

THE ĚRSŪ SHĀBĀ PICTOGRAPHIC
WRITING SYSTEM¹

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ABSTRACT

The Ěrsū are a Qiāngic people living in southern Sìchūān Province. A diminishing number of Ěrsū religious practitioners known as *shābā* employ a pictographic writing system described in Sūn Hóngkǎi's 1982 article that is the subject of this translation. An introduction provides background on Sūn Hóngkǎi and the theoretical framework he employs to describe the Ěrsū *shābā* pictographic writing system; additional footnotes and a map provide further context.

KEY WORDS

Ěrsū, *shābā*, Sūn Hóngkǎi, pictographs, Sìchūān, Qiāngic

¹ Sūn 1982a.

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INTRODUCTION

Sūn Hóngkāi's description of the Ěrsū pictographic writing system is contextualized by introducing the author, his theoretical perspective (and certain translation decisions this required), the uniqueness of the *shābā* pictographic writing systems, and reviewing relevant literature.

Sūn, a graduate of Běijīng University, had had a career spanning more than fifty years in 2008. A scholar of Tibeto-Burman languages in China, he has conducted field studies on Qiāng 羌, Dúlóng 独龙, Nù 怒, Pǔmǐ 普米 (Primi), Ménbā 门巴 (Monba), Luòbā 珞巴 (Lhopa), Báimǎ 白马, Tibetan, Jiāróng 嘉绒, Nàmùyi 纳木依, Guìqióng 贵琼, Ergōng 尔龚, Zhābā 扎坝, Ěrsū 尔苏, Mùyǎ 木雅, Shǐxìng 史兴, Róuruò 柔若, and Anóng 阿侬 (Sūn 1987). Sūn's most significant project in recent years has been the editing of the forty volume series *New Found Minority Languages of China* (*Zhōngguó xīn fāxiàn yǔyán yánjiū cóngshū* 中国新发现语言研究丛书, Thurgood 2003, Chirkova 2006). In 2007, he was an affiliated fellow of the International Institute for Asian Studies, during which time he worked on a Trans-Himalayan database of Tibeto-Burman Languages. In 2008, Sūn Hóngkāi worked in the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

The current translation represents a fragment of Sūn's large corpus of work that included more than forty publications in 1987 (Sūn 1987). To better understand the theoretical perspective employed by Sūn, it is important to note that, typically, the world's writing systems are classified into three types. Daniels (1996) attributes this categorization system to Isaac Taylor who, in *The Alphabet* (1883), laid out the concepts of logographies, syllabaries, and alphabets in his description of the languages of India. A logography uses a graphic symbol to refer to a word, or more specifically, a morpheme. For example, 女 represents

the Standard Modern Chinese monosyllabic morpheme which can be written in Roman Letters as *nǚ*. Syllabaries consist of graphs representing a single syllable that, depending on the language, may contain a single phoneme, or a sequence of phonemes. For example, ໃ represents the Tibetan syllable that can be written in Roman letters as *da*. Finally, an alphabet represents phonological structure on the level of the phoneme.

Gelb (1952) used Taylor's nomenclature to explain how writing systems evolve. In *A Study of Writing*, Gelb suggested a principle of unilineal evolution of writing systems, postulating that they evolve from logographies to syllabaries and finally into alphabets. Sūn's description of Ěrsū places it on a unilineal evolutionary scale based on the Gelb/ Taylor system. Sūn posits that Ěrsū is in an intermediary stage of non-writing, i.e., drawing, developing into a logography. Following Fù Mào'ì 傅懋勳,⁴ Sūn distinguishes two different writing systems: *túhuà wénzì* 图画文字 'pictographic writing system' and *xiàngxíng wénzì* 象形文字 'hieroglyphic writing system'. A pictographic writing system is characterised by mimetic representations without phonetic content. Conversely, the hieroglyphic writing system is characterised by the emergence of phonetic elements, is closer towards syllabary, and a step further away from simple pictures. *Shābā*, according to Sūn's model, is therefore important in representing a unique stage in the evolution of writing systems.

