shelter the mental growth of the younger generation (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 1995; Chen 2006; Waters 2009). In Germany, however, the discussion of migrant religious communities takes on a slightly different tone. Researchers frequently connect religious practices among immigrants with the question of integration, especially in research on Turkish immigrants and Islamic congregations (Fetzer and Soper 2005; Öztürk 2007; Ewing 2008). Studies on religious communities and religious practices of migrants rarely focus on the religious beliefs or activities of these congregations but rather prefer to measure their function and influence through the scale of integration. From Egyptian Christians to Vietnamese Buddhists, scholars examine communities of various religious and ethnic backgrounds and analyze how the religious institutions have served as sites of communication, mediation, and negotiation to integrate these communities into German society (Baumann 2004; Währisch-Oblau 2005; Dümling 2011; Lüdde 2011, 2013; Elwert 2015).

With the CCCB case study, this article takes a close look into the internal calibration of a migrant church and analyzes its impact on the migrant community from the perspectives of both church leaders and church members. Observing the beliefs and practices of the congregation, this article documents how the biggest Chinese Christian church in Germany developed its profile and shifted its focus over the course of a few years. Highlighting the incentives for church members and the strategies of the church leadership, it deconstructs how a Christian church became an additional socialization space for the Chinese migrant families in Berlin by transforming its structure and agenda. I argue that migrant churches in Germany do not necessarily have to function as “sites of integration” (i.e., Dümling 2011) into German society. As I have shown in this article, not only did the CCCB provide Chinese immigrants with opportunities to strengthen their religious faith but also additional occasions for Chinese families to emphasize their ethnic background, improve the capacity of

their heritage language, and enhance the Chinese identity of the next generation. In other words, becoming Christian does not necessarily make these migrant families “more German”; instead, it helps them to “remain Chinese.”

AUTHOR

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NOTES

1. During the course of my field research, I applied a range of ethnographic methods: participant observation, semi-structured and biographical interviews, discourse analysis, and photography. I conducted interviews with the pastor and church committee, as well as with dozens of adult members at CCCB, both during the Sunday service and the Saturday Bible meeting. Additionally, I collected extensive field notes and numerous sources and materials from all field sites. It is worth pointing out that, although I was in close contact with this community for a long period of time, I myself was not a member of CCCB, and neither a baptized Christian.
2. According to records available at CCCB, forty were baptized in 2006, followed by thirty-two in 2007 and twenty-three in 2008.
3. The term “Chinese” could indicate nationality, ethnicity, and language at the same time. Concerning discussion about people, I mainly use the terms “Chinese immigrants” and “Chinese students” to address those who are of Chinese nationality. To be specific, the terms refer to those who are of Chinese origin and living outside China—in the case of this article, in Germany—while still holding a Chinese passport. This means neither citizens of Hong Kong or Taiwan nor the ethnic Chinese population from Southeast Asia are included, mainly because they do not appear in the ethnography. I call the children of first-generation Chinese immigrants in my fieldwork “second-generation Chinese immigrants” or “children of first-generation Chinese immigrants,” although some of the second generation might have German citizenship. Concerning discussion about language, “Chinese” refers to the standardized form of Chinese language used in mainland China, which is recognized as the official language of China. I choose to use the term “Chinese language” mainly because the interlocutors in my fieldwork dominantly use the word “*zhongwen*” (Chinese language) during our conversations. Although “Chinese language” in this article refers to the same language as “Mandarin” and “*putonghua*,” I do not use these two terms, because neither the Chinese translation of “Mandarin” (*guanhua*) nor the term “*putonghua*” ever appeared during conversations presented in the article.
4. Except Pastor Xu, all names appearing in this article are pseudonyms.

5. There are numerous writings about the meaning and the importance of full-immersion adult baptism at CCCB, from their newsletters, magazines, and brochures to Pastor Xu's blog and all the materials on "The Basic Truth about Christianity" church members were circulating online.
6. Tithe donation is based on the book of Leviticus 27:30–34 and the book of Deuteronomy 14:22–29, according to the CCCB church committee.
7. While families received a warm welcome at CCCB, students expressed their experiences as "invisible" and attended other churches instead. Especially among students who used to be active members at CCCB, several expressed sharp criticism of the church leadership's focus on donations in recent years. For further analysis of other Chinese Christian churches and their relations toward CCCB, see Yu 2019.

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Reviews



China

Liz P. Y. Chee, *Mao's Bestiary: Medicinal Animals and Modern China*

Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. 276 pages. Paperback, \$26.95; cloth, \$99.95. ISBN 9781478014041 (paperback), 9781478011903 (cloth).

In *Mao's Bestiary*, Liz Chee examines a problem in China's medical field: the rampant and shocking use of animals, often illicit according to international regulations but often given legitimacy by scientific research in China. Chee acknowledges that animal parts feature relatively less in Chinese medicine education in universities; Chee does not argue that the majority of college-trained Chinese medicine doctors routinely use animal parts in medicinal practice. However, Chee argues that in the top-down state-led Chinese economy, the state bureaucracy commandeered Chinese medicine as a unique field while initiating and expanding the industrial-scale exploitation of animals as therapies. Chee traces changes over time from premodern Chinese medicine's use of animal parts to the dramatic escalation of animal use with the Communist Party's rule from 1949 onward.

The dilemma that Chee poses is that the boundaries between the world of widespread use of medicinal animals and learned university-level medicine are unclear when a sizable number of doctors in China nevertheless endorse animal products and help the pharmaceutical companies with their laboratory research. Chee coins the term "faunal medicalization" to analyze this frenetic, horrifying, brutal, and ridiculously performative policy, which is always tied to the imperatives of a state-led economy that claimed medical science as its justified authority. In short, Chee questions what Chinese medicine would look like if we acknowledge the fact that the Chinese state in its various iterations placed a high priority on the exploitation of animals for their body parts and plasma for medicinal use. Such a stark picture aims to correct the established view in the historiography of a state that was largely committed to public health by incorporating Chinese medicine within the wider ambit of socialized health care. Chee does not dispute this narrative but asks us to also understand the PRC socialist state as a bureaucracy driven by the Soviet-inspired mechanisms of material production of goods at the forefront. Authorities saw manufacturing as a priority, and animal use in Chinese medicine nicely served this utilitarian purpose.

Chee also quite bluntly unravels idealized notions of Chinese medicine as practiced in China as somehow based on ideas of a gentler medicine closer to nature and less beholden to the behemoth of global pharma. Chee emphasizes that the state was always

keen to strip Chinese medicine of its traditional theories. The PRC saw medicines as commodities that fit into the new socialist understandings that prioritized science, mechanistically and biologically. Chee debunks any idea of the state as interested in Chinese cultural traditions and the finer points of Chinese medical theory. Mao Zedong's famous statement in 1957, that Chinese medicine is a "treasure house," should be literally translated that Chinese medical drugs (*zhongyiyao*) are "treasure houses." In fact, his guiding principle was to abandon medicine (*yi*), while retaining and expanding on the range of drugs (*yao*).

Chee bases her argument on years of research at Guangzhou University of Chinese Medicine. Since there were no institutional records specifically dedicated to animals, Chee read across a range of sources, mostly pharmacological journals but also industry reports, government documents, and Chinese Medicine Association documents.

Chee's analysis of the significant influence of the Soviet Union provides refreshing and necessary insights. For too long, scholars have neglected the influence of the Soviet Union on science and medicine in twentieth-century China. The Soviets, claiming scientific authority and keen to differentiate their science from that of the West, promoted the extensive use of animal tissues in medicine. Combining nativism with laboratory medicine meant that both the Soviet Union and socialist China claimed scientific justification for faunal medicalization. For example, they shared an obsession with injections as scientific, including injecting serum from animal organs or animal blood. Even today, visitors to China may be astonished at the rush to use injections and intravenous drips for a range of conditions, including the common cold.

The book cover hints at a China that resembles a hellish slaughterhouse for animals. In a possible nod to the Chinese zodiac animals, we see seven jars, each containing a single animal colored mostly in socialist red but most likely indicating blood. In order, we see a rooster, antelope, pangolin, bear, deer, rhino, and tiger. More cynical readers may infer a political metaphor of a socialist China that reduces its inhabitants to caged prisoners. However, Chee does not go there. She restricts her story to the horrifying ways that post-1949 China has mistreated and exploited countless animals in the name of Chinese medicine. Mao Zedong is not Chairman Mao in this telling, but rather a Mao who oversaw a hellscape under his rule. Chee does not discuss, though, the rather telling habit of communist activists cursing their supposedly impure enemies with animal epithets referencing animals such as dogs, cows, and snakes. However, Chee brings new attention to the insanity of medicine in the high Maoist period and questions the characterization in some of the historiography of Maoist medicine as somehow liberating. For example, Chee analyzes the astonishing story of the common practice at the height of the Cultural Revolution in 1967 of the so-called masses injecting fresh chicken blood as an all-purpose therapy as an emblem of high Maoist medicine. Chickens not only signified rural medicine but also were thought to embody some kind of virility.

Chee also argues that Mao's successors, most especially Deng Xiaoping, continued and further refined the industrial-scale use of animals as Chinese medicine. The Deng-era economic reforms saw a renewed emphasis on production for export. Thus, a range of animal products became key, including rhino horn powders and deer antlers. Deer farming, like bear farming, grew as a Soviet-inspired economic project. Potential species extinction—such as of rhinos and pangolins, both of which are killed in large numbers—remains possible. Also, the state identified beetles, centipedes, scorpions, and toads as animals to be promoted for use.

As a Singaporean who grew up using Chinese medicine, Chee explains that her activism to protect wildlife brought her to personally understand the horrific abuse of bears trapped in tight cages. Even today, bear farmers in China insert a tap into bears' gallbladders to collect the bile that is used for medicine. To try to escape, the bears usually rub against the cage-bars, thus causing raw open sores that receive no treatment. Chee marshals a range of evidence to show that such a venture was mostly invented in the 1980s and only tenuously related to any claim of tradition. North Koreans were likely the first to farm bears on such a scale for their bile, but again, the important argument that Chee makes is that of the Soviet influence.

