Words from the Fire: Poems by Jidi Majia

Jidi Majia

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MĀNOA means, in the Hawaiian language, "vast and deep." It is the name of the valley where the University of Hawai‘i is situated.


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Words from the Fire
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I met Jidi Majia for the first time in summer 2016 when I spoke at the Lu Xun Institute of Literature in Beijing about publishing Chinese poetry in the West. The institute is housed in a large, modern building faced with red stone. Life-size bronze statues of prominent Chinese and international poets stand under the shade trees along the path that circles the building. Inside, memorial plaques celebrating other poets hang in the main hallway. An oversize tapestry portrait of Lu Xun—one of China’s most revered twentieth-century writers—billows from the ceiling.

Jidi Majia and I had lunch in a room off the hallway with several other Chinese translators, publishers, and scholars. In his late fifties, Jidi has a soft oval face and prominent eyes behind large square glasses. His shoulders are rounded, his body stout. When I was with him over the next two weeks, he dressed casually in a long-sleeve plaid shirt and trousers. Despite his status—Jidi Majia is a nationally acclaimed ethnic poet as well as a highly placed advocate for ethnic minorities throughout China—he seems unaffected and genuinely gracious.

Jidi Majia is a member of the Yi ethnic minority group, one of the fifty-five officially recognized minorities in China and the sixth largest, comprising about nine million people (0.6 percent of the country’s total population). Among the Yi there are several dozen subgroups—such as Lipo, Nisu, and Azhe. The subgroup to which Jidi Majia belongs, Nuosu, is the largest.

Several days after meeting in Beijing, we met again in Xichang, the capital city of the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture. Located in Sichuan and Yunan Provinces, about a thousand miles southwest of Beijing, the city stands at the eastern edge of the Himalayan plateau.

Jidi Majia grew up in Liangshan, the heartland of Yi-Nuosu culture. Most of the Yi in Xichang speak the Yi-Nuosu language. The city has Yi newspapers, radio stations, and karaoke bars; and parents can send their children to Nuosu schools. For centuries, Nuosu people have held on to their language, culture, and social structure, staving off assimilation by the majority Han. The area’s remoteness and rugged terrain have helped. Until recently, a large area of the mountains only had dirt roads, which turned to mud during the rainy season. Increasingly, however, paved roads, economic development, and urbanization have resulted in a changing relationship between Yi-Nuosu traditional ways and life in many modernized parts of Liangshan.

The area around Xichang is one of the most environmentally beautiful in southwest China. Nearby Qionghai Lake—seven miles long by three miles

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Editor’s Note
wide, at the foot of the Lushan Mountains—is a stunning feature of that beauty. One evening I jogged beside its shore on a wide wooden walkway, past leisurely bicyclists, old men and women out for a walk, and young couples with their kids. The walkway projects out over lush, green wetlands that skirt the lake, attracting white cranes, herons, swallows, and an abundance of other birds and wildlife. Over eight million tourists visit each year, patronizing Xichang’s hotels, shops, and festivals. Together with the Xichang Satellite Launch Center, forty miles away, eco-tourism helps fuel the government’s efforts to lift up the rural poor.

The juxtaposition of high-tech space port and environmental beauty is emblematic of the region’s clash of modernization and traditional Nuosu cultural practices. In many of the poems in *Words from the Fire*, Jidi Majia worries about this clash. He is a man immersed in multiple eras, cultures, and languages. In “Self-Portrait,” the first poem, the speaker/self embraces his identity as a member of the Nuosu People, his soul nurtured by his Nuosu forebears. In this majestic land, he writes, he is attached to his people like an “an infant whose mother couldn’t cut the umbilical cord.” Yet in a later poem, “Split Self,” he expresses his unease with his internally divided situation—his conflicting selves embattled in what he calls a “life and death struggle.” On the one hand are the dazzling fields of wild buckwheat; on the other, skyscrapers clang with the shrill grating of steel on steel. At the end of the poem, he addresses the troubling question, Who are you? Again, he declares, “I am a Nuosu.” But he is a Nuosu who has lived much of his adult life in large cities, and is now witnessing urban expansion into the mountains where he grew up.

