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Chapter 8

Words beyond writings: how to decrypt the secret writings of the Masters of psalmody (Yunnan, China)?

Aurélie Névot

Yi script, *yíwén* 彝文, is the Chinese appellation given to different writings from Southwestern China that can be observed in the present day in Sichuan, Yunnan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces. *Yí* refers to the official appellation given to the largest Tibeto-Burman nationality in China which numbers about eight million people. The latter do not call themselves Yi in their own languages, despite what is mentioned on their Chinese identity cards. Indeed, they belong to different branches that do not share the same idioms and do not refer to themselves as an ethnic group neither; it is the aim of the rulers of the People's Republic of China to build a homogeneous 'Yi nationality', not theirs. As for *wén*, it is a very specific Chinese word used to transcribe the notion of script. It means 'simple character of writing' and refers to 'written tradition' and to 'culture' as well. Etymologically, it relates to different visible pattern coming from the mineral, vegetal, animal or cosmic world: to veins in stone or wood, to traces of animals in the ground, to drawings on the carapaces of tortoises, to cracks in divinatory bones and shells, to features connecting the stars. *Wén* also designates tattoos and figures made by crossed lines. Hence Chinese writing refers to images – according to mythology, one of its creator, Cang Jie, is represented with two pairs of eyes, observing the sky and the ground.

Whereas the expression *yíwén* may suggest that there is, as for the Chinese writing which is itself the result of various standardisation processes, *one* common Yi writing that would be moreover connected to the Chinese classical perception of writing, it comprises, in fact, several religious scripts that are used by shamans, in charge of domestic and collective rituals, to ritualise and to communicate with gods. The manuscripts they chant to contact their deities are composed of sheets covered with writings specific to the Yi branch from which they come. Hence, the so called 'Yi writing' not only differs from the Chinese writing system, but also from one

branch to another. According to Chinese linguists, there are six Yi scripts; as for the linguist David Bradley (2009, 171), four groups within the Yi nationality have distinct logographic traditions: the Nuosu, Nasu, Nisu and Sani branches. Depending on the local languages, their shamans are called *peimao*, *pimo*, *bemo*, etc., which are translated by *bimo* in Chinese. I propose to use this term not only for simplicity but also because, in my fieldwork, *i.e.* in the Stone Forest county (Shilin) of the Yunnan province where the Yi-Sani people live, their own appellation could be translated by *pimo* or *bimo* (*p* having to be pronounced near to *b* and reversely). This expression means ‘Master of psalmody’ in their language.

The purpose of these semantic clarifications is to focus, as a preamble, on the complexity of the Yi local cultures that refer to differentiation and not homogeneity, contrary to what the Chinese government promotes by standardising the scripts of their shamans. So there are strong political issues at play that have to be kept in mind while reading this article that will focus on the Yi-Sani script in particular, *i.e.* on the script used by the shamans belonging to the Sani branch of the Yi nationality – which includes about 78 thousand people located, as previously mentioned, in Shilin. The Yi-Sani *bimo* number between one hundred to three hundred individuals, depending who my informant was, and their writing has its own scriptural variants. It has been more than a century since the graphic variability of certain characters of the shamans’ *corpus* has been noticed by different encounters. Linguist scholars are therefore knowledgeable about these Yi-Sani specificities, although the anthropological reason for this variability had never been analysed head-on until I began to investigate this topic.

Thanks to the training I received from some *bimo* living in Shilin, I had the opportunity to learn their shamanic writing(s) and thus to focus on this graphic variability. I propose here to refer to what I have observed and understood thanks to this apprenticeship – not a shamanic one but a writing one, I shall insist. In fact, I was allowed to study manuscripts beside a shaman in particular from 1999 onwards because, as I was to be informed later, asking for learning is believed to be a call from the shamanic spirits. Hence, according to the man who was my main master from 1999 to 2011, I went to China to meet him because I followed the way the spirits of psalmody (*bimo* auxiliary spirits) had shown me. He agreed to teach me writing, that is to say to study some of his texts and to clarify them, so as not to offend these agents of the invisible world and to respect their choice.

