

**Ethnicity in Legend:  
the Gwer Sa La Festival of the Bai  
in Southwest China**  
族性傳說:中國西南白族的"繞三靈"節慶

Liang Yongjia 梁永佳



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## INTRODUCTION

Among the Bai, a southwest China minority in the Dali Basin, ethnicity is crucial to people's sense of their past. In particular, the Bai's ethnicity is articulated in a popular legend created in the 14th century and remembered over time, a legend of a Bai king's voluntary abdication of his throne. Promoting this ideal form of Chinese political morality, the legend constitutes an implicit criticism against an ancient central power which held the same political morality but incorporated Dali into the empire by ruthless conquest. In the year of 2002 when I did fieldwork in West Town, the community where Francis Hsu stayed in 1940s, this legend has been enacted through an annual festival that gathers all the Bai in Dali, and, by so doing, the Bai's ethnicity is expressed in a seemingly cultural context. The festival is Gwer Sa La.

In the few ethnographies of the Bai, the Gwer Sa La festival immediately draws readers' attention for its "unseemly" customs. It is "unseemly" because men and women will meet in the wild, singing love songs and performing "eccentric" dances. C. P. Fitzgerald claimed Gwer Sa La is a distinctive Min Chia (the old designation of the Bai) festival, and, "for the Min Chia one of the most important festivals of the year, a kind of country carnival...The participants are Min Chia peasants from the villages, no Chinese taking any part in it" (Fitzgerald 1941: 122). Based on the distinction, he regards the festival as "a day of carnival, [and] a rare spectacle breaking the monotony of village life" (ibid: 130). The Min Chia--Chinese distinction is thus attributed with some sort of essential significance:

"To some extent the Gwer Sa La is felt by Min Chia peasants to be especially their own rite, one in which the city folk, and therefore the Chinese and half Chinese, have no part. They do not mind the spectators from the city coming out to look, but they do feel that the rites are in some way bound up with the country and its farmers, and are not a matter for regulation by city people and government officials." (Fitzgerald 1941: 131)

The assertion was drawn from his incomplete knowledge of the festival

proper, making him unable to explain why it could be felt by the Min Chia (Bai) as "their own rite", and for what reason the Chinese were reluctant to participate. This is an important question because only three years after he finished the fieldwork, Francis Hsu studied in exactly the same locality<sup>1</sup> but in his account did not mention this "carnival" at all (Hsu 1948). Hsu even denied the people are Min Chia (ibid: 17-8). Why is it the case that although both were students of anthropology<sup>2</sup> who studied in the same place at approximately the same time, Fitzgerald devoted pages to Gwer Sa La while Hsu did not mention it? What is in Gwer Sa La that contributed to such a radical discrepancy?

Edmund Leach shed some light by raising the question of otherness. Arguing an anthropologist should study the "other" rather than his own people, he asserted that Hsu was wrong to take Min Chia as Chinese. In addition, "Hsu was so anxious that 'West Town'<sup>3</sup> should typify China as a whole that the Min Chia peculiarities of the local culture are hardly ever mentioned. This is a palpable distortion but the resulting stereotype picture is curiously static" (Leach 1982: 126). Leach was right because it was impossible that Hsu, by living in West Town for fourteen months, had never heard of Gwer Sa La.<sup>4</sup> It is quite certain that Hsu deliberately ignored Gwer Sa La. Then, why did Hsu choose to do so to prove the people are Chinese? What cultural, political, and ethnic implications might be found in this festival?

Beth Notar (1999) put forward two explanations on the festival: time-space politics and bodily narrations of history in place. She argued that as an indigenous ritual practice, Gwer Sa La has suffered from suppression by the government, because it follows the lunar calendar disfavoured by Chinese governments, be it run by the Nationalist Party (KMT) or by the Communist Party (CPC), both of whom tend to treat lunar calendar as a trope of Chinese "backwardness". This argument appears rather questionable because there are other non-western festivals including the Spring Festival that follows the lunar calendar but seldom met suppression. On the other hand, her second explanation, the bodily narrations of history in place, for which she coined word 'toposomes', elegantly epitomizes the ethnic nature of the festival. She argues that Gwer Sa La, revived after Maoist destruction of the "Four Olds", seeks "to

ensure community continuity through history and fertility. For Dali villagers, history is both embodied and emplaced." (Notar 1999: 242)

It is soundly acceptable when Notar qualifies Gwer Sa La as "bodily narrations of history in place," because it partly and indirectly explains the discrepancy between Fitzgerald and Hsu: both understood the ethnic implication of Gwer Sa La so that one tried to explain while the other simply excluded it from consideration. However, Notar chooses not to explore a longer history, which may pose at least two questions. Firstly, whereas the festival claimed a history of over a thousand years, it made its first appearance in any known historical data as late as 1910 (Yang Q.[1910]2001: 302). Secondly, in spite of its so-called "unseemly" customs and "superstitious" beliefs, the festival successfully draws legitimacy from its ethnohistory--a popular legend of royal alliance abundantly documented for six centuries. Why is that so? What are the Bai implying by claiming their version of history? In this paper, I will give a relatively detailed account of Gwer Sa La festival, including a legend that has not been treated. I will argue that it is the legend of Gwer Sa La that metaphorically lends the festival powerful ethnic implications.

