Layered Alterities: 
Discourses of the Other in Lijiang, China

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Abstract
Presented at the Asia and the Other conference, this paper examines Said’s construction of the self/other and addresses a question posed by conference organizers: “Does a newly privileged ‘East’ construct its own ‘others’?” By focusing on the Naxi, a Tibeto-Burman ethnic group, the author suggests that Said’s insights on alterity contradict at least some of the imperial, post-revolutionary and contemporary constructions of difference in southwest China. While this paper does not challenge Said’s critique, in Orientalism, of the West’s distortions and “inventions” of the Middle East, it does argue that China cannot so easily fill the role of the Saidian East as Other (to the West), especially when we look at China’s own projects designed to “civilize” the country’s ethnic minority groups. It argues that China, usually assumed to be part of the “East” as defined in Orientalism, did not occupy a fixed position of “Other” (with regard to the West or anywhere else), but in fact has long been engaged in creating its own “Others.” Rather than thinking of self/other and West/East necessarily as geographical designations, these binaries might better be understood as projects of domination, enacted during historical moments of change and fluidity.

Keywords
alterity, Saidian binaries, China, Naxi (納西), Tibeto-Burman ethnicity, gender, marginalization, globalization, “civilizing” projects

1 I thank Audrey Bilger, Angelina Chin, Phil Haft, Zayn Kassam, and three outside reviewers for their helpful comments on this paper.
China’s growing prominence in the global economic sphere has prompted scholars of Asia to revisit Edward Said’s theorization of self/other as a distinctly west/east binary. During a recent conference titled Asia and the Other, scholars of Asia reexamined Said’s construction of self/other and the demarcation of other/other in the context of Asia’s rise as a new center of power and influence that rivals the economic primacy once enjoyed by Europe and America. China in particular, with the fastest growing economy in the world, has begun to exercise considerable influence over development in third world countries and over global resources. What happens, the conference organizers queried, when the “east” threatens to eclipse the “west”—does a privileged “east” construct its own “others”?

The “east” as defined by the conference organizers includes regions beyond those that were the primary focus of Said’s Orientalism. While Said primarily focused on Islam (Said 17, 73, 74), he was not silent on the topic of China. He pointed out that during the 13th and 14th century Islam’s rule included parts of China (59) and he made a point of referencing China as the object of orientalization. In Orientalism, Said concluded that China was seen as the dangerous eastern other, and that the Chinese people had been essentialized as “a Mongolian tribe,” “the Chinese race” and “the perfidious Chinese,” whose political eruption threatened to destroy the western world. While Said’s discussion of China is not central to Orientalism, he does present us with the following opposition—European travelers and expansionists, Jesuit scholars and American political strategists on one hand, and China on the other. Few scholars of China would disagree that a west/east binary is operating here.

My project in this paper is to address the question posed by the Asia and the Other conference organizers, which was to examine the extent to which Said’s self/other, west/east binary is useful to my own research as a contemporary scholar of Asia. This paper is based on historical and ethnographic research I have conducted in southwest China over the past eighteen years focusing on gender and difference, and it is written from the disciplinary perspective of an anthropologist. I would like to preface the paper by noting that I am completely sympathetic to post-colonial theory and mindful of the historical and geographical scope of Said’s Orientalism. Nor do I challenge Said’s characterization of China as an object of western orientalization. Because of the importance of Orientalism, the conference organizers and participants (authors of papers largely addressing China, Taiwan or East Asia) have sought to consider the contemporary scholarship on Asia through

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the lens of Said’s categories of self/other and west/east. The conference’s charge is not surprising given that Orientalism has become a key text for theoretically informed historians, anthropologists, and literature scholars of East Asia. As an ethnic minority raised in the United States, I am keenly aware of how the West has constructed its “others” and the extent to which alterity has been, too often, a project of the West. However, it is also sadly the case that constructions of otherness have arisen at multiple historical moments and contexts where the self may not be categorized as “the west.”

In responding to the question posed by the Asia and the Other conference organizers, I will argue that the self/other binary described by Said characterizes different historical moments of privilege in the history of the Naxi, who live in Lijiang (麗江), southwest China. I argue that the West had no monopoly on projects of orientalism and that, in fact, the Chinese themselves were responsible for the othering of non-Chinese ethnic groups in China, the Naxi being a case in point. It is beyond the scope of my research to examine the extent to which imperial Chinese selves may have been constructed by a (European) West in the early 18th century, when the first Chinese civilizing project enacted on non-Chinese ethnic groups took place. During this period, China was not threatened by Western (European) expansion; not until the late 18th century was there much contact with the West. By examining other moments of privilege and fluidity in Lijiang, I will argue that other/other distinctions between sinicized Naxi (納西) on one hand, and “backward” rural or mountain Naxi on the other, were reformulations of earlier distinctions between “advanced Chinese” and “primitive ethnic minorities,” and that contemporary gendered other/other distinctions between urban Lijiang residents and recent rural immigrants are yet another form of earlier modern/primitive distinctions. My understanding is that the self/other binary is not fixed to any particular group or geographic region (west or east) but signals an attempt to exert dominance in moments of change or social fluidity.

