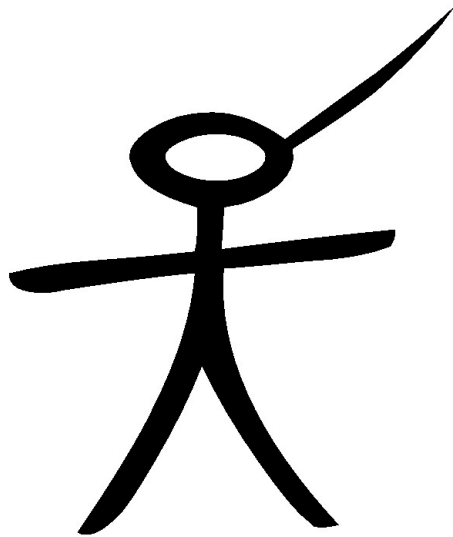


Part One

Introduction



Words as pictures

It is sometime in the early 1930s, deep within the alpine pastures and high mountain peaks of the land of the Naxi people. In this remote Himalayan region of southwest China, a Dutch missionary, Cornelia Elisabeth (Elise) Scharten, sits in the open courtyard of an old wooden house with a local Naxi “sorcerer”, a ritual specialist who can commune with the spirit world. The ritualist is reciting from an ancient manuscript written in pictographs. After pausing and discussing the meaning of certain words (they are talking in the Tibeto-Burman Naxi language, for Elise Scharten has been living here for over fifteen years, and is already fluent), Scharten types an English translation using her typewriter, a technological marvel in this remote mountain town on the ancient “Tea Horse Road”. This typewritten manuscript would become the first cover-to-cover translation of the most important Naxi myth: the origin story of mankind, a tale of incest, a cataclysmic flood, and a hero’s quest to win the hand of a divine bride. Once complete, the original pictographic manuscript and its translation were taken back to Scharten’s native Netherlands, where they have lain untouched in a museum archive for almost a century. Now, with modern technology, we can bring this old Naxi manuscript, along with its oral reading and typewritten translation, back to life.

Starting in the late nineteenth century, unusual pictographic books began to flow from a remote corner of southwest China into the libraries of the western world. At first this flow was nothing more than a mere trickle, a few curios sent home by French Catholic missionaries, but by the early twentieth century, they were being acquired in their hundreds and thousands, bought up in bulk by renowned plant hunters and explorers, and filling up shelves in such venerated institutions as the Library of Congress, the British Library and the German State Library at Marburg. This was a literature that could no longer be ignored, or, in the words of Austrian writer Felix Braun, “eine literarische Entdeckung, die fortan in der Geschichte der Weltliteratur nicht mehr übersehen werden kann” (Koc 1969). What made these books so attractive? For one, they possessed the air of mystery that came with being “magical” books almost indecipherable to all but a select few ritual specialists, but perhaps more importantly, they were written in what looked like an ancient form of picture writing.

These are books where the written events unfold on the page visually. Rather than just reading descriptions of heroic deeds, the reader actually *sees* the protagonists perform them: but they are not picture books, for the pictures on these pages are themselves words. Take the sentence “The man takes his arrow and bow and kills the tiger”. Now compress the nouns, verbs and other syntax words into two (or at least what looks like two) graphs, and you might get something like this:



Figure 1. A simplified reading: man shoots tiger.
Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen.
Coll.n^o. RV-4175-26, detail.

The imagery is relatively clear: a horned figure aiming an arrow at a tiger, the animal represented by its head alone. Perhaps this looks something like a primitive comic book – but a comic book still relies on the words to be read alongside the pictures. What if the words were also the pictures? This is the allure of the Naxi “dongba” script, a logographic writing system that emerged centuries ago as a form of picture writing, and which later developed into a script that is still in use today to record the religious stories of the Naxi, a Tibeto-Burman people who live amidst the high mountains of the extended Himalayas in southwest China. This is the world’s only fully logographic writing system still alive today, a form of writing in which one single graph can equate to a whole word, or sometimes even a whole sentence.

But how do we go about *reading* these graphs that look like pictures? How do you compose complicated syntax in such a script? This is where the difficulties really begin. Writing is, ordinarily, a linear process of moving from one word to the next in a regimented fashion. In the dongba script of the Naxi, especially as it is traditionally composed in the ritual literature, there is no fixed order of the graphs on the page, and they are often arranged in intricate, ideographic collages. To compound matters further, some words are written and not read, while many are read and not written. There is in general a looser relationship between the written and the spoken word than the reader is probably used to.

The two graphs in Figure 1 above *could* read:

Naxi: la / kail / zhuaq / nee / kail¹

Word for word: tiger / shoot / man / topicalizer / shoot

English translation: [When it comes to] the shooting of the tiger, the man does the shooting

This means that those two graphs are read as five syllables (in already very concise ritual language). The man and the bow represent all at once the verb “*kail*” (to shoot), which is

¹ Reading by He Yuncai (YSMGZCGB 1986, 249).

read twice, and the noun “*zhuaq*” (man). The fact that this figure as written has horns and an elephant’s trunk (in what are admittedly very abstract forms) also indicate that this is the Naxi culture hero *Coqssei-leel’ee*, the only man to survive a great flood in Naxi myth. His name is not read out in this section; in this way the graph, by virtue of those adornments on the figure’s head, portrays even more information than a formulaic reading presents (in Saussurean terminology, it is a “motivated” sign). The source marker *nee*, a grammatical particle crucial to the syntax because it identifies the agent of the action, is not written at all, and must be supplied from memory. The non-linear connection between the written and the spoken word has led some scholars to call dongba script a “phraseographic” writing (*yudian wenzi* 语段文字), wherein one single graph can represent an entire phrase.²

The second major problem is that a great number of the graphs are, as they are used in the manuscripts, not what they at first seem: they lose their “motivation” (the degree to which a symbol actually looks like what it is supposed to represent). Take the following graph as an example:



Figure 2. *Zzee’laq-epv*.
Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen.
Coll.nr. RV-4175-26, detail.

Now, you might see the resemblance of this head to the tiger’s head in Figure 1 and think “Aha! What we have here is surely an anthropomorphic tiger wearing some kind of robe!”, and that is precisely what is depicted, but it is not the meaning of this graph, it is not how it is read. This is the graph denoting the maternal grandfather of mankind, the god, *Zzee’laq-epv*, who is depicted as a robed, seated tiger. He was not, in fact, a tiger; the tiger’s head is used merely phonetically. When we see the tiger, we know in this case that the name of this individual includes the syllable “*la*”, the Naxi word for tiger, here just the second syllable in the deity’s name: *Zzee’laq-epv* (read in the falling tone).

This is what is known as the rebus principle, one of the great leaps forward in the technology of writing (and coincidentally what marks Naxi dongba as essentially a phonetic, not a pictographic script). Even so, the dongba script is almost universally known as a “pictographic”

² See for example Wang Yuanlu (1988, 162).

writing system (see the title of this very book!) despite its overt reliance on the rebus principle, presumably because there is a certain appeal to talking about pictographs that remind us of the mystical past of the written word, and it is also more convenient than bombarding the reader with such academic jargon as “logographic” (where each graph represents a word, and is not limited to a single syllable) or “morpho-syllabic” (where each graph represents a single monosyllabic morpheme). The simplest explanation, perhaps, is this: the dongba script, like the Chinese script, is comprised of *evolved* pictographs, with the caveat that the Naxi script remains fossilized in an earlier stage of evolution compared to Chinese writing. This means that, by virtue of being made almost obsolete by the encroaching influence of Chinese, the dongba graphs have retained more of their original pictorial quality.

The dongba script can be used to write fully syntactic texts such as land contracts, diary entries, and colophons appended to ritual manuscripts where the dongba lament their old age and the passing of time.³ In its most traditional form, however, this writing is characterized by its semi-oral nature, by the “gaps” that need to be filled in. Without already knowing the story that a manuscript relates, it would be very difficult to put the graphs into any kind of syntax (the grammar words, such as auxiliary particles, are often not written). All this means that the books are essentially indecipherable mysteries for anyone approaching them *in isolation*. Reading these texts, then, requires context. This context is usually supplied by someone who already knows the stories and the rites, i.e., a “dongba”, the very ritual specialists after which the script was named.

