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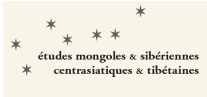
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*Des liens sociaux à l'identité culturelle. Changements de signification des danses  
Na dans le contexte du tourisme et de la patrimonialisation*

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# From social bonds to cultural identity. Changing meanings of Na dances in tourism context and heritage-making

*Des liens sociaux à l'identité culturelle. Changements de signification des danses Na dans le contexte du tourisme et de la patrimonialisation*

Pascale-Marie Milan

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## Introduction

- 1 At 9 p.m., a day of summer 2012, like any other day between 2009 and 2013, tourists mostly Han middle-class vacationers from urban areas, gathered in front of the large door of the Yang house in Xiaoluoshui 小落水 Village in Yunnan Province, People's Republic of China (PRC)<sup>1</sup>. Every night during this period, villagers held “bonfire festivities” (Ch. *gouhuo wanhui* 篝火晚会), which became very prestigious thanks to an award for dance performances at the “circling-the-mountain” festival (Ch. *zhuan shan jie* 转山节). Despite the disadvantageous but negotiated rates, the villagers, who belong to the Na 纳 ethnicity, have started to work with travel agencies in Lijiang run by people from other minority nationalities (Ch. *shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) of China to welcome more tourists and to benefit from some economic incomes. Before the festivities, most of the villagers welcomed them in their house to enjoy ethnic labelled meals (Ch. *minzu can* 民族餐). For barely a hundred RMB per group (1 RMB is roughly equivalent to 0,14 euros), these paying guests could eat a snack, followed by a hearty meal, and wear traditional clothing while imitating Na people way of life and posing for some photos. The locals also tried to sell some scarves, advertised as self-woven, for extra cash, which were in fact made in an industrial way and bought wholesale, as I was told. The atmosphere seemed more “authentic” as the Na publicly acquiesced to the

incredible stories told by the guides about their local sexual customs or the absence of fathers, which, in fact, was often the opposite of the life they had.

- 2 Since the beginning of the 1990s, Lugu Lake (Ch. Lugu hu 泸沽湖), located astride Yunnan and Sichuan Provinces, has gradually become a regional tourist attraction. Most of ethnic tourism<sup>2</sup> is concentrated in this area due to water and mountain landscape corresponding to the Chinese pictorial tradition and the presence of the Na. Also called Mosuo 摩梭 in Mandarin, they are known to be an exemplary case of matrilineal and matrilocal societies<sup>3</sup>. Numbering about 40 000 (Cai 1997, p. 27) the Na people are famous for their institutionalised visiting system called *sessee* in Na language (Nru. Narua<sup>4</sup>) and *zouhun* 走婚 in Mandarin. Men visit the women at night, yet each partner lives in his or her mother's house. Routinely depicted as "primitive" (Ch. *yuanshi* 原始) and "backwards" (Ch. *luohou* 落后), the Na are thought to be a "living fossil society" (Ch. *huo huashi shehui* 活化石社会), a judgment fostering the ideologically evolutionist discourse at the core of the ethnic distinction within China (Yan & Song 1983; Zhan *et al.* 1980).
- 3 This Chinese ethnic distinction separates the population between the Han majority (93% of the population) and the minority nationalities (7%). According to a strange equation, the former, considered as civilised and educated, would be the representatives of the Chinese nation (Ch. *Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族) and would include the latter, considered as backward and lacking civilisation (Harrell 1995; Mullaney 2004). This "civilising project" that aimed at governing minorities has gradually become a consumption pattern pursuing the same objective. New romantic media representations on minority nationalities and the state's narrative of a supposedly common past, led millions of Chinese, most often from urban areas, to travel domestically each year (Chio 2014; Zhu 2018). During these journeys to minority nationalities territories often considered as "ethnic cultural heritage" sites, or even minority theme parks, these Chinese middle-class vacationers, whatever their own ethnic origins, can experience the boundaries between "civilisation" and "primitiveness" (Fiskesjö 2015; Oakes 2006; Sofield & Li 1998).
- 4 Since the mid-2000s, minority nationalities experiencing tourism started to perform "traditional" dances during "bonfire festivities", a standardised cultural form dating back to the 1990s (Mueggler 2002; Liu 2006; Nyíri 2006, p. 16). Like for many others among China's, dances have become an integral part of cultural identity construction (Mueggler 2002). With the signing of the 2003 UNESCO Convention, these kinds of cultural practices have been valorised as intangible cultural heritage (hereafter ICH; Ch. *feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 非物质文化遗产, often shortcut as *feiyi*). In the Lugu Lake area, Na dances became one of the most famous Na intangible cultural heritages when Sichuan Province focused on labelling, inventorying, and listing cultural practices to catch up with the Yunnan part of the lake in terms of tourism development.
- 5 Heritage can be considered at first as a broad institutional category of goods, practices or monuments considered as cultural. ICH is its latest trend. This is also a puzzling notion that expresses a certain cultural authority through an increasingly homogeneous, but implicit and diffuse language of what culture and tradition are. However, heritage is a set of "complex processes of selection and requalification, bringing into play more or less shared values" (Bondaz *et al.* 2012). Heritage commodification is also prone to bring new values to cultural practices (Dutournier & Padovani 2021; Zhu 2018; Zhu & Maags 2020). In the first part, I attempt to

contextualise the meaning ICH takes in the Chinese heritage context characterised by tourist situations.

- 6 Yet, local worlds from which cultural expressions originate often have totally different conceptual universes conveying quite dissimilar social values with heritage institutions. For example, Na dances have long played a significant role in the social reproduction of communities. They were usually performed at particular events in community life, following rituals such as year-end celebrations, the completion of house construction, and *gutch* ceremonies – used to celebrate cohabitation between partners and, today, marriage. This was still the case until 2014 in the non-touristy village of Lijiazui 李家嘴, located in the hinterland of the Yongning 永宁 Plain in Sichuan Province.
- 7 This paper aims at comparing the festivities between two Na villages, Lijiazui and Xiaoluoshui (located in Yunnan Province), to grasp sociocultural changes that are gradually reshaping Na social organisation toward a market-oriented national economy (Blumenfield 2014, 2018; Mattison 2010; Milan 2012, 2019, 2021; Walsh 2005). As a component of Na people’s social life conveying values and norms, I argue that dances have been seriously challenged by tourism growth and heritagisation processes. Drawing on fieldwork findings that were followed by ongoing online exchanges with key interlocutors and online research on ICH processes and narratives, the article seeks to grasp both the Na people’s agency and new subjectivity that have been remodelled within this new context. I ask how locals negotiate, contest, and accommodate China’s ICH policies that are part of the nation-building. Throughout the article, I examine these issues by investigating the meaning that the Na people have of the core notions of ICH like culture, tradition, identity, and transmission.
- 8 As part of my doctoral research investigating social change and economic transition, the collected ethnographic data comes from participant observation of daily life, festivities, and tourism activities. While I lived in two Na houses, one in each village, between 2012 and 2014, I actively participated in their daily life in many ways, such as serving tourists, cleaning, working in the fields, etc. Caught in village social relations, I was able to investigate what Walsh (2005), following Goffman’s concept (1973), calls the “backstage”, where people hold private speeches that contrast with public ones, especially those held on the tourist scene (Milan 2012, 2019). Such “backstage” information is particularly explicit if we observe the way the Na call themselves. They have been officially identified as Mosuo in Yunnan Province in order to differentiate themselves from the Naxi 纳西 minority nationality in the late 1980s (Walsh 2005, p. 451). In Sichuan, the Na were categorised as Mongols (Ch. Mengguzu 蒙古族), but an increasing number of Na also identify themselves as Mosuo because of the increasing popularity of this ethnonym in tourism.
- 9 In this article, the core ethnographic material draws from daily conversations, first conducted in Mandarin, collected during multiple fieldwork since 2007. The extended period of time over which the research took place provided an emotional closeness and a high degree of trust that fostered informal feedback on tourism, with a particular focus on the festivities and the villagers’ hopes and fears. This positioning allowed me to further investigate these issues in their own language, as learning the Na language was necessary to access what James Scott calls “the hidden transcripts” (1992). The knowledge my interlocutors had of the two villages under scrutiny is central to the data collected. Their comments on my account of my activities during my stay in each

village helped to capture the similar sociocultural contexts and an emic perspective on the changes occasioned by tourism.

- 10 Their comparative comments on the festivities also provided insight into “the qualities and logic that guide them” and the judgments they rely on “to act in the world” (Fassin 2009, p. 1238). Following Didier Fassin’s revisited concept of moral economy, I thus seek to capture the grammar of emotions, values, and norms that underlie the dances and give them different efficiencies and logics in each village. I thus also use the moral economy in the same structural way as Edward P. Thompson (1971, 1991) and James Scott (1976). Both authors link moral economy to economic issues while looking beyond them to lived experience. Extending this definition, Scott links moral economy to the ethics of subsistence, which, according to Karl Polanyi’s (1983) idea, is embedded in broader relationships. While Scott sees it as an opportunity to explore rebellion or resistance, I also understand the notion of moral economy for its ability to highlight explainable regularities and as a part of the social fabric that can reveal antagonistic power relations.
- 11 In the first part of this article, I will shed light on what is considered as heritage by the Chinese government among the Na and on how this process is closely related to tourism. The following section will cover the people’s trajectories and livelihood opportunities in the two Na villages under scrutiny. I will then describe the Na dances in the non-tourist village, one among many in the hinterland, while accounting for their importance in the social organisation and Na’s understanding of what tradition is. Next, I will address dances in the context of tourism to show how Na people took hold of the cultural encounter with Chinese (mainly Han). Finally, I will turn to the cultural heritage valorisation, more specifically to the ICH narrative to highlight the existing discrepancies with the Na’s understanding of what culture and tradition are.

