



The politics of Ethnicity in China and the Process of Homogenization of the Yi Nationality

Aurélie Névod

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THE POLITICS OF
ETHNICITY
IN INDIA, NEPAL AND CHINA

edited by

MARINE CARRIN
PRALAY KANUNGO
GÉRARD TOFFIN



The Politics of Ethnicity in China and the Process of Homogenization of the Yi Nationality

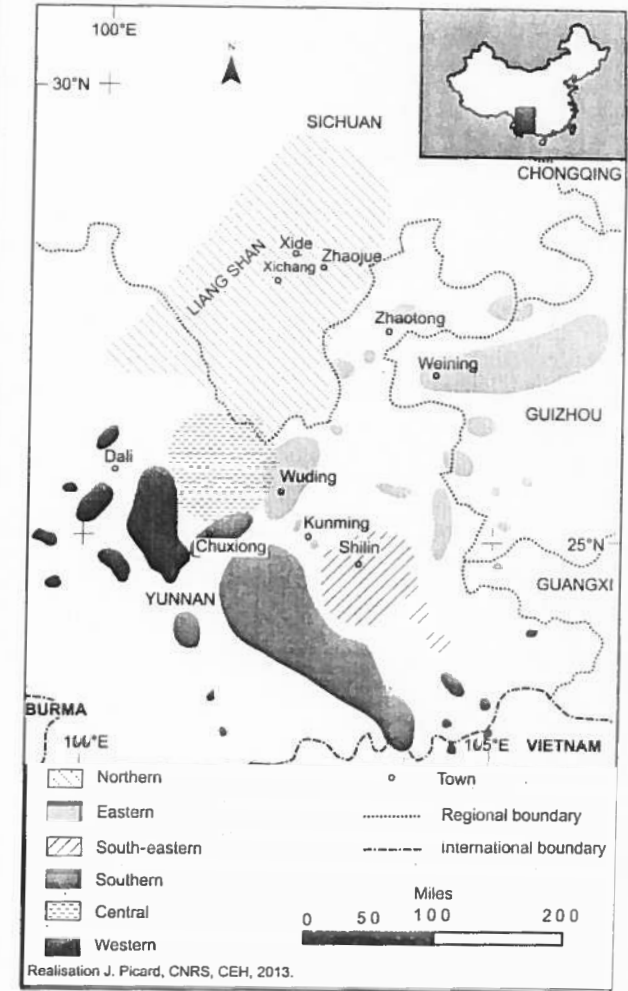
AURÉLIE NÉVOT

PARALLEL TO research focusing on the majority nationality of China, the Han people (who constitute about 92 per cent of the population), are other studies on Chinese populations defined as minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族), officially numbering 55. By and by, new issues are emerging that leads to a re-examination of the interactions between non-Han and Han people, and between the majority and the minority. Recent work tends to challenge the presupposition, on the one hand, that non-Han groups are lumped together as a monolithic ethnic group and, on the other hand, that all non-Han groups are culturally peripheral to anything that is Chinese. However, fieldwork reveals the existence of links that connect Han and non-Han people, and, at the same time, which tie the state—still pursuing its unifying project—to the populations in a variety of local contexts.¹ Indeed, this unification programme is based on the recognition of the diversity of Chinese population. The Constitution explicitly states that the People's Republic of China (PRC) is a united multinational state (*tongyi de duominzu guojia* 统一的多民族国家). It also asserts that all nationalities enjoy equal status. Although distinctness and equality do in fact appear to be encouraged, they are nevertheless limited. The will of the government is to homogenize each nationality.

I have observed such a situation in south-western China, in Yunnan Province—the most ethnically and linguistically diverse of all China's regions—where I have been carrying out research among the Yi nationality (*Yizu*, 彝族), especially among a branch of this nationality called the Sani branch (*Sani zhixi*, 撒尼支系), numbering about 85,000, located in Stone Forest Yi Autonomous District (*Shilin Yizu zizhi xian* 石林彝族自治县).² This chapter aims to examine the ongoing interaction

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MAP 14.1: Distribution of Yi dialects in Yunnan, Sichuan, Guangxi, and Guizhou

it is a branch of the Yi minority nationality—and the state apparatus based on a relationship built around the religion of the Sanis, a type of literate shamanism.³ In order to understand how the Chinese government promotes this local religion so that it could control and rule the Yi people whose culture is reified to being harmonious with the central power—indeed we will see in the second and the third points how the authorities transform local practices and reintegrate the latter into the original structure—it is first of all necessary to look at the background to the strategies applied today in order to unify the country; political strategies based on a form of anthropology the origin of which can be traced back to more than 2,000 years, when the Qin dynasty (221–206 BC) was only just emerging.

HISTORY OF THE CHINESE POLITICS OF ETHNICITY

Much information about the different populations who lived in the kingdoms and empires that constituted part of the modern Chinese territory can be found in annals that have been handed down over more than 2,000 years by the successive dynastic administrations. Though these data come from official writings, it is somehow a second-hand information concocted by the authorities from different eras. Indeed, these official texts reflect the ideas of the political authorities that imposed a Confucian orthodoxy on an extremely diversified country. Let us see how the emergence of Chinese central power is linked to specific politics of ethnicity—of course, it would be impossible here to refer in an exhaustive manner to the whole phenomenon running through the successive kingdoms and dynasties and taking place in different social and historical organizations. This chapter aims to promote an overview of the unifying project supporting today's construction of the Chinese nationality (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族).