Jidi Majia was born in rural Zhaojue County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, in 1961. Two thirds of his homeland stands at over 8,000 feet above sea level. Continuous snow-melt from the Himalayas feeds powerful rivers, such as the Anning and Jinsha, rushing through the canyons and river valleys. He lived in Zhaojue until he was seventeen. Then he moved to Chengdu to attend Southwestern University for Nationalities, where he read classical literature and modern world poetry. After graduation, he began to publish poems in local, Sichuan-based literary magazines, and emerged in the 1980s as a member of an ambitious group of young poets, just as a new, more open political era was dawning across China. At that time, in a shift in national policy, the government began to encourage minorities to embrace their ethnic and cultural identities; moreover, the government urged Chinese citizens to go abroad, engage with the international community, and learn from the rest of the world. Contemporary poetry became more popular across China, with Sichuan emerging as one of the major poetry centers. Like many poets of his generation, Jidi Majia sought poetic inspiration from classical and modern Chinese poetry, along with poetry from other parts of the world. In addition, he often wrote about his heritage and asserted his Nuosu identity.

In 1985, Jidi Majia rose to national attention when his collection *Song of My First Love* won the Third China National Poetry Prize. In his following
books, he continued to write poetry about Nuosu ethnicity—with its themes of romantic love, affection for parents, ancestor worship, the Yi homeland and its history. As a poet, he sought to give Nuosu poetry its distinct place on the world stage, without modernist irony and contemporary experimentation. The National Writers’ Association soon hired him and began sending him to international poetry gatherings abroad. Already a well-known poet in China, he gained an increasingly cosmopolitan perspective on his own poetry and on writing in other countries. He began organizing major international poetry festivals and conferences in China and abroad. At these conferences, he met face-to-face with world poets and translators, who appreciated his work and encouraged its publication in their own countries. In recent years, as a result, Jidi Majia has become widely recognized and has received honors in such countries as Peru, Bulgaria, South Africa, Romania, Poland, and the UK. In China, he began to also work as a government official, serving for a time as vice-governor of Qinghai Province; currently, he is secretary of the Chinese Writers’ Association, and a vice-president of the All-China Youth Federation.

As a man of many aspects, it’s not surprising that Jidi Majia speaks in his poems with a number of identities. Sometimes, in an elevated rhetorical voice, he addresses all humanity, admonishing the despoilers of nature and pleading for world peace and understanding. At other times, he defends poetry as a refuge for the soul in times of crisis. And he praises and eulogizes international poets whose heroism he admires. But at the heart of Words from the Fire is his focus on the Nuosu people. He defends his people’s fundamental dignity, argues for the preservation of their creation myths, traditions, and folk beliefs, and declares their right to have a prominent place “in the grove of the world’s most ancient peoples.” When he speaks in this way, calling on the heroic ancestors to return, his tone is frequently sad and nostalgic rather than demanding. He can be forceful, but his poetic voice is basically that of a gentle, idealistic man. Often, that gentleness emerges most clearly in poems about universal love for family and parents, natural beauty, music, and solitude.

Some explanation of Jidi Majia’s references to Yi-Nuosu culture in Words from the Fire may be helpful for English-language readers. In “Self-Portrait,” for example, the poet traces his descent—and that of all Nuosu people—from the primary mythic hero, Zhyge Alu, who was born from the combining of two spiritual realms: sky and earth. According to legend, before Zhyge Alu was born, his mother, Pupmop Hnixyyr, was weaving under the open sky when she saw dragon-eagles circling above her. Three drops of their blood fell and landed on her skirt, and instantly impregnated her. That evening she gave birth to the hero Zhyge Alu, part dragon-eagle and part human. Raised by the dragon-eagles, Zhyge Alu matured quickly into a mighty warrior with supernatural powers. Among other feats, he destroyed the surplus suns and moons that were scorching the earth, making life impossible. In another tale, he tamed lightning, which had been destroying hearths from which the smoke of the cooking fires drifted skyward.

