The Ethnic Chameleon: Bakhtin and The Bai

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"The Ethnic Chameleon: Bakhtin and the Bai"

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Introduction

In this essay, I should like to explore the Bai world through the theory of civilizational dialogics elucidated by the Russian thinker, Mikhail Bakhtin, and consider how an understanding of Bakhtin’s cross-cultural theory may clarify ethnic identity and the interrelation between self and other in storytelling and field work. Before turning to these topics, some background information regarding my research and the Bai minority is needed.

In the summer of 1985 I went to Yunnan Province, to embark on a joint project with colleagues from Yunnan Normal University, selecting and translating folktales of the officially designated twenty-five ethnic minorities. During the spring and summer of 1991, I conducted field work among the Bai people, collecting oral tales in Bai villages with a Bai colleague, which he translated into Chinese and I translated into English. I engaged in further fieldwork on my own in the summer of 1992. This essay reflects on that research experience in terms of Bakhtin’s dialogical enterprise.

Generally speaking in China, ethnic identification follows four criteria set forth by Stalin: an ethnic group is one that shares the same language, region, economy, and psychological makeup or culture. Identity in China is static—once the government determines that a group is an “ethnic nationality” (minzu), that identity is set and unchanging. The Bai were granted ethnic minority status in 1963. The Bai live mainly in the Dali Bai Autonomous District in western Yunnan, which includes the lakebank region between Erhai Lake and the Cang Mountains, the western part of the Yunling mountain range, and the area of the southwestern gorges of the Yunnan–Guizhou plateau through which the Salween, Mekong and Jinsha rivers flow, from north to south. The Dali culture is one of the earliest to develop in China’s southwest border region. Remains of the New Stone Age are found all about Erhai Lake. The Han dynasty emperor, Han Wudi set up a prefecture there in 109 B.C. In 739 A.D., the Nanzhao (Southern Zhao) Kingdom was established by a prince of one of the Bai tribes, and in 937, the Dali Kingdom began, lasting until the twelfth century. Formerly non–Han Chinese territory, the land “South of the Clouds” (Yunnan) became a Chinese province under the Yuan, or Mongol, dynasty after the Mongol conquest under Khubilai Khan in 1253, but the Bai were neither displaced by the Han, nor
dispersed among other groups, as was often the experience of other ethnic minorities. The Bai have no written language of their own, but write using Han Chinese characters which are read phonetically in the Bai language. The classification of the Bai language is uncertain—it contains elements that appear to be Tibeto-Burman, Mon-Khmer, Tai, and Chinese.

The most economically successful minority in western and north-western Yunnan, Bai today farm ricelands on the fertile, six thousand foot high, Dali plain, and follow the traditional practice of fishing Erhai Lake with nets and cormorants. Dali marble is famous, and Bai are recognized as marble craftsmen and boat builders. A cheese Bai and other minorities make is prized by Han-Chinese in Yunnan, contrary to the general Han abhorrence for dairy products. Traditional Bai architecture is impressive—in the Dali area, it is identified by large two-storied houses with three wings built around garden courtyards, carved wooden doors and balustrades, stone floors, and landscape pictures painted on whitewashed walls which have pointed arabesque patterned windows. Below the nineteen peaks of the fourteen thousand foot high Cang mountain range, which form a vast screen to the west of Erhai Lake, Buddhist pagodas and pavilions dot the lakeside landscape, evidence of the vital presence of Buddhism during the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdom periods, which came to Yunnan over the southern silk routes between India and Burma.

With this description in mind, let us turn to Bakhtin and the Bai.

"To imitate or to apply Bakhtin, to read him by engaging him in a dialogue," writes Paul de Man, "betrays what is most valid in his work." Since what I propose to do is to apply Bakhtin, to engage him in a dialogue with the Bai (but hopefully not betray him), I should clarify de Man's reservations. De Man describes Bakhtin's dialogism as both a metalinguistics term which applies to intra-linguistic, rather than interpersonal relations, and, on the other hand, as "a principle of radical otherness," which Bakhtin employs to bring into encounter and dialogue different cultures, ideologies, nations, religions, and literary voices (de Man, 1989: 108-109). As Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson note, de Man doubts the possibility of the latter, questioning whether we move in Bakhtin from intra-linguistic awareness to intra-cultural relations and cross-cultural understanding. De Man himself states, seemingly deflating the balloon of enthusiasm he notes Bakhtin theorists ride with their mentor, hoping dialogism may enable them to cross the fiction-reality line, and move to recognition of the other: "The ideologies of otherness and of hermeneutic understanding are not compatible, and therefore their relationship is not a dialogical but simply a contradictory one. It is not a foregone conclusion whether Bakhtin's discourse is itself dialogical or simply contradictory" (de Man, 1989: 110 & 112).
Hermeneutics has to do with ideological analysis, the what of a text, the descriptive discourse of poetics deals with formal analysis of the how—how a work is written, how it is read, de Man remarks. "Compatibility can only be achieved at the expense of dialogism" (de Man, 1989, 114).