Edward Said argued that the “other” is a creation of the West, a projection of desire and fear, a subject without its own identity (Rotter 5). Said, of course, was referring to an imagined “east,” a representation that nonetheless shaped policies toward people and a geographic region with significant and harmful consequences. But what happens when countries or regions, the creations of acts of representation, themselves become centers with the power to represent themselves and others? The extensive historical literature on ethnicity and territorial expansion during China’s late imperial era documents the depiction of ethnic groups in ways that directly
parallel Said’s characterization of the other.\(^4\) In addition, many recent historical and anthropological accounts addressing ethnicity invoke Said’s notion of the other in the theorization of ethnicity or difference in China.\(^5\)

This paper seeks to complexify interpretations of Said’s understanding of self/other through the examination of moments that gave rise to otherness or alterity involving the Naxi, one of China’s ethnic groups. The Naxi case illustrates how China’s formulations of self/other during the late imperial era were unrelated to the west/east binary. Alterity varies with social context and is enacted on a continually shifting ground. Self/other narratives arise from moments of privilege, and thus have no intrinsic relationship to the “west” or “east.” In order to appreciate Said’s powerful insights, we need to focus primarily on the shifting arenas of privilege in which layered alterities are generated. By layered alterities, I refer to constructions of otherness that shape related constructions of difference—what Said refers to as binaries of other/other. Where discourses of self/other might be related, as in the case of the Naxi, it is because those discourses were generated in interlocked arenas. I argue that formulations of alterity tend to be both nested and gendered.

My paper will explore demarcations of self/other (civilized/barbarian and Chinese/ethnic) as well as demarcations of other/other (sinicized ethnic/authentic ethnic and pure/polluted) as a way of considering common misreadings of Said’s formulation. Naxi history of the late imperial period illustrates that the “other” was not only a creation of “the west.” The dynamic of self/other in what Harrell refers to as the “civilizing project” of the late imperial era was one in which the “east” or, specifically, “the Chinese empire” was colonizer to its own “others” (3). After the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the categorization of ethnic groups using evolutionary hierarchies led to the creation of a Chinese/ethnic binary that was informed by, but also reconfigured, the earlier self/other formulation. The Han Chinese/ethnic distinction led to the creation of what Said referred to as an “other/other” binary between, on one hand, Naxi intellectuals and those they categorized as sinicized Naxi and, on the other hand, those considered more ethnically authentic or “other,” namely female ritual practitioners, rural mountain people, and Naxi women. The post-revolutionary distinction between Han Chinese and ethnic was both shaped by imperial distinctions and enabled subsequent distinctions between more sinicized and less sinicized Naxi. Finally, I turn to a

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\(^4\) See also Crossley, Siu, and Sutton, “Introduction” 18; Diamond 2; Dikötter 2; Herman, “Cant of Conquest” 146; Millward and Newby 127; Wiens 219.

\(^5\) See also Chao, “Hegemony, Agency and the Re-presentation” 228; Cheung 252; Giersch 80; Harrell 7; Hostetler 87; Khan 129; Lipman 83; Litzinger 34; Ren 75; Schein 100.
discourse of self/other among the Naxi in Lijiang that dates from the recent development of tourism and the reordering of structures of prestige. As tourism in Lijiang was associated with travel to the past, the modernity of Lijiang residents was called into question. In a context of rural to urban migration, resulting from the city’s tourism-related growth, upwardly mobile young rural women who migrated from the countryside were constructed as polluted “others” and deemed inappropriate marriage partners by established urban residents seeking to police older hierarchical distinctions. This self/other discourse was partially informed by a more sinicized/less sinicized Naxi binary that drew on earlier hierarchical distinctions between urban and rural Naxi.

**Imperial Other**

Lijiang, a city in northern Yunnan Province, is predominantly populated by the Naxi, one of China’s 56 ethnic groups. The Naxi are a Tibeto-Burman speaking ethnic group with a written history dating from the Tang Dynasty. Discourses of self/other in Lijiang date to the late imperial era. Lijiang was incorporated into the Chinese imperium during the 18th and 19th centuries as part of the Qing Dynasty’s territorial expansion, a project which doubled the size of the Chinese empire, resulting in China’s present size (Millward 113). Late imperial discourses established a distinction between “civilized selves” and “barbarian others” which justified the dominance and suppression of the latter category by the former.