## THE GWER SA LA FESTIVAL

The Bai call themselves "*sua bai*" (Bai-speaking people), while by outsiders they were designated as Min Chia (common people) or Bai Tsu (Bai Nationality), one of the 56 officially recognized Chinese nationalities. The Bai are centred in the Dali Bai Nationality Autonomous Prefecture, in southwest China's Yunnan Province. The 2000 census indicates a total population of 1.85 million, 80% of whom dwell in Dali. They are a Tibetan-Burmese speaking people, many of whom also speak the local Chinese dialect.

They trace their past back to the Nan-chao and Dali kingdoms (consolidated in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and in 937 respectively). Both were subject to great influence from the central kingdoms of China. The influence became even more intensive since 1382, when the newly established Empire conquered Dali and attempted to homogenize the people. However, the Bai successfully kept their own customs in many

ways while embracing the Chinese influence (Liang 2005). Gwer Sa La is one of these practices.

Gwer Sa La means “visiting three places”. It occurs from the night of the 22nd to 25th of the fourth month, starting with sending off the “Princess Jingu” and her husband “Prince Hsi-nu-lo” at the Dali City God Temple. In the following days, the participants visit three places one after another. The first one is the Capital of the Gods, where most of the Bai in Dali join the celebration by burning joss sticks, dancing, jostling each other in a crowd of temple-fair visitors, or encountering lovers through singing duets. The next two destinations are Riverside Town and Mer Ger Yu village, where more merry-making ensues. By the time Gwer Sa La ends, the itinerary the participants have followed draws a circle in the Dali basin. (See Map 1)

The nickname of Gwer Sa La is *Felu Hui*, which depicts its general concept. *Felu* means non-marital or pre-marital relations, improper to Chinese but not uncommon to the Bai. The strangers in Gwer Sa La may “*bir sai bair vux*”, literally, “engage in furtive relations”. The partners they make or reunite with are called *ja ni*, or lovers. This furtive relation is established on the night after visiting the Capital of the Gods, when the sung duets are performed on the open field. Far from “casual sex”, this relation involves a serious commitment to a life-long partnership. In addition, the relation is not supposed to go beyond Gwer Sa La, a rule not difficult to observe since lovers are always made among strangers. Even if two *ja ni* come across during market dates, one of the few occasions that bring together traders and buyers from a larger area, they should refrain from any contact, even a wave. As another rule, people from the same family, especially spouses, always avoid going to Gwer Sa La together. However, family members usually tolerate *ja ni* relations, though it is by no means an open topic. I was told of a supportive wife whose 70-year-old husband fell ill and missed a reunion with his lover. She tried many medicines but did not get him better. Next year, after she made him a pair of new shoes and sent him to Gwer Sa La, he miraculously recovered.

The physical engagement makes pregnancy quite likely. However, since



most of the lovers are married, the pregnancy will be credited as the child of the woman's married life, blessed by the White King. Some people may put “*ai*”(love) --one of the words in the title of the White King (Love People Emperor)-- in the name of the baby born in this way. Actually, taking a lover at Gwer Sa La is a remedy for a married woman's barrenness, a belief strongly held by the Bai. In the long list of gods, temples, and festivals that are held to bestow fertility on married life, Gwer Sa La is the most efficacious one.

While some strangers are seeking for physical relations and fertility in their married life, people from the *gunainihui*--or Old Women's Association--assume the ritual responsibility of the festival. These people are well-to-do women of their communities, obliged to follow the entire itinerary and pray for fertility for their families and villages. They chant the sutras before the god's images, enjoy communion with them, and sing and dance in the temple courtyards. People living nearby will come and watch with amusement.

Gwer Sa La is inaugurated on the morning of 23rd, when pilgrims from Old Women's Associations come and send off Princess Jingu and Prince Hsi-nu-lo by burning the costumes dedicated to these gods. They then set out northward to the Capital of the Gods, the temple of the White King. Groups of Bai throughout Dali will wind their way from the highway up the roads and paths toward the Capital of the Gods. As the ancestor of all the Bai, the White King is held as supreme and the ruler of all the communities in the Dali basin. People from the Old Women's Associations, when reach the destination, will form a line and march into the temple, dancing through a dense throng of spectators. After due homage is paid to the gods, including the White King and other images which symbolically made up the whole collection of the Dali community gods, the members may freely join the dancing in the open square outside the temple.

A variety of other people participate the event in one way or another. There are vendors who have already rented a place along the hill road to sell their items. There are local officials from the Municipal Bureau of Religion, who regulate the traffic, business, and security, and charge for

the “service” from the vendors as well as bus drivers. There are also Buddhist monks from the neighbouring temple who offer special programs for paid salvation. There are still innumerable beggars alongside the road, many of them disabled, waiting for a little rice or money. Most of the visitors spend the whole day at the fair, enjoying the food, watching the dances, and buying items. All of them seem to wear their best clothes, looking cheerful. Among strangers, men and women flirt casually from time to time. At 2002 festival, I heard an interesting conversation between a male passer-by and several women cooking a cake at the side of the road. Seeing the cake was saturated with heavy smoke, the man asked one of the women,

-- “How could you eat this BLACK THING?”

-- “Black is delicious.” the woman replied.

-- “How could you eat it RAW?”

-- “Cooked is no good, in Gwer Sa La we eat RAW things.”

