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## Chapter 9.

### Gathering Life Stories and Oral Traditions among the Na of Southwest China

Pascale-Marie Milan

#### **Introduction**

Doing anthropological research with the Na people (Mosuo 摩梭 in Mandarin) comes with methodological challenges that stem not only from the historical, sociocultural, and political contexts of China but also from the existing body of anthropological knowledge about this ethnic group. Exploring their identity means entering into a debate that touches on local history, the history of the Chinese nation, and the broader history of humankind (Harrell 2001, 216). The Na are among the most intensively studied ethnic groups in the world. They are famous for their extreme matrilineal and matrilocal systems, and have been popularized incorrectly in anthropological literature as *a society without fathers or husbands* (Cai 1997). Their most spectacular attributes include (i) a sexual custom whereby men visit women at night, (ii) an organization of relations among relatives in which the role of the maternal uncle replaces that of the biological father,

and (iii) a transmission of property and filiation by women. In the eyes of Chinese officials, the Na people are routinely depicted as a primitive and backward matriarchal society, a judgment fitting the ideologically evolutionist discourse on ‘minority nationalities’ (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) within China (Yan and Song 1983; Zhan et al. 1980). The end result is a community seen as stable and almost immutable that glides through history sheltered from any influences, cultural contacts, or social changes—a perception only further accentuated and oversimplified in the context of China’s expanding domestic tourism industry.

Since the onset of political and economic liberalization in the late 1970s, tourism has become one of the main strategic tools used in China to ‘develop’ remote regions and ethnic minorities living in the southwest. By the early 2000s, the Go West Campaign<sup>1</sup> incorporated a touristic strategy “coded in a modernist assimilationist state-oriented discourse” (Swain 2011, 177; see also Goodman 2002). The expansion of tourism was part of an extensive market-oriented reshaping (Walsh 2005; Mattison 2010; Blumenfield 2014; Blumenfield and al. 2018; Milan 2019).

In the late 1990s, Lugu Lake, straddling the border between Sichuan and Yunnan and home to a substantial part of the Na population, became a favorite destination for Chinese middle-class vacationers. Thousands started arriving by bus for two or three days to gaze at this picturesque ‘mountain and water landscape’ (*shanshui* 山水), expecting a journey “to a simple and ancient self” (McKhann 2001, 36). As one of many consequences of this ‘friendly invasion’, daily life for the hosts has been split into two halves: *onstage* and *offstage*. Onstage, the Na people have come to publicly perform a version of self conforming to Chinese narratives focused on their uniqueness—namely as a matriarchal society of titillatingly ‘loose women’. Backstage, however, the Na congregate and work to instrumentalize the outside discourse on their identity with the aim of adjusting it to their own agenda and carving out a better place for themselves in the modernist politics of the state. Studying social change for my doctoral dissertation, one of the first things I observed about the Na was the surprisingly different perspectives than those given in

previous anthropological studies. A challenge no doubt, but also an opportunity for a young scholar to assert a distinct voice. Accordingly, this chapter deals with the methodological questions I faced and the ethical choices I had to make during my eleven months of fieldwork from 2012 to 2014. Detailing the onstage and backstage narratives will first help to convey the issues at stake. I will advocate for an emic perspective that foregrounds the Na's own conceptualizations of ordinary life, personal narratives, and memories. These indigenous understandings will be set out against the background of the dominant (indeed hegemonic) Chinese discourse on history, but also against the background of earlier anthropological investigations.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, I will reflect on how my positionality allowed me to access the backstage, particularly in connection with the tourism industry. Finally, I will bring out how the Na categorize and conceptualize history, arguing for the necessity of incorporating multiple voices to provide a nuanced micro-historical perspective from below.

