

## **12 BUILDING YI (M)OTHER TONGUE: VIRTUAL PLATFORMS, LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE AND CULTURAL AWARENESS IN A CHINESE MINORITY CONTEXT**

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### **Introduction**

In this chapter I discuss current developments regarding language loss and corresponding language revival activities among the Yi (Nuosu) of China. The so-called Yi ethnic minority ranks sixth in size among the officially recognized 55 ethnic minorities of the People's Republic of China (MOFCOM 2009). The Yi are an extremely heterogeneous group consisting of different branches or tribes which are distributed in China's southwestern provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan, and Guangxi. Yi cultural and linguistic heterogeneity, paired with the lack of a unifying, vibrant religious-linguistic culture, such as Tibetan Buddhism or Islam in China, co-determine a process of acculturation and language switch/loss, which has been increasingly evident with the Nuosu subgroup in semi-urban and urban, as well as in semi-rural contexts.

The new Constitution of the People's Republic of China in 1982 granted ethnic minorities far-reaching legal, political and cultural autonomy. It also signified for the Yi an incentive to re-assess issues of language reform and education, whose foundation had been laid in the 1950s, and which had come to a forced standstill during the ten turbulent years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Nevertheless, the languages of the Yi, like those of other ethnic minorities in China, are in a state of crisis. In an ironic twist of events, this situation may be co-determined precisely by measures propagated to preserve language, such as the Yi language reform.

I argue that the mechanisms which determined and emerged as a consequence of the Yi language reform, can be conceived in terms of an ongoing process of superscription (Duara 2009), which has gained a different and potentially much more far-reaching dimension over the past ten years. The unparalleled speed with which the internet, and corresponding new means of virtual information-sharing, have been developing in China has generated new types of Yi language learning materials, which are primarily proliferated online, and which emerged only rather recently as part of what I define as an 'Yi language revitalisation' movement. This movement employs the notion of a heterogeneous 'Yi mother tongue' (*yizu muyu*), and sometimes a 'Yi mother tongue culture' (*yizu muyu wenhua*) to advance language learning and main-

tenance among young Yi in urban and semi-urban contexts in China. An analysis of the current and the future design and potential of Yi language learning materials requires an assessment and understanding of the ‘Yi Mother Tongue’ language movement. As part of this assessment I present and analyse contemporary Yi (Nuosu) language materials in their primarily virtual manifestations (internet), especially in regard to their genesis and potential for language maintenance.

### The Yi (Nuosu) of Liangshan and the current situation of ‘Yi language’

The Nuosu are the largest of several subgroups (Harrell 2001a), or branches, of the so-called Yi ethnic group, which was established by Chinese sociologists and ethnologists in the 1950s. As allegedly one of the oldest (MOFCOM 2009) *minzu*, or officially recognised Chinese ethnic minorities, the Yi are distributed over Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces. Today, around 2 million Nuosu live in what is known as Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture, a mountainous area in southwest Sichuan Province, as well as increasingly in translocal urban centres such as Chengdu and Beijing. Until the Communist takeover of the area in 1956, the Nuosu were organised in a rigid caste-clan system, with a ruling caste of the nobility, or Black Yi at the top, underneath these the serf caste of the White Yi, and two serf/slave castes in the bottom stratum. This social structure was branded by official ideology and Han-Chinese scholars as the only ‘slave society’ (*nuli shehui*) in feudalistic China. The term Liangshan, ‘cold mountains’, was coined by Han Chinese. Originally the area encompassed a much larger total territory than remains in today’s Liangshan Autonomous Prefecture. In their own language the Nuosu call their homeland *nimu*, or *nuosu muddi*, which literally means ‘land of the Nuosu’ (Harrell 2000: 3).

The Nuosu speak a variant of what has come to constitute ‘the Yi language’ in post-1949 China. Recent scholarship classifies ‘Yi’ as belonging to the Tibeto-Burman language family, and as being closely related to Burmese (Bradley 2011; Hu 2010: 3). In the 1950s six major ‘Yi’ dialects were identified, e.g. the Northern, Southern, Western, Eastern, Central and South-Eastern dialects. Most of these are mutually unintelligible (*ibid.*). The Liangshan Yi, who call themselves ‘Nuosu’, or simply ‘people’ in their own language, speak what has become classified as the Northern Yi dialect. According to Hu (2010: 3), there are nearly 2.8 million speakers of Nuosu dialect(s), including those outside of Liangshan Prefecture. Like the other ‘Yi’ dialect groups, the larger Northern Dialect group consists of smaller linguistic units, which Bradley (2001: 202) refers to as subgroups. The Northern Dialect is generally divided into three such subgroups, namely the ‘large trousers’, or *Yynuo* (Chinese, *Yinuo*); the central ‘middle trousers’, or *Shynra* (Chinese, *Shengzha*); and the southern ‘small trousers’, or *Suondi* (Chinese, *Suodi*),<sup>1</sup> with a subdivision into western *Adu* and eastern *Suondi* (Bradley 2011: 203, 204). “*Yynuo* and *Shynra* are mutually intelligible, but speakers of *Suondi* must make

a considerable effort to learn *Shynra*” (ibid.). Among the Yi (Nuosu) of Liangshan, differences in language also always go hand in hand with cultural differences, such as dress, headdress, and women’s jewellery.<sup>2</sup>

A common feature of Yi Northern Dialect is its own traditional script, with which this language has purportedly been recorded for about 500 years (see for instance <http://www.ancientscripts.com/yi.html>; and longer according to other sources, such as <http://www.babelstone.co.uk/yi/script.html>; both sites last accessed on 22 November 2012). This script consists of a pictographic system of 8,000–10,000 glyphs, with each glyph representing a basic lexigraphic unit that developed independently from the (Han) Chinese script. According to Hu (2010: 3), it is also unrelated to the alphabetic scripts of neighbouring peoples such as the Tibetans or the Burmese. These characteristics might evoke a sense of a homogeneous Yi script for all Yi dialects and areas. This, in fact, is not the case. As early as 1913 Mueller (1913: 51f.) discusses the parallel existence of several such scripts among different Yi-related groups in Sichuan and neighbouring areas of Yunnan and Guizhou.<sup>3</sup>

An understanding of the reasons behind both the ‘Yi language’ crisis and language maintenance thus necessitates not only a cultural and linguistic differentiation between different branches of ‘Yi’, but also between the notion of ‘Yi’ and ‘Nuosu’ spoken and written language, as the main cultural-linguistic group focused on in this chapter. In traditional Nuosu society before 1956, spoken and written language belonged to different dimensions of daily life. Written language was associated almost exclusively with the realm of religion, e. g. the *Bimo* (priest or religious practitioner), whose extensive scriptures and rituals accompany every Nuosu through life. Use and proliferation of written language in sacred contexts stood in contrast to the orality of mundane cultural transmission of songs, ballads and poetry, as well as orally transmitted classical ‘texts’ with social and ethical instructions, such as the *Hmatmop teyy*, or ‘Book of Teachings’ (see excerpt at: <http://faculty.washington.edu/stevehar/bkhamamu.html>).

Bradley (2001: 197ff.) and others have written extensively about the project of Chinese ethnic classification and corresponding language issues between 1956 and 1958. According to Bradley (2001: 199), determining the standard variety within each officially designated ethnic minority group was the most difficult and controversial aspect of language policy – a process whose outcome “was largely determined in advance, but the consultative process was seen to be carried out in full” (ibid.). For the Yi of the now so-called Northern Dialect group, the *Shynra* speech of Liangshan’s Xide County was selected as standard (Bradley 2001: 206). From the existing Yi script in Liangshan, a “new syllabary of 819 syllables and one diacritic (representing a tone that arises mainly from *sandhi*) was chosen from the traditional characters in their Xide pronunciation”(ibid.). However, official approval of this new syllabary was substantially delayed by the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In the mid-1970s “a group of Nuosu cadres and intellectuals, sensing an opening amidst the declining

radicalism of the last years of the Gang of Four, began to agitate for using the Nuosu language once again as a medium of instruction” (Harrell 2001b). Without their own script, they argued, the rate of illiteracy and school attendance could not be improved (Heberer 2001: 230). Their efforts resulted in the ratification of “a modified version of the traditional Nuosu script used by the *bimo* priests” on 1 October 1980 (*ibid.*).<sup>4</sup> According to Heberer (2001: 230) the

“reintroduction was, at the same time, an expression of the failure of the policy to compel the Yi and many other people to use the Chinese language, along with Chinese script, as their own language. The Yi were clearly not ready to undertake the unlearning of their own language in favour of a foreign tongue.”

Since its ratification in 1980, the new script has been widely used and proliferated by an “entire corpus of elementary and secondary textbooks for a wide range of subjects, [... and] bilingual education in elementary and later in secondary schools” (*ibid.*). Due to these developments up to 100 percent literacy has been claimed in some areas (Bradley 2001: 206).