When the night gradually falls, many people begin to move to another open space further away from the temple, known for singing duets and meeting lovers. The duets are always between individual strangers of the opposite sex. It usually starts with a man who initiates a line, waiting for a woman around him to respond. Many a time a certain woman does respond, leaving the man to compose his own. The lyrics are love songs composed impromptu, in a competitive manner that demands wit and cleverness. Singers are expected to outwit one another through clever remarks. If a female singer fails to respond, her girl friend may come up with some help. As the lyrics are exchanged, the audience begins to draw around, commenting on the singers’ skills. The songs often go from flirty to explicit, most of time becoming lewd or obscene, and take over the mood of the audience. From time to time, a woman may leave the crowd, followed by a man shortly after, disappearing in the dark. The singers, finishing the duets, may also disappear. This is the manner the new *ja ni* are made. Some of the audience may give a smirk to his or her neighbours at this sight, but no one would follow any pair because people hold that to see a real sexual intercourse inevitably brings disaster to the witness.

The following two days in the Riverside Town and the Mer Ger Yu village are spent on much the same events on a lesser scale, but are no longer proper to take *ja ni*. Singing becomes more cheerful than sensual. At night, some Old Women's Associations occupy the temple floor, while others may sleep in a villager's house, where they are warmly welcomed. Vendors, dancers, and visitors are still numerous, but beggars disappear. In the olden days, *Ja ni* may sleep together in a quiet place, such as on the dyke of the rice-field. The straw mats they used are precious, because it is believed that by being thrown into the rice paddy, the mat, together with the liquids of sexual intercourse, will dramatically fertilize the field and bring a high yield.

## **The Gwer Sa La Legend and its Ethnic Implication**

Three gods are significant in the Gwer Sa La festival: the White King, Princess Jingu, and Prince Hsi-nu-lo. As local mytho-historical figures, these gods appear in one popular legend, known to most of the participants of Gwer Sa La. The White King is held to be the common ancestor of the Bai, <sup>5</sup>and the legend is about his daughter, Jingu (golden lady):

Princess Jingu was the youngest daughter of Chang-lo-chin-ch'iu, the White King and the ruler of Pai-tzu kuo Kingdom. One day, she was scolded by her father. Depressed and angry, she ran away on the ninth of the second month. In the wild, she was almost bitten by a snake at night before a hunter named Hsi-nu-lo saved her. Out of affection and gratitude, she gave her virginity to him in the dark. The next morning she found the hunter was dressed in animal skin and was unbelievably ugly. Despite this, she found Hsi-nu-lo was a kind-hearted and brave young man. She decided to go with him to the hunter's home at Mt. Wei on the land of Meng-she, where they were married with a proper wedding. In a few years, Hsi-nu-lo proved himself a great leader, and was elected by the people as the Meng-she chief.

The White King, after Jingu ran away, sent his son Tuan Ssu-p'ing south to look for her. But the son lost his way and came to another

mountain and had to stay there. Since the area is backward, he had to bear the terrible food and the bitter life. The White King, though angry with his daughter about the unapproved marriage, finally accepted the reality and permitted the princess to pay a visit to his palace--the Capital of Gods. Jingu's friends, accompanied by music and dance, happily set out receiving her on the day of her disappearance. This is the origin of "Receiving Jingu".

Although uninvited, the now-approved Prince Hsi-nu-lo was afraid of losing his wife, so he went with her to Dali. On the way, Jingu's friends could not help frowning on his ugliness, and began to worry that the White King would turn against him. Prince Hsi-nu-lo also felt himself undeserving, and, since he was not invited after all, he left the band and hid in the Protected Peace Temple a few miles before reaching the destination. On the third of the third month, he could not wait any longer and left for his home in the south. However, when he passed the City God Temple at Dali City, he changed his mind and stayed there to wait for his wife. On the 23rd of the fourth month, Princess Jingu finished her visit, joined Prince Hsi-nu-lo, and together they set out for their home at Mt. Wei.

The legend ended with the White King's decision to pass his throne to Prince Hsi-nu-lo, thus ending the Pai-tzu kuo Dynasty, which led Prince Hsi-nu-lo to found the Nan-chao Kingdom by uniting his Meng-she chiefdom with his father-in-law's people.

The legend throws much light on Gwer Sa La's inauguration ceremony in which Princess Jingu and Prince Hsi-nu-lo are sent off on the morning of the 23rd of the fourth month. It is the date indicated in the legend that the couple finally left Dali. There are two other previous festivals marking Jingu's elopement and the day Hsi-nu-lo left the Protected Peace Temple. They are the festival of "Receiving Princess Jingu" and "Sending-off Prince Hsi-nu-lo". The festivals take place respectively on second and third month as indicated in the legend.

No wonder that what had happened in Dali's history is inconsistent with the legend, except that Hsi-nu-lo founded the Nan-chao Kingdom in

Meng-she. It was not until the reign of his grandson that the kingdom finally expanded its territory to the land of Dali, not through romantic royal alliance or voluntary abdication, but through military expansion in 8th century with the aid of the T'ang Empire (A.D. 618-907). Before the Dali area was taken over by the Nan-chao Kingdom, it was ruled by several indigenous chiefdoms who claimed allegiance to Tibet, and the control over the Dali basin "would take much longer to accomplish" (Backus 1981: 56). Actually, though the White King and his Pai-tzu-ko Kingdom were mentioned in various local and national historical records, neither of them ever existed (Backus 1981: 56; Hou 2002: Chp. 6). The legend makes another apparent "mistake" by claiming Tuan Ssu-p'ing as the son of the White King. Actually, Tuan was the founder of a much later dynasty--Dali Kingdom (938-1253). As to Jingu, no record is ever found beyond this legend. Then, why do we have a legend in which out of four figures, two (the White King and Princess Jingu) never existed while the other two (Hsi-nu-lo and Tuan Ssu-p'ing) were hundreds of years apart?

