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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Chunmei Du

The Love-Suicide Mystique of Naxi: Experiential Tourism and Existential Authenticity

Abstract Love-suicide (*xunqing* 殉情) is often hailed as a representative component of the Naxi culture. This article examines how representations of love-suicide have transformed from an obscure social taboo to an invaluable Naxi tradition in the last two decades. While Han and Naxi cultural elites aestheticize love-suicide as a cultural symbol of moral sublimity, tourists further transform the discourse into a simultaneously spiritual and erotic experience in which they seek and create their own existential authenticity. The apparent revival is not simply a result of Naxi political resistance to the external regime or a natural return to their "authentic" culture. It rather marks another tide of radical transformation in a multi-agent and highly commercialized global world within which both minority cultures and tourists' identities are transformed.

Keywords Naxi, love-suicide, existential authenticity, ethnic tourism

Introduction

In May 2013, a new club in Lijiang, Yunnan called "Rain of Rouge" (*yanyu*), a pun on the word meaning "a romantic encounter, or tryst" (*yanyu*),[1] installed a statue of sexual union from Tantric Buddhism on its center stage. Overwhelming criticisms claiming profanity followed, after provocative images of tourists touching the statue spread in social media overnight. The club owner defended the statue as nothing but a good-intentioned gesture to bring customers luck and should not be viewed in the conventional secular light. Under pressure, however, the nicknamed "Trysting Buddha statue" (*yanyufo*) was removed within two weeks.[2]

The controversy highlights a seeming contradiction in both minority cultural

[1] *Yanyu* 豔遇 can describe both premarital romantic encounters and extramarital affairs.
[2] Zhang Guoyu, "Guaili luanshen," 13.

Chunmei Du (✉)
Department of History, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42101, USA
E-mail: chunmei.du@wku.edu

representations and in tourists' experience: the simultaneous presence of the profane and the spiritual. Scholars of modern China have written that state and popular constructions of ethnic minority images, especially in contexts of eroticization and commodification, are a means of constructing a homogenous Han identity and a continuing Han cultural and political domination.[3] Recent research has also pointed out the worldwide phenomenon of ethnic tourism and its transforming effect on ethnic identities, such as in the cases of invented traditions and staged performances.[4] While external agents' roles in shaping an ethnic identity is something commonly recognized, mostly due to the forces of the state and the market, less is known about how tourists' own identities are transformed by experiences that they themselves have helped to create, whether indirectly or directly. Using the newly-invented love-suicide culture of Naxi as a case, this article examines how both minority cultural symbols and Han tourists are transformed through what may be called experiential tourism. Rather than simply consuming goods or spectating performances, participants in experiential tourism help create events and experiences that can activate their own feelings and even trigger a change in identity.

Reinventing the Naxi Culture

The Naxi minority is the majority population of the Lijiang basin in Yunnan province, at approximately over 300,000.[5] The Naxi has a relatively small

[3] The Self-Other paradigm has been widely used as a useful lens in understanding identity constructions. For scholarship on modern China, see Louisa Schein, "Gender and Internal Orientalism in China"; Dru Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China: Refiguring Majority/Minority Identities"; Emily Chao, "Hegemony, Agency and Re-presenting the Past: The Invention of Dongba Culture." Researchers of American history have also identified similar processes of "Othering" in the country's past and present. Besides blacks and Asians, various groups of European immigrants have also been assigned different "racial" identities, such as the hillbillies of the Appalachian region and early Italian immigrants in the South. All can be seen as Internal Others constructed in contrast to the pure white Anglo-American Self. For scholarship in American history, see Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*; Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*; Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*.

[4] For example, see Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger eds., *The Invention of Tradition*; John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc*; C. Tilley, "Performing Culture in the Global Village"; Philip Feifan Xie, "The Bamboo-Beating Dance in Hainan, China: Authenticity and Commodification."

[5] Lijiang can refer to various entities depending on the context and period. In 2002, the new county-level administrative unit called Lijiang City (*Lijiang dijishi*) was established including Lijiang Ancient Town District, Jade Dragon Naxi Autonomous County, Yongsheng County, Huaping County, and Ninglang Yi Autonomous County. Naxi is the majority population of Lijiang Ancient Town District and Jade Dragon Naxi Autonomous County, which formed Lijiang Naxi Autonomous County (*Lijiang Naxizu zizhixian*) from 1961 to 2002. For more information, see Lijiang City's official website at http://news.lijiang.gov.cn/ others/ introduce.htm.

population among the 55 state-designated minority nationalities of China. Nor is it famous for political resistance, like the familiar cases of the Mongolians, Tibetans, and Uyghurs. In fact, the area has been formally incorporated into the Chinese empire at least since the 18th century, and long influenced by Chinese culture through immigration and intermarriage over the past millennium. As some anthropologists have pointed out, it is difficult to distinguish many cultural aspects of contemporary Lijiang-basin Naxi, such as "patrilineal descent, ancestor veneration, and clan exogamy," from the social structure of Han Chinese in surrounding Yunnan or neighboring Sichuan.[6] Moreover, the legacies of Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist rituals, and Chinese popular cultures continue in Naxi societies today.[7]

Despite these historical connections and the apparent proximity to Han communities, a so-called distinctive Naxi culture has emerged and attained new and unprecedented national and international fame in the recent decades.[8] This includes so-called Naxi Ancient Music, Dongba culture of ritual practitioners, the "unique" picturesque language in which Dongba scripts are written, and "love-suicide (*xunqing*)."[9] The tradition is said to have a long history dating at least to the 17th century, when lovers would commit suicide to protest parental and social rejection of their romantic premarital relationships. The practice became prominent among young Naxi women in the city of Lijiang and nearby under the direct Chinese rule in the 18th century. The love-suicide ritual was banned by the new Republic in 1912 and had fallen sharply by the time of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.[10] The following "liberation movement," which denounced the practice as part of the superstitious, backward, and feudal past, led to its further decline to obscurity.[11] Since the 1990s, however, love-suicide has made a sudden comeback in scholarly and popular discourses, appearing in every single guidebook on Lijiang and Naxi, and receiving both enormous social currency and direct, official sanction.

In the last two decades, tourist sites in Lijiang started to brand themselves as historical sites of love-suicide. Recently-developed ones include Spruce Meadow, Yak Meadow, and Tiger Leaping Gorge, all becoming part of the so-called

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[6] Sydney White, "Fame and Sacrifice the Gendered Construction of Naxi Identities," 301.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Charles McKhann, "The Naxi and the Nationalities Question," 39–62, and "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Observations and Reflections on Tourism Development in Lijiang," 147–66; Helen Rees, "Echoes of History: Naxi Music in Modern China," 28–34; Xiaolin Guo, "State and Ethnicity in China's Southwest," 255–63.
[9] Chao, "Hegenomy, Agency and Re-presenting the Past"; Gu Xue'er, *Naxi ren de zuihou xunqing*; Yang Fuquan, *Shenqi de xunqing*.
[10] Anthony Jackson, *Na-khi Religion: An Analytical Appraisal of the Na-Khi Ritual Texts*, 74.
[11] Yang Fuquan, *Yulong qingshang: Naxizu de xunqing yanjiu*, 12.

