

## Several Issues on Hieroglyph of Naxi Ethnic Minority

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### Abstract

Hieroglyph of Naxi ethnic minority is the picture text, which has been so far the only “living hieroglyph”. Naxi Hieroglyph is the general name of Dongba Script, Geba Script Malimasha Script as well as Ruanke Script. Moreover, the creation of Naxi Hieroglyph is closely related to the migration routes of Naxi Geba Script, based on Do ancestors, which corresponds with the dialect areas of Naxi ethnic language, and its creation can date back to 11<sup>th</sup> century. Geba Script, is created when contacting with foreign culture, which carries the characteristics of Chinese and Tibetan writings.

**Key words:** Naxi hieroglyph; Dongba script; Geba script; Geographical factors of creation; Creation time

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### INTRODUCTION

There are four signs for the characteristic of human civilization: script, city, metal pot and large ceremonial-type building. Script is the extension of human memory as well as the crystallization of human wisdom. Therefore, there is epoch-making meaning for human being to create and use scripts. Naxi ethnic minority, one of the 56 nationalities, inhabits in the angle region of Yunnan, Sichuan and Tibet and enjoys very long history as well as colorful culture. Meanwhile, the world-renowned Dongba culture and Naxi ancient

music are created and used by Naxi ethnic minority. In history, Naxi ethnic minority has created two relatively mature scripts: Dongba Script and Geba Script, which are very different from Chinese, Tibetan and English. It is a script reserved with the stage of pictographic text. If the development of human script experiences the process from picture to picture script, then to abstract script, just as the development of Chinese character from Jiagu Script to Li Script, then to simplified Chinese used today. In this way, Dongba Script of Naxi is in the period of note-taking picture and ideographic writing. It should be created before Shang Dynasty from the perspective of the development history of Chinese characters. In history, many pictographic writing has gradually evolved into mature stage of script-sound correspondent relationship, while Dongba Script of Naxi ethnic minority has been retained up to now, with the main characteristic of ideographic pictures, and called the only “living hieroglyph” (Xi, 1966). All the Dongba Scriptures are written by Dongba and Geba characters. Because they are between the picture and text, Fei Xiaotong once said: “Dongba Script is even more ancient than Jiagu Script.” It is judged from the form of character’s development, which demonstrates its value in the study of ancient character. A character without people and place used means a “dead script”. There is large number of characters appeared in history. However, Dongba Script of Naxi ethnic minority is the only character used from ancient time to the present in the world. Therefore, Dongba Script becomes the vital research object of word-formation during the initial period of human development, which carries great value of philology and history research. This paper mainly studies the naming of Dongba Script, explores the creation of Naxi hieroglyph from the perspective of historical geography, and discusses the order of time when Dongba Script and Geba Script have been created.

## 1. IS IT NAXI HIEROGLYPH OR DONGBA SCRIPT?







At present, there are many names in the academia for hieroglyph created by Naxi ethnic minority in different historical periods, such as Naxi Hieroglyph, Dongba Script, Geba Script, Malimasha Script and Ruanke Script. Among them, Naxi Hieroglyph and Dongba Script are most frequently used and their meanings are confused. Dongba Script is called “sə<sup>33</sup> tɛə<sup>55</sup> lv<sup>33</sup> tɛə<sup>55</sup>”, signifying marks by stone and wood. In the original meaning of Naxi language, “sə<sup>33</sup>” means wood, “lv<sup>33</sup>” is wood, and “tɛə<sup>55</sup>” is used as a verb, meaning marking, when it is used as noun, it means the mark. In general, the Dongba Script means the scripts marked on stone and wood instead of “copying alone the objects of stone and wood”, which emphasizes the carrier of script rather than content. Wooden plaque picture in Dongba worship ritual is considered as the earliest hieroglyph, which corresponds with “sə<sup>33</sup> tɛə<sup>55</sup>”. What needs to mention is that there is no fixed name. Dongba Script and Naxi Hieroglyph are alternative use in the study and works of Naxi research. The paper “*Scientific Naming of Dongba Script*” (Deng, 2010) by Deng Zhangying is the major research of the naming of Dongba Script, and finally it is put forward that the name of Dongba Script is more in line with the principle of scientific naming. From my viewpoint, both Dongba Script and Naxi Hieroglyph are the names of script created by Naxi ancestors, and there is no distinction between them. However, from the perspectives of naming habit of ethnic language and the representation of ethnic characteristic, Naxi Hieroglyph is a general name for all the languages once appeared in Naxi ethnic region, and Dongba Script refers to the pictures or pictograms specifically used by Dongba and among civil people, which becomes the main script in Naxi ethnic region. It originates from the ritual activities of Dongba Religion, while widely used among the people, which are beyond the range of religion. In this way, it is not practical to generalize the hieroglyph by Dongba Script. There are varieties of hieroglyphs in Naxi ethnic region, such as Dongba Script, Geba Script, Malimasha Script, Ruanke Script and so on, which enjoys close relationship one another. And most words of these scripts can be used same, while their creation are independent. There is binary relationship among them, which can not be over generalized.

