

Hao Chi

Yunnan, 2002

by Bill Greer

About the Author

Adventure travel expert Bill Greer is the founder of GORP.com, the early Internet era's leading community for outdoor and adventure travel, selected as one of the Top 50 sites on the web in 2000. More recently, he is the author of **The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan**, a novel of New Amsterdam that paints a real and bawdy portrait of Dutch life on the Hudson through the eyes of a sharp-tongued bride who comes among the first settlers. Visit Bill at www.billsbrownstone.com.

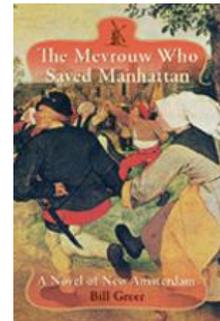
Reviews for The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan

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“**A**mericans and Yi both have culture,” the shaman greeted us. “Our culture ties us together.”

The grizzled old man squatted in a corner of his cabin facing the light shining through the door. The wrinkles around his cheeks and eyes reflected his 80 years as a spiritual leader in a village nestled in the shadow cast by the 18,000-foot Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. Xuehua was really four interconnected communities, all told a couple of hundred families of Yi, a small, historically rebellious minority that occupied the poor higher land in northwestern Yunnan.

We had been walking for about an hour on the second day of our trek along the Tea Horse Trail, an ancient route for moving horses and tea from India through Tibet and into southwestern China. Justin Zackey, a researcher in environmental development, was guiding my wife Diane and me through several of the villages he studies. He suggested we detour for a quick mid-morning visit with his friend.

“He will want us to stay the night,” Justin warned. “I will tell him we only have time for tea.”

The shaman and his wife had seen us coming. He bellowed to someone in the fields as he ushered us into the main room of the wood house. Woven bamboo curtained off smaller rooms on each side. A fire blazed in the open hearth dug into the dirt floor. Diane and I were directed to the seat of honor, a short bed covered with a black pad of goat hair pressed into felt. Everyone else perched on wooden blocks. Sun reflected off the smoke escaping through the eaves.

The daughter whom the shaman had called joined us to serve tea. Meanwhile his wife scurried around to find more refreshments. We agreed to a simple snack, nothing elaborate. Shortly another woman came in, introduced as a daughter-in-law. She carried

a large black chicken, wings flapping as it tried to escape mortal danger. As she raised a knife up to its throat, it quickly became clear that tea alone would not be a sufficient show of hospitality. We settled in for a long visit and a large meal.

As the women prepared the food, the shaman seated us on logs under the awning fronting the house. A scraggly white beard dirtied his chin. He had only a few molars left in the back of his mouth, drawing his lips into a permanent sneer. But his eyes twinkled with a remarkable expression of delight as he unwrapped a book, a scroll really, sheets of cotton bound at one end around a bamboo rod.

“The Yi are 10,000 years old,” he told us in Mandarin, with Justin translating. “10,000 years ago, we were nothing. We had no farming, no culture. Then we received this book and started our history.”

The shaman had written the book himself decades before, copied from material he said was as old as the Yi people themselves. During the Cultural Revolution, rumors reached the village of the Red Guard burning sacred writings. He loaded some of his books onto donkeys, and his brother carted them hundreds of kilometers into Burma for safekeeping. But the village could not spare enough animals, so he carried others into the mountains to bury under rocks.

“The Yi are the elder brother,” he continued. “We originated the culture, then handed it down to our middle brother, the Tibetans, and to our younger brother, the Han Chinese.”

He opened the book to a page with four figures sketched across the top, three stick men and a woman signified by a square on her breast. The left column presented drawings of the sun and the moon. Script covered the body of the page. “The writing has changed many times,” he noted, counting on his fingers each of the dynasties through which Yi script had evolved. “The book governs our life, when everything happens, our planting, our fertility rites, our festivals.”