Chee's well-written study ends with an implicit challenge to think about how to end the rampant and unnecessary harvesting of animal parts in medicine. Critics will argue that faunal medicalization should not be conflated with Chinese medicine. Certainly, many Chinese medicine doctors will cry foul. Chee writes not to target Chinese medicine doctors, however, many of whom campaign for medical practice that explicitly excludes using animals. Chee's challenge rests on the problem of the top-down institutions and business entities, mostly based in the PRC, that exploit the authority of Chinese medicine's good reputation to sell animal-based therapies in Asia and the global marketplace in general.

All students, scholars, and practitioners of Chinese medicine need to read this book. It asks us to think about the cost of not speaking up. Chinese medicine does not exist in a vacuum but in a very real sociopolitical context contingent on top-down demands for profit. Additionally, anyone interested in China, including a general audience, will gain insight into the ways that supposed traditional Chinese practices have often been reconstituted for purposes other than therapy. Ironically, the PRC's desire to scientize Chinese medicine has made it more difficult, rather than easier, for Chinese medicine practitioners to valorize their therapies. Political imperatives in China have tainted Chinese medical doctors with a faunal medicalization that has very little to do with historically traditional medicine in China. Unfortunately, Chee reminds us, traditional medicine cannot escape geopolitics.

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Scott Rozelle and Natalie Hell, *Invisible China: How the Urban-Rural Divide Threatens China's Rise*

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. 248 pages, 5 figures, 2 tables. Cloth, \$27.50; PDF \$26.99; eBook, \$26.99. ISBN 9780226739526 (cloth), 9780226740515 (eBook).

Invisible China is a clearly written book full of policy prescriptions for China based on decades of research by Scott Rozelle's research team at REAP (Rural Education Action Program). Though both Rozelle and Natalie Hell's names are on the cover, the authorship of the book seems vague. The author(s) of the book refer(s) to themselves (himself) as "I" instead of "we," REAP is described as "my" research team rather than "our" research team, and the "Author's Note" that begins the book is signed by Rozelle alone. I felt that the main arguments come from Rozelle and that Hell was more of a writer, clarifying Rozelle's prose for a popular audience. While I find myself convinced of the value of many of the book's policy recommendations, I disagree with its basic arguments.

These arguments conclude that it is in the interests of Americans to support China's continued economic development (China's rise), and that China's underinvestment in the education of its rural youth threatens China's transition from a middle-income to wealthy country. Since many popular images of China's education system come from the hypercompetitive schools and students of its urban regions, and few other than academic researchers are aware of the problems rural students face, Rozelle and Hell title the book "*Invisible China*."

Rozelle and Hell's data is convincing for the most part, though one aspect is misleading. They begin with statistics that show that the average education levels of Chinese workers are low for a country of its economic means, but much of the discussion of this data does not address the fact that these low education levels reflect the availability of schooling thirty or more years ago, not the circumstances of the twenty-first century. When Rozelle and Hell focus on the contemporary situation and its remaining shortcomings, they are much more convincing. Yes, China has built primary and junior middle schools with good facilities and well-trained teachers across most of its rural areas; yes, China has expanded its university enrolments to the extent that roughly 25 percent of students can attend university; yes, China has systematically built vocational high schools so rural students who do not go to university can at least attend a vocational high school. But these measures are still inadequate for several reasons. First, the vocational high schools offer poor-quality education; they are not as well-administered as the primary schools, junior middle schools, and academic high schools, and the students who attend them often learn little. Second, many rural primary school students suffer from nutritional deficiencies (mainly anemia) and public health problems (mainly intestinal worms and myopia) that sap their energy and capacity for learning. Third, rural students are often raised by grandparents who lack cultural capital and do not give their grandchildren enough intellectual stimulation. In my own research on rural education during the early 2000s, I discovered that rural children had been remarkably successful in testing into university. However, that situation has changed, and I attribute the change to the fact many of the children with relatively high levels of cultural capital tested into universities and then migrated to cities during the 1980s and 1990s. Rozelle and Hell also do not mention the fact that the majority of university spaces are reserved for urban dwellers, meaning that many rural students must achieve even higher scores on the university entrance exam than their urban counterparts to make it to university, top universities especially.

Rozelle and Hell make several policy recommendations related to these problems. These include providing vocational schools with greater investment and monitoring, rolling out public health programs across rural China, and providing parenting classes to rural parents. Rozelle and Hell also suggest ending the rural-urban divide of China's household registration system so that rural children in general, including those who are labeled "rural" by the household registration system but who actually live with their migrant-worker parents in large cities, can receive better educational opportunities. Amending the household registration system would also end the systematic anti-rural bias of the university entrance exam. On humanitarian grounds, I support most of these measures, but I am convinced neither that American or Western institutions should donate money to encourage China to implement these measures nor that these measures are the key to China's continued economic development, nor even the happiness of China's youth, as Rozelle and Hell suggest.

The authors assert that economic interdependence makes it in America's interest to support China's rise. They do not analyze the possibility that one country's rise and another's fall can be interlinked. Nor do they mention China's support of authoritarian governance around the world. As someone located in Hong Kong, who sees the downside of China's authoritarian governance every day, I do not feel that charitable American organizations (such as the Gates Foundation) should be encouraged to donate money to Chinese causes. The authors also take a rather dichotomous view of economic development. Either a country develops or it remains poor, stuck in the "middle-income trap." Rather than a gradation of levels of economic prosperity, countries are either rich or poor and China will remain poor if it does not develop its rural education. I prefer to view levels of prosperity on a continuum and would be perfectly content if a bit more prosperity went to places and people other than China. There are plenty of countries poorer than China and plenty of poor people in wealthy countries like the United States. Insofar as the world economy is interrelated, I do not see why slightly more prosperity in China should matter more to the United States than a bit more prosperity in India or Indonesia. Support for democracy should be a major factor when considering where to donate.

I am also not convinced that investment in education is the key to China's continuing economic development. Rozelle and Hell assert that as automation increases and income levels rise, the capacity to continually learn new skills is paramount and that only highly educated workers can succeed at this. Such a view of economic development suggests that employers would hire people if only they could learn quickly enough. I tend to think that employers will hire people only if they need them. Though employers will attempt to select those people who seem to need the least training, they will provide enough training if they really need the workers. There are plenty of academic theories that suggest an overly educated workforce is more of a problem than an undereducated one. In my own research in Shandong province, I found that many young people, particularly those who had a high school education or above, refused to work in factories, even though factories paid close to double what was paid by the service sector jobs that these youths accepted. The book suggests that automation will cause factory work to dry up, and undereducated youth will be left with no options. But China now has the problem of many factory jobs being rejected by youth who see such careers as below them. According to Rozelle and Hell's data, Russia is the country with the highest average levels of educational attainment, but it is hardly an economic powerhouse. Ronald Dore (1997) proposed the problem of "diploma disease" to describe those countries where the education system developed more quickly than the economy. The result was schools filled with students who did nothing but memorize facts so they could succeed on exams and secure a diploma to continue on to the next level of education. As the education system but not the economy developed, academic credentials for certain jobs increased and students had no choice but to fight for educational success. Eric Wolf (1969) argued that the great peasant revolutions of the twentieth century were all organized by overeducated but underemployed youth. Nothing was more dangerous to "social stability" than a bunch of college graduates with no suitable jobs. As an academic, I value investment in education, but whether such investment directly leads to economic development is a matter of debate, and Rozelle and Hell only present one side of this debate.

Finally, Rozelle and Hell imply that rural children would be much happier if they only had the educational experiences that their urban counterparts receive. Again, this

picture is a bit too rosy for me. It reminds me of their view of the Chinese and American economies being interdependent instead of competitive. In economics, perhaps there can be both interdependence and competition, but in education, the competitive aspects dominate. In China, roughly 25 percent of students can win in the competition for university places. Of these, the great majority of winners come from urban backgrounds due to the problems the book discusses; but if all of these problems were solved, it would still only be 25 percent of students who made it to university. Indeed, in addition to a lack of social capital, the competitiveness of the education system itself is a factor that causes some students to drop out early. Enhancing the competitiveness of the education system by giving rural students support would only enhance this dynamic.

When I teach about educational dilemmas, I sometimes ask students to choose between two dystopias. The first is modeled after Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Humanity is divided into genetic castes: a few are bred smart with great credentials and intellectual jobs while the majority receive shorter education and work menial jobs. There is no class mobility, no competition, and, at least according to the ruling classes, all are relatively satisfied in their jobs. In the second society, anyone born with or who develops the slightest intellectual flaw is immediately given all of the medical care and supplementary tutoring they need to catch up. At age twelve all of these completely equal children are put into a six-year high school to compete for university places. The system is hyper-competitive with all studying to exhaustion nightly; slight differences in stamina and perhaps luck on test day make the difference in determining who wins entrance to the best universities. The children of professors are just as likely to end up in working-class jobs as the children of street cleaners. Students don't like either option, but many, including the majority of Chinese students, pick Huxley's dystopia.

Like many academics, I value education, equality of opportunity, and human rights. I support all of Rozelle and Hell's policy suggestions. However, I think that China's development is just as likely to harm American interests as it is to help them, that more rural educational opportunities might not affect China's development, and that increasing the ability of China's rural students to compete academically is not likely to increase their happiness.

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Mayfair Yang, *Re-Enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou, China*

Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 384 pages, 44 illustrations. Paperback, \$29.95; cloth, \$109.95. ISBN 9781478008279 (paperback), 9781478007753 (cloth).

Throughout the past decade, there has been growing attention given to the survival and revival of local religious life in post-Mao China, and Hunan and Guangxi in the south as well as Shanxi and Shaanxi in the north have been major hotspots in the study of religion and locality. Mayfair Yang's *Re-Enchanting Modernity: Ritual Economy and Society in Wenzhou, China*, however, turns to a distinctive spot on China's eastern coast: Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province. Wenzhou's claim to fame is due to the fact that it is the birthplace of the private economy in China, known as the "Wenzhou model" (*Wenzhou moshi*). Also known as "China's Jerusalem" (*Zhongguo de Yelusalem*), Wenzhou is populated by one million Christians out of its 8 million population, and by Buddhists, Daoists, and practitioners of popular religions. As an economic powerhouse and home to multiple faiths, Wenzhou is a vantage point for observing the relationship between economy and religion. *Re-Enchanting Modernity* provides us with a picture of grassroots initiatives for pursuing religious vocation in a rapidly changing socioeconomic context, offering a unique and in-depth insight into ritual economy, religiosity, and modernity.

