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Transformative and Transformed: The Changing Meaning of the Magic Bread in the Wutu Festival of Nianduhu Village, Rebgong, China

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Abstract: This article examines the influence of local government on the folk rituals of Rebgong in China's Amdo Tibetan region, by highlighting the example of Wutu, a tiger festival held in one Tu minority village. In particular, it encapsulates the impact of local government intervention through the changed meaning of the "magic" bread in the ritual. Originally, the dough was rubbed on sick parts of the villagers' bodies, and the bread was subsequently removed from the village by the Wutu performers as a medium for the elimination of sickness. In recent years, however, the bread has become one of the important positive symbols of the festival, and, during one dance performance in the 2018 ceremony, was actively promoted for consumption as "healthy for old people and good for healing diseases!" This intervention on the materiality at the heart of the festival has influenced its meaning away from that of a negative shamanic rite concerned with the expulsion of evil towards a more positivist celebration of China's minority ethnic cultural heritage.

Keywords: China; Amdo; Rebgong; Tu; Tibetan Buddhism; folk religion; materiality; Wutu; Glu rol; Intangible Cultural Heritage

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, scholars have documented the post-Mao revival of Tibetan Buddhism within the Chinese mainland and its relationship with the state during the course of the Reform and now the New eras (Goldstein and Kapstein 1998; Kolås and Thowsen 2005; Makley 2007; Cooke 2010; Yü 2012; Caple 2019; Lama 2024). Less attention has been paid, however, to the interaction between the authorities and folk religious practice in mainland Tibetan Buddhist communities. In the context of the Amdo region specifically, while considerable interest in mountain cult deities (Tib. *gzhi bdag*), village spirit-mediums (Tib. *lha pa*; Ch. *fashi* 法师), and the Glu rol or Sixth Month Festival (Ch. Liuyuehui 六月会) of Rebgong County (official name, Tongren 同仁) in Qinghai Province's Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture has produced rich ethnographic accounts (Stuart et al. 1995; Dpal ldan bkra shis and Stuart 1998; Epstein and Peng 1998; Buffetrille 2004; Buffetrille 2008; Snying bo rgyal and Rino 2008), in the main, they have not directly focused on this relationship. Similarly, Chinese scholarship on Glu rol has been largely descriptive or functionalist in approach (Liu and Ren 1994; Xian 2002; Xue 2003; Wang and Qi 2010; Zhong 2012). This article seeks to complement the literature by highlighting the close and complex interaction between the state and Rebgong's folk rituals. To demonstrate this relationship, I analyse the lesser-known festival of Wutu 於菟 ("Tiger"), an annual winter exorcism ritual unique to the Tu minority (Ch. Tuzu 土族, also known as Mongour, Ch. Menggu'er 蒙古尔) village of Nianduhu 年都乎 (Tib. Gnyan thog). In particular, I encapsulate the impact of

local government intervention through the changed meaning of the "magic" bread in the ritual. Originally, the dough was rubbed on sick parts of the villagers' bodies, and the bread was subsequently removed from the village by the Wutu performers as a (negative) medium for the elimination of sickness. In recent years, however, the bread has become one of the major positive symbols of the festival, and, during one staged dance performance at the 2018 ceremony, was actively promoted for consumption as "healthy for old people and good for healing diseases!" By impacting on the materiality at the heart of the festival, the local government itself has become "entangled" (Barad 2007) in the festival's social–natural continuum, directing its meaning away from its intended annual expulsion of malevolence and towards a positivist celebration of China's modern (*xiandai* 现代) and harmonious (*hexie* 和谐) society.

The following analysis is divided into five main parts. In the next section, I provide some theoretical background on ritual and materiality in order to situate the study in this issue and provide an analytical basis upon which to add the important element of local government intervention. In Section 3, I provide a contextual background to the Wutu festival, including an introduction to the Rebgong Tu community and Nianduhu village in particular, before describing the important and related prior festival of Bang. Section 4 looks in detail at the Wutu festival, assessing the various theories of origins posited by Chinese scholars, before describing the ritual process itself. Section 5 begins by noting some of the changes to the festival that have occurred in recent decades, after which I recount the current local government influence on the festival, and in particular how its impact on the magic bread complicates the ritual's human–material interaction and alters its meaning. Section 6 then concludes by reviewing the state's influence on the wider folk culture of the Rebgong region.

2. Theoretical Background

In the latter part of the twentieth century, a reaction against the positivism of functionalist modes of analysis saw a turn towards the importance of symbolism in the interpretation of cultures (Douglas 1966; Turner 1967; Schneider 1968; Turner 1969; Douglas 1970; Geertz 1973b; Sahlins 1976; Geertz 1983). Specifically in the field of religious ritual, both Geertz and Turner argued that the symbolic processes, rather than simply fulfilling a role in supporting an individual's needs, or the cohesion of society as a whole, were keys to understanding beliefs that for the participants involved were "really real" (Geertz 1973a, p. 112; see also, Turner 1969, p. 6, and the discussion in Deflem 1991, pp. 12–13). While for Geertz, however, symbols were ultimately vehicles for meaning, Turner saw such "objects, activities, relationships, events, gestures, and spatial units in a ritual situation" (Turner 1967, p. 19) as operators in the social process and transformative on the persons involved (Ortner 1984, pp. 128–32; Deflem 1991, p. 5). Similarly, in her chapter on magic and miracle in *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas concluded that:

> The ritual is creative indeed. More wonderful than the exotic caves and palaces of fairy tales, the magic of primitive ritual creates harmonious worlds with ranked and ordered populations playing their appointed parts. So far from being meaningless, it is primitive magic which gives meaning to existence. This applies as much to the negative as to the positive rites. The prohibitions trace the cosmic outlines and the ideal social order. (Douglas 1966, p. 73)

For Turner, Douglas, and other theorists, therefore, the importance of the ritual manipulation of symbols lay in the transforming social effects they produced (see, e.g., Lévi-Strauss 1963; Tambiah 1968; Myerhoff 1974).