According to what I’ve mentioned above, the naming of “Naxi Hieroglyph” is more appropriate.

## 2. RESEARCH ON GEOGRAPHICAL FACTORS OF THE CREATION OF NAXI HIEROGLYPH

When Naxi Hieroglyph was created is neither specifically recorded in Chinese literature and document, nor in

Dongba Script. And there are few archaeological finds of hieroglyphs. Xu Zhongshu thinks that there are some common grounds among Ba script of ancient Sichuan, Mexie script and Chinese character. They might be from the same origin, but the separation of these branches should occur before Shang Dynasty (Xu, 1980, p.47). He Fayuan also considers that “the creation of hieroglyph should occur when Naxi ancestors lived from animal husbandry to farming period, that is before the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.” (He, 1986, p.280) The creation of a character is the outcome of the development of social politics as well as economics, which requires certain historical conditions and social foundation. Viewed from the social and historical development of Naxi ethnic minority, primitive wizard religion in Naxi society has become Dongba Religion under the influence of Ben Religion at the beginning of 7<sup>th</sup> century. There are full-time priests who are responsible for collecting folk pictures and scripts for a simple event-noting, divination, telecommunication and so on. And gradually it is formed relatively fixed hieroglyph. Therefore, Naxi Hieroglyph should be created in the early Tang Dynasty, not after 11<sup>th</sup> century of Beisong Dynasty.

Under what condition or circumstance did Naxi ancestor create hieroglyph? In the book *Research On Birthplace of Hieroglyph of Mexie Ethnic Minority* (Li, 1984, p.31), Li Lincan thinks that the word structure of “south” and “north” showing the direction. “North”, pronounced “ho<sup>33</sup> ku<sup>33</sup> lo<sup>21</sup>”, with the hieroglyph “”, means valley with deep water signifying the source of water. “South”, pronounced “i<sup>33</sup> tsu<sup>33</sup> mu<sup>21</sup>”, with the hieroglyph “”, means the downstream of river. Then the two words combined to form the hieroglyph of “water” “”. In this way, the northern part is the source, and the end is the southern part, which shows the geographical environment of Naxi Hieroglyph should be near the river with north-south direction. Combined with the development history of Naxi ethnic minority, the geographical environment of Naxi Hieroglyph should locate along Wuliang River instead of Jinsha River. In addition, it is evident that Naxi Hieroglyph is firstly created along Wuliang River from the perspectives of hieroglyphs of “house” “”, “water” “” and “mountain” “”. Generally speaking, the argument by Li Lincan is reasonable in some extend, while the argument is not so solid to infer upon several hieroglyphs, and the demonstration is in assumption.