Original Ecological (*yuanshengtai*) tourism in Lijiang.[12] As such, love-suicide legends of the past are not only transformed and elevated into a unique, intangible culture of the Naxi but they have also turned into tangible commodities such as tourist sites, songs, and guidebooks. The new products are largely based on reconstructed or invented traditions. For example, jumping off the cliff is only one of the many ways couples supposedly committed suicides and the practice has long declined over the twentieth century. In addition, the socio-economic impacts upon local minorities are troubling. After Spruce Meadow, eventually known as Love-suicide Meadow, was developed into a tourist attraction, local poor Yi villagers developed a horse-riding business to benefit from the tourist potential. After the initial boom, a new chair-lift to the site was built with foreign investment and local Yi businesses fell off. As a result, local Yi communities who had abandoned their traditional agriculture became more economically desperate. Two groups of young Yi village dancers were brought in to perform for tourists and later degenerated into prostitution.[13]

What is the mechanism by which tourists are attracted to these newly-created sites? These places themselves offer only natural scenery without anything uniquely Naxi. Furthermore, people who are interested in love-suicide culture do not necessarily need to visit the "historical sites" to appreciate an "exotic" practice. Unlike folk singing and dancing, suicide cannot be performed or reenacted. Tourist activities in the Love-suicide Meadow, for example, only involve the humdrum listening to tourist guides' introductions, appreciating the views, and having pictures taken. As a domestic tourist comments in 2013 on a blog: "Nothing special to see there. Only some flat land…."[14] And yet the sites remain popular. Increasing from 4,000 people in 1990 to over 10,000 in 1993, the number of visitors to Love-suicide Meadow continues to grow.[15] A look at tourist sites, local hostels' websites, and tourist blogs reveals an unusual fascination with the love-suicide legends among visitors, and few have questioned the authenticity of those sites.

What exactly is attracting tourists and are they simply victims of sophisticated advertising ploys? In what ways, if at all, can love-suicide be seen as authentic? Dongba culture and Naxi Ancient Music can at least claim authenticity in time

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[12] Lindsey Swope et al., "Uncommon Property Rights in Southwest China: Trees and Tourism." Having no exact counterpart in English, *yuanshengtai* can be roughly translated as Original Ecology. Inspired by Western awareness of environmental and ecological issues, the neologism was invented in Chinese media about a decade ago, and *yuanshengtai* culture is often applied to minority folk cultures. See Helen Rees, "Intangible Cultural Heritage in China Today: Policy and Practice in the Early Twentieth-First Century," 34.

[13] Swope et al., "Uncommon Property Rights in Southwest China."

[14] "Yulong xueshan, yinxiang lijiang."

[15] Swope et al., "Uncommon Property Rights in Southwest China."

and space from its links with the original, the past, and the ethnic Other. In contrast, love-suicide is problematic for its "dead" and "deadly" nature and cannot be directly replicated or easily consumed in reality. The following section of the article examines the origins and appeal of the love-suicide mystique by looking at its cultural representations, focusing on the discourses of cultural elites and tourists. While Lijiang natives, local governments, and religious elites are all actively participating in the reinvention of Naxi culture, love-suicide provides an ideal case to examine in addition the role of tourists in transforming both the cultural symbol and themselves.

From Taboo to Sublimity: "The World's Suicide Capital"

The recent popularity of Naxi culture can be associated with the ongoing fad of inventing ethnic traditions in China and attributed to the changing official ideologies regarding ethnic minorities in general. During the pre-reform era, nationality was largely downplayed and even denounced as being threats to the central goal of political integration based on so-called class alliances.[16] Post-Mao leaders, however, have increasingly promoted ethnic and regional diversity to maintain national unity and construct an authentic national tradition that can face a globalized world.[17] While the Cultural Revolution did much damage to ethnic culture, the surviving nation-state has realized that ethnic diversity can be a valuable source for reconstructing national authenticity. To confront challenges from inside and outside, the state has been promoting cultural preservation in line with global concepts such as the Intangible Cultural Heritage (*feiwuzhi wenhua yichan*) by UNESCO. Meanwhile, local governments in collaboration with commercial enterprises find ethnic tourism a profitable and convenient source of revenue, especially within less-developed regions. For example, since Lijiang Ancient Town became a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site in 1997, the prefecture has become one of the fastest-developing tourist regions in China. In such new contexts, minority cultures such as the Naxi depart from the old images as "primitive" dead fossils, and become celebrated tradition and valuable commodity.

Recent research shows clear evidence of the invention of Naxi culture. Emily Chao demonstrates how the so-called Dongba Culture was only created in the 1990s. Often referred to as priests, dongbas were a type of Naxi ritual practitioners but not part of an organized religion. They performed a variety of

[16] Guo, *State and Ethnicity*, 61.
[17] Guo, *State and Ethnicity*; Emily Chao, "Layered Alterities: Discourses of the Other in Lijiang, China," 101–20; Rees, "Intangible Cultural Heritage in China Today."

rituals including "exorcisms, healing, funerals, and annual sacrifices," combining elements of shamanism, Bon and Buddhism.[18] While the original practices are religious in nature and not necessarily privileged or gendered, the newly fabricated Dongba Culture occupies a more "civilized" space in relation to the Han through sanitization and secularization.[19] In the process, Dongbas become experts on Naxi cultural traditions, Dongba texts become objects of scholarly analysis, and Dongba religion becomes Dongba culture. The Naxi also claims to be one of the only minority groups with their own system of writing. The Naxi language, supposedly the only extant ancient, picturesque language, is only used in Dongba scripts and remains unintelligible to the majority of Naxi speakers.[20] Claims of other distinctive Naxi cultures are no less problematic. For example, the so-called Ancient Naxi Music was only coined around 1980. It is arguably Daoist-influenced ritual music from Han-dominated areas surviving in this region.[21]

Compared to these "unique" elements, love-suicide does not seem to be an ideal candidate to fabricate an "authentic" Naxi culture with a negative and mysterious tone; in fact, certain Naxi ritual texts portray suicidal women as evil.[22] In the imperial era, the Confucian ideology saw the practice as immoral and harmful to the family structure and social stability, except in the case of widow suicides. Couples' defiance of parental decisions was viewed as posing challenges to social norms of sexuality and marriage. Love-suicide's fate in most of the 20th century was even less promising. The Republican era denounced the practice as countering the new model of civilization based on science and progress. The subsequent socialist model discarded it as a backward practice linked to the feudal past, based on the linear and evolutionary model of social development within which the Han occupies a modern and civilized position. In practice, iconography and ideologies of the new Communist regime managed to penetrate much deeper into the previously isolated areas, going hand-in-hand with unprecedented levels of land reform and socialist style education.[23] Overall, actual love-suicide has long declined in the modern era and largely gone extinct. It is mostly seen as taboo today even within the Naxi communities.

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[18] Chao, "Hegemony, Agency and Re-presenting the Past."
[19] Chao, "Layered Alterities."
[20] The writing system includes a pictographic script (*dongbawen*) and a less common phonetic script (*gebawen*). Chao, "Hegemony, Agency and Re-presenting the Past."
[21] Rees, *Echoes of History.*
[22] Peter Goullart, *Forgotten Kingdom*, 146–47.
[23] Recent observers note that in the very remote villages only accessible through a horse ride of several weeks, Maoist influences are still present and visible. For example, marriage ceremonies are performed in front of both Mao portraits and religious symbols. People still wear Mao hats in dancing and formal events and give them as wedding gifts, a popular practice during the Cultural Revolution. See Gu, *Naxi ren de zuihou xunqing.*

The drastic change in the narrative and perceptions of love-suicide is impressive. Instead of being the direct result of government initiative or a popular trend, Chinese cultural elites, both Han and minorities, have played the key role in discovering and transforming the love-suicide legends into an iconic cultural symbol of the Naxi. Although several major Western-language studies on the Naxi are available and frequently referred to by the Chinese scholars, none of them deals exclusively with love-suicide or celebrate it to the level of a "high culture" in the conventional notion. Instead, in early Western anthropological studies love-suicide is usually examined in connection with Naxi religious beliefs and practices as well as political changes in Lijiang. It is only among Chinese studies of the 1990s that we start to see a new type of narrative of the love-suicide as a symbol of morality and spirituality.