At the same time, the "symbolic turn" in anthropology also led to a renewed focus on the importance of materiality and material culture, which had been regarded as

subservient to social interaction in functionalist accounts (Tilley et al. 2006, p. 2). Studies not only focussed on the dialogical relationship of objects and commodities with humans, but also on their own processual history as "things-in-motion" (Appadurai 1986, p. 5; see also, e.g., Munn 1977; Kopytoff 1986; Miller 1987). Over the last few decades, the assumed Cartesian duality between human subjects and material objects has increasingly come under question (see, e.g., Miller 2005), and, following recent theories emphasising the agency of non-humans (Latour 1996; Gell 1998; Barad 2007), writers have posited post-humanist models invoking the vitality of materiality, as well as its entanglement with the human social domain (Bennett 2010; Coole and Frost 2010; Stockhammer 2012, 2020; Saxer and Schorch 2020). In parallel with these trends, studies in Tibetan Buddhism have shown a renewed interest in seeking to demonstrate the importance of material phenomena as aids to devotion, their interconnectivity with humans, and their agency in producing healing and other transformative outcomes (Rambelli 2007; Almogi 2009; Kerin 2013; Gentry 2017; Diemberger 2019; Tan 2020; Simioli 2025). In the following analysis, I highlight the close connection of the materials involved in the Wutu festival, especially the bread, with the participants involved, and the central part they play towards the attaining of Turner and Douglas's social transformation. I then show, however, how the state-led influence on the materiality at the heart of the ritual in turn impacts on the meaning of the festival itself, steering it away from its originally intended negative rite towards that of a more modernist, positive celebration.

3. Background to the Festival

3.1. The Rebgong Tu and Nianduhu Village in Historical and Geographical Context

The Rebgong Tu originated from what became known as the "Four Forts" of Bao'an (Ch. Si Zhaizi 四寨子, Tib. Khre tsi bzhi; also called the "Four Bao'an Military Farms", Ch. Bao'an Situn 保安四屯), which were established in Rebgong's Longwu River Valley (Ch. Longwu Hepan 隆务河畔)[1] during either the late Yuan (Mongol, 1279–1368) or early Ming (1368–1644) dynasties (Taubes 2019, p. 17). Consisting of troops left over from the Mongolian and subsequent eras who intermarried with other groups, the forts eventually bifurcated into what have now become the seven Tu villages of the region. Out of these, four, Nianduhu, Guomari 郭麻日 (Tib. Sgo dmar), Gashari 尕沙日 (Tib. Rka gsar), and Lower Bao'an 保安下庄 (Tib. Tho rgya bod skor), speak a Mongolic language known to linguists as the Qinghai variant of Bonan (Ch. Bao'anyu 保安语) but referred to by the villagers as Manegacha (Bonan for "Our language"). The other three, Lower Wutun吾屯下庄 (Tib. Seng ge gshong mar mgo), Upper Wutun吾屯上庄 (Tib. Seng ge gshong yar mgo), and Jiacangma 加仓玛 (Tib. Rgya tshang ma), have developed their own mixed Sinitic language known as Wutun (Ch. Wutunhua 吾屯话) or Ngandehua (also "Our language") (Norbu et al. 1999, p. 190; Roche and Stuart 2015, p. 241; Sandman 2016, pp. 2–3, 6; Roche 2019, pp. 117–18) (see Figures 1 and 2). Today, the Rebgong Tu have a total population of around 11,000, and are classified as part of the much larger Tu ethnicity, which consists of other Mongolic speakers spread across various parts of Qinghai as well as Gansu; nevertheless, the majority feel less affinity with the Tu populations elsewhere as with the neighbouring Amdo Tibetans, and they regularly self-identify as Tibetan (Battye 2019). Such a close relationship is not only heightened by the villagers' fluency in Amdo Tibetan (in addition to either, or a combination of, Northwest and standard Mandarin), but also in the little acknowledged fact that the seven Tu villages form the heartland of the production of Rebgong Art (Ch. Regong Yishu 热贡艺术), the region's most famous export, which includes *thang ka* painting and other forms of Tibetan Buddhist artwork.