BEGINNINGS

During the Warring States Period (475–221 BC), before the unification of China by the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC), each kingdom had its own sacrificial canons, government practices and customs, its own heroes, ancestors, legends, music, and rites.⁴ Among the shamans at the time, there were *fangshi* 方士, ritual specialists, masters of the territories, who were local men of letters, considered to be doctors and magicians who were also involved in their local government in their role as forecasters and soothsayers.⁵ As soon as the first emperor of the Qin Dynasty seized power (221 BC), the *fangshi* no longer belonged to their former local government but were integrated into an imperial institution. They

therefore had an important role and function to play by collecting—each on his own territory—ritual and medical knowledge, myths, legends, cosmological representations, etc. Their contributions were part of the tribute each area under the emperor's authority had to pay because the centre had to be informed of the different visions of the world. As a symbol of unity and of centralization, the emperor had to assimilate them. Culinary specialties were for instance integrated into the food of the emperor who symbolically consumed the territory where this food came from, just as he had to marry women from different ethnic groups. What was assimilated had to be restored to the people in the form of laws.

Let us not forget that the emperor was regarded as the son of heaven (*tianzi* 天子), and the legitimacy of power, as codified by Confucianism, based on the Celestial Mandate which manifests itself by spontaneous popular adhesion to the power of the emperor (expressed through songs, ballads, poems, legends, customs, etc.). According to this ideology, a virtuous emperor has a virtuous empire and if anything goes amiss among the population, it may be considered the emperor's fault because of his lack of virtue. For instance, discordant music was considered to announce the decline of the dynasty.⁶ Nursery rhymes could also be seen to contain occult messages announcing the accession of a new chief. Thus, whatever came from the population had to be fully taken into consideration, studied and analysed because it was of major political importance. That is why a form of anthropology was necessary in order to rule Chinese populations; more specifically, the data collected serve as 'raw material to be processed in order to rule'.⁷

Confucianism did not intend to annihilate peripheral people but, as Thomas Herberer underlines, it 'demanded their subordination to the emperor as well as their integration into the Chinese empire. The aim was "cultivation" by Confucian values, i.e. a cultural, non-violent assimilation. Even a barbarian could become an emperor, but only by fitting into the Chinese system and by giving up his previous identity. Even today this attitude has changed only gradually and remained an important component of Chinese nationalities policies'.⁸

This sino-centred style of governing⁹ combined with Confucian perceptions of social hierarchy was indeed still practised when the Celestial Mandate was taken over by the second imperial dynasty of China, that of the Hans (206 BC–AD 220). The importance attributed to local monographs to unify and to rule the country has survived through the centuries, despite deep social transformations. The unification of China was still one of the central concerns of the state even after the fall of the empire in 1911.

DURING THE MAOIST PERIOD

In the 1920s, Sun Yatsen introduced into the Chinese language an expression from the Japanese *minzoku* to designate the diverse populations of China: that is to say the word *minzu*, nationality. Thirty years later, after Mao Zedong's accession, these nationalities were created and listed following an identification campaign organized in the 1950s essentially adopting language-based categorization. Whereas conventional accounts of China's classification points out its political and methodological continuity with that of the Soviet Union, Thomas S. Mullaney shows that the origins of this categorization comes from British colonial practice and its amateur ethnologists and linguists (among them Henry Rodolph Davies).¹⁰ As this classification was drawn up, the word nationality does not carry the meaning given to the expression ethnic group. On the contrary, a nationality may group together different ethnic groups (branches in the Chinese vocabulary). Since that particular period in history, China has recognized 56 nationalities, the Han being the largest, as already mentioned. That is why the term minority is associated with the other 55 nationalities. This expression of minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) does not only refer to the demographic superiority of the Hans, but also to the evolutionist perspective underlined in the 1949 programme. Indeed, the Communist Party planned to integrate the different ethnic groups of China into the revolutionary cause, to adapt them to the socialist world in order to practise common politics on its huge territory. Its ambition was to create the Chinese nation whose dominant group is, according to this ideology, the Han people. The line of action chosen by the authorities was to lead the minority nationalities, regarded as outdated, forward towards the stage of socialist society.

THE 2000s

Although the construction of the socialist state still prevailed at the beginning of the reform period, since 2000s the Chinese government has taken a major turning point. Particular attention should be given to two years, i.e. 2003 and 2010.

In 2003, China signed the UNESCO convention to preserve the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH). Under the tutelage of this international organization, an exhaustive and systematic inventory has been carried out since 2005 concerning all different forms of ICH present on Chinese territory. The PRC Ministry of Culture keeps this inventory which is subdivided according to local levels and ICH categories.¹¹ An operational inventory manual, conceived by a team of experts under the tutelage of the Ministry of Culture, has been circulated to the local

authorities in order to orientate the methodologies to be adopted in fieldwork. And yet, such an organization that was created to collect materials recalls the collections (mentioned above) that were organized for centuries in China to rule and to unify the country. By collaborating with UNESCO in the patrimonialization of its culture, the Beijing government centralizes its power and promotes its territorial harmony (in the Confucian sense) under the aegis of an international organization. In other words, the controlling, ruling and unifying project promoted by the Chinese central power is now supported by a foreign authority. The transformations long operated among ethnic populations by the Chinese state are acknowledged, as it were, on an international scale.

The year 2010 marked another turning with the organization of the World Expo in Shanghai. Since then, the minority nationalities are no longer regarded as backward but avant-garde people who incarnate the figure of the good savage, close to nature and, at the same time, who follow the path of urbanization promoted by the Chinese government with the slogan harmonious urbanization (*hexie chengshi* 和谐城市). They symbolize the universal project defined during the Shanghai World Expo based on the theme: Better city, better life. Thus, there has been a shift from the evolutionist paradigm to the ecological way of life now promoted by China.¹²

In these new international contexts (post-UNESCO convention and Universal Exposition), the unification of China as well as the preservation of its cultural particularities remain the Chinese government's prerogatives. The aim of the authorities is to federate the different branches that constitute a national minority, to homogenize their different cultures in order to create macro-ethnic groups, while encouraging their integration and assimilation. I propose to illustrate these politics of ethnicity by focusing on the strategies used to create the Yi nationality which includes about 80,00,000 people, and which is ranked first among the country's Tibeto-Burman speaking populations.