This book is based on twenty-six years (1990–2016) of ethnographic fieldwork. The author spent forty-two weeks, distributed over thirteen trips, conducting research on religious and ritual practices of local people and grassroots organizations in Wenzhou. Trained as a cultural anthropologist, Yang is able to combine the contemporary ethnographic material collected from her fieldwork with a historical inquiry into the local religiosity of the past six hundred years of the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1911) dynasties. Taking a bottom-up approach, the author, rather than exploring the elite and orthodox practices of religious traditions, focuses on Chinese "popular religion," including "deity worship, shamanism, ancestor worship, divination, and Chinese geomancy (*fengshui*), as well as popular Daoist and Buddhist practices" (5). Throughout her rich ethnography, Yang masterfully deploys theories and responds to scholars—such as Max Weber, Marcel Mauss, Georges Bataille, Émile Durkheim, and Saba Mahmood—to explore issues such as religious ethics and capitalist logic, gift-giving, local identity, and female religious agency, among other topics.

The book is composed of three parts. In part 1, "Introduction" (chapters 1–2), Yang sketches a brief social and cultural history of Wenzhou from the nineteenth century to the present, focusing on the secularization accompanying its economic and industrial development. The introduction sets the scene for the rest of the book, and the readability of this part is greatly enhanced by the author's rich and up-to-date ethnographic notes on her fieldwork experience, including some odd and awe-inspiring moments in modern Wenzhou. For example, she describes her "supervised" field trips and monitored communication with her local informants via WeChat. She also notes that the Wenzhou dialect, once a language barrier for the author, is much less so today as it is no longer used by younger generations, who now speak Mandarin.

In chapter 2, the uniqueness of the "Wenzhou model" and its impressive economic achievements are discussed in relation to "private family enterprise" (36), "indigenous self-generating capital" (38), and the "high mobility of people and goods" (42), as well as the environmental degradation that comes with industrialization. This discussion of the "Wenzhou Model" not only responds to Hill Gates's (1996) notion of "petty capitalist

mode of production” in late imperial China but also paves the way for the exploration of the local religious resurgence and religious economy of Wenzhou in the modern era.

Part 2, “Religious Diversity and Syncretism in Wenzhou,” is divided into three chapters, on popular religiosity (chapter 3), Daoism (chapter 4), and Buddhist religiosity (chapter 5). This part is comprised of historical surveys and descriptive accounts of the local pantheon and cults and includes descriptions of diverse religious and ritual practices as well as performances of religious storytelling in Wenzhou, which researchers on the history of Chinese popular religions, popular religious literature, and oral and performing arts will find of exceptional value. The panoramic sketch of the religious landscape in Wenzhou is supplemented by silhouettes of and interviews with peasants, businessmen, bureaucratic officials, abbots, abbesses, laypeople, and religious practitioners. This part also includes stories on religious competition and syncretism, the feminization of Buddhism, and digital religion, among other topics, all of which provide a piquant glimpse into dynamic and competitive religious markets in Wenzhou and the religious practices in the new (media-influenced) world.

Part 3, “Religious Civil Society and Ritual Economy,” contains five chapters and concerns a variety of interesting issues, including religious civil society (chapters 6 and 9), lineage (chapter 7), female agency (chapter 8), and ritual economy (chapter 10). One of the major themes that runs through this book is the notion of “religious civil society.” Yang suggests that civil society has become a modern and global category, and that in contemporary Wenzhou, the non-state “realm of people” (*minjian*)—grassroots-initiated temple organizations, local lineages, and the management of religious associations—represents an “indigenous civil society” (269). Drawing on Anthony Giddens’s (1984) work on “discursive” and “practical consciousness,” as well as Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “bodily habitus” (1977), in chapter 8 Yang tackles the question of “how female agency works historically to reproduce, as well as to configure or detail, patriarchal structures” (227). By uncovering five different modes of women’s religious agency in Wenzhou—such as lay Buddhist women’s self-sacrifice, self-cultivation, religious sisterhood, grassroots initiative, and leadership—Yang demonstrates there are diverse forms of women’s religious agency, which “contributed to strengthening, adjusting or transforming patriarchal structures” (253), and that resistance should not dominate our understanding of agency. In doing so, Yang argues that Saba Mahmood’s (2005) postcolonial approach to women’s agency can also be applied to non-Western religious cultures.

Chapter 10 is one of the book’s most fascinating and innovative contributions, as it provides an answer to the overarching question this book asks: What is missing in the Wenzhou Model of economic development as conventionally conceived by economists and sociologists? Yang suggests that what she calls the “ritual economy”—religious and gift expenditures on sacrifices and offerings, rituals and festivals, donations and charities, construction of ritual sites, gift circulation, and ritual services, such as ritual performances, spirit possession, divination, geomancy, and scriptural chanting (282)—has stimulated Wenzhou’s economic boom. Yang proposes that Wenzhou’s ritual economy resonates with Georges Bataille’s (1985) notion of “excessive ritual expenditures” and that the so-called “wasteful” and “gratuitous” consumption of ritual and religious expenditures, which in the 1980s and 1990s was dismissed or condemned as “superstitious” and “ignorant” behavior in Wenzhou’s official discourse, in fact, plays a key role in “redistribution of wealth, reconstruction of community, and promotion of the public good” (282). In her conclusion, Yang validates the research on decoding

Wenzhou's economic success through the perspective of ritual economy and the call for a post-secular and re-enchanted society.

Re-Enchanting Modernity is a compelling and insightful work offering an in-depth exploration of Wenzhou, meticulous analysis, and fruitful dialogues with a variety of theorists. Filled with fascinating ethnographic narratives, this wonderful work takes us on an engaging dive into the mundane and sacred activities of life in Wenzhou, urging us to meditate on re-enchancement and modernity, religion and economy, state and community, gender and agency, as well as loss and gain in life and the afterlife. This work would be of greatest interest to scholars of Chinese history, religion, and Asian studies, as well as anthropologists, sociologists, and economists.

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Veronica S. W. Mak, *Milk Craze: Body, Science, and Hope in China*

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021. 224 pages. Hardcover, \$68.00; paperback, \$28.00. ISBN 9780824886271 (hardcover), 9780824887988 (paperback).

The recent blossoming of China food studies has brought fresh attention to the topic of how China produces and consumes dairy. Much of the scholarly interest in this topic has revolved around two points: the historical emergence of China's milk industry, including the circumstances that gave rise to melamine poisoning in 2008, and the cultural transformation behind the adoption of dairy into the Chinese diet. Grounded firmly in the literature of food anthropology, *Milk Craze: Body, Science, and Hope in China* successfully integrates both of these perspectives into a unique multi-site ethnography.

Milk Craze focuses its attention on two sites in the Southeast: Hong Kong and the nearby culinary center of Shunde, each presenting distinct opportunities and perspectives. In Hong Kong, Mak uses cafe menus, product advertisements, and internet chat rooms to show the evolution of milk in culinary imaginaries in an international city with distinct dietary traditions. In Shunde, she starts with the city's two claims to culinary fame: handmade cheese and the steamed dessert known as "double-skin milk," both made with the milk of water buffaloes. Herself a new mother at the time of her fieldwork, Mak explored with young families in both locations the ways that milk reflects concerns about food safety, child health, cost of living, and the precarity of labor.

Following a detailed introduction, the book's content breaks down into four chapters. The first chapter focuses on Hong Kong, showing the stratification of meaning socially ascribed to dairy, divided by place and method of consumption. The early scarcity of cow dairy that once marked liquid milk and sweetened milk tea as habits of the British elite gave way to new products with new meanings, such as the Vitasoy brand of soy milk that was marketed as the "soft drink" of the 1970s middle class, and the intensely flavored "silk stocking" milk tea that for some has come to embody the classless virtues of Hong Kong itself. The second chapter shifts focus to Shunde's buffalo cheesemakers, following experienced craftswomen back to their workshops to watch the milk being boiled, coagulated, and pressed by hand into its characteristic coin shape, and back in time to learn how rural collectivization and the neglect of agriculture eroded traditional practices of buffalo rearing. Mak traces the decline of Shunde's buffalo milk to the rise of the national cow dairy industry, an unstoppable "state-corporate alliance" built on preferential policies, global capital, and marketing that ties milk to health and patriotism.

The third chapter examines the social messaging of infant formula. Beginning her story with the run on foreign-made formula after 2008, Mak asks why formula would become so attractive to a culture that would otherwise prefer breastfeeding. The answer shows the value of her dual fieldwork sites. In Hong Kong, formula feeding is shown to help women facing pressures to return to the workplace quickly and fully slimmed down but also playing on fears of mothers' inability to produce sufficient milk. In Shunde, migrant parents take pride in returning home with foreign-made formula, materially substituting for lost maternal care and tangibly demonstrating earning prowess. In both, the switch to formula feeding is promoted by industry-sponsored research that exploits the personal anxieties of parents who wish above all to ensure that their children can "win at the starting line," growing up with all possible advantages.

The final content chapter traces the "medicalization of childhood" through the pathologization of "picky eating." The combination of industry-sponsored research, dietary recommendations, and product advertising transforms children's dislike of certain foods into a medical condition, one with a handy solution in the form of nutrient-laden milk formula. Constantly asking chronically worried parents "Are you sure?," the anxiety-driven market for formula as a nutritional supplement creates a race with no finish line.