The earliest imperial claims to rule over Lijiang date from the Yuan Dynasty, when the *tusi* (土司) system, a system of indirect rule using native chiefs, was established. Lijiang was ruled by a succession of native chiefs from the Mu family. Their genealogies, the Mu Chronicles, document extensive tributary relations with Kublai Khan (Rock 9). Late imperial self/other discourse is typified by Wang Yangming’s justification of the *tusi* system:

> Barbarians are like wild deer. To institute direct civil administration by Han Chinese magistrates would be like herding deer into the hall of a house and trying to tame them. In the end they merely butt over your

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6 The Mu Chronicles, a genealogy of the rulers of Lijiang, claim that the earliest governor of Lijiang (Satham in Tibetan; Sa-ddo in Naxi) ruled during the Tang Dynasty. This claim is corroborated by Yuan historical sources (Rock 87). Lijiang is mentioned in earlier imperial documents, but as part of other, differently named territories.
sacrificial altars, kick over your tables, and dash about in frantic flight. In the wilderness districts, therefore, one should adapt one's methods to the character of the wilderness. . . . On the other hand to leave these tribal chiefs to their own alliances . . . is like releasing deer into the wilderness. . . . To fragment their domains under separate chiefs is to follow the policy of erecting restraining fences and is consonant with the policy of gelding the stallion and castrating the boar. (Wiens 219)

In the imperial self/other discourse, it was common to liken tribal groups to wild animals (Dikötter 4). The disdain for tribal groups is further evidenced in the Chinese characters used for ethnic groups that name and classify them by including ideograms or radicals for insects or animals (Yang qtd. in McKhann 42). Submission to political control was the principal means by which tribal groups were classified by the Qing and Ming empires. Tribal groups were either shu (熟, sinicized), those who submitted to the imperial labor tax and recognized the authority of the tusi, or the more barbarous sheng (生, less sinicized), who refused to be taxed, register their households, submit to any authority, or show humility towards the state.7

During the Ming Dynasty, the tusi, the office of native chief, became hereditary and descendants of the tusi were required to lead military campaigns to “open land” or suppress “criminals” and “rebels” (Rowe 62; Rock 101). In Lijiang, Mu De (木德), the first hereditary tusi, was given the title tuguan zhifu (土官知府), hereditary native magistrate, of Lijiang Prefecture in 1383 as a reward for military expeditions that expanded the Ming empire (Rock 101). Qing imperial discourse described the tusi system as a method of yi yi gong yi (以夷攻夷), “using barbarians to attack barbarians” (Wiens 215). Indigenous elites, such as Mu tusi, were simultaneously situated as rulers in local hierarchies and subjects in imperial hierarchies. The Lijiang tusi blurred Said’s boundaries of self/other in the sense that they both benefited from, and were exploited by, the Imperial Chinese. The Mu tusi used their alliance with the Ming and Qing empires to wield power over local rivals and pass that power to their descendants. In this sense, the tusi were intermediaries between the imperial rulers and their indirectly-ruled frontier subjects, and might be described as handmaidens to imperial expansion.8

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7 See Dikötter 9; Siu, “Where Were the Women?” 47; Herman 164 for similar ideas.
8 As Foucault and Said point out, elites often play an interstitial role in facilitating projects of domination.
Although the tusi were likened to “barbarians,” their position was not unequivocally on the “barbarian” side of the binary. Lijiang historical sources indicate that the tusi and their descendants were the earliest targets of the Qing civilizing project. During the late Qing, there was increasing pressure on descendants of the Mu tusi to prove their “civilized” status. The genealogies of the ruling Lijiang tusi are filled with boasting about their knowledge of Confucian classics, the ancestral halls they built, their adoption of Chinese dress, and the performance of their filial deeds (Rock 92, 118).

In 1723, with the institution of the gaitu guiliu (改土歸流) policy, the tusi system was ended in Lijiang and the Qing state implemented direct rule by Chinese magistrates. The self/barbarian discourse was still evident in the explanation given by Guan Xuexuan (管學宣), an early Lijiang magistrate, for the shift to direct Chinese rule in 1723: “Why did they [barbarians] not remain in their peaceful barbarian state? They had been attracted by the Imperial Benevolence as animals are attracted by sweet grass” (Rock 46).

With direct rule, the “barbarian” population at large became the focus of the Qing civilizing project. Under the Yongzheng emperor, four schools opened in Lijiang in 1736; their purpose was to jiao hua (教化), effect a moral transformation of local subjects through education. The schools taught the Chinese language as well as Confucian ritual and ceremonial etiquette. Emphasis was placed on marriage and funerary ritual, and Lijiang citizens faced punishment for failing to adhere to Qing practices. In theory, barbarians could cross the divide to civilization through the adoption of “civilized” practice (Dikötter 2; Rowe 7; Smith 95). In this sense, the late Qing civilized/barbarian demarcation was not based on biological essence, but rather on individual practice.