Shābā is also significant in using color as a meaningful unit. Certain Mayan glyphs (logographic and syllabic signs), employed until the sixteenth century, used shading (hatching and cross-hatching) to distinguish meaning (Marci 1996a). Hatching was also used on the

⁴ Fù received his PhD in 1950 from Cambridge University for his work on Lolo grammar (Fù 1997). He has also written on the Nàxī language (Fù 1944, 1984).

Rongorongo script of Easter Island, which is most probably an undeciphered syllabary (Marci 1996b).

In addition to the current article, Sūn Hóngkāi (1982b) has published 'A Brief Introduction to the Ěrsū (Tosu) Language'. Regarding non-linguistic data on the Ěrsū, we currently know of only two published articles. Both are by Wū Dá from the Institute of Ethnology and Sociology, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Wū (2005) discusses the relationship between Ěrsū ethnic identity and writing system, exploring the way that Ěrsū writing in *shābā* and Tibetan differently construct ethnic identity. In a later article, Wū (2006) gives a general introduction to the contested nature of Ěrsū ethnic identity, focusing on the role of historical factors in identity construction.

All comments in the footnotes were provided by the translators.

TRANSLATION

The Ěrsū 尔苏 refer to themselves as ə¹ su¹. In the past they were called Xifān 西番. They live mostly in Gānlù 甘洛, Yùexī 越西, and Miǎnníng 冕宁 Counties, and Mùlǐ 木里 Tibetan Autonomous County in Liángshān 凉山 Yi 彝 Autonomous Prefecture, Sìchuān 四川 Province. In addition, they also live in Shímíán 石棉 and Hànyuán 汉源 Counties, Yǎ'ān 雅安 Prefecture, and in Jiǔlóng 九龙 County and nearby areas in Gānzī 甘孜 Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sìchuān Province. The Ěrsū population is approximately 20,000.⁵ Ěrsū living in different places refer to themselves differently. For example, Ěrsū in eastern Miǎnníng call themselves do¹çu¹ (Dūoxù 多续).

⁵ At the time of writing, i.e., 1982. However, Wū (2004) states that there were approximately 10,000 (sic) Ěrsū in 2000.

li¹zu¹ (Lìsù 栗苏) is used in Jiǔlóng, Mùlǐ, and western Miǎnníng. In Gānlüò, Yùexī, and Hànyuán, Ěrsū call themselves ə¹lsu¹ (Ěrsū), or pu¹ə¹l¹z¹ (Bùěrzi 布尔兹), and at times they say pu¹ə¹l¹z¹l¹ə¹lsu¹ (Bùěrziěrsū 布尔兹尔苏). People in Shímíán call themselves lu¹su¹ (Lǔsū 鲁苏). These different self-designations are dialect variations of the same name, meaning 'white people'.

The Ěrsū language belongs to the Sino-Tibetan Language Family, Miǎn 緬 Language Group, Qiāngic Language Section.⁶ Ěrsū dialects vary to the extent that if Ěrsū who speak different dialects meet, they can only communicate with difficulty. The Ěrsū language is divided into three dialects: eastern, central, and western.⁷ The eastern dialect (Ěrsū Dialect) is spoken by approximately 13,000 people in Gānlüò, Yùexī, Hànyuán, and Shímíán. The central (Dūoxù) dialect is spoken by approximately 3,000 people in the east of Miǎnníng County. The western (Lìsù) dialect is spoken by approximately 4,000 people in Mùlǐ, Jiǔlóng, and the west of Miǎnníng County.

Most Ěrsū currently read and write Chinese. Several Ěrsū teachers have studied Yí.⁸ Before the founding of the

⁶ Gordon (2005) gives the following ISO-639-3 code for the Ěrsū language: ers. The linguistic lineage given is as follows: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Tangut-Qiāng, Qiāngic.

⁷ Gordon (2005) suggests that the Menia/ Menya variety of Ěrsū may also be a separate dialect. It is possible that, but unclear if, the terms Menia/ Menya refer to Miǎnníng and if so where in Miǎnníng County this separate dialect occurs.

⁸ For an overview of Yí writing systems, see Bradley (2005). The extent and nature of the usage of Yí are unclear.