Parallel to the standardised Liangshan variant of Yi script (which is also used in the *Shynra*-speaking part of northwestern Yunnan’s Ninglang County), other Yi groups in Yunnan and Guizhou devised their own models of script reform. For Guizhou, “the decision was to retain and standardise the traditional characters, but not to impose a standard pronunciation” (Bradley 2001: 207, 208). Although their own learning materials were published in the early 1980s, the Guizhou standardised Yi script variant has not gained in popularity to date. One major reason for this may also be that most Yi areas in Guizhou have been sinicised for quite some time, and therefore lack the necessary human resources to teach and proliferate spoken and written Yi in a school environment. Others lament the fact that the old generation of Yi-speaking or literate Yi intellectuals has died out, and that the younger generation has not been able to live up to the former standard of spoken and written knowledge.

For other groups in Yunnan, a “somewhat unusual” (Bradley 2001: 208) policy was employed for script reform. Misleadingly, this new script is, like the new Liangshan syllabary, also known as *guifan Yiwen* (lit. ‘standard Yi’). These two scripts are usually only distinguishable by the adjunct ‘Liangshan’, ‘Sichuan’, or ‘Yunnan’, which precedes them in related online sources. According to Bradley, the Yunnan version was “devised between 1982 and 1987 by a committee of Yi working at the Yunnan Nationalities Commission, and approved for use from 1987 in most areas of Yunnan” (*ibid.*). It is based on a “character-by-character compromise between Eastern, Southern, South-eastern, and Northern Yi characteristics” (*ibid.*). With some 2258 selected characters the sheer vastness of the new script may have been one of the many ‘complicated reasons’ which determined ‘setbacks’ in its implementation to date (LJF 2010).

### From reconfiguration to superscription: the crisis of 'Yi language'

As part of the realisation of Chinese ethnic minorities' rights to political and cultural autonomy, the Nuosu/Yi language and script reform ostensibly reconciled the notion of Nuosu and Yi as well as the gap between traditions of spoken and written language realms, and is therefore generally regarded as a success by those who participated in the reforms and the resulting canonisation and proliferation of language materials and instruction. Perhaps ironically, these reforms have not been without their cultural repercussions for the language and culture they have purportedly attempted to help sustain. For the Nuosu as well as Yi groups in Yunnan, the reforms that came to constitute the notion of a monolithic 'modern Yi language and script' initiated a process which could well be read in light of what Prasenjit Duara (2009: 79ff.) has described as superscription. In Duara's interpretation, superscription is part of a complex balancing between worldly powers and dimensions of (spiritual) meaning within a religious context. Specifically, he describes how during the late years of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), local Qing administration was able to contain, and thus control, (potentially deviant) local power structures in villages in Hebei Province through the expansion of the canon of deities in local Guandi (God of War) temples by Confucian principles (statues). Through this strategic move, the Qing connected to existing structures, which were potentially politically challenging unless conquered, but without usurping or obliterating their original set-up. This strategy proved highly beneficial for maintaining local social and cultural stability.

Although a one-to-one transcription of Duara's concept to minority language mechanisms is not possible *per se*, the process of superscription certainly bears interpretative validity if understood in terms of a mechanism of ruling, or power discourse. Applied to the Yi/Nuosu language situation, this process entailed (similar to Duara's example),

- 1 a premeditated, politically determined top-down incentive to contain local identity (minority diversity with official rights to political and cultural autonomy), while having to secure the dominance of socialist state control (in Duara's case, empire).
- 2 In containing local structures, members of the local ruling elite are integrated in the decision-making process and become actively involved in shaping the canon of their local cult and/or culture.
- 3 These groups do not regard the interference of the state as an infringement on their rights because they are actively involved in the process by the state, and because the expansion of a canon, or in this case the reform of a language and a script, does not undermine their position of power at the local level. Quite the contrary, it expands, parallel to the state's (empire's) sphere of influence, their own political position within both their (local) culture and *vis-à-vis* the state (empire).

- 4 As for the cult or language at stake, an expansion of its canon, or accompanying changes in structure, do not overtly diminish its symbolic power of cohesion.

Interpreted in light of superscription, then, the specific case of ‘Yi language’ in its ‘Northern Dialect standard Yi’ variant entailed both the (random) legal identification of a standard dialect for all speakers of the Yi Northern Dialect regardless of their ‘mother tongue’, and for all students, both Yi and non-Yi, wishing to acquire Northern Yi Dialect. More importantly, it involved both a formal and ideographic reform of ‘Yi’ written language in its then diverse manifestations<sup>5</sup> into a standardised, homogenised ‘Yi’ script (a thorough description of which can be found in Bradley (2001: 206, 207)). Both aspects of language reform were initiated by the state and reinvigorated with the new Chinese Constitution in 1982, which granted extensive rights to minorities in regard to their political and cultural-linguistic-religious autonomy. Moreover, Yi language reform was implemented in coordination with the new academic and political Nuosu elite. Hence, language reform manifested itself as an immediate, positive effect of the new rights to cultural and political autonomy, but maintained the power of local ethnic authorities and elites.

Generally, the popularity which the new (standardised) language and script have enjoyed speaks for the success of this unique model of language reform in China.<sup>6</sup> Since it came into effect more than thirty years ago the new standard Yi script has been widely popularised via language tools and the media in Liangshan Prefecture, Ninglang County in Yunnan Province (home to *Shynra*-speaking Yi communities) (Bradley 2001: 207) as well as at university level in semi-urban and urban contexts, primarily Xichang, Chengdu, and Beijing. At the time of Bradley’s (2001) comprehensive appropriation of the Yi/Nuosu language situation in the 1990s there was

“extensive publishing of school textbooks up to university level [...], adult literacy materials, traditional literature, new literature in traditional and modern styles, translated Chinese literature, agricultural and political materials, and even a daily newspaper. Regular radio broadcasts and public notices in the Yi areas of Sichuan are bilingual, and much of public life can be conducted in Yi. One result is rapidly increasing knowledge of the standard variety by speakers of other varieties, derived from its use of a lingua franca and language of education and the media. There are type fonts, including various ornamental ones, typewriters, and a computer font, for this script. In addition, a standard Romanised phonetic form for *Shynra* has been agreed upon, though it is mainly used for teaching Yi to Chinese and others or in citing linguistic examples in scholarly literature” (Bradley 2001: 206).

A study of bilingual education at a middle school in Liangshan in the same time period (Schoenhals 2001) also affirmed a strong sense of ethnic and cultural pride in young Yi students who were speakers of Nuosu (subdialects) while receiving Chinese language state education.

These developments notwithstanding, both written and spoken Yi are currently on the decline. This is true for translocal (migratory) and urban Yi contexts as well

as for the language situation at different levels in Liangshan Prefecture. The apparent bilingualism which Bradley observed at the end of the 1990s stands in stark contrast to the current language loss among young Yi, as discussed by Hu (2010). Regarding the language situation in Liangshan Prefecture, a place which has over the past years advanced to a position of role model par excellence for Yi culture and language maintenance, Hu found that many young Yi in rural, semi-urban and urban contexts and regardless of their social background, now frequently speak a more sophisticated version of what is sometimes jokingly referred to ‘*tuanjiehua*’ (lit./iron. ‘ethnic unity speech’): local Yi dialect invested with a fair share of Sichuan dialect loan words and Chinese grammar (see also Wu 1992).

The ongoing loss of domains for spoken Yi (Nuosu), and the deterioration of mother tongue use and knowledge among Yi in Liangshan and across China are attributed to a variety of factors, most pertinently: the fundamental dilemmas of bilingual education in Liangshan and at university level;<sup>7</sup> the crisis of China’s higher education system;<sup>8</sup> the influx of national television, broadcasted national culture and the generalised access to the internet in semi-rural/semi-urban Liangshan;<sup>9</sup> and intensified labor migration from Liangshan and other Yi areas to non-Yi urban environments, and back.

The implications of a crisis of colloquial Yi have thus come to outweigh by far those of the ‘loss’ of a written language, considering that this new script has yet, despite its official standardisation, to become a universal means of communication among Yi groups of China. Bradley (2001: 207) asserts that the standard dialect and script have also created new hurdles for Yi/Nuosu language acquisition and literacy among the Nuosu:

“A speaker of *Yynuo*, *Suondi*, or *Adur* (or even a speaker of a local variety of *Shynra*, where the rules are slightly different) must learn standard *Shynra* as a second dialect to achieve literacy, and will have considerable trouble learning all the arbitrary extra forms in their correct phonetic spelling; this problem would not have arisen if the characters had remained semantic rather than syllabic.”

