



## **Political Transformations and Love Suicide Among the Naxi People<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

*All people in the world are familiar with the tragedy of love suicide, but few societies have experienced love suicide on the scale suffered by the Naxi people of China. This paper argues that the reason the Naxi committed love suicide in dreadfully high numbers must be sought in socio-cultural changes brought about by political reforms and, in particular, in the large-scale transformation of Naxi culture that followed the integration of Lijiang into the Qing imperial administration in 1723. These reforms, implemented by appointed officials, shaped unsolvable contradictions between new rules of arranged marriages and the Naxi's own traditional views of sex and marriage. These contradictions resulted in a tragically high rate of suicide among Naxi youth and especially among young Naxi women, as well as a unique socio-cultural phenomenon. For the Naxi, love suicide became a social custom that fostered religious rituals and sacred texts about martyrdom, as well as tragic literary works romanticizing sacrifice and mystical beliefs. Love suicide was not only a grave social problem among the Naxi, it was also a peculiar cultural phenomenon involving a complex combination of social and cultural factors.*

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*Toutes les sociétés humaines connaissent la tragédie du suicide par amour, mais peu de peuples ont fait l'expérience du suicide dans des taux aussi élevés que le peuple Naxi de Chine. Le présent article argumente que la cause principale du suicide par amour chez les Naxi repose dans les changements socio-culturels créés par certaines réformes politiques, et en particulier la transformation à grande échelle de la culture naxi à la suite de l'intégration de Lijiang dans le système administratif impérial des Qing en 1723. Ces réformes, qui ont été implémentées par des fonctionnaires nommés par le gouvernement impérial, ont donné suite à des contradictions irréductibles entre de nouvelles règles relatives aux mariages arrangés et les perceptions traditionnelles des*

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1For a detailed study on the Naxi love suicide custom, refer to the book by Yang Fuquan: *Yulong qing shang: Naxizu de xunqing yanjiu*, 玉龙情殇: 纳西族的殉情研究 [A Study Of Love Suicide among the Naxi People], Yunnan Renminchubanshe, Kunming, 2009.

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*Naxi sur la sexualité et le mariage. Ces contradictions ont abouti à un taux de suicide effroyable parmi les jeunes Naxi et surtout parmi les jeunes femmes, mais aussi à un phénomène socio-culturel unique. Pour les Naxi, le suicide par amour est devenu une coutume qui a stimulé des rites, des textes sacrés, et des oeuvres littéraires romançant le sacrifice des amants et les croyances mystiques. Le suicide par amour était non seulement un problème social gravissime, mais aussi un phénomène culturel inédit impliquant un complexe de facteurs sociaux et culturels.*

### **Reforming the Barbarians by Implementing Han Customs: the reform of the native prefecture and love suicide among the Naxi People**

The suicide of Naxi lovers was first recorded in the 1901 book *Continued General Annals of Yunnan in the period of Guangxu*, as follows:

Unmarried men and women who love each other and had sexual relations cannot be married if their parents have promised them to others. When the lovers cannot tear themselves apart, they swear to die together. They put on new clothing, go into the mountain, sing to each other. Then they have a good meal and wine, and they commit suicide. They join hands, and tie their clothing together. They then jump off the mountain cliff and die together according to their wish.<sup>3</sup>

The consideration of a broad range of factors reveals that the principle cause of Naxi love suicide rests with the reforms of the local cultural and political system following the implementation of the policy known as *Returning the Land to the Flow* (改土归流, *gaituguilou*). In 1723, the first year of the Yongzheng Emperor, the native prefecture of Lijiang was abolished: the hereditary native chieftain and officials were removed and replaced by appointed imperial administrators. Indirect rule was over, and Lijiang was integrated into the Qing administration.

This administrative reform introduced deeply disruptive cultural reforms into Lijiang. Prior to the Qing dynasty, Lijiang had been relatively remote from the culture of the Chinese interior - which, in the remainder of this article, I identify as 'Han'.