People's Republic of China, a few people known as $\text{ʃu}^1\text{va}^1$ (Shūfá'ěr 书伐尔) studied Tibetan.⁹

In such northern Sichuān Province areas as Gānlùo, Hànyuán, Miǎnníng, and Shímíán, we discovered valuable examples of a colored pictographic writing system used by *shābā* 沙巴 (religious specialists). Apart from the *shābā* scriptures, we also learned from local people that there are many other kinds of texts written in the *shābā* pictographic writing system [hereafter SPWS]. Presently, names of some of the texts are still remembered. The scriptures we saw are $\text{n}^0\text{ma}^1\text{ʃ}^1\text{ta}^1$ (Nüemànshǐdá 虐曼史答), $\text{k}^0\text{ts}^1\text{i}^1\text{ʃ}^1\text{ta}^1$ (Gèqíshǐdá 各齐史答), $\text{ʃ}^1\text{p}^1\text{a}^1\text{n}^0\text{ʒ}^0\text{nd}^1\text{z}^1$ (Shǐpàzhúozī 史帕卓兹), and $\text{t}^1\text{ʃ}^1\text{a}^1\text{nba}^1\text{ʃ}^1\text{ua}^1\text{ta}^1$ (Chāngbā'ěrshuādá 昌巴尔刷答). These books are mostly concerned with primitive religion and are valuable data for studying minority history 民族史, ethnology 民族学, minority languages 民族语言, and primitive religion 原始宗教. In particular, these books provide a valuable resource for studying the development of writing systems. Moreover, the *shābā* pictographs are somewhat similar to the Nàxī Dōngbā writing system.¹⁰

SPWS is not known to have a specific time of origin;¹¹ nor does Ěrsū folklore agree on a time of origin. Some Ěrsū say that SPWS has a history of no more than ten generations, whilst others say that it has a history spanning several tens of generations. Others say that SPWS existed during the time of Zhūgě Liàng.¹² One account states that

⁹ The original text is unclear on this point. These people were most likely religious practitioners, almost certainly males.

¹⁰ The ISO 693-3 code for the Nàxī language is nbf (Gordon 2005).

¹¹ That is, its time of origin is not given in written (Chinese) historical records.

¹² Zhūgě Liàng 诸葛亮 (181–234) was a political and military figure of the Three Kingdoms era (ca. 184–280).

Zhū carried books written in SPWS on horseback when he was in battle. When Zhū lost the battle, he scattered the books,¹³ of which only a few have survived. In analyzing these *shābā* books from the view of graphic analysis and religion, and also according to the similarities between *shābā* and Dōngbā writing systems in their formation and structure, we presume that SPWS originated at around the same time as the Dōngbā, or perhaps slightly more recently than Dōngbā.¹⁴

Ĕrsū call SPWS ndza+ra+ma] (Zhālāmǎ 扎拉玛). SPWS is only hand-written,¹⁵ mostly with a bamboo brush or animal hairs dipped into inks of different colors. The books we have seen were written in red, yellow, blue, white, black, and green. Interestingly, the different colors give different meanings to a single glyph. For example, if the pictograph 'stars and moon' is written in black it means 'dim' or 'not brilliant'. On the other hand, if the same pictograph is shown in white, it means 'shining' and is considered an auspicious symbol.

SPWS has basically already separated itself from the manners of drawing and entered the ranks of writing systems. Some important features are:

1. Even though more or fewer strokes are used, the basic written form of each pictograph remains the same. In

¹³ Presumably to save them from falling into enemy hands.

¹⁴ Goodman (2000), without citing sources or providing evidence, states that the Dōngbā script is thought to have originated ca. 1100 AD. Rock (1947) citing interviews with Nàxī Dōngbā practitioners, places the script's origin in the thirteenth century. Jackson (1971) brings the date forward even further, after 1590, but probably not becoming widespread until after 1723. Jackson's theory is based primarily on ethnological and historical reconstruction.

¹⁵ That is, it is not printed or mass-produced.

other words, the relationship between form and meaning is fixed.