The dongba are the mediators between the human world, the spirit world, and the divine. They officiate the religious ceremonies of the Naxi, ensuring that both man- and spirit-kind retain their harmonious relationship. It is the remit of the dongba to fill in the “gaps” of the written manuscript, and a proficient dongba well-versed in the tradition could perhaps elaborate at length upon any given section of text. When faced with a situation like this, where a handful of written graphs can be embellished to tell a longer story episode, we can understand how the early western commentators might have suggested that the Naxi dongba script was not a “full” writing system. The intrepid missionaries and explorers of the nineteenth century who were first to come into contact with this writing almost couldn’t conceive of it as “writing” at all: they were stuck in linear, logocentric modes of thought, innately suspicious of anything that claimed to be writing but that didn’t seem to accurately transcribe speech. Père Desgodins of the Missions-Etrangères de Paris, one of the first Westerners to encounter the Naxi script, wrote in an 1882 letter to the Tibetologist Terrien de Lacouperie that “These hieroglyphics ... are not, properly speaking, a writing” (1894, 47). This blanket, orientalist

³ A colophon to a manuscript written by dongba He Nianheng of Baidi includes the lines: “I hope there’ll be more days left for me, and if so, I will visit that village [where I conducted this ceremony] again one day. May the cranes fly among the clouds, and may the wild geese wander by the riverside, I’ll be there again one day,” see Yang (2008, 243).

appraisal can still be seen in some contemporary scholarship on the Naxi. But denying the Naxi script the status of writing “proper” is misleading, an ideological position tied too closely to a linear understanding of writing as a technology. If we posit that non-linear writing can exist, then the “gaps” in a Naxi manuscript do not indicate a *lost* presence, but merely another kind of presence, a non-logocentric presence. Think of it like this: the spaces can themselves be read, or, in other words, the spaces can be filled with words by virtue of those words that *have* been written down. In the same way that a parent may give an impromptu performance when reading a children’s book, perhaps inserting extra dialogue to match a particularly vivid picture, the dongba extemporise during a performance where necessary. In this way the Naxi dongba script is still writing, just not writing as we normally understand it. The Naxi books can be read, and if they can be read, then they can be translated into other languages.

It wasn’t until the Austro-American botanist explorer, Joseph Rock (1884–1962) began his expeditions into China’s mountainous southwest in the early twentieth century that the world began to have some idea what the Naxi books contained. Rock, famous for being the *National Geographic* magazine’s “man in China” in the 1920s and 30s, was captivated by the ritual books he found in the possession of the Naxi religious specialists (the “dongba”) while plant hunting in China’s borderlands. Rock went on to devote the remaining years of his life to the translation of these books that contained such a treasure house of knowledge, a corpus of literature that, for Rock, offered tantalising glimpses at the indigenous religion of pre-Buddhist Tibet.

Rock, a voracious autodidact, appreciated an intellectual challenge: this was a script that, by the time he first encountered it in the 1920s, nobody had previously deciphered (aside from some exploratory, incomplete translations conducted via Chinese by French scholars and explorers). This vast corpus of ritual literature was essentially unexplored territory, and this was where Rock liked to tread. Through his assiduous collecting and cataloguing, and not without controversy,⁴ he preserved thousands of these texts in collections now spread throughout the western world. Unfortunately, this legacy has not yet been fully developed by western scholars. Rock’s passing in 1962 marked the abrupt end of a nascent European Naxiology:⁵ his work was completed by scholars unfamiliar with Naxi in adjacent disciplines such as Tibetology and Sinology.

⁴ In China, Joseph Rock’s legacy has undergone a radical transformation. During the Cultural Revolution, he was branded an imperialist spy, and criticized for “stealing” thousands of historical manuscripts – an entire corpus of minority religious literature (YNDXLSYJS 1976, 2). In China today, his legacy is celebrated, and he is heralded as one of the progenitors of Naxi studies. Somewhat ironically, his legacy in the west has continued on an opposite trajectory, and his work is treated with some scepticism by anthropologists and Sinologists alike.

⁵ Naxiology can be defined as a specialized discipline that involves the in-depth philological study of the Naxi literature. “The death of J. F. Rock has left research on the Naxi, an ethnic group of about 175,000 people in the province of Yün-nan, in a stage when it was just about to develop into a distinctive specialized discipline” (Prunner 1969, 100).

In the story of western “Naxiology”, which is very much a history of these unusual manuscripts and their translation, Rock is not the only protagonist (although he no doubt wished to believe he was). Indeed, there were other unsung translators who encountered the Naxi and attempted to bring their manuscripts, and the stories contained within them, to the western world. The translator whose work forms the core of this book, Elise Scharten (1876-1965), was a Dutch Pentecostal missionary, and like the early Jesuits in China, she was convinced of the need to spread the Christian message amongst the Chinese and non-Han minority peoples of that country. But she also took an interest in the Naxi ritual literature, and this interest led to the creation of a unique translation of a central Naxi origin story that has, until now, lain undisturbed in a Dutch museum archive. Elise Scharten’s most valuable contribution to Naxiology is this full, cover-to-cover translation of the Naxi *Coqbbertv* (loosely, the *Origin and Migration of Mankind*) myth, completed before Rock published any of his own full translations. But let us first take a step back. What exactly are these “pictographic” books, and how do we read them?

The Naxi and their literature

Unfortunately for those who approach the books in the western collections, the Naxi manuscripts cannot be understood when they are divorced from the context of their creation and performance. So, who are the Naxi? They are, at least by Chinese standards, a numerically small ethnic group, with a population of around 330,000, most of whom live in and around the picturesque Lijiang basin in the Himalayan foothills of northwest Yunnan province. The Naxi language is usually classified within the Tibeto-Burman language family, but it is writing among the Naxi that has given them a certain level of cultural cachet that is perhaps not commensurate with the size of their population. Besides generally writing standard Chinese with Chinese characters, they have two native scripts for recording their own language, one phonetic and the other primarily logographic (touted by the Chinese authorities as “the world’s last living pictographs”). The traditional Naxi name for this script is *serjel lvjel* 𑄆𑄇 𑄈𑄉𑄊𑄋, literally “wood record, stone record”,⁶ which scholars suggest points to the earliest materials used for recording the characters, that is, writing is defined as marks made on wood and stone. It is today more commonly known by its Chinese name, *dongbawen* 东巴文, “dongba script”, after the dongba themselves, and a straight translation of the colloquial Naxi phrase, *dobbaaq tei’ee*, “dongba writing”. There is another mode of writing known as *geba*, which is entirely syllabic, and shares more in common with the syllabic modern Yi script than logographic dongba script. To illustrate the difference between a logographic script and a syllabic script, take the word “Naqxi” (Naxi): in dongba script, this word is represented by one single graph, and read “Naqxi”, with two syllables: 𑄆𑄇. This is a figure of a person, and the sheaf of rice on

⁶ Here the abstract verb is depicted via a rebus: while we have two graphs derived from pictographs, a tree and a lump of stones, the verb *jel*, to record, is portrayed with the graph for bracelet, *jjiuq*, used as a rebus, and read “*jel*”.




their head indicates the pronunciation (*xi*, person). We know it is not just any person, but a Naxi person, because the head is coloured black (*naq*, black). One graph therefore represents two syllables. In the geba script, the same word, “Naqxi”, would be written with two graphs, one to represent each syllable: . The first graph is “na” (without the falling tone, as geba graphs do not represent any specific tone), and the second “xi”. In geba, each distinct graph represents one syllable only. When placed together, they are read “Naqxi”, the context indicating which tones are required. Table 1 shows the same word across all the major scripts used to write Naxi.

Table 1. Script diversity in Lijiang

Script	Example
Simplified Chinese	纳西
Hanyu pinyin	Nàxī
Modern Naxi pinyin	Naqxi
Rock’s romanization ⁷	¹ Na- ² khi
Dongba script (logographic)	
Geba script (syllabic)	

While rare, manuscripts can be written entirely in geba. The majority of the Naxi books are predominantly written in dongba, but it is altogether possible for a text to mix the two systems. As we shall see, Scharten’s *Coqbbertv* manuscript features a number of geba graphs, used by the composer of the manuscript as a kind of shorthand (for the dongba graphs are usually more complex).

The Naxi religion and its ritual specialists are both known as *dobbaq*, Chinese “dongba 东巴”, which is either derived from the Tibetan *stonpa*, meaning “teacher” (according to Rock 1963, 87), or more likely the Tibetan Bonpo, the priests from whom the dongba ritualists likely inherited many ritual manuscript traditions.⁸ The dongba religion therefore shares elements of the early Tibetan religion (what many scholars label “Bon”), but also draws from Tibetan Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, to differing degrees. It is a complex admixture of beliefs and ritual practices. The dongba have no temples, instead conducting their rites in designated clearings adjacent to the mountain villages or in the courtyards of the households which have requested a ceremony. They pass their knowledge from father to son (during

⁷ Despite being anachronistic, some of Rock’s transcriptions persist to this day: notably “Na-khi” (Naxi) and “dto-mba” (dongba). For these general terms I use standard Chinese pinyin as is convention, and for other Naxi words I use Naxi pinyin.

⁸ The prolific Chinese Naxiologist Yang Fuquan has discussed the connection between *dobbaq/stonpa* and *bonpo* (possibly rendered into Naxi as “*biu bbiuq*”) at length, see Yang (2012, 298-334).

the Cultural Revolution, this chain of patrilineal transmission was cut for a generation, but there are now a number of dongba training schools in Lijiang where the tradition is taught to any students who are willing to learn). A dongba must be proficient at performing major rites such as funerals, appeasing the nature spirits, and exorcising malevolent entities. These rituals require the recitation of the Naxi ritual literature, written left to right on coarse, locally-produced paper and bound into small, rectangular volumes. The majority of the extant Naxi ritual texts are written in the dongba script, a script that has stuck very close to its pictographic roots – direct representation of the thing itself. The dongba script has an inventory of several thousand graphs, which can be combined in a near infinite number of ways to create noun and verb phrases. Joseph Rock's 1963 dictionary, for example, lists over 3,000 graphs but is by no means exhaustive.