From the Tang (618-907) through the Song dynasties (960-1279) and into the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), there was relatively little contact between Yunnan and the Chinese interior, and no opportunities for a cultural clash to develop between external laws and regulations and the native culture. In Volume 14 of the sixteenth-century *General Annals of Yunnan*, it is written that, during the three hundred years of the Song Dynasty, "Nanzhong was abandoned as a foreign land, and only a few words in the historic records survived. Han culture was cut off and no one could learn and follow Han customs."<sup>4</sup> Lijiang was in fact isolated not only from the Chinese interior but from the outside world at that time, and in a state of peaceful development. It can be imagined that this stable social environment created good conditions for the development of the local culture. It is in this period time that the Naxi Dongba religion and other cultural modes developed. A social

<sup>3</sup> Xu *Yunnan tong zhi*, 续云南通志 [*Continued General Annals of Yunnan in the period of Guangxu*], Yunnan shengzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui bangongshi bian, 1901.

<sup>4</sup> Zou Yinglong and Li Yuanyang *Wanli Yunnan Tongzhi*, 14, 万历云南通志 [Records of Yunnan, Wanli period (1573-1620)]. Zhongguowenlianclubanshe, 2013. Note that Nanzhong is known today as Yunnan.

environment which is less disturbed by the outside world will promote the stable development of the traditional customs of a nation, and the society will not change greatly. Under such conditions, it is impossible to produce a large number of tragic martyrs.

Between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Yuan and Ming emperors instituted indirect rule over Yunnan and Sichuan by appointing native chieftains to govern the local people. Yuan and Ming policies, however, allowed ethnic people to follow their own customs. In *Yuan History*, it is written: "The common people and their barbarian native chieftains retain their ancient traditions and follow traditional customs of administration."<sup>5</sup> Therefore, during the Yuan dynasty, as in the previous periods, no cultural conflict had opportunity to cause deep or widespread socio-cultural change and the Naxi people were able to maintain many ancient customs.

During the Ming period (1368-1644), native chieftains issuing from the Mu clan ruled over Lijiang and established a feudal system.<sup>6</sup> The Mu controlled a vast territory. With the support of the Ming emperors, they expanded their realm and prospered both economically and culturally, and their power reached its zenith at the close of the seventeenth century. The Mu chiefs were loyal vassals of the Chinese emperors and willingly embraced Confucianism: they adopted the Confucian etiquette and emulated the Han customs of the Chinese interior. However, the Mu and other aristocrats adopted Confucian mores and values only as an elite practice and an elite marker. Confucian modes were not widely implemented among the common people and feudalisation of Naxi society under the Mu chiefs proceeded without recourse to Confucianism. During the Ming Dynasty, the Mu clan maintained the policy of 'conforming to custom and etiquette without changing the old' and Confucian mores were not mandated among the population at large. In 1384, during the seventeenth year of his reign, Zhu Yuanzhang (Hongwu) emperor and founder of the Ming dynasty wrote:

I have appointed noble and virtuous men, offered rewards for their meritorious service, and reserved the right to demote them; all have a charter. Since the native chieftains do not change the old ways and are compliant with the customs of their people, they are able to keep the peace between them and to govern over them.<sup>7</sup>

Under this policy, the region of Lijiang experienced no significant social change.

Beginning with the reign of the Emperor Yongzheng (1722-1735), Qing officials carried out a large-scale policy of replacing the native chieftains with appointed officials among the people of southwestern China. The native prefectures were abolished and made way for a two-tiered administration at both the county and prefectural levels. Governors were also appointed by the emperor and sent into what are known today as the 'nationality minority regions'. This large-scale political reor-

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5 Song Lian, *Yuanshi, Renzong benji*, 元史.仁宗本纪 [Yuan History. Book of Renzong]. Zhonghuashuju, 1976. This record was composed under the direction of Ming dynasty historian Song Lian in 1370, during the Ming period (1368-1646). Song Lian's dates are 1310–1381. Emperor Renzong was the fourth Emperor of the Song dynasty and reigned 1022-1063.

6 The Mu chiefs were descended from the Ah chieftains family, who had been instituted by the Yuan administration following the Mongol conquest of Yunnan in 1253. The Ah changed their names to Mu when the rule of the native chief Ah-De was confirmed by the Hongwu emperor (1368-1398) founder of the Ming dynasty.