We should start with the role of these kings. Since 14th century on, local records of Dali history were kept very carefully. Governments had been attempting to write local gazetteers, regional histories, geographical and cultural reports. Local scholars and travellers were also proud of writing Dali's past, just like the case in most of other places in China. In most of the literature, Chang-lo-chin-ch'iu, Hsi-nu-lo, and Tuan Ssu-p'ing were hailed as the founder-kings of three powerful dynasties in Dali. Important local records like *Unofficial History of Nan-chao* (nanzhao yeshi), *Nan-chao Reference* (nanzhao beikao) often devote chapters to list these dynastic changes and royal lineage.

At present day Dali, many people know who these kings are very well. There are temples and shrines, including the grassroots community temples (*Benzvt*) dedicated to these kings, or to their ministers and relatives. Most of the ancient relics, now turned into tourist sites, are marked in reference to these kings, especially to Hsi-nu-lo and Tuan Ssu-p'ing. The Bai, meaning "The White People", think themselves as descends of the Buddhist White King, who "held his palace in the White Cliff and ate white rice". At present, The surname Tuan, as in Tuan Ssu-p'ing, constitutes the largest population of among the Bai, who by being

Tuan, are thought to be the descendants of this royal family of Dali Kingdom. The people with surnames of "Zuo" and "An" believe themselves as direct heir of Hsi-nu-lo. Other surnames like Yang, T'ong, Yin and Ch'ao believe themselves to be the aristocratic houses of either Nan-chao or Dali kingdoms.<sup>6</sup> To some extent, these kings symbolically represent the Bai.<sup>7</sup> In other words, by involving three founder-kings in the Gwer Sa La legend, the legend loudly pronounces what it is representing—the people of the Bai and the land of Dali.

## POLITICAL MORALITY AGAINST RUTHLESS CONQUEST

By putting two distant kings, one non-existent king and his daughter together, what is this "surreal" legend trying to tell us? Or, put it in another way, what does the Gwer Sa La festival has been trying to do? The theme of the merging of Nan-chao and Pai-tzu-ko is very noteworthy, because in local historical records, the theme is abundantly found and constitutes the most popular version of the people's past. It often starts with a creation myth, claiming that Dali was an uninhabited lagoon before Avalokitesvara drained the water. After a series of events, he<sup>8</sup> made Hsi-nu-lo to take over Dali. Just like the legend of Gwer Sa La, the historical record also claims the merging has something to do with the White King and the chief from Nan-chao. In particular, the historical record tends to claim the merging as a peaceful one, in which the chief of Nan-chao is bestowed with heavenly signs as qualified to the throne. The earliest record of the event was found in *Nan-chao History With Paintings*, a document of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>9</sup> It says,

According to *Record of the Iron Column*, Chang-lo-chin-ch'iu, the great general of three Bai Cities, offered sacrifice to heaven at the Iron Column, with other eight persons, including Prince Hsin-tsung. The guarding bird flew from the column and landed on Prince Hsin-tsung's shoulder, which surprised Chang-lo-chin-ch'iu . Prince Hsin-tsung recalled out of happiness that the bird was the guarding bird of his house. The bird perished after staying at the Prince's home for 11 months (You 1989: 179).

The meaning of this piece of writing is quite vague, but the theme is clear: a ritual bird chose Prince Hsin-Tsung<sup>10</sup>, which indicates that he was bestowed with a kind of divine legitimacy that surprised the White King.<sup>11</sup> The theme re-appeared in *Recollections of Ancient Yunnan*, dated to the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, it was not until the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) that an important theme was added: the voluntary abdication of power. The new version was found in *General History of the Ancient White Kingdom*, a book that re-invented the history of the people of Dali, including a divine genealogy of Nan-chao royal family from Asoka of India down to Hsi-nu-lo. Although the book is already lost, contemporary historians have largely re-assembled it based on quotations from other historical materials (cf. Wang 1981). Moreover, an account of this book with comments (*Account of the General History of the Ancient White Kingdom*) was also discovered in 1950s, in which the voluntary abdication by the White King in favour of Prince Hsi-nu-lo was accounted in full detail:

Chang-lo-chin-ch'iu, King of the Pai-tsu-ko, King of Yunnan, lived in his capital at the White Cliff. He learnt Avalokitesvara had ordered Hsi-nu-lo to be the king. Though unhappy, he invited Hsi-nu-lo and other chiefs to offer a nine-vessel sacrifice, at the Iron Column in the White Cliff. They divined and solicited an oracle from Heaven, asking who was destined to be the next king. When the sacrifice was about to conclude, a cuckoo bird suddenly fluttered and alighted on the shoulder of Hsi-nu-lo, calling his name three times and returning to the sandalwood-tree. Deeply convinced, the rest stopped divining and knelt down before Hsi-nu-lo, asking him to ascend the throne. Chang-lo-chin-ch'iu also realized that the sign did mean Hsi-nu-lo was the king of virtue sent by Heaven, so he gave up his throne, and married his daughter to Hsi-nu-lo (You 1989: 23).