Nobody knows exactly how many texts make up the body of Naxi literature as a whole, or even exactly how far back the script dates. Lijiang authorities have estimated that around 1,000 separate manuscript traditions exist, but new ritual traditions are still being discovered in manuscript collections stored around the world. Li Lin-ts'an believed that the dongba script could not have predated the Tang dynasty (618 – 907 CE), and that it could not have emerged any later than the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 CE). The earliest dated manuscript is from the 13th century. There are well over 30,000 individual dongba manuscripts stored in various library collections around the world. Rock, alongside other less prolific collectors, preserved these manuscripts in the west, essentially for nobody to read; as the British anthropologist Anthony Jackson has said, "The irony is that the freely-available [Naxi] mss. in the West cannot be read by Western scholars!" (1989, 137). This is the somewhat dire state of affairs when it comes to western Naxiology as a discipline.

We cannot access the content of the books without being able to first *read* them. In this, Naxiology shares a similar fundamental linguistic barrier to that of Sinology: just as Sinologists must first master the Chinese literary language, requiring a long and demanding training "that can seldom be combined with the acquisition and cultivation of another discipline" (Leys 2013, 317), so too must Naxiologists learn Naxi and the dongba script. Therein lies the rub. If, as with Sinology, the Naxiological field is restricted linguistically, the problem is that it is even more difficult to master the Naxi literary language than it is the Chinese; so much so that Rock was the only westerner to have done so (with a prodigious amount of assistance from native informants). As Klaus Janert, the Sanskrit scholar who attempted to finish the cataloguing of Rock's Naxi manuscripts in Germany after his death, once said, "Rock was the first and the only European so far who learned to read the pictographical script of the Dtombas as well as their syllabic characters and to interpret the Nakhi texts" (Rock 1965, xv). Elise Scharten (of whom Janert was most likely unaware, for Rock never wrote about her) interpreted a text, but she did so via a translation into vernacular Naxi from a local informant, for there is little evidence she could read the dongba script. She was fluent in colloquial Naxi, but not literate in the written ceremonial register.

The first task of any true Naxiologist, then, is to learn the language. This in itself would certainly also require a long training, but even knowledge of Naxi and the dongba script does not give us direct access to the ritual texts – they are always being read in translation. When read, the texts have to be translated ad-hoc from the semi-oral mode of ritual composition into an oral performance. The Naxi manuscripts’ semi-oral nature (many scholars, following Rock, have labelled them “mnemonic” texts; see for example Michaud, Zhong and He [2017]), means that anyone wishing to really *read* these manuscripts must first be familiar with the oral traditions behind them, something which takes, at perhaps a conservative estimate, a decade of single-minded study with an inheritor of the oral tradition (the most learned of which have long since passed away), and in any case would still not equip one with the necessary training to memorise all of the ritual traditions in the Naxi corpus.

What is required, therefore, is the assistance of a dongba ritualist well versed in the oral traditions. Rock hired a number of such local informants (and he dedicated his Naxiological magnum opus, a two-volume compendium of translations of and bibliographic notes on Naxi manuscripts, the *Na-Khi Naga Cult and Related Ceremonies*, to these “Na-khi teachers”). This makes the translation of a Naxi text a time-consuming and expensive affair and precludes the existence of one true “translation”, for each dongba will give an idiosyncratic reading dependent upon their own memory. To put it simply, translation in the Naxi dongba context is fraught with the indeterminacy of reading. It is highly improbable that a dongba will give the exact same performance of a book twice, and when the book is unfamiliar to them, i.e., from outside of their own oral inheritance, they will read it much less fluently, or perhaps distort the written text with the influence of their own memory.

Joseph Rock realised that the voluminous undertaking of translating the Naxi texts would take more than his lifetime, but he felt nevertheless that this was his mission, spurred in the belief that if he were not to translate these books, the knowledge contained within would be lost forever: “A very few years more and the Na-khi books will be undecipherable, and no matter how many and how complete dictionaries may be available they will remain closed books, no Rosetta stone would prove of value” (1952, 18). Rock’s more pessimistic prognostications have not (yet) come to pass: the Naxi manuscripts are not, even in the twenty first century, closed books. At least when it comes to the more common manuscripts, we can still access readings, and we can get toward some semblance of “translation”, as this book aims at showing. I hesitate to suggest, as Jackson’s student at Edinburgh, Pan Anshi (1998), has done, that we can rely on Rock’s work alone to perform translations of any Naxi book, for Rock did not translate all their literature as he had hoped, and in any case relying on Rock alone would mummify what is supposed to be a living oral tradition. We can, however, still find learned dongba in the Naxi areas, and by using the vast body of Naxiological scholarship left by Rock, Li Lin-ts’an and other Chinese and western scholars, we can come to a fuller understanding of the contents of these manuscripts.

Before we can do anything serious with these texts, such as exploring the Nazi religious beliefs or examining the philological practices of the *dongba*, we must understand the books, and this necessitates various layers of translation (from semi-oral ritual manuscript to spoken Nazi, from the literary language of the old books to the modern vernacular, and finally from Nazi to a more accessible language such as Chinese or English). While most of the manuscripts stored in the western world (in places such as the Library of Congress, the Harvard-Yenching Library and the John Rylands Library in Manchester) have lain dormant, unused and untranslated, a number of intrepid individuals have chosen to attempt translations since the late nineteenth century. It is the intent of this book to explore one particular manuscript and its previously forgotten translation in detail, at once contributing to the discipline of western Naziology and attempting to highlight the contribution of the forgotten missionary translator Elise Scharten.

Elise Scharten, Nazi translator

Elise Scharten (1876-1965) was a pioneering Dutch missionary who has been almost completely omitted from the history of the Nazi people, and of translation studies as a whole.⁹ This obscurity is remarkable, for Scharten was the first person to produce a complete translation of a Nazi ritual text (the focus of this book). Despite Rock's pre-eminence in Naziological circles, it was Scharten who was the first to fully translate a Nazi ritual text, and her translation work fills a gap in the translation history of the Nazi manuscripts. Scharten was helping interested parties (notably the Scottish plant hunter George Forrest) to understand these unusual manuscripts from the early 1920s. In fact, we can see Scharten's work as the link between the early translation attempts of the late 19th century and the larger-scale translation projects that would follow. Scharten translated three Nazi ritual texts, in full or in part.¹⁰ Two translations were sent to George Forrest, one of which has been identified in the John Rylands Library Nazi collection. I have previously said that the handwritten draft translation of Mo-So 6 at the John Rylands Library was one of these two translations (Poupard 2018), but upon further analysis it is unlikely to be the case. I thank Michael Friedrich for correcting this oversight (2023, 294). The third is a typescript translation, stored in the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, part of the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen in the Netherlands, and it is this translation that is particularly noteworthy, as it is a complete rendition of a central Nazi manuscript, and a translation conducted without the mediating influence of the Chinese language. These are

⁹ For a more complete introduction to Elise Scharten as a Nazi-English and English-Nazi translator, see Poupard (2018), from which parts of this section have been adapted and updated.

¹⁰ A tentative list of Scharten's extant translations is as follows (her Nazi-English translations are undated). Nazi-English: *The Book to Invite the Spirit*. Mo-So Manuscripts Collection, John Rylands Library, Manchester (a partial translation of a Nazi text that tells of the origin of a warrior god). *Manuscript Scharten*. Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Leiden, RV-4175-26 (a translation of the Nazi creation myth). English-Nazi: *Na-hsi Mark*. (Shanghai, British & Foreign Bible Society, 1932). *Na-hsi Catechism*. (Shanghai, British & Foreign Bible Society, 1933). *Na-hsi Hymnbook*. (Shanghai, British & Foreign Bible Society, 1933).

important documents: many libraries and museums around the world have collections of Naxi manuscripts, but very few possess full translations of these books. Scharten spoke Naxi but would not have been literate in dongba writing, or familiar with the rituals, making a dongba informant a necessity for her translation process.¹¹

Dutch scholar of Pentecostal history Cornelis van der Laan (2008) has written an authoritative account of Elise Scharten's life and missionary work, and I will only summarise a couple of main points here. Cecil Polhill, himself a missionary to China from 1885-1900, established the Pentecostal Missionary Union (PMU) on 9 January 1909. In 1911, the PMU began work in Kunming, Southwest China. Scharten, born in Amsterdam in 1876, was among the first few missionaries to be sent to the region, arriving with the second group in 1912 (Arie and Elsie Kok, also of Amsterdam, were the first, arriving in 1910). The Dutch missionaries had a calling for Tibet, but as Tibet was closed to foreign visitors, they were assigned to Lijiang. The PMU quickly established a church in Lijiang. Van der Laan wrote how Scharten seems to be among the first foreigners to become proficient in the Naxi language (van der Laan 2008, 351). Rock apparently became friends with Scharten sometime during this period, but she does not write of this friendship in her diaries. In September 1945, the political situation in China forced the missionaries to leave Lijiang.

