

# MENTORSHIP OF INDIGENOUS CULTURAL SPECIALISTS: A CASE STUDY OF TRAINING OF DONGBA, NAXI PRIESTS

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## ABSTRACT

*Every culture is a crystallization of wisdom accumulated from generation to generation. The continuity and development of the knowledge system depends on specialists and foremost exponents of an ethnic group who hand it over from generation to generation. The transmission of culture cannot be handed over without the lay people, but it will depend more upon the role of folk masters as outstanding representatives of traditional cultures.*

*Dongba, the Naxi priests, are not only cultural specialists who hand over and develop the traditional knowledge and spiritual values of Naxi people, they are also key persons for the conservation of the natural environment and resources as well as environmental educators in a community. They preach and explain the traditional concept about the relation of nature and humans based on the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources in a community. They promote a harmonious relationship between man and nature in their society.*

*The ignorance of traditional knowledge by the current educational system in many societies has caused the decline of the mentorship of indigenous cultural specialists. At the same time, the absence of cultural specialists speeds up the erosion of the traditional knowledge system. Mentorship and training of indigenous cultural specialists should not be ignored, nor should it be done as a superficial instrumentalisation of ethnic cultural resources for tourism. For example, handicraft products, dancing and singing performances based on the contents of Dongba culture which are not seriously handed over by the cream of the Dongba culture will not mould the spirit and national characteristics of Naxi People. Furthermore, the link to identity will get lost. As a result, the culture of ethnic group becomes something beautiful in appearance but empty of spirit.*

*Ethnographic data from Western China has proven that cultural values and spiritual power are important for the conservation of nature by maintaining a harmonious relationship between nature and humans. In many areas where indigenous people live, one cannot depend just upon the regulations established by the different levels governmental agencies for standardizing human activities. It is more efficient and useful to have a mechanism of self-control and self-governance based on the traditional cultural values and spiritual beliefs. The mentorship and training of indigenous cultural specialists is useful for the achievement of this goal and improvement of the mechanism in the Naxi society, this will be the main content of my contribution.*

## PREFACE

Every culture is a crystallization of wisdom accumulated from generation to generation. The continuity and development of the knowledge system depends on specialists and foremost exponents of an ethnic group who develop and hand it over to succeeding generations. The transmission of culture cannot be handed over without the lay people, but it depends upon the role of folk masters as outstanding representatives of traditional cultures. They are as important as those intellectuals presently trained in schools and universities in terms of the values of an ethnic group.

In the present time, the systematic education of mainstream cultures is everywhere given scant attention. Education on the indigenous knowledge of ethnic minority people is comparatively weak in schools and universities, with the result that more and more young people of the

ethnic minority groups have limited knowledge about their own history, art, writings, religion, geography, astronomy, ecology, plants, animals and so forth. Many indigenous young people are even forgetting their mother languages. This causes the continuous decline of the particular characteristics and distinctive features of their own nationality and contributes to the erosion of the general human inheritance.

Much experience in both China and foreign countries has proven that the development of any kind of knowledge system has its continuity from past traditions. The continuity of the modern knowledge system cannot be sustained without absorbing from history and tradition. The excellent components of the traditional cultures of various ethnic groups, which have stood the test for a long time in the history, could remedy and overcome the disfigurements, weaknesses and limitations of the modern knowledge system, especially those weaknesses and nega-

tive results cause by the “cultural hegemony” and “cultural chauvinism” of the present globalization.

In my opinion, there are two systems for mentorship and continuity of indigenous traditional knowledge, one of them is those knowledge components which are handed over by oral and technical training, including the various forms of knowledge about production, handicraft skills, customs, and so forth of everyday life; the other one is those which are more fine, delicate and complex, like cosmology, world outlook, philosophy and astronomy, classic literature, art, and so forth. The mentorship of this kind of knowledge requires long-term training and accumulation. Such mentorship of indigenous knowledge should give greater emphasis to the cream of traditional cultures in addition to the mentorship of the usual knowledge of everyday life.