Late imperial histories of the Ming and Qing encounters with the Naxi illustrate that the “other” was not a creation of “the west.” The dynamic of self/other in the late imperial civilizing project was one in which the “east” or, specifically, “the Ming and Qing empires” were colonizers to their own “others.” While the “east” was being constructed as “other” in 18th century western discourse,

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9 Gaitu guiliu is a double entendre, literally meaning to “improve the dirt by returning it to the stream,” but also understood as “to change from native to regular administration” (Dreyer 284).

10 In Guangdong Province, ethnic labels were deployed for the purposes of marginalizing groups or asserting superiority (Siu, “Where Were the Women?” 49), and elements of indigenous populations became Han as they acquired the cultural symbols of the larger Chinese polity (Siu, “Where Were the Women?” 22).
one element of the “east,” China, was simultaneously, and apparently independently, constructing its own “others” as part of a major imperial project of territorial expansion.

Ethnic Other

Soon after the founding of the People’s Republic of China, the civilized/barbarian demarcation was transmogrified into a “Han Chinese”/“ethnic other” distinction. This process drew on western epistemology. The People’s Republic of China adopted early 20th century anthropology’s understandings of “ethnicity” and Stalinist evolutionary schemas, informed by what Said might have referred to as a combination of “Darwinian Orient” and “racist Orient” discourses (Said 22). Chinese scholars writing in the 1950s defined “nationality” (民族 minzu) as interchangeable with “ethnic group.” The effect of the minzu shibie (民族识别), the project to categorize China’s population in 1957, was to create ethnic subjects and situate them on an evolutionary hierarchy of difference. Harrell has described the objectification and classification of China’s ethnic groups during the 1950s as another “civilizing project” (Harrell 22-27). Yan Ruxian’s research on the Naxi, conducted in 1963, typifies the Chinese interest in evolutionary placement of ethnic groups: “They [Naxi] are like a colorful historical museum of the evolution of families in which one finds living fossils of ancient marriage formations and family structures” (Yan 60).

Chinese social scientists used such criteria as patrilineal kinship, written language and sedentary agriculture to rank ethnic groups as more advanced or backwards. Similarity to the Han Chinese culture also advanced the position of ethnic groups on the PRC’s evolutionary ladder. The new system of categorization

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11 The concept of ethnicity in early 20th century anthropological discourse displaced “race” as a means of classification. The present anthropological understanding of ethnicity is not as a system for categorizing people into different natural kinds. Rather, ethnicity is understood as a means of creating boundaries that is used by dominant groups to categorize subordinate populations (Wilmsen 5). While ethnic categories are imposed on groups, it is also the case that groups defined as “ethnic” may embrace identities or adopt other ones as a means of advancing collective interests (Levine 71; Wilmsen 5).

12 Chinese categorization was derived from Stalin’s definition of “nation” as “a historically formed stable community of people arising on the basis of common language, common territory, common economic life, and a typical cast of mind manifested in common culture” (1914).

13 Minzu Shibie was carried out by historians, anthropologists, professors and students of China’s Academy of Sciences and the Central Nationalities Institute, as well as by other scholars from universities in Beijing and elsewhere (Dreyer 141).
allowed for differentiation between groups, just as the imperial era’s raw/cooked distinction had, but it claimed to use wenhua (文化), culture, to rank groups as opposed to submission to political domination.

A significant departure was that the minzu shibie classification fixed groups and individuals within ethnic boundaries and ethnic labels. Classification according to “ethnicity” required that groups be distinct from one another, that individuals could not transcend their group’s classification, and that non-Chinese ethnic groups be ranked by evolutionary criteria in fixed grades of inferiority to the dominant Chinese.

The categorization of ethnic groups is a common way for nations to define national characteristics. It is also a means of privileging national characteristics or particular regions or groups based on a stratified order (Crossley, Siu, and Sutton 5). The dominant group is usually unmarked, while marginal groups are marked as “ethnic.” The self/other demarcation in post-revolutionary China has been explained as an opposition between a desired “modern” Chinese self and a “backward” ethnic other (Gladney 93; White 304). However, unlike the “civilized”/“barbarian” discourse, the “Han Chinese”/“ethnic other” boundary was not a divide that could be crossed by changing one’s practices.

Despite the putative use of genealogical or cultural criteria, the creation of ethnic categories was political. Several groups who have presented evidence of separate cultural practices have been denied recognition as independent minzu. The appellation “Naxi” previously applied to the descendants of four clans14 who were ruled by the Mu tusi. But as a result of minzu shibie, “Naxi” also came to represent divergent groups: Han Chinese from Jiangnan who migrated during the Ming and Qing; other indigenous groups who migrated to Lijiang during the Qing and were forced to adopt the surname “He” as a marker of their subjugation to the Mu tusi (Chao, “Deceptions of Difference” 37); as well as peoples (called Lulu and Moso) who lived in contiguous areas. The Moso have continually sought classification as an independent minzu, but have been denied that status.

