RELIGION THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS: FIELDWORK, BIOGRAPHY
AND AUTHORSHIP IN SOUTHWEST CHINA AND BEYOND

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Abstract

This article is an exploration into how a distinct fascination with the study of religion traverses the biographies of researchers who, through fieldwork, episodically enter into the life-worlds of the peoples they study. In it, I offer up ethnographic and auto-ethnographic reflections on the experiential crossroads and personal biographies which are perhaps as constitutive of religion as they are of the persons who study it. Through a discussion of interconnected events that arose during and outside of my anthropological fieldwork among the Nuosu, a Tibeto-Burman group of Southwest China, I highlight how Nuosu claims to authoring my biography have brought their animistic religion, culture, and its international import further into focus for myself, local scholars, and rural Nuosu persons. My argument pivots around the idea that fieldwork-based researchers and their interlocutors often appropriate each other’s biographies in rather cosmic ways, thus revealing the historically, socially, and personally contingent qualities to studies of religion.

The Power of Fascination

It is probably more often the case than not that scholars of religion command the power of fascination across continents, time zones, memories, collegial relations, friendships, and the imagined gulf between themselves and the religions they study. Perhaps researchers give rise to their own fascination for reasons that exceed themselves, much as Captain Cook’s demise, so Marshall Sahlins suggests, arose from how the Hawaiians authored his biography vis-à-vis that of their god Lono (1995:1-2). In this article, I discuss how studies of religion provoke a distinct fascination with the biographies of those researchers who partake in them – a fascination that may elicit rather cosmic claims, by researchers and interlocutors, to having authored each other’s biographies. Anthropologists focusing on the ‘new animism’ already have observed the central role of ‘wonder’ (Scott 2012:120, 2013a:303, 2013b) and ‘astonishment’ (Ingold 2006:18, 2013:735) in studies of religion and Euro-American scholarship more generally. I wish to extend this focus by exploring the fascination that fieldwork-based researchers and their interlocutors have with each other and with studying religion. As I show, this fascination may lead researchers and interlocutors alike to declare a degree of ownership over each other’s biographies. To this end, I demonstrate the value of incorporating auto-ethnographic elements into the study of religion, given that claims to authoring or owning our biographies are, by extension, claims to the historical moments and socio-culturally contingent relationships through which they unfold. Revealing just how our interlocutors work to make their fascination with us tangible to themselves may also conjure up analytically useful reflections on charisma, enchantment, or demonic power, which have become common themes in the study of religion.

The fascination with research, researchers, and those persons being researched will not come as news to anyone who has conducted fieldwork (and not just the anthropological variety of it) among practitioners of religion. Nor, of course, is this fascination unfamiliar to those peoples living in so-called remote corners of the globe. Yet the fascination with
scholarship is routinely fed by the dipping in and out of people’s lives that is inherent to fieldwork-based research. Time spent in and out of the field complicates the researcher’s ever-shifting biography, which is shaped as much by the doing of fieldwork as it is by the intervals spent between the ‘return’ visits made to the people(s) of study (Vitebsky 2012:180-184). Indeed, the researcher’s absence may lead to beguiling situations in which fieldwork friends claim a degree of authorship over his or her biography, even after having travelled quite a distance away.

In this article, I therefore ask whether it is possible to capture the dynamics of this fascination with research and researchers that ultimately travel through multiple biographies, locations, and times. I explore too how this fascination yields additional heuristic leverage for acquiring the fullest understanding of the study of religion. My discussion pivots around how fieldwork-based studies may be paired with a brand of ‘auto-ethnography’ in which the researcher reflects on how his or her biography is routinely shaped by the peoples of study. Auto-ethnography is used here to highlight how the peoples being researched actually co-author the biographies of researchers, so that as Marilyn Strathern suggests, they acquire a degree of what, in Euro-American contexts, would be glossed as ‘ownership’ or even ‘authorship’ of the researcher’s own self (1987:21-23). Given this, I suggest that the researcher’s biography is co-produced by fieldwork interlocutors as much during the moments of fieldwork as it is during the intervals spent away from the fieldwork locale, or what is often glossed as time spent ‘at home’. Conversely, the biographies of certain fieldwork interlocutors may develop in tandem with our own, through processes that reveal how the vocation of studying religion can shape the biographies of all those who partake in it.

Allow me to give a timely example up front that illustrates my point. In summer 2015, I made a seven-week long fieldwork trip to Ninglang County in Yunnan Province, China, which is predominantly populated by the Nuosu, a Tibeto-Burman group (also known in Chinese as Liangshan Yizu凉山彝族) with whom I have worked since 2007. Just two weeks after I returned from this trip to the UK in September 2015, I received a text message from Bahmat1, a Nuosu member of an ethnological institute in Ninglang, who reflected that: ‘Probably I have made Su Menglin [苏梦林; author’s Chinese name] possess too much fascination (Ch. meili 魅力)’. There are perhaps numerous ways to interpret Bahmat’s thought, which as I learned in follow-up text messages, were not fully clear to him either. But a simple look at the etymology of meili, which is a compound work like many Mandarin terms, sheds some poignant light on his reflection. Mei (Ch. 魅) is written with the ‘ghost’ radical, which appears on the left side of the character, and can alternately mean evil spirit, demon, magic or charm. Li (Ch. 力) can mean power, force, strength, ability, or doing something strenuously. Taken together, meili thus evokes a sense of fascination, charm, glamour, or even charisma. Yet Bahmat’s view of my fascination did not allude to a quality inherent to me or otherwise produced by myself. Instead, Bahmat emphasised his responsibility in ‘probably’ having authored this fascination, since he had ‘made’ me ‘possess too much’ of it. This is a significant claim to authorship that bears within it important implications for anthropology and the wider study of religion. Bahmat’s text message begs the question: Where did his claim to have produced my ‘fascination’ come from?

