

Gallery Guide

Colette Fu

Land of Deities: Pop-up Photos of Southwest China

Georgetown University
Department of Art & Art History
Spagnuolo Art Gallery

This guide accompanies the Colette Fu exhibition “Land of Deities: Pop-up Photos of Southwest China,” on view in the Spagnuolo Art Gallery at Georgetown University from January 21 – April 12, 2015. Edited by Assistant Gallery Director Carolanne Bonanno.

About the Artist

Colette Fu makes pop-up books using photographs from her travels around the world. After receiving an MFA in Fine Art Photography from the Rochester Institute of Technology in 2003, Fu began devising complex compositions that incorporate photography and pop-up. She has designed for award winning stop motion animation commercials and freelanced for clients including Vogue China, Canon Asia, the Disaster Research Center and Moët Hennessy • Louis Vuitton. Her popup books are included in the Library of Congress, the National Museum of Women in the Fine Arts and many private and rare archive collections. Fu recently returned from a 6-month residency in Shanghai, where she continued her *We Are Tiger Dragon People* project, an extensive visual exploration of China's ethnic minorities. There she also designed China's largest (1 spread) pop-up book measuring 2.5 × 5m.

Fu's numerous awards include a Fulbright Research Fellowship to China, as well as grants from the Independence Foundation, Leeway Foundation, En Foco, Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, Puffin Foundation, and Society for Photographic Education. She has attended many artist residencies, including the Fine Arts Work Center, Sacatar, Bemis Center, Swatch Art Peace Hotel, Visual Studies Workshop and the Vermont Studio Center. Fu is also a passionate educator, who teaches pop-up courses and community workshops with marginalized populations at various art centers, universities and institutions nationally and internationally.

*Note: Names of Chinese ethnic groups are highlighted in **bolded red text** throughout this guide.*

Preface

As museum professionals explore ways to engage our visitors, we have investigated writing interpretive materials that speak to the non-specialist viewer. Our goal is to help visitors make connections, on their own terms, with the works of art. Guided by learning theory and best practices, students in the *AMUS 520: Museum Education and Interpretation* Fall 2014 graduate program course wrote these labels for the Colette Fu exhibition. Ideas that were discussed within the course—and which the students considered when writing about Fu’s pop-up books—include the premise that a work of art can have many different interpretations; the meaning that each individual will find in a work of art varies depending on his or her previous experiences; viewers remember more about art when they construct their own meanings rather than being fed a single “correct” interpretation in an anonymous, authoritative voice; and visitors do not want to read lengthy, jargon-filled texts.

I would like to thank Spagnuolo Gallery Director Evan Reed, and Assistant Director Carolanne Bonanno for allowing us to experiment with putting theory about interpretation into practice; Colette Fu for agreeing to let us provide commentary on her artwork; and my colleagues Adrienne Gayoso for working with the students on effective strategies for interpretation and Krystyna Wasserman for introducing them to artists’ books. I especially want to thank my students for all of the thoughtfulness and creativity they put into writing these materials. As you read the labels, our hope is that you will be challenged to look again at the artwork and to make your own personal connections.

Harriet McNamee

Adjunct Lecturer, Art & Museum Studies Master’s Program

Georgetown University, January 2015

Student's Note

Famous for their colorful festivities and romantic legends, the **Yi people** are a diverse group that is one of the fifty-five recognized ethnic minorities of China. They are widely dispersed across different Southwestern provinces and integrated into the country's majority Han Chinese society, while holding customs, languages, and belief systems unique to their tribal branch. Their religious rituals honor ancestors and a pantheon of nature and animal spirits. Led by Bimo leaders who are the mediators between humans and supernatural beings and are able to read the Yi script, festivals held throughout the year are one of the ways the Yi people maintain cultural traditions. Such practices bring people together and allow generations of Yi decedents, including the artist, to understand their Yi identity.

- Michelle Yaw

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Axi Fire Festival

Artist's Note

The **Axi people**, one of the 27 branches of Yi celebrate the Axi Fire Festival to honor Mu Deng, the man who brought them fire. Legend has it that once when the naked Axi were hunting, heavy rains came down, sending them to shelter under an old tree. An old wizard, Mu Deng, appeared, rubbed some dry wood together and started a fire. The Axi were no longer cold and learned how to cook food.