## Heritage and tourism strategy in China

- 12 Since the four modernisation reforms<sup>5</sup>, China has steadily developed domestic tourism, leading millions of Chinese people to explore its historical, national, and natural sites every year. As a means for rapid economic growth and regional development (Lew *et al.* 2002; Nyíri 2006), tourism became a perfect strategy to pursue the civilisation and modernisation project of the margins. The minorities summoned for decades to become more like the Han “civilized majority” (Harrell 1995) rapidly got involved in tourism by marketing their ethnic potential (Chio 2014). Boiling down to “exotic” rituals and survivals, cultural practices, once considered backward, undesirable and condemned as superstitious archaisms during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), have become valuable cultural resources to honour diversity through folkloristic representations (Grillot 2001). New forms of *cultural encounters* (Harrell 1995) have been paradoxically triggered out from the celebration of cultural and ethnic differences (Chio 2014; Harrell 1995; McKhann 2001). Chinese tourists have become eager for “exotic difference”, while locals perform their ethnic identities through various cultural practices. As Zhu Yujie demonstrated in the Lijiang case, these two elements often intersect with broader socio-economic forces and create a local tourist culture fuelled by a “romantic consumption” of tourist places (2018). Zhu states that romantic consumption is not only about romantic feelings and love, but “refers to individual desire, pleasure seeking

and the motivation of consumption”, especially through the touristic experience (2018, p. 27).

- 13 Lugu Lake, located a few hundred kilometres north of Lijiang’s regional tourist epicentre, opened to tourism in the 1990s. Its “water and mountain landscapes”, a natural area protected by Yunnan Province in 1989, combined with the presence of the Na, quickly transformed it into an ideal tourist destination (Walsh & Swain 2004). Various administrative authorities in Yunnan beforehand engaged in tourism infrastructure construction. Ninglang 宁蒗 County authorities, mainly from the Yi minority nationality<sup>6</sup>, drew on public poverty alleviation funds to build the first guesthouse in Luoshui 落水 Village, and then worked with private investors to develop tourism in exchange for 30 percent of the profits (Guo 2008, pp. 258-260). They have built a ticket gate, which clearly gave the impression that Lugu Lake had become “a closed and controlled consumption area” (Nyíri 2006; p. 7). By the 1990s, annually, sixty to eighty-six thousand mainly Han Chinese tourists visited the area (Walsh 2005; Yang 2013, p. 717). Under the aegis of the Chinese National Tourism Administration, in charge of tourism until 2018, Lugu Lake rated with a four A as a remarkable natural and cultural heritage site, a Chinese National Scenic Landscape <sup>7</sup>. In 2010, the Lijiang Management Committee estimated that more than one million people visited Lugu Lake every year, making tourism its primary income. The steady flow of tour guides at well-identified tourist spots even suggests, in Oakes’ terse formulation, that Lugu Lake has become a “village as a theme park”<sup>8</sup> (2006). This almost exponential growth of tourism in the Yunnanese part of Lugu Lake was due to the enhancement of Mosuo (Na) cultural practices and cultural identity following the new ICH fever.
- 14 By ratifying the 2003 UNESCO’s Convention in 2004, China made ICH (and heritage as a broad category) a flagship concept<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, the country’s effort to manage ICH these last few years has led to an upheaval in its legal apparatus, administrative structures, and regulations (Blumenfield & Silverman 2013; Bodolec 2012; Bodolec & Obringer 2020; Dutournier & Padovani 2021; Wang 2018). A special division of ICH (Ch. Feiwuzhi wenhua yichansi 非物质文化遗产司) within the Ministry of Culture was created. The production of juridical texts that followed led to the elaboration of numerous ICH lists at all administrative levels: county, municipality, provincial, national<sup>10</sup> and UNESCO World Heritage level. In 2006, the centre dedicated to the safeguarding of China’s ICH in Beijing (Ch. Zhongguo feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu zhongxin 中国非物质文化遗产保护中心) proposed the first national list of 1028 Chinese ICH items. This massive identification of ICH elements and classifications generated a frenzy of media attention and widespread public interest. Regardless of the type of heritage, in 2006, a national plan systematically associated tourism with heritage (Gao *et al.* 2009). As a result, a Heritage Day (2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of June) and a Heritage Week were enacted. In 2018, the creation of a Chinese full-fledged Heritage and tourism ministry<sup>11</sup> confirmed the claim that ICH is used as a tourism strategy (Beaud 2015; Blumenfield & Silverman 2013; Bodolec 2012; Graezer-Bideau 2012; Shepherd 2009 among others). ICH has indeed become public goods or commodities that can be commercially exploited through tourism (Zhu 2018, Zhu & Maags 2020).
- 15 The Yunnan government first engaged with these issues at Lugu Lake to develop tourism. Na dances were valorised in the mid-2000s as Na cultural heritage with the matrilineal system, and the *daba* 达巴 religious practices<sup>12</sup>. In 2002, the Ninglang Yi Autonomous County even declared “making necessary preparations for the application

of world heritage status to UNESCO”, but has not yet succeeded (Xinhua News Agency, March 14, 2002; Blumenfield 2018, p. 173). In 2006, Walabi Village labelled as a “centre of weaving tradition”<sup>13</sup> and Wenquan 温泉 Village designated as a “remarkable” hot springs site, became protected zones of traditional culture (Ch. *chuantong wenhua baohuqu* 传统文化保护区)<sup>14</sup>. State-led initiatives for surveying ethnic cultural practices however led to another strategy in Sichuan Province. The Yanyuan 盐源 County Cultural Centre carried out surveys in the mid-2000s which led to the identification of many Mosuo (Na) cultural expressions or practices<sup>15</sup>. All of them have been classified on the ICH provincial list, but the dances called *jiacuo* 甲搓 in the naming procedure were both ranked on the Sichuan provincial list in 2007 and national ICH list in 2008, in the category of traditional dances (Ch. *chuantong wudao* 传统舞蹈)<sup>16</sup>.

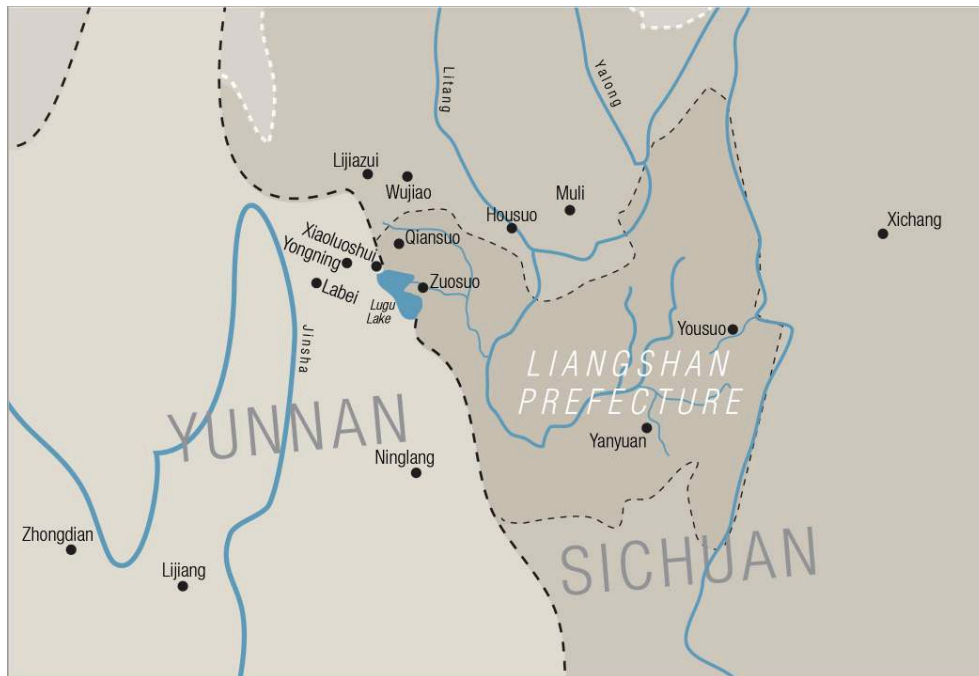
- 16 Scholars have pointed out the direct chain of causality between China’s long tradition of recording folk customs and heritagisation processes surveys (Bodolec 2012; Wang 2018; Bodolec & Obringer 2020). According to the well-documented long-standing state interference in minorities’ cultural affairs (see Trebinjac 2000; Wellens 2012), it is not surprising that heritage is viewed as a new cultural policy of the same order as governing minority nationalities (Shepherd 2006, 2009). Heritage is indeed often seen as China’s international cultural “soft power” (Huang & Sheng 2006; Li 2009), and generally goes hand in hand with the ideology of the “harmonious society” (Ch. *hexie shehui* 和谐社会) promulgated by Hu Jintao (Bodolec 2012, p. 249). It enables the spread of a nationalist, modernising and socialist discourse linking ethnic harmony with Chinese (Han) nation-building goals (Ai 2011, p. 130; Maags & Svensson 2018; Shepherd 2006, 2009, p. 62; Sofield & Li 1998, pp. 370-371).
- 17 UNESCO’s conceptual devices often lead to unique heritage regimes at the national level due to selective or complementary applications (Bendix 2011; Bendix *et al.* 2012). Through heritage narratives, China aims to enhance cultural diversity by highlighting minority heritage and traditional culture to provide new narratives about the past that are suitable for the nation-building process (Ai 2011). Culture (Ch. *wenhua* 文化) and tradition (Ch. *chuantong* 传统), two key words in UNESCO’s heritage policies, are, along with safeguarding, the best narrative tools. They became highly politicised and strategic in justifying cultural policies in China.
- 18 In the Na case, the ICH narratives present their “traditional culture” as ICH according to the criteria of the ICH Law of 2011 (see Bodolec 2012, pp. 254-255, Bodolec & Obringer 2020). Dances are thus presented as “promoting national unity” and “making a positive contribution to the construction of a harmonious society”<sup>17</sup>. Nonetheless, using the term “traditional culture”, one may wonder what exactly is at stake. “Culture” and “tradition” are actually “problem words” used nominally and “very poorly defined” (Lenclud 1987). Moreover, they are inherent to the questions of transmission (Berliner 2010; Geertz 1973, p. 89; Lenclud 1987, 1994; Pouillon 1991, p. 701) and thus query what Hobsbawm and Rangers called the invention of tradition ([1983] 2006). The inhabitants of the destination’s villages are the most concerned by these tourist and heritage situations. The presentation of the singular kinship system of the Na and the social organisation of the two villages studied will highlight the very social fabric that underlies the festivities and dances.