Chinese studies generally attribute the high rate of suicide in the region to the critical role that the Qing occupation played.[24] Most agree that the strong appearance of the practice can be traced to the systematic sinicization policy of the Manchu government that replaced native chieftains with direct bureaucratic control (*gaitu guiliu*). Since 1723, when local rebellions were suppressed and new administrative units were added, local Naxi customs were drastically transformed. Such statements are consistent with more recent Western scholarship on the phenomenon—still sporadic yet predating work by their Chinese counterparts. Anthropologist Anthony Jackson points out that the intervention in 1723 by the Qing state led to the forceful replacement of the Naxi matrilineal kinship system by the Chinese patriarchal system. Such radical changes, especially the repression of women's rights, caused young women to "escape from the problems by embracing the idea of suicide and dragging their lovers with them." He continues, "This 'solution' was offered to them by the dto-mbas [dongbas] who continuously suggested and encouraged this habit, especially near Li-chiang."[25] Emily Chao, also an anthropologist, argues that rather than caused by Chinese repressive policies, Dongbas' encouragements, or women's desires to escape difficult lives, Naxi suicides were "the result of a clash between the indigenous cultural scripts of the Naxi and the cultural scripts of the Han Chinese." She points out that most of the suicides were young women and rural males, the two groups that "lost considerable status as a result of the Chinese occupation." Therefore, she sees the suicides as "acts of indigenous resistance in the face of cultural incorporation and gender transformation."[26]

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[24] Gu, *Naxi ren de zuihou xunqing*; Yang Fuquan, *Shenqi de xunqing*; *Xunqing*; *Yulong qingshang*; and "Lüelun yishuyu Naxiren de xunqing beiju zhi guanxi," 57–66. A simple search in the Chinese academic databases also shows hundreds of articles and thesis on the topic.

[25] Jackson, *Na-khi Religion*, 73.

[26] Chao, "Suicide, Ritual, and Gender Transformation among the Naxi," 72.

Despite the consensus on the external intrusion and implicit message of resistance, love-suicide in Chinese works is primarily told as a romantic story of the Naxi's courageous quest for freedom to love. Compared to recent Western scholarship on the subject, both the Qing state and the Dongba are downplayed in Chinese narratives. Suicide couples are portrayed as repressed by the dominant new social norms, rather than the oppressive political regime in particular. Moreover, indigenous priests' roles in profiting from and promoting the practice are deemphasized. Religious factors are often reframed in a more ambiguously secular tone, simply as Naxi's belief in harmony with nature. For example, Yang Fuquan, Vice Director of the Yunnan Social Science Academy and himself a Naxi from the region, has written three monographs and a dozen articles on Naxi suicide.[27] Considered a pioneer authority on the "Naxi studies" nationally and globally, his works have brought much attention to the previously neglected and largely extinct custom. In his monographic study, Yang Fuquan disagrees with previous scholarship that highlights the oppressive and exploitative role of the Dongba in promoting the practice for their own economic interest and instead insists on their possible sincerity in the process.[28] He argues that Naxi suicide is saturated with morality, a kind of supra-rational morality, due to the surrounding presence of a certain courageousness associated with performing a sacrifice for the tribe, nationality, and country, as well as for love.[29] In another article, he also links love-suicide with Art—painting, drawing, music, and dance, and calls it carrying "unique aesthetic sensibilities."[30] In addition, Gu Xue'er has spent decades in the region and published what she calls a documentary fiction based on love-suicide stories that she collected.[31] She compared love-suicide and Dongba cultures as boudoir and sword (*guige yu dao*), symbolizing the femininity and masculinity side of Naxi culture respectively. Her 2013 documentary titled the "Last Great Dongba" (*da dongba*) has been screened in Chinese and international film festivals. Acknowledging that moral norms often see suicide as taboo, Gu Xue'er instead celebrates Naxi's respect for "sentiment" and their choice of "sublimity." She sees the custom as reflecting their quest for eternity and their fundamental belief in a harmony between humankind and nature.[32] Similar romantic portraits can be found in mass media, where further simplification is often involved. "Impression Lijiang" (*yinxiang Lijiang*), a large-scale live outdoor performance about Naxi culture (2006–), includes a

[27] Yang Fuquan, *Shenqi de xunqing*; *Xunqing*; *Yulong qingshang*; and "Lüelun yishuyu Naxiren de xunqing beiju zhi guanxi."
[28] Yang, *Yulong qingshang*, 130.
[29] Ibid., 210.
[30] Yang, "luelun yishuyu Naxiren de xunqing beiju zhi guanxi."
[31] Gu, *Naxi ren de zuihou xunqing*.
[32] Ibid.

section titled "Heaven and Earth." The third phase of the six-part show tells a romantic story of a couple's love-suicide based on Naxi legends that such lovers will afterwards live in the eternal paradise of the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. In the show, a couple wave to their friends and walk deep into the Snow Mountain, suggesting their journey to the love-suicide.[33] Yet, no explicit explanation is provided to inform the audience, most of whom would not associate the act with anything else but another romantic action. The show is codirected by the internationally renowned film-maker Zhang Yimou and had 1.4 million visitors in 2009 alone.[34] In the popular song "Shangri-La in Dreams," Naxi folk singer-songwriter He Wenguang draws from the Naxi epic rendering the first love-suicide legend. The main line of the lyrics is, "Use deer to plow my field and use red tiger for my ride … in the mysterious wonderland, drink milk like water, and use clouds as handkerchiefs. *Aqiuyio*, that's me, Shangri-la in a dream."[35] The references to tiger and deer come from the classic epic that supposedly depicts the invitation from the Gods of Love: The first love-suicide girl was seduced by the afterlife wonderland to be lived on the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain.[36] Nevertheless, He Wenguang uses "Spirits' homes" (*shenxian de jia*) instead of "Heaven" or "Paradise," omitting any direct references to suicide or its religious origin. In all of these portraits, love-suicide is associated with the ultimate sentiment of love and eternity that transcend practical life and mundane existence. In a way, the apparent impracticality and irrationality of love-suicide allows it to be easily reinterpreted as surreal and spiritual. As such, love-suicide, once associated with personal weakness and escape, political defiance, or religious superstition, becomes aestheticized into art and sublimity through a notion of romantic purification.