2. Though SPWS can only be understood by *shābā*, and despite the fact that the books are distributed throughout a large area, pictographs with a single meaning have a consistent form and manner of reading.¹⁶ In addition, the content of books found in Gānlùo, Hànyuán, Shímíán, and certain other counties are all very similar. Furthermore, we learned that the *shābā* rarely met one another in the past. Nonetheless, the interpretation and pronunciation of the *shābā* pictographs are almost the same. SPWS has been transmitted across generations and copies have been made. It has a certain social standing. There are clear standards for how to write and interpret the script; it is not just an individual's arbitrary creation.
3. *Shābā* do not simply draw anything they see. From the creation of SPWS until the founding of the People's Republic of China we can see that its development must have been very slow and the number of single-formed (*dútǐzì* 独体字) words is invariably limited within a definite scope. From the books we have seen (and the following figure is from an as yet incomplete survey) there are over 200 single-formed words. Nonetheless, the documents that can be produced are incredible. The scripture called $\text{no} \mid \text{ma} \mid \text{ʃ} \mid \text{ta} \mid$ contains around 360 different composite diagrams each containing several single-formed words.

SPWS is quite primitive; from the point of view of its expressed content and its range of use, its limitations are

¹⁶ That is, the *shābā* script does not vary greatly from place to place in form or in the way the texts are read.

evident. From the point of view of the structure of the graphs, the objective content being described and the representational forms used are very similar, which means that the written language itself is still like pictures. See the examples below:



1. [hkeɽnuɑɽ] A leather pouch.	2. [htuɑɽk'uɽ] A flame.	3. [tɕiɽpaɽ] A chopping board or a wood plank.
4. [ntʃ'oɽpaɽ] A food tray.	5. [dziɽ] A bridge.	6. [vaɽɽtʃ'aɽ] A slave who became a ghost.
7. [jaɽwaɽ] A religious instrument resembling a human hand. ¹⁷	8. [zuɽ] A cage for demons.	9. [ŋuaɽɽ] A cow/ bull.

¹⁷ It is unclear what this implement is, who uses it, how, why, when, and where it is used.

10. [vu]ts'ua An ax.	11. [sa]ti]pu-inba Decorated pottery jar for alcohol.	12. [hto]ts'ε A tripod used by religious specialists in rituals. ¹⁸
13. [z]ka+tsa A fork in the road.	14. [tsua+ja A stretcher used to carry corpses.	15. [p'ε+ngu A household container.
16. [ə]lbe A white conch used in religious rituals.	17. [ps]ma A frog.	18. [no]ma The sun.
19. [ta]p'ε The moon.	20. [nda+ma] An arrow.	21. [nk'ua]ji A fishhook.

¹⁸ Graham (1958) gives the following information for the tripod stove used by the Qiāng people of the Wēnchuān region: "[The stove is] an iron band or a circle with three equidistant iron legs and with three pieces of iron reaching almost horizontally toward the center from the places where the three iron legs are joined to the iron circle. These three horizontal pieces of iron support a cooking vessel over the fire. The diameter of this stove is nearly 3 feet..." (17) and "... the iron leg that has in it a small hole in which an iron ring hangs... is the fire god... The other two legs are A-ba-sei, the male ancestor, and A-ta-sei, the female ancestor" (49). Plate fifteen shows such a stove. LaPolla and Huang (2003, 14) further state that, "The iron potholder is treated by the Qiāng people with great respect, and cannot be moved at random. One cannot rest one's feet on it, or hang food there to grill. Most important is that you cannot spit in front of the potholder." We do not suggest that Ěrsū concepts and practices are necessarily related to those of the Qiāng, but they may provide a useful model.

22. [tʂɿ] A star.	23. [baɫp'uɫ] A shield used in religious rituals.	24. [np'oɫpaɫ] A religious implement.
25. [siɫpuɫt'ɛɫhkeɫ] A tree, broken by the wind.	26. [siɫpsɿ] A <i>qinggang</i> 青冈 tree leaf. ¹⁹	27. [tsaɫ] Pottery jug with a handle for alcohol.
28. [zɔɫmɫdzɿɫ] A ghost.	29. [ts'iɫntʂ'ɑɫ] A precious knife. ²⁰	30. [jiɫzɿɫnuaɫpuɫ] Auspicious constellation.

These thirty *shābā* pictographs are all single-formed words. When they are employed in context, the single-formed words are grouped together in a composite diagram (see examples in Appendix Two). Now we will attempt to explain two composite diagrams below, from the *shābā* scripture ɲ.oɫmaɫʂɿɫtaɫ. This name literally means 'look at the Sun' or 'look at the days'; it is an astronomical almanac.

