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How the Turtle Lost its Shell: Sino-Tibetan Divination Manuals and Cultural Translation

Duncan Poupard

This article is a pan-Himalayan story about how the turtle, as a cultural symbol within Sino-Tibetan divination iconography, came to more closely resemble a frog. It attempts a comparative analysis of Sino-Tibetan divination manuals, from Tibetan Dunhuang and Sinitic turtle divination to frog divination among the Naxi people of southwest China. It is claimed that divination turtles, upon entering the Himalayan foothills, are not just turtles, but become something else: a hybrid symbol transformed via cultural diffusion, from Han China to Tibet, and on to the Naxi of Yunnan. Where borders are crossed, there is translation. If we go beyond the linguistic definition of translation towards an understanding of transfer across semiotic borders, then translation becomes the reforming of a concept from one cultural framework into another. In this way, cultural translation can explain how divination iconography can mutate

and transform when it enters different contexts; or in other words, how a turtle can come to lose its shell.

Keywords: divination, Naxi, Sino-Tibetan, cultural translation.

At the end of a Tibetan divination manuscript discovered in the Mogao caves at Dunhuang, China, written on the verso of a Buddhist sutra and dating to the ninth or tenth century ACE (see Figure 1, British Library manuscript Or.8210/S.6878 verso, hereafter ‘Dunhuang manuscript’), a strange creature appears. It is an animal that is clearly linked with the divination practice being described in the text: the casting of a horoscope for finding a lost object. The divination is carried out by counting various positions around the diagram of the creature, counting one point per lunar day since the object in question was lost, on a schema of ten points, from the animal’s head to its tail. Each point reveals a different location for where the lost item can be found. This method is reminiscent of Chinese turtle divination practices, but the creature itself represents a rather unique mystery that connects old Tibetan rituals with both the transmission of traditional Chinese divination practices and the Naxi people of southwest China, and reveals in the process a case of semiotic cultural translation. This is ostensibly a divination text for

recovering a lost object, but in a cruel irony the creature itself may have lost something one would assume would be quite dear to it: a shell.

Tibetologists have assumed that the creature is a turtle, which seems fair, specifically as the diagram is labelled as such in Tibetan *gser gyi ru sbal* གསེར་གྱི་རུ་སྐྱལ་ (‘golden turtle’) is written on its back. But this hypothesis can also be questioned, as the ‘turtle’ lacks a shell, the clearest identifying feature of its kind. One can imagine an archetypal Greek fable about how the turtle came to get its shell, but the story I will tell here is akin to a trans-Himalayan fable about how the turtle came to *lose* its shell. This research is an investigation into the *Dunhuang* turtle’s origins, and an extension of the debate as to its exact nature, via a comparative analysis of Sino-Tibetan divination manuals. I suggest that it is not *just* a turtle, but something else: a hybrid symbol transformed via cultural translation, from Han China to Tibet, and on to the Naxi people of Yunnan. The Naxi are a minority group of some 330,000 people who

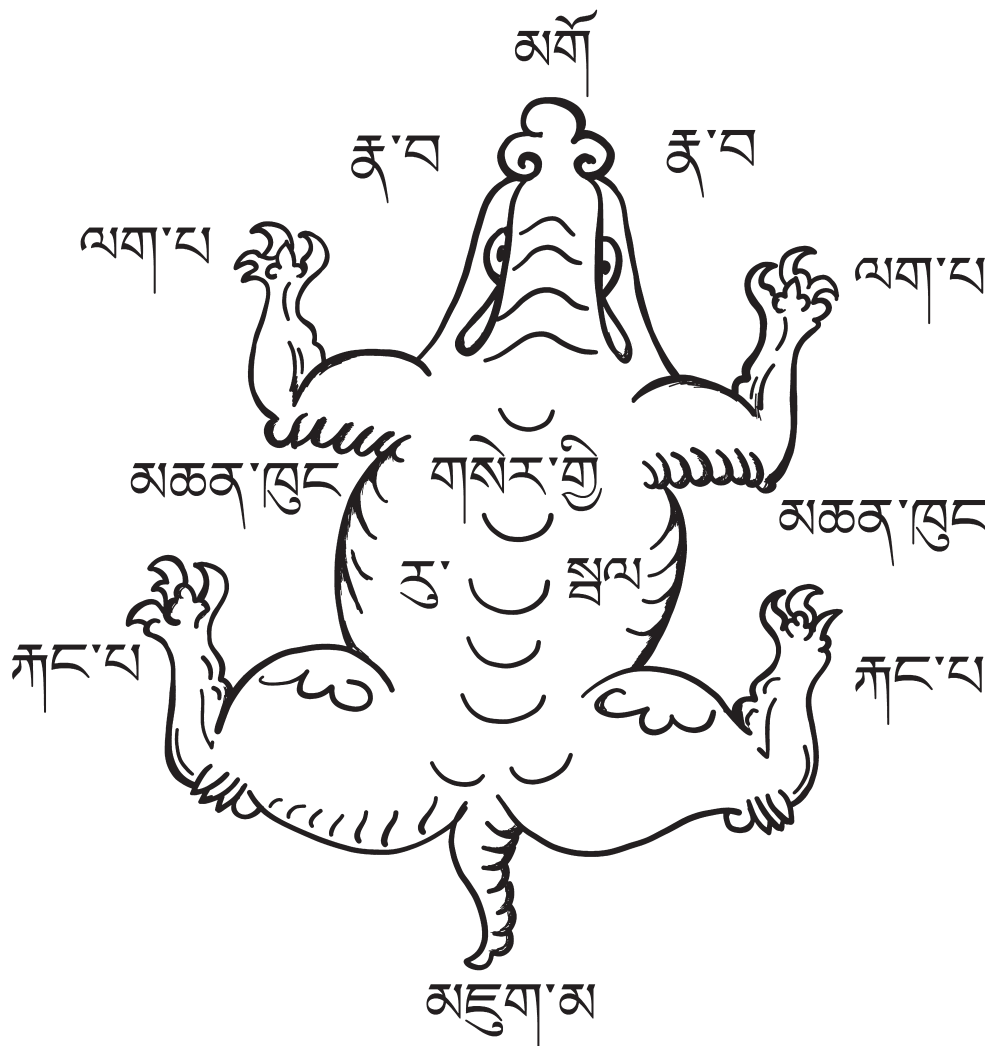


Figure 1. Golden Turtle.

(Or.8210/S.6878 verso)

live in parts of China's Yunnan and Sichuan provinces, and they are one of China's fifty-six officially-recognised ethnic groups. Their native religion, *dongba* (also the name of their unique 'pictographic' script, and the group's religious practitioners) is an amalgam of Tibetan Bon, Buddhist and Daoist traditions.