Scharten's first recorded translation works were two draft translations of Naxi manuscripts for George Forrest (1873-1932). Upon his request, she sent him two original books alongside their abridged translations. These are perhaps the first direct translations into English of Naxi texts (there had previously been partial translations into French, by Charles Eudes Bonin [1896], Prince Henri d'Orleans [1898] and Jacques Bacot [1913]). Scharten writes in a letter dated 21 Nov 1922, "I hope you will be able to make out what the pictures in the book mean through the translation".¹² Translation seems to have been pleasant work for her, as she states, "Please, don't thank me any more for the work, for it has been quite a pleasure to me to do the same." Scharten then offers further assistance if required, "Perhaps you will find a moment to look up the Mo-su's books. Perhaps there is something which has to be explained. If so, gladly I will do so."¹³ During the early 1920s, Scharten must have been one of, if not the only, westerner fluent in the Naxi language, but even so, these early translations seem to have been

¹¹ Yu Suisheng has published a letter written by the dongba He Huating and written in dongba script that mentions how Rock came to hire his services (Yu 2003, 271). Any assistance Scharten may have had has gone uncredited. Modern Chinese translations are usually attributed to a dongba who reads the performance, as well as the translator(s) responsible for the Chinese version.

¹² Letter from Scharten to Forrest dated 21 Nov 1922, Mo-So Manuscripts Collection, Acc. Book XI f.24, John Rylands Library, Manchester.

¹³ Here Scharten refers to the Naxi by their earlier name, the Mosuo. Mosuo/Moso/Mo-so (Chinese 摩梭/麽些) are all names given to the Naxi before they were "officially named" as an ethnic group in China's nationwide ethnic group classification project that took place after 1949.

carried out via Chinese, that is, there was an intermediary stage of a translation relay, from Naxi, then to Chinese, then to English.

Perhaps Scharten's most overlooked contribution to Naxi studies is her full translation of the *Coqbbertv* manuscript – the Naxi creation myth that tells of how a heroic Naxi ancestor wed his heavenly bride. This is a central myth of the Naxi people, a story that has become an essential part of contemporary Naxi cultural identity.¹⁴ The translation would have been completed with the assistance of a Naxi dongba, with Scharten translating from the oral explication. At ten A4 pages of typescript,¹⁵ it is a 'full' translation of the written Naxi manuscript, and in fact the lengthiest translation of a Naxi text to have been completed up to that point.

The translation is a close match to the written graphs, suggesting that her Naxi informant was not performing and elaborating much upon the text, merely providing an interpretation of the writing on the page. This gives us an excellent opportunity to investigate the connection between the written and the "spoken" word when reading the Naxi manuscript – we can match Scharten's rendition with the graphs on the page, because the translation does not add much in the way of extra detail or context. The story itself contains the Naxi cosmogony and anthropogenesis, beginning with the creation of the earth and a flood that leaves only one survivor, the protagonist and Naxi culture hero, Coqssei-leel'ee, who embodies all that is best in men. The story then concerns how Coqssei-leel'ee came to find a celestial bride. The hero's name is romanised as "T'so-rze-le-hgeh" by Scharten, and 'T'so dze llü ghüh' by Rock, which shows an almost uncanny similarity in the use of consonant sounds (and is most likely a coincidence). The *Coqbbertv* is the single most-translated Naxi story, and it has been re-translated and re-interpreted in many Chinese publications, starting from 1946, with Li Lin-ts'an (only published in 1957), followed by Fu Maoji in 1948, and Zhou Rucheng in 1963. Chinese translation work picked up again in the 1980s with the coming of the era of reform and opening up, and there are many contemporary versions. Scharten's translation, however, was the first to be completed, and to this day no complete English translation of a single *Coqbbertv* manuscript tradition has been published.

¹⁴ Emily Chao notes that the *Coqbbertv* (or the variant name, *Coqbbersa*, that she uses) has become "one of the most important, if not *the* most important" dongba texts (2012, 82), used to represent the entirety of Naxi culture and history. Despite this present-day cultural cachet, knowledge of the myth was not widespread among lay Naxi in 1990s Lijiang (*ibid.*, 83). It must have nevertheless been highly valued by Scharten's Naxi informants in the early 1930s, however, as this is the only manuscript selected for a full translation. Chao connects the privileging of the origin myth with the creation of an essentialized "dongba culture" during the late twentieth century, and efforts to solidify a homogenous "Naxi" ethnicity.

¹⁵ A letter from a Pentecostal missionary in Lijiang and published in the missionary newsletter, *Confidence*, mentions Scharten's typewriter, which was evidently a source of fascination to the Naxi locals at the time. "It is amusing to learn some of their ideas of England. Miss Scharten has a typewriter which the teacher really thought was an English printing press. But when I told him they could print the book he held in England in about five minutes he was more than surprised, and would hardly believe it" (Andrews 1923, 88). This helps us to surmise that Scharten's translations were indeed carried out at her home in Lijiang.

The original source Naxi manuscript used by Scharthen likely dates back to the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century, and bears some similarity to a manuscript translated by Li Lints'an in 1946. It was probably written by a Lijiang dongba, as some of the graphs on the early pages are coloured, generally known to be a Lijiang affectation, and at certain points in the text, syllabic graphs are used instead of dongba logographs (the syllabic “geba” graphs are primarily seen in Lijiang and its environs). The unpublished draft translation is not dated, but we can ascertain that the translation was completed in Lijiang between 1924 and 1934, before Scharthen travelled back to the Netherlands on furlough. The reasons for this are twofold: firstly, it follows the early, more concise translation attempts of separate manuscripts that were sent to George Forrest, translations that do not reveal any prowess at spoken Naxi. Secondly, it was given to the museum alongside fifteen Naxi ritual texts in 1936. Coincidentally, Rock published his own summary translation of the Naxi creation myth in 1935, suggesting that work on translating this important Naxi religious text was carried out almost concurrently by both Rock and Scharthen. Rock's early translation is more of an overarching explanation of the text and its underlying traditions, while Scharthen's is a more straightforward translation of one particular manuscript – notable for its completeness, as earlier Naxi translations were only partial.

Her work on the *Coqbbertv* makes her the starting point of a translating lineage that extends to the present day, but Scharthen's pioneering work has, for almost a century, found no audience. Nevertheless, Scharthen was, pre-1949, the longest-residing western resident of Lijiang, and the first dedicated translator both into and out of Naxi from English. She was by all accounts a hard-working and kind missionary, but she was also a pioneer of Naxi studies and missionary translation, a field at the time almost completely dominated by men. This book is an attempt at reclaiming something of that lost audience: by publishing her draft translation of the *Coqbbertv*, no doubt her crowning achievement in Naxi-English translation, alongside a presentation of the original manuscript, with a full exegesis and updated translation, we can carry this manuscript tradition into dialogue with the present. The Naxi ritual texts are a treasure trove of myths and legends accumulated over centuries, told and re-told in each performance, and translations like the one presented herein are part of an intertextual retelling that allows the tradition to survive and be rediscovered in a new time and place.

The translation method

The translation presented in this book owes most to the detailed ethnographic translations of Joseph Rock. After some early, piecemeal attempts at translating the Naxi ritual texts during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Naxi scholarship as we know it began in earnest with Rock, who spent many years between 1922-1949 in southwest China, either in the provincial capital of Kunming, or holed up at the foot of the Jade Dragon snow range. He eventually published full translations of several Naxi ritual traditions, alongside a plethora

of other anthropological and bibliographical works. His published translations first appeared in 1935, with the retelling of the story of the flood. Prior to this, however, Elise Scharten had already finished a complete translation of the same Naxi story, a version that can be read alongside the source manuscript that she collected while working as a missionary in Lijiang. Despite hers being the first cover-to-cover translation of a ritual manuscript, Scharten never published her work. This book revisits Scharten's translation, adopting some of the translation methodology that Rock later created, finally putting these two Naxiologists in conversation with one another.

While Rock's first published translations were no more than concise summaries of the stories he discovered within the Naxi manuscripts, he later developed a more extensive, anthropological style of translation. This meant recording in exacting detail the phonetic reading given by a dongba and then embarking upon a full written commentary. The first translation to use this method was published in 1937 as *The birth and origin of Dto-mba Shilo, the founder of Mo-so shamanism, according to Mo-so manuscripts*, a seminal work on Dobbaq-sheel'lo, the mythical founding father of the dongba religion. Just two years later he published the monograph-length *Romance of Ka-ma-gyu-mu-gki: a Na-khi tribal love story translated from Na-khi pictographic manuscripts*, which he believed to be the most lyrical and beautiful of the stories contained within the Naxi books. In 1948 he published a translation of the most important Naxi ceremony, the sacrifice to heaven. After he was compelled against his will to leave China in 1949 because of the changing political situation, he continued with his Naxiological endeavours. He worked on multi-volume works such as the *Na-khi-English Encyclopaedic Dictionary* in two volumes, and the *Na-khi Naga Cult and Related Ceremonies*, also in two volumes. Since Rock's time, Chinese translations of Naxi texts have flourished, but western Naxiology floundered, and while we have seen several translations and attempts at engaging with this corpus of texts, there have been no studies that engage fully with the source manuscripts.