7 *Yunnan Shiliao Congkan*, di 2, 云南史料丛刊, 第二十四集 [Yunnan Historical Materials Series, Vol. 24] Yunnan Daxue Lishi Yanjiusuo Youyinben, 1978.

ganization brought profound changes in the social organizations and cultures of many the people of southwestern regions. Officials who had carried out the policy of *Controlling the Native People by Conforming to Local Customs* in the Yuan and Ming Dynasties now implemented the policy of *Reforming the Barbarians by Implementing Han Customs* (以夏变夷, *yi xia bian yi*). They turned to lamenting the past and criticizing the officials of the Yuan and Ming Dynasties whose policies of legal restraint had done little to 'civilize the barbarians'.<sup>8</sup>

Along with other frontier regions, Lijiang was incorporated into the political regime of the Chinese interior. In the wake of this administrative re-organisation, Confucian ethics and Han customs were imposed on Naxi customs. The Qing government initiated the naturalisation of Lijiang in 1723, in the first year of Yongzheng's reign. The Qing ranked ethnic minorities according to a scale of degrees of civilisation based on Manchu and Han cultural standards and Confucian ethics, and proceeded with a policy of 'Reforming the Barbarians through Han Customs' and the newly appointed magistrates in Lijiang proceeded with full implementation of the cultural reforms mandated by the Qing regime.

The first policy goal was to expand and universalize Confucian education among the Naxi. In 1697, Emperor Kangxi appointed Kong Xingxun, a sixty-sixth-generation descendant of Confucius as *Tong Pan* (advisory magistrate) to the Lijiang native chieftain. Kong Xingxun, upon discovering that not a single Confucian Temple could be found in Lijiang, wrote this:

In 1697, at the beginning of my stay in Lijiang, when I compared the sight of the beautiful mountains and rivers to the primitive local customs, I could not help but sigh deeply. The way forward lies with the Confucian rites and music, but in order to have rites and music, a Confucian temple must first be constructed.<sup>9</sup>

Kong Xingxun's disenchantment was echoed by the Chinese officials who were appointed to Lijiang after him. All saw the customs of the various ethnic groups from the perspective of Confucianism and Qing culture. They regarded as 'lowly and barbarous' all those who ignored the rules of Confucian ethics and Confucian rites and music. In their eyes, the ancient Naxi Dongba culture, Buddhism (both Tibetan and Chinese) and even the Taoist culture, which had all been established in Lijiang and in other Naxi areas under the rule of the Mu native chieftains during the Ming dynasty, amounted to nothing more than barbaric customs. They believed that it was their sacred destiny to reform the customs and traditions of 'exotic places' by replacing them with Confucian rites and music and with Confucian social norms and moral principles.

After 1723, the appointed officials sent to Lijiang by the Imperial government tried very hard to instill new ethics among the people of Lijiang and to reform their customs according to Confucian norms. In 1743 Guan Xuexuan, who was appointed magistrate to Lijiang in 1736, compiled the *Lijiang prefectural records*, where he wrote:

Lijiang is connected to the western regions; the people believe in Buddhism and ghosts, carry crossbows and wear swords. They followed the dress code of the barbarians but

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8 *Qianlong Lijiang Fuzhi*, 乾隆. 丽江府志 [Qianlong, Lijiang Prefectural Records] *Lijiang zhì bàngōngshì*, 1991. These are records compiled by the magistrate Guan Xuexuan in 1743.

9 Ibid.

now their headgear has been reformed. The duty of a senior official is to maintain Confucian principles. If the principles are installed, then integrity will be encouraged and the local customs will become serene and good; if the customs are serene and good according to Confucian principles, then the people's speech and behavior will also follow Confucian principles.<sup>10</sup>

In his preface, Guan Xuexuan assured posterity that he: "... is the keeper of this land and his office has received blessings from afar ... Ever since he has been appointed to govern this land, he has changed the local customs and carried out the Confucian principles. All the rules and regulations are followed according to the principles of the Chinese interior." Also in the eighteenth century, in the *Records of the Xueshan Academy*, then-Provincial Education Officer Cai Song praised Yang Bi, the first appointed magistrate of Lijiang, with this comment: "Gentleman Yang has made it his duty to educate and transform the customs of Lijiang."<sup>11</sup>

Such comments can be found everywhere in the Lijiang records of the Qing Dynasty. The policy adopted by the Qing government officials in the Naxi area had for objective to 'reform the Barbarians by implementing Han customs.' Therefore, officials who measured Naxi cultural modes according to Han and Manchu cultural values sought to reform the customs which they considered 'barbarous, lowly and vulgar' accordingly.