Where borders are crossed, there is translation. If we go beyond the linguistic definition of translation towards an understanding of transfer across semiotic borders, then translation becomes the reforming of a concept from one cultural framework into another. In this way, we enter the realm of cultural translation as a "borderline condition" of "hybrid states of meaning" (Bhabha 1994: 234). Cultural translation, in taking translation as a process rather than a product, becomes something more than a way of discussing the written texts we call translations; it becomes a way of understanding the world, which consists of the cultural objects and cultures that emerge as hybrid constructs that are enacted by translation across borders. Translation studies is often concerned with what is changed from source to target text, but perhaps the more productive approach is to ascertain what has changed at the cultural level, that is, not to look for what is subsumed in the translation but how "the very frame [of the culture] is subjected to alterations in order to accommodate what does not fit" (Iser 1994: 5). And that is precisely what is under investigation here: the changing frame of a cultural symbol in translation.

Let me first explain why I believe the creature in the Dunhuang manuscript to be a hybrid cultural symbol. Lionel Giles, in his catalogue of the Dunhuang manuscripts, calls the 'golden turtle' an 'imaginary' creature, describing the manuscript as "A long Tibetan text: instructions for astrological divination, with diagrams, and imaginary animal at the end" (Giles 1957: 521). Others have noted how the shell-less turtle seems to resemble a frog: "visually the animal depicted looks like a cross between a turtle and a frog" (Hofer 2014: 100). So which is it exactly? Turtle, something imagined, or frog? And why should this semantic argument matter? In fact, the golden turtle as a cosmic creature is a motif commonly found in the Tibetan religious traditions: both in Bonpo divination and Buddhist cosmologies. Tibetan Buddhist accounts (from earlier Hindu sources) tell of Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of wisdom, calling forth a giant golden turtle into the depths of a great ocean with the power of his mind, then shooting it with a golden arrow. He then turns it over and inscribes on the plastron an astrological chart from which prognostications can be made (see Ramble 2013). This legend

directly connects the turtle with astrological divination, the primary purpose of the Dunhuang manuscript.

The Dunhuang manuscript features twelve divination charts, including the turtle chart at the end. Tibetan astrological divinations are performed to evaluate the positive or negative outcomes of certain actions. In Tibetan elemental astrology every year is related to its own element and animal sign. Each element rules for two years in succession, the first being a male year, the second a female year. The Dunhuang manuscript incorporates all these components, with charts for the sequence of animal signs, the elements, male and female, and other more specific calendrical divinations, as well as the final 'turtle' diagram. The manuscript begins with two calendrical divination charts based around auspicious and inauspicious days, the first being a method of divining a date for setting off on a journey, the second being a calendrical divination related to three of the four supernatural creatures of the four directions: the dragon, the red bird and the tiger. There are then several charts that depict the twelve animal signs in various combinations, and a circular chart divided into ten sections that shows how the male and female are connected to each of the five elements in succession: starting at the top with *myi pho* མྱི་ཕོ (fire male), followed clockwise by *myi mo* མྱི་མོ (fire female), then *sa pho* ས་ཕོ (earth male), and so on. Two charts are divided into nine sections, reminiscent of the magic number squares that are characteristic of the Bon divination practices (Norbu 1995: 153).

While there are Buddhist astrological divination texts, the 'golden turtle' that is the title of the final chart (Figure 1) offers up clues as to its provenance: *gser gyi rus sbal* is the name of a Bon great perfection text, 'discovered' by Ngödrup Drakpa in the late eleventh century, and subsequently copied with some alterations by practitioners of Nyingma, the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism. Whether Bon or Nyingma, the *gser gyi rus sbal* texts are probably philosophically based on earlier Buddhist texts, themselves informed by Chinese myth and ritual. Ramble highlights the story of the cosmic tortoise (or turtle; the Tibetan language, as in Chinese, does not make the distinction) in Bon divinatory practices, quoting Lungtog Gyatso's nineteenth century treatise:

Then Mawe Senge (sMra ba'i seng ge) in his yellow form embraced the world in his compassion, and emanated a golden tortoise as a foundation, and it lay spreadeagled on its back. Its head pointed to the south and its tail to the north, and its four limbs pointed to the four interstices. It is said to have

been the foundation on which Mt Sumeru came into being. From the flesh, the blood, the bodily warmth and the breath of the tortoise there appeared the four great elements; from its twelve outer and inner faculties there arose the basic cycle of twelve years. From its eight consciousnesses came the eight hexagrams, and from its nine orifices the nine magic numbers. Its eight major joints became the eight great planets and its twenty-eight lesser joints became the twenty-eight constellations. (Ramble 2013: 209)

From this passage, we learn that the Tibetan golden turtle points in four cardinal directions, from its body comes the elements, the cycle of the years, the eight hexagrams and nine magic numbers of divination, and even the stars of the cosmos. In the Bon account, the turtle's liver, in the east, is equated to the element of wood, and the calendrical animals of the tiger and the hare, alongside various lunar mansions. From its heart, in the south, comes the element of fire, the horse and snake, with the turtle's lungs equated to the west, and its kidneys to the north. The turtle becomes a graphic representation, a text that can be read, albeit with no fixed syntax.

Tibetan tortoise divination charts adorn *thangkas*, scrolls and woodblock prints, almost always in conjunction with the eight trigrams (symbols from Chinese cosmology that represent the principles of reality) and the twelve animal signs. It is the shell of the turtle that forms the basis for elemental divination. Tibetan turtle diagrams are an example of a non-linear textual structure, the shell often transposed into a receptacle of the magic number square. The salient point is that turtles, complete with shells, are common in Tibetan divinatory charts, a divination tradition that entered Tibet before the tenth century, so the lack of a shell on a creature clearly labelled 'turtle' indicates that something else is going on here: the turtle, so prominent an image in the Tibetan tradition, surely cannot accidentally lose its shell.

Sinitic Turtle Divination

The Bon religion is an amalgam of beliefs and ideas that have their origins in India, China, Central Asia and Tibet, while the origins of the divinatory tortoise can be traced to ancient Chinese divinatory practices. The very Tibetan phrase, *ma hā gser-gyi rus sba!*, is glossed by Das as 'the fabulous golden tortoise from the figures upon whose breast the Chinese are said to have derived their knowledge of divination and astrology' (Das 2000[1970]: 1189). To understand this kind of Tibetan divination, it follows that we must turn to the older Chinese tradition of turtle

divination, which dates back to the beginnings of Chinese civilization. Chinese divination texts were first transmitted into Tibet via an oral lineage dating back to the sixth century ACE, followed by textual translations that took place from the mid-seventeenth century to the late eighth century (Dorje 2008: 55). In China, the turtle shell had long been equated with mystical diagrams, either as a map of the universe, a physical representation of the cosmos, or providing a key to unlocking the secrets of the world via esoteric symbols.