Bimo scriptural transmission supposes oral transmission as far as *bimo* manuscripts are elliptic: composed of pentasyllables and containing secret words, they enclose a ritual language. How to access the written ‘secrets’ and speech? In order to answer this question, I have to share my experience as an ethnographer; I assume here the need to expose part of the intimacy of the anthropologist who is ‘cooking’ and ‘tinkering’ at the same time. Jean Pouillon rightly wrote that ‘knowledge is prepared, elaborated, in short: cooked’ (1993, 17). This cooking recalls a famous passage from *La pensée sauvage* (1962) in which Claude Lévi-Strauss mirrors modern

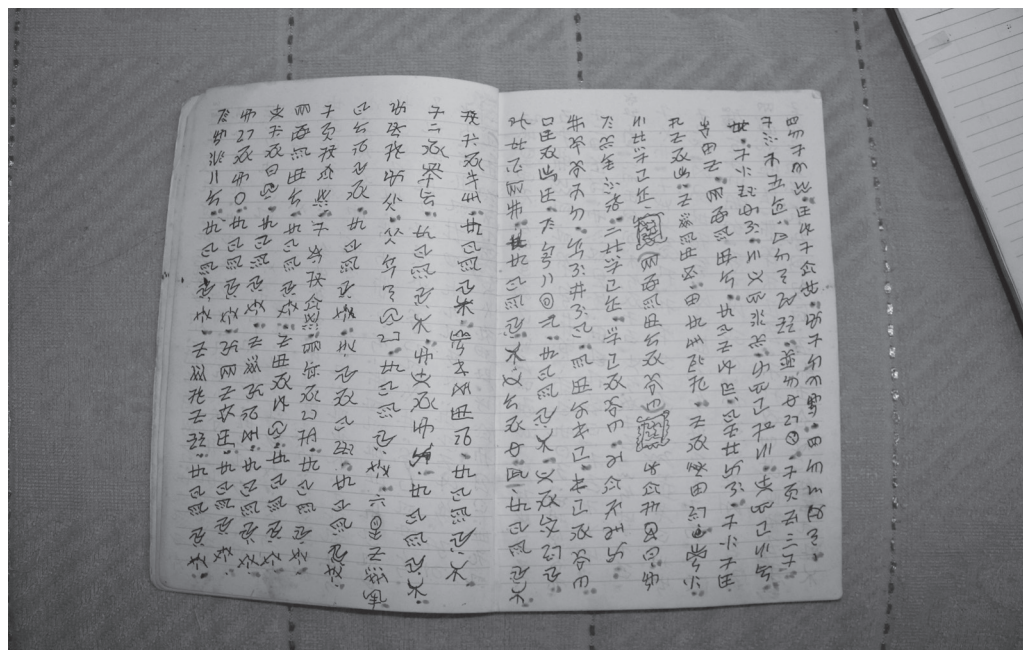


Fig. 8.1. Manuscript of Great Master Jiang's grandson (Shilin, 11.11.2015, © Névot, all rights reserved).

scientific thought, which has many materials and tools, and mythical thought, associated with bricolage. Lévi-Strauss imagines the anthropologist on the model of the engineer 'who designs and builds a machine through a series of rational operations: it must nevertheless work, logical certainty is not enough' (1962, 18). Is anthropological analysis not the result of a personal experience, a researcher's 'grumbling', an intellect filled with the Other (the Ones he/she meets) and oneself at the same time – product of his/her subjectivity and of his/her cultural background episteme – even if the observing subject is supposed to disappear in front of the observed subject and the specific bricolage of the latter? As Jacques Derrida wrote, '[i]t would, of course, remain to be asked whether the ethnologist thinks of himself as an "engineer" or as a "handyman"' (1967a, 154). I would say both, quoting one more time Derrida:

As soon as we stop believing in such an engineer and in a discourse that breaks with historical reception, as soon as we admit that any finished discourse is forced to a certain bricolage, as soon as the engineer or scientist are also a kind of handyman, then the very idea of bricolage is threatened, the difference in which it took meaning is decomposed (1967b, 417).

The aim of this article is to expose and to discuss my own cooking and bricolage, that is to say the methodological approach I had to develop spontaneously in/thanks to the field in order to understand *bimo*'s texts and thus to analyse them, and the huge problem of translation I constantly have to face because of the specificity of the

religious context in which those writings are involved. Indeed, if the apprenticeship I followed beside a *bimo* in particular allowed me to fully translate one of his ritual manuscript dedicated to a territorial cult (Névot 2013), I understood later, by having to translate other manuscripts coming from other ritual lineages, that learning with a shaman does not help to understand all the Yi-Sani *corpus*. I had then to refer to other Masters of psalmody. Thanks to these two main facets of my ethnography – the opportunity to learn with a *bimo* informant, from 1999 to 2011, and then to contact other shamans from that year onward (after asking my master’s permission) – I have gradually built up a network that allows me to develop a comparative approach of *bimo* writings. This textual comparatism is crucial to understanding the local system based on writing lability. Little by little, I put into perspective not only the texts but also the different discourses of the *bimo* I met; the analysis of their comments on what their writing is gave finally access to their own logics of thought in relation to patrilineage blood substance and to secrecy. Indeed, a key concept is placed at the core of the Masters of psalmody’s practices and introduced in the present article, that of *se*, a graphic sign which at the same time means writing and blood and that I thus translate by ‘writing-blood’.