The shaman was passing his learning on to his 18-year old grandson. One of his sons had also learned the art and was in high demand for spiritual advice and blessings among the villagers. Nonetheless, the assimilation of his culture into the outside world

concerned the shaman more than anything. Four of his ten children had moved to Lijiang, the big city in these parts. One had become a minor government official, two others policemen. A television sat inside his door, tuned to an international soccer match. A basketball hoop stood outside on a court of rough packed dirt sloping sharply away from the post. The culture seemed strong sitting here under the mountain, but these signs heralded its fragility.

The women calling us in for lunch demonstrated first-hand the traditions endangered with the passing of generations. The shaman's wife wore several layers of skirts, blouses and vests, all dark from faded dyes, smoke and dirt. Loops of brightly colored beads hanging from each side of her head brightened the outfit. But it was her headdress that evoked the long history of the Yi. A black scarf covered a wide mortarboard atop her brow and hung down to her shoulders. Centuries ago, the women were much smarter than the men. The men devised the mortarboard as a barrier between their women and the heavens, lowering their wives' capacities to the men's level. The younger women had abandoned this practice. While the daughter-in-law still dressed in traditional skirts, the daughter herself could have walked off the streets of Lijiang in her pullover, jeans and sneakers.

Lunch began with whole potatoes roasted in the coals. We peeled and ate them while the chicken boiled in a wok on the fire. When the fowl was ready, the daughter-in-law ladled bony pieces into our bowls, along with a rich broth. More potatoes, rice and leafy vegetables in soup were laid out. Each dish was local fare, but putting them all together was a feast reserved for guests or festivals. Another daughter and two more sons with a grandchild in tow appeared to share in the unexpected bounty.

As the meal ended, the shaman sat in his corner examining the carcass of the chicken. He picked apart the skeleton, then hurried excitedly around the fire to show us the curve of the wishbone. "A good omen," he promised. He needed more light to complete his prophecy so he carried the bones outside, throwing each of them to the ground as he finished inspecting. Finally, he pulled out his knife and scratched at the skull, looking for cracks. Finding none, he assured us, "You will encounter no

contradictions or quarrels. Your spirits are protected.” Our appetites satisfied, we complimented the women, “*Hao Chi*,” “Good Eat,” and headed down our path of good fortune.

THE NAXI VILLAGE where we stayed the prior evening had surprised us with an equally interesting experience around the dinner table. The Naxi are the dominant minority on the eastern slope of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. Unlike the Yi, they cooperated as the Han Chinese moved into the area, being more interested in carving out a prosperous economic position than in proving their independence. The Chinese repaid them with more fertile land at lower altitudes.

We reached Wenhai after a short drive and a three-hour walk from Lijiang. Our first stop was the local store, which sported a new snooker table in its vestibule. Ten men and six horses had hauled the massive slate piece up the mountain the prior week. At two yuan a game, about a quarter, the store owner could likely pay off its 2,500 yuan price tag in a few months, maybe less if he added in the profit on beer that the players and spectators would consume. We contributed for a couple of games and a few bottles.

The village operates a cooperative guest-house, purchased and donated by Jack Ives, a geographer who studied the area in the 1980s. Several rooms line two sides of a courtyard. A veranda runs around it, a kitchen sits in one corner. We refreshed ourselves with tea and potatoes while awaiting dinner. Various locals stopped by. One old man told us of serving in the army of Lin Biao, a famous general who ran afoul of Mao and died mysteriously in a plane crash. A young man training with The Nature Conservancy to be a guide offered to lead us to caves explored by Dr. Joseph Rock, the naturalist who first surveyed the flora and fauna of Yunnan in the 1930s.

Meanwhile, women were preparing the meal. The Naxi kitchen differs from that of the Yi. Rather than cooking over an open hearth, the women stoke a fire beneath a brick range, effectively a double burner with two massive woks set on top. Dinner is served on a low table surrounded with benches, instead of the ground around the fire.

After laying out bowls of chicken, rice, and fried potatoes, the women retire, leaving the men to entertain their guests.

“I spent 30 years studying,” the doctor sitting beside Justin told us. His mentor resided in Longpan, a few hours walk down the mountain. “We melded our bodies together,” he continued, describing how he had learned to diagnose ailments.