To my mind, the basic, perhaps irreconcilable, difference between Bakhtin and de Man has to do with the concept of self. For Bakhtin, Matthew Roberts observes, the self is dynamic, inalienable, and continually constituted in dialogue between the I and others; for de Man, the self is radically suspect, a linguistic or theoretical construct continually deconstituted or deconstructed in the confrontation with literary texts. In this essay, I opt for Bakhtin's self, not just because I am happier with it personally, but because it allows me to gaze at an ethnic chameleon, the Bai, and to engage Bakhtin and the Bai in fruitful dialogue.

The Bai are appropriate for a Bakhtinian study for several reasons. Currently, Bai folktale collecting and publishing are what Bakhtin would term "chronotopic" events—concrete actions taking place in a specific, unique context of time and space—and mark an important civilizational stage, what Michael Palencia-Roth identifies in his 1992 Presidential Address at the Annual Meeting of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations as a time of authority and expansion, encounter with outsiders, and hybridization. The Bai, with the favorable support of current policy toward minorities in the People's Republic of China, are coming into their own, so to speak, with Bai scholars and cultural leaders asserting Bai identity, Bai territory legally recognized in the Dali Bai Autonomous District in western Yunnan Province, and Bai people extending their long tradition of hybrid relations with Han and other minorities through encounters with foreign cultures, travellers, and scholars. What makes the Bai especially intriguing from a Bakhtinian perspective, is their dialogical relation with the Han, and other ethnic minorities. Cultural encounter with the Han goes back at least to the beginnings of the Nanzhao Kingdom in the seventh century. Despite conquest and colonization by the Han in Yunnan over the centuries, Han engulfment of the Bai has not happened, as one might expect. To see the fullness of Bai cultural encounter requires the perspective of what Bakhtin calls "great time," whereby cultures, cultural works and individuals break through the boundaries of their own epochs, and take on a significance impossible to perceive previously. (Morson and Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin, p. 35)

Pursuing that significance which evolves in the fullness of great time, I should like to discuss aspects of dialogical discourse encountered while collecting Bai folktales in Yunnan. A Bakhtinian view of Bai folktales themselves is the subject of another essay. Here I shall focus on the colors
and hues of the Bai ethnic chameleon which change when observing and listening in the field. How do Bakhtin’s dialogics illuminate the encounter between native Bai and foreign scholar? Why is the encounter with tale teller, collector, redactor, or interpreter different when there is a Bakhtinian consciousness at work? Who are the Bai, and how might dialogism help us understand their evolving ethnic identity?

The “Anthros” and the “H” Factor

For the field worker and the native Bai or Han, there are different views of the act of collecting tales as well as of the tales themselves, attributable to what Bakhtin calls the “field of vision” and “surroundings.” The former is a person’s own emotional-volitional field, the self view; the latter the view a neutral person has of me (Morson and Emerson, *Rethinking Bakhtin*, p. 23). I see outwardly from my perspective, along my own line of vision—I cannot really see myself. Another cannot share my view, but sees, as it were, an “aura” around me. Bai and Han co-workers today invariably see the foreign colleague just as they see their own, that is, in terms of their danwei or work unit—the country they come from, the institution that sponsors them, whether they are married or single, male or female, and so forth, whatever marks one’s social and political context.

The self view or field of vision may be exemplified in myself, the “anthros,” the foreign researcher and field worker who struggles to overcome ethnocentricity, and beguiles himself or herself with the notion that the contemporary attitude of self criticism and self doubt—how can I be a participant observer without being a thief?—may counter anthropological imperialism. “Anthros” is my term for the foreign scholar who romanticizes minorities in China, at the expense of the Han, a tendency to which I confess. My surroundings or the way I am perceived are outstandingly other among the Bai, for I appear as a white, middle aged male, a giant in size, comparatively speaking, six feet two inches tall, and weighing 100 kilos. The outer, physical filter of foreign self is inescapable. But there is also the internal bias in my own field of vision, hidden within those Werner Sollars calls “de-ethnicized intellectuals,” persons who share a xenophilia and perhaps a guilt over the exploitation of alien minorities. Such internal fields of vision play important roles in all inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relations in Yunnan. As Mr. Zhang Xilu, a Bai colleague at the Xiaguan Museum near Dali, pointed out to me one day, there’s a popular saying among both minorities and Han in the Dali area, “Minorities imitate the Han, Han imitate foreigners, and foreigners imitate minorities” (*Shaoshu minzu xue Hanzu*, 4).
Younger ethnics may abandon distinctive markers of minority identity in an effort to appear Han. Han capitalists desire the economic well-being of foreign visitors, and tourists identify with non Hanitized minorities they consider uncorrupted by modernity, buying folk art, eating ethnic foods, and listening to folktales. Among the foreigners, there is a certain disenchantment on the part of more than a few western anthropologists, sinologists and comparatists with the Han in relation to minority studies, an oftentimes commendable desire “to save the ethnics” (Sollars’ expression, ibid.), such as the Tibetans whose culture is being decimated by the Han and the Han dominated Chinese government, and an awareness many ethnic and Chinese scholars share that minority cultures in Yunnan are waning.