Once again, we can make the connection between this cosmic animal and the practice of writing. Chinese legend has it that the markings on the bodies of animals inspired the invention of script; sacred writings were revealed to us through animals. In fact, Chinese myth holds that Chinese characters, the first form of writing in East Asia, were invented by Cang Jie 倉頡, an official in the employ of the Yellow Emperor (2697-2597 BC). Cang Jie is said to have drawn inspiration from the *ba gua* 八卦 (eight trigrams), that were first seen on the back of a turtle arising from the river Luo 洛. Inscriptions on shells and animal bones are some of the earliest recorded examples of Chinese writing. In addition, the turtle can be seen as a microcosm of the universe: "The turtle shell used in divination was itself laden with symbolism; it has been suggested that its plastron resembled the Shang vision of the cosmos, with the undershell being roughly square like the earth and the domed and round uppershell resembling heaven. As such the turtle carapace was a microversion of the universe" (Sterckx 2002: 100).

But the turtle was also a divination tool, alongside and perhaps due to its metaphorical representation as a symbol of the cosmos. Tortoise diagrams, *guitu* 龜圖, combined *wen* 文, or writings, with pictures of the animal, or in the shape of an animal. One such *guitu*, found in tomb number six at Yinwan, Jiangsu Province and dating to eleven BCE, shows a similar method of divination to the Dunhuang manuscript.

The graphic depiction below (Figure 2 on page 5) is accompanied by a series of written elucidations that are meant to be consulted after the turtle diagram has been used. The diagram is used in the following manner:

用神龜之法：以月電以後左足而右行，至今日之日止，問。

[How to use the mystical turtle: after every first day of the lunar month, move anti-clockwise from the back-left leg, arriving at the current day, stop, and check (the horoscope).] (Lianyungang Municipal Museum 1999: 128, author translation)

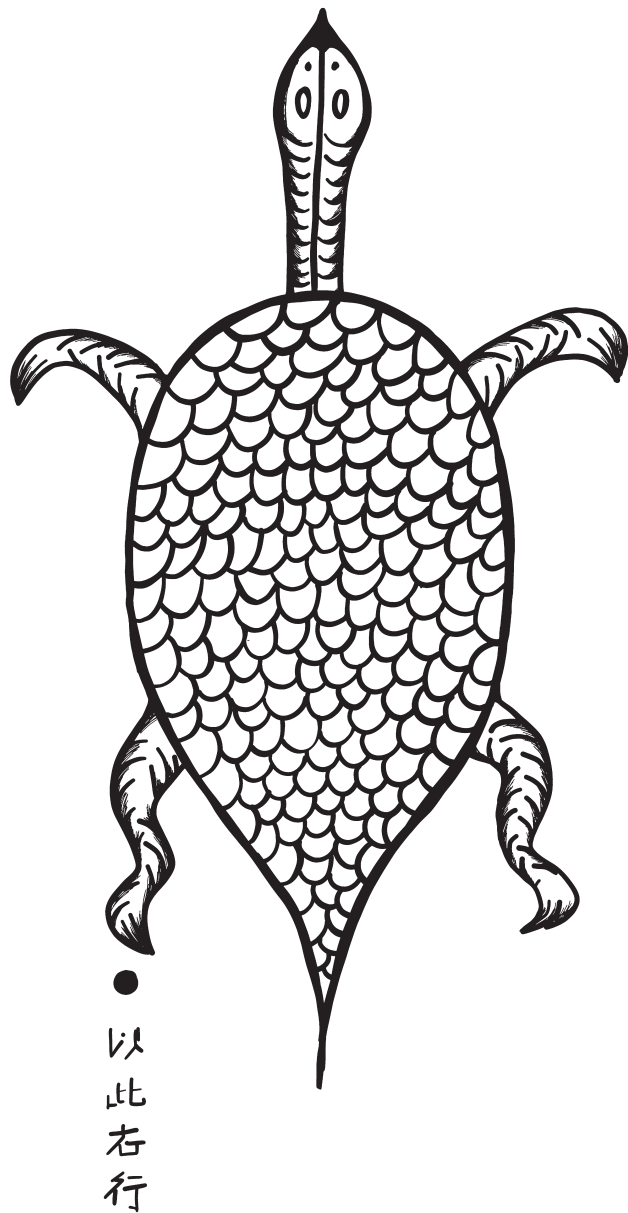


Figure 2. Image of the divination turtle from YM6D9 recto, Lianyungang Municipal Museum.

As an example, one of the elucidations reads:

直右脅者，可得，姓朱氏名長，正西。

[If one comes to rest on the upper-right portion of the body, [the culprit] will be captured. He is Zhang of the Zhu clan, and he lies to the West.] (ibid, author translation)

Fodde-Reguer suggests that the shell in the above diagram is key to performing the divination: “While much remains

unclear about divination by means of a tortoise in the Han, it is evident that the user of the Yinwan manual was meant to count the scutes on a tortoise shell, one scute per day for every day one’s goods were stolen” (Fodde-Reguer 2014: 68).

I find this less evident. In fact, rather than counting along the shell, it seems more likely that the turtle is to be divided into eight parts: the four legs, the head, the tail, and east and west. There are more scutes on the shell in the Yinwan manuscript turtle diagram than there are days in a month, and it is also unclear how they might be divided neatly to fit the eight different prognostications. The differences between this chart and that of the Dunhuang manuscript are evident: this turtle has a shell; it has eight figurative points (only six of which are clearly marked), where the Dunhuang turtle has ten. Whereas in the Dunhuang text the object of the divination was merely lost, the Yinwan text is concerned with *recovering* something that has been stolen, and identifying the culprit by name. Nevertheless, the diagram is, in combination with the elucidations, another example of a non-linear textual structure, also cardinally-oriented. The turtle becomes akin to a compass, its tail and head pointing north and south respectively, and its legs pointing in the sub-cardinal directions, northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest. Each of the eight elucidations lines up exactly with one of the eight points on the turtle diagram, which suggests that the turtle divination is closely linked to the ancient Chinese concepts of the eight directions, yin and yang, and the five elements. Moreover, the shape of the Shang dynasty model of the cosmos was approximately the same as that of the turtle plastron that was the primary tool of Shang divination. As illustrated by these examples, these turtles are symbolic cosmic diagrams.

The Naxi Bage Chart

Noting the similarities between the Chinese and Tibetan divination manuals, it seems certain that the creature in the Dunhuang manuscript is a turtle after all, as the very writing on its back claims it to be. Indeed, Dieter Schuh (2013: 322) refers to it as a “*goldene Schildkröte*” (golden turtle) in his discussion of Sino-Tibetan divination practices, making no mention of the missing shell. Is it not remarkable, however, that the shell, the carrier of text, the tool used for writing and for divining, is missing in the Dunhuang manuscript? Is a *Schildkröte* without a *Schild* not simply a *kröte*, or toad? Our initial question, then, remains. How exactly did the ‘turtle’ come to lose its shell?