Along with expanding the Confucian schools, Qing government officials carried out a comprehensive reform of customs in Lijiang, mandating that funeral rites, weddings, marriage rules and dress standards conform to the Manchu and Han standards of the Chinese interior. The Naxi people had long practiced cremation but the Qing officials abhorred this custom, which they saw as barbaric and uncivilized. From their perspective, cremation denied the dead the customary offerings of Chinese burials. Above all, the burning of one's parents' bodies and the destruction of their bones was antithetical to the filial piety at the core of Confucian ethics. Cremation was therefore prohibited, as recorded in the eighteenth century annals of Lijiang: "It is forbidden to burn and discard bones; proper burial must be taught."<sup>12</sup>

In Lijiang, as in other frontier regions, the Qing reformed local dress. In 1724, the magistrate Yang Bi described the Naxi people as wearing 'curled bun and ear rings, and weird costumes', and concluded that 'it should be easy to dress and teach people to wear normal clothes.' Obviously, in his opinion, Naxi traditional dress was not proper clothing and the Naxi ought to conform to the dress standards of Qing China. A century later, in the 'Book of Famous Officials' of the *Lijiang Prefectural Records*, it is said that Wang Houqing, a native of Shandong province who attained the rank of Jinshi (进士), which is to say that he had graduated from the highest imperial examinations, was appointed to Lijiang.<sup>13</sup> Although Lijiang had previously been under the gradual influence of Han custom, men and women's clothing, weddings, and funeral ceremonies did not as yet follow the Han custom. Appointed in 1820, Wang apparently spared no effort to enforce the necessary measures to achieve widespread cultural reforms and after Wang worked hard to carry out the reforms, the local people changed their customs.

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 *Lijiang Fu Zhi Gao. Ming huan zhi. 乾隆. 丽江府志稿. 名宦志* [Qianlong. Lijiang prefectural records; illustrious magistrates] Lijiangzhi Bangongshi, 1991.

13 Ibid.

Along with changes in burial customs and dress, the Qing administrators imposed changes on the local marriage customs to suit Confucian ethics and moral standards. With mandatory assimilation, young Naxi men and women were deprived of the local custom of free love and became the victims of Confucianism. Traditional Naxi marriages, clan alliances, and family hierarchies, although patrilineal and patriarchal, had been flexible arrangements. Under the policy of assimilation, this traditional system was transformed into a rigid system of arranged marriage and of absolutely binding betrothal promises. Confucian moral standards imposed a heavy spiritual burden on Naxi youth.

The distribution of love suicide rates in the Naxi regions shows the part played by Confucian reforms in the development of this tragic custom, for the rate of love suicides was highest on the Lijiang plain, in Lashi, Huangshan, and Baisha townships, and next in the mountainous areas surrounding the plain area, as, for example, in Tai'an and Longshan. The plain area is the traditional political, economic and cultural center of Lijiang, although there had been Han-educated scholars among the Naxi of this region for several centuries. After the Qing reforms, the Lijiang plain area became profoundly influenced by Han culture and ethics as Confucian education, imperial rules and regulations, etiquette and customs became widely accepted. In the region, illicit love was now seen as a disgrace and there was extreme contempt for the lovers who committed suicide.

By contrast, in the rural areas, where people lived far away from the ruling centers of the Qing administration and where they were least influenced by Han culture, such as in the townships of Sanba in Zhongdian county (now Shangri La County) in Yunnan, in E'ya in Sichuan, and in the townships of Baoshan and Fengke in Lijiang prefecture, suicide was much rarer than in the Lijiang plain area. In these more remote places, the ancient customs of the Naxi people were not strongly affected by Han culture. The Naxi people were not completely consumed by a system of ethics antithetical to their own traditions. To cite as an example, Eya was established as a garrison town by the Mu chiefs of the Ming dynasty, and settled by Naxi soldiers. To this day, the people of E'ya have retained many traditional customs as well as polygamy, and there has been no custom of love suicide among them.

