

## *Travelling Back via Translation: Alai, Lijiang and Minority Literature*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Tibetan author Alai's Chinese essay, *Yi di shui jingguo Lijiang* (一滴水经过丽江 [A drop of water passes through Lijiang]) is a piece of travel writing that describes the city of Lijiang (home to the Naxi minority of Yunnan province) and its environs from the perspective of an anthropomorphic drop of water. The essay has been subsequently translated back into the minority Naxi language of Lijiang by Naxi scholar Mu Chen, and both versions are presented as a lapidary inscription in a tourist square. Writing travel from the reverse perspective, i.e. translating the writing from the minority perspective of the place being travelled, is perhaps a way of counteracting the genre's inherently epistemic appropriation of the 'other'. I believe that a comparative approach can act as an antidote against the monolingual, ethnocentric tropes of travel writing. In this essay it will be observed that through back-translation of the travel writing into the Naxi culture being observed, cultural specifics can be reintroduced into a text, and a minority culture can reclaim the power to speak for itself.

**Keywords:** Naxi script; minority literature; travel writing; Alai

The picturesque Old Town of Lijiang in China's southwestern Yunnan province is no stranger to the genre of travel writing, both domestically (as a top-rated "5A" travel destination) and internationally (as a UNESCO World Heritage site). The renowned Ming dynasty travel writer Xu Xiake 徐霞客 (1586–1641) arrived in Lijiang, home to the Naxi minority people, in 1639, and was immediately taken with the geography of the Himalayan foothills and the cultural landscape of the region, which forms a prominent section of his famed 17<sup>th</sup> century travel diary. In the west, James Hilton's 1933 book *Lost Horizon* is said to have been inspired by the travel notes concerning this part of Yunnan of the botanist-explorer Joseph Rock, published in the *National Geographic* in the late 1920s and early 1930s. However, it would perhaps not be an exaggeration to say that travel writing has experienced something of a bad press in academic

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fields of enquiry. The tourist experience, the necessarily fleeting and often-times cursory foundation of writing about travel, could be (ungenerously) defined as “superficial and blinkered... ephemeral and pre-packaged” (White 2010: 1). Further, following the growth of postcolonial studies, the genre of travel writing itself often struggles to extricate itself from its colonial heritage of representing a cultural ‘other’ (see Clark 1999). The term “Shangri-La” itself has long been associated with a certain kind of orientalisation, of presenting an unknown, mystical space somewhere in the Far East. Since being coined in James Hilton’s novel, Shangri-La has been dogged by distinctly colonial overtones; after all, the story follows a group of Westerners who discover a Utopian valley where they can live without growing old in an anachronistically luxurious Buddhist lamasery, waited on hand and foot by Tibetan serfs. It is the draw of Shangri-La, of a place where the people live in harmony with nature in the rarefied air of the high mountains, that has turned Lijiang into a major tourist destination, and one that forms the ideological foundation of ethnic Tibetan author Alai’s 阿来 2016 Chinese language essay, *Yi di shui jingguo Lijiang* 一滴水经过丽江 (*A drop of water passes through Lijiang*, hereafter “*Yi di shui*”).

*Yi di shui* is not written from the author’s minority perspective of being a Gyalrong Tibetan writer;<sup>2</sup> it is instead anthropomorphic, the narrator being a drop of water. The water is figured as a traveller, modelled on the prototypical Chinese tourist (as we will see, the “water” wonders about cultural specificities in passing, without the time or true desire to go further). As an essentialised Chinese tourist to Lijiang, the culture of the Naxi people falls by the “waterside” as the water journeys down to the Yangtze, to return to the central plains of China’s heartland. The essay is the story of a “transcendent traveller”, but, as Indira Ghose has noted, the gaze of such a traveller, interested primarily in the aesthetic, is “absent from *the site of observation while simultaneously* serving the function of surveillance over the other” (1998: 9). Translation offers an opportunity for re-orientation of the gaze. Writing travel from the reverse perspective, i.e. translating the writing from the minority perspective of the place being travelled, is perhaps a way of counteracting the genre’s inherently epistemic appropriation of the ‘other’. In this essay, it will be observed that through translation back into the Naxi culture that is being described, cultural specifics can be reintroduced into a text, and a minority culture can reclaim the power to speak for itself.