Mak's engaging study adds to the growing field of research on China's dairy as a government project, site of status and desire, and overlooked culinary heritage. I felt that the book was at its best when exploring the interaction of these expressions, such as the diverse forces behind the decline of Shunde buffalo farming, the impact of celebrity motherhood on childrearing norms, or the marketing that made Vitasoy a household name. *Milk Craze* is theoretically ambitious, occasionally to excess, as the introductory chapter raises so many issues that the reader is left wondering what the book actually wants to do. The heavy reliance on secondary literature, often without specific reference to the author's own fieldwork, occasionally left me doubting its conclusions. For example, the claim that buffalo milk is unable to compete with the savvy health promises of the modern dairy industry could be interpreted differently, since traditional products are much better placed to play off the anxiety about the anonymized chains that produced the 2008 melamine poisoning. Indeed, large milk producers have diversified into buffalo, yak, and camel dairy for this very reason (DuBois 2020). Similarly, Mak's claims about the novelty of bottle feeding ignore a much older moral panic about women who "have

breasts but do not feed” (*youru buwei*) (Luo 2018, 208). Finally, I felt that the author’s unique emphasis on Shunde and Hong Kong was a missed opportunity to speak to the preponderance of research on the history of dairy consumption in other parts of China, notably Shanghai (Zhang 2020).

This book will not be the last on China’s great dietary transformation, but by presenting dairy in the distinct forms of buffalo cheese, mass-produced liquid milk, and scientized infant formula, *Milk Craze* persuasively shows how a single food can embody both the erosion and reinvention of tradition, as well as the hopes and anxieties of consumers across the social spectrum.

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Sanjukta Sunderason, *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India’s Long Decolonization*

Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2020. Xvi+318 pages. Hardcover, \$90.00; paperback, \$30.00. ISBN 9781503611948 (hardcover), 9781503612990 (paperback).

“Realism was born in the streets of Calcutta,” says the author in a lapidary phrase that captures the social predicament of art in a colonized nation. The Calcutta famine, birthed in the crucible of war, nationalism, and left-wing politics, created an orientation toward the depiction of the everyday abjection of the subaltern. The 1940s were a crucial period in creating a new sensibility arising from the urgent need to rethink earlier engagements with idealism and primitivism in modern Indian art. The peasant, tribal, and the subaltern, in general, could no longer be an object of reflection alone; the new situation necessitated the rise of a partisan aesthetics. Art had to have a social character, a commitment to particular historical subjects and themes, and artists themselves had to be the partisans—the irregulars—in the war against the retreat of art into the studios and a vapid humanism. The art of the famine generated an archive of modernity that provided a different genealogy to the very idea of a modernist aesthetics. As Sanjukta Sunderason points out, we have to engage with a narrative space shared by visual art, the left, war, and decolonization. The book navigates deftly the constantly moving terrain between the cultural left and the Left parties’ reconciling of theory with the exigencies of the historical conjuncture.

There is a genealogy that could be constructed from the Bengal School of the early twentieth century to the individual humanism that characterized the period after independence. In this trajectory, the left aesthetics of artists like Somnath Hore, Chittoprasad, and Zainul Abedin can appear to be a conjunctural blip occasioned by the horror of war and famine. How exactly are we to read this archive of work that dealt with questions of destitution and abjection, putting the frail human at the center of aesthetic consideration? This “conjunctural terrain” (9) in which we witness the “becoming political of the artistic” (9) needs a narration not located only in the standard narrative of colonialism and nationalism. Sunderason is insistent on the transnational space of aesthetic imagination and draws out the imbrications of the work of these artists that exceeds the demands of a Stalinist socialist realism. Social reality was depicted through expressionistic forms and “grotesque realism,” such as in the work of George Grosz and Kathe Kollwitz. The conjuncture of the famine led to a reaching out to forms from transnational contexts, creating a very particular form of vernacular modernity. Sunderason manages the disruption of Indian modernism’s rhetoric about itself with great dexterity by recovering for us the partisan aesthetics of the war period.

If we consider the trajectories of the left-wing cultural movement between 1936 and the decade after India’s independence, we need to begin with what Sunderason calls “the passive participation of art in political mobilization” (31). It is the war and famine that moves the artists to an active authorship. However, even as Chittoprasad and Hore transition to gut-wrenching depictions of distress, the Calcutta group set up in 1943 showed a “vacillating affiliation” to social and socialist art, the latter more ideological in intent. Sunderason’s argument is convincing that the Calcutta Group represents the “missing link” (169) that allows us to explain the deradicalization that happens under the aegis of Nehruvian modernity. There are several aesthetic temporalities in the period, and the “partisan aesthetics” ranges across a spectrum of commitment. After 1947, the artist engaged gives way to the idea of individual humanism and the citizen subject. It is less destitution and more the proleptic idea of modernity and development that takes over. A statement issued by the Calcutta Group in 1950 with the newly formed Progressive Artists Group in Bombay is revealing of this transition. “Art will, as long as it remains, be esoteric. It can be utilitarian, didactic, socialist and religious, but then it is mercenary, pedagogic, political and devotional but never pure intrinsic art” (163). National freedom also called for a freedom from the exigency of showcasing the devastation of subaltern life. A new era, presumably, had dawned when “pure art” could come back. Chittoprasad, the heroic artist, could now express a sense of distance from the “picture as the saddle horse of history,” and Hore could move from the urgency of the present to metaphor. The cover of the book captures this transition. Hore’s *Wounds* (c. 1977) are abstract indentations on paper pulp, no longer the bodies of the suffering human.

In charting this transition, which sits alongside the histories of modernism in Indian art, Sunderason does the exceptional work of producing “granular histories of artistic modernity in India” (36). Decolonization itself emerges as an analytical field in which the privileged narrative of the national-modern is set aside. This book is an original and profound intervention in the understanding of modernity, art, and politics in South Asia.

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Rimli Bhattacharya, *The Dancing Poet: Rabindranath Tagore and Choreographies of Participation*

Delhi: Tulika Books, 2019. 359 pages. Hardcover, \$58.00; £45.00. ISBN 9789382381983.

With a background in comparative studies, performance and gender studies, primary education pedagogy, and translation (Bengali to English), *The Dancing Poet: Rabindranath Tagore and Choreographies of Participation* emerges as a confluence of these strands of Rimli Bhattacharya's expertise. The author has shaped the narrative with relatively obscure documents, memoirs, anecdotes, and statistical details. With her adeptness in translation, she has skillfully excavated that which lays dormant within the printed lines. This has lent new vigor to yet another narrative on Tagore and his times, though Tagore's colossal written opus is a territory well documented, with one of the most recent contributions being *Rabindranath Tagore's Drama in the Perspective of Indian Theatre*, edited by Mala Renganathan and Arnab Bhattacharya in 2020.

Bhattacharya's maiden work in 1997, on Tagore as script consultant for a film based on his last novel *Four Chapters (cār adhyāy)*, was followed by numerous research papers. *The Dancing Poet* emerges as a narrative on Tagore's struggles through his days as estate manager to the guiding guru of Shantiniketan, his open-air schools, as well as his fundraising performances. Bhattacharya foregrounds his attempt to institutionalize the arts by bringing them into formal training at Shantiniketan and taking them out from the folds of hereditary performances. She has also traced the history of dance and its changing contours and spaces, especially woman's entry into theaters and public spaces through these performances. Needless to say that in addition to education pedagogy, performance, and woman dancers, the focus of this work has been choreographed through the dancing poet himself, Tagore.

Spaced out over eight chapters, the author begins in a synoptic way with the themes of the successive chapters and the queries she has in relation to them in chapter 1, titled "The Shape of the Questions." In chapter 2, "Movement and Movements," the author looks into the macro- and micro-cultural movements developing amid mass mobilization of man and machines in the interwar period. She has analyzed within a comparative framework the creation of new national cultures in Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany, and the so-called New Israel through arts and performance, along with the micro-movement at Shantiniketan. There Tagore was experimenting with the new pedagogy of body and mind and also creating *brati bālak* (a scouts-like organization with local rural boys at Sriniketan), which emphasized nurture (*śrī*) and strength (*bal*). Bhattacharya compares the ways in which the narrative conducive to the ruling elite was being developed in new cultures around Europe and Russia with technological support like films, whereas in India, a colonized territory, cultural awakening necessitated an indigenous understanding of the range and diversity of arts and crafts alongside the emergence of hegemonic models of cultural nationalism.

The narrative on women and Shantiniketan becomes more detailed in chapters 3 and 4. In "Cause Apart," chapter 3, the author looks at the entry of women into theaters and other public spaces, an important phenomenon of the times, which catalyzed an old debate related to women adopting the profession of dance and drama, hitherto open only to hereditary performing women, known as *naṭīs* (actresses). She also underscores the debates centered on the issue of women earning a livelihood through dance and the possibility of prostitutes taking up acting as a means of livelihood in those times.

Chapter 4 illustrates attempts in the contemporary arts to fashion the new woman dancers (and male dancers as well) along the ideals of the past. She brings out contradictions visible in the new modernity inspired by ancient sculpture or Ajanta murals, as well as Tagore's own ideological foundation of Shantiniketan-Sriniketan as an educational institution formed by the morals of austerity and plainness ("begging missions") and fundraising through song, music, and dance performances.

The themes of chapter 5, "Opening Up the *Utsav*," are the reconfiguration of *utsav* (festival) in Shantiniketan; *baiṭālik* (music and dance gatherings in the early morning or late evening hours); bringing household decorations like *ālpānās* (geometric floor designs drawn with wet rice flour) into public spaces; new performance spaces instead of auditoriums; and how imported "folk" dances like *garbā* are *Utsav* in the Indian context, understood as a festival or celebration. Within the Brahmo Samaj movement, a nineteenth-century socio-religious reform movement started by Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) to launch the so-called Bengal Renaissance, *utsav* had acquired a significant meaning and had become an integral part of Tagore's practical agenda. He realigns the *utsav* in Shantiniketan in a distinct way to signify an excessive surplus beyond mere need. Instead, it aimed at *ānanda* (joy). While referring to the *utsav* and its impact on building community, the author also raises the important issue of whether or not such festivals were at all significant in overcoming hierarchies of caste and gender.

