

## Nakhi Tiger Myth in its Context

Bai Gengsheng

Tiger belief is popular in the Tibeto-Burmese language family. In recent years, academic circles at home and abroad discovered it among the Yi, Hani, and Lisu. However, tiger belief among the Nakhi,<sup>1</sup> one of the most important Tibeto-Burmese language families, is still largely unknown, a fact that impedes our general understanding when we consider the language family as a whole. To make up for this deficiency, the author will try to sort out the background of Nakhi tiger myth and provide a general perspective for the Tibeto-Burmese, or even China's, tiger cultures.

### A Brief Introduction to the Dongba Myth of *The Origin of the Tiger*<sup>2</sup>

Tigers are known as [la<sup>33</sup>]<sup>3</sup> in Nakhi, a term similar or close to the words for tiger in related languages: [lo<sup>31</sup>] in Achang, [lo<sup>42</sup>] in Bai, [la<sup>55</sup>] in Nu, [lo<sup>35</sup>] in Pumi, [la<sup>55</sup>] in Yi, [lo<sup>55</sup>mo<sup>33</sup>] in Jinuo, [xa<sup>31</sup>la<sup>31</sup>] in Hani, and [la<sup>53</sup> qa<sup>53</sup> pM<sup>31</sup>] in Lahu (*Tibeto-Burmese* 1991:124). This shows that the Nakhi and many other Tibeto-Burmese groups, who believe in the tiger, share the same linguistic stock.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Nakhi, also known as the Naxi, are a minority group in China with a population of 309,500. Most Nakhi live in the mountainous region of Yunnan Province and in Lijiang.

<sup>2</sup> *The Origin of the Tiger* : (la<sup>33</sup> t'v<sup>33</sup> la<sup>33</sup> pM<sup>55</sup> in Nakhi) a *domba* (to<sup>33</sup> mba<sup>11</sup>), the Nakhi ritualist, would chant this story during such rites as "Empowering with prowess" and others; a newly inaugurated *domba* chants the myth to absorb the tiger's power.

<sup>3</sup> The Nakhi language has several dialects. The most representative one is the west dialect, which has four tones: 11 indicates a low falling tone, 33 a mid-flat tone, 55 a higher-flat tone, and 31 a lower rising tone.

Of the Nakhi tiger myths *The Origin of the Tiger* is the most famous. It explains the tiger's ancestry, its birth, and its appearance, origin, and powerfulness. It goes something like this (trans. from He Z. 1963):

The heavenly blue dragon is grandfather to the tiger, / the white-faced cat is grandmother to the tiger, / the tiger's father is called Lusigebu, / its mother is called Lusigemu.

The tiger's head is granted to him by the heavens. / The tiger's skin is presented to him by the earth. / The tiger's lungs are given to him by the moon. / The tiger's bones are granted to him by the stones. / The tiger's flesh is given to him by the soil. / The tiger's breath is given to him by the wind. / The tiger's blood is given to him by the water. / The tiger's heart is given to him by iron. / The tiger's eyes are given to him by the stars. / The tiger's voice is given to him by the blue dragon. / The tiger's claws are given to him by the vulture. / The tiger's gallbladder is given to him by the white yak. / The tiger's ears are given to him by the jackal.

There were no stripes on the tiger's body at first. / Those stripes on the tiger's cheeks, face, ears, head, back, arms, sides, waist, legs, tail, and eye sockets / are all drawn as an expression of gratefulness to the tiger by the crow who has enjoyed the tiger's leftovers. / The stripes represent prowess.

Thereafter, / the wasp stole one of the tiger's stripes. / Hence it has tiger stripes all over its body. / The horse stole one of the tiger's roars, / and it neighs like a tiger. / The frog stole one of the tiger's claws, / and its webbed foot looks like a tiger's claw.

The stripes on the tiger's forehead look like bright pearls; / they can bring longevity to man. / The stripes on the tiger's face look benevolent; / they can give a *domba*<sup>4</sup> longevity. / The stripes on its shoulder look like treasure; / it is granted to the ritualist who releases the souls of the craftsmen of longevity from purgatory. / The stripes on the left should look like a sharp knife; / they symbolize ingenuity. / The stripes on the right arm look like a mirror; / they grant beauty, wealth, and prosperity to people. / The stripes on the waist look like the moon; / they shine as much as the moon. / The stripes under the left armpit look like a golden plow; / they are capable of opening up the land. / The stripes on the left leg look like a gold-plated bell; / they are at the disposal of Dingbashiluo.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> *Domba* (to<sup>33</sup>mba<sup>11</sup>): the ritualist of the *domba* religion among the Nakhi. *Domba* is a loan word from Tibetan meaning "wise man." All *domba* are male and inherit their office patrilineally. A *domba* participates fully in the daily life of the village, acting as a holder of spectacular ceremonies or rites for curing diseases in neighboring villages. They possess a multitude of scriptures in the *domba* pictographic language, and are good at singing, dancing, music, crafts, smithing, disease-curing, and divination.

<sup>5</sup> Dingbashiluo (ti<sup>33</sup>mba<sup>11</sup>sI<sup>55</sup>lĒr<sup>55</sup>): master god of the Nakhi *domba* religion. It is said that he is the founder of this religion. Since his name is close to ston-pa-shes-rab in

/ The stripes on its right leg look like *jinjizi*; / they are available for the *zoba* ritualist's use. / The stripes on the tail look like iron pins<sup>6</sup>; / they are a magical weapon for vanquishing enemies.

The tiger befriended Chongrenpandi<sup>7</sup> / and helped him to fight the western monster Leqinsipu.<sup>8</sup> / After Chongrenpandi's death, / the tiger was killed by Taomabenli<sup>9</sup> / to redeem his lost soul.

The tiger died with its head towards the east. / Its skin has been divided into 99 pieces. / Miliduzhu<sup>10</sup> has received one piece; / as a result he killed Milishuzhu,<sup>11</sup> / and won worldwide fame. / The nine unvanquishable men received their share; / as a result they killed nine *zhixu* ghosts,<sup>12</sup> / and won worldwide fame. / The nine men from the Ha tribe<sup>13</sup> had their share; / as a result they killed nine Su ghosts<sup>14</sup> and won worldwide fame. /

pronunciation, as are his experiences, it is commonly believed that he combined *bon* religion dogmas with the early Nakhi primitive religion and created the *domba* religion.

<sup>6</sup> Gold-plated bells (*jinjizi*) and iron pins belong to the magical paraphernalia of the *domba* religion.

<sup>7</sup> Chongrenpandi (ts'o<sup>31</sup>ze<sup>33</sup>p'Èr<sup>33</sup>tv<sup>11</sup>): a Nakhi legendary hero. To cure his father's disease he went to the ghost world to steal the elixir of life; he is respected as an ancestor of medicine.

<sup>8</sup> Leqinsipu (le<sup>55</sup>ti<sup>33</sup>si<sup>33</sup>p'v<sup>33</sup>): a legendary western monster.

<sup>9</sup> Taomabenli (t'a<sup>55</sup>ma<sup>33</sup>pM<sup>33</sup>IM<sup>33</sup>): a legendary tiger-shooting hero.

<sup>10</sup> Miliduzhu (mM<sup>33</sup>IM<sup>55</sup>du<sup>11</sup>dzu<sup>33</sup>): chief of the Du tribe in the Nakhi mythology. The territory under his rule looked like the white heaven, white earth, white sun, and white moon, representing brightness, justice, kindness, and other divine merits.

<sup>11</sup> Milishuzhu (mM<sup>33</sup>IM<sup>55</sup>su<sup>11</sup>dzu<sup>33</sup>): chief of the Su tribe in the Nakhi mythology, whose territory looked like the dark heaven, dark earth, dark sun, and dark moon, representing darkness, evil, ugliness, and other demonic qualities.

<sup>12</sup> Zhixu (sy<sup>11</sup>di<sup>33</sup>ts'I<sup>11</sup>): a type of demon in the *domba*, who deliberately brings disasters and diseases to mankind.

<sup>13</sup> Ha (xa<sup>33</sup>): a divine tribe in the Nakhi mythology. It is said that the Ha tribe and the Su tribe were half brothers, with different mothers. They later separated. The Ha occupied social space, while the Su inhabited wild and mountainous space. At last a war broke out between the Ha, who represented civilization, and the Su, who represented barbarianism. The Ha tribe had a decisive victory.