<sup>2</sup> Alai (1959–) is perhaps most well-known for his Chinese language novels about Tibet, such as *Red Poppies* (*Chen’ai luoding* 尘埃落定, 1998) and *The Song of King Gesar* (*Gesa’er Wang* 格萨尔王, 2009).

## Travel, translation, minority

That travel writing is, if not translation ‘proper’, then at least a translational genre of writing, has been the focus of some theoretical discussion in translation studies (Bassnett 2004; Polezzi 2006; Martin and Pickford 2012). Of course, travel writing cannot but be translation if we consider that translation itself is a form of travel, of bringing one cultural world into the orbit of another. Travel writings are translations in the sense that source cultures (the places being travelled) are *translated* into target cultures (the places of publication of the travel accounts). In other words, a travel writer could be conceived of as a translator whose source text is the very land being described.

Such an approach adopts the broader understanding of translation that gained prominence in translation studies after the 1980s, in what is known as the cultural turn. The cultural turn saw a shift of emphasis away from the formalist evaluation of translations against source texts, to something ‘beyond’ linguistics: “what is studied is the text embedded in its network of both source and target cultural signs and in this way Translation Studies has been able to utilize the linguistic approach and to move out beyond it” (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990). Indeed, according to Douglas Robinson, the cultural turn works by “directing attention away from the linguistic conception of translation as abstract correspondence between texts to what *happens* in translation”; (1991: 129). What happens, then, in travel writing? Bill Ashcroft has talked of a “relentless trajectory” inherent in travel writing whereby the strange is drawn “into the intimacy of the familiar” (2008: 231). That is, travel writing, like translation, is involved implicitly with power and possession. It is a genre that raises uncomfortable questions of ownership. This ownership is enacted by textual discourse, and, “as the writing creates the travel, so writing creates the utopia of a strange world made familiar” (ibid.: 230). I posit in this essay that translating travel writing back into the original source culture can go some way to redress the inherent power imbalance of travel writing. The dominated culture (the place being travelled to) can take back some form of ownership via back-translation. Concomitant to this, if travel writing is already translation, then translating it back into the language of the place being described is nothing other than back-translation.

Back-translation is, in modern translation studies, primarily a tool of assessing accuracy and completeness, a tool commonly used in professional translation organisations to establish the veracity of a translated text. Marilyn Gaddis Rose has suggested a newer metric for the process, however, that of assuring the integrity of form. By “form”, Gaddis Rose means some kind of reconstruction of the original material (to reconstruct what the English in a French translation of Yeats’ originally English conversation “must have been”,

in her most prominent example): “[The first] category of backtranslation has us translate back to the source language to assure integrity of message. The second category... has us translate back to the source language to assure integrity of form as well” (Gaddis Rose 1985: 6). Form is here used as a shorthand for the integrity of the source culture, how it is presented, and to what level of nuance it is described. It is this approach I intend to adopt here, i.e. taking a cultural focus in the study of back-translation, whereby we move beyond the formal linguistic properties of the text to talk about underlying cultural structures.

Gaddis Rose goes on to state the “furthest pole of reconstructive back-translation on the spectrum” are translations that actually “replace the original”. I wish to analyse a case where the original culture, which runs the risk of being elided in the face of a travel writing narrative that makes the strange seem familiar, is re-instated via back-translation. Comparing the translation of a piece of travel writing with both its direct “source” text and the very culture which acted as the ultimate source will show that back-translation can move travel writing away from its association with national dominance and cultural homogeneity. Following Loredana Polezzi, I believe that this comparative approach can act as an “antidote against the narrow perspective of monolingual (and tendentially ethnocentric) analysis” (2001: 2).

