

Making as Praxis? Making in Action?
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Narrations, Ritual Making and the Ethnography of Development Among Hmub in Eastern Yun-Gui Plateau

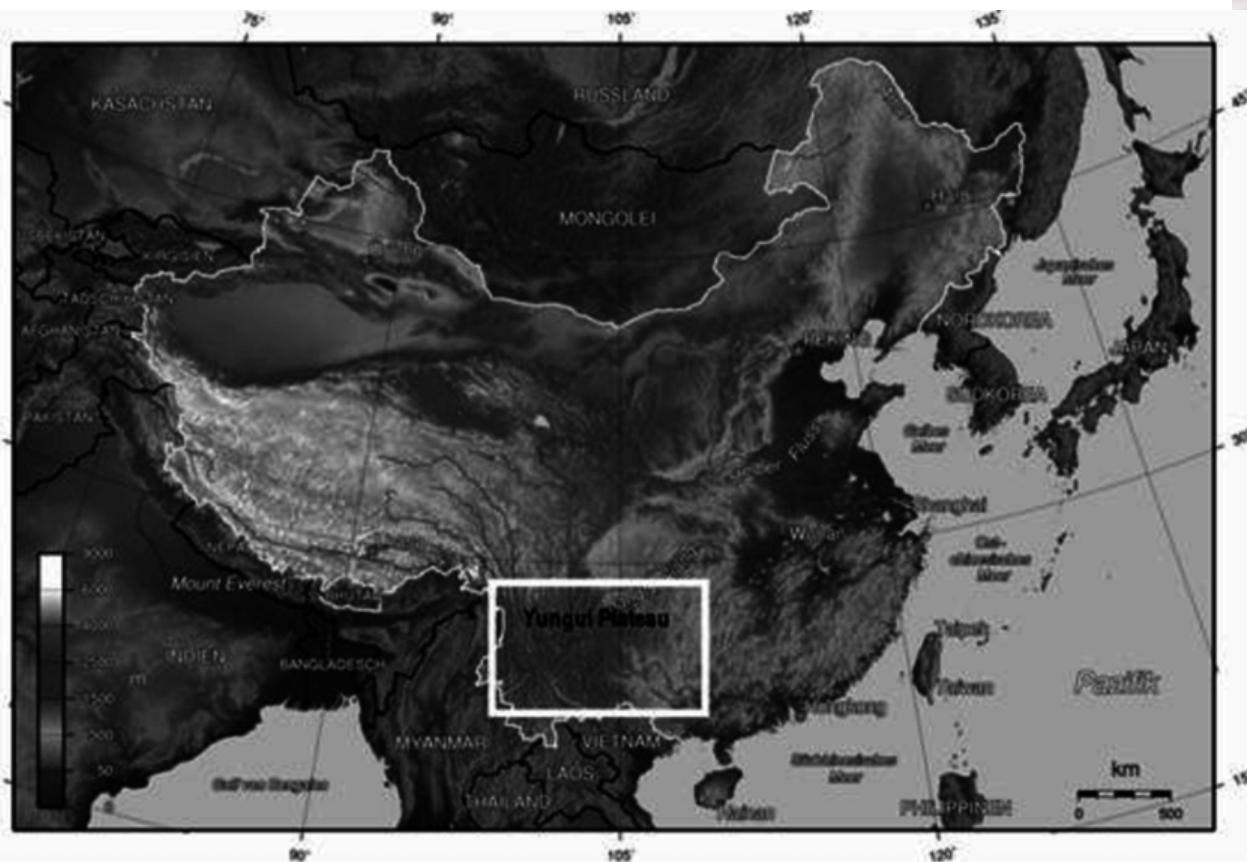
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Return to the Field