This reformulated legend has proven to be extremely popular in local historical materials, to the extent that after its invention, almost every book dealing with Dali's past took it as the standard version of Dali's origin. Therefore, it is very important to understand the theme of voluntary abdication.

Hou Chong (2003) excellently attributed it as a response to the conquest by the Ming Emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang, who looked down upon the Dali people as uncivilized. In order to claim legitimacy for his conquest, Zhu portrayed himself as an enlightener, bringing the "superior" morality of Confucianism to the "ignorant" Dali people. By so doing, he imposed a policy of "Confucianization" (*shenghua*) after the conquerors slaughtered the semi-autonomous Dali royalty, pulled down their palaces, and burned all the books. It was out of this repugnance that the *General History of the Ancient White Kingdom* was secretly written by an anonymous writer in Dali. By creating a myth of voluntary abdication out of a previous version of the relation between Nan-chao and Pai-tsu-kuo, the book was intended to reveal metaphorically the illegitimacy of the Ming conquest, because according to Confucian orthodoxy, voluntary abdication to a wise man sent by Heaven is the ideal form of political system, much better than king-prince inheritance, not to say military conquest. Actually, throughout Chinese history including and especially during the Ming Dynasty, voluntary abdication was held to be true as the beginning of Chinese history. This political criticism was so explicit that the writer had to write the book in an artificial language that recorded the Bai phonetics with localized Chinese characters, a system intelligible only to educated native Bai speakers.<sup>12</sup> The commentary notes which follow this episode of voluntary abdication in the version discovered in the 1950s, which was written in Chinese in the late Qing Dynasty, carried the same spirit of such political criticism:

In the ancient past, when King Wuding offered a sacrifice to King Tang, a pheasant alighted on the sacrificial vessel and crowed. King Wuding was afraid of this bad omen, and took the blame on himself. He revitalized his kingdom and he was enshrined as the dynasty's High King.<sup>13</sup> Now that Hsi-nu-lo received a cuckoo's call, is that an omen sent by Heaven? When Shun was living on Mt. Li, King Yao sent nine men, two women, artisans, cows and sheep, and crops to him, until Shun had no choice but to succeed Yao.<sup>14</sup> When Hsi-nu-lo was living on Mt. Wei, Heaven sent an extraordinary monk to exorcise the evil spirits and establish a kingdom. Heaven then gave the kingdom to Hsi-nu-lo, who had no choice but accept.



Although Chinese and minorities are different in scale, both adopted the way of voluntary abdication. We can therefore say that they share the same spirit (You 1989: 23-24).

The parallel drawn here highlights the equality of political morality between ancient China and ancient Dali, thus contrasting it with the Ming's conquest. In order to reveal the illegitimacy of the conqueror, Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang, the commentary becomes even more explicit:

Chang-lo-chin-ch'iu is nothing more than a native chief, but he was able to relinquish his throne and marry his daughter to a wise man. Can we say he had followed the example of King Yao? However, when we look at that ambitious tyrant who knew nothing but conquest, isn't he as different from these exemplars as the sky is different from the earth? ... (With Hsi-nu-lo's deed) then, who dare say that Chinese and minorities are not the same? (ibid. 24)

Who is the "tyrant who knew nothing but conquest"? The ancient commentator did not and dared not say. However, regarding the context the book, it is an apparent allusion to Emperor Zhu Yuanzhang. In other words, by re-inventing the story of the White King's voluntary abdication to the wise Hsi-nu-lo, the Bai commentator exercised a kind of political criticism instead of a revolt that was destined to fail. In this light, we can say that the Gwer Sa La legend is the Bai's "invented tradition" that by claiming the Bai had already practised voluntary abdication, constitutes a sharp contrast between the Bai and the conquerors. Since the legend is abundantly found in the local historical records and extremely popular at present the Gwer Sa La festival, we find that many of the Bai, far from losing their own identity (Mackerras, 1988), have been always trying to be different from the Han Chinese.

## **FORGETTING THE UNSEEMLY**

Compared with the legend, it is very difficult to trace the record of Gwer Sa La. As far as I know, while neither Receiving Princess Jingu nor Sending-off Hsi-nu-lo is found in any literature before the 1940s, Gwer Sa

La was referred to as late as the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when an imperial title holder (Duan Wei) wrote some romantic poems about it. A definite record appeared even later, in 1910 by a local scholar (Yang Q. 2001[1910]).<sup>15</sup> The next record appeared as late as 1940s. (Xu 1978: 273). While we find these descriptions correspond very much to what we know about Gwer Sa La of the present day, the taking of lovers (*ja ni*) was not mentioned at all, though the romantic spirit was allured to.

Why it is not recorded in historical literature? A conspicuous reason is that the practice is too unseemly to be shown to "outsiders". Moreover, as local scholars who were trained in Confucianism and thought themselves morally superior and obliged to teach ordinary people of descent behaviour, they might have felt it inappropriate to tell that the people around them were doing something against Confucian code. I found this to the case when I discussed the topic with the local intellectuals. They would either skip the lover episode or switch to another topic. Only the uneducated people tell the truth. One of my key informants, a middle-aged man, told me the details of his experience but denounced the morality of them, saying that the participants are "seeking sexual pleasure under the guise of paying homage to the gods." It seems that the Bai has been trying to keep Gwer Sa La in practice without ever recording it.