A major issue of this script is that “it is based on the phonetic form of the standard *Shynra* dialect” in “which there is a semiproductive tone *sandhi* process that changes a midlevel [33] tone and in some environments a low falling [21] tone into a lower-high [44] tone” (ibid.).<sup>10</sup> Rather than providing a means to sustain Yi language in its original domains, then, the new script may actually signify the first step on the road to a de-contextualisation and subsequent deterioration of Yi language. (Yi) Scholars’ main criticism mentions the discrepancy between the original socio-cultural function of written language, and its (modern) representation. As Hu (2010: 3) notes, literacy and writing in Yi script in traditional, pre-1956 Liangshan were almost exclusively restricted to the ruling caste (Black Yi) and to the use of the *Bimo* (religious practitioner) clergy.<sup>11</sup> Although a “number of works on history, literature, religion and

medicine as well as genealogies of the ruling families written in the Yi script are still in circulation in Yi areas today,” a large percentage of old *Bimo* religious scriptures were burned during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Also, most of the older written sources, or hand-copied newer versions of old Yi script sources existent in Liangshan today are not to be mistaken with the new syllabary described above, but have in turn been influenced by it (Bradley 2001: 206, 207). In this sense, the apparent ruptures in transmission of traditional written Yi script and an accompanying, rapid decline in traditional scriptures as hand-copied and transmitted by the *Bimo*<sup>12</sup> (allegedly the traditional keepers of Yi script) are not exclusively a byproduct of the advent of modernity via television and bilingual education for their children in rural areas of Liangshan.

Criticism is also increasingly audible from the ranks of those wishing to learn Yi for both study and for (re-) affirming their ethnic and cultural identity. This critique is largely based on the earliest, and most comprehensive, Yi textbooks so far. These were developed by and for the specific use of Yi language instruction within university departments, and have since served as the basis for all other learning materials available, both written and increasingly online.<sup>13</sup> I have heard (and read online) numerous complaints from young, male Nuosu regarding *Shynra* as the only dialect available to learners of ‘Yi’, and regarding the reformed script. The latter, one young Nuosu man told me in 2007, is dismissed by many young Yi on the grounds that it is a ‘fake’ script, which has been abstracted and devalued, and imbued with new meanings by a commission of scholars, as opposed to being inherent to the tradition of a group of people. The young man said he refused to learn a script which was not ‘his language’ anymore, but construed by policies and strategies leading towards eventual cultural assimilation of the Yi. Along similar lines, many Yi from Liangshan wishing to achieve fluency in their purported mother tongue are restricted to the standard *Shynra* dialect.<sup>14</sup> In light of these developments, questions regarding available, and standardised, means for language transmission, their quality and effectiveness, have become more pressing.

### Media and language maintenance

Although the Yi (Nuosu) language and script reform may be considered a completed project, recent developments, such as language loss and new studies on language domains and cultural maintenance, have been increasingly contesting its theoretical-methodological legitimacy. Superscription of the Yi language is not (yet) a process under closure. Those realities of language loss, which have been co-determined by the initial superscription through language and script reform have more recently co-determined the advent of a Yi language revival movement among Yi *intelligentsia* and artists. This ‘Yi mother tongue’ movement may prove an even stronger force for superscription, as it merges artistic pursuits (pop songs, poetry) with the political-cultural agenda and (post-) modern media, primarily the internet.

Through media such as television, karaoke and, rather recently, internet and mobile telephone internet access (3G), the process of superscription of Yi language has gained in momentum and complexity. In her very detailed study of public and private domains, in which ‘Yi’ is still spoken in Liangshan today, Hu (2010: 8, 16) emphasises the overall importance of media in the process of transmission and awareness-raising for the cause of endangered languages, and culture in general. In her study, in which Hu investigated five domains of language transmission in Liangshan (family, education, religion, work, media), media are limited to conventional media in Liangshan, such as Nuosu-language newspapers (Liangshan Daily) and television programmes (Chin. *Yi Xiang Feng*; Engl. lit. ‘Yi Hometown Winds’). Hu (2010: 8, 9) noticed that the duration and contents of these programmes were “fairly limited as compared to their Chinese language counterparts, thus limiting the use of Yi, and the limited broadcasting times affect their rankings in assessments of language vitality.” In many rural and semi-rural contexts in particular, Nuosu have regular access to television. The Nuosu (Yi) language television programme in Liangshan has a clear focus on Nuosu culture. The standard broadcast language is *Shynra*. A large share of broadcasts, including national and international news, are in *Shynra*; movies are dubbed in *Shynra* dialect to cater to Nuosu audiences. Also, the Nuosu language channel of Sichuan People’s Broadcasting Station features programmes in *Shynra*; traditional music from the Liangshan heartland; and international and national news for six hours daily. The channel, which celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2009, claims to have a regular listening Yi audience in China of over 400,000, and an overseas or southeast Asian Yi community (among these in Thailand and Vietnam) of 100,000.<sup>15</sup>

Hu’s media domain somewhat coincides with the platforms identified in Harrell’s (2001b) assessment of traditional (in-group) and ‘modern’ Nuosu media, although Harrell’s outline is more concerned with the development of traditional and modern media as a means for sustaining culture towards the in-group, and, later towards the state. Harrell also mentions Nuosu pop music as one such media platform, whose distinct performance, style and content, and of course language of performance, present for him “an interesting amalgam of different mediation processes” (ibid.). At the time of Harrell’s appropriation, many modern media in China were still in their fledgling stages. Pop and rock music had just moved out of the tape realm and into new dimensions of CD, VCD (ca. 1998) and DVD (ca. 2003) production, and the Chinese internet was still in its fledgling stages. Since then these realms have witnessed a rapid development to include not only a multitude of new mechanisms for distribution, but new contents, platforms and functions for ethnic minority cultural causes.

The internet in particular has been rapidly expanding and adopting new roles and functions in the process of language, cultural maintenance and awareness-building for China’s ethnic minorities (see also Kraef 2012b, 2012d). It has enabled the communication, networking and merging between a tremendous amount and diversity of information, information sources, and different modern media platforms and devices.

And it allows for own, and potentially reversed representations as opposed to former representations by the state through television and film in particular (see Senz and Zhu 2001). These characteristics have led to a sense of empowerment for China's ethnic minorities in particular, and have also made it an attractive platform for Yi causes across China. In 2001 the first Yi-related website, [www.yizuren.com](http://www.yizuren.com), was launched and has been gradually expanded as an information tool both for Yi internet users and those interested in the Yi. At the same time, this platform has contributed significantly to giving voice to cultural concerns among Yi groups in China, and has thus served as a spearhead for all later, similar websites, which are available for networking and resources to young Yi internet users across China today (Kraef 2012 b). These include a vast array of Yi-related websites and local government websites of local Yi areas, and an increasing linkage to Chinese-language blogs, online chat forums, and, most recently, microblogs.

Their new potential for transmitting cultural (and political) causes of ethnic minorities notwithstanding, the content and quality of information available as well as the merging function of the internet do present challenges to the success of precisely these causes. The 'real' threat to a revival, which has become a main cause for cultural concern among Yi internet users may not lie so much in the alleged influx of mainstream (Han-Chinese) language and culture into geographically, culturally and linguistically distinct contexts, where they impact, shape and potentially superimpose language behaviour among young Yi with internet access in particular. Rather, it could lie within the dilemma of the ambivalent role, which some of the main proponents and distributors of the superscribed version of Yi language, are now taking on as 'virtual' advocates of the protection of a 'Yi mother tongue'.

### The poetics of virtual 'Yi mother tongue' revival

It is difficult to determine where the idea of a universally valid 'Yi mother tongue', or the recent manifestation of this idea as a full-fledged 'Yi mother tongue' activism, first originated. The significance of this discourse lies in its use of the internet as a means to join the urban to the rural Yi, and to unite modern Nuosu/Yi media (Harrell 2011b) under a common banner. Individuals from translocal academic and artistic Yi groups, most notably Jike Qubu, frontman of *Shanying Zuhe* ('Mountain Eagle'), the most famous Nuosu and Yi pop trio ever, and Nuosu poet Akup Wuwu (Luo Qingchun), have come to act as major agents in this process.

The beginning stages of [yizuren.com](http://www.yizuren.com) coincided with the release of *Shanying Zuhe's* seventh album, *Youshang de muyu* (lit. 'Distressed Mother Tongue'). As a reflection of a sense of cultural loss by those Yi who have chosen to make a living for themselves in China's urban centres, it signifies a reproach to 'go back to the roots', a new cultural rhetoric, which is evident in the album title, the text on its accompanying

leaflet, and the repertoire of songs performed exclusively in Nuosu, as well as in the album's strong connection to themes of Nuosu language and identity, and its strong message to a young Nuosu (and Yi) audience. In 2002, *Shanying Zuhe* were already looking back on an impressive musical career. Founded in Liangshan in the early 1990s and supported by the local political-cultural elite, the group allegedly became the first all-male minority pop trio in China. Most of their earliest songs were in the Northern Dialect, which earned them musical cult status among (young) Nuosu in Liangshan. The trio later switched to almost exclusively Chinese language-lyrics when they signed with a Guangdong-based record company in 1996. This 'cultural reorientation' to adjust and open themselves to the Chinese market may have co-determined a long-term identity crisis marked by artistic silence between 1997 and 2000.

