

Theme 4 Traces of Identity: Reflecting Diversity Through Language and Writing

Multiculturalism is not a new phenomenon. Ever since the first cities and kingdoms, diverse peoples have tried to communicate with one another, and leaders have had to figure out ways to integrate them. One strategy is to establish a common language. Another is to use several different languages. Chinese encompasses seven different languages and numerous dialects. The system of writing, using characters rather than letters, provided a means of communication for literate people throughout the country. Yet China also encompasses non-Han peoples who speak languages that are fundamentally different from Chinese. Language has become a way of exerting power and solidifying a group's identity.

The visuals introduced in *Traces of Identity* show how language reflects and even plays an active role in diversity. They also reinforce the idea of China's ethnic diversity because four different scripts are used. The background essay, "**Ethnic Minorities in China**," introduces four different minorities in China: the Mongols, Tibetans, Manchus, and Naxi. The first activity, **Discovering Pictographs**, explores the pictographic writing system of the Naxi and shows how this unique writing system helps to maintain the group's identity. The second activity, **Exploring Multiple Language Use**, looks at the reasons for and effects of multiple language use.



Annals of Creation in Pictographic Script with Accompanying Translation in Chinese

People's Republic (1949–present), dated 1950.

Manuscript of 18 double leaves, ink and color on paper; each leaf approximately 20.1 x 28.0 cm.

Naxi pictographic script on upper register of each leaf.

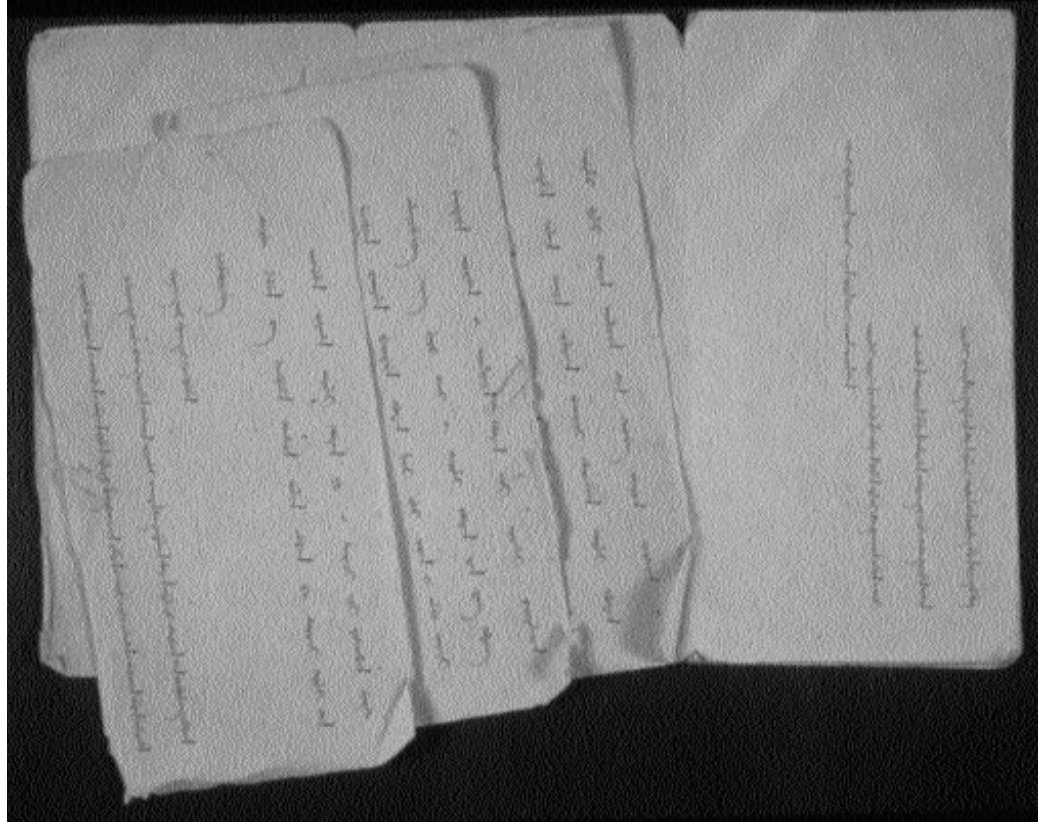
Chinese translation on lower register.

This text was written in 1950 by the Naxi in southwestern China. There are fewer than 300,000 Naxi people, most living in Yunnan province in southwestern China. From the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, they dominated the region. However, when the Mongol armies arrived in 1253, the Naxi were quick to submit to their authority. From that time onward, they ruled southwestern China on behalf of whatever imperial dynasty was in power in Beijing.

Naxi religious leaders, called Dongba, have long used a unique form of picture writing to record the stories and myths central to their religious teachings. This script, known as Dongba writing and said to have been invented by King Moubao Azong in the thirteenth century, is made up of tiny stylized drawings of people, animals, and plants representing concepts instead of sounds or words. A system of Roman letters recently has been developed for the Naxi language, providing a more efficient method of writing. However, the Dongba script continues to be a powerful symbol of Naxi ethnicity.

- Introductory Questions
- Which writing would you guess is pictographic? Why?
 - Can you guess what some of the pictographs might stand for?
 - The Naxi are the only people who currently use a pictographic script. Why do you think most people do not?
 - What might be the advantages of a pictographic script?
 - This text is the *Annals of Creation*, one of the Naxi's three great epic poems that explain the origins of the world and the Naxi people. Why might the Naxi feel strongly about using pictographic Dongba script for this?
 - This document is also translated into Chinese. Why might this be?

Palace Memorial in Manchu and Chinese Scripts



Palace Memorial in Manchu and Chinese Scripts

Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Qianlong period (1736–1795), dated 1760.

Composed by Zhuang Yougong (jinshi of 1739; d. 1767).

Document with 21 accordion-style folds; overall dimensions of document completely unfolded, 23.5 x 247.8 cm; each leaf approx. 23.5 x 11.8 cm.

China was invaded by the Manchus, who established the Qing dynasty in 1644. Their rule lasted until 1911. Among the reasons for the success of the Manchu government were its adoption of many of the Chinese systems of government and administration and employment of many Chinese as civil servants in the government.

- Introductory Questions
- Would it be useful to have official documents in Chinese, Manchu, or both?
 - Would it sometimes be advantageous to use only Manchu? Why?