The difference between the anthros’ field of vision and the native’s surroundings immediately comes to the fore at the initiation of any field work. When conducting research in Yunnan, and probably anywhere else in China, for that matter, one becomes aware of the “H” factor, a term coined by Professor John Deaney, pioneer comparatist and specialist in East-West literary relations at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. The “H” graphically represents the double relation a foreign scholar has with academic and political units. One works with a research group, but must also cross the “H” to the government or party authorities. To do research, one must get approval from one’s work unit, such as a minority literature department, in a university or research institution located “down the river” in some major city, which has jurisdiction over, or official links to, the minority folk “up the river.” Next, you must cross over the bridge of the “H” to the other side, so to speak, and have your project approved by government and Chinese Communist Party officials in the same major city, who sometimes are located in the same building as the work unit. Given these permissions, one ventures to Bai land, beginning at Dali, the capital of the Bai Autonomous District, and you repeat the same pattern of obtaining approval of both sides of the “H” (governmental and cultural bodies), in each village along the shores of Erhai Lake and into the interior of the Bai region. Once permissions are granted, relations are cordial. After arrival in the village of Jianchuan, for example, we met with government officials, then an explanatory session of several hours duration was held with them and local Bai cultural and government officials, introducing my project, accompanied by my Bai guide or peitong (“companion”) from the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. My peitong then had permission to locate storytellers and I was free to conduct interviews and storytelling performances, usually with the additional help of another local village or town peitong. If you do not deal with both sides of the “H,” you
cannot conduct research. If you discover a story-teller on your own, for example, and try to record stories without gaining the approval of the “H” groups—local intellectuals, government and party officials—he or she will unlikely be willing to speak with you, or if tales are told, political and cultural authorities are likely to accuse you of stealing. Presumably, this dynamic might change, were one to reside in a Bai village for a number of months, instead of travelling through village to village on a six week field trip, as I did.

The “H” factor means that the foreign researcher often has to pay exorbitant fees for services to an urban research institute to facilitate contact with minorities in the countryside. But the “H” is more than an attempt to control and charge for access to the Bai, or an effort to maintain harmonious political relations between urban governmental institutions and their rural Bai counterparts. It also reflects an official and intellectual notion of Bai ethnicity, which those in authority believe can best be understood from a centrist or hierarchical approach, starting at the top, where there are the material resources, minority institutes and cultural centers, and Bai intellectuals busy at work researching and developing Bai identity. On the other hand, the “H” filter also produces tensions over authority and interpretation, as local village Bai who are “up river” from the research institutes in the provincial capital, Kunming, know local cultures better and are accepted within them. Country and urban units are supposed to be cooperative, but the former may have superior knowledge and local power.

Ironically, the dialogical process which goes on in “H” relations, and is meant to guarantee or protect official views, instead produces new meanings whose potential is not realized in Bai culture alone. Permissions obtained unleash different fields of vision and surroundings. One catches the other and the self in the act, so to speak. To cite a crude example, as we were entering the government building in the ancient town of Xizhou, Bai Autonomous District, my peitong blew his nose in his hands, and wiped them on the wall next to the lovely wooden entrance door, carved in the elegant Bai style. From the Bai cultural perspective, nothing uncouth here—my disgust probably marks my ethnocentricism. Or, to tell one on myself, climbing Cock’s Foot Mountain on the eastern side of Erhai Lake in the Dali region, I met a Bai grandmother and young mother who invited me to tea in their farmhouse. When the latter began bowing up and down at my feet, I imagined I must be the Buddha returned to the mountain, or else a candidate for romance. Gradually, it dawned on me that I was being asked to name the baby.

Only later did I learn through my Bai colleague, Zhang Xilu, that I had been honored with the role of gandie, “dry-father” (a sort of godfather).
He congratulated me for being initiated, in effect, into the Bai, whose custom requires the first person met a month after a birth to name the child. Apparently, as someone who was so other and so foreign, I was considered especially auspicious. My obligation was to forward baby pants and baby food to my godson, which I happily did. Ignorance isn’t bliss, but bears fruit in cross-cultural encounter! In this case we have an instance of what Bakhtin calls “live entering.” Despite my own good intentions to empathize or understand from the grandmother’s and mother’s viewpoint—Bakhtin holds that empathy is mere duplication in cultural encounter, and produces nothing new—I inadvertently maintained my own outsideness, staying alive, so to speak, with my particular time and space intact, entering lively into dialogue as my distinctly different cultural self, and consequently contributing an original meaning and discovering a new identity (Rethinking Bakhtin, pp. 10–11).