The answer can be found far south of Dunhuang, south of Tibet, in the Himalayan foothills of southwest China. Here, in the Naxi culture that is in many ways a melting pot of Han Chinese and Tibetan traditions, the missing shell is part of divination. The Naxi have their own cosmic creature, their own receptacle of writing: the *Haishee-bamei* hæɫ ʃɪɫ paɫ meɫ. In the Naxi tradition, this is a creature that also acts as a cardinally-oriented non-linear textual structure, a microcosm of the cosmos. This creature, the *Haishee-bamei*, is usually referred to in Chinese translation as *huangjin shenwa* 黄金神蛙 (golden frog). In Naxi, *Haishee-bamei* means great golden frog. ‘*Haishee*’ means golden yellow, ‘*ba*’ is frog, and the ‘*mei*’ is an augmentive suffix, in this case ‘great’. It is, excepting the switch from turtle to frog, a direct translation of the Tibetan *ma-hā-gser-gyi-rus-bal* (*ma hā* being an augmentive prefix). It is perhaps best to recount its origin story in some detail.

The legend goes that the Naxi goddess of wisdom, *Perqzsee-samei* (P’ərɫ dɪɫ saɫ meɫ) once put 360 manuals of divination into a box and entrusted them to the white bat, emissary to the gods, to take back to the people of the earth, in order to help mankind to divine the reasons why they had fallen sick. The bat, in its hubris, opened the box, and all the divination books were blown away in the wind. The best among the books were swallowed by the golden

frog. To get the books back, the white bat sought out three (sometimes four) brothers renowned for hunting frogs, and they shot it with an arrow. As it died, the frog underwent a miraculous transformation: it croaked five times, each cry becoming one of the five elements: wood, metal, water, fire, and earth. The frog died with its head facing south, its tail north, with the head of the arrow piercing its body pointing towards the east, and its tail towards the west. The story has many variants; sometimes, the frog names the elements as it dies, other times its five croaks become the elements, and in other versions its individual body parts turn into the elements, or the earthly and heavenly stems of the Chinese calendrical system. All these variants share the common theme of the frog becoming, in one way or another, the cardinal directions, the elements, and other composite parts of the cosmos.

This is all graphically depicted in the *bage* (*ba ge* [paɫ geɫ]) chart, an iconographic Naxi ‘turtle diagram’ that is employed as a divination text, depicting the frog at the center, surrounded by the four cardinal and four sub-cardinal directions and the twelve animal signs. The *bage* chart is used for a variety of purposes: the date of birth of the subject of the horoscope is used as a starting point from which to rotate around the chart, reaching the current year, and the fortune is then told based upon a

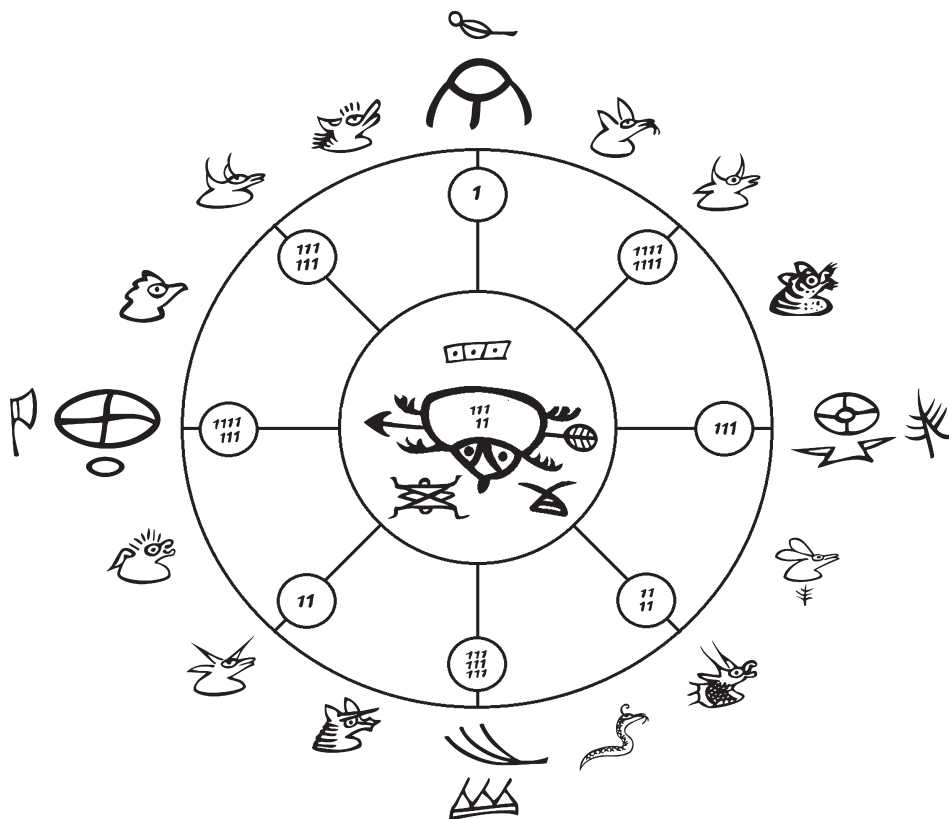


Figure 3. Naxi *bage* chart in dongba script. Adapted by the author from charts in Li (2000) and Rock (1965: v). When used for divination, such charts often show the five elements, eight directions, twelve animal signs, and nine magic numbers. In the center, head pointing south, is the golden frog, its body pierced by an arrow from east to west.

combination of astrological factors. Such a reading may go as follows: “those born in the year of the ram, when their position on the *bage* chart is that of the ox (the northeast point), must perform a ceremony to close the door to the realm of the dead” (Wang 2008: 45).

The Naxi use a diagram of the frog for many different kinds of divination. The frog chart reproduces the eight directions, the five elements and the earthly and heavenly stems, and can be extended to include the constellations. From all this, prognostications can be made. The Naxi use the chart to choose an auspicious day, to divine one’s fortune for the year, to divine the causes of an illness, and resolve a multitude of other issues, large and small. The *bage* chart is in many ways a composite of the diverse divination charts of the Dunhuang manuscript. The Naxi myth of the golden frog is very similar to the Tibetan myth of the golden cosmic tortoise, except that in the *dongba* tradition the frog’s blood, in the south, becomes fire, its bones, in the west, become iron, its gall, in the north, becomes water, its skin, in the east, becomes wood, and its flesh, in the center, becomes the earth. The nine magic numbers share much from the Tibetan tradition, with two differences in the colors associated with the numbers: number three in Naxi is associated with the color red, not blue; and number seven is yellowy-grey, and not dark red. The *bage* chart is ubiquitous in Naxi culture, and can be seen in many places, even adorning walls as a decorative feature (see Figures 4 and 5).