Motivations by elites to elevate love-suicide from a diminishing and socially tabooed practice to a unique Naxi suicide culture can be understood in a broader context. Ethnic pride and desires for a new national and international prestige often depend on "unique" cultural heritage, real or invented. As Emily Chao has shown, Dongbas have been converted from a diverse group of ritual practitioners to the representatives of a "learned, civilized, and advanced minority" with a distinctive language and scripts.[37] What's more intriguing to me in the love-suicide story, however, is the particular ways that the love-suicide mystique is created. All the contemporary Chinese writings on the topic draw heavily from the accounts of two Westerners who lived in the region and studied the Naxi

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[33] *Impression Lijiang*.
[34] Mao Renjie, "Impressions under Fire."
[35] He Wenguang, *Mengzhong de Xianggelila: He Wenguang yuanchuang gequ zuopin jingxuan*.
[36] Yang, *Yulong qingshang*, 172; He, *Mengzhong de Xianggelila*.
[37] Chao, "Hegemony, Agency and Re-presenting the Past."

substantially before 1949 and whose work was criticized during the pre-reform era.[38] They are Joseph Rock, an American botanist-turned-ethnographer who lived in China between 1924 and 1949 collecting and translating Naxi texts, and Peter Goullart, a Russian explorer and author who lived in Lijiang for eight years in the 1940s. Both have written about the exceptional level of suicide rates, and agree that the enforcement of the rigid Chinese marriage system after Qing pacification in 1723 was a crucial reason.[39] They think that arranged marriages and conservative social attitudes interfered with the Naxi tradition of freedom in establishing love partnerships, therefore driving young unmarried couples into suicide. The two Westerners became local celebrities in the region. Museums were built to honor Rock and some of his books are displayed in the center of the Dongba Cultural Research Institute's museum,[40] and their relatively obscure names now appear as the standard references in almost all the books about the Naxi as well as exhibitions prominently displayed in tourist sites of China.

If relying on early-twentieth-century Western anthropologists' sources to reconnect with the Naxi's own traditions seems ironic in nature, recent cultural borrowings are more problematic. In 1998, a local Naxi leader of the Dongba revival movement went to Canada to set up a Naxi Cultural Exhibition. Stumbling upon Native American totem poles, he appropriated the poles as the perfect medium to illustrate Naxi culture, especially its legend of human origins.[41] An architect was then hired and a new Naxi totem was erected at the entrance of the Dongba Culture Museum in Lijiang. Ever since, totem poles have become the prominent symbol of Naxi culture on display everywhere, such as at various international Dongba cultural festivals in Lijiang and abroad, the large-scale tourist site called the Dongba Pantheon Garden where many TV dramas and movies have been made, entrances to local ethno-theme villages, and a newly-built multifunctional tourist restaurant done in postmodernist style designed by a Singaporean architect.[42] In a few years, totem poles have become a local, indigenous, and authentic Naxi tradition.

Direct importation of totems to represent Naxi origin myths may be an extreme case, but creative cultural borrowing in minority representations is commonly seen today. The aforementioned singer-songwriter He Wenguang uses Shangri-la as the title of his song as well as of the new album, instead of using

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[38] Jackson and Chao also based their research on previous studies by Joseph Rock and Peter Goullart as well as the materials that they have collected, many of which are still preserved in the West.

[39] Joseph Rock, *The Ancient Na-khi Kingdom of Southwest China*; Goullart, *Forgotten Kingdom*.

[40] Guo, *State and Ethnicity*, 255–63.

[41] Weng Naiqun, "Bei 'yuanshengtai' wenhua de renleixue sikao."

[42] Weng, "Bei 'yuanshengtai' wenhua de renleixue sikao."

Jade Dragon Mountain where the legendary love-suicide supposedly took place. Shangri-la, now a geographical and cultural icon of the region, was invented by British writer James Hilton in his 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* to describe a hidden Himalayan paradise.[43] Although many suspect that Hilton was inspired by Rock's description of the Lijiang area in the *National Geographic*, it is obviously a result of Western imagination. Nevertheless, Shangri-la has been thoroughly internalized as an authentic place and cultural capital of northwest Yunnan tourism since the 1990s and even became a "reality." Two local prefectures, Lijiang of Naxi and Zhongdian of Tibetans, disputed the actual place of the authentic Shangri-la. In 1997 the Yunnan provincial government granted Zhongdian the "intellectual property rights" to Shangri-la based on "scientific research," and Zhongdian changed its name to Shangri-la in 2001.[44] The fiction and reality, West and East, minority and majority, and past and present all converge and become conflated as with a Mobius-strip, thus creating ambivalent meanings.

The acts of discovering, reviving, and inventing ethnic tradition are clearly not only a Chinese creation, but also a familiar global phenomenon where communities look at their past for resources to construct a certain unity and a type of cultural capital.[45] The above examples about the Naxi, however, illustrate an irony: Chinese cultural elites and the government today rely on early records and contemporary sources from the West to reconstruct their traditions. The Naxi case shows the critical role that Western sources have played in the creative process. It also highlights paradoxical features in the reconstruction of minority identities in China today: using modern Western-originated symbols to recreate authentic Naxi tradition and then resell them in popular formats in domestic and global markets. The irony is partly due to the fact that after early Communist policies and the Cultural Revolution destroyed many traditional practices and documentations, reliable textual materials and surviving personal transmission grew scarce. A glance at the listed references of Naxi studies shows the limited scope of reliable Chinese sources. Besides, the heavy dependence on Western sources should be seen in the context of minorities' current efforts in creating their own identities and enhance their status, when elites frequently draw foreign materials as evidence of international recognitions and prestige. The acclaimed Naxi Ancient Music, for example, first achieved its status through foreign tourists and international performances, and then started to gain domestic

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[43] James Hilton, *Lost Horizon*.

[44] Ben Hillman, "Paradise under Construction: Minorities, Myths and Modernity in Northwest Yunnan."

[45] Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*; Comaroff and Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc.*; Tilley, "Performing Culture in the Global Village"; Xie, "The Bamboo-Beating Dance in Hainan, China."

fame.

Local interest and pride are clearly at stake in the enthusiastic receptions of Rock and Goullart. The Chinese version of Rock's *The Ancient Na-Khi Kingdom of Southwest China* was published in 1999 by Yunnan Fine Arts Publishing House. The executive editor is Xuan Ke, the principal spokesman for the Naxi Ancient Music, and Naxi scholar Yang Fuxuan is the coeditor. Goullart's book, "Forgotten Kingdom," was published in 2007 by Yunnan People's Press and translated by another Naxi scholar. It is clear that global sources are frequently drawn into the inventing process to legitimize and enhance local prestige. Although remaining unintelligible to many Naxi scholars because of the language barrier, Rock's works are celebrated by the Dongba Cultural Research Institute with pride, as "emblems of the importance of Dongba Culture and the Naxi people, who commanded the attention of a Western scholar associated with the world-renowned Harvard University."[46] Goullart's book dealing with Lijiang was also influential: one of the chapter titles, "the world's suicide capital," has become a catch phrase for Lijiang, together with its other "world records."[47] In this case, Han and Naxi cultural elites' narratives converge as they share the common goal of elevating love-suicide to a unique, high culture.

Through aestheticization and simplification, "primitive" becomes sublime and the transgressive normalized. In the old system, cultural practices like love-suicide were seen as illustrating minorities' socio-economic backwardness. In the new system of the reform era, in contrast, cultural distinctions among different ethnic groups are increasingly valued as evidence of national pride in line with global aesthetics and cosmopolitan values in order to claim equality and superiority to the Han-dominant version of civilization and modernity. Using such global values and sources, they find a way to reconcile the tension between ethnic distinctiveness and the more exclusive practice of Han ethnic nationalism.

Transgress the Normative: Love-Suicide Mystique

If cultural elites are pioneers in discovering love-suicide, their representations are not always consistent with consumers' experience and accounts. In 2010, *Sichou zhilu* (Silk Road), a national semi-scholarly bi-monthly magazine, published an article titled "The Unique Naxi 'Sacred Land of Love-suicides' and 'Valentine's Day.'" The article explains the love-suicide practices as "men and women in unhappy marriage coming here, first to be couples in front of the Love Binding

[46] Chao, "Hegemony, Agency and Re-presenting the Past," 215.
[47] Goullart, *Forgotten Kingdom*, 181–89.

