

HALINA WASILEWSKA

**Ritual Manuscripts of the Yi in China
– the Case Study of the Nuosu**

Abstract

The Liangshan region, a homeland of the Nuosu Yi, was fairly isolated until the fifties of the twentieth century. Thus Nuosu culture is often regarded as relatively pure and free from the influences of the surrounding area. Even today the manuscripts written in Nuosu (both language and script) are numerous and are still used in the religious ceremonies conducted by religious specialists called *bimo*. The present paper focuses on Nuosu manuscripts whose usage is primarily religious. It also discusses the usage as well as function of the Nuosu ritual manuscripts in connection with some of their physical and linguistic features.

Keywords: Nuosu manuscripts, ritual manuscripts, *bimo*, Liangshan, Yi

The Nuosu are people who speak the Nuosu language from the Northern Ngwi (or Loloish) subgroup of the Ngwi (Loloish) languages of Tibeto-Burman¹ (in Chinese classification it is referred to as Northern dialect of the Yi language). They are the subgroup of an officially recognized Yi minority in China, who live in south-western China. The Nuosu who number over two million people live in the Liangshan Mountains in the southern part of Sichuan Province as well as in the north-western part of Yunnan Province. Geographical factors such as high mountains and deep valleys in this area have led to the considerable separation of its inhabitants. Especially prior to the 50s of the twentieth century, when the new communist administration gained control on this area, Nuosu people had little contact with the outside world, unlike the other groups of Yi who inhabit Yunnan and Guizhou provinces as well as the Guangxi – Zhuang Autonomous

¹ Bradley 2011.

Region.² As Harrell points out, Nuosu culture is an example of a culture that for a long time was cut off from any large-scale outside influences and developed in the absence of any formal state organization.³ Since the influence of the outside world on this group was minimal until the mid-fifties of the twentieth century, the Nuosu are often considered (especially in Chinese literature) to be a Yi group which has preserved many cultural characteristics considered to be typical of the ancestors of today's Yi who in the past lived and were concentrated in the north-eastern part of Yunnan. Western literature in the past often referred to them as Independent Lolo or Yi.⁴

The manuscripts are still an important element of Nuosu culture which might not be the case among the other subgroups of the Yi in the regions where contact with Han people has been established for a long time. They mainly include the Nasu, Nisu, Sani and Azhe subgroups.⁵ The owners, readers and scribes (or producers) of the manuscripts were *bimo*. In traditional Yi society, a *bimo* (*bimox* in Nuosu Yi) is a kind of priest or religious specialist (also referred to as “ethnic intellectual” *mínjiān zhīshǐ fēnzǐ* 民间知识分子 by some authors), who conducts different kinds of rituals and whose indispensable task is the recitation of the scriptures. He is an intermediary between people, spirits and ghosts, as well as between people and their ancestors. *Bi* in *bimox* means ‘to recite, to read aloud’ and *mox* is a suffix, a nominalizer used after a verb to indicate a person; *bimo* thus means ‘a person who recites or chants scriptures’. The essential possessions of each *bimo* are his manuscripts as well as other ritual implements such as spirit fan, *bimo* hat, spirit quivers, and spirit bell (see illustration 1). The manuscripts whose usage is mostly religious are *bimo*'s most valuable tools, for they comprise the texts which are recited when conducting all kinds of ceremonies. So we can read the following:

“*Bimo* depend on their books,
The brown text pages,
Transmitted to sons and grandsons,
With their wise and perceptive words. (...)”⁶

² Those groups include the Nisu in south Yunnan, the Nasu in north-western Yunnan and eastern Guizhou and Guangxi, the Sani in central Yunnan, the Lipo and Lolopo in western Yunnan, as well as some other smaller subgroups.

³ Harrell 2001: 12.

⁴ See, for example, d'Ollone 1912; Ramsey 1987: 253; Diringer 1962.

⁵ There are also some other subgroups of the Yi who do not have a tradition of writing, thus do not have manuscripts written in their own language and script.

⁶ A fragment from “The genealogy of *bimo*”, *Bibu*, a scripture that is usually read at the beginning of a ceremony, translated by Bamo Qubumo (Bamo Qubuo 2001: 465).



