

From “American Botanist” to the “Father of Naxi Studies”’: a Brief Study on Joseph Rock's Road to Naxi Studies

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Abstract: The Naxi people are one of the few ethnic minorities in the Northwest of Yunnan Province that has its own characters; its religious culture and language are quite different from other minorities. Last century, many scholars from the West had a strong interest in Naxi culture. Joseph Rock was undoubtedly the most significant, known as the "Father of Naxi Studies". His monographs “*Naxi-English Encyclopedia Dictionary*” and “*Ancient Kingdom of Naxi in Southwest China*” are the earliest records about Naxi culture, and his collections of documents and research have played an inestimable role in the subsequent study of Naxi culture. During his process of research, Joseph Rock took the chance of visiting local places, communicating with local Dongba, collecting a large number of ancient Naxi books, and then spreading some of what he had collected to various parts of the world, even to some famous museums overseas. His study and dissemination of Naxi culture played an very important role in introducing Naxi culture to the world and attracting more and more researchers to come to Lijiang to continue their further study, that’s why Joseph Lock was also known as the “Father of Naxi studies”.

1. Introduction

Joseph Rock, an American botanist, was a famous propagator of Oriental culture from the end of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century. He enjoyed a reputation as the "Father of Naxi Studies", and was the first Western scholar to study Naxi culture. He was born in Vienna, Austria, on January 13, 1884, and died in Hawaii, USA, in 1962. He never married for his whole life. Joseph Rock devoted all his life to studying the Naxi people and spreading their culture.

2. The Road from American Botanist to the "Father of Naxi Studiess"

2.1 Self-Taught Botanist

Joseph Rock was born in a common civilian’s family, his mother died when he was six years old. His father tried his best to make him a respected priest, while things won’t develop on the basis of human will. .

As time went by, the lonely young Joseph Rock grew up, and he was at his rebellious period who was not interested in learning about textbooks. He often fancied himself as a traveler traveling

around the world. In order to realize his dream, he spent a great deal of time learning foreign languages and began to study world geography. Time is fleeting, he has graduated from college, no intention of continuing his studies, resolutely set foot on taking a part-time job while traveling. During this time, Joseph Rock's experience was greatly improved, and on one occasion he was offered a job as a cabin attendant on a cruise ship sailing from Europe to New York. The ship also brought this young man's heart to New York, so he decided to stay in the United States instead of returning to Europe.

The penniless Joseph Rock had a hard life in New York, where he had to wash dishes in a restaurant, and sometimes he had to sell the suit he brought from the cruise ship in exchange for living expenses, and what's more, disasters pile up on one after another. He was then infected with tuberculosis. He led such a miserable life. However constant sufferings and pains did not frighten him, in 1907, though warned by the doctor that tuberculosis patient could not be exposed to moist air, he set out on a difficult journey to Hawaii.

Joseph Rock was so excited about seeing the new places, the moment he saw fresh things, he looked as if he had taken stimulants. He taught himself a foreign language in Hawaii in a short time and mastered ten languages, including Arabic and Chinese, which showed his linguistic genius completely and also provided unlimited confidence for his following academic research. Later, he found a job at a secondary school in Volcano, teaching Latin and natural history.

There was plenty of vegetation in the Hawaiian Islands, and Joseph Rock was deeply attracted by these strange plants and often went outdoors to study them, and his long outdoor activities also helped him recover from the disease. Finally, one day, Joseph Rock worked up the nerve to walk into the USDA Forestry Office and advised his staff to publish a collection of plant specimens. Finally, he volunteered to do the job for the Department of Forestry. Joseph Rock's confidence and sincerity moved the staff. The staff took his advice without even checking his qualifications, and immediately gave some research funds for him. Joseph Rock did not disappoint them, and his research was soon on track, making him a recognized botanist in Hawaii.

In 1911, Joseph Rock became a professor of botany at the University of Hawaii. During this period, he published five monographs and dozens of papers. It is still well-known by leading experts in the industry. The literature he published is still a classic in the history of botany. But the halo of glory didn't stop him exploring the world. Because of resenting some of his colleagues' words and behaviors, in 1920, he left Hawaii and returned to the United States. He then went to Harvard University to apply for a curator at the Herbarium, but was rejected because of salary problem. He was then hired as an agricultural inspector by the United States Department of Agriculture and soon sent to Asia. He then began his Nazi cultural research journey that influenced his life.

2.2 From Botanist to Nazi Scholar

In 1920, Joseph Rock, a botanist at the University of Hawaii, was commissioned by the United States Department of Agriculture to set up an expedition to Thailand and Burma, India in search of seeds of gale trees. It is said that the oil extracted from the tree species can effectively treat leprosy. (the results of later experiments have shown that gale seed oil has little effect on the treatment of leprosy.)

In 1921, Joseph Rock moved from Thailand-Myanmar border to Lijiang and settled in a village called Wuluken. Wuluken is the Nazi language, meaning the village at the foot of the snow mountain. The reason why Joseph Rock chose here was that its convenient transport connected Ma Bang (train of horses carrying goods) with south Tibet and Myanmar. Since then, the American-Austrian botanist lived with the Nazi people. Since the expedition had to recruit some

local guides and assistants, he was willing to spend a great deal of money to disguise himself as a rich man by wearing shirts and ties even in the hall, and would hire four couriers and drudgery when he traveled. He was once regarded by the locals as a distinguished foreign prince. Every day he led a team to collect precious plants and birds from the mountains. On one occasion in 1923, Joseph Rock found several Naxi people performing a sacrificial ceremony that aroused his greatest interest. Over the next few days, Joseph Rock hired the local *Dongba* to re-present their "performance" and explained the details of the ritual. (Dongba in Naxi refers to the traditional religious clergy, symbolizing the "wise men" and the most senior intellectuals of the Naxi nationality. They are the main inheritors of Dongba culture) From then on, Joseph Rock fell in love with the Naxi culture and embarked on a study of the Naxi culture step by step.