Stone, then jumping off the cliffs embracing each other."[48] The author then identifies the distinctive Naxi Valentine's Day: "Usually Valentine's day is for unmarried lovers. But Naxi's Valentine is for married couples to have dates with other people."[49] The author explains that the three-day period in early spring allows married people to date their own lovers. They "live together, talk about love, and can do anything. No one would interfere. After three days, they will go back to their own homes as if nothing ever happened."[50] The print copy of the article first came out in 2010 and later was published online in March 2012. In August 2012, the Yunnan International travel service company published a similar article, essentially an abbreviated version, on its official website, titled "Yunnan Tourism: Different Valentine's Day of Naxi." The online piece basically paraphrases or plagiarizes the earlier article. It begins with "You may not believe that in the beautiful Naxi minority of Lijiang, there is a Valentine's Day just for 'extramarital lovers (*disanzhe*),'" and continues explaining its practices as an unrestricted three days for married people to have extramarital affairs.[51]

Although less-rigid sexual relationships exist in certain groups now labeled Naxi, there is no evidence that the Naxi celebrate a special Valentine's Day for extramarital affairs. According to a recent journalist account titled "Naxi couples get married in the traditional way," the wedding was held on *qixi*, the traditional Han Valentine's Day, and the ceremony also included Western practices such as the groom kneeling down to put a ring on the bride and kissing her.[52] This aforementioned 2010 account is the earliest published story on the so-called Naxi Valentine's Day that I can trace and is likely invented by the tourist author and then widely reproduced. The author's motivation remains curious, and so is the fact that such a sensational story can quickly gain momentum in the public realm.

A closer look at the Naxi Valentine's Day narrative reveals some implicit erotic attractions. During the three days, the two lovers, married to different people, "live together, talk about love, and can do anything."[53] The euphemism "getting married" evokes hedonistic activities of singing, dancing, drinking, and love-making. The freedom to love and to make love are innately linked in this context. In the name of celebrating the freedom of romantic love that rebels against the oppressive Han marriage system, the narrative includes erotic images of couple-swapping and partner exchange for sexual pleasure. As such, the Naxi Valentine's Day is portrayed as celebrating socially-sanctioned orgies with erotic

[48] Liu Shuanhu, "Naxizu duyou de 'xunqing shengdi' he 'qingrenjie.'"
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Yunnan tuxun lüyou wang, "Yunnan lüyou: Naxizu buyiyang de qingrenjie."
[52] Xinhuanet, "Naxi Ethnic Group Couples Get Married in Traditional Way."
[53] Liu, "Naxizu duyou de 'xunqing shengdi' he 'qingrenjie'"; Xinhuanet, "Naxi Ethnic Group Couples Get Married in Traditional Way."

festivities.

One possible reference for the author is the existing literature on the Naxi love-suicide tradition. Scholarly and popular writings on the Naxi are filled with accounts of similar practices before couples commit love-suicide.[54] According to a 1932 account of the custom frequently cited in recent scholarly and literary works, couples "dressed in their best clothes, drink and make love as much as possible. Afterwards, they take poison and leave the world holding each other."[55] A late Qing Confucian observant calls Naxi love-suicide "promiscuous death" (*fengliu si*) after couples' love affairs are exposed.[56] Interestingly, scholars point out that in Dongba religion one kind of ghost associated with love-suicide is called the Wind Ghost and "*feng* in Naxi language has negative connotations of being flirtatious, imprudent, or even promiscuous."[57] In fact, as the title of the original article suggests, "Unique Naxi 'Sacred Land of Love-suicide' and 'Valentine's Day,'" the eroticized image of Naxi love-suicide can easily be extended to a Romantic-Erotic Valentine's day, a.k.a. Trysting Day.[58]

Another possible source of inspiration is Mosuo women.[59] Perhaps no other ethnic minority's sexuality has captured more of the urban Chinese imagination than the Mosuo, famous for their supposedly ongoing matrilineal society and their so-called "walking marriage" (*zouhun*) system. Different from the Han and Naxi patrilineal kinship, Mosuo men and women live in separate households and maintain different descent identities, and the children are raised in their mother's family.[60] Many outsiders see the system as having the potential to free non-Mosuo men who have sexual relationships with Mosuo women from any moral judgment and responsibility. Anecdotes that Han male visitors are welcomed into the households of Mosuo women are well-known among tourists. Popular tourist programs such as "Walking marriage in Mosuo villages" feature photos of allegedly naked Mosuo men and women bathing together in local hot springs.[61] Capitalizing on such fascination, the Mosuo community in the Lugu Lake area has become a popular tourist resort, and a Mosuo hamlet with a hot spring was designated as a cultural preservation site.[62] Concerts in the evenings

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[54] Yang, *Yulong qingshang*; Gu, *Naxi ren de zuihou xunqing.*

[55] Yang, *Yulong qingshang*, 1–2.

[56] Quoted from Shen Yufei, "Naxizu zongjiao xunqing yishi jiexi."

[57] Yang, *Yulong qingshang*, 134, 144.

[58] Liu, "Naxizu duyou de 'xunqing shengdi' he 'qingrenjie.'"

[59] Although labeled as Naxi since the Ethnic Classification Project of the 1950s, Mosuo and Naxi of Lijiang speak mutually unintelligible languages. Mosuo has a different socio-economic system with no suicide tradition. See McKhann, "The Naxi and the Nationalities Question"; Chao, "Hegemony, Agency and Re-presenting the Past."

[60] Rees, *Echoes of History*, 28; Guo, *State and Ethnicity*, 81–85.

[61] Yiming (Anonymous), "Luguhu: yu Mosuo meinü yiqi luoyu."

[62] Guo, *State and Ethnicity*, 258, 261–62.

are preceded by "mud wrestling with girls in the meadows" in the Lugu Lake.[63] The image of Mosuo women as romantic, prolific, and free lovers has become a well-known advertising gimmick for the Mosuo and Naxi. In the popular show "Impression Lijiang," a leading male actor pronounces loudly at the end of the show as part of his farewell speech: "Do you remember me? I am that Mosuo man who owns fifteen women. I am here, waiting for your return!"[64] Naxi songwriter He Wenguang illustrates the same themes in another song titled "Love Drunk in the Female Kingdom": "There are many fortunes in life, the hardest to leave behind is the Female Kingdom. Women's mountains, *gemushan*. You are the Goddess' big breasts that nourish strong Mosuo boys. Come friends! Come friends! Come to the amorous female kingdom. Women like it and men are happy."[65] Popularized through books, TV series, and films, tourists today are familiar with the images of romantic and erotic Mosuo female lovers and popular urban legends about them. As such, the author's Naxi Valentine's Day story is just one of many in an overall popular discourse on the erotic Naxi.

In my view, the lure of love-suicide partly lies in its association with forbidden love and unrestrained sexual activities. It is no accident that the original article on Naxi Valentine's Day is published in the category called "Ten Thousand Kinds of Romanticism" (*fengqing wanzhong*) in the journal, usually referring to erotic female attractiveness.[66] The exotic and erotic elements of Naxi and Mosuo can lure tourists to love-suicide sites and Naxi Valentine's Day stories. Like the familiar examples of Dai females bathing in the river and the Peacock dance, Naxi Valentine's Day and Mosuo migrant husbands are traditional and invented folk cultures staged and performed for urban tourists, sometimes incorporating certain degrees of pornography disguised as a celebration of the authentic natures of minorities.