Illustration 1. *Bimo* in his traditional apparel, Meigu County, Liangshan
Source: Halina Wasilewska 2004

The majority of Nuosu manuscripts comprise ritual texts that are recited during the numerous ceremonies conducted by *bimo*. Traditionally, the ritual manuscripts are divided into three categories in accordance with the categories of the ceremony in which they are used.⁷ They include the following:

1. The manuscripts called *nisu* in Nuosu are used in various stages and kinds of ceremonies conducted during a traditional Nuosu funeral. They are used for example in rituals for pacifying the soul, purifying the soul, sending the soul to the ancestral homeland, and many other rituals whose purpose is to ensure rest for the deceased and to ensure peace for the living.⁸ They are deeply connected with ancestor worship, a part of the religious tradition of the Nuosu.
2. The *ssyrre bburre* manuscripts contain spells and counter-spells. They are used in various incantation ceremonies and for expelling ghosts, which have their roots in the Nuosu belief system, usually referred to as animistic. Their primary purpose is to cure illnesses by expelling the ghosts which are believed to cause all kinds of sickness. They can also be used in ceremonies intended, for example, to counter bad luck and

⁷ Ji'er Tieri 1996: 82.

⁸ Ma Erzi 2000: 52.

bring good fortune by dispelling pollution in people's housing, bodies or goods of daily use; breaking malicious spells or curses, expelling evil ghosts that can cause unnatural death; and also to resolve disputes between two parties in conflict. These manuscripts are the most numerous among the three kinds of Nuosu manuscripts.⁹

3. The manuscripts entitled *kusi hleji* in Nuosu are used in divination and fortune telling. These manuscripts are used, for example, to explain ill omens, the meaning of dreams, the cause of illness or good and bad luck.¹⁰

The ritual manuscripts are primarily used in the numerous ceremonies providing peace both for the dead (by sending them to their ancestral place) and for the living (who are disturbed by spirits that have not returned to their ancestral homeland; but also by other ghosts and spirits who are believed to interfere with humans all the time). They are indispensable in the ceremonies conducted in the event of illness or to ensure prosperity for Nuosu clans.¹¹ They also might be used during a variety of consultations for the purpose of choosing auspicious days for numerous events and activities (also those of great importance in human lives), choosing a spouse, explaining bad omens, etc. Illustration 2 shows a *bimo* reading a manuscript when providing his services on the street.



Illustration 2. A *bimo* offering his services on the street, Butuo town, Liangshan

Source: Halina Wasilewska 1996

⁹ Ji'er Tiri 1996: 82–86.

¹⁰ Ji'er Tiri 1996: 92–93.

¹¹ A clan is a basic unit of Nuosu society. There are many different rituals whose purpose is to ensure prosperity for the clans. They include, for example, a ritual of dividing a clan into branches and a ritual for combining branches into a clan (Bamo Qubumo 2001: 458).

In addition to the ritual manuscripts, there are also those used in *bimo* education plus some other kinds. In Liangshan, these mainly include a compilation of the names, natures and characteristics of various ghosts and spirits; texts narrating the order of various rituals; charts and texts describing ritual instruments and their use.¹² The most well-known include the “Scripture on education” (*Hmamu teyy*) which establishes the borders between good and evil, beauty and ugliness as well as social rules of numerous relationship; the “Mother’s daughter” (*Amo hnisse*) representing a lyric poetry which narrates the story of a girl forced into arranged marriage; the “Story of creating the world” (*Hnewo teyy*), a historical poem which narrates the story of creation of the world and the many things, reflecting the Nuosu vision of the universe and human’s life and death.

The number of the Nuosu manuscripts that are not typical ritual ones is much smaller than those used by the other Yi subgroups. Except the manuscripts used during ceremonies conducted by *bimo*, they have many others that contain literary works such as folk stories, lyrics and novels of which the most well known is Ashima story.¹³ There are also numerous scriptures on natural science and medicine as well as on astronomy, history, geography, education, rural production, just to mention only some of them. Unlike Nuosu manuscripts, some of those scriptures prove the influence of the outside cultural elements, for example Taoism.¹⁴

The manuscripts display different forms of the written language which depends on the function of an individual manuscript or, more precisely, the type of ceremony during which it is used. *Nisu* manuscripts, the scriptures used in ceremonies for sending souls to their final resting place, are written in an archaic language in a kind of poem, mostly with five syllables in each verse. The content is difficult to understand or to alter (like for example to freely add new text) for the style is very strict.¹⁵ Their vocabulary is different from ordinary speech for they are written in a language with many literary and archaic words and phrases. These texts are also considered to be the oldest, because they have many similar features (for example vocabulary) to the texts of the other Yi groups from Yunnan and Guizhou provinces. On the other hand, the language of the texts used in various ceremonies connected with expelling evil spirits and ghosts is much simpler and closer to the spoken variety of Nuosu. It is relatively easy to understand their content for the style is not very strict and the vocabulary is closer to the vernacular.