¹⁹ Various known as the oriental white oak, Japanese blue oak, ring-cupped oak, and glaucous-leaf oak (*Cyclobalanopsis glauca* syn. *Quercus glauca*).

²⁰ This is a ritual implement, the exact usage of which is uncertain.

EXAMPLE ONE

From picture nine in *no* [ma] sɣ [ta]. The author added numbers in the text later.



TRANSCRIPTION AND LITERAL TRANSLATION

ɣj-i ¹	ta ¹ a ¹	ngɛ ¹	wo ¹	no ¹	tɕ'o ¹	i ¹
正月	月白	九	个	日	狗	(助词)
the first lunar month	white moon	nine	CL ²¹	sun	dog	PRT

no ¹ ma ¹	me ¹	k'a-tɕɣ ¹	te ¹	no ¹
日子	火	属	一	天
day	fire	belong	a	day

²¹Grammatical term abbreviations: CL: Classifier; CONJ: Conjunction; MP: Mood particle; PRT: Particle.

xə ¹ zu ¹	mɛ-ti ¹	ɬo ¹	mɛ ¹ nts'u ¹ ma ¹ nts'u ¹	tse ¹	tɛ ¹	ntɕ'o ¹
雾 fog	地下 under the earth	有 have	天亮不亮 sky bright not bright	云 cloud	一 a	股 bunch

dɛ ¹	ga ¹	gɛ ¹
(前缀) (prefix)	升起 appear	(后缀) (suffix)

ts'i ¹ nŋ'a	ta ¹	ka ¹	dɛ ¹	dzɿ ¹	gɛ ¹	mp'o ¹ pa ¹	ta ¹	gɛ ¹
宝刀 ritual sword	一 a	把 CL	(前缀) (prefix)	出现 appear	(后缀) (suffix)	法器 religious implement	一 a	(后缀) (suffix)

ka ¹	dɛ ¹	dzɿ ¹
个 CL	(前缀) (prefix)	出现 appear

no ₁ ma ₁	le ₁	ja ₁ nde ₁	te ₁	no ₁	Tsa ₁	te ₁	wo ₁	de ₁ -dʒɿ ₁ tʂa ₁ -ɬ
天日子 day	(语气词) MP	好 good	一 a	天 day	陶罐 pottery	一 a	个 CL	(前缀)出现(后缀) (prefix) appear (suffix)

tʂɿ ₁	ne ₁	wo ₁	te ₁ ʂo ₁
星星 stars	二 two	个 CL	(前缀)死 (prefix) die

te ₁	wo ₁	de ₁ -dʒɿ ₁ tʂa ₁ -ɬ	no ₁ ma ₁	ma ₁	nde ₁	te ₁	no ₁
一 a	个 CL	(前缀)出现(后缀) (prefix) appear (suffix)	太阳 sun	不 not	好 good	一 a	天 day

da ₁	tʂu ₁ ɹa ₁	me ₁ i ₁ ɬ	dʒo ₁	te ₁	no ₁
(语气词) MP	太岁 deity	地下 under the earth	有 have	一 a	天 day

TRANSLATION

The ninth day of the first lunar month, a dog day, will be a fire day. In the morning there will be fog under the earth. Before sunrise, clouds will appear in the sky. A ritual sword and a religious implement will appear afterwards. This means that the morning will be a good morning. After midday, two stars will die, only one of the three will still be shining and the sun will be in an abnormal condition. One can surmise that there is a deity under the earth; it is better not to move earth that day.

EXPLANATION

There is a dog's head tʂ'oŋ in the center of this picture (1) meaning that this day is a dog day. The dog's body is painted red, which means that it is a fire day according to the five elements: gold, wood, water, fire and earth.²² Ęrsū customarily refer to the first half of a lunar month as ʎaŋəŋ 'white moon', and the other days of the month as ʎaŋnuəŋ black moon. At the bottom left corner of this picture there is a xəŋŋzuŋ (2) meaning 'the morning is foggy'. If this pictograph appears in the bottom right corner it means that fog will appear in the evening. tsaŋ (3) is a jug with a handle. In the picture it is red. The pot is a liquor container.²³ It means that there will be alcohol to drink on that day, which simultaneously indicates that the day is comparatively good. At the top left corner there are three stars, tsŋŋ (4). Two of them are black. This shows that they

²² *Wǔ xíng* 五行 'the five elements' are used in traditional Chinese medicine, geomancy (*fēngshuǐ* 风水), cosmology, astrology, music, and philosophy.