It may seem an exaggeration to identify the popularity and representations of the Naxi love-suicide culture as reflecting tourists' erotic fantasies, as there is apparently little explicit language of sexual promiscuity or direct descriptions of nudity. Nevertheless, sexual fantasies lead to consumption of not only performances by young, pretty, minority girls, but also of images, folklore, and legends. It is interesting that love-suicide is often narrated as a female planned, initiated, and enforced process.[67] Females are portrayed as the more aggressive partners—often forcing the secret escape and final suicide act onto the cowardly males. If their lovers demur, they poison and push the men down the cliffs before

[63] McKhann, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," 162.
[64] *Impression Lijiang*.
[65] He, *Mengzhong de Xianggelila*.
[66] Liu, "Naxizu duyou de 'xunqing shengdi' he 'qingrenjie.'"
[67] Goullart, *Forgotten Kingdom*; Yang, *Yulong qingshang*, 94–122.

they themselves jump off. Minority women are historically both desired and feared by Han northern migrants. On the one hand, they are perceived as challenging both sexual norms and political hegemony, and therefore considered taboo. On the other hand, encounters with the very "uncivilized" include wild attractions.[68] In this case, the image of strong and powerful Naxi women, as demonstrated by chasing their men into the final acts, suggests female proactiveness and aggressiveness and represents the ultimate lure of forbidden love.

Many scholars have shown the male fetishization of the female body and the sexual fantasy of licentious activities in minority representations in the 1980s and 1990s.[69] Such a trend certainly exists in this case. An immoral and savage ethnic Other continues to be constructed in opposition to a chaste and civilized Han Self, reflecting a type of internal Orientalism. Compared to the erotic images of minorities in this early reform era, however, more recent tourist consumptions have changed drastically. When northerners flocked to Yunnan to see minority nudity in the 1990s, it was still a rarity at the time as nude images were banned in China except those of minority women, who were seen as sexually less restrained in contrast to the strictly monogamous modern Han citizens.[70] Within a decade, nude bodies and sexual scenes have become common commodities easily accessible in print, TV, and the internet. Perceptions of Han and minority women's sexualities have also been transformed. In previous decades, minorities appeared as sensual, sexual, and even promiscuous in contrast to the chaste, reserved, civilized, and conservative Han women. Today younger urban and cosmopolitan Han women are seen as enjoying open, casual, promiscuous, and excessive sexual relations where love is commodified. In contrast, minority women are often romanticized as beautiful and genuine lovers. Packaged as more authentic, minority women remain spiritual and "unpolluted" by urban modern monetary values and material interests. In the early stage of market reform, the imagined ethnic Other enjoyed sexual escapades that the Han Self desired and feared. In contrast, the more recently constructed ethnic Other becomes a symbol of truthfulness and purity that the modern Self longs for. In both cases, ironically, the projections reveal anxieties about Han supremacy and identities. Eroticization of minorities, especially women, as primitive yet desired objects is not new. Nevertheless, recent eroticization has become more subtle, hidden, and deceptive, due to its largely apolitical origin and decentralized nature. Camouflaged using

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[68] Louisa Schein, *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics*, 9; Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China.*

[69] Schein, "Gender and Internal Orientalism in China"; Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China."

[70] Gladney, "Representing Nationality in China."

new labels such as original ecological culture, erotic minority images are now expressed as the true appreciation of the more progressive and higher cultures of minorities, and are often reproduced in minorities' self-representations.

Both Erotic and Spiritual: Tourist Dreamland

As emphasized in tourists' narratives, love-suicide women defy parental expectations and social pressures of marrying other men because they cherish true love and fidelity even over their own lives. Coexisting with this image of physical aggressiveness and attraction is an emphasis on timeless sincerity and loyalty. The two facets represent the quintessential dual qualities that men desire about women, physical attractiveness combined with fidelity and purity. Such a mixture of the erotic and the spiritual illustrates the key characteristic of what I call the love-suicide mystique.

For decades, Lijiang has occupied a distinctive place in popular imagination; and among tourist destinations it is thought of as a place with spiritual forces and healing power.[71] Lijiang tourism differs from the usual Chinese tourist places that focus on programs consisting of visiting famous sites, taking pictures, and souvenir shopping. It instead presents an alternative model for simple relaxation and lifestyle change. One promotional article from a travel company, "Experiencing an Alternative Life Philosophy in Lijiang" (*zai Lijiang tiwei lingyizhong shenghuo zhexue*), advertises the pleasure of sitting on a rocking chair, sun bathing, and contemplating the snowy mountain in the distance.[72] Unlike modern society's materialism and spiritual poverty, visitors long for what they see as the preindustrial values in relatively remote and less-developed minority regions.

A 2013 statistical study shows some interesting demographic trends among Lijiang tourists. Most visitors are adult males between 25 and 44 years old who have received a college education. Among different professions, white-collar corporate workers are the biggest group, followed by students, which probably explains why the majority of visitors are either in the lowest or highest income levels. According to the study, 42 percent reportedly chose Lijiang for a "relaxing vacation" while "ethnic tourism" only accounts for 13.3 percent. In addition, over half of the tourists stayed more than two weeks. Within that group, thirty percent stayed over a month.[73] It is reasonable to believe that most visitors are

[71] Lijiang used to be a popular destination for Western backpackers searching for spirituality, before it became overcrowded and filled with domestic tourists.
[72] Xu Yi, "Zai Lijiang tiwei lingyizhong shenghuo zhexue," 150.
[73] Wang Xin and Wang Xuejun, "Lüyouzhe dui lüyou mudidi xingxiang de ganzhi xingwei yanjiu: Yi Lijiang gucheng weili."

middle-class urban dwellers who are facing the most intensive career competition and family and social pressures. Increasing living costs in cities and spreading income gaps have added pressure to the process of surviving, succeeding, establishing a family, and to have children, especially for the one-child generation offspring now in their thirties. While enjoying unprecedented opportunities in the market economy, Chinese youth today are also experiencing new levels of anxiety and loss due to urban migration and dislocation.

Lijiang tourism, with its emphasis on lifestyle change, draws parallels with nature tourism such as beach vacations or mountain hiking. It also has an indispensable social component in which people meet new friends in local clubs and hostels, where romantic encounters (*langman xiehou*) are expected to take place.[74] Websites and blogs often include articles such as "How to have affairs in Lijiang," "Tips on how to meet girls in Lijiang bars," and "Proper procedures on finding a love partner in Lijiang." Local hostels often adopt romantic or erotic names such as "I am waiting here for you," "If love," "Drunken love," and "Resident of the Beauty."[75] Aforementioned new inventions such as "Trysting Buddha" and "Trysting Day" reflect people's romantic lens through which they view Lijiang. In a magazine article titled "Lijiang Romance" (*Lijiang qingyuan*), a young tourist fantasizes a romantic encounter with a 19-year-old Naxi girl during his stay in Lijiang. He dreams about holding the Naxi beauty and walking along the river, attracting envious looks from others. Imagining her smile as devoted to him rather than other group members, he laments that "seeing her charming smile at me, my ego is satisfied."[76] In the author's mind, the Naxi girl represents the ultimate symbol of beauty, morality, and gentleness. She is not as shy as an elite woman, nor as causal as an urban girl. She sets up proper boundaries and does not take money for helping his group of travelers.[77] In another article "Romantic Lijiang" (*langman Lijiang*), an older male author describes Lijiang's night as "making the impossible possible." Seeing a middle-aged man pushing his lover in a wheelchair on the street, he proclaims, "That's romance!"[78]

It remains a seductive urban myth that Ljiang is famous for love affairs and bars, and Lijiang is among the top destinations in China for singles. It is said that people come to Lijiang for emotional recovery and spiritual rejuvenation,

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[74] Such a social component certainly exists in other "romantic" destinations around the world. Middle-class, single, and male tourists are also common among these locations. But Lijiang tourists' assumptions and expectations are more dominated by forging temporary romantic relationships with locals and fellow travelers.