While the initial categorization of ethnic groups took place in 1957, essentialized characteristics defining different minzu were not elaborated until the post-Mao era. Soon after the initial categorization, the state condemned difang zhuyi (地方主義), local (ethnic) nationalism, as part of the Anti-Rightist Campaign.

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14 The Naxi trace their ancestry to four clans: He, Mei, Shu, and Yu. According to dongba (東巴) religious texts, the ancient Naxi did not use surnames. Rather, their clan names were combined with their fathers’ names and names chosen through divination [This information is based on the author’s fieldwork in a mountain village interviewing the villagers].
Expressions of ethnic identity and autonomy were seen as an obstacle to the goal of national unity and to socialism itself. Minzu Tuanjie (民族团结), a journal addressing minority policy, complained that “minorities tended to stress their own cultures and ignore the ‘advanced’ Han culture” (Dreyer 157). The elaboration of ethnic identities did not resume until the late 1970s and early 1980s, when policy shifted and ethnic diversity became an important component of national identity. At this time, in contrast to state researchers who carried out minzu shibie, it was the ethnic groups themselves that were called on to articulate ethnic distinctiveness. But nearly two decades of suppressing ethnic cultural practices and languages had created a national culture that supplanted much of the cultural distinctiveness of “ethnic groups.”

Other/Other

In Lijiang of the 1980s and 1990s, as part of the rediscovery of ethnic difference throughout China, the “Han Chinese”/“ethnic other” discourse led to the creation of distinctions among the Naxi. Naxi intellectuals and elites, in an effort to advance the status of the Naxi as a collectivity, essentialized Naxi culture as dongba wenhua (东巴文化), Dongba culture. Dongba culture was literally the cultural practices found in Lijiang’s mountainous regions. Dongbas were Naxi shamans, still living in mountainous areas, who used a pictographic script in their rituals. Though dongba script was exclusively a ritual script, and intelligible only to shamans, it was an ancient form of writing and could be construed as marking the Naxi as one of the more advanced ethnic groups in terms of Chinese evolutionary criteria. The use of evolutionary criteria simultaneously shifted the terms of privilege and enabled new formulations of alterity. Literacy in dongba script was not a status marker among the Naxi before 1949, and dongba shamans were often from the poorest of rural households. Dongba culture constructed “authentic Naxi culture” as including only the practices of mountain Naxi, specifically drawing on the way of life described in these semi-mythical ritual texts. As argued elsewhere,

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15 In Lijiang town (between 1949 and the late 1970s) schoolchildren learned Chinese and grew up singing a handful of patriotic songs. While Naxi is still spoken in the countryside, a moratorium on folk religion, defined as feudal superstition during the Maoist years, alienated younger generations from pre-revolutionary Naxi cultural practices. This was less the case in mountain villages, where some Naxi shamans continued to clandestinely practice rituals [This information is also based on the author’s fieldwork.].

Dongba culture created distinctions between male and female ritual practitioners (women were not permitted to be dongbas), between Naxi men and women, and between mountain Naxi and Naxi living in the basin (lowlands) and towns (Chao, “Hegemony, Agency and the Re-presentation” 221, 230).

Naxi intellectuals and elites identified women and mountain people as more “authentically Naxi,” at the same time that they described themselves as virtually Han Chinese. The inauthentic/authentic distinction is informed by bounded evolutionary categories that allow only the Han to occupy the place of the modern self, and by older imperial distinctions that associate mountain people and women with “barbarism” or the lack of “civilization.” It has been argued elsewhere that this is a result of the imperial civilizing project’s exclusive concern with male education and the fact that its schools only reached as far as the Lijiang basin or lowlands (Chao, “Hegemony, Agency and the Re-presentation” 222-23). The mountains were a domain associated with rebellion and banditry beyond the reach of the state.17 Women and mountain people appeared to be more authentic—that is, they appeared less “civilized” and implicitly more “barbaric” or “primitive”—because they were not subject to the imperial civilizing project in the same way sinicized Naxi men were. This was a fact that informed imperial imaginings and continues to inform a contemporary popular imaginary of difference.18 The invention of Dongba culture was intended to reflect positively on the Naxi as an ethnic group, at the same time that it demarcated differences creating an other/other distinction; more specifically, a sinicized (inauthentic)/authentic distinction between Naxi.