What is behind such episodes, according to Bakhtin, is the openness of culture, whose semantic possibilities “have remained undisclosed, unrecognized, and unutilized throughout the entire historical life of a given culture” (Bakhtin, “Response to a Question,” in Speech Genres, p. 6). The point is neither that one gets the wrong notion of the other, nor the right one, but that new meanings are engendered through dialogics. My encounter in the Bai farmhouse was with the word in dialogic discourse, which, says Bakhtin, is oriented toward a future answer-word, and is always in dialogue. “The speaker strives to get a reading on his own word, and on his own conceptual system that determines this word, within the alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver . . .” (Dialogic Imagination, p. 282). The Bai mother thought that I thought that she thought . . ., while I thought that she thought that I thought . . .

Peitong and Storyteller

Two other vital elements of dialogics in Yunnan tale collecting are the voices of the peitong and the storyteller. The peitong, or “companion,” is one who accompanies a foreign researcher conducting field work among minorities. The peitong is practically essential, both because his or her presence is required by regulation, and because the peitong is the go–between in cross-cultural encounter. He or she is a representative, not only of ethnic culture (my peitong was Bai), but of his or her work unit as well (my peitong was from the Yunnan Academy of Social Sciences). In this dual role, there sometimes appear contradictory voices through which the peitong speaks, interpreting Bai culture or official policy. Regarding the latter, my peitong...
would occasionally exhibit the infantalizing tendency often experienced by foreigners in research relations, that is, a tendency to take responsibility and make decisions for foreign guests, out of concern that they might hurt themselves, get wrong impressions, or cause trouble. I myself felt babied at times, but at others discovered the need for my peitong—indeed, I often did misunderstand and was dependent on his guidance. Regarding the role of interpreter of Bai culture, interestingly, my peitong suffered a limitation similar to mine in being an “outsider.” As a person from one specific Bai village, and as an official intellectual from an urban institute, and possibly a Hanitized Bai, he is “wailaide,” “someone coming from outside,” when we visited villages beyond his native Eryuan County. He pointed out to me that people are not always free nor forthcoming with the two of us, because we are alien. The local village cultural representative or government official usually must provide the contact with the storyteller. Often we visited a storyteller in the company of a local peitong.

The fact of my peitong and I being other also colors the telling and hearing of tales, affecting the voice of the storyteller. Always there is a triangular relation among us three, the peitong who is from “above” (shang-tou, the seat of the provincial government, Kunming, is always indicated by such hierarchical directionals), myself from “outside” (waitou) or abroad, and the local teller. The teller’s consciousness is aware of ourselves as a pair of outsiders. A story is told to me with the teller mediating the tale through an awareness of the presence of my Bai outsider peitong, and, at the same time, with the teller spinning the tale for my peitong, conscious of the fact that I am a cultural eavesdropper. Sometimes my minor role is very conspicuous, like the time when my teller, supplied with the usual bottle of bai-jiu (fiercely powerful Bai rice wine) required for storyteller sessions, got too drunk to tell a story, totally ignoring me. At other times, I feel grandly important. Once a teller told a delightful story about a dog who nursed kittens in imitation of the household mistress, who nursed her sister-in-law’s baby before she would nurse her own. When the tale spinner learned my field was Comparative Literature, he promptly balanced the first tale with the story of an evil sister-in-law who threw out her brother-in-law, explaining at the end, “being a comparatist, Professor Miller likes opposites.” Being a Bai storyteller, my narrator automatically and probably unconsciously employs a particular speech genre, what Bakhtin identifies as a stable type of utterance used in a particular social sphere—in this case, addressing a foreign literature specialist (Speech Genres, pp. 60 & 95).

This latent sense of a double audience and a double consciousness colors Bai tale and ethnicity. In fact, there is a third audience, not just when we happen to be in the company of a Bai crowd (usually stories are narrat-
ed privately), but whenever a tale is told, teller and listeners are aware of government and Communist Party officials who may hear the tale recording one day, or read it once it is published in China or appears in translation in the foreign press. In Bakhtin's terms, there is a kind of trio present in the Bai example of dialogism, speaker and other who is addressed directly, and a superaddressee who has absolutely just understanding, or at least ultimate authority—the Bai folk, the Communist Party."

From the perspective of Bakhtin, such coloring is not a liability but a source of fascination. The chameleon changes hues yet remains a lizard. But sometimes it radically transforms into a fish, a sail, or an anchor. The mixture of addressees in the audience—foreign me, intellectual Bai from the capital, government or Communist Party officials who may overhear or read—is a perfect example of internal dialogization, which is creative because it is enriched by what Bakhtin terms social heteroglossia, in the present instance, the mixture of Bai, Han, and English languages, official and unofficial listeners, and a dialogue of voices and languages and ideologies (Dialogic Imagination, p. 285). Because of this creative mixture of voices, there can be no textual stability, according to Bakhtin, and, as Michale Palencia-Roth would perhaps affirm, no tale in Bai land can be studied independently of the consciousness of its producers, receivers, and interpreters (Palencia-Roth, 1992 ISCSC Presidential Address, p. 2, footnote).