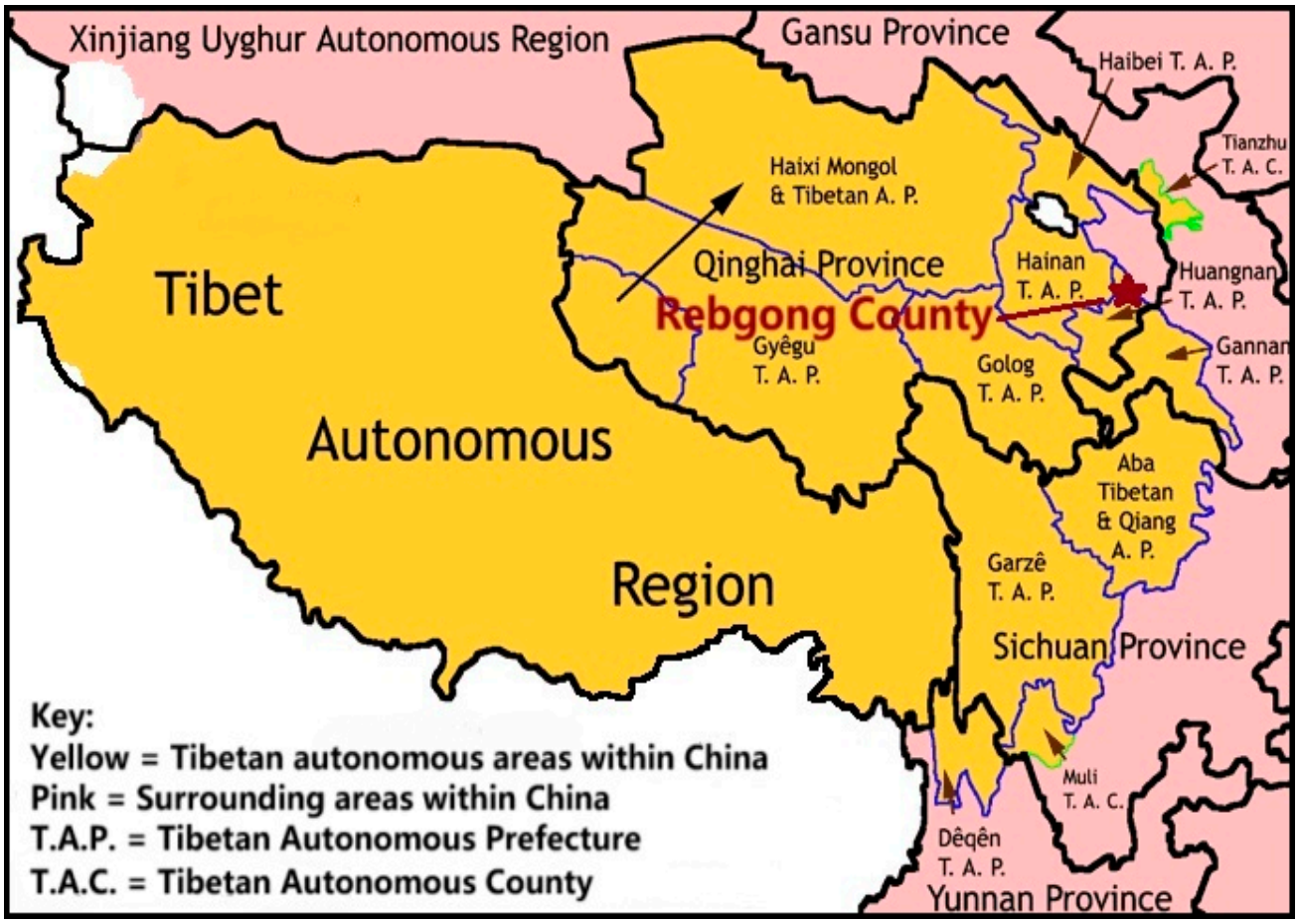

Figure 1. The Tibet Autonomous Region, the Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures, and the Tibetan Autonomous Counties of the People's Republic of China, indicating the location of Rebgong County in Huangnan Autonomous Prefecture. Originally uploaded by Ran to en.wikipedia.org, and subsequently uploaded by Electionworld to Wikimedia Atlas of the World, edited by Timmy Tian. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons (https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:TAR-TAP-TAC.png, accessed on 16 April 2025).

As well as artisans, the Rebgong Tu are also traditionally farmers, growing wheat and rapeseed (Ch. *youcai* 油菜); however, since the Reform era, increasing areas of farmland have been reappropriated for commercial use (see Fried 2009, pp. 22, 103–7), and villagers are more likely to find work in Longwu 隆务 Town (Tib. Rong bo), the prefectural and county seat, or further afield. Such an increase in mobility is leading to increased pressure on Manegacha and Ngandehua; for example, statistics indicate that a high proportion of Lower Bao'an villagers live or work in the county seat, and there is clear evidence of generational language shift within the village itself (Battye 2019, p. 166; Roche 2019, p. 125). While language attitudes remain generally positive, both languages lack an orthography, and short of any revitalisation efforts, Amdo Tibetan and Northwest or Mandarin Chinese are likely to continue to encroach on the various linguistic domains into the future (Wang 2008; Battye 2020, p. 70; Roche 2019).

Nianduhu itself is situated on the site of one of the initial forts, known as Jitun 季屯,[2] and the village monastery boasts a Chinese stele dating back to the Ming era, which describes the exploits of a commander of the garrison from the late sixteenth century named Wang Tingyi 王廷仪 (Taubes 2019, pp. 32–34). Wang was just one in the line of a leading hereditary family, the Wang family Tu commanders (Ch. *Wang Jia Tu ba zong* 王家土把总, Tib. *Bang kya Thu'u pa tsong*), who, according to Tibetan sources, derived from "Daoist"

Mongol warriors in service of the Yuan emperors (Taubes 2019, pp. 15, 18; Blo bzang snyan grags 2015, pp. 242–47), and who built the temple to the regionally important mountain god Ri lang (Ch. Erlang 二郎) on the hill above the village.[3] Their power was curtailed, however, during the early eighteenth century, when the incumbent commander, Wang Rapten (Ch. Wang Lafudan 王拉/啦夫旦), was executed by the Qing authorities, an incident that gave rise to a tradition as to how the old village was built: Wang Rapten was commanded by the emperor to build a garrison fort, but only built three sides, and used the remaining funds to endow the village's Buddhist monastery. Accused of corruption, he was then executed, but he was subsequently viewed by the people as a hero for being willing to give up his life for the cause of the Dharma (Norbu et al. 1999, p. 193; Taubes 2019, pp. 39–44). To this day, the old village is bounded by earthen walls on three sides—the north (300 m in length), east, and west (around 100 m, respectively); on the south, a man-made precipice runs down to the Nianduhu stream (Fan and Wen 2010, p. 35)—and while only a proportion of the village's 1354 population[4] still live within its walls (Roche and Lcag mo tshe ring 2013, p. 168), it is protected as an important heritage site (see Section 6 below).