Four steps will help to follow the process I myself followed in the field to decrypt the *bimo* writing and thought. We will see how I progressively came to understand that Yi-Sani script is connected to lineage transmission – black ink writing ‘represents’ the lineage blood transmitted from master-father to disciple-son. And because writing is ritual lineage blood, each lineage has scriptural specificities – hence the local scriptural variability. Then, we will observe that *bimo*’s lineages reinforce the secret nature of their ritual speech by omitting to write certain characters which therefore remain invisible. Because *bimo* writing is encrypted, the presence of the owner of the manuscript is necessary to its translation. In other words, the latter implies transmission between individuals – in this case, ethnographer/informant relationship – and the use of oral communication through texts. To be initiated to *bimo* writing does not suffice for the understanding of the Yi-Sani shamanistic texts. Oral transmission is as important as scriptural transmission to enter the scriptural world of the Masters of psalmody, which must be approached, indeed, through the prism of its orality. That is the right place to start.

A vocal script

Chinese writing is composed of pictograms, simple ideograms, compound ideograms, and phono-semantic compounds; most of the characters have semantic and phonetic indicators, *i.e.* radicals under which the characters are listed in dictionaries. The Yi-Sani *bimo* writing is different. In the *Yi-Han Abridged Dictionary* published in 1984 in order to promote the standardisation of the Yi-Sani writing, 1390 graphically distinct character forms are listed. According to the missionary ethnographer Paul Vial (1855–1917), who lived among Yi-Sani people from 1887 to 1917 and took into

account all the written forms used by the shamanic tradition before the Chinese State imposed standardisation (Nénot 2008; 2011; 2014; 2019a), this writing numbers no less than 3000 characters.

The *bimo* writing is 'syllabic' or 'phonographic'. Indeed, the characters do not have any radical, and no scriptural logics are related to the meaning or sounds. One character corresponds to one morpheme (a word), and its pronunciation corresponds to one syllable. It thus refers to a phonetic form and to a semantic unity. But contrary to Chinese writing, it does not have a phonic sign. It gives priority to 'monomial forms': a word corresponds to one single syllable, contrary to the Yi-Sani language in which a term is usually 'binomial', *i.e.* composed of two syllables. This ritual written language based on pentasyllables has thus a laconic style.

A single pronunciation is linked to one character but several characters may have the same syllabic pronunciation (thus a common phonic unity), which makes the *bimo* ritual language difficult to understand, all the more so as it is chanted in a manner that does not respect the five tones of the vernacular language. Each syllable corresponds to a note and prosodic variations do not depend on the voiced characters. Moreover, a character is not necessarily chanted in the same tone in one verse as it was in the previous one. A certain vocal autonomy is associated with psalmody with regards the semantic frame anchored in the writing, with each character having the possibility of being sung in any tone that corresponds to the shaman's chant. Thus, melodic variations are independent of the syllables. The melody is independent of the semantic language and of the tones of the vernacular language.

When they chant, *i.e.* when *bimo* read out aloud character for character of their ritual texts, they say they speak actually a 'secret language' (*ka di dje di be*) and compare it to the screech of a falcon or to the quack of a wild duck. It is unintelligible by the uninitiated people who themselves compare this chant to caterwauling. While the secret is kept by ritual speech, it is also etched in *bimo* writing, which is unreadable to laypersons. These features are linked to the nature of the exclusive communication which is established between the Masters of psalmody and the spirits. In fact, the chants are supposed to carry the voices of the spirits. The orality of the shamanic script is inscribed in communication and in conversation processes with gods. Accordingly, situated at the crossroads between the visible and the invisible, the writing of Masters of psalmody is a ritual and divine language (Nénot 2019b).

This communication through ritual texts between shamans and gods requires no understanding from the audience which is rarely attentive. Indeed, this utterance does not concern people who may play cards and chat while the shaman is chanting. What prevails for them is the prosody and the recurrence of elements, of course incomprehensible but always the same, like formulas, syntactic methods. The enunciation is performative by itself and the ritual chant has a perlocutionary effect. Or, to put it another way, a *bimo* possesses texts whose meaning cannot be 'heard' vocally: what is heard by the uninitiated persons is only his psalmody. Only graphic signs express the meaning. Thus, only the *bimo* grasps the meaning which is visible

and kept secret in his manuscripts but stays explicitly inaudible to common people. How can one be initiated?

For the Yi-Sani, as for the Han (who constitute the majority of the Chinese population), the father is said to pass on bones to his descendants while the mother passes on flesh. A *bimo* believes that he passes on his bones to his sons. Moreover, he is expected to pass on his *se*, i.e. ‘writing-blood’, to one of his sons. A disciple first learns to read and to write texts from his ancestors’ lineage by copying them as many times as possible. His initiation is thus based on the exact copying of ritual and secret writing. He learns not only to understand and to memorise knowledge, but also to access his lineage power. Indeed, this apprenticeship implies what we might understand as a slow embodiment of the master’s blood, or else an imbibition of texts – a process that I qualify as *transubstantial* because it refers to the body-to-body exchange. A disciple becomes filled with his master’s scriptural substance in order to evolve.

