



THE LAST OF THE DONGBAS

Shamans of the Naxi Dongba Religion
Documentary Production Plan

1. Significance of this production

The Naxi nationality is a minority group living in the Jinsha and Lancang River valleys of southwestern China. Although their population numbers only 300,000, this nationality has become world famous thanks to its magnificent traditional culture, of which Dongba is the center. The Naxi nationality's Dongba culture has been a focus of international attention since the 19th century.

Naxi Dongba culture has been preserved in the ancient traditional Dongba religion. The Dongba religion was followed in the past by the entire Naxi nationality. Its shamans refer to themselves as "Benpu"; the people call them "Dongba", meaning knowledgeable one, or great master, hence the name Dongba religion. In the eastern dialect of the Naxi people, "Dongba" is pronounced "Daba". In the eyes of the people, the Dongba shamans are in tune with heaven and earth, able to predict misfortune and calamity, communicate with deities and repel demons, pray for luck and drive out evil. They are generally busy with their work of plowing, planting, cutting firewood, and herding. Only when they are requested by the people do these religious non-professionals hold ceremonies. All Dongba shamans are male. Their position is hereditary, passed down from father to son to grandson, or to a nephew if there is no son; occasionally a master will accept an apprentice from outside the Dongba line.

The Dongba shamans are not only familiar with the ancient Dongba books and records, but also with the ways and customs of the people, traditional stories, and herbal lore, truly combining magic, medicine, scholarship, and art in one. They are the primary bearers of Naxi traditional culture. They wrote the numerous ancient pictographic scrolls using paper, ink, and bamboo brushes that they make themselves. There are more than 1400 types and 20,000 scrolls of Dongba scriptures, as they are called by the academic world, collected in libraries and museums in Lijiang, Kunming, Beijing, Nanjing, Taiwan, Great Britain, the United States, Germany, France, Italy, and Holland. Their rich and varied content, encompassing philosophy, religion, history, folk mores, art and literature, medicine, astronomy, calendar keeping, geography, flora and fauna, manufacturing, weaponry, clothing, etc., has led them to be referred to as the Naxi Encyclopedia. Scholars both in China and abroad consider the Dongba scriptures to depict the transmission of religious culture through the Southwest Zang-Yi corridor, the history of the relationship among nationalities, and the form of the original Ben religion from which Lamaism developed. They are a priceless repository of information concerning the sources and changes of ancient Chinese culture. Because there are still Dongbas who can read and write these pictographic scriptures, Dongba writing has the reputation in international academic circles of being "the



world's only remaining complete living pictographic script." China - Ancient Naxi Dongba Literature Manuscripts were selected by the International Advisory Committee of UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme in 2003,

We established Beijing Association of Dongba Culture and Arts. The association aims at uniting all interested parties around the World, in order to preserve, protect and propagate the ancient Dongba heritage; and give ancient Dongba culture a new lease of life in the contemporary arts in modern society.

Purposes and Goals of the Beijing Association of Dongba Culture and Arts are to help preserve the ancient Dongba heritage of China and actively promote the understanding of Dongba culture, arts and traditions both nationally and internationally. In its endeavors ADCA has received encouragement from both the Central Government of China, the Beijing Municipal Government and the Government of the Lijiang Naxi Autonomous City.

ADCA is a non-profit organization (NGO) according to the applicable laws and regulations of China. After approval by the relevant authorities, it was officially registered in March 1997. The founding session of the Association was held on November 28th 1997 in Beijing, and drew significant attention from academic, cultural as well as media circles. It was followed immediately by a series of acclaimed exhibitions of rare cultural objects, photos, and works of art both at home and abroad.

Today's Dongba shamans continue to use the ancient Dongba pictographic script for ritual purposes, providing an unbroken link with the ancient Dongba culture. International scholars therefore believe that studying Dongba culture can shed light on many mysteries on human cultural development. Seen from this perspective, Dongba culture should not only be regarded as the treasure of China's Naxi people, but should also be recognized as part of the cultural heritage of all humanity.

But as of today, there has still been no in-depth documentary about the Dongba shamans, the bearers of Dongba culture. From the perspective of ethnology, producing a documentary about the Dongba shamans is of major importance for preserving the memory of this unique cultural inheritance. Focusing on the Dongba shamans, the primary transmitters of the traditional Naxi culture, will make it possible to explore and analyze the Naxi people's religion, social structure, and changing culture, as well as the social and historical reasons behind the formation, development, and decline of the Dongba religion. The documentary will present an interesting example of regional cultural development and change in the history of human culture, preserving this information for posterity in visual imagery. It will deepen our understanding of the skein of connections between a primeval religion and social life of a minority people, and be of international academic and cultural significance.

The transmission of Dongba shamans is facing a crisis. Of the 300,000 Naxi people, there are less than two or three remaining full Dongba shamans. The Dongba scriptures are written employing a type of mnemonic script, which can only be read by the Dongba shamans. The major problem now confronting us is that there are few remaining Dongba shamans, and they are all very old. For various historical reasons, there is no new generation of Dongba shamans to carry on this unique culture. If we



do not seize the opportunity to film a documentary of the old Dongba shamans' religious ceremonies and experience while they are still living, the loss will be both great and irreparable. Previous films about Dongba culture have been no more than simple introductions. Every year, more of the few remaining Dongba shamans pass away. This proposal is offered in consideration of this serious situation and these long-range considerations.