My mobile telephone announced the arrival of Bahmat’s text about a week before I embarked on this article, and 18 days after returning from fieldwork in Ninglang. This article was not planned in advance and was to some extent the product of serendipity. However, I did choose to compose it during what anthropologists often describe as the ‘transitional time’ between field and home, which on this occasion was accompanied by my receipt of an around-the-clock flurry of Chinese-language text messages, as well as some messages in
Chinese and Nuosu language on the Chinese ‘QQ’ social media platform. Initially, I had envisioned spending the time writing something else while shifting my focus from being in the field to having returned from it. But an intriguing sense of being pursued by fieldwork friends via social media prompted me to instead give voice to an idea that I had for some time entertained in passing, namely: that the fascination which researchers and their interlocutors have with the study of religion arises from their efforts to produce each other’s biographies.

To some degree, a fascination with the study of religion thus salts down to the ‘hyper-reflexivity’ that, as I have suggested elsewhere, routinely shapes research exchanges with interlocutors who are versed in anthropological (or other academic) forms of knowledge-making (Swancutt and Mazard 2016:2-5, see also 11-12; Swancutt 2016b:81-82, see also 85-89). The concept of hyper-reflexivity speaks to how researchers and interlocutors draw upon discipline-specific concepts and methods to mutually produce their research findings. When hyper-reflexive relationships come into play, researchers and interlocutors may do more than claim authorship over each other’s biographies. They may also work to merge the locales that, at least in anthropology, have tended to be conceptualised as the separate time-space domains of fieldwork and research at home. Of course, lengthy debates have addressed the differences (if any) between what Mariza Peirano calls fieldwork ‘defined by the distance, conceived as both cultural and geographic, that separated the researcher from the researched group’ and fieldwork done ‘at home’ (1998:105). Disentangling oneself from fieldwork is not always a straightforward process since, as David Mosse shows, ‘closer relations in the field, long-term and insider research have all made exit rather than entry the significant shift in location that is ethnography’s pretext – including exit from the templates of our younger ethnographic or professional selves’ (2006:936-937). Usually there is no easy exit from situations in which researchers and interlocutors lay claims on each other’s biographies.

Some degree of auto-ethnography is thus needed to fully demonstrate how researchers and interlocutors lay claims to each other’s biographies. Since I run the risk of being misunderstood here, let me clarify that the kind of auto-ethnography I have in mind is one which specifically shows how fieldwork interlocutors harness the researcher’s biography in ways that reflect their own concerns. While auto-ethnography can highlight many aspects of a person’s biography, my point here is not to discuss its use as a soul-searching technique for the researcher. Instead, what I wish to flag up is that auto-ethnography is an important lynchpin to ethnographic studies which unfold through our interlocutors’ claims to having authored our own personas. Auto-ethnography is an apt method for highlighting the changes that our interlocutors author on us, even though it is a craft that typically entails turning the fieldworker’s gaze inwards to harness personal experiences that become, so to speak, both the subject and accomplice of analysis. To some degree, although not entirely, auto-ethnography is an ‘autobiographical’ endeavour, which, as Simon Coleman suggests, is perhaps the ideal point of entrée for anthropology students into the practice of fieldwork (2011:3, see also 9). Built into the classic ethnographic method, auto-ethnographic approaches, and indeed humanities research more generally is considerable space for the researcher’s work to run in what Coleman calls ‘unruly’ directions, which are nonetheless often foundational to ‘the creation of the exemplary’ ethnographic case (2015:147 and 148). In Coleman’s view, this unruliness is specifically traceable to the ‘inchoate’ quality of ethnographic examples – a quality that no doubt animates key examples across the wider field of humanities and the study of religion in particular (2015:149). Coleman discusses the inchoate with reference to the work of Michael Carrithers (2008) and James Fernandez (1986), who:

‘reflect […] on the importance of the inchoate – that which is unformed, undeveloped, the material on which the culturally informed imagination is going to work – in exploring understandings of how a situation may move
from the relatively formless through successive stages of particularity, from a bare intimation of something to an apparently intimate relationship with it’ (2015:149).

Plumbing the depths of what being fascinating means, then, requires a multidirectional approach to fieldwork, biography, authorship, and the study of religion. To invoke Scott again, recent approaches in the fields of ‘cosmology and anthropology’ have developed in response to the ‘wonder’ surrounding, on the one hand, the diverse understandings of the ‘religious’, ‘traditional’, or ‘scientific’ [...] macrocosm’, and on the other hand, ‘the microcosm of human variation’ (2014:32). Anthropologists and other fieldwork-based researchers who study local cosmologies may thus find that their biographies become a thing of wonder to their interlocutors. As I will show, certain interlocutors go to great lengths to shape the researcher’s biography (unwittingly or not) into a poignant ethnographic ‘example’, which according to Lars Højer and Andreas Bandak, bears within it ‘the capacity to make new connections (and divides) and conjure up particular worlds-in-the-making’ (2015:14). Or interlocutors may craft the researcher’s biography so that it unfolds into one of those rare ethnographic ‘exemplars’ that become analytical touchstones, as they ‘manage to theorize or assemble what lies beyond them by elucidating connections, evoking trains of thought, and persuading audiences’ (Højer and Bandak 2015:7). In either case, the researcher who becomes a thing of fascination may well find him or herself second-guessing who, after all, is the author of their own studies.