Student's Note

Many cultures have legends about those who brought fire to earth. The ancient Greeks had Prometheus; the Hindus have Mātariśvan; and China's Axi people have Mu Deng. The Axi celebrate Mu Deng's discovery of fire by painting their naked bodies, dancing, and ritually making fire. Fu's artwork mimics the festival by having a multitude of figures actually emerge from the book as if they are inviting us to dance along to the beat of the drums.

– *Mary Kathryn Jorgensen*

Artist's Note

The **Sani people** live in and around Stone Forest, and are a subgroup of the Yi. Their lives are as colorful as their embroidered clothing, and they treasure song and dance above wealth and success. Their legend of Ashima is sung from generation to generation and is an inspiration for Sani women today who refer to it as "the song of our ethics."

Student Notes

This pop-up book depicts two important elements of Sani culture: their homeland in the Stone Forest of Yunnan Province, and their famed, brightly colored clothing. Fu depicts the calligraphy of her great-grandfather, a governor of the Yunnan region, on the foreground stones that mark the significance of the site.

– Ann Scoggins

The Stone Forest is home to the legend of a young woman named Ashima. The engagement between the beautiful Ashima and her love, the poor but brave Ahei, was challenged by the jealous Azhi who kidnapped Ashima and married her himself. Ahei rescued her after he beat Azhi in a song competition and killed the three vicious tigers that Azhi set upon the couple while they slept. Enraged, Azhi got his revenge by drowning Ashima with a flood. Whenever Ahei missed her, he would call out her name and listen for the responding echo of the river stones. Notice the arrows Fu has depicted in this book. What other symbols can you spot? What do you think they mean?

– Alexandra Roe

4 8 1 Village

Artist's Note

Unmarried women of 8 1 Village wear black turbans; married women wear red cone shaped hats. The women wear these hats because of a legend long ago; when traversing through the forest, the female leader of the group would wear a red plantain flower on the top of her head.

Gallery Note

The residents of this village, located near the border between China and Laos, are called the Red Hat **Yao people**. “Yao” is a complex term that refers to various ethnic minority groups scattered around southern China and Southeast Asia. As a result, their identities and traditions are derived from multiple cultures of the region.

Artist's Note

The **Dai people** refer to their land of Xishuangbanna as *bazi*, meaning tranquil and beautiful. Their homes are in a lush subtropical area near river basins with exceptionally fertile soil. One of the least-known but most flavorful culinary treasures in China, their food is similar to Thai food in that it combines sour, spicy, salty and sweet flavors but with its own distinctive style.

Student Notes

Brightly colored foods in a subtropical setting of abundance – can you taste the spicy, crunchy flavors of fresh green vegetables and roasted meat? In Xishuangbanna, the autonomous region of the Dai ethnic minority people in southern China, food and place are intertwined. The region's name actually means “12,000 rice paddies,” linking eating and cultivation.

– Shannon Sullivan

Sticky rice is considered a staple of Dai cuisine, especially for offering to guests. Dai food preparation involves roasting, pickling, salting, frying, and steaming. The subtropical climate and fertile soil provide ingredients like pineapple, riverweed, bamboo shoots, and even large insects. What other exotic dishes do you see?

– Kendall Newby

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Wa Hair Swinging Dance

Artist's Note

The **Wa people** regard the wooden drum as a divine tool that has exceptional power, and is the symbol of existence and prosperity.

Student Notes

When you are feeling exceptionally excited, anxious, angry, or joyful, how do you express yourself? Women of the Wa ethnic group, indigenous to Yunnan Province, traditionally decorate themselves in black and red costumes with elaborate jewelry made of silver and bamboo as they dance. Can you feel the movement in this piece? How does Fu achieve this through collage?

– *Alexandra Roe*

Wooden drums beat as Wa women vigorously swing their long black hair. The drums represent existence and prosperity; their music represents "anger and sadness, anxiety and happiness."