FROM YI WRITINGS AND LANGUAGES TO THE
YI WRITING AND LANGUAGE?
THE YI NATIONALITY CASE IN HOMOGENIZATION POLICIES

The Yi nationality is made up of diverse ethnic groups called branches in Chinese—spread over the Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces—, each with its own cultural, linguistic and, for some of them, writing specificities. In order to deal with extremely heterogeneous features, the Beijing government aims to federate the Yi languages as well as their writings.¹³ While dissimilar from Chinese writing and reserved for *bimo* shamans, Yi writings in fact differ from one region to another.

The linguist Zhang Qiren has identified six different regions,¹⁴ which are writings from Daliangshan (Sichuan), Guizhou, Dianbei (northern Yunnan), Diannan (southern Yunnan), Shilin (Stone Forest District mentioned above) and Luoping (eastern Yunnan).

THE OFFICIAL YI LANGUAGE AND WRITING:
A MULTI-ETHNIC CREATION IN YUNNAN

In Sichuan Province, the language of Xide District—more specifically the language of the Nosu branch—has been selected as standard language, and traditional characters used by their *bimos* have been chosen to edify the standard writing.¹⁵ In contrast to what is observed there, the standard spoken and written Yi of Yunnan Province is artificial, even though it has local roots.

In 1982, a research team, whose aim was to consider the unification of the different writings of the Yi branches of Yunnan Province, was set up in Kunming. To create a language and a writing common to the Yis of this area, linguists working for the state—and, for the most part, of Yi nationality—have matched different written *bimo* characters taken from various Yi branches (essentially from eastern and southern Yunnan, and even from Guizhou). Since the written characters of the Sanis, a Yi branch living in Shilin District, are extremely diversified and vary from one village to another, very few of them were chosen by the committee in charge of creating the national Yi writing and language.

In 1996, this committee decided that standard spoken and written Yi should be taught at school to Yunnanese Yi children. Since then, standard Yi has been taught to the Yis of Honghe and to the Yis of Stone Forest District (Shilin).¹⁶ Thus, in addition to Chinese writing, at school the Yis learn an artificial writing created from the repertory of the *bimos* over which they have no traditional right, since it is secret, and which their ancestors never used as such because the writing is merely an invention. Children are therefore incapable of reading it. The aim is to promote the use of this national writing for communication to all Yis in order to form a unified nationality, speaking the same dialect and sharing the same writing. By secularizing the *bimos'* ritual and secret writing, governing bodies also plan to undermine the shamans' power.

For the linguist Zhang,¹⁷ the goal of the standardization process is clearly to federate the Yis and to ensure their development by integrating them in the global economy. The study of shamanic texts from the Sani branch shows that the ritual writing, which does not usually serve as a tool for communication between humans but between people and divinities, is used as a social cement. One manuscript in particular, to which we will come back later, shows that by psalmodying ritual texts

during the annual harvest cult, the shaman leader federates different localities where different Yi groups live. Thus, Zhang attributes to *bimo* writing a role which, in a certain manner, it plays in a local context: a federative function.

THE LAICIZATION OF THE RITUAL WRITING
AMONG THE YIS OF HONGHE

In 1991, in Yi villages from Honghe District in Yunnan, where Yi teaching was performed in certain classes in both Chinese and Yi writing and speaking, the results proved to be positive according to Zhang. The number of students supposedly increased and children were thought to have a better standard of Chinese and to have learnt it more quickly than in classes where only Chinese was used. Following the success of this experiment, the local authorities decided to open a school where teaching is done both in Chinese and Yi languages and writings. Prior to that, teachers had to learn the Yi writing and language that is to say, the one produced from the official standardization. Zhang underlines that, thanks to the correspondance of a Yi term with a Chinese term, children should be more interested in school because studying would make sense for them.

Teaching in the native language would no doubt facilitate children's understanding of the official language, Chinese, which is taught at school. Suffice to say that in the Han environment, the same problem exists. Children usually speak a local language, not the national language (*guoyu* 国语) which is closely related to the Beijing language and taught everywhere. Hence, an imbalance exists in China between vernacular speaking and language. Nevertheless, the situation for the Yis of Honghe is even more singular because, added to the teaching of *guoyu* is the teaching of official Yi speaking and writing which do not exist outside school. It is no more understandable to Yi children than official Chinese. Moreover, they learn a writing which was originally for ritual use and which should be of no concern to them, unless they have shaman ancestors.

The linguist Zhang wishes to confer a certain value on the federating characteristic of the national Yi. He takes part in the propaganda discourse.¹⁸ One may therefore doubt the veracity of his words. Of course, the word *bimo*, the vernacular name given to the local shamans and specialist in writing, never appears in his articles nor is the original ritual nature of the writing ever mentioned. The question could also be put to *bimos*. Do they accept having their ritual script nationalized and having it lose its religious dimension?

AMONG THE SANI BRANCH:
THE STANDARDIZATION ON THE WAY?

The communist authorities are aware of political and anthropological implications of *bimo* shamanism. Having sent onto the field anthropologists who have spent years collecting material, they understand that *bimos* are linked to politics. Indeed, shamans from the Sani branch, which is a society based on two halves, carry out community worship side by side with village chiefs. During a territorial cult, fêted every year in autumn, they make offerings together in order to celebrate their ancestors. On the same occasion, they refer to an ancient political organization probably linked to the Nanzhao, a Tibeto-Burman kingdom established in northern Yunnan from 750 to 1253. Governing bodies aim at standardizing and secularizing the language's written characters not only to unify the members of the Yi nationality. In doing this, they are also seeking to eradicate the shamans' religious and political power.