Authorship, Ownership, and Becoming a Cultural Ambassador

Stephan Feuchtwang and Wang Mingming (2001:10) have discussed the production of ‘charisma’ in China, which, as I mentioned above, is an alternate translation for meili – the term that Bahmat used when declaring that he had made me possess too much fascination. They argue that, in China, there is a grassroots charisma which does not exclusively emanate from the charismatic person to his or her followers, but is instead mutually produced through leader-follower relations and often through divine authority too (Feuchtwang and Wang 2001:131). Since the production of charisma and fascination in China pivots around questions of authorship, this is perhaps an opportune moment to reflect further on the distinction that Strathern draws between ‘authorship’ and ‘writing’ in her study of ‘auto-anthropology’ (1987:24-27).

Strathern points out that not all people take the same view of how ethnographic publications are produced or of what they entail. Whereas Euro-American conceptualisations of ownership include the production of knowledge, ideas, and ‘framings’ associated with authorship and ownership, the views on writing found in other parts of the world do not necessarily involve similar claims to an authorial voice or authority (Strathern 1987:17-25). Through a comparative study of English villagers in Elmdon, Essex and Mt Hagen villagers in Papua New Guinea, Strathern shows that the Elmdon villagers she knew were irritated by ‘the arrogation of authorship’ in which ‘the anthropologist is making himself the author of an account in which their authoring of events, acts, [and] feelings is displaced’ (1987:21). By contrast, Strathern’s interlocutors in Mt Hagen considered that she was simply writing about their lives, rather than ‘supplanting an original account in such a way as to make it a new version for the people concerned’, which would not be a viable enterprise, since they consider that ‘Other people’s authorship cannot be displaced’ (1987:25). Yet the Mt Hagen villagers did have some concerns with Strathern publishing work abroad because, as she notes, ‘my relationships with them were going to further my prestige and not also theirs’ (1987:22). What, then, the Mt Hagen villagers wanted was a joint venture that would bring their own
ideas and Strathern’s framings of them into dialogue – a venture from which they could garner prestige (Strathern 1987:25).

On the surface of this, it might appear that Strathern’s discussion of the kind of ‘writing’ recognised by Mt Hagen villagers, as a joint undertaking for attracting prestige, would map directly onto the Nuosu (and possibly other Chinese) ethnography. However, Nuosu broadly speaking – and not just ethnologists like Bahmat – tread something of a middle ground, because they are familiar with both ‘authorship’ and ‘writing’ in Strathern’s sense of the terms. Nuosu in rural areas have been exposed to ethnological scholarship for decades, since the period of the Nationalist government (1927-1948), and I discuss below how this scholarship has in recent years become an increasing presence in their lives. There is, then, a closer parallel to be made between Nuosu approaches to authorship today and, as Strathern notes, the fact that ‘Melanesian students may well espouse private property notions […] as their] sensibilities are shaped in part by those of expatriate academics’ (1987:20).

My experience with Nuosu academia dates back to my initial fieldwork in Ninglang in 2007, where my very first contacts comprised a team of Nuosu ethno-historians and traditional cultural specialists working as ethno-theologians in a local ethnological institute. Stevan Harrell notes that there is a formidable prestige in Nuosu circles surrounding the craft of Nuosu scholars qua ‘Yi intellectuals’ at state-financed institutions in China, as well as the ancient literary accomplishments of bimo priests (Harrell 2001:180-182). Fijy, who is a bimo (Nuo. 갑ꭵ 갑ꭴꭹ) priest, or text-reading shaman, doubled as an ethno-theologian at the local institute. He was also my first fieldwork host. As news travels fast in Nuosu ethnological and anthropological circles, within just one month of my stay at Fijy’s home, my presence came to the attention of Tuosat, a Nuosu anthropologist based in Kunming, who immediately made a special day-long trip to meet me in Fijy’s home and introduce himself. Not surprisingly, I am most familiar with Nuosu in these academic circles, whose views on authorship and writing arise, in large part, from their experiences of publishing in China. Whereas Nuosu anthropologists routinely publish under their own names, the ethnologists in state-financed Chinese institutions have their works appear under a variety names. Nuosu ethnologists may appear as the main or single author of their works. But ethnologists often also have their works appear within larger compilations, in which the current leader of their institute appears as the ‘lead’ author, no matter how much (if at all) he or she contributed to the volume. It is important to note that this situation is not specific to Nuosu, but reflects the long-standing protocols of ethnological publishing in China. Tellingly, the Nuosu ethnologists that I know conceptualise both authorship and writing as important platforms for cultural ambassadorship.

The explicit effort to promote all things Nuosu through scholarship and published findings was voiced to me by Mitsu, a Nuosu ethnologist (or Yi scholar) whom I also met during my first trip to Ninglang in 2007. Mitsu spoke explicitly about this objective with me in summer 2015, but he had also alluded to it on my previous trips to Ninglang. His idea – shared with Bahmat and (as far as I could tell) all of his other colleagues – was that he wanted his publications to be read by as many people as possible who could read Chinese, Nuosu, and any other languages in which they might appear. According to Mitsu and his colleagues, the most important reason for producing their publications was that they would propagate Nuosu culture across the generations. Ideally, their publications would also attract fame and heritage protection to Nuosu culture, as well as development initiatives in Nuosu areas. I asked Mitsu about the prospect of propagating his own name via his publications, and observed that the idea at first seemed remote to him. But when I told Mitsu that I, for instance, could cite him, he made a point of marking precisely those pages on which his work appeared in several volumes of which he had given me a copy, including works in which Mitsu’s name only appeared in the front matter with a large compendium of authors. I noticed the slippage
that Mitsu made between ethnological writing (published under his institute leader’s name) and authorship (published with varying degrees of reference to his own name), both of which in his view were suitable mediums for propagating Nuosu culture. Ultimately, any distinction between authorship and writing was conflated when viewed against the Nuosu raison d’être for publishing, namely: disseminating Nuosu culture far and wide.