²³ Here, red is a symbol of prosperity, indicating people will have much liquor.

have died and are no longer shining, only one star is white and therefore is still shining. At the top right corner there is a no^1ma^1 (5), a sun, but in the middle of the sun there is a cross, X which means that the sun has been locked in chains. This indicates that the weather will not be very good. Fortunately, there is a sword $\text{ts}'\text{i}-\text{ntf}'\text{a}^1$ (7) that can overcome evil forces, as well as a religious implement²⁴ $\text{np}'\text{o}^1\text{pa}^1$ (6). Therefore, nothing out of the ordinary will occur the whole day.²⁵

²⁴This can, in addition to the sword, assist in overcoming negative powers.

²⁵That is, the positive and negative forces are balanced.



EXAMPLE TWO

From picture forty-three in *nɔːlmaʃɿlta*. The author added numbers in the text later.

TRANSCRIPTION AND LITERAL TRANSLATION

ziːiː	ɬaːlɛːʈ	ts'aːʃsaːʈ	woːʈ	nɔːʈ	miːliː	nɔːlmaːʈ
二月	月白	十三	个	日	猴(助词)	日子
the second lunar month	white moon	thirteen	CL	day	monkey PRT	day

ʃuːʈ	kaːtʃɿː	iː	nɔːlmaːʈ	tɛːʈ	nɔːʈ	mɛːlnts'uːlmaːlnts'uː
土	属相	(助词)	日子	一	天	天 亮 不 亮
earth	zodiac sign	PRT	day	a	day	sky bright not bright

nʃˈoːpaː	tɛːʈ	woːʈ	dɛːhkuːʈtsaːtɬ	ʃɿːdʒɿːvuːʈts'ɛːʈ	iː	nɔːlmaːʈ
食盘	一	个	(前缀)出现(后缀)	肉 吃 酒 喝	(助词)	日子
food tray	a	CL	(prefix) appear (suffix)	meat eat alcohol drink	PRT	day

xə ¹ zət	me ¹ t	ɣo ¹	me ¹ ŋk'e ¹	ɣe ¹	me ¹	t'e ¹ p'uɑ ¹ ɬ
雾	地下	有	天黑	(连词)	天	(前缀) 变
fog	under the earth	have	dark sky	CONJ	day	(prefix) change

me ¹ ə ¹	de ¹ ə ¹ ɣe ¹
风	(前缀)刮(后缀)
wind	(prefix) blow (suffix)

tɕ ¹ ɿ	ne ¹	wo ¹	de ¹ ɬɰ ¹ ɿtsɑ ¹ ɬ	tsɑ ¹	te ¹	wo ¹	de ¹ ɬɰ ¹ ɿtsɑ ¹ ɬ
星星	二	个	(前缀)出现(后缀)	陶罐	一	个	(前缀)出现(后缀)
stars	two	CL	(prefix) appear (suffix)	pottery	a	CL	(prefix) appear (suffix)

nə ¹ ma ¹	ja ¹ li ¹	te ¹ ŋə ¹
日子	好	一天
day	good	a day

TRANSLATION

The thirteenth day of the second lunar month will be a monkey day and an earth day. Before sunrise, a tray and a pottery jug will appear, meaning it will be a celebratory day with alcohol and meat. At sunset, conditions will probably change. There will be fog beneath the earth and a tree will be broken by the wind, indicating that a gale will be blowing. However, two stars are still shining in the sky. All in all, it will be a good day.