When Chinese writers compose travel writing about minority areas within China, the issue of power cannot be ignored. The Chinese language discourse on ethnic minority regions is undoubtedly one of ownership, and travel writing by Han authors about minority areas is a textual discourse that supports the Utopian political vision of one China. In China, domestic travel writing is of course also political, in that mainstream narratives reinforce the idea that all parts of China are, though perhaps different culturally at the micro level, all part of the same macro-Chinese culture. This essay analyses the case of back-translation of a piece of Chinese travel writing about the locale of Lijiang and its minority “Naxi culture”. The Naxi are, by Chinese standards, a “small” ethnic group, with a population of around 330,000, most of whom live in and around the scenic Lijiang basin in northwest Yunnan province. The Naxi language is usually classified within the Tibeto-Burman language family, but it is writing among the Naxi that has garnered them a degree of fame within China at odds with the size of their population. Besides writing *putonghua* 普通话 with Chinese characters, they are most prominently known for possessing a native logographic script, known in popular culture as “the world’s last living pictographs”: the *dongba* script.<sup>3</sup> Traditionally reserved primarily for ritual purposes, the script has never seen wide secular usage. It is this script that is

<sup>3</sup> So named after the *dobbaq* ritualists who are the custodians of the Naxi religion. In this essay I use the Chinese romanisation, *dongba* 东巴, as it is now conventional usage.

the medium for the back-translation of Alai's essay, an essay that via translation, manages to reclaim its status as minority literature.

The PRC recognizes 55 minority groups, inspired by the former Soviet model of categorising ethnic minorities (Mullaney 2010). These groups are mainly located in China's border regions. Each of them possesses what could be termed a 'national literature' such as oral traditions, historic written traditions in Sinitic or non-Sinitic scripts, and since 1949, literature composed in standard Chinese (the official language of the PRC). Contemporary minority literature can be divided into Sinophone writing, i.e. works that employ standard Chinese, and literature written in native languages. There is some hybrid middle ground here, whereby the native language can also be recorded in Chinese as part of a work primarily written in standard Chinese. Because of the dominance of Han culture and standard written Chinese, "Many ethnic authors find themselves caught between two cultural worlds, and the shaping of an ethnic identity is problematic for some" (Bender 2015: 262). In China, ethnic literature is generally classified as a work written by a person who belongs to an ethnic minority. This definition is not always clear-cut; some authors are of mixed heritage, and some minority authors do not write about ethnic themes. In 1983, Chinese scholar Mao Xing wrote that "so-called 'minority literature', is, in our understanding, one, when the author belongs to an ethnic minority, and two, when the work possesses characteristics of this ethnicity, or reflects the life of this ethnic group" (1983, 1). Nevertheless, minority literature can probably be given both broad and narrow definitions. A broad definition would be any work composed by a minority author, while a narrower definition would suggest that the subject matter must also be related to the author's own minority.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of *Yi di shui* we have an ethnic minority author (Alai, who is ethnically "Tibetan") composing travel writing in standard Chinese about a different ethnic minority group, the Naxi, which is then back-translated into the Naxi language and the traditional Naxi logographic script. In this story, Alai is writing not in the same mode as in his early stories of Tibetan life, but in his more recent (and more politically prominent) identity as chair of the Sichuan Writers' Association and vice-chair of the Chinese Writers' Association.<sup>5</sup> He is a minority writer writing about a minority culture,

<sup>4</sup> See Fan Yihong (2016) for a detailed discussion of this topic.

<sup>5</sup> Alai, himself a "hybrid" (his mother was Tibetan, his father a Hui Muslim), was born in Aba prefecture in China's western Sichuan province. Alai self-identifies as Tibetan, and has said that "He still thinks in Tibetan, though he writes in Chinese" (Alai 2012: 255). This is exemplified in his essay's attitude to both language and writing.

but, this is not minority literature *per se*, at least according to the narrow definition above, because the subject matter is Naxi, and not Tibetan. In (back-)translation however, we will see that the text becomes minority literature once again, a piece of writing with minority culture truly at its centre.