The release of *Youshang de muyu*, its musical impact among young Yi, and the new karaoke craze sparked by the song *Qopbbop*<sup>16</sup> not only signified another milestone in *Shanying Zuhe's* career. It also marked a change in course and spirit, evident in the way Jike Qubu, an active speaker of Ynuo and grandson of a renowned *Bimo* of Meigu County, conceived of his role as an artist. After 2002, Jike Qubu became increasingly vocal in ways which transgressed the realm of music. Asked in a television interview<sup>17</sup> in 2003 if his calling out to Yi audience in-between songs to take care of their culture and maintain their mother tongue, did not go beyond a singer's responsibility, Jike Qubu answered:

"The outline [sic] of my blood determined that I was born a Yi of Da Liangshan. The scriptures that I recite, and the mother tongue I speak have determined that I had such a language, such a script, that I am this ethnic group. As an ethnic minority and if you love this country, then you should carry on your own culture, scientifically (*kexue de*) carry on your ethnic culture (*minzu wenhua*). So, where do we start to carry on ethnic culture? We start with mother tongue. So, calling for the use and protection of mother tongue is an occasion for me to express the deep love for my people (*wo de minzu*). We do not only wish to be singers, but want to move beyond that and be 'bards' (*gezhe*), that means that we wish to use our singing voices to testify to these times, to this ethnic group of people, to the people [...]"

In the 1990s, and between 2000 and his relocation to Xichang (government seat of Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture since 1979) in 2008, Jike Qubu was strongly affiliated with Yi academic and media networks in Beijing. In 2004/2005 he began participating in Yi-steered, semi-governmental efforts to promote development and poverty alleviation in Liangshan. Until his relocation to Xichang in 2008, Jike Qubu also acted as host and support for several Yi student and community events with Minzu University of China (*Zhongyang Minzu Daxue*, former Central University for Nationalities), which continues to serve as a major platform for Yi diaspora in Beijing. At many of these occasions and similar to the interview quoted above, Jike Qubu would emphasise his ethnic background and sense of pride and belonging.<sup>18</sup> Although his role as spokesperson of young Yi has somewhat faded into oblivion, much of the

activities (music, cultural promotion) he is involved with in Xichang now are the result of the translocal network and discourse he was part of while still in Beijing.

Nuosu poet Akup Wuwu (alternately spelled *Aku Vuvu*; Chinese name, *Luo Qingchun*) is another key figure of the ‘Yi mother tongue’ revitalisation movement. Born in Liangshan Prefecture’s Mianning County in 1964, Akup has been part of the Yi (Nuosu) urban diaspora (particularly Chengdu) for many years. He is a member of the Chinese Communist Party, and currently professor for ethnic and Yi literature at Southwest University for Nationalities and Sichuan University in Chengdu. Akup is a long-term acquaintance of Jike Qubu and amply supported the album *Youshang de muyu* by providing textual references for its songs. Since 2004 Akup has been visiting Beijing frequently, where he has also become a regular feature at Minzu University’s Yi new year celebrations. His poem *Zhaohun* (calling back the soul), an impressive Yi-language cultural ‘wake-up call’ that is dedicated to his ethnic identity and his people, has since moved urban Yi audiences (and myself), and signifies Akup’s entrée into the limelight of Yi cultural and political activism as a spokesperson for Yi literature and language.

In 2005, Akup began organising so-called Yi Pen Club meetings (*bihui*), the first of which took place in August 2005 in Meigu County, Liangshan Prefecture. In 2007, he convened the First Yi Mother Tongue Culture and Art Festival (*Xide Shoujie Yizu muyu wenhua yishu jie*, CZG et al. 2007) in Liangshan’s Xide County. In early 2009, he extended the scope of these meetings to include other realms of Yi culture and language, and related individuals, perhaps to proliferate a common cause, and also to streamline related efforts under a common banner. On 13 February 2009, Akup Wuwu and Jike Qubu jointly convened the *Conference for the Development of Yi (Ethnic Minority) Mother Tongue Literature and Arts (yizu muyu wenxue yishu fazhan yantaohui)* in Xichang.<sup>19</sup> According to its organisers this conference was designed to advance theoretical research on the protection of Yi mother tongue *culture* [my emphasis], on ways of language transmission, and dissemination of this ‘culture’. Another aim was to develop the creative industry revolving around the production of ‘Yi mother tongue’ literature and the arts in the new century. The supplement ‘the arts’ did justice to Yi music as represented at the conference by Jike Qubu and Emu Shama, an amateur singer-songwriter and former teacher with the Liangshan Yi Language College (*Liangshan Yiwen Xuexiao*)<sup>20</sup> in Xichang. As actual conveners, the ethnic language department of Minzu University was listed, among others.<sup>21</sup>

In 2009, Akup began extending his language activism to encompass joint conferences and meetings with renowned scholars from the departments of archeology and literature at Beijing University, with the intent of discussing the relationship between Yi script (as it is still evident in its Guizhou and Liangshan variants today), and the findings at the Sanxingdui sites near Chengdu. So far, two such conferences took place in Xichang. (PD 2010; CB 2010; conference languages: Mandarin, Sichuan and Yun-

nan Dialects, Nuosu, English) The prefecture government provided substantial financial support for both events.

Concrete academic results of both conferences are still pending,<sup>22</sup> but their relevance may actually lie in the fact that they were organised by Akup with the, albeit unspoken, intent of upgrading the standing of Yi language, and consequently 'Yi culture' on the national scale of Marxist cultural hierarchy and Chinese hermeneutics. With what is considered to be dominant Han-Chinese culture centred around a sophisticated written culture and tradition, much of what continues to constitute feelings of cultural/racial supremacy towards both China's ethnic minorities as well as towards other cultures around the world is based on the ancient history of Chinese writing and written history. The designated media support for the first conference was surprisingly prestigious and substantial (national television station China Central Television (CCTV); and the local TV and newspaper). Also, heated academic debate among the 100 invited delegates and participants, some of whom teach at departments as renowned as the Chinese studies and archeology departments of Beijing University, underlines the sensitivity of the topic, which remains clad in historical implications but which in fact bears much wider-reaching consequences for the cause of ethnic minorities, and particularly the 'Yi' in China.

Akup's events have also attracted international attention, most notably that of UNESCO (United Nations Education Science and Culture Organization). At the *Conference for the Development of Yi (Ethnic Minority) Mother Tongue Literature and Arts* in 2009, then UNESCO Myanmar Bureau delegate and alleged US-anthropologist Baihaisi (English name not provided), reiterated UNESCO's recent policies in regard to protection of ICH (intangible cultural heritage) and language issues.<sup>23</sup> She discussed plans for the filling of a Nuosu-language television series or TV drama for the purpose of promoting knowledge on the prevention of drug addiction and HIV/AIDS in Liangshan. UNESCO's presence at the conference can be seen in light of China's official launching of the drive for the protection of its ICH as part of UNESCO's international policy. The ICH drive has been providing new financial incentives and means to all of China's ethnic minority groups and local Han Chinese cultures for cultural and political development (Kraef 2012a). For the Yi this has so far led to new measures for cultural maintenance and protection in Liangshan (ibid.; also Kraef 2012b), as well as to an unprecedented hermeneutic re-appropriation of *Bimo* scriptures as means for cultural and identity reaffirmation and political repositioning (Kraef 2012c).

Akup's enhanced internet presence over the past six years runs parallel to his increased presence as organiser of Yi language events. On 13 August 2006, he created his first blog called 'Holding ground in the face of Disappearance' on China's most popular blog provider, Sina.com (<http://blog.sina.com.cn/u/1249476222>). On 16 August 2006, Akup created a parallel blog presence on China's other main blog provider, Sohu.com.<sup>24</sup> The Sina blog has since been out of use.<sup>25</sup> All entries on Akup's

blogs are in Chinese. The entries on his Sohu blog have been filed under four different categories, including that of ‘mother tongue anxiety’. Between 18 August 2006 and 5 April 2007, Akup filed six entries under this category. On 14 March 2007, he announced the publication of his translated English poetry volume ‘Tiger Traces’. The commentary section underneath the entry and an image of the book reveals the deep reverence and emotionality which many young Yi with internet access harbor for Akup’s work. Blogger ‘Transformed cicada’ (*tuibian de chan*) writes:

“I don’t want to say too much, I just want to tell you, that in my and our lives, and in our endless ethnic culture and within countless, entangled ties and numerous ways, what you and your works have released is not only feelings and hurt or misery, but a kind of unprecedented inspiration and stimulation and motivation and spiritualisation; the function of this kind of inspiration and stimulation lies in making many people who don’t know who they are understand who they are [...]”