The Chinese state’s representations of China’s internal diversity sought to battle the West’s perceptions of the Chinese as the internally homogeneous “blue ants,” a legacy of the Maoist era, and to promote trade, tourism, and foreign investment. Ethnic categories, and the new forms of marginalization created by jockeying for higher positions on an evolutionary hierarchy, were not inevitable. Rather, they were part of a larger arena in which a new national image necessitated inventions of internal ethnic difference.19 The creation of a heterogeneous, multi-ethnic national identity required the elaboration of ethnic categories, which in

17 For similar depictions see Wiens, Siu, “Cultural Identity and the Politics of Difference in South China” and Crossley.

18 In the 1990s, when these ideas still persisted, older women in the basin and in Lijiang town wore Naxi clothing and only spoke Naxi, while older men wore Chinese clothing and were sometimes bilingual in Chinese.

19 Friedman, Gladney and others have also addressed the shift in the representation of national identity after the post-Mao era. Friedman’s discussion is particularly relevant because it illustrates how history is reinvented to foster a new national identity.
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The two ethnic discourses discussed here (Chinese/ethnic and sinicized/authentic) enable us to consider the relationship between demarcations of self/other and other/other. These oppositions are productively examined together in this case because they mark difference and hierarchy that exist in the same arena and are related and reinforcing. Sinicized Naxi elites necessarily partitioned the category “Naxi” and displaced authenticity (and its association with primitivity) onto female ritual practitioners, women and mountain Naxi, because essentialist ethnic boundaries did not enable them to be both Naxi and modern (Han Chinese). They could, however, be comparatively closer to the Chinese and relatively modern if “other” Naxi could be made to occupy the place of authenticity and primitivity. The other/other binary was not created to denigrate Naxi women or mountain Naxi, but must be situated in the arena in which the Chinese/ethnic (self/other) binary already defined difference. The sinicized/authentic formulation illustrates how local agency cannot be exercised outside the space of hegemonic formulations of difference and, indeed, is shaped within them.

Polluted Other: Globalization and Fox Stench

The last iteration of self/other in Lijiang is not “hegemonic” in the sense that imperial and ethnic discourses were and are. Like the distinctions created by Dongba culture, it is a nested discourse. Specifically, it echoes a number of new self/other oppositions that permeate popular subjectivity in contemporary China. And unlike Dongba culture, which appears on virtually every tourist pamphlet describing the Naxi or the Lijiang area, and which has become a field of scholarly production, the discourse of polluted taxi drivers has no official recognition. It is what anthropologists describe as part of a popular imaginary.

During the late 1990s, female taxi drivers were cast in an other/other discourse in which the pure bodies of urban, public sector, safe Lijiang women were distinguished from the polluted bodies of rural, private sector, dangerous Lijiang women. The huchou (狐臭), or fox stench, discourse dates from the late 1990s in Lijiang city. Rumors described some female taxi drivers as having heritable body pollution and abnormal sexual organs. The rumors were usually based on speculation as to why particular “attractive” women were not married, or why certain courtships suspiciously failed to result in marriages. Marriage to women with fox stench could have dire consequences for descendants and even deceased
Unmarried taxi drivers were suspected of being *yingyang* (陰陽), hermaphrodites, or lacking female sex organs. Other rumors cast aspersions on the morality of female taxi drivers. I have argued elsewhere that those who spread such rumors sought to police marriage boundaries in the context of Lijiang’s changing urban landscape (Chao, “Dangerous Work” 72, 102).

Since the late 1990s, Lijiang has become a major destination for international and national tourism. This transformation took place in the wake of an earthquake that resulted in nationally broadcast images of the ancient city and its later designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. National and international recognition resulted in a cataclysmic reconfiguring of local economics and demographics. In 1997, close to 2 million tourists visited Lijiang, a town of 60,000. Luxury hotels, restaurants, massage parlors, and businesses selling souvenirs and antiques filled the streets of the old town. In the early 1990s transportation primarily consisted of bicycling and walking, but by 1997 there were approximately 700 taxis operating in a town of merely three square miles. Tourism and capitalist privatization brought desired commodities as well as unexpected ills.

Lijiang residents lamented the transformation of their public space, once geared toward families with children, but newly taken over by entertainments catering to tourists primarily from East and Southeast Asia, Chinese government officials with expense accounts, and pleasure-seeking adults. With the growth of prostitution and the commodification of sex in massage parlors, public spaces after dark had become associated with sexuality and danger. A popular saying among local residents is that “Big bosses and high officials who visit Lijiang as tourists share three characteristics: They don’t use their own money, they don’t use their own grain and they don’t use their own wives.” In the same context, the commodification and consumption of sex by outsiders, largely tourists from within China or foreign tourists from East or Southeast Asia, altered local constructions of gender and power. In the 1980s prostitution in Lijiang was non-existent and adultery was condemned. But, as sex increasingly became identified as a privileged form of consumption by outsiders, it also altered local constructions of male prestige. Luxury hotel managers and prosperous entrepreneurs, notorious for keeping mistresses, came to be envied as modern men of power. The sexualization of space and power also affected local standards of female behavior. Particularly among Lijiang residents critical of these developments, widespread prostitution was equated with female immorality and heightened the need to categorize local women as either sexually pure or sexually polluted. The ensuing surveillance of women
focused on their circulation in now dangerously sexualized public spaces, as well as their contact with morally suspect outsiders. The saying about big bosses and high officials also warned the local male audience that the “corrupt outsiders who don’t use their own wives” are believed to be using the wives of Lijiang men. It was not the immorality of female taxi drivers, but the location of their labor that led to their vilification. They were essentially women out of place. The female taxi driver—whose occupation required her to transverse now problematic public spaces—was imagined to be facilitating immoral activities, and came to be equated with them.