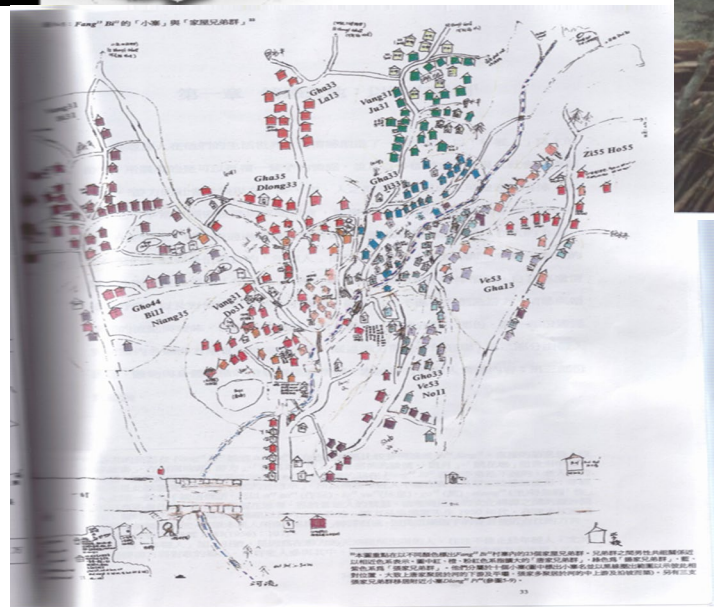
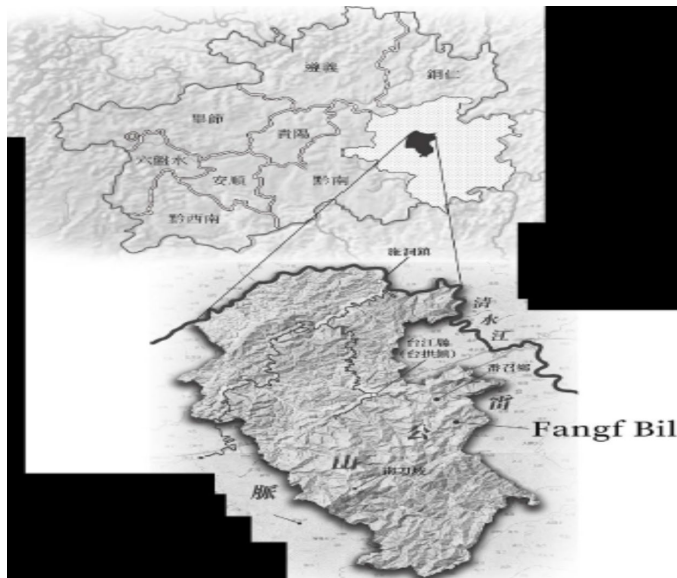
- ▶ ...When greeting my old friends and the elders of the village, all were wondering about my absence during the buffalo slaughtering ritual in the eleventh month of the lunar calendar in 2002. They all assumed I would have come back to watch the lively ritual.
- ▶ Brother-in-law Zhang, who ran a grocery store at the entrance of the village, said, “*maib yut* (“sister-in-law” in *Hmub*, a prescriptive kinship terminology, here means me),
- ▶ it was a pity that you did not see the buffalo slaughtering ritual.”
- ▶ He tried to point out there were so many cars from outside that they cramped from one end of the road to another end.

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- ▶ Uncle Tang, with his serenity, also told me what happened. “Journalists from Beijing and Guiyang TV came to our feast ritual. There were also a lot of foreigners. **I supposed that people of all nations came to our feast ritual this time.**”
 - ▶ What they said conveyed not only the popularity of their ritual for people outside the *Hmub* villages, but also expressed their enthusiasm and excitement for such a spectacular event.



Village Fangf Bil in Eastern Yun-Gui Plateau

- Village Fangf Bil is a Hmub (Miao/Hmong) village located in this area with a population of around 1,500.
- The village has **twenty-six patrilineal descent groups** and the two dominant Han-surname groups, Zhang and Tang, **who practice small-scale cross-cousin marriage**.
- Village Fangf Bil is located on the high slopes of the Leigongshan Mountains in Taijiang County, and its exposure to the outside world has come relatively late due to its remoteness.





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- ▶ The main purpose of the visit in 2003 was to study the **revival of a local religious ritual** that had been interrupted for half a century since 1950.
 - ▶ With patrilineage as the smallest representation during worship, **the Fangf Bil Hmub villagers** were able to establish kinship relations with neighboring villages in the course of the ritual.

Nenk Jet Niuf – the feast ritual to worship the ancestors

- ▶ The records of the feast ritual, both oral and literary, were discovered in the early literature and folk songs circulating in eastern Guizhou. Nonetheless, systematic records that were my main reference in studying the ancestral rituals of contemporary *Hmub* people did not appear until the 1950s.
- ▶ Eastern Guizhou is located on the eastern side of Yun-Gui Plateau, where most *Hmub* people reside in South West China. The *Hmub* people in this area have kept the custom of regular buffalo slaughtering for ancestor worship until the 1950s.

- ▶ The number of participants and offerings for sacrifice and consumption were **impressive**:
- ▶ Over ten strong male water buffaloes that had been offered to worship the ancestors illustrate well the dimension of **the feast ritual** called “*nenk jangt niuf*” or “*nenk jet niuf*” by the Hmub.