So far, the poem (‘Magnificent Mother Tongue’<sup>26</sup>), which Akup wrote as a ‘title poem’ for the *First Yi Mother Tongue and Culture Festival* in Xide County, seems to be his most popular entry. Also, several discussion threads on [www.yizuren.com](http://www.yizuren.com)’s chat forum feature a debate on Akup’s poetry performances and on the implications of his (poetical) message, for instance in regard to issues of ethnic identity, and a search for ethnic roots (YRLT1/2).

With the advent of microblogging in China, Akup started tweeting on China’s favorite microblog, Sina’s microblog site Weibo<sup>27</sup> on 8 June 2011. Since its launch by Sina Corporation on 14 August 2009 as the web domain [t.sina.com.cn](http://t.sina.com.cn), but more markedly since the inauguration of the new domain <http://weibo.com> on 7 April 2011, an increasing number of young Chinese (and Yi) in urban and semi-rural contexts have been using microblogs to connect, inform and be informed. My assessment of Weibo so far revealed that the greater percentage of information shared between users with varying degrees of Yi cultural background is Yi- and Liangshan-related. Akup’s microblog at <http://weibo.com/profile.php?uid=2128010833&page=4> has generated 3975 followers so far.<sup>28</sup> Akup’s first tweet ever contains an allusion to the title of his blogs: Mother Tongue, holding ground in the process of disappearance (*muyu, xiaoshi zhong de jianshou*). Like his blogs, his Weibo account runs under his Yi name *Akup Wuwu*, and features regular (sometimes daily) entries with unpublished materials.<sup>29</sup>

### ‘Mother tongue’, ethnic pride, and the ‘soul’ as selling points

Despite their very different biographies and backgrounds, the connection between Jike Qubu and Akup Wuwu and their ‘language activism’ is obvious. Because they share a common interest, or because Jike Qubu may have streamlined some of his

ideas to fit into Akup's general scheme of language and culture protection, similar vocabularies and semantic fields of meaning exist within both artists' rhetoric. Firstly, there is the depiction of 'mother tongue' as homogeneous and 'pure' in an almost primordial sense, and the stubborn (as illustrated by Akup's blog names), female entity, which is located in opposition to a threat of disappearance of non-specified, abstract origin. Yet, and as a second characteristic of both artists' cultural rhetoric, the protection and maintenance of mother tongue is not overtly removed from a sense of responsibility towards the state and its populace (see above interview with Jike Qubu). On the contrary, mother tongue rhetoric is always part of national rhetoric. This also becomes evident in a video of one of Akup's performances of the poem *Zhaohun* (Chin., lit. 'Calling back the soul'), which is perhaps his most famous poem and which has made him famous on Beijing's Yi stages in particular. The video was uploaded onto Sina Video (<http://video.sina.com.cn>) by user Mahai Wuda on July 1, 2010 under the heading 'Mother tongue–Calling the Soul' (<http://video.sina.com.cn/v/b/34918507-1678562817.html>, retrieved on November 22, 2012; 2200 hits so far) and shows a performance of *Zhaohun* for an audience of probably mixed Yi and non-Yi background people. After the ensuing applause, Akup gives a brief Chinese translation of the literal meaning of the poem, which he always performs entirely in *Shynra* dialect, his native tongue: "Return, mother; return, soul of the mother tongue; return, soul of the Yi people; return, soul of the great Chinese nation/race, return!"<sup>30</sup> (Followed by great applause.)

A third characteristic, which Jike Qubu and Akup Wuwu share in common, is a strategy of merging the promotion of mother tongue with a sense of ethnic pride. Stigmatised for decades by surrounding ethnic groups and, more recently, the Chinese state, as primitive and backward, and, in case of the Nuosu, as a 'slave society', Yi of all Yi areas in China have often incurred these negative vocabularies, in which they now conceive of themselves and of their culture. For Jike Qubu, who received only rudimentary state education but underwent the rigid regimen of *Bimo* training by his grandfather and father, this pride is transported through an assertion of identity and cultural knowledge via his music. Not surprisingly, his recent projects are geared to the preservation of local culture and musical instruments, such as the Nuosu mouth harp (Kraef 2012c), and to public appearances. As a Nuosu intellectual, academic and writer, Akup's recent efforts at renaming the approach of and to ethnic literature in terms of an academic discipline ('anthropological poetry', 'religious anthropological poetry') can also be seen in light of ethnic pride. Moreover, Akup has initiated an (at least on his microblog) outspoken drive towards an increased 'internationalisation' of the cause of Yi mother tongue poetry, which again creates a sense of an active process of redefining not only the terms a language is conceived in, but also its sociocultural environment.

### Language activism, the internet, and Yi language learning materials

On the internet, Yi language revival efforts merge with popular platforms frequented by young Chinese internet users of all ethnic, educational and rural/urban backgrounds and contexts. The ‘Yi mother tongue’ activism and enhanced virtual presence of Jike Qubu and especially Akup Wuwu have ‘virtually’ influenced a whole generation of young Yi students and their greater social networks extending all the way from urban contexts to Yi communities in China’s Southwest, and back – and beyond a mere musical, written, and classroom presence. Indirectly and directly these two individuals have come to act as special interfaces between major institutions of higher education in China, which offer courses in Yi language, literature, history and culture, and young Yi internet users, who may very well become tomorrow’s local and translocal ethnic elites.

At the praxis level of language maintenance, initiatives by Yi students and internet users for young Yi of all cultural and social backgrounds to acquire Northern Dialect and the reformed script reflect the language materials distributed in the wake of Yi script reform, and the ethnic spirit which has since become a strong motivating force in language acquisition. When I was a student of Yi (Nuosu) language at Minzu University of China from September 2005 to February 2006, Yi students from different departments within the university had already begun organising free Yi lessons for interested students and young people from outside the university environment, including Yi of Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou, and urban-translocal backgrounds, as well as non-Yi. These lessons were held at the university every weekend, and were taught by Yi graduate students from Liangshan.<sup>31</sup> The learning materials were the same that had been used by the former Yi language department at the same university. The department was eventually closed. Like other Yi community events in Beijing, the extracurricular language activity was strongly advocated and supported by the main internet platform for all things Yi in China, [www.yizuren.com](http://www.yizuren.com) (see also Kraef 2012b; 2012c). Its main initiators and operators are Yunnan-born Yi Mao Fahu and Pu Zhongliang. Mao, whose current professional life as vice section chief of the security division of Beijing University of Civil Engineering and Architecture (*Beijing Jianzhu Gongcheng Xueyuan*) is only peripherally related to his cultural concerns, and Pu, CASS (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) scholar, have been very active both on- and offline since 2004, and have revamped the site several times in order to do justice to an ever-expanding diversity of categories, materials, people, and services. They have also built a solid network of people and topics, which are not only regularly featured on [yizuren.com](http://yizuren.com), but they use and are used by the website both directly and indirectly to create an interface between the growing communities of (young) Yi in China’s urban centres, those in Liangshan, and the Yi cultural, academic, and artistic elites.

Although [yizuren.com](http://yizuren.com) does not actively promote the cause of Yi language, its own online chat forum reveals a long list of related threads. The online chat ‘Mother

Tongue Inn' (Chin., *myuy kezhan*: <http://bbs.yizuren.com/forumdisplay.php?fid=8>, last accessed 22 November 2012) so far features 24 pages of related chat entries. In one of these from 25 March 2006, user Lucky (*ruyi*) states that she

“sincerely sympathise[s] with those friends here who cannot speak ‘mother tongue’. I don’t know how the term ‘mother tongue’ is defined in linguistics, but I think that if somebody cannot speak a language they can at all call ‘mother tongue’, then that is something quite ridiculous. [...] There are some Yi, who don’t speak Yi, because their parents were sinified (*hanhua*), and they therefore lacked the necessary language environment. But another reason for the not being able to speak Yi is their lack of ethnic pride (*minzu zihaguan*); they have no sense of ethnic self-respect (*meiyou minzu zizunxin suozhi*) [...]”