As a people of the Chinese frontier, which had caused too much trouble to the imperial centre, the Bai can not openly admit their unseemly custom, since by doing so they might make the imperial Chinese Confucian politicians put the whole Dali into the category of barbarians, a designation that had been employed upon them and neighbouring peoples. As barbarians, people would be denied to attend the national exam. As a result, on the one hand, the writings of the local people had been attempting very hard to justify themselves as being as civilized as the Chinese. Many of these justifications are invented, including a claim of Chinese origins often found in local lineage records. On the other hand, the local gazetteer, the "official histories", was always stuffed with the claim that Dali people were as virtuous as what was prescribed in Confucianism. A case in point is probably the *Dali Prefecture Gazetteer* compiled during the reign of Kangxi (1661-1722):

“Most scholars are self-respectful, ashamed of lawsuits. Retired officials are as modest as an ordinary old villager, engaging in teaching instead of seeking for fame and wealth. The custom cherishes Buddhist truth. Every house has a Buddhist shrine, and everyone has several prayer beads. On the first and fifteenth days of a month, the sound of sutra repeating is heard everywhere. A legend tells that Avalokitesvara visited the place, teaching people to abandon the sword, read the Confucian books, and understand the principle of the five virtues such as loyalty to the emperor and filial piety to one's parents.” (Huang 1937: vol. 12, art. custom)

Compared with the Gwer Sa La festival, what the Bai said and what they do form sharp contrast. The Gwer Sa La festival appears to be something the Bai elite tried to forget.

After 1911 revolution made Confucianism unorthodox, both the Nationalist and Communist governments were still hostile to Gwer Sa La. It was dismissed as something against modern idea of marriage, as well as something superstitious. Nation-state system, with its encompassing power to control the once semi-autonomous grassroots society (Wu and Fei 1948, Duara 1987), actively participate this attempt of forgetting. In the 1916 edition of Dali Gazetteer, Gwer Sa La was considered as “superstitious, forbidden and abandoned. And the images were destroyed” Yang Qiong, the first one who recorded Gwer Sa La in detail, was rather contemptuous to it: "It is said the festival originated from Nan-chao Kingdom, and could not be banned since then. This is perhaps because the people are deceived by the witches' words, thinking that by so doing they could be blessed with children or healed from illness.

Another explanation is that Dali is the land of Buddha, and the gods and Buddha are so mysterious that they are not easily dismissed" (Yang Q. 2001[1910]: 302). In 1930s, Nationalist government declared Gwer Sa La "decadent" and "superstitious, and tried to ban it every year. After 1949, Gwer Sa La was seldom mentioned. One of the few exceptions was the 1959 edition of *Literature History of the Bai*, in which all the unseemly was silenced, and Gwer Sa La as was interpreted as the "drama of the mass

to mobilize [agricultural]production"(Zhang 1959: 303). During the Cultural Revolution, the festival was successfully put down by the government after some villagers were arrested and accused of "committing disordered man-woman relations." (Wang 1998: 77)

However, the nation-state government has never been successful. Despite the Nationalist government's banning order, villagers continued to go Gwer Sa La (Fitzgerald 1941: 122). The 1947 Gwer Sa La records showed that around 700, 000 national dollars were collected during the festival in the Capital of the Gods alone. On the same year, a Japanese-trained local scholar explained why Gwer Sa La persists: "(the custom) was handed down over generations for more than 1200 years. How could millions of villagers give up their belief for the sake of a mere government order?" (Zhao 1999[1947]: 307) During the Cultural Revolution, the time most of the traditional practices were strictly forbidden, the responsible Old Women Associations moved the Gwer Sa La ritual services into their homes, and secretly went for pilgrimages on foot. Since 1980s on, Gwer Sa La as "the belief of minorities" became acceptable by the state. Government begin to involve itself in the event by defining Gwer Sa La as ethnic festival, developing tourist business, encouraging local scholars to write its folklore, and, most importantly, making money out of the event through direct administration of the traffic and vendors.

While ancient Bai scholars tried to forget Gwer Sa La by writing, modern nation-state tries to make the people to forget it by action. However the action failed for apparent reasons. Compared with Gwer Sa La, modern festivals are never efficacious to family and personal concerns. We are now certain that the nation-state has admitted its failure to make the people forget Gwer Sa La, and accept the ethnic implications of the event.

## CONCLUSION

Earlier observations on the Bai tend to understate the ethnicity of the Bai. While Fitzgerald remarked on the ethnic attributes of Gwer Sa La, he commented that the Bai lacked a "strong national feeling" (1941: 14). Colin Mackerras thought the comment "is still valid today." and "It seems that the Bai are quite happy with the strengthened acculturation of the

1980s" (1988: 78). Gwer Sa La was revived exactly in the 1980s (Notar 1999). However, far from showing contentment with acculturation, it is precisely an articulation of the Bai's ethnicity. As we have discovered, the Gwer Sa La legend is shaped as a response to the Ming conquest. In the long interaction between central Chinese dynasties and Dali, the Ming Empire was the first dynasty that successfully incorporated Yunnan as part of China, in terms of politics and culture (Hou 2002; Yang B. 2004a, 2004b). The legend, as it survived in various local and national historical documents, has successfully transmitted the criticism against centralized rule by devising the theme of voluntary abdication. At present, the legend has been recorded in many books and documents (for example, Yang Z. 1999), as ethnic folklore. The festival is thus safely placed into the domain of local culture.