The poem also references a legendary woman, Gamo Anyo, the epitome of
feminine virtue. In the epic that recounts her story, as scholar Mark Bender explains, the youthful Gamo Anyo was engaged to her lover, Ngafu Muga. But, attracted by her beauty, a powerful Han overlord pursued her. She fled, but the man caught and imprisoned her (perhaps in Xichang), and killed Ngafu Mugu when he attempted a rescue. The overlord tortured Gamo Anyo, but she steadfastly refused to yield to him. At last, she asked her prison guards for a silk ribbon, on the pretext that she wanted to adorn her hair in preparation for yielding to her captor. But when the guards were not looking, Gamo Anyo tied the ribbon into a loop and hanged herself.

In other poems, Jidi Majia calls out to the rivers, animals, and ancestors. He praises everyday objects, which embody the soul of the Nuosu people and culture. He describes ritual festivals, farmers, hunters, wives, and widows. He emphasizes the important role of dance, music, and musical instruments.

The mouth harp—so emblematic of Nuosu identity—is depicted throughout Words from the Fire and is the subject of the final poem. Typically, the Nuosu mouth harp consists of several thin strips just a few inches long of bamboo or copper. In “Confessions of a Mouth Harp,” the strips are shaped like dragonfly wings. The mouth harp was traditionally a woman’s instrument, worn on a string around the owner’s neck, “against her heart.” Able to make powerful, plaintive sounds, it can express sorrow, longing, or happiness. It’s able to tell a tale, drive a rhythmic dance, lament, or warble sweetly. One day, when I heard the mouth harp played by men and women in a Nuosu village, I was startled by how thrilling the voice of this little instrument could be.

That same day, I listened to a Nuosu woman who was standing out in the open and singing in lyrical, high falsetto, projecting her song toward the rolling, forested hills and valleys. Her pure, wistful voice seemed to carry for miles in the thin mountain air, reaching shepherds and farmers in far-off fields.

Dance is particularly important in Yi-Nuosu celebrations, such as the mid-summer Torch Festival. In Xichang, people come together from the outlying villages to dance hand-in-hand around magnificent bonfires. The elders tell stories, young couples meet, and women turn out in beautifully embroidered red, yellow, blue, and black clothing: ankle-length pleated skirts, embroidered jackets, shawls, and capes, intricately crafted head coverings, and silver jewelry inlaid with blood-red agate and other precious stones. Farmers from outlying villages bring their bulls to town and face them off in pairs in a clearing prepared for combat. The animals butt and shove one another, sometimes viciously, until one turns aside and gives up. Champion bulls, as depicted in “The Fighting Bull Who Died Long Ago,” might fight annually until defeated. Today, bullfights at the Torch Festival are a spectator sport for the large crowds of tourists.

Reverence for animals and nature appears throughout Jidi Majia’s poetry. Another culturally significant animal is the muntjac, a small, short-antlered deer who in folklore is a shapeshifter. Muntjac personifies the spirituality embodied by wildlife. In “Autumn Portrait,” muntjac appear as a dream of
the earth, and in “Night” they are noticed as an absence. In the latter poem, the hunter, too, is an absence. In many of Jidi Majia’s poems, a hunter stands for the ideal head of the family and community; when hunters in the poems pass away, they reflect the disruption of the social fabric.

Other poems in Words from the Fire speak of romance, courtship, and love for parents—especially mothers. Jidi Majia can be unapologetically sentimental, as folkloric poetry universally can be. In “First Love,” the young speaker desires the attention of a beautiful girl, elusive as a dragonfly. In the moonlight, the boys and girls play hide-and-seek and games of “snatch the bride,” not yet understanding the emotions of courtship. The game mimes the adult wedding custom in which the groom pretends to kidnap his bride and ride away with her on horseback. But in the poem, the young boy’s mother cannot help him fathom the mystery of his emerging feelings.