Main Activities in the Feast Ritual during 2000-2003 (in Lunar Calendar)

Month	2 nd	1 st	5 th - 6 th	5 th – 6 th	10 th	11 th	10 th	11 th
Year	2000	2001	2001	2002	2002	2002	2003	2003
Year of Ancestor - Worshiping	1	2	3			4		
Rites of Ancestor - worshiping	Rising the Drums	Buffalo-purchasing ↓ Buffalo-fighting	Buffalo- fighting ↓ Buffalo-slaughtering ↓ Worshipping the horns of the buffalos ↓ Having beef ↓ Carrying the ancestors' clothes on the back to worship them on the levee or alluvium			Pig-slaughtering (after the buffalo-slaughtering) ↓ Carrying the drums back to the Mountains		
Main Sacrifice	Buffalos						Pigs	

Social Grouping & Kinship Foundation

- ▶ According to tradition, the feast ritual in Fangf Bil during 2000 to 2003 was an **intra-village** as well as an **inter-village** activity in the sense of **social grouping**.
- ▶ The Yang and Tang family in Fangf Bil and the Tang, Zhang, and Wan family in Eb Diuf Nel shared a pair of drums (one male and one female).
- ▶ The Zhang and Wan family in Fangf Bil shared a pair of drums as well. People in Fangf Bil and Eb Diuf Nel chose the same number of head persons and **conducted buffalo slaughtering** with the villages of Eb Diuf Jes, Eb Hlot, and Xid Dent, which also had the feast ritual with Fangf Bil, even though they were not sharing the same pair of drums.
- ▶ The **kinship foundation** allowed these old customs.

Narrating the Feast Ritual

- ▶ Nonetheless, what I would like to deal with in this paper is *how the individuals in a Hmub village narrated a traditional event.*
- ▶ I would like to describe four dimensions comprising: *who* was narrating this event, *what* was the narrator's point of view, *why* was the feast ritual displayed in these ways, and did the ways of display represent the relation between the *Hmub* people in eastern Guizhou society and the *contemporary situation in modern China.*
- ▶ *The 1950 documents eluded these issues.*

Party Secretary Yang & Mayor Tang

- ▶ Just like most men in their fifties or sixties in Fangf Bil, had heard little about the feast ritual.
- ▶ They have received their primary and middle education in the village.
- ▶ They also had the experiences of being employed in laborious works, or engaged in performing folk dances in other places such as the Taijang County Township, Kaili, Guiyang or some big cities of other provinces, e.g. Kunmin, Beijing, or Shenzheng.

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- ▶ Their life in the outside world came to an end when they stepped into middle age while their eldest children had grown up.
 - ▶ They then came back to Fangf Bil and helped out on the farms for the rest of their lives.

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- ▶ P. S. Yang and Mayor Tang both were **the highest administrative leaders of the village** in addition to their long term working experiences outside the province.
 - ▶ P. S. Yang was responsible for the personnel organization of the ritual, and, along with Mayor Tang, contacted and dealt with other villages,
 - ▶ while the Senior Village Elders (*Lil Laut*) and ritual specialists took charge of the contents of the cultural renewal feast ritual.

Making Traditions, Modernities and Development in the Narrations

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- ▶ *The Village Elders, who knew the traditions well, were responsible for the revival and stressed this time that “old customs have to be followed”.*
 - ▶ *This was an “Ancestor-Worship Day” in accordance to the old customs. The elders added that there were no literal records in the past; therefore details of organizing the feast ritual were taken from recollections of the four Village Elders.*

-P S Yang 2003

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- ▶ *A feast ritual is not mainly for the ghat (consanguine) and khait (affine) of the village. It is also for people outside our village.*
 - ▶ *In this feast ritual, we invited a lot of journalists to keep detailed records and take photos. But they can only work on a segment of the event. To make a complete record, they would have to stay here for three years.*
 - ▶ **-P S Yang 2003**

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- ▶ *The feast ritual itself was under the charge of those village elders. The responsibilities of administrative leaders like us were to keep good order, negotiate with the media, and propagate the culture of Fangf Bil to the global market.*
 - ▶ *People from Hong Kong and other countries also came to the ritual. Some came for tourism and some for the ethnological study of the minority cultures. We charged by the rules that were accepted by the county government, and placed a “fee box” at one end of the bridge.*

-Mayor Tang 2003

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- ▶ *In the evening, there was a campfire party. People danced in circles. The aim was “to make foreigners feel that this is an ethnic village.” There were more foreigners than usual, and we made the event bigger. A lot of people joined the performance and sang loudly. They felt excited.*

-Mayor Tang 2003

Arjun Appadurai (1996)

- ▶ says that the **migration** of people and the imagination from the distribution and reception of **mass electronic media** contribute to people's **imagination** on being in neighborhoods.
- ▶ People transcend the limitation of time and space, sharing the feelings of modernity together.
- ▶ However, Appadurai also stresses that **indigenous cultures** gain their **autonomy** with myriads of **practices** on **local subjects**.