2.Documentary contents

Contents will include the daily productive life of Dongbas and their religious activities carried out socially and at home.

We have selected two typical villages for the shooting of the documentary, both with living Dongba shamans.

Documentary 1: Life of Dongba Xi A'niu

Place: Rishuwan Village, Sanba area, Tibetan autonomous prefecture of Diqing, Shangri-la county, Yunnan province.



Xi A'niu Dongba Shaman was born in 1913, year of the Rabbit. He is a full master of Dongba religion, especially good at divining, and in spite of his age a skilled dancer of the Dongba ceremonies. As a Dongba shaman he is highly respected and was given the title of Dongba King by the Naxi people of Diqing.



Xi A'niu's eldest son was recognized as the reincarnation of a Tibetan Living Buddha by Tibetan lamas when he was five years old. The son became a Living Buddha in the Tibetan area of Batang, Sichuan province, and is now Abbot of three temples: Wenfengsi, Yufengsi and Zhiyunsu in Lijiang City, Yunnan province.

During the Cultural Revolution Xi A'niu initiated secretly his youngest son Dongqi into the rites of Dongba, and today when most Dongba priests have died out, Dongqi is one of the few Naxis to carry on at least some rites of the old tradition - divination especially.



Although the last Dongba King Xi A'niu passed away in 2009, and his soul has been sent to heaven by Naxi cremation in the mountain, but his family still are living examples of the cultural and historical links that exist between Dongba shamanism and Tibetan Lamaism.

The documentary will faithfully record the life of Xi A'niu Dongba in his family and village: farm work and relations with neighbours and family; private hobbies (alcohol distillation, playing the gourd reed pipe wind instrument); trading goods; writing pictographs on handmade paper, use mineral pigment painting Dongba ritual scroll on handmade linen fabric; preparing garments, headgear, and instruments for Dongba rituals; carrying out the rituals of worshipping nature, driving out the ghost, marriage, funeral, divination and so on; teaching Dongba rituals to his son and a student from outside the family.

The shooting will take place over a sufficiently long time so that most aspects of Dongba life can be documented.



The documentary will provide visual material for researchers and coming generations at a seminal time in history when the Dongba culture has nearly died out, and will constitute a lasting tribute to the last of the Dongba shamans of Shangri-la Holy Mountain.

Documentary 2: Life of Dongba He Zhiben

Place: Gudu village, Baidi area, Tibetan autonomous prefecture of Diqing, Shangri-la county, Yunnan province.



It is said that the Baidi area is the birthplace of the Naxi nationality's Dongba culture. Eighty-two years old He Zhiben of Gudu village is the area's most famous living Dongba shaman. The Dongba tradition has been handed down through his family for ten generations. He Zhiben is not only a master of Dongba scripture who still celebrates the Dongba rituals, what's more, he has carried on the almost forgotten craft of making the paper upon which the ancient Dongba writings are copied. He Zhiben formerly owned many hundred Dongba manuscripts handed down from many generations of his family; after Liberation (1949) the Chinese government banned Dongba culture as "superstition" and during the Cultural Revolution these vestiges of a "Ghost Culture" were all burned by the Red Guards except for one manuscript that had accidentally and luckily fallen down behind a trunk out of view.



He Zhiben has three sons, the youngest of which can write a few pictographs, but none will be able to carry on their father's tradition of the Dongba Shaman. Yet all three sons have learned the skill of papermaking.



This documentary will record the traditional Naxi papermaking: the proces by which



paper pulp is made, how He Zhiben and his sons handmake the paper from pulp, the materials employed (such as Daphne Odora shrub and bark,) the tools employed (such as harvesting knife, backpack, iron stove, handmade wooden mallet, trough and mould, bamboo grate, roller, pan, and wood ash.) The final product will be He Zhiben's handmade 8 x 28 cm paper strips that are used for Dongba manuscripts, and he and his sons will give a demonstration of writing the old pictographs, using bamboo pens and wooden penholder, ink, and natural pigments.

The paper made by the Naxi people of Baidi is an integral part of the Dongba writing tradition. Traditionally Dongbas used the local bush Daphne Odora (Adede in Naxi language) for the making of paper pulp, but this vegetation has become rare at low altitudes. The documentary will record a replanting of Adede bushes at a lower altitude by the village people helped by the Beijing Association of Dongba Culture, in an effort to enhance the old tradition of Dongba pictography.



The documentary will offer evidence that Dongba writing is the world's only extant pictographic script, and that the preservation of this papermaking technique by the Naxi people of Baidi may allow Dongba pictographic writing to survive in its original form.

3. Partners to the Documentary



At present the partners in carrying out the documentary are:

- Beijing Association of Dongba Culture and Arts (ADCA)
- Beijing Television Arts Center (BTAC)

ADCA will find the staff and invite Naxi scholars, coordinate the project, carry out liaison with the local government, carry out preparatory work in Beijing, research work in Naxi country, shooting in Naxi Country, editing work in Beijing.

BTAC will take charge of the shooting permission of the documentary in China.

4. Duration of the Documentary

Preparation time and shooting period will persistence from 10 month to 12 months.

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2009-12-15