The different divinatory practices of the *bage* chart all require one to move in circles around the animal at the center; just as in the Dunhuang manuscript, the horoscope is created by moving around the limbs of the animal, and the Chinese turtle divination is a circular, counter-clockwise counting of the directions around the shell. The frog diagram, like the Tibetan tortoise diagrams, is a clear example of how the tradition can be enriched via cultural translation: it has become a fully-fledged frog mandala. Furthermore, the Dunhuang manuscript provides concrete evidence that similar kinds of frog/turtle divination were practiced on the Tibetan plateau during the tenth century. This could be a case for the ‘stimulus diffusion’ theory of cultural transfer, wherein a cultural symbol has been borrowed, translated, and developed in a new culture. Stimulus diffusion, defined as “new pattern growth initiated by precedent in a foreign culture” is a close analogue to the hybridity of cultural translation (Kroeber 1940: 20). Kroeber’s first example of stimulus diffusion is the invention of the Cherokee syllabary by Sequoya, based upon his experience of ‘Caucasian’ writing (e.g. basing some characters on letters seen in a spelling book). An example of

stimulus diffusion much closer to home for the Naxi would be that of the creation of the Lisu script. At some point between 1908 and 1941, Sara Ba Thaw, a Karen Evangelist from Myanmar, created the Old Lisu script by modifying Latin characters, which were subsequently refined by the missionary James Fraser, after whom the script came to be known. For Kroeber, this process is of interest “because it combines development within a culture with influence from outside. It contains the element of invention in the wider sense, as well as that of diffusion of a special kind” (ibid).

Naxi frog divination clearly has an antecedent in the Chinese and Tibetan divination practices, but contains its own points of originality too. This originality is most evident when we consider the de-emphasizing of the shell. When the *Haishee-bamei* perishes in the Naxi myth, its constituent parts become the elements, but there is never any mention of a shell. The Chinese cosmic turtle’s carapace was a micro-version of the universe, but the Naxi cosmic creature’s flesh and inner bones become the universe itself, as in the Tibetan tradition. I believe this difference is due to the translation of the concept of turtle; the frog is, in modern-day translation studies parlance, a ‘domesticated’ Naxi idea of the cosmic turtle. How can the idea of a turtle be domesticated? Semiotics helps open up the boundaries of translation to include the non-linguistic sign. Gideon Toury defines translating as a “series of operations whereby one semiotic entity is transformed into, and replaced by, another entity pertaining to another [sub-]code or semiotic system” (Toury 1986: 1112). In his definition, “Translation is an act (or a process) which is performed (or occurs) over and across systemic borders” (ibid). In translation, one semiotic entity is transformed into a different semiotic entity, retaining some potential informational core, which is the basis for what is termed ‘equivalence’. Toury suggests that Roman Jakobson’s tripartite division of translation theory (intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic; that is, translation within the same language, between different languages, and between semiotic systems respectively) is also bound up in the linguistic aspect of translation: “the notion of language appearing, at least as possibility, in each one of its three categories” (ibid). Semiotics, and therefore translation, for Toury, transcend language.

Toury instead hypothesizes translation as a four-stage process: decomposition of the semiotic entity and the assigning of various features to it, selection of features to be retained, transfer of those features, and [re]composition of a resultant entity. We can then apply the turtle/frog to this schema: what once was a turtle is divided into its various features, physical and non-physical, these are then



Figure 4. Decorative Naxi bage chart on the wall of a guesthouse in Lijiang, Yunnan province, China.

(Poupard, 2017)

selected, transferred and recreated in the target semiotic system. The physical features are the ones we have already mentioned: the shell, the tail, the legs. The non-physical features are its connection to the elements, to the cardinal directions, and to divination as a concept. The 'key' non-physical features are retained, but the shell is not. This is cultural translation, translation that "as a superior level of interaction takes place whenever an alien experience is internalized and rewritten in the culture where that experience is received" (Carbonell 1996: 81). This kind of translation at the macro-cultural level occurs without an explicit textual performance. It is intra-semiotic; only when we bring *texts*, and the resulting language transfer into the equation does it become intersemiotic.

Turtle or Frog? A Naxiological Controversy

But what kind of creature is the *Haishee-bamei*? I have so far been referring to it as 'frog', but the answer is not so

clear-cut. It is fair to say that some amount of debate about the exact nature of the *Haishee-bamei* has been conducted in the Naxi studies literature over the past few decades, but that most of it can be deemed somewhat elliptical at best. Nevertheless, the arguments have never been detailed in English, and as they are central to the question, I shall summarize them here.

Naxi scholar Ge Agan suggests the creature's identity is key to understanding the full value of Naxi divination culture as a whole. He states:

《碧帕卦鬆》中出現很多神秘符號，其中最重要的一個符號就是“含時巴美”。隻有先探清這個被稱為“黃金巨蛙”的神靈到底何物，我們方能真正理解這部記載佔卜文化淵源的典籍所蘊藏的文化內涵及其價值。

[Many mysterious symbols appear in the *Bbibbeq gualshuq*, among which the most important is the



Figure 5. Decorative Naxi bage chart on the wall of a Naxi-style courtyard home in an ethnic theme park in Shenzhen, Guangdong province, China.

(Poupard, 2017)

Haishee-bamei. Only if we make clear exactly what kind of creature this ‘great golden frog’ is can we truly understand the cultural content and value within this classic text that recounts the origins of Naxi divination.] (1999: 145, author translation)

Ge analyzes the Naxi graphs for the *Haishee-bamei*, recognising a unity in depictions across manuscript traditions; the graphs primarily include a shell, and a tail. Ge admits that the head and the four limbs do not resemble a turtle, instead more closely resembling those of a frog, but attributes this to the fact that “when they were drawing these graphs, they [the dongba] had no turtles at hand to refer to” (1999: 147). Turtles simply are not native to the region. This recalls our Dunhuang manuscript, and the speculation that the scribe had never seen a turtle. Ge also takes aim at an article written by Mu Lichun which links the traditional Naxi dress to totemic frog worship. Ge (1999) states that Mu’s assertion was based upon an interpretation of the *Haishee-bamei* as a frog, not a turtle, and that turtle worship is more prevalent in Chinese regions. Bai Gengsheng has also written about this very question. He claims that the

Naxi animal is in fact a turtle, based on a combination of factors, philological, linguistic and anthropological. He calls the animal ‘shengui’, the cosmic turtle, throughout his text (e.g. Bai 1998: 18). In terms of the written Naxi characters, Bai notes (in mostly repetitious agreement with Ge Agan) that most, if not all depictions of the *Haishee-bamei* share the following visual characteristics: a long tail, a shell, standing on four limbs, and bulging eyes, and that the ancient Chinese characters for turtle in the oracle bone script also share the shell and the long tail, without long rear legs.