One evening in Beijing, I attended a birthday party for Jidi Majia. Surrounded by friends, fellow writers, his wife and children, he wore a gold-colored paper crown, the kind you can get at Burger King. Excited children wearing their own party hats ran between the tables, jumped joyfully, and danced. Birthday cake was passed around, gifts were unwrapped. Jidi Majia smiled just slightly, always keeping his remarkable calm with guests. We had been together only briefly, but I came to feel that what holds Jidi Majia steadfast in a world of colliding values is the sincere hopefulness from which his poems emerge. In a speech at Cambridge, England, printed at the end of this volume, Jidi spoke to his audience about globalization, art, and spirit, but he was also describing the contradictions in his own situation. He said, “I take solace in one thing: when many aspects of human affairs stand in overt or latent opposition, poetry miraculously becomes a hidden means for bridging the inner worlds and spiritual realities of human beings. Poetry does not let down the collective hopes of kind-hearted, beauty-loving people.”

Readings

She witnessed an extraordinary age
and experienced a life her ancestors never experienced…

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO JIDI MAJIA’S MOTHER

Niziguoguo Zhuoshi
I feel honored to gather here for an exchange of ideas with all of you. We are told that our current world is a globalized world, that Internet coverage basically extends over the whole planet, and that the flow of capital crosses boundaries of almost every nation. Even in apparently remote places, it is hard to escape direct influence from the outside world. Even so, can we conclude from this that human communication and exchange are better now than in any past era? Clearly we are talking here about something that facilitates overall harmony. In substance, communication and exchange are supposedly means to solve problems faced in common by people of different religions, different classes, and different value systems. Yet the present situation is unsettling because it falls so far short of our wishes and expectations. As the twenty-first century unfolds, the technological revolution has proceeded from victory to victory, but for humanity this has been accompanied by the emergence of extremist religious forces and a resurgence of nationalism in many areas of the globe. We have seen the dissemination of narrow-minded, exclusionist views and positions, and terrorist incidents are happening with increasing frequency. Even a country like England that upholds respect for different beliefs has not managed to elude terrorist attacks. Four attacks have happened already in 2017: the year is not over, but this is already the highest number of attacks in one year. Precisely because of such developments, I think there is a need to establish more effective channels and mechanisms for dialogue and consultation between different races, different classes, and different value systems. This is doubtless an arduous and thorny job. This is not just a task for politicians; it is something that any person of conscience should take upon himself or herself. You may ask what function we as poets can fulfill in the face of current reality. This is what I want to talk with you all about.

For quite some time people have been questioning whether poetry—this most ancient of arts—can go on existing. Well, facts have demonstrated that such doubts are completely superfluous. Why? Because those who raise such questions are thinking in terms of technology and logic. They believe that all
old things will inevitably be replaced by new things. They fundamentally ignore the reliance of human inner life on art that possesses enduring qualities and meets a spiritual need. Poetry is unquestionably one such art form. There is no denying that, in today’s world, human spiritual space is pervasively occupied by capital and technical logic. There are many times when poetry is situated at the margins of social life. Yet there are two sides to the development of any entity, which is the basis for the saying “Extreme things tend to swing the other way.” I take solace in one thing: when many aspects of human affairs stand in overt or latent opposition, poetry miraculously becomes a hidden means for bridging the inner worlds and spiritual realities of human beings. Poetry does not let down the collective hopes of kindhearted, beauty-loving people. Spanning different languages and nationalities, it takes one into a space that was not originally one’s own. Within that space, it makes no difference whether you are Asian or Western, Muslim or Jewish: you can still find a receptive heart that resonates with yours in mankind’s realm of spiritual ideals.

