

Exploring the endangered cultural heritage of an ethnic minority in China

Did you know that out of the 7,000 languages spoken and signed worldwide, nearly 40% are endangered? On average, one language disappears every two weeks, leading to the loss of entire cultures and their invaluable knowledge.



Naxi manuscript during the ceremony. Zhang Xu Tayulam, 1990.

GABRIEL REAL DE AZUA, UNIGE

Digital technologies are sometimes accused of homogenising languages and cultures, with fewer than a hundred languages being used online. But such technologies can also be allies for safeguarding and revitalising this linguistic and cultural diversity, which is part of the heritage of humanity.

Together with the National Institute for Oriental Languages and Civilizations (Inalco, France), and the Beijing Language and

Culture University (BLCU, China), the University of Geneva has launched a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) as an introduction to Dongba script, the script of the Naxi ethnic minority in Yunnan, China. This collaborative effort also received support from UNESCO.

We had the pleasure to sit down with [Dr. Jue Wang-Szilas](#), Senior Advisor in Technology-Enhanced Learning at the Centre for Continuing and Distance Education

(CCDE) of the University of Geneva, to give us some insights into this fascinating project.

Thank you for taking the time to speak with us. Let's start with some background information. What is the Dongba script and how does it relate to the Naxi culture?

The Dongba script is a hieroglyphic-like writing system used by the Naxi ethnic group, residing primarily in southwestern China, with a population of



About Dr. Jue Wang Szilas*

I enjoy learning languages and writing, and I am curious about different scripts. I love exploring the meaning behind them. I have visited Lijiang (China) several times, and each time I go there, I am fascinated by the uniqueness of the Dongba script. I never thought I would have the opportunity to create a MOOC about it.

The idea for this project originated in 2019. My role as Executive Manager of the project was to establish partnerships, coordinate teams, oversee course digitisation, supervise video production, and manage translations.

The production of the MOOC took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which presented a huge challenge. For instance, we couldn't go to Lijiang for filming on-site and interviews with Dongba scholars. Plans had to be

revised multiple times. Also, I fell ill and was obliged to take medical leave. In spite of these challenges, I am proud that we ultimately managed to complete the course successfully. Throughout the project, I deeply felt the Naxi people's love for their culture and script, as well as their strong desire to preserve it and pass it on. Many Naxi volunteers participated in the production and beta testing of this MOOC, providing constructive comments and suggestions. In this respect, I firmly believe that we have genuinely achieved the "living" preservation we were striving for.

* Senior Advisor in Technology-Enhanced Learning at the University of Geneva's Centre for Continuing and Distance Education, and Research Associate at the ELCF of the University of Geneva and the PLIDAM of INALCO, France.

approximately 300,000 people. It is considered the world's only living pictographic script as it is still actively used by Dongba shamans to conduct rituals, interpret sacred texts, and preserve historical records.

Believed to have originated around the 12th century, the Dongba script consists of nearly 1,400 characters. It serves as a vital tool for safeguarding and transmitting the religious, cultural, and historical knowledge of the Naxi people. The significance of the script is internationally recognised, with its inscription on the UNESCO Memory of the World Register in 2003.

The Dongba script embodies cultural significance in two distinct ways. Firstly, it acts as a living fossil of pictographic writing, retaining exceptional vitality that necessitates dedicated efforts for its preservation. Secondly, the script reflects the profound beliefs of the Naxi people, particularly their shamanistic practices deeply rooted in nature worship, influenced by Tibetan traditions.

What is the difference between a picture and a script?

The Dongba script possesses unique features. Its characters are primarily pictographic, representing objects and concepts through visual symbols. The texts

often emphasise key words, while nonessential words are omitted, and there may be instances where words lack corresponding symbols. The script's organisation is non-linear, with characters arranged figuratively based on the position of objects. The relationships between words and characters are complex, and there is often uncertainty regarding the sound and meaning of certain characters.