The manuscripts are all written in Yi languages and a number of varieties of Yi scripts. The literature usually refers to them as traditional Yi writing (古彝文 *gǔ Yíwén*). Thus the development and fairly wide spread of traditional Yi writing system¹⁶ obviously form

¹² Bamo Ayi 2001: 129.

¹³ Ashima story was published with Chinese translation in Zhao Deguang ed. 2003.

¹⁴ The influence of Taoism can be seen in the Nasu scriptures from the Shuixi region in Guizhou province (Zhu Chongxian and Bamo Ayi 1993: 158).

¹⁵ Mose Cihuo 2002: 29.

¹⁶ It is not clear when the traditional Yi writing system developed. The earliest historical artefacts with examples of traditional Yi writing descend from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and they were found in north-eastern

a crucial component of manuscript culture among those groups of Yi which have their own script. The traditional Yi writing system embraces diversified but closely related script varieties used by some groups classified as Yi.¹⁷ They include the Nuosu, Nasu, Nisu, Sani and Azhe groups.

Consequently, the Nuosu manuscripts are written in a different script variety than the manuscripts of the other Yi groups. The differences between Yi script varieties refer to the form of the signs and signaries. Although there are a number of signs common to all varieties of traditional Yi writing, which might differ in their shape to some extent,¹⁸ there are also signs which can be found only in a certain variety. The main features which distinguish the signs of the Nuosu variety (in terms of the formal appearance of the signs) is the straight stroke and circular or oval shapes of certain signs, whereas the corresponding Nisu and Sani signs are often triangular and Nasu ones are fairly irregular in shape; besides, the strokes of the Nasu signs are rather crooked or bent. In addition, especially in contrast to the Nasu signs, the strokes of the Nuosu signs are written with no differences in their width (compare  and  – the first specimen is from a Nuosu manuscript from Decheng County, Liangshan, the second one is from a Nasu manuscript from Bijie County, Guizhou Province). Illustration 3 shows different forms of corresponding signs found in nineteen texts representing five varieties of traditional Yi writing.

Yunnan and western Guizhou. This was presumably the area where Yi writing came into being some hundred years earlier.

¹⁷ It must be noted that not all of the Yi subgroups (or more precisely, groups classified as Yi) have manuscripts as not all of them have their own script. Those who are not included, for example, the Lipo and Lolopo who linguistically are more closely related to the Lisu ethnic group than to the other groups classified as Yi (Bradley 2001: 202).

¹⁸ In the present paper I follow my previous publications: Wasilewska 2012 and Wasilewska 2014, and call them corresponding signs. For more details see Wasilewska 2012; Wasilewska 2014.

Variety of traditional Yi writing	Place of origin	‘white, silver’		‘leopard’		‘leaf’	
		⊖	[t’ɔ33]	𠄎	[dzɿ55]	—	—
Nuosu	Puge	⊖	[t’ɔ33]	𠄎	[dzɿ55]	—	—
	Xide	⊖	[t’u33]	𠄎	[zɿ55]	—	—
	Yanbian	⊖	[t’u33]	—	—	—	—
	Meigu	⊖	[te’u33]	𠄎	[zɿ33]	𠄎	[p’i33]
	Ninglang	⊖	[te’u33]	—	—	𠄎	[p’ɛ33]
Sani	Luna	▷	[ɦu33]	𠄎	[zɿ33]	𠄎	[p’e33]
Azhe	Mile	▽	[t’ɔ21]	—	—	𠄎	[p’ie21]
Nisu	Shuangbai	—	—	𠄎	[zi21]	𠄎	[p’e21]
	Honghe	▽	[ɦu21]	—	—	—	—
	Xinping	△	[t’u21]	𠄎	[zi21]	𠄎	[p’e33]
	Yuanjiang	—	—	𠄎	[zi21]	𠄎	[p’e21]
Nasu	Luoping	⊖	[t’u21]	—	—	𠄎	[p’a33]
	Luquan	⊖	[t’u33]	𠄎	[zi21]	𠄎	[p’a55]
	Wuding	⊖	[t’u33]	𠄎	[zi21]	𠄎	[p’a55]
	Panxian	⊖	[t’u33]	𠄎	[zi21]	𠄎	[p’a21]
	Dafang	⊖	[t’u33]	𠄎	[zi21]	𠄎	[p’a24]
	Weining	⊖	[t’u33]	𠄎	[ze24]	𠄎	[p’a33]
	Hezhang	⊖	[t’u33]	𠄎	[zɿ33]	𠄎	[p’a33]