<Map 8 about here>

### **Onstage vs Backstage: A Touristic Effect**

Tourism in Lugu Lake started in the 1990s and has steadily expanded since. Its development has relied on selling Na culture as a local renewable resource of sorts. Top-down state labeling carefully directed the Chinese urban market to focus on a fantastical take on matriarchy that paints the Na as living fossils, while on the ground, their exotic—and eroticized—gendered practices were put at the core of the sale of their culture (Walsh 2005). Of particular interest was the Na visiting system, by which men visit women at night to have intercourse, called *séssé* in the Na language (Narua)<sup>3</sup> and *zouhun* (走婚) in Mandarin. Tourists can also visit the “bridge of *zouhun*” (*zouhun qiao* 走婚桥), a bridge allegedly built, say the guides, by a Na lover to join his partners for the night. One can

also find “zouhun rice alcohol” (*zouhun jiu* 走婚酒) and in some food stalls, advertisements for sexual titillation by indicating the possibility for visiting (*zouhun*) opportunities.

< Figure 9.1 about here >

Women are thought to be “freely available for sex, to whom present lovers have no future commitments, or of a land where women rule” (Walsh 2005, 450). These representations are embedded in a complex representational space endowed with the aura of a country comprised of “women/daughters” (*Nü'er guo* 女儿国), with hypothetical links to the historical Female Kingdom (*Nü Guo* 女国) in the fantasy novel by Wu Cheng'en *The Journey to the West* (*Xi You Ji* 西游记) (Walsh 2005, 464–465). Others, such as Bai Hua's novel *The Remote Country of Women*,<sup>4</sup> features an impossible love between a Han man and a Mosuo woman, a story that recasts the nature-culture divide and portrays the Na through their purity of feeling and innocence compared to the calculating and jealous Han (Harrell 2001, 251). To complete the picture of idyllic love, the work of the indigenous scholar Lamu Gatusa on Na folk stories, songs, and poetry has nurtured a romantic picture of men travelling on long-distance trading expeditions to the point that they “reenter the imaginary of the Mosuo as adventurers and seducers” (Walsh 2005, 466).

Such commodification of ethnic identity in China has routinely turned landscape, personhood, performance, and artifacts into something authentic and consequently, both tourists and Na engage in “mythical realities of the ‘exotic others’ [...] relationally constructed between the tourist and the toured, dictated by market forces, or defined by dominant cultural tropes and reaction to them” (Swain 2011, 174–175). The Na, who are not blind to the hegemonic discourse on their identity, engage in its commodification to fit the tourist gaze. Eager to transform both their economic and social conditions and reverse the stigma of being “backward” (*luohou* 落后) and “primitive” (*yuanshi* 原始), to

which state categorization and popular representations confine them, many consent to play into what tourists seek (see also Adams 1996).

Agency has enforced the compartmentalization of social and cultural visibility between onstage and backstage scenes (Walsh 2005; Milan 2019). Onstage, Na agents perform their identity through folk songs, discourse on the veracity of the sexual custom, the lack of fathers, etc. For tourists, these confirm Na ‘authenticity’, and they feel that they are experiencing time travel with a living fossil society due to the supposed matriarchy of the Na. These speeches contrast sharply with backstage behavior or narratives. According to Scott’s understanding of subaltern mentality, “the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate” are public transcripts (Scott 1992, 2). That is to say that the Na, who are considered to be at the bottom of the evolutionist ideology that shapes the Chinese conception of alterity, use conventional patterns of speech—i.e., folk songs, anthropological official discourse—for tourists who are mainly Han or urban Chinese. However, “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders” (Scott 1992, 4) is totally different. Here, Na agents calculate that the extra income can improve their “quality” (*suzhi* 素质) and help them climb the evolutionist scale to enter the same time period that the Han tourists live in (Milan 2012, 2013).

This strategic divide in the representation of self has entailed major challenges for me. Gathering meaningful ethnographic knowledge therefore became a methodological quandary, because if public transcripts (Scott 1992, 2006), enforced by meta-narratives, are relatively easy to follow, the hidden transcript is much trickier to access. I will return to this problem later in this chapter.

### **Fitting In**

Ethnographic work is constrained in China by the political dimension of research, political restrictions on certain subjects, limited access to data, regions closed to foreign

researchers, and/or control of researchers' movements (Thurston and Pasternak 1983; Pieke 2000; Heimer and Thøgersen 2006; Hansen 2006; Bamó and al. 2007; Turner 2010, 2013a; Michaud 2013). In this context, reflexivity and flexibility can considerably improve one's immersion in the field (Turner 2010, 2013b).