### The Naxi translation: travelling back

In 2018, in a shady corner of Lijiang's Jade River square – the main point of entry to the UNESCO-listed old town – an elaborate lapidary inscription was unveiled. This is an essay carved into a large piece of jade, and that bears the UNESCO logo, which acts almost as a certificate of its global tourism credentials (see figure 1). The inscription, on one single piece of jade some 12.5m in length, records in full the Chinese essay by Alai on the topic of Lijiang's cultural tourism: *Yi di shui jingguo Lijiang*. This inscription is also multilingual, for the reverse of the stone (hence, a literal back-translation!) contains the essay, translated into Naxi by local scholar Mu Chen 木琛 and beautifully written in the logographic dongba script (see figure 2).<sup>6</sup> The jade it is carved upon acts metaphorically as the ultimate source text, the rock of the Naxi-land (the snow mountain that overlooks Lijiang is known as the Jade Dragon snow mountain).



Figure 1. The jade inscription of *Yi di shui jingguo Lijiang* (front).

<sup>6</sup> The Naxi translation can be seen online here: <https://kknews.cc/zh-hk/travel/le4nb39.html> (accessed January 2021).

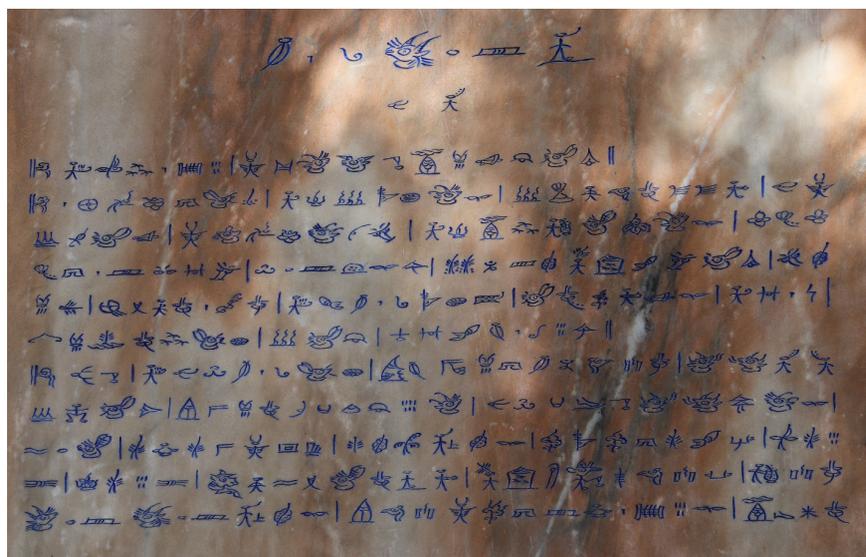


Figure 2. The jade inscription of *Yi di shui jingguo Lijiang* (reverse in Naxi translation, detail).

Alai's *Yi di shui* was written at the behest of the Lijiang municipal government (Su 2018: 223); it is, if we take into account its patronage, essentially an advertisement for the city. It is by nature a travelogue, a piece of eco-literary ethno-tourism (touring through this minority locale from the perspective of a drop of water, describing its journey from the mountaintops above Lijiang, through the old town, and down into the Yangtze). In a comparison of travel writing and ethnography, Loredana Polezzi has noted that, "unlike the translator, the travel writer and ethnographer have no fear of being brought to task by the presence of an original which could be invoked to test their authority and the truthfulness of their account" (2001: 92). This authority is solidified by the nature of the language used – Chinese – as the official language of the region being travelled to; Lijiang is, after all, part of China. When travel writing is back-translated, however, we can perhaps identify a method of testing this authorial veracity. We can start looking at the issue of authenticity by analysing the proper names in the essay and its translation.