The cultural specialists mentioned in this paper are those folk masters of indigenous people who are trained particularly according to their tradition and who know the specific traditional knowledge and skills. The Naxi priests Dongba are one typical kind of such folk masters.

## 1. THE HISTORIC ROLE OF NAXI PRIESTS DONGBA IN NAXI CULTURE AND SOCIETY

The Dongba is a Naxi priest. “Dongba” means “wise man” or “sage.” According to the mythological records in the manuscripts of Dongba religion, the social and politic stature of the Dongba were very high in the ancient times. They were the go-between of humans and the spiritual world; they were also counselors and advisors of the tribe and clan chieftains. They were considered by the Naxi people as wise men who have the special knowledge about heaven and earth. They know how to pray for good luck and happiness and to prevent the occurrence of bad luck and evil. They know how human beings should deal with nature. As a result of their many important roles, many Dongba priests were apotheosized in the Dongba religion. Later on, as the Naxi society gradually became influenced by outside political, cultural and religious institutions, the manner of the Naxi chieftains (like Family Mu, a ruling family of Naxi hereditary chieftains in the Ming Dynasty) in the various local and foreign cultures was undermined, and the stature of Naxi Dongba priests decreased. They were rarely involved anymore in politic affairs and policy making. Their usual activities were reduced to performing various rituals and making divination for the common people. Today they are peasants who are usually involved in agricultural work, animal husbandry, etcetera who will perform the rituals when somebody comes to ask their help. The Dongba priests have no specific religious organization, uniform rules, or regulations. They also have no temples and monasteries. A very knowledgeable Dongba could be known as “a great Dongba” and an extremely outstanding Dongba could be called “Dongba

King,” but these are just respectful forms address and there is no comparison to hierarchical religions such as Tibetan Buddhism.

All Dongba priests are male and their succession system is related to the patrilineal inheritance. This means that a Dongba will choose one of his sons to continue his job, and his son will in turn hand over the task to one of the grandsons. The Dongba priests live among the lay people of the Naxi and they are familiar not just with the Dongba tradition, including the rituals, divinations and pictographic manuscripts, but also with the customs of daily life, herbal medicine, handicrafts, the traditional architecture, and so forth. They are real folk masters of the Naxi culture. Many Dongba have unbelievably outstanding memory and are able to chant several hundreds of manuscripts which they have learnt by heart. The Na people (or Nari, usually called Moso at present) is a branch of the Naxi ethnic group. The priests of the Na (or Nari) people are called “Da ba” (the eastern Naxi dialect term for Dongba). The Daba have no written manuscripts, but they are able to chant quickly the very long oral sutra.

In the past, the Naxi people were tied closely to the Dongba religion throughout their lives. First of all they related to the rituals of the life cycles, for example, the ritual performed for purification of a new-born child, the ritual for a mother who gave a birth to a child, to wash her hair and worship to the sun; the ritual for naming and puberty rites,<sup>1</sup> wedding, funeral, and so forth.

The various social and productive activities are also related to the Dongba religious belief. For example, the Naxi people must worship the various gods and spirits such as the gods of grain, the gods for animal husbandry, the hunting spirits, the mountain gods, the gods for protection of villages, the spirits of the hearth located in the main room of a house called “the mother room,” the gods of the blacksmith, the gods for war and victory, the god for herbal medicine, and the god Ssa ddo who is the paternal god of the Naxi Nation.

The Dongba religion has a close relationship with the Naxi society. All the Dongba rituals are performed by certain social institutions or organizations within Naxi society such as family, clan, and village. One can trace back to the religious activities of the ancient clans of the Naxi people in some of the rituals. Some rituals reflect the typical religious activities of the Naxi patrilineal clans, for example the ritual for sacrificing to heaven is one of the largest rituals of the Dongba religion, as well as the grandest festival of the Naxi ethnic group. There are different factions of sacrificing to heaven among the Naxi people, and most Naxi people belong to the four factions called “Pvl dvq,” “Ggv xuq,” “Ggv saiq,” and “Ggv zzaiq.” The “Pv dvq” is the largest among the four. The various groups sacrificing to heaven based on the patrilineal clans in the Naxi rural areas belong to each one of these four.

