# Mozzarella of the East
# (Cheese-making and Bai culture)

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SOMMARIO

La produzione del formaggio non è comune in Cina, ma ci sono alcuni gruppi etnici come i Tibetani, i Mongoli e i Sani, che ne producono alcuni tipi. L'articolo descrive brevemente i formaggi prodotti da questi gruppi etnici, in particolare due tipi (conosciuti come *rubing* e *rushan*) prodotti dalla minoranza Bai nella provincia dello Yunnan. La storia e le tecniche di produzione sono descritte in dettaglio. Comparazioni fra il formaggio dei Bai e quello dei Sani, possono suggerire collegamenti storici fra i due gruppi etnici.

## *Introduction*

Marco Polo, the first Western traveller to visit China, described many things he observed, but even though he almost certainly came to Dali, he never mentions cheese. This is a great pity as there are similarities between Bai cheese and Italian cheese that he would have found interesting. Since Marco Polo omitted cheese from his travel guide to China, we will attempt in this brief article to help modern travellers to Dali understand more about this little known yet fascinating food.

It is well known that the Chinese traditionally are not fond of eating dairy products. Only in the last few years, under Western influence, have milk, yoghurt, butter and cheese become available in large cities. Most Han Chinese still feel a certain revulsion when it comes to cheese. Yet the Bai have produced and consumed two varieties of cheese for centuries. This is doubly surprising when one considers that very few minority groups in the whole of China traditionally make any kind of cheese. Of further interest is the fact that the Sani, a small minority group living near Kunming, make the same kind of cheese as the Bai.
This suggests some kind of connection, and we argue that their common cheese is evidence that at least some of the Sani people migrated from the Dali area.

## *The Bai*


The 1.6 million Bai people live in north-west Yunnan province in south-western China. They are one of the 55 minority nationalities officially recognised by the Chinese government. The origins of the Bai people are shrouded in mystery. Although there was a time when it was believed they were a Tai-speaking group, that theory has been discredited and they are now commonly accepted as being of Tibeto-Burman origin.[1] The Bai language, however, has not been definitively shown to be related to other Tibeto-Burman languages, and because of its overwhelming borrowing from Chinese, claims have alternatively been made that Bai is Sinitic.[2] Bai culture, too, has drawn heavily on Han culture, so much so that when Francis Hsu found himself in a Bai area during the Second World War, he felt no misgivings about basing his study of Chinese family structure on a Bai community.[3] C. P. Fitzgerald, writing in the 1940's, says "The lack of any strong national feeling among the Min Chia (Bai) has led many travellers to regard them as an absorbed people".[4]

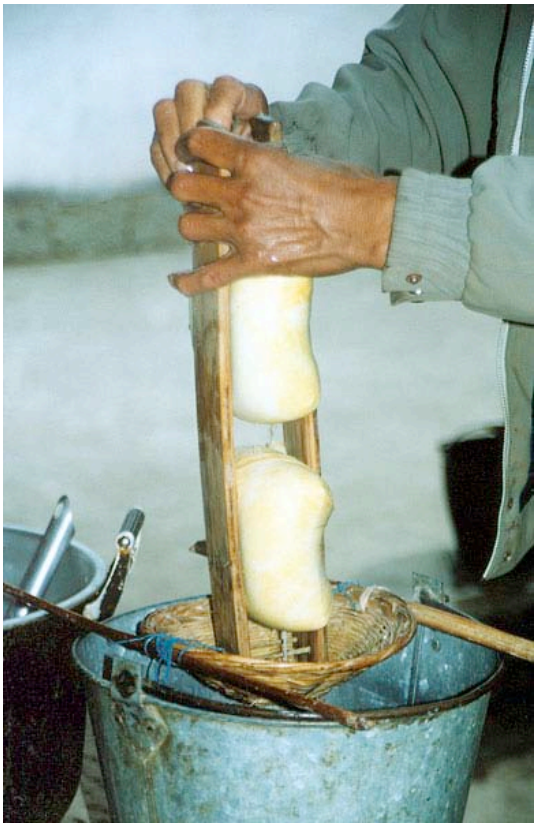
The impression one gathers from these ethnologists is that the Bai are a people who are being absorbed by the Han, who have no distinctive cultural characteristics of their own. However, our three years of fieldwork reveals that in Bai areas outside large towns such as Xiaguan and Dali, everyone speaks Bai; nearly all the women wear traditional costumes; in their religion, the Bai pay respect to distinctive 'tutelary spirits'; and the people have a strong musical tradition which is uniquely Bai.