This is to be expected, for Rock's method of translation (as discussed in Rock 2002, 186) was a laborious one. He presented the texts in a number of additive layers: the original text (via a line drawing), followed by a transcription into a romanisation system of his own devising (inclusive of tone marks), then translation (sometimes split between a word-for-word and a literal translation) and finally an explanation of the text, syntax and detailed exegesis of the graphs themselves. This was, in effect, a "five-way" translation that produced worthwhile results. Under this method, the text undergoes a series of movements, or translations: from the original to the transcription, then written translation, before arriving at a full explanation. This meant that Rock's translations allowed for unparalleled access to the world of the Naxi literature, but only if the reader could stomach all those annotations and comments. In Rock's time, producing translations and getting them printed was an exceedingly costly business, most notably as he liked to present the manuscript he was translating in line illustrations to accompany the exegesis. Rock says he drew these images "in Chinese ink on stiff paper,

uniform size” (Rock 2002, 197); they were then reproduced on zinc plates and the images were printed simultaneously with the text.

The layers of translation had to be carefully prepared. Rock would work with his informant, who for many years was dongba He Huating. The young dongba would first copy out each page of a manuscript in his own delicate calligraphy. He would then perform a reading for Rock, who jotted this down in a system of transcription that he had himself invented. The next stage was a translation from the ritual language to the vernacular. This was then translated into Chinese, and Rock then produced the final version in English, alongside detailed notes on the graphs themselves (see Mueggler 2011, 273-274). This elucidation makes the method even clearer: we go from copies of the original to a phonetic transcription, to a colloquial Naxi reading, to a translation into Chinese, only then into English. The crucial final component was the philological analysis, a “double-backing” that serves as the real code to understanding the graphs.

In this book I take cues from Rock’s method, providing first a digital recreation of each individual panel of the manuscript, labelling the graphs in the order in which they are read, as they are often read out of the traditional left-to-right order. I then provide a key to the pronunciation of the graphs in Naxi pinyin and a phonetic reading of the panel itself,¹⁶ followed by several “translations”: a word-for-word translation, Elise Scharthen’s original translation, a new, modern rendition of my own, and exegetical notes that bring in wider scholarship on the Naxi or explain the reading process. Rock reproduced each page at a time and dealt with the panels one by one in a following explanation, but this method involved a lot of aforementioned “double-backing”, of moving from exegesis back to the line drawing and then forwards again, often across multiple pages. I attempt to solve this inconvenience by showing each panel in the Naxi script (the panels of a manuscript are separated by vertical lines, and frequently indicate a discrete intonation unit, or story episode composed of several such units) and providing an individual analysis before moving on to a recreation of the following panel in the same manner. This admittedly turns reading the translation into a gruelling task, but one which hopefully highlights the textuality of the manuscript in greater detail.

¹⁶ It should be stressed here that the reading is based upon a modern interpretation by a contemporary dongba, in conjunction with the phonetic readings separately recorded by Li Lin-ts’an and He Yuncai. The phonetic readings presented in this book are by no means definitive, and simply provide guidelines for *one possible* oral performance. I use Naxi pinyin instead of IPA firstly for the practical reason that He Guisheng, the dongba who provided a reading of this text, and He Lingyu, my Naxi language informant in Lijiang, themselves both use this system. Secondly, and more importantly, it allows the reader to look up the Naxi words in various contemporary dictionaries and reference works, all of which are arranged alphabetically according to Naxi pinyin. By far the most useful reference work is the *Naqxi neif Habaq shelzoteeq* [Naxi-Chinese dictionary] by He Xueguang 和学光, in six volumes, published by the Naxi culture promotion committee in Lijiang in 2013. A more readily-accessible resource is Thomas Pinson’s 2012 dictionary.

Because no such work can conceivably be completed by someone from outside the Naxi tradition, I am indebted to dongba He Guisheng 和桂生 of Ludian township (鲁甸乡) in Lijiang for his patient reading and exegesis which has been crucial to the new translation presented in this book, as well as his student He Lingyu, who performed valuable work on the ground, recording and transcribing the dongba's readings. He Guisheng has been taking dongba disciples since 2004, and has established a centre for the inheritance and transmission of dongba culture in his native village. It should be noted that He's readings often diverge from the writing on the page itself, as the dongba are wont to perform a recital in line with the books from their own oral tradition that they have already committed to memory. The manuscript being translated is a historical one, and its provenance is unknown, but any significantly divergent readings are highlighted in the notes. As an example, when reading page two of the manuscript, which describes the genesis of the great god Iggvq-ogeq (Naxi: ꨀꨁꨂꨃ), He Guisheng briefly recounts the origin of Iggvq-dinal (Naxi: ꨀꨁꨂꨃ), a malevolent deity who is the dualistic counterpart of the benevolent god Iggvq-ogeq, despite the name Iggvq-dinal or the deity's origin *not* being recorded in the written text. He Guisheng adds two intonation units totalling some twenty-seven syllables to the reading. Iggvq-dinal is completely absent from Scharthen's original translation, just as it is absent from the written manuscript. The transcription and translation presented herein are informed by He Guisheng's contemporary reading, but this is only one source among many: the readings of He Guisheng are taken into consideration alongside published translations of similar manuscript traditions. Rock published two different translations of this origin myth: the first, appearing in 1935, is a short summary that appeared in a scholarly journal. The second is another summary that appeared in his 1952 *Na-Khi Naga Cult* (675-688), but that does share some DNA with the Scharthen manuscript, for it is also related to the *chelggvq* purification rite. The version by Taiwanese scholar and prominent early Naxiologist Li Lin-ts'an is a classic "four-way translation" (the "four ways" are the original manuscript, IPA notation, direct translation, free translation) carried out with the assistance of a young dongba, He Cai. This translation has proven to be a valuable reference, although many of He Cai's readings appear to be at odds with the written manuscript Li presented. The reading by He Yuncai, recorded in IPA transcription and translated into Chinese by He Fayuan (see YSMGZCGB 1986) as part of a Chinese minority literature translation project that would eventually result in the publication of a one-hundred-volume "complete" collection of translations, has also been consulted (alongside the English translation by Charles McKhann in his 1992 PhD thesis, which draws from this rendition, as well as Rock's translations). Finally, another contemporary translation can be found in volume 39 of the *Annotated Collection of Naxi Dongba Manuscripts* (Kunming, Yunnan renmin chubanshe, 1999). Other translations exist, but those not consulted are primarily "literary" re-imaginings that have little to do with the original manuscripts.


I have combined these sometimes divergent readings with my own textual research to reconstruct a simulacrum of the reading that engendered Scharten's translation.¹⁷ The key element that makes Rock's translations stand apart is their intertextuality. He was aware that the books did not stand in isolation; he knew that each manuscript was a tributary of a particular tradition. While Rock's intertextuality dealt with numerous manuscript sources, the translation in this book is an intertextual rendition taking into account the *translations* of similar manuscript traditions. Thus armed with the work that has been completed over the second half of the twentieth century, we can revisit Scharten's early translation.

Scharten's translation is perhaps overly concise, in that it offers the reader no context for what is transpiring beyond the pages which are populated by very few written words. Her translation sticks very closely to the words written on the page, mostly ignoring potentially elaborate readings. It is also written in often questionable English, which has been preserved in the transcription, with some very minor spacing edits. To complicate matters further, she could not actually read the dongba script. But we can be sure that she *did* know fluent Naxi, and further, she was able to secure the services of a dongba to perform a reading of the manuscript for her. This oral recitation was the real "source text" of her translation. By working backwards (i.e., utilising the process of "back translation") combined with an analysis of the graphs on the page, we can make some approximations as to what that reading might have been, and "resurrect" this early performance of an old manuscript.

As a simple example, early in the manuscript the story of a heavenly chicken is related. This chicken lays eggs that hatch into a pantheon of deities and ritual practitioners. At first, this chicken is unable to fly up high into the heavens (see panel 2-10). Only in Scharten's translation do we read about the chicken's feathers falling across the earth: in other versions (including the contemporary reading of this manuscript), feathers are not mentioned, despite the textual clues pointing to falling feathers on the page itself. It can be said, therefore, that Scharten's translation offers the reader valuable glimpses into an early performance of the Naxi origin myth as it pertains to a particular ceremonial tradition (the purification rite), made prior to any of the published translations available today.

¹⁷ As such, and this should be emphasised, all mistakes that appear within these pages are entirely my own.

Why another translation?

If we already have English translations of the Naxi origin myth, then why, the reader may rightly ask, do we need another one? Beyond T.S. Eliot's oft-repeated maxim that "each generation must translate for itself", there are a number of more practical reasons. No translation of the *Coqbbertv* in English has connected the story to the actual ritual at hand. This translation showcases the Naxi origin myth as it relates in particular to the *chelggvq* (purification) ceremony. Rock's translation in the *Na-Khi Naga Cult* covers only twelve pages, and is merely a summary of the story, while McKhann's translation comes primarily from a manuscript that belongs to the "sacrifice to the wind" ceremonial tradition, and as such the final pages refer specifically to the expelling of various malicious spiritual presences. As Rock says, "There are only few ceremonies during which Ts'o mbër t'u [Coqbbertv] is not chanted, but as already remarked each ceremony has its own particular Tso'o mbër t'u, the main facts of the story remain however unchanged" (1935, 65). Although the main story beats remain the same, what does change is the ritual setting. Jackson noted that the origin myth plays a pivotal role in the ritual structure of the Naxi because it is "used as a charter: the ending is simply adjusted to ratify the particular rites that are to be performed" (Jackson 1975, 212). Scharten's *Coqbbertv* manuscript is a distinct retelling that includes an emphasis on the details of the *chelggvq* purification rite. The last page of the manuscript describes a prototypical performance of such a ceremony, including the ritual altar and paraphernalia, and even the animals used for a ritual sacrifice, which include a chicken, a duck, and the centrepiece, a black goat. Further, in Scharten's translation the dongba Chelshul-jiqbber  (Scharten romanises this name as "T'she-su-chi-mbehr") appears for the first time in English. This legendary dongba is summoned specifically during the purification ceremony and is depicted as a robed figure with the head of a yak (a phonetic for the final syllable in his name, *bber*).