The Dongba script consists of characters resembling pictures, but with distinct differences. These drawings primarily serve artistic beauty and lack communicative purposes. By contrast, in Dongba manuscripts, the drawings take on a communicative role, serving as phraseographic writing that corresponds to textual content. It's worth noting that the entirety of the Dongba script cannot be simply categorised as phraseographic writing since it does not constitute a mainstream part of the Dongba literature.

While some consider Dongba writing pictographic like Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Dongba script includes phonetic symbols and extends beyond pure pictography. Notably, the Dongba script has not only pictograms, deictograms, and ideograms but also more ideophonograms and a large number of borrowings, which is beyond the scope

of a purely pictographic script. Therefore, strictly speaking, the Dongba script cannot be classified solely as a hieroglyphic script. Instead, it is best classified as an ideographic or mixed type of script, transitioning from a phraseographic script to an ideophonographic script.

Why is the Dongba script considered to be the last living pictographic writing system in the world? And why is it endangered today?

There are several significant reasons. First, most characters in the Dongba script represent objects and ideas directly, creating a visual link between the symbols and their meanings. Second, Dongba shamans actively use the script for religious practices, interpreting sacred texts and historical documents, making it more than a mere relic of the past. Finally, the Dongba script continues to be used and passed down from generation to generation, maintaining its status as a living script. These unique qualities have led to the Dongba script being considered the only remaining example of a pictographic writing system today.

However, this writing system has traditionally remained in the hands of shamans and has not been widely disseminated. As a result, the use of the Dongba script among the Naxi people is

very limited. Due to historical reasons, the number of Dongba shamans who possess the knowledge and skills to read and write the Dongba script is decreasing. The transmission of this expertise is at risk as younger generations are showing less interest in becoming shamans. Additionally, the advent of modernisation and digital communication has led to a decline in the practical use of the script in everyday life. Opportunities to learn, practice, and preserve the Dongba script are diminishing, putting its future at risk. Greater efforts should be made to document, revitalise, and raise awareness of the Dongba script in order to preserve its existence and cultural significance.

How can a MOOC help preserve the Dongba script?

This MOOC serves as a valuable tool in preserving the Dongba script in three ways. First, it provides a free and accessible platform that allows individuals to acquire knowledge about the script's origins, the rich Naxi culture, and the cultural significance of the Dongba script itself. It also raises public awareness about the importance of its preservation and transmission.

Second, it pioneers the exploration of how MOOCs can contribute to the "living" preservation of endangered languages and



The old town of Lijiang, Yunan, China.

© Photo courtesy of Mr. HE Zhao for the MOOC "Initiation to the Dongba script"

scripts, ensuring their revitalisation in the digital age. This approach could be a way to make it a vernacular writing system with practical applications in Naxi people's everyday life.

Lastly, the MOOC's expansive learning platform has the potential to foster a community of learners and researchers, facilitating collaboration and discussions among diverse audiences. Such discussions and exchanges can be both popular and very academic. Ultimately, the MOOC plays a crucial role in facilitating learning, actively preserving the script, and establishing a vibrant learning community.

Among the multiple universities and partners involved in this project, what was the precise role of the University of Geneva, and why?

In addition to the three partner universities, this project has received support from various research institutions and experts, including LACITO (Languages and Cultures of Oral Tradition), BULAC (*Bibliothèque universitaire*

des langues et civilisations), the Lijiang Institute of Dongba Culture, Southwest University, Beijing Association of Dongba Culture and Arts, Tsinghua University, [FacLab](#) of the University of Geneva, and others.

The University of Geneva, represented by its *École de langue et de civilisation françaises* (ELCF) and the *Maison des Langues*, has played a significant role in the project. With a strong commitment to promoting language diversity, the MOOC has been translated into Chinese, French, English, and German, enabling a wider audience to engage with the content. Multilingual subtitling is utilised to enhance knowledge transmission and create an inclusive learning environment for learners from different linguistic backgrounds. These efforts ensure that the exploration of the Dongba writing system and culture is accessible to all, fostering a deeper appreciation of its significance. ■

For more information visit www.fun-mooc.fr/en/courses/initiation-to-the-dongba-script. The MOOC is intended for anyone (students, researchers, general public). There are no prerequisites for the course. A free badge of successful completion is available (conditions apply).