The disciple may psalmody for the first time during rituals where his master officiates. The latter may invite him to accompany his chanting. On the basis of this two-voice training, the future shaman has a good idea of what a psalmody is. But it is only at the end of his apprenticeship that he is able to chant on his own. His ultimate voicing is regarded as not having been learned but as occurring by itself. A disciple must improvise his chant in order to be consecrated *bimo*. He is said to have vocal affinities with his master – they share the same blood lineage substances – but these affinities will not lead to any confusion in their identity. Though not a composer, because he has a melodic model, each *bimo* is a performer. This ‘individuation’ by the voicing of texts, emanating from the learning of a scriptural ritual language, which demarcates the disciple’s tone from his master’s, is based on a writing-blood transmission process.

The movement of ‘outing’, of expulsion of the *bimo*’s voice, is recurrent in four verses (which have been translated literally and taken from a ritual text):

<i>ni bi se bé bi djo</i>	They are the <i>bimo</i> of the Yi-Sani who ‘speak’ (<i>bé</i>) the written characters,
<i>se bé djo nè li</i>	This speech of the written characters (<i>sebé</i>) comes out.
<i>se nè ke tseu djo</i>	The spirits who come out take hold of the latter,
<i>jo nè ke tseu li</i>	I go out and come to take hold of the latter.

A *bimo*’s chant, based only on texts, will not vary according to the theme it refers to; it will be the same whatever linguistic form it takes (dialogue with spirits, narrative, etc.) and whatever ritual text it may concern – I did not notice any singing differences regarding the ritual text involved, the *bimo* always sing to the same rhythm and melody. Indeed, as has already been mentioned, the shaman bursts into song using the same tones but without respecting the tones of the word that may be used in the vernacular language. During a ritual, the shaman may then assume multiple identities (he makes the spirits speak) while keeping his own vocal identity. In spite of this form of monotony of singing, the chant is perceived as unique (even if, as already mentioned,

each *bimo* has a vocal model), expressing the ritual efficacy of the shaman whereas the texts, which are also specific to him because they are linked to his own writing-blood, nevertheless come from a transmission process based on copies of texts containing the writing-blood emanating from a 'connected Other' via the bones (of his father). The lineage-specific writing doubles as a chant that is proper to the shaman who has inherited the lineage power. It is therefore through chanting that a disciple becomes a *bimo*, that is to say by the ritual enunciation carried by his master's text. He must follow the lines of his ancestors' writing, share the same bones and, so to speak, 'speak and write the same blood' in order to acquire voice and travel in the cosmos. As a result, it is the acquisition of his chant (which is a voice somewhere between human and divine) that proves his inner transformation.

We can now better understand why these shamans are not named in reference to their scriptural ability. They are called *bimo*, which means 'Master of psalmody' in the Yi-Sani language, because their secret writing has to be 'self' melodised. The Yi-Sani shaman is defined as an enunciator of writings who masters a secret speech. He is the master, *mo*, of psalmody, *bi*, he reads aloud, *teu*. Writing and orality are never conceptually differentiated in the *bimo*'s thinking, with different expressions describing the dual influence of speech and of the script. The chant is visual. The writing is heard in a musical form. The *bimo*'s chant comes from the acquisition of writing and reading techniques, then from enunciation. A *bimo* has to master this vocality by learning his master's writing and chants because it is through the writing that the sound passes, not by the sound that the writing passes.

Scriptural chaos?

The aforementioned French Catholic priest Paul Vial was the first Westerner who deciphered Yi-Sani *bimo* books. He reported the difficulties he encountered when trying to read manuscripts in 1898:

Even if one knew their language, one would not have yet overcome all the difficulties encountered when translating Lolo [Yi-Sani] books; there are other difficulties that I am going to explain in a few words. 1) The first is to know where a sentence begins and where it ends. The set way Lolo scholars [*bimo*] have of reading their books by breaking off every five characters forced them to more or less adjust the meaning to this meter. Here, you have one word less that would have fully explained the idea, here one word too many that must not be translated; and because the language abounds with composed words, you may sometimes have to discover behind a single character the meaning given by three joint words. 2) Many locutions are obsolete; others are only used in certain areas. Others, however, have been lost or may have died out. The books themselves have not changed; they are copied as they are, with no explanation of the text and with no regard for the meaning but, because lots of books are the same, only a comparative approach might allow you to grasp the meaning of most of the sentences. 3) As all these books are handwritten, some characters may have been modified, others forgotten, or sometimes whole lines forgotten. It would be good to refer to the oldest books; but as the dates are not specified or very unclear, we are

reduced to guesswork. 4) One last difficulty concerns the characters themselves; they are not completely ideographic or completely phonetic; we are at a loss as to how to take them. It would be good to have the books read to us, if one could find a reader intelligent enough to cut the phrases according to the meaning, not according to the meter. But that is impossible, a thousand times more impossible than reading French verses without respecting the rhyme. (Vial 1898, 66–67)