The Qinghai Lake International Poetry Festival, founded in 2007, has provided precious experience and insights over the ten-year course of its operation. Nearly a thousand poets from various countries have made the journey there, where they engaged in free discussion on topics of mutual concern. In that ambience of felicity and earnestness, we could deeply sense the inherent power in poetry. What is more, it was my good fortune to be invited to attend the Medellin Poetry Festival in Colombia. There I saw the important effect of poetry on public life in a strife-torn society. Hundreds of thousands of people have died violent deaths in Colombia’s civil conflicts lasting over half a century, and thousands of villages have been reduced to rubble. Only poetry has stood up for the sufferers and never spurned them. So thousands of people braved the risk of violence and terror to listen raptly to readings by poets in Medellin; many of them had walked dozens of kilometers to reach that Square. If you had seen how they made their way there, out of enthusiasm for poetry, wouldn’t you as a poet be proud that our art still helps to provide faith and courage for human beings as they stride toward tomorrow? The answer will surely be affirmative. My friends, in saying this I am not trying artificially to elevate the effects of poetry. From a mundane, utilitarian angle, the effects of poetry are inherently limited. It cannot directly solve the hunger and material shortages that humans face. Right now, for instance, Kenya is facing such problems. Likewise, poetry does not automatically take effect to defuse the kind of civil war that Syria is mired in. Yet, however we figure things, poetry became an integral part of our inner being long before yesterday. It has kept company with humans for as long as we have been producing creations of the spirit.

Although poetry has its own qualities and attributes, one who writes it cannot separate himself from the culture that nurtured him, especially against a backdrop of globalism, as its trend toward uniformity becomes overwhelming. In all honesty, we must admit that the ingredients of poetry are by no means uniform: this is all the more true on a metaphysical, philosophical level, where poetry’s
ultimate telos and creative resources of language offer limitless possibilities. Thus the value of poetry lies in the spiritual height it attains, and in the breath of mystery imparted by its symbols and metaphors. Genuine poetry can serve as a model in terms of both content and rhetoric. Putting aside such assumptions and inherent qualities, seeing the cultural identity of “poet” affirmed seems to offer confirmation from the outside world to many poets. That is, there is no such thing as a poet in an abstract sense. Even for a poet like Paul Celan, despite his lifetime of writing in German, his sense of spiritual allegiance belonged to paradigms of the Jewish cultural tradition.

Of course no outstanding poet, when actually sitting down to write, would diagrammatically reduce all this to concepts to be included in his poems. As a poet of the Yi people, which possesses an ancient cultural tradition, I was pervasively and deeply influenced by our unique way of life and our spiritual culture, right from the time I was aware of the world. Not only are the Yi people one of China’s most ancient minorities, but we also hold a place in the grove of the world’s most ancient peoples. We have records in writing that clearly date back two thousand years. The stability of the Yi writing system is noteworthy even in the context of the world’s writing systems, and our ancient writing system is still being used and handed down today. Our forebears created the illustrious Ten Month Calendar. Worship of fire and sun has instilled fiery passions in my people, but aside from that our mountainous dwelling place has given us gravitas like a silent boulder on a slope. Within the extended family of humankind, we are one of the few ethnicities to preserve an impressive number of creation epics: Hnewo teyy, Asei-po seiji, Meige, Chamu. We also have long lyrical poems like My Youngest Cousin and Gamo Anyo: placed in the history of world poetry, these deserve to be called classics. An ocean of folk poems has instilled the knack for verse storytelling in the minds of all my compatriots.

It is a blessing for a poet to inherit such a rich intellectual and artistic heritage. The Yi people embrace pantheistic beliefs and worship ancestral heroes, causing those who know the history and older social structure of the Yi to associate them with Greeks of the Homeric era, or perhaps with ways of life in Sparta. Our Nuosu society of the past two centuries miraculously preserved features that harken back to the ancient Greek aristocracy—a phase that persisted right down to the 1950s.