Language, Redaction, and Translation

The subjects of voice and audience bring us to language and its use in redaction and translation, both fundamental in Bai dialogism. In regard to the Bai language, I suspect heteroglossia, or a mixture of vernacular languages in the Bai region, and a dialogical relation among the Bai, Naxi, Tibetan, Yi, and Dai languages that is mutually enriching. There is a long history of Bai intellectuals becoming fluent in classical Chinese—one wonders whether there has been the negative interplay between Bai and Chinese languages that Bakhtin finds elsewhere in the relation between dialects and literary language, the former becoming deformed, losing their closed socio-linguistic systems, while deforming the literary language (Dialogical Imagination, p. 294). At any rate, there are variations in dialect from one Bai town to the next, and young people from valley towns often have difficulty understanding their mountain elders. My peitong reports that few persons of Bai origin living in the large urban center of Kunming, who are under 60 years of age, can speak Bai. It is largely a language of the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, predominating in country villages.
I studied the Bai oral language one summer in America and for two months in Kunming, but my knowledge was insufficient for field work. Until recently, there was no written Bai language, although Chinese characters are read phonetically to represent Bai sounds. Presently, a romanized alphabet and Bai script have been developed for use at a bi-lingual (Bai-Chinese) elementary school in the town of Jianchuan, with the sponsorship of the United Nations. In our field work, I would record a tale in the Bai language, which my peitong would listen to and translate into Chinese (Hanyu), which I then translated into English. Obviously, translation filters are at work. Comparison of the Bai oral versions with the Chinese translations must wait further Bai language study. From a Bakhtinian viewpoint, translation errors are insignificant. What will be important to investigate in a comparison of Bai, Chinese, and English versions of a tale are differences in cultural consciousness. What may be revealed are the concrete intentional levels and contexts of source and target languages, and the social heteroglossia which surround different voices of teller, redactor, and translator (Dialogic Imagination, pp. 298–99).

Normally, in minority folklore work conducted by Chinese, there are two renditions of a tale produced from collecting—the “scientific version” (kexue ben) and the “literary version” (wenxueben), the former a kind of field book full of notes and literal transcriptions, not allowed to be published, nor read by foreign scholars, the latter a redacted text intended for publication and public consumption. A redacted folktale is formally reshaped to stimulate reader interest (dramatic devices, climax, dénouement), for the bottom line in a literary version is sales. Material that is sexually prurient, superstitious, or attacks another minority or the Han is deleted. Editors I interviewed consider it unacceptable to “tell secrets,” or reveal truths about ethnic minority cultural practices which might be considered laughable or “backward” by outsiders. When you translate for publication, you want the other to look good from the perspective of both self and other. Although I have no direct evidence, I would speculate that this “pro minority” viewpoint is a modern Han Chinese practice in the People’s Republic of China, resulting from the government policy of promoting harmony among the nationalities. Certainly, in pre-modern China, pejorative views of minorities on the part of Han Chinese were normative.

As my project was “alterity,” the representation in Bai tales of whatever or whoever was outsider (other minority, foreigner, disease, distant lands), it was important that censorious redactive practices be avoided by my peitong in his translation work, and he agreed. Of course, comparison of Bai and Chinese versions will determine conformity with this goal. A local peitong in the town of Jianchuan was hotly critical of literary versions, say-
ing that the sole criterion was sales, and that they were bowdlerized to make them more exciting and polished. As evidence, he gave me both scientific and literary versions he had collected for comparison, in the latter of which I noted the reappearance of motifs to establish story line, and the insertion of climax and dénouement to enhance reader interest. I would point out that my project itself had little impact on dialogism, as none of the storytellers understood otherness in my sense—typical story categories are local god tales, romances, legends about local places, flora and fauna, customs, dragon tales, ghost stories, and jokes. It is possible that my “self” versus “other” approach is an analytical device of western literary critics who purport to be sensitive to the depictions of outsideness, while alterity is not part of Bai cultural consciousness.