<sup>14</sup> Su (su<sup>11</sup>ts'I<sup>11</sup>): Since the Su tribe lived under a dark heaven and on a dark earth, symbolizing darkness, evil, and ugliness, they were called the "ghost tribe."

Youlaodingduo<sup>15</sup> got his share; / as a result he killed seven “*meng* ghosts”<sup>16</sup> / and won worldwide fame. / Laobutuogou<sup>17</sup> got a piece; / as a result, he killed *du* ghosts<sup>18</sup> / and won worldwide fame. / Tuogouguru<sup>19</sup> got a piece; / and as a result he killed nine *tuoma* monster-kings<sup>20</sup> / and won worldwide fame. / Puluolaobu<sup>21</sup> got a piece; / as a result he divided gods from ghosts, / and won worldwide fame. / Chongrenlien<sup>22</sup> got a piece; / as a result he killed the yak and tiger with arrows / and won worldwide fame. / Chongrenlien’s eldest son [Tibetan] got a piece; / as result he could ride a lightning horse / and won worldwide fame. / Chongrenlien’s second son [Nakhi] got a piece; / as a result he destroyed ninety-nine enemies’ fortresses and ninety-nine rocks / and won worldwide fame. / Chongrenlien’s third son [Bai] got a piece; / as a result he was capable of building tiled houses / and won worldwide fame. / Gaolequ<sup>23</sup> got a piece; / and he gave birth to four able sons<sup>24</sup> / and won worldwide fame. . . .

---

<sup>15</sup> Youlaudingduo (jÈ<sup>11</sup>la<sup>33</sup>ti<sup>33</sup>do<sup>33</sup>): a spirit in the *domba* religion, who could distinguish right and wrong, perform justice, and suppress demons.

<sup>16</sup> “*Meng* ghost” (mu<sup>33</sup>ts’I<sup>11</sup>): the hungry ghost in the *domba* religion who distinguished himself by his lasciviousness, his gullibility, and by his fear of the neighing of horses, the roaring of oxen, the barking of dogs, the sound of a *domba* praying, the noises a rich man makes while drinking soup, the bleating of goats, the sound of goats splashing in water, and so on.

<sup>17</sup> Laobutuogou (la<sup>33</sup>bv<sup>33</sup>t’o<sup>33</sup>kÈ<sup>55</sup>): an ancestor eight generations above the *dingba shiluo* god-ancestor. It is said that he specialized in holding ceremonies to welcome the god of victory and that of prosperity.

<sup>18</sup> *Du* (dv<sup>11</sup>ts’I<sup>11</sup>): monsters in the *domba* religion. They were born from nine pairs of eggs laid by the ghost-master, who was born from a primitive black egg. They were 360 in number, lived up in heaven, and were used to prevent people from moving back to earth.

<sup>19</sup> Tuogouguru (t’o<sup>33</sup>kÈ<sup>55</sup>kv<sup>33</sup>z’I): a spirit in the *domba* religion.

<sup>20</sup> *Tuoma* (t’o<sup>33</sup>ma<sup>11</sup>ti’I<sup>11</sup>): a master of evil ghosts in the *domba* religion.

<sup>21</sup> Puluolaobu (p’v<sup>33</sup>lo<sup>11</sup>a<sup>11</sup>bv<sup>55</sup>): a spirit in the *domba* religion who has endless magical power and can divide ghost from gods.

<sup>22</sup> Chongrenlien (ts’o<sup>31</sup>ze<sup>33</sup>IM<sup>55</sup>M<sup>33</sup>): human ancestor in the Nakhi mythology, who was a survivor of the floods, and who married with a heavenly maiden, Chenhongbaobai (ts’e<sup>55</sup>ho<sup>11</sup>bu<sup>33</sup>bÈ<sup>33</sup>), giving rise to the ancestors of the Tibetan, Nakhi, and Bai peoples.

<sup>23</sup> Gaolequ (ka<sup>33</sup>le<sup>33</sup>ty<sup>55</sup>): in the genealogy of the narrative Nakhi mythology Gaolequ is the fifth-generation offspring of the human ancestor Chongrenlien, and the fourth-generation offspring of the Nakhi’s founding ancestor. His four children, Ye

### The Cultural Interpretation of *The Origin of the Tiger*

How should we interpret *The Origin of the Tiger* (cf. He Z. 1963)? I believe that this work above all belongs to the tiger worship of the Nakhi. With its supernatural themes and lively wording, *The Origin of the Tiger* graphically expresses both the Nakhi belief in their tiger origin and their strong aesthetic sensibility. It depicts the objects of worship that have fully absorbed people's spiritual beliefs, even to the level of a totem. Therefore, the tiger is perfect inside and out, in appearance and in essence; it is full of dignity whether dead or alive.

The tiger's genealogy is a noble one: the ancestor on his father's side is the blue dragon in heaven, and the ancestor on his mother's side is the white-faced cat. The constituent parts of the tiger's fleshy body are sacred: his head, skin, lung, liver, bones, flesh, breath, blood, heart, eyes, voice, claws, and ears are all granted by nature, enabling him to absorb the essential spiritual properties of heaven and earth and of the sun and the moon. The shape of the tiger is beautiful: its sides, face, ears, head, back, forelegs, waist, hind parts, paws, tail, and the area around its eyes are all replete with beautiful and solemn stripes. It can either grant people longevity or put its enemy to death; it can either open up heaven and earth or compete with the sun and the moon to see who is brighter; it can bestow people with wisdom and strength; it can give people beauty and wealth or serve as the ritualist's magical talisman for conquering ghosts. Even after its death, the tiger's skin will make the god who possesses it famous and the man who possesses it a hero.

Such descriptions in *The Origin of the Tiger* have made an ordinary animal into an object of worship endowed with perfection and endless power, and in harmony with the Nakhi tiger worship in the Nakhi religion, language, folklore, and arts. What constitutes such worship? It can only be explained by reference to the Nakhi view of nature, their ethics, and their sense of self-understanding.

Worship of animals reflects the fact that animals' relation to man is one of the basic relations between nature and mankind. Man not only conducts everyday interactions with the animal world, but also uses it as the main staple for livelihood. Man satisfies his needs for fat, protein, and fibres by hunting and fishing and the domestication of animals. In fact, animals

---

(jĕ<sup>11</sup>), Shu (su<sup>11</sup>), He (ho<sup>11</sup>), and Mai (mĕ<sup>11</sup>), each became an ancestor of the four great Nakhi tribes in remote antiquity.

<sup>24</sup> Ye, Shu, He, and Mai.

that interact with human beings differ in rank. Among all mountain animals, the tiger is the king because it is large in body, quick in movement, fierce by nature, and powerful. Its existence not only influences other animals, but also threatens human life. Therefore, the Nakhi ancestry worshipped its unique dignity and ferocity, as well as its superiority in bodily build; awe lies at the core of their tiger worship. As the clan gradually became aware of its collective identity, its members desired to trace the clan's origins to a powerful genesis; thus tiger worship rose to the level of totemism. People began to regard the tiger as the symbol for their own tribes or clans, an icon to distinguish themselves from other communities. The Nakhi have many totems, such as yaks, bears, golden turtles, goats, and dogs, that played cognate roles alongside the tiger. This is nothing surprising, because the Nakhi are a community consisting of many subgroups that practice totemism.

These worshipped animals among the Nakhi involved two specific beliefs: first, the elements of the universe either create the totemic animal or the universe is created from the animal; and, second, the totem belongs to the clan's genealogy. The totemic animals usually create the universe through transformations of their bodies. For example, the *domba* scripture *Chongbantu* describes the process of transformation of the yak into the universe. After the yak has been slaughtered (He F. 1963:17),<sup>25</sup>

Its head became the heavens,  
 Its skin became the earth,  
 Its lungs became the sun,  
 Its liver became the moon,  
 Its bowels became roads,  
 Its bones became stone,  
 Its flesh became soil,  
 Its blood became water,  
 Its sides became rock,  
 Its tail became the trees,  
 Its wool became grass.  
 Its head points to the north,  
 Its tail to the south.

Not only the yak but also the golden turtle transformed in this way, with the only exception being that the latter transformed into the five elements<sup>26</sup> and

---

<sup>25</sup> *Chongbantu* (ts'o<sup>31</sup>mbÈr<sup>33</sup>t'v<sup>33</sup>): a Nakhi epic that describes the origin of the universe and mankind.