Louisa Schein (1999)

- ▶ In her study of Hmub people in eastern Guizhou and other areas,
- ▶ Louisa Schein (1999), indicates that
- ▶ myriad **practices** intertwining and **juxtaposing tradition and modernity** are significant in the realization and **construction** of contemporary **identities** of the Hmub people.

Linguistic Turn

- ▶ In this essay, I discuss the **linguistic actions**, including the **styles, themes, and vocabularies of the narrations**
- ▶ looking at how each unique action **marks** modernities **connecting** and **juxtaposing** traditions and modern life to one another.

Making Traditions as Values

- ▶ I am using the first and second part of P. S. Yang's narration to exemplify the contrast.
- ▶ In the first part of the narration, the values of organizing the feast ritual are in the pursuit, reviving and recording of old customs and traditions.
- ▶ Obvious markers in the narration lie in the **combination of verbs and objects** like “old customs have to be followed,” “knew the traditions well,” “in accordance to the old customs.”

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- ▶ The expression “the old customs” overlaps with the expression “traditions” creating an impression that **amplifies** the linguistic effect of three parallel phrases:
 - ▶ It proceeds from (a) “The **elders** who knew the traditions well were **responsible** for the revival” to (b) “**old customs** have to be **followed**” and further develops into (c) this was an “Ancestor-Worship Day” in accordance to the **old customs**.

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- ▶ The displays of language are like dancing tango as traditions and modernities are in juxtaposition.
 - ▶ There is cooperation and interaction between them, creating certain flowing processes.
 - ▶ In other words, what lies between traditions and modernities does not reflect a power relation that exists between the dominant and subordinated culture.

Making Modernities Surpassing Traditions

- ▶ The **style** of the narration by Mayor Tang is distinct from P. S. Yang. We can detect strong effects of **exaggeration** in his use of language.
- ▶ In his thinking, “**modernities surpassing traditions**” is noticeable.
- ▶ He **used** grand and ornate **words** to describe the **careful planning** in bringing the Fangf Bil feast ritual to the outside world.

Making the Strategy of Performance

- ▶ Mayor Tang, in the third part of his narration, remarked that **the strategy of performance** was not only **manipulating** traditions.
- ▶ It **created** an experience that **comprises fictitious Hmub romance, modern, and spiritual atmosphere in the “Hmub” time and space.**

Conscious Agents

- ▶ Besides narrating about the relation of traditions and modernities, the *Hmub* local elites also talk about **the value of cultural displays** behind the feast ritual.
- ▶ P.S. Yang and Mayor Tang, both as contemporary political officials of the village, reveal that the discourse of display can **either be *the action of display and the contents itself*, or *valuation imposing upon the action of display*.**

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- ▶ Although the feast ritual, a traditional event in essence, has been exposed to the outside within national and international contexts, the local elites in the *Hmub* village are able to **maintain local subjectivity and act as agents**, in this case describing the displays of the feast ritual.
 - ▶ I think it can be interpreted as the way ***Hmub* people settle themselves and their culture in the contemporary world.**

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- ▶ The feast ritual is not only an event on reviving a traditional culture.
 - ▶ It is about **the cultural display of performances heightened by external resources and propagated through mass media, with much tourist and academic interest.**
 - ▶ The result is the formation of a **high self-esteem** and **ambitious discourse about the future**-- *People from the outside world are looking at us.*

Gender and Minority Rule?

- ▶ *Miao male elites not only facilitated Han consumption of their culture as embodied by their women, but they also engaged in a kind of ritualized objectification in which they themselves partook of staging of their own “traditions.”*
- ▶ *This practice was especially common among those Miao who had left the countryside for urban vocations and, living among the majority, separated in space from their home villages, had begun to cultivate a romantic nostalgia for their forgotten culture.*

-Schein 2000 Minority Rule

- ▶ *The practices of Miao men (and a few elite women) indicated that there were two increasingly differentiated modalities by which Miao engaged their traditions in the late twentieth century.*
- ▶ *One – usually assigned to women – involved the highly performative process of assuming characteristic roles and appearances to enact Miao culture through cloth, song, hair, and demeanor.*
- ▶ *The counter part of this mode was activated through longing and through consumption. Miao men who partook of the native woman were not renouncing their cultural identity but recasting it as a form as subjectivity that remembered tradition fondly, took pleasure in gazing upon it, but did not engage in it directly.*
- ▶ *-Schein 2000 Minority Rule*

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- ▶ This essay is not about Miao modernities analyzed as **alienated, feminine, and deviant new experiences** from traditional Miao cultures, nor is it about subjects of nostalgia written by Miao urban elites in earlier literatures.
 - ▶ The **crux** is about how some Hmub (Miao) elites in Fangf Bil, who are active in their local village, narrate about their participation on the reviving of a ritual culture.