One important Nuosu-specific dimension to what I call ‘cultural ambassadorship’ dovetails with my previous work on the Nuosu art of capture, which resonates with their penchant for ‘luring’ or ‘attracting’ (Ch. yinyou 引诱) good things to them (Swancutt 2012a, 2012b, 2015, 2016b). Nuosu, for instance, lure back their lost souls in soul-calling rituals, just as they once lured slaves away from rival masters before their slavery was disbanded in the Democratic Reforms (Ch. minzhu gaige 民主改革) of 1956-1957. Nowadays, Nuosu attract followers to them through their accomplishments, which in turn can draw fame and material wealth to their lineages. Academic publications on Nuosu culture can also attract fame and sometimes moderate wealth – even as they capture the reader’s imagination – a dynamic on which Nuosu scholars (like academics elsewhere) want to capitalise. The Nuosu I know are aware that they have captured my imagination, and anticipate that as an anthropologist working among them, some of my potential repute or material remuneration probably would flow back to them. To the extent that I may have become a captured item of Nuosu ‘property’, then, it would be fair to say that my biography is also being ‘authored’ (in the Strathernian sense) by my Nuosu interlocutors – both when I am in Ninglang and when I receive text or QQ messages abroad. By their own admission, though, the most important thing about our relationship is that I have become a cultural ambassador for all things Nuosu.

A key point here is that Nuosu concerns with authorship and writing revolve around the production of intangible qualities, such as the fascination with research, at least as much as (if not more than) they do around the ownership of material goods or services obtained through research collaborations. As Olivia Kraef shows, the study of bimo 祆姐 religious practices and sacred texts became an academic area of interest in China during the 1980s period of Economic Reforms and the concomitant Chinese state-led initiatives for cultural revival and relaxing controls over religion (2014:151-152). What is now often referred to as ‘bimo culture’ among Nuosu, which is a scholarly reification of Nuosu religion broadly speaking, has recently also become a candidate for intangible cultural heritage in China (Kraef 2014:167-168, see also 172). My role in furthering this prestigious study of Nuosu religion is thus a source of fascination to my interlocutors, who take pride in my university affiliations (past and current) and other biographical details that they deem prestigious. To show how my Nuosu interlocutors routinely lay claims to my biography in the service of drawing me into their projects of cultural ambassadorship, I now turn to my ethnographic cases.

Fieldwork Friends Define the Field

I first met Katba, a retired schoolteacher, in 2011 when I lived in the rural village that was his home in Ninglang. Katba was a cheerful and joking uncle-like figure to me, so it came as no surprise that he made a comic request of me in mid-August 2015, on my return fieldwork trip to the village. Having visited the head of my village fieldwork home for an evening of drinking, chatting, and general revelry, Katba called me over to his side and invited me to join their conversation. At this point, the head of my fieldwork household, who had been on migratory labour in a neighbouring province during my 2011 trip, decided to make a polite show of interest in my work by inquiring what the population figures were for various parts of England. Like others of his generation, this man had been exposed to Chinese ethnology during the 1956-1957 Democratic Reforms, which had popularised a Marxian-
Morganian inspired labelling of the Nuosu as China’s ‘slave society’, who were meant to socially evolve towards a fully modern way of being (Hill 2001:1035). Population figures became of primary concern during this period among representatives of the People’s Liberation Army, who worked to distinguish Nuosu slaves from their masters. Coinciding with the Democratic Reforms was the 1950s process of ‘minority classification’ (Ch. minzu shibie 民族识别), and among the Nuosu, these initiatives were deployed in tandem to parse out slaves and masters, in line with the yet larger class labelling process across China that involved gathering population figures through an often ethnological mode of ‘research’ (Ch. diaocha 调查). Specific to Ninglang County was the tactic of separating former slaves, who were moved to newly-built ‘slave villages’ produced in a dormitory-like fashion, from their former slave owners, who continued to reside in their rural homes that encircled these slave villages (Jiarimuji 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2014). So in the popular imaginations of Nuosu, Chinese ethnology (linked nowadays to anthropology) had been foundational to the creation of slave villages built on demographic information and population figures. The importance of population figures has been further underscored through classroom teaching across China in recent years, where they are routinely emphasised. Given this, my fieldwork host was confused by my ignorance as an anthropologist on the population figures of England, and pointedly asked why I did not know the answer to his question.

However, Katba interrupted my fieldwork host’s train of thought, saying that he did not understand anthropology. Katba said that I had not come to study population statistics, nor are anthropologists meant to be experts in them; instead, anthropologists should ask intricate questions related to society. Revealingly, Katba’s insights into anthropology had come predominantly from Tuosat, the Nuosu anthropologist whom he had helped to raise like a father in his home village (Swancutt 2015, 2016a, 2016b). Katba then plied me with a rhetorical question about which university I was now based at in England. When I replied that I was at King’s College London, he gave me a sidelong glance and asked what I teach there. Before I had the chance to answer, though, he cut in again with a chuckle, asking if I perhaps teach my students how to become kings? Feeling the momentum of his joke building, Katba then loudly declared ‘I want to send my son to King’s College London so that you can teach him how to become a king!’ This was an only half-jesting invitation to teach the descendants of Katba (and, by implication, those of his whole lineage) the art of English royal virtues. For by jokingly turning this conversation on its head, Katba suggested that it would be me – the ‘British’ anthropologist originally from Los Angeles – who could now socially engineer the Nuosu in the tradition of British kingship, albeit by teaching them about society rather than population figures.