The vast majority of the Bai people live in the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, which is centred on Erhai lake. The Erhai basin is very fertile and intensely cultivated, the principal crops being rice, wheat, beans, rape, maize and tobacco. Further north, around Dengchuan and Eryuan, the land is wetter and there are rich meadows and grasslands, where dairy cows are raised. The Jianchuan and Heqing regions are hillier and are more suited to the raising of sheep and goats. Using the milk of these animals, the Bai make two kinds of cheese, known as 'rubing' and 'rushan' respectively in Chinese. The local Han Chinese have also adopted the custom of eating the cheese (both *rubing* and *rushan*), using it at holiday times and festivals, and in some cases even making it themselves.

[1] XU LIN and ZHAO YANSUN (1984) *Baiyu jianzhi*. Beijing.
[2] STAROSTIN, Sergej (1995) "The historical position of Bai", *Moskovskij Lingvisticheskij Zhurnal* 1:174-190.
[3] HSU, Francis (1948) *Under the Ancestors' Shadow*. P. 17. Stanford University Press.
[4] FITZGERALD, C. P. (1941) *Tower of Five Glories*. Pp. 14-15. London: Cresset Press.

## *Cheese-making*

### Rubing



'Ru' in this context means 'milk'. 'Bing' means 'a round flat cake' or by extension 'something shaped like a cake', so *rubing* is 'a cake made of milk'. *Rubing* comes in fist-sized cakes, shaped like a rounded brick, creamy white in colour, and with a spongy texture. It is made in the Jianchuan and Heqing areas mainly, though there are individuals outside those areas who produce it too. Traditionally, *rubing* is made of goat's milk, and this is still the case in Heqing, but in Jianchuan, cow's milk is often used in its place. In fact, the Bai term for *rubing*, 'youdbap', means 'goat's milk'. Every day buses transport *rubing* to Dali and Xiaguan to be sold in the markets. The Bai normally slice *rubing* and fry it in shallow oil. It is then eaten with a sprinkling of salt or sugar. It has the property of not melting when heated. Sometimes it is coated in a batter of egg and cornflour, and deep-fried. If eaten raw, it tastes a little like mozzarella. It is considered a special dish which is served to guests or eaten at banquets.

To make *rubing*, the milk is first boiled well, and then when taken off the heat, a souring agent is added which causes the milk to curdle. The souring agent is extracted from the dried stems and leaves of a cultivated vine. The dried plant matter is boiled up to produce the agent, which has a bitter-sour flavour, and is called 'naiteng' (a Chinese term meaning 'milk-vine'). The curdled milk is then warmed up a little more to accelerate the process, and the milk quickly separates into white curds and yellowish whey. The curds look and taste like cottage cheese, and are sometimes eaten without further preparation, usually by children, with sugar added.

The curds are scooped up and poured into a handkerchief-sized cloth. The cloth is then wrapped around the curds and pressed tightly to squeeze out the whey. The tightly wrapped cube of cheese is then placed in a press. The press consists of two rectangular pieces of wood, each about half a metre long and five centimetres wide. There is a bolt running through a hole at each end of the pair of boards, tightened by wing nuts, to apply even pressure. In this way the pieces of wood can be joined together and tightened, applying pressure to the bags of *rubing* between them. The *rubing* is left in the press for several hours to squeeze out any remaining liquid. After this, the cheese is ready to eat. The left-over whey is very nutritious and is fed to pigs.

## Rushan

*Rushan* is quite different from *rubing* in appearance. 'Shan' in Chinese means 'fan', so *rushan* is usually translated 'fan cheese'. In Bai it is called 'nvxseiz', the etymology of which is unclear. Sold in sheets about 30-40 centimetres long and 7-10 centimetres wide, it has a yellowy cream colour, is shiny, and hard to the touch, though pliable. It is made in Eryuan, Dengchuan and many other places including Xizhou. It may be eaten raw, though people usually deep-fry it. The cheese is cut up into small chunks and fried very quickly in hot oil, which causes it to puff up. It becomes light and crispy, and melts in the mouth. Like *rubing*, it is considered a special dish that is often served to guests and is eaten at festival times.

*Rushan* is one of the ingredients in the Bai three-course tea, which is a kind of tea ceremony, nowadays accompanied by dancing girls and music. The three-course tea actually dates back to the Tang dynasty, when the Nanzhao and Dali kings used to offer it to their important guests.[5] The first cup is a bitter tea, the second is sweet, and the third has a strong aftertaste. The first bitter cup is made from roasted tea. This is supposed to represent the hardships of life that one must endure before one can attain happier times. It is also called 'one hundred struggles tea' or 'hardship tea'. The second cup contains pieces of walnut, brown sugar, and some *rushan*. The sweet flavour reminds the drinker of the good times in life. Honey, ginger, pepper and cinnamon are added to the third cup, which therefore has an interesting tangy flavour which lingers in the mouth. The thought behind this cup is that one should look back over one's actions and consider which have been good and which bad.