Positionality helps to situate knowledge (Abu-Lughold 1991; Scott 1991; Haraway 2007; Turner and Delisle this volume). This notion has been specifically conceptualized by feminist geographers (Rose 1997; Madge 1993; Sultana 2007). In research, this concept refers to the *position*, made of essentialist and reified images often shared culturally, that is assigned to a researcher, and the *positioning* that a researcher undertakes by negotiating and adjusting to local categories in order to find his or her place. Awareness about one's positionality permits a reflexive reading of the self or multiple selves (Rose 1997; Madge 1993; Sultana 2007). Race, ethnicity, nationality, age, gender, economic and social status, sexuality, level of education, and even language skills and social class are all distinctive signs that the researcher must question to understand the way he or she is perceived locally (Madge 1993; Sultana 2007) as well as how he or she will perceive the local reality.

It can also include philosophical perspectives and ways of viewing the world, political leanings, and specific combinations of these, such as having the same gender and sense of humor as the informants, but being very different in terms of ethnicity and social class. (Turner 2010, 126).

The local circulation of images of the Other via the Internet, television, or live through tourism made me seemingly fit into broad, essentialized categories: western woman, tourist, student. During my first stay at Lugu Lake in 2007 in a village boasting tourist facilities, I was immediately directed to the most expensive guest house where the owner also spoke fluent English. The bus driver's hasty conclusion that I was 'just traveling' determined the economic categorization into which I was assigned, which undoubtedly emanated from my appearance. Because of my skin color and my light-coloured eyes, I reflected the advertisements extolling the beauty of white skin. As soon

as I presented myself as French, there was also a romantic cliché,<sup>5</sup> which was then added to the tenacious fantasy associated with loose sexuality. At the beginning of my fieldwork, despite my attempts otherwise, I remained confined to the tourist category. Reflecting on my situation, I saw how much Na people's representations reflected above all imaginings of social, cultural, and economic distinctions. Much the same as the locals' own images were in the mind of Han tourists... We shared that.

To wiggle myself out of these categories, I moved to a less touristic settlement where the "head of one house" (*ddabu*) offered me to settle permanently. Yet, other stereotypes arose. The temporality of my ethnographic work did not overlap well with their timeframe. Because of their tourism-oriented livelihoods, the household members neither had the time nor the inclination to answer the questions of this anthropologist, whose research seemed rather pointless. Even the term "anthropology" (*renleixue* 人类学) did not make any sense to them. I also did not want, however, to declare myself as an "ethnologist" (*minzuxue jia* 民族学家) because even though many scholars have conducted research in the area, I felt a level of distrust, which was certainly due to the historically political intentions that scholarly state agents had in the past (see Cai 1997). At most, I could be a student of culture and traditions eager to know more. To circumvent obstacles, it seemed opportune to deploy subtle strategies, tricks, and negotiations according to the position assigned to me and the positioning I wanted to have in order to access the depths of the hidden transcript.

Being a "single woman from elsewhere," to use Trebinjac's words (1995), was the element of an 'atypical intrusion'. My status and behavior were uncommon in the Lugu Lake communities and even among Na women. In a way, a foreign female ethnologist can be perceived of as 'asexual', because I differed so much from local stereotypes (Trebinjac 1995; Smith 2006). But my age (in my thirties) and the fact that I did not yet have children were two signs that made Na women assume I could not bear a child, which did not help my integration into the community. The body, the ethnologist's "first (...) instrument" (Mauss 1934, 10), is fully engaged in the field (Conquergood 1991; Wacquant 1989).

< Figure 9.2 about here >

Copying Smith's (2006) strategy among the Uyghurs, I nevertheless tried to blend into the local categories of gender as much as possible. I made myself useful; I contributed regularly to ordinary tasks; I cooked; I welcomed tourists into Na houses; and so on. With time and in spite of all the rest, this proactive strategy allowed me to build strong links with family members, villagers, and tour guides. I was even allowed to present myself under my hosting house name, which facilitated my integration into a network of relationships. I then negotiated my presence in a household of another non-touristic village (see next section). My hosts no longer considered me as a guest (*hinbbae*), allowing me to grasp and enter their daily lives and the components of their kinship including their reciprocity system (Milan 2019, 2021). Taking root in two Na houses opened the door to systems of kin and neighbors and to spending time in other related houses. I became so involved in this social network that, as Jean-Guy Goulet (2011, 117–120) put it, I had “the possibility of entering or believing in the world of the people [met] on the ground.” And, as a woman positioned in this matrilineal society, women's voices concerning past narratives have become more audible. Indeed, past narratives paradoxically privilege the “men who know” too often (see also Fiskejö and Petit this volume).