How could my biography become the platform for such an intricate discussion of historical projects and the authoring of power relations – including those that arise from the fascination with ethnological and anthropological research – between the Nuosu, wider China, and the world beyond? And how might my biography in particular relate to any claims of authorship among Nuosu? One part of the answer to these questions, of course, is that Nuosu think, joke, and live through the current moment, itself a product of historical events, including the entrance of ethnology and anthropology into the purview of everyday life. Another part of the answer, though, can be found in the dynamics of how the Nuosu and I spend time, both during and outside of my fieldwork, as well as in how we conceptualise my purpose(s) in visiting them. Nuosu are exceptionally gracious hosts, who can demand quite a lot from guests, especially when it comes to attracting prestige to themselves and their lineages (Swancutt 2012a). This prestige can be built up and extended across time, including across the career of the visiting anthropologist, which Nuosu can shape and direct in ways that benefit them. For instance, Nuosu sometimes integrate guests into the home through
name-changing ceremonies that make them formally part of their lineage (Swancutt 2012a:S110-S111). As I have experienced firsthand and explained elsewhere, name-changing ceremonies can put the guest into the position of being claimed as a cultural ambassador for the Nuosu to the wider world – which is no mean feat, considering that before the Democratic Reforms most outsiders would have needed to take special care that they were not captured as slaves, who were always ethnic others (Swancutt 2012a:S110). So Katba’s suggestion that I teach his descendents the art of English kingship was, in this sense, only partly a joke. While he soon laughed off the idea that I would teach chivalry, he maintained a serious outlook on the prospect that I could offer training in, say, British anthropology to the Nuosu youth. This intergenerational view on how Nuosu could author some elements of my biography, position in the wider world, and research on their life-world was intended to traverse our total relationship across space-time. Through this intergenerational dynamic, the Nuosu authoring of my person would thus extend across the moments of my fieldwork, the lives and research of my Nuosu colleagues (especially ethnologists) in Southwest China, my life and research in England, my return (and past) visits to Ninglang, the previous and upcoming visits of Nuosu persons to me, and finally the fascination with all things Nuosu that my work might attract, particularly when enhanced by my newfound ‘kingly’ cachet.

Things turned out in such a way that my 2015 fieldwork was spent mostly in the county seat of Ninglang with the local ethnologists, rather than in the village with Katba and my fieldwork family. Time spent with the ethnologists, though, contributed to the fascination in the village with what I was doing. This was especially the case as I was moving in elite circles with Nuosu Yi intellectuals who routinely produce publications on Nuosu religion and other themes. These publications include short print-runs of in-house ethnological journals on local culture and folklore gathered from the villagers themselves, in which I had already produced a translation of Nuosu folklore from Chinese to English during my 2011 fieldwork, at the request of Mitsu and his colleagues (Swancutt 2011). Occasionally the villagers read these journals, on their visits to the Ninglang county seat, or when I (for instance) show them a copy that I had brought with me to the village (Swancutt 2016a:148-150). From the villagers’ point of view, then, the main question for the future would be how my biography would further unfold in tandem with theirs, ideally in ways that would harness the more prestigious elements of my research presence. The ethnologists took this a step further through efforts to more firmly anchor my collegial relation to them into my personal biography. Let me turn now to another ethnographic vignette from my 2015 fieldwork among the ethnologists, which illustrates how they co-opted certain elements of my biography (and the fascination with it) into something of a joint research endeavour.

Biographies, Hobbies, and Role-Play

The Torch Festival, known in Nuosu as Dut zie ( Dut zie ) and in Chinese as Huobajie (火 把节), is a major seasonal celebration for Nuosu, the wider ‘Yi’ ethnic group of which they are considered to be a part, and some other groups in Southwest China. Yet 2015 was the first year I had ever had the chance to attend the Torch Festival. I was looking forward to taking part in the festivities and originally envisioned spending them with my fieldwork family in the village. But on the repeated advice of Tuosat, I decided to spend the Torch Festival in the county seat instead, where I could observe in Mitsu’s home ‘The Descent and Exchange of the Soul’ (Nuo. Yyrci Hlaba 烏力欽拉, the household-based ritual that underpins the entire celebration. As Tuosat explained, the Ninglang county town would host a week-long pageantry devoted to celebrating the Torch Festival in state-sponsored ethnic regalia, with a
fleets of competitions in oral recitation, dance, women’s beauty, and singing. Mitsu would judge the 2015 competitions, which was not something he had done before, so this was a unique opportunity for me. Arrangements were made for me to attend these competitions, accompanied almost every time by Mitsu, who was judging nearly every panel of the competition, due to his profession as an ethno-historian, his status as a former schoolteacher, and his general repute as a local expert in Nuosu culture. Both Mitsu and I took the view that the competition was a Nuosu festival in its own right and a spectacle of state pageantry. In order to prepare for working with Mitsu, I left my fieldwork home in the countryside and travelled to the county town a few days before the competitions began, where I took the opportunity to ask him about the Torch Festival more generally.

On one of these pre-festival days, a pause arose during our conversation. I took a few moments to think about my next question, while Mitsu became absorbed by the television that he had requested we play in the background of our conversation. A women’s diving competition was being broadcast just moments before the official announcement that Beijing would host the 2022 Winter Olympics. Mitsu explained that while many people anticipated Beijing would be awarded the hosting of the 2022 Winter Olympics, they were looking forward to watching the official announcement that this would happen. Commending the good divers together with the televised sports announcer, Mitsu suddenly asked me: ‘What are your “hobbies” (Ch. aihao 爱好)?’ I had told him the answer to this question in passing during my previous fieldtrips to Ninglang, as part of my standard reply to fend off (albeit, always unsuccessfully) the Nuosu expectation for visitors to over-indulge daily in alcohol and food. Through sips of tea, I casually replied that my hobby is classical ballet, adding that it was my first serious career track and an art form I still indulge in routinely. He made a comment that it’s good for the physique and we returned to discussing the Torch Festival.