Indeed, to be in front of a *bimo* manuscript is confusing for a non-specialist reader as for a sinologist: how to position it, where to begin? Whereas the writing differs from Chinese, any experience of the ‘Chinese world’ would prompt us to open the book with its spine on the right-hand side by making a start at the top right-hand side of the first page, and then to read it from right to left and from top to bottom – as far as a page is in the form of vertical columns of characters. Yet a *bimo* manuscript has to be read by opening the book with its spine on the left-hand side and then reading it from left to right (and from top to bottom).

Studying ritual texts with a *bimo* is helpful, of course, but it may also throw the observer into another kind of confusion, this time about the meaning. Esoteric, cryptic and following their own syntactic rules – those of ritual language – shamanic writings are difficult to understand, even for the Masters of psalmody who are asked to clarify them. It seems that commentaries, exegesis or reflexive texts by the *bimo* about their own texts do not exist. Their books deal with ritual activities and are composed of performative texts that may relate to recitative registers about Sani myths, to the actions of the shamans walking or riding in the cosmos, or to the dialogs between the *bimo* reader and different local spirits.

A contemporary of Vial, the French explorer Henry d’Ollone, had also faced the heterogeneity of the Yi writings and the difficulty to understand them. He used the word ‘chaos’ to report on his observations (1912, 17). Studying *bimo* writings in Sichuan, Young wrote twenty years later:

Another difficulty comes from the fact that the tribes do not all have exactly the same characters; some differ rather a lot from tribe to tribe so that they cannot be identified; moreover, some tribes have infinitely more characters than others which are unknown to their neighbours; homophonic characters are used indiscriminately; in the end, since the language itself is far from being the same everywhere, different characters are bound to represent the same idea when the latter is translated by different words and, on the contrary, identical characters will have different sounds and meanings. (Young 1935, 28)

More recently, another Chinese scholar stated, concerning the writings of the Yi of Guizhou, that:

Bimo or Yi sorcerers in different areas often changed the forms of the characters as they pleased by adding or subtracting strokes when they copied the scriptures. As a result, many variants of the same character were passed on from generation to generation among the Yi people. Therefore the characters of the traditional writing were in confusion with too many local variants, which naturally made the compilation and the standardization of the traditional writing very difficult. (Pu 2004, 268)

As for the linguist David Bradley previously mentioned, he observed:

In traditional materials, many variants can be found for the characters representing frequently occurring words. The most extreme example is the character meaning ‘not’ in Nisu, for which Pu Zhangkai (2005, 53) lists 103 possible alternative forms, drawn from a very wide range of Nisu manuscripts from the entire Nisu area. Eleven of these are found in the Azhe text in Guo (2004, 180–217). Jin (1983, 35) gives seven alternative forms for the corresponding character in Sani. Bai (1995, 22) gives four alternative Nasu forms. Vermander (1998) shows a total of 22 alternative forms in one very long Yino Nosu text written by one shaman, and this is typical of traditional texts. The same frequent word in adjacent lines of a text is often written with a different character, whether as a stylistic flourish or as a means of disguise. It is notable that for the character meaning ‘not’, a form similar to the standard selected form in Guizhou Nasu and Yunnan. Reformed Yi is also among the alternatives seen in traditional Nisu and Nosu, though it is not the most frequent form there. With such variation within a text, in the absence of a standard prior to recent reforms, and with individual transmission and recopying from one shaman to his successors over many centuries, it is not surprising that diversification in the forms of characters was so extreme in traditional Yi orthographies. (2009, 174–175)

Basically, these different statements suggest that variability predominates in Yi writings, that is to say in *bimo* writings, wherever they come from. But are the latter so exposed to the arbitrary decision of every script-writer? Are the characters really invented and used in an ‘anarchic’ and chaotically way, according to the will of each *bimo*? Would religious individuality predominate? It is pretty hard for an anthropologist to stick with that simple statement without thinking about bringing a logic to light. The idea is to go further in the analysis and to make the situation more understandable. Indeed, beyond the inherent spelling mistakes in any work involving copying, how are we to apprehend, anthropologically speaking, such a supposed scriptural instability or even writing disorder?

With regard to the Yi-Sani script in particular, I confront major difficulties as well: how to understand two facts that seem paradoxical, *i.e.* the fact, on the one hand, that transmission is based on a very definite process – identical copywriting from father to son for the patrilineage transmission – and the fact, on the other hand, that writing may vary between *bimo*?