*Rushan* is made by warming fresh cow's milk (never goat's milk) in a wok, and then adding either household vinegar or some sour milk to curdle it. Since the milk is never pasteurised, the natural live bacteria work quickly in curdling the cheese. The milk is stirred with chopsticks and quickly separates into curds and whey. The fresh curds have the consistency and taste of mozzarella, and when cooked, melt in a stringy way in the characteristic fashion of mozzarella. However, the Bai never eat the fresh curds, but always dry them first.

The warm curds are pulled out from the wok with the chopsticks and are manipulated with the fingers for a while before being stretched over a bamboo frame. The frame consists of two parallel 2.5 metre-long bamboo poles fastened together about 10 centimetres apart. Several strips may be spread over the frame, and when full it is placed outside, usually on a covered porch, to allow the cheese to dry. The cheese is left for about twenty-four hours, and then is removed from the frame. The sheets are basically oblong in shape but taper at the ends to a curled up point where they had

[5] Xuxia Keyouji

been wrapped around the bamboo poles. Two sheets are placed together, one on top of the other, in such a way that the ends of the lower sheet curl round the upper one, holding them together. Stacked in pairs, they are then taken to the market to be sold.

## *History and possible origins*

Because making cheese is a highly unusual activity in China, we are particularly interested in its origins. We have examined all historical records available to us, and have sought help from local Bai historians, but the fact remains that cheese is seldom mentioned in written records. According to the Dengchuan Gazetteer,[6] *rushan* was already being made in the Ming Dynasty. In 1641 Ai Zixiu listed goods produced in Dengchuan: "felt hats, socks, blankets, bamboo arrows, butter, cheese, black tea, honey...". To be precise, it does not say '*rushan*' for 'cheese' but '*ruxian*', meaning 'milk thread or string'. The gazetteer also states that a family with four cows could produce 200 sheets of *ruxian* daily. This figure is commensurate with today's production levels.

A book on Chinese minority cuisine[7] recounts a legend describing the origin of *rushan*. At the time of the Nanzhao kingdom there was once a village headman called A Kuo. He raised a large number of dairy cows, and to look after them he employed long-term farmhands, whom he used to pay in milk. One day, one of these hands named Zhang Zhi poured some left over sour milk into a wok to heat it up. By mistake he added some fresh milk, and when he stirred it he found that the mixture quickly solidified. He scooped some out, moulded it with his hands, rolled it into thin sheets and left it to dry. After this, everyone else learned the technique.

This simple story would indicate that the Bai discovered cheese-making by accident, which is entirely possible. The fact is that these cheeses are extremely simple to make. There is therefore a strong chance that any people involved in dairy farming for long enough will find that they can extend the life of their milk by converting it into cheese. A cheese similar to *rubing* is found in South America, where it is called 'queso blanco'. A similar cheese known as 'paneer' is found in India. Thus one cannot rule out the possibility that the cheese-making process was independently discovered by the Bai themselves or by their ancestors. We do not wish to rule out, however, the possibility that they learned how to make cheese from another group. Buddhist monks could have passed on the skill, along with Mahayana Buddhism, when they arrived from India during the Tang dynasty, but the absence of historical records make this impossible to confirm. Perhaps more likely is the theory that the Bai learned how to make cheese from another Chinese group: the Tibetan, Mongolian and Sani peoples all make cheese, and all have had contact with the Bai.

[6] Dengchuan Gazetteer, chapter 3

[7] *Zhongguo Shaoshu Minzu Tesecai* (Chinese Minority Delicacies) (1997) published by Guangxi Kexue Jishu Chubanshe.