He leaned over to take Justin’s left arm. He placed the tips of his fingers on the inside of the wrist, measuring the pulse. He moved his hand down to feel his patient’s palm. He reached over for the right arm and repeated the process.

“Your back aches,” the doctor concluded. Earlier in the afternoon, Justin had been squirming around on a bench, trying to get comfortable. The walk uphill had indeed aggravated a minor affliction caused by too many sedentary hours hovering over a computer keyboard. The doctor’s exhibition convinced Diane. She held out her hand.

The doctor placed his fingers on her pulse. “Your lungs hurt,” he diagnosed immediately, not needing to explore further along her arm. Although she had shown no problems that day, asthma chronically clogged her breathing. She held up an inhaler of medicine to demonstrate the accuracy of his assessment.

But the doctor was not done. He continued on with his examination, feeling her palm and then her other forearm and hand. He motioned to her stomach, indicating pain. Cramps had plagued her for a couple of days.

Feeling healthy, I wasn’t sure that I wanted the doctor to uncover any lurking illnesses. Nonetheless, he was batting a thousand and we wanted to see if he could maintain his average. I rolled up my sleeves. The doctor went through his normal routine. He then stood up, raised my arm over my head and pulled it behind as far as possible. “Bad back,” he asserted.

I questioned his finding. Yes, I had been laid up years ago, but daily exercises had kept me pain-free for a decade. Not to be outdone, the doctor countered, “The pain is rising.” He placed his hand at waist-level, then rubbed up to my shoulders, demonstrating his message. I shrugged off the diagnosis without much credence.

“*Hao Chi*,” we thanked our hosts the next morning for a hearty breakfast of eggs, pork and baba, the Naxi’s fried bread. As we lifted our backpacks, my shoulders stiffened from the exertion of the prior day, the first time I had carried that weight in several months. I would argue with the pulse doctor no more.

“**A** GANG ATTACKED him with axes. He had to defend himself.” Our host explained the situation of a young man accused of murder.

On our second day, we walked for a half-hour after lunch with the shaman to the third complex of houses in Xuehua. We stopped at the home of a young couple whom Justin knew through his work with Photovoice, a Ford Foundation project distributing point-and-click cameras among villagers to record their life and environment. A just-completed building enclosing one side of their courtyard would provide rooms for the night.

Our protests against killing the third chicken in 24 hours convinced the wife. She instead cooked a typical though elaborate Yi meal – boiled pork, soup with vegetables, rice and potatoes. She served it around the fire in what she proudly described as “the Yi way.” As she cleared the dishes to our offers of *Hao Chi*, three of her husband’s friends arrived for an evening of discourse with the foreigners who so rarely visited.

Our host continued his story. Evidently the teen and his friends had wandered down to Longpan. For reasons that seemed no more serious than town rivalries, they had gotten into a fight with a group of local boys. Unfortunately that gang was armed sufficiently to cause serious harm. In the melee, the Xuehua youth had gotten his hands on one of the weapons and used it lethally.

“He sits in jail now while the families negotiate a settlement.” A settlement? That solution did not fit our western notion of justice, where a victim’s relatives would more likely be calling for vengeance. But it reflected the local reality.

The dead youth’s family had suffered a serious blow, partly the emotional trauma of losing a son but also the cost of a worker who would help support the family. His relatives expected compensation. But they expressed no desire to extend their pain. The

loss of the accused would impose an equally serious hardship on his family. Better to arrange a settlement that could provide tens of thousands of yuan, thousands of dollars, to ease the sorrow. The teen could be released and both families could put the matter behind them. The debt would be punishment enough, representing years of income and no doubt requiring contributions from many distant relatives.

The moral of the story is more about economic realities than crime and punishment. Both Xuehua and the Naxi village of Wenhai sit at altitudes above 10,000 feet. The hillsides are steep, the soil marginal and the growing season short. Potatoes are the most reliable crop. They can be eaten locally, though they have no value in the marketplace. Food actually flows uphill, the valleys sending produce to these agricultural highlands. The locals make charcoal or cut timber to earn enough cash to survive.