Illustration 3. Different forms of corresponding signs representing five main varieties of traditional Yi writing¹⁹

The manuscripts of a certain *bimo* are written in an individual version of the Nuosu script which is closely related to the script versions of other *bimo* of the Nuosu. The versions vary from place to place so it is difficult or even impossible for a *bimo* to read and fully understand a manuscript which belongs to another *bimo*. Illustration 4 gives an idea about the degree of difference between seven Nuosu manuscripts from different places in their representation of four words (in some cases more than one sign was used interchangeably in the notation of a given word).²⁰

¹⁹ These examples of signs were found in Guoji Ningha and Ling Fuxiang (eds.) 1993 (the texts from Puge, Xide, Yanbian, Meigu, Zhongdian, Ninglang, Lunan, Mile, Shuangbai, Honghe, Luoping, Luquan, Wuding, Dafang, Weining, Hezhang and Panxian), and Ma Liangchang (ed.) 1999 (the texts from Yuanjiang and Xinping), both containing the Yi ritual texts. They also offer transcription and Chinese translation of the texts.

²⁰ The examples of signs were found in Guoji Ningha and Ling Fuxiang (eds.) 1993.

Origin / Meaning	Puge	Ganluo	Xide	Meigu	Yanbian	Zhong-dian	Ning-lang
‘father’	𠄎 𠄎	—	—	𠄎	𠄎	𠄎	𠄎
	[p’a55]	—	—	[p’o55]	[p’a55]	[p’a33]	[p’a55]
‘to start off’	𠄎	—	𠄎	—	𠄎	𠄎	𠄎
	[tu21]	—	[tu21]	—	[tu21]	[tu21]	[tʰ21]
‘town’	—	𠄎	—	—	𠄎	𠄎	𠄎
	—	[lɿ33]	—	—	[lu33]	[lu33]	[lu33]
‘white’/ ‘silver’	𠄎 𠄎	—	𠄎	𠄎	𠄎 𠄎	𠄎	𠄎
	[t’o33]	—	[t’u33]	[t’u33]	[tɛ’u33]	[tɛ’u33]	[tɛ’u33] [t’u33]

Illustration 4. Orthographic differences in writing four words in seven examples of Nuosu manuscripts from different places

This diversity in orthographic representation as exemplified in illustration 4 results from the fact that the manuscripts are written in a script that did not have any orthographic standard. The chief function of the script was religious and it was mainly used in *bimo* manuscripts of ritual usage rather than in social communication between the Nuosu. The transmission method of the script was not institutionalized.²¹ A *bimo* did not learn the script at school but from his *bimo* master during their apprenticeship. The scriptures a given *bimo* possesses were copied by himself from his master’s scriptures and are usually only used by himself in ritual activities or by his disciples who also copy them for themselves.²²

In most of the Yi manuscripts, the scribes use special symbols as punctuation marks to indicate the end of a verse or a sentence. In most of the Nuosu manuscripts, however, no sign indicating the end of a sentence or verse or punctuation mark is used,²³ but in some of them the scribes use a dot or a small circle (a typical Chinese punctuation mark) to indicate the end of a verse.²⁴ This kind of circle is also used in Nasu manuscripts. The punctuation marks used in the manuscripts include:

²¹ This refers to the traditional Yi writing system. The Nuosu also have a standard syllabary (based on the traditional Nuosu script variety) which is taught in schools from the primary up to the university level.

²² The *bimo* appraise each other’s work on the basis of the number of manuscripts they own. Those *bimo* who can understand texts written by a variety of scribes are the most highly esteemed among other *bimo*; Ma Erzi 2000: 52.

²³ Ma Erzi 2000: 52.

²⁴ Mose Cihuo 2000: 34.