Chapter 6, "Even Their Demons Dance," sourced from Tagore's correspondences from Java (*jābhā-jātrīr patra*, "letters from Java"), is an account of his Southeast Asian tour covering Java, Bali, Malaysia, and Thailand. Though purposed as a fundraising tour, the author exposes the real intention behind his tour, which was the exploration of the ancient and still-living links between the mother country (India) and its cultural outposts. Tagore's travelogues are further extended in "Kinship, Eros and the Nation," chapter 7. Here the author describes Tagore's 1934 Ceylon tour as an extension of the dancing tours aimed at taking the spirit of his Vishvabharati University elsewhere. She digs into the term "kinship" and finds it quite intriguing and compelling in the age of anticolonial movements in different parts of the world, where she hints it to be a symbolic form of Asian comradeship.

The tension between artistic independence, institution building, and modalities of funding through and in the performance is reflected in "Performance and Begging Missions," chapter 8. The author also draws attention to some areas that require comprehensive research, such as the range, amount, and modes of funding for the various institutions that grew in the three decades until Tagore's death. There is also an attempt to explain the seamless recycling of Tagore pieces in the larger field of dance and theater in West Bengal during the last six decades.

Bhattacharya concludes her study with the significant issue concerning the context of the virtual mode being employed for artistic exchange across nations today. She asks whether the arts remain a visceral field in which resignification is indeed possible?

I strongly recommend this book. Being interdisciplinary in nature, it caters to both academic and lay audiences interested in Tagore, performance, dance, theater, and women in the public spaces of early twentieth-century Bengal. The exhaustive notes and references at the end of each chapter are appreciable, as are the black and white photographs of Tagore, *utsavs* at Shantiniketan, and dance performances, which make for beautiful additions.

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Japan

Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader, *Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese “New” Religion: Transformations and the Founder*

London: Bloomsbury, 2018. 216 pages. Hardcover, £81.00; paperback, £26.09. ISBN 9781350086517 (hardcover), 9781350086517 (paperback).

This excellent book explores the aging of a Japanese “new religion” and the challenges its leaders are facing in coping with the loss of its charismatic founder. Agonshū was founded in 1954 by Kiriyaama Seiyū (1921–2016), whose teaching promises worldly benefits and the “cutting” of bad karma through prayer rituals and ancestor veneration. During the 1980s, his group gained nationwide recognition for its spectacular events. At the time, around half a million visitors annually attended the Star Festival (*hoshi matsuri*), its best-known event. The importance of this book lies in looking beyond Agonshū’s years of success in attracting new followers. Based on nearly three decades of ethnographic research, both authors provide a sharp analysis of interplay between Agonshū’s stagnation, Kiriyaama’s aging, and right-wing shifts in his political message, which lives on in Agonshū today.

Aimed at legitimizing Japan’s role in the Pacific War, these political shifts, as Erica Baffelli and Ian Reader demonstrate, were reflected and shaped by Agonshū’s ritual practices before and after the charismatic founder’s death. Kiriyaama’s enshrinement, the veneration of his relics, and the ways that Agonshū’s leaders continued to channel Kiriyaama’s teachings from the spirit world are striking examples that offer fascinating insights into the reorganization of a “new religion” at a watershed moment.

Reader started researching Agonshū at its peak during the 1980s, and co-author Baffelli joined him soon after members of the new religion Aum Shinrikyō committed attacks on the Tokyo subway in 1995. Kiriyaama’s former membership in Aum Shinrikyō continued to haunt Agonshū ever since. The bursting of the bubble economy, technological changes, and new social trends that Agonshū struggled to adapt to exacerbated and otherwise altered the organization’s experience of crisis that muted its dynamism and growth of previous years. *Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese “New” Religion* tells the story of Agonshū’s response to this crisis.

The book offers many new insights into Agonshū. The analysis of the multilayered negotiation of Kiriyaama’s death within a social and political context is invaluable, and so is the analysis of Agonshū’s leaders’ efforts to mediate the dead founder’s transformation into the most powerful Buddha of all. As its long-term scope of thirty years may already suggest, however, the book also draws heavily on previously published works by the authors themselves and by other scholars in the field. Readers familiar with Japan’s “new religions” and Agonshū might thus be familiar with most of the contents presented in

the first half of the book. Chapters 1 to 3 deal with the problem of the “new” in “new religions,” Kiriyaama’s biography, and the interplay between the group’s beliefs and practices. By contrast, chapters 4 to 6 offer rich descriptions and analyses based on the authors’ recent field research before and after Kiriyaama’s passing. Chapter 4 examines Agonshū’s increasing nationalism in the course of Kiriyaama’s aging, his affiliations with right-wing politicians like Ishihara Shintarō, and his visits to Yasukuni Shinto Shrine, among other activities involving the care of Japan’s war deaths. Chapter 5 covers new ground in showing how Agonshū’s leaders elevated the founder from a human founder and spiritual guide into a superior Buddha and main object of worship. Chapter 6 then combines these strings in a terrific conclusion.

This apparent gap between the first and second halves of the book is not meant as a criticism. It is within the interwoven context of aging, nationalism, and post-mortality discussed in chapters 4 to 6 that the first three chapters emerge in a new light. Problems associated with the dated yet widely used concept of “new religions,” for instance (introduced in chapter 1), are accentuated by Agonshū’s aging and thus become apparent in new ways. The chapters on the aftermath of Kiriyaama’s death and Agonshū’s conservative turn, moreover, pose important questions on the group’s past self-representation as a dynamic, prophetic, and cosmopolitan religion that rejected the war. Cross-references between all six chapters make it easy for the reader to follow the analytical strings between Agonshū’s present and past at any point in the book. Additional comparisons with other aging “new religions,” like GLA (God Light Association) and Mahikari, furthermore guide the reader in understanding the trajectories of Japanese modern religious organizations more broadly. This makes *Dynamism and the Ageing of a Japanese “New” Religion* an excellent introduction to the study of Japanese “new religions” for students and scholars in different fields.

The only thing I found missing in the book was more room for the voices of ordinary practitioners, although the book’s focus is mainly on Kiriyaama and Agonshū’s leadership. The book introduces a rich pool of ephemera, such as flyers and magazines for ordinary members, as well as news articles and ads by Agonshū in conservative newspapers. However, there is relatively little information on how ordinary members of Agonshū interact with and interpret these sources in their everyday lives. It would be interesting to learn more about the meanings regular followers ascribe to Kiriyaama’s death or to Agonshū’s political activism in recent years. This information is partly provided in the book but mostly so through the voices of the authors, whereas direct quotes are overall scarce. In any case, as Baffelli and Reader indicate, future research will be necessary to determine the long-term effects of Agonshū’s new life trajectory after Kiriyaama’s death and the various ways that members deal with his enshrinement and elevation from a human to a powerful Buddha and a main object of worship. This book is an excellent starting point for future comparative research on the aging of contemporary movements.

I highly recommend this book to scholars and students in the field of religious studies and to a general audience with an interest in contemporary society and politics in Japan. It is my hope that Baffelli and Reader will co-author a comparable long-term study about Aum Shinrikyō and its successor organizations Aleph and Hikari no Wa. It should also be noted that an online version of the book is available for free through the Bloomsbury Open program.

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Patrick W. Galbraith, *Otaku and the Struggle for Imagination in Japan*

Durham: Duke University Press, 2019. 335 pages, 95 illustrations. Paperback, \$27.95; cloth, \$104.95. ISBN 9781478006299 (paperback), 9781478005094 (cloth).

In this groundbreaking work, Patrick W. Galbraith offers a detailed analysis of the changing history and perception of manga/anime fans known as “*otaku*.” Galbraith purposefully keeps the term “*otaku*” in scare quotes as he is attempting to “draw attention to it as a label, which is to be interrogated in context rather than taken for granted at large” (6). He initially studies the early articulation of the concept in the context of 1980s Japan and problematizes the term’s more rigid understanding in the United States that it is only applicable to straight, male, Japanese, sexually repressed fans of *shōjo* (girl) manga. He then examines the tensions surrounding the concept in Japan at various key points in time to explain how and why *otaku* are perceived both as representatives of “Cool Japan” and as marginalized men prone to sexual excess and perversion.

The book follows a roughly chronological order, beginning in chapter 1 with the history of *bishōjo* (cute girl) manga art and its male consumers in 1970s Japan. Drawing on a variety of sources, including archival research and interviews with creators, Galbraith shows how predominantly male fans and authors of *shōjo* manga engaged with the genre as a form of escape from rigid societal gender expectations. These fans were able to cross gender and genre boundaries at the time but also “released fanzines featuring *shōjo* as object[s] of affection” (35), thus paving the way for perceptions of *otaku* as socially inept men attracted to cute manga girl characters. These perceptions are examined in chapter 2, which focuses on the 1980s. Early in the decade, Japanese popular media sources established a discourse around *otaku* as “socially and sexually immature” men who “had problems accepting and living in reality” (51). By 1989, however, in the aftermath of a number of gruesome murders associated with an *otaku* serial killer and child molester, this discourse quickly transformed into concerns about the inability of *otakus* to distinguish between reality and fiction. *Otakus* became associated with predatory impulses and even pedophilia, strong associations that remain ingrained in common perceptions to this day.

Chapter 3 examines the concept of *moe* (affection toward manga and anime characters) and particularly its development in the 1990s. Unlike the previous two chapters focused on telling a single story, this chapter consists of three different “perspectives [as] examples of the stories that manga/anime fans and critics tell about *moe*” (81). With this unusual approach, the chapter serves as a conclusion to the more historical first two chapters and as background for the last two. It is based on the author’s decade-long ethnographic field research in Tokyo that he began in 2004. These final chapters are the highlight of an already excellent manuscript. With its complex analysis of the Akihabara neighborhood as a centralized space created by and for *otaku* culture, chapter 4 is truly outstanding. At almost sixty pages, it is also by far the longest chapter and could potentially work as a stand-alone study. Here Galbraith is able to seamlessly interweave observations on history, politics, architecture, and performance in Akihabara in order to show how Japanese politicians have been able to recuperate what they consider “good *otaku*” subculture and infuse it into the national project of “Cool Japan,” while simultaneously marginalizing and policing “weird *otaku*” subculture (183). The final chapter, drawing on a premise that *otaku* culture is not that easily split into distinct “good” or “bad” subcultures, examines maid cafes in Akihabara as unique in-between

spaces where *otaku* can access the world of manga and anime through real-world human interactions.