The standard Yi (writing and language) was taught in the late 1990s at the national secondary school in the district which is located in the administrative centre and reserved for Yis only.¹⁹ This new language and writing does nothing to help children master Chinese since it has little in common with their native tongue. In addition, children learn Mandarin from the age of seven, so that by the time they enter secondary school they speak it fluently. The aim of this official teaching is not to promote education among the young but to initiate them in a writing and language that enables the Yis to communicate. The authorities' ambition is to turn adolescents into Yis, not Sanis, i.e. to deprive them of their local and ethnic particularities.

Secondary school girls seemed proud to learn the Yi writing just as boys do (when I questioned them in the late 1990s and early 2000s). My master shaman's niece claimed to be very happy, making her cousin, my master shaman's daughter, jealous because the latter who was not in school said that she regretted not having access to her father's writing. Let us point out a common misunderstanding: the two cousins did not refer to the same writings as the first girl learned a form of writing unknown to shamans themselves, while the second girl would have liked to learn a ritual writing that her father masters and to which, as a girl, she is not allowed to be initiated anyway.

For shamans from the Sani ethnic group, the official Yi writing has no ritual effectiveness since it is inculcated by teachers who do not belong to a shamanic lineage. In their eyes, these teachers do not represent the quintessence of the power of *bimos* who pass on from master to disciple their written characters associated with their bodily substances. Moreover, this national writing is the fruit of an intellectual invention by linguists

and of the combination of different writings. This ultimately explains why Sani shamans does not seem to feel any competition from the project to teach Yi writing to children; in fact, it seems to be of little concern to them. On the contrary, Martin Schoenhals has observed that in Sichuan—where the official Yi writing is the original *bimo* writing of the Nosu branch—the shamans strongly oppose the fact that they have to send children to school, which according to them is a symbol of Han culture.²⁰ Strong competition is said to be felt between the Han teaching system and that of the *bimos*. The situations here are therefore quite different: the Yis living in Sichuan Province were relatively free of Chinese bureaucracy until the 1950s,²¹ whereas the Sanis consider themselves Chinese, and if they distinguish themselves from the Han, they share with the latter an undeniably common cultural background—their ethnic group may indeed be considered the fruit of a meeting between Tibeto-Burman clans and Han people.²² The acculturation process is different from one region to another, and that is no doubt the reason why the Chinese government has decided to create and teach a national Yi language and writing to the Yis of Yunnan Province, who are already acculturated, as well as making a pre-existing language and writing which is alive in the local sphere official among the Yis of Sichuan Province, who are more independent. The Chinese government takes into account the distinctive geopolitical conjunctures in order to make its attempt at nationalization effective in the long term. And Sani society has indeed started to undergo a process of assimilation.

ONLY ONE YI NATIONAL WRITING AND LANGUAGE?

The linguist Zhang encourages Chinese scholars to pursue the collection of songs, ballads, tales and above all ancient books (as the author puts it). He hopes to discover the identical and original components of the Yi writing. In this sense, actual characters would be vestiges of an outdated social stage. Hence, to his thinking, standardizing Yi writing means making it recover its formal and primitive form. The will to reconstitute the initial writing of the *bimos* is in keeping with the political determination to unify the Yi nationality by ignoring the cultural distinctions of the different branches which compose this nationality.

But what can be said about the ancient manuscripts evoked here? The process of handing down *bimo* knowledge, as observed within the Sani branch, implies that ritual texts are transmitted from master to disciple by copying the master's manuscripts—that is, all the texts written in his hand—after the latter's death, cease to exist as they have to be burnt to accompany the dead *bimo* to the other world.²³ Consequently, there are no ancient manuscripts (even though *bimos* may have kept some of their

masters' manuscripts, especially since the reform period, to preserve this material which was destroyed during the 1960s).

And what can be said about the original writing, as mentioned by the linguist Zhang, which would have been common to the various Yi populations? Though the different Yi branches observed today may stem from the Tibeto-Burman kingdom of Nanzhao (750–1253), it is plausible that the *bimos*' ancestors long ago had less diversified written forms until their clans were scattered. Nevertheless, scholars do not know exactly when this writing appeared. One claims that *bimo* writings descend from Tibetan civilizations. According to Anthony Jackson and Anchi Pan, a particular form of shamanism without trance but using texts by ritual specialists, is said to have been developed in Yunnan.²⁴ This writing was supposedly born of the meeting between autochthonous shamans and bon-po Tibetan monks who had been driven towards the eastern Tibetan border upon the spread of Buddhism (Samten Karmay notes that the bon-pos, who had been persecuted, left central Tibet in the eighth century and headed eastwards²⁵). Some Chinese scholars consider that Yi writing appeared under the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220).²⁶ According to ancient Chinese ethnographers, this monosyllabic language was invented under the Tang dynasty (518–807) then re-developed under the Ming dynasty (1368–1646).²⁷ One *bimo* in particular, from the Nosu branch of Daliangshan (Sichuan), is thought to have created this writing eighty generations ago.²⁸

To sum up, the Chinese government adopts distinct strategies regarding the different Yi branches. Whereas the Yis of Sichuan Province now have an official writing, originally from the Nosu branch, the undertaking to nationalize the language differs from the one in progress at school among the Yi branches of Yunnan Province where a new writing, born from the matching of distinct shamanic writings taken from diverse branches, is taught to Yi children, thereby secularizing a writing of shamanic origin. In this particular case there is a manifest process of deconstructing the politico-religious system. There is no denying that the Beijing government is active on all fronts: on a more local scale it promotes—one might believe almost paradoxically—shamanic writing.

LITERATE SHAMANISM AS A BOND BETWEEN ETHNIC AND CENTRAL POWERS THE SANI BRANCH CASE IN HOMOGENIZATION POLICIES

An important amount of Chinese literature is available about Yi people—more precisely the populations now gathered together under this exo-ethnonym.²⁹ Speaking about the languages of ethnicity, Stevan Harrell argues that three kinds of languages interact, the local identity language,

the scholarly language of ethnicity and the state discourse of ethnic identification.³⁰ These three languages all need to be studied together in order to have a complete view of the ongoing situation.