We can also compare the situation of the Naxi people of Lijiang with that of the Na (Mosuo) people of Yongning in Ninglang County to confirm that 'Reforming the Barbarians by Implementing Han Customs' contributed to the suffering of the Naxi people. During the Ming dynasty, Yongning Prefecture was set up under the hereditary rule of the Ah chief (also of the Na people), who was appointed as the local official. When the Qing dynasty later carried out the policy of removing native chieftains and instituting appointed officials in their place, the imperial government continued the policy of indirect rule in some areas, including along the Lancang (Mekong), Nujiang, and Irrawaddy rivers and, in Yongning, on the eastern shores of the Yangtze River.<sup>14</sup> Yongning thus became one of the few remaining areas to retain hereditary native chieftainship. Indeed, the system of indirect rule that had been established in the thirteenth century by the Yuan emperor remained in place in Yongning through the Qing Dynasty and into the Republic of China. In fact, the Na people of Yongning have maintained their matrilineal social system and their customs of visiting

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14 Wei Yuan, *Shengwuji. Yongzhengxinanyi gailiuji*, 圣武记.雍正西南夷改流记 [The Sacred Wars. Records of the administrative reform of Yongzheng in Southwestern China] [1842] Zhonghuashuju, 1984.

relationships to the present day. In Yongning, both men and women have considerable sexual freedom, and people can choose their lovers according to their wishes. Love suicide is unknown to them.

The customs governing love and marriage among the people of Yongning and Yanyuan, and in other places among the more remote mountainous areas of Lijiang, are in sharp contrast with those found in Lijiang plain area. This contrast confirms that marriage and sexual relations found in Lijiang plain area in the first half of the twentieth century were the product of the ongoing influence of Confucian culture. The farther from the Lijiang plain area, which is to say, from the political, economic and cultural center, the weaker the Confucian influence. And love suicide took place in Lijiang plain, at the political, economic and cultural center, which was not Confucian in more ancient times – not in the remote regions.

The extreme measures instituted by the Qing reforms caused profound tensions in the Naxi society of the Lijiang plain. The Naxi, who had inherited a set of traditional values and culture thousands of years old, were forced into sudden and brutal cultural changes. These changes were most harmful to young people. There arose a fierce conflict between the social system and human nature, and between the traditional culture and the introduced culture. The rigid patriarchal system of Confucianism, the conflict of values between the newly established system of arranged marriage and the traditional customs of free love, and the harsh new concepts about women's chastity all contributed to young people opting for love suicide. The most evident and direct cause of this tragedy lay with notions of chastity. However, the evolution of love suicide into a historical social custom cannot be attributed solely to structural causes. The Naxi's traditional outlook on life and death, their unique national temperament, were also significant factors.<sup>15</sup>

### **Conflict between traditional perspectives on love and sexuality and Confucian feudal ethics**

Naxi customs of love marriage are geographically bound. The joys and sorrows of the world were divided east and west of the upper reaches of the Yangtze River, and in Naxi country, love suicide was most prominent on the Lijiang plain and surrounding regions whilst in the remote mountain areas of Baoshan, Fengke, or Mingyin, few people took their lives. The reformed marriage system was a major factor in promoting love suicide. After 1723, the system of arranged marriage combined with Confucian ethics became much stricter. Under the impact of the mandatory reforms, the Naxi people developed a dual and contradictory system whereby youth retained the customs of freedom before marriage even as the selection of a marriage partner became entirely devoid of freedom of choice.

The Qing reforms were more forcefully implemented in Lijiang than in some other regions. According to the Lijiang prefectural records, a Hall of Loyalty, a Hall of Filial Piety, and a Hall of Righteousness were constructed in Lijiang in the second year of Emperor Qianlong (1712).<sup>16</sup> A chapter dedicated to righteousness in the *Lijiang Prefectural Records* includes a list of chaste

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15 See: Yang Fuquan, *Shenqi de xunqin*, 神奇的殉情 [The Mystery of Love Suicide] Hong Kong Sanlian Bookshop 1994; and Yang Fuquan, *Duoyuanwenhua yu Naxi shehui*, 多元文化与纳西社会 [Multiculturalism and Naxi Society], Yunnan Renmin Chubanshe, 1998.