<sup>26</sup> Metal, wood, fire, water, and earth.

five directions, a discrepancy that seems to stem from assimilating foreign myths (He Z. 1964a:37-38).<sup>27</sup> In *Lamumengtu*, this transforming principle has been reversed to work on human figures. It is said that after the human figure was formed, the sun gave him lungs, the moon liver, the stone bones, the soil flesh, the water blood, the *pan* god eyes, the *dong* god head and feet, the *sai* god hands, the *chan* god teeth, and the *heng* god heart, giving soul and flesh to the lifeless wood figure, enabling it to return to the ancestral world (He S. 1987:122-24).<sup>28</sup> Thus, the way the human figure acquired soul and flesh mirrors the way the yak transformed into the universe, the only difference being the direction of transformation.

*The Origin of the Tiger*, like *Lamumengtu*, has adopted the theme of combining all elements. It is said that the tiger got its head from the heaven, its skin from the earth, its lungs from the moon, its bones from the stones, its flesh from the soil, its breath from the wind, its blood from the water, and its ears from the jackal. *Chongbantu*, *Lamumengtu*, and *The Origin of the Tiger* all employ a series of transformations, no matter what combination or type, and make relevant adjustments based on whether the hero is the yak, the tiger, the human, or whatever. For example, the mutually transformative relations between the sun and the lungs, the moon and the liver, stone and bone, water and blood, soil and flesh, earth and skin, stars and eyes, wind and breath, the road and the bowels, and so on are somewhat stable, except that the yak in *Chongbantu* includes the road and the bowels, the rock and the sides, the tree and the tail, and the grass and wool, while the tiger in *The Origin of the Tiger* has the sun and the eyes, iron and the heart, the blue dragon and the voice, the eagle and the claws, the white yak and the gallbladder, the jackal and the ear, and wind and breath. These transformations are all based on two principles of likeness in appearance and nature. For example, the tiger's ears resemble those of the jackal and the tiger's boldness is like that of the yak's. Unlike *Chongbantu*, both *The Origin of the Tiger* and *Lamumengtu* picture all natural elements transforming into the tiger or human figures. These two latter works, especially *Lamumengtu*, came into being at a time far removed from that of *Chongbantu*. The difference is significant: *Chongbantu* appeared during totemic times, while the *Lamumengtu* and *The Origin of the Tiger* came into

---

<sup>27</sup> From *Bibaoguasong* (py<sup>11</sup>p'a<sup>11</sup>kua<sup>55</sup>su<sup>11</sup>): also translated as *The Record of the White Bat's Getting the Scripture*, a Nakhi myth about the origin of divination.

<sup>28</sup> *Lamumengtu* (la<sup>33</sup>mu<sup>33</sup>mM<sup>33</sup>t'v<sup>33</sup>): a Nakhi *domba* scripture, read at the rites for redeeming lost souls, which includes mythological parts.

being during the period of ancestral worship. Both do, however, preserve some totemic traces of the past.

The Nakhi totems as universe-transformers, or integrators of all elements of the cosmos, possess supernatural distinctions, spiritual importance, and grandeur of appearance, as well as uniqueness of origin. Without these characteristics, the yak, the tiger, and the sheep would not have become totems that could arouse feelings of awe in the hearts of Nakhi ancestors.

Totemic animals usually belong to a clan's genealogy and serve as human ancestors in a broader sense. It is same with the tiger. In the *Chongbanchongsha* (ts'o<sup>11</sup>bÈr<sup>33</sup>ts'o<sup>11</sup>sa<sup>55</sup>), there are detailed descriptions about the origin of man and his genealogy that have later been used by the Nakhi rulers and included in the famous *Mu Shu Family Genealogy*. Its basic contents are as follows (Lijiang County 2002):

<u>Chinese Pinyin</u>	<u>Nakhi pronunciation</u>	<u>Translation</u>
cao gu tian neng gu	ts'o <sup>11</sup> kv <sup>33</sup> mM <sup>33</sup> nM <sup>33</sup> kv <sup>11</sup>	The heavens gave birth to a human egg.
cao feng di neng feng	ts'o <sup>11</sup> bv <sup>11</sup> dy <sup>11</sup> nM <sup>33</sup> bv <sup>11</sup>	The earth hatched the human egg.
cao xian gu fu gu	ts'o <sup>11</sup> ze <sup>33</sup> gv <sup>33</sup> fv <sup>55</sup> gv <sup>33</sup>	Albumen and yolk began to mix.
gu fu gu lu gu	gv <sup>33</sup> fv <sup>55</sup> gv <sup>33</sup> lv <sup>11</sup> gv <sup>33</sup>	It was getting warm then;
gu lu qi lu gu	gv <sup>33</sup> lv <sup>11</sup> sa <sup>55</sup> lv <sup>11</sup> gv <sup>33</sup>	The egg created warm air.
qi lu lu lu gu	sa <sup>55</sup> lv <sup>11</sup> dzer <sup>33</sup> lv <sup>11</sup> gv <sup>33</sup>	The warm air condensed to dew.
lu lu liu dian gu	dzer <sup>33</sup> lv <sup>11</sup> ts'ua <sup>55</sup> tie	There were six drops of dew.
yi dian hal niang ding	dw <sup>33</sup> tie <sup>55</sup> hM <sup>55</sup> nie <sup>11</sup> die <sup>33</sup>	One drop fell into the sea;
hai shi hai xian gu	hM <sup>55</sup> sl <sup>55</sup> hM <sup>55</sup> ze <sup>33</sup> gv <sup>33</sup>	Changed into hai shi hai xian,
hai xian la xian gu	hM <sup>55</sup> ze <sup>33</sup> la <sup>33</sup> ze <sup>33</sup> gv <sup>33</sup>	Changed into hai xian la xian,
la xian tian xian gu	la <sup>33</sup> ze <sup>33</sup> mM <sup>33</sup> ze <sup>33</sup> gv <sup>33</sup>	Changed into la xian tian xian,
tian xian cong cong	mM <sup>33</sup> ze <sup>33</sup> ts' <sup>133</sup> tx' <sup>11</sup>	Changed into tian xian cong cong,
cong cong cong yang	ts' <sup>133</sup> ts' <sup>133</sup> ts' <sup>133</sup> jy <sup>11</sup>	Changed into cong cong cong yang,
cong yang cong jiao	ts' <sup>133</sup> jy <sup>11</sup> ts' <sup>133</sup> tcy <sup>11</sup>	Changed into cong yang cong jiao,
cong jiao jiao xian	ts' <sup>133</sup> tcy <sup>11</sup> tcy <sup>11</sup> ze <sup>33</sup>	Changed into cong jiao jiao xian,
jiao xian bi xian	tcy <sup>11</sup> ze <sup>33</sup> bi <sup>33</sup> ze <sup>33</sup>	Changed into jiao xian bi xian,
bi xian cao xian	bi <sup>33</sup> ze <sup>33</sup> ts'o <sup>11</sup> ze <sup>33</sup>	Changed into Bi xian cao xian,
cao xian li wei wei	ts'o <sup>11</sup> ze <sup>33</sup> IM <sup>55</sup> γM <sup>33</sup> γM <sup>33</sup>	Changed into Cao xian li wei wei,
li wei nuo yu	IM <sup>55</sup> γM <sup>33</sup> no <sup>55</sup> γo <sup>11</sup>	Changed into Li wei nuo yu,
nuo yu ban pu	no <sup>55</sup> γo <sup>33</sup> bæ <sup>33</sup> p'v <sup>33</sup>	Changed into Nuo yu ban pu,
ban pu yu	bæ <sup>33</sup> p'v <sup>33</sup> γo <sup>33</sup>	Changed into Ban pu yu,
yu gao lai	γo <sup>33</sup> ga <sup>33</sup> la <sup>11</sup>	Changed into Yu gao lai,
gao lai qiu	ga <sup>33</sup> la <sup>33</sup> tcy <sup>55</sup>	Changed into Gao lai qiu,
ye, shu, he, mai <sup>29</sup>	je <sup>11</sup> su <sup>11</sup> ho <sup>11</sup> me <sup>13</sup>	Changed into Ye, Shu, He, and Mai.

