

One Artisan in China's Vanishing Culture

BY JOCELYN EIKENBURG
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At the foot of the sacred Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, a peak soaring to over 18,000 feet in a mountain range just shy of the Tibetan border, I found my first moment of true serenity after weeks of traversing across China.

I was staying in an old wooden Chinese-style courtyard house, one of the many traditional homes lining a cobblestone street in Baisha, Lijiang, that offered a rare glimpse into the life of one of China's most distinctive ethnic minorities: the Naxi people. Baisha was once the capital of the ancient Naxi Dongba Kingdom, and even today the place seems to exist in another era. I saw Naxi women dressed in their characteristic blue blouses and pants wrapped with a blue or black apron, roaming the streets with baskets on their backs filled with produce, or babies tucked gently into a brightly colored child

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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This is part two of a four-part series of articles providing a snapshot of modern life in China in observance of Oct. 1, 2009, the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Part one ran last Sunday and the series will continue every Sunday through Oct. 11.

ONLINE

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holder. Every now and then a herd of cattle or goats, often led by a man wearing the traditional cowboy-like Naxi hat, would flood the entire street, the soft click-clacking of their hooves the rhythmic accompaniment to this animal parade.

I am also here for something else — my friend Bi Zhihui, a 37-year-old artisan who is Naxi and Yi, one of China's other ethnic minority groups. I first met Bi in June 2004 while wan-

dering through Baisha, and was besot by the beauty of his craftsmanship. Located near Dr. Ho and the Baisha frescoes, the town's two main attractions, Bi's store overflowed with lovingly handmade embroidered throws, mats, pillowcases, bags and more. Each piece told the stories of Naxi traditional beliefs and spirituality through suns, flowers, animals and people stitched in an explosive sunburst of brilliant colors and waves of geometric

designs. And the man behind them was as grand as the artwork, a gentle Catholic with a compassion for others that reached far beyond the blue skies above us.

Bi's more than 15 embroidery techniques, which range from basic cross stitching to the more exotic horsetail stitching, have been passed down through six generations in his family. On this visit, I discover new masterpieces hidden deep in a backroom, which still has newspapers taped under the staircase that date back to the early 1970s, when Mao Zedong's daily quote was printed on the first page. These jackets, dresses, bags, hats and wall-hangings, embroidered with even more vibrant, delicate designs than the works outside, could easily become museum pieces because they include stitching techniques that Bi, and most other young embroidery artisans, haven't mastered. Yet, there is always the possibility these precious heirlooms could be lost if Bi sold them just to make ends meet.

See China, C3

INSIGHT ISJ



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Life in Baisha, Lijiang — a small countryside town about 15 minutes away from the Lijiang Old Town — is still a simple affair infused with traditional Naxi culture. It is a reminder of what Lijiang Old Town used to be like before it was commercialized.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

This man in Baisha, Lijiang still makes cotton items, such as this cotton cushion, by hand — but he is one of the last ones in the area to continue this tradition.

China

Continued from C1

Why should Bi struggle in Lijiang? This is one of China's top tourist destinations, renowned for its UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Old Town. Lijiang's Old Town, 15 minutes south of Baisha, is a vast swath of traditional wooden Chinese homes with a labyrinthine network of winding streets and waterways where visitors could commune with the unique Naxi culture. Yet, if you look closer, below the quintessential rooftop view of the Old Town, seismic changes are rocking the place with a ferocity greater than the area's 1996 earthquake — changes that have affected the lives of simple Naxi traders and artisans, like Bi.

Bi once had a small storefront in Old Town Lijiang in 2004. Though well off the tourist circuit, any presence in the Old Town meant potentially more sales. He has since given up the storefront because his customer base — mostly foreigners with disposable income — dwindled with the Sichuan earthquake and economic crisis, making the rent

burdensome. Old Town rents often hover around 100,000 RMB (\$15,000) per year.

Nowadays, most storefronts are almost exclusively rented by outsiders from as close as Sichuan and as far as Shanghai and Beijing — people with capital and business acumen. They turn rented property into coffeehouses, restaurants, bars, inns and stores that aim to capitalize on local minority culture. They give their businesses names evocative of Naxi Dongba culture, and decorate them with homespun artwork and antiques. Alongside a

dizzying array of generic Chinese souvenirs, stores sell factory-made embroidered apparel and bags, hoping tourists will believe they are as authentic as Bi's own work.

The businesses may occupy traditional wooden homes, but none of the experience — the names, decorations, embroidery — is authentic. The giant TV screen, whose continuous broadcasts seem to overshadow the nearby iconic waterwheel. The deafening music from bars and karaoke joints spilling out onto the crowded Old Square, a place once as quaint and quiet as Baisha. The bat-



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The artisan Bi Zhihui, right, and his grandmother work on embroidery from their home in Baisha, Lijiang. Bi's unique embroidery art, passed down through six generations, is a tradition that deserves more attention from tourists and tour operators in the area.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The square in Lijiang's Old Town was once a quaint place where Naxi (the local minority group) traders came to sell snacks, small wares, and some of their handicrafts. Today, it is a boisterous place with booming karaoke music, pop music from nearby bars, and hordes of tourists.

tery cycling receptacles stuffed thoughtlessly with cigarette butts. It all points to a new reality — a reality that ignores the other side of Lijiang's World Heritage: Naxi culture and people.

Naxi artisans like Bi are often lost in the race for profits. While Baisha welcomes many tourists, only a handful come into his store — mostly independent foreign travelers. Most Chinese tourists never have the chance to

appreciate Bi's artwork, because their tour guides herd them into the Old Town's commercialized stores. These stores usually pay 50 percent commissions to the guides on every sale — an arrangement untenable for Bi and others like him.

Still, during these summer months, Bi continues to make a few sales every day, in spite of the dwindling numbers of foreign tourists to Lijiang. For now, at least, the heirlooms

are safe.

Back at Bi's home, in the tranquility of a starry evening, we feast outside on spicy fish, wild mushrooms, taro and mung-bean cakes dipped in spicy vinegar, next to a wall painted with Dongba characters. It's a delicious moment that seems as timeless as the quaint wooden homes, Naxi women and livestock that fill the streets of Baisha, where for the time being Naxi culture lives on.