16 *Qianlong Lijiang fuzhi*, 乾隆. 丽江府志 [Qianlong. Lijiang Prefectural Records], Lijiang Fuzhi Bangongshi, 1991.

women and bears witness to the growing importance attached to chastity in Naxi society. From 1723 onwards, Chinese language literature produced in Lijiang repeatedly emphasized ethics and integrity. Joseph F. Rock, who resided in Lijiang for nearly three decades before the advent of the People's Republic of China, wrote that the Naxi of the Lijiang plain area regarded illegitimate pregnancy and illegitimate births as unspeakable disgrace, and that illicit lovers were utterly despised by the local society.<sup>17</sup> Women who became pregnant outside of the betrothal arrangements committed suicide. A feudal outlook on women's chastity completely transformed Naxi morality, taking deep roots in Naxi psychology and persisted well into the Republican period (1912-1949). In my own field investigation, informants confirmed to me that in the Lijiang plain area, many women committed suicide because they were pregnant out of wedlock. These women were afraid of being mercilessly attacked by public opinion. Most of the women's lovers died with them.

Love suicide is depicted in the Naxi Dongba manuscripts. The story of the Kaimeijjemilji, the first Naxi woman who committed love suicide, is told in a ritual dedicated to the souls of lovers who have committed suicide *Lv Bber Lv Ssa* [the young herdsman's journey]. The direct cause of her death lies in an arranged marriage and expectations of female chastity. That is, Kaimeijjemilji is pregnant from a lover who is not her betrothed; she has broken the promise made by her parents, and she must die.

However, if we compare the love and marriage customs described in many myths and legends recorded in the Dongba manuscripts and investigate the customs of Naxi people in different places, we can see that the concept of chastity was not native to ancient Naxi society, and that it is the product of more recent feudal ethics. From the Dongba manuscripts, it is clear that the Naxi once had customs of sexual freedom. For example, in the Naxi creation myth, the hero Cosseilee'ee (who is still worshipped today as the first ancestor of the Naxi people) married the heavenly daughter Ceiheibubami. But Cosseilee'ee also lived with the female ghost, Lumeimu'ee who gave birth to three children, while after her marriage to Cosseilee'ee, Ceiheebubami cohabited with Yussolasser, with whom she also had children.

The ancestral heroine Eyidunumi lived with several men, among them Meessepeizei, Keezzeeloshe and Leemeimeeshv, and she gave birth to three children from different fathers. In the Dongba manuscripts dealing with the purification ceremony *Cee Na Nee Che Shu* [To Purify a Black Goat], Ceezhuajjimu, wife of the White tribe chieftain Meeleedduzee, went to the lake of Meeleiddajji to fetch water, and there she had sexual relations with Meeleeshvzee, the chief of the Black tribe. In the story of the ancient Naxi hero *Seebajjibbu*, the wife of another White tribe leader cohabited with the chief of the Black tribe, Meeleeshvzee. In the Dongba story of the Naxi ancestor *Galaiciu*,<sup>18</sup> Ceezhuagemu, a princess of the White tribe, lived with Miseingewu, a prince of the Black tribe, for three night; in the ritual text, *Su Shua Na* [Burning the Black Ritual Wood] this same princess Ceezhuagemu had an affair with subordinates of Meeleeshvzee, the chief of the Black tribe, and gave birth to a son. In Naxi mythology, the wife of Yulishuabbu (son of the earth god) had an affair while her husband was out hunting. The leader of the Black tribe asked his daughter Geessanamo to seduce and live with Ddossoalu, prince of the White tribe. Indeed, even

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17 Joseph F. Rock, 'The Romance of K'a-ma-gyu-gkyi', *Bulletin de L'Ecole Francaise d'Extrême-Orient*, Vol. XXXIX, 1939.

18 Also spelt Gelaiqiu (see Mathieu in this issue).



after Ddossoalu was captured and imprisoned, Geessanamo continued to live with him. In the Dongba manuscripts, there are many other stories about warring tribes sending beautiful princesses to charm and seduce their enemies. We can conclude that if the Naxi people used a honeypot strategy in warfare, women could not have been required to observe chastity. Most of the characters mentioned above, who have liaisons or live temporarily with their partners, are ancestors, heroes, and wise men, both mortals and immortals of the Naxi mythology. They are praised in many Dongba manuscripts and there is no concealment of the fact that these females once had sexual freedom and multiple partners. The behaviour which was abhorred by later generations of Naxi raises no opprobrium in the ancient Naxi ritual literature.

Indeed, polygamy, sexual freedom, and flexible sexual ethics are all consistent with the stories told in the Dongba manuscripts. In the Dongba manuscripts, it is often mentioned that 'a good man travels through nine villages and obtains lovers in nine places', and it is evident from the numerous stories and myths that polygamy and sexual freedom were socially permissible among the Naxi's ancestors, and that no concepts of chastity restricted women's sexual behavior.