<sup>29</sup> This genealogy is contained in the *Mu Shu Family Genealogy* of the Nakhi rulers. The quotation, however, is from the *domba* scripture *Chongban chongsha*. Since it is transcribed with Chinese characters, some words were transliterated and some were freely translated with sound transcriptions difficult to understand. For that reason, the author has added Chinese Pinyin transcriptions, together with international phonetic symbols of the whole text.



In this very long genealogy, from *cao gu tian neng gu* to *hai shi hai xian gu*, the heavens gave birth to the human egg and the earth hatched it; then it warmed up, became dew, and dropped into the sea. From *hai xian la xian gu* to *jiao xian bi xian*, the genealogy of the birth of animals is told, among which *la*, the tiger, first appears, followed by *tian* (“oxen”), *cong* (“goat”), *yang* (“sheep”), *jiao* (“horse”), and so on. It is only with *bi xian cao xian* that the genealogy of human origins unfolded. Conjecturing from the features of the genealogy, which consists of the Tibeto-Burmese patronymic system, we would say that *hi xian cao xian* is father to the human ancestor *cao xian li wei wei* (also called Chongrenlien). Of course, another view would say that the human ancestor appeared right from *tian xian cong cong*. However, the tiger (*la*) is held to be the earliest animal that has ever appeared quite close to the remotest human ancestors. In his grand work *A Dictionary of Nakhi Pictographs* (1981), Fang Guoyu revealed that there are sayings claiming that “the tiger is the human forefather” among the Nakhi folk.

The relationship between man and tiger can be proven in the *Chongbantuo*. In this work, the human ancestor Chen hongbaobai’ming (ts’e<sup>55</sup>ho<sup>11</sup>bu<sup>33</sup>be<sup>11</sup>mi<sup>55</sup>) was originally a heavenly maiden, whose parents were heavenly gods, called *Zilaoapu* (dzI<sup>33</sup>la<sup>11</sup>a<sup>31</sup>p’v<sup>33</sup>) or *Zilaoa zu* (dzI<sup>33</sup>la<sup>11</sup>a<sup>31</sup>dzI<sup>33</sup>). Here *lao* is same as *la* in the *Official Genealogy of the Mu Family* and the *Origin of the Tiger*; both mean “tiger.” The pictographs *zi lao a pu* and *zi lao a zu* even look like a tiger. If man did not regard the tiger as an ancestor, this kind of pictograph and sound-to-meaning correspondence would be inexplicable.

Due to the symbiotic relationship between man and tiger, the ancient Nakhi people widely practiced the custom of using “tiger” as a surname. For example, the headman of Zuosuo of Yanyuan, Sichuan, was from the Nari, a sub-group of the Nakhi. He called himself La la, which means tiger.<sup>30</sup> Not only the headman of Zuosuo, but also the headman of Zhongsuo was known by the surname of tiger (*la*). For example, in the Hongwu reign of the Ming dynasty, Lawu was appointed head of a thousand households. From La Ruilin, who entered office during the Kangxi reign of the Qing dynasty, to La Chengjie, who was murdered by the Black Yi slave owners in the 1940s, and including La Junrong, La Yongzhong, La Tingxiang, La

---

<sup>30</sup> “Before liberation, the hereditary headman of Zuosuo and the 480 households of Nari under his government were known by the surname of La [‘tiger’]” (Guo and He 1996:210).

Yinghan, La Wenqing, La Bangzuo, and La Shutong, all used the same name (cf. Guo and He 1996).<sup>31</sup> Again, among the four ancient sub-branches of the Nakhi to which the hereditary headman of the Mu family at Lijinag of Yuiinan belonged, the sub-branch Ye usually regard their first ancestor as being born to the tiger, called *Yebeyela* (jÈ<sup>11</sup>pM<sup>55</sup>jÈ<sup>11</sup>la<sup>33</sup>) (Guo and He 1996). In the *Record of the Lijiang Fu*, there is even a legend about a man transforming into a tiger (Guanxu Reign): “It is said that in the early Yunan dynasty, Baishali moududi was brave and determined by nature. Whenever there was injustice, he would lie on the huge rock, transformed in a second, roaring and jumping, leaving traces on the rock, which we can spot even today” (*ibid.*:443).

Because humans and tigers share common ancestry, the *Origin of the Tiger* tells that the human ancestor Congren Pandi befriended the tiger and the tiger took his body to his original ancestral burial ground after his death. Here the author emphasized the similarity of the human ancestor and the tiger. However, since the *Origin of the Tiger* is not the first version of the tiger myth, the story adopted the plot in which Taomabenli (t’a<sup>55</sup>ma<sup>33</sup>pM<sup>33</sup>IM<sup>33</sup>), the hunter, killed the tiger. Some might doubt that the tiger is a totem for the Nakhi ancestors, for why would a people kill their own totem? However, in Asia, America, and Africa, many peoples have the habit of killing and eating their totems, believing that this practice will allow them to absorb the totems’ power and will give them lifelong protection. The same idea is at work when people dress in tiger skins, hoping to glean their magical power. For example, although the Ewenkis in China regard the bear as their totem, they do not refrain from shooting it. However, they will hold a ceremony for their victim, crying at the top of their voices, as if they had lost a parent. Those bear-hunters will not be condemned for the killing; on the contrary, they will be considered true heroes. Whether an adult can become a real hunter largely depends on his ability to hunt big game, such as bears and tigers (cf. Zhu 1999).

The *Origin of the Tiger* narrates that the primordial tiger’s skin was divided into 99 pieces and allocated to many gods, human ancestors, and ritualists, who killed and conquered their enemies, thus making contributions to society and winning world fame. In this case “99” is only an estimated figure; the Nakhi lay emphasis on the *yang* (odd) number and “99” signifies multiplicity. The important gesture here is the division of the tiger’s skin. What cultural meaning does dividing tiger skin have? What does it aim at?

---

<sup>31</sup> Among the Nari of the Nakhi in the Ningliang County of Yunnan “the hereditary headman at Yongning takes the tiger as his root-ancestor and prohibits people from killing it” (*ibid.*).

First of all, it is a reflection of an ancient Nakhi hunting custom. In early times, Nakhi hunters abided by the old rule of “everyone on the spot should have a piece”—whenever they brought down game they would share a piece with anyone they met on the way, besides sharing equally among themselves. If they failed to observe this custom, they believed they would bag no game later on. It reflects a conception of communal distribution. According to this convention, it was a great shame to own anything privately; collective ownership was most honored. Dividing the tiger skin also means dividing its power and strength, bringing its magic to many. Since the tiger is not a personal totem and belongs to all members of the clan, enjoying the protection of the tiger is a collective right. Due to the influence of the theory of the soul’s immortality, people believe that the tiger’s soul and power inhabits every piece of its skin. As a result, just as the Ewenkis would share within their clan the meat of the bear they had killed, the sharing of tiger skin meant collectively distributing the totem’s magic and its benevolence. The aim of sharing tiger skin is no doubt implied in the *Origin of the Tiger*. However, based on other peoples’ customs and mythology, its direct purpose is probably to have a coat made from tiger skin.

The act of wearing a tiger’s skin embodies the history of the symbiosis between man and tiger. This is also the transforming meaning we read in the Nakhi mythology. For example, the warrior god, Youma, whose egg was hatched by the tiger, has a tiger-like head, fur, and ferocious power (He Z. 1963). In Nakhi mythology not only the tiger but also some gods and monsters, after transforming into certain animals, develop correspondent inclinations, abilities, and functions. According to the *The War Between Dong and Shu* (du<sup>11</sup>æ<sup>11</sup>sv<sup>31</sup>æ<sup>11</sup>) (He Z. 1964b) and other accounts, the mythological Nakhi ancestor Mili dongzhu once led his tribe against the tribe of Shu. His nine warriors all wore tiger skins (He J. 1984). In the *Chongbantu*, the Nakhi ancestors’ high regard for tiger skin has been graphically depicted: when Chongrenlien was asked by Zilao apu, who dwelled in the heavens, to milk a tigress, he journeyed to the high mountains and penetrated the tigress’ den wearing a cub’s skin in disguise—he later returned successfully with the tigress’ milk. In doing so, he foiled Zilao apu’s designs to get rid of him. What is more, after marrying the heavenly maiden Chenhong baobaiming, he returned victoriously to the earthly world wearing a tiger’s skin, whereupon he built a beautiful home and gave birth to the ancestors of the three peoples: the Tibetan, the Nakhi, and the Bai (He S. 1987). It is said that the ancestor Gao lai qiu of the four ancient Nakhi tribes—Ye, Shu, He and Mai—was also a great hero who wore a tiger skin. As Lévy-Bruhl has observed (1986), when the heroes in Nakhi mythology

wear tiger skins, both tigers and men grow more powerful than they would have been without each other.