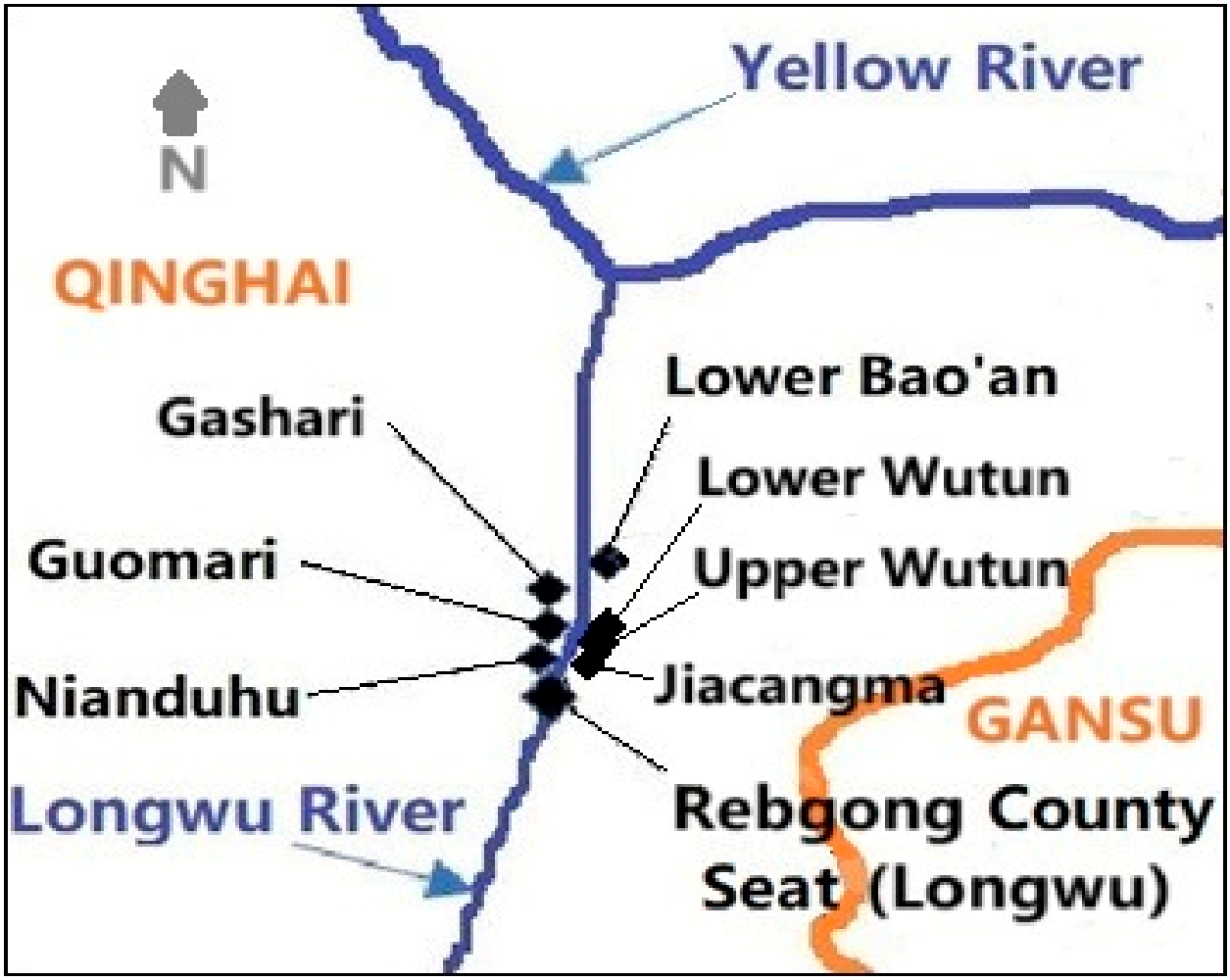

Figure 2. Local map showing Rebgong County Seat together with the seven Tu villages, including Nianduhu (not to scale). © Author.

3.2. The Preceding Bang Festival

In addition to commemorating the Great Prayer Festival (Tib. Smon lam) and other annual Buddhist ceremonies (see Roche and Lcag mo tshe ring 2013), all the Tu villages actively take part in the local mountain god folk rituals, such as Glu rol and Lab tse (for the latter, see Tsering 2017; Niangwujia and Havnevik 2023), and it is in the context of

one particular regional winter festival, Bang 邦, that the unique event of Wutu takes place. Bang is celebrated across the villages at clan (Ch. *buluo* 部落; Tib. *tsho ba*) level on various days in the eleventh lunar month and serves a dual purpose of driving out evil forces for the previous year and invoking the blessings of the mountain gods for the year ahead. In clan X of one of the villages, for example, the members gather to present smoke (Tib. bsang; see, e.g., Tan 2020) and liquor offerings outside the temple on the hill above the local monastery, before inviting the village *lha pa*, accompanied by an image of the mountain god Dar rgyas (see Snying bo rgyal and Rino 2008, p. 88), to the host's courtyard home (Ch. *siheyuan* 四合院) during the afternoon and evening. At the house, fires are lit on oil drums in the courtyard, more *bsang* and other offerings are presented, and the *lha pa*, having been possessed by the spirit of the deity, dances to the rhythm of a drum and gong. Following this, he moves indoors, and mediates the blessing of the god on the members of the clan by endowing them with *khata* scarves (Tib. *kha bdags*) and spraying them with liquor.[5] During the course of the day, two types of paper objects are prepared by clan members: paper coloured flags with holes cut in, sometimes topped with mini flat umbrella shapes, which are often referred to as *bang*,[6] and which symbolise health and prosperity (Tang 2003, pp. 82–83), and sheets of paper with black ink, symbolising the bad forces of the previous year. At the climax of the ritual in the evening, the *lha pa*, still in a state of trance, moves around the main room of the house burning the latter sheets of paper, in a dramatic enactment of the removal of malevolent influences.[7] Overall, we observe the detailed craftsmanship involved in making both the negative and positive symbols (see Douglas 1966, p. 73, quoted above), which expresses the importance given to material objects in achieving the desired outcomes; furthermore, the human–material connection is also seen clearly, not only through the crafting of those symbols, but also through the *lha pa*'s use of fire, *kha bdags*, and liquor as extensions of the authority invested in him by the deity.

In Nianduhu, where the ceremony takes place according to clan on the eighth, twelfth, fourteenth, and nineteenth of the eleventh lunar month, the format is generally similar, but the latter negative aspect is not emphasised; rather, the occasion takes on a humorous tone, as the *lha pa* cajoles the clan members into performing a song or telling a funny story in order to "delight the mountain god" (see Dpal ldan bkra shis and Stuart 1998) and invoke blessings on the community (Yin 2008, p. 32; Fried 2009, pp. 154–56; Fan and Wen 2010, p. 37). Bang is also traditionally the time when younger members of the village can rendezvous with those of the opposite sex without censure, owing to the fact that the ritual draws a connection between human love and love for the gods; in this sense, it has even been described as a kind of local "Valentine's Day" (Ch. Qingren Jie 情人节) (Tang 2009, p. 24). In addition, couples struggling to conceive take the opportunity to seek special favour, while young children see the festival as a kind of early New Year celebration, exchanging "*bang momo*" 邦馍馍—bread baked specially for the occasion—as well as sweets and nuts, and playing with the *bang* flags (Tang 2003, p. 84).

Here, therefore, in contrast to the other villages, Bang is generally restricted to the performance of positive rites, and while the direct connection between Bang and Wutu has been questioned (Yin 2008, p. 32, against which, see Fan and Wen 2010, p. 37), it is clearly against the backdrop of these more light-hearted celebrations that the latter ceremony takes place.[8] Having now performed for the gods, invoked luck and prosperity, and celebrated divine and human love at the clan level, on the twentieth day of the month the community finally comes together for the major and more serious enactment of the expulsion of malevolent forces from the village as a whole.