## Two villages under scrutiny

- 19 The Na people usually reckon descents along the mother's line and live in the same house (Cai 1997; Shih 2010). However, multiple house configurations can be observed. Usually, three generations live together, wherein sometimes nearly twenty individuals can live in the same house. The house can be divided if it becomes too crowded (Nru. *zitu*). I argued elsewhere that Na houses are more than a basic social unit of social organisation, they are also a kinship group (Milan 2019, 2021). Hence, people from different houses might belong to the same matrilineage. Individuals are identified by the name of their house, which may be the name of the matrilineage or another name referring to geographic location. Siblings most often live together with the women's offspring. Property is transmitted collectively from one generation to the next. Daily organisation and extraordinary events are often managed by women, while men are responsible for public relations. If genitors do not belong to the same lineage they can invest time, money, and emotions on their offspring (Mattison *et al.* 2014). Fathers can also live with their children, as conjugal ties are increasing. While marriage has become more common since the period of collectivisation, more Na people are getting married in tourism impacted areas. However, the institutionalised visiting system (Nru. *sessee*), whereby men visit women at night and live in their matrilocal houses, remains the main pattern of sexual relations. Depending on their gender equilibria or the people living together, a house can be neolocal, matrilocal, natalocal (Milan 2021).
- 20 The Na people are quite different from the simplified narratives about them. Indeed, succinct tourist and heritage accounts often present them as a remnant of the past, and even as a matriarchal society. This overview of their sociological characteristics is also breaking from the popular misconception that they are a society without fathers or husbands (Cai 1997). These narratives have so well infused popular representations that in the eyes of Han tourists, (Mosuo) Na cultural identity is perceived as stable and almost unchanging, gliding through history sheltered from any influence, cultural contact, and social change. However, the Lugu Lake area is inhabited by many other ethnic groups. Migration patterns and ethnic contingency are such that it is doubtful that the Na have not been influenced and affected by their sociocultural environment. Even in the tourist village of Xiaoluoshui or in Lijiazui, everyday life is more complex.

Figure 1. Map of the broader region where Na people are living, showing the two villages under scrutiny and other important locations



© Barbier-Mueller Museum Cultural Foundation, designed by Helder da Silva

- 21 Xiaoluoshui Village was inhabited in 2013 by 250 Na people distributed in 24 houses. Before 2007, this village was mainly surrounded by arable lands cultivated with potatoes and corn. According to my interlocutors in the village, people were still conducting collective work on a mutual aid basis in 2007 (see Milan 2021). Afterwards, tourism spread, following the successful development of tourism in Luoshui Village in the 1990s and in Lige Village 里格 in the 2000s. At that time, the few hostels were run by outside investors and the locals had to rely on displaying their culture and hosting dinners to benefit from tourism. To attract tourists, the villagers had to rely most of the time on their connections with other villages judged “more traditional” than Lige or Luoshui. If enough visitors come to eat or enjoy the few guesthouse facilities, villagers would hold a party and perform Na dances on the elementary school basketball court. Two years later, in 2009, the number of tourists had increased, due to the availability of new tourist facilities such as guesthouses, still owned by outside entrepreneurs. Some Na houses developed strong networks with Tibetan, Pumi, Naxi and sometimes Na guides from Lijiang and started a dinner hosting business while others started building hotels for their business. These guides brought more tourists from Lijiang to the houses until a contract was signed between Lijiang travel agencies and the village houses. The arrangement ran from 2009 to 2013, until the travel agencies found another, cheaper agreement in another village.
- 22 Lijiazui is a village of the Sichuan Province located in the hinterland of Lugu Lake, a few miles from Yongning Township in northern Yunnan Province. In this village surrounded by mountains, the inhabitants still live from a subsistence agriculture<sup>18</sup>. At an altitude of more than 2700 metres, they cultivate buckwheat or barley, potatoes, corn, and vegetables. However, in their houses, where sometimes more than twenty people live, some are sent to the city or to tourist areas to earn additional, albeit

meagre, income. Young people often told me that life in the village is quite harsh. Between my various visits in 2011 and 2014, the roads that lead to the village were poorly maintained, if at all. Electricity and water facilities were non-existent. However, social organisation was still driven at that time by reciprocity patterns, such as mutual aid between people of the same house, lineage, or even between neighbours and sexual partners for house building, agricultural work, or other purposes, while symbolic exchange was driving most ceremonies and rituals (Milan 2016, 2021). Na people indeed have similar values to what Scott labels as peasants' moral economy, in which "patterns of reciprocity, forced generosity, communal land, and work-sharing helped to even out the inevitable troughs in a family's resources which might otherwise have thrown them" (1976, p. 3). However, Na people's reciprocity systems help to understand the extent to which the economy is embedded in broader relationships (Polanyi 1983).

- 23 Compared to Xiaoluoshui, Lijiazui community life was, as usual, punctuated by many events. Villagers gathered for festivities held to celebrate local events such as the end of a house construction, the Lunar New Year or even a *gutch* ceremony (figs 3-5). Only a few tourists ventured into the area, including the very curious anthropologist that I was, often reduced to this position at first because of the surrounding tourist context, and followed the same patterns of sharing practices. They expressed and reproduced the values associated with this form of ethics of subsistence. Like the "gift" described by Marcel Mauss as a "total social fact" (1923-1924), festivities give insight into a broader set of ideas and local realities, be they economic, social, or cultural. The dances performed in Xiaoluoshui for the tourists did not follow the same pattern, although I will demonstrate some Na-led cultural reinvention. Although villagers performed dances on ceremonies and rituals to celebrate coming of age or weddings, the festivities were always organised for tourists.
- 24 The increasing tourist activity in Xiaoluoshui Village, however, has led the villagers to hire Na from the surrounding villages and the hinterland to meet the demand for tourist hospitality. Some of them came from Lijiazui Village. Young girls were quite favoured for these jobs because they enabled to support the popular representations surrounding the Mosuo (Na), that of a "country of daughters" (Ch. *nü'er guo* 女儿国). With the growing importance that dances have gained in the tourist landscape, many young Na have also learned "the value of their singing and dancing skills" and often leave their villages for other tourist destinations (Blumenfield 2003, p. 492). In Xiaoluoshui, the hiring of young girls to dance in place of villagers too busy running their small home-based hospitality businesses has radically changed the moral economy underlying the dances. From a communal social bond to a performance linked to tourist demand and the market economy valued as heritage, dances are at the heart of sociocultural change. Young women's mobility and sometimes men's give a first insight on the new values underscoring the valorisation of this cultural practice. But let us first examine the dances as performed in the village of Lijiazui following a protection ritual for a house and the comments of the villagers from this village and from Xiaoluoshui Village.

## Dancing ties

### Rites, lyrics and rhythms

- 25 During a winter day in 2013 in Lijiazui, I attended a festivity marking the end of a house construction. During that winter day, house members organised the festivity following a propitiatory ritual led by a Na religious specialist called *daba*. All day long the *daba* practitioner affiliated to the house matrilineage conducted a ritual service to chase away evil spirits<sup>19</sup>. During the day-long ritual, each house sent one of its members to place offerings (tea, alcohol, money) on the fire altar as a welcoming sign. At nightfall, when the ritual was over, the oldest villagers – namely men – were invited inside the house to drink alcohol and eat, while women attended festivities outside. This gender division corresponds to the domestic-oriented society character for which the public sphere is an extension of the domestic one. Women are in charge of the domestic space while men are in charge of public relations, as can be seen in the example. Na women are often the organisers of such events while men are those who publicly hold the event. The gender division is constructed along horizontal brother/sister and vertical mother/son relationships (Weng 2007). Intimate relationships between non-consanguine must be discrete and therefore public male/female relationships are highly compartmentalised. The Na women and men, also waiting in the courtyard, were dressed in their most beautiful “modern” clothes, while the younger boys and girls were wearing the traditional Na clothes, a modest headdress made of horsehair for the girls and a Tibetan hat for the boys.