I think that the question of whether there is a powerful cultural tradition behind one’s writing has essential importance: that is, is there an intangible background of great breadth looming behind a poet? For this reason, those who are genuinely engaged in writing poetry all understand one truth: namely, we are not ordinary artisans, and what we inherit is not a craft in the general sense. Rather, it is something marvelous that can only be obtained at a spiritual fountainhead. In the traditional society of the Yi people, there was no worship of a monotheistic god. Instead, we firmly believed that all things in Nature have souls. The bimo priest of the Yi people was the medium between people and the world of divine beings. The bimo is like a shaman in Shamanism. Even today
there are *bimos* who undertake the duty of making offerings and exorcising ghosts. What needs to be explained here is that our Yi society has undergone huge changes. In our social consciousness and in a spiritual context, many things from outside coexist with what was handed down. Like many ancient peoples of the world, the Yi ethnic group is undergoing an unprecedented process of modernization.

As we face an interplay of clashing forces, how to maintain our cultural tradition and way of life is a question that we urgently need to face. When I speak of these things, you will realize why cultural identity is so important for a poet. If we say that different poets undertake different duties and missions, then there are times when this may not be their own choice. I am not a cultural determinist, but the influence of cultural tradition on some poets may be decisive. The history of poetry in China and elsewhere holds numerous examples of such poets. Two examples from the twentieth century come to mind: William Butler Yeats and Mahmoud Darwish, who has been called the pride of Palestine. In both cases, poetic oeuvre plus public persona can be taken as spiritual emblems of their people. In terms of deeper cultural significance, through their existence and their writing they manifest the deep-seated, long-accumulated inner history of their people. In truth, these highly talented poets deserve esteem because they did not write to convey a certain predetermined social message. The reality manifested through their works flowed naturally from the inherent poetic qualities of the poems. As a poet of an ethnic group that is going through intense transformation, I have taken these figures as exemplars and models: William Butler Yeats, Pablo Neruda, Cesar Vallejo, and Mahmoud Darwish. In our special family made up of poets, each of us is an independent being, but one is drawn more closely to a certain few. Of course, this is a matter of affinity by types, but in essence each poet can only be himself, and no one can replace anyone else. Each poet’s writing is a crystallization of his life encounters and his spiritual journey.

The Yi people in China are a long-standing, stationary minority with a population of over nine million. Our forebears came in waves of nomadic migrants, over thousands of years, to the vast mountain ranges of Southwest China. That is a land of far-stretching successive ridges, densely interlaced with rivers. This natural patrimony and our intangible cultural heritage underlie the unique value system of my people. I admit that the intangible coordinates of my writing are based on the culture I am familiar with. To become a poet of this people was perhaps my predestined choice, but more than that I view it as an exalted responsibility and calling. One’s voice as a person who writes poetry should forever be that of an individual, and it should reflect one’s independent, distinct stance. Yet a poet who finds himself in this particular era and who dares to launch his life into its turbulent currents cannot help but concern himself with human fate and with living conditions of the majority of people. Behind his voice we should be able to hear reverberations of a choir of voices. I feel that only in this way can an individual voice be rich with charisma; only then will it carry value with which the Other can identify. We need not speak of distant eras. In
comparison with many great poets of the mid-twentieth century, today’s poets seem to be declining in terms of spiritual scope and the witnessing of life in our era. Part of the reason for this lies with the poets themselves, and another cause is the fragmentation of our social environment. Among poets today there is a lack of what Hölderlin could do at a metaphysical level, which is to interrogate and illuminate the starry reaches of the spirit. Whether or not a poet is deeply conscious of humanity has always been an important measure of his or her moral dimension.

My friends, this is the first time I’ve set foot on English soil, and it is my first visit to Cambridge University. Even so, from my early efforts at reading until today, I have been grateful to British writers and poets for being an essential part of my growth. The ones who come to mind are Percy Bysshe Shelley, George Gordon (Lord Byron), William Shakespeare, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Virginia Woolf, Dylan Thomas, Wystan Hugh Auden, and Seamus Heaney. Finally, let me seize this chance to give thanks to the literary fountainhead of the English-speaking world, from which a time-honored tradition has emerged, because no other portion of the world literary edifice has been quite so captivating.