Alai's "drop of water" starts its journey atop a snow mountain, looking down upon the Lijiang basin below. Throughout the text, Alai refers only to "Yulong xueshan" 玉龙雪山 (Jade Dragon snow mountain), while in his translation, Mu Chen utilises three different names for the mountain. The names change depending on the relative position of the water on its journey from

the mountaintop down to the Yangtze, and thus the translation reflects the real geography of Lijiang in the writing itself, within the nomenclature of the mountain. First, it is simply referred to as a (cloud-wrapped) snow mountain (Naxi: *jiqngv'lv*), then as the water travels further south it becomes the “proper name” of Baisha snow mountain, then, in Lijiang city, it becomes Lijiang snow mountain (i.e. how it is known internationally) in the context of globalised tourism. In the first sentence of the essay, the water (at this point snow) lands on top of the mountain:

我是一片雪，轻盈地落在了玉龙雪山顶上  
 (I am a single piece of snow, falling gently onto the peaks of the Jade Dragon snow mountain.) (Alai 2018:1)

While the Chinese uses four graphs, the noun phrase Yulong xueshan, Mu

Chen uses in Naxi one single logographic graph,  *jiqngv'lv* (lit. cloud silver rock), which simply means “cloudy snow mountain”, the silver being a metaphor for the snow.<sup>7</sup> When the water is nothing more than snow atop the mountain, it has no understanding of geography, and thus it is appropriate perhaps to not use a full proper noun for the mountain. After all, how would the snow know it was on top of the “Jade Dragon snow mountain”?

Later, the water makes its way down to the Lijiang plain, and looks back towards the mountain.

我还顺着人们远眺的目光看见了玉龙雪山  
 (I even followed their gazes into the distance, and saw the Jade Dragon snow mountain) (2018: 2)

<sup>7</sup> In this essay I use  (a graph taken from Fang and He's 1981 dictionary), where the clouds are written above the mountain. Mu Chen's graph has the tip of the mountain touch the clouds: .

The graph can however also be written with the clouds sitting lower, the tip of the mountain emerging above them:  (from Wu and Hu 2014: 148). In this case, the mountain truly becomes “The cloud-wrapped jade dragon often reveals its horns” (*yun biao yu long chang lu jiao* 云表玉龙长露角), a line from a poem by Ming dynasty Lijiang chieftain Mu Gong (1499–1553).

In translation, Mu Chen uses in this section the proper noun, “Bbesheeq jiqngv’lv” , which is perhaps the most formal Naxi name for the mountain, literally “Baisha cloudy snow mountain”. It is so named because the village of Baisha (Bbesheeq) is situated north of Lijiang, at the foot of the mountain. The Naxi ancestors, upon reaching the Lijiang plain, first settled in Baisha before moving south to Lijiang proper. We have now the mountain, preceded by the name of a village as a marker of location. By the mid-point of the essay, the water finds itself in the old town of Lijiang, and again looks back towards the mountain in the north.

看纳西古城的四方街，看玉龙雪山。

(I saw the Square Market of the Naxi old town, and the Jade Dragon snow mountain.) (2018: 2).

Now in Lijiang city, the water refers to the mountain once again. In Chinese, nothing changes, the mountain is constant, it is still the “Jade Dragon”. In the Naxi translation it is no longer Baisha cloudy snow mountain, but “Lijiang

cloudy snow mountain”, Yigv jiqngv’lv . It is worth noting here that Mu Chen uses a variant form of “Lijiang”, the *yi* being represented by the graph for the verb *yiq*, “to leak (water)”, whereas in the essay’s title, he writes

Yigv , the *yi* being a horned serow. Traditionally, such graphic variations were used to introduce variety into the written ritual manuscripts, i.e. to prevent the reading process from becoming too repetitive. As we can see, the name of the mountain in Naxi shifts depending on one’s geographical perspective (just as Alai uses the Chinese formulation and I might use the English translation of the Chinese name). That is, the Chinese writer is naturally going to use the Chinese name of the mountain (as are most foreign visitors, or anyone looking at an officially sanctioned map), but while the Chinese name of the mountain is constant, in Naxi it is, ironically, fluid.