The members of a clan of a patrilineal lineage generally constitute such a group sacrificing to heaven consist-

ing of several households or several dozen of households. The lineage is called in the Naxi language “Coqo.”

Identification of the members of an ethnic group is a key factor in promoting the cohesion of the whole nation. The Naxi people have a strong feeling of identification as Naxi man or woman, and the Dongba religion plays an essential role in the formation of this identity. For example, the Mee biuq (sacrifice or worship to the heaven) is an archaic tradition ranked as the first ritual of the Dongba religion, such that the Naxi people characterize themselves in terms of it: “the Naxi is the people who practice Mee biuq ritual (the ritual of sacrificing to the heaven).” They make the Mee biuq ritual as the symbol of identity of the Naxi people. One can see how its position is sacred in their minds. At the same time, one can also see the important role Dongba ritual plays in promoting this identification.

It is impossible to form an overall view of the traditional cultures of the Naxi ethnic group with specific characteristics and distinctive features without the Dongba priests who are the cream of the folk masters of the Naxi culture. It would also be also impossible to have the present national characteristic and spiritual features of the Naxi people which distinguishes them from other ethnic groups without the Dongba. It would be impossible to sustain such a rich cultural heritage with the thousands and thousands of manuscripts written with pictographic scripts, which are kept nowadays throughout the world, without the Dongba priests. Moreover, we can say that the current prosperity and development of tourism in Lijiang would be impossible without the Dongba culture which built the strong foundation for the high reputation and fame of the Naxi culture in the academic circles of the world.

## 2. THE ROLE OF A DONGBA IN THE CONSERVATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT OF A COMMUNITY

The Dongba are not only cultural specialists who hand over and develop the traditional knowledge and spiritual values of the Naxi people, they are also key persons for the conservation of the natural environment and resources as well as environmental educators in a community. They preach and explain the traditional concepts about the relation of nature and humans based on the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources in a community. They promote a harmonious relationship between humans and nature in their society.

In the cosmology and the outlook about life and death reflected in the Dongba religion, one can see very clearly the concept of integration of humans and nature. According to the concept of Dongba religion, nature and humans share the same origin in which both were generated from the eggs of a mythical bird. The Naxi ancestors thus considered nature and humans as one entity with kin rela-

tions. This is one of the intellectual roots of the view of the Naxi people about the concept of nature and humans.

The following concept reflected in the Dongba religion is that nature and humans are the brothers with a same father but different mothers. This is the philosophic concept generated from generations of Naxi people with the experience of thousands of years in their dealing with nature.

From a long time ago, this philosophic concept of the Dongba religion with its consideration that nature and humans are brothers has been a basic principle, and various taboos and customary laws beneficial to the natural environment and daily life of humans were generated from it. The activities of the Naxi people in terms of use and consumption of nature resource are regulated by this principle.

Svq ggvq, the ritual of worship and propitiation of the nature god Ssv was developed from the philosophy about nature and humans being brothers. This is a major ritual of the Dongba religion as important as the ritual for sacrificing to heaven. The Dongba priests are the guiders and organizers of the ritual. They will relate the story about how the nature brother and human brother fought with each other. The ancestors of the Naxi people realized that they had made a big mistake in treating nature badly, when nature brother started to punish the humans. The Naxi ancestors greatly regretted what they had done and asked for the help of the founder of the Dongba religion. The huge mythical bird Xe quq came to settle the quarrel and conflict between the two brothers and set down the principles humans should follow and obey. This is the practice of education in conservation and protection of nature through the traditional sacred stories of the Naxi people. The Dongba are the teachers in this ritual and have the goal and mission of conservation and protection of nature. Although they are different from the modern educators with their modern scientific concepts, we cannot avoid thinking of the powerful role and function of such an education based on spiritual sensibilities and the power of traditional belief. It once played an important role for restraint and self-control of the activities of consumption of nature resource.