Visitors over the decades recorded a photographic legacy testifying to the vagaries of agriculture on the slopes beneath Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. The naturalist Rock photographed a forested terrain two decades before Liberation. During the Great Leap Forward of the 1950s, the government collectivized the land, cleared it and began a crop rotation program. The farmers planted one crop the first year, another the second, and then let a field lie fallow the third. By the 1980s, privatization had begun and the land was divided into family plots. With the villagers directly profiting from the produce, they sharply intensified the farming on the land, unfortunately to the point that fields became depleted and abandoned. The geographer Ives, shooting the same hillside as Rock, captured the result – erosion.

A few years ago, the government implemented another program, “Farmland to Forest.” Villagers are given five years of food compensation to remove fields on 25 degree or greater slopes from production and to replant the forest. In this area, “forest” typically means thorn bushes whose berries are used to produce oil. As part of his research, Justin photographs these fields, replicating scenes captured in earlier years by Rock and Ives.

“We got only half our food allotment last year for the land we converted,” our host explained. He did not elaborate on the reasons for the shortfall in compensation,

though earlier he had cited corruption as the largest problem the people faced. “We worry that officials will penalize us again this year for the logging. It will cause trouble in the village.”

The government banned logging about the time it started the Farmland to Forest program. But with timber from national and provincial lands curtailed, the wood bosses are coming to buy logs illegally harvested from collective forests owned by the villages. We would see the effects the next day when we walked through a hillside clear-cut except for rhododendron bushes scattered about the slope. The few locals who don’t resist can earn good money chopping down the trees. But the entire community suffers from the punishment imposed by administrative officials, creating the strife to which our host referred.

Local concerns did not completely preoccupy the villagers, however. The men held conflicting views of America. “A bully pushing everyone else around to get its way,” our host initially described the U.S. The past year’s diplomatic flap over the grounding of an American air force jet by Chinese pilots likely influenced his perception. This attitude did not prevent a show of empathy with the terror of September and a great deal of interest in the aftermath and recovery when they learned we lived only a few kilometers from the World Trade Center.

But it was economics, not politics, which drove the men’s larger world view. “Paradise,” our host shifted ground. “We all want to go to America.” We tried hard to convince him that material riches did not make our country a perfect place. Little time with your family, a squabbling government, and other trials of modern life all fell on deaf ears. He repeated his definitive belief, “To us, America is paradise.”

We no doubt reinforced his view when the few dollars we gave him for our beds and meals amounted to more cash than he would typically see in a month.

SU SHENG, THE guide-in-training we had met in Wenhai, picked us up the next morning. As his first job in his intended profession, he would be escorting us over the

high route to Shanghai, another Naxi village where we would stay with his relatives and explore near-by caves.

After climbing a couple of ridges, the trail had led steadily downhill. With each drop of a thousand feet, the land grew more prosperous. The fields flattened, holding richer soil. Water ran freely between the terraces. Fruit trees flowered fully in these early days of spring. Yellow blossoms of rapeseed, cultivated for oil, wavered in the wind. Wheat stalks reached knee-high.

“Visit anytime. I am always here by the fire,” the grandfather of the household welcomed us. He had evidently earned a leisurely retirement. He shared the compound with his wife, his daughter and son-in-law, and two granddaughters.

“Do you want to eat?” asked the younger man of the house. We demurred except for food that required no cooking. The family would be serving us dinner in just a few hours.

Our snack started with candied fruit, sliced thin. We never determined its name, but in its natural form the fruit looked like a pale green and yellow gourd encased in a hard knobby shell. Freshly picked, the inside was hard and sour. Candied, it was sweet and crunchy. Rice cakes accompanied it, the grain popped and molded with sugar into squares. A stack of moon cakes was warmed over the fire, the only store-bought item we would consume in this household. These large round cakes, almost a cross between a cookie and unleavened bread, had little flavor.