Over the past fifteen months, I had learned the Na language, having realized that this would go a long way in giving me (at least some) access into the hidden transcript. This strategy has significantly changed the direction of my fieldwork. I could reply that I am a “woman of the Na language” (*nya narua gunia niq*) instead of ‘that white woman over there’.<sup>6</sup> Thanks to this new proximity, I was thereafter invited to Na houses—even if sometimes only for a fleeting encounter. In the remote village where women over forty had only vague notions of Chinese, they enjoyed conversing and teaching me more

Narua. My interlocutors always took time to translate their speeches if they could, although they often felt it was meaningless. I was then able to manage daily conversation, but I was still limited when it came to following a conversation. The Na language has a particularity in which the tones and certain phoneme agreements change from one sentence to another. Narua can indeed differ between villages and even between speakers of the same village. Faced with the disparity of the transcriptions, in-depth ethnolinguistic work would come to fill the oscillating anthropological interpretations and feed the rather recent linguistic studies (Lidz 2010; Dobbs and Yan 2018; Michaud 2018a, 2018b).

## **Methods**

To pave the way for my potential research in the second location (the non-touristic village), I first visited with a Na man from a touristic village in order to assess the possibilities. This man, with whom I had already established a good relationship, told me that he knew people in this village from a particular household—let us call it ‘A’. The links he had with this household, however, were soon revealed to be in the realm of economic subordination, as was often the case between houses in touristic and non-touristic villages. His mother had employed a young girl from this household to handle tourist services. Consequently, even though he was helpful with interviewing house members about local traditions, I felt this location would not work, and I chose to live with another household instead. A few months later, when I thought that I had become sufficiently integrated into this village’s life, I went back to A household to gently inquire about the feasibility of collecting songs from them, which they happily agreed to. Folk songs take many forms of oral tradition including legends, tales, and myths, and they represent testimonies of the past enshrined in oral tradition. Sung in Na language, they offer a glimpse into their worldview, and these songs are particularly interesting in my case when referring to women. As I had done with many other household, I expressly asked

this *ddabu* in Na language to share songs about the past. She readily accepted, and to my surprise, she launched into the following song:

*O ne le jo a zu jo* – no translation available<sup>7</sup>

*Mao zhu xi ne fanshen ni* – 毛主席（让我们）翻身了<sup>8</sup> – Chairman Mao emancipated [us].

*aha bbala ma da ami* – [recurring narrative of songs]

*Ba la ya aha a li li* – [recurring narrative of songs]

*Mao zhu xi ne fan shen ni* – 毛主席（让我们）翻身了 – Chairman Mao emancipated [us].

*O kuo nimi tu nigu* – He is like the Sun to me.

*aha bbala ma daa mi* – [recurring narrative of songs]

*Ba la ya aha a li li* – [recurring narrative of songs]

*Ama mo jo ta jo ke* – 没有妈妈 – I don't have a mother.

*Mao zhu xi la a ma ni* – 毛主席就是妈妈 – Chairman Mao is [my] mother.

*aha bbala ma da ami* – [recurring narrative of songs]

*Ba la ya aha a li li* – [recurring narrative of songs]

*Narua* is a language prone to metaphor. There are various singing styles, but songs are usually performed between two singers or more so as to become a gentle joust. While many songs are well known to all, improvisation is a central element of performances. The one I had just heard blended praises to Mao Zedong with a traditional song, clearly suggesting that Mao had replaced the most important figure in Na worldview: the mother.