Like the civilized/barbaric and Han Chinese/ethnic other discourses, what I will call the pure/polluted discourse in Lijiang at the turn of this century might be called an “other/other” discourse. Taxi drivers may be understood as an “other” within the category of Lijiang residents who once lived in a pianpi (偏远), undeveloped rural areas, in China’s southwest. In the pure/polluted discourse the pure “other” was characterized as an established resident, with urban origins, who was employed in the state sector. In many specific ways the “othering” of taxi drivers as polluted reflects the declining status of state-sector employees, the new mobility of some rural migrants, and the reordering of older social hierarchies in Lijiang. Most significantly, the pure/polluted discourse was articulated in an arena in which a tourist economy gave a new presence to the opposition between a “modern self” and an “ancient (primitive) other” as symbolized in the post-revolutionary Han Chinese/ethnic discourse.

Lijiang residents welcomed the development of the local economy in hopes of gaining a modern identity, yet the viability of Lijiang as a tourist destination necessitated that it and its inhabitants appear frozen in the past. For many urban Chinese, China’s new place in a global economy had changed the landscape of their own cities, making them ongoing construction sites no longer recognizable as China. For alienated urban Chinese from Shanghai and Beijing, as well as from Taiwan and Singapore, places like Lijiang, with its Song Dynasty architecture, embodied the Chinese past, a past that could now be traveled to. But this meant that Lijiang and its residents were still perceived as the ancient “other” to a modern China and its inhabitants; “ancient others” in contrast to “modern traveling Chinese selves.” Ironically, the tourism that enabled Lijiang’s “modernity” required a continual performance of “antiquity.” Hence, even embracing the perceived “modern,” “the ethnic other” could not escape the mark of difference and its older association with the antithesis of modern: “The ancient,” “the barbaric,” “the primitive,” and the “backward.”
As Lijiang residents found themselves living in a city where they were the “ancient other,” they displaced the sign of “otherness” onto a new “local other”: the rural migrant, particularly female taxi drivers, who came the closest to transgressing a preexisting local hierarchy. In Lijiang of the 1990s, about fifty percent of the taxis were driven by women. The prominence of rural women in this profession was rooted in Lijiang’s transport system before the 1990s, in which goods were transported by young and middle-aged rural women who pulled three-wheel carts. Hauling was not prestigious labor and it was considered “women’s work.” As a result of tourism and the expansion of the town into the neighboring countryside, many rural households sold their land and invested money in taxis to be driven by daughters or wives. But female taxi drivers, whose salaries were double or triple those of college-educated state sector workers, threatened the older social hierarchies and clashed with new constructions of gender-appropriate labor in the late 1990s. Their economic mobility, coupled with the sinking status of many long-established urban residents, led to a leveling of former status differences: urban over rural; state-sector over private-sector; mental over manual labor; and male over female salaries. The urban over rural and male over female binaries were freighted with earlier gendered distinctions such as modern/backward and civilized/primitive. The marked upward mobility of female taxi drivers eroded boundaries of difference, making it possible for these new rural migrants to marry the sons of established Lijiang families. At the same time, women who drove taxis were seen as problematically masculine in the context of an emergent model of femininity that stressed the appearance and morality of potential wives and mothers. Newer models of femininity were superseding the Maoist era models of womanhood based on labor productivity that reigned in rural Lijiang a decade earlier. Before the 1990s, rural parents imagined the ideal bride as either tzogutze, literally a Naxi woman with a “heart like a man” who was “bold,” “risk-taking” and “daring,” or mirouguo, literally a “female warhorse” and used to describe a woman with a robust physique capable of performing demanding agricultural labor. In the late 1990s, urban Lijiang residents perceived female taxi drivers as inverting emergent constructions of the feminine. The ensuing gossip about their bodily abnormalities—that they lacked female reproductive organs, possessed both male and female genitalia, or had polluted bodies that would create reproductive monstrosities—were cautionary tales meant to alert young Lijiang men to the perils of marriage that crossed boundaries, threatened individual and social reproduction.
Otherness in the pure/polluted discourse might be understood as a debate over acceptability that importantly came into play at a moment of change and social fluidity.