At any rate, I gave up asking for stories about outsiders, and simply asked for a story, within which otherness invariably appears, often unconsciously. Also, there was resistance to revealing inside information. For example, Bai tellers would not tell me pejorative nicknames they use for other minorities, but always employed polite terminology, I suspect because of Han Chinese government policy of promoting harmonious relations. Bai tell one another tales about a Hui (Muslim) ethnic minority hero, Du Wenxiu, defeated by a Bai hero, Yang Yuke, but these are not allowed to be published, in accordance with the government policy of the “unity of minorities.” Hui stories about Du Wenxiu are published, as he was a leader of Hui uprisings against the Qing dynasty, which are viewed favorably by the Communist government. The reason for this favoritism towards Du Wenxiu may well be, as my colleague, Professor Alvin Cohen, notes, because the Qing was a foreign dynasty, that of the Manchus, a minority who controlled the Han, and who were the Han’s favorite enemy. Anyone who opposed the Qing Manchus is a Han hero. Of the hundred plus stories I collected, few are directly about otherness, and only one gives a negative view of other ethnic minorities or the Han nationality.

Given my assumption about the importance of the Bai language in understanding a Bai tale, imagine my chagrin when I discovered in the town of Jianchuan a Bai teller, Mr. Yang Jinwen, telling me tales in Chinese. When I mentioned that I preferred him to speak in the native Bai language, he said people do not speak Bai in Jianchuan—a peculiar statement, since Jianchuan is the prime Bai speaking area in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, where more than 90% of the residents speak Bai. Later on, after the recording session, I found out that the storyteller was a Han person who had moved to Jianchuan and become a Bai, and a teller of Bai tales. When I visited his farm in the village of Longfeng for a recording session with another Bai teller, I noticed that he spoke Bai, not only with the other Bai...
storyteller, but with family members and friends as well. Interestingly, he was the only teller whose story revealed a critical view of the ethnic other, in this case, the Tibetans. His story was about a Tibetan monk who invited Bai friends to taste a soup which appeared to contain a Bai infant. It was a person with a dual perspective—that of Han and Bai—who was so readily able to tell me a tale about an ethnic other. Generally speaking, I believe a Bai would be less willing to tell a foreigner such a tale. In fact, after hearing the story, the local Bai peitong not only assured me that what the storyteller said in the story was not true—Tibetans never have killed Bai people in Jianchuan, nor do they kidnap nor eat Bai babies. He added privately that I should not tell this story to Tibetans, meaning, I think, that Tibetans would be insulted hearing these old stereotypes of themselves, and the Bai would look badly.

Our storyteller, Mr. Yang Jinwen, both Bai and Han, is a “hyphenate writer,” the ethnic artist who has a double consciousness of Bai–Han self and Tibetan other. He is, in Werner Sollars’ term, a “chameleon,” working as translator and interpreter, aware of a double audience which is composed of both self and other, Bai peitong and an American recorder who listen in fascination to him speak. Bakhtin speaks creatively of translation as “seizure”—a word or work is half someone else’s until the speaker or translator appropriates and transforms it into private property, populating it with his or her own intentions (Dialogical Imagination, pp. 293–94). From such a point of view, one could argue that all translation is authentic, regardless of how far it is from the literal or figurative layers of the original. All versions of a Bai folktale, whether in Bai, redacted into Chinese, or translated into English, are valuable, reliable or not, as the appropriations of the intentions of the speaker, writer, redactor, or translator. For Bakhtin, this is what is interesting—the fresh act of staking out private property as one’s own. For Yang Jinwen, I believe, there is a folk element of parody in his tale telling, a rebelling against officialdom, sanctioned literary language and orthodox genre content.

Bai Identity

One final area of dialogism is my sense of Bai chameleon-esque ethnic identity, a reality which Bai themselves might deny, or be unaware. Bai trace their ancestry to the Baiman (“White”) people of the Nanzhao and Dali Kingdoms (7th–13th centuries). Their self names are ambiguous. Often such names include the meaning “white people” (Baizi, Beizi), allegedly because of their fondness for white clothing. (I rather agree with
Professor Alvin Cohen, who suggests that this interpretation is a Han rationalization). The Han name for the Bai which originates in the late Ming Dynasty is "commoners" or "civilian households" (minjia). When I asked a Bai elder from Yunlong what name Bai people in his area used before the Communist era, he told me they simply called themselves "the people" (laobaixing), as opposed to the "officials" (guanjia), perhaps reflecting Bai repression of ethnic identity during that time. Elder Bai I talked with in the town of Zhoucheng spoke to me of hiding their Bai identity when they would visit Kunming, passing themselves off as Han in the pre-Communist days, lest they be taunted. But repression of identity points to identity. In the countryside, I found that Bai people commonly identify themselves in terms of their locality, such as a person from "After the Bridge Village" (Qiaohou Cun) or a "West Mountain" (Xishan) person, rather than as a Bai, laobaixing, or minjia. Often, self identity among the Bai is presented through similarity or contrast to other ethnic groups in Yunnan. A young Bai woman in Kunming told me that, while she cannot speak Bai, she is proud to be Bai, for the Bai are civilized and "clean" (ganjing). Unconsciously, she was identifying with Han and Han stereotyping—the Han commonly see themselves as "clean" and non-Han minorities as "dirty" (buganjing). My peitong's self-image of the Bai, contrasted to other minorities as well as the Han, is one of affability, cleverness, and intelligence. He believes other minorities love to fight, and are quick tempered, while the Bai are characteristically peaceful and calm.