– *Bridget Mazet*

Scan this QR code to watch the dance!



Bamei – Cave in a Peach Blossom Forest

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Artist's Note

Bamei means "cave in the forest" in the language of the **Zhuang people**. Tao Yuanming, an Eastern Jin Dynasty (317-420) poet, wrote of an isolated Peach Blossom Valley where people lived a simple, pastoral life. For centuries, Chinese people merely regarded this valley as imaginary. To the Chinese, the peach blossom symbolizes luck, love and longevity, and to some - immortality.

*This book is displayed next to a white paper model.
Please feel free to gently touch and examine the model to see
how the pop up books in this exhibition are constructed.*

Artist's Note

Long ago, there was a young Yi couple in love. In pursuit of the girl, a jealous Devil King tried to kill the boy. An old man taught the young girl to crow like a rooster to call out the sun and drive the Devil away. The girl saved her boyfriend and the villagers now show their gratitude by wearing cockscomb hats that bring luck, safety and happiness to their people.

Student's Note

Every year the sounds of trumpets and traditional Lusheng instruments fill the air as nearly two thousand Yi gather for a special fashion show. They don cockscomb hats, seen here, to celebrate an ancient story of love. The Yi believe that the cockscomb hat brings luck and happiness to the world, while the button-like, silver bubbles symbolize eternal light and happiness.

– Rebecca Adams

Similar to what we think of as a fashion show in contemporary life, Yi women treat the costume festival as an opportunity to show both their craftsmanship and physical beauty. What makes the festival so important in Yi culture is its association with marital traditions. Yi women dress themselves in the most beautiful costumes to compete for attention from men. It's not only a fashion show but also a competition for Yi women.

– Haowen Li

Artist's Note

In the religion of the **Naxi people**, the priests are called *Dongba*. *Dongba* writing consists of pictographic glyphs that can only be interpreted by a priest. The religion is based on the belief that both man and nature are half brothers born of different mothers and the same father. *Dongba* scripture places an emphasis on this relationship between man and nature where man is punished for exploitative activities to nature. The painting “The Road to Heaven” depicts the journey where souls of the departed are tortured in hell before being reincarnated as man again, and finally joining the land of Deities.

Student's Note

Dongba priests use a pictorial language to relay instructions from the gods for living righteously. During China's Communist Revolution, this writing system fell out of use, but the *Dongba* are seeking to revive this script. Fu incorporates elements of the language both on the bottom of the book and in the floating pop-up features in order to celebrate this rare writing method.

– Mary Kathryn Jorgensen

Object List

8 1 Village. 17 × 25 × 10.5"

Epson UltraChrome ink, Epson matte paper mounted onto cardstock, Iris cloth.

Ashima. 17 × 25 × 10.5"

Epson UltraChrome Ink, Epson matte paper mounted onto cardstock, Tyvek, embroidery thread, Iris cloth.

Axi Fire Festival. 23.75 × 35.25 × 14"

Epson UltraChrome ink, Hahnemühle German Etching mounted onto Somerset Velvet, laser engraved oak.

Bamei – Cave in a Peach Blossom Forest Book. 17 × 25 × 5.5"

Epson UltraChrome ink, Inkpress Rag Cool Tone mounted onto cardstock, Iris cloth.

Bamei – Cave in a Peach Blossom Forest paper model. 17 × 25 × 5.5"

Strathmore Bristol and illustration board.

Dai Food. 17 × 25 × 10.5"

Epson UltraChrome ink, Epson matte paper mounted onto cardstock, Iris cloth.

Return to the Land of the Deities. 33 × 49"

Epson UltraChrome ink, Inkpress Rag Cool Tone mounted onto rag paper, Chinese brocade, satin tassels.

Wa Hair Swinging Dance. 17 × 25 × 5.5"

Epson UltraChrome Ink, Epson matte paper mounted onto cardstock, Iris cloth.

Yi Costume Festival Book. 17 × 25 × 7"

Epson UltraChrome ink, Epson matte paper mounted onto cardstock, Iris cloth.

Yi Costume Festival Scroll. 21 × 120"

Epson UltraChrome ink, Chinese fabric.

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