Joseph Rock writes that “The Li-chiang snow range does not seem to have any other but Chinese names, which would indicate and confirm the belief that the Na-khi were immigrants in that region...proper Na-khi names in the true sense of the word for the range or individual peaks do not exist. The name of the highest peak is a Chinese one, though it is true that it is also called in Na-khi, *Boa-shi nv’lv*” (1947: 191). While Rock states that there are no “proper” Naxi names for the Jade Dragon snow mountain, this seems to simply be an assertion that there are no *historic* names, for it does have a number of

Naxi names as I have already suggested. Matthew Pinson's Naxi dictionary includes several entries under the Chinese headword "Yulong xueshan": Jiqngv'lv; Ngv'ddv; Ngv'lv; Ngv'lv bbei jjuq (2012: 527). Several names for the mountain are recreated in Mu Chen's translation, then, both logographically and syllabically, where in the original travel writing there is only one exonymic Chinese name. With an emphasis on "form", back-translation approaches a kind of trans-editing, whereby variants are re-instated and proper nouns take back their rightful place: "ambiguities must be clarified, perhaps with variants noted; proper nouns silently corrected" (Gaddis Rose 1985: 9–10). We have here a clear example of variants being noted, and proper nouns 'corrected', the Naxi text taking back ownership of the mountain via attention to nomenclature.

Mu Chen has said of the translation that he hopes it will be read by Naxi schoolchildren, as Alai's text has been incorporated into the Chinese language curriculum as a "model essay", perhaps its translation can occupy a similar position in a minority language curriculum.

首先要把文章翻译成纳西语，然后再用东巴文记录下来，原文写的很优美，所以翻译过程中也要用纳西语特有的表达方式将这种优美表现出来。另外，东巴文主要是记录古纳西语，但是我们希望让更多纳西孩子们能够学习，让更多人读懂，所以语体更加接近当代纳西语。

(First the essay had to be translated into Naxi, and then recorded in dongba script. The original was beautifully written, so, in translation, forms of expression unique to the Naxi language had to be used to capture this beauty. Further, dongba script is primarily used to record ancient Naxi, but as we wanted to let more Naxi children learn from it, and be able to read it, the language used is closer to contemporary Naxi.)<sup>8</sup>

When he says "forms of expression unique to the Naxi" were used, we can surmise that this includes the naming conventions of the mountain, and of Lijiang. These serve not to express the 'beauty' of the original (which does not possess such nuance), but rather to add a cultural edifice to the text, to re-familiarise the otherisation present in Alai's essay. This is also translation as a two-stage process, first Chinese into colloquial Naxi, then colloquial Naxi into a vernacular dongba script.

This issue of travel writing imposing a monolingual homogeneity upon the cultural landscape becomes clearer when actual dialogue is introduced into the essay. As the water makes its way through Lijiang, it notices that the people are all saying one word in particular:

<sup>8</sup> See <https://www.lijiangtv.com/news/travel/article/31067.html> (accessed January 2021).

不同的语言里，都有那个词频频出现：丽江，丽江。

(In different languages, one word kept coming up: Lijiang, Lijiang.) (2018: 2)

And in the Naxi translation:



Geezheeq me nilniq na, deeni bbei liljer liljer dal shel neiq yeq.

(In different languages, [they were] always saying Lijiang Lijiang)

In the time it took for the water to come down from the glacier and make its way into Lijiang, the city has become a global tourist destination, and many languages are spoken there. However, in all these languages, there is one word that remains constant, Lijiang. In Naxi, Mu Chen does not use the accepted Naxi word for Lijiang used elsewhere in his translation, i.e. the endonym Yigvddiuq, but instead a transliteration of its Chinese name, Lijiang, in this Naxi translation read “Liljer” (Pinson (2012) records the pronunciation as “liljaiq”), using

two phonetic loan graphs, the ritual drum, and a cup . The ritual drum has since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century been used as a prominent rebus in Naxi writing, most famously to depict the surname of the Taiwanese Naxiologist, Li Lin-ts'an 李霖灿 (see Yu 2016 for this example). The ritual drum, when used in a proper noun, signifies *foreignness*. The suggestion here is that non-natives will be saying Lijiang, for this is not its Naxi name (although it must be said today this is by far the most commonly used name even among native Naxi).