OFFICIAL TEXTS

Since the beginning of the 1980s which marked the return of a form of religious tolerance, the number of publications about the Sani branch has increased. A Yi/Han dictionary was published in 1984. As Sani writings differ from one village to another, this dictionary throws light on one character in particular by making an inventory of the others at the same time—added in brackets. This selection tends to promote the standardization of the writing of the Sani branch without transforming the writing itself, nothing is created here.

Since the 1990s, the Religious Affairs Department of Stone Forest District which comes under the Bureau of Nationalities (directly linked to Beijing) has published books written in Yi local script. More recently, bilingual books have been published in Chinese and Yi official writing, i.e. the one that takes the Yi/Han dictionary as a model. Books have been published for instance by the Kunming Nationalities Institute in collaboration with the Religious Affairs Department of Stone Forest District.³¹

The rewriting of shamanic books by an official institution goes against their traditional utilization. As we noted before, *bimos* are usually the only ones to use manuscripts written in their own hand. Besides, each village owns a written corpus specific to its territory. Hence, Chinese authorities give priority to a type of district federalism which is thought to be better than village segmentation, basing their strategy on the Yi confederation ideology contained in the original texts from the *bimos* themselves. One particular *bimo* supports this strategy.

THE 'OFFICIAL BIMO'

The task of this shaman consists in copying ritual texts from different villages in the district and then in compiling books. We could say that, for the Sanis, school is what this *bimo* is for *bimo* shamans, a uniformity diffuser.

Although he does not belong to a shamanic lineage, the 'official *bimo*' has been trained as a Master of Psalmody. The local government gave him this specific status as compensation for his brother having been killed during the Vietnam War in the 1970s. He then became chief of the Religious Affairs Department in the district and he receives his instructions directly from Beijing. His missions consist in organizing Yi official festivals—the torch festival and, since 1999, the *mizhi* festival—

and in rewriting the books burnt during the Cultural Revolution in order to promote the local heritage because those writings are now considered part of the national heritage—even if they are not yet listed on the ICH list. Due to his connections with national politics, the 'official *bimo*' is feared by most of the shamans I met, though people discretely laugh at him, especially during official festivals when he wears a Western suit and dons a pair of sunglasses. Ritual specialists also laugh at his ritual practice and psalmodies, doubting his ability to perform a ritual and his efficiency as he would have invented for himself a *bimo* father.

The official shaman is the master of the *mizhi* festival: the federal sacrifice that has been organized by the state since 1999. The local resurgence of this territorial cult, since the 1980s, and the importance it has gained since the 1990s have prompted the local government to revive it and to transform it into local governance in harmony with central power. Every year, at a grand official assembly, the authorities impose on the Sani *bimos* a reading of the ritual texts concocted by the state through the 'official *bimo*'. This gives official status to the most important shamanic worship for the Sanis: their harvest festival *midje*, the sacrifice to the earth, which is typically celebrated in autumn in each village by the autochthonous headman accompanied by a shaman of his choice who, on this occasion, chants a specific manuscript³² reserved for this particular celebration. They both renew the alliance between villagers and their founding ancestors with invocations and offerings. On the same occasion, they refer to an ancient political organization probably linked to Nanzhao, the Tibeto-Burman kingdom previously mentioned. Since this



concerns territorial and therefore political worship, the authorities have standardized it.³³

THE *BIMOS* WHO OFFICIATE DURING THE SHAMANIC STATE CULT *MIZHI*

Every year since 1999, the local authorities of Stone Forest District have organized a grand state rite.³⁴ The ritual *mise en scène* is staged by the governing bodies at the top of the highest mountain in the territory, which is also, for the Sanis, their ancestors' place of origin. In 1999, all the *bimos* were invited to take part in the *mizhi* festival. Of the 90 *bimos* officially accounted for 75 were present. The *bimos* of the villages of Dalaowa and Shangpucao who officiated that year during their own village's cult, were among the *bimos* who did not take part in the official festival. Indeed, they were not allowed to leave their village and to officiate outside their own territory. That is why the *bimo* of Shangpucao sent his son as a substitute. The *bimo*—my master shaman—who had been chosen to celebrate the local ritual in the village of Dalaowa but who had to leave his disciple to officiate because he himself was grieving, meanwhile decided to officiate at *mizhi*. Ritual prohibition was not respected in that case: *mizhi* differs from *midje*, it is fake claimed my master shaman who nevertheless took part in celebrating it, fully conscious of its particularity.

When *mizhi* was held for the first time in 1999, the *bimos* were literally plagued by photographers from the major Chinese television channels. This celebration granted them official recognition and allowed them to parade and to promote their religious activities that the government had appropriated at the same time. Indeed, if *midje* is linked to local and village leadership, *mizhi* is also linked to political leadership, not on a village scale but on a Shilin district scale. Through the *mizhi* festival, local government creates a bond between shamans and state authorities, and local governance is established by using the original political role of the shamans for the state's purpose. Concretely, the Chinese government gains a certain amount of power by delegating to local associations, i.e. the *bimos* group created for that purpose, in order to create a Shilin Yi federation.

AT THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN OF LAOGUI, THE RESIDENCY OF SANI ANCESTORS

During *mizhi*, all shamans have to wear identical costumes that look like copies of the costumes worn by the *bimos* in the Daliangshan area, i.e. a turban and a cape. It is the traditional costume of the Yi people, so the 'official *bimo*' declares, keen to give to the shamans of Stone Forest

District the same appearance as their cousins living in neighbouring Sichuan. The federal cult is organized outside village limits, in a non inhabited place. It has to be common to all Sani people, independent of their villages of origin. And yet *midje*, which is not officiated at the same time of the lunar calendar for all villages, is associated with one territory in particular and with local ancestors. Consequently, grouping together *bimos* from distinct villages is usually unthinkable because they do not belong to the same clan and they do not share the same vital substances.