Despite the difficulty of tracing the varying identities of the users of these chat forums, it is very likely that many of the Yi who are active in the chat forums of *yizuren.com* and *yizucn.com* are at least partially congruent with users of Yi-language related materials on other major Chinese websites.<sup>32</sup>

Apart from these online chat forums, information and materials related to Yi learning can be found on individual blogs. On 22 July 2010, user Aniu Yifu launched his blog (<http://www.yizucn.com/blog-3814-2933.html>) via another popular Yi- website, *yizucn.com*. His entry from 3 March 2011 is titled ‘Learn Yi characters, speak Yi language’ (*xue yiwen shuo yiyu*), where he invites “friends wishing to learn Yi characters and Yi language” to use his space blog (“The characters I love with all my heart’), with which he wishes to help “promote the culture of our Yi ethnic group.” His platform features phrases and images, which he provides in (modern) Yi script, phonetic script, and Chinese. His page has received 987 hits so far.<sup>33</sup> Blogs by presumably young Yi (judging from user names and profile pictures) also fulfill an important function in the proliferation of online Yi language learning video materials. Proliferation of such a set of videos posted on the Chinese video/audio site *tudouwang.com* in 2007, for instance, can be found on the *sina.com* blog platform of user *Musen Haifan* ([http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_48b9196301000b0c.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_48b9196301000b0c.html)).<sup>34</sup> The three *tudou.com* Yi lessons (I to III), which he posted on 30 June 2007 were hit 665 times so far, received 6 comments (one comment posted twice), were ‘collected’ twice, forwarded seven times, and appreciated three times.

Most of the blogs and pages promoting Yi language learning materials feature semi-professional, instructional Yi language video clips, whose origin can be traced to one of China’s currently most popular video sites, *tudouwang* at *www.tudou.com*. A page titled *Yiyu 600 Ju* (Yi Language in 600 sentences), which can be found at <http://www.tudou.com/playlist/id/1634046/> (retrieved 22 November 2012), lists seven Yi learning videos, with lengths ranging from 1:30 min. to 5:35 min., and which were all uploaded by user *Linmu Gujie Yizu CG Gongzuoshi* (Linmu Gujie Yi CG Studio) on 3 September 2007. With 306965 hits so far, this user’s *tudou.com* profile page at

<http://www.tudou.com/home/jsag/> can be considered a real treasury of Yi online/video learning materials.<sup>35</sup> It also features a link to two clips with simple cartoon clips for children's Yi language learning (retrieved 22 November 2012 at <http://www.tudou.com/playlist/p/11634118.html>). So far, all of the online and DVD format video materials found were produced by the *Linmu Gujie Yi CG Studio* (see references to this chapter). One of these videos was recorded in a classroom environment and features a young Yi woman and man acting as teachers, and one other young Yi man and two young Yi women, all in Yi attire, acting as students. The video is 5:35 minutes in length, and teaches words, phrases and simple dialogues in the *Shynra* dialect. It was viewed 4662 times<sup>36</sup> so far, which suggests that it is in fact used as a means to acquire and review basic proficiency in Yi. In a short heading on this 'language' page within his repertoire of materials, user *Linmu Gujie Yi CG Studio* notes that Liangshan Television Station and Xichang College were actively involved in the compilation of language teaching materials and in the production of the video clips.

The comment section underneath the list of videos reveals that these materials are not equally helpful to all users. Although many viewers comment on the good support provided by these materials for self-learning purposes, some voice legitimate objections. User *Guanguang Tudou* notes on 5 October 2010 at 23:31:02 that they

"primarily need something to learn Yi characters with. This material differs too much from our dialect, some pronunciations are the same, but others are completely different, and I am therefore at a loss as to what to do. It would be great to have language learning videos for each dialect. [...]"

[T]he simplification of the Yi script has gone a bit over the top, to the extent that some of these characters are in fact '*tongjiazi*'!<sup>37</sup> Considering the fact that there are over 80,000 Yi characters, then these surely cannot be completely accommodated by the simplified circa 1000 characters; I really wish to learn the 'authentic' (*yuanzhi yuanwei de*) Yi language and script!"

Several users voice their hope that more such videos will be available in future, and comment that there are not yet enough such learning materials available. Returning to the intricate relationship between language maintenance and ethnic pride, user *Shaochaomin* writes on 10 November 2007 at 17:35:59: "Come on everyone, support the profoundness of our ethnic culture!!!!" Many similar comments can be found on the message board of user *Linmu Gujie's* tudou.com user page <http://www.tudou.com/home/jsag/>; last accessed 22 November 2012). Yet the true impact of such platforms is questioned by the fact that the video, which received the most total views (14881 views! Last accessed 22 November 2012 at [http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/\\_rP42T7qz8o/](http://www.tudou.com/programs/view/_rP42T7qz8o/)) on Linmu's page is a music video featuring the Yi (Nuosu) language song *Liangshan Amo* (lit. 'Mother Liangshan') by Yi pop quartet Liangshan Yi Shili Group, with subtitles in Yi script.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless Linmu Gujie is, to my knowledge, the first one to produce young Yi language movies. These mainly semi-professional slapstick comedies in Yi, which feature amateur actors and tell everyday stories of

the lives of young Yi in Liangshan and translocal contexts, are also available on the studio's tudou.com page.

Apart from the operators of popular Yi websites, which now promote and distribute these Yi language materials, the potential of online platforms also seems to have motivated some young Yi individuals in translocal contexts to explore new ways of distributing material, and of networking. One such example is user *Zuzu Puwu* (first name in real life: Wage), who lives in Chengdu, and currently works for a Chinese company that produces fruit juice.<sup>39</sup> On 21 July 2010, Wage set up a Sina blog (*Yizu wenxian ziliao dianzihua xiaozu*; lit. 'Yi digital archive group') at <http://blog.sina.com.cn/u/1676595877> (retrieved 22 November 2012) with the intent of building a digital archive for collecting and sharing digitalised sources on Yi history, language, and culture. Perhaps because Wage has been too busy with work this page hasn't been updated since 22 July 2010. Wage is also using other (related) forums, for example Sina's file sharing platform <http://ishare.iask.sina.com.cn> for the uploading and distribution of materials, such as the original Yi language manual *Yiyu 600 Ju* (see above). It remains to be seen if and how networks like Wage's can expand in future, or what potential they bear for an optimised distribution of Yi language instructional and other materials to online Yi communities.

The Yi language phone may prove to be another (digital) information platform, which may prove crucial in the applied use, and thus maintenance, of Yi language. For a while now the rumor of an Yi language phone (*Shynra* standard Northern Dialect and simplified Yi/Nuosu character writing function) has been a topic of discussion among young Yi, primarily in Liangshan. In the online Q&A forum by baidu.cn, *tieba baidu*, we find a post by user *Yingzu Lamo* (lit. 'Lamo of the eagle tribe') from 18 May 2011, asking where such a phone could be bought, which he heard could "send Yi language text messages, speak Yi language, which one can listen to Yi songs with, and which is used by Yi people" at <http://tieba.baidu.com/?kz=1082902700>, retrieved 22 November 2012. So far, Lamo received a total of 14 responses, which judging by the icons and/or user names, all belong to the greater Yi group in China. These responses range from users stating that they, too, would like to buy such a phone, to that they have found it difficult to buy the phone despite numerous people having seen numerous related advertisements (around Liangshan in particular), all the way to an analysis of the current user potential of such a phone. Like all other forums I analysed, users demonstrate varying degrees of knowledge regarding Yi culture and language. About the Yi phone user Wind – *Qixi* asks: "Yi writing is kind of like *jia guwen*,<sup>40</sup> or? That writing on the phone screen image looks a bit like that."

My personal search for more information on such a phone revealed many online references to a Beijing-based company, which allegedly produced and issued this phone in October 2009 (for instance <http://lib.cqvip.com/qk/80606B/200910/30643892.html>, last accessed 22 November 2012), and even a video featuring such a phone (retrieved 22 November 2012 at <http://v.ku6.com/show/Tlt14yW3hqvFxbgc.html>). So far, I have

not been able to verify this information. In personal communication with the author in 2010, young Nuosu in rural, semi-rural and semi-urban contexts in Liangshan stated that they considered the concept of a Yi phone to be quite ‘cool’, as this device would finally allow them to compose text and chat messages in Yi script, without always having to rely on Chinese characters to act as phonetic placebos. Online chats in particular frequently read like the subtitles to popular Yi songs in local Liangshan karaoke bars: the Yi lyrics are reproduced by using Chinese characters to signify pronunciation, thus providing textual passages, but not their actual meanings.

## Conclusion

To date, the Nuosu of Liangshan are sometimes considered to be a sort of cradle of whatever may have come to constitute ‘Yi culture’ in the minds of younger generations of rural and urban Yi. For many urban Yi in particular, Liangshan has come to signify the heartland of Yi culture, and a prototype for ways to preserve this culture. Relatively untouched by early Han-, empire-, and later state-led attempts at intervention, the Nuosu preserved until 1956 their linguistic and cultural independence both from the ruling power structures, and in relation to other groups, which would later join them to constitute ‘the Yi minority’. It may have been this relative cultural and political independence or, put differently, seclusion, which despite harsh setbacks during the Cultural Revolution, determined the long-term successful implementation of the revised editions of language and script after 1980 at all levels of Liangshan, and also at the urban diasporic level in Chengdu and Beijing. Certainly, the purported success of this language reform would have also been unthinkable without a group of early-day vociferous Nuosu specialists, academics, and intellectuals.