2.3 The Research Process of the “Father of Naxi Studies”

Confused by the sudden change of research direction, and with the help of a local guide, Joseph Rock decided to learn Naxi language by worshipping the old Dongbas as his teachers. In 1924 Joseph Rock began to offer manuscripts to National Geographic, and also took a large number of photos for the National Geographic. It is these photographs and transcripts that continue to appear in National Geographic magazine to keep these precious images well preserved. Since China was considered to be a mysterious country by westerners at that time, his photos caused a stir when it was published by American Geographic magazine. As a result, National Geographic appointed Joseph Rock as its representative in China, with an honorable title “captain of the National Geographic Association's Yunnan expedition”. And the American Geographic also sent Joseph Rock a lot of dry negatives to take more photos and paid him for it. For a long time, Joseph Rock’s research was funded by American Geographic.

Influenced by the worldwide financial crisis in 1929, Joseph Rock's research funds were restrained and he had to return briefly to the United States to get more financial aid. He returned to Lijiang in 1931 after failing to raise the funds he needed. When the War of Resistance against Japan broke out in September of the same year, Joseph Rock chose to stay in Lijiang and study Naxi culture instead of leaving China like other Americans.

In 1935 Joseph Rock officially concluded his contract with National Geographic magazine and began to concentrate on Naxi culture. Joseph Rock studied Naxi language and culture deeply by communicating with the local Naxi people. Ten years later, Joseph Rock finally completed his first monograph’s original manuscript of Naxi Culture the “*Naxi-English Encyclopedia Dictionary*”. By this time, the World War Two had reached its most critical stage, Joseph Rock had to return to the United States in 1944 to participate in the mapping of the Hump Route with the invitation of the U.S. military. Joseph Rock, as a botanist living in northwestern Yunnan for many years, was a master in mapping. But as the map was almost finished, the news came that a ship carrying a large number of Dongba scriptures, related translations and manuscripts he had collected over 20 years of studying the Naxi culture had been hit by a Japanese torpedo, and all his manuscripts were lost.

After knowing what he has collected all his life being destroyed, Joseph Rock, was almost distraught - to some extent that he even wanted to commit suicide as a way to extricate himself. Because he spent all his life savings from 1931 to 1944, he could never return to Lijiang to study Naxi culture and restore the lost manuscript of the *Naxi-English Encyclopedia Dictionary*.

At the end of 1944, the map of Hump Route was drawn up. What Joseph Rock wanted most at that time was going back to Lijiang to continue his study. After hearing about Joseph Rock, Serge, the director of the Yanjing Research Institute of Harvard University in the United States, decided to fund the publication of two volumes of the *Ancient Kingdom of Naxi in Southwest China*. This proved very lucrative for Joseph Rock, who upon receiving the fee, immediately planned his return

to Lijiang as if he were full of vigor. Plans didn't go smoothly, but after some twists and turns, Joseph Rock finally returned to the familiar land of Lijiang.

2.4 The Final Footprint of Joseph Rock

Joseph Rock, 62, set foot on Lijiang for the third time in 1946. At this time, China was undergoing a civil war, and bandits were rampant in southwest China. At the same time he was suffering from severe facial neuralgia, he had to return back to Boston for the unbearable pain. As soon as he felt better, he returned to Lijiang. Though life was difficult to go on, he determinedly devoted himself to the compilation of the *Naxi-English Encyclopedia Dictionary*.

Years after years, on the third year after his returning, Joseph Rock found that his Naxi language assistant had disappeared. Joseph Rock learned by radio that Lijiang was liberated and the assistant who had worked for him was marked as "imperialist dog" and could no longer help him. As an American, he knew it was impossible for him to stay in China. Staying here would be great burdens for scientific expeditions. At this time Joseph Rock realized that it was time for him to leave Lijiang.

In August 1949, the 65-year-old Joseph Rock left Lijiang reluctantly by plane and never set foot on the land again. As a scholar, however, he never stopped pursuing his career. In 1962, he finally completed the manuscript of the *Naxi-English Encyclopedia Dictionary* before his death, which marked the perfect end of his life. The first volume of the book was published the following year. The second edition was republished after ten years.

3. Conclusion: Joseph Rock's unremitting pursuit of Naxi Culture

Nowadays, more than 3000 volumes of Naxi ancient books are still quietly lying in museums around the world, almost all of which were collected and purchased by Joseph Rock between 1922 and 1949. Because of the shrinking of funds for research in 1929, influenced by the economic crises, Joseph Rock had to sell some of his collection of ancient Naxi books for further research. In addition to the ancient books buried in the Pacific Ocean in 1944, there are more than 600 volumes of Naxi ancient books in the Harvard Museum, and more than 1000 books in The Library of Congress, some of which are of great value to the study of Naxi culture. Joseph Rock had made such great contributions to the study and dissemination of Naxi culture and laid a deep material foundation for the further study of Naxi culture in the future. It can be said that the rise of Naxi culture was totally resulting from Joseph Rock's unremitting pursuit of oriental culture. Let's always remember the hard-working "Father of Naxi"---Joseph Rock for his contribution to Naxi culture.

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