Importantly, the traditions of free love were preserved in many Naxi areas into the contemporary period. In Eya, as we saw, the Naxi have customs of polygamy and polygyny. The people of Eya are descended from Naxi soldiers who were garrisoned to guard the Tibetan territories held by the Mu chiefs during the Ming period. There is no doubt that their sexual customs have preserved aspects of traditional Naxi custom. Besides Yongning, as mentioned above, free love was practiced in Baidi, Zhongdian county, and in Yanyuan, Sichuan, which were all part of Mu feudal estates during the Ming dynasty. But sexual freedom was also found in Lijiang itself, in an area which became deeply influenced by Han culture. Indeed, quite in spite of the Qing reforms, the Naxi did not implement the segregation of the sexes according to Confucian norms, and people of all ages kept the custom of free social intercourse between men and women almost everywhere in the Lijiang area, and along with this, opportunities for youth to engage in love before marriage. Naxi parents did not interfere with their children's friendships and social relations, and were largely blind to the love relationships young people developed before they were married.

Seen against this historical and social context, the development of the Naxi love suicide custom is best understood as the result of a fiercely conflicting cultural script that opposed the foreign value system of Confucian morality and ancient customs of free social intercourse and free love – which the Naxi maintained beyond the Confucian reforms with dire consequences.

## **Women and Love Suicide**

Based on several years of research, I am able to confirm that in pre-Liberation Lijiang, the number of women who committed love suicide was much greater than the number of men. In many villages, Naxi women committed suicide either alone or in groups. Women were more inclined to die for love than men, and their determination to commit love suicide was stronger than men's. Indeed, Naxi society placed more value on men than women, and if we make a serious analysis of the gender system, it is evident that such gender disparity was not an ancient feature of Naxi culture but was bolstered by the feudal ideals that came into Lijiang with the abolishment of the native prefecture in 1723. The Dongba manuscripts, the historical records, and Naxi folk customs all

confirm that at some earlier stage of history, Naxi women had high social status and that they played a significant role in social life, religion, and war.

The Naxi people refer to themselves as 'people who worship Heaven': *Naxi mee biu sso*. Their most important ritual is the Sacrifice to Heaven, when the Naxi come together to commemorate the origins of their people and to celebrate the cohesion of their lineages. During the Sacrifice to Heaven, the Naxi propitiate the heavenly god Zela'apu and the heavenly goddess Ceihee'ezee, who are the parents of Ceiheibubami, the first female ancestor of the Naxi, and the main object of worship is none other than the matrilineal ancestor Ceiheibubami. Besides the Sacrifice to Heaven, the Naxi worship many goddesses, and have many myths and stories about goddesses. Goddesses are also the cultural heroes who invented modes of production and the life skills. Fearless, intelligent and resourceful heroines, most of whom are considered Naxi ancestors, feature in many Naxi myths and legends

In ancient times, Naxi women played an important role in religious life. In the ancient Dongba manuscripts, Naxi ritual specialists were female diviners who had the ritual titles of *pa*. Naxi religious lore tells that three hundred and sixty books of divination were given to the Naxi people by Perzreesamei, the great Diviner in Heaven. Yet, in the twentieth century, Naxi women were almost completely excluded from religious activities in the contemporary period. Today, there are no *pa* ritual specialists, but there are a few Naxi female shamans who go by the title of *Sani* or *Saipa*, who are undoubtedly the descendants of these ancient female ritual specialists.

Taking into account a range of sources - the Naxi Dongba manuscripts, ancient Chinese historical records, and traditional Naxi customs - we can see that, in a more distant past, Naxi women were afforded a traditional respect, that they played an important social role, and enjoyed high social status. Naxi patriarchal values developed gradually in the feudal society established during the Ming period, and very much hardened after the integration of Lijiang under direct imperial administration. Lijiang was among the minority regions where Confucian reforms were most forcefully implemented. We have seen above that within two years of the removal of the native prefecture in 1723, three Confucian temples were constructed and a register of chaste women was established.