These developments can well be interpreted in a positive light, and regarded as having created new chances for linguistic cultural, and also political, autonomy for the Nuosu – and perhaps even a model to emulate for other Yi branches in Yunnan and Guizhou. Yet, ‘Yi language’, or rather the remains of it, are today in a state of crisis. There are manifold reasons for this development, whose complexity by far transcends the realm of this chapter. Nevertheless, there were and are several mechanisms involved in the process of language development, both as a top-down policy approach and as part of a ‘natural’ communication between native tongue speakers, which co-determined both the present crisis of the language, as well as its prospects for future development. An appropriation of the ‘Yi language’ reform in light of Dura’s notion of superscription seems justified, both by the notion of Yi script as an interface between religious and worldly/sociocultural matters (*Bimo*), as well as by questions pertaining to order and power structures in traditional societies. Most importantly, I suggest that Dura’s concept of superscription also always involves a process of ‘decontextualisation’ or ‘cultural decentering’ (Kraef 2013). In Dura’s example, an inte-

gration of Confucian ideals into a primarily Guandi context expanded the religious canon and thus, by necessity, diversified attention without ruling out the centrality of Guandi's significance for local religious culture and power structures. Similarly, the restructuring and reconfiguration of Yi script and language, which superficially suggest a potential for language (and cultural) sustenance, are in fact creating a new order of language culture. The balance of this new order, which by definition favours some aspects of language and language culture over others, necessitates a homogeneous, clear-cut policy model. In Duara's example, the new balance of empire and local power became a potent unit all the way until its, according to Duara (2009), fateful abolition by the Guomindang during the Republican era. For 'Yi language', too, the incongruence between language reform policy and activism, and speaker reality, is creating an environment that undermines what it was purportedly designed to maintain – all reports of its success notwithstanding.

The media may very well signify the final step in the superscription of Yi language, or Liangshan 'standard Yi'. This is quite ironic when the media have also proven vital, as in Hu's study (2010), for the maintenance and proliferation of standard spoken Northern Dialect in particular. In light of the new platforms for information-sharing and interaction, which it has created for (ethnic) minority groups such as the Yi, the recent, substantial development of the internet in China underlines its huge potential for the proliferation of a budding canon of language instruction materials, which are especially devised and multiplied for an online Yi community. At the same time this function has ironically become threatened by the very same, new strand of superscriptive rhetoric, which can be considered at least partially responsible for these language materials and related discussion forums for young Yi in all geographical, social and cultural contexts of China. The drive for the protection of a postulated notion of 'Yi mother tongue' by a very ambiguous, very vocal, and ethnically affirmative language activism represented by artists and intellectuals such as Jike Qubu and Akup Wuwu, underlines the ambiguity of a set-up, in which language activists and speakers of and for their people are at the same involved in state power structures (government, party organs, universities), which sustain the original overt policies by which their culture, in this case language, was defined and superscribed. Their language goals, and personal interests, are muddled. It seems ironic that those agents signifying superscription are now attempting to continue superscribing Yi language, and the means by which it is conceived and perceived, under the auspices of protection and maintenance, and according to their own terms. As an example, an internationalisation of the Yi language cause via USA-China poetry and research exchange as pursued by Akup may be a welcome and vital development for the proliferation – and thus lifelines – of his mother tongue literature and related audio and video materials. But much of what Akup has actively engaged in over the past ten years is too much focused on his own cause, e.g. promoting himself as a Yi poet. Conferences focused on Yi literature, with the same core group of people attending each time, can probably

contribute little to the structures which a language requires in order to be appreciated, cared for, and applied by its speakers. The drive for ‘Yi mother tongue’ thus creates an abstract environment, which features a debate that actually centres around internet platforms, but whose positive effects on speaker reality among both urban and (at least semi-) rural Yi are pending. These doubts regarding the language revival movement are further highlighted by the varying, and partially low quality of available online learning materials, and the lack of some sort of standardisation of online and print learning materials.

Also, creating a language drive among college or university students (who are avid followers of their professors’ ideas, and especially so in a Chinese or Asian context) as the future Yi intellectual elite may not prove to be the most effective way to attain the desired goals. After all, many students who are now graduate students in Yi studies end up in some other business or field which has little if anything to do with their original studies. Moreover, many do not wish to return to their place of origin within Liangshan for professional and financial reasons, and often end up marrying into a language community other than Yi, where any form of language maintenance becomes ever more difficult to maintain. On a different note, and as is the case with many Yi living in urban contexts today, the problem of language switch has introduced a trend which in the long-run may entail Yi or Shynra being completely replaced by Sichuan dialect, even within all-Yi circles.

The propagation of seemingly homogeneous concepts, such as ‘Yi language’ and ‘Yi mother tongue’, or the even trickier notion of a ‘mother tongue culture’, or announcing a drive for ‘mother tongue protection’, which no one actually defines or re-embeds within the original linguistic and cultural context of ‘the Yi’, adds to the general confusion that comes hand in hand with the attempt to apply this terminology to one’s own language situation. Many young Yi in both Liangshan and beyond, who are not speakers of the proclaimed Yi ‘mother tongue’ Shynra dialect but wish to either connect back into or share in what is manifesting itself as a collective Yi cultural identity, are unhappy with the limited options available for secondary language acquisition, or future development of language aptitude. Their strongest point of criticism refers to, again, the fact that whatever has been superscribed as ‘mother tongue’ is in fact nothing of the sort for as heterogeneous a group as ‘the Yi’, nor could it ever be at least a common denominator of or surrogate for a sense of ethnic belonging.

In conclusion, if the ‘Yi mother tongue’ revival movement is, as it implies, in fact targeting the maintenance, preservation and revival of language, then it needs to be separated from its twin – the meta-cultural discourse, which members of the ethnic elite are propagating as an alternative to state discourses. Yet the fact that the new set of vocabularies geared to language maintenance is not ‘organically grown’, but represents yet another set of top-down concepts generated from ‘above’, could very well prove its downfall. Consequently, the Yi (Nuosu) language revival movement as it can be traced since the year 2002, already seems to be past its zenith. Reasons for this are

twofold. For one, the movement will never be able to escape the linguistic (and policy) restrictions within which it came into being. In other words, as long as the vocabularies with which 'Yi language' has been superscribed or at least circumscribed by the state and the minority administrative structure since 1956 are not openly and critically re-assessed, or even reconfigured, and Yi languages, dialects and subgroups of dialects objectively re-assessed and 'updated' (e.g. by means of new and standardised learning materials for Yi as a second or foreign language, etc.), then all other activities relating to language maintenance among the Yi need to be critically assessed. Along the same lines, attempts at re-evaluating and re-estimating the 'worth' of a culture within the rigid, state-defined hierarchy of ethnic cultures, such as the internationalisation of Yi poetry, literary discourse and 'mother tongue death', as well as joint, high-profile, and again international conferences on new historical insights involving age-old 'Yi culture' may be a praiseworthy first step towards reconsidering notions of political dominance and possible shifts in cultural dominance, but not a real indicator of 'progress' in language maintenance. As long as the vocabularies remain the same, or new vocabularies are simply grounded on old ones, suggesting ethnic heterogeneity where there is in fact hardly any, then these efforts cannot be sustainable. Moreover, the willingness to learn Yi, and to practice and maintain it, cannot be instigated as a top-down movement, even if policy makers or activists such as Akup Wuwu are still counting on an elitist – and, towards the state, culturally apologetic – approach to ethnic revival. This model is, even in combination with the joint effort of language, literature and music activists, proving unable to sustain any emotional hype around Yi language learning in the long run.

Nevertheless, what the personal investment of Akup Wuwu and Jike Qubu may have triggered, especially vis-à-vis young, educated Yi internet users, is the willingness to discuss, reflect and share in issues related to the protection or at least maintenance of their own culture and language. Despite the fact that Yi language learning materials are still hard to come by, and multimedia and video materials, which present easier, time-efficient ways of language acquisition as compared to classroom lessons based on written materials, are still sparse, the fact that they exist could already be regarded as a small success. Adding to that the seemingly unlimited potential of internet usage in China, one could very well imagine a scenario in which the collective discussions on the future of Yi culture and language could generate, at least among younger generations of Yi users, an awareness for the necessity of a cultural future. More ideally yet, some linguistically versed individual will come up with a set of learning tools which are applicable to different dialect areas, and which can accommodate linguistic differences while maintaining a sense of ethnic belonging. Such developments, though, also require a re-appropriation of the needs of the younger generation of Yi growing up in Liangshan and beyond, and, as a first step, the definition of younger, more flexible, and more realistic ethno-cultural role models.