Reflecting the ambiguity, Western scholars have generally either affirmed a distinct Bai ethnicity, or else insisted that the Bai are really Han. My opinion is that such views are not only contradictory, they ignore the dialogue of Bai ethnicity, the way in which a people living so interdependently as the Bai do with the Han, Hui, Naxi, Yi and Tibetans maintain a sense of self. What is fascinating about Bai identity is that the Bai have for centuries lived closely with the Han, as well as other minorities, assimilating and undergoing assimilation. Who they are, ethnically speaking, is a dynamic, fluid, ambivalent reality, continually constituted in dialogue between themselves and others, much like Bakhtin's concept of individual self, noted earlier. There is hybridization but not totalist assimilation, incorporation of Han culture within the Bai, yet the assertion of Bai identity. In Bakhtin's sense of culture, that of the Bai is found not so much internally, within a territory, as along boundaries between Bai, Han, and other minorities which "pass everywhere, through its every aspect . . . , " and whose potential and individuality are best revealed through encounter and dialogue between native self and outsider (Morson and Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin, 1990, pp. 51 & 55). In regard to the chameleon Bai, Bakhtin is enormously
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helpful, enabling us to see changing hues.

Two examples of Bakhtin's beneficial vision come to mind: language and parody. While I have only begun to explore the Bai world, I suspect that, as Bakhtin says of language in general, the Bai language is not unitary. Under the canopy of a national ethnic language (Bai), there may well be a variety of worlds and ideologies, which Bakhtin would hold are stratified into various genres and jargons according to the denotative and expressive intentions of native speakers and professionals, mountain Bai and valley Bai, city folk and peasant, carpenters and Bai intellectuals, female tie-dye cloth makers and marble masons. It would be an exaggeration to suggest we might discover in the Bai language world what Bakhtin finds in Dostoevsky—no single dominant ideology but independent voices and autonomous consciousnesses, heterogeneous materials and various fields of vision, but in the Bai peasant I can locate Dostoevsky’s, a person who lives in several language systems, singing love duets in one (these strictly follow a specific form of rhyme, meter, strophe and antistrophe), talking to their family and telling stories in another (Bai vernacular), and petitioning local authorities in still another (written Chinese) (Dialogical Imagination, pp. 295–96).

Speaking of parody, Bakhtin suggests that laughter and humor are fragments of a unified whole: “I imagine this whole to be something like an immense novel, multi-generic, multi-styled, mercilessly critical, soberly mocking, reflecting in all its fullness the heteroglossia and multiple voices of a given culture, people and epoch.” (The Dialogic Imagination, p. 60) While Bai folk humor is the subject for another essay, I would suggest here that Bakhtin’s view of parody can be fruitfully applied to the Bai folk world. While the Bai language is probably not unitary, Bai folk laughter is, extending across folktale, mountain song, and funeral stele, making fun of Buddhist divinities, Han officials, the ethnic other, and the Bai self. In Bai parody, one finds the timeless simultaneity, coexistence of contradictions and diversity that Bakhtin sees in folk poetics as well as in Dostoevsky.

My experience of the Bai has been an encounter with a distinctive poly-identity culturally marked by features such as dress, music, dance, festivals, local deity worship, locality, folktale, and language. These markers vary according to areas I visited in the Dali Bai Autonomous District—clothing, dialect, and mores differ among valley Bai in towns and villages such as Xizhou, Zhoucheng, Eryuan, and Jianchuan, along the western shore of Lake Erhai and the road to Lijiang, north of Dali. On the basis of a brief three day visit to the remote mountainous area of Xishan, Eryuan County, and from what I have been told by Bai colleagues, I would say that these same cultural markers are distinctly different among mountain Bai, in
many respects not like their valley counterparts. Bai identity is often vehemently expressed, especially by Bai intellectuals engaged in the dissemination and preservation of their culture in the face of modernization and assimilation. Whether any cultural markers are identical to those found among other minorities, or the Han, remains to be demonstrated, but even if they were, that would not deny ethnic identity to the Bai, as the cultural content of ethnicity is frequently interchangeable among ethnic groups, as Werner Sollars remarks (Beyond Ethnicity, p. 28). Cultural markers such as food, dress, and religious rituals are often shared, for example, by different ethnic groups. Given the pressures of modernization, regional variations in cultural practices and dialectical differences among the Bai in the Dali Bai Autonomous District, and years of intermixing among Han and other ethnic minorities, the Bai do not exhibit a uniform ethnic identity. The commercialization of Bai culture through the government’s and the Bai’s promotion of tourism has contributed to the rise of ethnic consciousness among the Bai, no doubt. On grand festival days, such as the Third Month Festival (Sanyue jie) in the spring, myriads of young women dress identically in what is purported to be authentic Bai costume. In fact, women from different villages vary in their apparel; one can identify a Bai woman from a certain village, for instance, by her headdress. What we probably have in public displays of Bai culture is what Richard Handler and J. Linnekin call the invention or reinvention of tradition. That is, private aspects of culture, such as dress, or of events, such as dance, are presented “in contexts utterly different from their prior, unmarked settings,” and thus given a new meaning as “tradition” by tourists, scholars, and, I might add, by the Bai themselves.