More important than the chronological structure of the book is Galbraith's reliance on two abstract concepts that hold the text tightly together. The first is a strict distinction made in Japan between "two-dimensional" (that of manga/anime characters, even if they take the form of real-world objects, such as action figures) and "three-dimensional" (that of flesh-and-blood humans) realities. Galbraith returns to this distinction consistently, and it serves as a good grounding for all other ideas he brings in. The second concept is that of "imagination," seen not simply as the ability to envision new ideas and realities but as a transformative anti-hegemonic power. This view of imagination is the focal point of the book and is instrumental as a framework on which the author builds his argument.

The book is meticulously researched. Galbraith draws effortlessly on the work of theorists of media and cultural studies as varied as bell hooks, Edward Said, Henry Jenkins, and Scott McCloud. Yet he remains firmly grounded in the Japanese context of his field research and incorporates important and varied sources by Japanese scholars, artists, creators, and fans. The only minor weakness in Galbraith's writing is his tendency to repeat important points more than what is necessary for readers to follow his reasoning. In some extreme cases, sources are overquoted to the point of recycling (e.g., on page 216, the same quote by Honda Tōro is used in consecutive paragraphs to make a very similar argument). Yet this is hardly noticeable, as the author is typically able to articulate clearly and succinctly his research findings and his intimate familiarity with Japanese culture.

Numerous manga pages and photographs serve as helpful visualizations of what Galbraith discusses. Images are ordered purposefully within blank spaces and on occasion as panels creating a story by themselves outside of the text, a distinctive and successful strategy. The quality of the greyscale print is excellent and, with a few minor exceptions, the images are large enough to be clearly readable.

Thoroughly researched, focused, and well written, this book is a must-read for advanced media and cultural studies scholars as it provides a lot of information and a very distinct view of *otaku* fandom and Japanese popular culture more broadly. In addition, its tight structure and straightforward language, as well as the examples provided from a wide range of popular sources, make it accessible to wide audiences interested in the topic.

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Noriko Tsunoda Reider, *Mountain Witches: Yamauba*

Logan: Utah State University Press, 2021. 224 pages, 18 illustrations. Paperback, \$25.95. ISBN 9781646420544.

The *yamauba/yamanba/yamamba* (mountain witch) is distinctive among Japan's pantheon of supernatural beings. Ubiquitously represented within a diversity of legends, folktales, *noh* plays, woodblock prints, narrative poems, films, and other cultural forms, she personifies an entire category of enigmatic personae. She can be an elderly woman, deity, ancestral spirit, *oni* (demon), *yōkai* (monster), and can even shift between those forms. She also embodies myriad apparent contradictions: the demonic and divine, malevolent and benevolent, fearsome and seductive, voracious and secretive, maternal

and murderous, female and male. Developed over many centuries, her collection of identities invites further study but also defies easy summation.

Noriko Tsunoda Reider's *Mountain Witches: Yamauba* embraces these contradictions. The book's six chapters adeptly catalog a far broader assemblage of historical and literary *yamauba* than one might imagine possible. Its first four chapters fashion a vast body of tales and legends into a rough taxonomy of *yamauba* personae. Japan's mountain witches are far older than we would imagine. Her archetypes are traceable to ancient goddesses described in Japan's earliest mythohistories and for centuries were connected to mysteries concealed within the country's mountainous landscapes. Her associations with demons and monsters evolved alongside the changing (declining) position of women in medieval Japanese society. *Shugenja* (mountain ascetics) tended to demonize and subjugate solitary women living in the highlands, casting them as temptresses and sources of societal disharmony. Other forms of systemic misogyny affirmed the dualistic natures of real and imagined mountain-dwelling women, upholding the cultural vilification of those individuals. Consequently, Reider maintains, such women "found their emotional outlet in ghostly, monstrous figures" (5). The *yamauba* as a literary identity crystallized in the Muromachi period (1336–1573) through transitional texts like the *noh* play *Kurozuka*. It was at this moment that "the good and evil aspects of an *oni*, an *oni*-like creature, and a goddess merged to create a *yamauba*" (162).

The book's final two chapters shift from literary characters to living individuals. Chapter 5 discusses how nonconforming women variously afflicted by old age, abandonment, dementia, or eating disorders were subjected to societal scorn as living embodiments of legendary *yamauba*. Chapter 6 focuses on contemporary iterations of *yamauba*. It opens with a discussion of the teenage denizens of Shibuya called *yamanba gyaru* (*yamamba* girls), the character Yubaba in Hayao Miyazaki's film *Spirited Away* (2001), and the *yamauba* character in a 1995 episode of the manga *Hyakkiyakkō shō*. Analysis here draws only weak connections to traditions covered in the preceding chapters. Indeed, Reider concedes that Yubaba and the fashion-obsessed *yamanba gyaru* are only "yamanbaesque" (146) and not true inheritors of their pre-Meiji forebears. They nonetheless testify to the *yamauba*'s malleability and continuing cultural allure.

Mountain Witches is arranged both chronologically and thematically, a structure that enables Reider to recast the ancient *yamauba* as a thriving, cosmopolitan icon. This organization also enables her to complicate the genealogy by blending analysis of premodern, modern, and even foreign *yamauba* variants. The tangle of threads becomes impossibly frayed in the modern period, when pop culture, media, and international influences dissolve any semblance of thematic or aesthetic continuity. *Yamauba* characters created by Ōba Minako (1930–2007), for example, were influenced by fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and the Finnish author Zacharias Topelius, and those in Kurosawa Akira's film *Throne of Blood* (1957) were based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Connections become more abstruse with discussion of the teenage *yamanba gyaru*. Clearly, modern iterations of *yamauba* can no longer be considered neither indigenous historical tropes nor strictly "Japanese."

Whereas much of the book's textual analysis is wonderfully rich, it is not always contextualized historically or theoretically. Citations from Japanese and English secondary sources are often deployed uncritically. A narrative may, for instance, incorporate interpretations from eighteenth-century nativist Motoori Norinaga, early twentieth-century folklorist Yanagita Kunio, and sundry contemporary authors without

historicizing those respective voices. At other times, the process of assembling those puzzle pieces can feel disjointed. Admittedly, the task at hand—teasing a comprehensive narrative from a bewildering collage of sources and scholarly commentary—is daunting, but the author’s efforts to honor its complexity sometimes feel scattered. Composed of several originally independent studies, the monograph occasionally suffers from redundancies and awkward transitions. Pages 15 and 54, for example, repeat a quotation from religious scholar Hori Ichirō.

Sometimes the book’s coverage of provocative historical issues also leaves the reader wanting more. Its discussion of how “gender transcendent” *yamauba* defied societal gender constructs, for example, is compelling in its own right, but surely it could add more about these defiant personae as countercultural figures and their broader impacts on systemic patriarchy. Reider’s important characterization of *yamauba* as “two sides of the same coin” (34) also invites further commentary. One can surely extend the *yamauba*’s fascinating ability to embody and thereby reconcile opposing qualities to many other aspects of Japanese thought and aesthetics. A monograph cannot (and should not try to) do everything, and one may applaud the author for resisting the temptation to digress from her topic. Nonetheless, I could not help feeling the book would be more impactful if it connected these aspects of the *yamauba* to historical or cultural points of broader interest.

There is no denying, however, that *Mountain Witches* successfully offers a uniquely comprehensive genealogy of the *yamauba* as a cultural icon. Specialists and non-specialists alike will appreciate how it demonstrates the longevity and multiplicity of *yamauba* as a living tradition that continues to resonate with contemporary Japanese life.

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John W. Traphagan, *Cosmopolitan Rurality, Depopulation, and Entrepreneurial Ecosystems in 21st-Century Japan*

Amherst: Cambria Press, 2020. 296 pages. Hardcover, \$109.99. ISBN 9781621965022.

In *Cosmopolitan Rurality, Depopulation, and Entrepreneurial Ecosystem in 21st-Century Japan*, John Traphagan discusses entrepreneurship in rural Japan, drawing a map of the strategies, tactics, and long-term aspirations of his interlocutors. Juxtaposing anecdotal sources to wider demographic and economic figures from national and prefectural Japanese sources, Traphagan explores the dynamic (albeit declining) world of the Japanese countryside. Current pressing issues of Japanese rurality—such as population shrinkage, rural exodus, and economic decline—are the main forces against which Traphagan’s extravagant, dreamy, and at times reluctant (101) entrepreneurs measure themselves across two-and-a-half decades of ethnographic research.

Traphagan has been researching in Japan since the mid-1990s, focusing on aging, well-being, tradition, modernity, medicine, and religion. His geographical focus has largely been the agrarian Iwate Prefecture in Japan’s Tohoku region. This long-term engagement informs the book’s contents with depth and perspective. The book’s theoretical trajectory rests in the well-established field of rural studies in Japan, although the author provides a set of novel contextual reflections, systematically addressing the existential and self-actualization issues of his interlocutors.

Chapter 1 introduces the main research site in southern Iwate and provides the reader with two important definitions. The first defines “entrepreneurialism” as a form of risk management and the ability to innovate, access, and use available resources (5). The second concerns “contemporary rural Japan,” viewed as a system closely connected with the cosmopolitan city and strategically engaged in economic and social sustainability (29).

Chapter 2 produces a series of poignant examples addressing the depopulation of rural Japan and the social centrality of return migrants. These return migrants were born in rural environments but spent their formative years in urban ones. They later decided to return to their hometowns in the countryside and started independent, small-scale business activities. Such activities take advantage of the “entrepreneurial ecosystem” (70) produced by governmental, environmental, cultural, and economic factors that shape the constraints and possibilities of doing business in southern Iwate.