Lapsus

A first step in answer to these questions has to be found in analysing the confusion or incoherence I felt while deciphering a *bimo* text and, above all, in the fact that the shaman with whom I was studying felt the same. Here is the anecdote: in 2011, my master shaman and I were both working for the first time on the translation of texts that did not come from his own ritual lineages (his maternal uncle’s one and his wife’s father one)¹ nor from his village (until then, I only studied the texts copied by

¹ He followed two initiations, and a third one, as we will see, from the first official *bimo*, paid by the Chinese State to standardise the *bimo* cults and writings.

this *bimo* himself). We both stumbled over some characters that were ‘specific to the locality from which they came’, as my master shaman underlined. Other characters were lacking. That is how I understood that Yi-Sani *bimo* do not share exactly the same writing and some verses may be reduced to three or four feet. But was this variability only geographical, territorial, linked to each Yi-Sani village? What about these missing characters, are they the result of copy mistakes? I had this question in mind when something else happened: lapsus.

It should be stressed that my *bimo* master and I were speaking in Chinese about his practice. By not using his mother tongue, he momentarily took a step back by translating manuscripts. This language distancing through Chinese has created a form of reflexivity about his own culture. It is through this means that I had access to certain senses and raised many lapsus in this shaman’s words. Indeed, I noticed that, on a regular basis, he translated into Chinese either by ‘blood’ or by ‘writing’ the character he first said meant ‘writing’. Concomitantly, I noticed that in his books, the script used to mean ‘blood’ may sometimes be also used for the word ‘writing’. Writing and blood being both said *se* in the first tone in the Yi-Sani language (used during teaching session and thus outside the ritual activities when *bimo* psalmody), I was totally confused: when is it blood, when is it writing, why are those characters homophonic (a simple coincidence?), why does this shaman use one script for the other? Is it just a careless mistake?

My master shaman stipulated that in the *Yi-Han Abridged Dictionary* – published in 1984, let us recall, to help the standardisation of the Yi-Sani writings – the two characters have two specific and clearly defined orthographies. So, he explained that if he used one script for the other or one translation for the other, it was only a mistake. In expressing himself in this way, my shaman master was sharing the state shamanic norm, *i.e.* what he had learned from the first official shaman in 1999, when a common teaching for *bimo* began to be promoted in Shilin in order to accelerate the process of homogenisation of the various lineage scripts. Nevertheless, I found very surprising that he based his argument on official data and insisted on the graphic heterogeneity of ‘blood’ and ‘writing’. He emphasised this characteristic. He gave the impression that he had to explain himself, as if I had pierced some kind of strangeness in the scriptural system. I was also astonished that he never referred to what he may have learned from his maternal uncle before the Cultural Revolution and later from his wife’s father. He has always refused to talk about them or to show me the texts he inherited. I had the intuition that something more had to be said, as if I had stumbled upon a knot that I had to undo, all the more so as this shaman underlined the close relationship established between *bimo* writing and the shamanic body. Let us not forget that we are in China where writing has something to do with body and substances: the image of a Chinese calligraphy that beats to the rhythm of the calligrapher’s arteries is well known.

Labile and missing characters

In 2013, I began to study with the oldest shamans of the area who think that the new generation of shamans has lost the *bimo* knowledge. They turned out to be crucial informants and allowed me to go further in my analysis – based on an intuition itself based on lapsus. They explicitly say that the character used for ‘blood’ and ‘writing’ is one and the same. I also observed that the script used to designate the word ‘blood-writing’ differs from one initiatory lineage to another. By and by, I also extended my research to villages I had not yet visited in order to create a catalogue of characters used by each ritual lineage to designate itself the shamanistic concept of ‘blood-writing’.

I came to understand that the *bimo*’s ritual and initiatory writing is, in the case of lineage transmission, intimately related to what passes through (and thus what is shared by) generations of male religious specialists: blood, *se*. Writing (the quintessence of power) is so closely linked to the trans-corporeality of the Masters of psalmody who belong to the same patrilineage that ‘writing’ and ‘blood’ are concepts written using the same script, while this script may differ from one shamanistic lineage to another.

In a parallel fashion but only rarely occurring, I learned that a *bimo* is allowed to transmit part of his knowledge to other disciples who do not belong to his own lineage but who nevertheless have asked for an initiation. But this does not achieve much recognition. Those initiated in this way are not allowed to copy manuscripts but receive a few texts copied by the master himself for their attention. In this case, the Master of psalmody does not transmit his blood-writing but a different writing: he has to transform certain scripts so that those nonhereditary disciples does not inherit his lineage’s power, *i.e.* blood. In particular, a digraphy has to occur between the signs ‘blood’ and ‘writing’: those concepts shall not share the same graphical sign. And a *bimo* can modify his scripts each time he transmits texts following exo-lineage transmission, *i.e.*, all his exo-lineage disciples, if he has any, does not necessarily share all the same graphical signs. So different lines of transmission developed in the field, the majority of them following patrilineage rules in which heterogeneity is based on lineages and others following exo-lineage rules in which heterogeneity is based on each particular master-disciple relationship, which latter was even stronger than the former model of transmission.