Each village has its own fixed ritual place and certain time for performing the ritual. The ritual place is usually located nearby the water source of the village. The ritual of Svq Ggvq (worship to Svq, the nature spirits) in most villages is held on the day of the second lunar month belonging to dragon and snake, as it is said that frog and snake are the key representatives of Svq spirits. The dragon which originated from the Han culture is similar to Svq in terms of control of water. Therefore the Naxi people in their Dongba religion absorbed the dragon, and the Naxi people chose the day of dragon in the calendar with twelve lunar months to hold the ritual for worship of Svq.

The ritual is held under the supervision of the Dongba priests, and it becomes a community-based activity with the very regular principles. A family of a village would

take on the duty of annually preparing the offerings of worship to the Svq spirits.

The ritual of Svq Ggvq reflects the strong desire of the Naxi people to deal with the nature gods harmoniously. In the past, the Naxi people of various communities would hold a small-scale ritual for propitiation of Svq spirits in order to express their thanks and apologies to the nature spirits after they have cut some trees and broken some rock for building a house. According to the principles of the Dongba religion, illegal logging, pollution of water, and violently hunting wild animals are the major reasons of offending the nature spirits.

After 1950s, due to the reason that the Dongba religion was rebuked as “the activity of feudal superstitions,” the rituals of Svq Ggvq in communities began disappearing. From the 1980s to 2000, I several times undertook ethnographic fieldwork in the villages of Tacheng Township of Lijiang county and Baidi villages of Zhongdian county. Although I did not see the grand ritual of Svq Ggvq held by the collective, I did observe some Dongba priests perform small rites to worship the Svq spirits in the place nearby the sacred water source, and some of them still used ritual materials such as the painted wooden slates. Some Dongba priests still preached the traditional concept of the Dongba religion about how to deal with the nature harmoniously during the existing rites like weddings and funerals. They ascribed the various illnesses and calamities to the over-exploitation and over-consumption of nature resources. I also noticed during my fieldwork that the Dongba priests ascribed certain illnesses and bad luck to the action of cutting down trees in the vicinity of water source or killing a frog, snake and birds nearby a well or water source, or breaking too much rock for building a house.

The environmental ethic and moral code of the Dongba religion is reflected in the famous long scroll painting of the Dongba religion called Heiq Zhi Piq [The gods decide a road for the dead], for example. Painted on one section of this scroll is a deceased man being punished by two ghosts with a chisels in their hands, two oxen are stepping on him, and other violent wild animals are eyeing covetously and hungrily eyeing him. Some Dongba priests explain that this painting describes the punishment of a man who hunted wild animals violently in his life, and therefore he is attacked by wild animals and birds after he is dead. In the another section of the same scroll Heiq Zhi Piq, the following is written in Naxi language: “It is the punishment of a man who hunted with a dog.”<sup>2</sup>

The customary law of Naxi for conservation of the nature has been sublimated to a moral concept. In the past, it took the form of a social morality that prescribed everyone with responsibility to protect and care for the forests and water sources of a community. Each village had its own regulations for protection and use of nature resources, and the old men of great prestige were elected by the village people and established as “Lao Min Hui” (the Elder Committee). The duty of this organization was to supervise and urge the implementation of the regulations of the village.