[75] Zhongguo guzhen wang (Website of China's ancient towns).

[76] Kangding qingge, "Lijiang qingyuan: jingyan yu meili de Naxi shaonü."

[77] Ibid.

[78] Liu Gang, "Langman Lijiang."

especially after difficult break-ups or loss of direction in life. The minority girls in Lijiang, who are seen as remaining light-hearted, spirited, and genuine, represent a lost ideal that can be attained in reality. Middle-class Chinese men seek romantic love with local, indigenous women who cherish both pure love and adventurous sex compared to their urban Han counterparts, who are believed to increasingly measure relationships in monetary terms and demand rigid, controlled, and female-centered relationships.[79] The commodification of love and romance in the reform era has created enormous stress for both genders, yet more so for men economically as they continue to be perceived as the main providers in the family.[80] Visits to Lijiang provide some therapeutic experience for males who have lost competition to more successful men for lack of money, house, or career in an increasingly competitive job market. Their damaged masculinity is repaired after some romantic encounters with beautiful local minority girls who admire their "personalities" with sincere singing, dancing, drinking, and other perceived romantic activities. In a well-known local singer's words, Naxi songs are "songs but more so medicine. They bring peace to people's hearts and help those with sorrow and loss find their true selves."[81]

Projecting their own erotic fantasies and sexual desires onto Naxi and minority females in general, Han tourists now imagine Lijiang to be a paradise for romance. Lijiang tourism allows a sentimental journey to the past, the sublime, and to one's spiritual world. Stories of love-suicide allow an individual to express a resistance to an increasingly competitive and alienating world that is otherwise difficult to achieve in reality. Love-suicide mystique therefore reflects and refracts the desire and fantasy of urban youth tourists whose needs are not fulfilled in their current lives and who seek a physical and psychological escape. Such longing and search for authenticity reflects the anxiety in the drastically changing socio-economic environments of China.

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[79] Sexuality has long been at the core of popular imaginations of Lijiang. Visitors observe that nightclubs and karaoke bars in Lijiang "exhibited thinly veiled signs of prostitution in the form of 'bar girls,' who, for a fee, drink and dance with customers," and that "Flagrant new storefront brothels include a couple of 'shampoo parlors,' conveniently located on the main street." Tourist guides often "warn" tourists of unexpected midnight phone calls in their hotel rooms from local minority women. See McKhann, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," 161.

[80] It is interesting that many young, middle-class, Han females have joined the trend as they are also facing similar career competition and even more intensive family and social pressures to marry young and have children. While females often project romantic images onto minorities as well, their fantasies generally exist on a smaller scale and include less explicit sexual elements. Overall, romantic encounters are not only between Han males and local, minority females, but are also increasingly popular between Han male and female tourists. Outsiders are transformed by the magic space of Lijiang and the sacred Snow Mountain, where perceived true romance is forged with little consideration of one's social class, income, or other socio-economic factors.

[81] He Wenguang, "Naxi sanbuqu: shige geng shiyao."

Scholars have paid increasing attention to the active roles that consumers play in the creative process of cultural production. The very concept of authenticity has also drastically transformed in the last few decades, whereas modernist views as original, static entities from the past have been challenged by new phenomena such as Disneyland and other hyperrealities that have been analyzed by postmodernist scholars.[82] Wang Ning points to three notions of authenticity in the tourism experience. First, there is the objective authenticity of actual objects as being original. Second, a constructive authenticity is what becomes projected onto the objects that are acted upon by tourists or producers of tourism. It is in a sense a symbolic authenticity, contextually determined, negotiated, and even merged with ideology. And third, there is existential authenticity that "refers to a potential existential state of Being that is to be activated by tourist activities."[83] Authenticity is seen as activity-related through experience and participation, rather than object-related; this provides a new way of understanding the appeal and authenticity of the love-suicide mystique. When the seminal folklore about love-suicide is turned into tourist sites by the collected efforts of local and outside cultural elites, governments, and business enterprises, visitors construct their own authentic Valentine's Day stories and authentic experiences of romance, adventure, and existence. Middle-class urbanites are transformed by the magic space, where "true identities" unveil. As visitors of Lijiang, they are able to rediscover their authentic desires and forge relatively egalitarian relationships with other visitors, unrestrained by social status and income differences.[84] They now "reenact" the lives of Naxi lovers, defying family and social norms in a month-long sabbatical retreat from their mundane lives in an anxious modern world. The meanings of love-suicide as such are both constructed and lived through the sensuous bodies of tourists.[85] Regardless of the authenticity of the actual history or object of love-suicide, such a kind of experiential tourism provides "authentic" experiences for urban visitors because of its cathartic, nostalgic, and romanticizing nature.

Fabricating Authenticities: Transforming the Self and the Other

As shown above, "love-suicide" is first aestheticized by cultural elites to a

[82] Wang Ning, "Rethinking Authenticity in Tourism Experience"; Britta Knudsen and Anne Waade eds., *Re-inventing Authenticity: Tourism, Place and Emotions*.
[83] Wang, "Rethinking Authenticity."
[84] There is no lack of luxurious hotels or indulgent ways of touring Lijiang. But here I deal with the majority of the Lijiang tourists who are middle-class "backpackers" and hostel dwellers.
[85] Knudsen and Waade, eds., *Re-Inventing Authenticity*.

romanticist sublimity, and then turned into a simultaneously spiritual and erotic experience through tourist consumption. While cultural elites, both Han and Naxi, draw from Western sources and global values to create authentic, local, and national experience and identities, tourists further transform the discourse into a pop mystique. As such, a commodified cultural invention is turned into a vehicle for the creation of authenticity, as tourists inject new meanings into the culture they consume. The love-suicide mystique of the Naxi allows some perceived—if momentary—authentic existence.

The Naxi love-suicide culture is fabricated through heterogeneous sources ranging from historical records, participatory activities, mass consumption, and various projections. Like the familiar stories of the "restive" minority nationalities of the Uyghurs, Tibetans, and Mongolians, the more integrated and "sinicized" groups like Naxi are also experiencing drastic identity transformations in the new and national and global environments, and often in more subtle, complex, and ambivalent ways. The story of the rediscovery and reinterpretation of love-suicide is neither one of top-down enforcement, nor of a political assertion of cultural autonomy. There is no organized conspiracy to control the masses through consumption: multiple ideologies including the multi-ethnic unitary, capitalism, and ethnic tourism are present. The case complicates a simple domination model and its manifestations of Han over non-Han, state hegemony over local resistance, or colonizers over the colonized. For example, tourists, the unofficial and non-local agents, directly participate in the myth- and fact-making in minority representations and are able to create their own authentic experiences. Although tourists are recipients of the elite production of cultural commodities and often appear as gullible victims of mass media and commercial means, as they are tricked into consumption of "inauthentic" goods, they in fact play an important role as consumers in shaping cultural productions and representations.[86] Meanwhile, in the process of inventing the new Naxi love-suicide culture, tourists' own identities are also transformed. While elites seek aesthetic purity and evidence of high culture, tourists seek experiences combining romance and spirituality. As such, reconstructions of "authentic ethnic identities" are closely connected to the needs of authentic Han identities in a global, commercial world full of modernist anxieties.