4. The Wutu Festival

4.1. Origins

As noted above, the Wutu festival is completely unique to Nianduhu Village, a fact that has prompted interest from Chinese scholars as to the question of its origins (Liu 1993; Ma and Xin 1996; Qin 2000; Tang 2003; see also the summary in Battye 2020, pp. 135–37). Given that *wutu* as the word for "tiger" stems from the ancient southern Chinese Chu 楚 kingdom of the Warring States period (722–221 B.C.), some scholars believe that the ceremony was brought across by soldiers from southeast China, who were despatched to the Bao'an forts during the early Ming (Qin 2000). This corresponds with the fact that, according to the *Xunhua Chronicles*, which date from the reign of Qing Emperor Qianlong (1736–1795), some of the troops sent to man the Bao'an forts were from "Jiangnan" (江南, "South of the [Yangtze] River"), a term for the southeast of China (Gong et al. 2015, p. 142; see also "Zhongguo Shaoshuminzu Shehui Lishi Diaocha Ziliao Congkan" Revision Editorial Board 2009, p. 152). However, others question the vast time lag and distance involved (Norbu et al. 1999, p. 193), and the main competing theory is that it is a residual of the totemic tiger worship of the ancient Qiang 古羌, a people residing in Qinghai and other Western regions during the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) (Liu 1993). This may resolve the problem of distance, if not time, but the striking fact remains that there is no other equivalent festival anywhere else in northwest China (Yin 2008, p. 32). Other scholars propose a "backflow" (*huiliu* 回流) theory, where Qiang tiger totem influence spread to other parts of China, including the southeast, from where the ceremony returned with the soldiers (Ma and Xin 1996, pp. 93–94).[9] Tang Zhongshang, a proponent of this idea, also found evidence that Jiacangma and Lower Wutun villages held similar festivals prior to 1958, which, due to their likely Sinitic origins, corroborates a potential Chinese influence on the festival (Tang 2003, pp. 89–91). In summary, none of the theories are without their problems, and more recently Zongka Yangzheng Gangbu and Zhou Maoxian have questioned both the "Chu" and the "Qiang" versions of events and even dispute the Chinese origins of the term *wutu* itself (Zongka Yangzheng Gangbu and Zhou 2023).

A related issue is the question of how long the festival has been running in Nianduhu, and again, two main views are proposed by Chinese scholars: the first, that it arrived with the establishment of the fort at Nianduhu around 600 years ago, which would potentially corroborate either the Chu or the "backflow" theories of origins, and the second, that it was introduced around 200 years ago by Lobzang Tubten Jikme Gyatso (1792–1855), the Third Jamyang Zhepa *tulku* (Tib. *sprul sku*; Ch. *huofo* 活佛) of the regionally important Labrang monastery, who was originally from the village (Tang 2003; Dorje 2012). Fan Jing and Wen Zhongxiang argue that the two dates are not necessarily contradictory, if the ceremony ceased for a period, but was then revived again under the *sprul sku* (Fan and Wen 2010, p. 36); however, this goes against the popular Nianduhu tradition that the ceremony has been continuously celebrated since their forebears arrived in the village (Tang 2003, pp. 91–92).[10] Overall, there is little substantial evidence to say with confidence either where the festival came from or how long it has been performed in Nianduhu, and despite the interest among scholars, its origins remain somewhat of a mystery.

4.2. The Ceremony

Early in the afternoon on the twentieth day of the eleventh lunar month, the village *lha pa* and an assistant, together with seven men selected that year to perform the tiger role (they are also known individually as "*wutu*"), gather on the hill above Nianduhu Village, on which, as noted earlier, is situated the temple of the regionally revered mountain god Ri lang.[11] Standing bare topped and with their trousers rolled up, the seven, who are divided into five young unmarried "*xiao wutu*" (小於菟—small tigers) and two older "*da wutu*"

(大於菟—big tigers), are smeared all over with ash from *bsang* offerings, after which their faces and bodies are painted with tiger stripes or leopard spots in black ink by local *thang ka* painters. Two strips of white paper, said to resemble tiger ears, are tied into each *wutu*'s hair, a Tibetan knife in its sheath is tied around each waist, and they each carry two 2 metre wooden poles taken from the nearby village *lab tse*, a raised rectangular construction inserted with arrows and branches in dedication to the mountain deity.[12] Holding a pole in each hand erect in front of them, they all kneel on one knee towards Ri lang's image, while the *lha pa*, who is wearing a white silk *kha bdags* around his head, which supports a Five Buddha Hat (Tib. Rigs lnga, Ch. Wu Fo Guan 五佛冠), bangs a coloured sheep-skin drum and chants scriptures before the deity. The *lha pa* then gives the *wutu* draughts of liquor (Ch. *baijiu* 白酒) to offset the effects of the cold and to assist their entry into the spirit world, and from this point on they are not allowed to speak until the ceremony is over.

At around two o'clock, the seven *wutu* emerge from the precincts, and process in single file in a slow step-and-hop cadence around the courtyard outside, followed by the *lha pa* and his assistant, who mark the time with the drum and a gong, respectively. After a few circuits, firecrackers are set off and members of the community whoop loudly, whereupon the five *xiao wutu* immediately break ranks and run straight down to the northwest corner of the old village. Splitting into two groups, they begin scaling the walls and climbing down into the village's connecting *siheyuan*, where they voraciously consume the meat, liquor, or other items that the family may have prepared for them, as well as thread large loaves of special bagel-shaped bread (Manegacha: *kanzer*) onto their wooden poles. They also jump over any sick people in the house as a means of taking away their illness. Continuing towards the east gate of the old village, they proceed along the *siheyuan* via their adjoining roofs, since it is forbidden to enter a home by the front door for fear any evil will follow them in; when leaving a house, however, they are allowed to exit that way. Eventually, they arrive at the east gate, where they wait for the *da wutu* to join them.

Meanwhile, the two *da wutu*, who all the while, supported by the *lha pa* and his assistant, have been continuing the slow dance down the hill, reach the entrance to the village. The *lha pa* is presented with a *kha bdags* by the elders of the village, and the *wutu* are each given a piece of raw meat, which they grip with their teeth; this reminds them not to speak, as well as entices malevolent forces to follow them out of the village. The *da wutu* do not scale the walls, but proceed along the narrow lane between the houses, from the roofs of which villagers reach down and thread the *kanzer* bread onto their upward pointing wooden poles. Once they reach the east gate, they reunite with the *xiao wutu*, and to the sound of more firecrackers they all rush together down to the stream, where they throw out the poles and the *kanzer*, and, breaking through the ice if necessary, wash the ink and ash off their bodies. After putting their own clothes back on, they return towards the village entrance, jumping over a fire prepared for them en route in order to ensure that no misfortune follows them back in. At the same time, the *lha pa* and his assistant burn paper and recite scriptures near the stream, declaring that the evil forces have been thoroughly expelled—this concludes the ceremony.