To my surprise, less than a week later, my hobby came to animate my fieldwork. Mitsu and I had spent several full days observing the pageantry of the Torch Festival from the comfort of the very public front row of ‘judges’ (Ch. pingwei 评委). Just the final day of singing remained, and many judges were feeling exhausted by it, especially since they doubled as behind-the-scenes organisers of the various events throughout the week. Amidst all of this, I had become a judge’s accomplice, routinely seated next to Mitsu or other county-based teachers and political leaders during the competitions, while joining their meals throughout the day and shadowing their administrative work as cadres for these events.

But late on the penultimate day of the competitions, and unbeknownst to me, Mitsu had met with a dilemma. Two visiting ethnologists who were supposed to act as judges for the final singing round had suddenly told him that they would rather travel outside of the county town instead, to conduct research on Nuosu embroidery. Faced with a potential shortage on the judging panel for the last competition, Mitsu had engineered the alternative plan of having me and him take on this responsibility, in place of the ethnologists who wanted to travel. He reasoned that I would know enough about music to judge a Nuosu singing competition due to my research on Nuosu and my training in classical ballet, and he had finalised these arrangements on behalf of both of us, without me knowing. Perhaps this was not too surprising, considering that ethnic minorities in China (and I would count as one there) are routinely stereotyped as good singers and dancers (Komlosy 2004; Litzinger 1998; Makley 2010; McKhann 2010; Mueggluer 2002; Oakes 2006; Schein 1994 and 1997; Vasantkumar 2014; Walsh 2005; Ying 2014). Indeed in China, folk culture – even when performed by members of the Han ethnic majority – tends to be considered synonymous with good stagemanship (Wu 2015). However that may be, on the following day, just three hours before the competition began, Mitsu informed me of the role that I would take up, in full knowledge that this competition, along with the rest of the pageant, would be filmed for local
television. There was no time to lose, Mitsu said, as we needed to quickly produce a sign with my Chinese name on it for the judge’s table and the benefit of the television film crew. I would need to score the contestants on a scale of 3.5 to 9.99, to write my scores on A4-sized sheets of paper, and to hold them up for the spokeswomen on stage (and the television cameras) to see. Intrigued, though only partly sure I could pull it off, I agreed to be game for this venture.

Already from the start of the pageant, I had become something of a local celebrity, having been seated next to the judge’s panel and filmed on previous competition days by local and national Chinese television. Becoming a judge in full, though, took things to another level. The competition went smoothly, with the other judges concluding that I could hear better which competitors sung well or poorly in English, whereas they could discern better who sung well or poorly in Chinese. We all liked the Nuosu singing about equally well and the Tibetan judge was perhaps harshest on the Tibetan singer. I was asked to take the microphone and commend or critique some candidates in Chinese mid-way through the competition, and I appeared briefly on stage with the candidates during the final awards ceremony. Throughout the day, I agreed to wear one of the judge’s black vests, embroidered on the back with a torch and the Nuosu script for ‘China’s Nuosu’ (Zhuguop Nuosu ꁕꁭꆈꌠ), made vibrant by the red-and-yellow colour scheme that is synonymous with Nuosu ethnicity.

Having been made a judge was both a product of and stimulus for Nuosu claims to authorship over my biography. As had been the case with Katba in the village, I noticed when meeting Mitsu on my 2015 trip that he showed interest in my new university base and wondered why it was the college of kings. When it was made clear that this was a name (rather than a label for what I teach) and that I was still serious about doing research on the Nuosu, Mitsu and his colleagues appeared even more interested to collaborate with me than had been the case during previous fieldwork trips. They noticed that I had allowed my 2015 trip to become far more county-based than any of my prior visits to Ninglang. Graciously agreeing to help with my research, they deftly harnessed my total biography, even down to my hobbies, for the sake of doing joint ethnological work, which in Ninglang includes civic duties, such as judging the Torch Festival competitions or helping with disaster relief in the event of mudslides and earthquakes. The ethnologists encouraged me to return much more often to Ninglang (ideally each year) and to build inter-institutional connections with them. More than once I was told that our connections could potentially replace my links to Chinese universities. While the Nuosu researchers at the institute encouraged me to do joint projects with them, Mitsu tempted me with the prospect of getting copies of his latest publications as soon as they appeared.

Time spent away from Ninglang since my previous trips in 2007 and 2011 had unfolded in such a way that the biographies and careers of Mitsu, myself, and the Ninglang institute as a whole had changed. In my observation, members of the institute had become increasingly fascinated with the reception of their research, which Mitsu hoped to propagate through the cultural ambassadorship of their publications. Mitsu and his colleagues felt that my place in this endeavour was to extend the knowledge of Nuosu further afield, including via the institute’s in-house journal. As my 2015 fieldwork progressed, I observed their efforts at crafting my biography grow in tandem with their thoughts on how I might contribution to collaborative research on Nuosu culture with them. I was intrigued by how the ethnologists’ fascination led to their increased efforts at shaping my career trajectory, over numerous banquets, bar-hopping, late-night barbeques, and even karaoke sessions sung alternately in Chinese, Nuosu, English, and Mongolian (which I had learned for my PhD fieldwork). My hobby in the so-called refined art of ballet, coupled with my university’s association with kingship, seemed to encourage the excess of food, drink, and revelry. Just how, then, my
Nuosu colleagues envisioned our biographies and collaborations as falling into step in the future is the theme to which I now turn.