Further, and most importantly, no translation of the *Coqbbertv* in English has ever attempted a detailed graph-by-graph analysis. Rock's translations are both summaries, and McKhann's is a translation based upon other translations and with no single manuscript source in particular. The real key to understanding the Naxi texts, as Rock's most successful translations show, is to allow the reader to navigate that fine line between orality and literacy that they represent, and this requires an in-depth explication of the graphs that appear on the manuscript pages, alongside the words that a dongba chants when reading them, and an explanation of how the oral and the written interact (including, perhaps, a discussion of what is written and what is not written, what is read and what is not read, and a philological examination of the manuscript text). It is for this reason that I invite the reader to use the translation as a guide with which to navigate the mostly uncharted realm of the Naxi scriptworld.

What to watch out for when reading

There is an organic fluidity to Naxi dongba writing that is born from being unrestrained by orthographic rules. Entire phrases can be left out, summoned back into the manuscript by the power of memory alone. The dongba do not have to make sure that each graph is the “right” size. No schoolmasters are present to scold a dongba who writes a graph too ebulliently, the ink crossing over a dividing line marker. There are no barriers between the words or sentences – or perhaps more accurately we can say that the barriers are pushed back, to form rectangular spaces of irregular length but more or less fixed height, and the words can appear at differing sizes anywhere within this 2D space, creating loose, cartouche-like episodes in which the words, the “characters”, are free to interact with one another in different ways within said space. Here, then, we have free range words, not the battery-farmed rigidity of alphabetic or morphosyllabic composition. Given this lack of rules, and a general refusal of the dongba to standardise (e.g. which graphs to use as phonetic borrowings), the uniformity in how the texts are composed is still quite remarkable. It has been possible to recreate the entire Coqbbertv manuscript using standardised digitised graphs, with only a handful of exceptions. The basic graphic inventory of the digital recreation is based on the Naxi script input method editor, Edongba, which uses a font based upon the graphs contained within Fang Guoyu’s 1981 dictionary. To recreate graphs that do not appear in this input editor, I have used Li Lin-ts’an’s 2001 dictionary (a reprint of an earlier 1972 edition). Thus, all the graphs in the recreated manuscript have their provenance in these two dictionaries, none have been drawn from “scratch”. The digital recreation is meant to mirror the original manuscript, but not to be an exact copy. Some graphs have been edited slightly in terms of size and position, but, when consulting the original manuscript, it should still be readily apparent which graphs are which in the digital recreation.¹⁸

Reading each panel is akin to solving an intricate philological jigsaw puzzle. Working out how the graphs connect with each other, and with the oral performance, is the key to solving this puzzle. On the most basic level, the Naxi manuscripts are read left to right, panel to panel; sometimes panels continue on subsequent lines or pages. For some very brief panels (usually four graphs or less), I have combined two panels into one individual analysis.

The phonetic readings provided herein, alongside the word-for-word translations, are intended to be a *rough guide only*. The phonetics do not recreate a full oral performance of the text, but a reconstruction of a single possible reading, with an emphasis first and foremost on the written manuscript. The idea is to try to connect potential readings with both the original translation and the graphs on the manuscript page. To do this, each graph has been numbered. This allows the reader to quickly identify what each graph represents, because

¹⁸ The possibilities of using digital technology to study the Naxi dongba script have been explored in an article by Xu Duoduo (2023).

each panel has its own key to the graphs contained within, and to follow the reading, because the graphs that appear on the page are highlighted in bold in the phonetic reconstruction.

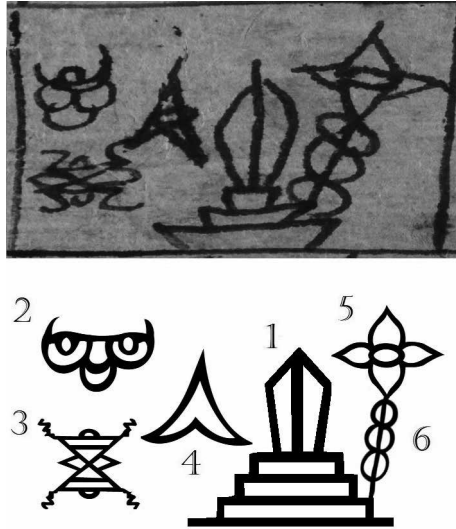


Figure 3. Top: The sacred mountain is constructed,
Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen.

Coll.nr. RV-4175-26, detail.

Bottom: Digital recreation of the same panel (panel 7-4).

Consider the panel in Figure 3 (top) which shows the construction of the Naxi sacred mountain. Contrast with the digital recreation (bottom, panel 7-4 in the translation). Here the mountain and the materials used to build it emerge before our very eyes: the first graph to be read appears in the middle-right of this panel: the sacred mountain itself (labelled “1”), with its stepped base and angular faces. The reader may then consult graph number 1 in the graph-by-graph analysis and learn that it is read “*Jjiuqnal-sheel’lo*”, the name of the sacred mountain.

The transcription reveals that this five-syllable name accounts for the first intonation unit of this panel. We then move to the left to read the next two graphs (silver and gold), followed by graph 4, a ploughshare that indicates via the rebus principle the verb “to build”. We then jump beyond the mountain to the final two graphs (turquoise and carnelian). The numbers represent *as accurately as possible* the intended reading order of the oral performance, but it must be borne in mind that sometimes words are repeated several times and only written once. In this case, the verb “to build” appears in two intonation units, attached to each pair of materials, but is only written once. This method of numbering the graphs has some precedent: A single panel of a manuscript was presented in this way in Tatsuo Nishida’s introduction to the Naxi and their script (2001, 105), but that was merely used for illustrative purposes. To

aid the reader decipher the manuscript reproduced within this book, the idea of numbering the graphs has been taken to its natural conclusion – every single graph that appears in the manuscript is labelled, even obscure ones without definitive readings.

Basic character classification

Assuming that the Naxi “pictographs” are all pictures of things is a common misconception. In fact, scholars usually borrow the first five categories from Xu Shen’s 许慎 ancient classification method for Chinese writing, the *liu shu* 六书 “six writings”, to classify dongba graphs. Bear in mind, however, that these categories are all more fluid in dongba script than they are in Chinese.

i) Simple pictographs

Many graphs are simple visual depictions of what they are intended to denote. A common example is *xi* 𠃉, person, a stick figure with arms and legs. Contrast this with the more abstract Chinese graph for person, *ren* 人, a somewhat more unfortunate stick figure with only its legs remaining, but that is still classified as a pictograph. Some pictographs can be drawn with such simplicity they almost seem to lose their pictographic nature, while others can be elaborate artistic depictions. Many pictographs are written in exacting detail when important events are depicted. In panel 32-2, we see the bundle of green branches being burned on a fire, smoking out (*shu*) the demons of impurity (*chel*). Immediately following this, there is a striking depiction of a goat, head and tail raised, tied to a wooden peg, awaiting sacrifice. This is the most important offering to the gods and is therefore drawn in full.



*Figure 4. The ritual scene: burning the branches (left),
the sacrificial goat tied to the peg (right).*

Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen. Coll.n^o. RV-4175-26, detail.

From the final page of the manuscript, and again on the back cover (albeit somewhat more indistinctly drawn), we can see a leopard, depicted in full, after the manuscript proper has finished. These two depictions are no longer occupying space within any particular panel, but are instead roaming free across the page.

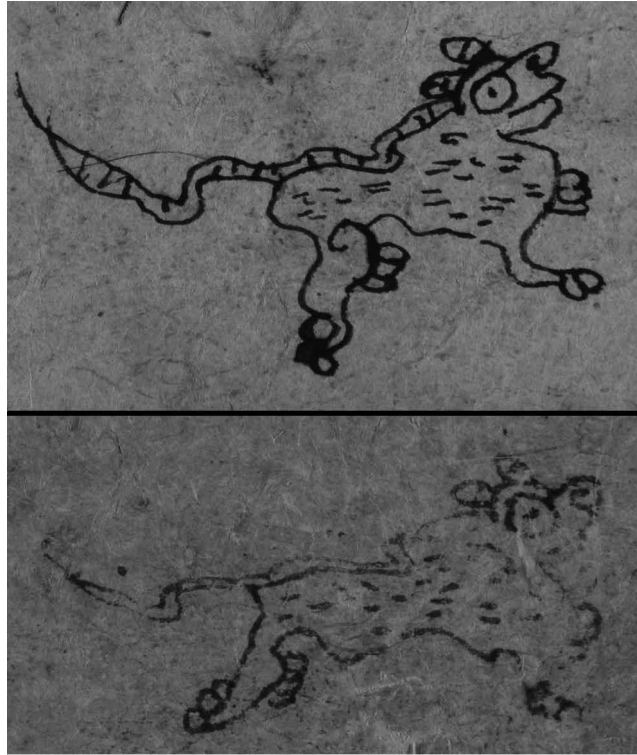




Figure 5. Leaping leopards.
Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen.
Coll.n^o. RV-4175-26, detail.