While meeting the oldest Yi-Sani *bimo*, I got closer to the second official *bimo*, who succeeded the first, who passed away. This *bimo* underlined that his shaman forefather was the first man to promote a large-scale teaching of shamanic writing in 1864. By doing so, he wished to facilitate the learning of disciples coming from other initiatory lineages than his own in order to counter the project of Chinese civilisation supported locally by the creation of schools where the Chinese language and writing were taught. As this *bimo* was not authorised to transmit the writing

characters specific to his ritual lineage except to one of his sons, he taught, for certain writing characters, scripts specific to each of his disciples, different from those transmitted to others. This shaman notably transcribed the word 'writing', on the one hand, and the word 'blood', on the other hand, while creating new graphic signs for each concept each time he had a new disciple. This man promoted a plurigraphic process and developed local scriptural heterogeneity. Was he at the origin of the digraphy process of the concept of 'writing-blood'? I do not know but this may be a hypothesis. The official *bimo* then stressed that the son of this *bimo* who promoted a form of shamanic ecumenism, learned French thanks to the priest Vial and taught him *bimo* writing in return.

Field research allowed me to understand that Vial was probably inscribed in a particular type of transmission by the shamans with whom he studied. The missionary did not inherit the script associated with the transmission of the lineage blood in the same way as a man inscribed in ritual filiation, but a singular version, reserved for cases of transmission where a disciple is not the son of the master. Thus, Vial learned that the ideas of 'writing' and 'blood' had to be written differently. Then, he promoted the teaching in schools of the script he studied and thus brought about the secularisation of the writing; by imposing a graphic standard that would be common to all Christian Yi-Sani, he also circumvented the modes of transmission for which the script retains graphic specificities within each ritual lineage. It is therefore understandable that the dictionary he published in 1909 is not representative of the graphic complexity specific to *bimo*. Moreover, research conducted within the Bureau of Religious Affairs showed that the cultural policies implemented since the late 1990s among the Yi-Sani are grafted onto the secularisation of writing in schools initiated by Vial, and that the graphic standard now imposed on the Yi-Sani is based on the priest's dictionary.

Thus, if certain writing characters still differ today from one ritual lineage to another in the sense that they translate the scriptural and therefore bloodline particularity of each lineage, the graphic standard imposed on *bimo* and taught in parallel to Yi-Sani schoolchildren by local members of the Chinese state apparatus implies the homogenisation of this writing which is defeated of its lineage roots. Yi-Sani who wish or have to learn the official Yi-Sani script, whether they are ritual officiants or not, must in fact write the terms 'blood' and 'script' separately, using the scripts published in the 1984 dictionary and coming from Vial's own scriptural initiation.

So, I came to the conclusion that specific graphic signs reflect the specificity of the blood of the lineage of the initiated men and it is related to the shamanic secret: one *bimo* said in particular: 'We write "blood" and "writing" using the same writing character because we do not want others to know'. The notion of shamanistic secret is not only based on graphic variability between lineages but also on the missing characters, textual characteristic that was also mentioned by the missionary Vial as we noticed before.

Whereas each verse usually includes five characters, it may happen that some of them are truncated, hence the difficulty in reading them. In addition to scriptural specificities, *bimo* lineages in fact reinforce the secret nature of their ritual speech by voluntarily omitting the writing of certain characters which therefore remain invisible. They are 'secret', the *bimo* say, because they are not transcribed on paper. Though truncated visually, the versification is not, however, truncated orally – the unwritten characters are communicated from master to disciple. Without sharing the secrets of the lineage, it is impossible to know where a verse begins and ends. A man has to inherit his father's blood to be able to psalmody the text that has to remain 'between them'.

The fact that certain characters are seen as invisible has to be analysed because they are graphically absent and present at the same time, as far as the *bimo* knows where they are supposed to be missing in the verse and thus where they have to be pronounced during his chant. Through his voicing, the character is spelled and then fill the hole of the verse. The *bimo* depict missing, unwritten characters, the existence of writing removed from the visible, but they never consider that their books are made of quatrains or three-feet verses. Consequently, a manuscript contains visible and invisible characters which suppose and call upon the memory of the officiant – it is explicitly claimed that invisible characters have to be memorised. But it is not said that visible characters have to be memorised in order to know the ritual language by heart, as it is not said that *bimo* texts have to be known by heart. In this sense, the invisible characters create an incompleteness that the voicing, thus their visual memorisation expressed orally, comes to fill in without nevertheless making these characters visible. Consequently, psalmody gives consistency to the character which nevertheless remains invisible. Visible characters imply speaking while invisible characters take shape and are materialised by speaking. A written character gives sound, though a word with no textual support shall never be transformed into any script. Hence, through his voice, a *bimo* renders invisible written characters manifest and public even though the latter remain invisible. Their visibility stays in the voice. Voice provides access to vision for initiated men alone.