### 3. THE CURRENT CRISIS OF THE MENTORSHIP OF DONGBA CULTURE

At present, the Dongba culture which has influenced the spiritual and material life of the Naxi people for centuries is facing a crisis of decline. The most serious crisis is that very few really knowledgeable Dongba priests survive, and their numbers continue to decrease. At the beginning of 1980s, the Institute of Dongba Cultural Studies of Lijiang prefecture had invited 11 knowledgeable Dongba, of whom nine have already passed away. The remaining one is already very old and in poor health. Before 2000, as these old Dongba priests could not train any disciples according to their wish, they were extremely worried about the danger of decline and erosion of the Dongba culture. They were desperate to give their total knowledge to the younger generation while they are still alive. But in the current age impacted by the fashion which respects only economic and commercial value, more and more people just make the Dongba culture out as some kind of very valuable commodity for selling in the market, and few young people want to invest years of hardship, effort and spirit into the work of restoration and preservation of the Dongba culture. Most offspring of the Dongba priests live in rural areas where first of all they have to struggle hard for their daily life and then compete with the urban young people who are advantageously positioned for studying in technical secondary schools, colleges and universities. They have to work much harder than oppidans to get a job. Hence they do not want to take the road of study of the Dongba culture that they cannot see as able to bring them a good future. The Daba priests of the Na (Moso) people who are identified as a branch of the Naxi ethnic group are also in danger, as there are also few Daba still alive. According to our fieldwork, at present, only two are survive. One is Dafaluroo, a Daba of Qiansuo area of Sichuan province who is 67 years old. Another is Abugaruo, who is Daba priest of the Labo village of Labo Township of Ninglang County. Abugaoro wants to hand over his knowledge to his son, but his son is devoted to running a business and completely uninterested in the Daba knowledge which he sees as unable to bring benefits to him.<sup>3</sup> Viewed from the perspective of the current situation, if emergency measures cannot be carried out to save and restore the Dongba (including Daba) culture, there will be no more Dongba masters existing in coming years in Lijiang, Zhongdian and Ninglang counties.

### 4. THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING THE DONGBA SPECIALISTS FOR CONTINUITY AND DEVELOPMENT OF NAXI CULTURE

The ignorance of the traditional knowledge of ethnic minority groups by the current educational system in many societies has caused the decline of the mentorship of indigenous cultural specialists. At the same time, the ab-

sence of cultural specialists speeds up the erosion of traditional knowledge systems.

Mentorship and training of indigenous cultural specialists should not be ignored, nor should it be done as a superficial instrumentalisation of ethnic cultural resources for tourism. For example, handicrafts products and dancing and singing performances based on the contents of Dongba culture which are not seriously handed over by the cream of the Dongba culture will not mould the spirit and national characteristics of the Naxi People. Furthermore, when the indigenous cultural specialists are ignored, the link to identity is lost. As a result, the culture of yet another ethnic group becomes a thing with beautiful appearance but no spirit.

The great components of Naxi traditional culture were handed down by generations of Dongba priests. In the people's history, the Dongba religion acted as a role for building the harmonious relations between nature and humans and among the social organizations, communities, and so forth. The particular characteristics and distinctive features of the Naxi ethnicity and culture are intimately related to the Dongba culture. If the mentorship of Dongba cultural specialists is broken, then the living attraction and mechanism of the Dongba culture in folk society will disappear and its vitality be lost. Its ability to mould the ethnic personality, cultural characteristics and national spirits of the Naxi people will then also decline, and it will be reduced to an antediluvian existence found only in museums and libraries without any living counterpart.

Various ethnographic data from western China provide strong evidence that cultural values and spiritual power are important for the conservation of nature and the environment through maintenance of harmonious relationships between humans and nature. In many areas where indigenous people live, one cannot just depend upon the regulations established by the various level governmental agencies for standardizing human activities. They cannot begin to be sensitive to or address the complex array of relationships, interests, interactions embodied in the local situation. This can only be done through a mechanism of self-control and self-governance based on the traditional cultural values and spiritual beliefs.

It was a terrible error simply to denounce the concept and activities about "Respect and fear of Nature" reflected in the traditional cultures of ethnic groups as simply "feudal superstitions." The legacy of Chinese history provides ample evidence that the most awful things are those concepts and ideas such as "conquering nature," "Humans will defeat nature," and so forth, which reflect the concepts of centralization of humans in nature. In another words, humans are "the Overlord of the Nature." Such a concept has led to humans themselves to be reduced in the same way as nature to "natural resources" and subjected to the same treatment of violence and greed.

If we still encourage people to accept the wisdom and philosophy of the important world-wide religions like Buddhism, Daoism, Christianity, and Islam to regulate and

impose self-control on human activities, solve social problems, mould the fine temperament, and improve the relationship of the nature and humans, why cannot we also encourage the ethnic minority peoples to make use of the useful elements generated from their indigenous religions and local beliefs for building the harmonious relationship between the nature and humans, human and human, and science and society.