### Traces of Tiger Worship

While the *Origin of the Tiger* clearly shows the Nakhis' reverence for the tiger, traces of tiger worship appear as well in their language, toponyms, customs, political organizations, and medicine. By investigating these aspects of Nakhi culture, we can deepen our understanding of the character of the tiger and its worship in the *Origin of the Tiger*.

#### *Language*

Language is the most stable element in an ethnic culture. Though the lexicon may undergo changes, this happens more slowly than economic developments and shifts within social institutions. The core vocabulary in a language enjoys great stability, and can preserve information within an ancient culture longer than inscriptions on marble stones and copper columns. As far as tiger worship is concerned, the Nakhi language has preserved a rich variety of references.

For example, in Nakhi language “healthy” is *la la* (1a<sup>31</sup>la<sup>11</sup>), which literally means “tiger, tiger”; a free translation would be “strong as a tiger.” This example shows that the tiger symbolizes health and strength according to ancient Nakhi aesthetics: a healthy person’s condition is understood as equivalent to that of a tiger. Another example comes from a Nakhi saying, “at first there were no sages and all sages were taught by the tiger.” This proverb reveals how much the Nakhi ancestors’ regard for the tiger had risen from the level of biology to the arena of spiritual, mental, and moral issues, a level of regard expressed in the *Origin of the Tiger*. Similar phrases found in Nakhi speech are *la shi gan mei shi* (la<sup>31</sup>sI<sup>33</sup>gæ<sup>11</sup>mÈ<sup>33</sup>sM<sup>33</sup>) and *jing jiu la la dui* (dzi<sup>33</sup>dziÈ<sup>11</sup>la<sup>33</sup>IÈ<sup>33</sup>dy<sup>11</sup>). The former, meaning “the tiger does not lose its prowess even after death,” expresses praise and respect for the tiger, whose soul and power will survive death. The latter, translated as “the fierce tiger roars in the human world,” represents the wonderful landscape where man and tiger live together.

#### *Toponyms*

In the Nakhi-populated areas there are many places named after the tiger, including mountains, rivers, regions, and individual villages. Evidence

of tiger worship is everywhere. Mountains and rivers named after the tiger include the Lancang, Hutiao Xia, and Lapu. Where the Lancang river meets the Hengduanshan Mountains there are many Nakhi people. Some place-names refer to the tiger's movements. "Lancang" originally comes from the Nakhi *la<sup>33</sup>ts'o<sup>33</sup>*, meaning "tiger jumps," because where the Lancang river rushes through the valley is grows narrow enough for a tiger to leap over it. The Jinshajiang valley between the Yulong Snow-capped Mountain in Lijiang and the snowy Haba Mountain in Zhongdian, Yunnan, is known as Tiger-Jump Valley, or Lancang ge (*la<sup>33</sup>ts'o<sup>33</sup>ko<sup>11</sup>*), because of the narrow river running through it and the small river island called Tiger-Jump Rock (*la<sup>33</sup>ts'o<sup>33</sup>lv<sup>33</sup>*). It is said that in the past tigers crossed the river using the Tiger-Jump Rock. In addition, in the Weixi County of Yunnan there is a river called Lapu (*la<sup>33</sup>p'v<sup>33</sup>*). According to the *Toponyms of the Weixi Lisu Autonomous County of the Yiinnan Province* (Weixi Lisu County 1987), *lapu* is a Nakhi word meaning "tiger's den."

Many other places have toponyms incorporating the Nakhi word for tiger. The Nari tirbe's original homeland in Yanyuan County of Sichuan is called in Nakhi "Latuo" (*la<sup>33</sup>t'a<sup>55</sup>*); the Lugu lake beside it is called "Latuo hai" (*la<sup>33</sup>t'a<sup>55</sup>hM<sup>55</sup>*) in Nakhi. Here again the syllable *la* in Latuo means "tiger." During the Tang dynasty, the Yongning area of the Ninglang County of Yuiman was called Tanlan or Santanlan. It is possible that Tanlan is a mistake for Lantan, while Lantan might be the transcription of *latao* in the Nakhi language at that time. In addition, during the Ming dynasty the Lancang Guard was established in the Yongsheng County of Yunnan, where Yonghshen was ruled by the Nakhi headman from the Mu family and the Nakhi continue to live. *Lancang* is a Nakhi word meaning "the tiger jumps." In Lijiang and Ninglang of Yunnan, there are many neighboring places named after the tiger; for example, Lashi County's Nakhi name is Lashi (*la<sup>33</sup>sI<sup>55</sup>*), meaning "new tiger"; Baoshan County's Nakhi name is Labo (*la<sup>33</sup>pÈ<sup>11</sup>*), meaning "the springing tiger"; the southern end of Baisha Ba is called Lake (*la<sup>33</sup>k'o<sup>55</sup>*) in Nakhi, meaning "killing tiger." It needs to be pointed out that Shigu's Nakhi name, Laba (*la<sup>33</sup>ba<sup>11</sup>*), has nothing to do with tiger worship, because *laba* comes from the Tibetan word *luopo* (*lo<sup>11</sup>p'o<sup>11</sup>*), a name given to this area by Tibetans during the Tang dynasty. *Luopo* in Tibetan translates into Chinese as "Shenchuan" ("sacred river"), which is exactly the same name given to the Jinshajiang river in the *Tang Shu* (*Record of the Tang Dynasty*).

Villages named after the tiger are widespread. For example, there are two places where the Nakhi live in the Muli County of Sichuan: one is the Laoluo (*la<sup>33</sup>lo<sup>11</sup>*) village—or meaning "the place where the tiger visited"—in the Eya township, and the other is the Nabu (*na<sup>55</sup>pv<sup>55</sup>*) village of the

Wuxiang township. Here *nabu* is a modified form of *labu* (la<sup>33</sup>bv<sup>33</sup>), meaning “the place the tiger visited.” The name of the Nakhi village Laluge (la<sup>33</sup>lo<sup>55</sup>kv<sup>33</sup>) of the Tuoding Township means “the village the tiger visited” (Deqin County 1986). There are six Nakhi villages in Zhongdian County of Yunnan bearing the word for tiger in their names: Lake (la<sup>33</sup>k’o<sup>55</sup>) village—or “the place where the tiger was killed”—of Shangjiang township; Lazhigu (la<sup>33</sup>dzi<sup>11</sup>kv<sup>33</sup>) village—or “the place the tiger frequents”—of Shangjiang township; Lalaixi (la<sup>33</sup>l̥er<sup>11</sup>xi<sup>11</sup>)—“the place where the tiger roars”—of the Shangjiang township; Lariluo (la<sup>33</sup>zi<sup>33</sup>lo<sup>11</sup>) village—“the wooded mountain valley of the tiger”—of Jinjiang township; and Labiaozhi (la<sup>33</sup>bm<sup>11</sup>di<sup>33</sup>) village—“the place of tiger-slaughtering”—of Hutiaoxia township, where it is said that people hunted and shared a tiger. Other examples are as follows: Laha (la<sup>33</sup>ha<sup>33</sup>) village—or “the place where the tiger rests”—of Yongchun township; Lalongge (la<sup>33</sup>lo<sup>55</sup>ko<sup>11</sup>) village—“the place the tiger comes and goes”—of Yongchun township; and Lari (la<sup>33</sup>zi<sup>33</sup>) village—“the village of tiger path”—of Yongchun township (Weixi Lisu County 1987). Names of villages relevant to the tiger appearing in the agreement signed by the Yunnan and Sichuan governments with the Yongning and Lijiang local governments include Lawuwa (la<sup>33</sup>u<sup>33</sup>uo<sup>33</sup>), Laruowa (la<sup>33</sup>zi<sup>11</sup>uo<sup>33</sup>), Laerwu (la<sup>33</sup>γ̣̥er<sup>11</sup>uo<sup>33</sup>), Lakewa (la<sup>33</sup>k’o<sup>33</sup>uo<sup>33</sup>), Laziwa (la<sup>33</sup>tsi<sup>33</sup>uo<sup>33</sup>), and Lamiewa (la<sup>33</sup>mi<sup>11</sup>uo<sup>33</sup>) (Guo and He 1996). Two Nari villages in Yanyuan County of Sichuan are named after tigers: Nawa (na<sup>55</sup>uo<sup>33</sup>) of the Yanhai township, where *nawa* is the same as *lawa*, meaning “the village that has tigers”; and Nakua (na<sup>55</sup>k’ua<sup>33</sup>), where *nakua* is the same as *lakua* (la<sup>33</sup>k’ua<sup>33</sup>), meaning “the tiger’s footprints” (Yanyuan County 1985).