Figure 2. A *daba* conducting a propitiatory ritual (Lijiazui, January 2013)



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Figure 3. Dancers at a *gutch* festivity (a village in Yongning plain, January 2013)

The wedding couple makes the junction between men and women. The husband wears a Tibetan-style outfit, and the bride follows him in a glittering Na clothes

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- 26 House members raised an altar in the yard in front of the bonfire, around which villagers would later dance. It resembled the main house altar where women sit, named after the hearth god Zabala<sup>20</sup>. The dances are a continuity of the religious rituals but take place in a rather autonomous time, without being totally independent of the moral economy of daily life and religious activity. Sharing practices are in fact at the heart of the festivities and reflect both the secular imperatives of society and the importance of *daba* specialists in daily life. Before beginning dancing, the *daba* blessed the dancers with gestures and psalmody for auspiciously opening the festivities. During the dance time, members of the house welcomed villagers with sweets, cakes, fruit juices and alcohol to show their hospitality and thank them for their gifts. However, the exchange does not stop there, almost all the young Na of the village started arm in arm to sing following the flutist:

Dancers chorus:

*Co bbi bihin ceehin niq; Meco lebbi ta meyi; Leco aendua ji sso yi; Aha bbala meddami; O, co bbi sei; Co bbi sei la gguaq bbi sei; Leco yo, leggua yo*<sup>21</sup>.

[We] say [we] have come to dance; [if you] don't dance, you can't go home; [we will] dance till the rooster crows; Aha bala madami [traditional song chorus]; Oh, let's go dance; Let's go dance and let's go sing; Come and dance, come and sing.

(Song recorded in Lijiazui, January 2012)<sup>22</sup>

- 27 At first glance, this song seems simply to point to the festive character of the dance. However, it does much more than that, as the young Erche (25-year-old villager) explained. He had come to speak to me, surprised that I knew how to sing it<sup>23</sup>. I understood how much the dance described the village's socio-political functioning with his explanations. Erche discussed moral values transmitted in the lyrics. While giving rhythm to the dancers' steps and cadence, it indicates the expected interactional norm between the host and the guests. Visitors will not leave before they have danced and

sung. However, what is really expected is a good hospitality. The hosting house must offer visitors hospitality to seal their integration into the village. After each dance sequence, two or three members of the house or helpers rush to bring the guest alcohol and sweets. On that night, this little customary game between the dancers and the people of the house lasted until late at night. Everybody, especially the dancers, could measure the satisfaction degree by the time spent together, and by the redistribution of sweets and alcohol.

- 28 Dances are corporal techniques, or more precisely movement techniques made of a specific form, gestures and styles and necessarily referring to a particular way of being together (Mauss 1950). Among the Na, they are usually held in the houses' courtyards, where the villagers circulate in a semicircle. Dancers hold each other by interlacing their arms to form a chain. Heads, shoulders, and torsos do not move. Interlocking steps and rolling arms are the basis of the choreography's aesthetic. Bodies are thus tightened one against the other. The right arm is along the body, under the left arm of the previous dancer and so on. The clacking steps give rhythm to the dance. Dances are structured in alternating sung and instrumental sequences. When the flutist weakens intensity, the dancers take up the song and pursue more intensive movements to motivate and wait for him, the flutist, to catch his breath. During long dances, another man can take the flutist's place, and the dancers can have difficulties to follow as the pace accelerates. At this moment, because of the fast pace, arms are frequently unlinked, and some dancing variations are introduced. One can hold someone else by the shoulder (right hand on the right shoulder), which brings the dancers to a faster tempo. Women often escape then, because of their difficulty to follow a faster pace while maintaining what they consider as graceful motions. The dance usually ends with rude but comical steps that make the assembly laugh. Step sequencing is not easy to maintain when the entire chain of dancers moves. Each is free to withdraw from the half-circle or to reintegrate it as they want.

Figure 4. Zabala's altar, the divinity of the hearth standing outside the house for the event and some boys dancing more roughly at the end of the evening (Lijazui, January 2013)



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Figure 5. The younger generation is taking over (Lijazui, January 2013)



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- 29 The most skilled and experienced young men (rarely over thirty) placed first, followed by the youngest. The first dancer followed the flutist with a hand on his shoulder. Then came the young women. The youngest boys and girls (over thirteen) came last. When the experienced dancers needed a rest, the younger generation willingly took over. Children under thirteen, who had not yet had their coming-of-age ceremony, were just

watching, or playing in the courtyard<sup>24</sup>. However, some incursions of young boys in front of young women could disrupt this generational and gendered pattern. This usually occurred when the young people had fully acquired the rhythm. If this action did not maintain the necessary pace ensuring the graceful dance chain, the person was immediately sent back.

- 30 Festivities are always much more than entertainment, as evidenced by the 2018 issue “Éclats de fête” of the French-edited *Socio-anthropologie journal* coordinated by Edith Lallement. Na dances actually provide insight into a broader set of social behaviours concerning gender relations and the political, economic, aesthetic, and symbolic dimensions of life.

## Actions and feedback

- 31 As the evening progressed, young women were also moving forward in the dance circle. They could then entwine their arms with their beloved boys. Although they are visible here (fig. 4), these movements illustrate a more compartmentalised daily life. Between 2012 and 2014, I observed that youths had little opportunity to see each other except during agricultural work, usually mobilising the help of relatives from another house. The main moments they could gather without the disapproval of house members were those during the main village life events (e.g., funerals, Lunar New Year, *gutch* ceremonies, etc.). In any case, dances were always a special timeframe where Na people could transgress bodily habits. Young people attracted to each other could flirt. The physical proximity of the young women and men and the hands’ grabbing were obvious signs of emotional closeness. The comments that the girls made about the love affairs in the village during their meetings were consistent with these observations. Festivities are in this sense a libidinal space where intimate encounters can be observed and are therefore a prelude for starting a nocturnal visit relationship.
- 32 At nightfall, Na men go to their partner’s room. However, initiating a visiting relationship starts with an encounter, which my interlocutors attribute to such moments. During various conversations about intimate relationships, young women as well as young men told me about examples of courtship games: stealing anything from a woman that she does not take back meaning a mutual consent, standing close together as in dances, etc. But despite the transgressions of the daily body habitus, this libidinal space remains discrete. The space-time of the festivities only gives the opportunity to deploy the social norms. Gatherings such as the dances are indeed the continuity of a social organisation for which the visiting system is considered as the “pivot of Mosuo culture” (Shih 2000, p. 701). Shih argues that from the characteristics of matrilineal ideology this sexual institution maintains the matrilineal residential setting and thus what he calls household harmony (Shih 2000, p. 704). Men who circulate to visit women are simply maintaining the social norms that guarantee the matrilineal principle.
- 33 An analogy between dances and society can even help to understand the special “quality of action” of the former and consequently the relational patterns of the latter (Houseman 2006). The very effectiveness of dances as rites lies in their capacity to rehearse and reactivate with authority the organised, social, and symbolic space (Houseman 2002). Their spatial deployment presents this homogeneity of atmosphere and action, rendering them like the relational framework through which community



values are enacted by villagers. By dancing, Na villagers are (re-)creating a special quality of relatedness between villagers and the hosting house, or rather between the village houses. Sweets and alcohol offered to dancers, and gifts offered by dancers' houses during the ritual day, seal their place into the village.

- 34 Every time I observed and participated in dances in Lijiazui, I was struck by how much they provide a snapshot of reciprocity patterns governing relationships between houses considered as a collective person. Interactions between villagers and house members remind and generate sharing values, gifts as well as return obligations and mutual aid. Their efficiency is such that the dances fully participate, as a continuous moment of ceremonies and rituals, to permanently create and recreate social bonds. In this sense, the dances mirror the Na subsistence ethic. The social imaginary of the Na takes shape through exchange practices that will continue with other events throughout the existence of the house. In this sense, the festivities are like an institution, animated by a moral economy of sharing and mutual aid practices. That is to say that the dances are generators of socio-political elements. They are structuring and are structured by the dominant realities that weigh on the villages. These social issues are also carriers of subjectivity, such as the cultural behaviours expected and understood by all villagers. Their actions as individuals, houses and village communities are part of a social whole that could be understood as their tradition.
- 35 My trips back and forth between the two villages between 2012 and 2014 allowed my interlocutors to comment on what they considered culture and tradition (conversing in Chinese) is while asking me questions about the practices I was observing. Na folks who are experiencing new livelihood opportunities tied to tourism, often refer in their own language to Lijiazui dances as traditional (Nru. *deelo*). One informant from the lakeside village told me one day in July 2012: "If you go to Lijiazui, you will see our traditions. There are no tourists there". This sentence reflects the daily use of the term to comment on changes they are experiencing, but also refers to a kind of nostalgia they feel. Comments on Lugu Lake cultural life transformations were also common at Lijiazui. One Lijiazui *daba* told me in January 2013: "You should come back for the New Year, because here we dance real dances. It is not like in your village by the lake. There they dance for the tourists". At that time, they only used the term "tradition" to compare the dances of the two villages – I was asking them in Mandarin. They readily punctuated their answers about practices that could be considered traditional with sentences like "that's how we did it". But when I asked them in Na language to "teach me the tradition" (Nru. *deelo taesoq*), the word conveyed other meanings and among them the most important: to know the Na tradition is to have good manners, to behave correctly.
- 36 An especially striking contrast could, however, be observed in the early 2010s between rituals and songs as practised by villagers among themselves in the village of Lijiazui and the performances staged for tourists on the shores of Lugu Lake. Despite a slightly distinctive style, the Lugu Lake dances are not meaningless. Tradition has even gradually become a term used to present the dances to tourists.

