

七十

In the old town of Lijiang
the streets were confusing
at night on Square Street
we found dancers amusing
in the middle of town
ran a clear crystal stream
where paper boats carried
our hopes and our dreams



Chapter 70– Jade-Dragon-Snow Mountain and the Naxi Minority

The province of Yunnan has it all. Of the 55 recognized minorities in China, 25 of them can be found in Yunnan. The city of Jinghong in southeastern Yunnan makes you wonder if you might be in Burma. The capital, Kunming, located on the banks of Dianchi Lake (滇池 Diānchí) has a climate similar to San Francisco. The further north one travels from Lijiang into the foothills of the Hengduan Mountains (横断山脉 Héngduàn Shānmài), the more Yunnan seems to morph into Tibet.



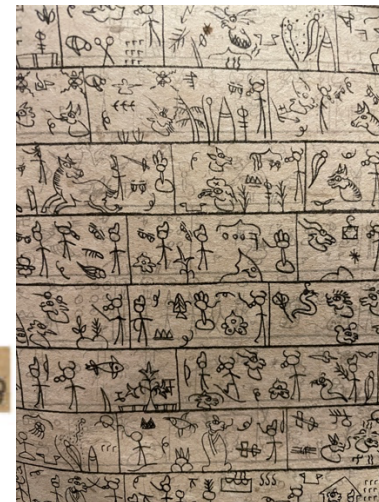
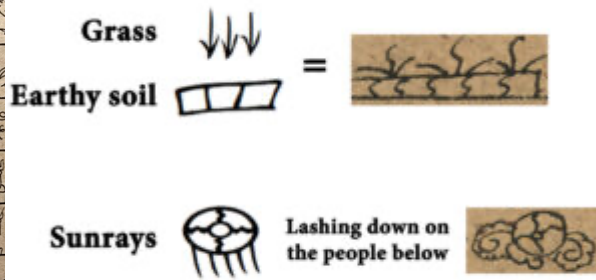
It was not long after a New York Times article, [In China, Rock's Kingdom](#) by Bruce Chatwin, in 1986, that Lijiang became a 'must visit' place for backpackers with their sights on China. A slight segue off of the "Hippie Trail" that already had backpackers camping out in Yangshuo and Dalian, Lijiang had some even cooler draws. First off was the town itself . . . well the old town that is. The old part of Lijiang is a maze and amazing. Lanes and alleys broke out in funny angles. There was a crystal clear canal running through the middle of the town where people would float paper boats with candles and wishes. The backpacker hotels were usually two story rustic wooden houses surrounded by small stores selling clothes, curios, tea, ice cream, and other "necessities." In the middle of old town was Square Street where dancers, singers, and other performers entertained at night. But that was then, and now is now. Like so many "destination" spots, Lijiang is no longer 'off the beaten path.'

Forty kilometres due north of Lijiang is the 18,360 foot high Jade Dragon Snow Mountain 玉龙雪山 Yùlóng Xuěshān. The 300,000 納西族 Nàxī people who live near Lijiang today know it as Mt. Satseto. The area at the base of the mountain looks very different now than it did when the botanist and explorer Joseph Rock went there to live in the 20's, 30's, and 40's. At the foot of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain is a visitor center where stores sell containers of oxygen for the high elevation, and where I bought a fine cup of Hump coffee in the early 2000's. From the visitor center at the base of the mountain, one can board a cableway to a viewing platform nearly 15,000 feet in elevation.

It was outside the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain visitor center that in 2006, film director Zhang Yimou first presented a spectacular outdoor extravaganza called "Impression Lijiang," which employed more than 500 Naxi, Bai, and Yi people. The performance takes its audience along the ancient Tea Horse Road, before introducing you to the lives and the cultures of the people who inhabit the amazing region around Lijiang. There are three shows a day (during peak season) filled with singing, dancing, drumming , and storytelling – and all in beautiful local costumes - with the majestic Jade Dragon Snow Mountain as the back drop. Perhaps best known for his ground breaking movies such as Red Sorghum (1987), Raise the Red Lantern (1991), and Hero (2002), "Impressions Lijiang" is one of seven live shows that Zhang Yimou has created scattered throughout China.



Joseph Rock was fascinated by the Naxi minority people whose language is called Dongba and is the only living pictographic script. Dongba's main focus has always been religious. Dongba culture appreciates and celebrates the relationship between people, nature, and the spiritual world and is related to the Tibetan Bon religion. The Naxi people have their own music and their own distinct spoken language and oral literature. Through Rock's relationship with Naxi shamans, he was able to translate and interpret a huge number of Dongba scrolls and relics. Rock compiled eighteen notebooks full of Dongba script and translations, and in 1944, he placed his ready-for-publication manuscripts and many items he had collected from his life in China on a ship so they would be safe in America. Unfortunately, the ship was torpedoed by the Japanese in the Arabian Sea, so his work was lost. After a brief and miserable stay in the USA, Rock returned to China and was able to resurrect much of his research and ultimately published The Ancient Na-Khi Kingdom of Southwest China with Harvard University Press in 1947. Joseph Rock finally left China in 1949 and died in Honolulu in 1962 where he had continued his work on a dictionary of the Naxi Dongba script and resumed his studies of Hawaiian flora. His Naxi-English Dictionary Encyclopaedia, both a dictionary of the Dongba script and an encyclopaedia of Naxi culture, was published in 1963.



Ezra Pound was fascinated with Joseph Rock's work and wrote in his final section of *The Cantos*, known as Drafts and Fragments: "And over Li Chiang, the snow range is turquoise – Rock's world that he saved us for memory – a thin trace in high air" Pound loved how Rock described "the whispering language of the Na-Khi" as "a talk made up of wind noise which the Na-Khi huntsmen developed so that their speech would not disturb the game." *from Pound's Cantos Declassified by Philip Furia*