The son-in-law poured oil into an iron ladle and warmed it over the fire. When he deemed it sufficiently heated, he mixed it into a porcelain bowl of chopped red peppers from one of the village gardens. He piled a plate high with puffy rolls, freshly steamed despite our protestations against cooking. Demonstrating, he tore a piece from the roll and dipped it into the red peppers. We followed his example and were soon filling ourselves with bland dough covered in an addictive fiery sauce.

“We are hiking to the caves this afternoon,” Justin informed our hosts. Local lore claimed that Joseph Rock had photographed a large crowd of Naxis on pilgrimage at the caves. The rooms in the cliff face had been carved into pools for collecting water during

the rainy season. The water cascaded down tiered fountains at which the devout prayed for fertility.

“You will need refreshments,” the old man said. We knew it was pointless to resist, despite the piles of fruit, cakes and rolls in which we had made only a small dent. We each received an Asian pear, a large apple-shaped fruit with a reddish mottled skin and a watery flavor that mixed pear and apple, plus a couple of handfuls of walnuts. Thus fortified, we headed for the caves, wondering what feast would await our return.

The caves were hardly breathtaking, but we were not to be disappointed on our arrival back at the village. Dinner was once again served in the Naxi manner, the grandmother covering the table with what seemed like a dozen dishes before she retired. “Everything is grown in the village,” the son-in-law assured us. The obligatory chicken had given its life to the stew pot, its head and feet naturally offered first to the honored guests. Pork had been cut down from the rafters in the upstairs room where Justin would sleep, the meat boiled and served in its broth, the rind laid out in another bowl. Scallions flavored thinly sliced fried potatoes. One vegetable was simmered with spices, another swimming in soup. Rice accompanied everything.

The men enjoyed watching us eat the bounty of their harvest in these well-watered lands lying far down the mountain. Our dinner companions on this evening had not been the most talkative or opinionated we had encountered. Baijo, the local liquor, did little to loosen their tongues as we drank around the fire, munching sunflower seeds for dessert. But their hospitality and cuisine were clearly a source of pride on this last night before we walked out to the roadhead. We could truly compliment our hosts, “*Hao Chi.*”

The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan

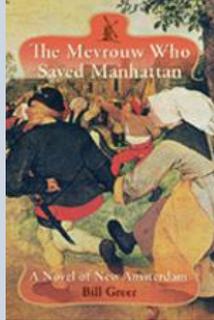
by Bill Greer

“A very authentic ring ...
like etchings by
Van Ostade and Steen.”

– Charles Wendell, Ph.D., President of
the New Netherland Institute

A Novel of New Amsterdam

When Mevrouw Jackie Lambert opens her New Amsterdam tavern in 1626, she jumps aboard a madcap ride through New York history. With a razor-sharp tongue and the tastiest beer on either side of the Atlantic, Jackie spurs the tiny Manhattan settlement toward a head-on collision with the tyrannical Dutchmen who rule it. Poison, blackmail, murder, all are fair game as she fends off threats to the family she yearned for growing up as an orphan. And when peggleg Peter Stuyvesant would rather destroy the town than surrender his honor, Jackie must take history into her own hands or lose everything she has spent a lifetime building.



A Real Portrait

While a work of fiction, *The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan* paints a real portrait of life in New Amsterdam with all its humor, bawdiness, and conflict. It presents a window into how Dutch culture during the Golden Age of the Netherlands transplanted to the wilderness of the Hudson Valley. The thread of Jackie's life reflects the central theme of the Dutch period, the rebellion of the common people against their rulers, the Dutch West India Company and its Directors, a conflict that historians argue laid the foundation for the pluralistic, freedom-loving society that America became.

About the Author

Bill Greer has spent much of his working life in the heart of New Amsterdam. He is a Trustee and Treasurer of the New Netherland Institute, a membership organization supporting research and education in Dutch-American history. Visit him at www.BillsBrownstone.com for more on Mevrouw's world and old New York and to read an excerpt of fifty pages from *The Mevrouw Who Saved Manhattan*.

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Reviews

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