Villages named after the tiger are even more widespread in Lijiang County of Yunnan. *La* in all of the following names means “tiger”: Laquwu (la<sup>33</sup>ts’y<sup>55</sup>uo<sup>33</sup>) (Wutai village) of the Huangshan township; Lamaojiu (la<sup>33</sup>ma<sup>55</sup>dzi̥<sup>11</sup>), situated between the Jinshan and the Qihe townships; Lazhemai (la<sup>33</sup>dzi̥<sup>11</sup>mæ<sup>33</sup>) in the Lashi township; and Lake (la<sup>33</sup>k’o<sup>55</sup>) at the southern end of the Baisha township. Concerning Laquwu village, it is said that once the Nakhi hereditary headman from the Mu family appointed the people of Laquwu village to raise a tiger, but when the tiger escaped as a result of their negligence the Mu family asked for compensation. Hence, *laquwu* means “the village of paying the tiger back” in Nakhi. After the tiger’s escape, the villagers rushed out in search of it and finally found the animal in Lamaojiu. After being chased, the tiger ran from the Qihe township, climbed over the South Mountain to the Lashi township, was caught in the village of Lazhemai, and was killed at Lake, not far from the city. Hence, *Lamaojiu* means “the spot where the tiger was found

escaping”; *lazhmai* means “the spot where the tiger was caught”; and *lake* means “the spot where the tiger was killed.”

The same prevalence of tiger names exists in the Judian township. It is said that the area around the Wuhouqing of Judian that used to be inhabited by tigers is called Lazhuluo (la<sup>33</sup>dzI<sup>33</sup>lo<sup>11</sup>) in Nakhi, meaning “the place with many tigers.” Once a tiger went down the valley to the banks of Jinshajiang river in search of food and was spotted by a hunter. The hunter chased it to the west of the valley, where it disappeared. Therefore the location is called Lapigu (la<sup>33</sup>p’i<sup>55</sup>kv<sup>33</sup>), or “the place where the tiger disappeared.” After the tiger’s disappearance, the hunter continued his search along the valley. The place where he rediscovered and caught the tiger is called Lamogu (la<sup>33</sup>mæ<sup>33</sup>kv<sup>33</sup>), “the spot where the tiger got caught.” The considerably flatter place where the hunter dragged the tiger in order to kill it is called Lakeluo (la<sup>33</sup>k’o<sup>55</sup>lo<sup>11</sup>), “the spot where the tiger was killed” (Su 1997).

Villages with tiger-influenced toponyms in Lijiang of Yunnan are as follows: Laru (la<sup>55</sup>sI<sup>33</sup>), *laru* meaning “tiger cubs,” in the Baoshan township; Laben (la<sup>33</sup>be<sup>33</sup>), “village of tigers,” in the Daju township; Layoutui (la<sup>33</sup>jÈ<sup>11</sup>dy<sup>11</sup>), “the place where the tiger was sent off”; and Lasazhi (la<sup>33</sup>sa<sup>11</sup>dzI<sup>33</sup>), “the village where tigers escaped in all directions.” There is a village called Mulake (mu<sup>11</sup>la<sup>33</sup>k’o<sup>55</sup>) in the Dadong township, meaning “the village that slaughters oxen and tigers.” One must conjecture from these place-names that there must be some inspiring stories or special beliefs behind them.

### *Customs*

In Nakhi marriage customs, architecture, games, costumes, arts, and other cultural activities, tiger worship is expressed in vivid detail, corresponding with the records about tiger mythology in the *domba* scriptures and thus forming an intriguing landscape of Nakhi tiger culture.

In the marriage custom, the go-between is known as *milabu* (mi<sup>33</sup>la<sup>33</sup>bu<sup>11</sup>), meaning “the tiger who holds a maiden in its mouth.” According to He Shicheng, this title originates from a story told by Gonta, a Nakhi *domba*, who lives in the Baidi village of the Zhongdian County of Yuiman (He S. 1993):

In the olden times, a father and a son lived in a mountain village. They were so poor that the son could not get married at the appropriate age. One day, a tiger came and asked, “What do you live on?” The father answered, “We live by working for the landlord in the village.” The tiger

then asked, “What kinds of jobs do you do?” The father answered: “All kinds, from cutting firewood to carrying water. The three daughters of the landlords wear damask and silk and we wear only sackcloth and eat feed for dogs and pigs.” The tiger then asked the father, “Would you like me to find a wife for your son?” On hearing this the father said, “We are too poor for any girl to be willing to marry into our family.” Several days later, the eldest daughter of the landlord was suddenly carried away to the father and son, secretly. The tiger told the daughter, “Your family is far too rich and their family is far too poor. You’d better stay put and be a good wife. Otherwise I will eat you up alive.” She was so frightened that she had to stay and live with them. She asked her husband to get the weaving machine and she labored at it every day without stopping. The husband was asked to sell the damask and silk on the market. The family was faring better and better. One day, when the damask and silk were sold to the landlord’s family, the landlord asked, “Are these stolen wares?” The son from the poor family answered, “My wife wove these.” The landlord’s two other daughters examined the texture and found that it was identical to their elder sister’s handiwork. The landlord then asked how it was that poor son had found a wife. He was forced to tell the truth and the landlord learned that his long-term hired hand had become his son-in-law! He had no choice but to recognize him. From that time forward, the poor father and son lived a better and better life. Since it was the tiger who brought husband and wife together, people call the go-between *milabu*.

According to traditional architectural styles, the Nakhi set up a stone on each side of the gate, called the Dong<sup>32</sup> stone and Se<sup>33</sup> stone, respectively; these are also known as the *yang*-god stone and *yin*-god stone, and the tiger-stone and yak-stone. The gate guardians in the *domba* picture scrolls depict Dong riding on a tiger, Se on a yak. Dong is male and belongs to the *yang*, while Se is female and belongs to the *yin*. Hence the three names agree with each other. The main function of the gate guardian is, of course, to protect the household.

In traditional games, Nakhi children everywhere would play the game of “a tigress protecting her cubs” (la<sup>33</sup>me<sup>33</sup>la<sup>33</sup>zo<sup>33</sup>gæ<sup>33</sup>). It goes like this: a boy will play the tigress and stand in front; a group of people play the cubs and stand behind him in a line. When the game starts, another boy plays the “evil beast” and tries to avoid the tigress in order to catch her cubs, while the tigress will do all she can to protect them. The cubs follow the tigress in

---

<sup>32</sup> Dong (du<sup>11</sup>), whose full name is Milidong (mM<sup>33</sup>IM<sup>55</sup>du<sup>11</sup>), is a *yang*-god in the Nakhi *domba* religion, the male gate guardian.

<sup>33</sup> Se (se<sup>11</sup>), whose full name is Milise (mM<sup>33</sup>IM<sup>55</sup>se<sup>11</sup>), is a *yin*-god in the Nakhi *domba* religion, the female gate guardian.



order, in case they should fall into the hands of the evil beast. Once a cub is caught, the game is over and another one begins.

As for clothing, it is said that the Nakhi ancestors liked to wear tiger skins. In recent years, however, the tiger population has been decreasing rapidly and they are now on the brink of extinction. As a result, the supply of tiger skins has dropped, making it impossible for officials and commoners alike to wear them. The skins passed down by ancestors now serve primarily as symbols of power and status, and are displayed only on special occasions. For example, among the Youngning Nari of the Nakhi in the Ninglang County of Yunnan, on every first and second day of the lunar new year, the headman will reveal the tiger skin normally kept from view, draping it over a chair in honor of his ancestors and for the subjects, commoners, and household slaves to pay homage. On the third day he will put the skin away.