## Taking hold of cultural encounter

### Dancing for tourists

- 37 From 2011 to 2013 in Xiaoluoshui, Yang house courtyard hosted hundreds of tourists every evening. Villagers had agreed on this place, much more suitable for performing dances than the basketball court of the school. Whatever the weather conditions, the courtyard was never empty, and the program was always the same. I had the opportunity to observe and participate in these festivities as repeatedly as the Na did during my various stays in the village. Every evening after helping my host with the reception and service of tourists, we would go to Yang's house. Ama, the grandmother of the house, only went there for special occasions, and with other women of her age. She attended the festivities only for the Lunar New Year's (Nru. *kushe*) festivities, when thirteen-year-olds celebrate their coming-of-age ceremony. During this traditional family time, tourists are more numerous to travel to Lugu Lake and the festivities do not stop anymore in Xiaoluoshui. The same goes for the *gut* ceremonies (like weddings) that used to take place far from the tourist areas, but now some Na bring in tourists to participate.
- 38 Whatever the festivities were, two men scrupulously recorded the number of entrances to the big door of Yang's house every evening. For a fee of 10 to 20 RMB (about 1 or 2 euros at that time) they paid, tourists would dance, sing, and take pictures with the locals, especially women. The Na women were dressed in colourful and sparkling habits, and their heads were adorned with a colossal and brilliant headdress (fig. 7). Na women often overly made up their "dark" complexion with a white foundation, red lipstick, and false eyelashes to imitate the Chinese criteria of beauty that the tourists expected. The two men also had to count the Na villagers present for the dance. Each house had to send a representative to the dance, and also had to take turns lighting the fire around which they took place. The inhabitants collectively agreed with the village chief on these rules. If people failed to comply, they were not compensated. Many women were busy welcoming tourists to their houses and hired Na women from other villages to replace them. Whether it is in a tourist place or not, villagers are the representatives of their house.
- 39 While waiting for the progressive arrival of the tourists, people were welcomed to the sound of large speakers playing Na music sung in Chinese. Then, a man from the village in the role of the speaker would begin to explain the course of the evening. Under his direction, the flutist and the dancers would dance the same dances as in Lijiazui, except that they were significantly different with regards to gestures. In fact, dancers have modified some sequences to mobilise more spectacularly the upper body, torso, and arms (fig. 6). Bodies were more often able to break away. Holding other dancers' shoulders was more frequent than intertwining arms. Wide arm movements ended with ornamental hand gestures resembling the slow and graceful gestures of traditional Chinese operas. This new choreographic arrangement met various expectations of Na dancers. Most of them, however, specified that they had levelled these modifications on Naxi dances in Lijiang. Some Na who worked in the city as guides in the middle of the 2000s suggested imitating the new gestures of these dances because of the astonishing tourist success. However, one of the village dance leaders, a young man around 25-years old, often leading the dance, told me in 2009 that these

new gestures were largely influenced by his sister's suggestions. She experienced some success in singing and dancing when she was a member of a Mosuo women's trio that recorded some CDs. According to him, this way of dancing attracted more tourists because it was more adapted to their aesthetic criteria.

Figure 6. A final sequence of Na performance for tourists (Xiaoluoshui, July 2011)



The choreography does not exist in Lijiazui. In the background women wear very elaborate and glittering headdresses

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- 40 After the dance performance, the speaker usually invited tourists to join the circle. Under his guidance, the half-circle quickly became a dense, spiralling hodgepodge. A sound system was substituted for the traditional Na flute. No matter how loud the speakers were blaring, the speaker kept telling them how to perform the steps. After experiencing folkloric “traditional” dances, the Na invited the tourists to dance Mosuo “disco”. Na people use Mosuo cultural identity to promote what they consider a modern dance, even though many minority nationalities dance modern rhythms like disco. Many tourists were amazed at the bouncy dance steps and seemed particularly surprised to see Na dancers performing this modern dance. Finally, the speaker would always end up dividing Na dancers and tourists on either side of the bonfire to start a singing contest. The dancers began with a song in Narua to which the tourists responded with a well-known Chinese song. Na dancers would then mobilise Chinese songs from other minority groups (especially Tibetans) to which the tourists responded with well-known classical and popular Chinese songs, still under the speaker's guidance. The singing game would continue for a dozen songs. Tourists were enjoying the show so much that they heavily applauded<sup>25</sup>. Each time they seemed surprised that the “backward and primitive” Na could sing the songs praising the glorious China.

Figure 7. Messy dance circles with tourists (Xiaoluoshui, July 2009)



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### From exotic to erotic representations

- 41 Women and men dancers were usually in their twenties, but if a house had no choice its dancer may be older. Younger people generally did not participate, except for the annual events of village life like Lunar New Year's Day. However, they waited longer than their thirteenth birthday to take part in parties. Na dancers, especially women, were often solicited by tourists to take pictures with them. However, women also attracted unwanted attention. The erotic and exotic representations were always at the core of interactions with tourists. For instance, during evening performances, male guests usually insistently asked Na women if they practise the visiting system and whether they could take advantage of it. In reaction to such unwanted interactions, women had taken to insulting them in Narua, using an equivalent term to the English slang to shut someone up (Nru. *makrajua*), while harbouring a beaming smile...
- 42 Because the tourists paid the entrance to the festivities, the dancers feel like they had to make good impression: resorting to their own language, which the tourists would not understand, was a way for the female dancers to react to what they perceived as (sexual) harassment, thereby displaying their agency. Some tourists would also try to scratch their hands to flirt: scratching (Nru. *ghuaeghuae*) hands metaphorically means to flirt with someone. Even if some Na told me this used to be a discreet flirting practice, it rather seems to be a story told to tease the tourists' curiosity on Na erotica. In fact, Na women did not really "flirt" anymore with Na men in this manner. They were mainly flirting through cell phones. I also mentioned above that grabbing hands (not scratching) during dances was a sign of emotional closeness. But as these examples show, Na dances, and especially male tourists' interactions with female dancers, were imbued with fantasies about Na sexual practices.

- 43 Mosuo commodification of cultural identity is part of a complex representational space endowed with the aura of a country of women/daughters (Ch. *nü'er guo*), with reference to the historical female queendom (Ch. *nü guo* 女国) recorded in the Tang dynasty annals (Walsh 2005, pp. 464-465). This name, “country of daughters”, from the Chinese records, appeared in the 2000s as a brand of the Lugu Lake area to attract tourists (Walsh 2005). The tourism industry has actually greatly benefited from the 16<sup>th</sup> century popular fantasy novel of Wu Cheng'en, *The Journey to the West* (*Xi you ji* 西游记, Wu 1977-1983), to broadcast nationwide hypothetical links between the ancient women's queendom and the country of daughters (Walsh 2005). The same goes for the Gyalrong ethnic group, a subgroup belonging to the Tibetan minority nationality, studied by the indigenous scholar Jinba Tenzin, where a fantasy of matriarchy is instrumentalised to attract tourists (Tenzin 2013). To complete that picture, idyllic love was valued as a cultural trait through the work of the indigenous scholar Lamu Gatusa on Na folk stories, songs, and poetry as well as Bai Hua 白桦's famous novel written in 1988, *The Remote Country of Women* (Bai 1994). The former has nurtured a romantic picture of men practising the long-distance trading expeditions to the point that they “reenter the imaginary of the Mosuo as adventurers and seducers” (Walsh 2005, p. 466), while the latter features an impossible love between a Han and a Mosuo woman.
- 44 Of particular interest, and regardless of its sociological meaning, was the Na visiting system. A suggestive iconography often portrays many minority nationalities across China as feminine, wearing colourful costumes, dancing, singing, and picking fruit (Gladney 1994; Schein 1997; Frangville 2007; Allès 2011, p. 247). These representations have notably allowed for the expression of sexual issues that would have been deemed non-moral if characters had been Han, as Vanessa Frangville has argued regarding postsocialist cinema (2007). Tourist fantasies therefore often portray the Na women as being “Freely available for sex, to whom present lovers have no future commitments, or of a land where women rule” (Walsh 2005, p. 450). The Na, aware of the tourist projections, sometimes played at titillating the tourists according to these erotic representations, without responding to their fantasies (Walsh 2005).

### Tourist tricks and new aspirations

- 45 Songs and dances are so powerful and effective in today's China that minority nationalities use these simplifications of cultural identities for their own purposes, thus showing that Na people are not passive subjects. Eager to transform their economic and social conditions and reverse the stigma of “backward” and “primitive” associated with their Mosuo cultural identity, many consent in performing tactically what tourists are looking for. They indeed act as a “mimesis”, a notion suggested in the Sherpa case to explain a performed virtual identity for Europeans (Adams 1996; Walsh 2005). Keenly aware of what they pretend to be for tourist consumption, Na people instrumentalise festivities to negotiate their ethnic identity and their social positions. Onstage, Na people use conventional patterns of speech – i.e., folk songs, anthropological and official discourse – for tourists that are mainly urban Han to fit their expectations about Na's alterity. According to Scott's understanding of the subaltern mentality, “the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” are public transcripts (1992, p. 2). For instance, during the singing joust the Na people were mobilising songs praising Mao and praising national unity.