However, the *ja ni* relation meets with disapproval because the modern Chinese state, just like late imperial China, never developed an ideational frame to accommodate non-marital sexual relations. As a result, like their predecessors, the Bai scholars have refrained from mentioning the *ja ni* relation (for example, Yang Z. 2000). Zhang Xilu, a Bai scholar, said to me, "We didn't want to mention it because we want to protect people's privacy" (Zhang 2002: personal communication). In fact, because many Bai are involved in *ja ni* and anonymity is very easy, we may understand that it is the privacy of the Bai as a whole that the Bai scholars are trying to protect. The reason is clear: the Bai are still selective in showing their ethnicity in negotiating with the larger political and cultural context.

In terms of space and time, the metaphoric implication of Gwer Sa La is especially interesting. In space, the itinerary covers an area corresponding to the central area of both the Nan-chao and Dali kingdoms, the glorious past of the Bai. In time, the three males in the legend-- Chang-lo-chin-ch'iu, Hsi-nu-lo, and Tuan Ssu-p'ing-- are respectively the last king of the legendary Pai-tzu kuo, the first king of Nan-chao Kingdom, and the first king of Dali Kingdom. The legend makes them consanguineal and affinal kin, though it is apparently not the case. The fact that some of them have alternative names--Tuan Tsong-pang for the White King and General Yang for Tuan Ssu-p'ing--reveals to us that there is some manipulation occurring in order to avoid historical

inconsistency. All of these practices--romanticizing a legend of ancient political criticism, hiding an "unseemly" custom, and tracking a time-space scheme that involves a territorially symbolized congregation (the Old Women's Association)--sophisticatedly imply the Bai's ethnicity.

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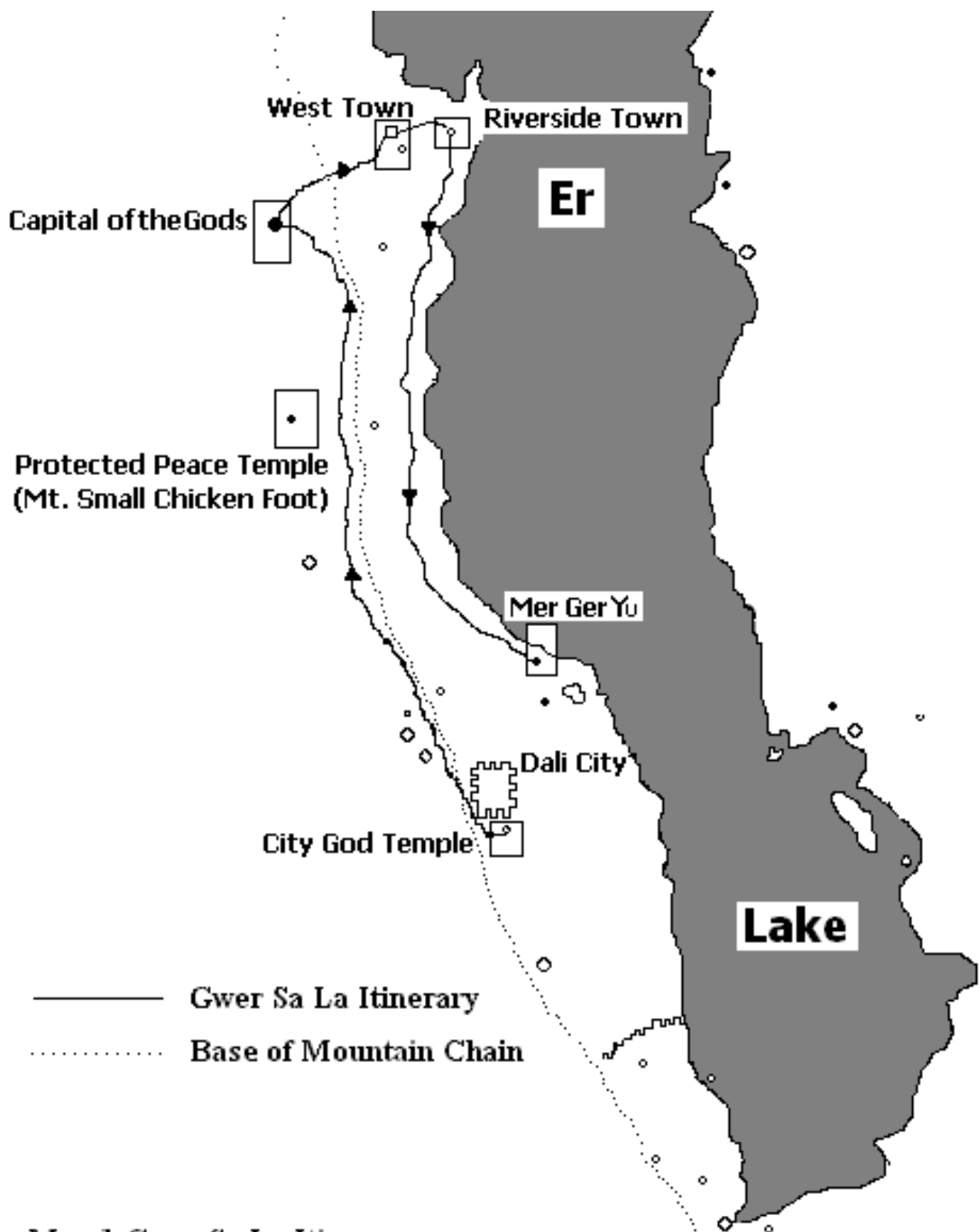
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## SPECIAL TERMS