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- ▶ Based on **linguistic materials**, there is indication that the *Hmub* males in these villages are not gazers of their traditional Hmub culture.
 - ▶ They are **active narrators** or, from the aspect of linguistic actions, we may say that these local elites are active actors as well.

Concluding Remarks

- ▶ This paper aims to explore how the indigenization of modernity and development was experienced and made through the action of speaking by the Hmub local elites.
- ▶ They have been rural immigrants and now serve as local political leaders in an extensive cultural renewal feast ritual (lasting four years) at an upland village in eastern Guizhou.

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- ▶ Discarding the Han Chinese's discourse of otherness that tended to emphasize the feminine image of the peripheries and minorities,
 - ▶ this paper shows that throughout this indigenization act, the local elites worked actively as the main channels in communication, passing down and re-learning the languages and knowledge of this feast ritual.
 - ▶ By using specific vocabulary and phrases, they made the dialectical relationship among tradition, development and modernity.

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- ▶ The indigenization of development and modernity displayed through their voicing is the result of a creative linkage of traditional perspectives, ethnography of development and modern reality, presented to the outside world by means of cultural exhibitions and ritual making.

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- ▶ In the context of this paper, I specify the notion of modernity is not just the penetration of the government or of capitalist modes of exchange, but also the *Hmub* villagers' imagination, recombination and reconstitution of the past and the present, the local and the global.

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- ▶ The ritual demonstrated that peripheral groups in China have experienced radical and profound social changes.
 - ▶ However, it does not mean that the vision and experience of modernity breaches traditional village culture encroaching the space of everyday life.
 - ▶ Instead, the local *Hmub* elites have pushed the integration, not alienation, of their culture within modernity.

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- ▶ Elements of modern human society and ideas are incorporated in the space, surroundings, rituals and daily lives in a Hmub village.
 - ▶ I demonstrate not only the cultural identity of contemporary Hmub, but also their aspirations in a modern sense.

Development and the Making of Modernity: The Uneasy Relationships

- ▶ David Lewis 2005-
- ▶ “Since the emergence of the term in its current usage after the Second World War, **the concept of development** went on to become one of the dominant ideas of the twentieth century, **embodying a set of aspirations and techniques** aimed at bringing about positive change or progress in Africa, Asia, Latin America and other areas of the world.

- ▶ Development brings with it a set of confusing, shifting terminologies and has been prone to rapidly changing fashions.
- ▶ The popular demarcation of 'First World' (Western capitalist), 'Second World' (Soviet, Eastern Bloc and other socialist areas) and 'Third World' (the rest) became common during the Cold War.
- ▶ More recently, the still common distinction between a wealthy developed 'North' and a poor, less developed 'South' has its origins in the UN sponsored Brandt Commission report of 1980.

- ▶ The policy language of ‘basic needs’ in the 1970s has shifted to new paradigms of ‘sustainable development’ in the 1990s, alongside more recent attention to ‘building civil society’ and ‘good governance’.
- ▶ The language of development, as well as its practices, has changed over time as the global context has also shifted, indicating a growing sophistication in its understanding of problems of poverty as well as perhaps a lack of confidence in some of the basic assumptions of the ‘developers’” (Lewis 2005 1-2).

Arturo Escobar 1995-

- ▶ “Escobar’s (1995) study traces the ways in which development as an idea has constructed and framed the concept of the ‘Third World’ as a location which is defined and acted upon by the West, and he documents and advocates resistance to its onslaught.
- ▶ This book reflected increasing attention among anthropologists to the fact that development exists beyond the configuration of agencies and individuals attempting to implement change, and has become one of the dominant ideas of the post-War era.
- ▶ As such, it constitutes a social phenomenon that affects not just livelihoods and living standards, but also the ways in which we see the world.

Arturo Escobar 1995-

- ▶ Escobar's conclusion, in line with the **post-development view**,
- ▶ is that the idea of development is itself degraded and outmoded and that only **the rise of new local, identity-based social movements**
- ▶ that **directly challenge the orthodoxies of development** offer hope for a new paradigm within a **'post-development' future'** (Escobar 1995; Lewis 2005: 9).

Thank you so much for your attention.