- black or red dot – a symbol that appears in Nasu manuscripts from eastern Yunnan²⁵ and also in some Nuosu manuscripts;
 - ✕ – the symbol that appears in Nasu manuscripts from the Dafang and Weining areas in Guizhou;²⁶
 - △ – a triangle which is often used in Nisu and Azhe manuscripts, as well as in Nasu ones from the Panxian area, Guizhou;²⁷ it could be black or black filled with red;
 - ⊗ – this symbol is an alternative to the triangle above, although it is used less frequently in the Nisu manuscripts. It could be black or red;²⁸
 - ▴ – a triangle with stripes which is used in the Nisu manuscripts from Xiping area in Yunnan;²⁹
- typical Chinese punctuation marks including <。 , 、 > are used in some manuscripts from Yunnan but according to convention only one of them is used in a single manuscript.³⁰

These symbols are helpful in understanding texts written in an archaic language that is very different from the spoken variety. They could also help a *bimo* to recite the text properly. The symbols indicating the end of a verse were presumably introduced individually in particular regions (after the writing started developing separately in different regions) for they are not used in certain regions and their forms vary; unlike some other conventionalized symbols which appear in all the varieties of traditional Yi writing (like for example 𠄎 – the sign of reduplication used in cases where a given sign in the text has to be written twice, one after another, and then the second one is substituted by the sign of reduplication).³¹ Illustration 5 shows three specimens of texts with and without punctuation marks.

²⁵ Huang Jianming 1993: 108.

²⁶ Wu Zili and Ji Jiafa and Xiao Jiacheng 1980: 38.

²⁷ Huang Jianming 1993: 108.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ Wu Zili and Ji Jiafa and Xiao Jiacheng 1980: 38.

³⁰ Huang Jianming 1993: 108.

³¹ The reduplicated sign mostly takes the same shape in the Yi manuscripts of all script varieties, although some other forms can also be occasionally found: for example 𠄎 and 𠄎 in Nisu manuscripts; and 𠄎 in Nasu manuscripts.

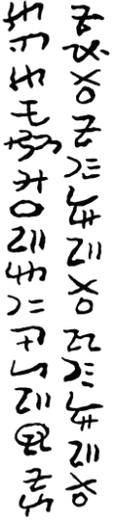
Nuosu (no punctuation mark)	Nisu < ㄨ >	Nasu < ● >
		

Illustration 5. Examples of punctuation marks in the manuscripts of different Yi script varieties
Source: Halina Wasilewska

Most Yi manuscripts are written in vertical columns arranged from left to right, but there are also places where the arrangement from right to left is more common. The direction depends on the indications on the fore-edge of the book.³² The texts are read in the same way/direction as they are written. The convention is different in case of the Nuosu manuscripts for the Nuosu signs are written in vertical columns from left to right and the text is rotated ninety degrees clockwise when read. The direction of reading is then from right to left in horizontal lines. Another way was writing the signs in vertical columns from right to left, and reading the text in horizontal lines from left to right after rotating the manuscript ninety degrees counter-clockwise.³³

Usually, the Nuosu manuscripts were written with pot soot or charcoal mixed with water and animal blood,³⁴ although regular ink or just a pencil – a writing tool that has been common in the manuscripts of the other subgroups for a long time – have also been used in more recent times. Nevertheless, there are some manuscripts – those containing spells and counter-spells – which are written in blood, which is believed to intensify the strength of a spell. It could be human or animal blood depending on the usage context of the manuscript.³⁵ Blood is believed to have been commonly used in writing the scriptures

³² Huang Jianming 1993: 62.
³³ Liu Yaohan (ed.) 1990: 25.
³⁴ Ma Erzi 2000: 52.
³⁵ Mose Cihuo 2002: 30

before ink was introduced into the Yi inhabited area.³⁶ The Nuosu manuscripts are written on paper, usually of a light brown colour. The pages are bound with bamboo strips, but thread, which is a typical binding material among other subgroups, can also be utilised. The manuscripts are rolled up and wrapped in cloth or leather when stored.