In the thirteenth year of Guangxu 光緒 (1887 CE), Huang Jinxiang was the prefect of Lijiang prefecture. He formulated the maxims for governing Lijiang, and many regulations to suppress women. For example, he strictly prohibited women from participating in religious activities performed by lay people, such as burning incense in the temples. He judged that the colorful clothing of Naxi women and their loud speech and laughter, along with public mingling of men and women, taught stealing, eroticism, and obscenity.<sup>19</sup> For these, he decreed severe punishments: "If a man allows his wife and daughter to go to the temples to hold a ritual of burning incense, he will be beaten forty times with wooden batons, as it is the sin of the husband and father."<sup>20</sup> Huang Jinxiang even banned women from watching the lanterns during the Lantern Festival, because he believed it was shameless for women to be in the public space in groups. Women were only allowed to watch from the gates of their homes and were forbidden to play with the lights. Fathers and husbands

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19 Huangjin Xian: *Zhì lì zhǐ yán*, *Gǔ lì shǐ yán*, 治丽箴言, 光緒十九年 [Maxims for Governing Lijiang, 19th year of Guangxu Changchunfaningwentang, Kunming, 1893.

20 Ibid.

were punished for women who broke the law.<sup>21</sup>

In ancient times, Naxi people had a custom of following the father's name and the mother's surname. However, after the abolition of the native prefecture, Qing imperial officials, proceeding from extreme patriarchal values, strictly forbade men to marry into their wives' families and to adopt their wives' family names, declaring that it was shameful and despicable for the husband to follow his wife's surname. Children who carried the family names of their mothers were deemed illegitimate and unfilial. To be matrilineal was said to respect one's wife by destroying one's ancestors. In the *Maxims for Governing Lijiang*, it is written that "Those who raise sons of different surnames and bring chaos to the clans and lineages will be punished by sixty strokes. The same punishment applies to those who give their sons to families of different surnames."<sup>22</sup>

During the Qing Dynasty, tragic and bitter songs became popular among Naxi women, reflecting the patriarchal views that placed so much more value on sons than daughters in Lijiang. Some of these songs relate concerns that clan relatives will inherit the family property if the family has only daughters. Others tell of the suffering of women who are not treated as full family members, who are despised and abused, and are deprived of the warmth of the world. Many of these bitter songs tell of women's desire not to live in this world, and of not wanting to be reborn as women in another life. The songs often conclude with thoughts of suicide. In these songs, the suffering, deep sorrow, and resentment experienced by Naxi women are expressed in low and dignified tones. These expressions of grief and resentment are rarely encountered in the ancient Dongba manuscripts. In the Dongba texts, women's lives are depicted as free and unrestrained.

Many of these women's songs, which became so extensive during the Qing dynasty, reflect the loss of a historical tradition and profound social change. These songs bear witness to the drastic reversal of women's social position as a result of institutional and culture reforms. They express the sorrows of lives lived in a social environment contrary to tradition, lives that have been crushed physically and mentally.

## Conclusion

The Naxi love suicide custom was a complex social problem, further complicated by layers of cultural inputs. Over a long history, many young Naxi walked the path to love suicide. The immediate causes of their death may have varied, as each individual had a personal reason for wishing to die. However, such individual factors were not isolated elements but indeed related to a whole. We can only understand this strange cultural phenomenon and solve the mystery of suicide on this scale by taking into account the larger picture: culture, society, and history. On this count, we should not ignore the part that Indigenous cultural factors played in love suicide. The Naxi people's own worldview, beliefs in ghosts and gods, and their attitudes to life and death, nature, love and sex that make up the Naxi collective psyche also contributed to the mysterious development of love suicide. The traditional Naxi spirit of 'fearing no death' and the belief that a paradise (Naxi: *Ngvlyechehgeo*) in the next life awaited lovers who committed suicide had a catalytic effect on the development of this heartbreaking custom and the leading role that women

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21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

played in this tragedy.

At a historical juncture, the Naxi people developed a set of cultural values which were inextricably linked to their own cultural traditions. Thus, love suicide among the Naxi was not only a tragedy that shocked both Chinese and foreign observers, it was a very unique cultural phenomenon, and a unique Naxi custom. In this paper, I have only explored part of this story: the role of the political system and the part played by the social and cultural reforms that were imposed on the Naxi in the 18th century. There can be no doubt that under the Confucian value system, women almost entirely lost their former status and freedom, and suffered humiliation. This social transformation amounted to a physical and mental torture that became unbearable for Naxi women.

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