- 46 Na people indeed use festivities as a “serious game”<sup>26</sup> (Ortner 1996, 2006, p. 5) to communicate values, and activate their own discourse about themselves. Festivities thus become a “public arena” In the public arena, there are power relations between strategic groups defending different material or symbolic interests that unfold in the relationship and specific positions of local power. Following Cefai, the public arena is also a “place of combat and a performance scene” (Cefai 2002, p. 53). China’s action for ICH clearly expresses its will to create a new space of public action (Wang 2018). I therefore use the term in a double sense, a scene for direct interaction but also a problematic virtual situation that has to be resolved (Cefai 2002). Throughout the festivities, the Na people try to prove to tourists that they are their contemporaries. Paradoxically, they represent themselves like the evolutionist discourse portrayed them and within the tourist erotic and exotic representations to shape their future in the national political and economic fields. Within the power imbalance, Na agents calculate that the extra income can improve their “quality” (Ch. *suzhi* 素质) to make a living.
- 47 All the villagers often repeated to me that the tricks of tourism should not come to the ears of tourists. Whether it is the scarves they sell pretending to have woven them themselves, the stories they tell about the lack of fathers or husbands, the visiting system according to the dominant metanarratives or the onstage identity they perform during festivities, tourists must believe in the cultural and social specificities of the always friendly smiling Mosuo (Na). However, as Zhuoma Latcuo, a young woman in her thirties in 2013 told me, Na people were numerous to feel tired of this showcase. Compared to the Lijiazui dances often described as traditional, they are aware, like Zhuoma Latcuo, that dances are now only for tourists and of the changing values and meaning of dances. However, they presented the Na dances as traditional to the tourists.
- 48 Tourism has become a new livelihood opportunity that improves the villagers’ living conditions. Many often told me that one of the advantages of tourism is that they can go to school, access hospitals, electricity, and water facilities. Some young Na people, eighteen-year-old men have left the villages to work in China’s theme parks and to take advantage of their dancing talents. Zhaxi, for example, left Xiaoluoshui for the Shenzhen theme park “to see the face of the world” (Ch. *jian shimian* 见世面). Others may be hired at Lige Village cultural centre, located on the Yunnan shore of Lugu Lake, to perform a modern dance show. Sometimes dancers come from other regional minority nationalities. Here Mosuo (Na) culture is displayed according to ICH main elements and with many romantic clichés around the purity of Lugu Lake and Na love, and customary practices represented in a folkloric way, etc. Younger people are indeed often enthusiastic to dance and use their dancing skills to earn money. For this generation, dance, however, has less of a sense of community ties and more of individual achievement.
- 49 At the village level, if the houses still worked together, each one would send a person to dance, which ensured attractive festivities, or bring logs for the fire. However, each house managed its own success. Their guides’ networks are quite different. Some could accommodate up to 10 groups of eight, nine or ten tourists per night, while others none. A competition between the houses to attract tourists existed. Some of the houses have not hesitated to sell off the prices to attract the regular guides of other houses. Like the concurrence between houses, dances are dis-embedded from traditional

cultural logic of reciprocity. Hence, a new moral economy frames the sociocultural life of Xiaoluoshui Village. As cultural practices are enhanced at the national level, the values surrounding social behaviour are now linked to the market economy.

- 50 Across China, not only dances, but also songs, have become the most effective means of presenting different ethnic cultural traditions of a unified multinational state (Mueggler 2002), as observed at the opening ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. However, the valorisation of the traditional culture of minority nationalities raises questions about the very local meaning that national minorities may give to their cultural practices as well as to the very words of tradition and culture.

## Cultural expressions under the spotlight

### Meaning gaps: about cultural tradition

- 51 Dances performed at Lugu Lake are presented according to a “pseudo-culturalist” angle (Grillot 2001, p. 71; Lavoie 1986). This is to say, locals draw their repertoire of actions and representations into the *minzu* (ethnic) cultural and “traditional” database. This process known as folklorisation is a “the processes of selection of the most visual cultural particularities of minorities to make their ‘promotion’” and that leads to homogenise cultural markers so to appear immutable for commodification of the local culture (Grillot 2001, p. 71; Lavoie 1986). With heritagisation processes, folklore became everywhere around the world the prerogative of official cultural identity. The latter have the particularity, as Babadzan asserts, of establishing “a relationship to culture that is uniquely modern, without equivalent in traditional societies” (Babadzan 2001, p. 5).
- 52 If exoticisation and eroticisation processes sold Mosuo culture and gendered practices as a local renewable resource of sorts (Walsh 2005), heritagisation processes promoted their “primitive” custom as cultural tradition. Chinese tourists were bound to see in these characteristics the unique cultural identity of the Na. However, the dances, presented as a cultural tradition, have been associated with the idea of immutability, which carries romantic or ethnocentric prejudices. The online presentation of these dances illustrates these presentations. Named and recorded as *jiacuo* for the ICH, the etymology of the word dance is presented as follows: “*ja*” which would mean “beautiful” (Ch. *meihao* 美好), and “*cuo*” 搓 which would mean “dance” in Mandarin. However, a linguistic approach indicates that *jiacuo* simply means “to dance” (Michaud 2018, p. 34), as the translation of the lyrics above also shows. Highlighting these differences shows how far the institutional necessities of heritagisation are from the meaning that the Na give to dances. In other words, while dances are meant to structure the social world as well as reflect it for the Na, they are presented as ICH very appropriately for the romantic and aesthetic (beautiful) consumption of the tourist experience (Zhu 2018).
- 53 Most of the time, whether in Chinese or English, “tradition” is a word used without a definition, and heritage narratives are not the least of it. Heritage narratives about Na dances are clearly part of “an effort to rehabilitate the past as ‘tradition’”, following in China “a complex product of decades-long struggle between rival modes of imagining the past” (i.e., local, and state-led) (Mueggler 2002). For instance, Na dances are presented on China ICH website as “a living fossil of primitive song and dance art”

linked to “the primitive *daba* religion (Ch. *dabajiao* 达把教), production, hunting and war”<sup>27</sup>. According to this narrative, the Na people are invariably primitive and backward people who must climb the ladder of social evolution if they are ever to become like the Han majority. There is no mention of the reciprocity pattern and social bonds linked to the dance. But for the Na, dances are considered a tradition (Nru. *deelo*), which means “to know the custom” or “to have good manners”. My informants thus just explained to me that the dances are simply “the way they do”. The same is true for “culture”. In Narua, there is no word for culture. However, people’s conception of “culture” is also about everyday practices for acting in the world. They thus also use the term *deelo*, “to know the custom” or “to have good manners”.

- 54 Between 2007 and 2014, I often naively asked people of different ages from the two villages about their culture in Chinese. Many just answered that they have no culture. As a synonym of civilisation (Ch. *wenming* 文明), *wenhua* (culture) expresses a moral hierarchy, a valuation and judgment between what is *wenming* or *wenhua* and what is not. Both are conveying a meaning of civilised and educated. Besides the cross-cultural challenge for a young anthropologist such as myself, I understood with their answers that they have well incorporated this hierarchy, consistent with how they are considered on the social evolutionary scale of ethnic classification. A *daba* specialist even told me, as a practitioner mindful of the official line, that local religious rituals are superstitions (Ch. *mixin* 迷信), a term especially used in Mao’s times to level people towards socialist goals.
- 55 Young people of Lijiazui sometimes told me that they have no culture because they consider themselves to have “vulgar or low qualities” (Ch. *suzhi bi/di* 素质鄙/低). That was their argument to explain to me why they wanted to leave the village in order to work as dancers or elsewhere in tourism areas and urban cities. The term *suzhi*, which conveys the meanings of education, has indeed spread among the Na. Those who were looking for job opportunities but did not reside in the Lugu Lake area said that they needed to level up their qualities to the tourism market: business skills, ability to get by, speaking well, etc. Having “qualities” can be perceived as a synonym for “culture” in their explanations, in the sense of “being educated” but also in the sense of self-development joining economic goals and entrepreneurship (Anagnost 2004; Kipnis 2007). After all, to experience living and working in tourist areas or urban cities is an opportunity to become “more modern and civilised”, according to the historical development narrative.
- 56 In Lijiazui, where 13 *daba* were still practising in 2013, while there were none in Lugu Lake, the younger generation was still training to become *daba*. But in Xiaoluoshui, they are caught with the tourist market and lacked interest to follow the teaching, as the young Zhaxi told me. Dancing skills were much more attractive to them. Valued in the market as “culture”, much more than *daba* practices, which, according to the official discourse, are supposed to be linked to dances, the dances represent a new modern opportunity to level up their “qualities” and their social conditions.
- 57 With this new scope, “culture” within the expression of ICH was understood by my interlocutors in a minimal way. The Na people were nevertheless more numerous to use the ICH rhetoric since heritage inflation. On social networks, young Na and entrepreneurs now often post about local “culture” and “heritage” with the hashtag #feyi to reap the benefits of tourism. In 2021 for instance, to promote his restaurant, the



owner posted an online a message that said that local dumplings were Mosuo's ICH, like dances, when dumplings are not a local culinary speciality at all...