The unity of migration route and worship route in Naxi Dongba Script is a vital basis for the geographical environment of Naxi Hieroglyph. Naxi ancestors have migrated from north to south, and scattered around Wuliang River. Then Naxi ancestors have divided in Shuluo which lies in the middle part of Wuliang River. One group has migrated along the mountainous range southeastward, and becomes the ancestors of Naxi ethnic minority currently living in Muli, Yanyuan and Ninglang,

the other group has migrated along the river southward or southwestward, and scattered in the shape of “H” area in the middle part of Jinsha River. In addition, hieroglyph appeared in this area. Worship routes of two groups meet in Shuluo of Wuliang River, which is a memorable place name of great value. The group migrating southeastward have not created hieroglyph and Dongba worship rituals are completed by Daba. The content is rare, which is identical with Dongba Script in the West. It can be testified in Dongba Script of *Heaven Worship-Greeting Migrated Ancestors*. There are four branches of Su, You, Mei and He when Naxi ethnic minority has developed after the Gaolequ period. The branches of Su and You have migrated to the western part of Jinsha River together, and resided in Lijiang area, meanwhile the branches of Mei and He have migrated eastward, and resided around Muli, Yanyuan and Ninglang. The description in Dongba Script is basically credible (He, 2010, p.138).

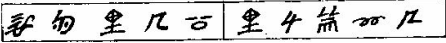


There is no script of Naxi ethnic minority in the eastern part. It is said that there was script of eastern Naxi, while the pigskin and cowhide on which Dongba Scripts were written when there was famine. In this way, scripts disappeared.

During the period of Republic of China, Li Lincan has drawn *Map of Geographical Distribution and Migration Route of Mexie Script* (Li, 1984, p.38) on the basis of field work, which is very convincing. However, the geographical distribution and migration route of hieroglyph are not so neat. The chart is idealized, but the reality is more complicated. In the town of Tacheng in Weixi, and around Lapu River, there is a branch of Naxi ethnic minority self-called “Malimasha”, which is translated into “Mulimosuo”, showing this branch is migrated from Muli and Yanyuan. Their language belongs to the eastern part, while text to Dongba Script. “Malimasha Script originates from Dongba Script (pronounced in Naxi language ‘Naxisijiu’), pronounced in Naxi language, but different from Dongba Script. After learning from Dongba Script, Malimasha people have created some words by themselves.” (Yang, 2012) The language of “Ruanke people” (one branch of Naxi ethnic minority) belongs to eastern dialect area, and they migrate from Muli, Yanyuan and Yongning, and scatter in Eya of Muli, Luoji, Dongba, Baidi of Zhongdian (Guo, 1999, p.524). Ruanke Script is the same as Dongba Script, but there are some special Ruanke words, which are not identified source. In the eastern dialect area, there are several branches who believe in Dongba Religion and use Naxi Hieroglyph. This branch has gradually migrated from the east of Lijiang since Ming Dynasty, for example, the village of Cobbler in Yongning has formed with the development of commerce and villagers are mainly from Suhe Village of Lijiang from the later period of Qing Dynasty to Republic of China. Moreover, Dazhu Villiage of Yanyuan has developed in Ming Dynasty, the villagers believe in Dongba Religion and use Dongba Script, there are amounts of Dongba Scripts remaining.

According to what mentioned above, there is correspondent relationship between eastern and western dialect areas of Naxi ethnic minority and the use of Naxi Hieroglyph, while there is no obvious distinction. From the period of Ming Dynasty to Republic of China, various branches of Naxi ethnic minority have migrated, inhabiting dispersedly. Villagers from eastern dialect area believe in Daba Religion, and mainly chant scripts, there are a few picture texts used for divining. However, villagers from western part believe in Dongba Religion, and there are a lot of Dongba Scripts. In addition, Malimasha Script and Ruanke Script which are created to loan from Naxi Hieroglyph appear in the western dialect area.

