

From Culture spy to Culture Ambassador

by Zhang Xu Tayou Lamu (October 2009)

He or she who studies the western provinces of China, and especially the Naxi area, whether botanist, zoologist, ethnologist, mountain climber or traveler, will sooner or later encounter the name of "Rock," the Austrian-American explorer who was born in Vienna on January 13, 1884. His full name was Joseph France Rock.

Joseph F. Rock was the son of an Austrian manservant who ended up as majordomo to a Polish nobleman, Count Potocki. His mother died when he was six. At thirteen, already under the spell of an imaginary Cathay, he taught himself Chinese characters.

In the newly established People's Republic of China, the Naxi Dongba Pictographs were considered to be associated with feudal superstition, and their study was prohibited. In the eyes of some Chinese officials, Rock was even a spy who had smuggled many Naxi Dongba manuscripts to foreign countries.

With the implementation of the open-door policy, after 1978, Western scientists began to flock to Lijiang and its surrounding areas, where the Naxi-population is centered. Since then, the Chinese media have discovered Rock: for the first time Rock has appeared on CCTV, the inscription on his tombstone in Hawaii has been mentioned; and he is being referred to as the "Western father of Naxi studies."

Perhaps Chinese officials and scholars realize now that many Dongba classics destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, because they were works of "monsters and freaks," would have been saved if only Rock had shipped them abroad earlier on.

Very few foreigners understand the meaning of these mysterious scriptures handwritten by Dongba priests and so these priceless documents that luckily escaped destruction due to Rock, are now sleeping peacefully in the caves of libraries and museums all over the World.

On May 11, 1922, Rock rode on horseback into the Lijiang area, famous for its rhododendron, forsythia, gentian, and peony gardens, and especially for the beautiful Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. He was sent out by the US Geographic Society to do research on the local flora, but fell in love with the local Naxi Dongba culture..

He stayed there for 27 years, in a village just outside Lijiang City, in a cedar house on the second floor, where his private room still exists.

The village elders still affectionately call him Dr. Rock, but nobody cares where the title comes from. Rock is the man who hired the local caravan, and recruited a number of sturdy Naxi men as his guards, and traveled through almost all Naxi villages.

On his journeys he brought a luggage with the nametag: "David Copperfield," to remind himself of his tragic childhood. But he really traveled like a prince: a cook prepared his favorite Vienna dishes; meal times were always respected, and the table was set with tablecloth, beautiful chinaware, golden eating utensils, all to the sound of Caruso singing from an old recorder.

When he received the visit of Chinese officials, he dressed himself formally in a suit, white shirt, and tie. Whatever the local conditions, he always ordered his servant to open a folding tub so that he could have his daily hot bath. He liked to look back at the road, across

the hills, to see the caravan a "half-mile long". When he faced criticism, he replied: "You have to let people see who you really are. If you wear old clothes and hold an aluminium lunch box like a coolie does, then there is no one in China who will respect you."

As a National Geographic magazine expedition leader, Rock's first article was about a ritual performed by shamanist Dongbas: *Banishing the Devil of Disease* from a sick man's body in Lijiang. In his article he describes a number of strange priests, their hopping dance and leaps into the bonfire, their reaching into burning oil. Finally one Dongba Shaman allowed him to take pictures during the ceremony. His photographs and article have been published many times in National Geographic magazine from 1929 to 1933.

In the early 90s, a Naxi claimed to have seen Rock's son, a blond-haired and blue-eyed man, who was speaking fluent Naxi language and bathing at the natural hot springs pool beside Lugu lake, and telling people there that he was on his way to see the Yulong Snow Mountain. The son did not say why, and also, he never came back.

Naxi scholars tend to disagree with this rumour; they believe that Rock was homosexual, because Rock was always surrounded by strong and handsome Naxi guardsmen.

But the Naxi people are more inclined to believe this theory. At some time Rock stayed at Lugu Lake in the matriarchal area and may have had romantic affairs with local Mosuo women. Indeed, Rock lived beside this beautiful lake, steeped in maternal tenderness, for quite a long time, seemingly forgetful of the World.

The Dongba way of rituals and pictographs strongly appealed to him. It was with enthusiasm that he translated, and did research on Dongba pictographs, Dongba religion of Naxi history. The Dongba script was a bit like the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs he found. He began to write a dictionary, in which each pictograph was translated from a historical and theological perspective, with comments and pronunciation.

Early in 1930, he was forced to return to Washington, through San Francisco; the National Geographic headquarters could no longer support his work due to the economic depression. But 1943, relying on his own finances Rock returned to Yunnan.

Rock had to move quickly: "The political situation is very bad," he wrote in early 1949 in the National Geographic magazine. "The southern and eastern provinces have been under the control of a gang," which of course refers to the Communist Party.

On August 3, 1949, two weeks before the Communist troops entered Lijiang, Rock left China. He waited a full three years at Kalimpong in India. When the Tibetan authorities in October 1950 clashed with the Chinese government, he left for Honolulu.

Rock shipped back to the US most of his belongings. Among his goods there were a large number of his Naxi study documents, including the manuscript he had been working on for 10 years: *A Na-Khi- English Encyclopedic Dictionary*. Unfortunately, the ship was hit by a Japanese torpedo and sank with all its cargo. When the news came, Rock almost collapsed, and even thought of committing suicide. He felt that it would be impossible to re-write his lost work on the basis of memory.

Later, Rock had a stroke. Even so, he seems to have been considering a journey to Yunnan, to restart his work. Under the auspices of Harvard University, he hired a number of Naxi Dongba shamans to help him retranslate the pictographs of the dictionary.

Rock had always considered Lijiang as his unique home. Just after he was expelled from there, he wrote in a letter to a friend: "I want to die among those beautiful mountains rather than in a bleak hospital bed all alone."

With the help of the Dongba shamans, Rock finally completed *A Na-Khi- English Encyclopedic Dictionary*. He asked the National Central Library in Rome for funding to publish the Dictionary, but just after the war the Library was itself suffering from a lack of funds. The only way was to sell his Dongba manuscripts in exchange for funding.

During this time of economic plight, the German Chancellor Adenauer did not hesitate to pay a high price for the best 1,500 Dongba manuscripts, which are now in the German National Library in Berlin.

So Rock sold his Dongba manuscripts to pay the publishing house in Rome, Italy. By January 13, 1963, when he was 79 years old, he was still hoping to see his *A Na-Khi- English Encyclopedic Dictionary* in print. However, on December 5 of the same year, he died from a heart attack at home, in his study filled with volumes of Naxi manuscripts.

He did not see the crowning achievement of his life. Today his dictionary has been translated from English into Chinese by the Naxi people and the first volume has been published in Yunnan, China. Only Dongba priests can explain the Dongba classical Dongba pictographs, but they are quickly dying out. Thus in the future *A Na-Khi- English Encyclopedic Dictionary* will provide an entry into this ancient human culture like a precious key.

In the eyes of the Chinese people, now that Rock has been dead almost half a century, he has finally completed his mutation from culture spy into culture ambassador. He will soon become a bronze statue, as another hero, to which later generations will pay their respects. Rock's soul seems to be hovering over the Dongba manuscripts of the World. His limited life but infinite spirit is maybe just now wandering on the "Dongba Spirit Road" that releases the souls from Purgatory. He is advancing toward the Ancient Naxi kingdom where he will surely pursue his life.