### What about transmission?

- 58 As Blumenfield noticed for weaving tradition in Walabi Village, ICH could represent a source of pride and local empowerment (2018). Despite official protection efforts, the market's vagaries can sometimes perpetuate inequalities (see also Blumenfield 2018, pp. 175, 183). She earlier noticed some resilience in preserving Na culture (especially weaving) but explains how much "Indigenous knowledge among locals has been influenced by several major changes in recent years" (2003, p. 493). This is what happened in Xiaoluoshui, despite the efforts of villagers to thwart the commercial practices of guides and agencies. The competition between the houses showed a deviation from the established system of reciprocity (Milan 2021) and a change in social organisation (Milan 2019).
- 59 In China, scholars argue that heritage cultural policies are due to the younger generation's lack of knowledge and indifference towards their heritage (Liu 2006, p. 27). Liu pointed out the Cultural Revolution's disruptions, modernisation, and even the spread of Western celebrations (Christmas, Valentine's Day, etc.) to justify such arrangements (Liu 2006, p. 27). This type of argument can be seen as a justification for China's current heritage regime. Following the ICH Convention, which makes the transmission and participation of communities a fundamental principle of heritage identification (UNESCO 2003; Bortolotto 2011, 2015), China developed "bearer" designation processes for safeguarding ICH. But there are significant differences between provinces and even communities due to the *guanxi* system<sup>28</sup> (Blumenfield 2018, p. 172; Maags 2018). In the Na case, only one man living in Sichuan was designated as the official "bearer", which forces us to ask: can one man be the transmitter of a collective practice?
- 60 Dances cannot be performed without their federating context and the villagers as a whole, whether in tourist situations or not. Transmission patterns are passed from one generation to the next. Information passes from individual to individual by social collective learning mechanisms such as imitations, teaching, or language. I mentioned how young people turning thirteen learn the steps by informally following the lead of their elders during the first dance they can join. The means of transmission are oral and the ritual contexts, the places, and times when tradition is "communicated", are therefore intimate parts of transmission, as are the village and family-based transmission patterns. In other words, dances-transmission patterns also mirror the importance of social ties. One might thus ask again: how could one "bearer" transmit a practice learned collectively? As Robert Shepherd argues, heritage policies can also conflict with cultural and social values (2009). The Na dances case is therefore also questioning if the prestige and advantages linked to this new category of transmitter are not, in the end, an integral part of the commodification of the traditional ethnic traditional culture?
- 61 Since young people from Lijiazui relocated to tourist areas to earn money for their house, they learned simultaneously how dances can be transformed into skills for developing tourism in their villages. I discovered on social networks that since 2017, the villagers of Lijiazui have developed similar services to those in Xiaoluoshui. Now

they perform dances for tourists too and welcome them to their typical houses. The heritagisation of a cultural expression that has become a tourist attraction calls for new ways of transmitting customs, skills, etc. The people of Lijiazui Village have learned a lot from their counterparts in Lugu Lake, including that the latter's participation in tourism has transformed their social conditions. As the villagers began to perform dances suitable for tourism exploitation, many older women who did not speak Chinese seemed wary. One thing is certain, in this village, conflicts like those observed at Lugu Lake with previous practices are emerging.

## Conclusion

- 62 Throughout the article, I demonstrate that the very words of UNESCO to value ICH, i.e., culture and tradition, are rather vague notions. The case of the Na dances, for example, gives three ways of understanding what tradition is. On the one hand, in Chinese, “tradition” (*chuantong*) is a word that is used as a tool for heritage narratives that the state has been quick to instrumentalise. The term “tradition” in fact makes it possible to play with words and to produce new narratives about the past to build national unity. Cultural practices, once depreciated during the Cultural Revolution, are thus valued. Tradition is, however, in the Na language, a word that merges with the vague idea of culture and describes the way they have (always) done things, and even a synonym for sociocultural *savoir-faire*. With the expansion of ICH narratives, tradition, as a Chinese word, has become a synonym for culture that is particularly well suited to the UNESCO device. The Na, on the other hand, do not have a word for culture in Na language. They understand the word culture in Chinese as something similar to the ladder of civilisation they have to climb.
- 63 Since heritage fever certifies and beautifies cultural practices for commercial purposes, a new kind of cultural reproduction is at stake. The modes of transmission inherent in cultural practices are animated by new objectives stemming from this imposed framework, without being exempted from the conceptual universe of the Na. The Na people actually use the festivities to communicate about themselves. They have thus become a public arena for contesting, while instrumentalising, the cultural representations that conform to the evolutionary discourse. The Na people also negotiate their ethnic identity to carve out a place for themselves in the modernist agenda of the state. The Mosuo (Na) cultural identity, represented in dances, has become both a source of pride and a source of improved living conditions.
- 64 This new framework, however, is unable to maintain the social efficacy or cultural meanings of the Na dances. Using the framework of moral economy, this paper shows the opposing logic of commodification and the reciprocity pattern. Heritage, as a strategy for maintaining tourism, has clearly impacted the values and norms of Na dances. The Na are hence subject to an interactional framework between the state and minority nationalities of the same order as the civilising and modernizing project. Heritage narratives and tourism are governance strategies that aim, through cultural diversity, to develop the social and economic qualities of minority nationalities so that they contribute to the GDP.

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## APPENDIXES



## Interlinear gloss

<b>1st interlinear gloss</b>							
IPA segment (no tone)	tro	bi	pi- <sup>h</sup>	tʰu- <sup>h</sup>	ni		
Narua orthography	co	bba	bilin	ceehin	niq		
Word gloss (Eng)	dance	go	say-nom	come-nom	cop		
Word gloss (Chin)	跳舞	去	说的	来的	是		
Narua sentence	Co bbi bilin ceehin niq						
Sentence trans (Eng)	(We) say (we) have come to dance						
Sentence trans (Chin)	(我们) 说要来跳舞的						
<b>2nd interlinear gloss</b>							
IPA segment (no tone)	ma-tʰo	lmi bi	ʔo	ma- ji			
Narua orthography	meco	lebba	ta	meyi			
Word gloss (Eng)	neg-dance	return-go	proh	neg-do			
Word gloss (Chin)	不跳	回去	别	不做			
Narua sentence	Meco lebba ta meyi						
Sentence trans (Eng)	(If you) don't dance you can't go home						
Sentence trans (Chin)	不跳的话, 不能回去						
<b>3rd interlinear gloss</b>							
IPA segment (no tone)	la-tʰo	æ tiv	tutu	zo	ji		
Narua orthography	leco	aendha	ji	sso	yi		
Word gloss (Eng)	accom-dance	rooster-crow	put	should	do		
Word gloss (Chin)	跳舞	鸡叫	放	要	做		
Narua sentence	Leco aendha ji sso yi						
Sentence trans (Eng)	(We will) dance till the rooster crows						
Sentence trans (Chin)	要跳到鸡叫						
<b>4th interlinear gloss</b>							
IPA segment (no tone)	a ha	ba la	im dn mu				
Narua orthography	aha	bbala	maednam				
Word gloss (Eng)		(traditional song)	alan				
Word gloss (Chin)		(民歌)	阿哥啊				
Narua sentence	Aha bala maednam						
Sentence trans (Eng)	Aha bala madami [traditional song chorus]						
Sentence trans (Chin)	阿哈巴拉玛达咪【传统歌词】						
<b>5th interlinear gloss</b>							
IPA segment (no tone)	o	tʰo	ba	se			
Narua orthography	o	co	bba	sei			
Word gloss (Eng)	oh	dance	go	perf (dialect variant)			
Word gloss (Chin)	哦	来	去	了			
Narua sentence	O, co bbi sei						
Sentence trans (Eng)	Oh, let's go dance						
Sentence trans (Chin)	哦, (我们) 去跳舞						
<b>6th interlinear gloss</b>							
IPA segment (no tone)	tʰo	bi	se	lo	gvr	bi	se
Narua orthography	co	bba	sei	la	gguq	bba	sei
Word gloss (Eng)	dance	go	perf (dial var.)	and	sing	go	perf (dialect var.)
Word gloss (Chin)	来	去	了	和	唱歌	去	了
Narua sentence	Co bba sei la gguq bbi sei						
Sentence trans (Eng)	Let's go dance and let's go sing						
Sentence trans (Chin)	去跳舞和去唱歌						
<b>7th interlinear gloss</b>							
IPA segment (no tone)	la-tʰo	jo	la-gvr	jo			
Narua orthography	leco	yo	leggua	yo			
Word gloss (Eng)	accom-dance	come	accom-sing	come			
Word gloss (Chin)	跳舞	来	唱歌	来			
Narua sentence	Leco yo, leggua yo						
Sentence trans (Eng)	Come and dance, come and sing						
Sentence trans (Chin)	来跳舞, 来唱歌						

## NOTES

1. I would like to thank A. Dalles, C. Jacquemoud, T. Bytyqi & the anonymous reviewers for their insights on this article. I am also grateful to the members of the Barbier-Muller Foundation, Laurence Mattet and Helder Da Silva, for providing me a map and the rights to reproduce the photographs (from Milan 2016).
2. Ethnic tourism “is marketed to the public in terms of the ‘quaint’ customs of indigenous and often exotic peoples” (Smith 1989, p. 4).
3. Throughout the paper, I distinguish Na and Mosuo ethnic identities. I use the former as an endonym from the local language. The second one is used as a cultural brand corresponding to the official ethnic identity. They use it when speaking in Chinese. Thus, when I refer to heritage labels or the cultural identity promoted by tourism, I use the term “Mosuo”. When I refer to their own way of calling themselves, I use Na. For clarity, I will guide the reader using Mosuo (Na) or Na (Mosuo) to distinguish my usage, while emphasizing the inextricable link between their endonym and their official ethnic identity.
4. Romanised Narua terms are written according to the recent dictionary produced by Alexis Michaud (2018) which borrows from Dobbs and Yan’s orthography system (2018). I will indicate Narua terms with its ISO 639-3 code: NRU (Nru).
5. These reforms were put in place in 1978 by Deng Xiaoping to make China a great economic power. Called “reform and opening” in Chinese (Ch. *gaige kaifang* 改革开放), they are notably characterised by the economic opening towards the West and an unprecedented economic growth.
6. The region is particularly ethnically diverse. Power positions related to tourism or governing institutions are generally held by people from Han, Yi and Naxi *minzu* (ethnicity), depending on

the level of decision-making. Ninglang, for example, is a Yi Autonomous County under the administration of Lijiang City, which is predominantly Naxi with a strong Han presence. Only local posts in the Lugu Lake area are held by Na, as in Yongning Township. As in Lijiang, the tourism sector is monopolized by the Han, but actors such as agency owners, and guides, can be from Naxi *minzu* or Na, or even from other regional minority nationality groups such as Pumi, Tibetans, etc.