Manuscripts which are read during ceremonies that are conducted during the day, when there is plenty of light (for example when performing ceremonies to help ancestors find peace in their homeland), are usually written with relatively small signs. The density of signs on a page is reasonably high. The signs in the scriptures that are used during ceremonies which are held at night are usually bigger, and their density is much lower in comparison with those in the scriptures that are used during the day,³⁷ to facilitate reading when the light is limited.³⁸

The number of Nuosu manuscripts is hard to estimate due to the fact that most of them are kept by *bimo*.³⁹ Only in Meigu County, which is considered an area where the manuscript culture is best developed and best preserved⁴⁰ and the number of *bimo* is the highest,⁴¹ have the total number of existing manuscripts been estimated in 1996 to be over 114,000,⁴² with over 200 different kinds of texts of which only a small selection have ever been studied by specialists.⁴³ The number of scriptures with a different content in the whole Liangshan area is estimated⁴⁴ at between 330 and 420.⁴⁵

The manuscripts used in different kinds of rituals that constitute the majority of all Nuosu manuscripts are, according to tradition, considered sacred and should not to be touched by ordinary people.⁴⁶ Even old manuscripts, those which are partly damaged, are treated with care by *bimo*. After copying them, a special ceremony should be held and they should be placed deep in the mountains or in a cave. Tradition prohibits taking them out and using or reading again. When, due to various reasons, a *bimo* stops practicing, his manuscripts have also to be taken to the mountains and left there after performing

³⁶ Huang Jianming 1993: 51–52.

³⁷ Mose Cihuo 2002: 30.

³⁸ It should be noted that the manuscripts were primarily written for recitation during ceremonies, and they originate in oral texts. Apparently, when reciting the text, a *bimo* did not necessarily read it one sign after another but used it as a kind of memory aid.

³⁹ It must be noted that only a certain portion of manuscripts survived being severely damaged at the time of the Cultural Revolution and many manuscripts that are found today were rewritten from the memories of the *bimo* (Ji'er Tiri 1996: 77).

⁴⁰ Meigu together with Butuo and Zhaojue counties are counties where the percentage of the Nuosu Yi is the highest in the region and reaches over 90 percent (Harrell 2001: 65).

⁴¹ Mose Cihuo 2002: 38.

⁴² Ji'er Tiri 1996: 77.

⁴³ Mose Cihuo 2002: 38.

⁴⁴ The estimated number depends on the assumed counting principles. The *bimo* could add new parts to the old text he inherited from his master. Some texts could also be split and rewritten as several separate manuscripts, and two or more manuscripts could be combined together (Mose Cihuo 2002, *ibid.*).

⁴⁵ Mose Cihuo 2002: 37–38.

⁴⁶ Yang Wen'an 2000: 62.

a special ritual.⁴⁷ In some areas the manuscripts are burnt with the death of an owner,⁴⁸ but in other places they are inherited by their families or disciples.⁴⁹ Touching the scriptures is usually considered as a kind of taboo that can bring misfortune and anger the spirits or ghosts.⁵⁰ Thus, research on the manuscripts is at odds with their traditional sacred status, and it is not a common occurrence for a *bimo* to be willing to show his manuscripts to other people, including other *bimo*. This explains the difficulty in collecting and translating the Yi scriptures. An additional difficulty in translation is the fact that it might be impossible to read a text with full understanding without help of the owner of the manuscript. Nowadays, some *bimo* do agree to provide their manuscripts for copying by certain institutions which collect manuscripts and gather statistical information concerning them. They also participate in translating certain ritual texts. Nevertheless, the majority of the texts have not been collected or copied and translated.

In Liangshan area, several bodies were appointed to collect manuscripts as well as to translate them. They also make copies of the manuscripts and take care of the manuscripts that are already in their possession. These groups were established both at county and prefectural levels and are supervised by local governments. The most important place for the collection of Nuosu manuscripts, especially those from Meigu County, and also for the research work on the manuscripts including their translation, is the Bimo Culture Research Centre (Yizu Bimo Wenhua Yanjiu Zhongxin 彝族毕摩文化研究中心) in Meigu which was established in 1996. The Centre has managed to collect 1535 different manuscripts of 300 different kinds, and made copies of over 3000 manuscripts.⁵¹

The other important place which collects Nuosu manuscripts is the Research Institute of Liangshan Minorities (Liangshan Minzu Yanjiusuo 凉山民族研究所) in the capital town of Xichang in Liangshan Prefecture. Other places comprise different institutions like Beijing Library, the Institute of Social Science in Beijing, the Library of Beijing University, the University of South-west Minority (Xinan Minzu Daxue 西南民族大学) in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, and many others. Since March 2010 the *bimo* manuscripts of Liangshan were listed among the Chinese Archives Heritage Resources (*Zhongguo Dang'an Wenxian Yichan Mulu* 中国档案文献遗产目录).