As indicated, all of the actions are Douglas's "negative rites", associated with the driving out of any evil influences accumulated through the year: tigers and leopards are seen as fearsome animals, strong enough to carry away the villagers' sickness and misfortune; evil is also said to follow food, in particular the *kanzer* that is placed on the poles. Jumping over sick people is to remove the illness from their bodies; the taboo on entering houses through the front door is to prevent evil spirits following, while the two *da wutu*'s slow patrol down the lane is to prevent malevolent forces escaping the wrong way. Washing the ink off symbolises the removing of the evil that the *wutu* have carried out of the village, and the action of jumping over the fire is in order to prevent any evil returning. Altogether, the symbols

represent an internally consistent attempt at purifying the atmosphere of the village in preparation for the New Year, whether, in fact, they operate at the spiritual, psychological, or social level (Douglas 1966, p. 71). At the same time, we observe the close interconnectivity between the human and material realm in seeking such a result: the *bsang* ash rubbed on the bodies of the *wutu*; the projection of the *thang ka* painters' artistry through their brushes, via the paint, and back onto the bodies of the *wutu*; the wooden poles extending from the hands of the *wutu* on which the *kanzer* bread is placed; the consumption of liquor; the beating of the drum and gong to mark the pace of the cadence step; the lighting of firecrackers; the importance of the structure of the old village and the correct use by the *wutu* of the walls and doors of the houses; the preparation and consumption of food, and the use of water and fire at the conclusion.

The following analysis will show, however, how local government intervention impacts the festival, including at its material level, resulting in a transformation of meaning towards more modernist considerations, as well as a more complex web of entanglement between the social and natural realms.

5. The Wutu Festival Today

5.1. Recent Innovations to the Festival

Yin Zhuoma describes a number of changes to the festival in recent times, including the fact that chilli pepper is no longer rubbed on the body under the *bsang* ash as an extra layer for warmth, while the tiger and leopard stripes are now painted in ink rather than the original stove ash, the former deemed more distinctive and better looking. She also points out how, originally, the *wutu* were required to stay in a nearby mill for one or two nights following the ceremony, in order to prevent any evil spirits from returning; in recent years, however, this rule has been relaxed, and the *wutu* are free to go home or celebrate down in the county seat in the evening. According to her *lha pa* informant, some of the detailed content of the festival was lost during the period of the Cultural Revolution (Ch. Wenhua Da Geming 文化大革命), since his predecessor and the more informed elders of the village passed away before they were able to impart the knowledge (Yin 2008, p. 30). Tang Zhongshan corroborates this by describing how, originally, the white paper tied into the *wutu*'s hair contained incantations and scriptures, but since the original printing plate, as well as the samples, were destroyed (presumably also in the Cultural Revolution), they are now simply left blank (Tang 2003, p. 87).[13]

One major change to the festival that took place about one hundred years ago was the reduction of the number of the *wutu* from eight to seven, after a tragedy in which one of the *xiao wutu* was accidently shot and killed by one of the guns used in the ceremony; according to Liu Kai, the villagers understood this to mean that it was the will of the gods to permanently receive one of the *wutu* into the spiritual realm (Liu 1993, p. 99). A related change is the fact that firecrackers have now, of course, replaced guns to mark the descent of the *wutu* from the hill and the conclusion of the ceremony at the east gate (Sun 2003, p. 63). Finally, Liu (1993) describes the ceremony as starting in the "early morning" (Ch. *zaochen* 早晨) and only concluding around 5 p.m., whereas by the time Kalsang Norbu, Zhu, and Stuart observed the ceremony in 1996 it commenced at 2 p.m. and lasted "approximately two hours" (Norbu et al. 1999, pp. 194–99). This roughly corroborates my observations in 2018 that the *wutu* started the dance at 2 p.m. (having already been painted and having followed the proceedings in the temple) and finished at around 3 p.m. Further investigation may be required to ascertain whether the ceremony was indeed much longer in the past, and if so, what was the cause of its reduction in length. Overall, while the above are all general innovations over time, or responses to external or internal events, the particular

impact of local government intervention has transformed the occasion in more noticeable ways, as the following section will describe.

5.2. *The* Wutu *Festival in 2018*

On the morning of the 26 December, the solar date of the ceremony that year, I managed to get a lift up to the village with a local friend who was involved in the display tent setup for the occasion (see below); for this reason, we were let through the traffic police barrier designed to restrict the number of vehicles coming into the village. Just below the hill on which Ri lang's temple is situated, a stage had been erected, with a blue backdrop featuring pictures of dancing *wutu* holding poles threaded with *kanzer* bread, and a long slogan in Chinese and Tibetan stating: "Tongren County's 2018 Rebgong Wutu Intangible Cultural Heritage[14] Folk Cultural Tourism Festival and 2019 Winter and Spring Season Cultural Tourism".[15] At around 10.45 a.m., the proceedings began with a series of government speeches, after which the dignitaries were each presented with white *kha bdags* and lined up on the stage. The festival was then declared "open" (Ch. *kaimu le* 开幕了) to an audience of about 400, against an audiovisual backdrop of fireworks and the *Star Wars* theme music blasting from loudspeakers (see Figure 3). Afterwards, a female MC speaking in Mandarin, supported by a male translating into Tibetan, introduced a series of stage performances, including that of around twenty-five male dancers dressed up in tiger and leopard skin outfits and holding the bread on poles. Between some of the dancers situated on a higher platform above the stage and connected to the side of the hill, the real *lha pa* and his assistant, already dressed for the ceremony itself, stood overlooking the performance, the assistant joining in by beating his gong to the rhythm.

Figure 3. Government officials with white *kha bdags* (Tibetan scarves) scarves at the Wutu ("Tiger") Festival opening ceremony. © Author.

After the performances, members of the audience took time to mill around the display tent, which contained *thang ka* paintings, engravings, and other local crafts and products for sale; following this, they were escorted back down to the village for set lunches of *tsampa* (Tib. *rtsam pa*), meat, and fruits organised in designated homes. I was ushered into the

house behind the village post office by a government official, who informed me that the day was organised by the local Culture, Sport, Media, and Tourism Bureau (Wen Ti Guangdian Lüyou Ju 文体广电旅游局). One of those joining for lunch was a Hui woman from the bureau who asked for a pot noodle (Ch. *fangbian mian* 方便面—"convenient noodles") instead of the food on offer, despite the protestation of others that the meat was, in fact, halal (Ch. *qingzhen* 清真). She reflected the fact that a good proportion of the audience were officials—either part of the organisation of the event, or especially invited—rather than visitors coming of their own volition. Earlier on I had also spoken to a tour guide I knew from Rebgong's Rong bo monastery (Ch. Longwu Si 隆务寺), who told me that her job that day was to help facilitate visiting government groups. In general, it seemed that most of the attendees were either from the government, or were locals from within Rebgong County itself, and in contrast to my experiences at the summer festival of Glu rol, I did not notice any tourists from other parts of China.