In contrast to the Chinese government’s static notion of ethnicity, Bai intellectuals assert not an unchanging identity, but one that is enduring, belonging to a persistent cultural system which has existed over centuries and through differing and sometimes oppositional political regimes, perhaps analogous in the Western mind to Jews, Basques, Welsh, Navajos, and Irish. This persistence and endurance remain to be demonstrated, I believe. Bai ethnic identity, in fact, seems to be in process, rather than persisting or enduring. It develops and declines, and includes election as well as inheritance, what Werner Sollars calls “consent and descent,” a combination of choice through contract, marriage, and assent to law, and of heritage through blood lines, genes, and nature (Sollars, 1986, 4–6; 1989, xiii–xiv). It also disappears. But what is more significant in regard to identity, I believe, is the dialogical self. Among the Bai, static cultural markers such as dress or dance are less important (despite the promotion of such markers for commercial reasons) than what Jonathan Y. Okamura terms “situational ethnicity,” a fluid, variable identity related to social context and an individual’s
self-ascription. The actor is constrained by objective criteria such as the political or economic setting, but also subjectively determines ethnicity by deciding the relevance of certain values to his or her identity. In this dynamic relation between consent and descent which is situational and dialogical, we find the similarities and differences among mountain Bai and valley Bai, women who wear Bai costume and those who do not, countryside elders who speak Bai, and urban youth who cannot.

Conclusion

I find that Bakhtin opens up the study of the Bai for me in ways that I would never have anticipated alone. Without betraying Bakhtin or de Man, I think we do move from poetics to hermeneutics, from intra-linguistic to cross-cultural understanding, for dialogics enables us to see ourselves working in the context of the discourse which unfolds in great time, heightening our awareness of scholarly self within “H” patterned relations, the double consciousness of hybrid or hyphenate storytellers, and the mixture of voices of narrator, peitong companion, official party eavesdropper and foreign guest collector. Instead of judging translation and redaction as deformed language, we see their creative dimensions, and their ability to reveal differences in cultural consciousness. Lastly, the controversial question of Bai identity is resolved by taking it in a fresh direction, that of the dynamic self which continuously reconstitutes its ethnicity in relation to Han majority and minority others.

In the Bai, civilizational dialogics is an ethnic chameleon.

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NOTES


6. See Bakhtin's allusion to "great time" in "REsponse to a Question form the Novy Mir Editorial Staff," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, 1986, pp. 4-5.

7. Lucien Miller, "The Carnival Folk in Yunnan Tales: Parody in Bakhtin and the Bai."


9. In his Introduction to Bakhtin's *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, Michael Holquist notes, pp. xii-xiii, Bakhtin holds that cross-cultural understanding comes through penetration of the other, and subsequent return to the native self perspective, located outside the object in time, space, and culture. Bakhtin says, "A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closeness and one-sidedness of these particular meaning, these cultures. We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself . . ." M. M. Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from the Novy Mir Editorial Staff," in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, p. 7.

10. "When speaking I always take into account the apperceptive background of the addressee's perception of my speech: the extent to which he is familiar with the sit-
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ulation, whether he has special knowledge of the given cultural area of communication, his views and convictions, his prejudices (from my viewpoint), his sympathies and antipathies—because all this will determine his active response understand of my utterance.” M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, pp. 96-97.

11. See Michael Holquist description, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, p. xviii. Bakhtin's superaddressee, says Holquist, may be God, absolute truth, the court of dispassionate human conscience, the people, history, or science, whatever is considered to have absolutely just understanding.

12. Because of the high percentage of Bai speakers in the Jianchuan area, and because the Bai language spoken there is considered the standard dialect, the United Nations has established the standard dialect, the United Nations has established an experimental bi-lingual (Bai-Chinese) education program in the elementary school there. The first Bai-Chinese dictionary is being produced in Jianchuan.

13. By adopting the Bai language, living in Bai territory, and becoming known as a teller of Bai tales.

14. For the concepts of double consciousness, hyphenate writer, and chameleon in ethnic literature, see Werner Sollar's *Beyond Ethnicity*, pp. 243-251.

15. For Bakhtin's notion of the decentralizing tendency of laughter and low genres, see *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 236 & 273-74.


19. For the polyphonic world in dostoevsky’s novels, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, pp. 16-21.


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