This song is exemplary of storytelling linked to the context of enunciation, for which the official discourse, the public transcript, has been playing an important part since the start of tourism expansion. Even though Mao is generally well-liked by Na

people because, as say they, he freed them from feudal servitude, an analysis of situated speech clearly suggests that this rendition tells more about the perception that the *ddabu* had of me than about Na history. With household A, I had not negotiated my position or participated in daily work. Caught in another web of relations, my positionality changed (Rose 1997, Turner and Delisle this volume). I felt mistrust on their part and thought of Trebinjac's (2000) work in Xinjiang documenting the alterations of folk songs to frame minority people as national subjects. Yet, Na songs are representative of indigenous beliefs and customs to the point that they are part of their consciousness of belonging to one another. This alteration by the *ddabu* singer underlines the extent to which some among the Na, as with other Chinese minority nationalities, either have allowed or even welcomed the dominant discourse into their own repertoire. Of course, their adoption of this discourse could also represent a front, a public transcript to mitigate the possible adverse effects of a meddling foreign ethnologist. This kind of distrust also appeared in the tourist context for other reasons.

One day in June 2012, while I was staying in Lugu Lake at a friend's house, I asked to record her thoughts on tourism and its connections to her own life story. By then, I knew she had married a man from Guangzhou the year before, who first came to the lake as a tourist; nonetheless, as befits a 'good' Na woman mindful of the official line, she said that she was practicing the sexual custom of men visiting women at night. As I quickly realized, this was a telling example of the bias automatically induced by the presence of a recording machine, and we could even add, by conversing in Chinese. Dominated subjects such as the Na, and Na women in particular, have no interest to publicly confront the Chinese meta-narrative that allows them to take advantage of tourism. Learning from this lesson in practicing infrapolitics among dominated societies, I thereafter conducted my interviews without a recorder. Conversations flowed more freely, and people seemed to be more outspoken about their lives and feelings. Interruptions often occurred, but these were accepted, as our chats might simply start on one day and end on another. With friendship as a method, "conversation, everyday involvement, compassion,

generosity, and vulnerability” were part of ethnographic work (Tillman-Healy 2003, 735; Lentz, Turner, Vargyas, Wang this volume). I learned that this level of informality allowed me to collect fragments of subordinate discourse, and on occasion, enter the hidden transcript.

During evening dance performances for tourists, young Na girls were often harassed by disrespectful male guests asking if they practiced the visiting system and if there was a way, they could take advantage of it. In reaction to such unwanted interactions, the girls had taken to mumbling in their language the term *makrajua*, equivalent to English slang for ‘shutting someone up’, while simultaneously beaming a broad smile. Crossing the language barrier helped me tremendously in reaching a more in-depth understanding of the field through local voices. I had initially conducted most of my discussions in Putonghua, but, when possible, I prioritized gathering materials in their language, especially regarding oral traditions. I remembered how people were later surprised to hear me speaking their language, not to mention that I could present myself with my hosting house’s name.

Linguistic skills helped me avoid simplistic or out-of-context interpretations. Together with a clear conscience of my own positionality, it made it possible to consider “the successive places and roles attributed to the observer, as well as the rhetorical strategies of the informants” (Bensa 2006, 34). This reflexivity enabled me to understand the power relations of tourism and more clearly distinguish between the public and hidden transcript. These latter allowing discerning the public roles played by the powerful and powerless and the mocking, vengeful tone displayed offstage (Scott 1992).

### **Fragments of Ama’s life story and accounts: Looking into past narratives**

Let me bring Ama into this discussion. I collected her story in fragments, but whatever fragments she told me, her stories were meant to teach me more about the social environment and Na people’s worldview. For instance, telling me about her youth, Ama

highlighted profound differences between the Na and the Nuosu. She might detail how the Na dressed differently from the Nuosu's, who wore black felt cloaks and belts of cartridges, and how the Na were wary to not be confused with the Nuosu (see also Blumenfield 2014). Her accounts were never dated, however. She was only referring to her age, her family members that were alive, and to certain events without naming them. Knowing her astrological sign and elements of her story, I understood that she was talking about the 'democratic reforms' (*minzhu gaige* 民主改革) period implemented across China's southwest in 1956–1957. Ama explained to me another time that she had been living in Luoshui, on the Lugu Lake shore, and relayed the harshness of life and the scarcity of food here. Such difficulties originated when villagers had to feed the Yongning/Tusi/Chinese troops (she used these terms interchangeably). When recounting this story, she also contrasted the Nuosu with the Tibetan/Lama people, who they used to welcome into their home. In this way, she was in fact expressing how much the Na's tradition and ethnicity related more to the Tibetan people than to the Nuosu.