The displacement of “otherness” echoes what Naxi intellectuals did in defining mountain people and women as more authentic and implicitly “primitive.” It may also have been a strategy of the various Mu tusi, who sought to identify with the “civilized” imperium by wearing Chinese robes and documenting their filial acts. In all three cases, self/other binaries led to the creation of new binaries and the displacement of “otherness” onto a subset, usually a gendered subset, of the “other.”

Self/other discourses will always provide a context for the creation of other/other discourses. However, little is gained by focusing on these sets of demarcations as a source of explanation in and of themselves. Oppositional demarcations are simply signs in the process of boundary construction. The more significant analysis requires embedding the sign in the arena where it is deployed.

**Back to Said**

The self/other demarcation was neither Said’s most original contribution nor what is most significant about his now canonical *Orientalism*. The self/other dynamic that Said describes echoes earlier theorists. Without invoking the idioms of self and other, Hegel’s discussions of the master/slave relationship and the negation of the negation both depict the relationship of self and other as intertwined. Without negation there is no self; without the slave there is no master. The structuralism of Ferdinand Saussure and Claude Lévi-Strauss identifies opposition or distinction as a universal mechanism for generating an endless array of different cultural orders. Before Said, the anti-realist structuralism of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss argued against an objective reality, suggesting that there are only sets of constructed representations corresponding to linguistic communities and cultural categories. Lévi-Strauss’ *La Pensée Sauvage* and *Totemism* understand the “savage other” as a construction of the analyst’s own imaginings, a projection and fulfillment of our own categories. The idea of the “other” as a fiction of its representer has a long history.

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20 Lévi-Strauss’ understanding of distinction or opposition is helpful here. He explains that any distinction or opposition makes a pair defined in relation to each other. Any opposition produces not a category, but a pair of categories, or a binary. This distinction always allows for the creation of at least a third category. Hence, the Han Chinese/ethnic opposition allows for “sinicized ethnic/ethnic” or its twins “inauthentic/authentic” and “modern ethnic/primitive ethnic” (88-89).
But it was Said who revealed how such imaginings informed decades of scholarly production. *Orientalism* revealed how the imagined Muslim Orient was a discourse of power and domination. It is the Foucauldian Said whose archaeology of orientalist narrative makes the most profound and enduring contribution to the reconfiguration of contemporary epistemology. Said’s critique calls our attention to a political economy of intellectual production, and cautions us to scrutinize the presumption that scholarly production stands in a place of neutrality. Orientalist scholarship is not informative about the other but about the self; and most significantly is a product of the arena in which orientalist representation is asserted. Critical analysis of orientalist scholarship focuses on the discursive context, particularly the historical moment and fields of power, in which the self/other are depicted. Said called our attention to putative geographic realms of west/east and Occident/Orient that belie distinctions of colonizer/colonized, representer/represented. In sum, it seems to me that Said would not ask us to focus on the self/other or on the other/other, but rather on the arena in which these demarcations or signs are deployed.

**Three Arenas and Three Representations of the “Other”**

The civilized/barbarian discourse ultimately has to be contextualized within the Qing project of territorial expansion. The “Chinese/ethnic other” discourse must be contextualized in the two moments of building national identity. The first was a post-revolutionary national taxonomy or categorization of subjects (1957); the second was a project tied to re-presenting China to an international audience after the end of Maoism (1977–the 1980s). The marginalization of women and mountain people is not about mean-spiritedness on the part of Naxi intellectuals or elites, but the (unintended) effect of a project of empowerment exercised in the context of shifts in state policy toward ethnic groups and the persistence of an evolutionary classification schema. The discourse of fox stench is not simply about the bullying of rural migrant women; rather, it illuminates difference and exclusion in an arena in which globalization takes place. It tells us about the effects of capitalist privatization, the decline of the state sector economy, the eclipsing of socialist social orders by capitalism, and the commodification of antiquity—in this case, of a city and its inhabitants. The arena’s tensions are representative of those present across China: Tensions between socialist and capitalist economies; tensions created by economic mobility and the communities changed by that mobility; popular debates over body quality (set off by state population policy) and its metaphorical
attachment to hierarchies of modernity. At the same time, fox stench discourse tells us about the exercise of agency, however misdirected, that draws on a rich cultural repository of signs and symbols to critique and resist the local effects of globalization. In sum, Said might advise us that the arenas in which orientalist demarcations are deployed tell us far more than the self/other demarcations themselves.

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Against the backdrop of the Ottoman threat, a very common motif in the diplomatic language of the late Middle Ages and the Early Modern period was the topos of a Christian Occident surrounded by innumerable enemies of the faith and protected by lands such as Poland, Hungary, and Livonia, stylized as 'bulwarks of Christianity'.