With regard to folk arts, many stories represent the tiger conquering an evil beast. There are also many other legends, stories, and parables; for example, “The Story of the Tiger and the Leopard Drawing Stripes on Each Other” describes the origin of the markings on the bodies of the two animals; “The Story of the Twelve Animals” (Li 1984) explains why the mouse and ox outrank the tiger; “A Hunter in Name Only” (He J. 1984) tells about tiger-hunting; “The Story about Tiger-Jumping Valley” (*ibid.*) reveals how the place-name came about; and “The Rabbit and the Tiger” (Nationality Studies 1978) narrates the rabbit’s competition with the tiger in the arenas of wisdom and bravery. Of course, in these folk traditions, the representations of the tiger are quite complex, differing at times from its sober depiction in myths, language, marriage customs, architecture, costume, and games. Presumably these folk stories appeared after man’s status had risen and the tiger had separated from the gods and ancestors, losing its former dignity.

### *Political Organizations*

As far as social organization is concerned, the tiger is used to characterize political institutions, as may be seen in the military institutions of Wei and Suo, established by the central government during the Ming dynasty within Yanyuan County of Sichuan. Among the five Suo and four Si set up then,<sup>34</sup> the Nari headmen from the *zuo* (left), *you* (right), *zhong*

---

<sup>34</sup> Five Suo and four Si: administrative units in Nakhi (Moso) areas of southwestern Sichuan, established in the Qing dynasty. The four Si include the Guabie Pacification Commission, the Muli Pacification commission, the Gubaishu Pacification Commission, and the Mala Chief’s Office. The five Suo refer to the Zuosuo Battalion

(middle), *qian* (front) and *hou* (rear) identify with the tiger. It is said that the five *suo* originated from the same tiger, becoming its claws, its teeth, the head, the tail, and the stripes. In 1983, the author of this paper was there in person while doing fieldwork. According to a local ritualist, the ancient Moso and their cultural “offspring” found in Qiansuo, Housuo, Zhongsuo, Zuosuo, Yousuo, Yongning, Langqiu, Lijiang, and Yezhi were compared to a tiger and its nine cubs, embodied by the local headmen from each group. It is difficult at present to clarify the organization of the military democracy of the Nakhi headmen at Lijiang during the Ming and Qing dynasties. However, they were always popularly known as having adopted a system of “Nine-Tigers and Eighteen-Young Tigers.” The Mu Family ranked at the top of the power structure, with nine military and civil departments under it, each with two further sub-departments, making eighteen departments and sub-departments all together.<sup>35</sup> In a word, the tiger is a symbol of political power and its institutionalization.

### *Medicine*

The Nakhi have a long history of relying on tiger skins and bones for medical treatment. Using the skin as a mattress is one such usage. Sleeping on it evokes the same totemic identification that wearing it evokes; moreover, it has medical efficacy—people believe that tiger-skin mattresses ward off cold-related diseases. The Nakhi also drink homemade tiger-bone wine profusely in order to have brighter eyes and a sound brain, treat *yin* deficiency, and strengthen the body.

We can see from the aforementioned aspects of Nakhi culture that tiger worship permeates material, spiritual, and social realities. Its variety, importance, and history betray the fact that the tiger is no common animal, but a special totem. Without such a grounding in Nakhi belief systems, mythological works like *The Origin of the Tiger* could never come into being.

### **Origins and Development of Tiger Worship**

---

Commander for the La Family, the Zhongsuo Battalion Commander for the La Family, the Zuosuo Battalion Commander for the Ba Family, the Qiansuo Company Commander for the A Family, and the Housuo Company Commander for the Bai Family.

<sup>35</sup> In the biological taxonomy, the tiger and the cat are of the same family, which explains why in *The Origin of the Tiger* the matriarchal ancestor of the tiger is held to be a white-faced cat.

There are many factors that contribute to an ethnic belief system. Among these factors, however, only a few play a major role. As for causes of Nakhi tiger worship, we can point to the environment, historical traditions, and the ancient Nakhi use of animal resources.

In much earlier times, human beings inhabited a variety of environments: hilly land, plains, steppes, desert oases, and islands. Different living conditions influenced the development of different cultural patterns—"culture" here defined as a product of humanity's adaptation to nature and establishment of a particular relationship with it. The Nakhi and its four sub-groups live in mountainous regions, except for a small percentage who inhabit the flatlands. Even those plain-dwellers build their villages at the foot of a mountain, in order to make plowing, grazing, and hunting easier. The majority of the Nakhi have spread out in the Hengduan Mountains at the intersections of the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau and the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. Here, at an altitude of thousands of meters above sea level, the mountains are high and forests dense, with a plentitude of rivers and streams. In this bounteous land the flora and fauna are plentiful, exhibiting a variety of species and forming a special mountain ecology. In this ecological enclave the tiger is "the king of all animals" and "master of the mountain." As the highest ruler of this hilly land, it has a large expanse to exercise its abilities. Only in the deep mountains and on steep peaks can it thoroughly demonstrate its bravery and power. It roars and leaps there at will.

After the Nakhi ancestors entered the mountains, they established a complicated relationship with the tiger, with whom they have since competed for the control of biological resources. As animists, human beings naturally regard the conquering of the tiger as the highest glory. People have built up a rich tiger culture, materially and spiritually, by recognizing its propensities, creating tools for conquering it, inventing methods of catching it, making aesthetic evaluations of it, and authoring a variety of myths about it. Tiger worship and the tiger totem are the essence of such cultural activities.

Historically, beliefs about the tiger were a common part of the ancient culture and these traditions survive into the present. According to historical records, the Chinese deity Fuxi<sup>36</sup> was born in Western Qiang, and its image, with a human head and a snake's body, appeared on a large number of Han

---

<sup>36</sup> Fuxi is the deity who created the Eight Diagrams and who oversees the crafting of fishing nets and magical instruments, the composing of music, matrimonial customs, the art of hunting, and so on.

dynasty bricks. Fuxi could also have had a tiger's body, a logical alternative for those ethnic groups of the ancient Qiang family who revered the tiger as ancestor, god, and totem. The Yi, Lisu, Hani, Jinuo, Lahu, Tujia, and Bai, all of whom descend from the Qiang, still are keeping alive various traces of tiger worship and relevant customs. These traces are particularly evident among the Yi and Lisu, who belong to the same language group as the Nakhi. The Yi used to be called Luoluo (lo<sup>33</sup> lo<sup>33</sup>) ("the tiger"), suggesting that the Yi's ancestors believed the tiger was their forefather.

Like the Nakhi epic, *The Origin of the Tiger*, the Yi epic *Mei Ge* (me<sup>11</sup>ko<sup>33</sup>) depicts the tiger as a totem that transformed into the universe. In *Mei Ge* the head of the tiger became the heavens after its death; its skin became the earth; its left eye became the sun; its right eye became the moon; its sides became the road; its waist became the stones; its blood became water; its stiff hair became trees; its soft hair became grass; its teeth became stars; its bowels became rivers; its oil became vapor; its body hair became rice seedlings; its marrow became gold; its small bones became silver; its lungs became copper; its liver became iron; its membranes became tin; its shoulders became ponds; its upper arms became the direction of north; and the big lice on its body became buffaloes (CIFY 1959). This series of cosmological transformations is similar to that in *The Origin of the Tiger*, with the only exception being that the description in the *Mei Ge* is more detailed.

Furthermore, mountains, rivers, villages, and regions are named after the tiger in the Yi and Lisu areas. The Lisu have clans with the name of the tiger even today. We can see therefore that the Nakhi, Yi, and Lisu, all of whom are offspring of the Qiang, share the same cultural origin. Of course, as these groups separated their tiger cultures developed along different lines, showing different characteristics. *The Origin of the Tiger* also differs from the *Mei Ge* because at the time of its first written record, Nakhi society had already completed the transition from totemic worship to ancestor and hero worship (He Z. 1963). However, no matter how much these two societies diverged in their evolution of tiger worship, their shared primordial "birth-mark" is indelible.