EXPLANATION

In the middle of this picture there is a monkey head, mi¹ (1), meaning that it is a monkey day. The monkey's body is yellow, meaning that it is an earth day according to the five elements. nt¹o¹pa¹ (2) is a tray. The three triangles on the tray show that there is alcohol, meat, and other food on the tray. Beside it there is a pottery jug with a handle, tsa¹ (3). These two things together mean that there is no need to worry that there will be food and drink on that day. Two shining stars t¹ɣ¹ (4) are also shown. (6) means fog. It is in the bottom right hand corner in the picture, showing it will be foggy in the evening. At the same time there is a tree, the upper part of which has been broken by the wind (5). Though the precise meaning is unclear, based on the appearance of the tree, we can infer that it will be a windy day. From the Ĕrsū viewpoint, a wind that can break a tree is a very severe wind; it is not a good sign. However, the tray, pottery, and stars are all auspicious symbols, so it will be a good day.

When Fù Mào¹jì was analyzing the Dōngbā writing system, he stated, "Throughout the process of studying this kind of scripture, I increasingly felt that the writing systems we normally call hieroglyphic writing are actually of two

kinds. One type is writing resembling sequential pictures. I think this should properly be called a pictographic writing system; most Dōngbā scriptures are written in this way. Another type is when a single character expresses a syllable, but most of the graphic structure comes from the semantic component; it should be called a hieroglyphic writing system. Only a small part of the Dōngbā scriptures are written with this kind of graph."²⁶ Fù also compared the different features of the Dōngbā hieroglyphic writing system and pictographic writing system. The Ęrsū *shābā* pictographic writing system shares many similar features with the Nàxī pictographic writing system. For example:

1. There is no fixed number of strokes or stroke order. For a single graph, more or fewer strokes are allowed, as long as the overall structure is unaffected. Stroke order is also irregular; it may be from top to bottom or left to right, or bottom to top and right to left. There are no strict rules for how and in what order to write. In a composite diagram; it is usually organized chronologically.²⁷
2. A single pictograph shows one meaning; at times a group of pictographs is used to describe a complex meaning. Some meanings have no graphic representation in the text. For example, the first example surmises that there is a deity under the earth on that day so one should not move earth. However, in the composite diagram there is no pictograph of the earth deity. We must infer the earth deity's presence from an interpretation of the diagram's overall meaning.

²⁶We could not locate the source of this quote.

²⁷According to what will happen during that day.

3. Color has a definite role to play in the expression of meaning in the text; the exact same pictograph may express different meanings due to its color. For example, a star painted in black means that the star is dim, whilst a white star means 'shinning and bright'. Furthermore, the same animal head, if yellow, means 'earth day' and if red 'fire day'. From this we can say that the *shābā* writings are more like drawings than the *Dōngbā* writing.
4. For the two sample texts we explained above, the composite diagram itself only has six or seven pictographs. However, it takes many words to explain the entire meaning. The *shābā* pictographs mostly suggest concrete objects rather than abstractions; verbs are even rarer. For instance, in the second text, we see a broken tree meaning a windy day. This use of concrete objects to infer new connotations is very rare in SPWS.
5. One pictograph is usually expressed with two or more syllables. Only a few pictographs are represented by a single syllable. From the thirty pictographs depicted above, there are only four single-syllable pictographs, a ratio of one to 7.5 (thirteen percent).
6. Differences in meaning are due not only to the color of the words, but also to the addition of extra strokes. For example, the 'sun' pictographs can be written in many different ways. Often it is just a circle, but this can be modified by the addition of extra strokes, for instance:
(1) a locked sun, (2) a brilliant sun, (3) a smiling sun, (4) a normal sun, and so on.



As we know, writing systems in general have three components: (1) a shape component (2) a meaning component, (3) and a sound component. Every kind of writing system symbolizes a different developmental stage; every type of writing system includes some complications. Writing systems that express the shape component are usually called pictographs, but on what theoretical basis can we distinguish between pictographs and hieroglyphs? Based on our analyses of SPWS, we find that SPWS, although it can be classified as a writing system, retains many features of drawing. It should belong to the lowest level of the developmental process for shape-component writing systems. We can say it is in the middle of the process of evolving from drawing into writing. Consequently, to study the features and context of SPWS has great theoretical significance for studying the origins of writing and the history and development of writing systems.

SPWS is mostly used for religious purposes. Of course, its content contains much superstitious material; some of it even seems ridiculous. However, if we use dialectical materialism and historical materialism to observe and analyze it, rejecting its bad points and focusing on its exquisite features, then it must be considered a very valuable source of scientific data for the study of the origin of writing. We feel much gratitude to Ęrsū ancestors for leaving us such a precious cultural inheritance and we wish to thank the Ęrsū people who paid an enormous price in the effort to save and protect this cultural heritage.