The first attempts in translating the Yi manuscripts took place in the 30s of the twentieth century. A book entitled *Cuanwen cong ke* 爨文丛刻 ('Cuan writing'⁵²) comprising eleven Yi texts edited by Ding Wenjiang was published in 1936, but it did not contain any Nuosu manuscripts. It was amended in 1986⁵³ and one of the earlier texts was replaced with a Chinese translation of a Nuosu ritual scripture, namely "Scripture on *bimo* offerings for

⁴⁷ Bamo Ayi 1998: 6.

⁴⁸ Bradley 2001: 201.

⁴⁹ Mose Cihuo 2002: 31.

⁵⁰ Baqie Rihuo 2000: 30, 33.

⁵¹ Data provided by the Liangshan Archives (Liangshan dang'an 凉山档案 at <http://daj.lsz.gov.cn>).

⁵² Cuan is one of the Chinese names that refer to the people today classified as Yi. Thus Cuan writing means Yi writing.

⁵³ It was published in Ma Xueliang (ed.) 1996.

ancestors” (*Bimo xianzu jing* 毕摩献祖经). Starting in the 80s of the twentieth century, various groups and institutions have successfully translated Yi manuscripts and other artifacts, as well as oral texts in Yi including the Nuosu ones. The Nuosu manuscripts that were translated into Chinese and published at the beginning included some ancient scriptures already mentioned: “Story of creating the world” (title in Chinese *Le’e teyi* 勒俄特依, 1986, also published in Japanese in 2001); the “Scripture on education” (*Mamu teyi* 玛木待依; 1985, also published later in Japanese), and the “Mother’s daughter” (*Mama de nü’er* 妈妈的女儿; 1987), among several others. Except for the Chinese translations those scriptures were also published exclusively in Yi. A number of translated ritual manuscripts were first edited as mimeographs and published as internal materials, only later being published officially and in several editions.

The contents of the ritual scriptures that have been translated mainly refer to ancestor worship, funerals, spirit worship, expelling evils and divination for they are used in all kinds of ceremonies. Since the 90s *bimo* have been asked to participate in various bodies and teams that were responsible for translation. Some of the most important translated works of the Nuosu ritual manuscripts include six texts of the “Scripture of showing the way” (*Zhilujing* 指路经⁵⁴), the most widespread scripture in many local versions which is used during funeral ceremonies in a ritual of sending a soul to the homeland of its ancestors.

Recently, many large scale translations have been done. They include the following works:

- “Series of Yi language scriptures”⁵⁵ published in 2009 in ten volumes; they comprise translations of 386 different Yi manuscripts and also offer the photographs of the manuscripts.
- “Series of Yi language scriptures in China”⁵⁶ that has been published successively in separated volumes since 2006; starting from the fourth volume the translations offer one to one correspondence of the Yi and Chinese characters; altogether over 40 manuscripts is going to be published, including many ritual ones, but also some of the literary works that were published earlier.
- “Compilation of religious scriptures of ethnic minorities in China – volume of *bimo* scriptures”⁵⁷ published in 2009; it comprises Nuosu ritual manuscripts in a Chinese translation, as well as a catalogue of 303 Nuosu scriptures.
- “Translations and annotations of the *bimo* scriptures of the Yi ethnic minority” is a multi-set volume series in which a total of 106 volumes were edited and published between 2007 and 2012; only a few Nuosu scriptures were included in this project: the “Ninglang scripture on offering sacrifice to ancestors and bringing peace to the soul”⁵⁸

⁵⁴ They were published in Guoji Ningha and Ling Fuxiang (eds.) 1993.

⁵⁵ They were published in Liangshan Yizu Zizhizhou Yuyan Weiyuanhui (ed.) 2009.

⁵⁶ They were published in Liangshan Yizu Zizhizhou Renmin Zhengfu (ed.) 2006-.

⁵⁷ They were published in Huang Jianming and Bamo Ayi (eds.) 2009.

⁵⁸ It was published in Chuxiong Yizu Zizhizhou Renmin Zhengfu (ed.) 2007.