### 3. DISCUSSION ON CREATION OF DONGBA SCRIPT AND GEBAS SCRIPT

Geba Script is the phonogram in Naxi Hieroglyph. The word “Geba” means “disciple”, as well as “shouting”. However, the use of Geba Script is only confined in Lijiang and Weixi. Because Geba Script has developed from the stage of picture to the correspondence of word and pronunciation, and there is picture text appeared first then word with pronunciation according to the word-making principle of all nationalities, Geba Script should be created after Dongba Script. When has Geba Script been created? Some scholar thinks that was created during the period of Song and Yuan Dynasty. The legend of “Moubaazhong” in *Official Profile Of Mu’s Family* says, “he could recognize words without learning, and has read various books. Then he has created Benfang Script.” (Zhang, 2001, p.9) There is a discussion on Whether Benfang Script is Geba Script or Dongba Script. Yu Suisheng thinks it is Chinese character (Yu, 2003). There is “Maicong Ink” on the stony rock in Baisha. Moreover, chieftain Mu Gong and Mu Gao of Ming Dynasty have inscribed with verses: “The characters in the rock is immortal, and write temporarily because of being drunk”, “The verses in the rock can be seen clearly, and the talent made poems at the age of seven”. These are regarded to judge the creation time of Dongba Script or Geba Script, which I disagree. In 1934, Fang Guoyu found Geba Script on cliff in Shangqiaotou of Lijiang. It was inscribed by Geba Script, Tibetan and Chinese. Geba Script is as follows: “”, meaning making bridge to wish the emperor long live on 14<sup>th</sup>, April, Wanli forty-seven years (Fang, 2005). There is no doubt that Geba Script was used during the emperor of Wanli in Ming Dynasty, therefore it must be created before the period of Wanli Emperor. The creation of Geba Script is confined to the western area where Dongba Script is popular. What’s more, Geba Script is created contacting with a foreign culture, which is the geographical mechanism of Geba Script.

There was a hot discussion on whether Dongba Script or Geba Script was created first during the period of Republic of China. Lock thinks sound-words (Geba Script) is created earlier than form-words (Dongba Script). In *Preliminary Study of Mexie Hieroglyph*, Hongyuo puts forward “the parallel between sound-word and form-word”. In *Discussion With Dr. Lock’s About Mexie Hieroglyph*, Li Lincan considers that form-word is earlier than sound-word from six aspects, that is Dongba Script is earlier than Geba Script, which is very convincing. In *History of Naxi Ethnic Minority*, Guo Dalie thinks that Naxi Hieroglyph is created around 7<sup>th</sup> century after Tang Dynasty, there is script written by hieroglyph, and Geba Script with Naxi pronunciation appears at the beginning of 13<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, there is cliff inscribed with Geba Script at the beginning of 17<sup>th</sup> century (Guo, 1999). Most words of Geba Script originate from Dongba Script. On one hand, some parts of the word are added or lessened to form new words, on the other hand, some words are loaned from sounds and forms of Chinese character, which shows Geba Script is created on the basis of Chinese character. There have been Han immigrants in Nanshan, Judian, Ludian Of Lijiang and Weixi since Ming Dynasty, especially after chieftains surrendering to central government, there are a lot of Han people along Jinsha River and mountainous range. After contacting Chinese character, Dongba loans several words from Chinese characters when creating Geba Script. Furthermore, from the perspective of Tibetan words, Geba Script is familiar with Tibet in form and sound of character; therefore the creation of Geba Script is influenced by Tibet. In my opinion, the conclusion of cultural interaction is not the conquering, but cultural infiltration instead. So Geba Script is created under the influence of both Tibetan and Chinese. There is a good example in “God-welcoming Script”:  (Chinese version: Cutting the bamboo in the deep valley, and make the yellow basketry),  (Chinese version: putting it near the wall, and deposit the mud),  (Chinese version: The winter wind does not blow). Therefore, it is difficult to judge the original meaning from the character form of Geba Script, it is almost the character of alphabetic writing. Moreover, the character of Geba script is not fixed, which differs according to varied people and places. Compared with

Dongba Script, it is more difficult to interpret because the pronunciation is marked with tone, and the same character enjoys different meanings.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, there are various hieroglyphs created by Naxi ethnic minority in the historical period, so Naxi Hieroglyph is a suitable name to generalize them. However, Dongba Script is only a part of Naxi Hieroglyph, so it is not suitable to summarize all the hieroglyphs of Naxi ethnic minority by it. The time of Naxi Hieroglyph’s creation corresponds to social historical conditions and social foundations of Naxi ethnic minority. It has become before the 11<sup>th</sup> century, with germination in the 7<sup>th</sup> century of early Tang Dynasty. The creation of Naxi Hieroglyph is closely related to activities of Naxi ancestors and their closed geographical environment. Geba Script, created by contacting with foreign culture, carries obvious features of Chinese and Tibetan writing.

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