The ancient Nakhi used to live as nomads on the northwestern steppe, where they depended heavily on animals, living largely on domestication, hunting, and nomadism. Animal resources were used for transport, food, warmth, and even tribal war and religious rites. This mode of existence and production continued without fundamental change even after the Nakhi ancestors had been settled in the southwestern hills and mountains for quite some time. Many sources have clearly shown that until the early twentieth century the Nakhi's livelihood was supported partially by agriculture and

partially by herding. However, for self-sufficiency the Nakhi relied primarily on animals rather than on the land and plants. Their aesthetic focus was also the animal, as the Nakhi language clearly shows. For example, “delicacy” is *e* (γM<sup>33</sup>) in Nakhi, literally meaning “ox”; “capable” is *ruo* (zua<sup>33</sup>), literally meaning “horse”; “beauty” is *zhi* (dzI<sup>33</sup>), literally meaning “leopard”; and “kindness” is *gu* (gv<sup>33</sup>), literally meaning “bear.” Since the tiger is the king of all animals, it became the most salient in animal aesthetics.

Among Chinese minority groups, the wolf plays a major role in the grasslands, the dog in hilly regions, the tiger in mountains, the yak in snowy lands, and the dragon and snake in watery places. All have close ties with the geographically determined activities of each ethnic group concerned. The wolf is a key factor in the maintenance of grassland ecology and influences animal husbandry. In the hilly regions, the dog plays an important role in hunting. In mountainous regions, the tiger is both a wild animal to be subjugated and a source of food. The yak is indispensable to the economy and life of the more northern peoples because of its large build, resistance to cold, longer wool, high-quality milk, mighty horns, and delicious meat and fat. In the watery places the snake links material life and the spiritual universe because it dominates the waters, deciding the fate of planting and fishing.

Thus the Nakhi culture centers on tiger worship and is represented by tiger mythology. This culture has very close ties with the tiger cultures of other Tibeto-Burmese groups; at the same time, however, it preserves its own features. Understanding the relationship between the tiger and Nakhi culture and learning more fully the dynamics of the Nakhi spiritual universe will secure a deeper and more accurate understanding of this people, whether the focus is on nature, war, or peace.

*Institute of Ethnic Literature*  
*Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*  
Trans. by Naran Bilik

### References

- Bai 1999                      Bai Gengsheng. *A Study of Domba Mythology (Dong Ba Shen Hua Yan Jiu)*. Beijing: Social Sciences Documentation Publishing House.

- CIFY 1959 Chuxiong Investigative Team for Folk Literature in Yunnan Province. "Yi People's Epic *Mei Ge (Lun Yi Zu Shi Shi Mei Ge)*." *Literary Review*, 6. Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House.
- Deqin County 1986 The People's Government of Deqin County. *Toponyms of the Deqin County of Yunnan (Yun Nam Sheng De Qin Xian Di Ming Zhi)*. Deqin.
- Fang 1981 Fang Guoyu. *A Dictionary of Nakhi Pictographs (Na Xi Xiang Xing Wen Zi Pu)*. Kunming: Yunnan People's Publishing House.
- Guanxu Reign *Record of the Lijiang Fu (Li Jiang Fu Zhi)*. [A local handwritten document of the Lijiang prefecture.]
- Guo and He 1996 Guo Dalie and He Zhiwu. *A History of the Nakhi (Na Xi Zu Shi)*. Chengdu: Sichuan People's Publishing House.
- He F. 1963 He Fang. *Chong ban tu* (ts'o<sup>31</sup>mbÈr<sup>11</sup>t'v<sup>33</sup>). Chinese trans. by Zhou Rucheng. Lijiang: Lijiang Cultural Center.
- He J. 1984 He Jiren, ed. "A Hunter in Name Only (*You Ming Wu Shi De Lie Shou*)." In *Selections from Nakhi Folktales (Na Xi Zu Min Jian Gu Shi Xuan)*. Ed. by the Propaganda Department of the Lijiang District Party Committee. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House. pp. 179-85.
- He S. 1987 He Shicheng. "*Lamumengtú* (la<sup>22</sup>mu<sup>22</sup>mM<sup>22</sup>t'v<sup>22</sup>)." In *An Annotated Translation of Nakhi Domba Scriptures I (Na Xi Dong Ba Gu Ji Yi Zhu)*. Ed. by the Collecting Office for Ethnic Classical Literature in Yunnan Province. Kunming: Yunnan People's Publishing House. pp. 122-24.
- He S. 1993 \_\_\_\_\_. *Oral Biography of Three Domba (San Ge Dong Ba De Kou Shu Zi Zhuan)*. With notes by Bai Gengsheng. (Unpublished).
- He X. 1993 He Xiaochun. *A Story of the La qu wu* (la<sup>31</sup>ts'y<sup>55</sup>uo<sup>11</sup>) (*La Qu Wu Cun De Chuan Shuo*). With notes by Bai Gengsheng. (Unpublished).

- He Z. 1963 He Zhengcai. *The Origin of the Tiger* (1a<sup>33</sup>t'v<sup>33</sup>1a<sup>33</sup>pu<sup>55</sup>) (*Hu De Lai Li*). Chinese trans. by Zhou Yaohua. Lijiang: Lijiang Cultural Center. (Unpublished).
- He Z. 1964a \_\_\_\_\_. *Bi bao gua song* (py<sup>11</sup>p'a<sup>11</sup>kua<sup>55</sup>u<sup>11</sup>). Chinese trans. by Li Jishan and Zhou Rucheng. Lijiang: Lijiang Cultural Center.
- He Z. 1964b \_\_\_\_\_. *The War Between Dong and Shu* (du<sup>31</sup>æ<sup>31</sup>sv<sup>11</sup>æ<sup>31</sup>) (*Dong Shu Zhan Zheng*). Chinese trans. by Li Jishan. Lijiang: Lijiang Cultural Center.
- Lévy-Bruhl 1986 Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. *How Natives Think (Yuan Shi Si Wei)*. Chinese trans. by Ding You. Beijing: Commercial Press.
- Li 1984 Li Lincan. *Selected Papers on Mosie Studies (Mo Xie Yan Jiu Lun Wen Ji)*. Taipei: The State Palace Museum Print.
- Lijiang County 2002 Lijiang County Cultural Center. *The Genealogy of the Mu Family*. (In Chinese). Lijiang.
- Muli County 1986 Collection of Toponyms of the Muli Tibetan Autonomous County. *Toponyms of the Muli Tibetan Autonomous County, Liangshang Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province (Si Chuan Sheng Liang Shan Yi Zu Zi Zhi Zhou Mu Li Zang Zu Zi Zhi Xian Di Ming Lu)*. Muli. (Unpublished).
- Nationality Studies 1978 Institute of Nationality Studies, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Yunnan History Institute. "An Investigation of the Yongning Nakhi Society and its Matriarchy, the Ninglang Yi Autonomous County, Yunnan (Yun Nan Sheng Ninglang Yi Zu Zi Zhi Xian Yong Ning Na Xi Zu She Hui Ji Qi Mu Quan Zhi De Diao Cha Bao Gao)." *A Report on the Nakhi Research in Ninglang County*, 4. Beijing.
- Su 1997 Su Jiazheng. "The Tiger and a Folktale about Toponyms (*Lao Hu Yu Di Ming De Chuan Shuo*)." In *The Lijiang Daily*, June 23.
- Tibeto-Burmese* 1991 The Editors of Phonetics and Glossaries of the Tibeto-Burmese Languages. *Phonetics and Glossaries of the*

*Tibeto-Burmese Languages (Zang Mian Yu Yu Yin He Ci Hui)*. Beijing.

- Weixi Lisu County 1987 The People's Government of the Weixi Lisu Autonomous County. *Toponyms of the Weixi Lisu Autonomous County of the Yunnan Province (Yun Nan Sheng Wei Xi Li Su Zu Zi Zhi Xian Di Ming Zhi)*. Weixi.
- Yanyuan County 1985 Yanyuan County Documents. *Toponyms of the Yanyuan County (Yanyuan Xian Di Ming Lu)*. Yanyuan.
- Zhongdian County 1984 People's Government of the Zhongdian County. *Toponyms of the Zhongdian County of the Yunnan Province (Yun Nan Sheng Zhong Dian Xian Di Ming Zhi)*. Zhongdian.
- Zhu 1999 Zhu Bing. *Literature of Hunting (Shou Lie Wen Xue)*. Hohhot: Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House and Inner Mongolia Education Press.