The leopard, *rhee*, is also a pictograph (identified by its distinctive spots and long tail), although in a manuscript proper it would likely be depicted with only its head, a conventional shorthand for writing animals: . I have encountered two related possibilities for the purpose of this final leopard. Both agree that it is a marker of the ceremony at hand, *chel ggvg*. According to He Guisheng, impurities are often termed *chel neiq rhee*, “the unclean and impure”, meaning that the leopard indicates the impurity to be expelled in the ceremony. Li Lin-ts’an suggests a different possibility, indicating that *rheeq* /  (read with the falling tone), a leopard’s head and a stick, can be used to mean “beat”, as in “beat or expel ghosts”, and the graph is used in purification rites (2001, 149). In both cases the leopard signifies impurity, although in the latter it is explicitly connected with the *removal* of impurity. What at first looks like a simple pictographic, decorative depiction, then, takes on a deeper symbolic meaning. In some sense the leopard becomes a shorthand for the purification ceremony as a whole, and a clear marker to any dongba of the contents of this book. It might already be clear, then, that the term “simple pictographs” is a bit of a misnomer, for they are anything but.

ii) *Simple ideographs*

The simple ideographs are not pictographs, because they are not direct representations of a thing (i.e. a loom or a pig), but rather abstract symbols that represent an *idea*. Take for example the graph *shuaq* 𠄎, “high”, its meaning indicated by two horizontal lines marking a high point atop a vertical line.




iii) *Compound ideograms*

Some graphs are combinations of two independent elements, fused together into a new compound. The principle is similar to how in Chinese person + tree can become *xiu* 休, rest (a person resting against a tree), only in Naxi this principle is much more freeform. Some of these compounds are highly conventional. “Tea” is a tealeaf inside a cup, *leil* 𠄎 a combination of the two graphs. To drink tea, *leil teeq* 𠄎, is a person drinking a tea leaf inside a cup, combining three graphs ideographically. Compound ideograms may also contain phonetic elements: snow tea, *goq leil* 𠄎 (lit. “alpine meadow tea”), is a tealeaf atop an alpine meadow, but there is a needle (*goq* 𠄎) inside the meadow, its presence indicating the pronunciation of meadow “*goq*” 𠄎.¹⁹

It is also possible for a dongba to simply invent new compounds by combining graphs that would originally be written separately. Take *haisheeq meeltv* 𠄎, a gold walking stick, which is depicted by a pictograph of a walking stick, with the graph for “gold”, *hai*, superimposed on top of it (panel 11-6): thus we know instantly that the walking stick is made out of gold. Ordinarily this could be written with the two characters in adjacent positions. Similarly, the “red cow” in panel 30-3 is a cow’s head with the graph for red, *hiuq* (depicting roaring flames) written inside the beast’s neck: 𠄎. These are by no means standardized combinations, but they are nevertheless instantly recognizable as compound ideograms. These compounds can be much more involved: not just the combination of two graphs, but whole dioramas can become compound graphs in their own right, a chicken lays atop a nest of eggs, figures move into houses, husband and wife talk with one another face-to-face, speech lines emerging from their mouths and meeting in the middle. The graphs become animated within the world of the text. Some scholars have attempted to differentiate between certain kinds of compound (usually in terms of how conventional they are), but I find this to be an exercise in futility; the imposition of a taxonomic framework upon a writing that fundamentally resists it. The joy of reading the dongba script – if you can get past the frustration commensurate with non-linear writing – is knowing that there are no real boundaries between words. The writing, just like the readings it engenders, is always in a state of flux.

¹⁹ Snow tea (Chinese *xuecha* 雪茶) is an herbal tea made from *Thamnolia vermicularis*, a white worm lichen found in Yunnan, mostly at an altitude of around 4,000 metres.

iv) *Phono-semantic compounds*


Phono-semantic compounds, graphs that combine phonetic and semantic information, are extremely common. *Aiq* , a cliff, is a depiction of a cliff with a chicken poking its beak in from the bottom corner. This is not to say that chickens live in the cliffs; the chicken's head tells us that the graph is read *aiq*, because chicken in Naxi is *aiq*. The fluidity of the script however means that any dongba can invent their own such compounds, adding phonetic markers to simple pictographs that already have formulaic pronunciations. Take the cat depicted in panel 28-7, for example. Normally the cat's head is read *halleiq* , with two syllables, but in this manuscript a phonetic marker has been added, the upturned moon, read *hal* and originally meaning “night” . Together with the cat's head, it becomes a phonetic marker for the first syllable of *halleiq*, and the two graphs (originally pictographs) together become a “new” phono-semantic compound.

v) *Rebus (phonetic loan) characters*

As mentioned at the beginning of this book, one of the greatest difficulties encountered when reading the dongba script is the fact that it is not strictly pictographic. There is a preponderance of phonetic loan graphs: graphs that are not used for their semantic value, but are instead used only for their phonetic value. One of the most common is *tvq*, originally a trough, bucket, or container. This graph is hardly ever used for its literal, pictographic meaning. Most of the time it instead indicates an emergence, or an arrival, and is read in the level tone, *tv* (indeed, it is used in the title of the *Coqbbertv* to mean “origin”).








Figure 6. Arriving home.
Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen.
Coll.nr. RV-4175-26, detail.



In Figure 6, the “bucket” graph appears at the bottom of a house, indicating an arrival home. The other two graphs are also rebuses: *ye* (tobacco) and *goq* (a needle), used to represent *yegoq*, “home”. Because these phonetic loans are so common, context is crucial. Take the following two graphs: , read *lvcee*q, these are literally “rock demons”, which means what you might expect: demons that have dominion over the rocks. This is the literal reading.


However, when read *lvceel* (reading the second syllable with a high tone instead of a falling tone), the two graphs mean instead “gravestone”. The correct interpretation of the graphs is governed entirely by context.

The geba syllabic graphs


Even armed with all this information, there is still the need to approach the text cautiously. The reader should first make themselves aware of certain unique characteristics of the Naxi dongba script. At a basic level, it’s important to know the context of the story when trying to read a manuscript written in the traditional ceremonial register, and even single graphs in isolation can be a minefield of varying readings. What look like simple pictures of things could mean something else entirely. This is compounded by the two different systems of writing at play: logograms and syllabograms. Consider this dongba graph: , read “*ceiq*”. It is used as a numeral in logographic dongba script and (normally) means “ten”. But add a small dot to the  and we get , a geba syllabic graph that simply stands for the syllable “*la*”, and is most commonly used phonetically in proper names or as the grammatical particle *la*, indicating “also”. But you don’t even need to add a dot for there to be confusion: there is a geba graph that looks *almost exactly the same* as *ceiq* above: , read not “*la*” but “*ai*”. And even if you think  means “ten”, then you’ll be saddened to hear that it’s used interchangeably with another graph, , read *xi* (the graphic form derived from Chinese *shi* 十, ten), which means one hundred, and the two are frequently used idiosyncratically for both ten *and* one hundred. Understanding of the graphs therefore is dependent upon having knowledge of the context surrounding the graph – if you don’t know the context, it becomes mostly guesswork.



The geba phonetic graphs are generally considered to be later inventions (although Rock argued that they antedated the dongba graphs). They are rarely found in manuscripts that are from the heartlands of Naxi dongba culture to the north and northeast of Lijiang, along the historic migratory route traversed by the Naxi ancestors. In this manuscript, the geba graphs often appear as later additions, see for example panel 27-4, where a deity’s name is added in geba around the other graphs that were probably written earlier.

Sometimes a geba graph is used in place of a dongba graph that had been used earlier on in the text. As an example, in panel 25-8 there is the dongba graph for tower, *tal* , used as a phonetic loan for *tal*, to be able. This is a very common phonetic loan. In a later panel (26-1), the same word is not represented by the tower, but by a geba syllabic graph that is read *ta* , and the reader has to supply the high tone (*tal*) as geba graphs do not indicate tone. From this example we can see that the dongba graphs might make for better phonetic loans, because it is possible to choose a homonym with a matching tone. But it isn’t always so easy; sometime graphs that are not exact homonyms – near or even not-so-near homonyms – are used. This may involve some guesswork when it comes to reading the text, and I have labelled such graphs with a question mark in parentheses where they appear in the text. See for example

panel 25-7, where the graph *no* , down or soft feathers, is perhaps used phonetically for the preposition *nieq*, “in”.