Chapter 3 follows the personal and professional life of “Akiko,” the owner of a gift shop in Kanegasaki town, as well as her interactions with the “ecosystem” of incentives, family relations, and individual trajectories. This chapter and the following one draw the conceptual core of Traphagan’s book, highlighting the pursuit of well-being as the main drive of small-scale entrepreneurship in rural Japan. Chapter 4 focuses on the counterintuitive aspect of reluctance, exploring a thriving family-run pharmacy in Ōshū and the parental obligations that led its co-owner, “Keiko,” to take on the family business. This case provides a second position opposed to the free and individual entrepreneurialism of “Akiko” in chapter 3. Between these two poles, Traphagan’s interlocutors swing in a pendulum-like motion, caught between the search for a better life and duties toward their families and loved ones.

Chapter 5 elaborates on three of the main ideas presented in the book through the experience of “Mariko,” owner of a gelateria in the middle of Iwate’s countryside. “Mariko,” a return migrant who after years spent abroad moves back to her hometown to take care of her elderly parents, sets up a small-scale enterprise borrowing money from her father. We can appreciate here the conflation between Traphagan’s concepts of neo-rurality (a highly connected, cosmopolitan reality), entrepreneurial creativity (the exotic Italian-styled ice cream), and the complex network of affordances actors operate within (family relations).

Traphagan’s book is a much-welcomed source of reflections for scholars and students of Japan, but as much as it reveals interesting depths, it neglects, in my opinion, a number of overarching factors. Traphagan insists on the interconnectedness and cosmopolitan rurality of Tohoku, but for whom exactly? Highly educated, sensitive, and independent individuals are portrayed here, but they emerge as if operating in a vacuum of social connections, family bonds excluded. Are these interlocutors indeed representative individuals of a “neo-rural” (28–29) emerging engagement with post-growth economies, creative mavericks who operate outside the norm (Klien 2020), or ethnographic interlopers? The reader is thus left craving a wider perspective on the social reality of Tohoku at large. Nevertheless, the book’s simple prose and the author’s ability to convey his ideas in a clear and concise manner make *Cosmopolitan Rurality, Depopulation, and Entrepreneurial Ecosystems in 21st-Century Japan* a viable read for undergraduate students and academics alike.

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Will Smith, *Mountains of Blame: Climate and Culpability in the Philippine Uplands*

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020. 192 pages. Paperback, \$30.00. ISBN 9780295748160.

Mountains of Blame appears as a much-needed interjection into Philippine studies and debates—and current obsessions—in anthropology regarding the role of indigenous communities in ameliorating climate change. Will Smith’s ethnography describes the moral discourses that the Palawan, an indigenous community of the Palawan Islands in the Philippines, deploy to understand the violent repercussion of unpredictable climate patterns into their livelihoods and to make sense of the dominant discourse of environmental conservation enforced upon them by the Philippine state and civil-society groups. A peculiar feature undergirds this moral principle, Smith notes. Palawans blame themselves for the erratic climate patterns in which long spells of dry weather and unpredictable rain devastate their livelihood. How to make sense of this almost defeatist stance? What kind of account does it demand from an anthropologist without falling into the trap of essentializing or reifying these moral accounts of self-blame as some weak form of intervention against the environmental norms imposed into an indigenous community by external actors? These are the key questions that Smith tries to explain in this book using the experiences of the Palawans. Their practice of *kaingin*, or swidden agriculture, became the target of different efforts by the government to sedentarize and force them to abandon their traditional livelihood and embrace less destructive economic activities.

Chapter 1 unpacks the genealogy of environmental discourses that framed *kaingin* as a destructive form of economic subsistence. From the Spanish period through the American colonial experiment in the Philippines, the practice of *kaingin* came to signify that which stood opposite to the projects of colonial modernity. Swidden agriculture was perceived as a “wasteful and destructive” (32) activity that must be criminalized. The particular political-economic contours of the colonial Philippines resulted in a situation where colonial knowledge of forestry and the flotilla of bureaucrats demonized swidden agriculture while eliding the role of commercial logging and other efforts of the colonial government to profit from upland areas. These same colonial indexes of barbarity continued to inform how the postcolonial government approached *kaingin*. The Palawans became the recipient population of development norms, whose goals included conserving the environment and the sedentarization of their economic activities. Whereas the colonial government relied on punitive actions to criminalize Palawans’ economic activities, the postcolonial government shifted its focus from the “problem of *kaingin* to the problem of upland development” (41).

Chapter 2 provides an ethnographic description of this morphing approach toward swidden agriculture by enacting the Palawan Tropical Forestry Protection Program (PTFPP). This project introduced new land zones that restricted the Palawans' access to vital resources and forced them to embrace "sedentary lives" (92) in designated areas. Through PTFPP, the Palawans were reconfigured to promote specific relations to indigenous spaces where borders and boundaries marked a new kind of spatial production to suit conservation projects. These borders and boundaries, in turn, became the mechanism through which an absent state made its presence known to the Palawans.

In chapter 3, Smith detects an illustrative example of the rise of a distinct kind of biopolitics in the governing of Palawan by the Philippine state. Instead of relying on punitive measures, the different conservation projects focused on delivering projects that allowed the propagation of Palawans' lives and specific forms of environmental subjectivity. With the introduction of social forestry programs, the focus shifted into making the Palawans productive subjects of environmental norms by transforming their ancestral domains into sites of economic production through agroforestry projects. However, Smith notes that these were done to further sedentarize the Palawans and integrate them into national and global capitalist production. In this way, the shift from punitive toward biopolitical governance changed how the state approached the problem of *kaingin* and pushed the Palawan closer to capitalist production.

In chapter 4, Smith describes how the ensuing processes of dispossession from capitalist integration and the decline of *kaingin* as an economic practice due to climate change were understood by the Palawans through a moral economy of self-blame. Like earlier studies on moral economy (cf. Scott 1967), the Palawans drew from their own onto-epistemologies to explain the gnawing effects of drought and floods on their livelihood. What is particularly striking is that the Palawans' moral account of their dispossession involved the recent change in climate as an epiphenomenon of moral decline. For them, the drought and floods resulted from incestuous relationships, and their deities were punishing them for committing sexual relations with their own kin.

However, this moral economy of self-blame does not excise the state from its role in violently transforming the lives of Palawans. The limits imposed by the government on their customary laws, most specifically the ritual punishment of killing persons involved in incestuous relationships, also contributed to the erratic weather patterns. Since they could no longer perform the necessary sanctions to placate the gods offended by their immoral actions, the Palawans also blamed the Philippine government for the restrictions preventing them from redeeming themselves. Hence, the Palawans find themselves in a predicament where the gods continue to destroy their livelihood by sending more rains and drought to remind them of their moral injunctions. For Smith, these emic accounts of climatic transformation where larger political and economic forces appeared outside the epistemological understanding of the Palawans should not be divorced from their "struggles over the forest lives and livelihoods" (128). They are embedded and articulated as an internal account of "cultural transformation, environmental uncertainty, and new geographies of social differentiation and state power" (ibid.).

The concluding chapter brings together the three ethnographic chapters and identifies crucial implications of Palawans' moral economy of self-blame into the study of indigenous peoples. Smith points to the now unquestioned assumption in anthropology and other forms of engagement with indigenous communities that invariably paint a homogenous and Edenic representation of indigenous communities

as saviors of the environment. He questions, for instance, the possible complications that arise when indigenous communities do not live up to this expectation and instead come up with “troubling accounts” (138) of self-blame that seem to defy the language of empowerment so prevalent in how nongovernment organizations and the government deal with indigenous minorities. These unpopular but grounded accounts, Smith adds, provide a more nuanced understanding that could counter the uncomplicated and dominant “narratives dependent on particular configurations of indigeneity” (ibid.) in the Philippines.

Specific questions are left unexplained in Smith’s ethnographic account. While he succinctly illustrates the shift from punitive to biopolitical approaches to the governing of Palawan swidden agriculture, I wonder if this shift is not just a conceptual illustration of Foucault’s core assumptions about the nature of power but also an indication of a critical historical transition in Philippine political history. More specifically, the post-authoritarian situation somehow engenders a condition where devolution of power came as an after-effect of Ferdinand Marcos’s repressive policies. This is particularly important as a historical juncture when discussing the genealogy of state power on the Palawan Islands and the contour of the moral economy of self-blame that Palawans deploy. Is there a relationship between the ethics of self-governance promoted by the post-authoritarian state and the moralized explanation that Palawans constructed to account for their failure to adhere to moral codes as the sole culprit for the change in weather? In other words, does the moral economy of self-blame find a perfect condition of possibility to emerge when the state’s authority is devolved and localized?

Despite these gaps, Smith’s ethnography provides a powerful reminder to those of us who study and bring illumination to the condition of indigenous communities. Instead of simply recycling idyllic images of indigenous communities as protectors of the environment, he cautions us of the Palawans’ often complicated relationships to the environment. Furthermore, instead of easily anointing the hegemonic language of rights as the only legitimate means for an indigenous community to speak and explain their dispossession, Smith’s ethnography pushes us to reconsider non-rights discourses where people’s emic understanding relies on morals and ontologies to describe their situation. This last intervention, I believe, is the most powerful message one can draw from Smith’s *Mountains of Blame*. Instead of treating the moral ecology of self-blame as another exotic account of some foreign tribal community about their condition, the nonuse of the formal language of rights reminds us of the very limit of dominant frames (i.e., indigenous resilience) to understand and describe dispossession.

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Chee-Beng Tan, *Chinese Religion in Malaysia: Temples and Communities*

Leiden: Brill, 2018. Hardcover, €121.00; paperback, €44.00; eBook, €121.00. ISBN 9789004357860 (hardcover), 9789004429864 (paperback), 9789004357877 (eBook).

Professor Chee-Beng Tan is a cultural anthropologist whose research contributions include major ethnographic studies of Malaysian Chinese society and culture, as well as edited volumes on the anthropology of Asian food. He studied as an undergraduate at what is now called Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, graduating in 1974. At that time, anthropologists trained in Canada, Britain, and the United States staffed the university's social science program. His undergraduate teachers involved him in their ethnographic research projects and encouraged him to undertake graduate work at Cornell University. For his doctoral research, in 1977–78 he studied the Malay-speaking Baba of Melaka, graduating in 1979. After teaching in Singapore for a year, he joined the faculty at the University of Malaya in 1980 and made Malaysia the focus for his research for the next sixteen years.