Taking a different stance, Li Guowen (1997: 97) claims that the Naxi have historically worshipped three totemic animals: the tiger, the ox, and the frog. However, the bulk of his evidence for this frog worship is the existence of the ‘cosmic frog’ as the mythical origin of the elements. Recently, Chinese Naxiologists have claimed that frogs were an important totem of at least certain historic groups of the Naxi people, with Mu Lichun and Yang Jiehong presenting historic and philological evidence of frog worship among the Naxi, although it is undoubtedly

not a current practice. Mu Lichun has identified totemic diagrams of frogs drawn on wooden ritual slats (Mu 2016: 72, 124) while Naxiologist Yang Jiehong believes a number of place names in the Lijiang basin are remnants of the totemic frog worship of the Naxi ancestors (Yang 2007). Another example of the importance of the frog in Naxi tradition is the traditional Naxi women's dress, the sheepskin cape, which is cut into the shape of a frog. This, He claims, represents a combination of the sheep totem (from the Naxi's nomadic Qiang ancestry) with the frog totem (their shift to Yangtze valley agriculture), and its invention was a way for the nomadic herders to integrate with the rice-cultivating locals when they first arrived in the region (He 1999). The sheepskin cape is known in Naxi as *yuq'ee ye'eel* [yɿ ʋurɿ jeɿ ʋurɿ] (cape made from sheep's skin), but in Chinese as *qixing yangpi* 七星羊皮 (the seven-starred sheepskin). These seven stars are known otherwise as *ba mie* (frog's eyes) in Naxi; they are stars, but also eyes, as the frog itself is a mandala that represents the universe (Tan 2006: 206).

A folk song that was once widely circulated in Lijiang talks of the connection between the frog and the sheep as totemic animals:

在那個遠古的時候啊
 禾，梅，樹，尤四個部族
 是從居那若傑山遷徙下來
 。 。 。
 人間料不到的厄事突發了
 天兒子和地女兒的腦殼發燒了
 天和地失去了方位
 人們失落了靈魂
 。 。 。
 黃金大蛙在彩霞裡叫了五聲
 他把智慧的雨露洒進了人們的心坎上
 人間就有了五行的方位
 。 。 。
 村寨裡的人們剪裁了羊皮
 仿著黃金大蛙描繡了兩隻大蛙
 [In that time long past,
 He, Mei, Shu and You, four tribes,

Came down from Mount Jjuqna-sheel'loq
 ...
 And then unexpected disaster befell them
 Sons of the sky and daughters of the earth fell sick
 The skies and the earth lost their direction
 And the people lost their souls
 ...
 The great golden frog cried out five times in the
 rainbow clouds
 Drops of wisdom falling into the hearts of men
 And the world found the five elemental directions
 ...
 And the villagers cut the sheepskin
 Embroidering two frogs, in the image of the great
 golden frog]

(He 1991: 28, author translation)

The sheepskin, representing the traditions of the nomadic herders, is cut into the image of the golden frog, a sacred animal of the valley farmers. In their early incarnations, these frog depictions were not explicitly textual; they could not be 'read' per se. Naxi scholar He Xianghong argues that the frog totem became part of Naxi *dongba* culture after the Tang dynasty as the Qiang descendants settled in Lijiang and intermarried with the local Pumi people, who venerated frogs (He 1991). Other examples of frog worship can be seen amongst the Zhuang of south China, the Newar of Nepal and in the early civilization of the Yellow River basin. In the late nineteenth century, Tibetologist Lawrence Waddell published a paper on frog worship in Nepal, claiming that the frog was worshipped by the Newars "not as a tribal totem, but in its supposed capacity of an amphibious (water and earth) divinity subordinate to the Naga demi-gods" (Waddell 1893: 293). The welfare of the crops was said to depend upon the frogs; they were deeply connected to the Newar means of agricultural production. The Newar "specially reserve" the Sanskrit title *Bhuminatha* (Lord or Protector of the Soil) for the frog (ibid: 294). The 'earth' element, or 'soil' is the one most connected with the frog in the *bage* chart. All other elements emanate from the four extremities (the head and tail of the frog, and the head and tail of the arrow), while earth is associated with the center, directly over its body. The frog, for the ancient inhabitants of the Lijiang

basin, may have possessed a dual symbolism, as both an emblem of a good rice crop and of fertility: two of the most important aspects of their lives. Siegbert Hummel states that “if the Na-khi [Naxi] learned the [astrological divination] diagrams and the practices connected with them from the Tibetans, the great deviations from the Tibetan model cannot properly be explained” (1969: 144). The deviations are namely the shift from turtle to frog. I believe that the significance of frogs in the cultures of the people living on the banks of the Yangtze is enough to explain this deviation. Another avenue of investigation might be the connection between frogs and specific elements of *dongba* ritual. *Dongba* myth has it that the origins of *dongba* ritual dance, the intense physical movements accompanied by hand drums and cymbals and performed during a religious ceremony, can be traced back to imitations of frog jumps. The opening of many ritual texts that detail specific dances is formulaic, with some variation of the following lines:

*zzi jje la ler ddiuq / co beeq co beeq zil, co beeq co lee dee
/ Hai sheeq bal mei nee / shuq bel ciq muq zil*

[In the lush, vast land where the people live, dance has its origin and its provenance, [the people were] inspired by the jumping of the Haishee-bamei.]
(Yang et al. 1990: 156, author translation)

In the Naxi tradition, the most ancient of the dances is known as the dance of the *Haishee-bamei*, *Haishee-bamei co, co* (ts'o) meaning jump or dance in Naxi. Naxi myth has it that the very first creature in the universe was the *Haishee-bamei*. As always, we should look at the text in question: the depiction of the *Haishee-bamei* in the dance manuscripts is one somewhere between a turtle and a frog; with a shell, but no tail (ibid).

What we have among Naxiologists, then, are conflicting views of the nature of the *Haishee-bamei* itself. Scholars merely report one possible perception of the symbol. There is ambiguity in the *Haishee-bamei*, introduced by cultural translation, and Bai (1998) reports a perception in calling it a turtle, as Li (2007) or indeed I myself may report a perception in claiming it as a frog. If we see the *Haishee-bamei*, or the creature of the Dunhuang divination diagram, as a turtle, and in a new context see a frog, what we have created is a turtle-frog, a new image, a new “ideational sign...constructed by the mind out of both primary signs” (Gorlée 1994: 16). We must, in short, open our minds to new perceptions, to the possibility of hybridity.

Towards an Etymologography

An analysis of the Naxi texts can show how both turtle and frog come together to create this ‘new ideational sign’, the turtle-frog. Analyzing the written graphs of the Naxi script can reveal the transformation, the dawning of a new aspect of perception. I am suggesting we should delve further into the realm of cultural hermeneutics and ‘etymosinology’. That is, a way of deciphering Sinitic thought and culture by the etymological composition and decomposition of “sinograms” (Hwa Yol Jung 2011:142). A better term for it might be ‘*etymologography*’, as the technique can be applied to any graphic/symbolic representation of a word, and perhaps now that we are looking at a Tibeto-Burman script the term can be disassociated from the Sinitic overtones. What characters are used, and *how* are they used in the literature? There do indeed appear to be written representations of turtles and frogs utilising distinct written graphs—but the turtle graph is always read in classic texts as the unique mythical beast, *Haishee-bamei*, and the frog simply as a generic ‘ba’. There was likely no word for turtle/tortoise until the loan word, *wuguil*, was introduced into Naxi from the Chinese *wugui* 烏龜 (Pinson 2012).