Semantic vs phonetic readings

A related issue is found in instances where graphs are read literally in one panel and then phonetically in the next, or even within the same panel. Take panel 5-3, where the graph for rain, *hee*q** , appears twice. The first time it is actually not read *hee*q**, but *ru*q**, summer – this means that it is used semantically, not phonetically, because summer is the rainy season in Lijiang. To complicate things further, the second time it appears in the same panel, it is read *hee*q**, as rain – “in summer, the rains...”

Also, for purposes of diversifying what can be a repetitive ceremonial register, sometimes different phonetic loan graphs are used to represent the same word: a shoulder blade  and a ghost with hair sticking on end , are both used as phonetic borrowings for the past tense of the verb, “to come” (see panel 25-10). Graphs can also be read semantically. In panel 6-4, the graph *bber*q**, yak is used to denote not the yak itself, but simply the head. This is because most animal graphs are written using only the head as a form of pictographic shorthand, the rest of the animal is present but not written. However, if the head is meant, then the same graph can simply be read semantically as *gv*, “head” and the animal to which the head belongs is obvious, but not actually read out.

Written, but not read

I have already discussed the issue of the “gaps” left in the written text; the feature that marks the manuscripts as semi-oral. But there is a related issue to this: alongside graphs that are not visibly written but that should still be read, we have graphs that are written and that are not read.

In panel 10-4 the brothers pair up with their sisters and have intercourse, which generates impurity (see Figure 7). In the manuscript we see an ideographic compound comprised of *jj*i*q*, house, *dde*i*q*, to have sexual intercourse (two figures copulating inside the house), and *che*l**, unclean (a vapour over their heads). The reading only references the incestuous intercourse via euphemism, both the house (*jj*i*q*) and the impurity (*che*l**) are not read out. Fu Maoji (1982) notes how common an occurrence this is in “picture writing” and suggests that picture writing should be distinguished from “pictographic writing”, the latter being a more advanced stage of development where one graph represents one syllable. Fu is here referring to morpho-syllabic writing; “picture writing” must, by its definition alone, be pictographic. Further, I argue that Naxi dongba script can be both at once syllabic and ideographic.

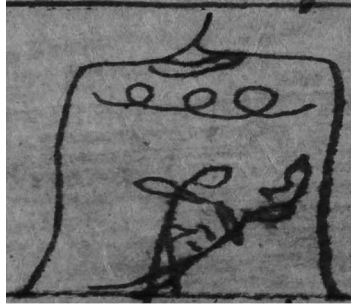


Figure 7. *Incestuous relationships engendering impurity.*
Collection Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen.
Coll.nr. RV-4175-26, detail.

Sometimes figures appear in the manuscript either as interlocutors, as people being spoken to, or as people being referred to in the third person, but they are not mentioned in the oral performance. Nevertheless, they are still “present” in the story, and on the page, whether the words are read or not. The “actors” move through the pages as if they have a life of their own. Mueggler (2022, 3) has written of a similar understanding when it comes to the Nuosu writing: “When abstracted from the glottographic function of the script, these forms could appear as discrete but mutating things, or *bodies*, which can be seen moving through any page.” There is therefore a constant tension between the shadow and light, what can be seen and what cannot be seen, what can be read but is not read. What one does see is bound inextricably to what one does not. From a linear perspective of reading, ambiguity is rampant. In this sense we must be able to divorce the graphs from the spoken reading, with the caveat that this separation is only partial: the graphs are not always part of the oral recitation, but they are always part of the story-world that the text has created, they exist on the pages as a presence whether they are specifically mentioned or not.

The *chelggvq* purification ceremony

The manuscript contained within this book belongs to an ancient Naxi ceremonial tradition: *chelnaggvq*, the ceremony for the purification of a place or a house. To put the performance of the manuscript in its proper context, it is perhaps worthwhile to say something about this purification rite and how it is performed. Before a large-scale ceremony such as the *svqggvq* (propitiating the nature spirits) is conducted, the site of the ceremony is cleansed of impurity, or “*chel*”. “*Chel*” can mean a physical impurity, such as faeces or household waste, but it can also indicate spiritual impurity, such as immorality and evil.

To rid the household or ceremonial ground of this impurity, the demons of impurity, *chelceeq* 𑌗𑌗, have to first be invited (the figure to the left is a ghost or demon, *ceeq*, a person with their

hair standing on end, holding a lump of impurity, read *chel*: this has been suggested variously to be a depiction of a foetus, or swirling vapour, or even an intestinal tract). The demons are then propitiated and finally driven away; only then will the spirits attend the main ceremony. The purification ceremony is itself a large affair and many manuscripts are performed (a total of 51 manuscripts is suggested in Xi and Zhao [2009], making undoubtedly for a rather gruelling undertaking), but the number depends on how many books the officiating dongba possesses.

According to Joseph Rock, the first thing prepared in the ceremony is an improvised chapel, usually located in the centre room of the house. Other sources suggest that the entire ceremony be conducted in a flat, open field (Xi and Zhao 2009, 299). In the chapel, three painted scrolls are hung behind an altar: Dobbaq-sheel’lo, the archetypal ritual practitioner and founding father of the Naxi religion goes in the centre, to the left is a deity known as “Zotv-ggesserq Yemaq”, who controls the *chel* demons and the *chelnaaggvq* ceremony. To the right of the altar, an image of “Tvchee Yemaq” is placed.



Figure 8. “Zotv-ggesserq Yemaq”

The Yemaq are protective spirits of a martial proclivity: their purpose is to fight demons. They are analogous in many respects to the Tibetan *wer-ma* ཨེར་མ་, a class of minor deities in the Bon religion, sometimes translated as “warrior spirits”. Of Zotv-ggesserq, we know that his body is covered in flames, and that he lives at the border between the white land of the gods and the black land of the demons (Rock 1952, 138-139). Rock goes into quite some detail on his provenance, but suffice to say, once he appears, “the demons vanish like snow on a lake”.



Figure 9. “Tvchee Yemaq”.

Tvchee Yemaq is the first of all the Yemaq. His body is white, and he is dressed in tiger's skin from the waist down. He holds in his hands a trident and a sword (Rock 1952, 136-7). Tvchee Yemaq is depicted in the Tibetan style in an early work of Naxiology by Tibetologist Jacques Bacot (1913, plate XIV). Note how the Yemaq are depicted in dongba script in Figures 8 and 9: first, on the left-hand side, the names of both these Yemaq deities are written phonetically with rebuses. Just as Jean-François Champollion discovered – by deciphering the name “Ramses” – that Egyptian names could be written phonetically in hieroglyphs, so it goes for the names in dongba “pictographs”. These phonetic graphs are complemented on the right-hand side by a much more visual depiction, a pictograph that is simply read “Yemaq”. They have the heads of lions, and the wings and tails of powerful birds.

Now comes the ritual proper. Some opening prayers are chanted (alongside the “throwing the grain” rite) on the first evening, and incense is burned before the aforementioned banners. The first manuscripts to be chanted are those concerning burning sacrificial incense, lighting the lamps, inviting the gods, and investing oneself with the power of the gods (see Xi and Zhao 2009, 301).

In Rock's account, the ritual field is erected in the courtyard of the home (traditional Naxi homes in Lijiang consist of a main building flanked by two side buildings, with a central, open-air courtyard). In the area of the courtyard that faces north, the gates of the gods are erected (made from juniper or pine). There is one main gate and five gates that lead to the houses of the *chel* demons. The main gate is some two metres high and one metre wide, enough for someone to walk through.

Either side of the main gate are the white stones of Dduq and wooden ritual slats, the one representing Dduq is placed to the left, the one representing Seiq is placed to the right (these two deities, the Naxi house gods, are central figures in the story told by the manuscript translated in this book). Five willow sticks are also used, three on one side and two on the other. Other descriptions note the use of a pot containing pure water, and bowls containing milk and animal blood. In front of the main gate is a bench upon which offerings are placed. A black hemp cloth is put on top of the bench, this represents the black bridge that the *chel* demons can use to cross over into this realm. Wooden effigies, acting as “guards”, are placed by the gates to the *chel* demons.

Lit charcoal is put into a bowl, and flour and pork fat are put on top of it. This generates an unpleasant smell that attracts the *chel* demons. This offering is placed before the central tree of the *chel* demons (there are three *chel* trees, a species of fir [*Abies Forrestii*]). More manuscripts are chanted on the following day. These will include the origin of impurity, the migration of mankind (i.e. the manuscript translated in this volume) and the story of the white bat's search for the scriptures. Specific manuscripts dealing with the eradication of impurity then follow. Bundles of green branches are lit by two dongba ritualists. The branches burn

with white smoke, which cleanses the area of impurities. A sacrificial animal (in the case of our manuscript, a black goat, although Rock states that a white goat was used) is tied up south of the central *chel* gate, and a chicken tied beside the rightmost gate (see Figure 4 for a depiction of the burning branches and sacrificial goat). In the more ancient past, a cow was used for the blood sacrifice (Rock 1952, 627-628). The animals are sacrificed at the end of the ceremony. The stomach and heart of the goat are presented to the Yemaq protective deities, and the blood and meat are offered to the *chel* demons, who thus propitiated, will no longer cause the human world to be polluted. A microcosm of this ritual appears at the end of Scharten's *Coqbbertv* manuscript, on pages 31 and 32.