During those years, Tan conducted research in many locations in Malaysia. However, in 1996, discouraged by the “hegemony of Malay nationalism” (Tan, Ngeow, and Ling 2017, 106), he resigned from the University of Malaya and joined the anthropology department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. During his sixteen years at CUHK, he shifted the main focus of his research to Fujian Province and also made major contributions to the emerging field of the anthropology of food. During that time, he also helped develop the field of overseas Chinese studies. Following his retirement from CUHK in 2012, he joined the anthropology department at Sun Yat-sen University. Due to the demands of shifting jobs, countries, and research interests mid-career, Tan did not have time to fully analyze the research materials he collected in Malaysia during the 1980s and 1990s (Tan, Ngeow, and Ling 2017, 100–1). These materials, supplemented by more recent observations, form the foundation of *Chinese Religion in Malaysia: Temples and Communities*.

Tan's book is comprised of seven chapters, an organization that demonstrates his approach to analyzing the complicated topic that is Chinese popular religion. These chapters discuss temples and local communities (chapter 1); deities, speech groups, and temples (chapter 2); temple services, mediums, and temple promotion (chapter 3); localization and Chinese religion (chapter 4); “Pudu: The Hungry Ghosts Festival” (chapter 5); religious organizations and philanthropy (chapter 6); and Taoist religion in Malaysia (chapter 7). In these chapters, Tan illustrates his analytical arguments using examples from many local communities and speech groups, drawing on interviews and observations made over a time period that spans decades. As well, he often seeks to tie temples and temple traditions back to Chinese roots.

Much effort and research went into the writing of this book. But in the period between Tan's commencing his research on Chinese temples and completing this book, much has been published on these topics. In my view, greater attention to the insights and contributions of other scholars would have deepened and enriched this study. To give but one example, the chapter on Dejiao organizations is empirically based on Tan's research on this topic (Tan 1985) but does not engage with Bernard Formoso's (2010) book *De Jiao: A Religious Movement in Contemporary China and Overseas*, which is referenced in a footnote and listed in the bibliography but not discussed. The same point could be made about many studies cited in this book.

As he described it in a recent interview, Tan's training as an anthropologist was in the Malinowskian tradition of functionalist ethnographic research (Tan, Ngeow, and Ling 2017, 97, 104). Although his approach has developed and changed throughout his career, his account of Chinese religion in Malaysia is functionalist, and he cites both Émile Durkheim and E. E. Evans-Pritchard favorably. For this book, however, Tan did not do functionalist-style in-depth research in a single community but rather multisited research. The result is that the reader is sometimes left with a series of ethnographic snapshots of temples and local communities at the moment in time when Tan visited them.

Multisited research can highlight network relationships and other social patterns, and Tan demonstrates that religious organizations and practices like community temples, spirit mediums, and public philanthropy are found throughout Malaysia. He also shows that overseas Chinese in Singapore and Thailand share these patterns, some of which he further links back to mainland China. The book's only map shows Malaysia's political boundaries. A map showing the regions of China from which overseas Chinese migrated would have been useful for many readers.

Tan's discussion of the modern history of popular Taoism and the Taoist priesthood is this book's most interesting chapter (chapter 7). Seeking unity and influence, Taoists have sought to create centralized forms of organization in both Malaysia and Singapore that promote wide networking with practitioners of Chinese popular religion in "greater China." The outcome of their efforts remains to be seen, but this subject could have been the topic of an entire monograph.

Many have described Chinese popular religion as syncretic and unsystematic; in mainland China, the government views many of its practices as little more than superstitions. In this short book, Tan succeeds in integrating diverse examples of popular religious practice, from temple festivals to spirit mediums, within a coherent framework that makes sense of its diversity. Although the book is scholarly, this study could be seen as a contribution to a modern movement to raise the status of Taoism.

Because I have done ethnographic research on Chinese temples, festivals, and spirit mediums in Penang and Singapore, I read the rich ethnographic data Tan was sharing with interest, but I wondered whether a reader who had less knowledge of Chinese popular religion and its practices would comprehend the significance of this information. This book will be most appreciated by academic experts in the field of Chinese religions and by readers seeking to learn more about Chinese popular religious traditions in Malaysia.

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Taiwan

Kirk A. Denton, *The Landscape of Historical Memory: The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan*

Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2021. 284 pages, 61 illustrations. Hardcover, \$79.00. ISBN 9789888528578.

Kirk A. Denton's *The Landscape of Historical Memory: The Politics of Museums and Memorial Culture in Post-Martial Law Taiwan* presents a timely, comprehensive, and meticulously researched study of museum politics and public memory in contemporary Taiwan. Relying on published sources, fieldwork observations, and interviews with key cultural actors, Denton moves away from ideological binaries imposed by divisive political discourses and focuses on the influential role of museum institutions in shaping the public memory of Taiwan's past and present.

The book includes ten body chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue. Denton sets the stage by studying the mobilization of individual and collective memories for state-building and the expansion of the museum heritage industry as an integral part of urban planning and development. He then continues the discussion in a survey of public museums and memorial sites in the post-martial law era, giving us a compelling account of Taiwan's fast-growing political, sociocultural, and economic landscape. Methodologically, Denton employs a statist approach to illustrate how the varieties of exhibitions in national and local museums reveal the multiple layers of historical memories and how these cultural resources transform Taiwan's collective understanding from a unified homogenous Chinese entity into an inclusive, pluralistic democratic identity.

Chapter 1 looks at three museums that focus on Taiwan's ancient history: the National Museum of History, the National Museum of Prehistory, and the Shihsanhang Museum of Archaeology. Their latest exhibitions break away from the Sinocentric view of history and identify the Neolithic origins of Taiwan, centuries before the arrival of Han Chinese immigrants. Evidently, Taiwan had long been part of the non-Chinese, multicultural Austronesian world. Building on the same notion of cultural pluralism, chapter 2 discusses the inception of the National Museum of Taiwan History during the 1990s. This Taiwan-centered museum places the contributions of Chinese culture and Mainland immigrants on equal footing with the contributions of Japanese colonialists and Western missionaries. The rich heritage of diverse ethnicities and cultures is shown to provide a template for Taiwan to embrace political pluralism today.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss how to make sense of the decades-long Kuomintang (KMT) dictatorial rule. Widely praised as the shrine of Taiwan's democratic struggle, the 2-28 Memorial Hall reconstructs the painful history of KMT's brutal crackdown on citizen activists. In a similar fashion, the National Human Rights Museum was launched in 2018

to advance the pursuit of transitional justice rather than perpetuating the bitter divisions between Taiwanese and Mainlanders. As part of the efforts to stabilize the democratic transition, “the discourse of human rights and exhibition of past human rights abuses have become central to Taiwan identity” (89).

Because the KMT’s White Terror era (1949–87) still haunts the island today, chapters 5 and 6 re-examine several anti-Communist and Cold War memorial sites that the KMT regime built to legitimate its autocratic rule. In particular, Denton highlights the latest efforts by the pro-independence government to repurpose the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall and other Chiang-related cultural sites in the public square. It is worth mentioning that a giant inflatable model of the powerful “tank man” was exhibited outside the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall to commemorate the thirty-first anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre from May to June 2020. This icon of courageous resistance to military dictatorship inspired oppressed peoples worldwide and signified a new Taiwanese initiative to support human rights advocates in neighboring countries.

De-Sinicizing Taiwan and eliminating the legacy of Chiang Kai-shek would never be complete without celebrating Taiwan’s unique heritage. Chapter 7 draws attention to the National Museum of Taiwan Literature, an enterprise designed to cultivate a sense of public confidence in Taiwan’s “national literature” as opposed to “Chinese literature” and to archive the literary accomplishments of native authors who write exclusively about the island’s social and historical experience. Chapter 8 evaluates museums and recreational parks that promote Taiwanese Aborigines’ contributions to Taiwan’s multiculturalism. The Aboriginal influence serves as a powerful paradigm of constructing a multiethnic Taiwan against the hegemonic effects of Chinese nationalism, even though Aborigines make up just a little more than two percent of the population. Chapter 9 discusses new eco-museums and ecological parks that exemplify a deep attachment to the natural landscape and neighborhood community. The interactive ecological exhibitions transcend the museum space through a partnership with surrounding inhabitants, thereby integrating “the residential community into the larger memorial space of the complex” (213). This user-friendly approach prompts visitors to feel proud of Taiwan as a home of recognizable groupings that are both unique and part of a diverse body (215). Connecting Taiwan with the outside world is equally important, as we see through the Museum of World Religions in chapter 10. Taiwan’s religious landscape is both global and local and is composed of spiritual insights from the Aborigines, Chinese immigrants, and Western missionaries.

The remarkable transformation of Taiwan’s museum landscape owed much to the innovative programs launched by several democratically elected governments since the 1990s. Former president Chen Shui-bian and current president Tsai Ing-wen have reformed the management of museums, welcoming inputs from critical intellectuals and civic sectors. President Tsai’s decision to revisit the history of human rights abuses marks an important step in Taiwan’s search for truth and reconciliation. The human rights memorial sites provide an outlet for healing deep psychological wounds associated with violent political upheavals.

For anyone who has not been to Taiwan, this book is the next best thing to experiencing Taiwan’s museums as it includes over sixty images of museums and memorial sites. Denton brings the story up to date by documenting their changes and incorporating these visual materials into the narrative. *The Landscape of Historical Memory* convincingly shows that Taiwan’s museums help to mediate the past and the present,

as well as the global and the local. When the Taiwanese have the freedom to delve into their traumatic past, they are ready to explore the intersection between self and nation and to reconstruct their own identity in a globalized era. This is probably one of the most valuable lessons from Denton's research, and such analytical findings should appeal to Asian historians, Taiwan specialists, museologists, and heritage anthropologists.

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