7. Ch. *guojiaji fengjing mingsheng* 国家级风景名胜. Tourism facilities and sightseeing offers are the main part of the criteria of this Chinese grading system.

8. Although the whole area is not a theme park, guides take tourists to the main sightseeing spots. Repeated visits to the lake with guides and a visit to the Kunming theme park confirm Tim Oakes' assertion.

9. This article is focusing on the latest trend of heritagisation that impacts Na (Mosuo) daily life. It thus started from the 2003 UNESCO Convention. However, heritage is not a new concept in China (Blumenfield & Silverman 2013; Fresnais 2001; Nyiri 2006, p. 51; Zhang 2003). For an overview of historical links between Chinese study of folk culture and the first policies combining state ideology on minority nationalities with previous cultural policies, see Blumenfield & Silverman 2013, Bodolec 2012 (pp. 253-254) and Wang 2018.

10. Officials at all levels were called to protect Chinese cultural heritage and to nominate local ICH for inclusion in China's ICH lists compiled every few years (Guowuyuan 2005).

11. On April 8, 2018, the PRC inaugurated this ministry dedicated to Culture and Tourism for closer management.

12. The *daba* are ritual specialists who perform funeral, healing, and house protection rituals, and connect to divine or malevolent forces and ancestors through mythical songs. *Daba* are always men. No woman can be a *daba*. The Yunnan Provincial ICH Protection Centre and Yunnan Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, two institutions working together, were in charge of Mosuo ICH (Ch. Yunnan sheng feiwuzhi wenhua yichan baohu zhongxin 云南省非物质文化遗产保护中心; Yunnan sheng wenhua he luyouting 云南省文化和旅游厅).

13. For an ethnography and a discussion about issues surrounding heritage making of weaving as a Na tradition in this village, see Blumenfield 2018.

14. Ch. *Lijiang shi feiwuzhi wenhua yichan* 丽江市非物质文化遗产 ( <http://lijiangfyw.wenlvlijiang.com/index.php/r.html?r=8>, accessed in July 2022) ; Ch. *Yongning xiang Wenquan cun Walabie Naxizu (Mosuoren) chuantong wenhua baohuqu* 永宁乡温泉村瓦拉别纳西族(摩梭人)传统文化保护区 ([http://www.ynich.cn/view.php?id=1175&cat\\_id=11111](http://www.ynich.cn/view.php?id=1175&cat_id=11111), accessed in May 2019).

15. This centre is located outside Lugu Lake area in Yanyuan City, in the autonomous prefecture of Mounts Liangshan (Ch. *Liangshan Yizu zizhizhou Yanyuan xian wenhuaguan* 凉山彝族自治州盐源县文化馆). Other local customs or cultural practices such as the matrilineal system, the rite of passage to adulthood (Ch. *Mosuoren chengdingli* 摩梭人成丁礼) and the "turning around the lake" (Ch. *zhuan hu jie* 转湖节) festival were classified at the provincial level. Mosuo clothing, *ahabala* songs 阿哈巴拉调, and *sulima jiu* 苏里马酒wine brewing were the latest ones added by the Sichuan Folk Culture Research Centre (Ch. *Sichuan sheng shehui kexue zhongdian yanjiu jidi minjian wenhua yanjiu zhongxin* 四川省社会科学重点研究基地民间文化研究中心).

16. Na dances became the only one Na (Mosuo) cultural practice to become a national intangible culture to be preserved (<http://ichsichuan.cn/scfy/index.php/home/Inherit/Inherits/id/1024>, accessed in May 2019) and <http://www.ihchina.cn/Article/Index/detail?id=13053>, accessed in June 2021). For Sichuan ICH dates see also <https://www.sc.gov.cn/10462/c109578/2022/6/10/3f9888ee9cc24d3abb8028d9f5af4583.shtml>, accessed on 1 October 2022.

17. Ch. *zengjin minzu tuanjie* 增进民族团结; *goujian hexie shehui zuochu jiji de gongxian* 构建和谐社  
会作出积极的贡献 (<http://www.ihchina.cn/Article/Index/detail?id=13053>, accessed in June  
2021).
18. The village has been welcoming tourists for the last five years.
19. In Lijiazui there were 13 *daba* specialists practising in 2013. Almost every lineage comprising  
several houses could rely on its own *daba* to conduct rituals.
20. In Lijiazui, the main room of the houses (Nru. *xximi*) is still constructed with two fireplaces,  
one is for women, the other for men and guests.
21. Narua transcription rules are still not normalised and a huge language discrepancy between  
villages and sometimes speakers of the same village is observed. Roselle Dobbs graciously  
provided assistance in the transcription of this song based on the spelling system she developed  
with Yan Xiong (2018).
22. See the interlinear gloss in the Appendix for a complete annotation of the transcript.
23. I learned the song step by step with the help of the women and children of my hosting house,  
each time we were going to the festivities.
24. The year they turn thirteen, they would be able to join them and learn step by step, by  
imitation, how to dance. The coming-of-age ceremony, named the wearing of the skirt  
(Nru. *taegi*) or the pants (Nru. *lhikhuagi*), happens in the early morning hours of the first day of  
the year. On that day, the children become young adults and have the full right to wear the  
“traditional” festive clothes. That evening, as I observed in 2013, they could then dance with  
other young villagers at events held to celebrate their ceremonial transition. The young people  
who met on the central square of the village made sure to integrate them in the round. If  
necessary, they even taught them the dance steps and the rhythm to follow. After a few hours,  
the young initiates usually got them right.
25. See Milan 2013a and 2019 (pp. 425-478) for an in-depth analysis of this singing joust.
26. Even if Ortner no longer uses the notion but a similar theme (2006), I nonetheless retain  
“serious games” to seize how people “play by the rules” for their own purpose while being at  
once serious and playful.
27. <https://www.ihchina.cn/Article/Index/detail?id=13053>, accessed in August 2021 (Ch. *yuanshi  
gewu yishu de huohuashi* 原始歌舞艺术的活化石; *ta de qiyuan keyi zhuisu dao shiqi shidai, yu Mosuo  
yuanshi de zongjiao dabajiao ji shengchan, shoulie he zhanzheng deng miqie xiangguan* 它的起源可以追  
溯到石器时代, 与摩梭原始的宗教达巴教及生产、狩猎和战争等密切相关).
28. *Guanxi* 关系 are personal ties, relationships, or social networks. It involves trust and mutual  
obligations between parties, and operates at the personal, family, social, business, and political  
levels. It can have an impact on a person’s ability to influence and move things forward.

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## ABSTRACTS

This paper examines a situation of tourism development and heritage narratives in southwest China as it unfolds among the Na people, known for their matrilineal and matrilocal system. To investigate sociocultural changes, I compare festivities and dance performances of two villages, one visited by tourists and the other not. I ask to what extent the dynamics of tourism have reshaped the meanings and values underlying dance gatherings and what heritage processes suggest about these transformations. By outlining the contradictory understandings of tradition

and culture by locals with heritage narratives, the article emphasises the agency of Na inhabitants. Largely left out of the processes of heritagisation but negotiating ethnic representations and new livelihood opportunities through tourism, the Na attempt to carve out a place for themselves in the state's modernist agenda by showcasing dances.

Cet article examine une situation de développement touristique et de récits patrimoniaux dans le sud-ouest de la Chine telle qu'elle se déroule chez le peuple Na, bien connu pour son système matrilineaire et matrilocal. Il compare les festivités et les spectacles de danse entre deux villages, l'un touristique et l'autre non touristique, pour étudier les changements socioculturels. Je me demande dans quelle mesure les dynamiques du tourisme ont désormais remodelé les significations et les valeurs qui sous-tendent les rassemblements dansés et ce que les processus patrimoniaux suggèrent de ces transformations. En soulignant les compréhensions contradictoires de la tradition et de la culture par les habitants à travers les récits du patrimoine, cet article met l'accent sur l'agentivité des Na. Largement écartés des processus de patrimonialisation, mais négociant des représentations ethniques et de nouvelles opportunités de subsistance grâce au tourisme, les Na tentent de se tailler une place dans l'agenda de l'État moderne à travers la présentation de danses.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** China, Na, Mosuo, tourism, heritage, narrative, dance

**Mots-clés:** Chine, Na, tourisme, Mosuo, récit, patrimoine, danse

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Pascale-Marie Milan (PhD 2019) has been working with the Na people of southwest China since 2007. Her research focuses on tourism and social change regarding the Na's institutionalised visiting system and their kinship practices. While pursuing her research during a post-doctoral contract at the EFEO, she delved into questions of kinship by studying vocabulary in detail and highlighted the house as a kinship group. She wrote a monograph for a large audience about the Na of Lijiazui (Barbier-Mueller/Somogy, 2016, in both English and French). She recently wrote "Entraide et réciprocité chez les Na de Chine. Une lecture de la socialité na et de la centralité des maisons dans l'organisation sociale" (Milan 2021).  
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