## *Tibetan cheese*

The Tibetans live in relatively close proximity to the Bai, and the two peoples have had centuries of contact: Tibetan traders come to the Bai Third Month Fair, bringing horses and medicinal herbs; Bai artisans have produced furniture and silverware for Tibetan rulers.[8] It is therefore possible that the Tibetans brought cheese with them to Dali. Tibetan cheese is quite different from Bai cheese, though: it tends to be extremely hard and is eaten raw. It is made from 'dara' (buttermilk), which is boiled for five minutes, then cooled to 20 degrees centigrade or less. It then separates into soft curds and a thin whey, which is drained off and fed to livestock. Sometimes a handful of curd is squeezed out from between the fingers, creating noodle-like shapes which are left to dry. Other times, melted butter and sugar are mixed into the curd, which is then formed into pretzel-like shapes and dried in the sun. The result is white, hard and sweet, and has the consistency of a peppermint. It is called 'chura kampo', which means dried hard cheese.[9]

There is a second type of cheese, 'chhurpi', which is even harder. It is made from solidified yoghurt, which is then cut into three-centimetre squares and strung on yak-hair necklaces. One of these yellowish brown pieces can last for at least two hours before one can finish eating it, and so it is suitable for chewing on lengthy journeys. One could therefore speculate that Tibetan traders brought some on their long treks down to Dali. The cheese differs from Bai cheese in several ways. The milk used is of course that of yaks,[10] and what is used for cheese-making is buttermilk—the milk left over after making butter. The cheese is allowed to dry out completely rather than being eaten fresh, as in *rubing*. Even *rushan* is only allowed to dry for twenty four hours and then should be eaten before it becomes too hard. Although *chhurpi* is sometimes boiled in soup to soften it a little, Tibetan cheese is generally consumed raw, not cooked. Because of these differences, it seems unlikely that the Tibetans taught the Bai how to make *rubing* and *rushan*, though they could have had some influence .

## *Mongolian cheese*

The Mongolians are the other main minority group making some kind of cheese. Zhang Weiwen and Zeng Qingnan write, "Mongolian traditional food is divided into two types, white and red, each with its own special characteristics. White food is made from the milk of horses, cows, sheep and camels. Red food is made from the meat of cattle, sheep and other domestic livestock. According to Mongolian custom, white is a symbol of purity, good luck, and sublimity. For this reason, it is the most courteous way to greet a guest. When a guest arrives at a herdsman's home, the host lays out milk skin, cheese, milk cakes and milk tea."[11]

Mongolian cheese is normally made of cow's milk, though sometimes sheep's milk is used instead. A tablespoon of yoghurt is added to about five litres of fresh milk which may or

[8] GOULLART, Peter (1955) *Forgotten Kingdom*. London: John Murray.
[9] RINJING DORJE (1985) *Food in Tibetan Life*. P. 96. London: Prospect Books.
[10] In Tibetan a female yak or *gyak* is called a *'bri* (pronounced *dri*).
[11] ZHANG WEIWEN, ZENG QINGNAN (1993) *In search of China's minorities*. Beijing: New World Press.

may not have been boiled. When it curdles the mixture is placed in a cheesecloth bag which is hung up to allow the whey to drain off. The bag is then placed on a table and a weighted board is put on top to press out more fluid. After about half a day, the cheese is removed from the bag and is stood up on end to allow it to dry for a few more hours. The outside will take on an off-white or light tan colour. If it is dark tan, then it has dried too long. Inside it is creamy white with a smooth solid consistency and a rather bland flavour. The finished cheese, called 'byslag' in Mongolian, is usually a square shape with sides about 20 centimetres long, and is about 5 centimetres thick. It is eaten raw, sometimes with sugar sprinkled on top, and is accompanied by bread and tea. While in the countryside the cheese is eaten quite often, in the city it is usually eaten on special occasions such as weddings or is offered to guests.[12]

The procedure used to make the cheese is quite similar to that employed by the Bai. The first real contact between the Mongolian people and the Bai would have been in the thirteenth century, when Kublai Khan conquered Yunnan, defeating the Dali kingdom in 1253. One could speculate therefore that the Bai art of cheese-making was introduced by the Mongols.

## *Sani cheese*

The Sani people also make cheese. Although not officially recognised as an independent minority, the 90,000 Sani maintain a distinctive language and culture, and are often referred to as the Sani minority. Actually they are classified as a branch of the Yi, who live in Lunan, 70 kilometres south-east of Kunming in Yunnan province. A guidebook to Yunnan states, "Lunan is famous not only for the Stone Forest, but also for its dairy product—the 'rubing' (milk curd) of goat's milk. About five pounds of goat's milk can be made into one pound of 'rubing'. 'Rubing' of good quality is yellowish, giving no sour scent."[13] In the Sani language their cheese is named 'sheep tofu'. The Sani make their *rubing* in the same way as the Bai, except that they do not use a press; while the curds are wrapped in a handkerchief, they simply use their hands to squeeze out as much whey as they can. Instead of using a vegetable extract to curdle the milk, they use a little of the previous day's whey which has been left to sour. If this is not available, they can also use vinegar. The resulting cheese is also eaten fried, generally on special occasions. Much of the *rubing* on sale in Kunming comes from Lunan.