*Translation by Denis Mair*
In 2013, Jidi Majia asked me if I would be willing to translate a collection of his poems into English. I was living in Beijing then, and Majia and I had become like family. Initially we’d developed a respect for each other’s work while participating in various poetry events in Beijing and in different parts of China. I’d also attended several poetry events he’d helped to organize in Qinghai and had gotten a sense of his work as a facilitator of international literary and cultural exchange. I agreed to translate the collection on the condition that Majia would be willing to discuss his poems with me at length throughout the project. He agreed, and we embarked on this five-year journey that saw Majia move from Qinghai to Beijing and my move from Beijing to California and Arizona. When describing our collaboration, Majia says, “You had a fate connection with the Nuosu people and with me.” Whatever the reasons this project came to me, it has been one of the great gifts of my life.

Majia sees himself as a Nuosu poet, a Chinese poet, and a poet of the world. Once I was at a conference in Beijing in which many writers and literary critics had gathered to discuss his long poem “I, Snow Leopard.” A participant commented that Majia was someone who knew his fate, or saw clearly his life’s path at a young age, and this enabled him to arrive at where he is today, both as a writer and a facilitator of local, national, and international cultural exchange. In his poem “Perhaps I’ve Never Forgotten,” Majia writes, “Perhaps I’ve never forgotten / the promise I made alone under a starry sky: / to be a poet faithful to my culture and a poet of conscience.”

After growing up in Zhaojue, in the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Majia moved to Chengdu at the age of seventeen to attend Southwestern University for Nationalities, in Chengdu. Like the work of many young Chinese poets at the time, his writing was influenced by classical Chinese poets, world poets, and modern Chinese poets—but his work was also influenced by Nuosu epics and folklore. He made the decision to write in Chinese, but to do so in a way that asserted and honored his Nuosu identity, and that insisted on recognition of Nuosu writing as part of Chinese and world literary history. In his poem “For My Motherland,” he writes, “Just like the voice of my People / Perhaps it comes from a distant border / but its existence is always necessary / just like our ancient Nuosu script / Without a doubt / everything it records has become / a proud immortal chapter / in your monumental literature.”

Majia told me he chose a path that involved writing and politics out of his
sense of responsibility toward other people and society, as well as from his personal literary dreams. His father was from the noble, ruling class of the Yi, had joined the Communist Party in the early 1950s, and became head of the Butuo County People’s Court in Liangshan. His mother also had a strong sense of social responsibility, and emphasized the importance of treating others with compassion and kindness. Majia brought this sense of cultural responsibility and compassion for others into his work. After he began gaining recognition as a poet in the 1980s, he joined the Sichuan Writers’ Association; later he held the post of secretary, and then was given a position in the National Writers’ Association. During the nine years Majia spent working in Qinghai, he devoted a great deal of energy to promoting writing, education, and environmental protection. It was during this time that the Qinghai International Poetry Festival grew, bringing hundreds of poets to the Tibetan Plateau. He also hosted events specifically for Indigenous writers from all over the world. In his current position with the National Writers’ Association, Majia continues to promote international exchange between writers. He was instrumental in building a poet’s residence in Butuo, and a writing center and Nuosu cultural museum in the mountains just outside Xichang. Certainly, Majia doesn’t do this work alone; he is surrounded by friends, family, and others who also believe in the importance of literary and cultural exchange.

While working on *Words from the Fire*, I was able to travel to Liangshan on four occasions. In 2014, I spent three and a half weeks with Jidi Majia’s cousin Luowu Muga and his wife, Han Dun. They took me to Xichang, Butuo, Zhaojue, Puge, and other villages and places along the winding mountain roads. Their cousin Bubi Wujiang joined us, telling me about Majia’s ancestors, showing me places where particular sayings came into being, sharing stories from the Fire Torch Festival and weddings, and telling me traditional Nuosu stories. We ate with their relatives in different towns, and visited villages and schools. Many images from Majia’s poems came to life during those weeks: shepherds walking with their flocks of sheep and goats, an old man smoking a water pipe, people walking along mountain roads wearing knit-wool capes, women in embroidered hats and clothes, buckwheat fields under an endless starry sky, mountains that stretch as far as the eye can see, hearth fires burning in village homes, *bimos* performing ceremonies, people singing together, and a newborn goat standing on its wobbly legs. We also went past towns where *waban* houses had been replaced with concrete ones, villages where most of the young men had left to find work in bigger cities, and we spent time in the highrises of Xichang, where urbanization has created a city much like those in other parts of China. On subsequent trips to Liangshan, I participated in international poetry events, including the opening of the international writing center just outside Xichang. By then, many of the dirt roads had been paved—parts of the mountains clearly changing due to modernization and urbanization.