The Laogui Mountain is a traditional place, well known by the Sanis though it is the first time *mizhi* is celebrated there and unified (*tongyi* 统一) says the 'official *bimo*'. This mountain is indeed the place where the Sanis locate the cave of their mythical ancestors and the origin of the world. Nevertheless, no ritual is habitually performed there. The place is untouched by any local activities as each village, 'little world', assimilates its own territory to the mountain of origin.

The 'official *bimo*' also explains that the *mizhi* festival should be organized on the Laogui because this mountain is based at a crossroads, at the centre of four touristy places (Jiuxiang, in Yiliang District, Alugutong in Luxi District, Caiseshalin in Luliang District, and Shilin, the famous Stone Forest karst). Not only do the authorities transform the religion of the Sanis in order to promote the unification of the Yis (with different districts being populated by different Yi branches) but they also get the Sanis to take part in the global economy essentially based on tourism in Yunnan.

THE *MIZHI* BOOK: A MELTING-POT

The 'official *bimo*' collected *midje* texts from the four directions of Shilin and compiled them in the official *mizhi* book to avoid—so he said—any jealousy. These texts taken from the four directions which in Chinese thought symbolize the whole of a territory have political implications.

Four villages were chosen: Haiyi, the place of origin of the Sanis according to Chinese history scholars, Zhaihei, Bantian and Dalaowa, three localities which are respectively the native village of the 'official *bimo*', of the linguist Ang from the Kunming Nationalities Institute, himself son of a shaman, and of another *bimo*, the father-in-law of the 1999 district chief. The *mizhi* text consequently contains written characters and texts from territories related to local official personalities closely linked to political and religious figures.

By uniting these shamanic writings and by distributing to each shaman a photocopy of the newly constituted and compiled *mizhi* book, the Chinese authorities refer with no doubt to the territorial confederation in the original books themselves, as already mentioned

before. Also, by utilizing the meaning of the original texts, the local Chinese leadership uses an effective political strategy because it reproduces what makes sense for the shamans who find the logic of their own ritual activities in official activities, and who therefore assimilate the new federative book.

The singing of texts from this *mizhi* book is also standardized. Indeed, the *bimos* have to sing to the same tempo. Repetitions are essential to achieve this chorus that sings in a common voice, in unison. Thus, shamans adapt their own style to the one imposed by the leader of the orchestra, the 'official *bimo*'. Finally, the local authorities have not only dissociated the writings from their original territory but have also reduced the function of *bimos* from masters of writing and psalmody to mere reader-singer.

Not only is the *mizhi* book not a manuscript, since it is photocopied, but neither does it contain the substances unique to shamans, i.e. their blood and breath. What is more, it is not from the same line of shamans: the process of passing down writings from one generation to another has been totally perverted. The official book has no local, territorial or lineage bond, and it does not contain any living substances.

One may ponder the performativity of such writing, devoid, as it were, of its vital substance, just as one might question the effectiveness of the blood sacrifice performed at this official worship. The message carried by the blood may be difficult to convey to spirits using a photocopied text since only characters handwritten by a shaman can carry the vital substances indispensable for passing on the message they convey to the spirits. It is not yet certain whether *bimos* will abandon the ritual copy in favour of the *mizhi* specimen handed out by the authorities. Some of them only use these books during the official festival. Moreover, the importance of maintaining the relationship between shaman, writing and village clan is so fundamental that my master shaman in Dalaowa has rewritten in his own script on the official *mizhi* text that was given to him certain characters specific to other villages that he does not know. So he has modified certain written forms of the official book to integrate it in his own clan through his own writing. Thus, shamans themselves divert the official books triggering a never-ending process, while the Chinese authorities alter *bimo* manuscripts to unify local Yi writings and federate Stone Forest District, *bimos* alter the official texts in order to re-appropriate them and, by doing so, to render them effective. Yet the majority of them use this example as a model because most manuscripts disappeared during the Cultural Revolution. In this context, the *mizhi* book will be the only one to serve as a reference.

Political performativity is nevertheless thought to emerge through this text. In reading it, Masters of Psalmody have close contact with

Beijing, no longer merely with the local authorities via the territorial headman. The state has conferred on shamans an important duty: to unify the Yis of Shilin and to constitute a form of religious-political task in relation to central government.

CONCLUSION

In order to unify the Yi nationality, different strategies—based on politics of ethnicity whose origins are closely linked to the beginnings of the Chinese state unification—are applied and different scales have to be identified. The Yi nationality considered in its entirety independent of its geographical localization, the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou where the majority of the Yi branches live, and, at the very least, Stone Forest District where the Sanis reside. The Beijing government uses a specific tactic of unification for each of the entities identified.

Whereas Chinese scholars still question the methods that should be employed to create a language and writing common to all the Yis, they have already experimented with the teaching of certain forms of writing/language based on a local language and writing or on matching diverse shamanic writings. The state also tries to standardize a shamanic cult and its ritual writings among the Sanis.

A pact has been achieved at the price of territorial and political restructurings. There is a shift from a shamanic segmented society which refers to an autochthonous leadership to a federal shamanic society placed under the supervision of the government which is gaining legitimacy. The shamans support this transposition into a new social and political framework since they maintain a certain form of power by collaborating with the authorities. Literate shamanism has been institutionalized for purposes of political subversion and identity claims. As a power stake, religion has become the base for negotiations between the ethnic group and the state apparatus.