**Feeding the Fascination with Research**

During the course of summer 2015, Bahmat and I had struck up a good friendship, often spending the evening after a day’s research in the ethnological office talking about the fate of Nuosu culture, the youth interest (or lack thereof) in it, and Nuosu conceptualisations of fire in their Torch Festival, cosmology, and social life. We also discussed the place of Nuosu society in today’s world. Our conversations were typically held around a stone table in the public square fronting the cultural house, which was on the brink of opening during my 2011 fieldwork. Dim street lamps lit up our discussions, so I took to memorising the sequence, key themes, and highpoints of our conversations, noting them down after retiring for the evening. Bahmat had a taste for Pepsi and was a night owl, both of which energised these late-night vigils. Yet he was always the first colleague to enter the office in the morning, whereupon he sent me a text message, prompting me to hurry up and meet him for the day’s work. Like Mitsu, he delighted in keeping count of how many notebooks I had filled over the summer and in giving me such a deluge of information that I was exhausted by working into the late hours (after they had gone to sleep) so as to keep record of it.

But as the weeks passed, conversations with Bahmat turned more towards the theme of how his work, as well as mine, might ensure the propagation of Nuosu culture in the years to come. My impression was that Bahmat had started to carve out a unique position for me in his personal view of the trajectory of Nuosu research. He felt that today’s Nuosu youth do not pursue the scholar’s vocation, but prefer more lucrative lines of work instead, such as that found in ‘massage’ (Ch. *zuliao* 足疗) parlours further afield in China. The sideline work in prostitution that accompanies massage, Bahmat noted, still contributes to the epidemic of HIV/AIDS among Nuosu (Liu 2011; Weng 2006). HIV/AIDS first peaked under the heroin trafficking that Nuosu turned to in the 1990s, after China’s closure of its steel industry and simultaneous introduction of forestry protection policies in the ethnic minority areas of Yunnan province. Reminding me that the Nuosu heartland in the Liangshan mountains of China is also the northernmost tip of the Golden Triangle, Bahmat declared it was critical to inspire Nuosu youth to maintain their culture.

Several evenings before I was due to leave Ninglang, Bahmat and I were seated again at a stone table near the cultural house, discussing the fate of Nuosu culture. Bahmat had been exhorting me for some time to ensure that I would return for annual research visits. I casually replied that it would perhaps be ideal for Nuosu scholars to occasionally come to England, as the Nuosu anthropologist Jiarimuji had done in 2012, when I invited him to the University of Oxford as a Visiting Scholar. Leaning towards me to capture my full attention, Bahmat then plied me with the suggestion that ‘to build up your research on Nuosu, and our reputation in Ninglang, you should open a new “unit” (Ch. *zhongxin* 中心) at your university’. He said that this would facilitate my projects and exchanges with his institute, as well as the role he envisioned for me in attracting international fame to Nuosu culture. I recall sitting across from him and reflecting inwardly on his suggestion, impressed to have observed this much interest in our collaboration. My reply was conservative and went something along the lines of ‘yes, perhaps that would be very good’.

Bahmat’s suggestion of the unit, though, took further form in the days leading up to my departure for the province capital of Kunming. It developed as an actual initiative through text messaging with Bahmat once I had reached Kunming, where I suggested starting a new unit at my university to Jiarimuji, who immediately liked the idea and suggested that he
would also make a parallel unit at Yunnan Minzu University. Taking the initiative a step further, Jiarimuji suggested that we should be directors of our own units, while taking up the vice-director’s role in each other’s unit, as a way of ensuring ongoing research exchanges. We laughed at the boldness of this idea and I told Jiarimuji that it reminded me of an English turn of phrase that he had often voiced to me. I have often heard Jiarimuji exclaim ‘It was outside of my imagination!’ when reflecting on his own routine astonishment as a Nuosu person studying Nuosu culture, which he still finds to be inexhaustibly replete with intricate and unexpected ethnographic detail. I was delighted with Jiarimuji’s unique idea of launching a joint venture between our two proposed units, which until that moment was outside of my imagination. In the end, we agreed to commit to working towards opening these new units.

What neither me nor Jiarimuji seem to have guessed, though, was the extent to which Bahmat’s plan would take hold upon my return to the UK – to say nothing of his keenness to keep abreast of these plans via text messaging and the QQ platform. My post-fieldwork correspondence with Bahmat began as soon as I turned on my English mobile phone in Heathrow airport’s baggage claims area, where I received a text message from him in Chinese, declaring that I must have arrived in England. He has shadowed my life in England since that return, eager to hear about plans with the unit, about this article in which some of his ‘story’ (Ch. gushi 故事) appears, about an away day for our department at the kingly Fulham Palace, about how my students and lectures are going, and even about me dancing ballet – all the while prompting me to keep up the good work. I learned too, via text message, about Bahmat’s own article in-the-making and the fascination he has with it. Both of us, it seems, had become cultural ambassadors for the Nuosu in each other’s country of residence – due, in part, to Bahmat’s efforts at shaping my biography by encouraging me to open a new research unit.

While in England, I wondered how to document this virtual ethnography based on my correspondences with Bahmat, and my auto-ethnographic reflections on it. Much like Katba’s request that I teach his descendants the art of kingship, or my experience of being recruited by Mitsu as a judge for the singing competition in Ninglang’s 2015 Torch Festival, Bahmat’s suggestion that I start a new unit (and his shadowing of my efforts in so doing) revealed his interest in laying claims to producing my biography across time zones and continents. This dynamic has unique implications for my (auto-)ethnography on Nuosu claims to authorship in my research. Recall Bahmat’s reflection that probably he had made me possess too much fascination. Now it would be easy to brush off my interest in this correspondence with Bahmat as symptomatic of the anthropologist’s delight in keeping up ‘contact’ with fieldwork friends in a remote Chinese county. But this would not explain Bahmat’s enthusiasm for and ongoing mentorship of me from Ninglang, however virtual or inchoate that mentorship may be. The explanation for his mentorship runs deeper than this, and I think that it lies as much in his fascination with research as it does in mine.