To put it another way: by copying his master's manuscripts, the disciple is aware of the missing characters that lend a hollowness to the verse, a hollowness that he has to fill in with his chant. The *bimo* apprentice therefore learns vocal techniques and he has to memorise a few secret characters. When there is orality without writing, memory ensures the presence of the missing character. Hence, by copying his master's texts as many times as possible, the disciple not only acquires scriptural and verbal knowledge but he also gradually incorporates the rhythm of his chant while learning how to temporalise and fill his text. In sum, he tends to appropriate his own manuscripts that 'live' with him until death. That is when they will be burned to accompany the dead *bimo* who will keep on ritualising in the world beyond on the basis of his script.

Conclusion

Radical changes have modified the Yi-Sani writing system and thus the lability of their shamanic writing. During the period of the Cultural Revolution whose effects extended far beyond the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, *bimo* manuscripts were on the list of prohibited items. So the *bimo* had to silence their texts, or at least to voice them secretly, without the authorities knowing. Many of them completely lost the capacity to use their ritual languages because most of their books were burned. After the Cultural Revolution and with the return of a degree of religious freedom in the 1980s, a process of rewriting and a *bimo* renewal was driven by *bimo* descendants or by *bimo* themselves. Because the religious practices had been banned for a period of over three decades, this movement brought about a huge transformation in the manner of writing verses as most of the written models had been destroyed. In the absence of written ritual speech, some Masters of psalmody decided to write from oral ritual speech, *i.e.* from what they remembered. Yet because shamanic texts are not supposed to be memorised but to be copied, the irreparable loss caused by the policies of the Maoist period can easily be imagined. Only those who had managed to hide books in the mud-walls of their houses or in mountain caves still had them as models to copy in the 1980s. Then the Chinese government rapidly took charge of this rewriting process of *bimo* rituals.

The Bureau of Religious Affairs of the Yi-Sani district is a key administrative unit. It has homogenised the *bimo* ritual writings and transcribed the vernacular language of the Yi-Sani into a unified script. The ‘secret speech’ (*ka bé*), ordinarily incomprehensible to the uninitiated people, has thus been transmuted into a lay language for communication, accessible to all and taught at school. The state simultaneously promotes increasing the number of *bimo* in the religious context. This ritual manner of transmission, controlled by the Chinese authorities, pays little attention to patrilineage transmission but favours exo-lineage transmission. It encourages the *bimo* to pass on their knowledge to as many disciples as possible beyond their lineage. The state follows the rules of *bimo* writing in this: a digraphic process between ‘blood’ and ‘writing’ is introduced, but at the same time, only one character of writing is associated with each word. To put it another way: two scripts, shared by all the Yi-Sani *bimo* should now express *se* differently. The *bimo* concept of ‘writing-blood’ is to be divided into two concepts: ‘blood’ and ‘writing’. Therefore, the *bimo* must transmit the same writing, a Yi-Sani *bimo* common writing, while dissociating the sign given for the word ‘blood’ from the sign given for the word ‘writing’. The ritual homogenisation of the Sani tends to supplant the heterogeneity that constituted the characteristic feature of their ritualists.

From now on, the script that is officially used to transcribe the idea of ‘writing’ also refers to the notion of ‘image’/‘figure’. Its original link to ‘blood’ has been totally erased. The individual scriptural specificities of each lineage have also been erased and some of the lineage secrets, reserved for oral transmission, have been divulged through state scriptural processes. Such disclosure leads to new textual configurations; that is to say, to the appearance of horizontal lines that are added to the traditionally visible

vertical lines. At the same time, the transmission process between master and disciple has tended to change: photocopying rather than copying the master's manuscripts is now commonplace. In the last five years, the process of standardisation has intensified: the disciples no longer even have photocopies of their masters' manuscripts in hand, but photocopies of texts from the Bureau of Religious Affairs that are distributed by the local central authority. They have to follow the official teaching in order to get a *bimo* diploma and to be able to practice 'freely' their religious activities. Henceforth, the *bimo* now share practically all the same standardised writings. The process of transformation of this scriptural shamanism is taking place so rapidly and is so massively anchored in Shilin that everything I write about the *bimo*'s writing system must be understood as on the verge of disappearing.