It is interesting that there are two minorities in Yunnan province who traditionally make the same cheese yet live five hundred kilometers apart, a considerable distance when one considers the lack of communications in the past. Although it is conceivable that they each discovered *rubing* independently, it would seem unlikely. Although many Yi are pastoralists, they do not make cheese or use any milk products. The Sani are an unusual Yi group in this regard, though even for them, raising goats is a peripheral activity: theirs is a wet rice economy.

[12] Darjaa Bazarsad, personal communication.
[13] *A Tourist Guide to Yunnan.* P. 303. Yunnan Provincial Travel and Tourism Administration, 1991

Of even greater interest is the fact that "Sani origin myths say that their ancestors traveled east from Dali to settle in their current territory."[14] The Sani people say that this occurred at the time of the Nanzhao kingdom (734-902 AD). At that time, a Yi-led kingdom united several other kingdoms to create a state called Nanzhao which eventually was to conquer the whole of Yunnan and extend its power into Sichuan, Burma and northern Thailand. Nanzhao was succeeded by the Dali kingdom, led by the Bai, which only fell before the all-conquering Mongols in the thirteenth century. The Nanzhao-Dali political entity is the only state formed by minority peoples in South China that maintained its independence for five centuries. It could well be that as a result of the expansion of Nanzhao, some of the ancestors of the Sani people migrated from Dali to Lunan. However, the Sani also say that some of their ancestors traveled from Guizhou, much farther to the east. More research remains to be done into the history of the Sani people.
What would seem likely, though, is that *rubing* was already being made during the Nanzhao kingdom. When the Sani left, they took the skill with them, and the Bai, who remained in the Dali area, continued to make it too. Thus *rubing* may be corroborating evidence for the Sani's having come from Dali. The fact that the Sani do not make *rushan* may indicate that *rushan* was a later development. Indeed, it is a more complicated procedure and may have been a refinement of *rubing*, evolving gradually into the *rushan* of today. Alternatively, since *rushan* is made from cow's milk, it could be that Lunan territory is unsuitable for raising dairy cattle, and so the Sani were only able to continue making *rubing*. Of course, if *rubing* were already being made at the time of the Nanzhao kingdom, it rules out a Mongolian origin. The question remains: who made it first, the Bai or the Sani? There is not enough evidence to come down on one side or the other; it is even possible that a third party invented it and the Bai and Sani both adopted it during the Nanzhao era.

The exact makeup of the peoples of Nanzhao is still not entirely clear. Chinese sources speak of 'Baiman' (White Barbarians) and 'Heiman' (Black Barbarians). Michael Blackmore writes, "It seems not unlikely that the White Barbarians were the main inhabitants of Han-period Yunnan, and that during four or five centuries of Chinese dominance they lost their own language, coming to speak a garbled form of Chinese. The Black Barbarians would then have been later arrivals, between the Han and T'ang periods, probably bringing their pastoral economy with them from the Tibetan borderlands."[15] It is conceivable that they also brought a knowledge of cheese-making, possibly similar to Tibetan cheese, but at the very least this could mark the introduction of dairy farming. There in the rich pastures around Eryuan, a pastoral economy flourished, while in other areas, it was impractical. Put simply, the Black Barbarians would be the forerunners of the Yi, including the Sani, while the White Barbarians would be the ancestors of the Bai.

## *Conclusion*

The Bai people have a long-standing tradition of making cheese, a custom that is little known to outsiders. The Sani people make the same kind of cheese, which would indicate a common origin, thus providing support for the theory that at least some of the Sani people originally came from Dali. Since contact with the Mongols only came later, the resemblance

[14] SWAIN, Margaret Byrne (1995) "Pere Vial and the Gni-P'a". In HARREL, Stevan (ed.), *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*. P.162. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press.
[15] BLACKMORE, Michael "The Ethnological Problems connected with Nanchao"

with Mongolian cheese would therefore only be coincidental. It is more likely that there was a Tibetan influence which gave early pastoralists the impetus to begin making cheese, which then evolved into the *rubing* and *rushan* of today. We hope that this brief introduction may help to build up a fuller picture of cheese-making in China and particularly of its place in Bai culture.

*Acknowledgement*

The authors wish to acknowledge with gratitude the help of the following people: Stuart Milliken, Ritva Lehonkoski, Ellen Bartee, Bazarsad Darjaa, Bai and Sani farmers.