## Notes

- 1 In the Chinese transliteration of the local names for these subdivisions, we can see the habit of copying these into Chinese language via standard Mandarin Chinese (*putonghua*) syllabary. This method has since also been mainly employed for subtitles in karaoke videos, as well as for transliterating Nuosu family and personal names, most pronouncedly after 1956.
- 2 This habit is on the decline, though, even in everyday life in rural areas of Liangshan.
- 3 In his outline of what is considered Yi script today, Mueller (1913) relies heavily on the findings of Paul Vial's *Dictionnaire Francais-Lolo*, which was published by Impr. de la Societe des mission-etrangeres in Hong Kong in 1909.
- 4 This date is provided in English-language sources (Bradley, Heberer, Harrell) as opposed to 1 August 1980 in Chinese/Yi sources (for ex. Munai 2011).
- 5 Not only was the Nuosu script type declared as standard for a multitude of Yi scripts (for ex. Ramsey 1989). Already in 1913 Herbert Mueller (Mueller 1913) commented on the great variety of the then existent Yi script variants, which were later subsumed under the category of 'Yi'.
- 6 'Yi' is the only language among China's minority languages which has and uses its own, complex character script (as opposed to 'foreign' origins of Uygur, Tibetan, Mongolian, and Korean script).
- 7 Recent developments and the current status of bilingual education among the Nuosu of Sichuan Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture have been thoroughly documented (Teng 2001; also Heberer 2001: 231; Schoenhals 2001: 242f.; Qumu 1999). In personal communication with the author on 20 August 2011 in Beijing, Chinese scholar Teng Xing, professor, ethnolinguist with Minzu University of China in Beijing, described bilingual education in Liangshan as 'having failed'.
- 8 The abolition of a top-down allocation of translation jobs for students of minority languages in state departments and academia in 1996 may have contributed to the drastic decline in incentives to learn Yi, especially at university level. The new policy particularly affected the Yi language studies programme at Minzu University of China (former Central University for Nationalities, Central Institute for Nationalities) in Beijing. Together with the Southwest University for Nationalities (former Southwest Institute for Nationalities) in Chengdu, these schools were the only top-level colleges which offered a B.A. degree as well as graduate and doctoral studies in Yi language and documents (historical sources, religious texts in the Yi script). As Hu Suhua related in personal correspondence with the author in April 2012, the Yi language department at Minzu University of China was closed a few years ago. Since then, there has been no option for specialisation in Yi language for undergraduate students. According to Hu however, a specialisation in Yi-Burmese is still possible for undergraduate students. Minzu University currently counts a larger number of graduate students and Ph.D. candidates with a focus on Yi language, culture, society and education. These students are pursuing their degrees in the school's respective departments, e.g. department of minority languages, dept. of literature, dept. of anthropology, and so on.
- 9 As touched upon by Liu (2007: 325) in his chapter on information transmission among young rural Yi in Liangshan.
- 10 Bradley here refers to Bradley, David. 1990. 'The Status of the 44 Tone in Nosu.' *La Trobe Working Papers in Linguistics* 3: 125–137; also (in Chinese) in *Proceedings of the International Yi Linguistics Conference*, Xichang, 1991.
- 11 See also Ramsey 1989: 258ff., who notes that Yi writing is not used as a means for communication, but for divination purposes by the *pimu* priest (essentially the same as *Bimo*). Although Ramsey considers the script reform in Liangshan in his treatise, only limited information in regard to its distribution and usage was available then.
- 12 Interview with the head of the Meigu Bimo Research Centre Gaha Shizhe Meigu County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, 5 August 2011.

- 13 See appendix to this chapter, where I list common, written teaching materials for Northern Dialect/Shynra. A common problem with the acquisition of minority languages in China is that there are basically no corresponding tapes/audio materials.
- 14 This situation can sometimes lead to admonishing remarks in a classroom situation, as I have witnessed myself as a student of Yi Northern Dialect at university level, and was also told about by Nuosu students taking similar courses to achieve literacy in Northern Dialect script.
- 15 [http://v.youku.com/v\\_show/id\\_XMTM1NTkyNDQ4.html](http://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMTM1NTkyNDQ4.html), uploaded 30 November 2009 by user SRT (Sichuan Radio and Television); retrieved 22 November 2012.
- 16 Perhaps the most popular song ever among young Nuosu (and Yi) in local Liangshan and trans-local contexts: *Qopbbop* (chin. *pengyou*, 'friend').
- 17 'Mother Tongue – True Record of a Shanying Zuhe Television Interview'.
- 18 For instance: [http://222.210.17.136/mzwz/news/11/z\\_11\\_2908.html](http://222.210.17.136/mzwz/news/11/z_11_2908.html). In interview with the author in Beijing in November 2007, Qubu confirmed that his self-perception as an artist had changed, and that he felt an increasing responsibility towards his people and his culture.
- 19 See [http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_51ee23290100d19r.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_51ee23290100d19r.html), posted 13 June 2009, last accessed 22 November 2012, and [http://iel.cass.cn/news\\_show.asp?newsid=7948&pagecount=0](http://iel.cass.cn/news_show.asp?newsid=7948&pagecount=0), posted 31 March 2009, last accessed 22 November 2012.
- 20 Due to the abolition of the classic job allocation system for students with majors in Yi language, the school was on the verge of closing in 2006.
- 21 These details are part of the official conference invitation, which Akup Wuwu first published on his sohu.com blog on 6 February 2009. Reposted at Southwest University for Nationalities website *yixuewang* (Yi Studies Net) on 7 February 2009. Retrieved 22 November 2012.
- 22 Judging by comments (personal communication) of scholars and participants, the first conference in particular had raised new hopes regarding the unraveling of the mystery which Sanxingdui continues to pose for scholars in ancient Chinese history and archeology.
- 23 [http://iel.cass.cn/news\\_show.asp?newsid=7948&pagecount=4](http://iel.cass.cn/news_show.asp?newsid=7948&pagecount=4), Last accessed 22 November 2012.
- 24 Akup Wuwu's sohu.com blog <http://akuwuwu.blog.sohu.com/10084065.html>. Last accessed 22 November 2012.
- 25 Akup's sina blog was deserted after 16 October 2006 with only eleven entries (but still total 4,527 hits so far), last accessed 22 November 2012.
- 26 For complete poem (Chinese): <http://akuwuwu.blog.sohu.com/70576937.html>, retrieved 22 November 2012.
- 27 Chin. term for 'microblogging'.
- 28 Last accessed 22 November 2012. Follower statistics on Chinese microblogs are unreliable as evidence for popularity among Yi netizens though, since many 'users' of this microblog are 'zombies'/virtual machine identities, which can be bought and sold to increase popularity for market purposes. (TE 2012)
- 29 Personal communication with Akup on 10 September 2011. 'Who is the arch-criminal' is a series of essays, which have not been published in print format yet.
- 30 '*Muqin guilai, Muyu zhihun guilai, Yiren zhihun guilai, zhonghua minzu weida muqin zhihun, guilai!*' English language excerpts at: <http://akuwuwu.i.sohu.com/blog/view/149657176.htm>.
- 31 My class was an official class taught within the Department for Ethnic Minority Languages by teacher Munai Reha.
- 32 This would require long-term observation, also because many users change names when using different online platforms. User *Zuwu Puwu*, is an exception.
- 33 Last accessed on 22 November 2012. On September 8, 2011 the page had had 250 hits.
- 34 Last accessed 22 November 2012, with a total 72,582 hits. I first visited this page on September 8, 2011. Then Yunnan-born Yi Musen Haifan's page had received a total 63,464 hits (since its launch on 22 March 2006).

- 35 Last accessed on 22 November 2012. I first accessed this page on 10 September 2011, when there were comparatively a mere 11587 hits.
- 36 Last accessed 22 November 2012. When I first accessed this video on 11 September 2011, it had been viewed 4026 times.
- 37 Interchangeable characters (from [www.dictall.com](http://www.dictall.com); retrieved 22 November 2012). A “Chinese character that is borrowed to replace a character that should have been used; this kind of borrowed character which has the same or similar pronunciation with the replaced one is called *tong jia zi*.” (retrieved from [www.nciku.com](http://www.nciku.com) on 22 November 2012)
- 38 This video was posted as part of their second album *Xungen* (lit. ‘Searching for roots’), which was produced by Linmu Gujie Yi CG Studio.
- 39 Personal communication with the author, 21 August 2011.
- 40 “The earliest characters ever found in China are the inscriptions on bones or tortoise shells, which have a history of more than 3,000 years.” From: <http://www.nciku.cn>. This user comment reveals the identity of the user – she or he is presumably either Han Chinese or sinicized Yi – in that it re-capitulates a common Han Chinese preconceived notion, which I have heard numerous times, even from scholars, upon seeing Yi script: it is considered to look like an early-stage or primitive version of complex Chinese characters.

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