At the age of sixteen, following the death of her mother, Ama moved from Luoshui to her sister's house close to Yongning. Unexpectedly, she told me that her mother was *boa* (Pumi), even though she was normally referred to as Na or Mosuo. She then moved to the village of Xiaoluoshui when the "lord" (*sipi*) of Yongning gave land to drive out the Han and Naxi who had settled there earlier. The Naxi moved to Dazui, the neighboring village, because of the magnanimity of the rulers of Muli towards the Naxi. Ama then married a *Naxi daba*<sup>9</sup> "ritual specialist" of this village, but she did not go to live with him. Bringing together the elements she told me, I asked her if she was Na: 'No Na *anié*?'. 'Yes, of course', she said. My question just did not correspond to her fluid categories, nor to the official Chinese ones and even less to those of Western anthropologists. This story raises important questions about ethnicity and social organization; for instance, the Na are matrilineal and the Pumi, patrilineal. This, however, is consistent with the adaptability of ethnicity described in southwest China by Western scholars (McKhann 1998; Harrell 2001; Gros 2014). When settling in a Na village, migrants were sharing in daily life, which

bounded them together with cultural values, so that the “inside” (*awo*) has the power to incorporate the “outside” (*apo*). This dichotomy of Na cosmogony offers a glimpse into the everyday processes driving identity, ethnicity, and kinship issues.

Life stories share some conventional patterns of speech with oral traditions. When telling stories about the past, whether they are personal or collective memories, the Na use formulas highlighting the way they conceptualize the past. Ama, like others, was always using the term ‘*eshae*’ or sometimes ‘*eyi eshae*’ to refer to life stories, proverbs, tales, traditions, and even mythical narratives. Intertwining elements of (oral) “traditions” (*ddeelo*) and “narratives of the past” (*eshae khua*), she said that she was “telling stories (of the olden days)” (*eshae khua*). ‘*Esha*’ specifically refers to a bygone past and ‘*eyi eshae*’ to an even more distant past, but these are terms used interchangeably. These rhetorical formulas were often punctuated by sentences like ‘this is how we say’ or ‘my mother or grandmother told me the story like that’. While expressing the power of memory the Na have developed, past accounts all bind historical material with the present day, conveying past actions and beliefs in the same way. As Scott (2009, 230-231) argued:

Because oral traditions survive only through retelling, they accumulate interpretations as they are transmitted. Each telling forcibly reflects current interests, current power relations, and current views of neighboring societies and kin groups.

Like Ama had told me that ‘telling stories about the past is useful today’, many Na people also expressed to me how recounting these narratives represents a way to educate and remember “the moral and social teachings of the community” (Gatusa 2021), and to comment on social changes and continuities.

Life stories, including historical events, can become oral traditions because the rhetorical forms and terms people use to refer to both blur the distinction between the recent and very distant past. Although differences between myths, oral traditions, and

life stories can be established through anthropological work—and myths are clearly tied to *daba*'s rituals— the retelling movements of Na oral transmission amounts to a mythologizing process. Notwithstanding their tremendous diversity, oral traditions share recognizable elements of social organization with life stories, such as why people get married or how they settle and “divide houses” (*zitu*). Whatever the stories are, they include the socio-spatial environment and remarkably, they follow a mythological template by borrowing some elements like a flood, mountains (seen as deities), sky (seen as a divine house of a mythical heroine), food shortages, and so on.

However, as acts of situated speech emanating from different informational processes, these accounts were changing due to environmental differences between villages. So, people were largely telling the same stories, not to mention their tendency to mix genres. I was a little baffled. Their way of referring to the past did not fit my classification schema. The Na case clearly blurred the distinction that Vansina (1985) made between oral tradition and oral history. The former would correspond to accounts that are not contemporary with the informants and that were transmitted by word of mouth before their birth. The latter would consist of eyewitness accounts of more contemporary events. However, the plurality of voices made it possible to learn another insight about the past—a localized, embodied one that is linked to the present-day.