I wish to make the case for the *Haishee-bamei* as a translated turtle, and the frog being the post-transformation state of the mythic creature. The key step to answering the turtle/frog question in the Naxi context is understanding this process of semiotic *translation* from turtle to frog. In focusing on a binary question (turtle or frog?), Bai, Ge and Li above all ignore the transformative element of writing (the third possibility, the amalgam of turtle and frog): the cosmic creature is, in fact, both; before and after the internalisation of its shell, of writing. It was once a turtle, but becomes a frog-like creature, which in turn becomes the elements, and finally a compositional *element* of writing itself. I will attempt to break this complex series of transformations down, step by step.

If we look closely at the textual tradition which tells the white bat story, which features in the ritual known as *Bbibbeq qualshuq* [pyl p^ha^l ko^l su^l] (the search for divination scriptures), we can see the creature and its transformation. The story relates how the white bat was able to travel up to the heavens to find the books of divination and save mankind from illness, but then accidentally drops them into the turtle/frog’s mouth. The creature is killed in order to retrieve the books, giving birth to divination, and, metaphorically, writing. Before the turtle is killed, the cosmic animal is clearly depicted as a turtle, with a shell (see Figure 6). The moment the animal is killed



Figure 6. Bbibbeq gualshuq, page 31, handwritten by dongba He Guowei (2016), reproduced with permission. Here in the bottom line we see the moment the Haishee-bamei, replete with turtle shell, eats the books as they drop into the sacred lake.



Figure 7. Bbibbeq gualshuq, page 32, handwritten by dongba He Guowei (2016), reproduced with permission. The final panel (bottom right) shows the death of the Haishee-bamei, now without its shell, a frog, as it is about to be reborn into the elements and cardinal directions.

by the huntsman’s arrow, however, it has become a frog; its shell is no longer present, the “writing” of the shell has been internalised (see Figure 7). This metamorphosis is not unique to one single manuscript; it is a common feature of the tradition. The manuscript in Figures 6 and 7 was copied in 2016, but based on a common *Bbibbeq gualshuq* tradition that dates back to the eighteenth century, and possibly earlier. In 1936, Joseph Rock translated a *Bbibbeq gualshuq* manuscript which he claimed to be over two hundred years old. It is likely that this manuscript tradition is about as old as the written *dongba* manuscript culture itself, but we cannot accurately date the origins of the written books. Rock’s manuscript also shows the same transformation (see Rock 1936: 51).

Similarly, the manuscript collected in vol. forty of the one hundred-volume translation of Naxi classics (DBWHYJS 1999), illustrates what is clearly a turtle, replete with shell, eating the divination books. Then, when it is killed by the arrow, it becomes a frog, its shell now missing. The section of the story concerning the *Haishee-bamei* eating the books is formulaic, and can be read like this:

Haishee-bamei ku nieq kee, bbeeq-ee Haishee-bamei nee kua, Haishee-bamei gv nee haishee bbeeq-ee zzee du me, beeq lee ssu muq ka nee tv.

[The books of divination were put into the golden frog’s mouth, and it swallowed them. And that’s how

the frog’s body came to resemble that of a book.]
(DBWHYJS 1999, vol. 40: 28, author translation)

The above section is an example of an origin fable, clearly referring to a turtle, for a frog’s body does not resemble a book. The *Haishee-bamei* has a shell, and the shell is what resembles the book, as in the Chinese myth of the cosmic turtle. When it dies (undergoes a transformation), however, the shell disappears and we are left with the frog. In Fu Maoji’s interlinear translation of the same story from a different *Bbibbeq gualshuq* manuscript tradition, we see the *Haishee-bamei* with its shell, until the moment it is killed by the arrow when it becomes the frog’s head, reminiscent of a tadpole, and the element that is most frequently used as a written graph for ‘frog’ in the script (Fu 2012: 186-187). The *Haishee-bamei* reverts to a transformative state, undergoing a metamorphosis.

It seems disingenuous to point to the philological evidence of the turtle-like depiction of the *Haishee-bamei* when it has a shell, as Ge and Bai have done, all the while leaving out the crucial moment of its transformation when it loses the shell. The turtle, in an altered state, becomes the frog. The post-transformation *Haishee-bamei* is depicted as a Naxi graph in Rock’s authoritative Naxi script dictionary (1963: 161) as a frog-like creature, the head points to the south, its tail to the north, with the individual Naxi graphs for these directions appearing as elements of the compound graph. This is clearly a frog, albeit with a long tail (perhaps

retaining the tadpole tail that suggests the transformation to frog is not entirely complete). Rock's dictionary entry recounts some of the frog's origin story:

The golden frog. After he had been shot, his head pointed south (left) and his tail north (right). The tail changed into the eastern wood element, his blood into the fire element in the south, his bones to the metal element in the west, his bile into the water element in the north, and his flesh into the earth element in the center. The frog's four legs changed into the four subcardinal regions between heaven and earth. (ibid)

All this means that we are in the privileged position of being able to pinpoint the very moment in the Naxi mythic tradition where the sacred turtle, a Chinese/Tibetan symbol and divinatory tool, becomes the sacred frog, a Naxi symbol and divinatory tool, because the transformation itself is part of the Naxi religious canon. Therefore the *Haishee-bamei* is both turtle and frog: the turtle that transformed and that was translated, into a frog. In terms of translation, the turtle and frog coexist in the *bage* divinatory chart, able to be perceived by those that are aware of both source and target. In this way, translation can enrich and give nuance to a sign. The very frame of the Sinitic source culture has been altered in translation, via Tibet.

This is why the animal in the Dunhuang manuscript has caused confusion. As the result of the process of cultural translation, it is at once both turtle and frog. During the late eighth century, a time of persecution of Bon believers in Tibet, Bon practitioners fled to eastern Tibetan border areas, and presumably made contact with the Naxi, whose ancestors, the ancient Qiang, migrated south and settled within the Yangtze loop in the region north of Lijiang in the first century. Siegbert Hummel (1969:144) has suggested that the Naxi divination frog was a corruption learned from either the Chinese divination turtle tradition prior to the eighth century or the Tibetan turtle tradition after the eighth century (the time of textual transmission of turtle diagrams from China into Tibet). If the Tibetans already had a tradition of turtle divination using the nine magic numbers prior to the tenth century, the divination method of the shell-less creature in the Dunhuang manuscript seems even more unlikely to have been an independently Tibetan creation. It is more probable that it is an example of a sign in the process of transformation, as Tibetan divination practitioners made contact with other tribes.