Are minority cultural symbols increasingly becoming postmodernist texts subject to interpretation? Do minority agents have any control over their "own" cultures? As the Naxi case shows, the process is not only influenced by transnational capital, but is also directly affected by global narratives and

[86] Schein, "Gender and Internal Orientalism in China"; Timothy Oakes, "Ethnic Tourism in Rural Guizhou: Sense of Place and the Commerce of Authenticity."

practices in ethnic tourism. Innovative cultural productions now incorporate popular symbols from all over the world, leading to contingent and fluid meanings. Invited to perform at a school for troubled girls, the He Wenguang family spontaneously choreographed Mosuo girls' Rite of Passage and invited American girls to participate in the initiation ritual. Mosuo girls were presented to the American audiences as symbols of purity, beauty, and romance, the exotic and primitive "Other". Dressed in a hybrid Naxi and non-Naxi garb, He's son sang "Shangri-La in Dreams" in a style mixing apparently non-polished voices and professional ways of singing influenced by Western *bel canto* vocal style**.** As a result, the performance "brings this group of American girls' hearts to the mysterious environment of the Orient."[87] The Shangri-la myth that came out of a Western fantasy has become incorporated into the self-representation of local minorities, and then performed back to the Western audience. At the end, the female audiences "welcomed the show with great joy."[88] It may appear to be a self-Orientalist act where the dominated intentionally or unconsciously reproduce the same narrative and paradigm that have been used to dominate them. But more can be said. Do these American troubled teenage girls become victimized in such a formalizing and conformative ritual experience? Are they subject to the same domination and exploitation by the male gazes arguably with a hint of pedophilic pleasure?[89] Or is it a therapeutic and authentic experience, whereas they are empowered by the Mosuo example as strong, powerful and independent women, a marginal group in their own society? These are only two among many different possibilities.

In a local live show in Yunnan, audiences are asked to participate in a so-called minority marriage ceremony as bride and groom, paired with minority performers of the other sex. A female audience member is chosen to pair with a strong and handsome minority actor, while a middle-aged, not-so-fit male is paired with an attractive minority female. Hosts frequently weave in blue jokes and semi-pornographic suggestions into the narrations such as "do you want to go to wedding night with her?" "Is your wife/boyfriend here today? If not, you can go home with her/him tonight."[90] Live audiences often react energetically to such interactive performances with laughing, applauding, cheering, and videotaping. On the surface, this seems to be another case of eroticization and exploitation of minorities. A closer look, however, shows that the boundaries

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[87] He Wenguang, "Naxi renjia zai Meiguo" (Naxi family in America).

[88] Ibid.

[89] Minority women are often identified with nature and youth. Special visual attention has long been paid to teenage minority girls, either in their formal colorful dresses or topless. Such fascination over young female minority bodies sometimes includes the desire for a pedophilia grooming experience. See Schein, *Minority Rules*, 121.

[90] Xishuangbanna Manting Park, "Langcangjiang, Meigonghe zhiye" gewu gouhuo wanhui.

between consumers and the consumed are less stable. While each pair had to pass certain tests such as men carrying the girls turning circles, the male audience member sweated and almost fell, causing laughs and mockery from the performers, hosts, and audiences. As he failed the tests and was unwilling to accept the "local custom" requiring a stay to work for the bride's family for three years before he could marry, the minority performer rejected him as an undesirable partner and the enactment of the minority marriage ceremony ended.

Do these two cases provide "authentic" experiences through re-enactment of constructed, inauthentic minority rituals by "authentic" performers? What are the implications of the recent revival of the so-called traditional minority culture? Will the newly rediscovered and reinvented love-suicide tradition empower and benefit the Naxi or destroy its authentic culture through mass consumption? Many questions remain unanswered. Anthropologists have identified widespread commodification of ethnic cultures to the extent that they call "ethnicity incorporation."[91] They have shown that selling ethnic identities, often in reinvented forms, can be both empowering and impoverishing. Ethnic groups worldwide today freely borrow formats and content from each other, where similar symbols and performing styles are circulated, thus further transforming local, ethnic cultures.[92] In such processes, not only are stereotypes of minority cultures reproduced or invented to meet tourist demands, but ethnic cultures also appear more alike or even identical facing similar gazes. Some scholars critique it as flattening of local cultures due to globalization,[93] while others discard the idea of any existence of objective authenticity that can be measured and tested.[94]

The implications of such invented traditions are far from settled. While the new narratives of love-suicide could soften the message of political resistance inherent in the original historical contexts, such aestheticization coexists with potentially contradictory messages and might have ambiguous implications. Overall, the occupation of Lijiang and the intrusion by the external Chinese military and culture directly led to the high suicide rate. In a Chinese writer's words, "Once the year [of 1723] is mentioned … you seem to see their [Naxi's] about-to-explode veins under the sexy skin and the horse clopping sound from their veins."[95] Many today see the Communist regime as sharing similar features with its imperial predecessor regarding its minority ideologies and policies, especially as China emerges as a new "empire" in the region and the world. An

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[91] Comaroff and Comaroff, *Ethnicity, Inc*.
[92] Ibid.; Tilley, "Performing Culture in the Global Village"; Chao, "Hegemony, Agency and Re-presenting the Past."
[93] Oakes, "Ethnic Tourism in Rural Guizhou."
[94] Wang, "Rethinking Authenticity"; Wayne Fife, "Penetrating Types: Conflating Modernist and Postmodernist Tourism on the Great Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland."
[95] Gu, *Naxi ren de zuihou xunqing*, 8.

emphasis on and a critique of the state's historical intrusion and oppression, as in the case of Naxi during the Qing, can have contemporary relevance. In addition, Han tourists' emulation of perceived minority lifestyles and values call into question Han cultural values and social position as well as the entire discourses of modernity on which Han superiority is based.

Whether invented traditions such as love-suicide will empower ethnic groups in China today or lead to their further decline also remains uncertain and contingent. On the one hand, it can be corrupting and destructive via the combination of simplified elite discourses and mass consumption of objectified cultural commodities. On the other hand, the new representation can be empowering and has the potential for reconstructing an imagined community of Naxi because of its emphasis on historical resistance and cultural distinctions. If the Qing conquest marked a watershed in the history of the Naxi and its tradition of love-suicide, when they were forced into redefining their social and gender relations according to foreign political and cultural systems, the current transformation can be seen as another milestone. The Naxi people are now celebrated for their quest for love and freedom, while their culture and bodies are exploited through commodification. On the surface, it appears to be a revival of the Naxi tradition, when freedom of sex and marriage was allowed and celebrated.[96] Nevertheless, the revival is not simply a result of the Naxi resistance to the external regime or a natural return to their "authentic" culture. It is rather another tide of radical cultural transformation in a multi-agent and highly commercialized global world within which both minority cultures and tourists' identities are transformed.

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[96] The historical trajectory of Naxi love-suicide poses interesting parallels with the Naxi burial system, which has changed from the original cremation to forced burial of bodies following the Han custom in the Qing period, to the more recent cremation again following the new socialist value. See Rees, *Echoes of History*, 38.

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