



Benoît Vermander, *L'Enclos à moutons: un village Nuosu au sud-ouest de la Chine* (The Sheepfold: A Nuosu village of South-Western China

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Hiav Yen Dam

- 1 **Benoît Vermander, *L'Enclos à moutons: un village Nuosu au sud-ouest de la Chine* (The Sheepfold: A Nuosu village of South-Western China), Paris, Les Indes Savantes, 2007, 244 pp.**
- 2 As he notes in the prologue to his book, Benoît Vermander is a Jesuit priest who has headed the Ricci Institute in Taipei since 1996, and who visited Sichuan Province for the first time in 1993. He had heard praises of the beauty of the "Cool Mountains" (*Liangshan*), but in addition to the natural environment that inspired his paintings, he discovered a people, the Nuosu. Moved not only by the living conditions of these inhabitants of the high plateaux, but also by the threat hanging over the future of their culture and identity, he undertook a study of their system of belief and contributed to an edition of Nuosu ritual texts. However, he was not satisfied with being a mere observer. In 1998 he launched a project to establish a primary school in the village of Yangjuan, or "Sheepfold" (the *Enclos à moutons* of his title), through the efforts of which he was able to share the daily life of the villagers.

In this work the author pursues different aims. He wishes to involve the reader in his passionate concern for the Nuosu, particularly the inhabitants of Yangjuan, while at the same time inviting them to take a critical look at the development of his aid project. The material constituting the body of the work was gathered through interviews, informal conversations, discussions over setting up the school, and more focused inquiries carried out between 1995 and 2005, and is delivered to the reader in the form of a monograph in 18 chapters.

The three opening chapters situate the place under study in geographical, historical, and ethnic terms. In so doing, the writer plunges the reader into the

complex entanglements of China's administration, while reminding us of the country's ethnic diversity and the intermingling of the peoples of the southwest. This complexity makes any attempt at retracing their history or setting out any clear outlines extremely difficult. The Communist regime's classification of 55 minority nationalities in the make-up of the population in the 1950s bears witness to this same difficulty. The case of the Yi people, of which the Nuosu are a sub-group, is an example among others of an artificially constructed category that has been questioned, but which at the same time gives the intellectual representatives of that group a means of affirming its legitimacy in the face of the overwhelming dominance of China and its culture.

Having familiarised the reader with the geography of the area and the history of its inhabitants, the author devotes chapters 4 to 16 to a detailed description of every aspect of the daily lives of the Nuosu in Yangjuan. Following the pattern of the traditional monographs written by early ethnographers and missionaries, he goes over each of the main features -- social organisation, production, diet, material culture, different stages in life (birth, marriage, death), language, forms of imagination, and the system of belief -- without forgetting to intersperse his descriptions with anecdotes and life histories. Despite the thematic diversity of the work, each chapter is linked to the others by the author's concerns for the future of Nuosu society and culture. He emphasises, but in less academic language, the dilemma confronting a considerable number of societies throughout the world as they face the global spread of a single model of society and economic development, while at the same time setting out the problems specific to China and its minority inhabitants. He pays particular attention to the three characteristic features of Nuosu identity, which are its social organisation into clans and castes (Chapter 4), its language (Chapter 9), and its religious system (chapters 12 to 16). He raises the question of the likelihood of these features persisting or disappearing, or alternatively, of the possibility for a process of change that might allow, or even support, the community's capacity to go on providing its members with a sense of belonging. What relationship do the young and not-so-young Nuosu maintain with their past and their culture? How are they adapting their cultural inheritance to the rapid changes taking place in China today? And finally, what role can education play in this process?

Chapters 17 and 18 pay closer attention to these themes. The former goes into the origins of the project for a school in Yangjuan and its eventual establishment, along with the initial costs and adjustments. The latter raises the wider question of the future of communities such as Yangjuan, and even of the possible routes that development in China might take, given the ecological crisis closely related to current economic growth patterns.

With this book on "Sheepfold" village, Benoît Vermander gives the reader a work that falls somewhere between a classical ethnographic monograph, an NGO report, and a personal narrative of an encounter with a community with a rich history and an uncertain future. Vermander's many anecdotes and portrayals of individual villagers manage to bring them to life and allow him to share with the reader his experience of the rich complexity of Nuosu life -- and by extension, that of all minority peoples in China. The case of Yangjuan village, despite its specific problems, is an illustrative example of the wider issues that confront all of China's minority peoples. Vermander is also right to emphasise that while the world celebrates the rapid development of China's coastal regions and large cities since the country's opening-up,

its rural regions, and particularly the more remote areas of the minority peoples, have only seen some improvements in the current decade.

However, there is a certain lack of unity in the style and the purposes served by the writing, and apart from making the work difficult to classify, this also detracts from its coherence. Indeed, it leaves the reader with the impression of being several works in one, which makes its message less clear. Ethnographic data are buried under figures relating to the village's potential development, whereas greater attention to the actual process of setting up the school would have been welcome. Although the author proclaims his wish to encourage critical comments on his development project, he gives it scarcely one chapter out of the total of eighteen. Perhaps the other chapters were just a long preamble to introduce and justify the establishment of the school? Or perhaps the project was just a way of introducing the reader to the village of Yangjuan and its rich and interesting community? Admittedly, the author is aware of this, as he explains in his prologue: "This is not the work of a professional ethnographer But neither is it a simple eye-witness account intended to move people's minds or introduce them to a local development project.... I would describe it as the reflective revisiting of an endeavour at contact, discovery, and co-operation begun some time ago...." (p. 15). Nonetheless, the work is structured in such a way that the three kinds of discourse -- those of the ethnographer, the eye-witness, and the participant -- come apart and do not form a coherent whole.

To sum up, this work by Benoît Vermander is a great pleasure to read, and will therefore, despite its shortcomings, certainly contribute greatly to wider public awareness of another aspect of China, while at the same time providing valuable first-hand data on a Nuosu village.

10 Translated by Jonathan Hall