Before two o'clock, the visitors reassembled on the top of the hill, and photographers crammed the temple precincts to get shots of the seven *wutu* being painted with stripes and spots. Others were waiting for them outside in the courtyard, and during their circuits the *wutu* became swamped with onlookers, such that someone had to keep shouting for people to make way (see Figure 4). After the circumambulations were over, some of the crowd chased the *xiao wutu* down the hill, while most followed the *da wutu* as they continued their slow dance, the procession narrowing into a huge, long bottleneck as it reached the lanes of the old village. Local villagers, who had lined up on the roofs above, placed the *kanzer* on the poles of the *da wutu* as they came past accompanied by the long line of visitors and continued on towards the east gate. The ceremony was concluded by just after three o'clock.

Figure 4. The *wutu* ("tigers") circumambulating the courtyard outside Rilang's temple, swamped by onlookers and photographers. © Author.

In short, we observed local government appropriation of the event on a considerable scale: a traffic police barrier near the entrance to the village, a stage set with opening ceremony, government speeches, MCs, fireworks, modern music and live performances, a

large display tent promoting local products, set lunches, and the swamping of the ceremony itself with photographers and onlookers. The particular impact of such government intervention can be demonstrated by showcasing its transformation of the meaning of magic *kanzer* bread, discussed in the next section.

5.3. The Transformation of the Kanzer Bread

Kanzer (Manegacha for "cow nose ring", since it is so shaped (Tang 2003, p. 88) was originally made with dough that had been rubbed on sick parts of the villagers' bodies and baked specially for the occasion. It would not, therefore, be eaten by the villagers, but threaded onto the poles of the *wutu* and subsequently thrown out, symbolising the elimination of sickness and disease, as discussed above.[16] Furthermore, it was by no means the only method of removing malignant forces: as described above, the *wutu* jumping over sick people served the same healing effect, while their consumption of other food and drink was also a medium for taking away misfortune or calamity (Sun 2003, p. 62).

The local government's appropriation of the festival, however, has served to alter the bread's symbolic meaning. At the end of the "tiger dance" prior to the ceremony (see the previous section), the performers came down from the stage and started distributing the *kanzer* on their poles among the audience, supported by the female MC, who enthusiastically encouraged everyone to eat it, since it was "healthy for old people and good for healing diseases!" (see Figure 5). Once their bread was all divested, the dancers then processed off, empty poled, to change out of their tiger and leopard outfits. While, later on, the villagers still threaded *kanzer* onto the poles of the real *wutu*, it is not clear that the same taboo on eating the bread still applies or is held as strongly. One villager told me that, whereas in the past, the *kanzer* was made as described above, now it is baked externally for the occasion and brought in from outside and, therefore, it is "okay to eat". This certainly would apply to the bread used in the dance, which totalled around 250 loaves. Further investigation would indicate whether some of the bread used in the ceremony proper by the villagers is still baked from dough rubbed on sick parts of the body in the traditional way and, therefore, presumably, thrown out.

Figure 5. Performers dressed as *wutu* hold *kanzer* (bagel-shaped bread) on poles. The bread is subsequently distributed to the audience and promoted as "healthy for old people and good for healing diseases!" © Author.

Although, as noted, the *kanzer* was not the only means of eliminating sickness, the "bread on poles" has now become a major symbol of the festival: on pictorial promotions of the ceremony, the *wutu* are often shown dancing while holding poles threaded with loaves, and on the day itself, towards the bottom of the village, wooden racks containing poles with threaded bread accompanied boards showing descriptions of the festival (see Figure 6). More racks with *kanzer* were also situated up near the stage, set under flags describing the Glu rol festival and other aspects of Rebgong culture.

Figure 6. The *kanzer* on poles has become an important symbol of the ceremony.

In summary, we observe how the "cultural biography" (Kopytoff 1986) of the *kanzer* has been transformed through government intervention: instead of the dough being rubbed on sick parts of villagers' bodies, the bread is now produced by professional bakers, and instead of being thrown out, it is now consumed by onlookers, as well as (potentially) villagers. This impact on the materiality at the heart of the festival, together with all the speech, performances, and other additions listed above, shifts the meaning of the festival from a negative shamanic rite aimed at the elimination of misfortune towards a positivist celebration of China's modernity, where, in particular, "minority ethnic culture" (*shaoshu minzu wenhua* 少数民族文化) is promoted as a benevolent part of the state-led harmonious society.

This, however, is not necessarily to say that the original meaning has been lost. Later on, during the ceremony proper, villagers still gathered on the rooftops and threaded bread onto the poles of the real *wutu* as they patrolled past. As suggested, further investigation would show whether all of this bread is now, as the informant indicated, bought in from outside, or at least some of it still baked at home from dough rubbed on sick parts of villagers' bodies. Similarly, despite all the surrounding embellishments and the impact of the spectators, the actual ritual process itself still continues relatively unchanged, albeit with the few modifications listed earlier. Furthermore, despite the fact that the case study involves government intervention on a minority village festival, a simple dichotomy between "local government" and "villagers" is not so straightforward. Many of the villagers are, in fact, members of the government themselves, or are stakeholders in government-led

initiatives. As noted, for example, my informant who brought me to the festival, a Rebgong Tu woman from another village, was involved in organising a *thang ka* display in the exhibition tent with her business partner; at the same time, she told me that she had also just been given a government grant for another cultural project she was involved in. Overall, therefore, a more realistic appraisal describes communities and individuals in varying degrees of connection with local government, positioning themselves for positive outcomes through inducing either, or a combination, of the human–material-induced meanings of the festival.

6. Conclusions

In this article, I have highlighted the marked influence of the local authorities on the Wutu festival, an influence particularly reflected in the changing meaning of the magic *kanzer* bread. A similar situation, albeit not so pronounced, also applies to the other folk festivals of the Rebgong region: Niangwujia and Havnevik, for example, describe how higher-level Communist Party officials are given honorary seats at the festivals, as village-level cadres take on important ritual roles (Niangwujia and Havnevik 2023, p. 479). In relation to Glu rol specifically, while the local government has less direct involvement in the individual village ceremonies than it does with Wutu, the festival as a whole is strongly promoted as a tourist attraction, and this impacts considerably on the atmosphere of the event (Makley 2013, p. 667; Battye 2020, pp. 176–78). As indicated by the sign on the Wutu festival stage, one important strategy pursued by the local authorities for the promotion of Rebgong's festivals and wider folk culture has been that of "cultural heritagisation" (Zhou et al. 2017; see also Chau 2011, pp. 6–7, cited in Kao 2014, p. 111). In 2006, both Wutu and Glu rol were placed on China's national Intangible Cultural Heritage list, and since then other regional festivals have followed suit at the prefectural level (Guowuyuan Bangongting 国务院办公厅 [General Office of the State Council] 2006; Niangwujia and Havnevik 2023, p. 480). Most significantly, in 2009, Rebgong Art was inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, one of only 44 elements in China, and 788 in the world (UNESCO 2025a; UNESCO 2025b). Such heritagisation is not only seen as an important driver of tourism development (Bian et al. 2011, p. 6851), it also serves to tie the folk activities directly to the state in monetary terms, through allowances to some of the region's *lha pa*, *thang ka* painters and sculptors as preservers of ICH, as well as through the provision of finance for the construction of roads to ritual sites and for the erection of public shelters and toilets for those attending events (Niangwujia and Havnevik 2023, p. 480). Moreover, the heritagisation is not only limited to the intangible kind: in Nianduhu itself, for example, I noticed three stone plaques gifted by different government agencies, including one which commemorated the fact that, in 2013, China's State Council (Guowuyuan 国务院) had declared the old village to be a "major national protected cultural site" (*quanguo zhongdian wenwu baohu danwei* 全国重点文物保护单位). Whether at a political, economic, or material level, then, over the last couple of decades, Rebgong's folk traditions have become increasingly aligned with local state interests.