Hence it is worthwhile to advocate and encourage the spirit of the Dongba religion which respects and worships nature. This is impossible to achieve just through books and articles. The more important requirement is for folk cultural specialists to preach, promulgate and continue this spiritual and cultural element in communities and achieve it through the activities of folk custom. We advocate training young folk specialists of Dongba culture, as the Dongba priests have always played the role of passing their cultural ideas on to the younger generation in the Naxi society. These folk cultural specialists of ethnic minority groups who live in the mountainous and rural communities are equal to those great monks, priests and imams of the great world-wide religions like Christianity, Buddhism, Daoism, and Taoism, although they preach their principles not in towering and expensive temples, monasteries and churches but in the countryside and mountains. What they do for respect of nature is as significant and meaningful as the wisdom of those religions mentioned above, and moreover, because they live and work among the people and cultivate the wide variety of knowledge and skills needed to live, they have a much better sense of the pulse of the society and the needs of their people.

Due to the various reasons of historic and cultural change, only a few old Dongba priests survive who can read through and chant the traditional tune of the classic manuscripts. Moreover, the Dongba manuscripts are recorded by pictographic script which is not written in the usual way of word by word, but sometimes one pictographic symbol for several words or even a sentence. A Dongba must learn the whole contents of a manuscript by heart from childhood, so the translation, interpretation and annotation of the Dongba manuscripts which are stored in museums and libraries both of China and abroad must depend on the Dongba priests. Without the practitioner the text loses its message and is reduced to mere ornament. The mentorship and training of young Dongba are a unique way of preventing this valuable cultural heritage from disappearing from the Naxi society.

In addition, the Dongba institution is the most important component of the Naxi traditional culture. The traditional knowledge system, including history, language, custom, literature, art, medical treatment, astronomy, geography and so forth; the knowledge of the harmonization of relationships of nature and humans; and the reasonably use of natural resources; and so on and on, were all handed down from generation to generation through the Dongba rituals. The aesthetic happiness and joy of daily life of the Naxi people are largely generated from the traditional fes-

tivals, rituals, dancing, singing and social doings in which the Dongba priests have always played a important role. They are promoters for formation of life ideality, the enthusiasm of life, and the aesthetic sense of the Naxi people as well as the carriers of the Naxi cultural history and spiritual history. Hence the mentorship and training of such cultural specialists in a community is significant for instilling the sense of cultural quality, of spiritual qualities, of social life, and of moulding the cultural characteristics of the Naxi people.

The Dongba priests are furthermore important roles for showing living wisdom, beauty and traditional knowledge of the Naxi ethnic group to other peoples and helping to improve the living conditions of their own people through the promotion and improvement of the development of tourism, and therefore we believe that the mentorship and training of more modern ethnic cultural specialists like the young Dongba priests who could hand down the excellent cultural heritage benefiting to the nation, the ethnic group and the community are one of the important measures for development of the Western China and establishment of Yunnan as “the great province of ethnic cultures.”

## 5. THE PRACTICE OF THE MENTORSHIP AND TRAINING OF THE YOUNG DONGBA PRIESTS

During the current years from 1999, the author and the researchers of the Institute of Dongba Cultural Studies have tried to carry out a task of mentorship of young Dongba priests with some financial support from the Ford Foundation and the Nature Conservatory (TNC).

At first, we selected seven students from the mountainous villages where the Dongba tradition has more or less still survived. Three of them are the grandsons of famous Dongba priests. Then we used the traditional way of mentorship for training them. For example, the old Dongba teachers teach the pupils to read, write and chant the pictographic manuscripts without use of the modern phonetic notation and type-record. The students are asked to be able to chant, read by heart and write. The Dongba teachers have to teach them to learn how to proceed through a ritual from rite to rite according to the index book of the Dongba classics and learn how to make the ritual offerings and instruments, such as painting on wooden slits and making gods, ghosts and animals of dough. The researchers cooperate with the Dongba teachers to look after the daily studies and results of the students. The teachers and students have frequent discussions and take time to solve the various problems that come up. The students must to pass regular examinations arranged by the Dongba teachers and the researchers. Arrangement is made for the students to return to their hometowns to practice what they have learnt in the institute so that they can participate and enrich in the traditional activities in the villages.