To make a comparison with India and Nepal, the first point that needs to be stressed is that perceived 'ethnic' characteristics among Chinese minority groups have—as clearly demonstrated by T.S. Mullaney—also been influenced by colonial history in which European amateur social anthropologists and linguists, administrators and also missionaries have left their mark since the early twentieth century. The radical reduction of ethnic categories made in the 1950s was not a Communist prerogative but influenced by social sciences and linguistic in particular. The second point that should be stressed is, on the contrary, the big difference between Indian/Nepalese and Chinese political practices toward ethnic groups. While the Chinese state proclaims to take cultural diversity in consideration, this diversity is controlled and

minimized through cultural actions applied by the central power. The so-called 'right' to express cultural specificities is only taken for granted on the 'minority nationality' level—and then, on the governmental level—rather than on the ethnic level itself. Since the beginning of the empire, the aim of the Chinese state is to unify the country. And this goal, running through centuries, is still present whereas the social and cultural contexts have changed. This civilizing and unifying project is specific to China.

NOTES

1. About the creation of the Zhuang nationality, cf. the study by Katherine Palmer Kaup, *Creating the Zhuang: Ethnic Politics in China*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000. For politics of national belonging and the impact of the latter on ethnographic studies on Yao nationality, cf. Ralph A. Litzinger, *Other Chinas: The Yao and the Politics of National Belonging*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000. For the changing status of non-Han minorities over time and about how Miao people have strategized cultural identities, cf. Louisa Schein, *Minority Rules. The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. For 'the ways of being ethnic' in south-western China, cf. Stevan Harrell, *Ways of Being Ethnic in Southwest China*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2001; cf. also Dru C. Gladney (*Dislocating China. Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), who argues that the Chinese have defined themselves against marginalized groups in their own society. More recently, Susan K. McCarthy (*Communist Multiculturalism. Ethnic Revival in Southwest China*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009) questioned what it means to be Chinese in the Communist multiculturalism context.
2. This locality owes its name to a karst topography which has made it famous worldwide due to the opening of China to foreign tourists and to its figuring on the UNESCO World Heritage list since 2007. Like most of the country, this region is mainly inhabited by Hans who live alongside other ethnic groups.
3. In *Comme le sel, je suis le cours de l'eau. Le chamanisme à écriture des Yi du Yunnan (Chine)*, Nanterre: Société d'ethnologie, 2008, and in *Versets chamaniques. Le Livre du sacrifice à la terre (texts, rituels de Chine)*, Nanterre: Société d'ethnologie, 2012 (forthcoming), I provide a detailed analysis of this shamanism. The Sanis do not have any books that are used outside the religious context and read by people other than their shamans called *bimos*, whereas the ancient chiefs, *nzymo*, of the Yi societies of Daliangshan area (Sichuan) would also have been able to read texts. According to Chinese scholars, ancient inscriptions carved in Yunnan cliffs, ancient steles inscriptions in Guizhou, and Qing contracts in 'Yi writing' referring to the slave trade may prove that 'the social functions of the traditional Yi writing went far

- beyond the perceived use of the script only in religious rituals' (Zhangliang Pu, 'Policies on the planning and use of the Yi language and writing systems', in *Language Policy in the People's Republic of China: Theory and Practice since 1949*, ed. M. Zhou, Norwell: Kluwer Academic Publishers, p. 259). We will see that the aim of the Chinese government is to extract the 'Yi writing' from its religious context. To demonstrate this, I intend to focus on the relationship officially established (through a shamanic cult) between the local religion of the Sanis, rooted in the autochthonous political leadership, and the Chinese state.
4. For more details about the particular form of anthropology supporting the political unification, see the article by Brigitte Bapandier (En guise d'introduction: Chine et anthropologie, in *Chiner la Chine*, ed. Brigitte Bapandier, Ateliers, no. 24, Nanterre: Laboratoire d'ethnologie et de sociologie comparative, 2001, pp. 9–27) which introduces this idea and has deeply inspired the following lines referring to beginnings.
 5. Cf. Kenneth J. DeWoskin, *Doctors, diviners, and magicians of ancient China: biographies of fang-shih*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
 6. Cf. Sabine Trebinjac, *Le pouvoir en chantant. Tome I / L'art de fabriquer une musique chinoise*, Nanterre: Société d'ethnologie, 2000, *Le pouvoir en chantant, II: Une affaire d'Etat... impérial*, Nanterre: Société d'ethnologie, 2008.
 7. Brigitte Bapandier, op. cit., p. 15. Translated from the French: 'matière première à élaborer pour gouverner'.
 8. Thomas Herberer, 'China's nationalities policies: Quo vadis?' <http://www.casaasia.es/pdf/21904105720AM1077184640713.pdf>, p. 3.
 9. Ibid.
 10. To understand how nationality or 'ethnicity' has been created in China and the role of social scientists in policy formation, see Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to terms with the Nation. Ethnic classification in Modern China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, Asia Local Studies/Global Themes 18, 2011.
 11. This information comes from: http://www.Unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=FR&pg=00034#cp_CN, accessed on 4 December 2007.
 12. See Aurélie Névtot, *La Couronne de l'Orient. Le centre du nouveau monde à Shanghai* (forthcoming).
 13. I have written in french on this topic in 'Une écriture chamanique bonne pour gouverner. Du processus de nationalisation des caractères d'écriture ni en caractères d'écriture yi', in *Du corps au texte. Approches comparatives*, ed. Brigitte Bapandier and Giordana Charuty, 2008, pp. 293–323. This article serves as a basis to write the following lines.
 14. Qiren Zhang, 'Dui sisheng yiwen tongyi de jidian kanfa, 对四省彝文统一的几点看法' (Few points of view about the unification of the Yi writing of four provinces), in *Yunnan minzu yuwen*, Kunming: Yunnan minzu chubanshe, 1998, pp. 48–9.