As with the Wutu festival itself, however, we also observe that the cadres, artists, *lha pa*, and villagers involved are neither simply passive recipients of inexorable cultural and political forces, nor do they sit neatly on either side of a simplistic "state–minority" divide. Rather, through their participation in the various folk festivals and activities, they are positioning themselves for benefit within the context of the overlapping roles and situations they find themselves in (see, e.g., Makley 2013). In terms of materiality also, the study helps us to guard against reifying the human element in human–non-human interaction. As different agents engaged with the *kanzer* bread, they transformed its reciprocal meaning, which, in turn, served to reshape its own cultural biography. In summary, what

emerges, therefore, is a complex web of entanglement, with diverse human agencies in dynamic interaction with each other and various elements of the spiritual, cultural, and material world.

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Notes

1 In Tibetan, the river is called the Dgu Chu—"Nine River".

2 The other three were Litun 李, which bifurcated into Guomari and Gashari villages, Tuotun 脱屯, whose inhabitants settled in Lower Bao'an, and Wutun 吴屯 (the current character used, Wu 吾, is erroneous according to the *Qinghai Tuzu Shehui Lishi Diaocha* ("Zhongguo Shaoshuminzu Shehui Lishi Diaocha Ziliao Congkan" Revision Editorial Board 2009, p. 148), whose inhabitants formed the three Wutun-speaking villages.

3 This Mongolian connection, however, is just one of numerous traditions and theories as to the origins of the villagers of Nianduhu and of the Rebgong Tu in general (see Norbu et al. 1999, p. 191; Fried 2009, pp. 12–24; Roche and Lcag mo tshe ring 2013, p. 167).

4 Statistic obtained from the Nianduhu township government in May 2018.

5 I witnessed the activity indoors on 25 December 2018, the date of that clan's Bang that year. Photos and videos of the earlier events were sent to me by a clan member.

6 The linguistic origin (i.e., Chinese, Tibetan, or Manegacha) and etymology of the term *bang* are unclear. Tang Zhongshan lists three possible meanings: "lovers' secret rendezvous", assembling together/the forming of companionships, and "exchange" (Tang 2003, pp. 84–85). See below.

7 Later on, a villager from Maba 麻巴, a Tibetan township in Rebgong, told me that this action was called "*nianshok*", while a young man from Lower Bao'an, who attended the ritual, was not familiar with the term Bang, and used "Nianshok" to describe the whole ceremony.

8 In addition, a number of days during the eleventh lunar month are set aside for the Nianduhu monks to recite scriptures: the Rnying ma monks from the fifth to the seventh, and those of the main Dge lugs pa monastery from the ninth to the twentieth days. According to Tang Zhongshan, during this latter period, the lay persons of the village are also required to recite the Six Character Mantra a total of one hundred million times, divided by household, with people especially assigned to tally up the numbers, and fines divvied out to shirkers or slackers (Tang 2003, pp. 86–87; 2008, pp. 30–31). While not technically part of Bang, the timing coincides, and the aim is the same: to thank the Buddha for peace and prosperity in the year past, and invoke blessings for the year ahead. This example highlights the overlapping and slightly ambiguous relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and folk religion (see below).

9 One particular piece of evidence presented by Chinese scholars for the influence of Qiang totem worship on the Wutu festival is the similarity between the latter and a "Tiger Festival" (Hu Jie 虎节) held by one village of Yunnan Province's Yi minority (Yizu 彝族), who are said to trace their origins back to the Qiang (Yin 2008, pp. 31–32); however, this is cited in support of both the "Qiang" and "backflow" theories (Liu 1993, pp. 101–104; Ma and Xin 1996), and it is unclear exactly how the two festivals relate to each other. It also begs a similar question of its own: why only that particular village out of all the Yi and other minority villages of the southwest?

10 Kalsang Norbu, Zhu, and Stuart relate a local tradition that the god Ri lang commanded the headman Wang Rapten (Rab brtan) to initiate the custom in order to aid the (presumably Qing) emperor, who was ill at the time, in his recovery (Norbu et al. 1999, p. 193). This would, of course, also contradict the idea that the ceremony had been in place since the villagers arrived.

11 For the following, see (Liu 1993, pp. 98–99; Norbu et al. 1999, pp. 194–99; Qin 2000, pp. 52–53; Tang 2003, pp. 87–89; Fried 2009, pp. 156–58; Fan and Wen 2010, pp. 35–36).

12 The term *lab tse* applies both to the construction and the ceremony associated with it (see Tsering 2017; Niangwujia and Havnevik 2023).

13 In addition, white paper in the shape of the flat umbrellas used for the Bang ceremony are attached to the top of the wooden poles (and, in the case of the two *da wutu*, each of their right-hand poles also holds a white Bang-style flag below the umbrella shape) in a tangible continuity between the two festivals (Tang 2003, pp. 87–88); however, according to Kalsang Norbu, Zhu,

and Stuart, local attendees did not have an explanation for these when they observed the ceremony in 1996 (Norbu et al. 1999, p. 194).

[14] On Intangible Cultural Heritage, see Section 6 below.

[15] Ch. Tongren Xian 2018 Nian Regong Feiyi Minsu Wenhua Lüyou ji 2019 Nian Dongchunji Wenhua Lüyou 同仁县2018年热贡於菟非遗民俗文化旅游节暨2019年冬春季文化旅游.

[16] Conversation with Nianduhu villager, 26 December 2018.

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