In Alai's text, there is only one word, despite the suggestion of many languages. The Naxi translation records both the endonym and the exonym, Yigvddiuq and Liljer, and makes it clear that the ‘othered’ Lijiang is not the Lijiang of the title (the endonym), but Lijiang in the mouths of people from all over the world (the exonym). In fact, this sentence refers to a previous paragraph, where the water hears people in the villages and on the ancient tea horse road talk of the Lijiang basin:

经过马帮来往的驿道，经过纳西族村庄里的人们，他们都在说：丽江坝，丽江坝

(Passing the old road used by the horse caravans, and through the villages filled with Naxi people, everyone was talking about the “Lijiang basin”.) (2018: 1)

Here Mu Chen *does* use the Naxi name for Lijiang (basin) proper, Yigvddiuq



. The third graph, *ddiuq*, indicates land, metaphorically a wide expanse, i.e. basin. At this point, the water has not reached the city, so those doing the talking are the native inhabitants of the Lijiang plain. In Rock we learn that “Li-chiang (beautiful river) is known as Yi-gv to the Na-khi of outlying districts such as La-bpu and the villages on the banks of the Yangtze. The Na-khi of the Li-chiang plain, however, always speak of the town as Ngu-bä” (Rock 1947: 172). We are presented, then, with yet another name, “Gguqbbbei”. This name does appear in the Naxi translation, specifically as a translation of the Lijiang square market (*sifangjie*), “Yigv Gguqbbbei qhee”



The existence of spoken dialogue in travel writing raises questions about the voice of the culture being described. The key question here is “who actually said what to whom” (2007: 332), as Maureen Mulligan puts it. Alai describes a heteroglossia in a single-voiced discourse where the local voices are effaced. Everyone appears to be speaking Chinese. When referring to Lijiang, Naxi residents would use their native language and say either Yigv (Naxi name for Lijiang) or Gguqbbbei (Naxi name for Lijiang old town), and Liljiaq/Liljer (the Chinese name as pronounced in Naxi). The Han Chinese, or non-Naxi speakers, would only say “Lijiang”. Lijiang is an ethnically diverse place, its people speak in different languages, and this variety can be represented in writing. In Alai, however, there is only homogenous standard Chinese.

There is a collusion between author and reader implicit in travel writing that generates questions about linguistic ability, and has been aptly summarised by Susan Bassnett: “the idea that travellers can talk to anyone, anywhere in the world and record their conversations in the form of direct speech” (Bassnett 1998: 36). In *Yi di shui*, we have an even greater collusion: that somehow this drop of water can understand everything that it hears. The impression one gets, perhaps, is that in modern China, even the water is fluent in standard Chinese.

Of course, Alai would have been remiss not to mention the dongba script in an essay that was supposed to be emblematic of Lijiang’s cultural tourism, and indeed the water does talk of the script in passing. The context is that as the water travels through the canals of the old town, it passes by shops (aimed at tourists) selling dongba script calligraphy, where it wonders how “water” might be written in this unusual form of writing. Unfortunately for the water, it cannot stop, it must flow onward, so it does not get to see how “water” is written in Naxi dongba.

经过售卖纳西族东巴象形文字的字画店。我想停下来看看，东巴文的“水”字是怎样的写法。

(Passing shops selling Naxi dongba calligraphy, I wanted to stop and look, to see how “water” is written in the dongba script.) (2018: 3)

And in the Naxi translation:



Dobbaq tei'ee berl qil nee ddee jji ku keel. Ngeq la teiq hiul naiq'vf, Dobbaq tei'ee jjiq tee seiq bbei berl mei.

(Passing a shop selling Naxi dongba writing, I wanted to stop (and see) how “water” is written in Naxi dongba.)