(2007); the “Three sisters of immortal fox”⁵⁹ (2009); a manuscript on traditional Yi calendar from Leibo⁶⁰ (2009), and a ritual scripture “Offering sacrifices to the ancestors for leprosy”⁶¹ (2010); the “Ninglang scripture on offering sacrifice to ancestors”⁶² (2010).

The manuscript culture of the Nuosu Yi is connected with their religious activities and the performers of those activities. Therefore the Nuosu manuscripts are still mainly in the possession of their owners – the *bimo*. Obviously, the *bimo* are one of the fundamental parts of the manuscript culture of the Nuosu as they are its transmitters. Lu Wanfa in 1999 wrote:

“In Meigu, the *bimo* are present in every town, their apprentices are present in every village; throughout four seasons of the year the sound of the spirit bell calling the spirits and expelling ghosts and the sound of recitation of scriptures are vibrating in the ear; the so-called ‘evils and ghosts’ (clay or grass figures of ghosts)⁶³ put to death by *bimo* can be seen everywhere; people almost all the time are speaking about ghosts and spirits, all coming into contact with ghosts and spirits”.⁶⁴

This suggests that *bimo* activities, including the recitation of scriptures, were still ubiquitous at that time. Nevertheless, the numbers clearly show that the *bimo* have rapidly reduced in number over the last two decades. According to the census conducted in Meigu County by the Bimo Culture Research Center in 2009, the number of *bimo* was 2973, compared to 6441 and around 7930 in the 2002 and 1993 censuses, respectively.⁶⁵ The latest census shows that the average age for *bimo* has increased rapidly, for there were only 424 *bimo* below the age 30 in comparison to 674 and 699 between 31 to 40, and 41 to 50, respectively. The censuses also provided data concerning the current number of scriptures held by local people (mainly the *bimo*). The data shows that the number of manuscripts between 1993 and 2009 decreased by 63 per cent: for in 1993 there were as many as 138,377 manuscripts; in 2002 the number dropped to 90,246; whereas in 2009 it was only 51,156. Fewer and fewer young people want to become *bimo*, and fewer and fewer parents are deciding that their children should continue their ancestor’s tradition or become non-hereditary *bimo*. As Qubi Aguo points out, even in some renowned *bimo* families in Liangshan, like the Qubi family, there are old *bimo* whose sons have not

⁵⁹ It was published in Chuxiong Yizu Zizhizhou Renmin Zhengfu (ed.) 2009a.

⁶⁰ It was published in Chuxiong Yizu Zizhizhou Renmin Zhengfu (ed.) 2009b.

⁶¹ It was published in Chuxiong Yizu Zizhizhou Renmin Zhengfu (ed.) 2010a.

⁶² It was published in two volumes: Chuxiong Yizu Zizhizhou Renmin Zhengfu (ed.) 2010b.

⁶³ Straw and clay figures of ghosts, together with ghost boards, are used in spells directed at ghosts. At the end of a ritual the ghost figures and ghost boards have to be thrown away to show that the ghost has been successfully expelled (Bamo Qubumo 2000: 60–61).

⁶⁴ Lu Wanfa 1999: 31.

⁶⁵ Qubi Aguo 2015: 49.

continued their tradition and the manuscripts have been placed in a case in an ancestral room which people enter only once or twice a year.⁶⁶ This tendency is evident in Meigu, and as one might expect, it is even more rapid in the other places in Liangshan. The reasons are probably complex. Presumably, the compulsory nine year education might be one of the factors which have influenced the number of *bimo* in recent years. Although in 1999 Lu Wanfa complained that the traditional *bimo* education became an obstacle in fulfilling the compulsory education, because many children had to give up school or did not attend school under the tacit permission of their parents in order to start a *bimo* apprenticeship,⁶⁷ but it is likely that after over ten years the local governments have succeeded in convincing people to fulfil their duties. Besides, the influence of global culture via Han Chinese culture presumably triggers a diminishing interest towards tradition. The large number of alternative modes of life which have started to reach Liangshan so effectively over the last two decades through various media has meant that the traditional modes of life might not seem attractive enough for young people and their parents. Thus, presumably the number of manuscripts will continue to diminish along with the number of *bimo*, in addition to their role in everyday life becoming marginalized to an extent that is difficult to estimate. For this reason, the translation work seems to be more and more urgent if the content of the Nuosu manuscripts that still exist is to be understood and investigated.

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⁶⁶ Ibidem 2015: 50.

⁶⁷ Lu Wanfa 1999: 32.

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