15. Cf. David Bradley, Language policy for the Yi, in *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China*, ed. Stevan Harrell, Berkeley: University of California Press, Studies on China 26, 2001, p. 206. On this subject, see also Zhangliang Pu (op. cit., pp. 260–5). When referring to the standardization of the Yi writing in Liangshan, he notes that 'as an important tool in education, the standard Yi writing system greatly promoted the cause of minority education' (op. cit., p. 262). Yet he never refers to the roots of this writing, insisting only on the fact that this recognition of their own script improves the quality of education in Yi communities. It seems here that the situation deals with the recognition of the Yi writing from Liangshan in the Chinese institution rather than its transformation and recreation as it happens in Yunnan. Even a computer code has been created for the official Yi writing of Sichuan (cf. http://scripts.sil.org/cms/scripts/page.php?site_id=nrsi&id=SILYi_home). The standardized Yi script and language is based on a local language which can be understood since it is a native tongue. The situation is completely different in Yunnan as we will see [and also in Guizhou where Yi is used as a supplementary language of instruction and/or subject of study (for more details, cf. Pu, op. cit., pp. 268–9)].
16. In Shilin, at least at the end of the 1990s. I can't assert that this teaching project still occurs locally. Many schools reserved for children from minorities are situated in the Chinese autonomous territories. For further information about minority education, see Mette Halskov-Hansen, *Lessons in being Chinese. Minority education and ethnic identity in Southwest China*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1999.
17. Qiren Zhang, op. cit., cf. also Longche wanxiao shishi yihan shuangyuwen jiaxue de zhouxiang bangao 龙车完小实施彝汉双语文教学的调查报告 (Inquiry report about the bilingual teaching Yi/Han at the primary school of Lingchi), in *Yunnan minzu yuwen*, Kunming: Yunnan minzu chubanshe, 1997, pp. 13–15.
18. Just as Zhangliang Pu (op. cit.) does without questioning the 'bilingual education experiments' in Yunnan.
19. As mentioned before, I can't assert the official Yi writing remains taught at school today. About research carried out in a Liangshan secondary school, cf. Martin Schoenhals, Education and ethnicity among the Liangshan Yi, in *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China*, ed. Stevan Harrell, Berkeley: University of California Press, Studies on China, 26, 2001, pp. 238–55.
20. Schoenhals, op. cit., p. 297.
21. Cf. Thomas Herberer, Nationalities Conflict and Ethnicity in the People's Republic of China, with Special Reference to the Yi in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, in *Perspectives on the Yi of Southwest China*, ed. Stevan Harrell, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 214–37.
22. Cf. Névtot 2008, op. cit.
23. Since writings are consubstantial with the shaman, copying them does not imply reproducing an exact copy of his master's writings, but rather appropriating them by making them more personal. In this sense, the death

of the master activates the writing process that consists in fixing one's vital essences on paper and of giving substance to manuscripts that are infused with one's power. A shaman's manuscripts are thus seen as fragments of his master's original books without being a reproduction of them. Indeed, writing means giving body to what has been incorporated for a long time (from the beginning of the novice shaman's learning based on readings to the death of the master). Ultimately, *bimos* introduce variants while at the same time conforming to a common pattern (see Névot 2008, 2013, op. cit.).

24. Anthony Jackson, *Na-khi, an analytical appraisal of the Na-khi ritual texts*, La Haye: Mouton publisher, 1979, p. 74; Anthony Jackson and Anshi Pan, The authors of Naxi ritual books, index books and books of divination, in *Naxi and Moso ethnography. Kin, rites, pictographs*, ed. Michael Oppitz and Elisabeth Hsu, Zürich: Völkerkundemuseum, 2001, p. 276.
25. Samten Karmay, *The treasury of good sayings: a Tibetan history of Bon*, London: OUP, London Oriental Series, 26, 1972, p. 93.
26. Cf. Chunshou Ding, *Yiwen lun 彝文论* [Discussion about the Yi writing], Chengdu: Sichuan minzu press.
27. See *Yi Yuwen jichu zhisbi 彝语文基础知识* [Introduction to the Yi language and writing], Chengdu: Sichuan minzu press, 1998.
28. Pu, op. cit., p. 258.
29. For more details about the use of heteronyms in the naming of composite *minzu* (nationality), and especially the Yi nationality, cf. Mullaney, op. cit., pp. 110–16.
30. Harrell, op. cit., pp. 33–5.
31. See the books written by the linguist Ziming Ang: *Lunan Yizu mizhijie yishi ge yishu 路南彝族密枝节仪式歌译疏* (Translations of ritual songs of the *mizhi* feast of the Lunan Yi), Kunming: Yunnan minzu chubanshe, 1996; *Yizu Sani jisi ci yishu 彝族撒尼祭祀词译疏* [Translations of Sani (Yi) ritual words], Kunming: Yunnan minzu chubanshe, 1999.
32. A book has been published on this theme, proposing an annotated transcription of these ritual texts [Névo, *Versets chamaniques. Le Livre du sacrifice à la terre (texts, rituels de Chine)*, op. cit.].
33. Basing his study on a Yi group from Chuxiong, Erik Mueggler (*The Age of Wild Ghosts. Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001) focuses on the relationship between a traditional organization and one imposed by the state (from the Great Leap famine of 1958–60 to the 1990s). He explores memories of a rotating headmanship system—including the rituals and poetics that once surrounded it—destroyed by the Maoist system.
34. To compare with what is going on in the Han context, cf. Adam Yuet Chau, *Miraculous Response: Doing Popular Religion in Contemporary China*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006, for the revival of popular religion in the Shaanxi province. Through the expression 'doing popular religion', this anthropologist underlines that local religion is an interactive sphere between

the elite, the local authorities and peasant society. In a recent study (*Religion in Contemporary China: Revitalization and Innovation*, Oxon: Routledge, Contemporary China Series, 2010), he and other scholars insist on the innovation process accompanying the religious revival in China since the reform period (in the 1980s).