There is yet more written variation to mention in this translation. The word “dongba” (Naxi *dobbaq*) is written in two different ways even in this short

extract. Initially, with the board *do*, and the goitre *bbaq*  (i.e. two graphs, both phonetic loans). It is then written with one single compound graph,

a board with a goitre , also read *dobbaq*. Of particular note here is the depiction of water itself. In Alai's text, the water is left only to wonder how “water” might be written. In Naxi we are from the very beginning presented with exactly this, “water” in Naxi dongba. If we do take the time to look at the

Naxi graph for water *jjiq* , we will see that it actually reflects a waterway: a spring or source at the top, from which water runs down in the form of a stream or river, just as Alai's essay takes us from the snow range down to Lijiang. This naturally introduces an irony into the translation, for the water as we are reading it is already written in the Naxi dongba script, we do not have to wonder how it is written (as Alai the tourist-narrator seems to wonder). This section is indicative of the incidental cultural tourism that short form travel narratives can engender: a type of travel that is not culturally motivated, where

the tourist “will only be superficially involved with culture during his or her visit” (Binkhorst 2007: 127). The water/traveller looks at the beautiful and exotic Naxi dongba script, but doesn’t have the time to really appreciate it, or learn how to write it. Cronin has noted the importance of foreign words when it comes to displaying authenticity in travel accounts: “Language is an important source of the detail that confers a plausibility on an account and makes the foreign textually apparent. Words become the souvenirs brought home to the expectant reader” (Cronin 2000: 40). In *Yi di shui*, we get no souvenirs; the transcendent traveller simply doesn’t have the time for them. The veracity of the spoken language(s), and the native written tradition, is both implicitly and explicitly obscured.

## Conclusion

Taking into account the genre of Alai’s essay, it is naturally unsurprising that he writes from a Han-centric perspective. Cultural hegemony was already apparent in the earliest examples of travel writing about Lijiang in Chinese. Take, for example, when Xu Xiake writes of being asked to educate the fourth son of Mu Zeng (1587–1646), *tusi* of Lijiang, in traditional Han Chinese culture. Mu Zeng himself (as quoted by Xu Xiake when asking for the writer’s help) is obsequious in his depiction of the civilised Han culture of the *zhongyuan* (central plains), opposed implicitly to the more primitive culture of the outlying regions over which he governed: “Although interested in writing, because there are no good teachers here, he [Mu Zeng’s son] has been unable to get even a glimpse of the culture (*wenmai*) of the Central Plains. I hereby ask you to instruct him: were he to learn the basic rules, you would have my eternal respect” (as cited in Ward 2001: 140). It is another irony that in the whole of Alai’s essay, the only named figure is the Han explorer Xu Xiake.<sup>9</sup> China has always placed great emphasis on the written text as a tool in projecting power, for “Written and printed documents emanating from the imperial court and local government seats (the *yamen*) were instruments of rule, both revered and feared by the common masses” (Chau 2008: 197). Even non-official texts such as travel accounts wield power in a similar, and subtler, way. Alai’s text is ostensibly a

<sup>9</sup> 一个名叫徐霞客的远游人来了, 把玉龙雪山写进了书里, 把丽江古城写进书里, 让它们的名字四处流传 (2018: 1) (A traveller called Xu Xiake came here, and he put the Jade Dragon snow mountain and the ancient town of Lijiang into his book, helping their names spread far and wide.) The name “Xu Xiake” is translated into Naxi with three

loan graphs: *siu*, *xe* and *ke* 

cultural tour, making the landscape intelligible to the reader, but at the same time it is effacing the minority culture, sanitising and washing it clean as the water makes its cursory trip through the landscape. No ‘foreign’ words remain, until, that is, the text is rescued in back-translation. It is unfortunate that the text only reaches its true potential as travel writing and minority literature in its final translated form.

I have earlier made the point that translation (more specifically back-translation) can be an antidote to cultural dominance inherent in travel writing. This antidote is not a panacea, especially given the precarious context of a minority language and script. The readership of Alai’s essay no doubt numbers in the millions (it has been included in Chinese high school textbooks as an example of short-form prose writing). How many readers are there of the Naxi rendition? How many readers *can* there be? While it has been published online and in tourism leaflets, one gets the feeling that Mu Chen’s version is more of a symbolic exercise. Nevertheless, the presentation of the travel writing alongside its translation allows us to see what was really there all along. It has, as Gaddis Rose might say, replaced the original (for those who can read it). With its back-translation, Alai’s text fulfils the initial promise of minority literature: of containing cultural content we might not find elsewhere in more dominant literary forms.

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