The villages selected as the sites for the mentorship of the Dongba priests usually still have some rituals of the Dongba religion like two types of rituals for sacrificing to the heaven during the lunar first and seventh months. They have other rituals such as the one for propitiation of the gods for domestic animals, the funeral, and the wedding. The students can communicate with the village people, especially those elders who are knowledgeable in the traditional culture (this is important as the elders are quite old and may leave the world at any time, so that it is possible that precious knowledge would disappear together with them forever.).

At present, the young Dongba students have learnt much of the systematic knowledge, for example, writing the pictographic scripts, chanting some classic manuscripts, performing some rituals, and singing the songs, dancing, making the ritual instruments like dough figures and paper-made materials with wooden slits, painting, and so forth. The outstanding student He Xiudong, a grandson of a well-known old Dongba who died several years ago, has been able to act as an important Dongba to perform some large-scale and difficult rituals. Up to now he has performed funerals for his grandmother (younger sister of his grandfather) He Hai, who was knowledgeable with the Dongba tradition, and for Mr. He Kaixiang, who was his teacher and a great Dongba. Next year, he will go to the Whitman College of Washington together with some researchers to perform a ritual for worship of the nature gods.

The implementation of the project for mentorship of young Dongba students has promoted the enthusiasm of the young villagers of the mountain area to learn the Dongba culture. For instance, a growing number of young men are studying the Dongba culture in the Shuming village of Tacheng Township of Lijiang county, and the activities of the traditional customs related to the Dongba culture are rising.

At present with the impact of the mainstream culture and globalization, the various excellent traditional cultures of ethnic minority groups are declining and the numbers of folk cultural masters are decreasing. This is leading to the loss of peoples' own cultural characteristics and features the world over. In Yunnan we could often hear among ethnic groups of “the last dancer,” “the last singer,” “the last paper maker,” “the last copper craftsman,” “the last cobbler,” “the last priest,” an so on. From such words one feels that the diversity of indigenous cultures with their traditional innovation, wisdom and arts, and their charming aesthetics which had been generated from generation to generation are getting assimilated—that is to say destroyed—by the mainstream of culture. Ethnic peoples with their once rich cultures and complex relations with nature and society are being turned into “rural poor” and “urban slum dwellers.” If the situation continues in this way, the world will lose its once rich and colorful heritage. It will not only become boring and plodding, but we will lose the myriad of connections that once held humans within

their natural environments and lose thereby strand by strand our connection to the world.

As it has been proven both in China and abroad, the special characteristics and individuality of a culture are the important factors which nurture and preserve its charm and life. Let us take the old town of Lijiang as an example, the prosperity and development of tourism here is only due to the local indigenous cultures of various ethnic groups. Its fame and charm originates completely from a particular local culture. Hence, we would like to appeal here, for the sake of preventing our world from becoming boring and unattractive through “cultural globalization” and cultural oneness, to try our best to keep cultural diversity and richness and try to train more folk cultural masters. The various excellence of traditional cultures of ethnic minority peoples which have brought colorful charm and value to this world should be handed down to future generations, preserving what we have rather than wishing in the future for what we have lost.

## NOTES

1. The Naxi people believe that when a boy or a girl becomes thirteen years old, he or she arrives at a mythical pass of life. One must ask a Dongba (or Daba) to hold a ritual for the youth in which the boy will be given a trousers and the girl a skirt. This rite represents their entrance into the puberty period.

2. Yang Fuquan: *The Road for the Soul of a Dead*, jointly published by Haitian Publishing House of Shenzhen and Educational publishing House of Jiangxi, 1999, p. 76.

3. Yang Fuquan's (1999) evaluation of the current situation of diversity of cultures of Naxi, Moso and Yi in Lijiang and Ninglang.

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