I already mentioned Bahmat’s concern that the younger generation of Nuosu should not lose their culture. He felt that instilling the fascination with all things Nuosu in this generation depended on demonstrating the value of education and research to them. Ideally, new opportunities for this research would be created, while international interest in the Nuosu would take things a step further. From Bahmat’s perspective, then, my research has the fascinating potential to become one of many poster-children for the study of Nuosu religion today, if not an exotic touchstone of fascination for all things Nuosu. Indeed, in Bahmat’s view, research has a fascinating life of its own, which not only enables Nuosu to claim authorship over the biographies of foreign anthropologists, but also facilitates their efforts at cultural preservation and other civic duties that fall within the purview of ethnological work in Ninglang. Feeding the fascination with research is thus a kind of mission statement for
Bahmat, who envisions ways of attracting Nuosu researchers-in-the-making and propagating Nuosu culture through time. Yet he is not entirely sure how this fascination will pan out in practice – which perhaps is one reason why he hedges his claim by saying that he ‘probably’ made me possess too much fascination. It may be that to reassure himself of his convictions, Bahmat keeps up a steady stream of text messages and QQ correspondences with me.

The Time Depth of Biography

Before leaving Kunming in 2015, I alternated between meeting with Jiariimuji for research and spending time with some of his postdoctoral researchers and students. I had met one of these postdoctoral researchers in 2007, during my return travel from my first fieldwork in Ninglang, when he helped me move between the airport and city in Beijing. He was a student in Beijing then, but had since joined the ethnology institute at Yunnan Minzu University, under Jiariimuji’s mentorship. Having recognised me eight years later, he hospitably volunteered to take me to some of his favourite sites in Kunming. To my delight, he suggested that we visit a small Buddhist temple that had become a writing retreat for Fei Xiaotong, China’s first anthropologist and a celebrated student of Bronislaw Malinowski at the London School of Economics. He explained that this temple was originally located elsewhere in the city, but had been moved for fear of bombing during the second Sino-Japanese war (1937-1945). Nearby was the former home of Fei Xiaotong, situated in an old-style Chinese neighbourhood. I eagerly agreed to this visit and we set off on his electric motorcycle.

When we arrived, there were several small folding tables set up in the courtyard entrance to the temple, where a number of elderly men were enjoying the Chinese game of ‘Go’ (Ch. weiqi 围棋). Although the caretakers said the building ordinarily would not be open at that time, we managed to gain entrance to the temple after graciously explaining that we were anthropologists. Outside and inside of the temple were historic photographs of Fei Xiaotong and several of his famous contemporaries who routinely did their writing at the temple, including Lin Yueh-hua (1961), who had pioneered anthropological fieldwork among the Nuosu in the early 1940s. We walked with the caretaker up several flights of rickety stairs to the top, stopping en route to appreciate items that bore the stamp of a documentarian’s fascination with research, including the large framed black-and-white photograph of Fei Xiaotong reading a book while inside the penultimate floor of the temple retreat where we were standing. In this photo, Fei Xiaotong leaned against a support pole for the temple, attached to which was a small print of what appeared to be Adam Smith. My researcher friend suggested that I pose next to this image for a photograph that would bring me and the founding father of Chinese anthropology ‘together’ – albeit across different moments of research time – within the old haunt of Fei Xiaotong, Lin Yueh-hua, and other Chinese anthropological luminaries. I agreed to this, and on our exit, the caretaker asked if we could sign the guestbook. On the advice of my postdoctoral friend, I signed the book in English, so as to more clearly reveal my connection to British anthropology. Reflecting a few moments on what trace I should leave of myself to highlight the fascination I have with Chinese anthropology, and with how it has shaped my biography, I penned something brief, appreciative, and perhaps a tad wonderstruck before we left to go view the exterior of Fei Xiaotong’s former home nearby.

Concluding Remarks: Through the Looking Glass of Fascination

Watching one’s own biography become shaped by the inclinations of those fieldwork friends whose lives we episodically dip in and out of is its own particular brand of fascination.
Yet the fullness of the research event always exceeds our efforts to distil it into any given study. Research partnerships remain inchoate, even as they contain professional and personal aspirations, including the beguiling potential for fieldwork friends to claim authorship over our biographies – and vice-versa – thereby transforming the researcher-interlocutor relationship into, say, a local scholar-cultural ambassador relationship (cf. Bamo, Harrell and Ma 2007). These claims to authorship and ownership can have a dramatic effect on fieldwork-based studies of religion, transforming not just the location or topic of research, but the researcher’s biography and potentially local cosmologies too. I have endeavoured to show how these transformations occur through several different instances in which my fieldwork friends – in rural Nuosu villages or in ethnological and anthropological institutes – have worked to shape my biography through their visions of my teaching, hobbies, potential for cultural ambassadorship, and ties to Britain’s anthropological legacy.

Bharmat’s catchword of ‘fascination’ is an extremely difficult thing to measure, not least because it can be ephemeral, elastic, and (like charisma) co-produced by more than one person in China. Fascination, as I have shown, is furthermore contingent on how ownership, authorship, or writing are conceptualised and deployed in a given socio-cultural milieu, across historical time. Finally, fascination arises from the particular constellation of qualities, accomplishments, and often serendipitous encounters that make up a personal biography. This is why I have interleaved my auto-ethnographic reflections with my fieldwork findings, so as to afford heuristic leverage for making visible the fascination in, and with, those persons who enable the scholar’s craft and the study of religion.

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1 Pseudonyms have been used in this article.