As a poet, Majia reflects on these changes and how they are similar to
changes that have occurred—and are occurring now—all over the world. He reflects on the losses to cultures and natural landscapes, and tries to understand the forces of human destruction that bring them about. He writes of places and people from his childhood that no longer exist as they once did, and he also writes of the violence that has been committed in the Americas against Indigenous peoples. Majia firmly roots himself in Liangshan, insisting that he is always a Nuosu and longs to return there when he dies, and yet he is also a world traveler. He connects his own life and the questions he asks with the lives and poetry elsewhere. Reading Majia’s poems, I’m always struck by the vastness of their interior and exterior landscapes. He moves between the smallest and largest scales of human existence, connecting all lives to the land, sky, ancestors, animals, stones, light, and darkness. He always returns to a humility and recognition that each of us is just one tiny part of the cosmos, and that the questions he is asking are ones that have been asked before. In his poem “Letter,” he writes, “What I desire/is what you’ve desired before/I’m merely a sign/no more than a flash of light/in a vast sky of stars.”

I want to express my gratitude to the many people who contributed to this project. I am grateful to Majia for his generosity as a friend, collaborator, and mentor. Zhang Yuehong, Caroline Knapp, Yi Lu, and Frank Stewart provided helpful feedback on earlier versions of the poems, and Shao Lei lent his support to the project. Some of the poems were published in RED INK and Pratik. My beloved partner, Simon J. Ortiz, offered invaluable comments, along with his usual enthusiasm and support for my work. I’m grateful to my family and friends for their love and support, especially to Dylan Xu, Zoe Blair, Russ and Carol Proctor, Shuangxi Xu, Rainy Ortiz and family, and all those who aren’t named here but whom I love and appreciate. I want to say thank you also to Luowu Muga, Han Dun, Bubi Wujiang, and to all those on Liangshan who have cared for me and enriched my life.

This collection is dedicated to Jidi Majia’s mother, Niziguoguo Guoshi, who passed away before its completion. I was lucky enough to have spent time with her, and I felt her love with me throughout this project.

Jami Proctor Xu
Phoenix, July 2018
WORDS FROM THE FIRE: POEMS BY JIDI MAJIA

...it's only on nights like these
that I'm truly myself, truly the poet Jidi Majia
truly a shaman no one knows about
Because it's only in these moments
that the words and flames on the tip of my tongue
finally arrive at the root of our great People's tongue.

Born in 1961, Jidi Majia is an indigenous poet of the Nuosu (Yi) people of southwest China's mountainous Sichuan Province. One of China's most celebrated ethnic minority writers, he writes about the mythic world and cultural beliefs of the Nuosu people, and is deeply concerned with the urgent problems of global strife and the potential for peace among nations that can be achieved through poetry. His writing has been translated into over twenty languages and distributed in more than thirty countries. He is the recipient of numerous international awards, including the 2014 Mkiva Humanitarian Award from South Africa, the 2017 Bucharest Poetry Prize, and the 2017 Lifetime Achievement Award of Xu Zhimo Poetry Prize from King's College Cambridge.

Translator Jami Proctor Xu studied Chinese at the University of California, Berkeley, before moving to Beijing in 2008. She is a recipient of a 2013 Zhejiang Poetry Award for a non-Chinese poet who has made a contribution to contemporary Chinese poetry. She has been a visiting scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and a writer-in-residence at the Chengdu Gao Di artists village.