As noted above, Ama's accounts were never dated. Only the temporal fragments such as her age, family members, etc. that she slipped into her story allowed me to track the account. All the life stories I collected were conveyed similarly, as were the oral traditions too. Both resemble a genealogical thought regime, shared by many ethnic groups throughout the Sino-Tibetan borderlands (Gros 2014; Harrell 2011; Wellens 2012). Often orally transmitted, regime is an important part of the Na people's lives that can be understood “in terms of kinship and a sacred geography (the souls of the deceased reverse the migratory routes to return to the land of the ancestors)” (Gros 2014, 85; see also Rock 1955; Mathieu 1998, 2003; McKhann 2003, 2012; Chen 2012). *Daba* specialists use this knowledge together with household members to lead rituals for which migration

routes are needed (see Mathieu 1998; Chen 2012). Depending on lineage, household, and village, these migratory routes do not lead to the same ancestral land. How then can the Na be related to the ancient Qiang tribes, as suggested by the official meta-narratives if not to construct a history of common belonging for the nation-building process.

< **Figure 9.3 about here** >

Unlike genealogical narratives, the historical ones used in the official discourse are dated and chronologically oriented. They suggest an ‘othering’ process by fixing identity through time (see Wang this volume). Through a shared interest for origins that the state has with minority groups, the Chinese government built a "unity of the past" that invokes a common ancestry and close historical ties to the nation (Gros 2014). For instance, the Na located in the Sichuan province are officially labelled as Mongol,<sup>10</sup> and many locals telling stories that connect this official discourse with their mythology (see Harrell 2001, 216-238; Wellens 2012, 315-316). The Na were either related to the ancient Female Kingdom or to the ancient Qiang—two versions of history which, in any case, incorporate local identities into the national discourse on China's origin and historical development. As Wang noted (1999, this volume), Qiang ethnic identity is a "superimposed category" resulting from distinct historical processes, which cannot be restricted to the current ethnic label. Understandably, researchers are very careful with any links made between the Tibeto-Burman language groups and the ancient Qiang (Mathieu 2003; Wellens 2012; Gros 2014).

< Figure 5: A Na interlocutor from Sichuan province presenting a portrait of Nabuhra "the uncle of all Na". This "ancestor" was indifferently identified as Kubilai Khan or Genghis Khan by my interlocutors. A portrait was offered to all villagers by a Han tourism entrepreneur who regularly visited the village. Lijiazui, December 2012. >

Alt text A man Na standing in the yard of his house with a painted reproduction of Genghis Khan in his hands. We can only see his bust and his feet because the reproduction is so large. Behind him, the entrance to the main room and a young man sitting against the wooden wall of this room.

Despite all my efforts to research how the Na deal with the past, I have not yet been able to feel how much history is embodied in their present life. Every Na individual knows their genealogy and thus knows how to identify ancestors. They perform this knowledge every day by feeding these ancestors on the fire where they cook. They feed the departed ones before they feed themselves, protecting them from evil spirits just as they protect themselves. Dealing with the Na's past may thus reflect Daniel's (1996, 50) distinction between myth and history, with the former encompassing a way of being and seeing and the latter representing only a way of seeing. I am acutely aware that the anthropological knowledge that I have produced is eminently situated, and that it reveals only a tiny part of Na worldview. At most, I can restore significant wording and motifs that allow me to capture fragments of the ways the Na conceptualize the past; report on the topics they discuss; grasp more important historical events intertwined with their personal and family histories; as well as perceive traces of an history of their own among the different types of narratives they use.

Nevertheless, all the stories they told me were the usual community teaching that allows me to circumvent the touristic discourse depicting the Na as a matriarchal society without fathers or husbands and composed of idyllic lovers. While always considering my positionality, the details I recorded have widened my view of Na social organization and kinship. By participating in everyday life and listening to what people shared, I gathered nuanced narratives about Na kinship in their own language. For instance, people would talk more about their "house" (*awo*) and their belonging to it rather than to the "family"

or “household” (*yidu*), which was previously recorded as the basic social unit (Zhan et al. Yan and Song, Shih 2010). I was able to go further than Weng (1993) on the symbolic importance of the mother's house or Shih (2010) in highlighting the house (*awo*) rather than the *yidu* through everyday language. I argue for the existence of various strategies, such as marriage or adoption, to continue the houses and thus the necessity to consider it as a rather efficient kinship group (Milan 2019, 2021).