The turtle/frog divination amongst the Naxi obviously has Chinese roots, but the question remains whether it came from China directly, or indirectly via Tibet. It is entirely possible that the Naxi adapted this divination practice from the Chinese. We cannot accurately date the Naxi manuscripts, but the earliest seem to be from the Mongol period in Yunnan (thirteenth century). It is unlikely that the Naxi developed a written tradition of frog divination prior to the eighth century, and cultural contact, due to various factors such as geography, language and shared ancestral history, was strongest between the Tibetans and the Naxi. British Naxiologist and anthropologist Anthony Jackson has already demonstrated the deep influence of ex-Bon monks in the formulation of Naxi ritual practices (Jackson 1973). The Han people rarely figure in the Naxi literature. In fact, the Tibetans are established as the most adept at divination in the Naxi ethno-geographic consciousness. Many Naxi ritual texts begin with an incantation that includes the line 'The Tibetans are best able to cast horoscopes for the year, the Min-chia [the Bai people, who live to the south of Lijiang]...for the month, and the Mo-so [Naxi] for the day' (Rock 1937: 229). The Naxi frog divination chart, with its twelve divisions, is a direct representation of an annual horoscope. While we can only speculate as to how the Naxi learned their divination, I believe the Dunhuang manuscript is a piece of evidence in favor of the Tibetan origins of Naxi divination. The shell-less creature is a proto-post transformation *Haishee-bamei*—the turtle with no shell. At some point in the cultural transfer of old Tibetan divination traditions into Naxi areas, the shell was de-emphasised, and golden turtle divination became golden frog divination. The Naxi learned turtle divination from the Tibetans and, via cultural translation, adapted it into frog divination. It is this process of adaptation that is remarkably preserved in the *Bbibbeq qualshuq* story.

And so, via semiotic cultural translation, in the Himalayan foothills the turtle loses its shell, and becomes a frog. The frog loses its receptacle of writing, but where there is loss, there is also gain, for in the Naxi context, the frog chart itself goes on to *become* writing. The term '*bage* chart' can be written as an iconograph in Naxi, without resorting to drawing out the whole chart. It is represented simply by a frog's head on a grid, with the standardised pronunciation, *ba ge* [paʈ kəʈ] (see figure 8).

Furthermore, the frog's head alone, *ba* [paʈ], is used individually in the Naxi script for many rebus usages beyond that of referring metonymically to the frog itself. Rock lists "'to sprout, as grain'; 'the appearance of the first teeth in

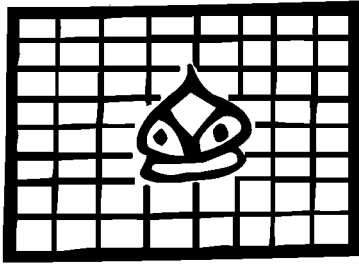


Figure 8. Naxi graph for *ba ge*, see Fang and He (1981: 348).

a child'; 'broad; wide'; 'to change into; to produce, as by sexual intercourse'; 'a chip of wood'; 'a handle, as of a bowl or cup'; 'an enumerator for iron utensils'; and 'to corner a wild animal'", all pronounced *ba* and written with the same graph (Rock 1963: 27). The turtle may have lost its shell, but that's only because in its new hybrid context, the shell was no longer needed. The Naxi turtle-as-frog came to embody writing itself.

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Endnotes

1. Rock (1948) is a good anthropological introduction to the Naxi people, their history and geographical situation.
2. Tibetologist Sam van Schaik was the first to make this point, and the first to discuss this manuscript, in a 2008 blog post <<https://earlytibet.com/2008/11/28/the-golden-turtle/>> and subsequently in (Iwao et al. 2012).
3. Tibetan tortoise divination charts can be mentally projected onto the hand, with the magic numbers, the five elements and directions linked to points on the palm and the fingers. This makes the diviner's hand into a kind of text, a 'memory palace'. The Naxi have a similar practice, with the *dongba* ritualists of Badian village (巴甸村) projecting divination charts onto the hand and using them to cast various horoscopes. The nine major points of the chart, the eight directions and the center point, are formed in a square around the nine joints of the index, middle and fourth fingers. North is represented by the middle joint of the fourth finger, with south the middle joint of the index finger (Li 2007: 183).
4. A text that is not laid out in the usual way, sentence following sentence creating a paragraph, and so on, but instead related in multi-dimensional ways, i.e. a graphic representation built with a combination of textual passages (Dorofeeva-Lichtmann 2004: 3–4).
5. "The dark color of the tortoise's shell, and its strange markings caused the tortoise to be held in reverential awe on account of the fact that the shell appeared to be a mystic map" (Walters 2005: 88).
6. The arrow piercing the turtle on the east-west axis in Tibetan myth (and as we will see in the Naxi divination charts) is perhaps an invention to provide a visual aid for the remaining two points.
7. The story is retold in Rock (1936) and in many Chinese versions, the latest (and most stylistically accessible) being LJBWY (2015).

8. The nine magic numbers (Tibetan *sme ba dgu* སྐེ་བ་དགུ) emerged from the turtle's nine 'orifices', see Dorje (2008: 53) for a full account.
9. Naxi women wear a black and white sheepskin over their shoulders, made from the skin of a black sheep, cut into the shape of a large frog, with seven colored disks (red, orange, yellow, green, black, blue, purple) embroidered onto it; these symbolize seven frog's eyes. See Sha (1998) for a detailed account of the mythic origins of traditional Naxi dress.
10. An interesting piece of circumstantial evidence on this topic is the example sentence found under the entry for 'frog' in Pinson's 2012 Naxi-Chinese-English dictionary: "Ebbeisherlbbei Naqxi nee baje gol liuq ddeeq zeel. It's reported that long ago the Naxi people highly valued frogs" (Pinson 2012: 13). This is of import because the data used to compile the example sentences came from first-hand Naxi oral sources (ibid: 2).
11. There may be a connection between the frogs and the See, or the naga, the half man-half serpent spirits who protect the natural world in Naxi myth. The See are frequently depicted in the Naxi script as having a frog's head and a serpent's body.
12. Essentially Ezra Pound's discipline, and one that Achilles Fang notes is "usually frowned upon", though this doesn't dissuade him from uncovering etymosinological tricks (plays on character composition) in the 'Canon of Shun'. See Fang (1953: 271).
13. This oral formula that groups the three peoples in a constructed geographic space is also one way of referring to the concept of 'everybody' in Naxi, but nevertheless, each ethnic group is associated with specific divination practices. This folk knowledge has a clear antecedent in Tibet, where elemental divination is also known as *rgya rtsis* རྩ་རྩིས (Chinese divination), perhaps indicating the path of transmission of this divinatory knowledge.

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