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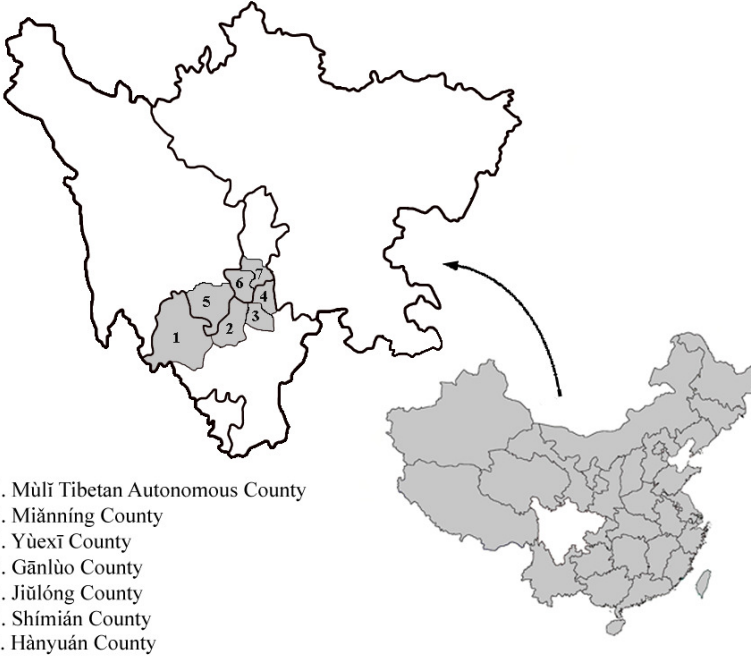
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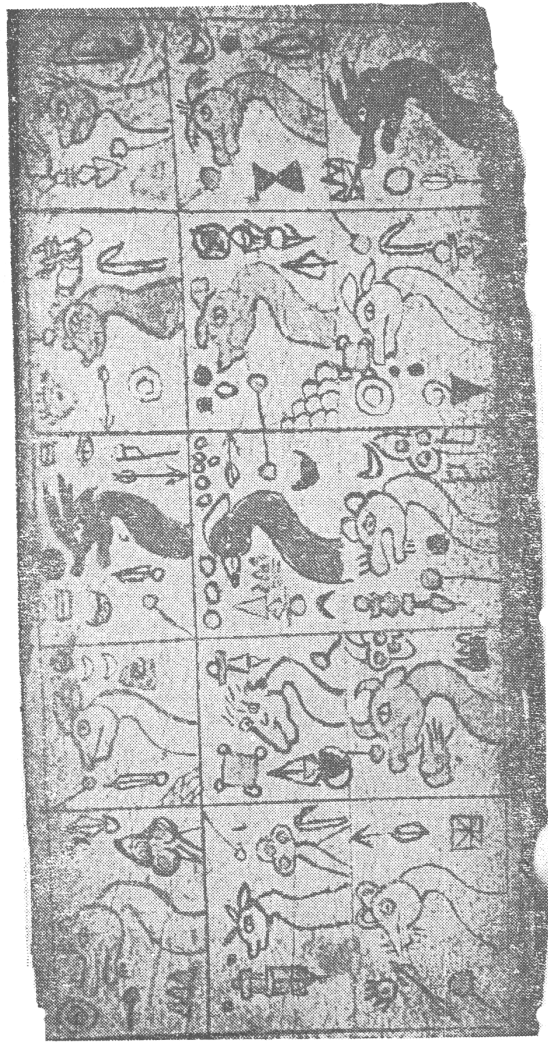
APPENDIX ONE: LOCATIONS
MENTIONED IN THE TEXT²⁸



²⁸ This map was adapted from several maps created by the Wikipedia user Croquant (<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Croquant>) and distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).

APPENDIX TWO: ĘRSŪ SHĀBĀ PICTOGRAPHIC SCRIPTURE n.o [ma] [sɿ] [ta]

Pictures 1–15



Pictures 31-45



Pictures provided by the Gānlüo County Cultural Bureau