However, one thing is certain: Chinese meta-narratives used in tourism are increasingly intruding in everyday life. The Na's limited room to maneuver and the acceptance of tourism development is changing their self-perception, and their singular voices have become inaudible. Modernity and new livelihood opportunities call on the youngest Na to adopt new lifestyles and to express themselves in Chinese instead of Narua. In this context, advocating for a pragmatic approach that considers all versions of past stories—specific to localities and to speakers—would engender profound anthropological understandings and is of utmost necessity.

## **Conclusion**

By reflecting on my positionality, I can clearly highlight how my informal approach for gathering life stories proved to be more than just an improved method for documenting the past accounts of an oral society without writing. Given the tourism situation and the historical paradigm characterizing the Na in China as primitive and backward, many Na individuals are cautious with public speech. The reflexivity I practiced to find a place from which I could research helped me access the backstage of tourism as well as the hidden transcripts untold in tourism interactions. Depending on the links I had developed with my interlocutors, the conditions and contexts of this narrative mattered. Speech is situated.

As dominated subjects, caught in the race towards development and modernization, Na people silenced stories matter. Even if they do not fit the researcher's

usual categories, these stories, and the ways they are told, help paint canvases of meaning while also avoiding the oversimplification of Na social organization. Importantly, paying attention to local voices helps to recognize their agency instead of their inability and/or lack of opportunity to record their accounts of the past in writing; a local focus also acknowledges the Na as actors in their own lives (Scott 2009). Above all, attention to Na people's narratives allows one to recapture a past to which a collective or singular subjects belong. Lived experiences, including family/lineage lore, are not written down in historical records, but they help seize the (dis)continuity in history that the Na underwent. Further research would facilitate an understanding of history as marked, interspersed, and even dislocated by the tense environment of the Maoist era. Instead of turning them into characters of a nation-building process that promotes meta-narratives about their past, I advocate for a pluralization of Na people's voices to build a micro-history that can (hopefully) account for their worldview.

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<sup>1</sup> China's western development program (*xibu dakaiifa*) contains a variety of strategies to be implemented over a 10-year period.

<sup>2</sup> My thesis takes issue with the idea of a society without fathers or husbands and draws on other more recent research that shows the Na's agency in tourism (Walsh 2001), facing media representations (Blumenfield 2010, 2014), and transformations due to economic growth (Mattison 2010), while also discussing work about kinship that highlights the household as a basic social unit (Shih 2010) and analyzing its symbolism (Weng 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Unless specified, romanized *narua* terms are written according to the recent dictionary made by Alexis Michaud (2018) and Roselle Dobbs and Xiong Yan's orthography system (2008).

<sup>4</sup> (*Yuanfang you yi ge nü'er guo* 远方有一个女儿国) translated into English in 1994.

<sup>5</sup> France was associated with the term "romantic" (*langman* 浪漫).

<sup>6</sup> They use the ungracious term *boshe* referring to the white flesh of pigs, which is a historical formula similar to the Chinese one used to name a "foreigner" (*yangguizi* 洋鬼子).

<sup>7</sup> The meaning of the terms used is too ambiguous, and I have no comment on the meaning. I therefore prefer not to translate this sentence.

<sup>8</sup> Only some verses have been translated into Chinese. However, other translations are within my linguistic competence. When Na terms are sung, they are not written according to A. Michaud's (2018) dictionary.

<sup>9</sup> I refer to *daba* (also written *ddabe*) instead of *dongba*, since she told me that he was a *daba*. The *daba* are specialists in Na rituals while the *dongba* are specialists in Naxi rituals. This blurring of conceptions is useful in understanding how ethnic boundaries are contingent and religious categories are confused.

<sup>10</sup> In the Yunnan province they are officially a Naxi branch but identified since the 1980s as Mosuo ren (摩梭人).