Bai Tzu	白族	Nan-chao	南诏
<i>benzv</i>	本主	<i>Nan-chao History With Paintings</i>	
<i>Book of History</i>	史记		南诏图传
Chang-lo-chin-ch'iu	张乐进求	Nationalist Party, the(KMT)	
City God Temple	城隍庙		国民党
Dali	大理	<i>Notes on Inner Yunnan</i>	滇中琐记
Dali Bai Nationality Autonomous		Old Women's Association	
Prefecture	大理白族自治州		莲池 ( 慈 ) 会
Er Lake	洱海	Pai-tzu kuo	白子国
Felu Hui	风流会	Protected Peace Temple	保和寺
Four Olds	四旧	<i>rao san ling</i>	绕三灵
General History of the Ancient		<i>rao shan lin</i>	绕山林
White Kingdom	白 ( 僰 ) 古通记	<i>Recollections of Ancient Yunnan</i>	
General Yang	杨氏将军		记古滇说集
Mer Ger Yu	马久邑	Riverside City	河湟城
Han Tsu	汉族	Shang	商
Hsichow	喜州	Shendu	神都
Hsi-nu-lo	细奴罗	Shun	舜
Hsin-tsung	兴宗	Tang	汤
Jingu	金姑	Tuan ssu-p'ing	段思平
Kangxi	康熙	Tuan Tsong-pang	段宗榜
Lo-Hs'eng	罗盛	tyranny whip	霸王鞭
Meng-she	蒙舍	White King, the	白王
Min Chia	民家	Wuding	武丁
Mt. Cang	苍山	Yao	尧
Mt. Li	历山	Zhu Yuanzhang	朱元璋
Mt. Wei	巍山		



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<sup>1</sup> Fitzgerald was based in Dali City, the prefecture seat of Dali, while Francis Hsu spent most of time in Hsichow, a town 16 kilometers north from Dali.

<sup>2</sup> Both of them were trained by B. Malinowski.

<sup>3</sup> The alias Francis Hsu gave to Hsichow.

<sup>4</sup> Actually, during the time Hsu stayed in the region, the major donators of the event were the rich businessmen from West Town, the landlords of Hsu and his colleagues.

<sup>5</sup> I was also told by a middle-aged man that several years ago, when he was watching the singing, two soft hands touched his pants from behind. As he was trying to move away, a woman's voice uttered, "Aren't you the White King's descendant?"

<sup>6</sup> Most of the Bai lineage records would also claim their origin as from Central China. But in recently years, when they begin to rewrite the family history, they tend to switch to claim their ancestors as indigenous origin who later migrated to central China and came back to Dali in Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). This is historically false but certainly sociologically true.

<sup>7</sup> A conspicuous example might be a debate over the birthplace of Tuan Ssu-p'ing, appearing as one of the hottest topics in the local newspaper in 1999.

<sup>8</sup> In Dali, the gender of Avalokitesvara was male.

<sup>9</sup> There are debates over the exact date of this document, but most researchers prefer it was created before Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368), for detailed discussion, see Li Lin-ts'an ( 1967).

<sup>10</sup> Prince Hsin-Tsung is the title the T'ang Empire granted to Lo-Hsi'eng, son of Hsi-nu-lo.

<sup>11</sup> Note that Prince Hsin-tsung is the title conferred by a T'ang emperor on Lo-sheng, son of Hsi-nu-lo.

<sup>12</sup> There are debates on this written language. Bai native scholars today argue it is written in Bai(Xu 2002), while some non-Bai researchers think not (Hou 2002). The former is quite unlikely because in Bai history, Chinese was employed as the official language while Sanskrit was the religious one. There was never a need to create a written form of the ethnic language.

<sup>13</sup> King Wuding was the offspring of King Tang, founder of the Shang Dynasty (16th century B.C.-1046 B.C.). The legend of pheasant's cock was recorded in *Book of History*.

<sup>14</sup> In Chinese legend, Shun was the successor of King Yao, one of the most ancient kings of Chinese civilization, through voluntary abdication instead of inheriting. The legend was also recorded in *Book of History*.

<sup>15</sup> The record in many details corresponds to what we know about the present day Gwer Sa La. "There is a festival named rao shan lin (winding [among] mountains and forests). Every year in mid-to late mid-spring, hundreds and thousands of men and women meet together in dozens of groups... A man usually carries a handkerchief or a folding fan, dancing and singing, or beating the "tyrant's whip". What is a "tyrant's whip"? It is made out of a piece of bamboo as tall as a human body, drilled with holes every three inches to its end, then attached with two or three brass coins. The holes are uneven so that when the bamboo is percussed, the coins will make a heartfelt sound... The festival lasts for four days, the first day at the City God Temple of Dali, the second day at the Great Source Temple by passing by the Three Pagoda Temple, the third day at the Riverside Town, and the fourth day at the Mer Ger Yu village . Because the itinerary covers the foothills of Mt. Cang and the road by the lake, the festival is thus called "winding among mountains and woods"...People eat and sleep in the temples and cook in the temple courtyards, where each group has one individual pot... They sleep on the floor on mats, lying in a disorder fashion, until all the room is occupied..."

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