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*A preliminary investigation of the ritual use of the calendar and the oracular script of the Sui (Guizhou, South-West China)*

**Abstract** – The Sui (Shui in Chinese) live in Southeastern Guizhou. They are speakers of a dialect belonging to the Kam-Sui branch of the Tai-Kadai language family. They are one of the 55 official “ethnic groups” labeled as “national minorities”. Sui possess their own calendar and oracular script mainly used for divination purposes. The Sui script and manuscripts (le-sui) entered in the Chinese historiography in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century but research, mainly carried by Sui researchers, have been largely ignored outside China and even within China. The recent and on-going “development” of their mountainous region opened up for tourism and leisure activities has however brought a new kind of interest on this script in both official and academic circles, which led to its registration in 2006 in the national list of “intangible heritage” and the conservation of the manuscripts ( owned by the specialists.

The political and tourism use of the Sui scripts is transforming what has become a “cultural heritage” into a major marker of the Sui ethnicity and some selected specialists as its official ambassador are asked to perform in festivals designed for the official spectacle of ethnicity offered for visitors.

However, outside this arena, the specialists of the Sui script, who distinguished themselves from other specialists playing a role in the interactions between the human-beings and their spiritual counterparts such as the spirit-mediums, do continue to perform the ritual activities requiring their specific intervention as “master of the Sui manuscripts”. The Sui writing, around 300 characters, is an

oracular script. It is mainly used at the domestic level to perform divination and rituals such as home setting, wedding and funerals, and at the collective level to perform at territorial rituals such as the Dor and the Mau festivals. These collective rituals take place in the specific time frame of the Sui calendar.

Based on preliminary fieldwork research in the Sui autonomous district of Sandu and exploration of the fertile academic work mainly produced by Sui researchers who have played a major role in the protection of the manuscripts and its official recognition as “a Sui intangible heritage”, the present talk will present the main characteristic of the Sui scripture and calendar. The role of the “master of the le-sui” will be placed in the ritual context of the territorial lineage festival Dor which marks the beginning of the Sui year.

Although the collective ritual has undergone major transformations since the last century, attempts by the “communist” authorities during the time of collectivism in the 1960 and 1970 to change the date of the festival and have it coincide with the celebration of the national day on October 1st, have failed. The “traditional” Sui calendar provides a “time of the self” as Sui, while the festivals of “traditional” luni-solar calendar of the Han *nongli* contributes in many ways to their sense of Chineseness as members of the Chinese pluri-national nation self-defined as *Zhonghua*. And the gregorian calendar, or “Western calendar”, *yangli*, provides the time of the Chinese nation within the rest of the globalized world. This constitutes a typical case in which the government reconstructed a tradition according to the new order of time. By replacing the date and regulating the ritual, the government re-interpreted the traditional cultural meaning of Confucius and this commemorative day. In contrast to this, the government completely rejected the traditional calendar, referring to it as an “abolished calendar” and claiming that “the fact that one continues to use the old calendar means he carries out the calendar promulgated by Tsing Dynasty, so that he would be the rebel of the Republic of China”. This negative description of traditional calendar and construction of Confucius symbol seem to be contradictory; in essence, however, their aims are both to reconstruct some order of time, through which the government aimed to distinguish itself clearly from the former dynasty and to justify itself. By doing so, the Gregorian calendar as an element of a foreign culture represented an approach to establish the new order of time and also reconstruct a tradition. Meanwhile, by placing the “tradition” into the new order of time, the foreign culture became a part of local culture.